

Mark W. Roche

The Cinematic World of Alfred Hitchcock

Brief Description

Alfred Hitchcock, the master of suspense, is a fascinating artist not least of all because he appeals to popular audiences even as he fascinates scholars. Hitchcock created films when cinema was still a silent medium and then carried his work forward to the age of talkies, color films, and ever new technical innovations. Like few others, Hitchcock mastered strategies of indirect communication that are distinctly cinematic. Moreover, he was peerless in playing on viewers' emotions, even as he engaged them with complex and often ambiguous ideas. His ideas carry a special resonance today insofar as he explored sudden and inexplicable threats, fear and isolation, and strategies for meeting seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

The course serves two main purposes.

First, it introduces students to film as a distinctive art form. Students will become familiar with the questions and categories with which one can most meaningfully interpret and evaluate any film, including film-specific dimensions. Like theater, film is a visual, temporal, and linguistic medium, but film differs from theater insofar as it is defined by camera or shot, which frames our sight; montage or editing, which allows film to be spatially and temporally discontinuous; and *mise-en-scène*, the totality of expressive content in the filmed image, from setting, props, and costumes to gestures, facial expressions, and lighting. Together these three elements bring forward not only a distinctive art form but also an unusually capacious and creative ontology.

Second, we will consider the ways in which Hitchcock's works raise questions and convey meaning. Although Hitchcock is justly famous for eliciting powerful emotions, he is also a cerebral director, whose works reflect on art and its relation to reality. Power and love are the two great intersubjective themes that dominate Hitchcock's concept of the social world. His films play with identity, mistaken identity, and identity crises. Hitchcock stresses the difficulties of achieving certainty in intersubjective relations and the various ways in which we try to navigate this uncertainty, which can evoke fear, thwart love, enable evil, and hinder the revelation of truth. Hitchcock is also a Catholic director who thematizes the gap between what is and what ought to be. His assessment of a human impulse toward cruelty is nonetheless paired with concepts of grace and providence. Hitchcock plays with diverse genres, but his most distinctive mode may be humor, which represents a persistent but loving critique of an inadequate world.

The course will be student-centered, with considerable focus on discussion. Students will write extensively on the films and thereby develop not only their interpretive but also their oral and written capacities.

The course is designed for Glynn students, but unlike the year-long Humanities Seminar, students may take one semester or two semesters. The fall semester seminar on Hitchcock satisfies the University Requirement in the Fine Arts. The complementary spring seminar, "Faith, Doubt, and Reason," satisfies the University Requirements in Catholicism and the Disciplines

and Second Philosophy. It engages questions of faith, doubt, and reason via a range of thinkers, including Plato, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. It also integrates literary and artistic works (including films).

Statement on Covid-19

On our first day I will briefly explain why our class is online. Please note that public perception of what an online course is (listening to asynchronous lectures, disengaged learning, taking multiple choice exams, and so forth) differs radically from the experience I hope and expect you will have in this engaging Hitchcock seminar. We will run it very much like a normal seminar, with very active student contributions, break-out discussion groups, and abundant interaction between students and students and teacher and students. In terms of learning, I do not expect to see any deficit at all. The difference with a regular class this fall will be simple: instead of wearing masks and distancing ourselves physically, we will conduct our discussions via Zoom.

Our challenge will be to ensure that Zoom does not hinder engagement and our potential for fostering a community of learning. To that end, I hope we can do at least three things.

First, Hitchcock's films are very much about anxiety, isolation, uncertainty, and dread; threats from known and unknown forces; the dialectic of the ordinary and extraordinary; the challenge of making sense of an unexpected and unwilled situation; difficulties of reading other persons; the need for resilience and courage as well as the assistance of others; living with ambiguity; and a faith and hope in providence. I hope that directly or indirectly the ideas in these works will resonate with our current situation.

Second, film is a medium you will experience your entire life, such that beyond its intrinsic value, the practical goal of developing a skill for your entire life—how to understand and interpret films effectively even as you enjoy them—will heighten motivation. What you learn in this course should last your entire life.

Third, I have adjusted the syllabus to offer students more flexibility, which tends to increase engagement and ownership, and more opportunities for collaboration and informal conversation, which will help ensure that the isolation and alienation caused by Covid-19 can be partly offset by our fostering a community of learning with deep intersubjective connections.

In the week before classes start, I will write each student with more information for orientation to the course. I am confident that we will succeed in fostering a wonderful community of learning. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at mroche@nd.edu.