ROPE: HITCHCOCK'S UNKINDEST CUT

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Just after Christmas Day of 1956, a man who was popularly known in the New York press of that time as "The Mad Bomber" planted one of his explosive devices in the theater showing Alfred Hitchcock's The Wrong Man. Luckily, this act of urban terrorism was thwarted, but it did succeed in eliciting from Hitchcock a characterization of George Metesky as "a man with a diabolical sense of humor." One can't help imagining that Hitchcock's response to the incident was ambivalent. After all, he must have delighted in his own role as "a man with a diabolical sense of humor," and Metesky had cleverly appropriated one of Hitchcock's favorite dramatic situations, a hidden bomb, for his little joke on that New York audience. But no—Metesky's style of humor really wasn't Hitchcock's: too much surprise, not enough suspense, in The Mad Bomber's modus operandi. This was simply no way to treat a film audience. Hitchcock could not, finally, have admired this failed artist whose methods were so abrupt.

But I would like to argue in this paper that a form of diabolical wit extends throughout Hitchcock's planning and execution of his 1948 film Rope, that Raymond Durgnat is basically correct when he says that "Hitchcock is like a God playing as many practical jokes on human beings as he can." The interesting difference in

Rope, it seems to me, is that Hitchcock has included himself, as well as his actors and technicians, in this elaborate exercise in cinematic perversity. The primary joke, not unexpectedly, is on the audience, which is made to feel various kinds of psychological discomfort while viewing the film, but Hitchcock has also arranged for himself the role of "victim" of his own experimental style. This unfamiliar role must have given him some pleasure—Hitchcock obviously enjoyed, for instance, the technical challenge posed by Rope's lengthy takes—but it is one which at the same time he strenuously resisted, in part through his manipulation of the audience's emotions. Since a key stylistic element in this strategy of audience manipulation is the editorial cut, it might be useful to begin with a consideration of how Hitchcock both loses and gains power through his shaping of the film's style.

Hitchcock's faith in "the importance of cutting and montage for the visual narration of a story" needs no rehearsal here. So when John Russell Taylor, in a reference to Rope, wonders about his "curious denying himself of cutting, the very resource which had always meant most to him in the cinema," one is struck by the self-consciousness such an artistic decision must have entailed. In his 1937 essay "Direction," Hitchcock talks about his willingness to use a "long uninterrupted shot," but he notes, too, that "if I have to shoot a long scene continuously I always feel I am losing grip on it, from a cinematic point of view." Later in the essay he specifically links this self-abandonment with losing "power over the audience." With its lengthy takes, Rope embodies Hitchcock's apparent release of control, yet it may be that he has in fact devised an unparalleled way to fulfill his artistic intentions while also teasing to distraction his audience and his actors.

In playing his novel game, Hitchcock planned to commit the cinematic equivalent of a mortal sin, then redeemed himself ironically through the malicious tricks he practices upon others. In his interview with Hitchcock, Truffaut actually phrases his own romantic defense of Rope in the language of spiritual transgression. He imagines Hitchcock as "a director ... tempted by the dream of linking all of a film's components into a single, continuous action." Hitchcock elaborates on Truffaut's image of sin by replying that "as an experiment, Rope may be forgiven." Indeed, repeatedly in the Truffaut interview Hitchcock seeks to dismiss the entire project.
Rope, he asserts, was a “stunt...I really don’t know how I came
to indulge in it...I got this crazy idea...I realize that it was
quite nonsensical.” My sense is that Hitchcock protests too much,
and that from its inception Rope was a project that he designed to
be, as William Rothman puts it, “disquieting.”

Viewed in this way, Hitchcock’s statements about the film fit into
a carefully contrived pattern of misrepresentation, aimed at making
the experience of Rope as disorienting as possible and creating for
the film an aura of personal dissatisfaction, imbalance, and failure.
In a 1968 essay, he says of Rope that “I tried to give it a flowing
camera movement and I didn’t put any cuts in at all.”

Since this kind of remark can’t simply be attributed to faulty memory, one
may reasonably posit a deliberate intention to obscure, or perhaps reimage, the world of the film.

