Faith and Film

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Course Description
This course uses the medium of film as an avenue for reflection upon the meaning and truth of the Christian faith as well as its communication and embodiment in contemporary cultures. The course uses a broad cross-section of film to open up creative windows for understanding and communicating the Christian faith, and it assists the student in thinking critically about film from a variety of theoretical and theological perspectives. The course combines film screenings and discussion with accompanying readings and lectures.

Course Aims
By the end of this course, students should:

- Understand the history of the relationship between religion and film as well as some of the more important approaches to the interface of theology and film;
- Be able to think critically about film from a variety of theoretical and theological perspectives, especially in relation to the existential faith claims film communicates both explicitly and implicitly;
- Be able to carry out a sophisticated theological analysis of a film.

Required Readings

- Downing, Crystal, Salvation from Cinema (Routledge, 2016), 1-73 (on blackboard).
- hooks, bell, Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies (Routledge,), 86-94, 123-134, 216-251 (on blackboard).
- Johnston, Robert K, Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue, Revised and Expanded (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).
- Marsh, Clive, Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004).
- Stone, Bryan P., Faith and Film (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

Quizzes
Short quizzes will be given at the beginning of class during the first 10-15 minutes only on the reading almost every week (see course schedule). If you are late, you will not be able to take the quiz, and a grade of 0 will be recorded. You may drop the lowest quiz.
**Reading Responses**

Class attendance is required at all sessions listed in the course schedule. If, in the professor’s opinion, the student is missing too many class sessions or is not actively participating, this can affect the student’s final grade — sometimes seriously. Punctual attendance is especially crucial in a class of this nature, since a basic platform of the course is that film should be watched together and reflected on together to have optimal theological benefit. Please be on time! No one likes it when people come in late to watch a film. Please consult with the professor ahead of time if you believe you will have difficulties in this area. Note: talking, texting, phone calls, or use of any electronic equipment are forbidden during all film screenings.

**Class Participation**

Class attendance is required at all sessions listed in the course schedule. If, in the professor’s opinion, the student is missing too many class sessions or is not actively participating, this can affect the student’s final grade — sometimes seriously. Punctual attendance is especially crucial in a class of this nature, since a basic platform of the course is that film should be watched together and reflected on together to have optimal theological benefit. Please be on time! No one likes it when people come in late to watch a film. Please consult with the professor ahead of time if you believe you will have difficulties in this area. Note: talking, texting, phone calls, or use of any electronic equipment are forbidden during all film screenings.

**Office of Disability Services**

The School of Theology at Boston University is committed to equal access for students with disabilities. If you are a student with a disability or believe you might have a disability that requires accommodations, please contact the Office for Disability Services (ODS) at 617-353-3658 to coordinate any reasonable accommodation requests. That office is located at 19 Deerfield Street on the second floor. If you have a specific disability and require accommodations in this class, please let me know early in the semester so that appropriate accommodations can be made. You must provide me with a letter of needed accommodations prepared by the Office of Disability Services.

Accommodation letters must be delivered to me in a timely fashion (within two weeks of the date on the letter and not later than two weeks before any major examination). Please note that accommodations will not be provided absent an official letter of accommodation.

**Late Policy**

No papers will be accepted late, and quizzes may only be taken at the times when they are scheduled.

**Academic Misconduct**

The STH Academic Code of Conduct may be found on the STH website at: www.bu.edu/sth/academic/academic-conduct. All students are required to familiarize themselves with this code, its definitions of misconduct, and its sanctions. Students should especially familiarize themselves with the section on plagiarism.

**Inclusive Language**

All students are urged to use inclusive language, images, and metaphors in both their speaking and writing.
Movie Précis

Each student will be asked to write a “Movie Précis” on two movies of his or her choice during the semester. The films should be selected on the basis of their importance or potential in illuminating the contemporary human predicament, shaping values, or critically evaluating and communicating the symbols, practices, and beliefs of the Christian faith. See course schedule for due dates. Each movie précis should be 8-10 pages, double-spaced, and should include the following. Please indicate each of the four headings in your paper so that it is clear both to you and the reader when you are doing each of the four parts:

Part 1: Introduction: In one paragraph (or brief bullets in no more than 1/4 of a page), provide all pertinent data such as title, date, language/country, genre, color or B/W, production company, director, producer, primary actors, and rating.

Part 2: Context: (1-2 pages) What is the (a) cinematic context (other movies by same director or producer, remakes, parallel movies and (b) historical, social, and cultural context (what was going on in the culture of the time?)

Part 3: Film Analysis (2-3 pages)
   (a) Plot & Character Development: (no more than 1 page) What is the main theme or central premise of the film in brief? For example, is there a protagonist who wants something? What are the obstacles causing conflict and what is the outcome or resolution? Is there an underlying subtext (a hidden agenda or message repeated subtly)? Trace the film’s development of the central character(s) throughout the course of the film (e.g., paralysis, growth, decline, fragmentation, redemption).
   (b) Cinematic analysis: How does the world of the film projected on screen contribute to the story-telling and to the viewer’s experience? Here you may want to discuss such items as lighting, camera angles, sound, sound editing, composition, spacing, depth of field, distance of shots, set, props, costumes, art direction, etc. You might also want to consider how the editing of the film contributes to the story-telling and to the viewer’s experience. The important thing here is to interpret the key religious or existential issue(s), question(s), or claim(s) you have identified with reference to how it (they) surface in the film “as a piece of film” (i.e. through imagery, editing, symbols, mise-en-scène, music, lighting, camera work, etc.). Also, be sure to provide evidence through appropriate citations and bibliography of your research.

