Course Description

Are ways of seeing and showing culturally specific? Mainly anthropological in spirit but drawing also on approaches from art history and media studies, this course will present and theorize a range of visual practices specific to the societies of historical and contemporary South Asia. At a critical level, the ideas we explore should embrace a broad range of contexts, including a variety of religious practices, including but not limited to Hindu visual worship, or darshan; classical and contemporary art and architecture; norms of self-presentation (or self-effacement) involving religion, caste, and especially gender; performance genres; and cinema, both ethnographic works and commercial productions.

Having said all that, I should state that there are two clear emphases here that reflect my own research interests: practices in contemporary devotional Hinduism, and Hindi-language popular film. This syllabus is India-centric, Hinduism-centric, and Bollywood-centric. But it’s designed to work as a source of critical ideas and contextual information to guide your own explorations across South Asian countries, traditions, and media forms.

Class sessions will be conducted seminar style, with discussion focusing primarily on the key South Asian themes and ideas introduced in the assigned reading and secondarily on the authors’ arguments about them. Many class sessions will be introduced with illustrative images chosen by student presenters; over the course of the term each student will be responsible for two brief visual presentations of this kind. In choosing your images, you will be contributing to making this class in visual culture a visual experience.

Note that among the assigned texts there are a number of mass-market Hindi films. These are examples of popular cinema, produced as crowd-pleasers. Attend the screenings expecting to enjoy yourselves, but also prepared to take notes over a three-hour stretch. You will be required to write short essays on two films of your choice. The most important assignment is a final research project, with an opportunity to experiment with nontraditional, creative formats available to students who are so inclined.
Course Goals and Learning Objectives

This class will encourage you to develop, refine, and express your ideas in more than one way. Alongside thesis-driven written assignments, there are presentation assignments that invite students to communicate ideas and information visually as well as verbally, and in so doing contribute their own research to the fund of group knowledge. Another way to put this might be to say that on their presentation days, students take on the responsibility of helping to teach the course. At a methodological level, the syllabus’s emphasis on visual material such as films and graphic images as sites of analysis should open fresh perspectives to the study of nontraditional texts—and indeed to forms of analysis that go beyond “readings” of “texts.” At a theoretical level, much of our discussion will center on questions of cultural difference.

I find much of the South Asian material we will study together to be not only important, meaningful, and powerful but also beautiful and pleasurable. There is room in this course for the exploration not only of critical ideas but also aesthetic and creative perspectives.

Prerequisites: There are no formal course prerequisites for AMES 35. But inasmuch as your ability to formulate mature and sophisticated ideas about the material you study with me will require you to relate it to various South Asia–specific contexts, I recommend that you enter this course forearmed with some prior experience of the academic study of the history, politics, or social organization of South Asia, or of South Asian cultures in their artistic, literary, or religious dimensions.

Required Books and Films

Amar Chitra Katha, The Gita (comic book)

Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley, editors, Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia (abbreviated as MTRSA)

John Berger, Ways of Seeing

Diana L. Eck, Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India

Emma Tarlo, Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India

Textbooks may be purchased at Wheelock Books. Note that the syllabus incorporates numerous reading assignments taken from sources outside of these books. You will be able to access these readings through Blackboard, generally in the form of PDF scans.

City of Photos (dir. Nishtha Jain, 2005)

Lage Raho Munna Bhai (dir. Rajkumar Hirani, 2006)

Mr. India (dir. Shekhar Kapoors, 1987)
Navrang (dir. V. Shantaram, 1959)

Ramayan (dir. Ramanand Sagar, 1987–88)


It is highly recommended that you view the films together with your classmates at the screenings scheduled for Sunday evenings. Films and other visual media will also be made accessible through the library’s reserves and streaming services.

Course Requirements

1. Class Participation: 20%

2. Visual presentations and written exercise: 20%

3. Film essays, 5 pp. each: 15% X 2 = 30%

4. Final project, 10+ pp.: 30%

Boilerplate

1. Attendance: Attendance in class is mandatory. If you find you are unable to attend on a particular day, tell me before you miss class, preferably through e-mail. Note that attendance is part of your class participation grade and that more than two unexcused absences will put that grade at risk.

