

## **Course Title: TR249: Engaging Theology and Religious Imagination through the Arts**

### **Instructor:**

Dr. Paul Myhre

Associate Director

Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

### **Instructor Hours:**

Students can contact me at anytime on my email account. I will respond to inquiries within 48 hours of receiving the email message.

### **Contact Information:**

765-361-6436

[myhrep@wabash.edu](mailto:myhrep@wabash.edu)

### **Course Schedule Hours and Location:**

Online

### **Course Description:**

The history of people is intimately interwoven with religious beliefs and practices that are threaded through varieties of artistic expression. The arts – visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, etc. – often explore core and peripheral edges of religious and theological convictions, invite probing questions about central beliefs and practices, and may reframe or transform religious beliefs and practices, theological formulations, and ethical behaviors. Theology, religion, and the arts are engaged in something of an expressive dance of imaginative play and discovery. The arts push settled religious and theological convictions beyond frayed places at the edges of those convictions to reflect on what might be most central to that religious tradition or theological conviction. Religion and the arts are engaged in an ongoing discussion that began with the first religious expression connected to an art form. The arts invite reflection, contemplation, and active steps toward religious imagination that may bring those who engage the arts in relation to religious ideas to connect with that which might be considered as most sacred, holy, or “real.”

This course will explore a range of ideas associated with theology, religion, spiritual, ethics and the arts globally and particularly in North America. Readings on visual arts will comprise the primary locus around which the course will revolve. A select number of religious groups will be explored in relation to the arts. Online sessions will involve engagement with the arts as religious expressions, spiritual explorations, ethical declarations, theological efforts to connect with the divine, sites for imaginative reflection, and so on. Students will be expected to visit churches, museums, and other locations where art involving religious, theological, spiritual, and ethical connections can be found. They will also be expected to write short reflection papers weekly on what they see or experience and place them in conversation with the readings for the week.

Students will acquire methods by which to analyze art in relation to religious, ethical, spiritual, and theological imagination. Basic skills for engaging the arts by learning how to

read visual texts and analyzing them in relation to the study of religion will be an important component for the course. Each online session will explore a range of questions in relation to the topic for the day. Assignments and additional readings will be posted on the Moodle courseware web page for this online course.

### **Course Outcome Goals:**

Students who complete this course will be able to:

1. Recognize and demonstrate comprehension of religious, spiritual, theological, and ethical concepts and ideas in visual arts through weekly online discussions and written assignments
2. Discern and describe ethical values and ideas expressed in various forms of contemporary visual art through weekly online discussions and written assignments
3. Recognize and demonstrate a capacity to critically analyze and reflect on contemporary religious, ethical, and theological imagery in global graffiti art through weekly online discussions and written assignments
4. Recognize and demonstrate an ability to identify specific expressions of cosmologies and religious ideals in Native American art through weekly online discussions and written assignments
5. Demonstrate comprehension of visual art in historical and contemporary religious and non-religious spaces through online discussions and written assignments
6. Show specific correlations between cultural aesthetics and religious art in online discussions and written work
7. Demonstrate development of critically reflective skills through weekly 2-3 page written assignments and a final research/reflection paper

### **Required Readings:**

David Morgan. *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005. (300 pages)

S. Brent Plate, ed. *Religion, Art, and Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002. (235 pages)

Rina Arya, ed. *Contemplations of the Spiritual in Art*. (250 pages)

ARTS Magazine – Specific articles will be assigned throughout the course

Up to 14 Articles (1 per week 14x15 = 168 pages) Noted in the schedule or will be assigned.

### **Additional Recommended Readings:**

Banksy. *Banksy*. London, UK: Random House Group Limited. 2005.

Hundertmark, Christian. *The Art of Rebellion III: The Book About Street Art*. Hauptstabe, DE: Croo & Publikat, 2010.

Lewisohn, Cedar. *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*. New York, NY: Abrams, 2008.

Peiter, Sebastian, ed. *Guerilla Art*. London, UK: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2009.

