

Introduction

Entangled

I SPENT A YEAR TANGLED UP in *Rope*.

My working days during those months were ones of “pleasing monotony,” to borrow a phrase from Thomas Mann.¹ Every morning I would make coffee, sit in a chair, and watch Alfred Hitchcock’s experimental film of 1948 about two young men named Brandon and Phillip, who murder one of their friends in the name of art, intellectual superiority, and “the perfect crime.”² I would pause the action every so often to make notes, to read a relevant text, or to pen paragraphs towards the book that you are now reading. Outside, the seasons came and went, bringing difference to the view from my window. But inside, the routine remained flatly the same day after day: *Rope*, *Rope*, and more *Rope*. A line from Philip Roth’s *The Ghost Writer* often haunted me: “And I ask myself, Why is there no way but this for me to fill my hours?”³

It was a strange, disorienting experience—a claustrophobic experiment inspired by a claustrophobic experiment. By the time I became a “sojourner in civilized life again” and handed over the first version of the typescript of *Perpetual Movement* to the publisher in the summer of 2019, I had spent hundreds of hours watching a film that runs for a touch under eighty minutes.⁴ I often felt lost or trapped in *Rope*, as if I were a friend of Phillip and Brandon, an unacknowledged guest at their macabre party. (On more difficult days I wished that I were inside their fine wooden trunk with only the corpse of David Kentley for company.) The word “diegesis” lost a little of its differentiating hold, as did the familiar distinction between life and text. I sometimes dreamed about

the film and occasionally caught myself imitating a character's mannerisms or style of speech (Brandon, usually, for the record). I found myself unconsciously mouthing the dialogue with the actors while I watched. Sometimes I would utter lines from the script involuntarily before they had been spoken on screen—a case of the entangled critic as prompter. I still do not feel, though, that I have managed to free myself from *Rope*, to escape from its textual bind. I lived daily with and within the film for a year, and I have devoted an entire book to it, but the pages that follow do not claim to pronounce a final shrugging verdict, a burying assessment; I have no interest here in what Roland Barthes once called “the monster of totality.”⁵ *Rope* comes out on top.

Why?

Why did I sacrifice a year of my life to a film about a sacrifice? What was the point? What did I discover? What, now that the experiment is over, do I have to report?

I found myself facing something like these questions a couple of months into the project. Examining duties took me briefly to Malta, where my hosts invited me also to attend a meeting of their “Futures of Literature” seminar during my final full day on the island. The topic for discussion was “creative criticism,” and all those participating were asked to read in advance the introduction to Stephen Benson and Clare Connors's field-defining anthology on the subject.⁶ On the afternoon before the seminar, after my work as examiner was completed, I made precise plans: catch the bus from my hotel in Attard to the ancient walled city of Mdina, see the sights, read the set text for the seminar in a café, travel back down to Attard, and meet my hosts for dinner. It all seemed so simple, so perfectly prepared. “You always plan your parties so well; it's odd to have anything go wrong,” as Rupert says to Brandon at one point in *Rope*.

But things did go slightly wrong. Five minutes into the journey towards Mdina, the driver slammed on the brakes to shout furiously at a gang of teenagers who were playing music on their phones and shouting through the windows at pedestrians. As the bus set off again, I must have unconsciously muttered some kind of weary middle-aged approval. “You're English?” asked the man sitting next to me; he was perhaps twenty years my senior. I explained that, no, I wasn't quite English, but that English is nonetheless my native tongue. He wanted to know

why I was in Malta. I said that I had been examining at the university. "Which department?" he asked. "English," I replied. "Ah," he cried. "So you teach English, you speak English, and you *look* English, but you say that you're not English. What kind of scam is this?" I laughed, and he then asked about my specialism. I explained that I was currently working on film. "Which films?" he wanted to know. "Just one," I said. Just one film. All day, every day.

He had not seen *Rope*, he confessed, but he was keen to know why on earth anyone would write—or read—an entire book on a single film. I was about fifteen seconds into a defensive soliloquy when he held up his hand and told me that his stop was approaching. He pressed the button to alert the driver. "If I see you on the bus later, you can finish your story," he said, rising from the seat. "I need to be persuaded that your book isn't a waste of time." The bus came to a halt. My companion stepped down into the street and waved fondly as the engine roared and we moved uphill towards Mdina.

