Cinema of Confinement

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It goes without saying that Alfred Hitchcock was publicly lauded as the master of suspense who delivered the goods in a great number of films, such as *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963), to name but a few. Yet Hitchcock was very much interested in experimental cinema. Peter Wollen explains that Hitchcock vacillated between seeing himself as a “100 per cent” commercial filmmaker of suspense cinema and “as a frustrated art-film director.” For Wollen, “Hitchcock the public showman was in constant conflict with Hitchcock the private aesthete.” Hitchcock’s interest in avant-garde art is evident in much of his work, such as the flashes of color and animation used during John “Scottie” Ferguson’s (James Stewart) nightmare in *Vertigo*, and Salvador Dalí’s surrealist painting of eyes on curtains during John Ballantyne’s (Gregory Peck) dream sequence in *Spellbound* (1945).

Although Hitchcock made some of the greatest suspense thrillers ever put on screen, he was not completely satisfied working within the genre, a frustration he expressed to the French filmmaker François Truffaut. For Hitchcock, Truffaut had much more creative freedom in regard to genre and narrative form. Hitchcock wrote to Truffaut: “You are a free person to make whatever you want. I, on the other hand, can only make what is expected of me; that is, thriller, or a suspense story, and that I find hard to do.” This was not the first time Hitchcock expressed to Truffaut the limitations of the thriller genre and classic narrative form. In discussing *Jules and Jim* (1962), Hitchcock stated that Truffaut’s film had more room for narrative and character experimentation, something that was harder to achieve in the suspense genre. As Hitchcock explained to Truffaut, “I’m often troubled by the dilemma of whether I should cling to what I call the rising curve of the story, or whether I shouldn’t experiment more through a looser form of narrative.”

Hitchcock was well aware of the limitations of the thriller and horror genres, as well as the public’s perception of him as the master of suspense. But that did not stop him from testing the barriers of these genres.
Indeed, the confined-space narrative of *Rope* is certainly one of Hitchcock’s biggest and most challenging formal experimentations in all of his works. *Rope* is both Hitchcock’s first color film and the first film he made after completing his seven-picture contract with the Hollywood producer David O. Selznick. The film is known widely for its experiment in long takes, as well as for its indirect representation of the murderers Brandon and Phillip as homosexuals. Yet not much attention has been given to the significance of Brandon and Phillip’s penthouse window and the cyclorama of Manhattan as part of Hitchcock “real-time” experiment. It is a film that not only exhibits Hitchcock’s interest in avant-garde cinema, as Wollen points out, but his desire to transcend the barriers of the suspense genre that he would later express to Truffaut. At the same time, Hitchcock did not deviate from his bomb theory in terms of creating suspense for spectators in *Rope*. Even within *Rope*’s technical and formal experimentations, narrative immersion was still primary for Hitchcock.

A key way in which *Rope* sustains suspense within the film’s confined space is the deployment of the gaze and its relationship to the authority of the big Other. The symbolic order is built on systems of language and networks of communication. It is the realm where meaning is produced and exchanged in everyday life. Embedded within the symbolic order is what Lacan terms the big Other. The big Other puts the symbolic order to work. The big Other is the communal network of social institutions, which entail the rules and unwritten rules of a given society. Whereas the symbolic order is the realm of communication and signification, the manifestation of the real realizes an excess of reality—something that cannot be incorporated into the world of language. This collapse in the visual field is the encounter with the gaze. I argue that the primary function of the big penthouse window in *Rope* is to conceal the excess of the gaze (as a protected and contained space in the penthouse) in order to present a coherent reality to work in tandem with Brandon and Phillip’s secret. But when their former professor Rupert Cadell (James Stewart) uncovers their secret and discovers David Kentley’s (Dick Hogan) corpse hidden in the trunk, the window’s containment of the gaze begins to collapse. The excess of the gaze is depicted in Hitchcock’s stylistic uses of light, camerawork, and acting in the final act of the film to coincide with Brandon and Phillip’s ensnarement with the authority of the big Other.

