

*FILM AS THEOLOGICAL TEXT:
RACE, GENDERS, CLASS, AND SEXUALITIES
TR360*

[United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities](#)

Spring 2010

Monday 6:00-9:15 PM

Room A

Professor Jann Cather Weaver

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Appointments available upon Requests

We will be using the web-based Moodle

I. COURSE OVERVIEW

This course examines the cultural medium of film as theological text and as a visual medium of re-presenting formative narratives about race, class, gender, and sexualities. Specially, we will view films that explore the theological issues around the enforcement and/or inversion of stereotypical meanings of gay/straight/transsexual African American men and women (*Birth of a Nation*, *Hustle & Flow*, and *Paris is Burning*), matriarchal and Africanized Gullah religious ritual traditions (*Daughters of the Dust*), Lakota Indian reservation life and religious practices (*Skins*), and economic class and religious traditions in Hindu India (*Slumdog Millionaire*).

The course will also explore through film the theological issues around the enforcement and/or inversion of stereotypical understandings of homelessness and mental illness (*The Soloist*), lesbians as vampires (*The Hunger*), white gay men (*Milk*), and white transgenderism (*Transamerica*). We will also examine the systemic religious and political Palestinian situation through the film *Paradise Now*.

A critical method rooted in theological, biblical, and visual fundamentals, expanded by literary, cultural-theological social analysis, guides this study of film as theological text.

N.B. The films and materials of this class are challenging and may at times be offensive to our sensibilities. May we use this as an opportunity to learn about situations in which people live to broaden our theological understanding of God's Presence in difficult and diverse situations.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE COURSE

By the end of the course student will be to --

- Examine the cultural medium of film as theological text and as a visual medium of re-presenting formative narratives about race, class, gender, and sexualities
- Understand the theological issues around the enforcement (mythic) and/or inversion (parabolic) of stereotypical and prejudicial meanings of race, class, gender, and sexualities in film
- Apply a critical method that is both theological and visual to examine film as visual theological text and discourse analogically, not allegorically
- Examine theologically the racial history of Hollywood film style, production and distribution
- Deconstruct the anatomy of racist, gender-ist, and classist stereotyping, as well as cultural prejudice and appropriation, as seen in film and mass media
- See film and mass media in new ways in order to serve as sources for liturgical, parish, and social ministry
- Have a self-understanding about how to minister/teach personal, cultural, and institutional dismantling of racism, sexism/genderism, classism, xenophobia, and heterosexism within theological, liberationist, and/or biblical paradigms
- Research with web-based tools films and prejudicial histories
- Be in civil, learning dialogue with differing theologies, denominations, and cultures

III. FORMAT OF THE COURSE

Class time will include opening worship or time for reflection, lecture-discussion; class viewing of supplemental film clips; small group work; large group discussions.

V. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Can we name these famous native people?



Required Films

¹ <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm4117272832/tt0284494> (accessed January 25, 2010). © Do not reproduce.

Birth of a Nation, D.W. Griffith, 1915
The Hunger, Tony Scott, 1983, 97 m
Milk, Gus van Sant, 2008, 128 m
Paris is Burning, Jennie Livingston, 1990, 71 m
Transamerica, Duncan Tucker, 2005, 103 m
Hustle & Flow, Craig Brewer, 2005, 116 m
Daughters of the Dust, Julie Dash, 1991, 112 m
Skins, Chris Eyre, 2002, 84 m
The Soloist, Joe Wright, 2009, 117 m
Paradise Now, Hany Abu-Assad, 2005, 90 m
Slumdog Millionaire, Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, 2008, 120 m

Seeing all films, except clips from *Birth of a Nation*, is the responsibility of the student outside of class. Viewing each film twice is highly recommended.

