

Religion and Film

RLG232H1H

Summer 2015

MW 6-9

WW126

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Office: JHB 323 (Available for meeting Wednesday after Class (9-10) and by appointment)

Course Description

In this course we will explore the dynamic relationship between religion and film in order to challenge our concept of "religion." Religions are often portrayed as static and insular traditions that stand in opposition to (or in conflict with) popular culture, but we will explore how films challenge this perception by mimicking, creating, and influencing our understanding of religion. The eleven films we will screen do refer to Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, indigenous religions, and new religious movements, but we will not approach these films as sufficient or authoritative representations of these religions. Rather, we will approach them as "technical creations" that allow us to analyze and debate *how* and *why* the films are referencing religion.

The course will be broken into four different sections, with each examining a different relationship between religion and film: (1) religion *in* film, (2) film *in* religion, (3) religion *as* film, and (4) religion *and* film in dialogue. In each of these sections we will examine how religious themes and figures are presented theologically, mythologically, and ideologically. We will not privilege any of these different relationships or critical perspectives but use them as tools to discuss religion.

A Word of Warning

Many of the films that we will be viewing contain images and language that some people may find offensive. If you believe that this will present a serious problem for you, *please withdraw from the class*. There is no way to provide you with a complete set of alternative films to avoid these problems, and I do not want anyone in the class to feel that they are being pressured into viewing or hearing things that violate their principles.

Required Texts

Joel W. Martin & Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1995).

Glenn Yeffeth, ed. *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix* (Texas: Benbella Books, 2003).

*A number of other mandatory readings will be made available in Electronic format on Blackboard. All of these are available through the University of Toronto library. Please bring these readings to class (in electronic or print format).

Recommended: Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film* (8th ed. New York: Longman Publishing Group, 2001).

Course Requirements and Assessment

1- 25% Film Screening Report - (10 x 2.5%).

After each film you will be required to fill out a screening report. We will use these reports to guide class discussion and you will **submit your completed report before the beginning of the following class** (via email). Your completion and submission of these film screening reports is how your class participation and general engagement will be graded. If you do not attend class you will not be allowed to submit a template for the respective film. **See film screening template at end of syllabus.**

2 – 20 % Film Review

You will write a brief review (1000 words/4-5 pages) of the Matrix by contrasting it to Platoon or Kundun. The review will give you an opportunity to illustrate the primary Christian and Buddhist themes in the Matrix by comparing it to respective themes (of your choice) found in the other films. You should spend the first half of your review summarizing the Matrix and its primary themes and the second half contrasting it to similar themes found in Platoon or Kundun. For instructions on how to write a review see Timothy Corrigan, "Writing about the movies," in *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, pp. 1-16. **Due by midnight July 17** (via email).

4 – 30% Critical Essay

For this assignment you will pick a predominant form of criticism (theological, mythological, or ideological) and use it to compare two or three movies of your choice. Your goal will NOT be to summarize the movies and to show they have a similar critical perspective, but to pick several predominant themes and discuss how they are used to “manipulate” the viewer into accepting a particular form of criticism. As in your screening reports, things to consider include not just narrative and plot but music, *mis en scene*, costume design, lighting, etc. Your selection of films may include ones that we haven’t actually watched in class, as long as I approve them in advance. For instructions on how to write a critical essay on movies see

Timothy Corrigan, "Writing about the movies," in *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, pp. 1-16. **Due by midnight on August 10** (via email).

5 - 25 % for final exam (date and time, TBA)

The final exam will be based upon readings, lectures, and the film scripting assignments. More details will be provided closer to the date of the exam.

Grading Policy

The grading scale will be in accordance with the Faculty of Arts and Science grading policy (<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/general/grading-policy>)

Policy on Late Assignments and Missed Tests

All late assignments will be penalised 5% per calendar day (including weekends). We live in a technological age and students are encouraged to backup assignments regularly; computer failure and other technological mishaps do **not** qualify for an extension.

