

**Introduction to Religion in America**  
**Religious Studies 124: Religion Observed in Popular Film**  
**Spring Semester 2017**  
Tuesday 3:30-5:50  
Lloyd 329

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Hours: Tuesday 1-2 PM and by appointment

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### **Course Description**

Religious narratives, language, themes, and rituals appear with surprising frequency in contemporary American films. How does an awareness of this religious dimension in a work of "popular culture" inform aesthetic judgments about a film's significance? What do these subtle traces of religion suggest about the American character and values? What narratives establish and reinforce the myth of America? And what does the broad popularity of these films say about the nature of being "religious" in America? These are the kinds of questions we will pursue together in Religious Studies 124. This course comprises a broad, interdisciplinary introduction to the comparative study of practices and concepts commonly identified as world religion. We will focus on the enduring debate between American culture and religious identity, or—in the contested language of the religious studies discipline—between the sacred and the profane. Our basic "texts" will be six films that have achieved box office, rental, or internet success since their release. Our conversations about these films will be supplemented with careful readings of critical, cultural, and literary scholarship. The class will be conducted as a lecture and discussion course. This course fulfills the General Education requirement for the Humanities and bears the "H" designation.

## Student Learning Outcomes

By semester's end, the conscientious student will be able to:

- Recognize religious themes in works of popular culture
- Analyze critically the construction and use of the category of religion
- Analyze critically the structure of at least one film
- Write a critical review of at least one film using skills acquired during the semester

## Course Requirements

There are no prerequisites, but students should be aware that all writing—including correspondences conducted via e-mail or through the BlackBoard® system—will be evaluated according to the standards of excellence established during the first-year English Composition sequence at the University of Alabama. Each participant is expected to contribute actively to the on-going, in-class conversation. All written work must be TYPED (except work done in class). Graded assignments will include: 1) a structural analysis of one of the films (probably *Bull Durham*, *The Color Purple*, or *Being There*); 2) a two-part film review critique and film review of 6 to 8 pages; 3) five quizzes; 4) four pre-discussion assignments; and 5) class participation. All of these assignments are discussed in more detail on pages 9-12 of this syllabus.

1) Structural analysis of a film	150 points
2) Two-part film review	200 points
3) Quizzes	500 points
4) Pre-Discussion Assignments	100 points
5) Class Participation	50 points

Extra Credit may be earned by attending and writing a report about as many as three lecture events scheduled in the Religious Studies Department and elsewhere across the University. Each report can earn up to 25 additional points. Appropriate lectures will be recommended during the semester. Please see pages 8 and 12 of this syllabus for more details.

In addition to viewing the films, reading the assignments is of crucial importance. Our work together as a class will presuppose familiarity with the films and the assigned readings—a familiarity that will be evaluated through the pre-discussion assignment questions. If you are unable to attend class or are unwilling to read with care an average of 35 pages per week, you should not take this course.

Attendance at all class meetings is mandatory. If you know—or even suspect—that you cannot honor the attendance commitment, do not take this class.

Class discussions are central to how this course will proceed. The pre-discussion assignments are designed to engender in-class discussion. Please come to class with written comments and questions that you would like us all to pursue together. Good class discussion is a sustained, wide-ranging-yet-focused, fun and exhilarating inquiry. It increases in quality and intensity as the semester progresses. Participation involves attentive listening as well as talking. We have a great deal to learn from each other. Listen respectfully to your colleagues; respond to their questions; build on their comments. This is how college is meant to be.

Feel free to visit Ms. Rachel Briggs or me during our office hours with any concerns you may have about this class. Among other things, we are here to help you develop your writing and speaking skills. In addition, we recommend to you the resources of the University's Writing Center—which you should visit physically, or at least electronically, during the first month of classes: <http://www.writingcenter.ua.edu/>

Academic honesty is expected of all students. All acts of dishonesty (plagiarism, cheating) in any work constitute academic misconduct. The Academic Misconduct Disciplinary Policy will be followed in the event of academic misconduct.