He was not on the bus when I traveled back down to Attard several hours later. This was particularly disappointing because I had just read the introduction to Benson and Connors's *Creative Criticism* anthology on the sunny terrace of a café and been bowled over by its propositions. I was inspired, illuminated, ready to defend my book and to give a thrilling lecture on the practice of criticism that would, no doubt, have had the whole bus spellbound. The paragraphs that follow in this introduction are, in essence, what I would have said to my inquisitive traveling companion. I hope that my words somehow find their way to Malta, where they took shape.

I was struck first by Benson and Connors's claim that "while there is much to be said for getting things in on time, it does not follow that we should therefore keep quiet about how we have spent our days" (p. 35). Setting aside an entire year to living with or within a single text is an activity whose aims are perhaps not immediately apparent, particularly in times of cruel austerity and urged institutional efficiency. This is precisely why *Perpetual Movement* begins with an open, explicit marking of time, of my time: *this is how I have spent my days, and I will not keep quiet about it*. That does not, of course, explain *why* I did what I did. A year, yes, fine, but for what possible reason?

Benson and Connors's introduction also helped me to address this crucial question. (If we are unable to give an account of why we do what we do as critics, we are, it seems to me, doing something wrong.) Creative criticism, the authors propose at one point, "registers the way works of

art don't just passively lie there, all before us, as the world did to Adam and Eve, but come at us in some way. We are surprised, or stolen up upon, find ourselves caught. It needn't be immediate; it is what turns out to have happened. It could take the form of an obsession, perhaps. We have to keep going back" (p. 37). As these words stole up, surprised, and caught me beneath the bright Maltese sun, I saw in them an account of my odd, obsessive relationship to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*.

I first saw the film as an undergraduate in the early 1990s. I returned to it occasionally in the years that immediately followed, but not with any kind of obsession. When I came to write *Hitchcock's Magic*, which was published in 2011 and about six years in the making, I did not feel the need to say much about *Rope*, though it rose up in a few places to shed light on other films by the director, notably *Rebecca* (1940).⁷ After that, however, *Rope* just kept coming at me, to use the vocabulary of Benson and Connors, and I felt a need "to keep going back," as they put it, to meet the film head on. *Perpetual Movement* is an account of this experience.

I do not mean "account" in the mere sense of telling a tale, as I have spent much time doing so far in this introduction; this is not an autobiography, though I remain committed to the belief that academic writing should tell a story and should acknowledge the lived investment of the critic. I mean "account," rather, in the sense of accounting for the way in which I have found myself pulled back to Hitchcock's film as it, in turn, came at me. What I want to address in the following pages is, in short, textual tenacity—the way in which this particular film, this *peculiar* film, remains alive, engaging, alluring, entrancing, enveloping, and engulfing, even when, thanks to repeated viewings and many pages of existing scholarship, there really ought to be nothing left to see or say. Benson and Connors point out that each piece in their anthology "has been impassioned in different ways by its encounter with what it has read or seen"; such an encounter, they add, is a "being-with" an artwork (p. 5). My "being-with" *Rope* lasted for a year in its most intensively obsessional phase, and this book is, by way of response, an impassioned reckoning with the encounter, with the daily touch of the text. Why did I go back for more, and why did the film keep coming at me?

The final element of Benson and Connors's introduction that leapt out at me is their discussion of distance. A section entitled "On" opens on the following note:

"Write an essay *on*." "What are you writing *about*?" The vocabulary of criticism tends to limit itself to these two prepositions.

They position us as standing apart from a text or artwork, facing it, a subject confronting an object from which it is distinct and aloof. (p. 18)

Creative critics, however, they propose, “invent a more flexible prepositional vocabulary, to capture the mesh of their involvement in and relationship to the art they encounter” (p. 19). They turn briefly to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “criticism of ‘beside,’” which they find persuasive in part, but, spurred on by their intervention, I have come to see this book not as being *on* Hitchcock’s *Rope* or *about* Hitchcock’s *Rope* or even *beside* Hitchcock’s *Rope*. It is, rather, a book that finds itself *in* Hitchcock’s *Rope*. This is a text by a captured critic, a bound critic.

