Francesco Gagliardi

FILM: ROPE

Dangling That Rope

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FILM: ROPE
Performed by Francesco Gagliardi,
Michael Caldwell, Marcin Kedzior & Cara Spooner

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Francesco Gagliardi's performance *Film: Rope* is one of a series of performances in which Gagliardi breaks down seminal — or at least recognizable — film texts into recalled or recollected movements in relation to selected audio components.[1] The performers, whether they are actors, dancers or performance artists, move through the sets carrying old-fashioned tape recorders in their hands. These tape recorders play back audio dubs from DVDs of particular scenes from the selected movies.[2] It is recommended in Gagliardi's instructions that the duration of a scene be at least three times the duration of the corresponding scene from the source film.

For some of the scenes, the performers consent to having their performance interrupted by a clock, which signals them to move on to the next scene, while for others the performers have the option of ending prior to the clock's signal. Fulfilling a scene before the alarm sounds is not necessary artistically preferable to having the clock inform the performers that it is time to begin a new scene. As far as the performers are concerned, either ending the scene before the bell or not completing the scene by the time the bell rings is perfectly acceptable. The clock does not provide a deadline; it is simply a structural event.

In *Film: Rope*, Gagliardi has accentuated the simultaneous clash and fusion of different disciplines by using as source material a film that has been controversial at a number of different levels: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948). *Rope* is something of an anomaly within the Hitchcock canon, as it is directed to appear as if consisting almost entirely of one continuous shot.[3] In this respect it breaks the modernist dictum that film should not appear simply to be recorded theatre. The film eschews montage altogether. It is also controversial for reasons related to tone and subject matter. *Rope* is a film about two rather naughty boys named Brandon Shaw and Philip Walker (played by John Dall and Farley Granger respectively), who kill a

young man they consider their inferior for the sheer thrill of it.[4] They conceal his corpse right under the noses of their dinner guests, among them their mentor-*cum*-professor Rupert Cadell (played by James Stewart), who slowly comes to realize what his protégés have done. It dawns upon the professor too late that extremist ideologies should never be taught to impressionable, precociously bright young things.

Of course, *Rope* is not really composed of one continuous shot. The eighty-minute film requires eight ten-minute rolls of film, and part of the fun for the viewer is watching for the transferences: the points where Hitchcock directs the camera behind a character's dark jacket or a chair in order to stop, reload the camera, and then resume filming. Another part of the fun of watching *Rope* is noting furniture and other set discontinuities as a result of the constant rearrangement required to accommodate the roving camera as it moves through the set. Hitchcock tended to talk about *Rope* in strictly technical terms, as a stunt,[5] but the nature of the stunt created recurring points at which concealment became necessary. *Rope* is a film about confinement and concealment, in which the reel changes are not unlike exchanges of illicit currency or weapons. Hitchcock's emphasis on his own formal audacity also served to partially mask his own fascination/revulsion with male homosexuality, which he associated with amoral superiority and outright criminality. The very title *Rope* is so appropriate; it refers to more than just the murder weapon. Pull that rope tighter; stretch the shot as far as possible; dangle the evidence right in front of the fools while smirking in their innocent faces.

Just as *Rope* only appears to be composed of one continuous shot, so the idea that it could be accurately described merely as "recorded theatre" is a clear misperception; rather, it has been called "one of the most cinematic of films, carrying one of the defining characteristics of the medium — its ability to use a camera as the eye

of the spectator, to take him right into an action, show him around inside it as it were — to its ultimate conclusion."[6] But of course the camera sees what Hitchcock directs it to see. The camera movements are thus choreographed; and the word "choreography" is central to the vocabulary of dance, a live art form. *Rope* may have been adapted for the screen from an original stage play, but the fluid camera movements so necessary to counteracting the inherent staginess of the script practically beg the question of how the performers adapt to the camera's movements. The camera in *Rope* may function as a substitute for the eye of the spectator, who is accustomed to moving his or her head and entire body in order to follow some visual trajectory through space, while the actors' movements have been blocked so that they are either dancing with or avoiding the camera.

Gagliardi's performance *Film: Rope* explores this peculiar relationship between actors and camera. The performers react to the audio taken from the film by attempting to recall gestures made by their characters in the film, and also enact (or reenact) the spatial relations between themselves as performers and the shifting positions of the camera in the original cinematic space. The performers have both viewed and rehearsed with selected scenes from the source film, and they have worked out individual blocking and gestures in relation to the camera's movements as well as the character's gestures or mannerisms in relation to the sound on their tape recorders. If they can't quite succeed in enacting the movements they recall from the film, they make another attempt. And often another and another and another.

