

RN 203

Fall, 2014

Office Hours:

T 9:30-10:45AM, 1:00-2:00PM, W 2:30-3:30PM, Th 9:30-10:30AM and by appointment

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RELIGION AND FILM: THE PLAY AND DIS-PLAY OF THE INEFFABLE IN THE SANCTUARIES AND MARKETS EVERYDAY LIFE

The links between religion and art in, most cultures and religious communities are unquestionable. Comparably clear are links between the cognitive and the commercial, as we will discover in some of our “field trips” back stage to where these links get financially evaluated and monetized, in rating systems and in festivals where they get advertised.

In some religions, such as Judaism and Islam, the ineffable is considered just that, so untranslatable into any form of representation. The prohibitions against idolatry are so powerful that this would seemingly inhibit the use of representation, construed as ‘graven images.’ Still, as in liturgy and in spiritual poetry, where so many words can be utilized to express how it is impossible to speak of the Divine, so in graphics, in manuscript illuminations, even in sculpture, there are fictions by which artists can protect themselves from charges of sacrilege while communicating their spiritual enthusiasms and visions to their audiences and patrons. The efforts of artists to express even the inexpressible in religious themes, and the efforts of religious leaders

to promote their own verities and visions by utilizing the arts do not seem to subside.

With film, we might think, the links are not so self-evident, in part because the cinematic technologies are so much a product of the same global forces that vanquished religion from many of its reality defining roles and pushed it to the periphery. Film is an artistic medium whose huge upfront financial investments would seem to justify some hard-nosed financial planning. The data would show that while Poland and Denmark, for example, are at the opposite extremes for popular piety and religious behaviors, such as frequent church attendance, both are countries in which there is significant film production and film consumption. There seems to be little correlation between the popularity of religion and the quantity of religious themes that makes it to the big screen. The “cinematic urge” for giving expression to public knowledge and experience and reflecting on that that society’s core values with celluloid and digital cyphers, and whatever else contributes to the popularity and marketability of films, is far more complex.

In this seminar we will examine affinities between religion and new forms of visualization, primarily as exhibited in films. Those films are generally, but now always, produced by teams of people in corporate settings called studios with motives to achieve monetary profits from pleasuring others in ways that they believe those others are prepared to pay for and/or increased support for ideas and worldviews that the filmmakers want to express. We will examine how spiritual sentiments, commitments to faith, the plausibility of social prejudices, and the regulation of erotic boundaries are expressed in various films and how religion is presented in films as problem solving or disruptive, in its various functions. These include teaching us how to explore celestial and quotidian realities and regulating the most important sets of social relations, such as those between insiders and outsiders, between genders, and between people on different levels of hierarchy.

This course is *not* what many good academic courses on religion and film are. It is not a course on how to make films, on how to view films, on how to write about films, nor on how to achieve competence in the history of film criticism, *per se*. At times, though, it might call for thinking about any of these issues and even utilizing materials, like film criticism, an intramural literature that other courses on religion and film might more readily utilize. It is a course that will challenge groups of students and a teacher to review a small number of films produced in less than a century out of all the centuries of human civilization. We will try, initially to identify some of the themes expressed in relation to what we call religion but also such themes seems that have and draw from roots that are far deeper in the history of that civilization.

Our task will include hearing and even “seeing” the voices, to use a term from the Jewish Bible. But we also will observe and reflect on how cinematic presentations of religious ideas and experiences, more powerfully, perhaps, than by any other creative media, are able to point our attention to the “silences,” as philosopher and film critic, Stanley Cavell teaches us. Influenced to some measure by the literary criticism of Northrop Frye, we will pay special attention to *inhibition* and *disinhibition*, to *sublimation* and *catharsis*, processes that are most often expressed in dramatic, religious, or psychological terms but have major implications for social and political processes. We ignore these implications at great risk. Watching together, as a group of learners, and discussing a few good films might, therefore, provide us with more than pleasure.

