Of all Hitchcock's American films, the one that has benefited the most from the shifting tides of theory is *Rope* (1948). Upon its rerelease in the mid-1980s, *Rope* emerged from decades of critical and popular obscurity into the powerful embrace of "high theory" exemplified by the endless play of language à la Derrida in Thomas Hemmeter's "Twisted Writing" and the bracing heights of "queer theory" in D. A. Miller's "Anal Rope."

While I admire Miller's essay as much for its elegance and logic as for its daring, several of his key points turn on a reading of the film's climactic image that needs to be reopened. Rupert Cadell (James Stewart), former housemaster to roommates Brandon (John Dall) and Philip (Farley Granger), has finally decided to resolve his suspicions and open the chest around which Brandon and Philip have staged their party and in which they've placed the body of their former schoolmate and victim, David Kentley. As Rupert flings open the lid, the back of the lid blacks out the image, disguising a cut. Of all the "hidden" cuts in the film, Miller argues that only this one "is 'completely successful' in feigning a continuity from which nothing can appear to have been omitted." However, the cut, it seems to me, does not work, if by "working" one means it erases our awareness of a cut. As the camera tilts up from blackness to reveal Cadell's face, he is suddenly much closer than we'd expected. The camera has in fact moved during the cut, producing the effect of a jump cut.

Miller argues that we are led to expect a point-of-view shot (Rupert's view of the body), but there is no need to see what's in the chest—we already know. The suspense throughout the film has been structured around the question "When
will Rupert look in the chest?" When he does, the point is not what he sees but how he looks seeing it. What we finally see in the film's dramatic, penultimate cut, what the whole film, I shall argue, has been leading up to, is a close-up of Jimmy Stewart.

The importance of stars in Hitchcock's American films can hardly be overestimated. Hitchcock's work throughout the 1940s and 1950s is deeply embedded in the star system. In *Rope*, as in their collaborations in the 1950s, it is Stewart who serves as Hitchcock's icon of American manhood. In this essay I would like to examine how Stewart's first film with Hitchcock highlights one of the recurrent themes of Stewart's star image: the exploration of an American masculine subjectivity threatened at all times by a frequently undefined but inescapable sense of shame. While key elements of Stewart's persona (a propensity for physical and spiritual suffering, lingering fears of inadequacy) were established in the 1930s, particularly in his work with Capra, these would intensify and deepen in his postwar work with Hitchcock and Anthony Mann. The importance of the war in terms of Stewart's performances in this period and the public's perception of Stewart's own war record add new dimensions to the already troubled Stewart persona, dimensions *Rope* addresses in unsettling ways. In order to see what issues are raised by Stewart's presence in *Rope* (and what that presence precludes), it will be necessary first to answer the questions, "Who is James Stewart? and what is he doing in *Rope*?"

It is clear that Hitchcock's need for a "James Stewart" type stems from the persistence of unresolved issues in Hitchcock's work at this time. The film *Rope* most resembles and to which it is most often compared is *Lifeboat* (1944). Companion pieces of formal experimentation, both films are predominantly films of ideas where romance is subordinated to talk and overt action precluded by the physically restricted settings. For both, the "excesses" of technical experiment have been seen as an attempt to make up for narrative/cinematic problems, while distracting the audience from problematic thematic issues.

Both *Rope* and *Lifeboat* begin with sudden violence (the murder of David, the sinking of the ship). A group of "types" comes together in a confined space. In *Lifeboat* they are (literally) without direction, in *Rope* they don't realize they need one. In neither film do they properly recognize the evildoer(s) in their midst. But *Rope* supplies what *Lifeboat* lacks, and we've almost forgotten it when James Stewart is casually discovered "already there" in a decidedly antistar entrance. A "natural" leader, "superior" to the others, the one who watches and who catches every slip, Rupert's late entrance puts him in the position of *Lifeboat's* Willy (the U-boat commander played by Walter Slezak). As with Willy, the film revolves around Rupert from the moment he enters. Rupert, like Willy, is the one we and the other characters watch the most closely. You have to watch Rupert because, like Willy, much of the time "you cannot really be sure whether Rupert is essentially good or essentially evil." Rupert serves simultaneously as the text's original fascist and its ultimate American, the charmingly glib nihilist who asserts that "murder is a privilege for the few" and the righteous defender of the American way ("Did you think you were God, Brandon?"). In *Lifeboat* the bestiality of those who kill the beast is something neither the characters nor the text has the strength to face. Through Stewart, Hitchcock can consolidate the contradictions of *Rope* within a star persona that is one of the most sympathetic, troubled, disturbing, and American in Hollywood at this time. The payoff to the prolonged suspense in *Rope* is what *Lifeboat* shirks, a moment of revelation condensed into a close-up of a star, the dawning self-awareness of a specifically American shame: Jimmy Stewart with blood on his hands.

Who Is James Stewart?

*Rope* is one of the transitional films that form part of the long postwar phase of Stewart's career, when he spent five years trying to reestablish his prewar popularity. This crucial transitional period saw Stewart make a decisive shift from comedy to drama. In his first flush of success between 1936 and 1940, most of
his films were comedies, with a few “women’s films” thrown in. By the time he regained his stride after the war with the first Mann western (Winchester 73 in 1950) until The Man Who Shot Liberty VaIance in 1962, the dramas vastly outnumbered the comedies. In the transition period from 1946 to 1950, the films are evenly split: six comedies, six dramas. Many of these either were only moderately successful at the box office or were outright flops. All of them show Stewart quite consciously trying to reestablish his prewar popularity.