**Containing the Excess of the Gaze**

*Rope* tells the story of Brandon and Phillip, two college students who strangle and murder their friend David with a rope, and subsequently
hide his body in a large Italian chest (*cassone*) in the dining room of their New York penthouse. That same evening Brandon and Phillip host a dinner party: the guests include David’s fiancée, Janet (Joan Chandler), David’s father, Mr. Kentley (Sir Cedric Hardwicke), and his sister, Mrs. Atwater (Constance Collier). To fulfill their maniacal plan of committing the perfect act of murder, Brandon and Phillip ghoulishly serve food off the chest while David’s corpse is secretly concealed within it. Brandon and Phillip’s former professor, Rupert, also attends the party. Rupert strongly believes in Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory about the right of the superman, a notion that elevates superior beings, privileging them to commit acts of murder on those who are inferior. Ultimately, the superman thesis is the kernel that drives Brandon and Phillip to murder David. Yet it is Rupert who notices something awry, something that “sticks out” with Brandon and Phillip, eventually leading to his discovery of David’s body inside the chest. It is Brandon and Phillip’s surplus-knowledge that generates the suspense of Hitchcock’s penthouse thriller.

Part of understanding Hitchcock’s single-space narrative is exploring how German Expressionism shaped his film career. As David A. Cook points out, “this influence was to last throughout his [Hitchcock’s] silent period and linger on considerably beyond it.” Hitchcock began as an art director and then made his first two films, *The Pleasure Garden* (1925) and *The Mountain Eagle* (1927), at Ufa (Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft) in Germany, so German filmmakers significantly influenced him in their emphasis on the visual. Hitchcock stated: “I’ve always believed that you can tell as much visually as you can with words. That’s what I learned from the Germans.” Spawned out of a number of literary and artistic developments, the features of German Expressionism include stylized set design, exaggerated acting, and chiaroscuro photography. Hitchcock was particularly fascinated by the controlling style of German filmmakers in visually depicting haunting moods and atmospheric tension, and this can be traced in many of his films, in such scenes as Miriam’s death (Laura Elliot) photographed through the reflection of her dropped glasses at the carnival in *Strangers on a Train* and Norman Bates’s (Anthony Perkins) gothic home that hauntingly hovers above his motel operation in *Psycho*.

But German filmmakers also taught Hitchcock that set design can create impressions of reality as a sort of “trick of the eye.” Hitchcock learned this specifically when observing F. W. Murnau set up an intricate shot of a railway station in *The Last Laugh* (1924). The scene involved both the use of a mock rail carriage and real passengers, carefully positioned and framed as a way to create forced perspective. Observing Murnau, Hitchcock learned that what is most important in blending the artificial and real components of a set is the illusion of reality that it creates for viewers. Murnau had supposedly told Hitchcock: “What you
see on the set does not matter. All that matters is what you see on the screen."8 We find this effect of forced perspective at work in Hitchcock’s set design of the penthouse window and cyclorama of Manhattan in Rope. This forced perspective serves the film’s correlation to a functional reality and Brandon and Phillip’s concealment of their secret.

At a primary level, the penthouse window operates as a textual sign in order to create a “real-time” effect. As the narrative progresses, the skyline slowly darkens as the city lights subtly emerge to create the illusion of the passing of time. Hitchcock stated that he had designed an elaborate cyclorama of the city as “an exact miniature reproduction of nearly 35 miles of New York sky-line lighted by 8000 incandescent light bulbs and 200 neon signs requiring 150 transformers.”9 Steven Jacobs notes that Hitchcock devoted significant attention to the atmospheric shifts of the cityscape seen through the penthouse window, even calling in a Griffith Observatory meteorologist to authenticate the cumulus clouds that float above the city skyline.10 Of course, these effects of the cyclorama were to support Hitchcock’s “real-time” narrative. Moreover, they gave Hitchcock complete control of the elements in the background so that the passing of time appeared natural and unmediated, an effect he learned from Murnau (see figure 2.1).

