

# 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.

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