IV. REQUIRED COURSE TEXTS AND OTHER READINGS

Required Reading and Resource Material

- Benshoff, Harry M. "Milk" and Gay Political History" *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 51 (Spring 2009). <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/Milk/index.html>
(LINK ON MOODLE)
- Benshoff, Harry M., and Sean Griffin. *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*. Second Edition. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Brooks, David. "The White Messiah Complex." *New York Times*, January 7, 2010, Op-Ed Columnist. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/08/opinion/08brooks.html?emc=eta1>
(LINK ON MOODLE)
- Dash, Julie. *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*. With Toni Cade Bambara and Bell Hooks. New Press, 1992.
- Dirks, Tim. "The Birth of a Nation (1915)," <http://www.filmsite.org/birt.html>. Accessed July 16, 2007. (LINK ON MOODLE)
- Feinberg, Leslie. "Natural becomes 'Unnatural'." In *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996, 60-65. (ON RESERVE)
- _____. "Not Just Passing." In *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996, 82-89. (ON RESERVE)
- Grosvenor, Vertamae. "Carolina's Coastal People," *NPR* Audio File (13 minutes)
<http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2000/aug/000830.cfoa.html>
(LINK ON MOODLE)
- Hooks, Bell. "Is Paris Burning." In *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*. New York: Routledge, 1996, 214-226. (ON RESERVE)
- Huff-Hannon, Joseph. "Don't Call Them Hermaphrodites." *The Daily Beast*.
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-09-16/dont-call-them-hermaphrodites/full/> (LINK ON MOODLE)

- “Indian Comedian's Ethnic Jokes are a Hit (Russell Peters),” *PRI* July 29, 2009. Audio File, PDF with three YouTube Links. <http://www.pri.org/arts-entertainment/arts/comedians-ethnic-jokes1520.html> **(LINK ON MOODLE)**
- “New Testament' Translated into Gullah.” *NPR: Morning Edition*. March 16, 2006. Audio File (4:17 minutes) <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid=5283230> **(LINK ON MOODLE)**
- "Outrageous Grace: Revelations" Tonéx "Gospel Singer Comes Out." *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2010. Audio File.
http://www.newyorker.com/online/2010/02/08/100208on_audio_sanneh **(LINK ON MOODLE)**
- “Pakistan's 'Third Gender' Seek Greater Rights.” *The New York Times. World Section*. February 7, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2010/02/07/world/AP-AS-Pakistan-The-Third-Gender.html> **(LINK ON MOODLE)**
- Selections from Russell, Letty M. , and J. Shannon Clarkson. *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. BT83.55 D5.3 1996 REFERENCE or from online book re-sellers.
- “Tonéx Gospel Singer Comes Out.” ABSTRACT. *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2010.
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/02/08/100208fa_fact_sanneh **(LINK ON MOODLE)**
- Weaver, Jann Cather. “Avatar” as *Classic Hollywood Flick in 3-D*.
http://www.theologyandfilm.com/RELIGION_AND_FILM_CLASSROOM/Blog/Entries/2009/12/30_AVATAR.html **(LINK ON MOODLE)**
- Weaver, Jann Cather. *The Theological Eye: Beyond Illustration*. WORKING MANUSCRIPT, 2010. (PDFs ON MOODLE) **(THESE ARE NOT POLISHED DOCUMENTS, SO CORRECTIONS AND COMMENTS WELCOME.)**

Rules and Rights of Discussion of Film
Basis Methodological Elements
Introduction
To See and be Seen
Film as Illumination, Not Illustration
Allegory and Analogy
Chiasmic Method applied to Dead Man Walking
Extensive Bibliography

Weiss, Andrea. “The Vampire Lovers.” In *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992, 84-108. **(ON RESERVE)**

N.B. Audio Files requires RealOne Player. See Moodle for links.

Class Work and Papers

- 1) Weekly attendance and class participation essential
- 2) Students will prepare a one paragraph (3-4 sentences), theological reflection on each film to be shared in small groups for each required film (double-spaced, 12 point, Times Roman font). These paragraphs are to be in your 'voice,' not quoting someone else's thoughts on the film. These are P/NC and will be commented on by the instructor. **Please put your box number on all submitted written materials.**
- 3) A final paper 10-12 pages, that provides an in-depth critical theological analysis on the re-presentation of race, genders, class, and/or sexualities on a film/s seen for class or in class. Your paper shall be your analysis, in your voice. Specify your method: e.g., myth/parable; hermeneutics; biblical text/s juxtaposition; theological analogy. This is not to be a research paper, although you can research historical or theological issues related to the film/s' concerns. The primary feature of the paper is your theological analysis of the film/s' re-presentation of race, gender, class, and/or sexualities as a whole, in specific scenes, or in cross-reference to other films. Begin with the text of the film/s, not a theological argument or doctrine to be proven. Papers are to be written in an academic style, with **footnotes** and **bibliography**. (**Style Required:** *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, by Kate L. Turabian, 7th Edition.)

