

WESTERN SEMINARY SAN JOSE

THS 563: Theology and Film

Winter Semester, 2005

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Syllabus

Course Description: Film has become a primary medium for reflecting and creating a cultural ethos as well as providing a forum that raises issues for theological interaction with those both inside and outside the church. This class provides an introduction to the concept of the nature of the arts in culture focusing upon the genre of film. It surveys various critical tools useful in film analysis and surveys the theological themes in several key films.

Required Textbooks:

James M. Boggs and Dennis W. Petrie, [*The Art of Watching Films*](#), 5th Ed.

D. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend, [*Boundaries*](#)

Robert K. Johnson, [*Reel Spirituality, Theology and Film in Dialogue*](#)

H. Richard Niebuhr, [*Christ and Culture*](#)

Philip Yancy, [*What's So Amazing about Grace?*](#)

Required Films (in order of viewing):

Ulee's Gold and *The Prince of Tides*

Snow Falling on Cedars and *Schindler's List*

The Bridge on the River Kwai and *Breaker Morant*

Chintown and *Grand Canyon*

The Matrix and *The Truman Show*

Recommended Reading:

Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, selected entries

Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, selected readings

Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies*

Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies*

Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound*

Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*

Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing Religion and Values in the Movies*

Bryan Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*

Gene Edward Veith, Jr. *Modern Fascism Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview*
Sara Anson Vaux, *Finding Meaning at the Movies*.

- Course Goals:
1. to provide tools and techniques necessary for intelligent and insightful film criticism;
 2. to provide methods and practice for discerning the basic assumptions and hidden premises of a film, as well as implicit messages, where present;
 2. to provide methods and practice in discerning theological implications in contemporary film;
 3. to examine approaches for dealing with theological issues raised by contemporary film both in terms of individual films and in terms of film as a medium.

Responsibilities:

A. Viewing assignments (20 hours). Active, analytical, responsive viewing will be essential for and analysis and later for class discussions. Such viewing will often require replaying crucial scenes to better understand the timeline of a complex narrative (e.g., *Breaker Morant*), to review involved or elliptical dialogue (e.g., *Chinatown*), or to review complex symbols or fleeting visual allusions (e.g., *The Matrix*). Students will also be expected to have notes on a film under discussion, primarily general responses based on the guidelines in the handout, "Analyzing Films." Occasionally, a second viewing may be in order.

B. Reading (20 hours). Each segment of the course will involve readings from a variety of texts.

C. Papers (20 hours)

1. A Response Paper to be written on a film which is not among those required for viewing this semester. The film must raise one or more theological issues, and such issue(s) must be clearly defined in the paper. (6-8 pages)

2. Term paper. A Position Paper: A Christian Stance with regard to Contemporary Film. (8-10 pages)

Handouts with guidelines for each paper will be given out later. Papers are due at the beginning of the class period of their respective due dates.

3. Notes. Not graded, but essential for class discussions.

D. Online discussion (1 hour).

E. Attendance. This is a graduate seminar which will depend heavily on

student contribution. There will only be six meetings!

Final Grade:

Position paper	40%
Response Paper	30%
Reading & Viewing	25%
Online Discussion	5%.

Class Outline

Jan 3. Introduction:

- General Theological Issues as Reflected in Film.
- At Issue: Christianity and Culture.
- Film as Both a reflection and a Shaper of Culture.
- Film Criticism as a Discipline.

