Unseen Words: On-Screen Visuals / Off-Screen Dialogue in *Rope* (1948)

By Jeff Hughes

for

The Films of Alfred Hitchcock

NYU Cinema Studies, Fall 2022

Professor: Sidney Gottlieb

Alfred Hitchcock's camera, not Jimmy Stewart, has always been the attention-grabbing "star" of *Rope*, his screen adaptation of Patrick Hamilton's claustrophobic 1929 play about two aristocratic male students who commit, as one describes in the original text, a "passionless, motiveless, faultless, and clueless murder." Describing this cinematic endeavor as a "stunt" to Francois Truffaut, Hitchcock acknowledged, "The stage drama was played out in the actual time of the story…I asked myself whether it was technically possible to film it in the same way." (Truffaut, Hitchcock, 1983) Hitchcock addressed this technical dilemma by filming *Rope* as a series of long takes, wherein "scenes were planned for visual strength, which in turn was blended with movement. The continuous flow of action meant the eye was occupied constantly." (Hitchcock 1995) But it is when the camera *stops* moving, framing a character or object in closeup while dialogue continues off-screen, that Hitchcock cleverly creates moments of structural, psychological, and thematic significance through the juxtaposition of on-screen visual and off-screen aural elements.

Rope is the story of a murder, but it is also the story of a party thrown to celebrate the achievement of that murder. Brandon (John Dall) and Phillip (Farley Granger) strangle their schoolmate David (Dick Hogan) and place his body in a living room chest. That evening they host a party, with the attendees including their former teacher, Rupert (Stewart) and the deceased's father (Cedric Hardwicke) and fiancé Janet (Joan Chandler). In a gesture of theatricality, Brandon decides that dinner should be served atop the chest (now functioning as a tomb), a decision he describes as "making our work of art a masterpiece."

Structurally, *Rope* is a late-blooming detective story; Rupert's quest to discover the truth of a murder already known to us. Psychologically, it is a study of the implications of guilt; Phillip actively wrestles with the burdens of his action throughout the entirety of the evening. Thematically, it is a deeply humanistic look at criminality; a film that does not allow us to forget *the murdered* in lieu of its detailed examination of *the murder*. These narrative components are highlighted at three important moments in the film by Hitchcock's aesthetic decision to present a singular image on-screen as dialogue audibly continues in an off-screen space.

While this might perceivably devalue the importance of what is being said in these scenes, an argument can be made to the contrary. Hitchcock, during these three sequences, is prioritizing the value of unknown information over known information. He chooses to direct our gaze not towards what is being said (known information), instead redirecting our focus to how those words are being heard and processed (unknown information). The dialogue still serves narrative purpose, but only in relation to the presented visual. It is the juxtaposition of the two elements – visual and aural – that make the sequences critically important.

The earliest example of the on-screen visual/off-screen dialogue dynamic comes shortly after Rupert's tardy arrival at the party. Brandon regales the attendees with a story about Phillip strangling chickens on his family farm in Connecticut, and as the story builds to crescendo, with Brandon equating the rise of an undead chicken to the Lazarus story, Phillip bursts out, "That's a lie!" A look at the working script:

———————

THE CAMERA WHIPS BACK at Phillip's outburst.

Brandon

Phillip!....

Phillip

There isn't a word of truth in the whole story. I never strangled a chicken in my life!

During the following, THE CAMERA HAS MOVED to a closeup of Rupert at the piano.

Brandon
(off-screen, getting angry)
Now look here, Phillip. Just because –

Phillip
(off-screen)
I never strangled a chicken and you know it!

At this, JANET laughs out loud. Rupert watched Phillip and Brandon intently.

Janet
(off-screen)
Forgive me, but it just seemed very funny; you two being so intense about an old dead chicken.

Brandon
(in control again)
Sorry. We were ridiculous and very rude. I apologize for both of us – and the story.

———————

Hitchcock deviates from this script, cutting abruptly to Rupert immediately upon the delivery of "That's a lie" and staying in closeup for the duration of the passage that follows. The reason for relegating the strangled chicken conversation off-screen is simple: the context of the discussion is known information. We know there is conflict between Brandon and Phillip; it has been established from the opening scene, wherein Phillip tells Brandon, "You scare me. You always have. From that very first day in prep school." But there is also an absurd redundancy to the

content of the argument. *Rope* opens with the image of Phillip strangling David, a human being. Is it terribly important to discern whether he's guilty of strangling a chicken on the family farm years earlier? The details of their discussion are of little narrative importance, but Rupert's processing of that discussion, and the building tension between Phillip and Brandon, is essential to the storytelling. His eyes dart from character to character, surveying the room with an inquisitive gaze. He is in the process of discovering what we already know, and Hitchcock understands the importance of making the audience an active participant in Rupert's journey.

