

Hist-651, DRAFT - subject to minor changes

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13-651

Hollywood: Cinema, History, and the Construction of Religious Values Fall, 2017

Rationale

Since their early years in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, motion pictures have constituted the most popular and pervasive form of entertainment for the US general public. Even under the competitive challenge of television, movies still hold the preeminent position. Indeed, a major portion of the content of television programming, whether via the commercial networks or the plethora of cable and internet providers, is comprised of movies – those produced for the theater venue or specially made-for-TV/cable. Cinematic productions have, from the outset, been argued in various quarters to have significant formative influence – positive or negative - on their audiences. This course is offered on the premise that movies do, in fact, have didactic and heuristic value, including service in the purposes of religious formation, critical faith development, and Christian praxis.

Objectives

To encounter and critically reflect upon important religious and social/historical issues as presented in film productions.

To develop skills in discerning and analyzing the explicit and implicit messages and embedded images in films

To discover ways that films and film analysis may effectively be deployed in ministry

Class schedule

Sept. 5 Introduction to the Course. “Make It a Blockbuster Night”

In-class film viewing: “2001: A Space Odyssey;” “Heavens Above”

Wright, Preface

12 Film: Image and Reality: Introduction to Film Studies

Fell, Introduction; Nelmes, 61-78; Nelmes, 35-42; Hill/Gibson, Chap. 22; Ferro, 146-165

19 Class discussion. To prepare, peruse print and online film reviews to observe how modern film reviews are written. How are they constructed? What is included, omitted? What appear to be their aims and goals? What is your experience of reviews versus what you have encountered in those same movies. Write a 2-page summary of your observations.

26 Film Criticism

Jinks, 130-154; Nelmes, 78-84

- Oct. 3 Finding Faith in Film
Stone, Introduction; Bryant, 101-114; Hurley, 61-78; May, 79-100; Stone, Chap. 1, 2.
- 10 Faith, the Self, and the “Other”
Zinn, Chap. 1; Stone, Chap. 6
 Film review: “1492: Conquest of Paradise” (1992)
- 17 The “Frontier” and the National Self-Image
Mahan, “Once Upon a Time in the West”
 Film review: “Cimarron” [1932 version]
- 24 Race and the Continuing Dilemma
Montague; Hill/Gibson, Chap. 17
 Film review: “Crash”
- 31 Foreign Policy and National Leadership
 TBA
 Film: “Argo”
- Nov. 7 Gendered Cinema
Nelmes, Chap. 8; Hill/Gibson, Chap. 13
 Film review: “Whale Rider”
- 14 “E Pluribus Unum”
 Students to present brief research reports on history of U.S. immigration policy
 Film review: “House of Sand and Fog”
- 21 No class. Thanksgiving recess.
- 28 Swords into Plowshares: War and Peace
 Film review: “Hacksaw Ridge,” “The Mission”
- Dec. 4 Class film review: “Tree of Life”
 Reports on class projects
 Reflection, integration, application
- 11 Final project due, by 4 p.m.

Reading

Course pack, available from instructor

Assignments, Evaluation

-- Attendance, Participation. Students are expected to attend all class sessions. Instructor may allow one unavoidable absence without penalty, provided there is prior clearance with instructor and arrangements are made for addressing the class session materials missed. A second absence, regardless of reason, will result in a grade reduction of 5%; a third, an additional 15%. Four absences will result in failure of the class. Students are

expected to have read all assigned materials as scheduled and be prepared to discuss them thoughtfully in class, guided by the “Weekly Written Reading Responses/Discussion Leads” below. For the Nov. 14 session, students are to do a library/Internet search for materials on US immigration history and policy. Students will submit their research notes and report on their findings/learnings in class discussion during that session. **20%**

--Students are to secure the films indicated for each session (from a library, video store, internet, etc.), view the film, and write a ‘working review,’ as one might find in a local newspaper, noting the genre of the film, its apparent purposes, and its quality as a film production attempting to accomplish said purposes. Then on selected films [TBA] you are to write a three to four page extended Formal Review according to the Formal Film Review Questions, Observation Guidelines given below. **40%**

