

# Visual analysis of hitchcock's "rope"



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Alfred Hitchcock claimed that *Rope* was merely a "stunt," and it is more well-known for its achievement in its technical aspects compared to the film's actual story. An adaptation from Patrick Hamilton's play, Hitchcock wanted to utilize fluid motion of the camera between the characters, mimicking what is visible on a stage of a play, and opted for a "one shot" method. Thirty-five millimeter film could only hold ten minutes of footage at a time, but through clever transitions in editing, Hitchcock made the entire film seem as one continuous shot. The camera does utilize traditional shots with the camera, but instead of intercutting between shots, the camera moves and zooms accordingly. The interaction between Rupert and Phillip at the piano is one such scene with no close-ups or various cuts in framing shots. At this point, the audience has been aware of David's body in the chest, and David's killers Phillip and Brandon have not yet run into any obvious issues at the party; the guests themselves are unaware of what transpired minutes before they arrived and do not know the whereabouts of David (all they know is that he is missing). This scene serves to escalate the initial tension in the third act, and is really the first real situation where it is hinted that Rupert may be starting to catch on to the mystery surrounding David's absence. Phillip's personality is integral to the way this scene develops, and his submissive, cautious, and self-conscious nature clashes with Rupert's determination to uncover the truth. This power dynamic between Phillip and Rupert is exemplified in this interaction between them and is one of the most intense moments in the entire film, and the usage of

mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound are integral to building the suspense in this scene and depicting the two contrasting characters.

Mise-en-scene in *Rope* functions to contrast the actual objects or people being shot by the camera with the conflict that happens “ behind the scenes.” In this specific scene, everything is in the camera’s view typically exists with positive or neutral connotations: the piano, drinks and glasses, portraits on the wall, the background of the city at dusk, and the two men talking. None of what is shown by the camera seems negative or out of order on the surface level, but of course, the audience knows that the stakes of the interaction between Philip and Rupert are high with David’s body hidden in a chest merely a few steps away. The dialogue juxtaposes the setting and visuals to an extreme extent: if the scene is listened to on mute without any context, the viewer may only see a conversation between two men, with perhaps a small disagreement, but never actually experience the waves of tension that come with the context of the moment. The usage of mise-en-scene impacts the audience psychologically more than anything, with the difference between the tense mood and the harmless objects being shown by the camera. The physical position of the two characters is also integral to the development of the tension in this scene. Phillip, already playing the piano, is confronted by Rupert, who walks up the piano from the side directly facing Rupert. Throughout this sequence, Rupert is typically bending over slightly with his arm on top of the piano in an intimidating position, and seems to come closer and closer to Phillip as the tension escalates. Phillip’s position is one of vulnerability, as he appears to be “ stuck” not only in his role in the crime but also physically, sitting down at the piano. Behind him

and to his left are walls, there is no room to “escape” the interaction with Rupert, he cannot move forward because of the piano, and Rupert is directly to his right. In fact, Rupert himself seems to be aware of Phillip’s vulnerable position by stopping him when he gets up to get a drink, exclaiming that he should keep playing. Mise-en-scene functions to escalate the tension between the characters by positioning them in such a manner that outlines their power struggle. Finally, the chest, while not in this scene, still has a mental impact in regard to mise-en-scene and a influence on the audience overall. A reason why the conversation between Rupert and Phillip is so intense is not just the dialogue, but also the fact that the audience cannot see the chest in the shot. Of course, the chest does resemble a sense of uneasiness, with a body inside it, but the audience is often reassured when the chest is shown because Hitchcock reminds the audience that the crime has not been uncovered yet. While the audience does not sympathize with the actual crime, they have a sense of uneasiness whenever there exists the possibility that the body may be discovered.

Cinematography and editing, somewhat similarly to mise-en-scene, are used in this scene to escalate the suspense and directly force the audience into engaging with the conflict. There are no traditional cuts in this scene, but the lack of cuts in the editing has its own importance. The way the camera moves and the style with what it shoots is very human, as if the audience themselves is viewing the conflict and moving and looking around on their own. In the interaction between Rupert and Phillip, the camera sets itself to establish the scene and does not move until Rupert goes to get Phillip a drink. As Rupert gets up, the camera follows him to his position by the table,

leaving David out of the shot as he continues to play the piano. At most points in the film, there is more than one character visible in any given shot, and by having Rupert walk over to the table by himself and completely isolated visually, it puts the audience in his shoes. The camera also seems to focus and zoom in on Rupert and no one else, and by doing this Hitchcock forces the viewer to ponder the question of how much Rupert really knows. This intermission between the tension allows the audience a breath of fresh air and a break from the tense dialogue, before throwing them back into the chaos. The camera's movement reflects this intention as it moves away from Phillip and the piano before moving back in and continuing the suspense and conflict between the characters. The camera's position and movement from the piano to the table and back to the piano visually locks the audience into conflict between the characters, and like Phillip, the audience feels trapped within the scene. While there is no editing in this scene, the lack of it helps to push the audience along with the same purpose that cinematography has. That lack of edits conveys the feeling of the audience becoming more than just a spectator, someone that could possibly be at risk of getting caught, along with Phillip and David. If the shots did cut from one to the other, the audience could feel somewhat detached from the actual crime, instead of being directly inside the conflict.

