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Hitchcock

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(A) Wonderful paper on Hitchcockian understatement and minimalism. Yes, less is much more.

Suspense through Small Sets in *Rope* and *Rear Window*

It's no stretch of the truth to say that Jimmy Stewart was an incredible actor and providing him the opportunity to work with one of the world's greatest film producers and directors only created more cinematic magic. Two of his amazing performances were in Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) and *Rear Window* (1954). *Rope*, a thrilling murder film, follows two gay lovers named Phillip and Brandon, as they try to pull off the perfect murder to impress their grammar school teacher, played by Jimmy Stewart. *Rear Window*, also a thrilling murder film, stars Jimmy Stewart while he tries to solve a murder from the confines of his wheelchair. The fascinating aspect to both these films is that there is virtually only one set for each film, yet Hitchcock was still able to create as much suspense as an expensive, technologically advanced film. ✓

*Rope* has surprisingly few shots throughout the entirety of the film because Hitchcock's goal was to create a movie that was filmed in "uninterrupted ten-minute takes" (Spoto 167). While this was a colossal box-office failure, I myself fail to understand why. This change in technique simply makes the film seem more like a stage play, in which case it would have played out very similarly regardless of it was on the silver screen or the stage. In fact, this film was even based off a stage play so there was an even greater opportunity to stick closer to the script with the "boldest

also

technical experiment ever attempted," (Spoto 167) by leaving out the many necessary changes film adaptations often create. Jimmy Stewart had a great opportunity to show off his acting prowess, and right away, even though the audience hasn't yet met Rupert Cadell, we know that young student Philip has a strange obsession with him, almost casting him in the light of the main character. Upon his first entrance, then, we are almost disappointed in the anticlimactic nature of it, as we've been led to expect someone almost superhuman. But Stewart manages to capture our attention right away with his insistence that murder should be acceptable if performed by the right person for the right reasons, reasons that clearly make the other partygoers uncomfortable even though some are able to laugh it off as a joke.

~~I think that perhaps~~ the extremely minimalistic set makes a film even scarier because there is an extreme feeling of claustrophobia. I found myself on the edge of my seat because I thought it was impossible for someone not to discover David's body hidden in the chest. Because we really feel as though we're part of the action, we move with the camera through the rooms, we feel many of the same emotions as Phillip and there are many close calls to the two getting caught. Because the set is small and relatively simple, Hitchcock utilizes many other ways to create suspense throughout. Brandon's character carries around the very same rope that he used to murder David and it seems as though it may as well be a flashing neon light screaming "Murder Weapon!" yet the other characters don't seem to notice it. The screenplay also helps to build the suspense because the words were chosen so carefully. Lines such as, "I could strangle you right now," and, "These hands will

*I agree*

✓

bring you great fame," are phrases that may seem commonplace in everyday conversation but within the context of this film actually hold a great amount of meaning. I physically cringed when I heard these lines because, again, it seemed so obvious, yet none of the other characters gave them a second thought.

*Rear Window* also builds suspense through small things. There are really only two sets: Jeff's apartment and the small courtyard visible from his rear window, which includes the windows of his neighbors. And while this is the "largest indoor set ever built at Paramount Studios" at the time (Spoto 217), it feels very small because we are trapped with Jeff inside his apartment. Most of the film is through Jeff's perspective, and he is convinced that his neighbor is a murderer. But the camera never even leaves Jeff's apartment; it merely acts as another character in the room, allowing us to join in the voyeurism (Spoto 169). There is really only one moment of voyeurism in which we see something that Jeff does not, and it is a rather important moment.

But this inability to leave the apartment and the "claustrophobic atmosphere" creates an enormous amount of tension in itself (Spoto 219). Jeff, who is a very independent person, is not accustomed to being reliant on others or unable to provide assistance. For this reason it is exceedingly painful in the best possible way to watch him struggle with this ineptitude, especially while he's helplessly watching Lisa as Mr. Thorwald attacks her. But this just adds to the incredibly suspenseful climax of the film. Hitchcock's use of a camera as Jeff's mode of spying on Thorwald is simultaneously entertaining, ironic, and suspenseful because the audience feels as though they could be caught peeping at any moment as well. We



feel tense when we're waiting to see if Miss Lonelyhearts is really going to commit suicide; we sit on the edge of our seat as we watch Lisa sneak into Thorwald's apartment against Jeff's wishes because we are just as powerless as Jeff.

Much like *Rope*, Hitchcock builds tension and suspense without all the usual action film tropes and by simply utilizing everyday objects. For example, while Jeff is being attacked, he uses his flashlight to disorient Thorwald. Hitchcock adds an orange glow as we for the first time see through Thorwald's bewildered eyes. Thorwald, however, still manages to attack Jeff and we see the first real special effect of the film when Jeff falls from the ledge of his own rear window. And in Rope, as well we experience Jimmy Stewart's stellar acting, literally watching as the pieces fall together in his mind, something that only truly incredible actors can successfully portray.

While *Rear Window* has a much happier ending than *Rope*, which has a much weaker ending due to the extreme contradictions that Stewart's character makes in his thoughts about murder, Stewart's performances in both leave audiences stunned in the best possible way. He steals the show without trying to do so, even when he's given poor lines with which to work. The actors in both films, while there are not elaborate sets, use what they're given to create wonderful performances. Hitchcock truly drew out the best from all his actors and achieved timeless films, which only gained popularity from their cult following as the decades progress. In a society that places more value on the big technical, computer generated films, Hitchcock is a humbling reminder that more extravagant is not always the solution. Sometimes the best films were created with simple and understated intentions.

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