In the performances in Gagliardi's series, dramatic time becomes skewed, through repetition, into something so much slower than real time that it becomes spatial rather than temporal. Narrative film compresses time in ways rarely used in live theatre (except when a play is attempting to be cinematic). Here, these

options are reversed, until dramatic scenes oscillate between the status of tableaux and the cacophony of a kindergarten classroom. Words either become converted to mechanized gibberish or are repeated beyond their capacity for signification. In many scenes there is more than one character in the performing space. The busier the scene, the busier the audio, and *Film: Rope* moves toward cacophonic sound or concrete music, and away from theatrical dialogue. This also happens in scenes where the characters are blocked into a tight playing area. Sometimes snippets of dialogue, or even single words or syllables, are repeated to comic effect, as repetition tends to create absurdist humour.

The effect of the performance will vary significantly between viewers who are familiar with the source film and those who are not. I know Hitchcock's film, so I do find myself placing these scenes in relation to the plot. But those viewers who have not seen the film will see these scenes independent of their narrative function within the source film's structure, merely as isolated scenes.

In *Rope*, the camera's generally tight framing amplifies the actors' gestures and movements. In *Film: Rope*, Gagliardi has refashioned Hitchcock's film into an ensemble dance work, one in which performers attempt to recall movements in their own time and in their own space within the overall performance space. Although the performers share the space, most of the time their actions do not mesh or cohere. The performative premise of *Film: Rope* and Gagliardi's other film-based performances does not prescribe set scores or determinant scripts or seamless ensembles.

What is seen in Gagliardi's performance is several degrees removed from the once-controversial film which two prominent actors quite emphatically did not want their names associated with.[7] The film's dialogue, perversely blending Agatha Christie, Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche, in the performance becomes primarily

sound, only revealing its inherently campy flavour at relatively calm moments in the performance. Especially in the scenes involving several characters blocked into a tight space within the cinematic frame, sound tends to override meaning, as gestures usurp spoken language, and movement is accentuated where it was previously subdued or even concealed. A highly formal exercise in tight control has been radically altered so that it now provides a loose and undefined structure for chance encounters and unpredictable tableaux.

Gagliardi has selected scenes from Hitchcock's film not for dramatic reasons, but rather for formal concerns:

> In terms of sound, I was interested in segments that contain very specific "accents" or "marks" (diegetic music, a doorbell, a car horn, gunshots, a distinctive pitch in the articulation of a line of dialogue), and in how those accents would recur and combine in the performance, creating random, yet distinctive, effects of repetition, phasing, overlap, echo, hiccup, etc. In terms of movement, I composed the selection considering the juxtaposition of "busy" scenes with more static ones, and scenes involving wide, cross-stage movement with scenes encouraging a focus on small actions and gestures (playing with a rope, drinking, lighting a cigarette, shooting a gun). I was also considering how these more recognizable actions would punctuate an overall texture of less specific, less recognizable movement.[8]

The performing arts, almost by definition, set up expectations of proficiency and accuracy. In film, take after take is necessary until those in charge feel that they have "got it right." What might seem like a perfect take to an actor could appear a failure to the camera operators, lighting people, continuity experts and other technicians. In live arts (theatre, dance, and live music) mistakes are made and mistakes therefore must be incorporated into the live performance.

The performers and technicians must persevere without blinking in front of the audience, some of whom will recognize a mistake and some of whom will remain oblivious. With certain forms of live or recorded performance involving improvisation (jazz or other improvised music, films without scripts, improvisational theatre, etc.) there is still an imperative for performers and crew to arrive at a coherent result. There will always be wrong notes and other errors that are to be avoided in anything other than rehearsals. But what about chance music or dance forms that permit and even encourage performers to work individually in a collective format? What about works that are structured to permit indeterminate movements and gestures from the performers? What here constitutes a cohesive or coherent result or "product"? If process is the point, then what constitutes the end product, or is there one at all? The question is not entirely rhetorical: if there is a public presentation, then the answer is *yes*, a product or offering is created.

