

History 3910
Film and Religion
Fall 2006

Dr. Colleen McDannell

Tuesdays and Thursdays 10:45 – 12:05 OSH 231

Contact me by phone 581-4748 not by email. Leave a message on my answer machine.

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 2:00 to 4:00 or by appointment in Carlson Hall 304

TA: Jared Anderson

Religion is a complex and vibrant phenomenon that influences every aspect of society and culture. This advanced undergraduate seminar focuses on the interactions between religion and American popular culture. Specifically it asks, how do commercial filmmakers (collectively called “Hollywood”) understand religion? How does Hollywood call on religion to articulate various social, aesthetic, and economic concerns? Which social and cultural changes make their impact on the movies?

This course will also consider how movies both create and maintain our culturally shared notions of what religion “is.” How do the movies define “good” religion and “bad” religion? We will discuss how Hollywood presents religious people (nuns, preachers, prophets), places (synagogues, the frontier, rural churches), and practices (revival meetings, prayer, charity work). Most importantly, we will examine how that presentation changes over time. To what extent do movies (rather than, say, Sunday School) teach us about what is *really* religious—what religious people are supposed to do.

While filmmakers can make movies that address core, fundamental values that we might define as “spiritual” or “supernatural” (like *Star Wars*) this will not be our concern this semester.

The course takes an historical approach beginning with the silent picture era and ending with recent current films. Readings and lectures present the historical, cultural, artistic, and religious contexts in which films were produced and viewed. Students will be then expected to discuss the movies in class.

In general, on Thursdays I will lecture about the film and we will discuss in class on Tuesdays. You should see the film over the long weekend and prepare your essays. Films will not be shown in class but all will be available to view in the library. Hollywood video (near the Avenues) and Blockbuster carry many of these films. Also, check your local library (Orem library is particularly good for videos). If possible, we will schedule some general viewings on large screens.

Watching the films, carefully, is important in this course.

Course Goals

To develop a more sophisticated understanding of how our popular, visual culture is created and how it changes over time

To become more aware of how our definitions of reality, and specifically *religious* reality, is created by forces outside of “normal” religious channels

To master the set of broad historical changes—in film, in religion, in politics—that influence what shows up “at the moves”

To improve our ability to critically see, communicate, and interpret—both in written and verbal forms

What this Course is Not

A “gut” course where all you do is watch a bunch of movies in class.

A “world religions” course where you’ll *finally* get told what Catholics believe

A “lecture” course where you’ll be quiet and memorize facts and dates

Course Readings

There is no assigned text for this class. You will be given a series of essays and documents to read which will be placed on my web page. To access the reading materials, log on to: WWW.CMcDannell.com Go to the “For Students” page. Then click on the “secret” icon.

Course Requirements

In this course you will “contract” for your grade. You will decide what type and amount of work you want to do for this class. If you have problems meeting your contract, you need to re-negotiate it with me by setting up an appointment.

Basically, those who contract for a “standard” grade take two examinations and those who want a “good” or an “excellent” grade write a series of short essays.

Students will have one week to revise their essays if they are not written at the acceptable level. Revised essays must be left **outside my office Carlson Hall 304**; do not hand them to me. If you have problems writing, set up an appointment with me for a “tutorial.” I take writing seriously. Contracting for a good or excellent grade means that by the time you leave this course, you will be a fine writer. If you do not want to put in the time and energy to improve your writing, then contract for the standard grade.

I also take attendance seriously. If you want a “B” or an “A” you cannot miss more than two classes.

Since only those contracting for “Cs” take exams, everyone else has the day off.

Grades

Students who contract for a “C” (standard performance and achievement) will:

Read the course materials, view the films, discuss ideas in class

Take **two** examinations (short-answer, essay) with cumulative score of 70%

Students who contract for a “B” (good performance and substantial achievement) will:

Miss no more than **two** classes without a doctor’s note

Read the course materials, view the films, discuss ideas in class

Write **four** response papers on any of the films.

Response papers are to be at least **three** typed, double-spaced, pages

Response papers engage course readings and lectures

Response papers elaborate on ideas generated by film viewing.

Response papers are written at a “good” level

Students who contract for an “A” (excellent performance and superior achievement) will:

Miss no more than **two** classes without a doctor’s note

Read the course materials, view the films, discuss ideas in class

Write **seven** response papers on any of the films.

Response papers are to be at least **three** typed, double spaced pages.

Response papers engage course readings and lectures.

Response papers elaborate ideas generated by film viewing

Response papers are written at an “excellent” level

Students will choose which movies they want to write on the first week of class and these will be noted on their contracts. Carefully choose your movies because you will not be able to change them latter in the course. All Response Papers are due at the time of the discussion of the film. I will not accept a Response Paper if you are not in class ready to present your ideas. If you are sick, you will need to discuss with me which other movie you will write about.

Response papers that do not meet the standards for an “A” or “B” paper in terms of English or intellectual content will be returned to be re-written. **You have one week** to do this and you need to place your revision in the box outside of my office at 304 Carlson Hall.

Disasters need to be discussed with me **before** the class when the paper is due. If you are not meeting your contract, you need to schedule an appointment to discuss your problems with me.

