Owl of Minerva Film Series Fall 2018

**Doubt, Dreams, & Dogmatism**

This fall’s film series is devoted to problems in the theory of knowledge. The philosophical problems the films address include the following:

- How can we be justified in our belief in an objective, mind-independent world when the only evidence we have for such a world seems to be based on subjective appearances presented to our senses? Can we rule out the possibility that the world external to our senses is radically different even from the way physics tells us it is? Is it really not possible to tell whether we are dreaming or awake? (*Waking Life, The Matrix, Johnny Got His Gun)*.

- Skeptical scenarios invented by philosophers often turn on the principle that we must doubt or withhold our assent to a proposition when we have equal evidence that contradicts it. But is the capacity to doubt always an intellectual virtue? Or are there some cases where it is better to doubt even in the absence of contrary evidence because the cost of getting things wrong is just too high? (*Doubt*).

- Is it possible to ‘photograph reality’? How do we decide which perspective---if any---gives us insight into the true nature of the objects of our perception? (*Blow Up*).

- Could a disembodied being be omniscient? Are there things an angel (e.g.) cannot know except by becoming acquainted with them by becoming embodied? (*Wings of Desire*).

- Much of our knowledge about the past is based on testimonial evidence. But can our beliefs about the past ever be rationally grounded on the shifting sands of human testimony? (*Capturing the Friedmans*).

- Some people seem incapable of assenting to propositions for which there is overwhelming evidence (e.g. the existence of the Holocaust). What is the best way to describe people in such a condition? Are they willfully ignorant or self-deceived? If the latter, how is self-deception possible, anyway? (*Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.*).

- When seemingly rational people disagree, must their disagreement always be explained as due to some implicit bias on the part of at least one party? Is it rational for people who are ‘epistemic peers’---who have the same intelligence, reasoning powers, and background information---to disagree about the truth of some proposition? Or does a body of evidence rationally justify at most one attitude (belief/disbelief) toward any particular claim? (*12 Angry Men*).

- The causes of certain events and certain of our experiences are mysterious to us. But may we not always reason to the best explanation in such cases? When may we reason to the best explanation and when must we suspend judgement altogether about the cause of some event? (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*).

*All films will be shown in AJB E105 (Adler Journalism School Frank Miller Screening Room) on alternate Thursdays starting at 6:30pm. Please see the schedule below for information about each film and precise dates.*
Thurs Aug 23: *Waking Life* (2001, Richard Linklater). *Waking Life* is about an unnamed young man living an ethereal existence that lacks transitions between everyday events and that eventually progresses toward an existential crisis. For most of the film he observes quietly but later participates actively in philosophical discussions involving other characters—ranging from quirky scholars and artists to everyday restaurant-goers and friends—about such issues as lucid dreaming and our knowledge of an external world, metaphysics, free will, social philosophy, and the meaning of life. Gradually, the protagonist begins to realize that he is living out a perpetual dream, broken up only by occasional false awakenings. The film was entirely roto-scoped, although it was shot using digital video of live actors (e.g. Ethan Hawke) with a team of artists drawing stylized lines and colors over each frame with computers, rather than being filmed and traced onto cells on a light box.

Thurs Sept 6: *The Matrix* (1999, Wachowski Brothers). *The Matrix* is science fiction film written and directed by The Wachowskis, starring Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss, Hugo Weaving, and Joe Pantoliano. It depicts a dystopian future in which reality as perceived by most humans is actually a simulated reality called "the Matrix", created by sentient machines to subdue the human population, while their bodies' heat and electrical activity are used as an energy source. Computer programmer "Neo" learns this truth and is drawn into a rebellion against the machines, which involves other people who have been freed from the "dream world".

