

RELIGION THROUGH FILM



University of South Carolina
Distant Learning Course Relg.Z491F
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Course Description and Rationale

Religion often plays an important role in film, but does film play an important role in religion? Perhaps the better question is, “Does film play an important role in the way people understand religious concepts?”

Although it may be that the best reasons for “going to the movies” are to be entertained and eat popcorn, understanding a film is actually quite involved. Movies not only reflect life, they also have the capability of shaping our norms, values, attitudes, and perception of life. Through the media of film, one can find stories of practically anything imaginable and some things unimaginable. The moviemakers can use their art to entertain, to promote political agendas, to educate, and to present life as it is, was, or could be. They can present truth, truth as they interpret it, or simply ignore truth altogether. A movie can be a work of fiction, non-fiction, or anything in-between. A film is an artist’s interpretation. What one takes away from a film depends upon how one interprets what has been seen and heard. Understanding film is indeed complex.

Understanding religion is also complex. In American society, Christianity is the largest religion; however, there are vast differences among Christians as to what one is to believe and how one’s beliefs are to be put into practice. Into that mixture come the beliefs and practices of other religions and the absence of any religious belief. America is indeed a melting pot when it comes to expressing what one believes about that which is sacred.

Although there are films that deal specifically with religious themes, most movies are secular. They are not intended to present a religious interpretation of life and we do not expect them to do that. However, religion is a part of the lives of most people, so it is realistic to assume that religious references will be present in film. When film and religion intersect, we are given a glimpse of our culture, a visual picture of the role of religion in our society. The question begging an answer is whether or not the portrayal of religion we are given through film is meant only to entertain, or is it meant to be an actual representation of what people believe and practice?

This course is designed to assist the student in recognizing the portrayal of religion in contemporary, secular to enable the student to influence religion in film filmgoer's understanding the main focus of the interesting, entertaining way to learn more about the various components of religion.

The Seven Components of a Religious Worldview is the focus of this course.

films. It is also designed gain an awareness of the has upon the modern of religious concepts. But course is to provide an

Throughout the course, you will analyze how movies, accurately or inaccurately, portray religious beliefs, themes, and images as you critically view films. You will attempt to ascertain if viewers are being given factual information about religion, stereotypes, fantasy, or merely Hollywood tinsel.

The course is divided into four parts. Part I begins your study with film, the power of film, and religion in film. Part II concerns religion (definitions, approaches to the study of religion, religious beliefs, and religious practices and experiences). Part III deals with religious beliefs (which you will learn as the seven components) as they are reflected in selected films. Part IV is concerned with religious practices and experiences as they are seen in selected films.

As you watch the films, questions: Which features of the intention of the filmmakers in the manner in which it has film teach about religion or a



consider the following religion are present? What is in presenting religion concepts been presented? What does the religion? Has the film given a

fair representation? Is the information given factual? What ideas of religion have been reinforced, represented, resisted? What role does the film play in the construction of religious stereotypes? If the Bible or other sacred texts are used, are they given a fair and accurate reading? If a viewer knew nothing about the religion or theme being used, what would they have learned? You may discuss these questions on Blackboard drawing upon your readings, your knowledge of religion, your own background, and your "take" on the various films. Although the class is set up much like a literature course in which the movies are the texts, the approach is through the lens of religious studies.

Learning Outcomes



Upon successful completion of the course, you should be able to:

1. discuss the seven components of a religious worldview common to most religions;
2. understand the components in Judaism and Christianity;
3. recognize the components when they are present within a film;
4. critically view a film through the lens of religious studies;
5. understand how religion and film intersect in our culture; and,
6. recognize the power film has to influence one's perception of religion.

Texts



1. Your textbook is an unpublished manuscript written by your Instructor and is available for you on Blackboard. For those who prefer learning by listening rather than reading, some of the chapters of the textbook have been recorded as lectures, also posted on Blackboard, and may be downloaded to an audio player, etc. You will find a list of suggested readings at the end of each chapter for those who would like to learn more.
2. Although you do not purchase the films, the class is set up much like a literature course in which the movies are also texts. The library has a good collection of films and I will put some on reserve to be viewed in the library only. Some films are available for instant viewing at Amazon.com for a small fee. Occasionally, Youtube.com will have a film. It is highly recommended that you subscribe to Netflix.com or Blockbuster.com for the semester. A couple of the films you will be required to view are not readily available in video rental stores, however, they are all available on Netflix. No excuses will be accepted for your not being able to view a film.
3. Suggested for those who want to learn more about the Seven Components: James Livingston's *Anatomy of the Sacred* (available in the library).
4. Various articles to be assigned.

