

**Seeing and Believing: Women, Religion and Film**

**Religion 197; Fall '06**

**Wed., 6:30 – 9:30 PM; Memorial 302**

**Instructor: Kelly Denton-Borhaug**

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**call or email if you'd like to make an appt to speak with me – I invite all students to seek me out in my office at least once during the semester!**

**Regular office hours: Monday afternoons, TR 2:20 – 4:00 pm**

**You may also make an appt. with me or pop by my office to see if I'm available.**

**Course Description:** “A film invites interrogation” (Makarushka: 1998). In this course we will 1) explore how films appropriate religious imagery and beliefs in the service of the cultural production of images of women and women's lives; and 2) investigate the ways in which the creation and viewing of film may share similarities with the construction and practice of religion. Along the way we will delve into the following themes: women's suffering and religious understandings of sacrifice; the representation of Jewish and Islamic women in a dominantly Christian society; Christian Fundamentalism, Jewish Orthodoxy, millennialism and women's lives; religious authority, gender, sexuality and love; and more. We will approach our films as “texts” that invite a critical reading, and develop skills to enable our increased thoughtful, deliberate, intelligent viewing. Class time will be equally divided between the viewing of our films and time for lecture and lively discussion/debate. Students are advised to familiarize themselves with Blackboard, as we will be using this online resource in our course.

**Course Objectives:**

- 1) We will gain a heightened awareness of the ways we approach/absorb films, especially commercial films, and become better able to distinguish extra and intra-filmic strategies that encourage various interpretive schemes on the part of audiences. We will become better versed in methods to “interrogate” as well as appreciate film.
- 2) We will improve our critical thinking, speaking, research and writing skills.
- 3) We will develop an introductory understanding of some of the complex relationships between portrayals and questions of religion, and constructions of gender, race and class.

**Course Books:**

*Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals*, John C. Lyden, New York University Press, 2003

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

*Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies*, bell hooks, Routledge, 1996

Additional articles, book chapters and essays will be assigned and likely posted in Blackboard or available at Reeve's on reserve.

**Course Films:** Each week we will focus on a different film that we will view during class time (listed below according to schedule). You are responsible for having intelligently and carefully viewed all the films in the course, including any that you miss because of an excused absence. Speak with me about how best to gain access to any film you may miss.

### **Requirements:**

- 1) Prompt attendance at every class period is a must. The only excused absences will be for serious illness, religious observance or a family emergency (unexcused absence will mean a serious detraction in this part of your grade). I ask you to inform me AHEAD of class time if you need to miss as a result of one of these reasons stated above (please call me at my office, at x7104). In order to participate fully and with intelligence in our class discussions, students also will have thoughtfully and deliberately read all the required readings before class; and will have responded to the questions listed that week on Blackboard by 12 noon on the day of class (in order that the instructor may read them before class!). ***Bring whatever text we are reading for the day with you to class!*** All students are expected to regularly participate in our class discussions with intelligence, responding to one another thoughtfully, raising good questions and new ideas, etc. Push yourself (even if this makes you uncomfortable) to grow as a liberal arts learner who can speak seriously and intelligently in public, and come meet with me individually if you need help in this area. Class participation in these areas represents 1/3 of the overall grade.  
***Important note on required time you should allot for this course. The minimum expectation of the college is that students should expect to spend 2 outside hours in study and preparation for every 1 hour in class. You should plan now on including in your schedule at least six outside hours every week for reading, thinking (don't forget to allow yourself time to think!), blackboard responses, research and writing. Take time to discuss our films and readings with others! These hours will increase in the weeks you have papers due.***
- 2) Students will write four 3-4 page, double-spaced papers over the course of the semester. Each of these papers will focus on the content of a particular week's assignment (film plus required readings), and in some way take further the analysis we have begun in our class discussion. Be creative and use these papers to further your own integrative thinking about our readings and film! No additional outside resources are required for these short papers (but if you wish to consult additional reviews/resources, you may). In these short papers you will use your own best critical thinking to address the required readings in connection with a given film, the class discussion following our viewing, and your own developing response and awareness. Do NOT use these papers to "retell the narrative." Students who take the opportunity to come and see me early in the

semester to talk about their short papers invariably improve their writing – make sure you do this! Make note of the due dates for your papers in the schedule of classes below. These papers combined will represent 1/3 of the overall grade. See the guidelines in Blackboard Assignments for further suggestions on writing superb short papers.

- 3) Each student will choose one course film for the purpose of more in-depth research and analysis. You will consult at least five additional resources beyond those in the required readings (at least three resources will be academic, analytical explorations), think through all the issues carefully, and write a 7-8 page paper, to be submitted in class on Dec. 6 in hard copy. The only acceptable excuses for requesting an extension on this paper are the same listed for excused absence above. Your paper will include proper footnotes and bibliography (check MLA style if you're not sure how to go about this); and will in some way focus on the intersection of gender, film and religion in the film you have chosen – other than that you are free to explore and dig in whatever direction you wish. On Oct. 25, I will ask you to hand in a 1 paragraph description of the thesis you are interrogating in your paper, and your bibliography. This means you will need to have completed your research in advance of this date. The research librarians have generously arranged for a research workshop based on this course requirement at our library, set for Oct. 11 at the beginning of class. On the last day of class we will celebrate with a “research roundtable” at which every student will have a few minutes to professionally present the results of his/her research to the rest of the class (and perhaps we'll also have a potluck dinner or dessert together). Your paper and oral presentation represent 1/3 of your total grade.

