

# Elements of Carnival as a Mirror of the Protagonists' Insanity in *Strangers on a Train*

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## Introduction

Fairs and carnivals have been frequently used in the history of both literature and film. They emerge as settings that, far from being trivial, reflect the values of the people who attend them. As Craig Warren contends, “these marginal spaces at once reflected and critiqued cultural attitudes toward class, gender, voice, law, and democracy” (78). As mirrors of the mindset of society at large, carnivals also have the potential to exhibit its visitors' vices, and hence the darkest part of their souls. In the words of David Danow, “the spirit hovering over the spectacle of carnival shares the stage with a lurking, less than benevolent, even demonic twin, which ... will smile upon and favor death rather than life” (1). Indeed, carnivalesque settings such as amusement parks can emerge as an unhealthy place in which the element of terror and even death prevail over laughter and fun. An illustrative example of the poisonous side of the carnivalesque is Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun, the amusement park depicted in Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* (1950). In the novel's chapter 12, the psychopathic Bruno kills the helpless young adult Miriam, and the elements of carnival contribute to highlighting the atrocity of his crime and, most importantly, his mental instability. Along the same lines, Alfred Hitchcock's 1951 film adaptation of the novel certainly reflects the ironic use of carnival elements to reflect danger and terror.

It has been noted that Hitchcock was engrossed in the world of circuses and the carnivalesque. According to Casey McKittrick, for Hitchcock “the carnival is a site of excessive consumption and perverse performance, often bordering on the grotesque, and allows for the emergence of voices and unconventional pleasures that have been muted in other registers of the picture” (86). As is the case with the novel, Hitchcock brings to the fore the more sinister facet of the carnival as a reflection of mental depravity. The film succeeds in providing an in-depth analysis of the edgy relationship of the two strangers (Bruno and Guy). Such a bond is not a profitable one, as what relates them is their “claustrophobic psychology” (Payne 151). Both of them are mentally insane, and the carnivalesque setting reflects their derangement to such an extent that Hitchcock goes beyond Highsmith's scene of Bruno's crime; Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* revisits the amusement park at the end and, as the protagonists fight for the duration of the merry-go-round's frantic ride, their irrationality is highly stressed.

Given Hitchcock's fascination with the carnivalesque, the novel and its film adaptation engage in a dialogue where the amusement park is the focal point. Even if Hitchcock deviates from the novel by returning to the funfair at the end, what is

sought with such reappearance is to draw attention to the key role of carnival as a reflection of the strangers' mental disorder. Although a number of studies deal with the relationship between the two strangers, there is little research that provides an in-depth analysis of the close relationship between carnival and the two protagonists' mental imbalance. Hence, this article provides a thorough study of how carnival elements mirror the protagonists' insanity and, most interestingly, to propose a comparative analysis that paves the way for new insights into the relationship between the novel and its film adaptation. Accordingly, this article aims to shed light on how the use of carnival elements in both Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* and its film adaptation by Hitchcock enhances the two strangers' mental instability.

As for methodology, first I will briefly explore the role of carnival as a literary mode that challenges the traditional order in an ironic way, highlighting its main characteristics as exposed by Mikhail Bakhtin. After summarizing the relevant ideas, I will analyze the relationship between chapter 12 in Highsmith's novel and the two scenes from Hitchcock's psychological thriller in which the amusement park appears. This comparative analysis is thus divided into two parts. Firstly, there will be an examination of the first instance in which Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun emerges as an unhealthy place. This scene corresponds to Bruno's premeditated pursuit of Miriam, and the realization of his cold-blooded murder of Miriam. Finally, there will be a focus on the second visit to the amusement park, which stresses the insanity of not only Bruno, but also Guy. In the essay, I will focus on the carnival elements that may relate to the two characters' depravity. In the case of the novel, I will focus on actual narrative techniques that may enable readers to subtly enter Bruno's mind (e.g. instances of free indirect style) or to plunge into his thoughts and worries (e.g. direct style or examples of interior monologue). As regards the film, I will discuss some relevant *mise-en-scène* elements, framing and homodiegetic music.

