Faith, Film, and Culture / Summer 2011

June 1-24, 2011
Monday-Friday, 9:00 – 11:30 am (see exceptions in calendar)
Gardencourt 206
Film viewings: afternoons 1 p.m. (Hundley Hall, Gardencourt)

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course description
This is a course designed to introduce the student to ways of thinking theologically about contemporary popular film, the messages about religion and values films convey, and the cultural context of film production and viewing. Students will examine a variety of theoretical approaches to film interpretation and use these interpretive methods to explore the ways popular films depict such themes as the human condition, evil and suffering, transcendence, moral and religious redemption, and religious and cultural difference. The course will give special attention to the contributions of this visual and narrative medium to public debate on moral and religious issues in church and society.

goals and objectives
Students will
• Develop their capacity for attending closely to visual texts,
• Examine latent theological and religious meanings in cultural productions,
• Learn and apply a variety of critical methods of film interpretation and explore the relations between critical method and theological interpretation, and
• Improve in their ability to articulate a theological interpretation of film and culture.

books available for purchase
• Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, ed., Explorations in Theology and Film (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
• Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack, Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film (New York: Longman, 1989).

These and other books from which assignments are made are on reserve at the Ernest Miller White Library. Some readings may be posted on the CAMS course site.

requirements
1. Preparation and participation: You are asked to attend all class sessions, view all the required films for the course, and keep current in the assigned reading so that you may enter effectively into the class discussion. Your thoughtful contribution to class discussion will count as 15% of the final grade.

2. Theology and film journal: Students are to keep a journal recording their thinking as it develops in response to their viewing of films, their reading, and the class discussion. This journal may summarize significant themes arising in films and writing on films and should include your attempts at theological interpretation, using one or another of the critical methods discussed in the class. (Please use the prompting questions supplied on p. 9 of this syllabus: “Areas to explore.”) Students will be asked to read from their journals from time to time in class. The journal is to be handed in to the instructor on June 24 and will count toward 25% of the grade.

3. Film review: A short (600-900 word) review of the film The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada is due June 2 (those with extenuating circumstances may submit the review on June 3). Write for an audience interested in the intersection of faith, film, and culture. For models, see reviews in The Journal of Religion and Film (esp. Frederick J. Rut’s review of The Motorcycle Diaries, http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No1/Reviews/motorcycles.htm) or in The Christian Century. This assignment will count toward 5% of the grade.
4. **Approaches to film interpretation paper:** Students will write a short (2-4 page, double spaced) paper outlining one of the methods of film interpretation outlined by Bywater and Sobchack in *Introduction to Film Criticism* (humanist, auteurist, genre, social science, historical, ideological/theoretical). The paper will serve as the basis for an in-class presentation and discussion of methodological options in interpreting film. **Due June 13.** This assignment will count toward 25% of the grade.

5. **Theological analysis of a film:** Students are to write a 6-8 page paper utilizing a combination of textual and contextual methods of interpretation discussed in class and in the assigned reading to arrive at a theological reading of a film of their own choosing. They should also prepare a short presentation of this analysis (no more than five minutes) for class discussion on the final class meeting day. **Essay due June 22; presentation on June 24.** The paper will count as 30% of the final grade.

All papers must be submitted electronically to the instructor’s email inbox on or before the due date. **Papers submitted late, when no extension has been granted, will be penalized one letter-grade increment for every day past the due date, up to ten days.**

**Film List**

*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005; 121 min.)
*Supplement: The Motorcycle Diaries* (Walter Salles, 2004; 128 min.)
*Jesus of Montreal* (Denys Arcand, 1989; 120 min.)
*Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993; 101 min.)
*Awakenings* (Penny Marshall, 1990; 121 min.)
*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004; 108 min.)
*The Pursuit of Happyness* (Gabriele Muccino, 2006; 117 min.)
*Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Woody Allen, 1989; 107 min.)
*Do The Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989; 120 min.)
*Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004; 113 min.)