Thurs Sept 20: *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971, Dalton Trumbo). *Johnny Got His Gun* is an American drama anti-war film written and directed by Dalton Trumbo. The plot is based on the novel of the same name by Trumbo, and features an uncredited writing collaboration by Luis Buñuel. Joe Bonham (Bottoms), a young American soldier hit by an artillery shell during World War I, lies in a hospital bed. He is a quadruple amputee who has also lost his eyes, ears, mouth and nose. He remains conscious and able to reason, but his wounds render him a prisoner in his own body. As he drifts between reality and fantasy, he remembers his old life with his father (Jason Robards) and girlfriend (Kathy Fields). He also forms a bond, of sorts, with a young nurse (Diane Varsi) who senses his plight. In a key scene, Joe hallucinates that he converses with Jesus Christ (Donald Sutherland) and pleads with Him to help him determine whether he is dreaming or awake; but even Christ cannot solve Joe’s dilemma. Eventually, Joe tries to communicate to his doctors, via Morse code by nodding his head, saying "help." He wishes for the US Army to put him in a glass coffin in a freak show as a demonstration of the horrors of war. While it is well known that President Jimmy Carter required all his new State cabinet members to view the film shortly after his election as Georgia governor in 1971, the film became far better known when it was incorporated in the video of Metallica's song "One", whose popularity subsequently turned *Johnny Got His Gun* into a cult film.

Thurs Oct 4: *Doubt* (2008, John Patrick Shanley). An instructor at a Catholic parish school, Sister Beauvier (Meryl Streep), suspects that her superior Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman) has committed an unspeakable transgression against a young vulnerable student. Despite her moral certainty that Father Flynn is guilty, she has not a shred of actual evidence to back up her audacious claim. As Sister Beauvier and Father Flynn enter into an epic battle of wills, the shock waves set into motion by their explosive confrontation threaten to destroy one man's reputation and tear apart the entire surrounding community. Written and directed by John Patrick Shanley and based on his Pulitzer Prize winning stage play *Doubt: A Parable*, the film also stars Amy Adams and Viola Davis.
Thurs Oct 18: Blow Up (1966, Michelangelo Antonioni). The plot concerns a day in the life of Thomas, an impatient, misogynistic, and disaffected fashion photographer in Swinging Sixties London. Thomas rushes around London in his Rolls Royce, snapping alien-looking models, buying expensive antiques, having dinner with his agent, and most importantly, photographing a couple embracing in the park. One half of the couple, (played by Vanessa Redgrave), frantically begs for the film but Thomas flat-out refuses. In the film’s key scene, Thomas blows up the photographs and hangs them around his studio, recreating the moment in the park he, and the audience, saw earlier. As the photographs enlarge, their contents becomes more and more oblique. Is that a man in the bushes? Is he holding a gun? Thomas initially believes he has prevented a murder, but later he sees on one of the blow-ups what seems to be the silver-haired boyfriend's dead body behind the bush. But what did his camera really record? Subsequent events force both Thomas and the audience to doubt whether it is possible to photograph reality: which perspective---if any---gives us insight into the true nature of the objects of our perception? Blow-Up was nominated for two Academy Awards – Best Director and Best Original Screenplay (Michelangelo Antonioni, Tonino Guerra, and Edward Bond) – in addition to winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and the National Society of Film Critics' Best Film Award.

Thurs Oct 25: Wings of Desire (1987, Wim Wenders). Set in contemporary West Berlin (at the time still enclosed by the Berlin Wall), Wings of Desire follows two angels, Damiel and Cassiel, as they roam the city, unseen and unheard by its human inhabitants, observing and listening to the diverse thoughts of Berliners: a pregnant woman in an ambulance on the way to the hospital, a painter struggling to find inspiration, a broken man who thinks his girlfriend no longer loves him. Their raison d'être is, as Cassiel says, to "assemble, testify, preserve" reality. Although Damiel and Cassiel are pure observers, visible only to children, and incapable of any physical interaction with our world, Damiel begins to fall in love with a profoundly lonely circus trapeze artist named Marion. A subplot follows Peter Falk, the American actor and painter, who has arrived in Berlin to make a film about Berlin's Nazi past. As the film progresses, it emerges that Peter Falk was once an angel, who, having grown tired of always observing and never experiencing, renounced his immortality to become a participant in the world. As one can take only so much of infinity, Damiel too longs for the genuineness and limitedness of human existence in the world. When, inspired by his encounter with Falk, he sheds his immortal existence, he experiences life for the first time: he bleeds, sees colors (the movie up to this point is filmed in a sepia-toned monochrome, except for brief moments when the angels are not present or looking), tastes food and drinks coffee---and pursues his human love.