To request disability accommodations, please contact Disability Services (348-4285). After initial arrangements are made with that office, please see me.

### **Reading assignments**

The following writings are available in pdf format at the REL 124 course page on the Blackboard® site for this course.

1. Russell T. McCutcheon, "What is the Publicly-Funded Study of Religion?"
2. David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlach of Rock 'n' Roll..."
3. Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwald, selections from *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*.
4. RWB Lewis, selections from *The American Adam*.
5. John Dominic Crossan, selections from *The Dark Interval*.

## Recommended texts

In addition to the assigned readings, excerpts from the following books will be made available during the course of the semester. These texts are recommended, particularly if you intend to pursue further studies in religion and popular culture, cultural studies, or media studies.

Terry Ray Clark and Dan W. Clanton, Jr., *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012).

Timothy J. Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, 9th Edition (New York: Pearson, 2014).

Chris Klassen, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach* (New York: Oxford, 2014).

## **Religious Studies 124: Religion Observed in Popular Film** **Course Schedule**

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I. Tuesday, January 17  
Class Logistics

1. Introduction of Syllabus including film diagram (filmography)

ASSIGNMENT for January 24:

1. Read McCutcheon and Chidester articles
2. Complete Assignment #1 (available on Blackboard)
3. Complete Class Questionnaire (available on Blackboard)

NOTE: Class Questionnaire and Assignment #1 to be handed in at the beginning of class or before class via e-mail by January 24<sup>th</sup>.

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II. Tuesday, January 24

***Bull Durham***

1. See: Ron Shelton, dir., *Bull Durham* (1988) (108 minutes)
2. QUIZ #1: *Bull Durham* + Chidester reading
3. Hand in: Class Questionnaire and Assignment #1

ASSIGNMENT for January 31:

1. Read Martin and Ostwald articles
2. Complete Martin and Ostwald Assignment #2

NOTE: Assignment #2 to be handed in at the beginning of class or before class via e-mail by January 31<sup>st</sup>.

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III. Tuesday, January 31

The Church of Baseball and the Myth of America

1. Discuss *Bull Durham*, Chidester, and Martin and Ostwald
2. Hand in: Assignment #2

ASSIGNMENT for February 7:

1. Read RWB Lewis selections
2. Complete Lewis Assignment #3

NOTE: Assignment #3 due before class on February 7<sup>th</sup>.

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IV. Tuesday, February 7

***The Color Purple***

1. See Steven Spielberg, dir., *The Color Purple* (1985) (154 minutes)
2. Hand in: Lewis Assignment #3

ASSIGNMENT for February 14:

1. QUIZ #2: *The Color Purple* + Martin and Ostwald, and RWB Lewis
- TAKE-HOME QUIZ; to be submitted via e-mail before noon on MONDAY, February 13<sup>th</sup> to ttrost@ua.edu.
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V. Tuesday, February 14

The Adamic Myth and *The Color Purple*

1. Discuss *The Color Purple*, Martin and Oswald, and RWB Lewis
  2. Lecture: "The Adamic Myth in America"
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VI. Tuesday, February 21  
*Being There*

1. See Hal Ashby, dir., *Being There* (1979) (130 minutes)
  2. QUIZ #3: *Being There* + Martin and Oswald and RWB Lewis
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VII. Tuesday, February 28  
The American Cultural Debate and *Being There*

1. Discuss *Being There* and RWB Lewis (continued)
2. Lecture: "The Parties of Hope, Memory, and Irony"
3. **Hand in: Film Structural Analysis Essay**

ASSIGNMENT for March 7:

1. Read Crossan selections
2. Complete Crossan Assignment #4

NOTE: Assignment #4 to be handed in at next class meeting on March 7<sup>th</sup>.