Course Requirements



Extended University Information

Read “Expectations for Online Students” and “Frequently Asked Questions” at saeu.lsc.edu/OnlineCredit/index.html. Distant learning courses aren't for everyone. There is very little contact with the professor and none with other students. You need to be self-motivated, have a desire to learn, and be willing to give the course the time it needs for you to succeed.

Class Meetings

Because this is a Web-based course, there will be no class meetings. You will, however, be expected to spend the same amount of time on this course as you would if you were attending class. Because this is a fast paced course, you will be required to view two films and submit two assignments each week.

Blackboard

Everything you need for the course (with the exception of the films) can be found posted on Blackboard. Blackboard is also set up for discussion. You are invited to enter into conversation with the Instructor and your classmates. Creativity is desired. There will be times when you will disagree with what is written in your textbook and times when you see something entirely

different. You are encouraged to express your take on any of the films written about in your textbook and any that you view.



Assignments

There are two assignments for each week of class. The value of the assignments is either 5% or 10%. When you are given a choice of films, you may not use any film you were required to view **or** that was discussed in the textbook. You may only use a film once. You are encouraged to view and discuss the films with other students; however, you may not collaborate on your work.

All written work must be submitted through “Safe Assign.” If any part of your work is plagiarized, you will receive a 0. If you are not sure what is considered to be plagiarism, check out the library website resources. Please note that your work is expected to be of good, academic quality. If you submit work that is not acceptable, you will be asked to either redo it or receive 0 points toward your grade for that assignment. Good grammar and correct spelling are important – please proofread your work before submitting.

You will be filling out Film Analysis Sheets for films you view for the last part of the course. These sheets are posted on Blackboard and each topic has its own sheet. Point values are indicated on the sheets. You will find more information on these when you reach that point in the course.

Tests

All tests will be taken on Blackboard. The tests are NOT open book; cheating will result in a 0. You are encouraged to view and discuss films with other classmates; however, you may not collaborate on written assignments or tests. The test will cover the entire assignment. You must take the tests by date stated in the syllabus. After that time, the tests will be closed. No make-ups are allowed. The lowest 5% grade will be dropped. If you should have to miss two assignments/tests, your exam will count twice – once for the missed test and once for the exam. If you miss a third, you will receive a 0 on that assignment/test. Any test that has written answers will require hand-grading by the Instructor – Blackboard is very particular as to spelling, capitalization, etc!

Your tests will have a time limit. The suggest time for a multiple choice true/false question is 30 seconds; I will always allow at least 30 seconds. You may not revisit any of the questions and you may only open a test one time. Please be sure you are prepared before opening a test!

If you should have a computer problem while taken a test, do not panic. Email me to let me know you had a problem. All I can do is reset your test. Before resetting it, I will copy the questions you missed as they will have to be marked wrong on your second attempt as well. If you have a technical problem, you will need to contact the Blackboard student help desk.



Grading

Your final grade will be based upon the grades you earn on the assignments. The grading scale for this course is as follows: A+ = 100; A = 95; A- = 90; B+ = 89- 88; B = 85; B- = 80; C+ = 79- 78; C = 75; C- = 70; D+ = 69-68; D = 65; D- = 60; F = 50; non-submission of an assignment = 0. Shortly after the course begins, you will receive an email requesting you report your status (military or civilian, etc.) to the Ft. Jackson USC office. If you do this, you will receive 1 pt. extra credit on your final grade. This has made a difference in student grades in the past!

Please note that it is your responsibility to be sure that the Instructor receives all of your work. Your grade will be penalized by 5 points for each day an assignment is late.

Availability of the Instructor

I am always available through email which I check several times a day Monday - Friday. There may be times when I check on the week-ends, however, don't depend upon that.

Detailed Course Outline and Assignments

INTRODUCTION

Read/listen to the Introduction – although future assignments will say “read” a section from your textbook, the book has also been recorded and posted on Blackboard as lectures and you may listen instead of reading.

