

Evil, Innocence and Identification: Genre Film and Philosophy



Instructor Information

Instructor

Professor Susanne Kord

Email & Phone

susanne.kord@ucl.ac.uk

Office Location

18 Gordon Sq, Room G12

General Information

Description

This module aims to read a series of classic genre films against two backgrounds: identification theories (in film and other media), specifically those involving POV (point-of-view camera angles), and philosophy, specifically texts focusing on the nature of evil. The course will be divided into two unequal parts:

How we see will discuss how we as viewers are encouraged to negotiate issues of identification and ideology;

Why we look will address various philosophical definitions of Evil and the question of Evil's appeal.

Taken together, these ideas will provide the basis for an investigation of the following questions:

- What aesthetic and thematic mechanisms does genre film employ to represent ideas of Innocence and Evil?
- Why is identification in genre film so often fraught (as expressed, for example, in Smith's distinction between viewer 'alignment' and 'allegiance')?
- Why is identification in genre films so often counter-intuitive (i.e. why are viewers so often steered toward identification with 'Evil' rather than Innocence)?
- Why does genre film so often conflate symbols of Innocence and Evil (for example in the popular image of the Evil Child)?

--How does genre film portray and popularise the most central themes of philosophy (for example fear and guilt)?

--To what extent do genre films present themselves as modern philosophical texts, in the sense that they contest key presuppositions of traditional philosophy, such as 'self-consciousness,' 'free will,' or 'truth'?

To test philosophical claims of 'universality', films will include works in various B-genres (family films, sci-fi, horror, crime films), from various nations and hemispheres (central Europe, the USA, and East Asia) and from a broad historical time line (at least one film from each decade since 1950). While breadth of genre, time and place was one criteria, films were mainly selected for their focus on themes that are commonly understood as the most central tenets that anchor and contextualise human existence and that therefore regularly appear in moral philosophy: nature and science; religion and ideas of the afterlife; consumerism and voyeurism; 'normal' life (for example, family life) and 'artificial' life (e.g. cyborgs, androids).

Expectations & Goals

The course aims to integrate readings in film theory and philosophy with genre film and encourage reflection on different modes of representation mandated by genre, rather than merely perceiving theory or philosophy as 'background'.

For this reason, this is a reading-intensive course. It is very important that you keep up to date with all course readings and ask for help when you need it.

Attendance & Participation

You are expected to attend all seminars, and to actively participate in discussions. This includes reading (and familiarity with) assigned material prior to class, asking questions, taking notes, and contributing to the discussions as scholars and critical thinkers.

Students with more than 3 unexcused absences will not be permitted to proceed to assessment.

Readings & Screenings

The assigned texts are integral to the course and are available from the instructor and/or, copyright permitting, on the Moodle platform. It is essential that you complete all readings and viewings before the seminar sessions.

Attendance is mandatory during seminar sessions. There will be no formal film screenings. Options to view films include streaming via UCL's streaming service, borrowing the film from the UCL Library, or purchasing or streaming it on your own.

Etiquette

No phones are allowed in class. Turn phones to silent when you enter and resist the temptation to check your phone during lectures, screenings, and tutorials. Laptops and tablets are permitted as note-taking devices only. This is a university course that treats film seriously; you are expected to behave as scholars during screenings (no whispering, no checking emails or Facebook).

In the event of illness or emergency

If you fall ill (or experience an emergency such as a death in the family) and are required to miss a *significant* number of classes, are unable to write a test/exam, or are unable submit an assignment on time, you must contact selcs.examinations@ucl.ac.uk to submit an extenuating circumstances form. You will need to provide selcs.examinations@ucl.ac.uk with evidence that

your illness/emergency directly impacted your scheduled academic obligations. Once selcs.examinations@ucl.ac.uk reviews and approves your case, they will contact the course instructor and a concession/extension will be arranged. Please do not email your evidence to the course instructor.

Assignments & Evaluation

Assignment	Weight
Final essay (5000 words) - submit on Turnitin	100%

Course Materials

Themes and Films

Part I: How We See

Identification: *Peeping Tom* (dir. Michael Powell, U.K. 1960)
The Cabin in the Woods (dir. Drew Goddard, USA 2011)

Ideology: *The Bad Seed* (dir. Mervyn LeRoy, USA, 1956)
Rosemary's Baby (dir. Roman Polanski, USA, 1968)

Part II: Why We Look

Evil v. Innocence: *Ringu/ The Ring* (dir. Hideo Nakata, Japan, 1998)
Blade Runner (dir. Ridley Scott, USA, 1982)

Evil's Appeal: *The Blair Witch Project* (dir. Eduardo Sanchez, USA, 1999)
The Brood (dir. David Cronenberg, Canada, 1979)
The White Ribbon (dir. Michael Haneke, Austria, 2009)

Required Texts

Alford, Fred, *What Evil Means to Us* (1997, excerpts).