A second level of the penthouse window is its social and architectural significance. The window’s spectacular view of the New York City skyline clearly indicates Brandon and Phillip’s wealth and privileged status. Penthouses, as Jacobs notes, were one of the most typical residences of the wealthy and rich. He states that “[the penthouse] drew its mystique from the verticality that was New York’s special trademark.”11 Jacobs adds that Brandon and Phillip’s penthouse can be seen as part of the skyscraper boom which “opened itself visually to the metropolis by means of great banks of windows.”12 Moreover, the penthouse window and its panoramic view indicate a new environment of glass properties and Modernist architecture. Anne Friedberg notes that the potential of glass is that it “performs a visual dematerialization, the material barriers of glass . . . isolate the other senses.”13 As such, the window is both transparent and a barrier, providing spectacular views while protecting observers from exterior elements such as cold, wind, and rain. Friedberg writes, “Plate glass performed this separation of the senses, in which it also contributes to the virtuality of experience.”14 The transparent barrier of the penthouse window not only helps to generate a “reality effect,” but assists in subordinating the presence of the moving camera that concerned Hitchcock. As Hitchcock stated, “The audience must never be conscious of it [the camera]. If an audience became aware that the camera was performing miracles, the end itself will be defeated.”15 From this perspective,
the details of the cyclorama work in concert with Hitchcock’s “real-time” narrative in order to follow Brandon and Phillip’s command of space and concealment of the secret.

The transparency of the window is analogous to what Lacan describes as the logic of the big Other: the linguistic and communicative framework within everyday life. For Lacan, the big Other functions as a large network of language, providing the groundwork for the daily interaction of culture. The big Other supplies the subject with a world or a referent in order to generate meaning. In this regard, the view of Manhattan through the window is represented as a comprehensible reality displayed in the film’s “real-time” narration. The window must sustain its transparent architectural effect (as a contained and protected space of the penthouse) to coincide with Brandon and Phillip’s secret.

At the same time, the glass properties of windows have the potential to lose their transparent effect and cause the observer to become aware of his or her looking within the visual field. Consider L. B. “Jeff” Jefferies (James Stewart) in *Rear Window*, who exploits his rear window and telephoto lens to spy into neighboring apartments across the courtyard. Jeff takes advantage of the window’s dematerializing effect for his own private
enjoyment. But in the last act of the film when Thorwald (Raymond Burr), the man who Jeff believes is a murderer, shockingly makes eye contact with him from across the courtyard, the window’s transparent boundary collapses as Jeff becomes conscious of his own looking. In this regard, windows can both evoke a sense of mastery in the field of vision, as well as transform into an apparatus of self-scrutiny where the observer’s looking folds back upon itself. These structures of seeing within the visual field bring me to the window’s third function: what Lacan calls the disrupting and self-scrutinizing effects of the gaze.

Lacan’s premise of the gaze demonstrates the split subject (between conscious and the unconscious) within the field of visual perception. The gaze as a stain or distortion marks a point of failure in the visual field. It is a point where the subject’s looking reaches the limits of the visible, where the space between object and subject collapses. The gaze lures the spectator into the picture—it entices the desire to look within the frame. For example, the viewer is drawn into Brandon and Phillip’s devilish plan to throw a party with a hidden corpse in the room. It arouses the viewer’s desire to see if Brandon and Phillip can pull off the perfect murder. To encounter the gaze realizes the observer’s desire to look within the image. In other words, to encounter the gaze, one must already be involved or engaged within the visual field. Otherwise the gaze would have little or no effect. Lacan’s theory of the gaze demonstrates that the observer is not outside the picture as a transcendental spectator, but rather is included within the picture itself as a subject of desire.

This brings us back to the penthouse window’s primary function in how Brandon and Phillip handle the plan during the dinner party. The primary role of the window is to provide the illusion of a coherent reality and forced perspective in order to coincide with Brandon and Phillip’s secret of hiding the corpse. All the details in Brandon and Phillip’s apartment must also provide the illusion of a bourgeois setting and smooth functioning of reality, such as the brightly lit setting of the dining room and the neatly displayed artwork on the walls—these elements must adhere to the plan in order to pull off the perfect murder.

These embellishments in the penthouse build the fantasy space of Rope. Fantasy is what allows the subject to know how to fantasize. Fantasy sets up the coordinates of desire. It is a framework which permits the subject to make meaning within the world. The appeal of cinematic fantasy is that we can experience events which are not permitted in everyday life. For example, we can root for Brandon and Phillip to get away with murder and succeed with the plan—something that is prohibited within the social order. As such, the primary function of the penthouse window in Rope is to provide the coordinates of fantasy and to diminish the disrup-
tion of the gaze. To call attention to the elements outside the window, however, can potentially jeopardize Brandon and Phillip’s plan and destroy the fantasy space and forced perspective of the cyclorama. In other words, fantasy can reveal itself as a structuring force within the visual space, collapsing the distance between subject and object and displaying the excess of the gaze. As we shall see, this is precisely what Rupert achieves at the end of the film when he fires the gun out the window, calling attention to the Law after he discovers David’s corpse and that Brandon and Phillip are indeed the murderers.

