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## From the Editor

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## From the Editor

### **Abstract**

The Editor introduces the December 1998 Special Issue on Teaching of the *Journal of Religion and Film*.

Some time ago the editors of the *Journal of Religion & Film (JR & F)* were asked to prepare a special edition of the print journal, *Spotlight on Teaching*. *Spotlight* is a supplement to the *Religious Studies News (RSN)*, a publication of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). The *Spotlight* editors wanted the special edition to focus on teaching the cross-disciplinary subjects of religion and film. We accepted the request and the resulting special edition of *Spotlight* appears in *RSN* of May 1998, vol.6., no. 1.

The response to this collection of essays and to our own *Journal of Religion & Film (JR & F)* has been so positive that we decided to attempt to give these essays wider circulation by printing them (some in augmented form) in this special issue of the *JR & F*. Having received the approval of the authors, the *Spotlight* editors, and the publishers of the *RSN*, this special edition (2,3) of the *JR & F* is the result.

The use of movies in the classroom has become increasingly popular. We once used movies only to teach about particular religions. Then we began to include "special" movies to introduce particular religious questions and themes. Today we find that even popular Hollywood movies (*Thelma and Louis*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Independence Day*, *The Apostle*) include important questions about religious values, human rights, and the competing ideologies of the contemporary world.

One reason for the increasing popularity of teaching religions with movies is the strength and development of our visual culture. Most of our students have seen more movies than they have read books. Even if students have not seen a movie, they have probably seen ads for it and heard discussion about it. Students often find the discussion of movies and their themes a natural part of their college lives.

Because of this direction in our culture, students bring to the classroom enough background and experience to make the discussion of movies fruitful in teaching religion. Although their understanding of both popular and more profound films may be even worse than superficial, films can provide an exceptionally accessible place for beginning important discussion and reflection.

What can be learned from films will surprise you. The articles included in this special issue will show why films can be such a powerful tool in the classroom. Popular films can help to explain such concepts as the cosmogonic myth (!) and sacred space. Films raise questions about the adequacy of explanations in our secular culture. Classes on religion and film can help students "see beyond the superficial seductions of a film" ("seeing films merely as entertainment"), and recognize some of the values that are embedded in our culture.

Film classes and discussion can help everyone to avoid taking any film as the final word on a topic ("film fundamentalism"), without glorifying excessive analysis ("film gnosticism"). Although films are still to be enjoyed, religion and film classes can help us all not only to perceive the values films espouse (with images as well as "text"), but also "to reassess our own attitudes and perceptions regarding the 'truths' they convey."

When we originally organized the issue of "*Spotlight*," we asked three of the authors to give an overview of teaching religion and film. What general approach might one take to teaching religion and film? What difference does the use of film make in teaching religion over the use of conventional types of texts? What should we expect of students who take this interdisciplinary approach to religion? What are the risks that teaching religion and film pose? What opportunities does such teaching provide? We would like to take this opportunity to thank Irena Makarushka (Goucher College), Conrad Ostwalt (Appalachian State University), and Barbara DeConcini (Emory University) for their contributions to this discussion.

We also asked two authors to provide an account of an actual course that they had taught on religion and film. There are many possible individual course designs, even under the same general approach, and we wanted to offer a sample of such designs. In order to give a larger sample, we have included a similar essay on

a course that we ourselves team-taught. We would like to thank Gordon Matties (Concord College) and Paul Flesher and Robert Tory (University of Wyoming) for their contributions.

Finally, we wanted our readers to see what could be done with an individual film. Mara Donaldson (Dickinson College) provides an essay on the 1989 movie, *Field of Dreams*, starring Kevin Costner, Amy Madigan, Ray Liotta, Burt Lancaster, and James Earl Jones. Ann Pearson (John Abbott College) provides an essay which compares two science fiction films: the 1984 version of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, which includes color and a rock-music sound track, and Ridley Scott's 1982 *Bladerunner*, starring Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, Edward James Olmos, and Daryl Hannah. We extend our thanks also to Mara and Ann for their work.