I am, however, clearly a critic who can still move, can still put pen to paper. The film has a hold, but not a stranglehold. How the rope is tied makes all the difference, I think. Too tight, immobility and death follow—as David Kentley discovers in the opening minutes of the film. Too loose, the bind is lost, and there is no hold. Hitchcock’s *Rope*, I will argue in what follows, walks a tightrope. On the one hand, the film pulls us into its narrative and holds us in suspense as we wonder if the “perfect crime” that we have witnessed will be discovered and the killers brought to justice. Our seeing the murder take place at the start of *Rope* is crucial to this suspended entanglement: from the very outset, the camera permits viewers to see and to know in ways denied to characters in the film. Most notably, until the final reel only we and the two murderers know what has happened and are therefore aware that there is a body in the wooden trunk in the living room throughout the party.⁸ I will examine this textual quality closely in the chapters that follow. *Rope* reels us in, then, and holds us tight until its final scene comes, at which point we are released from the agonizing suspense because we see the crime uncovered and the burden of our bleak knowledge at last shared.

On the other hand, however, one of the central arguments of this book will be that *Rope* never completely releases its audience. The textual knots are loosened with the conventional Hollywood arrival at narrative resolution, of course: Rupert lifts the lid of the trunk, sees the body of David Kentley, denounces the killers, and alerts the police by opening a window and firing a gun. This finally undoes suspense with revelation and knowledge: the viewer need no longer wonder anxiously if or how the crime will be detected. But this late loosening never goes as far as a complete release into full knowledge. *Rope* retains a hold upon us for, while we see and know with special clarity throughout the film, we are

also reminded repeatedly that we are *not* seeing and *not* knowing certain details, certain elements of the taut world in which the tale unfolds. This is particularly surprising because, with the exception of a sole exterior shot beneath the opening credits, the whole of *Rope* takes place in a single apartment and in real time.⁹ For around eighty minutes, the camera glides majestically around the limited interior space and offers intimate, nuanced access to conversations and details. This is all part of the film's apparent commitment to creating a position of knowledge and overview for the audience—a position of “dominant specularity,” to take a phrase from Colin MacCabe's classic account of realism in cinema and literature.¹⁰ But, as I will discuss in detail in the following chapters, there are moments in every one of the film's shots at which it becomes clear that we are being denied access to something. Each roaming possession of the *mise-en-scène*, that is to say, finds itself interrupted and undermined by an acknowledgment of an *elsewhere*: something that the camera could perhaps in principle show us but does not; something that lies beyond the embrace of its prowling, unearthing gaze. “Dominant specularity” meets oversight.

Perpetual Movement(s)

The film pulls, and pulls us, in two directions at once. This way: narrative closure, knowledge, and mastery. That way: openness, unknowing, and mystery. My year in *Rope* persuaded me that this movement cannot be stilled: it is a perpetual movement.

I should explain this phrase; it is the title of my book, after all, and I have already used the words in this introduction without comment. Over the opening credits of *Rope* we hear an orchestral arrangement of a piece that will appear repeatedly in the film: the first section of Francis Poulenc's *Trois mouvements perpétuels*.¹¹ This three-part composition was originally written for the piano in 1918 and performed for the first time by Ricardo Viñes in February 1919.¹² A popular phonograph recording was released in 1928, and by the time that Hitchcock's *Rope* appeared two decades later, Poulenc's name was well known in the United States, “where his choral works were more frequently performed than in his native country.”¹³ The archives show that Hitchcock was insistent on having Poulenc's music in *Rope* and that a fee of \$1500 was paid for the necessary rights.¹⁴

When Poulenc wrote to Ricardo Viñes to ask him to perform the *Mouvements* for the first time, he called the pieces “easy enough for a

child to play.”¹⁵ The compositions, with their debt to Erik Satie, are certainly brief and might appear to be “easy enough for a child to play,” but there is actually, again echoing Satie, a subtle complexity to the first part that makes its place in *Rope* both apt and significant.¹⁶ Scott Paulin offers the following concise description:

