

University of Alabama
Department of Religious Studies
Portraits of the Apocalypse in Contemporary Films
Religious Studies 240
FALL 2008
Wednesdays 3-5:45

Instructor Theodore Louis Trost, Ph.D., Associate Professor
of Religious Studies and New College
E-mail: ttrost@bama.ua.edu
Phone: 348-7534
Office: 206 Manly Hall
Hours: Mondays 9:30-11 and by appointment

What is "The Apocalypse"? How does the human imagination construct a vision of the future? To refer to TS Eliot: What "is the way the world ends"? What purpose does the apocalyptic genre serve? These questions have fascinated and haunted humanity from the beginning of time. After an initial investigation of the biblical book of *Revelation*, this course will examine contemporary portrayals of the eschaton, that is, the "end times," in six more-or-less popular films: *The Left Behind*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Daughters of the Dust*, *Blade Runner*, *V*, and *Whale Rider*. While these films will constitute our basic "texts," our conversations about them will be supplemented with careful readings of religious, cultural, and literary scholarship. The class will be conducted in both seminar and lecture formats.

Course Objectives

- To participate actively in the in-class discussions
- To become more familiar with the basic vocabulary of the religious studies discipline
- To become familiar with the themes and basic structure of the book of *Revelation*
- To recognize apocalyptic themes in works of popular culture
- To write a first draft of a critical review of one film
- To incorporate the instructor's critique of the first draft into a final critical review
- To write a comparative essay that involves two or more films and refers to at least two of the critical essays discussed during the semester
- To synthesize the semester's work by writing a final take-home exam

Course Requirements

This course is limited to 30 participants. There are no prerequisites, but students should be aware that all papers 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. Written work will include two typed 5-page critical essays (20% each) and a final take-home essay exam of no fewer than six typed pages (30%). There will be six quizzes, one offered immediately following the presentation of each film; of these, the five highest quiz scores will each count toward 5% of the final grade (25%). Class participation will constitute the remaining portion of your final grade (5%).

This class will meet on 14 occasions this semester. More than three absences from class will be considered excessive. After three absences, the student's final grade will be reduced one half grade for each additional absence. For example, a student with an A-average at the end of the semester plus four absences would have her grade reduced to a B+. **If you know – or even suspect – that you cannot honor the attendance commitment, do not take this class.**

At the end of the semester the University will ask you to state for evaluation purposes how often you attended class. You will be presented with these options: always; often; average; sometimes; rarely. The word "average" in this scale is misleading, since "on average" most students in a class like this attend "often" and miss only one or two classes. This is how I interpret the University's attendance rubrics:

Always = 0 - ½ absences
Often = 1 - 2 absences
Average = 3 - 5 absences
Sometimes = 6 - 7 absences
Rarely = 8 or more absences

Class discussions are central to how this course will proceed. 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.

Feel free to visit me during my office hours with any concerns you may have about this class. Among other things, I am here to help you develop your writing and speaking skills. In addition, I recommend to you the resources of the University's Writing Center – which you should visit during the second week of classes.

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.

Required Text

The course reader will be posted on the course web page. It includes the following:

- 1] *Revelation*, from *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, pp. 2307-2337.
- 2] John J. Collins, chapter one and epilogue in *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 1-32; 205-215; plus notes on 217-224; 249-250.
- 3] Adela Yarbro Collins, introduction and chapter 5 in *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 13-23; 141-176.
- 4] Conrad E. Oswald, "Movies and the Apocalypse" in *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2003), 157-188.
- 5] Margaret Miles, "'Older, Wiser, Stronger': Representation and Self-Representation" in *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 117-135.
- 6] Jon R. Stone, "'A Fire in the Sky': Apocalyptic Themes on the Silver Screen" in eds. Mazur and McCarthy, *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 65-82.
- 7] Conrad E. Oswald, "Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation" in eds. Martin and Oswald, *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995), 55-64.

In addition, other readings of interest to the class will be posted on the course web site throughout the semester.