Offhand, James Stewart seems the most transparent of American actors. According to Andrew Britton, “as far as James Stewart is concerned—he is, as we all know, an embodiment of homely, middle-American integrity and moral earnestness.” James Naremore, in his study of acting, lists among Stewart’s attributes “a lanky, awkward diffidence suggestive of Lincolnesque virtue; a drawling wit accompanied by a wise glint in the eye; a clod-kicking shyness and innocence concealing ‘natural’ intelligence and passionate idealism.” Stewart’s image had been formed through his work with directors specializing in comedy, like W.S. Van Dyke, George Stevens, Ernst Lubitsch, and most of all Frank Capra. Frank Capra in particular stresses the sense that with Stewart’s performances, “you were looking at the man, not an actor. You could see this man’s soul.”

But what Capra prized most about Stewart was his intelligence. “When you’re dealing in the world of ideas and you want your character to be on a higher intellectual plane . . . you turn to persons like Jimmy Stewart because he has a look of the intellectual about him.”

According to the description of Rupert in the play, “he has a very disarming habit, every now and again, of retrieving the whole thing with an extraordinarily frank, open and genial smile.” In his performance, Stewart prefers a suppressed smile and a sparkle in his eyes directed toward the recipient, a reaction that creates a “shared moment.” For instance, when he kids Mrs. Wilson about the paté, he tells her, “It was the ‘something something.’ Or was it just ‘something.’” On the last line he shares a look with Janet as his smile widens, giving away the joke. Where the popular image of Jimmy Stewart stresses an unaffected spontaneity and humility, the awareness of his own performance that characterizes Rupert in these comic moments provides a glimpse of Stewart’s “actorliness,” a display of his pleasure in performance as such.

Often the gentle tone of mockery Rupert uses with the women (signified by a soft voice, even muring) is replaced by a harder, biting style when he puts someone on the spot. Because Rupert’s “faintly mocking, cynical air” vacillates between spoofing and embarrassing directness, all the characters are kept on their toes and at a distance. Acerbic wit in 1940s Hollywood is often a sign of a desexualized or sexually subversive character. Clifton Webb’s Waldo Lydecker in Laura (1944) is a classic example; George Sanders’s Addison DeWitt in All About Eve (1950) is another. (As the gay subtext associated with these characters suggests, there are more complex sexual issues accumulating around Rupert that shall be discussed later.) Consequently, there is never a hint at a possible romantic interest between Rupert and Janet (this is probably the first time a younger leading man [Kenneth] was brought in to supply the “love interest” in a Stewart film). Rupert’s teasing that he might marry the fastidiously fussy Mrs. Wilson signals his lack of seriousness.

Discussing Stewart’s performance in 1954’s Rear Window, Naremore discounts “Hitchcock’s simplistic account of the Kuleshov effect or his glib descriptions of how the ‘best’ acting in movies is achieved” (by “doing nothing extremely well”). Naremore’s comments on Rear Window apply equally to Rope. “As much a tour de force for the star as for the director,” each film “heighten[s] the cleverness of Stewart’s performance by severely constraining him.”

Stewart’s acting is “the type most often associated with the medium: concentrated on the face and upper body, it emphasizes flesh tones, expressions in the eyes, and the grain of a voice.” If the impression of intelligence is created between the dialogue and the glint in his eyes, emotional and physical vulnerability are located in Stewart’s voice, a smooth baritone alternately cracking, shaky, hoarse, or hesitant with fear. Stewart’s control of his voice, its variations in intensity, volume, and color, not only adds variety to line readings but through the grain of the voice calls attention to his body, a body upon which a struggle between traditional definitions of feminine and masculine is being waged.

Sexuality

For Richard Dyer, the function of the star-as-social-phenomenon is to cover over the impossibility of constructing and maintaining a clear-cut subject position.
How they [do this] may be predominantly in terms of reaffirming the reality of people as individuals or subjects over against ideology and history, or else in terms of exposing precisely the uncertainty and anxiety concerning the definition of what a person is.17

Substitute “man” for “person” and you have James Stewart. The display of anxiety and uncertainty that shoots through Stewart's career like electricity through a wire converges on masculinity and heterosexuality.

As a leading man in the 1930s, Stewart's loose, unhurried sexiness ideally suited the romantic roles in screwball comedies such as You Can't Take It with You (1938) and Vivacious Lady (1938). A lanky 6'4", Stewart, who weighed only 130 pounds when he went into the army in 1940, carried clothes well without having the fashion status of Gary Cooper or the muscular build of Cary Grant. Throughout his career Stewart's long hair is almost always worn straight back without a part, a stray lock falling into his eyes at moments of stress. Although seldom "packaged" as a model of masculine beauty, Stewart is very good-looking. Naremore singles out his "unusually beautiful and expressive eyes." He also has strikingly nice hands, which he uses to good effect in film after film. (As early as After the Thin Man in 1936 he can be found stealing a scene by flexing his long, well-shaped fingers against the black velvet sleeve of a woman he's comforting for having left him.) He often plays scenes in full profile rather than three-quarter shots, a position that makes the most of his relaxed posture and, in close-up, his sensual lower lip and long lashes.

