

Popular Film and the Quest for Religious Meaning (I)

Religious Studies 266 / Fine Arts 252

Fall 2006

(Rev. 18/09/06)

Religion reflects both humanity's search for meaning and its attempts to maintain particular meanings in the face of cultural challenge and social pressure. In this course, we will use a number of films to examine some of the ways in which these processes occur. Using a wide variety of examples, we will learn how religion—whether explicitly or implicitly—has been a central inspiration for film makers, as well as how these films have often been a central concern for religious adherents. While some films will deal with obvious and easily recognizable religious topics, others will reveal their religious elements only upon closer, more critical examination. As our culture passes relentlessly from the more literary to the more visual, discerning how the varied dimensions of the human quest for meaning are reflected in cinematic texts is an important element in understanding the nature of religious belief and practice in late modern society.

"See every film ever made. Fill up on the medium."
—Ray Bradbury—

Instructor

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N.b., since every student is assigned a **University of Waterloo email account**, please use that for all electronic communications with me. Often the university servers interpret accounts such as Yahoo and Hotmail as spam, and delete the messages automatically. This means that either I may not get your message, or you may not get my reply.

Office Hours

5:30–6:30 p.m., Monday and Wednesday, or by appointment

Teaching Assistant

David Feltmate (dsfeltma@artsmail.uwaterloo.ca)

Class Location

Renison College 2106

Class Times

6:30–8:20 p.m., Monday and Wednesday

Required Readings

Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*
RS 2667/FA 252 Courseware Solutions: readings pack available at the Bookstore

Prerequisite

None

N.b., should unforeseen circumstances arise, the instructor reserves the right to modify the syllabus as he sees fit to ensure the academic and pedagogical integrity of the course.

Please note that this is a Religious Studies course that has been cross-listed for students in Fine Arts. It is not a Fine Arts course that deals with religious topics. This is an important distinction of which students should be aware.

Course Goals

In this course, students will:

- learn to appreciate and experience popular films as significant cultural texts that both reflect on the religious diversity, theological struggle, and ethical and moral dilemmas of late modern society through the medium of film;
- engage in critical dialogue with these texts and experiences, with scholars who have contributed to their interpretation, and with each other;
- develop communication skills through written assignments and class participation; and
- continue to foster skills in critical thinking and analysis.

Coursework and Evaluation

Class Participation

Attendance at and participation in all class sessions is expected. There is simply no way to expect that a student can do well in a course if he or she is unwilling to attend. This is especially important for a class that meets for lectures and discussion only once a week. Put simply, you should not miss class—ever. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class session.

Film Viewing

I am a great believer in the value of watching films collectively. As a group, we see different things than when we view films alone, and we very often react differently to what we do see. Even if you have already seen some of the films we will be viewing this semester (even several times), you are still required to be here for the class viewing period. You will, very likely, see something different.

Films are both cultural texts and social experiences, and you should consider all the listed films as the **primary required texts** for the course. Though the days of the week on which these occur will change due to holidays and so forth, the basic sequence for the course is that we will view the film one day (usually Monday, though check the syllabus matrix), and discuss it the following class session. Most films are shorter than the class period, so we will be done a bit early on those evenings. A few are slightly longer than the class period, so we will be here a bit later those evenings. Please plan accordingly.

Film Analysis Papers (60%)

Each student will prepare weekly film analysis papers. These constitute the major portion of each student's grade, and I urge you to take them very seriously. Each analysis paper will be a **minimum 600 words**, and I will provide detailed instructions on ways to approach this assignment, as well as the various components I expect to see in each paper.

Film analysis papers will be collected three times during the semester:

- **in two weeks (25 September)**, after you have completed your first paper. These will be marked up, but not graded, so that you can have sufficient feedback on what I expect in the analysis papers; you may rework these papers as you see fit, and resubmit them:

- **at the mid-term quiz (25 October).** All analysis papers for the first half of the course are due at the beginning of class that day;
- **6 December**, two days after the end-term quiz. Your **full set** of analysis papers must be dropped off in the **Renison College main office before 4:30 p.m.**

Papers turned in after the due dates will be penalized at a rate of 5% (1.5 marks) per day late. I do not grant Incompletes or extensions, except in cases of medical or family emergency, and documentation will be required. I do not offer the option for extra credit assignments.

N.b., film analysis papers are not weighted in terms of “so-many-points-per-paper”; at best, an incomplete set of papers can earn only half the marks available for that assignment.

Mid-term Quiz (15%): 25 October 2006: this will cover films and readings for the first half of the course.

End-term Quiz (15%): 4 December 2006: this will cover films and readings for the second half of the course.

Both quizzes will be two-part: (a) short-answer questions for content and comprehension, and (b) an essay question.

In-Class Presentation (10%): throughout the course.

Working in pairs, students will make a 20-30 minute presentation on selected films. Presenters will hand in a hard copy of their presentation, but will not be required to turn in a formal film analysis paper for that film.

Academic Honesty

Please note that I have a zero tolerance policy for plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty, and I follow up on all instances of plagiarism. Per university regulations, please be sure you are aware of the following policies:

Note on avoidance of academic offences: All students registered in the courses of the Faculty of Arts are expected to know what constitutes an academic offence, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for their academic actions. When the commission of an offence is established, disciplinary penalties will be imposed in accord with Policy #71 (Student Academic Discipline). For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students are directed to consult the summary of Policy #71 which is supplied in the Undergraduate Calendar (section 1; on the Web at <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm>). If you need help in learning how to avoid academic offences such as plagiarism, cheating, and double submission, or if you need clarification of aspects of the discipline policy, ask your TA or course instructor for guidance. Other resources regarding the discipline policy are your academic advisor and the Undergraduate Associate Dean.

Student who believe they have been wrongfully or unjustly penalized have the right to grieve; refer to Policy #70, Student Grievance, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm>.

Classroom Etiquette

I have relatively few rules in my classroom, but please respect the ones I have.

- Respect the opinions of others. During class discussions, it is very likely that contradictory opinions will emerge, especially when we are dealing with highly emotional topics. There

is no requirement in our class that students agree with each other, or with the instructors, but there is the mandate that the opinions expressed be respected.

- Please be on time. We will begin each class promptly, and I expect students to be in the room and ready to proceed. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class and if you are late, it will count as an absence.
- Since this is likely to be a large class, there will be the temptation to engage in, shall we say, extra-curricular communication. Use of cellphones for voice or text communication is prohibited in class, and all cellphones and pagers are expected to be turned **off** when you enter the classroom—**not** simply set to silent ring. If a student is found using one of these devices, he or she will be immediately asked to leave the classroom and will not be readmitted for that period. This, too, will count as an absence on the evaluation

Douglas E. Cowan