One measure of Hitchcock’s success at inventing and perpetuating
a mythology of the film is the degree to which its commentators,
from the earliest reviewers on, have misread Rope. Hitchcock’s allegation about its lack of cuts, for instance, was not without precedent. Time magazine had claimed that “in photographing the action, Director Hitchcock brought off a tour de force. There is not a single cut in the film.”

One critic refers to “John Dall’s calm pianoplaying” as calm, it isn’t even there; another states that “each shot lasts ten minutes,” when in fact only two of the film’s eleven takes are that long. At times Hitchcock’s flair for publicity seems to motivate his distortions. In a 1948 essay for Popular Photography magazine called “My Most Exciting Picture,” he boasts of his “magical...cycorama” — an exact miniature reproduction of nearly 35 miles of New York skyline lighted by 8000 incandescent bulbs and 200 neon signs. “Impressive as the background for Rope may be, one must
still wonder where it conceals thirty-five miles of New York skyline.

Even James Stewart unwittingly enters the game of reconstructing Rope. Hitchcock’s account of the direct sound track that was made possible by the elaborate set, with walls swinging on “silent rails” and “furniture...mounted on rollers” is contradicted, at least in part, by Stewart’s recollection that “the noise of the moving walls was a problem, and so we had to do the whole thing over again for sound, with just microphones, like a radio play. The dialogue track was then added later.”

Despite the recurring sense of vertigo that commentaries on Rope
might induce in the reader, it seems clear that Hitchcock’s penchant
for anxiety informed his making of a film requiring actors and actresses to master lines, cues, placement, and movement extending over several minutes of uninterrupted action. Such a demanding procedure must at some level have been designed to provoke distress in creator, cast, and crew, and must also have succeeded. Allowing for
a degree of self-dramatization, one may still credit Hitchcock’s image of his emotional state when production began: “I was so scared that something would go wrong that I couldn’t even look during the first take.” This hardly jibes with the legend of Hitchcock’s immense boredom on the set while his elaborately precut dramas were being
acted, but it plausibly represents what must have been, in Donald Spoto’s words, the “unallied horror” of filming Rope. Hitchcock typically renders his own discomfort in an elegant little narrative
that climaxes in a comic reversal. That first take proceeded for eight minutes without a hitch, he explains, until the camera conversely
panned to “an electrician standing by the window.”

Self-mockery and irony can thus be seen to be a pertinent mode
of self-presentation for Hitchcock, nicely complementing his evident delight in upsetting others. He enjoys reporting James Stewart’s nocturnal traumas during production, which in Hitchcock’s account bear a curious resemblance to the troubled sleep of Stewart’s Scottie Ferguson in Vertigo ten years later: “[Stewart] couldn’t sleep nights because of the picture,” Hitchcock remarked [about the making of Rope]. “It was the bewildering technique that made him worry.”

And John Russell Taylor extends the melodrama to “the most sea-
soned professional of them all, Constance Collier, [who] was abso-
lutely terrified to go to the studio when they were actually shoot-
ing.” Collier, who plays Mrs. Atwater, certainly had reason to be
concerned. Take, for instance, that moment in the film when Bran-
don (John Dall) is narrating his story of Philip’s (Farley Granger)
wringing chickens’ necks on an idyllic Sunday morning in the country.
In order to provide the comic counterpoint in the scene, Collier must
time her mouthful of chicken so that Brandon’s gruesome detail of
animal slaughter coincides precisely with her attempt to place the
food in her mouth. Appalled, she aborts her gesture and exclaims
“Oh, dear!” instead. Almost as nerve-racking from an actor’s point
of view must have been John Dall’s task of dropping the rope into
the kitchen drawer at exactly the moment that the door swings open...
to capture its descent. The film is full of such technically difficult moments whose execution demands not only skill but also a measure of luck.

But these are instances, too, of how Hitchcock's self-teasing is barely distinguishable from a sophisticated game of self-torture. It is one thing for him to insert in the scenario a joke about how difficult it is to remember the title of one of his recent films (Notorious), or to have Janet Walker (Joan Chandler) ecstatically "take" Cary Grant and allude to Ingrid Bergman's loveliness. (Hitchcock, we know, would himself have taken Grant for the Rupert Cadell role had he been available from RKO.) These ironic self-references are simply verbal equivalents of Hitchcock's popular cameo appearances in his films. It is quite another thing, however, for him to contrive a "visual technique that had everyone anxious," for such risk-taking threatens both the creative and financial success of his art.

