



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Rope

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

At the very end of Truffaut's interview book, Hitchcock comes up with a 'dream' project: 24 hours in the life of a city. 'It starts out at 5 am, at daybreak, with a fly crawling on the nose of a tramp lying in a doorway. Then, the early stirrings of life in the city. I'd like to try to do an anthology on food, showing its arrival in the city, its distribution, the selling, buying by people, the cooking, the various ways in which it's consumed ... And, gradually, the end of the film would show the sewers, and the garbage being dumped out into the ocean.' As an ambition, one might compare it with Samuel Fuller's desire to do a patrol movie in which the camera would simply follow (with takes lasting the length of the film magazine) a group of men undergoing the rigours of patrol (the 'sewer' theme in Hitchcock being matched by a latrine emphasis in Fuller – the final stop of realism). One might also note the irony of this lost hankering after an ultimate verisimilitude in two of the cinema's most extreme melodramatists.

In the event, Hitchcock came closer to fulfilling Fuller's ambition than his own (whether the city film would have lasted 24 hours is not clear). *Rope* employs a sequence of ten-minute takes not quite imperceptibly joined to create a seamless reality – a drama that unfolds without any ellipses of time and without recourse to editing (cutaways to reaction shots, for instance) which would make something sequential of events happening simultaneously. One might then ask, however, when the camera pans from speaker to listener to create an uninterrupted flow, whose 'time' is this happening in? Events actually become even more sequential: Hitchcock has traded the objective swiftness of editing for the ponderous subjectivity of the camera. And how real is 'real time'? *Rope* shows two young men murdering another, hiding his body in a trunk and preparing for a dinner party; they receive their guests, hold their party, then see the guests out – only to have one, suspicious, return to challenge and eventually unmask them. All this, according to the play's original time span, from 7:30 to 9:15. *Rope*, the movie, doesn't even last an hour and three quarters, only 80 minutes.

Contradictions multiply when one isolates some of the effects in the film. Painstaking realism in production can result in a great sense of artificiality on screen, and vice versa. For the end, when James Stewart fires a gun out the apartment window to summon help, and is obligingly greeted by a chorus of concerned passersby and then a police siren, Hitchcock has proudly described how 'I made them put the microphone six storeys high and I gathered a group of people below on the sidewalk and had them talk about the shot. As for the police siren ... I made them get an ambulance with a siren. We placed a microphone at the studio gate and sent the ambulance two miles away and that's the way we made the soundtrack.' On the other hand, for all the fuss about the ten-minute take, the real time of the film impinges far

less dramatically than the experience of being allowed to watch time passing in the progression from daylight to night outside the apartment window. And this was accomplished with a backdrop of the New York skyline made three times larger than the apartment décor (for reasons of perspective), and with spun-glass clouds moved about the sky on wires or stands in between takes. Problems of colour control at sunset occasioned a good deal of reshooting.

A film of artificial reality or real artificiality? What is curious is that Hitchcock's most sustained attempt to efface the cinema should have landed him in the theatre. (The same thing happened, a few years after *Rope*, when 3-D promised to extend reality on screen and Hitchcock employed it on *Dial M for Murder*.) Beyond the cinema is not real life but another arena of truth and illusion, whose reality is more real – real people, real space and, if necessary, real time – and whose manipulation and artifice are even more blatant. The number of Hitchcock's adaptations from plays is not particularly significant, but where he becomes self-conscious about his cinema, an ironist about the relationship of art and life, the metaphors and manners of the stage tend to crop up. Like a mischievous ghost, a theatrical sensibility seems to haunt this complete filmmaker, the master of 'pure' cinema.

Expressionism as a form of theatrical self-consciousness – one rhyming with the other – is striking in *Murder*, a stage adaptation with an incidental connection with *Rope*. It was made in 1930, a year after the London opening of Patrick Hamilton's play of *Rope*, and is set largely in Mayfair (as was *Rope* in its English incarnation), in the apartment of gentleman actor cum amateur sleuth Sir John Manier (Herbert Marshall). At this stage of his career, Hitchcock's attention to realistic detail is also evidence of a social consciousness, of a constant comedy of misunderstandings, embarrassment and blocked communication between the classes.

Rope is somewhere between British and American Hitchcock. It has shed the obvious stylisation and social manners of *Murder* in the shift from Mayfair to New York, but it has not yet found an acceptable substitute. The ten-minute take, the laborious attempt to suspend cinematic naturalism and create a different kind of realism, a 'space' made for Hitchcock as jester, the prestidigitator of bodies in trunks, is a step on the way to the increasingly refined artificiality of the American films, their more subtly disturbing split between what one might call a realistic and a non-realistic naturalism. *Rope*, like *Murder*, is still trying to identify itself with the theatre, with a certain mandarin irony about art turning into life, because Hitchcock has not yet clarified the theatrical sense of *North by Northwest* and *Marnie*. It comes at that stage in his career, in fact, when British theatrical manners seem to be pulling him in the wrong direction, as in *The Paradine Case*, made the year before, and his return to England, two years later, for *Stage Fright* ('the aspect that intrigued me is that it was a story about the theatre. What specifically appealed to me was the idea that the girl who dreams of becoming an actress will be led by circumstances to play a real-life role ... in order to smoke out a criminal').

