Syllabus: IST 3053, Religion and Film

Spring 2019, Tuesday, 1:00 to 4:30PM

**LEARNING GOALS:**

In this course, students explore the interactions of religion and film. Learning goals include demonstrating:

1. Develop a basic “film literacy,” the ability to recognize and interpret a movie’s visual composition, aural elements, and narrative structures.
2. Ability to theologically analyze film as a distinct form of religious art.
3. Ability to think about film as a cultural artifact through which implicitly and explicitly religious figures, institutions, themes, and concerns are expressed and ritualized.
4. Ability to use film as evidence in thinking about the structure, practice, and world view of different religious traditions.

**REQUIREMENTS:**

1. Attend and participate in all sessions.
2. Read and be prepared to discuss assigned readings.
3. Complete and present assignments on due dates.

**REQUIRED READING/VIEWING:**

**All Students**:

**Films:**

See the assigned films below. You will need to have access to the assigned films in order to view them outside of class. All of the films, which will be our primary texts for discussion and analysis, are available through Netflix.  For most students this is the easiest way to have reliable access to the films.  Many of these films are not available through Netflix for live streaming, so you will need to have – at least for a few months - a plan that allows for mail delivery of a DVD. They are also available from a variety of other rental sources, some you may even find on YouTube. But be cautious, downloads from free sites sometimes come with a virus and usually raises copyright infringement issues. I encourage you to use Netflix or another source with clear rights to distribute the film.

Even if you have seen a film in the past, please view each film in the week or two before the class discussion so that your impressions are fresh. In some cases, there are several films available with similar titles so pay attention to the directors and dates to be sure you come to class ready to discuss the appropriate film.

**Readings:**

Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, *The Religion and Film Reader (RFR)*(2007) New York: Routledge. ($39.33) Key historical and contemporary essays on the relationship between religion and film from diverse cultures and religions.  Includes writings by film critics and theorists, religious leaders and religious and theological studies scholars.

Johnston, Robert K., *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, (2000) Grand Rapids: Baker Books. ($18.19) Introduces film criticism, overview of the interaction of church and cinema, and clearly lays out ways of relating film and theology.  Rooted in a Christian world view the author also suggests ways in which the divine might be present in films that are not overtly Christian or clearly religious.

Plus, some essays and review, links indicated below.

**Doctoral Students** (In addition to the books above):

Lyden, John C., *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals*, (2003) NY: New York University Press.  ($20.80) Builds a Geertzian definition of religion rooted in understandings of myth and ritual, and argues that film should be understood as a form of religion (not simply as another form of social discourse in dialogue with religion) and suggests that understandings of interreligious dialogue provide a model for the discussion of the interaction of film and more traditional forms of religion. Part Two applies the method developed to a series of popular genres. No attention is given to films overtly about religion.

Martin, Joel W. and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995. ($28.20) Draws distinctions between theological criticism rooted in Christian assumptions, mythic criticism rooted in cross cultural archetypal studies, and ideological criticism which explores how myths affect society – with particularly attention to race, class and gender.

Note: The costs for books noted above are for paperbacks ordered through Amazon. There are also Kindle versions and used copies available for these texts.

**Outline of Reading and Viewing Assignments by Date Due**

**March 26: Intro to Film and Religion**

**Viewing**:  *Calvary,* dir. John Michael McDonagh, (2014) Ireland (100 min)

**Reading**:

*Reel Spirituality*: “The Power of Film,” pgs. 19-30.  
*Religion and Film Reader (RFR)*, Intro Part 1, pgs. 9-14.   
*RFR*, Wright, “Religion and Film.” pgs. 438-444.  
Search “Calvary, movie review” and you should find a selection of review of the film. After viewing the film, read at least three reviews.

**April 2: Religious possibilities and anxieties about the Movies**

**Viewing:** *Diary of a Country Priest*, dir. Robert Bresson, (1951) [from the Georges Bernanos novel, 1937] (122 min)

**Reading:**

RFR, P. Schrader, “Transcendental Style,” pgs. 176-182. *RFR*, Jump, “Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture” (1910) pgs. 14 – 24.   
*RFR*, Grant, “If Christ Went to the Movies,” (1920), pgs. 27-31.