Assignments:

Required Viewing:	<i>Ulee’s Gold</i> and <i>The Prince of Tides</i> .	
Required Reading:	<i>Christ and Culture</i>	Chapters 1-2.
	<i>The Art of Watching Films</i>	Chapters 1-3.
	<i>Boundaries</i>	Chapters 1-6.
Suggested Reading:	Jewett, <i>St. Paul at the Movies</i>	Chapter 2, “The Exposure of Shameful Secrets in the Prince of Tides”
	Miles, <i>Finding Meaning at the Movies:</i>	“Ulee’s Gold”
	Erickson, <i>Christian Theology</i>	“The Nature of Sin”
Required Writing:	First Response Paper	a six to seven page critique of a film <i>not</i> on the required list, due in four weeks (February 12).
Terms from Glossary*:		archetype, character, characterization, critical approaches (all nine forms of film criticism: psychological, myth & archetypal, sociological, political, historical, philosophical, ethical, form and eclectic criticism), irony, motif, narrative, narrator, point of view, plot, theme, timeline
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These terms are in the Handout Glossary. Students are also encouraged to familiarize themselves with the glossary included at the end of <i>The Art of Watching Films</i>. 	

Jan. 17

Discussion:

Ulee’s Gold and *The Prince of Tides*

Theological Considerations:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the fallen nature of man • personal and societal boundaries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • guilt, shame, and secrets • societal & family taboos • confessing • hope of redemption. |
|--|--|

- verbalizing and objectifying
- counseling

Cinematic Considerations:

three chapters from *Art of Watching Films*:

- “Film Analysis”
- “Fictional and Dramatic Elements”
- “Thematic Elements”
- archetype

Assignments:

Required Viewing:
Required Reading:

Snow Falling on Cedars and *Schindler’s List*.
Christ and Culture, Chapters 3 & 4.
The Art of Watching Films, Chapters 4 & 5.
Boundaries Chapters 7 & 8.

Suggested Reading:

Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound*.
or
Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*
“government” in *EDT*
“The Social Dimension of Sin” in Erickson, *Christian Theology*.

Required Writing:

A reminder: *Response* Paper due next class (February 12); *Position* Paper due in six weeks.

Terms from Glossary:

Academy, aperture, aerial shot, ambient light, anamorphic lens, angle of view, aperture, available light photography, backlighting, bird’s eye view, camera angle, camera movement, cinema verite, cinematographer, close-up shot, definition, depth of field, establishing shot, frame, freeze frame, full shot, lighting (“high key” and “low key” lighting; shot, lighting (“high key” and “low key” lighting; “soft” and “hard” lighting), long shot, long take, metaphor (visual metaphor), slow motion, still.

Jan 31.

Response paper due today (30 points).

Discussion *Snow Falling on Cedars* and *Schindler’s List*.

Theological Considerations:

- primary identity
- ethnic boundaries
- society’s “untouchables”
- Christians as members of
- religious boundaries
- stereotypes & prejudice
- forgiving the “unforgivable.”

society: autonomy vs.
responsibility.

Cinematic Considerations: Two Chapters from *Art of Watching Films*:

- “Visual Design”
- “Cinematography.”

Assignments: *The Bridge on The River Kwai* and *Breaker Morant*.

Required Viewing:

Required Reading: *Christ and Culture*, Chapter 5
The Art of Watching Films, Chapters 6 & 7
Boundaries, Chapters 9 & 10.

Required Writing: Position Paper due in six weeks.

Terms from Glossary: advancing colors, American montage, continuity, dissolve, editing (cutting), fade in, fade out, final cut, flashback, flash cutting, focus in/focus out, montage, parallel action, parallel cutting/parallel editing, visual literacy.

Feb. 14.

Discussion:

Theological Considerations:

Snow Falling on Cedars and *Schindler’s List*

- clashes between Cultural or societal obligations and moral.
- Christian positions with regard to violence, self defense, war
- military obligations and moral reservations
- Bonhoeffer’s action against Hitler
- The individual as ultimately responsible for his or her own actions.

Cinematic Considerations:
Two Chapters from *Art of Watching Film*

- “Editing and Special Effects”
- “Color”

Assignments:

Required Viewing: *Chinatown* and *Grand Canyon*.

Required Reading: *Christ and Culture*, Chapters 6 & 7.
Boundaries, Chapters 11-13.