Once his persona crystallized in the late 1930s, the particular kind of sexiness enacted by Stewart could be put into play for specific ideological functions. Stewart's style of masculinity, attractive to women because of its friendly interest, free of pressure or threat and demonstrated by a kind of unhurried ease with his body, complemented the assertive angularity of actresses who challenged limiting definitions of femininity. In discussing the careers of Katharine Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich, Andrew Britton attributes each actress's newfound popularity to the switch to comedy. What he fails to note is the crucial presence of Stewart. In Destry Rides Again (1939), Stewart plays a character whose strength lies in the apparent rejection of any of the affectations of traditional masculinity. In The Philadelphia Story (1940), his status as an agent of patriarchy selling domesticity door to door ("you have hearth fires banked within you") stands out by contrast to Cary Grant's openly vicious attacks on Hepburn's character's independence.19

There is a ten-year gap between the one-night stand with Stewart that sends Hepburn back to Grant and matrimony and the characters Stewart played in his first real postwar hits: the completely unsexed Elwood P. Dowd of Harvey (Stewart's successful attempt to revive his career with an adaptation of a Broadway hit) and the obsessive neurotic fratricide in Winchester 73 (both 1950). Harvey is the last of Stewart's screwball comedies, Winchester 73 the first western. The change in genre, with its possibilities of reinvention, brings with it a distinct change in Stewart's portrayal of heterosexuality. As is typical in the western, male-male relationships predominate. In The Far Country (1955), for example, Walter Brennan plays Stewart's sidekick, who uproots himself to follow Stewart around the frontier and plans to live with him for the rest of his life in a small house on a ranch in Utah. It is Brennan's death that shatters Stewart's illusions of self-containment and makes him recognize his need for other people. When it comes to women, a skittish negotiation with bad girl Ruth Roman is more his speed than the devotion of French tomboy Corinne Calvet.

Not all the changes in Stewart's troubled depiction of heterosexuality are due to genre. After the war, many of his films reveal a crisis centered on romance. His relationships are most painful when they are most sexual, the romantic scenes riddled with what a contemporary account termed a "tense urgency" and "romantic anguish."20 When he succumbs to the perfume of Donna Reed's freshly washed hair in the 1946 It's a Wonderful Life, it is staged like a breakdown. The violence of his resistance to marriage and small-town business opportunities ("I don't want any plastics, I don't want any ground floor, and I don't want to get married—ever—to anyone") as he shakes her, his voice breaking, tears in his eyes (what Silverman calls "his protest against the imperatives of capital and the family"),21 is remarkable primarily because we are seeing a man being torn apart. Heterosexual attraction as the thing that prevents him from realizing his ambitions appears again in Magic Town (1947), where he plays a Gallup-type poll-taker who thinks he has found the perfect microcosm of American values.22 Love for the local newspaper editor (Jane Wyman) again threatens to tear him in two, and when he finally kisses her, the expression on his face can best be described as one of exquisite pain. In the remarkable western The Naked Spur (1953), Stewart is literally reduced to tears every time he grabs Janet Leigh, the very act of acknowledging desire forcing him to confront a crisis of masculine identity that is almost unbearable. Little wonder that in the sweetly gentle Harvey, Stewart has given up women entirely and thrown in his lot with a six-foot-tall invisible male rabbit. It was love at first sight.

The psychic cost of postwar heterosexual desire, the searing pain of it in Stewart's films, cannot be attributed to the usual scapegoat, the newly independent postwar woman. Stewart's prewar films had proved he was especially adept at partnering challenging women. The problem was masculinity itself. According to Britton, "The meaning of the Stewart persona might be said to be—if you are the perfect, middle-class, heterosexual American male you go mad."23 Britton maintains that a "significant amnesia" is necessary for fans devoted to an untroubled image of Jimmy Stewart for his performances, for Mann and Hitchcock, as obsessive neurotics and 'action-heroes' trembling on the brink of psychosis, simply do not exist.24 I would counter that what makes the positive qualities of Stewart so precious (precious in the sense of something one is loathe
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to give up or part with) are their hard-won status. Stewart's gentleness, integrity, stability, and happiness are qualities shown to be under enormous threat from both inside and out.

Jimmy Stewart Is Being Beaten

Stewart's "crisis of masculinity" is made visible most prominently through the spectacle of his suffering. Film after film requires Stewart to "exhibit unusual degrees of neurotic suffering, moral anguish, and physical pain."

In discussing the suicidal hero of It's a Wonderful Life, played by Jimmy Stewart, Kaja Silverman argues that George Bailey is defined by a series of injuries or castrations, "splitting" from himself, "upon which his subjectivity is shown to depend." Masculinity (as a form of subjectivity built on the splitting of the subject in accession to language, submission to the law of the father, and the necessary cutting off of symbolic castration) is built upon a lie: "Our dominant fiction calls upon the male subject to see himself, and the female subject to recognize and desire him, only through the mediation of images of unimpaired masculinity." Bailey is a striking demonstration of the way the traditional male subject "not only accepts these 'wounds' as the necessary condition of cultural identity, but [is taught to take] pleasure in the pain they induce in him."

For Silverman (who does not discuss Stewart-as-star or his performance), the unending series of humiliations, losses, and sufferings Bailey goes through are remarkable because "so open a display of wounds would normally be totally incompatible with an affirmation of the dominant fiction and its phallic representations." However, this "display of wounds" is in fact typical of Stewart throughout his career. Not only is he emotionally vulnerable (Naremore calls him "the most intensely emotional leading man to emerge from the studio system"), but he frequently carries physical wounds as a signifier of emotional distress. He bears prominent leg wounds: in Magic Town a war buddy identifies Stewart by pulling up his trouser leg to find the large scar he got in the war; in The Stratton Story he's shot in the leg, and the wound plagues him throughout the film. He grows delirious from the pain, falls off his horse, and cannot climb back up a hill. In Rope, Rupert has a limp from another war wound, and in Rear Window, of course, Stewart spends the film in a full leg cast (by the end he has two). Even more disturbing is the damage done to his hands, as I discuss below.

Stewart's performances are frequently built around the display of these wounds, often dwelling on the scenes in which they're inflicted to such an extent that the issue of masochism becomes unavoidable. Silverman discusses the relationship between masochism and a conflicted or subversive masculinity, pointing out that for Theodor Reik in Masochism in Sex and Society, "what is . . . rendered visible" in masochism "is the subject's 'suffering, 'discomfort,' 'humiliation,' and 'disgrace' rather than its grandeur or its triumph." Stewart's performances epitomize the actory display of these traits. Think of the filibuster scene in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, where the naive idealistic junior senator, falsely accused and in disgrace, argues himself hoarse defending "lost causes" until he collapses. Or the inquest scene in Vertigo (1958), where there is an almost sadistic glee in the public humiliation of Stewart's traumatized, disgraced Scottie as the coroner recites with great relish Scottie's failures, weaknesses, and overwhelming inadequacy.