Carroll, Noël, *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990, excerpts).

Eagleton, Terry, *On Evil* (2010, excerpts).

Freud, Sigmund, 'The Uncanny' (1919).

Hall, Stuart, 'Encoding/Decoding' (1980).

Kord, T.S., *Little Horrors: How Cinema's Evil Children Play on Our Guilt* (2016).

McCloud, Scott, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993).

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886, excerpts).

Smith, Murray, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (1995, excerpts).

Sontag, Susan, 'Regarding the Pain of Others' (2003, excerpts).

Course Schedule

Week	Topic	Readings (to be completed for this lesson)	Film viewings (for discussion the following week)
1	<i>Introduction</i>		<i>Peeping Tom</i> (dir. Michael Powell, U.K. 1960) <i>The Cabin in the Woods</i> (dir. Drew Goddard, USA 2011)
2	<i>Identification</i>	Kord, <i>Little Horrors</i> , 'Introduction' Smith, <i>Engaging Characters</i> , 'Introduction' Scott McCloud, <i>Understanding Comics</i> , ch. 2 Discussion: <i>Peeping Tom</i> <i>The Cabin in the Woods</i>	<i>The Bad Seed</i> (dir. Mervyn LeRoy, USA, 1956)
3	<i>Ideology</i>	Carroll, <i>Philosophy of Horror</i> , excerpts Kord, <i>Little Horrors</i> , ch. 6 Discussion: <i>The Bad Seed</i>	<i>Rosemary's Baby</i> (dir. Roman Polanski, USA, 1968)

Week	Topic	Readings (to be completed for this lesson)	Film viewings (for discussion the following week)
4	<i>Ideology</i>	Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding' Kord, <i>Little Horrors</i> ch. 5 Discussion: <i>Rosemary's Baby</i>	<i>Ringu</i> (dir. Hideo Nakata, Japan, 1998)
5	<i>Evil / Innocence</i>	Nietzsche, <i>Beyond Good and Evil</i> Part V: chs. 188, 190, 197, 199, 201; Part VII: ch. 229; Part IX: ch. 259 Discussion: <i>Ringu</i>	<i>Blade Runner</i> (dir. Ridley Scott, USA, 1982)
6	<i>Evil / Innocence</i>	Alford, <i>What Evil Means</i> , excerpts Kord, <i>Little Horrors</i> , 'Conclusion' Discussion: <i>Blade Runner</i>	<i>The Blair Witch Project</i> (dir. Eduardo Sanchez, USA, 1999)
7	<i>Evil / Innocence</i>	Eagleton, <i>On Evil</i> , 'Introduction' Kord, <i>Little Horrors</i> , ch. 3 Discussion: <i>The Blair Witch Project</i>	<i>The Brood</i> (dir. David Cronenberg, Canada 1979)
8	<i>The Appeal of Evil</i>	Freud, 'The Uncanny' Kord, <i>Little Horrors</i> , ch. 4 Discussion: <i>The Brood</i>	<i>The White Ribbon</i> (dir. Michael Haneke, Austria 2009)
9	<i>The Appeal of Evil</i>	Sontag, <i>Pain of Others</i> chs. 6&7 Kord, <i>Little Horrors</i> ch. 7 Discussion: <i>The White Ribbon</i>	
10	<i>Project Presentations</i>		

Policies for written work

All written work must be typed and double-spaced and adhere to citation guidelines. Assessed essays must be uploaded to the TurnItIn site on Moodle.

Your written work should reflect your advanced knowledge of the subject matter; your final essay must include a coherent **thesis statement** which is rigorously defended through analysis, use of examples, and engagement with secondary sources.

Written work is assessed using the following criteria:

- the ability to write lucidly and with focused relevance, avoiding vague and unsupported generalities

- the ability to analyze, identifying issues with precision
- the ability to identify appropriate illustrative and supportive material through research and to make productive use of it
- the ability to use primary and secondary sources appropriately
- the ability to present and sustain a discussion, investigation, or argument based on a secure grasp of source material, and to draw reasoned and logical conclusions.

Information is available on the following topics:

Submission and feedback:

<https://wiki.ucl.ac.uk/display/ELearningStudentSupport/Moodle+Assignment+for+submission+and+feedback>

Webtools for writing and citation:

<https://wiki.ucl.ac.uk/display/ELearningStudentSupport/Useful+websites%2C+web-tools+and+web-services>

UCL's policy on plagiarism:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/exams-and-assessments/plagiarism>

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