

REL 257: RELIGION AND AMERICAN MOVIES

Lecture: TuTh 10:00-10:50
Screening: Tu 7:30-10:20

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And by appointment

Course Description: The controversy that attended the 2004 release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* sits in a long history of intimate and often fraught interactions between religious Americans and popular movies. In this course we explore the politics of representing religion at key moments in both American film and American religious history. Of particular interest will be the interplay among representations of religious belief, practice, individuals, and institutions and constructions of nation, race, gender, and sexuality. We consider what the processes of movie production and the cultural experience of movie-going can disclose about aspects of American religious life, and we explore what representations of religion reveal about understandings of American national identity.

Course Objectives:

- To become familiar with the major themes in the history of representations of religion in American film across a variety of film genres.
- To understand films as situated in particular religious and historical contexts that affect production, exhibition, reception, and representation of religion.
- To explore interactions among Americans' religious beliefs, practices and institutions and the film industry.
- To gain experience working with and interpreting a range of primary and secondary sources that address issues in religion and American film.
- To strengthen critical writing skills.

Precepts:

I prefer that you not use laptops during precept meetings but you may, if necessary. The emphasis for precepts will be on discussion and engagement with your classmates and, should you feel the need to take notes, pen and paper should suffice.

Books:

- Leo Braudy, *On the Waterfront* (British Film Institute, 2008)
- Mark Kermode, *The Exorcist* (British Film Institute, 1997)
- Steven J. Ross, *Movies and American Society* (Blackwell, 2002)

Books may be purchased at Labyrinth and are also on Reserve in Firestone Library. Additional readings will be available through Electronic Reserves on the course Blackboard site.

Film Screenings:

Screenings will take place in *Jones 100* at 7:30 each Tuesday evening. Please be sure to arrive a few minutes early so that we may begin on time. Screenings may include short films in addition to the feature-length movies listed below.

You will find background information for each film under the “Course Materials” menu on Blackboard.

September 22:	<i>Regeneration</i> , 1915 (72 min)
September 29:	<i>The Jazz Singer</i> , 1927 (88 min)
October 6:	<i>Hallelujah</i> , 1929 (109 min)
October 13:	<i>The Miracle Woman</i> , 1931 (90 min)
October 20:	<i>On the Waterfront</i> , 1954 (108 min)
October 27:	<i>The Exorcist</i> , 1973 (122 min)
November 10:	<i>Thunderheart</i> , 1992 (119 min)
November 17:	<i>Daughters of the Dust</i> , 1991 (113 min)
November 24:	<i>Contact</i> , 1997 (150 min)
December 1:	<i>The Siege</i> , 1998 (116 min)
December 8:	<i>The Passion of the Christ</i> , 2004 (127 min)
December 15:	<i>Jesus Camp</i> , 2006 (84 min)

Course Requirements:

Your final grade will be determined by the following components and all assignments must be completed in order to pass the course:

1. Precept participation:	20%
2. Weekly response papers:	20%
3. One 5-page film analysis paper:	25%
4. One 10-12 page research paper:	35%

The **weekly writing assignment** is intended to facilitate reflection upon *both* the readings and the film prior to our precept meeting. You may use the opportunity to pose broad or focused questions about the texts or draw connections to other readings, themes, or topics we engage, for example. Response papers should be formatted as Word documents and submitted as attachments directly to the Blackboard site. The weekly paper is due by 4pm each Wednesday. Each Tuesday at 3:00pm an entry for the following week’s paper will become available in the Assignments section of the Blackboard site and remain available until 4:05pm on Wednesday.

The **film analysis paper** is due by 3:00pm on October 23 and the **research paper** by 3:00pm on January 12 (Dean’s Date). Full details about the paper assignments will be distributed in precept. Work handed in late will be penalized. If an emergency situation arises and an extension is needed, you must negotiate this with your preceptor prior to the due date.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS, CLASSES, AND DEADLINES

Week 1: Orientations

September 17

- Ross, "Introduction: Why Movies Matter," 1-13

Week 2: Social Reform and Early Cinema

September 22-24

- Ross, "Going to the Movies: Early Audiences" and "Heroes and Heroines of Their Own Entertainment: Progressive-Era Cinema," 14-63
- Judith Weisenfeld, "The Silent Social Problem Film: *Regeneration* (1915)," in Colleen McDannell, ed., *Catholics in the Movies* (Oxford, 2008), 33-58

Film Screening: *Regeneration* (1915)

Week 3: Religious and Ethnic Assimilation

September 29-October 1

- Ross, "The Rise of Hollywood: Movies, Ideology, and Audiences in the Roaring Twenties," 64-97
- Felicia Herman, "'The Most Dangerous Anti-Semitic Photoplay in Filmdom': American Jews and *The King of Kings* (DeMille, 1927)," *Velvet Light Trap* 46 (Winter 2000): 12-25
- Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 127-179
- Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," *Critical Inquiry* 18: 3 (Spring, 1992): 417-453