### **Bakhtin's Carnival and the *Strangers'* Amusement Park**

In his study *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), Mikhail Bakhtin brings to the fore a phenomenon that he calls "carnivalization of literature" (122). Prior to the explanation of this notion, it should be warned that carnival is not a literary phenomenon *per se*; carnival is a manifestation of popular culture in which all the members of society can participate and where "the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary ... life are suspended" (Bakhtin 122). This means that carnival allows for an open challenge to authority and to social hierarchies. As Bakhtin maintains, "because carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its *usual* rut, it is to some extent 'life turned inside out', 'the reverse side of the world'" (122). To the issue of reversal marked in the quotation above should be added the element of humor that characterizes these celebrations. The process of carnivalization highlighted by Bakhtin is the permeation of this humorous reversal of social hierarchies into literature. Therefore, the use of the carnival motif enables authors to introduce elements in literary works that pose a threat the ordinary, potentially criticizing certain aspects of society.

Bakhtin goes on to differentiate between four categories within the carnival sense of the world (123): (i) *free and familiar contact among people*; (ii) *eccentricity*; (iii) *carnivalistic mésalliances*; and (iv) *profanation*. The first category refers to the carnival's success in breaking hierarchical barriers, giving way to free interaction between people. As to *eccentricity*, it enables latent emotions to express themselves. This feature is of great relevance, since it entails that even unacceptable behavior is accepted in carnival. As for *carnivalistic mésalliances*, it refers to the juxtaposition of those ideas that are seen as opposites in a hierarchical society, such as Heaven and Hell. Finally, *profanation* stands for the celebration of blasphemies linked to the earthly and the bodily.

In Patricia Highsmith's novel *Strangers on a Train* (1950), and in its 1951 film adaptation by Alfred Hitchcock, Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun emerges as a setting that amalgamates all four categories of the carnival sense of the world as listed by Bakhtin. First, it is an amusement park in which all members of society regardless of their class, sex or age gather together and share a feeling of happiness. In the novel, this is reflected in the use of the indefinite pronoun *everybody* in the following remark: "Everybody looked happy and full of energy" (Highsmith 69). Second, it is a place where people's natural behavior is not condemned, as can be seen in the childlike attitude of the characters as they go across the different parts of the park. This element of infancy connects the texts with *carnivalistic mésalliances*, since the young and the old are reunited. For instance, people ranging from children to elders ride the unleashed merry-go-round appearing in the last part of the film. As regards *profanation*, both earthly and body-based obscenities are celebrated in the two texts, namely food craving and the materialism implied by the money with which the characters pay for commodities. Finally, the amusement park looms large as a place where any deviations from moral rules and rationality are embraced. Indeed, this is a setting where the protagonists—Bruno and Guy—overtly show some irrational traits that point to their being mentally unbalanced. Prior to dealing with the link between Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun and insanity, which is this article's central concern, a succinct summary of Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* will be provided in order to better understand the unfruitful bond between the two strangers.

Highsmith's acclaimed novel revolves around the strained relationship between Guy Haines and Charles Anthony Bruno. The two male protagonists meet while travelling through Texas by train. At first, Guy would rather be alone so as to think about the impending meeting with his wife (Highsmith 11). However, he eventually agrees to engage in conversation with Bruno. In the course of the strangers' interaction, Bruno calmly acknowledges that he has considered killing his father (17) and that he has done a robbery (19). It is at this point that Guy grows aware of Bruno's mental instability: "Bruno could be violent. He could be insane, too. Despair, Guy thought, not insanity" (19). Nevertheless, far from keeping clear of his potentially hazardous fellow, Guy unconsciously confesses to him a highly relevant secret: his marriage with Miriam has proved disastrous, and now they are trying to arrange a divorce (20-22). Bruno infers that Miriam may be two-timing Guy, and his friend reluctantly admits that she has had a number of lovers (25). The belligerent Bruno wonders whether his interlocutor could avenge Miriam's infidelity and hence offers to exchange murders: "We murder for each other, see? I kill your wife and you kill my father! We meet on

the train, see, and nobody knows we know each other! Perfect alibis!" (30). Guy is horrified and rejects his psychopathic companion's proposal, eventually saying goodbye to him. Seemingly, Guy does not want to get involved in the murder-swap game, though he is not assertive enough to let Bruno know that he is strongly opposed to it. In spite of Guy's apparent reluctance to engage in his fellow's scheme, Bruno kills Miriam in an amusement park.