Students who miss an assignment due to illness or other acute adversity beyond their control must submit a formal letter of petition to the course instructor within one week. This letter should be accompanied by:

- a completed University of Toronto Student Medical Certificate (<http://www.utoronto.ca/health/forms/medcert.pdf>) in cases of illness, and comparable supporting documentation in other cases.
- student's phone number, U of T number and utoronto.ca email address (to which the instructor will send an email outlining the appropriate make-up assignment or penalty)

Students are expected to manage their time. A student who has adequately prepared for assignments over the entire tenure of course will not feel compelled to ask for an extension.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is one of the cornerstones of the University of Toronto. It is critically important both to maintain our community which honours the values of honesty, trust, respect, fairness and responsibility and to protect you, the students within this community, and the value of the degree towards which you are all working so diligently. According to Section B of the University of Toronto's *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* (<http://www.utoronto.ca/govcncl/pap/policies/behaveac.html>) which all students are expected to know and respect, it is an offence for students to:

- To use someone else's ideas or words in their own work without acknowledging that those ideas/words are not their own with a citation and quotation marks, i.e. to commit plagiarism
- To include false, misleading or concocted citations in their work.
- To obtain unauthorized assistance on any assignment.
- To provide unauthorized assistance to another student. This includes showing another student completed work.
- To submit their own work for credit in more than one course without the permission of the instructor.
- To falsify or alter any documentation required by the University. This includes, but is not limited to, doctor's notes.
- To use or possess an unauthorized aid in any test or exam.

There are other offences covered under the Code, but these are by far the most common. Please respect these rules and the values which they protect. As a student, you are responsible for ensuring the integrity of your work and for understanding what constitutes an academic offence. If you are not sure if your actions or methods are acceptable, always ask your instructor. **Ignorance of the rules does not excuse cheating or plagiarism.**

Expectations, Policies, and Common Courtesy

Attendance: Students are expected to attend all lectures and films. Should you miss a lecture you are responsible to find out what you missed from one of your colleagues in the class; I will not provide notes or an overview. Absence from more than one class can adversely affect a student's grade.

Punctuality: Please arrive on time and plan to remain for the entire class. Unless you become ill, do not begin packing up your books because this is distracting to everyone. If you know in advance that you cannot stay for the entire class, please sit next to the door and exit quietly.

Courtesy in Class: Other than to respond to or ask a question, please do not converse during lectures and films (even quiet whispering is distracting and disrespectful of your fellow students and your instructor). Please turn off (or silence) all cell phones and pagers before the class begins. Students who plan to spend the lecture time checking email, facebook or texting are invited to sit at the back of the classroom or leave. Should laptop use become a distraction we will, as a class, consider setting up laptop-free zones.

Email and Blackboard Communication: Students are expected to write courteously and clearly (no text-messaging abbreviations or slang). Always use your utoronto.ca email address (the server regularly rejects hotmail accounts as spam) and always include an appropriate summary of the email topic along with the course code (RLG232) in the subject line. In most cases I will be able to respond to emails in 24h.

Overview of Course Format:

This course will meet twice per week. Each session will be divided into three segments: at the beginning of each class we will discuss the assigned readings, then we will watch one of the films, which will be followed by a discussion of the film. Reading preparation for class (about 1-2 hours per evening) and actively participating in classroom discussions is essential to success in this course.

Schedule of Lectures, Readings, and Films:

June 29 – Introduction: Religion *in* Film, Film *in* religion, Religion *as* Film, Religion *and* film in dialogue

Readings: William L. Blizek and Michele Desmarais, "What Are We Teaching When We Teach 'Religion and Film'?" in *Teaching Religion and Film*, (Blackboard). Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., "Theological Criticism", pp. 13-17; "Mythological Criticism," pp. 65-72; "Ideological Criticism," pp. 119-124, in *Screening the Sacred*. Louis D. Giannetti, "Photography," in *Understanding Movies* (Blackboard).

Film: The Pervert's Guide to Ideology

July 1 – Canada Day, No Class (Read!)

July 6 – Religion *in* Film, Part 1: Enlightenment and Salvation

Readings: Readings: Read Mercer Schudart, "What is the Matrix," pp. 5-22; James L. Ford, "Buddhism, Mythology, and the Matrix," pp. 125-14; Paul Fontana, "Finding God in the Matrix," pp. 125-144, in *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*. Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, pp. 54-76.

