REL 257: RELIGION AND AMERICAN MOVIES
Lecture: TuTh 10:00-10:50
Screening: Tu 7:30-10:20

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Office Hours: Tu 11-12:30
And by appointment

Course Description: The controversy that attended the 2004 release of Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ sits in a long history of intimate and often fraught interactions between religious Americans and popular movies. In this course we explore the politics of representing religion at key moments in both American film and American religious history. Of particular interest will be the interplay among representations of religious belief, practice, individuals, and institutions and constructions of nation, race, gender, and sexuality. We consider what the processes of movie production and the cultural experience of movie-going can disclose about aspects of American religious life, and we explore what representations of religion reveal about understandings of American national identity.

Course Objectives:

- To become familiar with the major themes in the history of representations of religion in American film across a variety of film genres.
- To understand films as situated in particular religious and historical contexts that affect production, exhibition, reception, and representation of religion.
- To explore interactions among Americans’ religious beliefs, practices and institutions and the film industry.
- To gain experience working with and interpreting a range of primary and secondary sources that address issues in religion and American film.
- To strengthen critical writing skills.

Precepts:

I prefer that you not use laptops during precept meetings but you may, if necessary. The emphasis for precepts will be on discussion and engagement with your classmates and, should you feel the need to take notes, pen and paper should suffice.

Books:

- Leo Braudy, On the Waterfront (British Film Institute, 2008)
- Mark Kermode, The Exorcist (British Film Institute, 1997)
- Steven J. Ross, Movies and American Society (Blackwell, 2002)
Books may be purchased at Labyrinth and are also on Reserve in Firestone Library. Additional readings will be available through Electronic Reserves on the course Blackboard site.

Film Screenings:

Screenings will take place in Jones 100 at 7:30 each Tuesday evening. Please be sure to arrive a few minutes early so that we may begin on time. Screenings may include short films in addition to the feature-length movies listed below.

You will find background information for each film under the “Course Materials” menu on Blackboard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Duration</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 22</td>
<td>Regeneration, 1915</td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>72 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 29</td>
<td>The Jazz Singer, 1927</td>
<td>1927</td>
<td>88 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 6</td>
<td>Hallelujah, 1929</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>109 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 13</td>
<td>The Miracle Woman, 1931</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>90 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 20</td>
<td>On the Waterfront, 1954</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>108 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 27</td>
<td>The Exorcist, 1973</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>122 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 10</td>
<td>Thunderheart, 1992</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>119 min</td>
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<td>November 17</td>
<td>Daughters of the Dust, 1991</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>113 min</td>
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<td>November 24</td>
<td>Contact, 1997</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>150 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 1</td>
<td>The Siege, 1998</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>116 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 8</td>
<td>The Passion of the Christ, 2004</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>127 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 15</td>
<td>Jesus Camp, 2006</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>84 min</td>
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Course Requirements:

Your final grade will be determined by the following components and all assignments must be completed in order to pass the course:

1. Precept participation: 20%
2. Weekly response papers: 20%
3. One 5-page film analysis paper: 25%
4. One 10-12 page research paper: 35%

The weekly writing assignment is intended to facilitate reflection upon both the readings and the film prior to our precept meeting. You may use the opportunity to pose broad or focused questions about the texts or draw connections to other readings, themes, or topics we engage, for example. Response papers should be formatted as Word documents and submitted as attachments directly to the Blackboard site. The weekly paper is due by 4pm each Wednesday. Each Tuesday at 3:00pm an entry for the following week’s paper will become available in the Assignments section of the Blackboard site and remain available until 4:05pm on Wednesday.

The film analysis paper is due by 3:00pm on October 23 and the research paper by 3:00pm on January 12 (Dean’s Date). Full details about the paper assignments will be distributed in precept. Work handed in late will be penalized. If an emergency situation arises and an extension is needed, you must negotiate this with your preceptor prior to the due date.
**SCHEDULE OF READINGS, CLASSES, AND DEADLINES**

**Week 1:** Orientations  
September 17


**Week 2:** Social Reform and Early Cinema  
September 22-24

- Ross, "Going to the Movies: Early Audiences" and "Heroes and Heroines of Their Own Entertainment: Progressive-Era Cinema," 14-63

**Film Screening:** *Regeneration* (1915)

**Week 3:** Religious and Ethnic Assimilation  
September 29-October 1


**Film Screening:** *The Jazz Singer* (1927)

**Week 4:** Projecting Blackness  
October 6-8

- Ross, "Alternative Cinemas: Movies on the Margins," 164-191

**Film Screening:** *Hallelujah* (1929)

**** DUE THIS WEEK: Film choice for the analysis paper by Friday, October 9 ****
Week 5: Gender, Sexuality, and Censorship
October 13-15

- Alison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1993* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), 134-157

**Film Screening:** *The Miracle Woman* (1931)

Week 6: Cold War Hollywood
October 20-22

- Leo Braudy, *On the Waterfront*

**Film Screening:** *On the Waterfront* (1954)

**DUE THIS WEEK:** *Film Analysis Paper due by 3:00pm on Friday, October 23***

Week 7: Religious Horror
October 27-29

- Ross, “Reagan’s America: The Backlash Against Women and Men,” 313-343
- Mark Kermode, *The Exorcist*

**Film Screening:** *The Exorcist* (1973)

Week 8: FALL BREAK
November 3-5

Week 9: Religion, Memory, and Ethnic Revival
November 10-12

• Judith Weisenfeld, “My Story Begins Before I was Born: Myth, History, and Power in Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust,” in S. Brent Plate, ed., Representing Religion in World Cinema (Palgrave, 2003), 43-66
• Toni Cade Bambara, “Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Cinema Movement,” in Manthia Diawara, ed., Black American Cinema (Routledge, 1993), 118-143

Film Screening: Daughters of the Dust (1991)

Week 10: Culture Wars
November 17-19

• Philip J. Deloria, Playing Indian (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 128-180

Film Screening: Thunderheart (1992)

Week 11: The Religion of Science
November 24 (Thanksgiving) – No response paper

• Jodi Dean, Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace (Cornell, 1998), 1-21; 25-61

Film Screening: Contact (1997)

Week 12: Imagining a Muslim Menace
December 1-3


Film Screening: The Siege (1998)
**Week 13:**  
*The New Christian Cinema*

*December 8-10*


**Film Screening:** *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)

**Week 14:**  
*Documenting American Religion*

*December 15-17*


**Film Screening:** *Jesus Camp* (2006)

**DUE on DEAN's DATE: Research Paper due by 3:00pm on Tuesday, January 12**