

Vanguard University

Communication/English 480, Film and Myth

Fall Semester 2009



Class meets: Mondays only from 6:00 – 9:00 p.m. in Heath 109

Required texts: *Myth and the Movies*
A Guide to Mythology

Films (below) are to be viewed outside of class, but clips will be shown during the class period.

Instructor: Professor de Roulet

Office & Hours: Smith, second floor;
By appointment

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FILMS: *Unbreakable* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2000), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Capra, 1939), *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004), *Chocolat* (2000 Lasse Hallstrom), *Garden State* (Zach Braff, 2004), *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008, Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tanden), *Up* (Pete Docter and Bob Peterson, 2009), and *Field of Dreams* (Phil Robinson, 1989).

Film and Myth, Course Description

We will examine how three key definitions of myth work their way into, drive, and are revised or challenged by, films and the film genre. In order to do this effectively, we'll need to define film (as a genre) as well. Film is something that most people take for granted as "books made into moving pictures"—however, it's interesting that often the least effective films were attempts to faithfully render books. Those failures, combined with the stubborn holding-on to the novel genre, suggest the film is an emerging genre of what could be called literary or artistic expression—that is, a new...something. We'll be viewing nine films during the term in the following order (most likely), at first juxtaposing a film to a genre of myth, and then to genres of myth as the term goes on:

1. *Unbreakable*, (M. Night Shyamalan, 2000)
2. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, (Frank Capra, 1939)
3. *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004)
4. *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallstrom, 2000)
5. *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999),
6. *Garden State* (Zach Braff, 2004)
7. *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008, Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tanden)
8. *Up* (Pete Docter and Bob Peterson, 2009)
9. *Field of Dreams* (Phil Robinson, 1989)

While doing this, we'll also be reading two text books:

1. *Myth and the Movies*, Stuart Voytilla, ISBN 0-941188-66-3 (1999)
2. *Mythology*, Edith Hamilton, 0316341517, 11th edition (1998)

Neither of these books give answers. They give frameworks and background with which to enrich your understanding of films.

LEARNING OUTCOMES (WHAT YOU SHOULD BE LEARNING AND PRACTICING IN THE COURSE):

This is a 400-level course. While non-seniors are of course welcome to take the course, seniors and non-seniors *alike* should be prepared to (in no particular order) think about, discuss and write on matters one would hope people would engage before they leave college:

- How does film affect our culture in ways I have not fully considered? What is film?
- How does the underpinning of myth hold our culture together and enrich it? What happens to culture when myth is challenged?
- If I were to write screenplays and/or make films, how would I like them to affect the culture in which I live?
- How do my film sub-culture and my faith and/or religious sub-culture interact, and what does the degree of their interaction mean?
- What myths constitute the basis for what I expect life to be?

POLICIES

Attendance:

We meet on Monday nights for three hours. In fact, we do not meet for two of the first three weeks of the course. I will therefore take attendance, and I will interpret your presence or absence as a sign of how seriously you intend to take the course. Irregular attendance is the road to a poor grade, despite the best of intentions. Being late to class will have a similar effect.

Class Participation:

Coming to class and actively participating is a key to making this course a success. In order for you to get the most out of this course, you should come to class having completed all assignments (viewing, reading and writing). A good strategy for class discussions is to be proactive, to come to class with your own agenda of what you would want to discuss. You should have some thoughts on the assignments (what impressed you, what troubled you, what you agreed with, what you disagreed with, what you did not understand, etc.). You should have questions about the material in hand.

Late Work:

Late assignments will be accepted at a penalty of one third of a grade per day. Assignments turned in after class will be considered one day late. If you cannot be in class, you must figure out a way to get the assignment to me by the beginning of class. Also, be sure to exchange contact information with other students so that you can get the homework on any day you should miss.

Graded Assignments:

Participation: Journals, class discussions, viewing and reading questions, attendance (20%)

First Essay Assignment (20%)

Second Essay Assignment (30%)

Final Essay Assignment (30%)

Grading Scale:

A = 93-100%

A- = 90-92%

B+ = 87-89%

B = 83-86%

B- = 80-82%

C+ = 77-79%

C = 73-76%

C- = 70-72%

D+ = 67-69%

D = 63-66%

D- = 60-62%

F = 59% and below

Grading Standards

A: Outstanding work (90 – 100%). Work is above and beyond the requirements of the assignment. Demonstration of outstanding effort and personal investment is evident. Some measure of remarkable skill, creativity, and/or energy marks the work.

B: Above Average (80 – 89%). Fulfills all aspects of the assignment and goes beyond competence, showing extra effort, achievement, and/or investment.