Poulenc’s *Mouvement perpétuel* No. 1 is remarkable for its opposition to the norms of classical tonal music—in short for its deviance. Over a moderately paced *ostinato* bass (the “perpetual motion” of the title) Poulenc writes a series of brief, unrelated melodies, some of which are highly chromatic and clash rather dissonantly with the unchanging bass. After a return “home” to the opening theme (Poulenc’s one nod to classical form: a recapitulation) the music ebbs away, finally rising to close on a quiet but dissonant tone-cluster. The ending is tentative and inconclusive, and the pleasures of the work are those of momentary harmonic colors and shifts—not of a steadily building tension which is finally and cathartically resolved, as in classical tonal procedures.¹⁷

I will return repeatedly in this book to *Rope*’s incorporation of the first of the *Trois mouvements perpétuels*. What I want to isolate here at this early point are merely the “unresolved” and “dissonant” aspects of the music by Poulenc that runs through the film. I have given this book the title *Perpetual Movement* because one of my central points will be that the qualities of openness and dissonance found in Poulenc’s music are also at work in Hitchcock’s film. *Rope*, I want to argue, is as unresolved and dissonant as the music that frames it and is played on a number of occasions by one of its main characters. Like the first of the *Mouvements perpétuels*, *Rope* perhaps seems simple enough, straightforward enough: it is, after all, a mainstream Hollywood production with familiar narrative conventions that it is bound to follow. If Poulenc’s music is “easy enough for a child to play,” that same child could almost certainly understand Hitchcock’s film. But appearances are deceptive: Poulenc’s composition lets a distinct lack of resolution resonate, and *Rope*, I will argue in the ensuing chapters, follows suit. Hitchcock and Poulenc are a fine match: the *Trois mouvements perpétuels* and *Rope* are made for each other, a perfect couple, even if Poulenc was unaware that his work had been used in the film until he happened to attend a screening of it during his first North American tour in late 1948.¹⁸

A Whole Book?

My companion on the bus in Malta wanted to know why I was writing an entire book about a single film. Why devote so many pages to just one of Alfred Hitchcock's many works? Why allow a discussion of *Rope* to tie up around 75,000 words of analysis when there are more than fifty other films by Hitchcock calling out for consideration and comparison? ("Six and only six films," writes Murray Pomerance, outlining the scope of *A Dream of Hitchcock* and stressing that "no claim will be found here that I uncover the deeper meanings of Hitchcock the personality, or a blueprint to his vast oeuvre."¹⁹ One and only one film fills my pages, which are similarly uninterested in the personality of the director or a key to his work.) These are fine and fair questions, to which I have two broad responses.

First, while *Rope* has received a significant amount of critical attention over the years, and while some of that criticism has helped radically to reshape the study of Hitchcock's work, there has never been a monograph in English devoted solely to the film. Some of Hitchcock's other productions have found themselves the focus of dedicated volumes, but not *Rope*.²⁰ *Perpetual Movement*, then, is the first book of its kind, and it makes extensive use of archival material that has been underplayed or overlooked in existing criticism.

Second, and more significant, *Rope* requires space. Allowing my analysis of the film to unfold across an entire book enables me to draw attention to aspects of the film that have until now escaped the gaze of critics. There are many wonderful short discussions of *Rope*—in essays and in sections of books—but there is a textual density to the film that invites and requires extended discussion. *Perpetual Movement* will often engage with earlier analyses of the film, but it offers above all a new contribution to knowledge—one that is only possible in the context of an extended, obsessive discussion. *Rope* is set within a limited space, but critical analysis of the text cannot follow suit if it is to do justice to the tightly coiled richness of the film. Hitchcock "was master of the frame," as Murray Pomerance rightly notes, "and every nuance of his image is vital, no aspect decorative."²¹ This book, accordingly, is an attempt, in the words of Roland Barthes, "to live according to nuance."²² *Rope* does not take up much room, but analysis must.