The "neurotic suffering" and spiritual agony of these performances is joined by physical pain in such Mann films as The Naked Spur, Bend of the River and—the most extreme example—The Man from Laramie (1955). In the latter, he is backed toward the camera, a small figure surrounded by men on horseback, lassoed, and dragged through a fire (a stunt Stewart not only performed but suggested). In another scene he is ambushed by Dave, the arrogant rancher's son. In the shootout preceding Stewart's capture, a ricochet wounds Dave in the hand. Dave has two of his men hold Stewart so he can take his revenge. "You're not gonna kill him?" one asks. Stewart's character shows extreme fear, twice kicking out the full length of his legs trying to keep Dave away. As the two men hold Stewart by the throat, in a close-up they take the glove off his shaking hand. Dave puts the barrel of the gun directly against Stewart's palm. The camera pans quickly to Stewart when we hear the shot. In the Cinemascope close-up, Stewart's head rolls back, his eyes screwed up tight, the lack of music emphasizing the strangled animal-like cry deep in his throat. After a long moment of suffering, he opens his eyes, looks up at Dave and rasps, "Why you scum?"

In these scenes of violation, Stewart's expression classically "alternates between grotesquely distorted pain and a soft, almost erotic yielding." The staging of scenes of forcible restraint, suspense, and prolonged suffering whose enactment is itself the peak of "masochistic ecstasy" make Stewart's "wounding" "a loss which the film overtly thematicizes both as a castration and an erotic event."

The eroticization of Stewart's "weakness" results from depicting it as feminine. In his "feminine" vein, he breaks down in tears (It's a Wonderful Life, Naked Spur, and others too numerous to mention), threatens to lose consciousness as his body falls limp after a beating (Winchester 73, Bend of the River, Man from Laramie), or faints outright (Made for Each Other, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington). The 1950s westerns attempt to recuperate this weakness for masculinity through violent outbursts and revenge narratives. The Far Country, for instance, is described as the story of "a peaceful cowpoke who gets trampled on at every turn until he just explodes." The fervent hope that castration isn't permanent, that lost manhood can be regained, is literalized in Winchester 73, once humorously described as "man gets gun, man loses gun, man gets gun."
It is important to note that these attempts to restore Stewart's "manhood" through a climactic act of violence as often as not fail to eradicate the disturbing effects of the scenes of suffering. In 

The first thing one notices in reading the play is how the structure has been tightened up for the film. In the film, except for victim David Kentley's father and widowed aunt, none of the guests knows or is associated with the victim. In fact, we never see David. In the film, of course, his murder is the film's first shocking cut. In the Cronyn/Laurents adaptation, all of the guests are closely connected to David. Janet is David's fiancée and has recently broken up with Kenneth, her former fiancée and David's best friend. This increases every character's stake in the events of the drama. Simple techniques for generating suspense have also been added to the film, most notably when we watch Mrs. Wilson clearing the chest after supper as party chitchat goes on just offscreen.

There are also changes in slang, language, and style, and these are not incidental. What dates the play is its arch British drawing room quality. For instance, there is a grab bag of ethnic stereotypes, including a "comic' French valet (in place of the faithful Mrs. Wilson), and Philip's character (called Granillo or Granno in the play) becomes a "rather ornately dressed" "Spaniard."

But the most striking difference between play and screen can be seen in the Anglicized Rupert.

He is of medium height and about twenty-nine. He is a little foppish in dress and appearance, and this impression is increased by the very exquisite walking-stick which he carries indoors as well as out. He is lame in the right leg. He is enormously affected in speech and carriage. He brings his words out not only as though he is infinitely weary of all things... His affectation almost verges on effeminacy, and can be very irritating. (31)

A character straight out of Oscar Wilde, Rupert's "enormously affected" worldlessness, especially when combined with the other traits, has defined "foppishness" since the Restoration. (At one point he opines, "Oh, dear Heaven! What unmentionable fatigue" [75]). Miller also invokes Wilde when discussing whether or not it can be "proved" that Brandon and Philip in the film are homosexual. If the film depends exclusively on connotation to establish homosexuality (what can be inferred from things like "standing too close," the perception of affectation, manner), then "one straightforward thematic consequence" of connotation's tendency to recruit every signifier of the text... would be the implicit homosexualization.

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American Shame

Patrick Hamilton's play Rope was first produced in England in March 1929 and played London's West End that April. In the introduction to the published version, Hamilton goes out of his way to disavow any connection to the Leopold and Loeb case in America, which the play was widely thought to parallel. Hume Cronyn worked on a treatment of the play with Hitchcock in 1947; Arthur Laurents is credited with the screenplay.

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of almost all the other male characters," including "the bachelor pedagogue Rupert himself."66

In Hamilton's play, Rupert's sexuality is hardly a question, at every point it is as flagrantly closeted as Brandon's. In place of the older philosopher/publisher/schoolmaster of the film, the play gives us a young poet, forever marked by the trauma of the first World War à la Siegfried Sassoon, A. E. Houseman, Wilfred Owen, and Rupert Brooke (from whom the character probably got his name). Rupert is even recognized by Sir Kentley: "Are you the great Cadell, then?... Oh—I've read your poems" (33). (In the film, Brandon and Philip are the "artistic" ones; Mr. Kentley recognizes Rupert through his relationship with his son.)

