

## ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

### PTHM 640/THEM 639 Theology & Popular Culture: Engaging Film, Television & Music

**Lecturer:** Dr Shane Clifton<sup>1</sup>

Spring 2008

Feb. 25-29, 8:00 – 12:00/1:00-5:00

#### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course describes the interrelationship between theology and popular culture. It explores the way in which the church can respond to, critique, and interact with the various mediums of contemporary pop culture, including film, television and music.

#### **OBJECTIVES**

Students should be able to:

- Describe the way in which the mediums of popular culture provide a window into the values and meanings that frame life in a globalized world
- Apply hermeneutical tools for the purpose of understanding the meanings conveyed in film, television and contemporary music
- Identify theological concepts, themes and issues expressed through the various mediums of pop culture
- Utilize film, television and music in the prophetic task of proclaiming the gospel in the twenty first century
- Appreciate the importance of “culture” and its impact on social, personal and religious values

#### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS/METHODOLOGY**

The content for this unit shall be delivered as follows:

##### **1. Pre-course reflection:**

Students shall watch the following films prior to the commencement of the course, and draft a personal response to the film based on the parameters set out in the assessment guidelines below:

- The Passion of the Christ (2004, Director: Mel Gibson)
- Saved (2004, Director: Brian Dannelly)
- The Matrix (1999, Director: Wachowski brothers)

---

<sup>1</sup> Shane Clifton is the Academic Dean of Southern Cross College, and Head of the department of theology. In 2005 he completed a PhD with the Australian Catholic University, his thesis focused on the developing ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia. He has a number of articles published in Pentecostal journals, including a recent paper in entitled “The Spirit and doctrinal development: a functional analysis of the traditional Pentecostal doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit” - *Pneuma* 29 (2007): 4-22. He is currently involved in a book project with Professor Neil Ormerod on Globalization and the Mission of the Church. Shane is married to Elly, and has 3 sons.

Note: These films should be readily available for rent – but students can contact the lecturer for alternative film if unable to locate a copy.

In addition, prior to class, students are required to read:

- Lynch, G., *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005
- Any **two** other texts from the course bibliography (let your passion guide you).

## 2. Intensive:

The intensive class will involve lectures, film and television viewing, listening to music and individual and group responses. A draft lecture timetable is set out below although, given the exploratory nature of this course, this timetable is subject to alteration as the week progresses.

## 3. Post Intensive – Podcasts and Assessment:

Given that students will be watching a number of films and television programs in class, some lecture content will be delivered following the lectures via podcast. These will be made available over the web and through iTunes (details to be provided during the intensive). The majority of the assessment for the course will be completed after the intensive (see below).

### Preliminary Lecture Time-Table:

TIME**	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4	DAY 5
8-8.05	Prayer for the days learning				
8.05-9.30	<b>TV Viewing: The Simpson's: Homer Skips Church</b> Introduction to course & class introductions	Shooting Jesus – Exploring the portrayal of Christ in film	<b>Film Viewing: Either Blade Runner or The Seventh Seal</b>	<b>Film Viewing Dogville</b>	Image and Celebrity and the values of Pop Culture (and Church)
<b>Break</b>					
9.45-11.00	Reading the narratives of film and television: critical and theological reviewing	<b>Film Viewing – Dancer in the Dark</b>	Individual reflection and group discussion	Group Discussion (of previous 2 films) Lecture – rethinking forgiveness	Toward a theological aesthetic of popular culture
<i>Morning Tea</i>					
11.30-1.00	Reviewing Film: Example, David and Margaret At The Movies	Individual reflection and group discussion – leading into lecture on Christ figures in film	Engaging with Postmodernism & Nihilism	Rethinking forgiveness – cont.	<b>Film Viewing: The Mission</b>
<b>LUNCH</b>					
2.00-3.30	<b>Film Viewing: Either Jesus of Montreal or the Life of Brian</b>	Christ Figures and redemption in film and television	Engaging with Pluralism (in the Matrix)	Negotiating portrayals of violence and sex in pop cultural mediums	Ethics and Values in the mediums of pop culture

<b>Break</b>					
<b>3.45-5.00</b>	Individual reflection and group discussion	<b>Film Viewing –Jesus Camp</b> (listening to our critics)	<b>Film Viewing: Dead Man Walking</b>	Cont.	Summary and Class Oscars
	<b>Optional evening film – As it is in Heaven</b>			<b>Evening Trip to Cinema (film chosen by class)</b>	

Notes. 1. time of breaks flexible, depending upon length of movie.  
2. We have some movie options that will be chosen by the class

### Assessment:

#### 1. Film reflection and tutorial participation – 10%

Following each film viewing (both prior to and during the intensive), students shall complete a individual response to the film that considers:

- The genre, intended audience, and purpose of the film.
- The success and/or perceived failure of the film, i.e.
  - Did you enjoy the film?
  - Did it accomplish its purpose?
  - Was the film well-acted, directed, produced?
  - Was the film coherent, believable and appropriately paced?
- What philosophical and/or theological themes were raised by the film?
- Were there any inter-textual references (if any) to the biblical narrative?
- Did the message of the film pose a challenge to the contemporary society and/or the church?
- Would the film serve as a stimulant for church outreach/discussion?

