

**Religious Studies 137:
RELIGION AND FILM**

Spring 2004

Monday Nights 7:00-9:50 (Plumas 205)

Professor Andrew Flescher

Trinity 247

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Office Hours: T/TH, 2:30-4:30, and by appointment

Course Description:

This course is concerned with the representation of meaning through a cinematic medium. During the semester, we will examine themes as fundamental to the human condition as selfhood, religious conviction, despair, redemption, race and ethnicity. In particular, we will focus on the relationship between self and society, with special emphasis placed on the struggling self in American contemporary society. As such, the course is concerned with the intersection of cultural studies and religious studies.

There are three general aims of the course: (1) to study methodologically how religion is used and represented in the genre of film; (2) to harness your analytical skills by closely examining the films as “texts” and attempting to comprehend the meaning or message imparted in them; and finally, (3) to develop your interpretive and critical faculties by writing informed appraisals and criticisms which apply the models, concepts, and terminology that emerge in the films, readings and class discussions. In each unit of the course we will view three films, read a few articles, and read one major literary text. The latter is intended to provide an underlying context for the central issues covered in a particular unit. The course divides into three units: (1) “Religion and Self in Contemporary American Society” (2) “Religion, Redemption and Recovery” and (3) “Religion and Ethnicity: Examining our Constructions of the ‘Other’.”

In the first unit we examine the theme of the contemporary self in crisis. Increasingly, it appears that God is nowhere to be found in secular American society, where the existence of widespread and devastating evil serves as a profound challenge to our faith in a providential deity that oversees our ultimate welfare and well-being. Over the last decade, this crisis has been marvelously portrayed in several films. What does a society in which God is presumed to have ‘left the scene’ for one reason or another look like? This unit will examine closely the themes of despair, disconnection, and the search for justice in a world seemingly bereft of hope for redemption from any supernatural source. The three films of this unit (*Crimes and Misdemeanors*; *Grand Canyon*; *Changing Lanes*) we view in light of the Freudian/Nietzschean thesis that the “death of God” poses a crisis of civilization. Can meaning be found within a secular context in which bad things happen without any logic or warning? As we will see, not all three films present a completely pessimistic answer to this question. In this unit we will read Freud’s seminal *Civilization and its Discontents* in order to bring these issues into better focus. In this text, Freud

explores the tension he perceives between individual and the society that has betrayed him, delving into the modern themes of paralysis, resentment and despair.

In the second unit, the emphasis shifts to the possibility of redemption and recovery in light of the challenges to faith discussed in part one of the course. Here, we will examine films that acknowledge the arbitrariness of evil but that suggest also that the suffering, estrangement and seeming permanence of our shared human predicament might be overcome in unexpected ways. As such, we will focus on the themes of forgiveness and redemption as they are conveyed in film. What are some plausible options for our deliverance from “exile” in a world that manifests itself as both beyond our control and indifferent to our concerns? In some of these films, the traditional idea of an all-loving, all-powerful deity is reaffirmed, even if that deity remains hidden. In others, the religious alternative surfaces in rather unorthodox ways. Alongside the films that we will view in this unit (*Magnolia*; *Jacob’s Ladder*; *Breaking the Waves*), we will read Dostoevsky’s masterpiece about redemption and forgiveness, *Crime and Punishment*.

In the final unit of the course we will examine the question of our construction of the cultural “other,” a question that has recently become timely in light of the events of September 11th and its aftermath. In this unit, we will address the themes of ethnicity and understanding, assimilation, power, “cognitive dissonance,” and multi-culturalism. We will pay close attention to a problem that is particular to the field of religious studies, namely, the problem of “tribalism,” which often manifests itself as a violent and enduring struggle between two or more ethnic groups in close proximity to one another, the deep-rooted nature of which often seems unexplainable to the outside world. The three films we will view in this unit (*Freaks*; *Before the Rain*; *Three Kings*) each, in their own separate way, force us, as viewers, to re-examine our own prejudices about how we form our impressions of the “other” among us. The genre of film is a particularly effective medium for addressing the issue of “difference,” as it enables us to gain an acquaintance with the cultural or religious other through a visual exposure to her. The texts that we will consult to bring these films together are Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* and Jonathan Glover’s *Humanity: A Moral History of the 20th Century*.

Required Texts for Purchase:

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Norton)

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (Norton)

Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (Yale)

Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster)

Students with Certified Disabilities:

Please notify me of any special need relating to your disability within the first two weeks of the semester. I will make every reasonable effort to facilitate your success in this course. Please note that you may be required to show documentation of your disability.

Four Ground Rules:

- (1) Attendance is required and will be taken before we begin each class. Since we only meet Monday nights, you cannot---ever---miss class. Class participation is a major part of the course. Participation includes viewing of all films, reading all assigned materials, and contributing to class discussions.
- (2) You can bring one or two friends to any film showings in the class (and I wager you will want to do so ... these are some fine, fine flicks!!).
- (3) You must keep a running journal in which you take notes on each of the nine films we watch. This will be handed in at the end of the semester. It is probably best to update the journal late Monday night, after we watch the film, or sometime Tuesday. Your comments in the journal for each film are casual and primarily should consist of questions that the film poses for you. Devote about 2 or 3 pages to each film. The journal will count for about 5% of your overall grade.
- (4) There is no activity fee for the course (unlike most other films courses at this university). However, there will be several times over the course of the semester in which you might have to rent the films we watch in class in order to see parts of them again. This is to help you to get quotes precisely correct, remember scenes, etc. for when you write your three major papers. You should regard the films we view together as texts to be read and re-read. If you are in a pinch and cannot find these films in any of the local video stores then---as an exception---you may borrow, from my office, any DVD or VHS for a 24-hour period.