Film: The Matrix

July 8 - Religion *in* Film, Part 2: Creation and Destruction

Readings: Avert Childress Beck, "The Christian Allegorical Structure of Platoon" in *Screening the Sacred*, pp. 44-54. Richard Slotkin, "Ethnic Platoons and the Myths of American Nationality," in *American Literary History* (Blackboard). Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, pp. 1-16.

Film: Platoon

July 13 - Religion *in* Film, Part 3: Aesthetics and Freedom

Readings: Felicia Chan, "Politics into Aesthetics: Cultural Translation in Kundun, Seven Years in Tibet, and the Cup", in *Buddhism in American Cinema* (Blackboard). Richard King, "Orientalism and the Study of Religions", in *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (Blackboard). Jane Naomi Iwamura, "The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Blackboard).

Fims: Kundun

July 15 - Film *in* Religion, Part 1: Orientalism, creating an Other

Readings: Hamzah Saif, "Internalized Colonial Narratives in Pakistani Cinema: Liberalism, "Good Muslims," and the War on Terror (Blackboard). Bruce Lincoln, "The Study of Religion in the Current Political Moment" and "Jihads, Jeremiads, and the Enemy Within" in *Holy Terrors* (Blackboard).

Film: Khuda ke Liye "In the Name of God"

July 20 - Film *in* Religion, Part 2: Documenting Belief

Readings: James R. Lewis, "Scientology: Sect, Science, or Scam?" in *Numen* (Blackboard). Michael Kinsley, "Eyes Wide Shut 'Going Clear,' Lawrence Wright's Book on Scientology," *New York Times* (Blackboard). Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (Blackboard).

Film: Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief

July 22- Film *as* Religion, Part 1: The Force

Readings: Andrew Gordon, *Star Wars: A Myth for Our Time*, pp.73-82, in *Screening the Sacred*. John C. Lyden, *Religion as Film*, pp. 1-9; pp. 216-225.

Film: Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back

July 27 - Film *as* Religion, Part 2: The Divine Feminine

Readings: Janice Hocker Rushing, "Evolution of 'The New Frontier' in Alien and Aliens: Patriarchal Co-optation of the Feminine Archetype", in Martin & Ostwalt, Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred*, pp. 94-117.

Film: Alien 3

July 29 – Film as Religion, Part 3: Lost in the Matrix

Readings: James Gunn, "The Reality Paradox in the Matrix"; Dino Falluga, "The Matrix: Paradigm of Postmodernism or Intellectual Poseur (Part 1)"; Ray Kurzweil, "The Human Machine Merger: Are We Heading for the Matrix?" in *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*.

Film: The Matrix Revolutions

August 3 – Civic Holiday, No Class (Write Critical Essays!)

August 5 - Religion and Film in Dialogue, part 1: Prophecy

Readings: Robert Jewett, "The Disguise of Vengeance in Pale Rider," in *Religion and Popular Culture in American* (Blackboard); Mark Oppenheimer, "Amid Guns and Blood, an Ethicist Finds Religion in Eastwood's Films" in *New York Times*, Sept 29 2012 (Blackboard)

Film: The Pale Rider

August 10- Religion and Film in Dialogue, part 2: Lost Gods, Lost People

Readings: Hanh Ngoc Nguyen and R. C. Lutz, "Buddhism and Authenticity in Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth*," in *Buddhism and American Cinema*.

Film: Between Heaven and Earth

Final Exam

This lecture outline is subject to changes and revisions. You are responsible for keeping abreast of such changes.

Film Screening Report Template

Your Name:

Film Title (and Year released):

Director:

Main Actors / Characters:

Basic Plot (a single sentence if possible), and what “religious” elements are apparent:

What “relationship” between religion and film do you think the film expresses, why?

What type of religious criticism is most dominant in the film: theological criticism, mythological criticism, or ideological criticism? Is it advocating one particular form of criticism over the other? How is this criticism put to work? If the film doesn't present one form of criticism as dominant, how does it put them into conversation?

What style of film is used to present its story: realism, formalism, classical? Does it play with these styles?

How does the film get its point across?

Plot development

Character development

Symbolism/imagery

Use of dialogue / monologue

Other (music, *mis en scene*, costume design, lighting, etc)

Does the film simplistically propound a single critical perspective, or does it present contradictions in or problems inherent in its thesis/point of view?

Summarize your basic reaction to and conclusions about the film.