There is a risk, of course, that my approach will summon shades of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, in which Charles Kinbote's discussion of a cryptic poem by John Shade far outweighs its subject matter and

comes ultimately to drown it. In my defense, I would stress that I have no desire to be, in Kinbote's approving phrase, "the commentator who has the last word."²³ Even more laughable is Kinbote's suggestion that the reader consult his commentary before approaching Shade's work, then read the poem with the help of the analysis, and finally consult the critical discussion once again "so as to complete the picture" (p. 18). My attention to *Rope* will be close and precise—this is a work of academic scholarship, after all—but I will also conclude that Hitchcock's film of perpetual movement has the last word.

Rope Guide I

Dante was guided through the realms of the dead by Virgil and Beatrice; I chose T. J. Clark and Roland Barthes to lead me on *la diritta via* through the tangled threads of *Rope*.

The Sight of Death, Clark informs us on the opening page of his book, "is not a manifesto."²⁴ It is, instead, a diary of textual obsession.²⁵ Clark relates how he arrived in Los Angeles in early January 2000 to take up a six-month position at the Getty Research Institute. The precise purpose of the stay was not apparent to him at the outset: "It was not clear what would occupy my time in Los Angeles, but the most likely bet was Picasso between the wars. Work on that subject had already begun. The notes and books for it were in the back of my car" (p. 1). But "a day or so" into his stay (p. 1), Clark found himself standing in front of two paintings by Nicolas Poussin in the Getty Museum: *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (1648) and *Landscape with a Calm* (1650–51). He began visiting the artworks repeatedly, taking notes in the form of a diary:

It was not until several weeks into my note-taking that it dawned on me that the diary entries might make a book. Reading over what I had written then, I realized that if the notes were interesting it was primarily as a record of looking taking place and changing through time. Of course, bound up with that was the assumption, the truth of which I hoped would be demonstrated by the notes, that certain pictures demand such looking and repay it. Coming to terms with them is slow work. But astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what incidental

alter bewilderingly from day to day, the larger order of the depiction breaks up, recrystallizes, fragments again, persists like an afterimage. And slowly the question arises: What is it, fundamentally, I am returning to in this particular case? What is it I want to see again? (pp. 5–8)

I found myself standing in front of *The Sight of Death* quite by chance some months after my year-long entanglement in *Rope* had begun. While I am fortunate enough never to have suffered from writer's block, I often fall into deep despair while working on a book or even a short essay. Ink flows and fills the pages, yes, but the worth, direction, and dominion of the sentences are uncertain, unclear. "When I have laboured out a story, I suddenly see it in a light of such contemptible triviality," as Edwin Reardon says of his literary efforts in Gissing's *New Grub Street*.²⁶ I was in one of these states of wandering dejection when I happened to pick up a copy of *The Sight of Death* in a secondhand bookshop. I leafed through its smooth pages, and my eyes fell by chance upon the passage that I have just quoted at length. Looking at paintings is an activity that differs significantly from looking at films, of course, but I realized that Clark's questions about his obsessive returns to Poussin were, in effect, the questions that I had been trying to pose in my daily dealings with Hitchcock's film. *What is it, fundamentally, I am returning to in this particular case? What is it I want to see again?* In this chance encounter, *The Sight of Death* became the site of life, of new life, for my own uncertain undertaking, in which I would give myself over entirely "to the process of seeing again and again."

My conclusions about *Rope* are not the same as Clark's conclusions about Poussin's paintings, and I will sight death before I manage to write a book with the erudite elegance of *The Sight of Death*. But I take from Clark a spellbound interest in "what compels the return" (p. 142)—in what draws the gaze back again and again to a work of art. Around halfway through his analysis, while considering *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, Clark writes:

[W]hat I want to talk about is why *Snake* bears repeated looking. Paul Valéry says somewhere that a work of art is defined by the fact that it does not exhaust itself—offer up what it has to offer—on first or second or subsequent reading. Art-ness is the capacity to invite repeated response. *Snake*, or my experience of *Snake*, is a strong case of that. (p. 115)

Rope, or my experience of *Rope*, is a strong case of that, too. Although the film begins and ends with moments at which characters have exhausted themselves, the text, for me, “is defined by the fact that it does not exhaust itself.” My analysis of Hitchcock’s film in the following chapters wrestles with this “capacity to invite repeated response,” this textual tenacity, this open beckoning.

