STRANGERS ON A TRAIN

The first shots introduce us to two pairs of men's feet as their owners arrive at a station. The two are characterized by means of their shoes: first, showy, vulgar, brown-and-white brogues; second, plain unadorned walking shoes. A parallel is at once established in visual terms: or, more precisely, a parallel is imposed by the editing on what would otherwise be pure contrast. Each shot of the first pair of feet is promptly balanced by a similar shot of the second. On the train, we are shown the feet again, moving to the same table. It is always Bruno's feet that we see first—he arrives at the station first, he sits down first, it is Guy's foot that knocks his accidentally, under the table, leading directly to their getting into conversation. Thus Hitchcock makes it clear that Bruno has not engineered the meeting, despite the fact that he knows all about Guy ("Ask me anything, I know the answers") and has the plan for exchanging murders ready to hand: it is rather as if he is waiting for a chance meeting he knew would come. This gives us, from the outset, the sense of some not quite natural, not quite explicable link between the two men.

The contrast between them is developed explicitly in the dialogue. Guy is planning a career in politics: in Hitchcock's films, politics, government, democratic symbolism (the Statue of Liberty in Saboteur, the Capitol in this film, Mount Rushmore in North by Northwest), are always associated with the idea of an ordered life, set against potential chaos. Bruno, on the other hand, has been expelled from three colleges for drinking and gambling, and lives mostly for kicks. Guy wants to marry Ann Morton, a senator's daughter; Bruno is associated with his mother (by means of the ornate tiepin, a gift from her, which bears his name). Bruno, despite the fact that he has flown in a jet and driven a car blindfold at 150 mph, and has a theory that "you should do everything before you die," envies Guy: "I certainly admire people who do things"; and, "It must be pretty exciting, being so important—me, I never do anything important." We register this sense of impotence as probably, at bottom, sexual: it links up with Bruno's voyeuristic prying into Guy's love life.

Yet, behind the contrast, the parallel established by the editing of the opening shots becomes manifest. Both men, like so many of Hitchcock's protagonists, are insecure and uncertain of their identity. Guy is suspended between tennis and politics, between his tramp wife and his senator's daughter, and Bruno is seeking desperately to establish an identity through violent, outré actions and flamboyance (shoes, lobster-patterned tie, name proclaimed to the world on his tiepin). His professed admiration for Guy is balanced by Guy's increasing, if reluctant and in part ironically amused, admiration for him. Certainly, Guy responds to Bruno—we see it in his face, at once amused and tense. To the man committed to a career in politics, Bruno represents a tempting overthrow of all responsibility. Guy fails to repudiate Bruno's suggestive statements about Miriam ("What is a life or two, Guy? Some people are better off dead") with any force or conviction. When Bruno openly suggests that he would like to kill his wife, he merely grins and says, "That's a morbid thought"; but we sense the tension that underlies it. When he leaves the train he is still laughing at Bruno; but he leaves his lighter behind. This lighter, on which our attention has already been focused by a close-up and some commentary in the dialogue, is to be of crucial importance in the plot. It was given to Guy by Ann Morton, and bears the inscription "A to G" with two crossed tennis racquets: it is through his tennis that Guy's entry into politics has become possible. Guy's forgetfulness at this moment belies his dismissive joking air when Bruno asks if he agrees to the exchange of murders ("Of course I agree—I agree with all your theories"). He is leaving in Bruno's keeping his link with Ann, his possibility of climbing into the ordered existence to which he aspires. The leaving of the lighter is one of the visual equivalents Hitchcock finds for the interior, psychological analysis of the Patricia Highsmith novel that was his source.

Guy, then, in a sense connives at the murder of his wife, and the enigmatic link between him and Bruno becomes clear. Bruno is certainly a character in his own right, realized in detail with marvelous precision; but he also represents the destructive, subversive urges that exist, though suppressed, in everybody: he is an extension, an embodiment, of desires...
already existing in Guy. In their first conversation, as they face each other, the cross-cutting between them gives us Guy's face unshadowed, Bruno's crossed with lines of shadow like the shadow of bars. He is continually, in these early stages of the film, associated with shadows and with darkness; the development of the film can partly be seen in terms of his forcing himself into the light for recognition. He understands Guy's darker motives better than Guy does himself: "Marrying the boss's daughter—the short cut to a career": nothing later in the film, and especially not the uneasy, formal relationship between the lovers, contradicts this assessment.