In *Film: Rope*, Gagliardi and his performers are working in a form in which nothing can clearly be identified as a "mistake." Performers try to recreate gestures and spatial relations in response to their individual audio triggers; they attempt to remember specific pictures or images, but they do not have automatic recall. The performers go through a process in which they do not feel satisfied that they have successfully recreated the appropriate movements, so they make another attempt. But their process is not framed or presented in a format that creates audience demands for perfection and accuracy. Here, a not-quite-successful attempt at recollection does not constitute a mistake in any technical sense of that word. There is no authority figure lambasting performers for making mistakes.[9] The concept of a "mistake" implies right and wrong, and thus morality.[10] But in *Film: Rope*, a failed attempt might itself be interesting; it is not wrong but rather tentative, and tentativeness and

hesitation are intrinsic to the performance. In the making of *Rope*, numerous takes were surely required because of technical glitches, even when the performers had their lines and movements down pat. *Film: Rope*, in contrast to *Rope*, encourages accidents, which are easily incorporated into its form or shape. It is up to the performers to decide when they have accurately portrayed a particular source gesture in relation to the replayed dialogue. The performers are working individually: they are certainly aware of scene blocking and they know their workings will be perceived in relation to those of the other performers, but they are not under obligation to form an identical collective tableau for each performance.

Process is not separate from product in *Film: Rope*, whereas, in classic cinema and in most professional theatre and even dance, process is called rehearsal and is not open to the public. A cinematic work devised by one of the all-time masters of control has been perversely converted by Gagliardi into a vehicle for unpredictable recollections and movements, in which the performers take responsibility for their own decisions in the performance, rather than following the detailed instructions of a director, writer or producer.

Improvisation is fairly common in dance, whether in sections of a work in which the performer is free to execute spontaneous movements or choreography, or in works in which a minimal structure is present only to frame improvised passages. Improvisation in dance, as with improvised music, traditionally permits the performer to execute his or her own ideas or movements, and thus the performers tend to be expressive. In *Film: Rope*, the performers are not free to invent and then execute their own gestures, although the performers recall different aspects of their characters' scene trajectories in different performances. What is paradoxical in *Film: Rope* is the emphasis on expressive gestures, which exists parallel to the performers' obligation *not* to express themselves —

to suggest only the emotions of the characters in the film, never their own feelings. No two performances of *Film: Rope* will ever be identical, but this work is devoid of improvisation, at least in the sense of self-expression. Yet it does not entirely eliminate or reject emotion. The characters' gestures are often caused by either emotional vulnerability or (particularly in the case of the Brandon Shaw character) by a suppression of emotion. But the actual words of the characters, spoken in tandem with what are often emotional gestures, are not always clearly audible in the performance. And these gestures are quite removed from the emotional trajectory of the source film, which is an exercise in the manipulation of audience points of identification and character sympathies.

Film: Rope is certainly a dance-flavoured performance piece, but it also musical in its structure and execution. (Dance, of course, generally implies musical presence even when it is not accompanied by music.) Gagliardi himself sees his role as that of a performing composer.[11] His fellow performers manipulate the volume controls on their tape-recorders in a way similar to the effects-pedal manipulations of some electronic keyboards or guitars. They may be following cues or directions, but they are not adhering to a fixed score as classical musicians do. They will rewind the tape to roughly the same point in time, but seldom, if ever, to precisely the same point. Nor are they improvising, as the contents of their "instruments" have been determined prior to the performance (and indeed prior to the rehearsals).

The composer-*cum*-philosopher (or vice versa?) John Cage composed works featuring tape recorders, record players and radios as manipulated instruments in performance situations. Cage also had a complex history and shifting relationship with concepts of improvisation. Although some of his early prepared piano pieces were composed by his improvising and then notating the successful

or interesting parts of the improvised exercise, Cage came to disdain improvisation for its reliance on memory and personal taste, which he saw as preventing the creation of something unprecedented. Cage became suspicious of improvisation (and especially jazz), because he had come to reject music based on both personality and emotions.[12] Through various strategies, including the use of "chance operations," he eliminated deliberate relationships between sounds and created a novel type of abstract musical continuity largely "free of individual taste and memory (psychology) and also of the literature and 'traditions' of art."[13] This new kind of objectified musical continuity seemed to counteract all types of communicative improvisation based on common idioms or phraseology as they are found in improvised traditions such as jazz, flamenco, Indian classical music, and so on. Improvising musicians (even the best?) tended to fall back on what they remembered would "work" within a given structure or situation.

In *Film: Rope* it is bodily movements, gestures and spatial dynamics that the performers are in the process of remembering and recreating. The sound itself repeatedly plays back phrases or speeches from the source film, but the phrases are rarely if ever repeated identically. (As noted above, the performers cannot roll their tape recorders back to exactly the same point, although they do attempt to retain a fairly consistent touch.) Also, each performer's tape recorder contains the dialogue and noises made by specific characters, so the performers work in parallel within the playing space, sometimes relating to each other, but frequently not. Thus the performance tends to be cacophonous, and never quite the same. The audio resulting is not chamber music and not ensemble jazz, but rather a sound or noise sculpture based on *indeterminacy*, as the performers are not working from instructions designed to guarantee a specified, cohesive result, but rather one permitting variant colli-

sions in non-scripted tableaux. The performers are not improvising or self-composing, but at the same time they are not adhering to rigid stage directions or a fixed notated score. Gagliardi tries not to over-rehearse the performers: he is wary of having them fall into the trap of habitually repeating what worked in previous renditions.