Suggested Reading Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Chapter Two: “Theology and Philosophy”

EDT

“existentialism”; “Heidegger, Martin”;
“Kierkegaard, Søren”; and “Sartre, Jean Paul”

Required Writing:
Terms from Glossary

Position Paper due four weeks.
: antagonist, , anti-hero, protagonist

February 28

Discussion: *Chinatown* and *Grand Canyon*

Theological Considerations:

- the relationship of philosophy to theology
- existentialism as the philosophy of the 20th century
- two existential responses: despair and courage
- perceptions of cosmology
- the currency of atheism, agnosticism, and pantheism.

Cinematic Considerations:

- hidden premises; implicit and explicit messages; films as statements
- motifs, themes, and symbols.

Assignments:

Required Viewing: *Matrix* and *The Truman Show*.

(Identify at least three possible archetypes – either character or situations – in *The Matrix*)

Required Reading: *The Art of Watching Films*, Chapters 11 & 12.

What's So Amazing about Grace?

Required Writing: Position Paper due next class.

Terms from Glossary: allegory, allusion, auteur theory, black comedy, director, genre.

March 14

Assignments:

Position Paper due today (40 points).

Required Reading: Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*

Discussion: *The Matrix & The Truman Show*

Theological Considerations:

- | | |
|--|--|
| • free will and autonomy | • free will and determinism |
| • genetic manipulation & control | • subliminal persuasion |
| • cosmologies; the occult | • belief systems as choices |
| • faith as a choice | • the inescapability of choice |
| • varieties of Christian response to film as a medium; | • personal response to film as a medium. |

Cinematic Considerations:

- directors as artists

directors' canons.

POSITION PAPER

In *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr outlines five major positions that Christians have held regarding their relationship with the culture at large. While these positions may not perfectly coincide with the various positions that Christians take regard to film as a medium, they indicate the possibilities. Such positions range from refusal to see any films at all to a basic, unquestioning acceptance all film as an integral part of one's culture. In the latter case, one might refuse to see a given film (or might be disappointed in a film he has just seen), finding it offensive, but in such cases, the negative response would be more or less identical to that of the culture at large: the majority of film-goers would also have seen the film as offensive.

In this paper, each student must outline a position he or she holds regarding the overarching question of film as a medium, and must give a clear set of principled guidelines fro film viewing.

Among the many questions to consider:

- Do you allow yourself to see whatever films are current – or only those with certain ratings?
- What is the basis for your decisions?
- Did you have a considered, coherent position regarding films as a medium prior to taking this class?
- What has you family or church taught you in this regard?
- Do your views now differ from theirs?
- Do you find the films assigned in this class problematical, or do they seem appropriate to the course in terms of the course goals and objectives?

This paper should make at least occasional references to Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. It should also occasionally reference specific films in making its points. (Such examples are *not* restricted to the films assigned for this class.)

(8 – 10 pages; 40 points)

RESPONSE PAPER

In this paper, students are asked to critique a film – one that is *not* among the assigned films in this course – and ultimately to evaluate it in theological terms. There is no formula for such a paper, but there are certain guidelines.

The paper's focus should be the theme and/or statement of the film. In most instances, a quick review of various critical approaches (see Glossary Handout) should reveal possible opening line of attack. Moreover, certain films by their very nature demand a psychological approach, others a political approach, and so forth. At some point, the paper should deal with cinematic elements such as plot and sub-plot, characterization, or cross-cutting, or visual allusions and symbols. But it is inappropriate to try to cover *all* the technical elements that went into the creation of the film; one need only cover those which present themselves as being of special significance in the film under consideration.

In delineating a film's theme(s), the writer must determine whether or not the film is making a statement, and, if it is, the writer must be prepared to evaluate how well the film makes the statement. Finally, the film's theme and/or statement must be evaluated in theological terms, and in large measure the success of such evaluation will depend upon the (correct) connection made between the film's theme and the appropriate theological issues at stake.