Exposing the Excess of the Gaze

Rope’s one-location, “real-time” narrative can be traced to the Kammer­spielefilme (chamber-play films) of the 1920s. Carl Mayer was the founder and practitioner of the Kammer­spielefilme, which developed out of Max Reinhardt’s conception of chamber theater: plays performed with limited characters in a small environment in front of a small audience. Reinhardt’s idea of a small and intimate theater was for the audience to see subtle movements and facial expressions of the actors that might not be experienced in a large theater. Drawing upon Reinhardt’s conception of chamber theater, Mayer’s scripts contained only a few characters, generally had no intertitles, and relied on acting and mise-en-scène to communicate the narrative. The Kammer­spielefilme differed from German Expressionist films in that they tended to counter expressionistic techniques, focusing rather on realistic and intimate psychological narratives of lower-middle-class milieus, such as the portrayal of the hotel doorman (Emil Jannings) in Murnau’s The Last Laugh.

This is not to suggest that the Kammer­spielefilme did not entail expressionistic elements. As David A. Cook notes, “the whole realistic cinema which grew out of the Kammer­spielefilme can be seen as both an extension of and a reaction against the Expressionist cinema, in that it retained the morbid psychological themes of the earlier films but cast them in realistic form.” Hitchcock was always interested in stories that involved limited locations, which is evident in films such as The Lady Vanishes (1938), Lifeboat (1944), and Rear Window. Certainly Rope’s depiction of Brandon and Phillip as wealthy college students does not fit the lower-middle-class world of the Kammer­spielefilme. But Rope does share a commonality with the Kammer­spielefilme in Hitchcock’s emphasis on physical objects in the penthouse setting in relation to Brandon and Phillip’s plan to commit the perfect act of murder.
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Physical objects often have importance in the Kammerspielefilme and can take on additional meaning in relation to the lives and states of minds of the characters. Just as Reinhardt’s concept of a chamber theater was for the audience to detect character subtleties, the same effect applies to physical objects in the space of chamber-play film. In Rope, for example, the viewer spends a long time in the penthouse, which in turn allows him or her to map and familiarize objects within that space. Changes to those objects have the potential to take on greater significance. This is attributed to Hitchcock’s allowing us to participate in Brandon and Phillip’s plan. Here, surplus-knowledge within the confined setting intensifies the mise-en-scène. As such, objects in the small and intimate setting of the chamber drama are more susceptible to becoming strange and uncanny rather than integrating into a coherent order of things.

Throughout the party, Rupert detects these small oddities that stick out within the confined space of the penthouse: food displayed on the trunk instead of the dining room table, and Brandon serving expensive champagne for no apparent reason. These small anomalies are produced by Brandon and Phillip’s excessive enjoyment. Lacan argues that for the symbolic order to have a total, uninterrupted control of everyday life, it requires a renunciation of what he calls jouissance. The symbolic order functions on the sacrifice of enjoyment and will scrutinize those who enjoy excessively. Conversely, any surfacing of jouissance initiates a failure of the symbolic order—a failure that Lacan describes as an encounter with the real. Therefore, physical objects within Rope have the potential to lose their everyday textual significance, revealing an excess linked to the order of the real.

For example, during the party Phillip breaks his wine glass, cutting his hand when Mr. Atwater mistakes Kenneth for David. Hitchcock captures Phillip’s anxiety by quickly tracking the camera into a close-up of his bloody hand, which holds the broken glass (see figure 2.2). Phillip slowly walks behind the guests and gently places the broken glass on the table near the liquor. Here, the quick movement of the camera and Phillip’s protracted movement illustrate a momentary encounter of the real where time is portrayed as hindered and distorted. But more importantly, it demonstrates that physical objects are more vulnerable to losing their primary meaning within the chamber-space film. Like the primary function of the window, physical objects must maintain their everyday meaning and appear “natural” within the confined setting of the penthouse in order to coincide with Brandon and Phillip’s secret.