From this moment onwards, the mentally unstable murderer pursues Guy relentlessly to comply with the task of killing his father. The burden of satisfying Bruno haunts Guy to such an extent that he grows insane. He develops a monomania whereby he repeatedly enacts the forthcoming murder: "In the nights when he could not sleep, he enacted the murder, and it soothed him like a drug" (127). This obsession reaches its peak when he eventually feels attached to his insane friend: "Hadn't he known Bruno was like himself? Or why had he liked Bruno? He loved Bruno" (134). Being controlled by his insanity, Guy finally keeps to the initial deadlines of Bruno's plan and kills his father. Although the absence of Guy's murder is Hitchcock's main deviation from the source text, the film adaptation similarly underscores to what extent the apparently unyielding Guy is perturbed by the monomaniac Bruno. Such a psychological perplexity is reproduced in the frantic second visit to the amusement park at the end of the film, which once more accentuates how deranged the two main characters have become.

### **The First Visit to the Kingdom of Fun: Chasing and Murdering Miriam**

The first appearance of Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun in the two selected works is the moment at which Bruno murders Miriam. This amusement park is a place which, as a carnivalistic setting, allows for the interaction of adults and children alike. This is firstly reflected in the brief encounter between Bruno and a child: in the novel the younger one stretches his hand towards Bruno's kite, while in the film the child aims at Bruno with a toy gun. However, Bruno shows no desire for interaction whatsoever, and in both texts, he bitterly ignores the child. In the novel, Bruno refuses to give him the kite; in the film his reaction is colder, since a medium shot shows him looking down on the young cowboy. This glare suggests coldness and arrogance and underpins Bruno's emotional detachment. However, this is not the only moment where Bruno's gaze is brought to the fore. Both the novel and its film adaptation make prominent the gaze of this psychopathic character: while the novel presents him as the main focalizer in the chapter, the film makes use of techniques such as eyeline matches in order to show the perspective of the monomaniac Bruno. More often than not, what he visually perceives is the synergy of Miriam with fairground rides, such as the merry-go-round and the Tunnel-of-Love boat ride. The visual conjunction of carnivalesque elements inherent to the amusement park and Miriam's interaction is a projection of Bruno's burning desire: killing Guy's wife. Therefore, the prominence of Bruno's perspective in the first visit to Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun contributes to stressing the bond between this literary amusement park and the stranger's mental depravity.

Once Bruno has ignored the child, he catches sight of Miriam and her friends. They are about to ride the merry-go-round and, as they walk towards the fairground attraction, there is an eyeline shot that begins with Bruno looking offscreen, this being immediately followed by a shot that shows what Bruno is seeing. This editing technique points to the fact that Bruno is the main focalizer in the scene. In the novel's chapter 12, he is also an internal focalizer: in the passage corresponding to the eyeline match mentioned above, the narrator explains: "Bruno stood still, unable to take his dazzled eyes from it even to watch Miriam, tingling to the music that promised movement at any instant" (Highsmith 69). The stillness of Bruno is linked to the coldness that he shows when encountering the child: he is a man that feels no empathy whatsoever. It is acknowledged, though, that Bruno is attracted to the amusement park and that even partakes of the other characters' playfulness: "It made him feel like a kid again" (Highsmith 68). This *carnivalistic mésalliance* notwithstanding, it is not his childlike attitude that is enhanced in the texts; what is highlighted is a sense of bitterness which is connected to his monomania: his only desire is to kill Miriam. Hence, the phrase "dazzled eyes" in the quotation points to Bruno's lack of sanity: he is blinded by his obsession with killing Guy's wife.