Penney, David W. *North American Indian Art*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2004. (200 pages)

### **Hours Required for the Course:**

- Total reading pages required: Approximately 900 pages (40-60 hours)
- Total time engaging visual art: 45-75 hours
- Total class time: 45 hours
- Total research/writing time: 30-50 hours
- Total hours for the course: 160-230 hours

### **Assignments/Expectations:**

- Read approximately 50 pages per week in advance of the online sessions
- Practice reading visual texts on the web and in public spaces – civic and religious – 1 – 3 hours per week
- Write 3-5 questions about the readings or engaging visual art. Submit the questions in advance of class per week via the Moodle online course site.
- Weekly reflection papers that explicitly connect required readings with direct observation of visual art on the web and in public spaces or that explicitly connect the readings with insights gathered from conversations with local and regional artists (2 to 3 pages, 12 point new times roman font, 1" margins, single spaced). Papers are due each Monday by 5 p.m. during the course semester. Select papers may be shared near the conclusion of the course for class reflection and discussion.
- Final paper (7-10 pages) on a particular visual image that explores its culture, religious, ethical, theological and historical connections as a means toward reading the specific example of visual art as a religious, theological, spiritual, and/or ethical text. Information about the final paper will be provided in a separate note.
- There will be no exams in the course. Grades will be based on classroom participation, weekly student questions, and paper assignments.

## **Class Schedule:**

### **Week 1**

#### **Religious Imagination and Encountering Visual Images as Visual Texts in Religious and non-Religious Spaces**

##### **Readings:**

S. Brent Plate, 1-18

David Morgan, 1-21

##### **Assignment:**

Write two to three single spaced pages about your reflections on the readings for this week. In your response please answer the following questions:

- What is art?
- How does one interpret art?
- What is religion?
- How is religion best studied?
- How are arts and religion connected with each other and would religion or the arts suffer any significant loss if the arts did not connect with religion or religion connect with the arts? Why or why not?

##### **Questions for reflection and online threaded discussion:**

- What are the questions that people bring to the reading of art in general and to the viewing of religious, ethical, or theological art in particular?
- Are certain questions acceptable, while others are not?
- What questions do you bring to the reading of any visual text?
- What is religion?
- What is spiritual?
- What is art?
- What are ethics?
- What are the relationships between art and religion, art and theology, art and spirituality, art and ethics?

### **Week 2**

#### **Developing Skills for Reading and Interpreting Visual Images**

##### **Readings:**

Jeffrey VanderWilt, "To Teach Them to See": Teaching Christian Theology in Material Things." *Teaching Theology and Religion*. 2002. Volume 5, Number 2, 66-70

David Morgan, 25-74

S. Brent Plate, 19-51

##### **Assignment:**

Interview 2 to 3 practicing artists (not fellow students) and ask them the same questions as those posed in week one. Write a two to three page single spaced paper that includes the

artists' responses and your reflections on their responses. Include in your paper how you think the authors of the assigned readings would respond to their answers.

Questions for reflection and online threaded discussion:

- What are your greatest challenges for reading any visual text?
- How might learning specific methods help you to discern hidden meanings in any visual text?
- How are images misread?
- Visual Hermeneutics – What do you see?
- How is your cultural background involved in the process of interpreting what you see?

**Week 3**

**Developing Skills for Reading and Interpreting Visual Images**

Readings:

David Morgan, 75-112

S. Brent Plate, 53-66

Rina Arya, 1-9

Assignment:

Interview 2 to 3 professors of theology, ethics, or religion at a College or University near you or 2 to 3 ministers or religious leaders in your immediate area and ask them for their responses to the questions posed in the first week

Write a two to three page single spaced paper that includes their responses and your reflections about their responses. In your reflections be sure to attend to the following:

- What surprised or concerned you about their responses?
- What did you learn that you hadn't previously known?
- What questions did the interviews generate for you about the study or religion and the arts?

Include in your paper how you think the authors of the assigned readings would respond to their answers.