**Note on screenings:** Films will be shown at 1:00 p.m. on the weekday prior to the class session on which they will be discussed.

**Academic Honesty:**

All work turned in to the instructor is expected to be the work of the student whose name appears on the assignment. Any borrowing of the ideas or the words of others must be acknowledged by quotation marks (where appropriate) and by citation of author and source. (Please use standard forms of citation as detailed in *The Chicago Manual of Style* or *Kate Turabian, Manual for Writers*.) Students unfamiliar with issues relating to academic honesty can find help from the staff in the Academic Support Center and should make use of the available resources at an early date, since violations of seminary policy on academic honesty can lead to a failing grade for the course.

**Special Accommodations:**

Students requiring accommodation for a physical or learning disability should be in contact with the Director of the Academic Support Center (ASC; kmapes@lpts.edu) within the first few days of the course and should speak with the instructor as soon as possible to arrange appropriate adjustments. Students with environmental or other sensitivities that may affect their learning are also encouraged to speak with the instructor.

**Inclusive Language:**

The use of inclusive language in course work is a policy of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. Direct quotations from theological texts and translations of the Bible do not have to be altered to conform to this policy. In your own writing, however, avoid language for people that leaves out part of the population or
perpetuates stereotypes. Do not assume masculine gender when the gender of the person is unknown. When referring to God, you are encouraged to use a variety of images and metaphors. See http://www.lpts.edu/Academic_Resources/ASC/avoidinggenderbiasinlanguage.asp.

Calendar of Topics and Assignments

I. INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

**June 1**

**Avenues of Approach: Interpreting Film as Theological Reflection**

- Required reading:
  - Marsh and Ortiz 9-34
  - Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis,” in D. Brown, S. Davaney, K. Tanner, ed., *Converging on Culture*
  - Elwood, “Perceiving Evil” (posted on the course site)

**II. ATTENDING TO THEOLOGICAL AND RELIGIOUS THEMES**

**June 2**

**Toward the Resting Place: The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada**

- **Film review due**
- Required reading:
  - Marsh and Ortiz 35-43
  - Bywater and Sobchack ch. 1 and 2 (give more attention to ch. 2)
- Further reading:
  - Marsh and Ortiz 59-71
- Supplemental viewing:
  - *The Motorcycle Diaries (Diarios de Motocicleta)*

**June 3**

**Enacting the Christ in Jesus of Montreal**

- Required reading:
  - Marsh and Ortiz 115-139
  - Bywater and Sobchack ch. 3 and 4
- Further reading:
  - Peter Malone “Jesus on Our Screens,” in John R. May, ed., *New Image of Religious Film* 57-71
  - Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine* 113-129
  - Peter Malone, “Edward Scissorhands: Christology from a Suburban Fairytale,” in Marsh and Ortiz 73-86

**June 6**

**Redeeming Time in Groundhog Day**

- Required reading:
  - Marsh and Ortiz 155-165
  - Bywater and Sobchack ch. 5 and 6

**June 7**

**Out of Isolation: Depicting Redemption in Awakenings**

- Required reading:
  - Marsh and Ortiz 97-113
  - Bywater and Sobchack ch. 7 and Appendix (review quickly)
- Further reading:
  - Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine* 205-233

**June 8**

**Parables of Love, Loss, Memory: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind**

- Required reading:

Further reading:
Brannon M. Hancock, “Film Review: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*,” *Journal of Religion and Film*, http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/

III. RELIGION, HISTORY, AND THE POLITICS OF VIEWING

**June 9**

**Power, Evil, and (Superfamily) Values: *Spider-Man 2***

**TH**

Required reading:


Supplemental viewing:
*The Incredibles*

**June 13**

**Interpreting Film: Discussion of Critical Method**

**M**

*Student presentations: Film interpretation paper due*

Required reading:
By now, all students should have made their way through Bywater and Sobchack

**June 14**

**Chasing the Good Life: *The Pursuit of Happyness***

**T**

Required reading:
Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* 1-10, 193-221