It is expected that any bibliography with this paper be brief, in part because reviews of the film being criticized may be dated or virtually nonexistent. However, bibliographic items are not restricted to film criticisms, but may come from a variety of sources. For example, in critiquing a film such as *Ulee's Gold*, one might want to reference books or articles on chemical dependency and co-dependency. In critiquing a film such as *Schindler's List*, one might want to reference a work such as Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, or historical references.

Note well: Avoid spending a great deal of time in plot summary. Occasionally, a capsule summary is in order, but little space should be devoted to plot outline. Do not confuse plot summary with criticism!

ANALYZING FILMS

In serious film analysis, the critic always touches certain bases, even if only to later dismiss them. The following steps are provided to help you in your analyses of films. These steps need not be followed in a rigid, lock-step approach, but it is advisable for now not to skip steps lest you miss a tool that will unlock an otherwise hidden seam of meaning in the film under examination.

I. **THEME.** Does the film have an identifiable theme? Are there sub-themes? If so, do the sub-themes seem comfortably subordinated to the main theme, or is there confusion and an apparent competition of themes.

II. **FORM CRITICISM.** (Employ for *all* films). Was the plot believable; was it enjoyable or disappointing – and how did you arrive at your judgment? Were the characters believable? Were the central characters well developed or two dimensional? Were there special techniques that added to (or detracted from) the action (camera angles? cutting? setting? ambience or texture? soundtrack?) Did the action move forward at a pace appropriate to the storyline? Was the focus more on the action, or on the development of a character?

III. **MAJOR CRITICAL APPROACHES.** Is there a particular critical approach that seems to be demanded by the film? If so, what is it, and does it seem to be complemented by other approaches? Consider the following

- psychological criticism
- archetypal/myth criticism
- sociological criticism
- political criticism
- historical criticism
- philosophical criticism
- ethical criticism
- eclectic criticism

(See Glossary Handout for definitions of various types of criticism)

IV. **STATEMENT.** Did the film simply tell a story, or did it also raise questions and provoke thinking and analysis? Did the film seem to be making a statement, and if so, what would the statement(s) be?

VI. **THEOLOGICAL CRITICISM.** Can you “connect the dots” from its theme and/or statement to an area of theology?

V. **PERSONAL RESPONSE.** What was your personal response to this film? Could you relate it to any past experience, to strongly held beliefs, etc.? Would you see it again?

Theology and Film Bibliography

Aristotle. *Aristotle's Poetics*. Francis Fergusson, trans. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.

The oldest surviving source of dramatic criticism in Western culture, and the one from which we derive terms such as character, plot, etc., as well as a fundamental understanding of the purpose of the dramatic arts.

Boggs, Joseph M. and Dennis Petrie. *The Art of Watching Films, 5th Ed.*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 2000.

Perhaps the standard and most widely used introductory text on the art of analyzing and critiquing films. Chapter headings include "Thematic Elements," "Visual Design," "Cinematography," etc. Sixteen chapters in all, plus two appendices and an excellent glossary.; thorough and detailed.

Canby, Vincent, Janet Maslin, and the Film Critics of the New York Times.

The New York Times Guide to the Best 1,000 Movies Ever Made. New York, NY: Times Books, 1999.

So many films are now produced each year that titles are easily forgotten as the years slide by. Sometimes it is good just to have a books of lists, and this is one of the best. Comes with brief synopses and other information.

Curran, Daniel. *A Guide to American Cinema, 1965-1995*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998. Again a book of lists and synopses; for its range of thirty years, thorough and reasonably detailed.

The International Encyclopedia of Film. Dr. Roger Manhill, Gen'l. Ed. New York, NY: Crown publishers, 1974.

Fills in the years that books such as Curran's (above) fail to cover. A standard reference.

Jewett, Robert. *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

Critiques eleven films – including *Amadeus*, *Grand Canyon*, and *Tender Mercies* – from a Christian viewpoint. One of the first entries into the world of Christian film criticism.

