

THE GOSPEL OF MURDER

Annie Nardone on Human Darkness

He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.

— Fredrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*,
Chapter IV¹

We watch mystery and horror movies with the express purpose of enjoying a good scare; to find ourselves taken out of the day-to-day and ushered into the dark unknown. The old films — werewolves, psycho zombies, a creature from some dark lagoon — give us a good jump and a shriek. Just by using a tiny measure of logic, the viewer understands that none of it is really real. Leaving the theater, we carry a sense of something between spooked and freaked, but the point is, we leave the fanged, scaled, and furry behind us. The mystery of the evil creature's origin and end is solved. Case closed. We don't have to dread a knock from a clawed hand on the front door because wolfie will never come to call.

But the other mysteries, the stories written with a grain of truth, hit a nerve. To watch the unfolding of a murder in a film disturbs us to our core, haunting us with

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," *Project Gutenberg*, February 4, 2013, accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm>.

"what if" nagging our conscience. Reckoning the mind behind the murder is difficult to comprehend - the murderer's motives toy with our imaginations. A glance out of your window into your neighborhood reveals nothing but normalcy, but your neighbor might be one step away from a Hitchcock-style crime, and the tipping point is an enigma buried in the mystery of the human mind. What moves a person from imagination to action, from persuasion to power to purpose, while truly believing that nobody will ever discover what evil was wrought? And to live confident that no consequence shall come.

The Sanity of the Insane

Alfred Hitchcock wrote and directed many films that were not only magnificent works of psychological mystery, but I would argue some of the film industry's best examinations of the mystery of human nature. One of his films in particular, *Rope*, is a deep dive into a hubristic philosophy and the devilry (if we are honest) each of us is capable of. Hitchcock reveals that the force of personality can persuade those around us to follow our lead. Deep narcissism can elevate the determined mind to a god-complex level.

Rope is especially disturbing because Hitchcock portrays truth through story. He begins the film with the main characters, Brandon and Philip, who have just murdered their friend, David. The opening scene is a shock to the mind; not so much that this scene is a murder, but it is the Nietzschean-inspired premise of the act and the self-satisfied expression on Brandon's face. Two intelligent, wealthy young men committing what they imagined as the perfect murder and believing the

murder is sheer genius in execution — and seeing beauty in the act. No other cause for the murder, no vengeance or act of passion; merely an act of egocentricity. This theme is a reflection of Friedrich Nietzsche's ideal *übermensch* — the superman or beyond-man — "that man is something to be surpassed."^{2 3} The friends believe their monied positions, social advancement, and academic superiority provide them a privileged place in society, elevating them above the common man. Does this unique position entitle them to commit the murder because they are above society's moral framework? Brandon believes that culture's new elite are not entangled in outdated moralities and religious convictions because they, Brandon, believe they have moved beyond those outdated mores. *Rope* is a window with a view of the world without a higher moral authority — a mysterious place that is terrifying to comprehend.

gospel n. 4. A thing regarded as undoubtedly true. Middle English 1630-1669. 5. A principle that one acts upon, believes in, or preaches.

— New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

Brandon is obsessed with the perfection of the murder, and after they kill David, he says to Phillip, "Well, the Davids of the world merely occupy space, which is

² Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," *Project Gutenberg*, accessed November 11, 2022, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm#link2H_4_0004.

³ *Ibid.*

why he was the perfect victim for the perfect murder.”⁴ David is the perfect victim precisely because he is, in Brandon's estimation, average, and thus inferior. Nietzsche viewed this as a beneficial adaptation for society, for the cultural and intellectual elite to transcend outdated morality and manage the world in a way that they see fit, attuned to the needs of society's superior members. Their friend David, whom they view as average, inferior, and disposable, only clutters society. After all, this act wasn't a murder; it was a favor to the unfortunately bred David and a more advanced society. Brandon has moved so far into sociopathic behavior that he promotes the Nietzschean view of the *ubermensch* as gospel.

