

‘Strangled the Chicken’:

The Spectacle of Gay Male Sex and the Incitement of its
Discourse in *Rope*

Mark Guerrero

University of Alberta

INvoke Sociology Undergraduate Journal

Abstract

In this paper, I explore discourses of gay male sex and homosexuality in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) as it situates within the highly-restrictive moral landscape of the Motion Picture Production code era. Although the restrictive economy surrounding these regulations had supposedly expurgated all discourses of sex and sexuality from the public sphere, I will draw on Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1984) to argue that this was not the case. Instead, I shed light on the paradox of censorship, by which the shrewd restriction of sexuality has transformed gay male sex into a topic of discussion. I then offer a critique of Hitchcock's spectacularization of gay male sex, urging us to question *how* discourses of gay male sex are being constructed and *who* is constructing these discourses.

Introduction

Ever since motion pictures have been produced, society has sought to control them. When tracing back through an entire century of censorship in the U.S. film industry, motion films have become public sites of social, political, and moral control and influence. Stemming from early days of public outrage over 'indecent' films, society continues to analyze the power this medium yields. Historians of Hollywood widely recognize the time period between 1934 and 1968 as the Motion Picture Production Code era. Many sought to understand the societal effects surrounding these regulations that governed what could and could not be shown in film and advertisement during this period. In the name of 'protecting' the public from harm, motion picture films were restricted, censored, or outright banned if they did not comply with the Hays Code regulations and standards. The Hays Code recognized a moral obligation for filmmakers to remain "responsible and sensitive to the standards of the larger society" (Tropiano, 2009, 291) by abstaining from including 'distasteful' content in their films.

Among the list of content the PCA had considered 'distasteful', depictions of sexuality (and especially homosexuality) on screen was one of them. Although Alfred Hitchcock's psychological crime

thriller film noir *Rope* (1948) was released during an era of enforced censorship and strict regulations that governed the form and content of classical Hollywood films, Hitchcock was able to seemingly transgress these tightly enforced policies. Hitchcock used cleverly overt depictions of covert homoeroticism through his auteurship and originality in film technique. Some critics of film censorship would argue that the Hays Code has brought more destruction than good. These critics argue that the repression of homosexual discourse has ultimately resulted in less realistic depictions of homosexuality on the silver screen and has done little to curb the marginalization faced by LGBT groups during this time period. However, I will be drawing on Foucault's work on *The History of Sexuality* (1978) to disprove this claim. I thus seek to establish two main arguments in this paper: first, that censorship has paradoxically allowed the discourse of sexuality to flourish in numerous and diverse ways; and second, that the spectacularization of gay male sex has allowed for the deconstruction and resistance of certain 'negative' depictions of homosexuality on film.

I: Depictions of Sexuality on Film

It is important to recognize that while film censorship has seemingly expurgated discourses of sex and sexuality, in reality, the opposite has occurred. Traditional allegations against the Hays Code and other forms of film censorship have argued that this prohibitive practice results in fewer and duller representations of human sexuality presented on film (Gilbert, 2013, 1). This argument parallels what Foucault describes as the repressive hypothesis, or the dominant narrative of the history of sexuality. According to Foucault, the repressive hypothesis focuses on the shrewd controls that were tightly harnessed on the mouths of the public when discussing sex and sexuality. The repressive hypothesis served as "an integral part of the bourgeois order" (Foucault, 1978, 5), by which energy that was not expended on being a productive worker within a capitalist society and, instead, expended on pleasurable activities, like sex, were highly discouraged. Discretion, modesty, and prudishness had seemingly

characterized the Victorian epoch. This confined all discourses of sex and sexuality into the private sphere of the monogamous, heterosexual, married couple's bedroom. As a result, this history of sexual discourse ultimately led to contemporary enterprises that served to further repress public discourses of sex - such as the Hays Code. Foucault, however, does not agree with this narrative. In critiquing the repressive hypothesis, he also does not completely reject it either. He certainly does not deny the fact that Western culture has imposed an "edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence" (Foucault, 1978, 4-5) towards discourses of sex. Foucault recognizes that any talk of sex - especially deviant or abnormal forms of engagement, like gay male sex - was publicly discouraged. However, he does not think sexual discourse was completely removed from the public realm either. Rather, he argues that the way sex is "put into discourse" (Foucault, 1978, 9) has shifted. Crude discourses that were frowned upon as constituting 'bad taste' were replaced with the explosion of complex, nuanced, subtler, and less intuitive discourses of sex that allowed for the increasing public exposure of different forms and numerous discursive frameworks surrounding sex and sexuality.