The play repeatedly raises issues of manhood and masculine identity, though they are almost always clouded by double meanings or outright ambiguity. The privileged signifier of double meaning in the play is precisely the repeated use of the term "queer." As with all signifiers of the closet, it can be read as "innocent," unintended, as if the viewer is reading "too much" into it. Structurally, the term is privileged by its exclusivity; Brandon, Granillo/Philip, and Rupert say it only to each other and only when they are alone. When Rupert first uses the freighted term, in fact, it collapses murder and homosexuality and brings down the first act curtain.

Rupert: I have just thought of something rather queer.
Brandon: Something queer. What's that?
Rupert: All this talk about rotting bones in chests... (47-48, ellipsis in original)

Alone with Brandon at the beginning of act II, Rupert reminds him of his tendency "as an infant" to tell stories about hidden corpses. Brandon again presses for definition.

Brandon: What about it, though?
Rupert (lightly): Oh, nothing. Just queer, that's all. (49)

Brandon insists a second time on Rupert's saying the unsayable, but Rupert sidesteps him with a tautology, as if the word itself says everything without ever being defined.67

Brandon (pouring out whisky. Quietly): How queer—exactly?
Rupert: Oh, just queer. (50)

Earlier Rupert had added, "You were a morbid child."

"Queer" also defines the relationship between Brandon and Granillo, especially its problems. When Rupert walks in on a fight between them, Brandon says, "Rupert. This is nothing to do with you. Granno and I have a certain trouble between us which concerns no one else" (81). Earlier he had confronted Rupert, "You didn't know that Granno and I behaved like that, did you, Rupert?" Rupert notes that their argument was "a queer thing to quarrel about," and Brandon defiantly responds: "Yes. But we do quarrel about queer things nowadays, don't we, Granno?" (56).

When Brandon is not being put on the spot, attention turns to Rupert himself. After Rupert has left, Granillo/Philp says he thought Rupert had "got on to it." Brandon muses wistfully, "I sometimes rather wish he had. God. Rupert. Queer lad. I wonder... I wonder if he had been with us he wouldn't have got drunk" (73). The suggestion that his excessive drinking is a sign of repression (or self-hatred) is not foreign to Rupert's self-assessment. Having already had four drinks by the time he arrived and several more in the course of acts I and II, he returns for another at the beginning of act III. One of the first things he says is "Must we have all this light?... I am a creature of half-lights" (75-76). When Brandon tries to get him to leave, he responds with the evanescence of things left undefined: "Surely you're not going to spoil my mood?" (78). Brandon specifies, "You're in a queer mood, to-night, Rupert, too" (linking them all with "too"). But Rupert quickly denies it: "No—not a queer mood. An inspired mood, rather" (79), at which he pins the evidence of their guilt (a music-hall ticket) on his lapel, at a stroke disassociating himself from them. "Not a queer mood."

Although all these lines have been eliminated or changed in the film, their trace remains. For instance, in the play when Rupert has to acknowledge his role in Brandon's crime, he says, "This is a very queer, dark and incomprehensible universe, and I understand it very little" (88). In the film the world is still "dark and incomprehensible," if not quite so queer—or at least more securely closeted. The film substitutes code words for the original code and mise-en-scene for the unspeakable.

Rope can easily be seen as a saga of the closet where action equals identity (where what you do in private becomes who you "are") and where the evidence of what Brandon and Philip have done is smack in the middle of the room for all to see—but no one thinks to look. The chest literalizes the closet, a signifier of hiddenness bearing witness to what is inside, again calling to mind Miller on connotation and Sedgwick's "epistomology of the closet" and questions of how we think we "know" what we can never "see."68

If we take into account Miller's assertion that "a-man-standing-too-close-to-another" acts as one of the text's signifiers of "gay sex," then it is notable that Brandon often stands very close to Rupert, who makes no attempt to move. (Look at Stewart's casual body language when he points out that there is a gun in Brandon's pocket.) When Brandon asks Rupert how he would have gotten rid of David "if you were I," Brandon is so close to Rupert it is impossible to tell whether they're touching or not. When Rupert, with the fervor of a sinner saving his soul, refuses to be part of Brandon and Philip's "we" ("we've always said, you and I"), it isn't their gay identity that unhinges him. That certainly predated the murder.
Rupert objects to Brandon as a killer, his is repugnance located in the recognition of his own guilt.

War Wounds: James Stewart in Rope
Shame is a painful feeling caused by the consciousness or exposure of unworthy or indecent conduct... It is similar to guilt.

James Stewart would never play a killer.
—Alfred Hitchcock, as recalled by François Truffaut

"Good Americans usually die young on the battlefield, don't they?" Brandon asks disingenuously, smirking at the absurdity of David's recent death. Guaranteed to irk patriotic postwar audiences, this question positions the film in a specifically postwar context, raising several thorny issues that coalesce in the character of Rupert and the figure of James Stewart.

In Lifeboat, Hitchcock refuses to make the distinction between war and murder. The effect is a political paralysis where the characters and the plot are wracked with contradictions that cannot be resolved, only restated in an even starker form. In the film's last scene, when a second German sailor pulls himself on board, the others instantly suggest killing him and just as quickly react with disbelieving horror when he asks "Aren't you going to kill me?" ("What are you going to do with people like that," asks one of the Americans, eager to kill him only seconds before.) The only positions available when the film ends are a smug self-righteousness or a self-serving amnesia, breathtaking in the speed with which it represses the characters' awareness of the base acts of which they are capable.

