

# Syllabus: IST 3053, Religion and Film

Instructor: Jeffrey Mahan, Ph.D.

Winter 2021

## LEARNING GOALS:

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

1. a basic “film literacy,” the ability to recognize and interpret a movie’s visual composition, aural elements, and narrative structures.
2. an ability to theologically analyze film as a distinct form of religious art.
3. an 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. an ability to use film as evidence in thinking about the structure, practice, and world view of different religious traditions.

## REQUIREMENTS

1. Participate in all Canvas sessions by the assigned due date.
2. Read and be prepared to discuss assigned readings.
3. View and be prepared to discuss the assigned films.
4. 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 and 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. These films are not usually available for live streaming, so you will need to have – at least for a few months - a Netflix 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. It will strongly increase your ability to

analyze the films if you see them more than once. 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:**

Bordwell, David, Kirstin Thompson, and Jeff Smith, *Film Art*, 12<sup>th</sup> Edition, (2020) New York: McGraw Hill. This classic introduction to film study is lavishly illustrated and the examples and arguments are regularly updated. It is a bit pricy, depending on format it can run as high as \$125.00. You will find used, or text-book rental copies of the 11<sup>th</sup> edition, much cheaper. Your pagination will not quite match what I have listed, and you will not get some updates, but **it is fine to get the cheaper 11<sup>th</sup> edition**. If you shop online, you should be able to get a good used or digital copy in the range of \$30.00.

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. \$40.00.

Plus, some essays and review, links provided in Canvas.

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

Lyden, John C., *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2019) NY: New York University Press. 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. The updates are significant, get the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. \$25.00

Martin, Joel W. and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995. 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. \$27.00

Note: Unless otherwise noted, the costs for books given above are for paperbacks ordered through Amazon. There are typically also Kindle versions and used copies available for these texts.

### **ASSIGNMENTS, DUE DATES and GRADES:**

1. **Participation:** Appropriate participation is timely and demonstrates your preparation and engagement with reading, class presentations and discussion, and makes a substantive contribution to the discussion. At the end of each week, I will award up to three points for participation and often provide some feedback. You will find this in Speed Grader at the “Return to discussions” link. (30pts/30% of grade)

2. Close Analysis: Write a six-to-eight-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 visual and narrative form 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 one or two key scenes demonstrating how the images, narrative, and performances lead you to your interpretation. 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. *For many of you, this will be your first effort at written film analysis. I am not expecting this to be highly polished or reflect past film study. You are simply trying out the tools of analysis we are starting to develop. Relax and have fun trying your hand.* JM Due: (Feb 1) Monday of Week Five. Submit on Canvas. (10 pts/10% of grade)

3. Organize Discussion:

Masters Students: With a group of peers prepare to introduce and lead the discussion of *Jesus of Montreal* (Jan 21), *Hallelujah!* (Jan 28), *Children of Heaven* (Feb 18) or *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring* (March 4). 1) Prepare for posting a 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. Offer an interpretation of the film narrative and analyze a key scene. Read reviews 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? Forward the group presentation to [jmahan@iliff.edu](mailto:jmahan@iliff.edu) at least 48 hours in advance for posting in Canvas. 2) Separately, email discussion prompts to [jamahan@iliff.edu](mailto:jamahan@iliff.edu) including questions about the film as a whole, the way it engages religion, etc. Include a prompt that invites a visual and narrative analysis of at least one scene. Identify this scene, or any others you raise questions about, by its time location in the video. 3) Follow up in the Canvas discussion, responding to the class's reflection on the film and/or adding further insights from your research and engagement with the film. (30pts/30% of grade)

Doctoral Students: With peers, prepare to teach the class about Martin and Ostwalt's *Screening the Sacred* (Jan 10) **and** Lyden's *Film as Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (March 2). Email your presentation to [jmahan@iliff.edu](mailto:jmahan@iliff.edu) at least 48 hours in advance for posting in Canvas. Separately, email discussion question for your presentation. Include questions on the excerpt from this book that appears in *The Religion and Film Reader* (which the class will have read). Follow up in the Canvas discussion, responding to the class's reflection on the film and/or adding further insights from your research and engagement with the film (30pts/30% of grade)

4. 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 your own viewing as well as reflect research that 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. (30% of grade)

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

#### **Jan 4 - 8: Intro to Film and Religion**

- **Jan 4, Introductions and Syllabus review**
- **Jan 5, Reading discussion:** *Film Art*, part of Chapter 1, Film as Art: Creativity, Technology, and Business, pgs. 2 – 29 only, stop at the “Modes of Production” heading.
- **Jan 6, Reading discussion:** *Religion and Film Reader (RFR)*, Wright, “Religion and Film.” pgs. 438-444
- **Jan 7, Viewing Discussion,** *Calvary*, dir. John Michael McDonagh, (2014) Ireland (100 min)  
Note: After you have viewed the film and formed your own first impressions, search “Calvary, movie review” and you should find a selection of reviews of the film. Read at least two reviews, and consider whether and how they confirm, counter, or expand your own interpretation of the film.
- **Jan 8, Return to discussions**

#### **Jan 11 - 15: Content and Style**

- **Jan 12, 1:00 – 2:15PM, ZOOM**
- **Jan 13, Reading Discussion:** Schrader, “Transcendental Style,” link in Canvas  
*RFR*, Bird, “Religion in Film: Film as Hierophany,” pgs. 391-397
- **Jan 14, Viewing Discussion:** *Of Gods and Men*, dir. Xavier Beauvois (2010) France (120 min)
- **Jan 15, Return to discussions**

