

TR650 – Theology in Contemporary Film
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities
Winter 2007
M-T, R-F 1:00 – 4:15 PM

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Email is the best way to contact instructor

Course Description:

Discerning theological dimensions in contemporary film requires learning to read a film's theology, not imposing one's theological views upon a film. This course will introduce students to the tools of *'seeing'* the theology/theologies in contemporary films, enabling students to grapple with different theological perspectives. We will also discuss the social context of particular films. We will examine the films as the films will in turn examine our lives of faith and ministry. This is not a film studies course.

Learning Goals and Objectives:

Students at the end of the course will be able to –

- To apply a critical method that is both theological and visual
- To examine film as visual theological text and discourse
- To understand the nature of images and re-presentation, as well as critically engage the mechanisms behind the re-production and generation of images within church and society
- To learn diverse methods of working with film theologically
- To inquiry into the nature of beauty, sin, forgiveness, redemption, repentance, the human condition, 'truth', and the vocation of ministry by examining the re-presentation and interpretation of these (and other) theological themes in film
- To see film in new ways in order to serve as sources for liturgical, parish, chaplaincy, and social ministry
- To write concisely, with theological depth, theological reflections on films

Course Format:

- Worship Reflection – Each student will do a worship reflection individually or as a team
- Discussion of Reading Material
- Small and large group discussions on film

Films not viewed in class are the responsibility of the student to find and see. Instructor recommends students to see these films **twice**, if possible.

Required Reading:

Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Engaging Culture Series. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000.

Weaver, Jann Cather. *Discerning the Religious Dimensions of Film: Toward a Visual Method applied to "Dead Man Walking."* Still Unpublished, 2001.
(ON RESERVE)

_____. "Seeing." In *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell, and J. Shannon Clarkson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, 254-255. **(ON RESERVE – book is in reference collection.)**

On Reserve:

Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 4th ed. McGraw-Hill, 1979.

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

May, John R. and Michael Bird, eds. *Religion in Film*. University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1982.

Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media*. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Weaver, Jann Cather. *Discerning the Religious Dimensions of Film: Toward a Visual Method applied to "Dead Man Walking."* Still Unpublished, 2001.

_____. "Seeing." In *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell, and J. Shannon Clarkson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, 254-255.

Films To Be Viewed:

- A Beautiful Mind*. Directed by Ron Howard. 135 minutes. 2001. DVD.
- Billy Elliot*. Directed by Stephen Daldry. 110 minutes. 2000. DVD.
- Chariots of Fire*. Directed by Hugh Hudson. 123 minutes. 1981. DVD.
- The Eyes of Tammy Faye*. Directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato. Documentary. 2000. DVD. (Seen In Class)
- Hustle & Flow*. Directed by Craig Brewer. Produced by John Singleton. 113 minutes. 2005. DVD.
- Let the Church Say Amen*. Directed by David Petersen. Documentary. 87 minutes. 2004. DVD. (Seen in Class)
- My Left Foot*. Directed by Jim Sheridan. 102 minutes. 1989. DVD. (Seen in Class)
- Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Directed by Phillip Noyce. 94 minutes. 2002. DVD.
- Touch the Sound*. Directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer. Documentary. 99 minutes. 2004. DVD. (Seen in Class)
- "Two Cathedrals." In *West Wing: The Complete Second Season*. Episode 22, 1999. DVD. (In Class)
- Selection from *Smoke*, Directed by Wayne Wang. 112 minutes. 1995. DVD. (Seen in Class)
Based on "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story," by Paul Auster, *New York Times*, December 25, 1990: 31ff.
- Selections from *Nine Lives*. Directed by Rodrigo García. 114 minutes. 2005. DVD. (Seen in Class)
- Selection from *American Beauty*. Directed by Sam Mendes. 122 minutes. 1999. DVD. (Seen in Class)

Other Independent Short Films ("Shorts") and "Classic Clips" (In Class)

Required Work:

- 1) Daily attendance and class participation absolutely essential.
- 2) Students will prepare a typed, coherent paragraph of THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION on each film SEEN OUTSIDE of CLASS (total of five paragraphs) to be shared and discussed in small groups. These will be handed in to the instructor at the end of the class. Students are to use a method of theological reflection taught in the class. Students may choose a particular theological issue/concern/point from a scene in the film **or** an overarching theological theme and/or hermeneutic.

Instructor is looking for **theological depth** (or **"thickness"**) in the reflection, not a summary of the film. The instructor believes that a paragraph need not be longer than five to six sentences. Quality, not quantity.

Instructor is incapable of reading more than six sentences in a paragraph. (As you may see, instructor is helping students to write concisely. Avoid adjectives. And split infinitives. No dangling prepositions, please. ☺)

Instructor requests the following:

Please double space, if not triple space, your paragraph

Please use either Arial, Courier, Tahoma, or Times New Roman font

Please use **14** point font

- 3) One page exam/essay on a 'short' film shown in class on Fridays, January 12 and 19. Students will use a method of theological and visual reflection. Again, instructor is not arbitrarily tormenting students with this required work. It hurts me more than you know. ☺
- 4) Students are to develop a three (3) session youth or adult education class on film and theology. Each session, 1.5 hours long, is to have a detailed lesson plan. Assume class members have seen the film outside of class. Students are welcome to steal the model of a lesson plan below at not risk of copyright penalty.