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VIII. Tuesday, March 7  
*Crimes and Misdemeanors*

1. See Woody Allen, dir., *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) (104 minutes)
2. Hand in: Crossan Assignment #4
3. QUIZ #4: *Crimes and Misdemeanors* + Crossan reading

ASSIGNMENT for March 21:

1. Review all critical readings
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SPRING BREAK

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IX. Tuesday March 21  
*Crimes and Misdemeanors* as Myth and/or Parable

1. Discuss *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and Crossan reading
  2. Lecture: "Satire, Parable, and Myth According to Crossan and Allen"
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X. Tuesday March 28

***O Brother Where Art Thou?***

1. See The Coen Bros., dirs., *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2001) (103 minutes)
2. QUIZ #5: *O Brother Where Art Thou?* + critical readings

ASSIGNMENT for April 4:

1. Review "myth" in Crossan, Lewis, + Martin and Ostwald
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XI. Tuesday April 4

Revisiting the American Myth in *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

1. Discuss *O Brother Where Art Thou?*
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RESEARCH BREAK

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XII. Tuesday April 18

***Blade Runner***

1. See Ridley Scott, dir., *Blade Runner* (1982/2007) (116/7 minutes)
  2. (OPTIONAL) QUIZ #6: *Blade Runner* + critical readings
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Tuesday April 25

How Is a Replicant More Human Than Human?

1. Discuss *Blade Runner*
2. Review Semester's Themes

**3. Hand in: Two-part Film Review and Critique**

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## SUMMARY OF DUE DATES AND EXTRA CREDIT LECTURE OPPORTUNITIES

### ASSIGNMENTS

#### January

24 Class Questionnaire and Assignment #1 (Chidester) DUE in Class

24 QUIZ #1 in class

31 Assignment #2 (Martin and Ostwald) DUE in class

#### February

7 Assignment # 3 (RWB Lewis) DUE in class

13 (TAKE-HOME) QUIZ #2 DUE via e-mail by 3:30 PM to ttrost@ua.edu

21 QUIZ #3 in class

28 Film Structural Analysis Essay DUE

#### March

7 Assignment #4 (Crossan) DUE in class

7 QUIZ #4 in class

28 QUIZ #5 in class

#### April

18 Optional QUIZ #6 in class

25 Two-part Film Review and Critique DUE in class

### LECTURES

#### **Tuesday March 21, 2017**

*Department of Religious Studies Aaron Aronov Lecture*

#### **Dr. Laura Levitt**

Professor of Religion, Jewish Studies and Gender,

Temple University

**7:00 PM**

**Ferguson Center 3104**

#### **Wednesday, March 29, 2017**

*4th Annual Religious Studies Undergraduate Research Symposium*

9:30-11 AM

Gorgas 205

Other lectures and events to be announced.

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**ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES**

**Pre-Discussion Assignments**

Four "pre-discussion assignments" are scheduled during the course of the semester. The assigned questions will guide your reading and give you an opportunity to consider critically the arguments advanced by the authors—especially as those arguments relate to the films we will be viewing. All assignments are due at or before the beginning of class on the particular due date. No credit will be granted for late assignments.

**Structural Analysis**

The purpose of this exercise is to explore the relationship between the form or structure of a film and its content—in particular, content that relates to our twin themes of religion and American culture. Part one of the exercise is to complete a "filmography" of one film (*Bull Durham*, *The Color Purple*, *Being There*, or *Crimes and Misdemeanors*)—that is, a careful plotting of the action, events, and the dialogue as they develop in the film. Based on these "filmography" notes, **which are to be handed in as part of the exercise**, you will compose a short (3 to 5 pages) essay in which you: 1] identify five or more key scenes in the film related to the theme you deem significant; 2] discuss the relationship among these scenes with particular emphasis on how they advance or undermine a "religious reading" of the film (using Chidester, Martin and Ostwalt, Lewis, Crossan, or other theorists to signal what you mean by "religious"); and 3] construct an argument, based on the evidence you have just presented, for the "essential," "basic," or "true" meaning of this particular film. In other words: based on the evidence you assemble, present your interpretation of the film. NOTE: Please hand in your filmography with the paper.

**Critique and Review**

Go to <amazon.com> or <barnesandnoble.com> or an academic periodical such as the *Journal of Religion and Film* <<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/>>. Find a review of one of the movies we have seen (a review that you find particularly interesting or disturbing); copy the review for inclusion with your essay; and write a brief (2-3 pages) critique of the review from the point of view of our class, that is: with specific reference to what the reviewer does and does not say about the role of "religion" in this particular

film. Based upon (but not duplicating) your critique, write your own 2-3 page review of the same film. You may submit your review to amazon or barnes and noble if you wish, but do not forget to include with your essay: 1] a copy of the review you are critiquing; 2] your critique of the review; 3] your review of the film.

## Quizzes

Six quizzes will be offered during the course of the semester. Of these, five will count toward your final grade. They will test your active viewing skills (recognizing themes, characters, plot, etc.) and your familiarity with the assigned readings. The in-class quizzes may be handwritten; the take-home quiz should be typed and forwarded to me by the due date as an e-mail attachments. Generally speaking, the final quiz on *Blade Runner* will be optional; however, you may wish to take the final quiz and substitute that grade for a quiz you may have taken earlier (i.e., if the *Bladerunner* grade is higher).

## General Notes on Written Work

- \* All writing should be TYPED and double-spaced.
- \* Recommended fonts include Courier, Palatino, Times, Bookman, and Century Schoolbook.
- \* Type size should be 12.
- \* Margins on the paper should be 1 inch on the sides and 1 inch at the top and bottom.
- \* Papers longer than one page in length should have page numbers.
- \* A cover sheet should be stapled with the body of your paper. It should contain the following information:
  - 1) title of paper
  - 2) your name
  - 3) the date
  - 4) the course name and number
  - 5) the professor

For example, in the middle of the page:

No Guilt in a Godless World:  
*Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Magnolia* Contrasted

and in the lower right corner of the page:

Terri Mysteria

April 25, 2017

REL 124: Religion Observed in Popular Film

Professor Trost

\* Papers with more than six spelling or grammar errors will be returned for revision prior to evaluation. Please use the spellcheck function on the computer and review your work to make certain that properly spelled words are in fact the words you intend to use (for example: be careful about the difference between "there" and "their" or "its" and "it's").

\* Papers with major construction problems will be returned for revision prior to evaluation. At the very least, make certain that your sentences are complete sentences (they have a subject and a verb) and that they express one (but not more than one) complete thought. There should be no run-on sentences.

\* No matter your level of writing skill, if you would like to focus on improving your abilities you should consult one of the specialists at the Writing Center on the third floor in Lloyd Hall. Your tuition pays for this kind of expert assistance.

## Guidelines for Extra Credit Assignments in the Department of Religious Studies

The guidelines below are meant to streamline expectations and requirements of extra credit assignments relating to public lectures in the Department of Religious Studies. Should a professor decide to offer extra credit opportunities, he or she shall set the parameters of specific assignments regarding due dates and points allowed and awarded. These guidelines, however, offer a framework to which students and faculty may refer in the construction and completion of such assignments.

Throughout each academic year, the Department of Religious Studies hosts and sponsors a number of public lectures by invited UA faculty and visiting scholars from other academic institutions. A student may receive extra credit for attending such a lecture and completing a written response to the talk.

Written responses must contain the two following components:

1. Engaged Summary: The student must demonstrate that he or she listened closely to the lecture, understood its basic points or themes, and stayed for the entire event. The student should offer a broad but cohesive outline of the speaker's topic and argument.
2. Critical Reflection: The student must reflect critically on the lecture, responding analytically to its points and argument(s). In this critical response, the student should offer his or her own claims, noting specific points of the lecture with which he or she agreed/disagreed, which points were effective or ineffective, and what he or she found to be the productive possibilities of the kind of work outlined by the lecturer for the academic study of religion. In this critical reflection, the student should demonstrate and apply knowledge and critical thinking skills developed within the Department of Religious Studies.

Responses should adhere to the following formatting guidelines:

- Responses should be no less than one full page.
- Responses should be typed, in 12-pt. font and double-spaced with 1-inch margins.