#### **Jan 18 - 22: Religious Concerns and Possibilities *and* Jesus and his displacements**

- **Jan 19, Reading discussion:** *Film Art*, Chapter 2, “The Significance of Film Form,” pgs. 50 – 70
- **Jan 20, Reading discussion:**  
*RFR*, Burnett, and Martell, “The Devil Cinema,” (1920) pgs. 32- 34  
*RFR*, Pope Pius XI, “Vigilanti Cura” (1936), pgs. 35 – 42  
*RFR*, Jump, “Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture” (1910) pgs. 14 – 24  
*RFR*, Grant, “If Christ Went to the Movies,” (1920), pgs. 27-31
- **Jan 21, Viewing Discussion:** *Jesus of Montreal*, dir. Denis Arcand (1989), Canada (115 min) Masters Student Group: Intro film and set discussion questions  
After viewing the film, read: Mahan, “Celluloid Savior: Jesus in the Movies,” posted on Canvas.
- **January 22, Return to discussions**

#### **Jan 25 - 29: Religion, Film, and the Construction of Race**

- **Jan 26, Reading Discussion:** *Film Art*, Chapter 3, “Narrative Form,” pgs. 72 – 110
- **Jan 27, Reading Discussion:**  
*RFR*, Weisenfeld, “Projecting Blackness” pg. 285-293  
*RFR*, Lee W. Breskin, “Inner View: Filmmakers in Conversation,” pgs. 257-260
- **Jan 28, Viewing Discussion:** *Hallelujah!*, dir. King Vidor (1929) USA (90 min) Masters Student Group: Intro film and set discussion questions
- **Jan 29, Return to discussions**

#### **Feb 1 – 5: Theological Approaches**

- **Feb 2, 1:00 – 2:15PM, ZOOM**
- **Feb 3, Due:** Close Analysis paper on *Babette’s Feast*, post on Canvas
- **Feb 3, Reading Discussion:** *Film Art*, Chap 4 “The Shot: Mise-en-Scene” 112 – 158
- **Feb 4, Viewing Discussion:** *Babette’s Feast*, dir. Gabriel Axel (1988) Denmark (102 min)  
 After you have viewed the film, read: Mary Elizabeth Podles, “Babette’s Feast: Feasting with Lutherans,” *Antioch Review* Summer 92, Issue 3. (Search the essay title in EBSCOhost at the library.)
- **Jan 5, Return to discussions**

#### **Feb 8 - 12: Religion in the Art House Film**

- **Feb 9, Reading Discussion:** *Film Art*, Chap 5, “The Shot: Cinematography” Pgs.159 – 215
- **Feb 10, Doctoral Student Presentation, and discussion on *Screening the Sacred***  
*RFR*, Martin, “Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film.” Pgs. 421-427
- **Feb 11, Viewing discussion:** *Dekalog*, view episode 1, “Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods” dir. Krysztof Kieslowski (1989) Poland (55 min)  
 After viewing the film and forming first impressions, read:  
*RFR*, Kieslowski, “Introduction to *Decalogue: The Ten Commandments*.” pgs. 219-224  
[The Decalogue Movie Review & Film Summary \(1988\) | Roger Ebert](#)
- **Feb12, Return to discussions**

#### **Feb 15 - 19: Muslim Film, 1**

- **Feb 16, Reading Discussion:** *Film Art*, Chapter 6, “The relationship of shot to shot: Editing,” pgs. 216 – 262
- **Feb 17, View and discuss:** Two brief videos on Islam
- **Feb 18, Viewing and Discussion:** *Children of Heaven*, dir. Majid Majidi, 1997, Iran (86 Min) Masters Students: Intro film and lead discussion  
 After Viewing the film and forming your own first impression, read: “Majid Majidi and the New Iranian Cinema,” *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol 12, No. 1, April 2008
- **Feb19, Return to discussions**

#### **Feb 22 - 26: Muslim Film, 2**

- **Feb 23, 1:00 – 2:15PM, ZOOM**

- **Feb 24, Reading and Discussion:** *Film Art*, Chapter 8, “Summary: Style and Film Form,” pgs 303 – 325.
- **Feb 25, Viewing and Discussion:** *A Separation*, dir. Asghar Farhadi (2011) Iran [Academy Award, Best Foreign Film, 2012] (123 min)  
After Viewing the film, read the posted NY Times article
- **Feb 26, Return to discussions**

### **March 1 – 5: Buddhist Film**

- **March 2, Doctoral student Presentation and Discussion:** *Film as Religion* RFR, Lyden “Film as Religion” pg. 416 – 420.
- **March 3, Reading and Discussion:**  
View: Keown, “Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction”  
RFR, Cho, Francisca, “Imagining Nothing and Imaging Otherness in Buddhist Films” Pgs. 398-406  
RFR, LaFleur, William R., “Suicide Off the Edge of Explicability: Awe in Ozu and Kore’eda,” pgs. 153-16.
- **March 4, Viewing and Discussion:** *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring*, dir. Ki-duk Kim, (2004) Korea (95 min) Masters Students: Intro film and lead discussion
- **March 5, Return to discussions**
- **March 5, Due:** Research Paper, post on Canvas

### **March 8 – 12: Schrader (again)**

- **March 9, Viewing and discussion (and instructor remarks):** *The Big Lebowski*, dir. Joel and Ethan Coen (1998) USA (119 min)
- **March 10, Closing Discussion.**