

Myth and Ritual on Film

RELI 20803
Autumn, 2004

Instructor: Dr. S. Brent Plate
Time: MW 1.00-1.50; Lab T 3.30-5.30ish
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Course Description:

Religion is about the creation of worlds. Film is about the re-creation of worlds. Religions typically provide myths about the creation of the world, and then, through reorderings of space and time, religions establish rituals to reenact those myths. Film works on a level similar to religious ritual in that it begins with the raw (albeit abstract) material of space and time and bends them each in new ways. The result of both film and religious ritual is a re-created world: a world of recreation, a world of fantasy, a world of ideology, a world we may long to live in or a world we wish to avoid at all costs. In the end we will enquire about how cinema might help to reinvent traditional religious rituals in our contemporary age, as well as how a deeper understanding of the aesthetic nature of religious rituals might alter the production of film.

Through readings and film screenings, students will be able to detect the formal structures that comprise film (e.g., cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing), and to discern how these each contribute to the creation of new worlds on screen. With this in the foreground, students will be able to see analogies to the ways in which religious myths and rituals are constructed, and thus be able to analyze the formal components of religious practices.

Course Texts

- Robert Kolker, Film, Form and Culture, w/CD-ROM, (abbreviated: FFC)
- Film as Religion, John Lyden (abbreviated FaR)
- Other readings at online syllabus website.

Course Requirements:

Presence. 25% of the final grade. "Presence" entails a general sense of bringing both body and mind to the classroom for discussions. "Presence" means not coming to class and asking what you were supposed to have read; "presence" means listening to the others in the classroom; "presence" means not checking your watch every 10 minutes; "presence" means, to use the title of one religious film, "being there."

This course is a seminar, and therefore relies on informed comments by students on a regular basis. The grade for "Presence" includes attendance, which is required for the regular MW meetings and the film screenings every Tuesday. The grade also entails that students have read assigned readings before class, and come prepared to discuss the readings in conjunction with the film screenings. You will be graded on your ability to analyze and synthesize films and readings; on the frequency, relevance and insights of your comments; and on your ability to present your ideas coherently to the class. Presence grades will be calculated from: 1) my own notes from class sessions, in which I note who was significantly involved in discussion, 2) your own self-assessment of your contributions to class discussion, and 3) your assessment of others in the class (more about this in class). Assessment will occur twice during the semester, and I will calculate your presence grades based on the three components listed here at that time and report them back to you.

Critical Response Papers. 30% of final grade. About one per week (12 total), students are required to submit a critical response paper, commenting on the film screened that week, and incorporating all the readings for that week. Paragraphs should be approximately 250-300 words, typewritten. Although these are short and should not take long to compose, they should be carefully written and thoughtful. The purpose of these papers is to engage the readings and films and to articulate your engagement succinctly and clearly in writing. Be prepared to share your work in class.

2 Film Review-essays + 1 Draft + 1 Oral presentation. 45% of final grade in total (7.5% for the draft, 7.5% for oral presentation, 15% for each of the two reviews). The two final review-essays are to be 4-6 pp. each (1200-1500 words) typed, double-spaced. Note on the syllabus the dates these are due.

Each review-essay is of a film of your choosing; however, many suggestions are given at the online syllabus. Because thinking critically about film is a vital component to this course, students are required to submit a draft of the first review-essay. This is intended to stimulate you to think about the film you wish to review at an early date, and to make sure you are heading in the right direction for your approach to the review-essay. More information on this will be given in class. The first review-essay should be related to topics brought up in the first half of the course under the topics “Religious Myths on Film,” or “Worlds.” The second review-essay should be on some dimension of ritual, including topics on “Sacred Time” or “Sacred Space.” You will be graded on your ability to critically interact with the film as well as your ability to apply insights learned from the class to an analysis of the films.

Course Outline:

Introduction: Sacred Seeing/Seeing the Sacred

25 Aug-Wed Introductions
 30 Aug-Mon Readings: FaR, 41-55
 31 Aug-Tue Screening: *Baraka* (dir. Ron Fricke) 87min.
 1 Sep-Wed Readings: FFC, pp 1-17, + see “Introduction” to the CD-ROM.
 CRP 1 due: Question: Does *Baraka* show us the “real world”?

6 Sep-Mon No Class – Labor Day
 7 Sep-Tue Screening: *Cinema Paradiso* (dir. Giuseppe Tornatore) 123min
 Readings: William Paden, “Worlds”
 8 Sep-Wed Discuss *Cinema Paradiso* and religious worlds
 CRP 2 Due: Question: How does *Cinema Paradiso* display a “religious world”?