**April 9: Jesus and his displacements**

**Viewing**: *Jesus of Montreal*, dir. Denis Arcand (1989), Canada (115 min)

**Reading**:

*RFR,* Burnett, and Martell, “The Devil Cinema,” (1920) pgs. 32- 34. *RFR*, Pope Pius XI, “Vigilanti Cura” (1936), pgs. 35 – 42. *RFR,* Bird, “Religion in Film: Film as Hierophany,” pgs. 391-397. Mahan, “Celluloid Savior: Jesus in the Movies,” posted on Canvas. *Reel Spirituality*, “Are Movies Art?” pgs. 87-99.

Masters Students: Intro film and lead discussion

**April 16:** **Religion, Film and the Construction of Race**

**Viewing:***Hallelujah!,* dir. King Vidor, (1929) USA (90 min)

**Reading:**

*RFR*, Weisenfeld, “Projecting Blackness” pg. 285-293  
*RFR*, Dash with hooks, “Dialogue Between bell hooks and Julie Dash,” pgs. 251-256  
*RFR,* Lee W. Breskin, “Inner View: Filmmakers in Conversation,” pgs. 257-260 *Reel Spirituality*, “Becoming a Film Critic.” Pgs. 125-150.

**Monday, April 22,** Close Analysis paper on *Babette’s Feast* due, post on Canvas

**April 23: Theological Approaches**

**[NOTE: We are not meeting on campus. This week’s class session happens in Canvas.]**

**Viewing**: *Babette’s Feast*, dir. Gabriel Axel, 1988, Denmark (102 min)

**Reading**:

*Real Spirituality*, “Responding to Movies Theologically,” pgs. 151-172. Mary Elizabeth Podles, “Babette’s Feast: Feasting with Lutherans,” *Antioch Review* Summer 92, Issue 3. (search the essay title in EBSCOhost at the library.)

**April 30: Religion in the Art House Film**

**Viewing**:*Dekalog,* view episode *7, “Thou Shalt Not Steal”*dir. Krysztof Kieslowski, 1989, Poland (55 min)

# *Reading:*

# *RFR*, Kieslowski, “Introduction to *Decalogue: The Ten Commandments.*” pgs. 219-224. *RFR*, Martin, “Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film.” Pgs. 421-427.

[The Decalogue Movie Review & Film Summary (1988) | Roger Ebert](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-decalogue-1988)

Michael Wilmington, “Long Days Journey into Night, *Film Comment*, March/April 2000, @ https://www.filmcomment.com/article/long-days-journey-into-night/

Doctoral Students: present Martin and Ostwalt, eds, *Screening the Sacred*.

**May 6: Muslim Film**

**Viewing**: *Children of Heaven*, dir. Majid Majidi, 1997, Iran (86 Min)

**Reading**:

*RFR*, Kiarostami, “In Dialogue with Kiarostami” pg. 88-91.  
“Majid Majidi and the New Iranian Cinema,” *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol 12, No. 1, April 2008 *Reel Spirituality*, “Theological Approaches to Film Criticism.” Pgs. 41-63.

Masters Students: Intro film and lead discussion

**May 14: Constructing Religious Worlds**

Viewing: *A Separation,* Asghar Farhadi, 2011, Iran [Academy Award, Best Foreign Film, 2012] (123 min)

An excerpt of a Ghanaian video movie will be shown during class.

**Reading**: *RFR,*Meyer, from Religious Mediations: “Pentecostal Views in Ghanaian video-Movies” pgs. 95-102 *RFR,* Lyden “Film as Religion” pg. 416 – 420.