2. Cell phones: Off. Checking your phone for messages, etc. while class is in session is a mark of disrespect to me, your classmates, and the College and—outside of an emergency context—will incur mockery from me or worse.

3. Food and drink: No eating in the classroom. Liquids are fine. If it were up to me you could smoke in class too, but if you took me up on that I suspect we could both get in hot water with the College.

If you require a personal exemption from any of these rules, talk to me or e-mail me about it.

4. A general principle concerning the syllabus: Read the whole syllabus. No, really. Like today.

5. Another general principle concerning the syllabus: The syllabus is subject to change through the course of the term. As your instructor, I may revise or augment what’s on the menu for any given day through the end of the term.
6. **A general principle concerning class discussion:** The classroom is a community, and class discussion is a collective project. Participation in class discussion is more than individual students bouncing their own ideas off the instructor. When you contribute, be aware that your audience is a roomful of comparably well-informed interlocutors. As the instructor I’ll do my best to guide discussion such that each member has a chance to express her or his own ideas, but it’ll help if each of you keeps in mind this basic point: *It’s not about me; it’s about the ideas—and contributing to a dynamic and collective discussion about them.*

7. **Please turn in all written assignments to me** (or my office mailbox) on paper, unless otherwise specified. It’s up to you to print it out in time, not up to me.

8. **Late assignment policy:** In principle, pretty mellow. As far as I’m concerned, there’s one cardinal rule: *If you need more time than what I’ve indicated, get in touch and clear it with me.* I promise to be accessible—by e-mail, by office phone, and in person before and after class and at the office. Don’t be a stranger: if you need help with the assignments—whether your concerns are time-related, text-related, or anything else—consider me your first stop.

9. **Punctuality, yours and mine:** I will do my best to start class on time, and I really don’t like to deprive latecomers of important information, so I hope you also do your best to arrive on time. I confess to the bad habit of allowing class discussions to run overtime. Consider yourself notified: Class ends at 2:50 sharp. If we’re still talking, you may choose to stick around in the classroom out of interest or courtesy, but you are under no obligation to do so.

10. **My attitude towards grading:** Do the reading for each class and make informed contributions to class discussion when you see an opening. If you follow these two baseline principles, you’ll be well on the way to succeeding in my course.

    As for individual assignments: If you get the job done—namely, fulfill the requirements specified for the assignment, demonstrate comprehension of the sources you use, express yourself clearly and precisely, and conscientiously support your points with evidence—then I can promise you a score that falls within the range of B or higher. If you show me that you put something extra into your work, you’ll have a good shot at an A-minus—if you ask particularly sharp questions, make particularly thoughtful connections, press on with your intellectual curiosity.

    A straight-A project for me is one that exhibits excellence, and generally speaking there are two ways to do that. The first is to produce work that is letter perfect. In the case of a paper, that means the argument is tight and it discusses the material at a level of sophistication that demonstrates mastery. The second way is to take an intellectual risk—and for that risk to pay off. As a teacher, I’m never more pleased than when I recognize work from a student that surprises me and teaches me something new.
A grade in the C range or lower generally indicates that something is wrong. I don’t give out many Cs, and when I do I am sure to identify the problem. I do recognize that some students may make the call to turn in C-grade work in my class because they have placed their priorities elsewhere, and that is a decision I can respect on a personal level. In other words, no foul—so long as you’re a) in control of the situation; and b) not under the illusion that you’re entitled to a good grade for something you didn’t work hard on.

**Academic Honesty Policy**

*For academic honesty–related questions, refer to the Dartmouth Honor Code: [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~reg/regulations/undergrad/acad-honor.html](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~reg/regulations/undergrad/acad-honor.html).*

**Student Needs**

*Students with disabilities enrolled in this course and who may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see me before the end of the second week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the Student Accessibility Services office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.*

*Student Accessibility Services: [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~accessibility/facstaff/](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~accessibility/facstaff/).*

**Additional Support for your Learning**

*Academic Skills Center: [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/).*

Course Schedule

week 1—Introductions

Sept. 10 (M)
introductions of: members of the class; the general scheme of the class; its goals and standards; some basic terms and concepts: Where is South Asia? What is “visual culture”?