#### 2. Podcast assignments and required reading – 10% - Due ....

Podcast lectures following the intensive will cover content not addressed in the course, and will include some minor assessment. Students will need to listen to the podcast lectures to receive these assignments.

#### 3. Theological reviews (podcast audio or video) – 30% - Due .....

In groups of 2 or 3, students shall produce a review program addressing either the medium of film, television or music. The program will review 2 films/TV programs/Albums released *after* 2005 – not including films, programs or music covered in this class. This program will be between 20-30 minutes long, and shall be intended to help reflective Christian audiences (\*\*\*) decide whether or not to see the film or TV program in question (or purchase the album), and shall (at least):

- Provide an insight into the genre, purpose, plot, characters, and construction of the film/program/album – without giving too much away

- 
- Provide a critical response to the films/programs/ albums including, ultimately, a rating out of 5.
  - Identify themes, scenes or other issues that are likely to be pertinent (positively and negatively) to a Christian audience, and highlight inter-textual references.

These review programs should be produced in either audio (mp3) or video (DVD) format.

Students shall be assessed on content and insight of the review, as well as on the creativity of the presentation.

(\*\*) – Reflective Christian audiences should not include overly conservative or fundamentalist Christians, but neither should it include overly “liberal” perspectives. Assume your audience is the within the range of the student body.

To assist with the development of reviewing skills I recommended that students watch some film/television/music reviewers on television. In Australia, I would recommend ABC Television’s *At the Movies*, but I am not familiar with an appropriate program in the U.S. If possible, select a review program that has a reputation for intelligent and critical reviews.

4. Worksheet: Theological film response (2000 words, 40%) – Due .....

Students shall select one film/TV program/Album (either from those shown in this course – or any other source of interest), and respond to the theological issues raised. This response shall be in the form of a worksheet that addresses the following:

- i. Consider the ways in which either film, television or music provides insight into contemporary culture in a way that has a bearing on the task of theology. Note, this section need not relate to the particular film/program/album in question, and should be informed by library research (500 words).
- ii. Synopsis: Provide a brief summary of the chosen film/program/album (not more than 200 words).

Identify 2 theological issues raised, and engage in a dialogical conversation between the questions and insights posed by the medium of pop culture, and the traditional theology of the church. Note, this section should be informed by the text under review, by external critical reviews (available over the web or from other sources), and by systematic theological sources (1300-1400 words).

---

**Bibliography**

- Aichele, G. & Walsh, R. (Eds.), *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Films*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 2002.
- Baugh, L. *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997.
- Beard, Steve et al. *Spiritual Journeys: How Faith Has Influenced 12 Music Icons*. Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2003.
- Brand, Hilary & Adrienne Chaplin. *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001.
- Christianson, E., Francis, P. and Telford, W. *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*. London: SCM, 2005.
- Cunningham, D.S., *Reading is Believing: The Christian Faith through Literature and Film*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2002.
- Davis Jr, Walter J., et al. *Watching What We Watch: Prime-Time Television Through the Lens of Faith*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- Deacy, C., *Faith in Film*, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2005.
- Deacy, C., *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film*, Cardiff: university of Wales press, 2001.
- Dryness, William A. Dyrness. *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Fraser, Peter & Vernon Edwin Neal. *ReViewing the Movies: A Christian Response to Contemporary Film*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000.
- Godawa, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews—Watching Films with Wisdom & Discernment*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.
- Higgins, Gareth. *How the Movies Helped Save My Soul: Finding Spiritual Fingerprints in Culturally Significant Films*. Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2003.
- Irwin, W. (Ed.), *The Matrix and Philosophy*. Illinois: Open Court, 2002.
- Johnston, R. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.
- Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality—Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000.
- Leonard, R. Sj., *Movies that Matter: Reading Film through the Lens of Faith*, Chicago, Illinois: Loyola Press, 2006.
- Lewerenz, S. & Nicolosi, B. (Eds.), *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film and Culture*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2005.
- Light, A., *Reel Arguments: Film, Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Colorado, U.S.A: Westview Press, 2003.
- Lynch, G., *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005

