

Primary analysis of hitchcock's "rope"



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Shocking, horrific, and filled with suspense, Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) was a self-proclaimed experiment in filmmaking. Adapted from a Patrick Hamilton play, the film was received with mixed reviews, but the pioneering method of making the film appear as one shot was seen as a venturesome attempt by Hitchcock to try something unique. Featuring James Stewart in the starring role alongside Farley Granger and John Dall, the story was inspired by a true story of a murder in 1924. Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, two lovers, killed a young man believing in a Nietzschean philosophy of superiority among the inferior. The relationship between these two men (as depicted in the film Granger and Dall) and their murder divided critics, but the suspenseful subject matter attracted audiences because of their own "morbid curiosity." (Vanity "Film Reviews" 14). However, the film was not a major hit at the box office and even Hitchcock did not regard his own film as a success. While not particularly a hit, critics praised Hitchcock for his unique approach to shooting the film and for the bold attempt to tell a brutal story based on the murder from decades before.

The anticipation and media coverage about Hitchcock's plans for *Rope* and the rumored type of production it was going to be was perhaps as prominent as the reviews and reaction to the film after its release. Major talking points by enthusiasts and film magazines were the length that Hitchcock was going to be shooting for and how he would be filming. In December of 1947 *Boxoffice* magazine released an issue which stated that Hitchcock "allotted a three-week period to exhaustive rehearsals for the cast, headed by James Stewart, and expects to get the picture before the cameras sometime in January" (Boxoffice 18). The magazine stated that this left Hitchcock with

just under two weeks to work on the picture, and because of this constricted length of time for shooting Warner production executives would be following and monitoring the film closely. Most big-budget films took much longer to shoot than around ten days, but Hitchcock claimed to be confident in the abilities of his cast and crew to complete the picture on time. For comparison, his previous film *The Paradine Case* was shot from December of 1946 to May of 1947. Because of the nature of *Rope* and its filming style, there was no need for a large allocation of time. With only ten cuts in the film, the long takes were either immediately unusable or deemed appropriate enough to make the final cut.

Hitchcock's popularity was rising during this time period before the golden years, and his groundbreaking approach to the filming of the story was anticipated by critics and viewers alike.

His goal to mimic the action that is visible in a stage play was reflected in *Rope* through the fluid camera motion, stopping only when the film is used up in each reel (Yates 250). Newspapers and film journals heavily anticipated the outcome of this style of filming, a method that had been used before but was certainly not common, especially not in big budget films that Hitchcock was working on at the time. While the film itself did not receive the most attention from audiences, the very same critics that eagerly anticipated how Hitchcock's one-take method would work ultimately appreciated the usage of the mobile camera. A 1948 issue of *Variety* magazine reviewed the film's style and its lack of cuts by claiming that the method "paid off for presenting something different in production and does serve to emphasize the sordid story" (*Variety* "Film Reviews" 14). While film critics understood <https://assignbuster.com/primary-analysis-of-hitchcocks-rope/>

the usage of the one-take to convey the story on a technological basis, the same article in *Variety* stated the effect on the audiences is of a “distracting interest” and does not add to box office merits of the subject on which it is used (*Variety* “Film Reviews” 14). This is the only real criticism that the magazine has in the discussion of *Rope*, however, it also states that the plot itself could have been a “more entertaining subject.” They claim that it is in questionable taste to have a murder committed for practically no reason other than to satisfy a sadistic urge.

This discussion of plot and meaning behind the story is one where many film critics diverge on opinion. While *Variety* claims that the subject matter was a bit shallow, *Focus: A Film Review* published an article in 1948 defending the controversial usage of the plot that purely centers around a murder with questionable intentions. The main point that the author of this article wants to prove is what he replies to the man described in the anecdote on the right; “because a film is about decadent people that does not mean to say that the film is decadent” (*Focus: A Film Review* 11). While the article states that the technical aspects of the film are fascinating, it also says that technique of the one-take could combine the best of two worlds of cinema and theater, but could also destroy film as a distinct art form. This is an interesting contrast in comparison to the article in *Variety*, which demonstrates how *Rope* was received different ways even by the same audience.