Bruno's obsession with murdering Miriam accounts for the dominance of his perspective in the two texts and intensifies his mental disorder. This illness is supported by the novel's instances of free indirect speech, in which the gap between the external narrator and the internal focalizer is bridged in order to draw more attention to the characters' thoughts. One of the examples of this stream-of-consciousness technique accentuates Bruno's hate for Miriam: "He could see why Guy would loathe her. He loathed her, too, with all his guts!" (Highsmith 68). Likewise, Bruno's aversion is strengthened by another example of free indirect speech when he heads for the island: "His hands and the lower part of his legs tingled cozily with the liquor. If he had Miriam here in the boat with him, he would hold her head under the water with pleasure" (Highsmith 71). In the first part of the quotation, the tingling points to Bruno's excitement prior to committing his atrocious performance. This feeling is reinforced by the liquor, a bodily pleasure that is connected to the *carnivalistic profanation*. In the film, this profanation is translated accurately, since Bruno is eating popcorn while driving the motorboat. Bruno's decision to eat a large amount of food before carrying out his murder may be linked to profanation. This bodily corruption is juxtaposed with the depravity of his mind, which is emphasized in the second part of the quotation. Bruno's intrusive thoughts on killing Miriam are reflected by means of his self-assured gaze as he looks at Miriam's boat from afar: he is the dominant figure in the scene and will let nobody thwart his plan. Actually, as George Toles suggests in his study, "He is not yet in a trance. He is fully alert" (134). This self-confidence is reflected in the novel by the following: "Luck was with him tonight! Tonight he should be gambling!" (Highsmith 70). The reference to gambling makes it clear that Bruno's behavior is accepted in Metcalf's carnivalistic park: just as he is allowed to bet in the fair's stands, he has the opportunity to kill a woman in the park's island.

In the course of the journey to the island as depicted in Hitchcock's film, heterodiegetic music plays a key role: it helps create suspense and intensify the terror provoked by Bruno's plan. The music that can be heard ever since the characters

ride the attractions is the happy tune of the merry-go-round. However, while they are going through the tunnel the music's intensity diminishes; at this point in the scene, what can be perceived instead is the characters' murmur. In the novel, it is pointed out that Bruno—who is the focalizer—is hearing their whispering: "In the nooks along the shore ... he heard murmurs, soft radios, laughter" (Highsmith 71). In the film, it is likely that Bruno is listening to the same murmurs as those heard by the audience, since he remains silent. Since the audience gets to see and hear what Bruno himself perceives, a combination of suspense and terror is created in this scene: spectators are sharing the impressions of a psychopath who may commit his crime at any moment. The terror created by this suspicion is strengthened by two additional elements: the first one is *carnivalistic mésalliance* in the sense that the emotional numbness of the focalizer is juxtaposed with the characters' joyous laughter; the second one is a shot that shows the end of the tunnel. At this specific moment in Hitchcock's thriller, there is a fleeting moment of silence preceding a sudden cry of Miriam. By the time this shriek is uttered, spectators have not seen the ferry yet. Therefore, they can think that the insane Bruno has seized Miriam. However, the maniac will wait until Miriam sets foot on the island. Indeed, the island is the perfect setting for his perfect murder, and this suitability is also reflected in the novel: "The island. It looked like a neckers' paradise" (Highsmith 72). As anticipated by the term *neckers*, this area of the fanciful carnivalistic park is nevertheless a place where Bruno will strangle Guy's wife.

When the characters reach the island in the novel, "the music of the merry-go-round sounded tired and very distant" (Highsmith 72). This is perfectly translated in the film, since the homodiegetic tune of the attraction becomes less and less intense. The lack of intensity entails tranquillity and privacy: these are two elements that Bruno needs to conduct his crime and that, therefore, point to the loosening of behavioral norms. Given this growing silence, Bruno will not be discovered while murdering his victim, which can be linked to Bakhtin's idea of carnival as a rite aimed at challenging authority. Therefore, the carnivalistic island is a setting where Bruno's attitude is accepted but which, nevertheless, serves to ironically comment on the depravity of his mind: he is a man who continues strangling Miriam once she has lost consciousness. As depicted in the novel, "He was sure he had held her long enough, but did not lessen his grip" (Highsmith 73). The lack of sympathy shown by the killer is made prominent by the specific type of murder that he chooses: strangulation. As Carl Royer and Diana Royer argue, "strangulation is the most simple, primitive form of murder; it is also the most intimate. In that sense the killer is both completely alienated from humanity and completely engaged with it" (31). As implied in this contention, Bruno's procedure highlights his ruthlessness and, above all, his overarching psychopathy. The abjection which Bruno's total depravity produces at this point is reformulated in the film adaptation by means of a detail shot of Miriam's glasses. This is a shot in which the strangulation is reflected in the lenses of the victim. Since the audience can only see shadows, a certain sense of terror is created. As Dellolio argues, this shot "perfectly expresses the dreamlike monstrosity of Guy's wish fulfilment fantasy and Bruno's necromantic control of that fantasy" (265). Therefore, the reflection is an externalization of Guy's desire to have nothing to do with his wife and, more importantly, of Bruno's terrific crave for helping his friend by killing Miriam. To