--Each student will be assigned to a team that will select a session from the class schedule during which the team will lead the class in a Formal Review of the film indicated for that session. **10%**

--Students will prepare a final project in which they will select a film to be used in some aspect of ministry in an actual or hypothetical setting. The project will provide a formal review of the film; the setting in which its use is anticipated; a detailed description of how the film will be employed as a ministry focus, including the goals/purposes and desired outcomes. Suggestions: 1. Write a sermon using a film as the focus and source of illustrative material or as the subject of religious critique; write a church school or adult education lesson plan around a film, with film viewing, discussion questions, and some form of group follow-up/application; construct a four-week film series for a church or other study group, selecting four films and writing out the rationale for the selection of the four films, and the rationale, goals, and intended outcomes of the series. **30%**

Written assignments are to be submitted whether or not one is able to attend class. They may be delivered electronically. Written assignments submitted after 7 pm on the day of class will not be accepted.

Please be aware of the seminary’s policy on un-cited use of published materials, materials derived from sources other than oneself, and other improperly documented uses of intellectual property (all falling under the heading of intellectual integrity/plagiarism.) Refer to the Academic Handbook.

Weekly Written Reading Responses/Discussion Leads

- Key points of dialogue and/or engagement of the authors re: the subject matter and the claims they are making.
- Insights gained; illuminations and enhancements of ideas, information
- Points for clarification
- Questions, or subjects for further exploration growing out of the materials
- Something you understand better – in societal, organizational, ecclesial contexts – as a result of the readings

Formal Film Review Questions, Observation Guidelines

Write a paragraph synopsis of this film for a reading audience, e.g. newspaper readers. Then do an analysis of/reflection on this film, around the following questions.

1. What religious themes or issues are portrayed/illustrated in this film?
2. What historical themes or issues are portrayed or illustrated in this film?
3. Does this film appear to proceed out of a “controlling idea?” If so, describe that idea.
4. Does this film appear to presuppose certain values or “cultural inclinations” in its audience that it seeks to affirm? If so, what are they? Does this film appear to advance some alternative or counter-cultural values or inclinations? If so, what are they?
5. If, as suggested in the Fell text, a movie may serve as a “mirror” to its audience, what might the audience for this film see or learn about itself?
6. Fell says that a film may propose a set of ideas or concepts that reflect the auteur’s vision about the nature of the world, including its inner space. What vision of the nature of the world is projected in this film? What appear to be the auteur’s beliefs about the way human’s function – socially, emotionally, spiritually?
7. If a film may also, consciously or unconsciously, “touch and excite our most primitive responses,” [cf. Fell, p. 22] what “buttons” does this film seek to touch? What “primitive responses” does it evoke?
8. How does the auteur employ images and symbols to convey ideas and influence viewer thinking? How does the selection and presentation of setting (including also color, lighting, tone, music, dress, weather conditions, camera angles, et. al.) figure into the apparent aims of the film?
9. How would you summarize the explicit and implicit message(s) of this film? What “null” messages might you identify?
10. How/what do you feel after watching this film? What is its impact on you? What does it lead you to contemplate or to do? How does the film converse with your religious convictions/value system/stance on religious belief or non-belief (enhance it, challenge it, press its boundaries, contradict or violate it, have no effect, other?)
11. If you could determine the ending of this film, how would you write it? On what basis or according to what principles (ideological, philosophical, theological, etc.)?
12. What is one specific way that this film might be used as a teaching, leadership, or religious resource?

Cellular phones must be turned off or placed on silent signal during class. Students are asked not to leave class to answer calls, except in extreme emergency. Further, laptops, netbooks, tablets, and similar note-taking devices are not to be used for web-surfing, email, or other activities not supportive of immediate participation in the class session at hand.