Additional Information

Cheating or plagiarizing will result in an “F” for the course. I assume you know what plagiarism is; if you’re in doubt, talk to me.

Some of the films in this course may include material that conflicts with the core beliefs of some students. Specifically, several movies are rated “R” and contain scenes of violence and sexuality as well as crude language. While I think that these are serious films that will enhance your intellectual understanding of the human condition, you may not. Please review the syllabus carefully to see if the course is one that you are committed to taking. I will not substitute any movies in this course for any other ones.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that reasonable accommodations be provided for students with physical, sensory, cognitive, systemic, learning, and psychiatric disabilities. Please contact me during the first week of the course to discuss any accommodations needed for this course.

Likewise, if you have any problems speaking up in class or arriving on time, please tell me within the first week of class. If you don’t talk with me immediately, I will assume that all students can meet these basic expectations.

Lecture, Reading, and Discussion Schedule

Films are available at the Marriot Library Multimedia center with the exception of *Miracle Woman* which is at the Reserve Desk. Use the number under the film. For reading, see above “Course Readings.”

Theoretical Considerations

- Th 24 Watching Religion
- T 29 Course Requirements
Introduction to Religion in Film

Silent Era

- TH 31 Biblical Epics: Sex, Violence, and Uplifting the Masses
Read: W. Barnes, “King of Kings” in *Jesus at the Movies* (1997)
- T 5 Silent Movies
- TH 7 Jews, Assimilation, and the Jazz Age
Read: Henry L. Feingold, “Acculturation and its Discontents” and “Yom Kippur”
- T 12 *Jazz Singer* (1927) PN1997 .J296 1991

Golden Age: The Thirties and the Forties

- TH 14 Revivalists, Celebrities, Churches, Theaters
Read: Tucker and Liefeld, “Modern Pentecostalism and Denominationalism: Tent-toting Evangelists and Ordained Ministers”
- T 19 *Miracle Woman* (1931) At Reserve Desk in Library
- TH 21 World War II and the Movies
Read: James D’Arc, “Saints on Celluloid”
- T 26 *Brigham Young* (1940) PN1997 B7623

Refiguring Movies: The Fifties through the Seventies

- TH 28 Cold War Religion
Read: Lary May, “Outside the Grove of History: Film Noir and the Birth of a Counterculture”
- T 3 *Night of the Hunter* (1955) PN1997 .N5223 1987

- TH 5 **No class, Fall Break**
- T 10 **Examination I**
- TH 12 The Holocaust, Existential Reality, and Urban Angst
Read: Leonard J. Leff, “Hollywood and the Holocaust,”
- T 17 *Pawnbroker* (1964) PN1997 P38
- TH 19 Counter Cultures
Read: Rebecca Sullivan, “Cracks in the Cloister: The Changing Cultural Role of Nuns”
- T 24 *Change of Habit* (1969)
- TH 26 Catholic Horror
Read: Peter Gardella, “Catholic Horror”
- T 31 *The Exorcist* (1973) PN1997 .E95 2000

Coming to Terms with Religion: Eighties and Beyond

- TH 2 Saving Jesus from Christianity
Read: W. Barnes Tatum, “Martin Scorsese, The Last Temptation of Christ”
- T 7 *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) PN1997 .L3795 1989
- TH 9 Progressive Christianity in a Post-Reagan World
- T 14 *Dead Man Walking* (1995) PN1997 .D417 1999
Read: Helen Prejan, “Introduction” and “Chapter One”
- TH 16 Evangelical Protestantism
Read: Paul Harvey, “God and Negroes and Jesus and Sin and Salvation”
- T 21 *The Apostle* (1997) PN 1997 A65346
- Th 23 **No class, Thanksgiving Break**
- T 28 **Examination II**
- TH 30 Slacker Religion
Read: Amy Frykholm, “Catholicism Wow!”
- T 5 *Dogma* (1999) PN1997 .D62873

Reading References:

W. Barnes Tatum, "Martin Scorsese, The Last Temptation of Christ" and "Martin Scorsese, in The Last Temptation of Christ" in *Jesus at the Movies* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1997)

Henry L. Feingold, "Acculturation and its Discontents" in *The Jewish People in America A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920 – 1945*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992)

Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld, "Modern Pentecostalism and Denominationalism: Tent-toting Evangelists and Ordained Ministers," *Daughters of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1987)

James D'Arc, "Saints on Celluloid" in *Sunstone* (Fall 1976)

Lary May, "Outside the Grove of History: Film Noir and the Birth of a Counterculture" in *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)

Leonard J. Leff, "Hollywood and the Holocaust," *American Jewish History* 84.4 (1996) 353-376.

Rebecca Sullivan, "Cracks in the Cloister: The Changing Cultural Role of Nuns" in *Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Postwar Popular Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 2005)

Colleen McDannell, *Catholics in the Movies* (Oxford, forthcoming)
Peter Gardella, "Catholic Horror"; Amy Frykholm, "Catholicism Wow!"

Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking* (New York: Random House, 1993)

Paul Harvey, "God and Negroes and Jesus and Sin and Salvation" in Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004)