I. Religious Myths on Film

13 Sep-Mon Reading: FaR, “Myths about Myth” 56-78
 14 Sep-Tue Screening: *The Matrix* (dir. Wachoski bros., 136 min.)
 15 Sep-Wed Readings: [James Ford on The Matrix](#)
 CRP 3 Due: Question: What are the myths of *The Matrix*? How does the film “clothe conceptions of a general order of existence”?

20 Sep-Mon Readings: FFC, 22-33, + see CD-ROM “mise-en-scene”
 21 Sep-Tue Screening: *The Passion of the Christ* (dir. Gibson, 127 min.)
 22 Sep-Wed Readings: Rudolf Bultmann from *New Testament and Mythology* (handout)
 CRP 4 Due: Question: How is the myth of The Passion visually constructed in *The Passion*? How does the use of mise-en-scene bring out these myths?

II. Sacred Time

Cyclical Time: Repetition

27 Sep-Mon Readings: FaR, pp. 79-82.
 28 Sep -Tue Screening: *Before the Rain* (dir. Milcho Manchevski) 112 min
 29 Sep-Wed Eliade, “Sacred Time and Myths”
 CRP 5 Due: What type of mythical time does *Before the Rain* portray? How?

4 Oct-Mon Readings: FFC, 38-49 + CD-ROM on “continuity editing” & “montage”
 5 Oct-Tue Screening: *Antonia’s Line* (dir. Marleen Gorris) 102 min
 6 Oct-Wed Readings: Lesley Northrup, “Ritualizing Space and Time”
 CRP 6: Question: How does *Antonia’s Line* counteract Eliade’s versions of time?

Ending Time: Apocalypse

11 Oct-Mon Draft of First Film Review Essay due. Reading: FaR, pp. 83-94
 12 Oct-Tue Screening: *La Jetee* (dir. Chris Marker) 30 min.
 13 Oct-Wed Readings: Peter Berger, “The Sacred Canopy,” & D.H. Lawrence, from *Apocalypse*
 CRP 7: Question: Is this the end, or just the beginning?

18 Oct-Mon Discussion of Apocalypse.
 19 Oct-Tue Screening: *PI* (dir. Darren Aronofsky) 85 min
 20 Oct-Wed Readings: Briggs and Peat, Forward and Prologue from *The Turbulent Mirror*.
 CRP 8: Question: How does the end of time correlate with the beginning of time?

III. Sacred Space

Moving Through Space: Pilgrimage

25 Oct-Mon Final First Film Review-Essay Due
 26 Oct-Tue Screening: *Wizard of Oz* (dir. Victor Fleming) 100min
 27 Oct-Wed Readings: David Carrasco, "Those who go on a Sacred Journey"
 CRP 9: Question: Is *The Wizard of Oz* a pilgrimage? How and Why?

1 Nov-Mon Readings: FFC, 36-37 + CD-ROM "point of view" & "camera"
 2 Nov-Tue Screening: *The Straight Story* (dir. David Lynch) 112min
 3 Nov-Wed Readings: Frederick Ruf "Postmodern Pilgrimage"
 CRP 10: Question: Just why is the journey so important?

Staying in Place: Communal Life

8 Nov-Mon Readings: Eliot Deutsch, "Community as Ritual Participation"
 9 Nov-Tue Screening: *You Can't Take it With You* (dir. Capra) 126min
 10 Nov-Wed CRP 11: Question: Are the Sycamores "creative anarchists"? How and Why?

Extra article: Plate and Caruso on *You Can't Take it With You*

15 Nov-Mon Readings: [Interview w/Daniel Sack about "food and religion"](#)
 16 Nov-Tue Screening: *Chocolat* (dir. Hallström) 121min
 17 Nov - Wed CRP 12: Question: Is it the food or the symbol?

22-24 Nov NO Class

Death and Afterlives

29 Nov-Mon Readings: Ronald Grimes, "Living With the Dead"
 30 Nov-Tue Screening: *The Sweet Hereafter* (dir. Egoyan) 112min
 1 Dec-Wed No CRP.

6 Dec-Mon Oral presentation on second film review
 7 Dec-Tue Oral presentation on second film review
 8 Dec-Wed Oral presentation on second film review
 10 Dec-Fri Second Film Review-Essay Due by 5.00pm

Suggestions for further reading and viewing.