*Students are advised to review the Academic Honesty Policy in the Student Handbook (available online) and required to follow the guidelines therein.*

### **Schedule of Classes**

Aug. 30 *A History of Violence*, David Cronenberg, 2005  
Introduction to course

Sept. 6 *Dead Man Walking*, Gabriel Axel, 1987

Overt religious themes in film

Read: Lyden, Chapters 1 and 2

Also read: “*Dead Man Walking* and the Riddle of Divine Justice (Leviticus),”

*Scripture on the Silver Screen*, Adele Reinhartz (on reserve)

Before Class: Find the posted questions on Blackboard and write short paragraphs in response. Your answers are to be well-written, grammatically correct, and will demonstrate that you have taken time to think through and respond thoughtfully to the written material assigned for this week.

Sept. 13 *Left Behind*, Vic Sarin, 2000

Christian Fundamentalism: *Left Behind Series*

Read: Miles, Preface, Chapter 1, 5

(in Blackboard documents also read) : *En-raptured* , By: Byassee, Jason, Christian Century, 0009-5281,

April 20, 2004, Vol. 121, Issue 8 (available online through Academic Search Elite – enter “en-raptured” into field)

Before class: Find posted Blackboard questions and write short paragraphs in response

**DUE at beginning of class, hard copy, 3-4 page double-spaced paper focusing on one of the films from Aug. 30 or Sept. 6 we have viewed thus far, analyzing the film further with the help of the course readings, class discussion and your own best critical thinking!**

Sept. 20 *The Siege*, Edward Zwick, 2004

Read: Lyden, chpt. 12 (thrillers, horror movies); also, Miles, 4 Representation of Islam in Amer. Culture

Before class: Answer Blackboard questions

Sept. 27 *Crash*, Paul Haggis, 2004-5

Intersection of religion with issues of gender, race, class in film; Introduction to question of Religion-Film Dialogue

Read: Hooks, 1 “making movie magic”; 10 “neo-colonial fantasies of conquest: Hoop Dreams”; 19 “the oppositional gaze: black female spectators”

Lyden, 5 “The Religion-Film Dialogue as Interreligious Dialogue”

Before class: Answer Blackboard Questions

**Due at beginning of class: hard-copy, 3-4 page short paper on one of the films from Sept. 13 or 20.**

Oct. 4 *Trembling Before God*, Sandy Simcha Dubowski, 2001

Sexuality, Gender, Religion, Film

Read: Miles, 8 “Bodies, Pleasures, and Pains”; Hooks, 20, “Is Paris Burning?”

Before class: Answer Blackboard Questions

Oct. 11 No film tonight! We will meet at Reeve’s Library for a research workshop; then convene on the bottom floor

of the library for discussion, catch-up and more. During this week, see *Fight Club* on your own; also use the time to begin composing your

research bibliography. Finally, go on Blackboard to read the questions we’ll be addressing in our discussion following the research workshop. Please take time to re-read and think!

**Due at beginning of class: hard-copy, 3-4 page short paper on one of the films from Sept. 27 or Oct. 4**

***Important Note: We will begin Class in the computer alcove in Reeves Library with a one hour research workshop led by our research librarians to build your skills for our class research projects. After the workshop we will move to our regular classroom.***

Oct. 18 *Fight Club* ***Important Note: This is the only film that you are asked to view on your own – please do so IN ADVANCE of our class tonight! The Film is available on reserve. We will use the entire class time for extended discussion and analysis of this film.***

Read: Lyden, Chpt. 4, "Rituals and Morals" also (available in Blackboard docs)  
read:

"Fight Clubbing," unpublished paper, Ryan Shelley

"Integration and Rebirth Through Confrontation," Christopher Deacy, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*

"whose pussy is this? A feminist comment" hooks, 21

Before class: Answer Blackboard Questions

Oct. 25 *The Sea Inside*,

Read: Miles, chpt. 7 "Good Clean Fun: Love in Popular Film";

Lyden, 8, "Melodrama, Tearjerkers, and 'Women's Films'" and 9, "Romantic Comedies";

Before class: Answer Blackboard Questions

***Due at beginning of class: your bibliography for your research paper, in hard copy, plus one paragraph about the film you have chosen and the theme/argument/question you are researching with respect to your film***

Nov. 1 *Life of Brian*

Read: Miles, chpt 2, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?";

Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark*, "Telling Sacred Stories in Cathedral Cinemas," (on reserve)

Also read: pp 48-51, "The Scandal Films," *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ Figures in Film*, Lloyd Baugh (handout)

Before Class: Answer Blackboard Questions

Nov. 8 Film TBA (Class will have the opportunity in consensus to choose a film in connection with our course!)

Readings: TBA

**Due at beginning of class: 3-4 page hard copy short paper on one of the films from Oct. 11, 18, 25 or Nov. 1**

***Important note: please make an appt. to see me for a 20 minute consultation about your research and writing between now and April 19***

Nov. 15 *The Divan*, Pearl Gluck, 2005

Read: hooks, 19, "Confession – Filming Family"; Miles, 6, "Older, Wiser, Stronger: Representation and Self-Representation"

Before class: Answer Blackboard Questions

Nov. 22 (no class; Thanksgiving recess)

Nov. 29 *Submission*

Read: Review: Miles, Chapt. 4 – "Representing Islam and Judaism in a Dominantly Christian Society"; "Please, Go and Wake Up! *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and the 'War on Terror' in the Netherlands," unpublished paper by Marc de Leeuw and Sonja van Wichelen (posted on Blackboard).

Dec. 6 Last day of class: handing in of research papers and research roundtable –  
Celebrating together our good work at the semester's end!