In Rope, it is in trying to maintain the distinction between war and murder that the screenwriters most fundamentally alter Rupert's character. Rupert is the first character in Hamilton's play to publicly confess to murder. He tells the other guests, "It would be positively disingenuous to say that I don't approve of murder. Furthermore, I have already committed murder myself" (64). He points out that when one person kills another,

they call that murder. But when the entire youth and manhood of a whole nation rises up to slaughter the entire youth and manhood of another... then society condones and applauds the outrage, and calls it war. How, then, can I say that I disapprove of murder, seeing that I have, in the last Great War, acted on these assumptions myself?

When Janet insists he "must have some moral standards," he retorts, "Must I?" Janet: Don't be absurd. You wouldn't hurt a fly.
Rupert: Wouldn't I? I've hurt thousands in my time. (65)

The play's disillusionment with war and heroism is a typical product of Hitchcock's generation in the aftermath of the First World War. (We can see Hitchcock's personal inability to contribute wholeheartedly to the war effort reflected in the failed propaganda of a film like Lifeboat and in the two unreleased shorts he made in 1944, Bon Voyage and Adventure Malgache.) However, such a stance is not only unlikely in 1948 but must be actively censored and/or repressed, especially in relation to Stewart.

In the film Rupert is the soldier who stands in opposition to Brandon and Philip, his status reenforced by the well-publicized biography of World War II pilot James Stewart. Yet Stewart's war work is as repressed as it is celebrated. He is often called a war hero (the 1946 Newsweek article cites his rank as "a full colonel with the DFC and cluster, the Croix de Guerre with palm, and seven battle stars"), but no one says what particular missions he flew or what the medals were for.

One of the most popular ways of reading Stewart's refusal to talk about his experiences as wing commander for a bomber squadron was to see it as "characteristic" modesty. According to Newsweek, Stewart had a clause in his contract specifying that he would not act in war films. Newsweek finds it necessary to explain this refusal, using it to reiterate his humility and heroism:

[It] might have been easier if Stewart had made his return to civilian life in a war film, where he wouldn't have been acting so much as remembering. But he insisted that his contract specify no war roles, for two excellent reasons: He logged 2,000 hours flying B-24s overseas and had enough war to last him a lifetime, and he wants to avoid even the slightest suspicion that he is attempting to cash in on his war record. He just wants to forget the whole thing and be an actor.

Frank Capra tells another story about Stewart's desire to "forget the whole thing and just be an actor." During the filming of It's a Wonderful Life,

Capra sensed that Stewart still had doubts about whether acting was an important enough profession for someone who had experienced what he had in the war, so the director asked the old pro, Lionel Barrymore, to give the star a pep talk. When Stewart told Barrymore he didn't think acting was "decent," Barrymore asked him "if he thought it was more 'decent' to drop bombs on people than to bring rays of sunshine into their lives with his acting talent." Stewart told [Capra] that Lionel's barbs had knocked him flat on his ass, and that now acting was going to be his life's work.

Whether Stewart's postwar films, with their tormented, neurotic, suicidal heroes, bring "rays of sunshine" into people's lives is a moot point. After years of...
newsreel and fictional footage of the Blitz, focusing on the consequences of aerial bombardment for the people on the ground, it was a public relations challenge to make Allied bomber pilots heroes, especially if their targets were not exclusively military. For instance, it isn't likely that the trench warfare of World War I would have enabled Hamilton's Rupert to have "hurt thousands" in his time, but given the military "improvements" made in the following twenty years, the situation of a bomber pilot like Stewart was a different matter. As Barrymore's comment makes clear, there was a lingering ambivalence about the massive destruction it had taken to win the war. However, there was (and remains) a great fear that questioning the morality of war itself is tantamount to attacking veterans—despite the fact that this ambivalence (as Stewart's reaction shows) was perhaps most keenly felt by the veterans themselves. As a combat veteran Stewart was trapped by a contradiction which, in the wake of the officially sanctioned postwar euphoria, produced psychological turmoil veterans were left to negotiate alone. Consequently, nearly all of Stewart's postwar roles are haunted by an underright of confusion, guilt, and shame that is historically specific but can never be articulated.

Despite Stewart's reticence, his war experience was immediately recognized as having left a visible trace. If Stewart was never wounded in the war, its effects were nevertheless written on his body. "The boyishness Stewart projected as a personality before the war, Newsweek notes, has 'vanished with his return from the B-24s, which left him with a few unboycast gray hairs'" (emphasized in Hitchcock's film). Contemporary critics like Bosley Crowther thought they could see more substantial changes in Stewart: "He has grown in spiritual stature as well as in talent during the years he was in the war." This urge to read physical changes in a positive light is carried over in the film when Mrs. Wilson tells us "Mr. Cadell got a bad leg in the war for his courage," putting a positive "masculine" reading on what might otherwise be seen as a sign of castration or impotence.

In Rope, Hitchcock leans on James Stewart to do what stars do, to bring about what Dyer calls a 'magic' reconciliation of apparently incompatible terms. This is done by "throwing [political issues] onto the realm of personal experience and feelings." Stars depoliticize "consciousness by individualizing it, rendering the social personal," and converting "the opinion expressed in the film to an expression of [their] being." Stewart's performance of Rupert's final speech substitutes emotion for analysis, selling access to the star, who through bravura acting exposes his deepest guilt, showing us his raw nerves, his desperate need to believe, in exchange for our not pressing actor or character with "cold hard logic."

After Rupert opens the chest, we are treated to a climactic outburst of the kind we have come to expect in a James Stewart movie. As early as After the Thin Man in 1936 (where he broke down and confessed to murder), key Stewart films climax with an emotional speech that allows the actor to pull out all the stops. The same structure recurs in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939), Naked Spur (1953), and Vertigo (1957). In the play Rupert's denunciation scene was a privileged mo-

American Shame
easily ascertainable to be unusually fine in other characteristics, is probably 'queer' in sex tendency.\textsuperscript{63} The American fear of "unusually fine" young men is what enables Rupert to project onto Brandon and Philip everything that unnerves him in himself. Rupert may not fear their homosexuality, but it is Brandon and Philip's "otherness" as gay men that makes it possible to project onto them the things Rupert wants to fix as "other" than himself: his incipient fascism, the 'perversity' of his disdain for propriety, his careless playfulness with what others hold sacred—in other words, all the traits Brandon, Philip, and Rupert share.\textsuperscript{64} That, and having killed. The resounding bad faith of Rupert's attempt to deny his resemblance to Brandon and Philip is underscored by Hitchcock and Stewart's final "touch."