> Rupert is very much a silent observer here: he plays no part for now in the conversation that he is scrutinizing. We watch him studying something that is occurring out of our sight, and we watch his reactions to what he is witnessing: he frowns slightly and looks rather intrigued by Phillip's outburst and its aftermath. Although the three younger characters are off camera at this point, their voices are perfectly clear; this is not, in other words, another moment at which Rope leaves its acousmatic dialogue enticingly vague. (Badmington, 2021)

The close-up of Rupert during this off-screen dialogue also represents a complete inversion of *Rope*'s narrative structure. Suddenly, he is thrust into the role of detective and for the remainder of the film we are no longer concerned with whether Brandon and Phillip will be able to hide their crime, instead now focused on whether Rupert will discover it. *Rope* has structurally become a detective story, with Rupert ascending into the role of detective/protagonist. And for the audience, this would have been expected. Despite his late entrance, Stewart was marketed as the film's star and was clearly the most well-known actor in the film (and one of the most well-known in the world).

Later in the film, this visual/aural dynamic resurfaces as detective Rupert's fixates on the choice to serve dinner atop the chest and during dessert he asks Mrs. Wilson, "Why did you serve from here anyway?" As she provides her lengthy reply, Phillip enters the frame. Again, it is helpful to turn to the script:

> *It is at this point that the CAMERA REACHES THE DOORWAY and we see Phillip. The voices are only indistinct murmur now. Phillip tries desperately to hear. Finally, he strolls casually into the room, fighting to keep control of himself. As he walks over to Rupert and Mrs. Wilson, their voices come up again.*

There is an important filmed moment missing from the script. As the off-screen voices of Rupert and Mrs. Wilson are reduced to a "murmur," Phillip is isolated in closeup. He turns away from them in a subtle panic and begins to mouth the name "Brandon." It is a cry for help, as Phillip knows any discussion of the chest and its contents represents an existential threat. Once again, Hitchcock focuses not on the speakers but on the listener, as the words spoken represent known information. Rupert's investigation is well-established. Hitchcock focalizes the moment through Phillip because Phillip's psychological status is the focal point of the scene. There is no drama to be found in Rupert's attempted acquisition of information. The drama is found in Phillip's attempts to avoid detection.

As this sequence continues, Hitchcock uses a chaotic soundscape, primarily the overlapping dialogue of multiple conversations, to convey Phillip's pending psychological breakdown. That chaos, an incoherent collection of noises, mirrors the chaos building in Phillip's tortured mind. The "murmur" of Rupert and Mrs. Wilson is now "accompanied by an increase in volume of the music on the radio and, more significantly, the voices of the other characters, who are still in the

dining room." (Badmington, 2021) This breakdown is a direct result of Phillip's penetrating guilt and fear of discovery and it is viscerally achieved through the juxtaposition of his on-screen reaction to the off-screen sound. To him, conversation now sounds like cross examination; the cheerful music of a casual party takes on the deafening, pursual nature of police sirens.

Philip is paralyzed by inaction, unsure how to proceed in the moment. (Mouthing "Brandon" gives this mindset away as Brandon, throughout the ordeal, has been the mastermind.) Phillip's mind is full of questions that have no answers. Should he interrupt the conversation between Rupert and Mrs. Wilson? Would the very notion of "interruption" reveal guilt? His instincts were to retrieve Brandon but would pulling Brandon from one room to the other not reveal his panic in the moment? How can he effectively eliminate suspicion without appearing suspicious? This sequence starts Phillip on a downward psychological trajectory from which he never recovers.

The longest example of an on-screen visual juxtaposed with off-screen dialogue comes late in the film, as the guests gather to leave the party. Mrs. Wilson begins to clear the chest, which is foregrounded in a long, motionless (in the sense of camera) take. During this action a nearly four-page dialogue sequence takes place off-screen. Hitchcock allows us to hear what is said but does not move his camera to the conversation primarily because, again, the dialogue is comprised almost entirely of known information. The crux of the conversation involves speculation regarding David's whereabouts, and we know David now resides in the chest. When Rupert interrogates Brandon, attempting to retrace David's steps that day, it is a dynamic that has been previously established. We know Rupert suspects Brandon. When Phillip is questioned by David's father, revealing a lie about contact between the two, it would only be a revelation for

those in the conversation. We know Phillip had tragically intimate contact with David that very same day. These off-screen "revelations" would be narratively inconsequential if not for Hitchcock's choice to juxtapose them with the on-screen visual of the chest.