Questions for reflection and online threaded discussion:

- How much of reading visual texts can be applied to understanding music or dance?
- What skills might be required and how might you obtain them?
- How might learning specific methods help you to discern hidden meanings in any text?
- How is visual art or visual art in relation to religion or theology misunderstood?
- Visual Hermeneutics – What do see and how to you interpret what you see?
- When looking at something what do you choose to examine and what do you omit? Why?
- How is your cultural background involved in the process of interpretation?

## **Week 4**

### **Visual Images as Vehicles of Cultural, Religious, Theological, and Spiritual Meaning**

#### **Required Readings:**

Rina Arya, 11-32

David Morgan, 115-146

S. Brent Plate, 67-87

#### **Assignment:**

Visit a location near your home that involves a mixture of religious, ethical or spiritual association with a work or works of visual art. Spend time viewing the work or works of art and then write a two to three page single spaced essay that responds to the following questions:

- Given what you have read so far, how would David Morgan respond to the work of art?
- What might he say about it?
- What do you think about the work of art and how would you explain what it is and why it exists at the location you have selected?
- What about the work of art is explicitly religious, spiritual, theological, or involves ethics?

#### **Questions for reflection and online threaded discussion:**

- What claims might be made about art as spiritual?
- How is art culturally and historically situated?
- What difference does it make to read a work of art as a religious, theological, spiritual, or an ethical piece?
- Could a religious or spiritual work of art be read to mean anything the viewer wants to make of it? If so, why? If not, why not?

## **Week 5**

### **Visual Images as Vehicles of Cultural, Religious, Theological, and Spiritual Meaning**

#### **Required Readings:**

Rina Arya, 49-68

David Morgan, 147-187

S. Brent Plate, 89-117

#### **Assignment:**

Visit a different location near your home that includes some type of religious, spiritual, or ethical association with a visual art piece.

Write a two to three page single spaced essay that responds to the following questions:

- How would the authors in S. Brent Plate's book respond to the work of art?
- How might they think about it as a religious, ethical, or spiritually related piece of art?
- What might you say about the piece from a form and content critical viewpoint?

- What might you say about the piece from a religious, spiritual, or ethical perspective?

Questions for the week:

- What claims does David Morgan make about the intersection between art and culture?
- Do you agree with Morgan's claims? Why or why not?
- What are difficulties might be discerned in reading any visual, auditory, or kinesthetic work of art?
- How might you engage the arts first hand as primary texts about human meaning making?

**Week 6**

**Cosmologies and Religious Ideals in Visual Images**

Required Readings:

Rina Arya, 77-96

David Morgan, 191-219

S. Brent Plate, 161-193

Assignment:

Write a 2 to 3 page reflection paper about religious, theological, spiritual, and ethical ideals in visual imagery. Select 2 to 3 images from the Internet and discuss them in detail.

- Use the readings for the course in your paper.
- Use one of the methods for reading visual art that were introduced during the first weeks of the online course as you develop the paper.

Questions for reflection and online threaded discussion:

- What claims about art and religion do you find in Plate's book?
- What do you agree with in Plate's book and why?
- What do you disagree with in Plate's book and why?
- What are your own religious, spiritual, theological, or ethical commitments and who would you represent them in a work of visual art?

**Week 7**

**Cosmologies and Religious Ideals in Visual Images**

Required Readings:

Rina Arya, 173-193

David Morgan, 220-260

Assignment:

2-3 page reflection paper on ethical and religious ideals in Christian images. Select at least 2 to 3 images and think about them as visual texts. The images can be selected from the

Internet or from a location near your home. What do they say and what do they leave out? Why? Be sure to include the examples with your paper.

Questions for the week:

- What are your reactions to Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*?
- How does abstract expressionism work as a vehicle for visual art and prompting reflection about religion, theology, and ethics?
- How would you depict the *Stations of the Cross* in the visual arts? Why?
- What do you find as the most difficult dimension of reading abstract art?

**Week 8**

**Global Graffiti as Theological, Religious, and Ethical Visual Art**

Required Readings:

Paul Myhre, "Visual Art as Revolutionary Power: Street Art as Religious, Theological, and Ethical Declaration in Egypt's 2011 Arab Spring," ARTS Magazine

Graffiti reading, TBD

Rina Arya, 97-111

Assignment:

2-3 page reflection paper on graffiti as a medium for politically charged and justice oriented religious expression. In your paper select at least 3 images from the Internet or from somewhere near your home whose content intersects issues of religion and ethics.