OR

a final Multi-media project that provides in-depth critical, theological analysis the re-presentation of race, gender, class, and/or sexualities in film and media. This can be a video made from (copyright free) images, media clips, music. Windows Media Maker is a good software program for Windows users. MAC users – you know your options. Do not create a PowerPoint ppt. A PowerPoint mov is acceptable if well done. **Provide a short, written synopsis** of your theological analysis in your project, as well as a bibliography. (**Style Required:** *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, by Kate L. Turabian, 7th Edition.) Synopses may be emailed to instructor (jweaver@unitedseminary.edu) and multi-media project given to instructor on CD/DVD.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Integration of assigned reading materials, material presented in class, and scripture or other theologically significant resources to support your position
- Clear, concise articulation of method
- Depth and clarity of theological analysis
- Ability to be authentic to the filmic text/s and its theological renderings
- Accurate use of academic style notations

Assume the instructor knows the film/s, i.e., please do not recap the film in your papers/projects.

V. BASIS FOR EVALUATION

Weekly attendance, out-of-class research, and in-class participation – 35%
Paragraphs – 35%
Final Paper or Media Project – 30%

All work in this class is expected to follow the Inclusive Language Policy in the Masters Student Handbook, with opportunities for discussion on differences (114).

A selection from Implications of Inclusive Language Policy

3. Racially and ethnically inclusive language rejects the equating of color with virtue and does not equate darkness with negative qualities or lightness with positive qualities. It also rejects the use of or construction of “otherness” in language that connotes superiority of the dominant group.

VI. CLASS SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

FEBRUARY 15:

Readings:

Benshoff, Harry M., and Sean Griffin. *America on Film*, 21—30.

Brooks, David. “The White Messiah Complex.” *New York Times*, January 7, 2010, Op-Ed Columnist. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/08/opinion/08brooks.html?emc=eta1>
(LINK ON MOODLE)

Weaver, Jann Cather. “*Avatar*” as *Classic Hollywood Flick in 3-D*.

http://www.theologyandfilm.com/RELIGION_AND_FILM_CLASSROOM/Blog/Entries/2009/12/30_AVATAR.html (LINK ON MOODLE)

Weaver, Jann Cather. *The Theological Eye: Beyond Illustration*. Working manuscript, 2010.
(PDFs ON MOODLE) (THESE ARE NOT POLISHED DOCUMENTS, SO
CORRECTIONS AND COMMENTS WELCOME.)

Rules and Rights of Discussion of Film

Basis Methodological Elements

Introduction

To See and be Seen

Film as Illumination, Not Illustration

Allegory and Analogy

Opening Reflection

Review of Syllabus and Class Expectations

Class “Rules” of Dialogue

Basic Methodological Elements

Classic Hollywood Structure

Anatomy and Construction of Prejudice

Prolegomenon on Seeing and a Visual Theological Film Method:

Relationship between Film and Theology

Theological Nature of Image and Re-Presentation: Signs, Symbols, and
Icons

FEBRUARY 22:

Readings:

Benshoff and Griffin. *America on Film*, Chapter 1, 30—37.

Dirks, Tim. “The Birth of a Nation (1915),” <http://www.filmsite.org/birt.html>

(LINK ON MOODLE)

“Colonization” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Conscientization” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Deconstruction” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Eschatology” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Hermeneutics of Suspicion” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*.

