REL/AMES 690S-01

HOW TO SEE GOD

and other questions of SOUTH ASIAN VISUAL CULTURE

***SYLLABUS DRAFT: SUBJECT TO REVISION***

Spring 2013
Biological Sciences 063
Tu 4:40–7:10

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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.

This course brings graduate students and undergraduates together in a seminar format. Discussion will focus primarily on the key South Asian themes and ideas introduced in the assigned reading and secondarily on the authors’ arguments about them; I propose to look to undergraduate members of the class to initiate most discussions, and then invite graduate members to complicate the ideas on the table. 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 at least one visual presentation 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 Indian 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**


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 online, generally in the form of PDF scans posted on Sakai.*

*City of Photos* (dir. Nishtha Jain, 2005)
Navrang (dir. V. Shantaram, 1959)

Ramayan (dir. Ramanand Sagar, 1987–88)

Rang De Basanti (dir. Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2006)

Sant Tukaram (dirs. V. G. Damle and Sheikh Fattelal, 1936)

Satyam Shivam Sundaram (dir. Raj Kapoor, 1978)

*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 on reserve at Lilly Library.*

**Course Requirements (for undergraduates)**

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%

**Course Requirements (for graduate students)**

*By way of formal assignments, I will require one presentation and a final paper.*

*In addition, let’s arrange for each of you to contribute reading or visual material related to your own expertise or interests, to be the basis of a discussion you will convene during one of the last few class sessions of our term together.*

**Boilerplate**

1. **Attendance:** Attendance in class is mandatory. Given that the class format is a once-weekly seminar, absences are highly discouraged. If you must miss a session, please make sure to communicate with me as far in advance as possible.

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 Duke (never mind where the endowment came from).
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 7:10. 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. And let me stress one important point. Many of you have been trained to read to get the gist of the author’s argument: “What are the main points?” But superior analytic work will involve you in complicating the material you read, not merely simplifying it.

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. Own it! 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**

Please study and understand what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it by going through Duke’s comprehensive resource: [https://plagiarism.duke.edu/avoiding/](https://plagiarism.duke.edu/avoiding/). I take plagiarism very seriously and when I see academic dishonesty I will act in accordance with the policies set by the Office of Judicial Affairs. See [http://www.integrity.duke.edu/links/index.html](http://www.integrity.duke.edu/links/index.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.*
Course Schedule

week 1—What does our class look like?

Jan. 15
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”?
in-class reading: Susan Orlean, “Art for Everybody”

week 2—What does art look like?

22
reading: John Berger, Ways of Seeing
discuss visual presentation assignment

week 3—What does God look like? What do multiple gods look like?

29
virtual temple tours at <http://www.360spin.co.uk/360spin/co.uk/qtvr/bolton/hindutemple2.htm>, <http://www.willpearson.co.uk/virtual_tours/chennai/>

week 4—What do multiple copies of God look like?

Feb. 3 (Sun)
screening: Sant Tukaram (dirs. V. G. Damle and Sheikh Fattelal, 1936)
7:00, Gray 220

5
film discussion

week 5—What does a goddess look like? What does the nation look like?

12
readings: Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “For the Greater Glory of Indian Art’: Travels and Travails of a Yakshi”; Sumathi Ramaswamy, from The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping
Modern India; David Kinsley, “Kali: Blood and Death out of Place”; Rachel McDermott, “The Western Kali”

week 6—How does an idol look (back)?

17 (Sun)
screening: Navrang (dir. V. Shantaram, 1959)
7:00, Gray 220

19
film discussion
introduce presentation-related written assignment
introduce film essay assignment

week 7—What does realism look like?

26
in-class screening: City of Photos (dir. Nishtha Jain, 2005)
film discussion
reading: Karin Zitzewitz, “The Secular Icon: Secularist Practice and Indian Visual Culture”
before the next class: view at least one episode of Ramayan (dir. Ramanand Sagar, 1987–88)

week 8—What does tradition look like?

Mar. 5
presentation-related written assignment due

week 9—What does modernity look like? What does authenticity look like?

19
readings: Emma Tarlo, from Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India (begin); Paul Greenough, “Nation, Economy, and Tradition Displayed: The Indian Crafts Museum, New Delhi”
film essay #1 due
week 10—What do respectable women look like? (And who does not look like a respectable woman?)

24 (Sun)
Satyam Shivam Sundaram (dir. Raj Kapoor, 1978)
7:00, Gray 220

26
film discussion

reading: Emma Tarlo, from Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India (finish); 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”

week 11—What does history look like? What does globalization look like?

30 (Sun)
screening: Rang De Basanti (dir. Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2006)
7:00, Gray 220

Apr. 2
film discussion


weeks 12–13—What do your own interests look like?

9
TBA

film essay #2 due

16
TBA

week 14—What does a threshold look like?

23

May 4 (F)

final research project due: 5 PM IN MY MAILBOX, RELIGION DEPARTMENT