PART ONE FILM



Chapter One

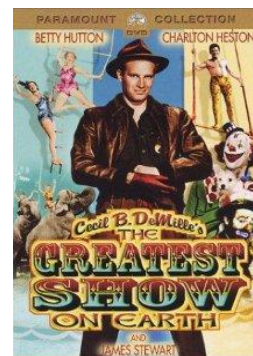
The Power of Film

Chapter Two

Religion Through Film

Assignments (worth 5% of your grade)

1. Read Chapters One and Two in your textbook.
2. As I recounted movies I remember from my past, you were probably thinking of those that have had a lasting impression on you. First, jot down some of the movies you remember as being significant in your life. What is the first movie you remember seeing? Ask yourself why you remember specific movies and not others. Try to recall characters you admired and wanted to emulate as well as characters you found despicable. Do you remember any evidences of religion that were



presented in the movies? Were there religious symbols present in the props and staging? Were there direct references to God? Think about your spiritual life in relation to the movies you have remembered. What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about the effect movies have had on you? If possible, discuss what you have discovered with someone else.

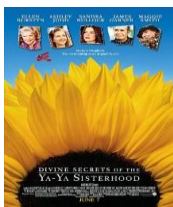
3. (5%) Now write a 2 to 3 page paper on what you have discovered about the impact of film on your perception of life. Submit your paper through SafeAssign on Blackboard.
4. (5%) Go to the Discussion Board and post your favorite films. Include a link to a trailer of your favorite one,

PART II RELIGION

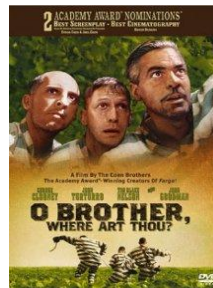
Chapter Three

Defining Religion

Assignments (2 assignments, each worth 5% of your grade)



1. Read chapter three in your textbook.
2. View **either** *Divine Secrets of the YaYa Sisterhood* **or** *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Select one of the scenes from the film you choose that depicts an aspect of religion. Which definition of religion (from the textbook assigned reading) do you think is the best “fit” for the clip you selected? Why? In a couple of paragraphs, describe the scene you chose and explain why you think the definition you picked is a “fit.” Submit through Safe Assign.



3. Take the test on Chapter Three posted on Blackboard.

Chapter Four

Seven Components of a Religious Worldview

Assignments (worth 5% of your grade)

1. Read Chapter Four and study the material.
2. Take the test on the Seven Components posted on Blackboard.

PART III RELIGIOUS BELIEFS THROUGH FILM

Chapter Five

The Nature of God in Film

Bruce Almighty You do not need to view this film; it is enough to read the chapter in the textbook.

Assignments (5% of your grade)

1. Read Chapter Five in your textbook posted on Blackboard.
2. View *Constantine* (2005) looking specifically for anything in the film



that concerns the nature of God. There are several religious components found in this film, however, you need to concentrate on the nature of God at this time. Please take good notes on the film as you will be using it again later.

3. Read the article on *Constantine* posted on Blackboard and found at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/movies/interviews/2005/constantine.html>
4. Think about how the nature of God can be understood from this film and how that depiction relates to the understanding of God in Judaism and/or Christianity.
5. Take the test on Chapter Five posted on Blackboard.

Chapter Six

Cosmogony/Cosmology in Film

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (2005) you do not need to view this film, it is enough to read the chapter in the textbook.



Assignments (5% of your grade)

1. Read Chapter Six in your textbook posted on Blackboard
2. Read Genesis from the Bible, Chapters 1 and 2
3. View *The Tree of Life* (2011)
4. Read "The God Behind the Screen: Pleasantville & The Truman Show" by Linda A. Mercadante posted on Blackboard
5. Take the test posted on Blackboard

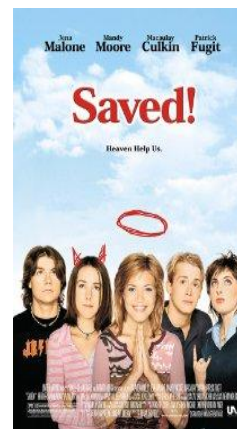
Chapter Seven

Anthropology in Film

Chocolat (2000) you do not need to view this film; it is discussed in the textbook

Assignments (5% of your grade)

1. Read Chapter Seven in your textbook.
2. View *Saved* (2004)
3. Read the article on *Chocolat* at <http://www.movieglimpse.com/movies/chocolat.htm>
4. Take the test posted on Blackboard



Chapter Eight

Theodicy in Film

Commandments (1997 directed by Daniel Taplitz, starring Aidan Quinn and Courtney Cox) you do not need to view this film, it is discussed in the textbook



Assignments (5% of your grade)

1. Read Chapter Eight in your textbook
2. View *P.S. I Love You* (2007)
3. What type of theodicy is shown in this film? In the end, how is God justified in light of undeserved suffering and evil?