“Imperialism” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Inculturation” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Race” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Racism” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Seeing” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*,

Opening Reflection

Film Techniques from Griffith

In-Class View: Clips from *Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffith, and a clip of
an interview with D.W. Griffith

Anatomy and Construction of Prejudice Continued

History of Black Films in early 20th century

MARCH 1:

View: *The Hunger*, Tony Scott, 1983, 97 m

Optional to View: *When Night is Falling*, Patricia Rozema, 1995

But I’m a Cheerleader, Jamie Babbit, 1999

Fire, Deepa Mehta, 1996 (India)

Readings:

Benshoff and Griffin. *America on Film*, 305-324.

Weiss, Andrea. “The Vampire Lovers.” In *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*. New York:
Penguin Books, 1992, 84-108. (ON RESERVE)

“Difference” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Feminist Hermeneutics” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Lesbian” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Liberation” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Postmodernism” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Reality, Women’s in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Sexism” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Sexuality” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Social Construct” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Stereotypes” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

Opening Reflection

Lesbians in Cinema

The Celluloid Closet Clips

MARCH 8:

View: *Milk*, Gus van Sant, 2008, 128 m

Optional to View: *The Times of Harvey Milk*, Rob Epstein, 1984 (Documentary)
Bent, Sean Mathias, 1997
Brokeback Mountain, Ang Lee, 2005

Readings:

Benshoff and Griffin. *America on Film*, 324-339

“Tonéx Gospel Singer Comes Out.” ABSTRACT. *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2010.

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/02/08/100208fa_fact_sanneh

(LINK ON MOODLE)

“Theologies, Queer” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

Audio File: "Outrageous Grace: Revelations" Tonéx "Gospel Singer Comes Out." *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2010. Audio File.

http://www.newyorker.com/online/2010/02/08/100208on_audio_sanneh

(LINK ON MOODLE)

Opening Reflection

The Celluloid Closet Clips

Paragraphs and Discussion questions of *Milk*

MARCH 15:

View: *Transamerica*, Duncan Tucker, 2005, 103 m

Optional to View: *TransGeneration*, TV Miniseries, 2005 (8 Episodes)
Boys Don't Cry, Kimberly Pierce, 1999
Hedwig and the Angry Inch, John Cameron Mitchell, 2001
Southern Comfort, documentary by Kate Davis, 2001

Readings:

Benshoff and Griffin. *America on Film*, 213—216, 339—354.

Feinberg, Leslie. “Natural becomes ‘Unnatural’.” In *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996, 60-65. **(ON RESERVE)**

_____. “Not Just Passing.” In *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996, 82-89. **(ON RESERVE)**

Opening Reflection

Trans*

Paragraphs and Discussion questions of *Transamerica*

MARCH 29:

View: *Paris is Burning*, Jennie Livingston, 1990, 71 m

Optional to View: *Pageant*, Ron Davis and Stewart Halpern-Fingerhut, 2008

Readings:

hooks, bell. "Is Paris Burning." In *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*. New York: Routledge, 1996, 214-226. **(ON RESERVE)**

Huff-Hannon, Joseph. "Don't Call Them Hermaphrodites." *The Daily Beast*.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-09-16/dont-call-them-hermaphrodites/full/> **(LINK ON MOODLE)**

"Pakistan's 'Third Gender' Seek Greater Rights." *The New York Times. World Section*. February 7, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2010/02/07/world/AP-AS-Pakistan-The-Third-Gender.html> **(LINK ON MOODLE)**

"Androgyny" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Desire" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Gender Construction" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Gendered Institutions" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Gendered Representation" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Marginalization:" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Paradigm Shift" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Solidarity" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

Opening Reflection

Presentation on Herms, Ferms, and Hermaphrodites ("Intersex"):
The Third Gender

Paragraphs and Discussion questions of *Paris is Burning*

APRIL 12:

View: *Hustle & Flow*, Craig Brewer, 2005, 116 m

Optional to View: *Tupac Shakur: Thug Angel*, Peter Spirer, 2002 (Documentary)

Malcolm X, Spike Lee, 1992

Menace II Society, Allen Hughes, 1993

Boyz N the Hood, John Singleton, 1991

Readings:

Benshoff and Griffin. *America on Film*, 47-60, case study *The Jazz Singer* on pages 68-69, 76, Chapter 4, photograph and caption page 226, 238—246, 253—255, 257—260, 270—273, 283—290, 296—301,

"Misogyny" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Oppression" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Patriarchy" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Redemption/Salvation" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Responsibility" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Violence, Institutionalized" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

Opening Reflection

Hustle & Flow as Blaxploitation?