While most critics and audiences found the topic and the circumstances of the murder in the movie acceptable, some censorship boards and authorities did not. A 1948 edition of the *New York Times* states that the film was

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deemed appropriate by the state censor boards of Pennsylvania, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Virginia, but was censored to different extents in some cities and at local theaters. Municipal authorities refused the picture to be shown in Worcester, Atlanta, Seattle, Memphis City, and Sioux City. In Sioux City, the Civic Advisory Committee recommended that the strangulation scene should be removed from the film. The article states that Rope “ first ran into trouble in Chicago last September when the police censor board barred the picture on the grounds that it was not ‘ wholesome’ entertainment. A week later, after Warner Brothers had appealed the decision, the censor did an about-face, granting the

picture the right of public exhibition with the “ adults only” classification” (Pryor 1). A week later Warner Brothers appealed this decision. Many film critics were outraged because of the ban of the film, claiming that other films with much more twisted moral precepts are allowed to be shown while Rope is censored. Clearly, the film’s reception by censorship boards was mixed, mainly because of the supposed crass and disturbing nature of the murder and not because of the implied homosexual relationship between characters Phillip and Brandon.

While opinions are split on the actual content of the story and the technical camera work used to convey it, most reviewers agreed that James Stewart, Farley Granger, and John Dall had fine performances in the film. A section of the Showmen’s Trade Review entitled “ The Box-Office Slant” wrote that many will consider James Stewart’s role as Rupert the “ best acting job he has ever done.” (Boxoffice 19) It is also stated that John Dall makes an arrogant psychopath seem real and Farley Granger is a convincing neurotic.

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The performances of Dall and Granger and especially Stewart were overall praised by audiences and critics alike, although like Hitchcock, James Stewart later admitted to not being a huge fan of how the film turned out.

Stewart, already a major Hollywood actor by 1948, was the keystone for the marketing of Hitchcock's *Rope*. The marketing campaign for the film, spearheaded by the slogan "Nothing Ever Held You Like Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*," featured visuals of James Stewart standing menacingly, with the rope held in his right hand. This striking image was a tool used to capture the attention of the audience and motivate them to watch the film. The prominence of not just the picture of Stewart but also the slogan is significant in understanding the strategy of film marketing and the utilization of an already known actor to draw the audience in. These ads for *Rope* were often featured in magazines and newspapers as full-page ads, in striking style, almost possessing suspense merely within the advertisement. In one advertisement for *Motion Picture Daily*, the marketing for the film feature a two-page ad in color with the headline "Today for the First Time to the Public, at the Globe N. Y." with the characteristics slogan of the film and James Stewart's picture. (*Motion Picture Daily* 1-2). Interestingly, it also features first-hand accounts from famous people that have already seen the film, even one from President J. Edgar Hoover. The text states "Nothing Ever Held J. Edgar Hoover like Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*" and uses a direct quote from Hoover claiming "Never saw anything like it! Terrific suspense! Leaves you breathless!" Other first-hand accounts are put in the advertisement in the same manner, one from famed columnist Dorothy Kilgallen and one from gossip commentator and newspaper columnist Walter Winchell (*Motion*

Picture Daily 1-2). Based off of these newspaper advertisements, it is apparent that Warner Brothers went through a strenuous marketing campaign that had the sole purpose of drawing moviegoers and non-moviegoers alike into the theaters.

Hitchcock's typical technical filming style is changed into an adventurous and daring one in *Rope*. Controversial and divisive, the film was met with criticism, praise, and censorship alike, from some disgusted at its disturbing content to some claiming it a stroke of filmmaking genius. The controversy over the film reflects Hitchcock as an unchanging director mastering the art of the new and the bold. *Rope* remains one of Hitchcock's lesser known works but is regarded by film critics and enthusiasts as both underrated and under appreciated.

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