In order for Brandon and Phillip to integrate into the reality of a dinner party and to fulfill their plan to commit the perfect act of murder, they must avoid any such encounters with the real. Brandon and Phillip’s
inability to do so—specifically their inability to contain their obscene enjoyment—initiates an encounter with the real, which, in turn, piques Rupert’s desire. This is especially evident when Brandon unexpectedly brings up Phillip’s inability to strangle and kill a chicken at Shaw’s farm in Connecticut. Phillip’s emotional outburst in response to Brandon draws attention to himself, causing Rupert to become even more inquisitive. Later in the film, while Phillip plays the piano, Rupert inquires about his odd behavior pertaining to the incident at Shaw’s farm in Connecticut. The sound of a police siren suddenly passes by as Phillip stops playing the piano and, startled, looks at the window. The sound of the passing siren coupled with Phillip’s worried expression briefly disrupts the transparent effect of the window. Rupert’s attempt to expose the secret is met when there are momentary encounters with the real, disrupting the protected fantasy space contained by the window. This demonstrates that the window can have both pleasurable and monstrous effects in terms of looking. At the same time, these oddities within the fantasy space intensify the viewer’s enjoyment of Rope. Phillip’s emotional and physical breakdowns are welcomed encounters with the real, because they help to drive Rope’s suspense, as well as to sustain and even heighten the viewer’s engagement with the narrative.
The Collapse of the Fantasy Frame

The big Other functions on the prohibition of enjoyment and scrutinizes those who enjoy excessively. Rupert takes on the aspect of the big Other, looking for what is hidden as the figure of the Law. Throughout the evening of the party, Rupert notices Brandon and Phillip’s strange behavior due to their inability to conceal the secret: namely, what is in the room (the corpse) more than the room. Rupert’s suspicions about Brandon and Phillip’s odd behavior are confirmed by way of David’s hat. As Rupert prepares to leave the penthouse, Mrs. Wilson (Edith Evanson), the nosey housekeeper, mistakenly hands him David’s hat. Rupert puts on the hat, which does not fit on his head. Mrs. Wilson laughs, realizing she handed Rupert the wrong hat. Rupert looks at the initials D.K. on the hat with arrested attention. Brandon and Phillip’s unawareness of the workings of the big Other reveals a large anomaly or stain in the visual space, something that clearly does not fit into the order of things. Like the skull in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* painting, David’s hat (as a stain within the picture) is a trap for Rupert to encounter the gaze and the real of his own desire.

At the same time, Rupert’s discovery of David’s hat is an encounter with the gaze for the spectator of the film. This is because the viewer has already been apprised of Brandon and Phillip’s secret plan, which is now under threat by Rupert’s new knowledge. The horror of Rupert finding David’s hat demonstrates the viewer’s investment in the narrative. Otherwise, this moment would have little impact upon the spectator. We should also note that Hitchcock frames Rupert so that only the viewer is privy to this moment. Just as the viewer is given access to David’s death, he or she is also privy to Rupert’s new knowledge pertaining to Brandon and Phillip’s strange behavior. This intensifies the viewer’s sense of spectatorship and suspense because he or she has information that is not known to Brandon and Phillip.

After Rupert discovers David’s hat, he leaves with the rest of the guests. Brandon and Phillip believe they have succeeded in their plan. Just as they are ready to dispose of the body, Rupert calls and tells them that he left his cigarette case at the penthouse. Rupert returns and pretends to find his cigarette case. He asks Brandon and Phillip for a drink and begins to theorize about what may have happened to David. Rupert imagines how they would have killed David, suggesting that they would have strangled him with a rope. Hitchcock moves the camera close to Rupert’s hand to reveal the rope Brandon and Phillip used to kill David. Phillip sees Rupert holding the rope and yells in horror: “He’s got it. He knows!”
Without any warning, Phillip attempts to kill Rupert with a gun. Rupert goes for the gun as he struggles with Phillip. The gun fires at the floor as Rupert snatches the gun away from him. Brandon, however, remains relatively calm as he apologizes to Rupert, trying to convince him that Phillip is drunk and does not know what he is saying. Rupert says to Brandon that he does not want to “fence” anymore. This is because Rupert knows their secret and wants to open the chest. Brandon responds angrily: “Go ahead then. I hope you like what you see!” When Rupert opens the chest and with shock sees David’s corpse, his suspicion of Brandon and Phillip is proven correct. But this discovery of knowledge comes with a price: namely, his encounter with the real of his own desire. This encounter can only occur with Rupert’s investment in wanting to know Brandon and Phillip’s secret.