Use the following as sources for your film review-essays:

- First, be sure to consult the linked guide to "writing an analytical essay" about film. [{click here}](#)
- Also helpful as reference tool is *The film encyclopedia* (Second edition), Ephraim Katz, ed. {Reference Room PN1993.45 .K34 200}
- [Click here, scroll down to MLA International Bibliography, search by film title.](#)

Films to write about (not inclusive):

I. Mythologies

Decalogue (dir. Kieslowski)

Gandhi (dir. Attenborough)

Jesus of Montreal (dir. Arcand)

The Big Kahuna (dir. Swanbeck)

My Dinner with Andre (dir. Malle)

Shrek (dir. Adamson)

Fight Club (dir. Fincher)

Dead Man (dir. Jarmusch)

Happiness (dir. Solodnz)

Sling Blade (dir. Thornton)

Star Wars (dir. Lucas)

Whale Rider (dir. Caro)

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (dir. Lee)

Three Colors: Red or White or Blue (dir. Kieslowski)

Tierra (dir. Medem)

Man Facing Southeast (dir. Subiela)

The Sacrifice (dir. Tarkovsky)

Blade Runner (dir. Scott)

Ghost Dog (dir. Jarmusch)

Smoke Signals (dir. Eyre)

Short Cuts (dir. Altman)

The Legend of Bagger Vance (dir. Redford)

II. Sacred time

Cyclical Time

Hannah and her Sisters (dir. Allen)

Time and Tide (dir. Hark)

Blind Chance (dir. Kieslowski)

Groundhog Day (dir. Ramis)

Lovers of the Arctic Circle (dir. Medem)

Flirt (dir. Hartley)

Run, Lola, Run (dir. Tykwer)

Sliding Doors (dir. Howitt)

Calendar (dir. Egoyan)

Donnie Darko (dir. Kelly)

Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring (dir. Ki-Duk)

Ending Time

Brazil (dir. Gilliam)

Twelve Monkeys (dir. Gilliam)

Terminator and T-2 (dir. Cameron)

Until the end of the World (dir. Wenders)

Strange Days (dir. Bigelow)

The Rapture (dir. Tolkin)

End of Days (dir. Hyams)

Dark City (dir. Proyas)

Last Night (dir. McKellar)

Book of Life (dir. Hartley)

Neon Genesis Evangelion (dir. Anno)

Akira (dir. Otomo)

III. Sacred Place

Pilgrimage

Fisher King (dir. Gilliam)

Big Fish (dir. Burton)

Last Orders (dir. Schepisi)

Finding Nemo (dir. Stanton)

Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure (dir. Herek)

Pow Wow Highway (dir. Wacks)

Get on the Bus (dir. Lee)

Lost Highway (dir. Lynch)

Blues Brothers (dir. Landis)

Stand by Me (dir. Reiner)

Trip to Bountiful (dir. Masterson)

Several by Wim Wenders: *Until the End of the World*; *Paris, Texas*; *Alice in the Cities*; *Kings of the Road*.

Community and Food

Eat, Drink, Man, Woman (dir. Lee)

Tampopo (dir. Itami)

Soul Food (dir. Tillman)

Life is Sweet (dir. Leigh)

The Grinch who Stole Christmas (dir. Howard)

Chocolat (dir. Hallstrom)

Daughters of the Dust (dir. Dash)

Like Water for Chocolate (dir. Arau)

Fried Green Tomatoes (dir. Avnet)

Breakfast Club (dir. Hughes)

The Celebration (dir. Vinterberg)

The Godfather (dir. Scorsese)

Steel Magnolias (dir. Ross)

Rites of Passage**Birth, Weddings, Funerals, Coming of Age**

Monsoon Wedding (dir. Nair)
Four Weddings and a Funeral (dir. Newell)
Garden State (dir. Braff)
The Funeral (dir. Ferrara)
My Big, Fat Greek Wedding (dir. Zwick)
The Big Chill (dir. Kasdan)
The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys (dir. Care)
Igby Goes Down (dir. Steers)
Little Women (dir. Armstrong)
Ghost World (dir. Zwick)
The Virgin Suicides (dir. Sofia Coppola)
Cider House Rules (dir. Hallstrom)
What's Eating Gilbert Grape (dir. Hallstrom)
Harold and Maude (dir. Ashby)
Monsieur Ibrahim (dir. Dupeyron)
Dazed and Confused (dir. Linklater)
Rushmore (dir. Anderson)
Wonder Boys (dir. Hanson)
Karate Kid (dir. Avildsen)
The Natural (dir. Levinson)
Pinocchio
Finding Forrester (dir. van Sant)
Lion King
The Sandlot (dir. Evans)
Northfork (dir. Polish)
Magnolia (dir. Anderson)
Thirteen (dir. Hardwicke)
Lost in Translation (dir. Coppola)
My Life as a Dog (dir. Hallstrom)
Circle of Friends (dir. O'Connor)