this terrific element can be added the horror produced by the increasing intensity of the merry-go-round's tune. The contrast between Bruno's atrocity and the playful nature of the homodiegetic music reflects the carnival's ironical attempt to reflect the murderer's insane mind and the monstrous bond between the two strangers.

### **The Second Visit to the Kingdom of Fun: Riotous Strangers in an Unruly Place**

Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951) revisits Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun as a suitable place for the film's *dénouement*. As Warren argues, "the director and his screenwriters were so taken with the powerful park setting that they return to it at the end of the movie" (84). As explained above, in the early visit the park emerges as a setting where the carnival underlines the insanity of Bruno's mind. However, Guy's psyche is barely explored in the first visit, as he is physically absent when Bruno kills his wife. It is only through Bruno's realization of the unhappy husband's desire to lose sight of the two-timing wife that the insanity of Guy is somewhat inferred. Nevertheless, Hitchcock's second visit to the amusement park contributes to exploring how Guy's psychological condition has deteriorated ever since he agreed to speak with his monomaniac companion. What is more interesting for the present article's central concerns, this re-visiting of Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun contributes to underscoring how elements of carnival ultimately reflect the two strangers' irrationality.

In this second visit, the two strangers meet for the last time and fight against each other on a merry-go-round that is out of control. This ill-matched pair acts irrationally in this final scene, so the carnival reflects that both characters are mentally disturbed to some extent. Although this second appearance of the amusement park is not present in the novel, there are some passages in chapter 12 that can be said to be reflected in the film's final scene. First, in the film Bruno catches sight of Guy in the immediate area of the merry-go-round, and this is reflected by an eyeline match connecting Bruno's startled look with the figure of Guy. This eyeline match bears some resemblance to a specific passage from the novel's chapter 12: when the characters are riding the merry-go-round, Miriam spots a man and, immediately after, Bruno turns round so as to see him: "Bruno looked. He saw the fellow in the checked shirt. He looked a bit like Guy" (Highsmith 70). The parallel that Bruno draws between the man in the checked shirt and Guy implies that he is unable to remove Guy from his mind. At this point in the thriller, Bruno's obsession with his fellow is accounted for by a key difference in terms of plot: whereas in the novel Guy kills Bruno's father, in the film Guy has failed to do so; hence, Bruno bears a grudge against his companion because he feels betrayed. Therefore, the encounter of the two strangers in the film's second visit to Metcalf will by no means go unnoticed. Actually, in the final scene of Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, the man who is opposite Bruno in the merry-go-round is no longer a mental construction, but the flesh-and-bone Guy.

The focal point in this scene is the fight between the two strangers on the merry-go-round. At some point during the ride, the carousel loses control and both characters come to blows. In the novel's chapter 12, the element of violence on the deadly carousel

is suggested as Bruno rides the merry-go-round: “Something swatted him in the back of the head, he turned belligerently” (Highsmith 70). The adverb *belligerently* suggests violence and hence links Hitchcock’s *dénouement* to the literary text. In the film, this belligerence is strengthened by the use of a medium shot that shows the two opponents at the same level: the fact that they are at the same level points not simply to their vicious bond, but mainly to their being equally insane. Moreover, the middle distance enables the audience to perceive the strangers’ countenance: their physiognomy reveals that they are frenzied characters, thus sharing a degree of madness.