Gender as re-presented in *Hustle & Flow*

Paragraphs and more discussion questions of *Hustle & Flow*

APRIL 19:

View: *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash

Optional to View: *The Rosa Parks Story*, Julie Dash, 2002

Readings:

Dash, Julie. *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African Christ Woman's Film*. With Toni Cade Bambara and Bell Hooks. New Press: 1992. (Including screenplay.)

Grosvenor, Vertamae. "Carolina's Coastal People." *NPR: All Things Considered*. Audio File (13 minutes) <http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2000/aug/000830.cfoa.html>
(LINK ON MOODLE)

"'New Testament' Translated into Gullah." *NPR: Morning Edition*. March 16, 2006. Audio File (4:17 minutes) <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid=5283230>
(LINK ON MOODLE)

"Ethics, Womanist" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Feminist Theology, Africa" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Memory" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Rituals, African" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Sisterhood" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Theologies, Womanist" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Virtue, Womanist" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Womanist Voice" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Work, Womanist" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

Opening Reflection

Gullah Language and Culture

Paragraphs and Discussion questions of *Daughters of the Dust*

APRIL 26:

View: *Skins*, Chris Eyre, 2002, 84 m

Optional to View: *Smoke Signals*, Chris Eyre, 1998

No More Smoke Signals, Fanny Bräuning, 2008 (Documentary)

Broken Rainbow, Maria Florio, 1985 (Documentary)

Readings:

Benshoff and Griffin. *America on Film*, Chapter 5

"Epistemological Privilege" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Freedom" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Revelation" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Suffering" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

"Survival" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

Opening Reflection

Native American Re-Presentations and Realities

Paragraphs and Discussion questions of *Skins*

MAY 3:

View: *The Soloist*, Joe Wright, 2009, 117 m

Optional to View: *Awakenings*, Penny Marshall, 1990
A Beautiful Mind, Ron Howard, 2001
My Left Foot, Jim Sheridan, 1989
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Milos Forman, 1975

Readings:

Benshoff and Griffin. *America on Film*, 359—384.

Weaver, Jann Cather. *The Theological Eye: Beyond Illustration*. Working manuscript, 2010.

**(PDF ON MOODLE) (THIS IS NOT A POLISHED DOCUMENT, SO
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Chiasmic Method applied to Dead Man Walking

Opening Reflection

Discussion of Chiasmic Method for Discerning the Religious in Film
Mental Dis-ease/illness as Dis-ability?

Paragraphs and Discussion questions of *The Soloist*

MAY 10:

View: *Paradise Now*, Hany Abu-Assad, 2005, 90 m

Optional to View: *Ha-Buah (The Bubble)*, Eytan Fox, 2006
The Lemon Tree, Eran Riklis, 2008
The Syrian Bride, Eran Riklis, 2004

Readings:

Benshoff and Griffin. *America on Film*, 70—75.

“Anti-Judaism, Anti-Semitism” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

“Holocaust” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*

Opening Reflection

Israeli-Palestinian Situation: Conflict of Geo-Politics, Race, and Religion

Paragraphs and Discussion questions of *Paradise Now*

MAY 17: LAST CLASS

Due: Final Paper or Media Project. Email to jweaver@unitedseminary.edu

View: *Slumdog Millionaire*, Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, 2008, 120 m

Optional to View: *Salaam Bombay*, Mira Nair, 1988
Mississippi Masala, Mira Nair, 1992
The Namesake, Mira Nair, 2006

Readings:

Benshoff and Griffin. *America on Film*, 167—170.

“Indian Comedian's Ethnic Jokes are a Hit (Russell Peters),” *PRI* July 29, 2009. Audio File, PDF with three YouTube Links. <http://www.pri.org/arts-entertainment/arts/comedians-ethnic-jokes1520.html> (LINK and PDF ON MOODLE)

Paragraphs and Discussion questions of *Slumdog Millionaire*