Rupert goes to the window, slaps open the latch with the gun barrel, and fires three shots. Turning away as voices rise from the street, he looks hesitantly at Brandon, then turns a long trouble look toward Philip. With great difficulty he lifts his bad leg off the windowseat, having to steady himself against the piano for a moment before he can stand. Once again Stewart slowly looks back and forth between Brandon and Philip. Finally, he limps across the room toward the chest. As the last sound he uses his bad leg to pull a chair closer and sits heavily, his gun hand resting protectively on the chest's firmly closed lid. The illusion that we can read the thoughts of actors on their faces and in their bodies is aided upon in this moment of "pure cinema," the "victory" transformed into guilt, shame, and utter defeat.

To paraphrase Britton, if you are Jimmy Stewart, the perfect, middle-class, heterosexual American male, you learn to live with it. Like Rupert Cadell, "James Stewart, war hero," did what he was supposed to do to be a good American. When Hitchcock cuts to Stewart looking in the chest, we see him brought face to face with the unthinkable: that James Stewart is a killer.

Notes

I would like to thank Al LaValley and Rick Millington for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this essay.


2. Miller suggests that all of the attempts to mask the five hidden cuts are somehow "spoiled" because they fail to remain invisible (quoting V. F. Perkins, "Rope," Movie 7 [February–March 1963]; 11, "Anal Rope," 138).

3. Rope's promotional material (posters, trailer, publicity stills) tease the audience with scenes not in the film; see the oft-reproduced still used with Miller's article that shows the chest facing the camera, promising us that if we see the film we'll see what's in it. The trailer promises to tell us all about Janet and David. Once the film starts, both promises are left in the dust.

4. Miller argues that the emphasis on "pure' technique perpetuates the 'phobic de-homosexualization that is sedimented in such abstraction"("Anal Rope," 140, n. 13).

5. Arthur Laurents, Rope screenplay, based on a treatment by Hume Cronyn, December 16, 1947. Laurents expands on Rupert's appeal: "He is completely self-possessed and elegantly detached. His manners are beautiful, his speech is eloquent."


7. The comedies include Magic Town, On Our Merry Way, You Can't Take It with You, The Jackpot, and Harvey; Call Northside 777, Rope, The Stratton Story, Malaya, Winchester 73, and Broken Arrow are the dramas. It's a Wonderful Life fits both categories, though most of it is played for comedy.


11. Ibid.


15. Ibid., 253.


19. Grant and Stewart's scenes together in Philadelphia Story are particularly interesting given their contrasting, complementary styles and the different ways they're used by directors like Capra and Hitchcock. It was Grant whom Hitchcock originally wanted for the role of Rupert Cadell (Donald Spoto, The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1983], 305). Naremore suggests that Hepburn can resemble Stewart ("crossing her legs, she leans forward and props her elbow on her knee... making her look as lanky and appealing as the young Stewart or Fonda") (Acting in the Cinema, 188). Naremore also describes Stewart in Destry and Philadelphia Story in sexual terms, saying
that Stewart "performed the same 'service' for Hepburn as he had for Dietrich" in Destry (ibid., 176).

20. Jeanine Basinger, The It's a Wonderful Life Book (New York: Knopf, 1990), quoting press releases (38, 39). Members of the press were impressed that the famous telephone scene was shot in one take, with no rehearsals.


22. Director-screenwriter Robert Riskin seems to have based the character on George Gallup, who pioneered the "quota sampling" method in 1936 (Village Voice, July 14, 1992, 90). The Stewart character's method fails when the town starts taking (and selling) its own polls and makes itself a national laughingstock by announcing that 76 percent of the population would vote for a woman for president.


24. Ibid., 6. He continues: "The image, in these cases, evacuates the ideological tensions embodied in the dramatic person by suppressing contradictory terms or representing them as something else. Thus, for example, in Stewart's case, 'moral earnestness and integrity' are repeatedly defined by his post-war films as at once the expression and progenitor of an intense repressive violence, barely contained and constantly threatening to erupt" (6).


27. Ibid., 42.

28. Ibid., 102.

29. Ibid., 102.


31. Silverman, Male Subjectivity, 198.

32. Interestingly, when Rupert opens the chest in the play, his reaction echoes Stewart in this and other films. He says, "Oh—you swine," then "wipes his hand across his mouth, his lips at once contemptuous and horror-struck," and "gives a shuddering sob" (Hamilton, Rope's End, 86). All these gestures are characteristic of James Stewart. ("Inevitably, at the point of his greatest trauma, he will raise a trembling hand to his open mouth, sometimes biting at the flesh" [Naremore, Acting in the Cinema, 65])

33. These quotes describe the climax of Rear Window, when Stewart's character is being strangled (Naremore, Acting in the Cinema, 259).

34. Silverman also discusses the term "shattering" (Male Subjectivity, 200). Silverman acknowledges that hers is a "utopian" rereading of masochism as working "insistently to negate paternal power and privilege" and sees "an obvious danger that it be taken literally, as designating the standard form of that perversion, rather than its visionary reconfiguration" (ibid., 211).