Andre Bazin's 1954 interview with Hitchcock will help to clarify what was at stake in Rope. Hitchcock explains that his artistic aim in his work has been to achieve a "discordant relationship" between drama and comedy, an aim fully realized to that point in his career only in the "adult" humor of his British films. If Rope is therefore read as an American experiment in fusing the dissonant elements of terror and humor, then Hitchcock must have perceived that his experiment was doomed, for (in Bazin's words) "Americans have much too positive a spirit to accept humor." The pragmatic American spirit would also resist the kind of morbid fantasy that a film such as Rope enacts. For instance, Bazin notes that Hitchcock "could never have made The Lady Vanishes in Hollywood; a simple reading of the scenario and the producer would have pointed out how unrealistic it would be to send a message with an old woman by train when it would be quicker and surer to send a telegram." Indeed, this is exactly the style of criticism that Robert Hatch, writing in The New Republic in 1948, invokes in his review of Rope. It is unrealistic, in Hatch's view, for Brandon and Philip to have overlooked David's hat in the closet, thereby providing Rupert with an important clue, and it violates the probability of New York zoning laws to place a garish neon sign in such close proximity to an elegant penthouse apartment. Furthermore, Bazin claims that Hollywood films are tailored to the sentimental tastes of the women who constitute the majority of the audience, so Rope's aggressive form and "warped sense of humor" (to quote Janet on the subject of Brandon's jokes) flirt with financial disaster. (Typically enough, it is difficult to determine whether it did fail in this sense; those directly connected to it, such as Hume Cronyn and Hitchcock himself, speak of its success, whereas later commentators see its profits as "modest." Durgnat speculates that "Rope might be meant for people who... irresponsibly play with moral ideas," but surely it would be folly to expect such a constituency in the American film-going public. In this sense, Rope willfully—though playfully—alienates its audience, and for-sakes the commercial benefits that were so important to Hitchcock, who told Bazin that "his 'weakness'... [was]... being conscious of his responsibility for all this money." Yet Rope nevertheless insists on its right to construct, in its own way, what Bazin calls the "essential instability of image" characteristic of Hitchcock's mise-en-scene. Critics who don't dismiss the film out of hand are usually sensitive to the ways in which this instability is rendered, paradoxically, by the precise and suspenseful movements of the camera. One contemporary reviewer said that "Hitchcock's brilliant use of a fluid camera maintains unflagging suspense from the moment the chest is closed until its lid is lifted again"; another linked the suspense to "the prying insidious eye of his continuously moving camera." William Rothman remarks that "the deliberateness of every move that the camera makes creates a state of perpetual tension." The anxiety that this photographic style elicits can be seen as Hitchcock's way of restoring his power over the film through an assault on the sensibilities of his audience.

This aggressive manipulating of his audience's emotions is an ironic analogue to the physical and psychological manipulations that Philip and Brandon exert on their victims in the film. Referring to Brandon, Janet at one point exclaims in exasperation, "Why can't he keep his hands off people?" Indeed, the film plainly proposes that Brandon metaphorically enacts the Hitchcockian role of director in his dominance of Philip, who has the artistic talent that Brandon can only imagine and who is commanded by Brandon to execute the crime (a symbolic rape) that he has meticulously arranged. That Brandon is Hitchcock's surrogate is also demonstrated by their common delight in perverse wit and in the unremitting pursuit of technical challenges that will finally enhance their works of "art." Thus Brandon insists on "making [their] work of art a masterpiece"
by serving food from the chest containing the murdered David, inviting their victim's family and friends to the "sacrificial feast," and tying Mr. Kentley's first editions with the instrument of his son's death. Viewed in this ironic light, Brandon plays not only "God," as Rupert Cadell suggests at the film's climax, but also Cupid, for it is he who engineers the reunion of the former lovers Kenneth and Janet. This directorial action is particularly unsettling, from a moral perspective, since Janet unwittingly implies, in her half-hearted response to Kenneth's question about whether or not she loves David, that Brandon has performed a socially useful act in eliminating David and in subsequently "maneuvering the other two points of the triangle" into amorous proximity.