Film: Rope is anything but body-averse. The not-quite-repetitive movements of the performers' bodies are the most prominent components of the presentation — certainly more apparent than the dialogue, and probably even the cacophony into which the dialogue mutates whenever there is more than one performer in the playing area. Is the body not expressive? Well, the performers, whose thoughts are focused on remembering previously seen images or character dynamics, are not expressing *themselves*, except for the inescapable fact that it is their bodies interpreting the speech and gestures of the corresponding Hitchcock film characters.

I look at a clip from a similar performance based on Ozu's 1953 film *Tokyo Story*, and I hear noise in tandem with the movements I see.[14] I don't speak Japanese, and I'm not as familiar with this film as I am with *Rope*. The performers move across what appears to be a wide but shallow playing area; they are often relatively distant from each other, but the sounds I hear are not comprehensible as words. Likewise, watching *Film: Rope* must be very different for someone who knows the source film and the language than it is for someone who doesn't, or is indifferent to the source material. I observe the rehearsal for a scene Gagliardi has selected because in it Hitchcock has violated his own formal strategy. At the top of this scene, Brandon and Philip's housekeeper, Mrs. Wilson (filtered through performer Cara Spooner in Gagliardi's performance) decides to move down a hallway, and there is an edit in the film, forcing all of the other performers in *Film: Rope* to shift their positions, as this edit occurs within the selected scene. In *Film: Rope*, this selected scene stands

out for its formal absurdity — as Mrs. Wilson commences to wheel her tray down the corridor all the other characters must suddenly shift from her left side to her right. Small wonder that Hitchcock cheated with a forced edit in the original film. In *Rope*, Mrs. Wilson's curiosity about unusual dining arrangements becomes a source of serious concern for Brandon and Philip, especially when they overhear her talking to Rupert instead of just doing her job. In Gagliardi's performance, these scenes are stripped of their suspense elements and become abstracted into not-quite exactly-repeated small and insignificant actions or gestures.

In rehearsal, I watch another scene in which I know that the Brandon character (as reenacted by performer Marcin Kedzior) is going to slap Philip (as reenacted by performer Michael Caldwell), so that his quivering partner-in-crime will not break down and confess to their Mentor Superior (James Stewart, filtered through Francesco Gagliardi). I know this confrontational moment is going to occur, so I watch the performers seemingly trying *not* to build up to it, but I also want it to happen. I pay close attention to this particular scene, in which only Brandon and Philip appear, a scene that utilizes a tigher playing space than many of the other *Rope* scenes Gagliardi has incorporated into his performance. Because of these factors, the repeated dialogue from the source film is clearer in this scene than in others, where there are more characters compressed into a smaller playing area. Although the repeated dialogue does become fragmented, the words do not convert into pure sound as much as in other scenes, so surely elements of suspense must come across to the audience. Philip's voice must sound paranoid; and will they or will they not answer the damn telephone? Surely the fact that Rupert has left something behind and is returning for it is a bad sign?

I watch the scene that begins with Gagliardi miming Rupert's firing of three bullets on the soundtrack, meant in the film to draw

the outside world's attention to the crime that has been committed in this perfect penthouse. Beginning (rather than concluding) this final scene of the performance with the three climatic shots diminishes its climactic quality, but I still detect emotion in the size of the gesture and the sound of the gunshots. Because these shots are directed to the world outside the apartment, the outside noises and sounds that have occasionally entered the soundscape now become amplified. One can even make out functional dialogue from "the street" as Brandon and Philip move forward, and then backward and forward and backward, but inevitably toward the performance's and the film's conclusion. This final scene of *Film: Rope* will undoubtedly seem more abstracted to a viewer who does not recall the source movie, yet audible gunshots are always gunshots, and they tend to determine actions and reactions occurring in their wake. At the conclusion of this final scene of both *Rope* and *Film: Rope*, the music for the final credits takes over the soundscape. In *Film: Rope*, this transition from the body of the film into the final credits is repeated and repeated as many times as the performers feel necessary. Perhaps, even at the end of the line, Gagliardi's film performance is not literally linear, although it is certainly temporal. The closing music, which is so glaringly opposed in tone and emphasis to the sirens that signal the imminent arrest of the two murderers, starts and then stops again and repeats this starting and stopping as the characters advance and back away from their final positions. The performers may or may not bow; and they don't need obvious orchestral cues to inform them when their performance is over.