4. Take the test posted on Blackboard

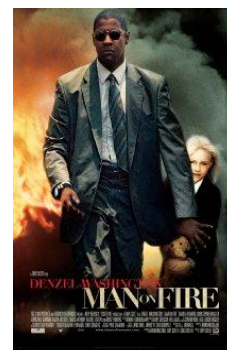
Chapter Nine

Soteriology in Film

Man on Fire (2004)

Assignments (Two assignments, each worth 5%)

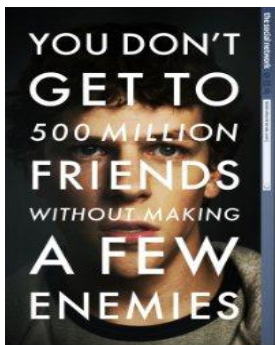
1. Read Chapter Nine
2. View *Man on Fire* looking specifically for how the nature of God is seen/heard.
3. In a previous assignment you were to view *Constantine* (2005) in order to see how the nature of God was depicted in the film. Please refer to your notes or review the film at this time.
4. Another of the components seen in *Constantine* is soteriology. Think about how soteriology is depicted in both *Constantine* and *Man on Fire*. Do either, or both, of the films present either a Jewish or Christian view? In one or two paragraphs, answer the question and defend your answer. Submit your work through SafeAssign.
5. Take the test posted on Blackboard.



Chapter Ten

Ethics/Morality in Film

The Confession (1999 film starring Ben Kingsley and Alec Baldwin, directed by David Hugh Jones - you do not need to view this film; reading the textbook is sufficient)



Assignments (5% of your grade)

1. Read Chapter Ten
2. View *The Social Network* (2010)
3. Take the test posted on Blackboard

Chapter Eleven

Eschatology in Film

Knowing (2009 film starring Nicholas Cage)

Assignment (5% of your grade)

1. Read Chapter Eleven
2. View *Knowing*.
3. Read the review on *Knowing* posted on Blackboard or at <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol13.no1/reviews/Knowing.htm>
4. Read the Oswalt article posted on Blackboard.



5. Take the test posted on Blackboard

PART IV

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES IN FILM

As you work on this part of the course, you will be filling in film analysis sheets that are posted on Blackboard. Be sure that you download the correct sheet, as each topic has its own. You are expected to research information about the director and writer. Although you will not always be able to find their religious affiliation, you need to let me know that you at least tried by citing at least 3 sites you tried. Send me an email if you're not able to find anything and I may be able to help.

Chapter Twelve

Overview of Religious Practices and Experiences

Chapter Thirteen

Sacred Texts

Sacred Texts in Film

Assignments (5%)

1. Read Chapters Twelve and Thirteen
2. Read the Reinhartz article posted on Blackboard
3. View one of the following films: *A Walk to Remember* (2002); *The DaVinci Code* (2005); *3:10 to Yuma* (2007); *Dark Matter* (2007); *Juno* (2007); *Autumn Hearts* (2008); or, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (2009); *True Grit* (2010)
4. Submit the Film Analysis Sheet through SafeAssign

Chapter Fourteen

Prayer

Prayer in Film

Assignments (5%)

1. Read Chapter Fourteen
2. View one of the following films: *End of the Affair* (1999); *Meet the Parents* (2000); *Hannibal* (2001); *The Sum of All Fears* (2002); *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the Sea* (2003); *Brideshead Revisited* (2008); *There Will Be Blood* (2007); *Robin Hood* (2010); *The Company Men* (2010)
3. Complete the Film Analysis Sheet and submit through SafeAssign

Chapter Fifteen

Religious Symbols

Religious Symbols in Film

Assignments (5%)

1. Read Chapter Fifteen
2. View one of the following films: *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002); *National Treasure* (2004); *3:10 to Yuma* (2007); *Angels and Demons* (2009); *The Blind Side* (2009)

3. Submit the Film Analysis Sheet through Safe Assign

Chapter Sixteen

Sacred Times

Assignments (5%)

1. Read Chapter Sixteen
2. View one of the following films (be sure you get the correct Film Analysis Sheet for the category you select the film from)

For sacred times: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001); *The Family Stone* (2001); *Eight Crazy Nights* (2002);

Chapter Seventeen

Sacred Places

Assignments (5%)

1. Read Chapter Seventeen
2. View one of the following films: *Van Helsing* (2004); *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002); *My First Wedding* (2006); *Doubt* (2008); *The King's Speech* (2010)
3. Submit the Film Analysis Sheet through Safe Assign

FINAL EXAM

(5%)

Your exam is accumulative with emphasis upon the seven components of a religious worldview and religious practices and experiences. The exam is posted on Blackboard.