That Hitchcock has successfully complicated the moral question of murder is demonstrated by such an ironic twist as Brandon's felicitous matchmaking, but his central achievement in viewer disorientation is his simultaneous provoking of his audience to regard the crime with horror and his implicating of that audience in the performance of the crime. More than anything else, this complex process accounts for the unpleasant sensations that Rope seems to produce in many of its viewers. The process, in fact, was underway from the earliest reviews of the film, and can be measured, for instance, by the consistency with which contemporary reviewers reconstructed Brandon and Philip's act of carefully placing David's body into the antique chest. Although the chest is obviously roomy enough to contain David, the reviews almost always state that the murderers "dump" him in, or "stuff" him in, or "cram" him in. What's happening here seems clear. The writers' psychological distress over the film is being unconsciously registered by their colorful but inaccurate diction; evaluative terms that capture their moral revulsion replace descriptive language (say, "put" him in) that would bespeak a degree of objective disengagement from the act itself. The key to such an entrapment of the audience lies in so fundamental a concept as Hitchcock's theory of suspense. In an essay on Rear Window, he argues that "the delineation of suspense covers a very, very wide field. Basically it is providing the audience with information that the characters do not have." Note how this works in Rope: the audience, which has never seen David Kentley alive and is therefore not encouraged to identify with him, is propelled into the scene of his murder and so knows, from the very beginning of the film, a crucial fact that no one besides the killers themselves knows. A pervasive dramatic irony is thus insinuated into the film. Our mere knowledge establishes our complicity in the crime, and more importantly, it sets us up as an appreciative audience for the continuous flow of double entendres and "malicious" witticisms that swirl around the fact of David's death. What Hitchcock has arranged for, in short, is our laughter, and it is that which troubles us. We may be appalled at Brandon's "warped sense of humor," but since we can't help getting the morbid jokes, we are compelled to laugh at them, and our laughter implicates us in the act of murder. We are thus continuously being forced to identify with the killers, an identification that is, as Durga's says, "paradoxical and tension-charged." Brandon's wordplay, as well as the unwitting puns of the other characters, is a recurrent comic ploy throughout the film. One of his most sardonic innuendos comes when Rupert asks Brandon if he or Philip were at the club that day, and Brandon replies, "Hardly. We had our hands full, getting ready for the party." As emotionally tentative as he is about their crime, Philip can also play with it verbally. To Kenneth's pleasantry, "Been up to much lately?" Philip replies, "Nothing to speak of." And even Mr. Kentley can be heard in the background referring to Brandon: "What a charming young man. I [wish that] David saw more of him."

Once he has involved his audience in the crime, Hitchcock is then free to explore a range of provocative strategies; in effect, his power over the audience's emotions, like his control over the film text, is absolute. So he can, for instance, have Brandon taunt the film's post-World War II audience with the sarcasm of his remark that "good Americans usually die young on the battlefield, don't they?" Or consider the arrogance of Brandon's approval of Rupert: "Do you know [he says] that [Rupert] selects his books on the assumption that people not only can read but actually can think?"

Yet perhaps Hitchcock's cleverest joke on his audience involves his use of James Stewart, an actor whose persona is imbued with the values of decency and right-thinking, to play the role of Rupert Cadell. A couple of assumptions seem to be operating here. First, Stewart as an apologist for murder, and a cigarette-smoking one at that, is bound to grate on the audience's sensibilities. One biographer of Stewart suggests that the cigarette smoking is included "so that he can use a missing cigarette case as an excuse to return
after the other guests have gone.” But if that were the only motivation for Cadell’s smoking, Hitchcock could more plausibly have arranged for him to be wearing glasses, which would have fit the boorish stereotype familiar to his audience, and to have left his glasses case behind. In fact, the cigarette smoking is part of the larger agenda of disorientation, but the brilliance of Hitchcock’s recreation of the Stewart persona lies in the fact that Hitchcock exercises here. He is cunning enough to blunt the malice implied by Cadell’s theory of superior and inferior beings, not out of solicitude for his audience, but rather to set the stage for the trap that ensnares both Cadell and the audience at the climax of the film.