Film Screening: *The Jazz Singer* (1927)

Week 4: Projecting Blackness

October 6-8

- Ross, "Alternative Cinemas: Movies on the Margins," 164-191
- Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (California, 2007), 19-51

Film Screening: *Hallelujah* (1929)

**** DUE THIS WEEK: Film choice for the analysis paper by Friday, October 9 ****

Week 5: Gender, Sexuality, and Censorship
October 13-15

- Ross, "Who Controls What We See?: Censorship and the Attack on Hollywood 'Immorality'," 98-127
- Alison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1993* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), 134-157
- Francis G. Couvares, "Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies before the Production Code," *American Quarterly* 44:4 (1992): 584-616
- Felicia Herman, "American Jews and the Effort to Reform Motion Pictures, 1933-1935," *American Jewish Archives Journal*, Vol. LLIII (2001), 11-44

Film Screening: *The Miracle Woman* (1931)

Week 6: Cold War Hollywood
October 20-22

- Ross, "Seeing Red: Cold War Hollywood," 192-248
- Leo Braudy, *On the Waterfront*
- Anthony Burke Smith, "America's Favorite Priest: *Going My Way* (1944)," in McDannell, ed., *Catholics in the Movies*, 107-126

Film Screening: *On the Waterfront* (1954)

****DUE THIS WEEK: Film Analysis Paper due by 3:00pm on Friday, October 23****

Week 7: Religious Horror
October 27-29

- Ross, "Reagan's America: The Backlash Against Women and Men," 313-343
- Mark Kermode, *The Exorcist*

Film Screening: *The Exorcist* (1973)

Week 8: FALL BREAK
November 3-5

Week 9: Religion, Memory, and Ethnic Revival

November 10-12

- Ross, "Black and White in Color: Race and Film in the 1960s and 1970s," 249-279
- Ntongela Masilela, "Women Directors of the Los Angeles School," *Black Women Film and Video Artists* (Routledge, 1998), 21-41

- Judith Weisenfeld, "My Story Begins Before I was Born: Myth, History, and Power in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*," in S. Brent Plate, ed., *Representing Religion in World Cinema* (Palgrave, 2003), 43-66
- Toni Cade Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," in Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema* (Routledge, 1993), 118-143

Film Screening: *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)

Week 10: Culture Wars

November 17-19

- Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 128-180
- Sam Pack, "The Best of Both Worlds: Otherness, Appropriation and Identity in *Thunderheart*," *Wicazo Sa Review* 16:2 (Autumn 2001): 97-114
- T. V. Reed, "Old Cowboys, New Indians: Hollywood Frames the American Indian," *Wicazo Sa Review* 16:2 (Autumn 2001): 75-96

Film Screening: *Thunderheart* (1992)

Week 11: The Religion of Science

November 24 (Thanksgiving) – No response paper

- Bryan P. Stone, "Religious Faith and Science in *Contact*," *Journal of Religion and Film* 2:2 (October 1998)
- Conrad Ostwalt, "Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn," *Journal of Religion and Film* 4:1 (April 2000)
- Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Cornell, 1998), 1-21; 25-61

Film Screening: *Contact* (1997)

Week 12: Imagining a Muslim Menace

December 1-3

- Ross, "Hollywood Goes Global: The Internationalization of American Cinema," 344-366
- Melani McAlister, "Introduction," and "Iran, Islam, and the Terrorist Threat, 1979-1989," in *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U. S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (California, 2001), 1-43; 198-265

Film Screening: *The Siege* (1998)

Week 13: The New Christian Cinema
December 8-10

- Yaakov Ariel, "The Passion of the Christ and the Passion of the Jews: Mel Gibson's film in Light of Jewish-Christian Relations," in S. Brent Plate, ed., *Re-Viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and its Critics* (Palgrave, 2004), 21-41
- Alison Griffiths, "The Revered Gaze: The Medieval Imaginary of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ," *Cinema Journal* 46:2 (Winter 2007): 3-39
- Colleen McDannell, "Votive Offering: *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) in Colleen McDannell, ed., *Catholics in the Movies* (Oxford, 2008), 317-346
- Dorothy Chanksy, "North American Passion Plays: 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' in the New Millennium," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50:4 (Winter 2006): 120-145

Film Screening: *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)

Week 14: Documenting American Religion
December 15-17

- Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (BFI, 2007), 3-57.
- Reid Vineis, "Onward Christian Soldiers," *Religion in the News* (Winter 2007): 7-8; 23

Film Screening: *Jesus Camp* (2006)

****DUE on DEAN's DATE: Research Paper due by 3:00pm on Tuesday, January 12 ****