Readings for this course will begin gradually as we experience films together and develop a shared vocabulary for describing that experience. All readings will be sent to you by email providing sufficient time for you to read and utilize the ideas that you incorporate from the reading into your ability to absorb more of

what the film communicates with you and how it does so. Additional reading may be recommended, in accordance with class developments and the manner in which students interests cluster.

A proper learning environment must be based upon trust, as well as effective communication between students and the instructor and students among themselves. In this regard, we will all be “co-learners.” Various studies, as well as my own experience, lead me to believe that students get more satisfaction from their work and learn better if it is reviewed in some framework of a group. Courses on film present a special dilemma in the set amount of time needed to review the primary sources, the actual films, not to mention the background reading material that elevates our perception of film making and film consumption as well as placing films in the context of the history of film and the films specific cultural context. The availability of films through BU libraries and via online rental agencies influences, in part, my selection of films for us to study. Students are expected, whenever possible, to view films with their classmates in advance. At the same time we need a collective experience of those films such that segments of many films will be screened, in part, during class times. Your study groups, will provide this added function of securing and viewing the films.

RULES

Timely and critical viewing of assigned films, and any attached readings, the entire week’s assignments is required for Tuesday afternoon’s meeting. Regular and active class attendance is required. Reasons for excusable absences must be documented by email. Please place RN330-2014, no space, on the Subject Line of all of your correspondences with me. This will automatically filter it into a special folder preventing it from getting lost in the huge quantity of my daily e-mails. You do otherwise at great risk!

The course will require ongoing personal reflections on the major issues and challenging questions that you confront in the films and readings in general. You will be expected to meet with me at office hours at least once in the first weeks of classes and again at the end of the semester. You are encouraged to keep me informed, on a regular basis, of your progress and of any problems that develop with your work. You are also expected to inform yourself of University rules governing proper behavior and responsibility in regard to your fellow students, me, and other stakeholders, enjoying, as they do, the privileges of serious education. That said, cheating is not a competitive sport. It is the precious right of people, who live in a community, to trust each other. In order to uphold that trust, the policy of zero tolerance, for any forms of cheating and plagiarism must be enforced. Please consult the appropriate student manuals, available online, for more information on this.

UNCONVENTIONAL LEARNING PATTERNS AND PLURALISM

Students, with any unconventional learning patterns should discuss these with me directly. Special accommodations will be made to enable students of all learning styles to learn and to share, with focus on the content of study in an environment of high intellectual and moral standards that not only analyzes pluralism, but also practices it. Included in this concern to sustain a pluralistic environment will be the tone of conversation that respects clear thinking, even when that leads people in different directions, and forms of expression that dignify those who speak and those who listen at every moment.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

I have never experienced stress and worry to be stimulus for serious learning. Neither have I seen any research data that would make me feel otherwise. My goal is to support an environment that supports achievement through orderly learning, but without stress. To encourage you to keep up with the reading, to absorb, organize and retain the material in creative ways, to preserve an ongoing connection with me, and to provide me with “real time” feed back on the effectiveness of my communication and conveyance of ideas, you will be asked to do several different types of writing, well paced at different intervals of the semester: for 6 weeks a one page comment paper; on one occasion to be determined by your film preferences, a 2-3 page film review, and one carefully structured research project, with a 2 page proposal due around the middle of the semester and reviewed with me followed by an oral presentation for 3-5 minutes at the end of the semester. There will be no written paper nor exam required in this course.