Questions for reflection and online threaded discussion:

- What is it about graffiti that provokes human sensibilities and pushes religious, ethical, and theological questions?
- What does Banksy's graffiti say about religion, art, and meaning making?
- Is there an outsider aesthetic? If so, what is it?
- What examples of graffiti art do you find most compelling and why?
- What is it about graffiti art that you find disturbing or difficult to comprehend?
- What graffiti art is most successful in communicating religious, ethical, or theological ideals? Why?

**Week 9**

**Global Graffiti as Theological, Religious, and Ethical Visual Art**

Readings:

Rina Arya, 151-172

Graffiti reading, TBD

Assignment:

2-3 page reflection paper on graffiti as global phenomena for religious and theological reflection and expression. Use at least 3 images from the Internet in your paper. Provide



sections in your paper where you cite the required readings in relation to the three images you've selected for your paper.

Questions for reflection and online threaded discussion:

- What has been the most surprising thing for you about reading graffiti art? Why?
- What does it mean to destroy or refigure billboards and contemporary walls with graffiti art?
- What would you paint or write as a graffiti artist that would represent your religious, ethical, and theological ideals? Why?
- What types of graffiti art spark your religious and ethical imagination and which types of graffiti art restrict your religious and ethical imagination? Why?

**Week 10**

**Where is God in visual art? Where is the divine absent?**

Readings:

Rina Arya, 195-229

Articles to be assigned

Assignment:

2-3 page reflection paper on where is god in contemporary visual arts? Use examples from the readings and the Internet. Provide some indication of engaging the visual arts or other art forms through the methods explored throughout the online course.

Questions for the week:

The question of God is a present one for many contemporary and historic visual artists. They reflected on this question and engaged it in a host of ways. Questions for reflection and conversation include:

- As contemporary artists wrestle with the idea of God what do they claim?
- How do contemporary artists portray or convey the idea of God or the absence of God?
- Some contemporary artists are agnostics or atheists and as such pose different questions about the existence of God. Are there art works that you have seen that would pose such questions? If so, what are they?
- Francis Bacon engaged in a series of paintings on the theme of the crucifixion of Christ. What do you think of these paintings?
- What is the message that you discern in the paintings and why?
- What is the most challenging part of reading these paintings and why?
- What do you think of Arya's claims about the paintings of Bacon?

**Week 11**

**Contemporary Art and Religious Imagination**

Readings:

Rina Arya, 231-245

Articles to be assigned

Assignment:

2-3 page paper on the idea of spirituality in the visual arts. Where is the spiritual most visible and why do you think so? Cite two or three visual works of art in your response and indicate what dimensions of the spiritual can be discerned in the pieces and why.

Questions for reflection and online threaded discussion:

- What could be considered as spiritual? Why?
- How is the spiritual understood in contemporary contexts?
- How do you understand the spiritual and spiritual in works of visual art?
- Where is the spiritual conveyed best in contemporary art?
- What is the difference between spiritual and religious art? Why?

**Week 12**

**Reflecting on the Visual Arts as vehicles for religious, ethical, theological, and spiritual imagination**

Readings:

Articles about Christian Icons and Iconography TBA

Assignment:

2-3 page reflection paper on the Christian icons. How do icons provide ways by which the religious, theological, and ethical imagination might be provoked? Cite two to three examples of specific icons that work well and indicate why they work well as icons?

Questions for reflection and online threaded discussion:

- What does it mean to write an icon?
- How do icons connect with themes and ideas we have explored in this course?
- What is the most difficult about reading icons?
- How do icons open up religious imagination and how do they close it down?
- What would you paint or write if you were an icon painter?
- How is a particular theology shown in icon paintings? What are the main themes of that theology?