C: Average (70 -79%). The work fulfills all aspects of the assignment with competence. *Doing the assignment exactly as assigned, no more or no less, will earn you a grade in this range.*

D: Below Average (60 – 69%). Some aspect of the assignment has not been fulfilled, or errors make clear communication difficult. There may also be a failure to follow directions, to implement specific recommendations, or to demonstrate effort or improvement.

F: Not acceptable (59% and below). The student did not complete the assignment as assigned, or the writing fails to meet the minimum level acceptable for college work.

Essays: All essays must be typed, using MLA format, and should adhere to the suggested length for each particular assignment. The final draft of each assignment must be accompanied by any working drafts and peer-reviewed drafts.

STATEMENT ON PLAGIARISM: The following is excerpted from the *Vanguard Student Handbook*, and is applied rigorously in this course:

Academic dishonesty, either cheating or plagiarism (presenting as one's own, the words or opinions of others), is regarded as a serious violation of both the academic and moral standards of VUSC. Dishonesty in a minor class assignment or test can result in loss of credit for the assignment, test, or even the entire course. Dishonesty in a major assignment or examination can result in immediate loss of credit for the course and referral to the Vice President for Student Affairs....

A student commits plagiarism if submitted as his/her work:

- *Part or all of an assignment copied from another person's assignment, notes or computer file*
- *Part or all of an assignment copied or paraphrased from a book, magazine, pamphlet or website*
- *A sequence of ideas transferred from another source which the student has not digested, integrated and reorganized, and to which he/she fails to give proper acknowledgement*

Plagiarism is simply not worth the risk. It opposes your purposes—spiritual and intellectual.

SCHEDULE (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

Week 1, Aug. 31

Syllabus, defining film and myth

Week 2, Sept. 7

No class meeting—Labor Day weekend

Week 3, Sept. 14

Discussion of *Unbreakable*, (M. Night Shyamalan, 2000)
Discussion of the mythic hero and dualism in mythology
Discussion of the supernatural as part of mythology

Week 4, Sept. 21

Discussion of *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004)
Discussion of mythology and nightmare

Week 5, Sept. 28

Discussion of *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallstrom, 2000)
Discussion of romantic love as cultural myth and as part of mythological systems

Week 6, Oct. 5

Discussion of *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999)
Looking at *The Matrix* as hero's quest and as true myth
First essay due

Week 7, Oct. 12

Discussion of classic myths (from Hamilton's *Mythology*)
Discussion of cultural myths (experiential, and from essay 1)

Week 8, Oct. 19

Discussion of *Garden State* as elements of myth and as personal cultural myth

Week 9, Oct. 26

Discussion of *Slumdog Millionaire* as the power of American cultural myth on other cultures, and on its transformation by other cultures

Discussion of colonialism and post-colonialism as theories of seeing

Week 10, Nov. 2

Re-examination of the question, "What happens to culture when myth is challenged?"

Re-examination of "What is film"?

Second essay due

Week 11, Nov. 9

Student presentation #1 and response panels:

What is the relationship of myth and the film, *Up*?

Week 12, Nov. 16

Student presentation #2 and response panels:

What is the relationship of myth and the film, *Up*?

Week 13, Nov. 23

Student presentation #3 and response panels:

What is the relationship of myth and the film, *Field of Dreams*?

Week 14, Nov. 30

Student presentation #4 and response panels:

What is the relationship of myth and the film, *Field of Dreams*?

Week 15, Dec. 7

Discussion: My film life and my spiritual/religious life

Reading: de Roulet, "Thorough Converts: Christian Higher Education and Culture"

Third essay due

Context

OUR COURSE EXAMINES how myth interacts with modern film. In doing so, the course is of potential use to the screenwriter, the film critic, the literary critic, and all watchers of film—a dominant media in which ideas, values, worldviews, hopes and fears are conveyed in our culture. Film is not only a conveyor for myth, but a center of conversation and analysis in contemporary society.

“Myth” will be defined in three primary ways in the course:

- (1) **As archetype:** An archetype is an ideal example that is copied or emulated. In the early twentieth century, psychologist Carl Jung theorized the existence of five human archetypes: the self (that whom we define ourselves to be), the shadow (the opposite of the self, but having qualities we possess nonetheless), the anima (the feminine in a man’s psyche), the animus (the masculine in a woman’s psyche), and the persona (the self that we present to the world). Jung believed that these sides of a human being were personified and reproduced in stories or myths. Joseph Campbell used Jung’s theories in *The Hero of a Thousand Faces* to produce what he called an archetype for a story, or a “monomyth” centered on the actions of a hero.