Similarly, Nora Gilbert (2013) sheds light on the paradoxical nature surrounding the prohibitive act of censorship. Through the Hays Code, Gilbert identifies a consequence of forcing certain narratives, like 'sex', underground - it "creates an open space, between text and subtext" (Gilbert, 2013, 14) for the filmmaker to explore and for the audience to interpret. Foucault would argue that this paradox supports his critiques of the repressive hypothesis. Although a "restrictive economy" (Foucault, 1978, 18) has policed and restricted the intensification of crude and indecent speech on sex, Hitchcock was still able to depict or, more appropriately, to *imply* the covert display of homosexuality in his film *Rope*. Throughout the film, a homosexual relationship between the two murderers, Brandon and Philip, is alluded to with subtlety. Hitchcock's usage of connotations was illustrated through a recurring double entendre throughout the film. Miller (1990) addresses the homoerotic undertones depicted right at the opening of

the film as Brandon and Philip exchanged dialogue about the murder, describing "it" as synonymous with sex ("How did you feel - during it?" "I don't remember feeling much of anything- until his body went limp, and I knew it was over, then I felt tremendously exhilarated") (Miller, 1990, 118). Since murder and homosexual sex were both taboo acts that were to be kept unspoken about and unseen from the public, this post-coital parallel is also reflected through the measure of precaution Brandon takes, especially when he ensures 'the deed' was done with the window shutters closed. Throughout numerous parts of the film, Brandon and Philip stood in close proximity and spoke to one another in a hushed tone. These scenes evoke a sense of intimacy and sensuality. Miller (1990) goes on to further explain that Hitchcock's clever use of depth perception, parallel spatial planes, and camera framing conveyed suggestions of Brandon and Philip committing a seemingly undisputable infraction "of the codes governing male homosocial space" (Miller, 1990, 124) by, in fact, touching one another. A play on words that is cleverly shrouded in suggestiveness is also exchanged throughout the film. An example includes Brandon describing to his house guests a time when Philip strangled the necks of two or three chickens - toying with the phrase *choking the chicken* as slang for male masturbation. Although some may argue that the Hays Code censorship regulations ultimately repressed discourse on sex, Foucault would agree that filmmakers like Hitchcock used numerous techniques and added various nuances into the production of the film in order to shroud depictions gay male sex and sexuality with secrecy during the Motion Picture Production Code era.

II: Gay Male Sex as Spectacle

The film techniques Hitchcock uses to depict the homoerotically charged nature of *Rope* has sparked a new, specialized form of discourse around sex and film where gay male sex has become a spectacle. Miller argues that *Rope* depicts an "essentially insubstantial homosexuality" by which the silent, yet implied nature of its existence in the film was built upon "suspense on less a question than that

of its own existence” (Miller, 1990, 119). Namely, the depiction of gay male sex is premised around an unstable, foggy image of what homosexuality *really is*. These connotations still provide a sense of ‘visibility’ for gay men in popular culture. However, a problem with this technique stems from the ambiguous interpretations the viewer must make, which involves navigating around that “which *may only be, does not necessarily mean*, and all the rest” (Miller, 1990, 119). For example, without explicit corroboration, the viewer may conclude that Brandon and Philip often standing in intimately close proximity throughout the film is evidence pointing towards their homosexuality. At the same time, that *does not necessarily prove* they are gay. Although charges of ‘homosexuality’ and ‘obscenity’ on screen have repeatedly thrown religious leaders, Hollywood industry regulators, and state/local officials into heated disputes, critical theorists analyzing the intersection between LGBT themes and popular culture have also asked a very similar question - how should homosexuality be depicted in film?