Rope Guide II

On February 8, 1968, Roland Barthes began a new seminar at the École pratique des hautes études in Paris. The title of the course had been advertised in advance as “Recherches sémiologiques: analyse d’ouvrages récents, compte rendu et discussion de travaux en cours” (“Semiological research: analysis of recent publications, account and discussion of works in progress”), but Barthes announced at the start of the first session that he had since undergone a change of heart—as is “normal for all research,” he added.²⁷ The stated title of the seminar, he explained, was now only “partly right”:

Semiological research? Yes, still [*toujours*].

Works in progress? Maybe, after Easter, if we have time.

Recent works? No, unless we decree that the plural is the singular and that the nineteenth century is the twentieth century. (p. 55)

The reference here to the singular gave a clue to the new direction of the seminar: “We will, in effect, *work* [. . .] on a single text and this text belongs to the nineteenth century,” Barthes proceeded to explain (p. 55). The work in question was Honoré de Balzac’s *Sarrasine*, a novella of around thirty pages, which forms part of the vast *Scènes de la vie parisienne*. The analysis of the tale would, Barthes noted, be slow and nonexhaustive, and it would proceed “*pas à pas*”—step by step (p. 74). He reserved for himself “the right to digression” (p. 75) and spoke of a “drugged reading” in which there would be a heightened sensitivity to the text under analysis (p. 79). The aim was not “deciphering” (p. 76) in the name of “*final* commentary on the work” (p. 79), and there would, Barthes stressed, be “no conclusion, truth, last word on *Sarrasine*” (p. 79). Barthes is no Kinbote.

So slow was the reading of the tale, in fact, that at the end of the seminar in Paris in May 1969, Barthes had made it no further than

Sarrasine's prologue—barely twelve pages of text. The analysis came to a halt, and the seminar disbanded. When it reconvened for the following academic year, its focus was “La notion d’idiolecte: premières questions, premières recherches.”²⁸ But Barthes’s engagement with Balzac’s narrative was not over: in 1970, he published a book entitled *S/Z*, in which he returned to *Sarrasine*—and finally made it to the end of the curious tale.

S/Z begins by denouncing forms of criticism that claim to reveal the truth of a text or, in classic structuralist fashion, attempt “to see all the world’s stories (and there have been ever so many) within a single structure.”²⁹ Such approaches, for Barthes, foster “indifference” on account of their ultimate lack of interest in the difference of each text.³⁰ He adds an immediate clarification:

This difference is not, obviously, some complete, irreducible quality (according to a mythic view of literary creation), it is not what designates the individuality of each text, what names, signs, finishes off each work with a flourish; on the contrary, it is a difference which does not stop and which is articulated upon the infinity of texts, of languages, of systems: a difference of which each text is the return. (p. 3)

A difference that does not stop. Or, to phrase things differently, perpetual movement.

In *S/Z*, interpretation becomes a matter, not of “establishing a truth,” but of “remain[ing] attentive to the plural of a text” (p. 11). The single tale by Balzac over which Barthes’s analysis obsesses is, as an example of nineteenth-century realism, “committed to the closure system of the West” (p. 7) and, as such, apparently dissolves the central enigma which drives its narrative. There is a familiar fictional formula at work in *Sarrasine*: mystery is established—who is the little old man at the Lantys’ party? what is the source of the family’s wealth? who is *Sarrasine*?—and then, with the closing of the narrative, mystery is replaced by knowledge. The little old man, we learn in time, is *La Zambinella*, a once-famous castrato; the family wealth comes from *La Zambinella*’s career on the Italian stage; and the figure who gives his name to the tale was a man who died for the love of *La Zambinella*. *Fin*.

But things are not quite what they seem. Balzac’s apparently formulaic tale is, Barthes’s painstaking analysis establishes, actually a story in which categories are undecidable, in which revelation occurs alongside reservation, in which narrative closure never quite comes. There is,

contrary to first impressions, a disruptive plurality at work in *Sarrasine*. This plurality is “parsimonious” (p. 6), Barthes acknowledges, and is clearly not the kind of explicit undecidability found in the modernist fictions that took issue with realism—but it is a plurality nonetheless. To read *Sarrasine* as a story in which complete closure is achieved and all enigmas evaporate would be, *S/Z* concludes, to overlook the quietly nuanced complexity of the text.

