

RELIGION AND CINEMA (RELS 505 CIMS 506)

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Office: Cohen 226 | Office Hours: Tuesday 6:00-7:00 pm



Children of Men (Cuarón, 2006)

“The image cannot be opposed to the body, as representation is opposed to its unattainable referent. For a fugitive, supplemental materiality haunts the (allegedly) idealizing processes of mechanical reproduction.”

- **Steven Shaviro**, *The Cinematic Body* (1993)

“To view film at the intersection of religion and power, then, is to read and experience film as enabling reflection on the ethics of subject formation. The... most basic goal is to demonstrate how the viewing of film can function as an ethical ‘pedagogy of self.’”

- **M. Gail Hamner**, *Imaging Religion and Film* (2011)

Course Description

This course looks at religion in film. As we will see, this is not just a question of how religion is represented onscreen, but how cinematic objects make religious subjects. We’ll explore the ways films are crafted through technique, performance, and distribution, then consider how these components shape religious bodies and religious traditions in turn.

Coursework

Each week, you’ll contribute a **response paper** of 400-600 words. You’ll post your response on Canvas in the appropriate Discussion thread no later than **6:00 pm** the day

before class. (Yes, you should be finished with the readings by the time you post your response.) I'll comment on a selection of these in the evening after they've posted. You'll then be expected to **read all of the responses** in the thread (including mine) and be prepared to discuss your own contribution in the seminar the next day. Each graduate student member of the class will also be expected to take on at least one **presentation** over the course of the semester. More information on this is offered below.

As a concluding project, you'll submit a **term paper** that critically assesses the issues of the class. This will be **20-25 pages (5000-6000 word, exclusive of bibliography and references)**. This will be due **Dec 19**. The paper should make primary reference to sources presented within the class but may also use outside material. On **November 28**, you'll turn in a **2-3 page proposal** outlining your field of interest and the specific intervention you see yourself making. We'll discuss both of these assignments in more detail closer to the date.

Texts

We'll be spending some time with a number of books in the first part of this course. In the final third of the semester, we'll turn our attention to a film festival in which we screen a series of movies and discuss them in class. These will be presented with accompanying short articles. I've sourced as many of our readings as possible through online access via the library or through PDFs, which I'll make available here. Books required for purchase are as follows:

- Giannetti, Louis. *Understanding Movies*. (Any edition from the 11th onward.)
- Stella Adler. *The Art of Acting*.
- S. Brent Plate. *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. (Any edition.)

Rather than routing this process through the bookstore, please procure copies as you see fit.

All films for the class will be watchable via the course Canvas page. Follow the links on the syllabus page or see the library tab on the sidebar for access.

Research Presentations

There are two types of presentations in the class: presentations from chapters of Giannetti, and presentations on specific films. Early in the semester, we'll be going through a two-week sequence in which we closely study film technique, with the Giannetti volume as our companion. Each student will do a presentation on a chapter from Giannetti (possibly more than one, depending on the number of people in the seminar). These will be primarily descriptive, rather than synthetic, presentations. Further details will be provided in class.

Film presentations are even simpler: each student will be assigned a film (or two) on which to serve as point person for the plot. The student will provide a storyboard summary of the film at the beginning of class. Again, this will be only descriptive.

Everyone in the room will have seen the film, but your task will be to get everyone on the same page by laying out the narrative in detail. We'll go over what this looks like as we approach the film festival section of the class.

Class Conduct

The classroom is a community of learning. The foundation of this community is respect. Disagreement is productive, but learning how to create a space within which we can constructively disagree with one another will be one of the projects of this class. At the same time, this class is going to challenge you with difficult readings and concepts. Some of these readings may even provoke discomfort, which I encourage you to explore. I respect your willingness to tax yourself intellectually, and to allow yourself to be frustrated and to take risks with this material. If you find some of the material distressing, let me know. I'm happy to flag up any content you may find upsetting in advance or to discuss any issues you might be having in office hours. Building a community of learning also requires a full commitment to academic integrity. The course will scrupulously follow all relevant procedures for any academically dishonest behavior, which sabotages trust between you and me and you and other students. Please spend some time with Penn's [Code of Academic Integrity](#) to make sure you're aware of these parameters. And see me (in advance!) if you are unsure about citations or **anything else** you're worried might be a violation of good academic practice.