Doctoral Students present: Lydon *Film as Religion*

**May 21: Buddhist Film**

**Viewing**: *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring*, dir. Ki-duk Kim, (2004) Korea (95 min)

**Reading**:    
Cho, Francisca, “Imagining Nothing and Imaging Otherness in Buddhist Films.” pgs. 398-406.  
Phalke, D. G., “The Problem of Capital Formation in the Indian Cinema” (1917) pgs. 25 - 26.  
LaFleur, William R., “Suicide Off the Edge of Explicability: Awe in Ozu and Kore’eda”, pgs. 153-163.

**Due:** Research Paper, post on Canvas

**May 28: Schrader (again)**

**View:**

*First Reformed*

**Read:**

[**https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/paul-schrader-nicolas-cage-april-issue-2018-in****terview**](https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/paul-schrader-nicolas-cage-april-issue-2018-in%20terview)

reread, RFR, P. Schrader, “Transcendental Style,” pgs. 176-182[1] *RFR,* Dorsky, “Devotional Cinema.” pgs. 407-416.

**ASSIGNMENTS, DUE DATES and GRADES:**

1. Close Analysis: Write an eight-to-ten page paper on *Babette’s Feast*. This paper should reflect your own careful viewing and analysis of the film, demonstrating how understanding the film’s form, composition and style inform your interpretation of the film.  Spend two to three pages laying out an overall interpretation of the film, then offer a close reading of three key scenes demonstrating how the visual construction, editing, sound, and performances lead you to your conclusion. You should be engaged directly with the primary text, the film itself, applying skills developed in the early weeks of the class. A primary goal is to demonstrate your ability think about film as film. Do not consult secondary sources such as the writings of film or religious scholars or reviewers. Due: (4/22) *Monday* of Week Five before our classroom discussion. Submit on Canvas. (30% of grade)
2. Lead Discussion:  
   Masters Students: With a group of peers prepare to introduce and lead the discussion of: *Jesus of Montreal* (4/9) or *Children of Heaven* (5/6).  1) Prepare a fifteen minute presentation on the film and filmmaker that introduces the class to ways the film has been analyzed and interpreted and which prepare them to engage the film.  Somethings you might include: Tell us something about the filmmaker, their background and the sort of films they make. Put the film in historical context, perhaps talking about movements in the cinema at the time or events in the world the film responds to. Read review and report on the reception when the film was released. Look for later studies of the film, what do they say and did opinion change over time. If it is helpful to share an outline, printed quotes, or images, come prepare to do so. 2) Choose two or three brief scenes to view and analyze with the class, twenty to thirty minutes, and 3) lead a fifteen to twenty minute post-viewing discussion of the film, its themes, and effect. (30% of grade)  
   Doctoral Students: As a group, prepare to lead/teach two sessions. On 4/30, based on your reading of Martin and Ostwalt, eds, *Screening the Sacred*, prepare a twenty-to-thirty minute introduction to their approach and lead discussion of the Martin essay read by all students for a further twenty-to-thirty minutes. On 5/14, based on your reading of Lyden’s *Film as Religion*, prepare a twenty-to-thirty minute introduction to his work and lead discussion of the Lyden essay read by all students for a further twenty-to-thirty minutes. (30% of grade)
3. Research Paper: Write a ten-twelve page paper (doctoral students, fifteen-to-eighteen page) on one of the films viewed in class*.*  This paper should draw on research as well as your own viewing to put the film in its historical/cultural context, and offer a theological or religious interpretation of the film rooted in visual and narrative analysis. Draw both on your own close analysis of the film and on assigned and outside critical resources. Or, identify with the instructor a topical issue in the relationship of religion and film and focus your paper on research and reflection on that issue.  Due: Friday of Week Nine. Submit on Canvas. (40% of grade)

**ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION:**

Being consistently present for class is a baseline expectation. Appropriate participation demonstrates your preparation and engagement with reading, class presentations and discussion. Further, participation that is respectful of others is expected.  While disagreeing or challenging, we honor the other and do so in ways that contributes to rather than disrupts the learning process. Final grades may be adjusted in light of attendance and participation.