35. Silverman, discussing Franz Biberkopf's loss of his arm in Fassbinder's Berlin Alexanderplatz (ibid., 236).

36. Naremore calls Stewart the only studio system actor "who could regularly cry on the screen without losing the sympathy of his audience" (Acting in the Cinema, 254).

37. At the end of Rear Window alone, Naremore notes Stewart's "eyes fluttering up in a swoon . . . [his] eyes closed and mouth lax, as if he were about to faint" (ibid., 259).

38. Steven H. Scheuer, ed., Movies on TV and Videocassette, 1985-1990 (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), 251. Fellow actors have noticed the feminine/masculine polarities in

Stewart. In a documentary on Stewart's career called James Stewart: A Wonderful Life, Richard Dreyfuss says, "He was a very feminine hero . . . very vulnerable," while on the other end of the spectrum Clint Eastwood counters, "He had a great way with violence. When he showed anger it was much more intense than most actors. He could be extremely volatile. When he snapped, the danger would come on very strong."


40. Life, August 22, 1949, 22-23, my emphasis.


42. Ibid., 128.

43. In the introduction to the play, published under the title Rope's End, Hamilton claims, "It has been said that I have founded 'Rope' on a murder which was committed in America some years ago. But this is not so, since I cannot recall this crime having ever properly reached my consciousness until after 'Rope' was written and people began to tell me of it. But then I am not interested in crime" (ix).


45. Most of the names in the play differ from the film, except for Brandon, Rupert, and the older Kentley. David Kentley is Ronald in the play, Janet is Leila, etc. For clarity, I refer to everyone except Philip/Granillo by their film names.


47. The Oxford English Dictionary cites 1932 as the first time the word "queer" appears in print in England (in W. H. Auden), though slang often exists years before it can be written. The first traceable American use occurred in 1922.

48. Hemmert argues that the film's "transcendental signifier" is the word "something," the great undefinable "whatzit" that prevents Rupert from committing the murders he talks about ("Twisted Writing," 258-60). Miller also sees that "something" as "la raison du plus fort" for the text, hiding behind a linguistic "sleight of hand"—only for Miller that "something" is an unnamed "quasi-intuitive opposition" to homosexuality ("Anal Rope," 127).


50. In the play Rupert calls the crime "a sin and a blasphemy" (89).

51. When musing on a different ending for Suspicion where the husband poisons his wife, François Truffaut suggests the more obsessive and neurotic Stewart for the role of the husband in place of Cary Grant, and Hitchcock counters with this line (Truffaut, Hitchcock [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967]), Stewart played murderers early in his career, most notably in After the Thin Man (1936) and RKO Mars (1935).


53. He does, however, play ex-soldiers, something it would have been hard to avoid in films of the late 1940s and early 1950s.


55. Wolfe, in "The Return of Jimmy Stewart," 104. In James Stewart: A Wonderful Life, a pair of newsreels feature Stewart near the beginning and the end of his war service. In the first he's neat and pressed, standing tall, looking down at the camera and smiling. In the second he's seated in a chair so low his legs look awkward sticking out in front of him.
His voice is not only softer but a little hoarse and shaky as he repeats, "We are going to do our best to be useful as soldiers in the United States Army." Older, more thoughtful, infinitely more vulnerable, he looks like he's had a hard time. Shellshock, tears, or a nervous breakdown do not seem unthinkable at this point. Seeming glimpses of the actual person are highly privileged moments in acting; the even thinner line between biography and scripted performance make these appearances especially touching.

56. Quoted in Basinger, The It's a Wonderful Life Book, 58.
58. Ibid., 31, quoting Barry King, "The Social Significance of Stardom" (unpublished manuscript, 1974).
59. Ibid., 31, quoting King, "The Social Significance."
61. Miller argues that for the film "the only way to establish the integrity of a truly other subject position is performative; by simply declaring that one occupies such a position and supporting the declaration with a strong arm" (ibid., 127). An American display of force requires a change of weapons. In the play Rupert pulls out the sword concealed in his walking stick and summons the police with "a little silver whistle" (ibid., 83).
62. "In an especially tense situation, [Stewart's] normally earnest behavior...becomes] harsh, shrill, and manic" (Naremore, Acting in the Cinema, 254).
63. According to Silverman, "perversion" is not only sexual but subverts "many of the binary oppositions upon which the social order rests: it crosses the boundary separating food from excrement (coprophilia); human from animal (bestiality); life from death (necrophilia); adult from child (pederasty), and pleasure from pain (masochism)" (Male Subjectivity, 187). In Rope the greatest scandal is the proximity of food and a corpse, when Rupert asks, "Did you think you were God, Brandon?...Is that what you thought when you served food from his grave?"
64. Oxford English Dictionary. According to the OED, the British felt the term "queer" was imported from America.
65. I am indebted to Rick Millington for this insight.

Now that depth psychology, with the help of films, soap-opera, and Horney, has delved into the deepest recesses, people's last possibility of experiencing themselves has been cut off by organized culture. Ready-made enlightenment turns not only spontaneous reflection but also analytical insights—whose power equals the energy and suffering that it cost to gain them—into mass-produced articles, and the painful secrets of individual history, which the orthodox method is already inclined to reduce to formulae, into commonplace conventions. Dispelling rationalizations becomes itself rationalization. Instead of working to gain self-awareness, the initiates become adept at subsuming all instinctual conflicts under such concepts as inferiority-complex, mother-fixation, extroversion, and introversion, to which they are in reality inaccessible. Terror before the abyss of the self is removed by the consciousness of being concerned with nothing so very different from arthritis or sinus trouble.

—Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia

The austere cultural critic Theodor Adorno wrote these angry and passionate words in 1944, while living in Los Angeles and working with Max Horkheimer on the essays that were to be published fifteen years later as The Dialectic of Enlightenment. In June of that year, Alfred Hitchcock returned to Hol-