Submit a weekly 1page statement, including 2-3 questions and 2-3 brief, but thoughtful comments on the coming week’s assignments. The questions and comments should demonstrate, in non-trivial ways, that you have viewed the film and done your reading assignments in a serious way. These 1 pagers should not take more than 10-15 minutes to write. Any part of these papers that extends more than 25% into a second page will not be read. As stated above, they should be sent only as emails, not as attachments, and they should be sent with RN203-2014 on the subject line so that they can be easily received and returned. They will be due no later than midnight on Sunday night, so that I have ample time to read, absorb into my preparations, and comment if need be. Grades will vary from 5 for excellent, 4 for very good, 3 for ample, 2 for confused but earnest effort and 1 for incomplete. At my discretion, students with 2 on a paper might be given the opportunity to re-write. The deadline will be rigorously upheld. Recognizing that

there are emergencies or unanticipated disruptions, each student will be allowed 3 opportunities in the semester to submit their papers late, but must provide an explanation that does not include anything that could be anticipated, and in which poor organization of one's time is the real problem. No excused late papers will be accepted later than midnight Monday night, the night before class. As another concession to reduce students' ample worry and stress, only 6 submissions will be required between week 2 and week 11, a total of 10 weeks. You may on three occasions miss submissions but please keep your own records on the number of your submissions. I most certainly will have to penalize those who do not fill their quotas.

A variant on the comment papers, for any time after the third week will be one film review of 3-5 pages, as you might write for a newspaper, providing moviegoers with information -- not too much nor too little -- to make their own decisions on whether to see a particular film. You should refer to the criteria of at least one film theory expert listed in our readings. You might establish some other reason that you are called upon to evaluate a film. We will read film reviews in class and talk about it as a genre of writing. By the second class on September 9th, you will review the list of films that we will be seeing in class, choose three, and write in descending order the three films that you would like to review and why. Submission requirements for the film reviews follow the rules for your comment papers. For the week on which you write a review, you may not submit a comment paper.

Personalization to a healthy degree is a motive for good learning. It is also generally a motive for taking one course or another. To some measure, I suggest that you keep thinking about this without allowing new ways of personalization to be thwarted by old commitments. It is in that regard that I will describe the last course requirement. Each student will engage in research on an issue, a development, an aphorism or image, an interpretation with which

she/he feels a strong personal identification or rejects with particular vehemence. In preparing an oral presentation of 5-7 minutes, each student will read a book and an article, generally an article that questions or qualifies the main point of the book that you chose about a film or type of films. The book requirement is attached to another requirement: even if you are prepared to buy a book online, it is a course requirement that you visit Mugar, or some other library with open stacks, and explore this venerable, yet somewhat declining institution, and that you partake in the singular pleasure of “reading shelves.” The goal will be to provide you with depth and/or comparative perspectives. Wikipedia articles should not be used but most certainly should not be included in bibliographies. In organizing the presentation, please prepare a 2-3 page proposal that will include the three following components: a clearly stated hypothesis, in less than 50 words, which should begin with, “I believe that...” and end with “...answers my question.” In an additional 200 words, you will develop and elaborate upon the hypothesis. The third part of this preparatory exercise is to present and annotate your bibliography. The annotations should include an explanation for why you chose this book and article over any other. Students will return this proposal with whatever revisions I have proposed, along with the original marked up version, at least three days before their oral presentations. Graduate students and students in the School of Theology will have special requirements in accordance with their individual interests and following consultations with me.

6 Weekly 1 page of questions and comments
30 points

1 3-5 page film review incorporating theoretical issues
15 points

Research hypothesis, development, and annotated bibliography
25 points

Oral presentation
15 points

Attendance and class participation
15 points

Allow me to emphasize: readings for the week must be completed and ready for discussion by the Tuesday session. Diligence in this preparation will be considered as part of your class participation grade.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION FOR RENTING AND STREAMING FILMS THAT WILL BE VIEWED AND STUDIED IN CLASS PREPARATION AND DURING CLASS

Paid streaming

Amazon Instant Video

- You can buy and rent videos from Amazon Instant Video on your web browser or compatible device.
- With an eligible Amazon Prime membership, you have access to thousands of Prime Instant Video titles at no additional cost.
- Without a Prime membership, renting costs range from \$2-\$5. Buying varies per movie.
- When renting a movie, you will have 15 to 30 days to start watching and 48 hours to finish watching it.