To use an example from *Rear Window* again, consider when Jeff suspects his neighbor, Thorwald, of murdering his wife. When Jeff looks out his apartment window with his binoculars, he is looking for his own desire in Thorwald’s apartment (wanting to know if he is indeed a murderer). But when Thorwald makes shocked eye contact with Jeff from across the courtyard during the denouement of the film, it is a horrifying experience because Jeff has encountered the real of his own desire. This effect is achieved because Jeff, like Rupert in probing Brandon and Phillip’s behavior, is invested in the desire to know Thorwald’s secret: did he kill his wife?

In the same manner, Brandon and Phillip’s unusual behavior intrigues Rupert, causing him to search for the secret: what are they hiding from me? David’s hat lures Rupert to return to the penthouse to further investigate David’s disappearance, which leads him to encounter the real of his own desire. Here, we begin to see the full transformation of the penthouse window as an effect of the excess of the gaze, where the barrier between reality and the real begins to falter. When Rupert reveals the rope to Brandon and Phillip, the window fully transforms into an object of anxiety, demonstrating the disruptive effect of the gaze as an unknowable force. Hitchcock’s “real-time” experiment of extreme long takes prevents him from using editing devices as a way to narratively depict character psychologically. For this reason, Hitchcock has to rely on elements of the mise-en-scène in order to visually show character emotions and narrative tension. Indeed, the window’s metamorphosis emerges from the influence of German Expressionism on Hitchcock’s work as a way to visualize the psychological tension in the film’s final act.

The big Other resides in the realm of language, made up of networks of signifiers, providing the subject a referent in order to make meaning in the everyday world. The real disrupts this order, realizing a
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point of non-meaning within the big Other. German Expressionist cinema is characteristic of the real, in that it destabilizes an objective and coherent cinematic reality. Ian Roberts, for instance, notes that “the dream world of Expressionism, artificial worlds of light and shadow captured on celluloid, created a unique approach to mise-en-scène which enabled the German cinema industry to challenge, albeit briefly, the growing dominance of Hollywood.” Rather than reproducing an objective cinematic reality, German filmmakers attempted to depict forces of the invisible through abstract and subjective perspectives. Expressionist filmmakers wanted to show the “twilight of the soul,” to represent and express dynamics of the strange and uncanny. As John D. Barlow puts it, German filmmakers saw the possibilities of cinema in representing “the mysterious, the strange, the fantastic, and the shadowy horrors of a soul in torment.” Lotte H. Eisner, in particular, points out that the set designs of German Expressionism “vibrate” psychological unrest, such as the slanted and oblique buildings and “twisting” back-alleys in Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). She explains that the “animation of the inorganic” can be traced to German novels “long before” the emergence of Expressionism. Eisner observes that “the Germans . . . have an eerie gift for animating objects. . . . We frequently find German-speaking authors attributing diabolical overtones” to objects, such as the description of streets in Gustav Meyrink’s novel *Golem*, which “seem to have an insidious life of their own.” She notes: “In some mysterious way these streets contrive to abjure their life and feelings during the daytime, and lend themselves instead to their inhabitants, those enigmatic creatures who wander aimlessly around, feebly animated by an invisible magnetic current. But at night the houses reclaim their life with interest from these unreal inhabitants; they stiffen, and their sly faces fill with malevolence. The doors become gaping maws and shrieking gullets.” In the final act of *Rope*, the transformation of the penthouse window is characteristic of Eisner’s description of the vivification of animate objects. The window, so to speak, becomes alive once Rupert exposes Brandon and Phillip’s secret. The gradual change from day to night seen through the window visually transforms the penthouse into a state of unrest in order to visualize the film’s narrative climax. This is most notable in the letters from a neon “Storage” sign outside the window that invades the space of the penthouse with red, green, and white pulsating light. Certainly the “Storage” sign is part of Hitchcock’s description of *Rope*’s city lights as a “light organ.” Hitchcock stated that “by the time the picture went from the setting of the sun in the first reel to the hour of total darkness in the final denouement, the man at the light organ had played a nocturnal Manhattan symphony in light.”
But it can be argued that the “Storage” sign and its flickering lights coincide with Rupert exposing Brandon and Phillip’s secret. Hitchcock displays this by overpowering the right side of the frame as a lighting effect, visualizing the window’s inability (as well as the space of the penthouse) to fit into a coherent reality. The metamorphosis of the window and city lights reflects a failure in the visual field caused by the gaze. More importantly, the atmospheric tension created through Hitchcock’s complex lighting design emotionally depicts Brandon and Phillip’s foiled plan to commit the perfect act of murder. Whereas the transparency of the window throughout the dinner party expresses an objective and transparent reality, the blinking of the lights of the “Storage” sign unravels the fabric of Rope’s contained and protected space as an effect of the excess of the gaze.