Hitchcock’s *Rope* is, like *Sarrasine*, a well-wrought case of realism. As a mainstream Hollywood production, it is required to move towards closure and resolution. The questions posed at the start of the film—will the terrible crime be discovered? will the body in the wooden chest be exposed? what was the motive for the murder? will the killers face justice?—are answered by the time that we reach the final reel. There is revelation, exposure of the truth, and, just before the final credits roll, the sound of the police approaching the apartment in which the killing has occurred. There is, in short, conventional closure: *Rope*, in spite of its striking formal innovations (to which I will turn in time), could not really be called an explicitly avant-garde film in terms of its narrative measure and movement.

But Barthes’s *S/Z* watches over the pages of my book because the central argument of *Perpetual Movement* will be that *Rope*, like Balzac’s *Sarrasine*, has a “parsimonious plurality,” a subtle tendency to undo the categories and conventions upon which it nonetheless relies. Alongside the dramatic revelation and the classical closure, there are, I want to propose, ways in which the film tells another tale—a tale in which viewers are reminded repeatedly of the *limits* of their knowledge; a tale in which categories are unsettled; a tale in which an opening undecidability stems confident certainty.

Barthes draws out the muted openness of *Sarrasine* by breaking Balzac’s text into 561 small pieces—*lexias*, he calls them—and reading these units in order to establish how “everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, to an ultimate structure.”³¹ “If we want to remain attentive to the plural of a text (however limited it may be),” Barthes proposes, “we must renounce structuring this text in large masses, as was done by classical rhetoric and by secondary-school explication” (pp. 11–12). I remain persuaded by this approach, which Barthes elsewhere called “microanalysis,” and I wondered while planning this book if I should divide *Rope* into hundreds of brief fragments for examination.³² I quickly realized, however, that Hitchcock’s film, unlike Balzac’s novella, has a textual form that suggests a convenient

way in which to separate the text for consideration: it is already divided, in effect, into eleven lexias.

Form

Don DeLillo once called the family “the cradle of the world’s misinformation.” “There must,” he added, “be something in family life that generates factual error.”³³ It seems to me that DeLillo’s claim also applies to discussions of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope*, which repeatedly contain glaring errors about the form of the film. D. A. Miller, one of the very finest readers of *Rope*, summarizes the situation beautifully:

The technical originality of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* has been so little neglected by serious-minded criticism that the latter may be considered almost definitively shaped by a ritual of recounting and assessing the director’s desire to do the film, as he put it, “in a single shot,” or at any rate, as nearly without benefit of montage as the state of the art allowed in 1948, when a camera only held ten minutes’ worth of film. Yet this technicist bias has proven to be curiously distracted by the very shooting technique on which it elects to concentrate. For one thing, contrary to all reasonable expectations, it has hardly managed to generate a single accurate account of the technique in question. Again and again, for instance, we are told that each shot in *Rope* runs to ten minutes, whereas the shots range variously from roughly three to nine minutes; or that Hitchcock blackened out the action every time he changed cameras, though only five of *Rope*’s ten cuts are managed this way. It is as though *Rope* criticism aimed less at a description than at a correction of Hitchcock’s experiment, for whose irregularities and inconsistencies there is substituted a programmatic perfection that better supports the dream of a continuous film (not yet to mention whatever wishes might find fulfillment in that dream) than Hitchcock’s actual shooting practice.³⁴

Given the strangely stubborn nature of such errors, it seems sensible to restate Miller’s corrections here in as clear and prosaic a way as possible.³⁵ If the mistakes have been repeated over and over again, I can see

no harm in rearticulating the reality; “I like people who face facts,” as Uncle Charlie puts it in Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).³⁶ These, then, without a doubt, are the facts about the form of *Rope*:

- *Rope* was neither filmed in one take nor made to appear as if it were filmed in one take. Hitchcock might have had, as he once told François Truffaut, a “crazy idea to do it in a single shot,” but such a thing was, as D.A. Miller points out in the quotation above, technically impossible in 1948.³⁷
- *Rope* consists of eleven separate shots which range in length from roughly two-and-a-half minutes to nearly ten minutes.
- Half of the ten cuts between these eleven shots are “masked,” in that there is some kind of attempt to hide the fact that a break in filming has occurred, but the other five cuts are perfectly regular, perfectly obvious. The ten cuts, whose style alternates, occur at the following moments:

1. 0:02:24 (hard cut)
2. 0:11:34 (masked cut)
3. 0:19:06 (hard cut)
4. 0:26:06 (masked cut)
5. 0:32:58 (hard cut)
6. 0:42:31 (masked cut)
7. 0:49:49 (hard cut)
8. 0:57:17 (masked cut)
9. 1:06:59 (hard cut)
10. 1:11:26 (masked cut)³⁸

Critics writing in the years during which *Rope* was, for contractual reasons, withheld from general circulation can perhaps be forgiven for their oversights—they were, after all, working in the dark, from memory.³⁹ But anyone who writes about the film in our era of easy access and *still* claims that *Rope* is, or appears to be, one continuous shot is guilty of careless, casual scholarship.

Because *Rope* has an unusually small number of component pieces (Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, by way of comparison, contains nearly 800 shots), I have let the form of the film determine the form of this book, which, after this introduction, unfolds across eleven chapters—one for each shot.⁴⁰ In this respect, I have stuck with the plan that Geoff Dyer

rejected when writing his brilliant, obsessive book on Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979)—another film, ultimately, about what happens in a room. “I had intended,” Dyer explains:

breaking this little book into 142 sections—each separated from the once preceding and following it by a double space—corresponding to the 142 shots of the film. That's a very low number of shots for a long film and it worked well at first but then, as I became engrossed and re-engrossed in the film, I kept losing track of where one shot ended and another began.⁴¹

I can see precisely why Dyer abandoned this approach, but *Rope* is considerably shorter than *Stalker* and, moreover, contains far fewer than 142 shots. I have, therefore, followed Dyer into a zone from which he retreated—and I have kept going. I will sometimes refer backwards and forwards, narratively speaking, in a given chapter—anything else would have been woundingly hermetic—but will for most of the time keep the focus of each part of the book trained obsessively upon its corresponding shot in Hitchcock's film. *Perpetual Movement*, in this respect, is a gradual movement through Hitchcock's film—*pas à pas*, as Barthes puts it. In the language of *S/Z*, I have treated *Rope* as a series of eleven ready-made lexias. When Barthes divided *Sarrasine* into 561 small units of analysis, he found himself having to choose at which points to “cut” the prose for inspection.⁴² “This cutting up, admittedly,” he added, was “arbitrary in the extreme” (p. 13). I, however, did not have to contend with such arbitrary impositions: I have cut my book where the film cuts; the filmic lexias were already apparent, already marked out in the fiction. *Rope* is roped off from the outset into eleven sections. Form follows form. “Form is everything,” as a fictional Robert Frost puts it in Tobias Wolff's *Old School*.⁴³



Introductions to academic monographs habitually conclude with summaries of the chapters that follow. Here, however, given the way in which the structure of the study mimics the structure of the film under analysis, there is little point in my offering a chapter-by-chapter overview. Chapter 1 addresses shot 1, chapter 2 considers shot 2, and so on. To continue in this vein would be laughably tautological (though I will point out here that most of the production history of *Rope* can be found in chapter 1).

I will, instead, bring this introduction to a close by returning to the heart of my project, to the desire that animates and orients each of the following chapters. My obsessively close analysis is driven by a wish to understand what it is in *Rope* that, in the words of T. J. Clark, “compels the return.” This requires the use of a magnifying glass at times, but the aim is not, as Pascal put it long ago, to magnify small objects with fantastic exaggeration.⁴⁴ I have written to give an account of my time, of my curious year spent with and within *Rope*. But I have also written because my extended, obsessive engagement with this single text brought to light overlooked details and cast new light upon why Hitchcock’s film will not release us from its hold. I have written, then, to describe how desire remains on the wing. This is a tale both of being held by *Rope* and of perpetual movement.