LESSON PLAN: MODEL (DEFAULT):

OVERALL THEME AND/OR SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE THREE SESSION CLASS

TITLE OF THREE SESSION CLASS

SESSION NUMBER _____

FILMS OR TV EPISODES TO BE VIEWED

WHAT TO RESEARCH BEFORE THE CLASS?

LEARNING GOALS FOR THAT SESSION

Goals are incomplete sentences beginning with "To"

Sample:

Students will learn in this session the following skills and/or worldviews:

To see movies as more than entertainment.

To see movies as possible ethical guides.

To not throw popcorn.

Et Cetera.

CLASS EVENTS AND ASSIGNMENTS TO MEET LEARNING GOALS

Check-in with people	15 minutes
Initial one sentence reactions to movie	10 minutes
In small groups discussion the question – How is this movie different from an Austin Powers movie? <i>Et Cetera</i>	5 minutes/question
Large group discussion about small group discussions	30 minutes
Remaining questions of class members	5 minutes
Prayer	60 minutes

Instructor will be looking for theological “thickness” in each lesson plan.
Instructor will also be looking for a method to aid class members to see the theology in the films or TV episodes. (*YouTube* videos may be used as a methodological tool.)

Instructor requests the following:

Please double space written material, even though it looks weird
Please use either Arial, Courier, Tahoma, or Times New Roman font
Please use **12-14** point fonts

Criteria for passing the course will be based on the following:

- ◆ Attendance and participation in class sessions and discussions. Absences will be considered in the final evaluation. A student cannot pass the course with more than **one** excused absence from class, unless more absences are due to extreme circumstances. (Extreme circumstances are (1) extended severe illness of the student or those persons dependent upon the student, (2) or a death among those close to the student. Please notify the instructor before absences from class. If this is not possible, please leave a voice message at 651.255.6135 and let me know you are not lost in a snow drift.)
- ◆ Satisfactory and timely completion of reading material, and written assignments
- ◆ Clarity and theological depth of written assignments, as well as evidence of student using a method for theological reflection.

Evaluation will be weighted with the following values: (80% is passing)

- ◆ Class Attendance and **appropriate** participation in discussions 25%
- ◆ Written paragraphs (Five) 5% each, totaling 25%
- ◆ Friday in-class essays/exams 10% each, totally 20%
- ◆ Three Session Course on Theology and Film
Each lesson plan 10% each, totaling 30%

N.B.

Because of the participatory, conversational character of the course, timely submissions of assignments are very important.

Instructor will accept late papers or projects beyond the course schedule, except students must file a petition for extension prior to the last day of class. Of course, extensions are not encouraged and are usually granted due to extraordinary circumstances.

Written materials requiring extensions beyond the last day of class –January 26 – will not be graded until June 2007. Requests for extension will have to be filed with the registrar’s office with consent of the professor before the last day of the class.

Extension Policy (42) in Masters Student Handbook

The work for a course is terminated at the end of the final class session. The performance in the course is evaluated on the basis of the work submitted by that time, unless an exception is made by the instructor, in which case an extension must be agreed to by the instructor by the end of the final class session and the student must complete a formal petition for extension to be submitted in lieu of a grade. If the student is unable to negotiate the extension by the end of the final class session due to critical health issues, the student is responsible for seeing that the instructor is notified as soon as possible and then negotiating the extension promptly. Extensions (of course work) beyond the end of the semester will be approved only under extraordinary circumstances. Each instructor will include this policy on each course syllabus as well as the criteria by which she or he will grant such an extraordinary exception.

In the event such an exception is agreed to, the student shall complete the petition for extension form and the instructor shall file the extension form with the registrar by the date grades are due. The Student Review Committee shall monitor extensions. If no petition for extension is filed, a final grade will be submitted.

An extension may be granted for a period not to exceed six months from the end of the term. If the work is not completed by the date petitioned, a final grade will be submitted. Any renewal of an extension must be approved by the instructor and filed with the registrar prior to the due date on the original petition. No extension or its renewal will exceed six months from the end of the term in question.

All work in this class is to follow **Policy on Freedom of Inquiry and Expression** in the Masters Student Handbook (101)

All work in this class is expected to follow the **Policy Regarding Confidentiality and Disclosure within Small Group Settings** in the Masters Student Handbook (118-119).

Regarding **Professorial Boundaries**, see **Statement on Boundaries** in the Masters Student Handbook (109-110).

All work in this class is expected to follow the **Copyright Compliance Policy** in the Masters Student Handbook (96).

The full UTS copyright policy is on Reserve in the Spencer Library.

It is the policy of United Theological Seminary that its faculty, staff, and students shall comply with the laws of the United States pertaining to copyright, with particular attention to Title 17. (96)

All work in this class is expected to follow the **Academic Integrity Policy** in the Masters Student Handbook (48, 100).