Furthermore, the excess of the gaze shows a darker side of these murderous characters, specifically Brandon, who appears to be proud of what he achieved, arguing that there is intellectual value and rationality in David’s death. Brandon states to Rupert: “He [Phillip] and I lived what you and I talked.” Here, the excess of the gaze allows us to see an obscene underside of power at work in Brandon and Phillip’s commitment to the theory of the superman. Of course, Rupert is sickened by their act as he says to Brandon: “You were right too, if nothing else, a man should stand by his words. But you’ve given my words a meaning I never dreamed of. And you’ve tried to twist them into a cold logical excuse for your ugly murder.” This suggests that Rupert’s belief in the right of the superman is a fantasy. And as long as that right is not enacted on anyone, Rupert’s fantasy continues. As such, the excess of the gaze permits us to see a dark dimension of Rupert’s belief in the superman. David’s death destroys Rupert’s fantasy, causing him to feel extreme guilt and shame. Yet Rupert thanks Brandon for these feelings as he states to him: “Tonight you made me ashamed of every concept I had of superior or inferior beings. And I thank you for that shame. . . . It’s not what I am going to do, it’s what society is going to do.” Rupert then turns to society to correct this situation. He walks to the window, opens it, and fires the gun into the sky to call attention to the Law.

Finally, Hitchcock depicts the excess of the gaze in both the film’s last camera movement and character performance after Rupert fires the gun out the window. After the call to the public, the camera slowly dollies back to the chest. The chattering of the public gradually increases. The juxtaposition of the movement of the camera against the amplified off-screen sound of the city creates a vertiginous and crippling effect on the film’s fantasy space. Rupert’s protracted and lethargic body movements, characteristic of German Expressionism, accommodate the hyp-
notic effect of the camera’s movement as he moves from the window to
the chest.

The enormous, utterly dominating penthouse window that is the
centerpiece of the set for *Rope* thus carries many functions in the film.
Its primary role is to sustain the illusion of a coherent reality in order
to coincide with Brandon and Phillip’s secret plan, as well as to support
Hitchcock’s “real-time” experiment. But when the window loses its trans-
parent effect, when the gap between seeing and being seen breaks down,
reality begins to falter. The window contains both a fantasy space and a
failure in the visual field, as well being the locus of the set design, light-
ing experiments, and camera movements of German Expressionism and
the *Kammerspielefilme* that so strongly influenced *Rope*. These functions
of the penthouse window show that the viewer is not outside the picture
in a transcendent perspective, but is included within it. Brandon and
Phillip fail in their plan because of their ignorance of the public sphere
and the necessity of sacrificing enjoyment. That is, they cannot conceal
their surplus enjoyment, which inadvertently leads Rupert to the corpse.
When Rupert discovers the corpse, he calls attention to the Law and thus
publicly exposes Brandon and Phillip’s obscene enjoyment. Brandon and
Phillip, who privilege themselves as superior beings, attempt to close the
gap between *jouissance* and the symbolic order. This is an impossible task
because the social order functions on the shared sacrifice of enjoyment.
This is precisely what Rupert states to Brandon: “By what right do you
dare say that there is a superior few to which you belong? By what right
did you dare decide that boy in there [David’s corpse in the chest] was
inferior and therefore can be killed? Did you think you were God, Bran-
don?” Or, in the words of Lacan: “The gods belong to the field of the
real.”27