According to Samantha Walton, what these characters ultimately share is, however, not only insanity, but responsibility for Miriam’s murder: “Guy is tacitly complicit with Bruno from the outset, and this makes it easier for Bruno to manipulate him and draw him into a shared sense of responsibility for the murder” (30). Having become Bruno’s puppet, Guy has grown vulnerable and thus easy to manipulate. In this respect, Guy has somehow become a projection of Bruno’s mind, hence partaking of his mental disorder. At the same time, Robin Wood brings to light the connection between the two unstable strangers by connecting Bruno’s repressed desires to Guy’s aspirations: “[Bruno] represents the destructive, subversive urges that exist, though suppressed, in everybody: he is an extension, an embodiment, of desires already existing in Guy” (173). This contention ties in with the idea that Bruno’s murder of Miriam could potentially be read as the realization of Guy’s unconscious yearning: losing sight of his presumably unfaithful wife.

As is the case with the first appearance of the park, carnival contributes to commenting on the mind’s insanity in a humorous way. By way of illustration, while on the merry-go-round there is a child to the right of the rivals who is watching them with a somewhat funny look. Hence, the elements of violence and fun are juxtaposed, this suggesting that the strangers’ fight is ludicrous. This *carnivalistic mésalliance*, in Bakhtin’s terms, is also invoked by the merry-go-round’s tune, as happens in the early visit to the amusement park. Indeed, this instance of homodiegetic music accentuates the characters’ imbalance, and this relationship between the tune and madness is also conveyed in the novel: when Bruno rides the merry-go-round in chapter 12, he sings the melody’s lyrics vehemently: “‘His brain was so loaded, it nearly exploded ... the poor girl would shake with alaa-arm!’” (Highsmith 71). As can be seen, the lyrics make reference to the troubled mind of a man, and that situation applies to the two strangers. Moreover, both the sustained vowel <a> in “alaa-arm” and the exclamation mark point to the passion with which Bruno sings. This element of passion suggested by the melody is also invoked by the carousel’s horse that can be distinguished on the lower right side of the shot. Later in the scene, this prop is made prominent by means of a close-up that shows the shaky face of the horse prior to the collapse of the merry-go-round. This animal conveys the idea of unbridled passion. Just as the horse seems to be running wild in the shot, the two characters that are fighting are by no means rational: they are driven by instinct, as if they were animals. Therefore, this aspect of the carnivalistic *mise-en-scène* defining the amusement park contributes to demonstrating that both Bruno and Guy are insane. All in all, the horse is some evidence of the fact that “the film suggests that dangerous moral, ethical, and material forces are unleashed when conscious behaviour and subconscious wishes are in



conflict” (Dellolio 260). Due to their respective preoccupations and obsessions, the two strangers have undergone a change in their conscious behavior, hence externalizing their subconscious wishes and ultimately their becoming mad.

## Conclusion

I have shown in my analysis that both Patricia Highsmith’s novel *Strangers on a Train* and its film adaptation by Alfred Hitchcock employ carnival elements that ironically reflect the insanity of the two strangers’ minds. They depict an amusement park where there is free interaction between people from different social classes and where any behavior, even though unacceptable, can be embraced. The depravity shared by the two protagonists is reinforced by elements such as the prominence of Bruno’s cold gaze, the uncontrolled merry-go-round and the carousel’s tune. Likewise, techniques such as free indirect style are reformulated in the film by means of eyeline matches and homodiegetic music. Furthermore, the ludicrous quality of the two characters’ unconscious drives is enhanced by framing devices such as medium shots showing their reactions and a close-up of a horse that symbolizes unrestrained passion. This paper also suggests that the novel’s chapter 12 may have inspired Alfred Hitchcock to revisit the carnivalistic amusement park in his 1951 film adaptation of Highsmith’s work. Actually, some important passages from the selected chapter are, to a certain extent, translated into elements of performance, *mise-en-scène* and framing that portray the ludicrousness and mental instability of the two strangers. Having accounted for the relevance of the novel’s chapter 12 in devising the film’s *dénouement*, a future line of research might be assessing to what extent the final scene of Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* is related to passages from Highsmith’s novel and to other examples of fiction that use carnivalistic settings. Such an approach would enrich the bulk of literature into the dialogue between literary texts and film.

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