Read a sampling of the following reviews/discussions:

“‘The Pursuit of Happyness’; Winner! People's Award for Best Spiritual Film of 2006” (http://www.beliefnet.com/story/210/story_21078_1.html)


Further reading:

IV. EXPLORING MORAL WORLDS

**June 15**

**Ethics and Entanglements (Vision, Truth, and Faith): *Crimes and Misdemeanors***

**W**

Required reading:

**June 16**

**More on Theological Interpretation**

**TH**

Required reading:

Further reading:
Robert K. Johnston, Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue 151-172

**June 20-21**  
**Writing Days: class does not meet**

**June 22**  
**Race, Otherness, and the City in Do The Right Thing**  
**Theological analysis paper due**  
Required reading:  
Douglas Kellner, Media Culture ch. 5  
Further reading:  
Margaret R. Miles, Seeing and Believing 157-167  
Sharon Willis, High Contrast 158-188

**June 23**  
**Race, Otherness, and the City in Crash**  
**Required reading:**  
Douglas Kellner, Media Culture ch. 5  
**Further reading:**  
Joel W. Martin, “Redeeming America: Rocky as Ritual Racial Drama,” in Martin and Ostwalt, ed., Screening the Sacred, 125-133

**June 24**  
**Conclusions: Discussion of Our Work**  
**Theology and film journal due**
Select Bibliography for Theological Themes in Contemporary Film

Books:


**Internet sites:**


Mostly bibliographical in focus, but includes links to reviews and to several databases.

*The Internet Movie Database:* [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). A site that supplies a wealth of information, plot summaries, cast and full credits, and links to reviews.

*Jesus: real to reel:* [http://post.queensu.ca/~rsa/Real2Reel/rearleel.htm](http://post.queensu.ca/~rsa/Real2Reel/rearleel.htm). Devoted to studies of Jesus through film, this site also features links to a variety of resources on the topic of religion and film.

*The Journal of Religion and Film:* [http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwjrf/](http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwjrf/). An online journal with articles and reviews, mostly written from a religious studies perspective.
Some Questions for Theological Interpretation of Films

I. Religion

Is religion treated in the film? Explicitly or implicitly?
In what form is religion depicted? As institutional, communal or individual? With attention to particularities of belief and/or practice?
How are understandings of or attitudes toward religion conveyed or elicited?
Does the film display religious dimensions (such as symbol, ritual, or myth) outside the context of any explicit reference to religion or religious practice?

II. Theology

Does the film advance a particular religious or theological vision?
Does it disclose a perspective on God, the sacred, or transcendence?
   On the human condition or predicament?
   On the nature of community?
   On redemption or liberation?
What attitudes toward nature or history are communicated in the film?
Does the film convey messages about the goal or consummation of history? About the capacity of human beings to affect historical outcomes?

III. Values

Are particular values advanced in the film?
Are certain values called into question?
By what techniques does the film advocate or denigrate particular values?
Are certain values or social arrangements assumed as normative?
How are gender roles and relations, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class depicted?

IV. Contextual readings

Are there continuities between themes addressed in the film and those taken up in other contemporary films?
To what experience(s) of the contemporary cultural moment might one relate the film’s treatment of religion and values?
To what matters of contemporary debate, concern, or anxiety does the film speak?
Are pertinent issues ignored?
Does the film address a particular audience? marginalize particular viewers?
Theology and film journal entries
Areas to explore

1. The film narrative
   • What aspects of this film especially invite theological interpretation?

2. The film’s context
   • How does what I know about the production of this film, its reception, and other elements of its context influence my theological reading?

3. Filmic elements
   • What (new) details of the film (and of the tactics of film making) am I noticing in this film? How do these details contribute to the film’s meaning or impact?

4. Criticism
   • What interpretive tools am I using as I interpret this film? (Aim to try a variety of tools, lenses through this course.)

5. The interpreter
   • From what position am I viewing this film (and reflecting and writing on it)?