The next sequence introduces us to Miriam and defines Guy's position more clearly. Miriam—hard, mean, slovenly, at once contemptible and pathetic in her limitations—is one of those Hitchcock characters created in the round with the utmost economy in a few seconds: a gesture of the hands, a drooping of the mouth, a slovenly way of turning the body, dull yet calculating eyes peering shortsightedly through those spectacles. She is more than a character. We are introduced to her in the record shop where she works, and the association of her with revolving objects (taken up later in the fairground sequence) suggests the futile vicious circle of her existence, the circle from which Guy wishes to break free. We have already seen Guy's lack of insight into other people in his inability to deal firmly with Bruno, and seen too that this lack is basically one of self-awareness; so we have no difficulty in accepting the premise of his involvement with Miriam.

After the row in the record shop, during which Guy "warns" Miriam and shakes her violently, the phone call to Ann: "You sound so savage, Guy"—"I'd like to break her foul, useless little neck . . . I said I could strangle her"—shouted over the roar of an approaching train. Cut to Bruno's hands—his mother has just manicured them, and he is admiring them, flexing the fingers. The cut finally clinches the relationship between the two men, making Bruno an agent for the execution of Guy's desires.

The fairground and amusement park is a symbolic projection of Miriam's world: a world of disorder, of the pursuit of fun and cheap glamor as the aim of life, of futility represented by the circular motion of roundabout and Great Wheel that receive such strong visual emphasis in almost every shot. The whole sequence is realized with a marvelous particularity and complexity. Through Miriam, Hitchcock evokes a whole social milieu, small town life in all its unimaginativeness and restriction. The sequence is introduced by the long shot of Miriam's home, from Bruno's viewpoint, as he waits for her to emerge: respectable-looking, white-fronted house, mother sitting outside on porch, calling, "Now don't be out late" to Miriam as she runs down the steps with her two boyfriends, holding hands, giggling childishly. We think back to the sullen girl in the record shop. At the fairground, she makes the boys buy her an ice-cream cornet, talking at the same time about hot dogs, and they tease her about eating so much. We remember that she is pregnant. She talks about her "craving"—the boys laugh. "Craving for what?" She turns, gazing round the fairground through her spectacles, licking at her ice cream like a spoiled schoolgirl, looking at once childish and sensual, and her eyes fix on Bruno, watching her from a distance. Not only is the character rendered with precision: an attitude to her is precisely defined, an attitude totally devoid of sentimentality, astringent yet not without pity. She is not pathetic in herself—she is never aware of needing anyone's compassion—but her situation, the narrow, circumscribed outlook, the total lack of awareness, is both pathetic and horrible. And what is being defined, ultimately, is the world from which Guy is struggling to escape: contaminated by that world (remember the impurity, exposed by Bruno, of his motives for wanting to marry Ann), he cannot free himself cleanly as he wants.

The sequence of events leading up to the murder throws further light on both Miriam and Bruno: the strangling is invested with a clear sexual significance. Miriam, at her first glimpse of Bruno, sees something more intriguing—more dangerous—than she can find in her two very unmysteries boys. She gives him the "come-on," unmistakably, demanding to go to the Tunnel of Love loudly, so that he will hear. As her boys fail to ring the bell at the "Test Your Strength" machine, she looks round for him, and when he materializes mysteriously on her other side, she smiles at him. He shows off his strength to her ("He's brokenit!"), first proudly flexing his hands, which are emphasized by the low camera angle, afterward wagging his eyebrows at her. Then the roundabout: circling motion, raucous music, painted, prancing horses, more flirtation from Miriam. She calls—loudly again, like an announcement—for a boat ride. More revolving in the backgrounds as they get the boats: the Big Wheel behind Bruno, huge waterwheel beside the Tunnel of Love ahead of Miriam. From here, the sexual symbolism accumulates strikingly. They
pass through an archway to the boats, above which is written “Magic Isle”—where Miriam will shortly be murdered; the boats cross the lake, enter the tunnel (where Bruno’s shadow ominously overtakes Miriam’s), out again onto the lake. Miriam runs away on the isle, purposely losing the boys. Then a lighter is trust before her face and struck: “A to G”. “Is your name Miriam?” “Why, yes,” she smiles seductively, and Bruno drops the lighter and strangles her.