Campbell wrote, in summarizing:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

Campbell developed five stages in the trials or journey of the hero:

- *Call to Adventure:* The hero starts in the ordinary world, and receives a call to enter an unusual world of strange powers and events
- *Road of Trial:* If the hero accepts the call to enter this new world, he or she faces tasks and trials. At its most intense, the hero must survive a severe challenge.
- *Reward:* If the hero survives, he or she may earn a great gift), which often results in or is important self-knowledge.
- *Return to the ordinary World:* The hero must then decide whether to return with this knowledge, often facing challenges because of his or her changes when she or he re-enters the ordinary world.
- *Application of the Reward:* If the hero is successful in returning, the reward may be used to improve the world).

The Greek Philosopher, Plato, tells a similar story in about the 4th century B.C.E. called now “The Allegory of the Cave.” This pattern of a hero’s journey comes into play in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries through comic books or films about the characters found therein.

In these theories, myths defined as archetypal stories seek to explain or give insight to the human psyche—to what it means to be human, or what we learn about humans when humans interact.

- (2) **As systems of mythology:** whereas an archetype gives meaning to an individual life, mythological systems give meaning to history. Part of the confusion often associated with the term “myth” is that it began to be used in Greek (*muthos*) to convey the idea of fiction, untruth, or even lie. Another sense of myth, however, is a narrative that contains truth or gives meaning. Thus, the term “Christian mythology” may be

insulting to a Christian, who could at first think that the term implies that Christian narratives (Scriptures) are false or just stories. But the term can mean a group of narratives that contain truth and meaning, and indeed give truth and meaning to human history. C.S. Lewis describes Christian narrative as “true myth”—that is, what is told by the narratives actually happened, and are the source for human understanding of God and truth.

Not all cultures or people view mythology in the same way. Here are five different ways in which societies might view myths:

- Allegory or Metaphor: Some theories propose that myths are stories that convey truth, but are not true. So, Plato’s allegory of the cave would not be a story that should be taken literally, but conveys a truth about people and the world we live in. Many of Christ’s parables can be read as allegories (such as “The Good Samaritan” or “The Prodigal Son”). Mythic films, by the way, fall into this category, by intention, lack thereof, or both, of their writers and directors.
 - Euhemerism: Myths are distorted accounts of human events in which people or events take on supernatural significance. This theory is named after the Greek writer Euhemerus (c.320 B.C.E.), who suggested that the Greek gods developed from legends about human beings.
 - Myth as Ritual: People began performing rituals for a reason that is now forgotten; later, after they have forgotten the original reason for a ritual, they try to account for the ritual by inventing a myth and claiming that the ritual commemorates the events described in that myth. Anthropologist James Frazer theorized that primitive humans started out with a belief in magic rituals; later, when they began to lose faith in magic, they invented myths about gods and claims that formerly magical rituals were religious rituals intended to appease the gods. If you think this sounds silly, watch baseball pitchers or professional golfers.
 - Personification: This theory offers that myths resulted from the personification of inanimate objects and forces. According to these thinkers, ancient societies worshipped natural phenomena such as fire and air, gradually coming to describe them as gods.
 - True Myth: True myth is a narrative of God directly interacting with human events. God’s actions and words convey values and meaning which explain life and its purposes. This is the term C.S. Lewis gave to the Christian narrative as read in the Old and New Testaments.
- (3) As contemporary cultural myths: Cultural myths drive our expectations about what a fulfilling or successful life should be, or how our society should function. Some of these myths are so thoroughly ingrained into our culture that (a) we hardly notice them and (b) they have had a “viral” effect through the easy accessibility of media on other cultures, in which they are actually modifying long-held cultural values.

Perhaps the two strongest American cultural myths are the American Dream and ideal romantic love.

Historian and writer James Truslow Adams coined the phrase “American Dream” in his 1931 book, *Epic of America*, writing:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is ... a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

The dream has practical applications: a career that matches one's goals and talents, home ownership, a family, a good life supported by continued gains in technology, etc., and is based on the American notion of self-reliance. Current social observation states not only that changes in the world economy will make the American Dream achievable by fewer and fewer Americans, but also questions the reality of the Dream in any but short periods of our history. Nonetheless, the Dream is powerful enough to drive expectations, not only in the U.S., but increasingly in other cultures as well.

The same can be stated about the cultural myth of ideal romantic love. Finding some fruition in Shakespearean comedy and in the romantic poetry of the west, this ideal has an especially strong hold on American culture (and increasingly in culture where, historically, romantic love was not necessarily an expectation). Television and films play this out in romantic comedies, and novels celebrate its presence as the point of plot or bemoan its absence in the theme of unrequited love.

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