- Marsh, C. and G. Ortiz (Eds.), *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1997.
- Marsh, C., *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology*, Milton Keynes, U.K: Paternoster, 2004.
- Martin, J.W. & Ostwalt, C.E. Jr., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Colorado, U.S.A: Westview Press, 1995.
- May, J.R. (Ed.), *New Images of Religious Films*, Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997.
- Miles, M.R., *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*, Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon press, 1996.
- Pinsky, Mark I. *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- Plate, S.B., *Representing Religion in World Cinema*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Riley, R., *Film, Faith and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003.
- Romanowski, William D. *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001.
- Runions, E., *How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Seay, Chris. *The Gospel According to Tony Soprano*. Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2002.
- Stockman, Steve. *The Rock Cries Out: Discovering Eternal Truth in Unlikely Music*. Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2004
- Stockman, Steve. *Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2*. Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2003.
- Stone, B. *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*. St Louis: Chalice, 2000.
- Tillich, P. *Theology of Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Turner, Steve. *The Gospel According to the Beatles*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006.

### Movie Bibliography

Film	Theme	Genre	Date
2001, A Space Odyssey	What it is to be human	Adventure Sci-Fi	1968
A Clockwork Orange	Ethics	Crime Drama Thriller	1971
Amazing Grace	Equality- story of William Wilberforce	Drama	July 27 2007
American Beauty	Suburbia and the corporate world	Drama	1999

Amistad	Racism	Drama	1998
Artificial Intelligence (AI)	What it is to be human	SciFi Drama	2001
Babel	Humanity's connectedness	Drama	2006
Babette's Feast	Religious drama	Grace	1987
Being John Malchovich	Personal Identity	Comedy Drama Fantasy	1999
Blade Runner	What it is to be human	Drama, Sci-Fi	1982
Bowling for Columbine	Fear bigotry and violence	Documentary	2002
Bruce Almighty	Nature of God	Drama Comedy	2003
Chariots of Fire	Conviction	Drama	1981
Crash	Racism- A good one	Drama	2005
Dancer in the Dark	Dedication, suffering	Drama!!!	2000
Dead Man Walking	Forgiveness, Capital Punishment, Humanity	Crime Drama	1995
Dead Poet's Society	Human freedom, carpe diem	Drama	1989
Divided We Fall	Racism in US after 9/11	Documentary	2006
Dogma	Religious theme	Drama	1999
End of Days	Eschatology	Action Drama Thriller	1999
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind	Memory and reality	Drama Romance	2004
Fall from Grace	About fundamentalist Rev Fred Phelps	Documentary	2007
Fight Club	Postmodernism	Action Drama Satire	2004
Hotel Rwanda	Human sin	Drama History Thriller	2004
Invisible Children	Politics and War Child soldiers	Documentary	2006
Jesus Camp	Right winged fundamentalists kids camps	Documentary	2006
I-Robot	What it is to be human	Action Sci-Fi	2004
Jesus of Montreal	Religious Films, Christ Films	Drama	1989

Left Behind	Religious Films, end-times	Drama	2000
Lethal Weapon		Action Comedy Crime	1987
Life is Beautiful	Love, Grace, imagination	Drama, Foreign	1997
Lord of the Rings- The Return of the king	Humanity's fallenness, redemption	Adventure Fantasy	2003
Not without my Daughter	Feminist issues?	Drama	1991
Patch Adams	Purpose, ethics	Comedy Drama	1998
Philadelphia	Ethics	Drama	1993
Rashômon	Psychology in Crime	Crime Drama Thriller	1950
Remember the Titans	Discrimination, Racism, Human Identity	Drama	2000
Romero	Religious Film, Mission, War/ethics	Drama	
Schindler's List	Value of life, redemption	Drama	1993
Shawshank redemption	Hope	Drama	1994
Starwars	Redemption	Drama	1977
Taxi Driver	Redemption	Drama	1976
The Apostle	Sin and rededmption	Drama	1997
The Corporation	Business ethics	Documentary	2003
The Crossing Guard	Forgiveness	Drama	1995
The Island	What it is to be human	Action Sci-fi Thriller	2005
The Last Temptation of Christ	Religious Films, Christ Films	Drama	1988
The Life of Brian	Religious Film, Christ Film	Comedy	1979
The Long walk Home	Oppression racism	Drama History	1990
The Matrix	Reality	Action Sci-Fi	1999
The Mission	Religious Film, Mission, War/ethics	Drama	1986
The Passion of the Christ			
The Seventh Seal	Religious Film, theodicy, philosophy	Drama Foreign (Swedish)	1957
The Thin Red Line	War	Drama	1998

The Truman Show	Reality, ethics	Drama	1998
To kill a mockingbird	Racism, human identity	Drama	1962
Total Recall	Memory and reality	Action Sci-Fi	1990
Triumph of the Will	Hitler propaganda	Propaganda Documentary	1935
Wag the Dog	Political ethics	Comedy	1997