To advance this strategy, Hitchcock makes certain that Cadell’s bitterness is always withdrawn before it is allowed to go too far. For example, Cadell will embarrass his former pupil Kenneth but will then hasten to allay Kenneth’s discomfort. When he propounds his theory of the art of murder, his language betrays an essential lack of seriousness about his “ideas,” a lack that Mr. Kentley is quick to detect. Cadell’s entire monologue is thus reduced to a comic performance enacted for the benefit of his appreciative audience, particularly Mrs. Atwater, who laughs delightedly at his trivializing of the subject, just as his cynicism was a pose designed to entertain Brandon and the other boys at prep school. It is important for the audience to perceive that Rupert is not Brandon. Rather than constituting a moderation of Hitchcock’s strategy of audience alienation, however, this role-playing of Rupert Cadell serves instead to promote Hitchcock’s ironic purpose. For the audience can more easily be teased into identifying with this character and thus can be entrapped by that identification at the end of the film, when the deadly consequences of Cadell’s cavalier toying with ideas are fully brought home to him, and the space between his play-acting and his pupils’ acting-out of his fantasy is dramatically closed.

The mood of inevitability that prepares for the stunning disclosure—and closure—of Rope can be attributed to both the gradual unfolding of the motivation which controls behavior and to the film’s distinctive alternation of straight and masked cuts. The motivation and behavior may be thus summarized: Brandon’s desire throughout the film is to be exposed by Rupert, his yearning to be admired only superficially delayed by his protests and by the circumstances of the evening’s “fun.” Just as he is furtively moving the plot toward its completion in the fulfillment of his romantic wish, so too is he being made the ironic victim of his fatal miscalculation. Not knowing Rupert so well as he thinks he does, he assumes that Rupert will conceal the crime. Philip, for his part, has been so intense on the subject of chickens and strangling throughout the evening that he seems destined to break down and reveal the crime. That he does so just this side of high comedy at the end is dramatized by his hilarious shouting to Brandon that “[Rupert’s] caught on . . . He knows!” while Rupert is presumably listening in on the other end of the phone line, and by his incensed responses to Rupert upon his returning to the apartment. Referring to Brandon’s offer of a drink, Philip screams, “He said you could have it!” Hitchcock has slyly made his comic treatment of Philip dramatically plausible by inserting several references in the dialogue to his inebriation, which would presumably account for his exaggerated manner here. As for Rupert, his suspicions about his former pupils’ behavior and their stated motives for the party have been aroused virtually from the moment of his arrival. Indeed, Hitchcock’s camera underlines the inevitable linking of David and Rupert by taking Janet’s cue when she says to Mr. Kentley that David will “probably be here in a minute” and tracking out to reveal the food-laden chest, then panning left to capture the “star entrance” of Rupert Cadell. Rupert is thus seduced visually not simply to the eventual revelation of the murder but to the very fact of the crime.

The alternating rhythm of straight and masked cuts contributes decisively to Hitchcock’s strategy of audience entrapment in Rope. The editorial transitions in the film clearly come at dramatically appropriate moments, for of the eleven continuous sequences, only two are extended to the ten-minute limit. Indeed, some takes are as “short” as four or five minutes, with most falling within the seven- to eight-minute range. The basic principle governing both the timing and the mode of the cuts is this: since an audience will quite naturally identify with the character or characters in jeopardy of exposure or of death, Hitchcock has arranged his cuts in a sequence that unites his audience first to the killers and finally to Rupert, who arguably is the “real” killer in the murder plot. Although there is clear progression, it is from one form of discomfort to another—from one troubling identification figure to another—so in a sense the audience, never released from the cycle of guilt, gets nowhere in the course of the plot’s unfolding.

The spiral is initiated by that first cut, following the credits, that
propels the viewer, startlingly, into the act of murder. Poised between shock at the horror of the moment and a paradoxical kinship with the killers, one is set up for the dramatic irony that attends the second cut, masked by Brandon's dark-blue suit. In the moment immediately preceding this cut, the audience has been shown the telltale rope, still unnoticed by the murderers. Anxiety is thus aroused, for one's natural instinct is to fear the exposure that the rope signifies. The masked cut then sustains the mood of suspense predicated on the audience's identification with Brandon and Philip. Indeed, throughout the film Philip's unintentionally comic expressions of nervousness can be viewed as Hitchcock's parody of the audience's own fear of disclosure. The third cut follows Brandon's ironic remark to Kenneth that he has "the oddest feeling anyway that your chances with the young lady are much better than you think," and it takes the audience from Kenneth to Janet emerging from the intersecting backs of Brandon and Philip. Brandon's sinister joke is designed to startle the viewer, who has already been made to feel involved in his crime, so the effect of the abrupt cut here is to reintroduce a feeling of guilt over the involvement, as well as to reflect the social awkwardness that Kenneth is feeling just then and that Janet is about to feel.