Although Hitchcock’s film was charged with homoeroticism, these film techniques become problematic when considering the societal effects it holds on gay people outside of the film. Foucault recognizes that the process of ‘truth telling’ produces the self. Foucault would then also argue that “transforming sex into discourse” (Foucault, 1987, 20) operates in a similar fashion. Discursive control of sexuality and the way people subjectively speak about sex not only offers further knowledge and control over the subject, but also, in turn, produces its objective reality. In an era of film with little visibility for sexual minorities like the LGBT population, Hitchcock’s depiction of homosexuality in *Rope* becomes a catalyst for potential misrepresentations of who gay men *are* and misunderstandings of what gay male sex *is*. Problematizing the spectacle of gay male sex in *Rope* extends beyond issues of distortion and silencing - it fails to draw the line between obscurity and the potential for inaccurate misrepresentations. Criminality and psychopathy, for example, may be interpreted by some viewers as characteristics associated with homosexuality. However, how could Hitchcock *prove* that *this is not*

necessarily the case? With society's need to control and dominate objects through formulating discursive knowledge on it (Foucault, 1978, 20), these misunderstandings could ultimately work to sustain a heteronormative system that subordinates gay men.

By flattening the richness and complexity of the lives of gay men, the spectacle of homosexuality vividly illustrates a seemingly unintentional implication of 'increased visibility' for marginalized sexual minorities. Although the idea for social change spurts a new form of discourse that also serves to reshape current discursive frameworks of sex and sexuality, merely "speaking about it" (Foucault, 1978, 6) does not necessarily curb this process of marginalization and oppression. Foucault understands power as a force that can constrain us but can also serve as a tool for social change. On Foucault's account, power does not operate in a hierarchical fashion that bears down on the individual. Instead, power unfolds in multiple directions through a "net-like organization" (Foucault, 1987, 95); therefore allowing us to both serve as both the subordinates and bearers of power. "To speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation and manifold pleasures" (Foucault, 1978, 7) has incited a new form of discourse of sex that utilizes the power of individuals - especially those belonging to the LGBT population - to overcome barriers together, establish solidarity, and build a stronger community. While the spectacle of gay male sex in *Rope*, as well as other films that depict homosexuals in a 'negative light' reflects a dominant narrative of heterosexual hegemony and taints gay men as 'deviant', LGBT pressure groups have formulated their own form of power through resistance. Although *Rope* had not received backlash specifically, this film definitely contributes to a "continuation of the treatment of homosexuality as seen through the eyes of the heterosexual" (Lyons, 2006, 293) on the silver screen. Foucault's understanding of power and the answer to the question of 'who is doing the speaking?' permeates our underlying assumptions and current understandings of gay male sex. While organizing for social change is a viable option for political advancement that supports and upholds the

rights of LGBT members, as well as eliminating the stigma and demonized stereotypes associated with gay men, mere 'visibility' on film does not play a sufficient role in reshaping the discourse of gay male sex.

Conclusion

Rope's depiction of homosexuality has ultimately contributed to the expansion of discursive frameworks surrounding gay sex and sexuality. By engaging with Foucault's understandings of power, discourse, and knowledge, the spectacle of homosexuality and the censorship of its depiction in film has proven to be a rather complex topic that highlights a symbiotic relationship between discourse and activism. In contrast to the repressive hypothesis, censorship measures have caused discourses of sex and sexuality to flourish through new, creative, and specialized ways. According to Foucault, discourse on sex is expected to shift through time due to society's unwavering desire to establish a sense of control and knowledge over these topics. Within a heteronormative society that continues to deprive gay men of certain rights and equal treatment, the path of determining further steps in consolidating progressive social change for gay men is not so straight. Since power operates in society through a pervasive network, the solution to this problem does not lie in eradicating all forms of authoritative social structures that limit the agency of individuals. While the Hays Code allowed the Production Code Administration (PCA) to maintain a sense of control over dominant discourses of sex and sexuality, the resistance against this dominative mode has also yielded its own form of power. Pushing for open, progressive, and diverse representations of sexual minorities in media, indeed, plays an important role in shifting the views of its audience. Resistance, however, stems from questioning and critiquing current representations and deconstructing the taken-for-granted assumptions that are inherent within the dominative mode.

References

- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: An introduction*. New York , NY: Vintage Books. A Division of Random House, Inc.
- Gilbert, N. (2013). *Better left unsaid. Victorian novels, Hays Code films, and the benefits of censorship*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lyons, C. (2006). The paradox of protest: American film 1980-1992. In F. G. Couvares (Ed.), *Movie censorship and American culture* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Miller, D. (1990). Anal Rope. *Representations*, (32), 114-133. doi:10.2307/2928797
- Tropiano, S. (2009). *Obscene, indecent, immoral, and offensive: 100 years of censored, banned and controversial films*. New York: Limelight Editions. An Imprint of Hal Leonard Corporation.