Dr. Jewett is Senior Professor of New Testament Studies at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois.

St. Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1999.

More focused than his first work, in this book Jewett works with the themes of shame and redemption as seen in ten films, including *Forrest Gump*, *The Prince of Tides*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000.

Deals with the whole issue of how a Christian might approach the medium of film and addresses as well of the relationship to film to theology. Thoughtful and persuasive. Dr. Johnston is a theology professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, CA.

Kael, Pauline. *5001 Nights at the Movies: A Guide from A to Z*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982.

One of the most imposing films critics of all time, Pauline Kael provides us with a superb guide to a very long list of films. A major reference work.

Konigsberg, Ira. *The Complete Film Dictionary*. New York, NY: Penguin: 1989.

Although many introductory texts provide glossaries, there are always terms or phrases that fail to appear in them, and leave the reader in a quandary. Although this text is perhaps a case of overkill for the average viewer, it is a superb reference for the true film buff.

Medved, Michael. *Hollywood vs. America*. New York, NY: HarperCollins/Zondervan, 1992.

An unusually powerful diatribe against Hollywood film-makers – from a New York film critic! This highly acclaimed work pinpoints area after area where Hollywood has betrayed a trust and a responsibility, and created an onslaught against traditional American values. A must-read for anyone hoping to study American film in terms of theology or ethics – or even simply in terms of popular culture.

Miles, Margaret R. *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1996.

A serious work by an extremely knowledgeable film critic. Rather than being a broadside against major Hollywood trends, this work examines fifteen films in pairs (with one triad) as examples of specific issues. Somewhat along the lines of Jewett's treatments, but a bit more demanding. Miles assumes a literate reader with a large repertoire of film experience. She treats a wide variety of films (15 in all), including *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Jesus of Montreal*, *The Mission*, *Thelma and Louise*, *The Piano* and others, all the while referencing many other films. On the other hand, her work at times seems far more concerned with cultural values than with spiritual ones.

Dr. Miles is dean at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA.

Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film*, 3rd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.

A bit technical for all but true film buffs, but a major introductory work on film analysis. Superb Appendices and an exhaustive bibliography.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York, NY: Harper dt's Row, 1951.

Niebuhr investigates five major positions Christians have taken with regard to the culture at large. Although one may not always agree with Niebuhr's categories (there seems to be considerable overlap), this is nonetheless a very thought-provoking work on the various responses possible, and is perhaps more current today than when it was first published.

O'Neil, Tom. *Movie Awards: The Ultimate, Unofficial Guide to the Oscars, Golden Globes, Critics, and Guild Honors*. New York, NY: Berkley Publishing, 2001.

Another book of lists, but an excellent resource for references for titles, directors, actors, etc.

Ryken, Leland. *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly about the Arts*. Wheaton Literary Series: Harold Shaw Publishing, 1989.

Ryken, well known for his works on examining scripture as literature, examines the general question of the relationship of the Christian to the arts. Though somewhat removed from the area of film studies, an interesting look at the whole question of Christians and art in general.

Stone, Bryan P. *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000.

In an fascinating trope, Stone uses the Apostle's Creed as the outline for his text, and to each of the phrases, he attaches the title of a film. The theological concept an the film then become the basis for a chapter which investigates the latter as a cinematic presentation related to the former: "I believe..."; *Contact!*

Dr. Stone is a Professor of Evangelism at Boston University School of Theology, Boston Massachusetts.

Vaux, Sara Anson. *Finding Meaning at the Movies*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999.

A superb work by an unusually gifted critic, one whose insights are more probing and penetrating than the average. Vaux has the ability to give a brief, balanced treatment to even those films that are are problematical, and to see what might be positive in them *without* losing sight of Christian values. The work is well organized, with an introduction, a brief plot summary, and a concise, but highly focused commentary.