Attendance

Like all seminars, this is a conversation class, which means a major part of the work of the class comes from our discussions. **The texts are not the class!** Attendance at all sessions is important. Unexcused absences will adversely affect your grade, at my discretion.

Canvas

This class has a Canvas site where most of the materials will be posted. It's also where you'll submit your weekly responses, in the appropriate Discussion tab. I'll also use Canvas occasionally to make announcements to everyone in the class. I encourage you to keep your notifications set to "on" (the default) for the site.

Individual Concerns

I'm available to talk about any needed accommodations for this class based on the impact of a documented disability. We should talk about this within the first 2 weeks of a semester. Anyone requesting these accommodations will of course need to be registered with [Student Disabilities Services](#), who will help us determine the right strategies.

Grading

A-range grades are given for truly exceptional scholarship. They are assigned to work that goes above and beyond, demonstrating a clear mastery of the material, a unified and focused argument, and an innovative approach.

B-range grades are given for very good work. They reflect a skillful argument that is perhaps a bit distracted in places, but still in excess of expectations. The engagement with the material is nonetheless comprehensive and rich.

C-range grades are given for work that is satisfactory. It shows evidence of thoughtful engagement with the material, but perhaps with some redundancy in the writing or shallowness in the argument.

D-range grades are given for work that is unsatisfactory. The material is only shallowly encountered and the analysis weak or haphazard. It is applied to work that merely restates other sources or appears to have been hastily thrown together the night before.

A **failing** grade is given for scholarship that shows little or no engagement with the material and is often applied to work that misses a key criterion such as a minimum word count or number of sources used

For every day or part-day late, an essay will be assigned a 3-point penalty.

Schedule of Readings

- This schedule is subject to change given **1 week's notice**.
- Remember to **bring the readings** to class each day!

INTRODUCTION

Week 1 – August 29

Introduction and background. *No readings*.

Week 2 – Sept 5

Manuel Vasquez. *More than Belief*. Introduction. [PDF](#) 

Gail Hamner. "Affect Theory as a Tool for Examining Religion Documentaries." [PDF](#) 

Film: Andrew Douglas. *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

THE ELEMENTS OF CINEMA

Week 3 – Sept 12

Louis Giannetti. *Understanding Movies*. Chs. 1-4. **PURCHASE**

Week 4 – Sept 19

Louis Giannetti. *Understanding Movies*. Chs. 5-6, pp. 448-454, Ch. 11. **PURCHASE**

Week 5 – Sept 26

Stella Adler. *The Art of Acting*. **PURCHASE**

Film: Alfonso Cuarón. *Gravity*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

FILM THEORY AND AFFECT THEORY

Week 6 – Oct 3

Steven Shaviro. *The Cinematic Body*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

Week 7 – Oct 10

David MacDougall. *The Corporeal Image*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

THEORIES OF RELIGION AND CINEMA

Week 8 – Oct 17

John C. Lyden. *Film as Religion*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

Film: Asghar Farhadi. *A Separation*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

Week 9 – Oct 24

S. Brent Plate. *Religion and Film*. **PURCHASE**

Week 10 – Oct 31

M. Gail Hamner. *Imaging Religion in Film*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

RELIGION AND FILM FESTIVAL

Week 11 – Nov 7

M. Gail Hamner. "Sensing Religion in Children of Men." [PDF](#)

Film: Alfonso Cuarón. *Children of Men*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

Week 12 – Nov 14

Laura Marks. *The Skin of the Film*. **PDF**

Judith Weisenfeld. "My Story Began before I Was Born." **PDF**

Film: Julie Dash. *Daughters of the Dust*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

Week 13 – Nov 21 – NO CLASS

Week 14 – Nov 28

The Book of Job. **ONLINE**

Gabriel Levy. "Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*." **PDF**

Film: Joel and Ethan Coen. *A Serious Man*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

SUBMIT PROPOSAL FOR FINAL ESSAY

Week 15 – Dec 5

M. Gail Hamner. "Filming Reconciliation." **PDF**

Film: Terrence Malick. *Tree of Life*. **LIBRARY ONLINE**

Dec 19 – Final essay due.