Netflix

\$7,99 a month for unlimited streaming.

Huluplus

\$7,99 a month for unlimited streaming.

Youtube.com

Some movies are available on Youtube.com. Go to Youtube.com and search for the movie title. Youtube will let you stream videos.

GENERAL AND REQUIRED READINGS

This list is to help you place your own interests in perspective and will help you choose your special research project. The short readings that may be assigned as our exploration deepens must be read for discussion by the Tuesday session. These readings will be distributed to students a week prior to their discussion in class.

Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*
Toward a Psychology of Art
Visual Thinking
Art and Visual Perception

Margret Dikovitskaya, *The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*

E.H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*

Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*

Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word*

Jeffrey Smith, "Hollywood Theology: The Commodification of Religion in 20th Century Films"

Richard Walsh, "Bible Movies"

Ryan Niemiec, "Understanding Death Attitudes: The Integration of Movies, Positive Psychology, and Meaning Management"

Allison Smith, "Jews and Jewishness in Films"

Rubina Ramji, "Muslims in the Movies"

Julien Fielding, "Redemption and Film"

Christian Haunton, *Imaging God in the Movies*

Wendy Wright, *Religion, Spirituality and Film*

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week of September 2

Introduction: “Seeing the voice of God:” The oral, the aural, and the visual in the religious experience and its “Visualizing” potential in film

Psalm 29, The Politics of the Awesome and the Awful

Films: *Earthquake*, Charlton Heston
Noah

Week of September 9

From Shtetl to Hollywood, religious and cultural roots

Jazz Singer is film, unmuted and where it all began, a play and display of the sacred and transgression, of legacy and new beginnings leads Al Jolson to discover his voice, renewal and return, affirming identity through engagement with the “others,” some powerful and some threatening.

Films: *Jazz Singer* (Al Jolson, 1927)
Jazz Singer II (Neil Diamond)

Week of September 16

Films: *The Messiah* (Iranian Film)
Doubt, (2008, Shanley)

Week of September 23

Ten Commandments on the big screen

Read *Exodus*, chaps. 19-20, particularly *Exodus* 20: 15 and a description of at least one other public gathering, as described in the Jewish Bible, the Christian Bible, or the Koran, at which time speeches were made.

Film: *Ten Commandments* (1923 and 1956, Cecille DeMille), *History of the World, Part I*, (1981, Mel Brooks)

Week of September 23

Dis-play of anguish

Read scriptural versions of events surrounding Jesus being crucified.

Films: *Last Temptation of Christ* (Scorsese); Film: *Life of Brian* (Python),

Week of September 30

Dis-play of anguish, II

Films: *Jeanne d'Arc* (Luc Besson, 1999)
Taste of Cherry, (Kiarostami, 1997, Iran)

Martin and Ostland, *Screening the Sacred*, introduction, “Seeing the sacred on Screen”

Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Polemical Introduction and First Essay

Week of October 7

Displaying a Hindu Goddess

From Hollywood to Bollywood, religious and cultural roots

Film: *Devi* (Ray)

Dwyer, “Hinduism” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*

Week of October 21

Films: *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* (Bae Yong-Kyuun)

Rashomon (Kurosawa, 1950)

Francisca Cho, “Imagining Nothing and Otherness in Buddhist Films”

Week of October 28

Films: *The Bicycle Thief* (De Sica, 1948)

Week of November 4

Films: *Dybbuk* (Ansky); *The Exorcist* (Friedkin)

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Week of November 11

Film: *Psycho* (Hitchcock)

“Shall These Bones Live? The Problem of Bodies in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*”

Week of November 18

Film: *Annie Hall* (Allen)
Scenes from a Marriage (Bergman, 1973)

Week of November 25

Films: *Life is Beautiful* (Benigni)
The Great Dictator (Chaplin, 1940)

December 2

Class Presentations

A closing word on documentaries and docu-dramas: 'Truth' in
Film and Religion

December 9

Class presentations

Surprise last film