Course Requirements and Grading:

Paper #1: Six pages, double-spaced, covering themes discussed in unit 1: 30%

Paper #2: Six pages, double-spaced, covering themes discussed in unit 2: 30%

Paper #3: Six pages, double-spaced, covering themes discussed in unit 3: 30%

Class Participation: 10%

Attendance is mandatory

Please note: For every unexcused absence, your final grade will be lowered a full letter grade. (An excused absence is one that is the result of an **unavoidable emergency** and one that, if at all possible, you will have **discussed with me in advance**). Also, you must receive a passing grade on all written assignments in order to pass the course.

Protocol:

Class will generally meet on Monday night, for about two and a half hours. There are five classes devoted to a unit. At the beginning of each unit, I will lecture at length on the text we are reading for that unit, as well as discuss the cluster of films we are scheduled to see in that unit. (Thus, there will be three of these “big” lectures over the course of the semester.) On the nine film nights, I will typically lecture for about a half an hour, discussing the particular film we are about to see and putting it in context of the reading. Following this introduction, I will show the film, which will last between ninety minutes and two hours. Finally, at the end of each of the three units, we will devote an entire class period to class discussion, in which we will talk about the three films and readings that comprised that particular unit. During these discussion periods, my goal is to speak less than all of you. In order to contribute, you must be present, both physically and mentally. This means that in addition to having watched the films you must, by this time, have done all the readings and come prepared to discuss them. This course is highly interactive and will not work without your active participation. **Please bring the texts with you to class on the days that we devote exclusively to discussion.**

Course Schedule:

Week 1: (January 26th)

Introduction to Course: Film and the Quest for Meaning/ Lecture on Freud

UNIT I: RELIGION AND SELF IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY

Week 2: (February 2nd)

The Fate of Faith and Justice Following the Death of God, Freud’s *Civilizations and its Discontents*

Reading:

Freud, *Civilizations and its Discontents*, chapters I-III, pp. 10-52

Glover, *Humanity*, Chapter 1, “Never Such Innocence Again,” pp. 1-10

Viewing:

Crimes and Misdemeanors (Woody Allen)

Week 3: (February 9th)
The Secular Self in Crisis, part 1

Reading:

Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, chapters, IV-XIII, pp. 53-112.

Viewing:

Grand Canyon (Lawrence Kasdan)

Week 4: (February 16th)
The Secular Self in Crisis, part 2

Reading:

Glover, *Humanity*, Part I (chapters 2-7), “Ethics Without the Moral Law,” pp. 11-46.

Viewing:

Changing Lanes (Roger Michell)

Week 5: (February 23rd)

Review/Discussion of all readings and films in Unit I

PAPER #1 DUE, Monday March 1st

UNIT II: RELIGION, REDEMPTION, AND RECOVERY

Week 6: (March 1st)

Lecture: The Transcendent Hidden?: Dostoevsky and Hard-Won Redemption

Reading:

Begin reading Dostoevksy, *Crime and Punishment*

Week 7: (March 8th)

God in Film: Theology and the Silver Screen

Reading:

Continue reading Dostoevksy, *Crime and Punishment*

Viewing:

Magnolia (Paul Thomas Anderson)

SPRING BREAK: (Week of March 15th)---continue reading *Crime and Punishment*

Week 8: (March 22nd)

Apocalypse and Redemption

Reading:

Finish reading Dostoevksy, *Crime and Punishment*

Viewing:

Jacob's Ladder (Adrienne Lyne)

Week 9: (March 29th)

Reading:

Stephen Heath: "God, Faith and Film: *Breaking the Waves*" (handout)

Viewing:

Breaking the Waves (Lars Von Trier)

April 5th: No Class

Week 10: (April 12th)

Review/Discussion of all readings and films in Unit II

PAPER #2 Due Monday, April 19th

**UNIT III: RELIGION AND ETHNICITY: EXAMINING
OUR CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE 'OTHER'**

Week 11: (April 19th)

Lecture: Self and Other in Film; Religion after September 11th

Reading:

Begin reading Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*

Week 12: (April 26th)

Race and Ethnicity in America

Reading:

Continue Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*

Viewing:
Freaks (Tod Browning)

Week 13: (May 3rd)
Ethnic Conflict and Tribalism

Reading:
Glover, *Humanity*, part III, "Tribalism," pp. 119-236.

Viewing:
Before the Rain (Milcho Manchevski)

Week 14: (May 10th)
Religion, Ethnicity and Current Events

Reading:
Finish reading Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*

Viewing:
Three Kings (David O. Russell)

Week 15: (May 17th)
(During Finals Session) Review/Discussion of all readings and films in Unit III
Hand in Journals

FINAL PAPER #3 Due Thursday, May 20th

Please note: No LATE papers accepted; papers due by 4:00 PM