Part 4: Theological Analysis (2-3 pages)
   (a) Identify the issue to be considered. What faith claim(s) or existential/religious issue(s) does the film communicate, challenge, or engage either implicitly or explicitly and how does the film do this? Some of these faith claims might have to do with worldview (nature of ultimate reality, God, universe, human nature, knowledge, nature of evil, history, etc.), ethics (values of life, death, wealth, sex, gender, race, justice, relations with neighbor, environment, etc.), or perhaps meaning and beauty.
   (b) Engage the issue theologically. Having identified the issue, construct a dialogue between the film’s implicit or explicit faith claims and those of the Christian faith for the purposes of mutual critique and clarification. Here you need to show that you have done theological research in addition to cinematic research complete with appropriate citations and bibliographic references. Draw upon Christian theological, ethical, or scriptural resources in considering the claim(s), issue(s), or question(s) raised by the film. Consider also whether the film utilizes any symbols that have theological significance for reconstructing or communicating the Christian faith.

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1 My appreciation to Prof. John Castelein, Lincoln Christian Seminary, from whom I have adapted this assignment.
(c) Communicating the Gospel. It may be useful to consider whether there are obstacles or advantages of entering into dialogue with this film for the purposes of carrying out a ministry of evangelism, liturgy, preaching, counseling, religious education, or spiritual formation. If so, feel free to discuss these at the end of the paper.

Grading

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<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage of Final Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>7 Quizzes</td>
<td>25% of the final grade</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Reading Responses</td>
<td>15% of the final grade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Movie précis (2 x 30% each)</td>
<td>60% of the final grade</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
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Course Calendar

Contact
(1997, PG, Science-Fiction)
“I believe”
(What is the nature of religious faith in a secular world?)

Thursday, Jan 21

Beasts of the Southern Wild
(2012, PG-13, Drama)
(The thin line between creation, fall, and redemption)

Thursday, Jan 28

Quiz #1: Johnston (1-86), Stone (1-38)

Jesus of Montreal
(1989, R, Drama)
“Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord”
(What does it mean to speak of Jesus as the “Christ”?)

Thursday, Feb 4

Quiz #2: Downing (1-73) [Note: Stone 39-49 is optional]

Risen (Free pre-screening at AMC Boston Common, Time TBA)
(2016, PG-13, Drama)
“On the third day he rose again”

Thursday, Feb 11

Stone: 50-66. No quiz and no further reading is scheduled during this week to assist students in focusing on preparing the first film précis.

The Gospel According to St Matthew
(1966, G, Religious)
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary”

(Who was Jesus of Nazareth and what was his message?)

Thursday, Feb 18

Film Précis #1 is due at 5:00pm by uploading paper to blackboard.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pan's Labyrinth</strong></td>
<td>Thursday, Feb 25</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2006, R, Drama)</td>
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<td>“Monsters and the Monstrous in Film”: Yara Gonzalez-Justiniano</td>
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<td>2-page response paper to Through a Lens Darkly (Suchcki). Due by 5pm, submitted to Blackboard.</td>
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<td><strong>Romero</strong></td>
<td>Thursday, Mar 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1995, R, Drama)</td>
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<td>“Suffered under Pontius Pilate”</td>
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<td>(For the Christian, what is the proper relationship between faith and politics?)</td>
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<td>Quiz #3: Stone (67-80); Johnston (87-134)</td>
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<td><strong>Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring</strong></td>
<td>Thursday, Mar 17</td>
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<td>(2003, R, Drama)</td>
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<td>An engagement with Buddhism</td>
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<td>Quiz #4: Stone (81-91); Johnston (135-184); Conroy; King</td>
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<td><strong>One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest</strong></td>
<td>Thursday, Mar 24</td>
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<td>(1975, R, Drama)</td>
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<td>“He was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended to the dead.”</td>
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<td>(How does Jesus’ death relate to our salvation?)</td>
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<td>2-page response paper to Cinema and Sentiment (Marsh). Due by 5pm, submitted to Blackboard</td>
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<td><strong>Student’s Choice on Social Injustice/Justice</strong></td>
<td>Thursday, Mar 31</td>
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<td>Ideas: Straight Outta Compton, Selma, Gandhi, Boys Don’t Cry, Philadelphia, Do the Right Thing, City of God, Crash, Hotel Rwanda, Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, District 9, 12 Years a Slave, The Color Purple, Fruitvale Station, Dear White People, Malcolm X, Race (new release)</td>
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<td>Quiz #5: Stone (92-110); “South and North American Perspectives,” in The Religion and Film Reader, 233-293; bell hooks (86-94, 123-134, 216-251).</td>
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THE MISSION
(1986, PG, Drama)
“The holy catholic church”
(What is the nature and purpose of the church?)

No reading is scheduled during this week to assist students in focusing on preparing the second film précis.

THURSDAY, APR 7

BABETTE’S FEAST
(1987, G, Drama)
“The Communion of Saints”
(What do Christians mean in speaking of a “communion of saints”?)

Film Précis #2 is due at 5:00pm by uploading to blackboard.

THURSDAY, APR 14

DEAD MAN WALKING
(1995, R, Drama)
“The forgiveness of sins”
(What do we mean by the forgiveness of sins? How does God forgive? How should we forgive?)

Quiz #6: Stone (133-166), Johnston (185-237)

THURSDAY, APR 21

SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION
(1994, R, Drama)
“The resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting”
(What is the nature of Christian hope? For what do we hope?)

Quiz #7: Stone (167-189); Johnston (238-290)

THURSDAY, APR 28

INDEPENDENT FILM VIEWING
By March 17, students should on their own watch Pulp Fiction and Forrest Gump.
By March 31, students should on their own watch Daughters of the Dust.