12 (W)
readings: John Berger, Ways of Seeing, first half; Susan Orlean, “Art for Everybody”

14 (F)
reading: John Berger, Ways of Seeing, second half

discuss visual presentation assignment

week 2—Popular Cinema

16 (Sun)
screening: Mr. India (dir. Shekhar Kapoor, 1987) 7:00, Thornton 104

17 (M)
film discussion
reading: Rosie Thomas, “Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity”

19 (W)
reading: Tejaswini Ganti, from Bollywood: A Guidebook to popular Hindi Cinema

21 (F)
reading: Sara Dickey, from Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India

week 3—The Eye of the Believer

24 (M)


26 (W)
reading: Diana Eck, Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, first half

28 (F)
reading: Diana Eck, Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, second half
week 4—Sacred Art?

Oct 1 (M)
_reading:_ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “‘For the Greater Glory of Indian Art’: Travels and Travails of a Yakshi”

_assignment of presentation-related written exercise_

3 (W)

week 5—The Image Looks Back

7 (Sun)
_screening:_ Navrang (dir. V. Shantaram, 1959)
7:00, Thornton 104

8 (M)
_film discussion_
_readings:_ Susan L. Schwartz, _from_ Rasa: Performing the Divine in India; Navrang handout

10 (W)
_reading:_ Richard Gombrich, “The Consecration of a Buddhist Image”

11 (Thu, x-period)
_in-class screening:_ City of Photos (dir. Nishtha Jain, 2005)

presentation-related written exercise due

12 (F)
_film discussion_

week 6—Modern Media and Its Publics

15 (M)
_readings:_ David Kinsley, “Kali: Blood and Death out of Place”; Rachel McDermott, “The Western Kali”

_first film essay due_

17 (W)
_readings:_ Frances Pritchett, “The World of _Amar Chitra Katha,_” (MTRSA); Jack Hawley, “The Saints Subdued: Domestic Virtue and National Integration in _Amar Chitra Katha,_” (MTRSA); _Amar Chitra Katha, The Gita_

before class Friday: _view at least one episode of Ramayan_ (dir. Ramanand Sagar, 1987–88)
week 7—Exhibiting the Authentic

21 (Sun)  
**screening:** Lage Raho Munna Bhai (dir. Rajkumar Hirani, 2006)  
7:00, Thornton 104

22 (M)  
**film discussion**

**reading:** Emma Tarlo, *from Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*

24 (W)  
**readings:** Emma Tarlo, *from Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*; Paul Greenough, “Nation, Economy, and Tradition Displayed: The Indian Crafts Museum, New Delhi”

**discuss final research assignment**

26 (F)  
**reading:** Emma Tarlo, *from Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*

week 8—Women and the Image of Tradition

28 (Sun)  
7:00, Thornton 104

29 (M)  
**film discussion**

**reading:** Sumita S. Chakrabarty, “Women and the Burden of Postcoloniality: The Courtesan Film Genre”

31 (W)  
**reading:** Emma Tarlo, *from Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*

Nov 2 (F)  
**readings:** Ákös Östör and Lina Fruzzetti, *from the “Scroll Singers of Naya” project*

week 9—Desire and Consumption

5 (M)  
**readings:** A. Stewart Woodburne, “The Evil Eye in South Indian Folklore”; D. F. Pocock, “The Evil Eye—Envy and Greed Among the Patidar of Central Gujerat”

**second film essay due**
7 (W)  
readings: R. Srivatsan, “Looking at Film Hoardings”; William Mazzarella, “Cindy at the Taj”

9 (F)  

week 10—Drawing Boundaries

12 (M)  

21 (W)  
Final Research Project Due: 5:00 IN MY MAILBOX, RELIGION DEPARTMENT