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Author(s)	Andrew Sarris Andrew Sarris
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# Return of the 'Missing' Hitchcocks

By Andrew Sarris

The news that the New York Film Festival is reviving five Hitchcock films that have not been generally accessible in recent years should make many of my readers happy, judging from the mail I have been getting. The five works in question are, in chronological order: *Rope* (1948), *Rear Window* (1954), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1954), *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), and *Vertigo* (1958). They will be screened on September 30 and October 1, and will then open, one at a time, at the D. W. Griffith Theater. Four of the five films star James Stewart, one of the greatest of our screen actors, even though President Reagan is said to do a passable imitation of him. The one movie in the group that has been the hardest to catch, even for underground movie buffs, has been *Rope*, and it is not surprising that it has achieved a legendary status almost on its unavailability alone.

Though *Rope* in 1948 was not exactly Hitchcock on the rebound from the critical and commercial failure of the *Paradine Case*, it did provide him with his first opportunity to work with color, and, more spectacularly, to experiment with the enormous technical challenge of a "single-take" scenario. The script was adapted from Patrick Hamilton's play by Arthur Laurents and Hume Cronyn, and very loosely evoked the Leopold-Loeb case. Two young homosexuals with Nietzschean pretensions (John Dall, Farley Granger) murder a classmate, stuff his body in a chest, and then hold a party around the chest. Among the guests are the victim's father (Sir Cedric Hardwicke) and the murderers' old college professor (James Stewart), who has supposedly inspired them to take life lightly, and murder comically. With most of the incidental action of the film swirling round the telltale chest, it is easy to see why Hitchcock was tempted to adopt a unified mise-en-scène for the story. The action takes place in a New York apartment (with a fake view of the New York skyline) between 7:30 and 9:15 p.m. There are no discernible cuts in the continuity, though the effect of the single-shot is achieved through artfully blocked out transitions, usually on close-ups of the clothing of a character as he or she momentarily passes before the camera lens. Each roll of film runs 10 minutes, which makes *Rope* a series of 10-minute takes without interruption or changed camera setup.

As a movie, *Rope* suffers from the mis-



**Rope:** too nervous and flustered to perform on the high wire of snobbish diabolism

casting of James Stewart as the mock-Nietzschean mentor whose students take him too seriously. Jean Renoir made the curious comment at the time that if Alfred Hitchcock had wanted to deal with two homosexuals he should have shown them kissing each other on the lips. Such a scene was to shock Hollywood to such an extent a quarter of a century later in *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* that Peter Finch was to lose out on an Academy Award to Gene Hackman. Hence, Renoir's prescription for frankness was completely unthinkable in the Hollywood and America of 1948. Also, Renoir's observation merely confirmed that one of the differences between Hitchcock and Renoir is the difference between implication and explication. The big problem with the picture, however, is that it has nowhere to go after its ghoulish premise is established except in the direction of hollow moralizing. The suspense is misplaced in that we do not care enough for the two murderers and their victim to have any feelings about their fate. Nor is there any countervailing humor to be derived from the staging of a party at the scene of the crime. In this instance, at least, the two murderers are too proudly aware of their act to serve as victims of cocktail party comedy. Yet they are too nervous and flustered to perform on the high wire of snobbish diabolism. They finally degenerate into case studies of fatuity and futility as the film ends in wearying anticlimax as little more than a stylistic stunt.

Nonetheless, *Rope* did generate a great deal of discussion for its aesthetic legerdemain. Oddly, Hitchcock was subtly denigrated for his formal concerns in the hyperrealistic critical atmosphere of the late '40s. It was as if the what were all important, and the how merely incidental. Mov-

ies were supposed to Deal Honestly with Problems, and that was it. Hitchcock was considered too devious and ironical for such square dealing. Entertaining yes, enlightening no. Hence, he was placed in a special niche as the Master of Suspense, and forbidden to stray from this peril-filled path. Sadly, many of today's critics still cling to this nonsensical notion.

*Rear Window*, however, should enchant and enthrall all but the most obtuse Hitchknockians. It is a thoroughly good movie by any standard except the most literal. Village types, for example, may still complain that Hitch's view of bohemia is strictly Middle America. There is the matter of a door that is left conveniently unlocked, and the more substantial complaint that the crucial relationship between the pathetic murderer (Raymond Burr) and the snooty witness (James Stewart) is insufficiently developed.

On the overwhelmingly positive side is the deliciously perverted relationship between the morbidly voyeuristic "hero" and the elegantly masochistic heroine (the late Grace Kelly at her most Vogue coverish), the director's profound insight into the morbidly voyeuristic attraction that is at the heart, if not in the soul, of all movie making and movie watching, the sterling contributions of Wendell Corey and Thelma Ritter in support, and the interesting tension between the sound film in the foreground and the silent film across the courtyard with its very broad pantomimes.

*The Man Who Knew Too Much* is a remake of Hitch's 1935 classic. In the new version, James Stewart and Doris Day play the roles assigned to Leslie Banks and Edna Best in the originals with Daniel Gelin in the Pierre Fresnay role, and

Bernard Miles and Brenda De Banzie combining to replace Peter Lorre. Through the '50s French and British critics waged bitter cross-channel debates on the comparative merits of the two films. I happen to like them both.

*The Trouble with Harry* is about as much in the way of sustained whimsy as Hitch was able to manage in Hollywood, perhaps because much of it was shot on location against the russet browns of autumnal New England, or was it the vernal greens—I forget. Shirley MacLaine is near the beginning of her career as a kooky comedienne with a kind of engagingly throwaway sexuality. John Forsythe was on the way nowhere in movies with an understated charm in which there was little Method and even less madness to satisfy contemporary tastes in acting. Mildred Natwick and Edmund Gwenn provided solid support to the nonstar leads. The movie failed commercially, of course. I am not at all sure how it will look and sound today. Hitch's humor has always seemed to be exhilarating in proportion to its obliqueness. *The Trouble with Harry* struck me at the time as too theoretical a demonstration of Hitch's penchant for murder most foul in bright sunlight by the babbling brook.

And then there is *Vertigo*, one of the landmarks of the world cinema, perhaps the most painfully confessional of all of Hitchcock's works, and, certainly, one of the most beautiful spectacles devoted to romantic obsession to the point of madness. If Hitchcock had made only this one movie, he would be stamped forever after as one of the incontestably and luminously major artists of the medium. I shall have more, much more, to say about this masterpiece when it opens officially. ■