Andrew James Paterson

ENDNOTES

1. Other films used as source material for performances in this series include *Tokyo Story* (dir. Ozu Yasujiro, 1953), *East of Eden* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1955), *La Dolce Vita* (dir. Federico Fellini, 1960) and *The Birds* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1963).

2. It is recommended that the duration of the piece is at least three times the duration of the scene from the source film. Quoted from *film {progressive number}: {number of film}* document sent to me by Francesco Gagliardi.

3. Actually, there are four ordinary cuts in the film, in addition to the disguised cuts necessary for the transitions between camera rolls.

4. The film was adapted from a play titled *Rope's End* (1929), by Patrick Hamilton, which was based on the Leopold and Loeb murder case in Chicago in the 1920s. Other films based on this case are *Compulsion* (dir. Richard Fleischer, 1959) and *Swoon* (dir. Tom Kalin, 1992).

5. François Truffaut. Hitchcock, revised edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), p. 179-184.

6. Robin Wood. Hitchcock's Films (New York: Castle Books, New York, 1965), p.33.

7. "Hitchcock approached Cary Grant and Montgomery Clift for two of the three key roles, but both declined, at least partly out of concern for their images. The roles of the young murderers went to gay actors John Dall and Farley Granger. James Stewart played their mentor (the role Hitchcock wanted for Cary Grant)." Glen Johnson. "Homosexuality in Hitchcock Movies," http://faculty.cua.edu/johnsong/hitchcock/pages/homosexuality/homosexuality.html (accessed March 2013).

8. Francesco Gagliardi, e-mail correspondence with the author, March 17, 2013.

9. Francesco Gagliardi may be the director and conceptualist of *Film: Rope*, but he is also engaged with his own performance, referencing character of Rupert Cadell from the film, and not placing himself in a superior role in relation to the other performers.

10. The source material, of course, dangles amorality before us, but must chastise it, according to the stipulations of both Alfred Hitchcock and the Hays Production Code, which was in force in Hollywood at the time of the filming.

11. "Although performers focus exclusively on the task/process they are carrying out, without any concern for the final 'effect' of each segment of the performance, in choosing the scene/segments that we work on I was thinking of the spatial and aural 'feel' that might emerge from each segment. We were talking last time about my role as a director/composer: I suppose that this is the one aspect of the piece where I exercise the most control in that capacity." Francesco Gagliardi, e-mail correspondence with the author, March 17, 2013.

12. Cage's notions of experiment and improvisation are not compatible, due to his belief that improvisation "does not lead you into a new experience, but into something with which you're already familiar" (Darter, 1982:21). Many other composers and improvisers, however, see experimentalism and improvisation as related to one another. See Tom Darter, "John Cage," Keyboard 8 (9) (1982), p. 21, cited in Sabine M. Feisst, "John Cage and Improvisation: an Unresolved Relationship," in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education and Society*, eds. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 38-51.

13. John Cage. *Silence.* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 57-59, cited in *Feisst.*

14. Francesco Gagliardi. *Film 7: Tokyo Story*, performed by the Ensemble for Experimental Music and Theater at Esorabako (Kagurazaka, Tokyo), http://music-theater.tumblir.com/.

FRANCESCO GAGLIARDI is a performance artist and occasional filmmaker based in Toronto. Programs of his work have been presented in San Francisco, Berlin, Tokyo, Milan, Turin, Los Angles (The Wulf, 2008; Sea and Space, 2009; Pieter, 2011), and New York City (Ontological Theater Incubator, 2009; The Stone, 2009; Presents, 2011; Willow Place Auditorium, 2012). His film *Short Sentences: 1993-2005* was awarded the NOW Magazine Overkill Award at the 2006 Images Festival. As well as performing his own work, he is active as an experimental music performer, and has premiered work by a number of composers including Jennifer Walshe, Mark So, Adam Overton, Travis Just, and G. Douglas Barrett.

ANDREW JAMES PATERSON is a Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist working with video, film, performance, writing, and music. His works have played locally, nationally, and internationally for over thirty years. His videos have largely been concerned with boundaries between what is public and what is private, and also with shifting relationships between bodies and technologies. He has edited publications by YYZBOOKS in Toronto and contributed to periodicals such as Impulse, FILE, C Magazine, Lola, and FUSE. Paterson has also presented performances which investigate archives and institutional collections. He is currently the coordinator for the 8 Fest Small-Gauge Film Festival.

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