Course Schedule

1. August 20 Introduction to the syllabus; themes of the course
assignment: *Revelation*
2. August 27 Discussion: **Revelation (the Book)**
assignment: John J. Collins reading # 2
3. September 3 see **The Left Behind**
Quiz 1
4. September 10 Discussion: *The Left Behind* and *Revelation*
assignment: Adela Yarbro Collins reading # 3 (optional);
Conrad Ostwald reading # 4
5. September 17 see **Twelve Monkeys**
Quiz 2
6. September 24 Discussion: *Twelve Monkeys*
assignment: Margaret Miles reading # 5 (or other reviews of
Daughters of the Dust)
7. October 1 see **Daughters of the Dust**
Quiz 3
FIRST DRAFT OF FIRST PAPER DUE
8. October 8 Discussion: *Daughters of the Dust*
October 15 NO CLASS: work on paper
9. October 22 see **Blade Runner**
Quiz 4
assignment: John R. Stone reading # 6
FINAL DRAFT OF FIRST PAPER DUE
10. October 29 Discussion: *Blade Runner*
11. November 5 see **V**
Quiz 5
assignment: Conrad Ostwald reading # 7
12. November 12 Discussion: *V*
assignment: Take Home Finals handed out

13. November 19 see **Whale Rider**
 SECOND PAPER DUE
 Evaluation
 Quiz 6

November 26 NO CLASS

14. December 3 Discussion: *Whale Rider*; Conclusion and Commencement

TAKE HOME FINAL DUE AT NOON on THURSDAY DECEMBER 11 in Manly 212

Religious Studies 240
Portraits of the Apocalypse in Contemporary Films
ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES

A. Essays

1] Critical Essay on Assigned Reading

One 5-page TYPED paper on an assigned reading of your choice must be submitted. Practically speaking, this probably means one of the first three readings we discuss in class, though you are welcome to read ahead in the Course Reader and choose another reading for your topic if you wish. A critical essay is not a book report. You should find some aspect of the reading that matters deeply to you (particularly – though not exclusively – with reference to our theme of apocalypse), tell why this is significant to you, and try to convince your readers that it should be significant – perhaps even "religiously" so – to them. Consider this distinction from John R. Trimble:

The difference between a plot summary and a critical analysis is analogous to the difference between (a) an account of the highlights of the Vietnam War and (b) an explanation of how the United States happened to get into it, why we stayed in it, and what its effects have been on us. A plot summary begins with no thesis or point of view; it merely recapitulates the facts. A critical analysis, on the other hand, takes a viewpoint and attempts to prove its validity; its object is to help the reader make better sense of something he [or she] is already familiar with (Trimble, 25-26).

A first draft of this paper is due at the start of class on October 1; in its final form, the paper is due at the start of class on October 22.

2] Critical Essay on Assigned Film

One 5-page TYPED paper on an assigned film of your choice must be submitted. A critical essay is not the film's plot summary. See the above note for more details.

This paper is due at the start of class on November 19.

B. Quizzes

A quiz will be administered immediately after each film showing. In particular, the quiz will test your understanding of the "religious" issues that arise in the films. In addition, the quizzes will provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate your familiarity with the assigned readings.

C. Take-Home Final Exam

The TYPED final exam will be your opportunity to put into perspective the films and readings for the semester. The quizzes will serve as a useful guide to the kinds of questions that will appear on the exam. In general you will be asked to recall the main points of the critical essays we have read and the key themes of the films we have viewed. In addition you will be afforded the opportunity to reflect critically and speculatively on the value of these works.

This exam is due at noon in room 212 Manly on December 11.

D. 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 10, 11, or 12.
- * Margins on the paper should be 1 to 1 1/2 inches 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*:

"Remember the Fifth of November":
Revolution and Carnival in
Twelve Monkeys and *V*

and in the lower right corner of the page:

Frank Lee Jackson
November 19, 2008
REL 240: Portraits of the Apocalypse
in Contemporary Films
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.

* If you have writing composition problems, you should consult one of the specialists at the Writing Center. Your tuition pays for this kind of expert assistance.

* Even if you have a facility with words, you may wish to sharpen your writing skills. In addition to the services of the Writing Center, I recommend:

1) John R. Trimble, *Writing With Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000)

2) Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (New York: Norton, 2005)

These books are available from <amazon.com> among other booksellers.

Please feel free to raise questions about these assignments at any time. You may do this in class – so that others might benefit from your inquiry; or come see me during my office hours. Have fun!