Hitchcock, in other words, is simultaneously linking and distancing his audience and his murderers. The following cut, a masked one, is placed in a verbal context parallel to the third—Brandon has just joked about David—but this time the masking of the cut both sustains one's shock at the joke and encourages a feeling of complicity about its moral implications. In the light of this complacency, the abruptness of cut number 5, which transports the viewer to an intrigued Rupert when Philip exclaims that Brandon's chicken-strangling story is "a lie," serves to reinvoke the audience's sense of complicity in the crime, for the transition emphasizes Rupert's deeper perception of disorder and thus prompts the disturbing feeling that Philip is about to reveal that disorder. The sixth cut, a masked one, is a repetition of cut number 4. Sustaining the disquieting possibility that Rupert is about to find "us" out, it also, paradoxically, placates our guilty conscience.

The final important shift in audience involvement comes at the ninth cut, for it is here that Hitchcock's camera repositions from a close-up of Brandon's jacket pocket (his hand on the gun inside) to a medium close-up of Rupert as he considers where he would put

David's corpse. By panning toward and then away from the chest at this point in Rupert's description, Hitchcock's camera has just teasingly implied that Cadell will say "in the chest." So the dramatic effect of the cut is to startle the audience, which assumes that the completion of Rupert's imaginary murder narrative will incite Brandon to shoot him. Brandon has already attempted to pacify Philip by saying that Rupert will be gotten out of the apartment in five minutes, "one way or the other."

Subtly but decisively, I think, the audience is made to fear for Rupert's life here, and, by inviting identification with Rupert, Hitchcock has contrived his most diabolical joke on the audience. First, he places the audience and Rupert in analogous positions of physical jeopardy by having the gun point directly at the camera as Rupert is struggling with Philip. Then, in the film's final cut—the one which is masked by the top of the chest—he tilts his camera up to a close-up of Rupert's pained expression as he discloses the body of David. No moment in the film more clearly invites the audience's compassion for Rupert's tragic insight, but the supreme irony of this sympathy resides in the parallel between the audience's identification with Rupert and its own implication in his crime. For he is irrevocably, though indirectly, guilty of David's murder, and so his shallow speech of self-justification at the end goes beyond simple hypocrisy or obtuseness and enters a transcendent realm of the absurd. To laugh at Rupert's ludicrous rationalizing is, for the audience, to laugh at itself. And to observe Rupert as he somberly assumes his attentive position in the chair next to David's chest, facing the literal murderers with his back to the camera and the audience, as if he were a mere spectator of this tragedy, is to taste the sour cream of Hitchcock's cosmic jest.

This Hitchcockian style of humor may help to explain why viewers often find Rope such a disquieting film. But one can also find consolation—and even pleasure—in being manipulated by such a diabolical genius as Hitchcock. Consider, for instance, what he can do with a single candle in a candelabrum. Brandon is preparing his dining-room table for the evening's "fun" when the camera captures a single crooked candlestick. It can mean nothing; it can reveal nothing. And yet, out of a natural instinct for neatness and order, we want that candlestick straight. And then we realize that our wish masks a hidden, impure desire: we want the crime kept a secret; we want the killers to get away with it. Brandon casually straightens the candle, we breathe a
sigh of relief, and so we are trapped. In Rope, as in the other masterpieces of his American period, Hitchcock played his audience like a “giant organ,” making it helpless and therefore utterly responsive in the hands of this devilish trickster who was intent on pulling out all the stops.

Notes

7. Truffaut, 184.
10. Alfred Hitchcock, “Rear Window,” in Focus on Hitchcock, 41.
15. Truffaut, 183.
17. Truffaut, 184.