Thurs Nov 1: Capturing the Friedmans (2003, Andrew Jarecki). The Friedmans are a seemingly typical, upper-middle-class family whose world is instantly transformed when the father Arnold and his son Jesse are arrested and charged with shocking and horrible crimes. Caught up in hysteria and with their community in an uproar, the family undergoes a media onslaught. ‘As [director Andrew Jarecki] shows the Friedmans and the law authorities who investigated their case, a strange parallel develops: We can't believe either side. Arnold seems incapable of leveling with his family, his lawyers or the law. And the law seems mesmerized by the specter of child abuse to such an extent that witnesses and victims are coached, led and cajoled into their testimony; some victims tell us nothing happened, others provide confused and contradictory testimony, and the parents seem sometimes almost too eager to believe their children were abused. By the end of the film, there is little we can hang onto, except for our conviction that the Friedmans are a deeply wounded family, that Arnold seems capable of the crimes he is charged with, and that the police seem capable of framing him. Our confusion about the facts is increased, not relieved, by another extraordinary fact: all during the history of the Friedmans, and even during the period of legal investigations, charges and court trials, the family was videotaped by another son, David.’ (Roger Ebert).
Thurs Nov 15: *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.* (1999, Errol Morris). *Mr. Death* is a documentary film by Errol Morris about execution technician Fred A. Leuchter. Leuchter claims he was invited to American prisons to inspect and design modifications to their electric chairs. Though not possessing any formal training or education in the matter, Leuchter relates he was told that the individuals who did possess formal and accepted qualifications would not provide advice due to their opinions on the death penalty, fear of reprisals or that they were squeamish about the subject. Leuchter's career continued with other state prisons seeking his advice on execution facilities other than electrocution, such as gas chambers, hanging and lethal injection. Though initially professing his ignorance of other methods of execution, the authorities seeking his advice reminded him that others with more qualifications refused to help. Leuchter claimed to have taught himself on these other methods of execution and provided advice that was used by the authorities to improve safety and efficiency. His fall begins when Leuchter claimed to have been sought as a witness for the defense of Ernst Zündel on trial in Canada for publishing and sending material denying the Holocaust overseas. Leuchter was asked by the defense to travel to Poland to visit Auschwitz to investigate whether there had been operating gas chambers for executions at the camp. Morris considers it obvious that Leuchter was wrong, and that the main idea of the film was intended to be the exploration of Leuchter as a being almost completely lacking in self-knowledge.

Thurs Nov 29: *12 Angry Men* (1957, Sidney Lumet). A Puerto Rican youth is on trial for murder, accused of knifing his father to death. The twelve jurors retire to the jury room, having been admonished that the defendant is innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Eleven of the jurors vote for conviction, each for reasons of his own. The sole holdout is Juror #8, played by Henry Fonda. As Fonda persuades the weary jurors to re-examine the evidence, we learn the backstory of each man. The excruciatingly hot day drags into an even hotter night; still, Fonda chips away at the guilty verdict, insisting that his fellow jurors bear in mind those words "reasonable doubt." Directed by Sidney Lumet, here making his feature-film debut. ‘Too few films take on the art of arguing as a subject; we could certainly use more of them, but until then, Lumet’s window into strained civic duty will continue to serve mightily.’ (Joshua Rothkopf).

Thurs Dec 6: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975, Peter Weir). *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is an Australian mystery drama directed by Peter Weir. At Appleyard College, a girls' private school, near the town of Woodend, Victoria, Australia, the students are dressing on the morning of St. Valentine's Day, 1900. The group prepares for a picnic to a local geological formation known as Hanging Rock, accompanied by the mathematics mistress Miss Greta McCraw and the young and beautiful Mlle. de Poitiers. With permission from Mlle. de Poitiers, Miranda, Marion and Irma decide to explore Hanging Rock and take measurements, with Edith allowed to follow. The group is observed several minutes later by a young Englishman, Michael Fitzhubert, who is lunching at the Rock with his uncle, aunt and valet. At the top of Hanging Rock, the group lies on the ground, apparently dazed by the sun. Miranda, Marion, and Irma awake and move, as if in a dream, into a recess in the rock face. Edith screams and flees down the Rock. The distraught and hysterical party eventually returns to the College, where it is discovered that Miranda, Irma, Marion, and Miss McCraw are missing. A search party led by the local police finds nothing, although Edith reveals under duress that she witnessed Miss McCraw climbing the Rock without her skirt. ‘A film of haunting mystery and buried sexual hysteria’. (Roger Ebert).