In Rupert's questioning of Phillip, sound has an extremely important role in building suspense and creating tension between the two combating characters. Throughout this scene, random sounds are used to create a rise and fall in tension, and they go along with the dialogue, often getting louder when Rupert's questions get more and more focused on David's absence.

The beginning of the scene starts out with Phillip playing the piano and repeating the same theme throughout their interaction: Rupert even inquires “ You are very fond of that little tune, aren’t you?” The pure sound of the tune itself has quite an impact on the audience. It is in a major key, which is typically known as the cheerful or happy key, as opposed to a minor key which is often seen as ominous or foreboding. The importance of the little tune being played in a major key is that along with the visuals created by Hitchcock’s usage of mise-en-scene, it sets a very lighthearted tone to the situation. However, as the Rupert’s questions start to become more direct and inquisitive, Phillip’s tune switches back and forth between major and minor keys, almost as if he himself is switching between mindsets. Not only this, but the subtle transition into a more minor sound and slightly more chaotic style of playing has an effect on the audience subconsciously. The piano’s sound moves the audience along with the tension of the dialogue, and matches the worrying nature of Phillip himself. Other than the piano, Hitchcock uses different sounds to increase the suspense as well. At the beginning of the scene, Rupert exclaims “ I get quite intrigued when people don’t answer questions, and quite curious,” to which Phillip responds “ Did you ask me a question?” Rupert then says “ Yes, Phillip, I asked you a question,” but as he says this, a siren outside the apartment can be heard, to which both men react to. The dialogue continues, and at the loudest point of the siren Rupert states “ I asked you what is going on here.” This extremely direct question seems to anger Phillip, but the siren may have an effect as well, perhaps symbolizing the impending doom of the “ law” coming for him. The only time Phillip actually stops playing the piano is when Rupert comes back to hand him his drink, and at this point the rest of the people in

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the party can be heard in the background. As with the usage of cinematography to pull away from the confrontation at the piano, this momentary pause in tension and the insertion of the background noise allows the audience to be pulled out of the action between the two characters. As the background chatter diminishes, the audience is forced back into this small “ world” between Rupert and Phillip once again.

After this momentary break with the piano's sound and with the dialogue, Rupert sets a metronome on the piano and lets it run. The tempo of the metronome is quite a bit quicker than the tune that Phillip is playing, and as Rupert's questions start to directly inquire about the whereabouts of David, Phillip seems to speed up his tune to match the tempo of the metronome. This appears to occur subconsciously and may show how uncomfortable Phillip is with the situation but could also show how much he is worrying internally, as his hands seem to match the speed of the metronome by themselves. At the start of the climax of the scene, Rupert speeds up the metronome and tells him “ That's the second time you haven't told [the truth]. Phillip asks, “ When was the first?” and Rupert responds “ When you said you'd never strangled a chicken.” The constant sound of the piano suddenly stops abruptly, with Phillip taken aback, and this pause in sound has a bit of a shock effect on the audience. Phillip's sudden reaction appears to come from Rupert's very utterance of the word “ strangle,” the very method Phillip and Brandon used to kill David. Rupert tells Phillip that he remembers seeing him strangle a chicken on a farm about a year ago, and he was quite good at it as well. Again, Rupert stops the metronome and speeds it up to an even faster tempo than the one before. At the very height

of the climax in the scene, after quick back and forth lines with Rupert accusing Phillip of lying and Phillip defending himself, Phillip suddenly stops playing and exclaims “ I can’t play with that thing!” The metronome, used by Rupert almost strategically to make Phillip uncomfortable, not only succeeds in doing so, but unnerves the audience as well. The combination of the siren, the different keys and style of the piano piece, and the metronome’s constant tempo suddenly speeding up at times and clashing with Phillip’s tune creates an overall uneasy feeling within the scene. Besides the dialogue itself, Hitchcock utilizes sound almost as a trap, to lock in the audience within the scene and make sure that they cannot escape, similarly to Phillip.