Michael Badmington addresses Hitchcock's visual choice during this scene:

> The camera watches Mrs. Wilson for nearly two minutes as she gradually clears the top of the cassone. She works without speaking and makes repeated trips to and from the dining room and the kitchen, removing crockery and returning books. (Badmington, 2021)

But the camera is not concerned with Mrs. Wilson at all; she drifts in and out of the frame performing menial tasks. An argument has been made that the prospect of her opening the chest creates suspense in this sequence, but Hitchcock never implies such suspense; the first suggestion that Mrs. Wilson might open the chest does not take place until the very end of the sequence, when dialogue resumes on-screen. The camera is not focused on Mrs. Wilson, it is focused on David. For the entirety of the four script pages, Hitchcock keeps the chest foregrounded, for it is the chest, and its contents, that Hitchcock considered "practically the second lead in the picture." (Hitchcock, 1995) The juxtaposition of the of visual (a chest containing a young man's corpse) and aural (a multi-character conversation about that young man's whereabouts) lends the sequence a distinctly compassionate, moral, humanistic tone.

No longer is Hitchcock concerned with Rupert's investigative prowess, or Brandon and Phillip's shiftiness, or Janet's hopefulness as to David's potential safety. In this moment, Hitchcock chooses to remind us that an innocent man has been murdered and dinner was served atop a chest

containing his remains. The length of the cut, the lack of camera motion and the seeming banality of the off-screen conversation all support this intention. Just as the strangled chicken sequence was about Rupert's inquisition, and the party's chaotic soundscape signaled Phillip's psychological break, this sequence is about David, and Hitchcock's choice to focalize it through him reaffirms such.

Hitchcock's choice to show the chest, and not the conversation, reflect what David Sterritt calls, "his predilections and priorities." (Sterritt, 2011) He is not interested in debating the particulars; the how's and the why's of the murder no longer interest him. By focusing his camera on the chest at this pivotal moment and juxtaposing the image with an off-screen conversation about David, Hitchcock is arguing that evil is not to be debated; it is to be defeated. Because if it is not defeated, the innocents among us end up like David. This humanism is common for the Hitchcock of the 1940s, as it was on display in prominent works such as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Lifeboat* (1944). There is an understanding in his films of this period that men are capable of terrible acts, but also that those men must be punished for those acts. In *Shadow of a Doubt*, Uncle Charlie, a serial killer who has spread hateful, fascist rhetoric at the dinner table, must ultimately be thrown from the train. In *Lifeboat*, Willi (the German) is thrown overboard for killing Gus and holding out on a private supply of water as the other passengers struggle with extreme thirst. *Rope* is titled such not only because a length of rope is used as the murder weapon, but also because it is the implied method by which Brandon and Phillip will be executed for their crime. *Rope,* as the title, represents both crime and punishment, and Hitchcock's decision to focus our attention on the victim during this lengthy off-screen dialogue passage,

forces us to remember the human toll of inaction and ask whether a foul deed will go unpunished.

Hitchcock describes his work on *Rope* as "giving the audience all opera glasses to follow the action on stage." (Hitchcock, 2015) But the director not only gives the audience opera glasses; he also instructs them where to point those glasses. His decision at these three pivotal moments to point the audience away from the dialogue, using the "orchestral counterpoint of visual and aural images" (Eisenstein, 1928), enables him to prioritize unknown information over known; invert narrative structure/develop character through the juxtaposition of silent on-screen visual and off-screen dialogue, and announce his thematic intention, providing a humanistic, moral foundation to a film about deeply inhuman, amoral characters.

But these sequences also reconfigure our spectatorial relationship to cinema by redirecting our gaze to silence. The first two scenes ask us to question not the intention of what is being said, but the narrative and psychological ramifications of what is being heard. The third, with its lack of action, challenges us to become active participants in a complicated, moral play; to decipher meaning in a visual that asks complicated questions without providing easy answers. Rupert does not speak because he is actively trying to piece together a puzzle. Phillip does not speak because he is paralyzed by the ramifications of Rupert's potential discovery. David does not speak because he cannot speak. In *Rope*, Hitchcock reminds us that even in a world of dialogue-as-distraction and dubious moral ideology, it is often in silence where the truth and morality are found.

Bibliography

Badmington, Neil. *Perpetual Movement: Alfred Hitchcock's Rope*. State University of New York Press, 2021. Albany, NY. p. 93-114

Eisenstein. Sergei. *The Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Edited and translated by Jay Leyda. Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949. New York. p. 257-60.

Hitchcock, Alfred. Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews. Edited by Sidney Gottlieb. University of California ress, 1995. Berkley, CA. p. 281

Hitchcock, Alfred. Hitchcock on Hitchcock, Volume 2: Selected Writings and Interviews. Edited by Sidney Gottlieb. University of California Press, 2015. Berkeley, CA. p. 96

Sterritt, David. "Morbid Psychologies and So Forth: The Fine Art of Rope" from *Hitchcock at the Source: The Auteur as Adaptor*. Edited by R. Barton Palmer and David Boyd. State University of New York Press, 2011. Albany, NY. p. 165-6

Truffaut, Francois. and Hitchcock, Alfred. *Hitchcock, by Francois Truffaut with the collaboration of Helen G. Scott* Simon and Schuster New York 1967.