

**The Mystical Arts:  
On the Theory and Practice of Hermeneutics and Aesthetics**

[W]hat turmoil William Blake's insights would create for the methodological conceptualization of standard religious studies. How could any of them be fitted to any coherent scheme, or, if they were, would they remain what they were originally? Why is the mentality of the technician sanctioned in religious studies while the attitude of the artist is treated with suspicion?

Walter Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*

In consonance with the teachings of mystic visionaries in various traditions, kabbalists assent to the view that the primary task of the imaginative faculty is to depict imaginably what is without image, to embody that which is not a body, to give form to the formless. The imagination is not, as Hobbes put it, a "decaying sense," but it is, rather, in Henry Corbin's telling phrase, the "psychospiritual" faculty, usually identified in medieval sources as the heart, the "intermediate plane" of the "Imaginative Presence," the *coincidentia oppositorum* of the hidden and the manifest.

Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*

*Course Description*

Mystical texts and the visual arts have contributed immeasurably to shaping individual and collective conceptions of the spiritual in modern and postmodern culture. By integrating rigorous textual analysis with direct experiential practices, we will bring a multifaceted approach to bear on the relationship between aesthetic, intellectual and mystical creativity—that is, between the often conflicting domains of spiritual experience, intellectual analysis, and beauty—in order to gain insight into the ways in which these distinctive yet overlapping modalities of knowledge have integrally shaped developments in high culture, sacred practice and visual representation. Drawing on the combined methodological perspectives of Art History and Religious Studies, we will examine the ways in which the contemplative and experiential practices of museum viewing, ritual performances, trans-cultural encounter and focused reading and writing activities can all serve as powerful acts of human self-creation.

*Requirements and Course Grades*

This course carries a substantial reading load and is designed for graduate and highly motivated undergraduate students. Course readings and class participation are central components of this course. All readings are required unless otherwise indicated. Students will regularly present brief reports that focus on significant questions raised in the weekly readings. All of the readings, either the original texts or photocopies of the relevant chapters, will be placed on Course Reserve at the library or will be available for purchase at the bookstore.

In addition, a final paper of 15-20 pages is required. While the specific topic of the paper will vary depending on the interests of the student, the final essay should be critical and analytical in nature. A proposal for this paper and an accompanying bibliography will be due at mid-term. The essay will be due at the last class meeting, during which time each student will present a brief description of their research. This deadline is firm. Class preparation and participation, including in-class presentations, will count for two-thirds of the final grade; the essay will count for the remaining third.

*Plagiarism and Disability*

Students must follow the honor code. If you directly quote or paraphrase a source, so indicate it with full citation. Any students with a documented disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to speak with us during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will be confidential. Such students should also contact Disabled Student Services in the Ley Student Center.

*Required Texts and Selections*

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Facsimile in Full Color* (1794; New York: Dover, 1994).

Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

Marcia Brennan, *Curating Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, forthcoming). Working manuscript.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Painted Language of Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson* (2007). Working manuscript.

Stephen Fredman, "Surrealism Meets Kabbalah: The Place of *Semina* in Mid-Century California Poetry and Art," *American Poetry: Whitman to the Present*, ed. Robert Rehder and Patrick Vincent (Tübingen: Gunter Naar Verlag, 2006), pp. 151-74.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents: The Standard Edition*, intro. Peter Gay; trans. James Strachey (1930; New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

Ivan Gaskell, "Sacred to Profane and Back Again" in Andrew McClellan, ed., *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 149-62.

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-02; New York: Modern Library, 1999).

Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

\_\_\_\_\_, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism & Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Alex Grey, *Sacred Mirrors: The Visionary Art of Alex Grey* (Inner Traditions, 1990).

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Pocket Edition, 2006).

Donald Kuspit, "Alex Grey's Mysticism" in *Redeeming Art: Critical Reveries*, ed. Mark Van Proyen (New York: Allworth Press, 2000), pp. 251-57.

Michael Leja, "The Self's Deceptions" in *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 185-219.

Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Marianna Torgovnick, "Entering Freud's Study" in *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 194-209.

Arlen Schumer, *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art* (New York: Collector's Press, 2003).

## Syllabus

Week 1: Course Introduction and Overview

Week 2: Seeing Sex, Seeing Jesus

Reading: Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*; Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift*, Introduction and ch. 1, "The Apocryphon of the Beloved"

Week 3: On Paradox, Inversion, Eros, Altered States and Liberalism in Text and Image

Reading: Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; Kripal, "Reality Against Society: William Blake, Antinomianism, and the American Counterculture," *Common Knowledge* 13 (no. 1), pp. 98-112.

Week 4: The Fiery Brook

Reading: Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift*, ch. 2, "Restoring the Adam of Light"

Week 5: Art, Democracy, and the Liberated Body

Reading: Whitman, "Song of Myself" and "I Sing the Body Electric" in *Leaves of Grass*; Brennan, *Painting Gender*, Introduction, ch. 1, "Puritan Repression and the Whitmanic Ideal," ch. 4, "Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe: Corporeal Transparency and Strategies of Inclusion," and ch. 5, "John Marin: Framed Landscapes and Embodied Visions"

Week 6: Mystical Harvard

Reading: James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 61-89, 185-209, 413-68; Leja, *Looking Askance*, pp. 185-219.

Week 7: Projection, Psychoanalysis and Mysticism

Reading: Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*; Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, pp. 194-209.

Week 8: Reading as a Mystical Practice

Reading: Kripal, *Roads of Excess*

Week 9: On the Mystical Arts of Kabbalistic Hermeneutics

Reading: Selections from Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*

Week 10: On the Mystical Arts of Kabbalistic Hermeneutics

Reading: Continue as above

Week 11: Flowering Light and Painted Poems

Reading: Brennan, *The Painted Language of Flowering Light*; Fredman, *Semina Culture*

Week 12: The Mystic as Curator

Reading: Brennan, *Curating Consciousness*, selections; Gaskell, *Art and its Publics*, pp. 149-62

Week 13: Illustrating Our Superpowers

Reading: Grey, *Sacred Mirrors*; Kuspit, "Redeeming Art," 251-57; Schumer, *The Silver Age*

Week 14: Your Turn

Student Presentations

**Final Paper to be Handed in during Class**