Her glasses fall off, one lens shatters, and the murder is shown to us reflected in the other lens, inverted and distorted. The lens itself recalls the chaos world has been finally defined, the “Magic Isle” becomes an island of lost souls. The association of sexual perversion with the sense of damnation will be taken up again more forcefully in Psycho. Bruno, with his close relationship with a crazy mother, is an obvious forerunner of Norman Bates.

As he leaves the fairground, Bruno helps a blind man across the road. At the time, it seems merely a cleverly ironic touch, a trifle glib; but in retrospect it takes on a deeper meaning. Henceforth Bruno will be haunted by the memory of Miriam’s eyes looking at him through her spectacles in which the lighter flame is reflected; his helping of a blind man with dark glasses is an act of unconscious atonement. The sequence ends with Bruno looking at his watch: cut to Guy, on a train, looking at his: the visual link again used to enforce the connection between them.

Later, we see Guy reaching his rooms in Washington. On one side of the street, stately, respectable houses; towering in the background, on the right of the screen, the floodlit dome of the Senate House, the life to which Guy aspires, the world of light and order. On the other side of the street, deep shadow and tall iron-barred gates from behind which Bruno calls. The light-and-darkness symbolism—Guy turning from the lighted doorway of the house toward the shadow, away from the Senate House—is simple, but not naive or ridiculous, and handled naturally and unobtrusively. Bruno beckons, a shadow among shadows. Again we see him with bars across his face: at the start of the ensuing dialogue he is behind the bars, Guy in the open. He gives Guy the spectacles, reminds him about the lighter—“I went back for it, Guy,“ Guy is horrified. Then: “But, Guy, you wanted it. . . We planned it together. . . You’re just as much in it as I am . . . You’re a free man now.” The phone rings in Guy’s rooms, a police car approaches, stops outside, and Guy promptly joins Bruno behind the bars, in shadow: a free man. He says, “You’ve got me acting like I’m a criminal,” and we have a subjective shot of the police from Guy’s position behind the bars. The scene gives a beautifully exact symbolic expression to Guy’s relationship to Bruno and what he stands for.

More light-and-darkness in the next sequence: Guy answers his phone, Ann tells him to come round. Right of screen: a large, lighted lamp, Guy holding the receiver to his ear, Ann’s voice coming through. Left of screen: heavy shadow, Miriam’s spectacles dangling downward in Guy’s other hand. The hands remind us of a pair of scales. We then see Guy and Ann together for the first time, and Hitchcock shows us their rather remote, uneasy relationship. Ann strikes us as the older, certainly the maturer, the more completed: the dominant partner. Their kiss lacks real intimacy or tenderness. She tells him she loves him and he replies, “Brazen woman, I’m the one to say that”: an odd, endistancing, defensive kind of joke. As Ann, her father, and her sister Barbara break the news, and Guy makes a feeble attempt at surprise, our view of the lovers’ relationship is confirmed by Ann’s obvious suspicions that Guy has killed Miriam: she tells him, with heavy significance, “She was strangled”; and she is visibly relieved when he explains his alibi. If the world from which Guy wishes to escape is defined for us by Miriam, then Ann —formal, rather hard, rather cold, in Ruth Roman’s unsympathetic performance—defines the life to which he aspires: a life of imposed, slightly artificial orderliness. As for his guilt, Hitchcock makes it very clear that what he can’t bear is not the idea that he has been indirectly involved, at any rate by desire, in the death of a human being, but the fear of being found out: it is the only feeling he reveals in his conversation with Bruno, and all that he and Ann reveal in this scene. The moral point is made clearly when Senator Morton rebukes Barbara for saying, of Miriam, “She was a tramp,” with the remark, “She was a human being.” The rebuke, for the audience, has relevance to the lovers as well.