In its 80-minute compression of the 'real' thing, however, *Rope* is in many ways as succinct a demonstration as the later films that for his manipulation of

cinema to work, Hitchcock must often pull us out of the cinema. When *Rope* proper begins (in fact, after a cut from the credit sequence outside the apartment) with a disconcerting close-up of Brandon (John Dall) and Philip (Farley Granger) strangling their victim, Hitchcock is most forcefully putting his case for suspense over surprise, the Master of the anti-whodunit making no bones about who is doing what to whom. But the gratuity of the crime, Brandon's assertion of a Nietzschean superiority to ordinary moral laws, also rhymes with the gratuity, in the movie's terms, of the body in the trunk. The victim, much talked about but never seen after that initial shot of his being done to death, is Hitchcock's most blatant McGuffin. Like poor, troubled Harry, he has been planted in the landscape so Hitchcock can enjoy exploring it. What he has created is not so much a film as an arena ('cinema', in a way, has disappeared along with editing), a riot of possible *mises-en-scène*.

One possibility is sketched by Rupert Cadell (James Stewart), the murderers' unwitting mentor, who describes how he thinks the victim might have been spirited from the scene, while the camera obligingly follows his scenario. The most practised *metteur*, however, is Brandon, the villain as theatrical entrepreneur, a character from the family of amiable Sir John Manier and [*North by Northwest*'s] all-powerful Van Damm. The most significant difference between the dialogue in the film and in the original play is the extent to which Brandon talks about the murder as a work of art, and the dinner party he has arranged to take place on and around the laden trunk as 'the signature of the artist'. It is in the chapter on *Rope* in the Truffaut book that Hitchcock declaims as a cardinal rule: 'The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture'. The villain as director's surrogate is not a bad prescription for someone for whom the cinema was so vicarious an experience as Hitchcock. Which leaves the hapless, manipulated hero as the audience's surrogate. But there is no hero as such in *Rope* – James Stewart is the murderers' nemesis but he is also (as their erstwhile teacher) the spiritual author of their crime. The audience's surrogate here is in the trunk – or gathered around it in the other party guests whom Brandon clearly lumps with his victim as ordinary mortals who 'merely occupy space'. With no hero there is no real trajectory to the plot, no way out of the theatre. Which is why *Rope* would not have worked if 'opened up' into a movie. Its theme as well as its setting is the space we are invited to occupy.

Richard Combs, 'Just Enough Rope...', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1984

ROPE

Directed by: Alfred Hitchcock
Production Company: Transatlantic Pictures Corporation, Warner Bros.
Production Manager: Fred Ahern
Assistant Director: Lowell J. Farrell
Screenplay by: Arthur Laurents
Adapted by: Hume Cronyn
From the play by: Patrick Hamilton
Directors of Photography: Joseph Valentine, William V. Skall
Technicolor Colour Director: Natalie Kalmus
Associate: Robert Brower
Operators of Camera Movement: Edward Fitzgerald, Paul G. Hill, Richard Emmons, Morris Rosen
Lighting Technician: Jim Potevin
Film Editor: William H. Ziegler
Art Director: Perry Ferguson
Set Decorators: Emile Kuri, Howard Bristol
Miss Chandler's Dress by: Adrian
Make-up Artist: Perc Westmore
Musical Director: Leo F. Forbstein
Sound by: Al Riggs

uncredited
Producers: Sidney Bernstein, Alfred Hitchcock
Script Supervisor: Charlise Bryant
Screenplay: Ben Hecht
Camera Assistants: Harry Marsh, Eddie Albert
Stills: John Miehle
Mechanical Effects: Ralph Webb
Technical Advisers: Dinsmore Alter, The Three Suns

Cast

James Stewart (*Rupert Cadell*)
John Dall (*Brandon, David's friend*)
Farley Granger (*Philip, David's friend*)
Sir Cedric Hardwicke (*Mr Kentley, David's father*)
Constance Collier (*Mrs Atwater, David's aunt*)
Douglas Dick (*Kenneth Lawrence, David's rival*)
Edith Evanson (*Mrs Wilson, housekeeper*)
Dick Hogan (*David Kentley*)
Joan Chandler (*Janet, David's girl*)

uncredited
Alfred Hitchcock (*man in 'Reduco' neon advert*)

USA 1948
80 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar

Tue 1 Feb 18:20; Fri 25 Feb 20:45

Young Soul Rebels

Wed 2 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Thu 17 Feb 20:45

All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre)

Wed 2 Feb 20:45; Wed 16 Feb 21:00

Beautiful Thing

Thu 3 Feb 20:45; Mon 14 Feb 20:30

The Handmaiden (Ah-ga-ssi)

Fri 4 Feb 17:50; Sat 12 Feb 20:10; Sun 27 Feb 17:50

Rent

Sat 5 Feb 12:30; Sun 20 Feb 18:10

Maurice

Sun 6 Feb 15:20; Mon 14 Feb 18:00

The Watermelon Woman

Mon 7 Feb 20:45; Sat 26 Feb 20:30

Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)

Tue 8 Feb 18:15 (+ intro by Yi Wang, Queer East); Sun 13 Feb 15:20

My Own Private Idaho

Tue 8 Feb 20:45; Wed 23 Feb 18:00 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair)

Brokeback Mountain

Wed 9 Feb 17:45 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Mon 21 Feb 20:25

Go Fish

Wed 9 Feb 20:40; Sat 26 Feb 18:20

Rope

Thu 10 Feb 18:30; Tue 22 Feb 14:30

Victim

Thu 10 Feb 20:40; Sun 13 Feb 13:00; Mon 21 Feb 18:00

Desert Hearts

Fri 11 Feb 20:40; Wed 16 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Head Librarian Emma Smart)

My Beautiful Laundrette

Sat 12 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 20:45

A Fantastic Woman (Una mujer fantástica)

Sun 13 Feb 18:40; Tue 22 Feb 20:50

Mädchen in Uniform

Fri 18 Feb 20:30; Sat 26 Feb 16:00

Moonlight

Thu 24 Feb 14:30; Mon 28 Feb 20:45

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