**Week 13**

**Reflecting on the Visual Arts as Vehicles for Religious, Ethical, and Theological Expression**

Readings:

No readings assigned

Assignment:

Written work by students – sharing of reflections about civic and religious visual art as vehicles for religious, ethical and theological expressions

Discussion about final paper topics and ideas for further exploration

Questions for the week:

Generated by students

### **Week 14**

### **Reflecting on the Visual Arts as Vehicles for Religious, Ethical, and Theological Expression**

Readings

No readings assigned

Assignment:

Written work by students - reflections about civic and religious visual art as vehicles for religious, ethical and theological expression.

Discussion about final paper topics and ideas for further exploration

Questions for the week:

Generated by students

### **Methods of Instruction**

- Lectures
- Class Discussions – Students are expected to engage weekly in online discussions about the readings for the day and questions or comments generated by other students about the topics for the week. Students are also expected to use the Moodle Courseware site each week prior to the beginning of the online session to access additional readings. Students will be expected to post questions and/or respond to questions weekly in the Moodle Courseware site.
- Video and multimedia presentations will be embedded or linked for students to view online
- Textbooks and additional readings
- Student research, essays, and online presentation of work associated with the student's final research critical reflection paper
- Field trips to local sites of intersection between religion and the arts by the students

### **Methods of Evaluation**

12 - Weekly 2-3 page critical reflection essays (5% each) 60%

7-10 page critical reflection research paper	30%
Online Weekly Class Participation (Individual & Groups)	<u>10%</u>
Total	100%

(Students are expected to be present in all class sessions. Students are also expected to engage in and consent to the Netiquette guidelines for this online course.)

The grading scale for reflection essays, presentation, research paper, attendance, and class participation is as follows:

90-100 = A    87-89 = B+    80-86 = B    77-79 = C+    70-76 = C    60-69 = D  
Below 60 = F

### **Class Participation**

Students are expected to engage in online class discussion. Therefore, students are expected to be prepared with questions that arise from reading the required texts, handouts, or from their research projects and engage them and other students about the readings in their online posts. Students are expected to post weekly on the Moodle Courseware site at least 2-3 questions and/or comments and read the required materials posted on Moodle.

### **Cheating/Plagiarism**

If a student cheats on assignment or plagiarizes a paper, she/he will fail that assignment and may fail the entire course. United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities guidelines for cheating/plagiarism will be followed for this online course. Hence, students are expected to do their own work.

### **Additional Requirements**

#### **Expectations for Auditors:**

Students auditing this class are expected to read the required readings, engage in all online class discussions, and post questions relevant to the work of each week.

#### **Petition for Extension Policy**

The work for a course must be completed by the end of the final class session. The performance in the course is evaluated on the basis of the work submitted by that time, unless an exception is made by the instructor. Extensions of time to complete course work beyond the end of the final class session will be approved only under extraordinary circumstances.

If an exception is made, the instructor must agree to the extension by the end of the final class session and the student must complete the Petition for Extension form to be submitted in lieu of a grade. If the student is unable to negotiate the extension by the end of the final class session due to critical health issues, the student is responsible for seeing that the instructor is notified as soon as possible and then negotiating the extension promptly. If no petition for extension is filed, a final grade will be submitted.

**Copyright Compliance Policy**

All work in this class is expected to follow the Copyright Compliance Policy in the Masters Student Handbook. The full Copyright Policy is at the Circulation desk in the Spencer Library.

**Academic Integrity Policy**

All work in this class is expected to follow the Academic Integrity Policy in the Masters Student Handbook.

**Inclusive Language Policy**

All work in this class is expected to follow the Inclusive Language Policy in the Masters Student Handbook.

**Confidentiality and Disclosure within Small Group Settings**

All work in this class is expected to follow the Policy Regarding Confidentiality and Disclosure within Small Group Settings in the Masters Student Handbook.

**Statement on Boundaries**

Regarding Professional Boundaries, see the Statement on Boundaries in the Masters Student Handbook.

**Email Communications**

To be in compliance with FERPA regulations, email communications from the faculty and staff of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities will be handled via UTS email only. Instructions for setting up forward or redirection of messages is available on the Student Services section on Moodle.