Writing papers, preparing oral and written presentations, and conducting scholarly research are an important part of seminary education. When students use the ideas or words of others, they must acknowledge their sources in accordance with a standard form for footnotes, such as the Social Science Style Sheet (APA), or Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers and Dissertations*. [6th Edition]

All work in this class is expected to follow the **Inclusive Language Policy** in the Masters Student Handbook, with opportunities for discussion on differences (108).

Exclusive language is any form of communication which demeans, discounts, or ignores the experiences and full humanity of a group of people on the basis of gender, race, ethnic group, class, age, sexual orientation, or differing abilities and hence fosters oppression and injustice. Language shapes relationships between persons and shapes the self-image of persons. UTS seeks to affirm the human community in all its diversity. In a tradition of seeking justice as an educational community and while embracing the diversity of faith traditions, UTS strongly encourages all of its members to use language in writing and speech that is inclusive in regard to gender, race, ethnic group, class, age, sexual orientation, or differing abilities.

Implications

1. Sexually inclusive language refers to human beings either in ways which are not gender-specific (e.g. "humankind," "chairperson," etc.) or which use balanced male and female terms (e.g. "she or he," "all men and women," etc.).
2. Nonsexist language is a broader category that refers to:
 - Language about God as well as about human beings, either using non-gender [or changing gender] specific references for God or using pronouns and personal or non-personal images for God which reflect male/female balance [that is, referring to God as Father is as appropriate as God as Mother, as long as all of us explore multiple images for God]; and
 - Language about human beings that acknowledges the full equality of women and men rather than reinforcing assumptions of male superiority and social privilege and/or reinforcing gender stereotypes (e.g. "pastor" rather than "woman pastor," "nurse" rather than "male nurse," "flight attendant" rather than "stewardess," etc.).

3. Racially and ethnically inclusive language rejects the equating of color with virtue and does not equate darkness with negative qualities or lightness with positive qualities. It also rejects the use of or construction of "otherness" in language that connotes superiority of the dominant group.

4. Inclusive language also rejects the identification of single physical characteristics with a whole person, particularly in the case of physical or mental limitations, and instead strives to name the personhood first (e.g., "person who is blind" instead of "the blind person").

5. Inclusive language rejects sexuality-specific language in general reference to relationships (e.g., "partner" is a more inclusive term than "husband" or "wife").

6. Likewise, inclusive language referring to age, class, and other categories acknowledges the full humanity of persons and does not use terms which identify only singular characteristics of a person or group. (e.g., people who are homeless)

Further elaboration of this policy and suggestions and resources for its implementation may be found on reserve in the library in the folder marked "Inclusive Language."

CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE

January 8

Worship Reflection
Review of Syllabus
Filmic Conventions and Metaphors:
West Wing – Final Episode Spring 2000

January 9

Reading:

Weaver, Jann. "Seeing." In *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell, and J. Shannon Clarkson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, 254-255.
(On reserve)

Johnston. Introduction

Worship Reflection
Discussion of viewing methods
Implicit and Explicitly Religious Art
Myth vis-à-vis Parable
In Class: *Touch the Sound*
Discussion of parallels to *Seeing*

January 11

Out of Class: *Billy Elliot*

Due: Paragraph

Reading:

Johnston. Chapters One and Three

Worship Reflection
Discussion of reading
Discussion of *Billy Elliot*
Shorts or clips

January 12

Reading:

Johnston. Pages, 63-74

Worship Reflection

In class essay/exam on an independent short:

Film will be shown twice, with 5 minute pause for students to make initial notes.

After the second viewing of the film, students will have 15 minutes to write a methodological, theological reflection on the film.

Film will be shown a third time.

Students will have 5 minutes to polish essay.

"Classic Clips"

Classic Clips from films for students' repertoire

WEEK TWO

January 15

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

No class

January 16

Out of Class: *Chariots of Fire*

Due: Paragraph

Reading:

Johnston. Pages 74-86, Chapter 8

Worship Reflection

Discussion of Reading

Discussion of *Chariots of Fire*

In Class: *Let the Church say Amen*

January 17

No class

Students are expected to use this time to begin preparing for their final assignment.

January 18

Out of Class: *Hustle & Flow*

Due: Paragraph

Reading:

Johnston. Chapter 5

Worship Reflection

Discussion of Reading

Discussion of *Let the Church say Amen vis-à-vis Hustle & Flow*

Blaxploitation Genre

The power of images and film to create worldviews

Musical expression in Contexts

Shorts or clips

January 19

Worship Reflection

In-class essay/exam

"Classic Clips"

WEEK THREE

January 22

Out of Class: *A Beautiful Mind*

Due: Paragraph

Reading:

Johnston. Chapter 6

Worship Reflection

Discussion of Reading

Discussion of *A Beautiful Mind*

January 23

Worship Reflection

Discussion of Reading

In class: *My Left Foot*

Discussion of *My Left Foot*

January 25

Out of Class: *Rabbit-Proof Fence*

Due: Paragraph

Worship Reflection
Discussion of Reading
Discussion of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*
Shorts or clips

January 26 Last Class

Due: Three Session Course with lesson plans on film and theology

Worship Reflection
In class: *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*
Student Evaluations

NOTES and MUSINGS: