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## A Picture's Worth: Teaching Religion and Film

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## A Picture's Worth: Teaching Religion and Film

### Abstract

I believe the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. As Berger claims, "seeing comes before words." Pictures, particularly the moving kind, have always fascinated me. Consequently, for over a decade, I have included films among the required readings in my courses in the hope of encouraging students to experience films as religiously pertinent texts that invite critical reading. Convinced as I am that we live in a highly visual culture, I am equally convinced that films, more often than not, elude the critical eye. In my experience, students tend to: 1) see films merely as entertainment; b) distrust the ability of films to contribute to their understanding of religion; and c) apply few of their critical thinking and reading skills to the interpretation of films. For these reasons I have tried to make the case for the importance of film in the religion curriculum. In what follows, I describe my own critical perspective and the rationale for including films among course texts. Furthermore, I comment on courses in which the interpretation of films has enriched students' understanding of religion and of the complexity of cultural contexts.

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"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words."

John Berger (*Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, p. 7).

"The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.... Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions--a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom."

bell hooks (*Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York and London: Routledge, 1994, p. 12).

"The Death of the Author ... means the liberation of the text from the authority of a presence behind it which gives it meaning. Released from the constraints of a single and univocal reading, the text becomes available for production, plural, contradictory, capable of change."

Catherine Belsey (*Critical Practice*. London and New York: Routledge, 1980, p. 134).

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more often than not, elude the critical eye. In my experience, students tend to: 1) see films merely as entertainment; b) distrust the ability of films to contribute to their understanding of religion; and c) apply few of their critical thinking and reading skills to the interpretation of films. For these reasons I have tried to make the case for the importance of film in the religion curriculum. In what follows, I describe my own critical perspective and the rationale for including films among course texts. Furthermore, I comment on courses in which the interpretation of films has enriched students' understanding of religion and of the complexity of cultural contexts. Paradoxically, as Berger suggests, films can help students to explain their world with words. bell hooks reminds us that teaching is a liberatory practice and that "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy...." With hooks, I believe that 'teaching to transgress' provides an occasion to reimagine the world. To this end I introduce students to competing interpretative strategies--ones that allow them to see and experience the world in its multifariousness and to broaden their understanding of religion. Critical perspectives such as those associated with postmodern interpretative strategies, particularly feminist theories, shape my own understanding of religion and its relationship to contemporary culture as well as my teaching practice. Insofar as postmodern interpretations of religion locate its significance in the creative process, religion becomes the engagement of individuals and communities in making life meaningful. Informed by nineteenth century philosophy of religion and

postmodernism, I regard religion as descriptive of the fundamental human inquiry into the origin, purpose and end of life. Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the significance of this journey? This understanding of religion provides an alternative to the traditional paradigm that equates religion with denominationalism and equates belief with adherence to a set of specific faith-claims, prescriptive laws, rituals and practices. Experienced as a commitment to living deeply-considered personal and political beliefs, religion reflects and reinterprets culturally constructed values. To see religion as a fundamentally humane experience rather than as a denominationally determined practice allows for a critical or ideological reading that is not limited to a set of specific symbols or signifiers.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, the study of religion and the arts has focused on identifying religious themes and images--more often than not, Christian symbols--that represent normative cultural attitudes about first and last things, origins and ends. In this model, religious meaning was commonly associated with monotheistic assumptions and Christological paradigms of redemption or salvation. Postmodern or ideological approaches to religion and the arts question received notions as well as the underlying assumptions that define traditional rhetoric. As Belsey reminds us in her description of critical practice, a postmodern interpretative strategy: "Death of the Author ... means the liberation of the text from the authority of a

presence behind it which gives it meaning." If the Author is the analog of the omniscient Divine Creator, then the demise of the Master Narrator, as well as of the Master Narrative, effectively frees us to relocate the religious dimension of texts, including artworks and films. Rather than being sought in 'a presence behind' the text, both meaning and authority are created in the process of interrogating and reinterpreting texts--in the critical engagement that changes the reader as well as the text itself. Therefore, to my mind, critical engagement can be understood as religious practice.

Insofar as my reading of texts is ideological rather than theological or mythological, my approach to religion and the arts, specifically, religion and film, is that of a critical inquiry into the politics of representation. At issue is not only what a film means but how it means. After all, a film is, in and of itself, a re-reading or re-interpretation of cultural signifiers. Images are not value neutral; rather, they are vested with cultural values. Therefore, images require a thoughtful, if not subversive, questioning. A film invites interrogation. By approaching a film with a degree of suspicion, a viewer can raise questions about its underlying values and assumptions. Furthermore, by engaging a film's indeterminacies--its gaps and inconsistencies, its silences--the viewer recognizes that meaning is created in the process of interrogating the complex web of signifiers that is the film.

The approach to reading films that I have described is continuous with my approach to texts in general. I am convinced that visual literacy requires the same critical skills and the same critical 'eye' that we consider necessary for thoughtful research and engagement with written texts. Students who take my courses are taught critical thinking, reading and writing skills from the outset, yet they are often reluctant to apply these skills to "reading" films. Perhaps as an ironic consequence of the current dominance of visual images, students either take films for granted by treating them as mere entertainment, or presume they provide some absolute truth. For many, visual images are harmless or meaningless expressions of a culture defined by MTV, consumerism, channel-surfing and excess. That such judgments are value-laden often escapes their notice. Consequently, I include films among the required course readings to provide students with an opportunity to become critical viewers who can identify cultural signifiers and discuss values and meanings.

I choose films for my courses that implicitly or explicitly allude to biblical narratives, address the general themes of the course and challenge received, traditional religious meanings. In a course on evil as well as in an Adam and Eve seminar, for example, I have taught Joyce Chopra's *Smooth Talk*. Last semester, in "Word and Image", a capstone seminar for seniors, I considered four films about Jesus: Pasolini's *Gospel According to St. Matthew*; Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*; Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal*; and, from *Monty Python*, Terry Jones' *Life*

of *Brian*. In discussing these films, students considered the politics of representation in their analysis of religious narratives and the visual arts.

In the case of *Smooth Talk*, students explore the film's retelling of the myth of the 'fall' that has traditionally been ascribed to the book of Genesis. Chopra situates this contemporary narrative about temptation and sin amidst an adolescent mall culture somewhere on the California coast. Students are asked to consider how women and men signify in the film compared to the assumptions about gender in the traditional narrative. Does the film merely illustrate the 'fall' or does Chopra subvert the traditional assumptions about women? If traditional values are subverted, how does Chopra reconfigure the myth? How does the film reflect current concerns about the 'truth' of the text; the politicization of cultural signifiers; the place of traditional or family values in contemporary America? Furthermore, what do visual dissonances suggest about the desire for autonomy, the inevitability of evil and the possibility of forgiveness?

The four films that reinterpret the life of Jesus do so through a variety of political and/or ideological perspectives ranging from Pasolini's *Marxist reading of Matthew's Gospel* to *Monty Python's* parody of religious zealotry. Whereas Scorsese takes Katzanakis' mystical retelling of Jesus' life as his starting point, Arcand asks whether Jesus can still signify in a capitalist society in which all traditional systems of power and authority are corrupt. Students were asked to



explore the four films comparatively, considering the different cultural contexts and political assumptions represented in them. How, for example, do these films reflect current cultural assumptions about power, self-sacrifice, good and evil, identity, and gender? How do traditional values figure in these contemporary retellings? Moreover, what do these films tell us about ourselves, the dominant culture and its values? Who are we? What is our world like in contrast to how we would like it to be?

Concerned primarily with the creation of meaning, interpretation of films, students discover, includes an interrogation of the text which in turn leads to a reassessment of their own attitudes and perceptions about the 'truths' they convey. Treating films with the seriousness with which they read books, students begin to trust their ability to see, to interpret what they see critically and to discuss how images contribute to their understanding of cultural signifiers and the values imbedded in them. Most importantly, students discover that they are free to engage texts on their own terms and to question received truths and traditional values, thereby persuading them of their own power to transgress and revision their world.

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<sup>1</sup> Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1995). In his "Introduction: Seeing the Sacred on the Screen," Martin offers a very helpful discussion of the different religious approaches to the study of film: theological, mythological and ideological. My approach is unequivocally ideological. For a more general introduction to reading culture at the end of the twentieth century, see: William G. Doty, "Within and Beyond the Picture Frame: The

Postmodernist Context and Contents of these Essays," in William G. Doty, ed., *Picturing Cultural Values*, (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1994.)