

Essay 2 – Filmic Conceptions of Theatre: Hitchcock and the World of the Theatre

Length: 7-8 pages (2000-2500 words)

Due: Wednesday March 18, 2009 in class

Weight: 35%

Topic

Alfred Hitchcock is known for his preoccupations with identity, truth vs. fiction, and illusion vs. reality. Famous for his original command of cinematic style, Hitchcock also demonstrates a fascination with the world of the theatre, including, among other aspects, the nature of performance and role-playing, the function of the stage, and the attractions of magic and intrigue. How does Hitchcock's use of theatre and theatrical elements comment on ideas of identity, truth, and reality? In other words, how does his use of theatre help to construct his 'world view'? Drawing on *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), thoroughly examine the function of theatre in Hitchcock's films, and create an argument that analyses how he uses theatre to explore broader philosophical questions.

Expectations

Students must construct an argument that illuminates Hitchcock's philosophical outlook, and accounts for the role that theatre plays in this outlook. The essay requires you to look closely at theatrical elements in the plot, but also at the *idea* of theatre itself. In articulating how ideas of theatre (performance, staging, magic, etc.) are constructed or conceptualized in his films, students should note Hitchcock's use of film style as well as his attention to narrative developments. Further, students are expected to note how his use of theatre addresses philosophical questions – including but not limited to – ideas of truth, the 'real', and identity. Questions to consider include: How do theatrical events factor into the films and shape their narratives? What arguments can be put forth for viewing elements of the films as theatrical? How do the notions of identity and performance come into play, and what does this say about Hitchcock's attitude towards the characters and worlds he builds in his films? The essay must include a variety of concrete examples from each film, and should include close analyses of one or more sequences from each film.

Suggested Approach

1. Watch both films in order to understand the intricacies of plot (they both involve mysteries).
2. No longer distracted by plot, watch the films again with the concepts of theatre and performance in mind. Collect observations as 'evidence.'
3. Choose several sequences from the films to more closely scrutinize this 'evidence.' Note Hitchcock's use of film style.
4. Look at your evidence. What patterns emerge? When viewed together, what does this evidence say about Hitchcock's conception of theatre? What understandings of identity, truth, and reality can you identify?
5. Construct an argument about his 'world view' and how theatre fits into this view. Develop several supporting points of discussion to account for this view, drawing clearly and specifically from your evidence.

TIPS

- * A single viewing of each film will likely be insufficient for producing a nuanced analysis. Try watching both films right away, even if you are not ready to get started on the essay.
- * This is not an exercise in scrutinizing Hitchcock's *intentions* or *personal biographical history*. Steer clear of developing speculative arguments that purport to pinpoint Hitchcock's psychology. Focus on *what* you see and *how* it is operating in the films, not *why* Hitchcock may have been motivated to do it.
- * Several copies of both films are available at the Drama department but you can also check libraries, video stores and even Amazon.com if you feel like splurging.