Perhaps what is most disturbing about this film is the idea that crimes of this nature happen more often than we know. *Rope* was based on a true crime story that occurred in 1924, and was originally written as a theatrical production in 1929 by Patrick Hamilton. Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb were two affluent college students who murdered a 14-year old boy as an act of intellectual validation.⁵ They believed that they were truly above condemnation because of their intelligence and elevated, wealthy position in life. Placing themselves as academically segregated, Leopold

⁴ *Rope*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, story by Hume Cronyn, based on the play *Rope* by Patrick Hamilton, 1929, starring James Stewart. (Production Company: Transatlantic Pictures, Warner Brothers, 1948).

⁵ Douglas O. Linder, “The Leopold and Loeb Trial: A Brief Account,” *Famous Trials*, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/leoploeb/Accountoftrial.html>.

and Loeb believed that their societal position placed them in a unique position to not only decide the fate of others in lower social classes, but conclude how to accomplish it successfully.

Hitchcock's characters, Brandon and Philip, believe that their superior academics, wealth, and standing in society make them exempt from condemnation. Brandon sees society's weaker members as disposable, taking up space of the more-worthy members. Being weak is a mistake of nature, and killing the weak is just an efficiency. The power to kill equals the power to create a different societal structure that Brandon and Philip believe is superior and would bring an advanced system of morality. But they demonstrate a brash cruelty in plain view, daring the world to notice. Arrogance blinds us. Narcissism destroys because it has no alternative belief system to keep it in line with normal behavior. With no conscience, the self-perceived superior and elite believe that they are the heroes to the world, the good guys who know best and will usher in a glorious new society. This is a dystopian view, that the elite structure knows best for the rest of us — their truth is the new, customized truth. Eliminate the average mind, the weak, or the sick. Even the definition of beauty is twisted. After the murder, Brandon confesses, "I've always wished for more artistic talent; well, murder can be an art too."⁶ This postmodern alignment of beauty and creativity is a shattering redefinition.

Staring into the mysterious abyss, attempting to unravel the twisted human psyche can lead to an examination of our own dark nature. As flawed and

⁶ *Rope*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

sinful humans, that darkness remains. How easy is it to state, "I would never do that." Confident in our morality and character, we take the high ground. But you and I are steps away from familiarity with the abyss. Nietzsche believed that each individual should be able to determine value for themselves in order to fully develop into an optimal self. It is easy to see that discarding absolute truth, especially that of religion and traditional morality, in exchange for relativism's self-truth leads to anarchy. Nietzsche wrote, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."⁷ But in order to properly understand this statement and how it pertains to *Rope*, read the statement in context. He continues, "Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"⁸ Brandon and Phillip have made themselves gods. But the eventual failure of Brandon and Phillip is realized. Obsessed with proving their point that murder isn't murder, only a solution, guilt digs into Phillip's conscience and the crime is revealed. While Phillip retains his humanity, Brandon remains confident in the value of his actions.

The decline of structure and moral order follows when the faith built into society is eliminated. The inevitable conclusion is the disintegration of justice, law and order. Nietzsche considered human nature's response to the death of religion. What would fill the void?

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Madman," in *The Gay Science* (Leipzig: E.W. Fritsch, 1887).
<https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/existentialism/materials/nietzsch-e-gay-science-hurry.pdf>.

⁸ Ibid.

The *mystery* of human behavior does not lie in what we say or do, good or bad, because scientific and psychological study helps us to understand. The mystery is why we know the difference between goodness and evil at all. The moral compass embedded in our consciousness cannot fathom pure, unrepentant evil. When presented with that evil, as Hitchcock so deftly illustrates, we cannot comprehend it. We were not made to.

The most dangerous thing you can do is to take any one impulse of your own nature and set it up as the thing you ought to follow at all costs. There is not one of them which will not make us into devils if we set it up as an absolute guide.

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 1, Chapter 2⁹

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 108.

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