Yet, despite the critical attitude adopted toward the lovers’ relation-
ship, we are made aware of its importance for Guy. Ann is more than a way to a career, she represents in herself something of the ordered world he aspires to. Thus the kiss that closes the sequence, which Guy, eyes looking straight into the camera, scarcely returns, is in contrast to the kiss that opened it: the potentialities of the relationship are threatened by the concealment of his involvement in Miriam’s murder.

In the ensuing sequences Bruno increases the pressure on Guy to murder his father. First, the phone call to Ann’s house: Guy hangs up. Second, the scene where Guy and Hennessy (the detective detailed to watch him) walk together past the Senate House. In the setting of spacious, ordered architecture, Guy says, “When I’m through with tennis I’m going into politics,” and looks across to see Bruno watching from the steps, tiny in long shot. Third, the letter from Bruno pushed under Guy’s door. Fourth, the scene where Ann sees Bruno for the first time. She and Guy are in the Senate House when Bruno calls Guy from among the pillars: “You’re spoiling everything . . . You’re making me come out into the open.” Fifth, Guy receives the plan of, and key to, Mr. Anthony’s house. Then, at last, the famous shot of Bruno watching Guy at the tennis court, all other heads turning to follow the ball, Bruno’s conspicuous because motionless, his eyes fixed on Guy: a moment at once funny and unnerving. He now manages to meet Ann while Guy practices.

These scenes work beautifully in terms of suspense, but here as elsewhere it is necessary to ask, of what exactly does his suspense consist? We feel uneasy not just because pressure is being brought to bear on Guy to make him commit a murder; rather, it is because that which he wants to hide is indeed “coming out into the open.” Think back to a character I have hitherto neglected: Ann’s sister Barbara. In the first scene at Senator Morton’s house, Barbara’s function is clearly to express, directly and unhypocratically, what everyone—including the spectator—is slightly ashamed to find himself thinking: that it is really an admirable thing from all points of view that Miriam is dead. Her frank and shocking remarks recall Bruno’s justification of killing—“Some people are better off dead”—and therefore involve the spectator with Bruno; they also prompt the senator’s rebuke—“She was a human being.” In other words, conflicting, apparently mutually exclusive responses are set up in the spectator, with disturbing results. We respond strongly to Barbara’s no-nonsense honesty, but we are made ashamed of that response. It is this conflict within the spectator that is the essence of the ensuing suspense: we, as well as Guy, are implicated in Miriam’s murder. Bruno’s symbolic progress, each step bringing him closer and clearer—telephone, distant figure, closer figure lurking among shadowy pillars, figure sitting in full sunlight, young man in conversation with Ann, intruder from the chaos world into the world of order—represents the emergence of all we want concealed: our own suppressed, evil desires.

Bruno’s appearance at the party marks his final eruption into the world of order: the demand for recognition of the universality of guilt by a world that rejects such an assumption. The centerpiece of the scene—in some respects of the whole film—is Bruno’s near-strangling of Mrs. Cunningham. It derives its disturbing power again from a subtly aroused conflict, the attractiveness and the danger of that connivance at common guilt which Bruno represents. First, we are disarmed by Bruno’s casually humorous treatment releases us from some of the uneasiness we feel at responding to Bruno and prepares us for the next step—Bruno’s conversation about murder with Mrs. Cunningham.

Here the underlying assumption of the film (subversive, destructive desires exist in all of us, waiting for a momentary relaxing of our vigilance) becomes explicit. Mrs. Cunningham’s denial that everyone is interested in murder breaks down abruptly when Bruno asks if there haven’t been times when she has wanted to kill someone—Mr. Cunningham, perhaps? There follows the richly comic exchange of murder methods, culminating in Bruno’s demonstration of silent strangling—the method he used on Miriam—with Mrs. Cunningham as guinea pig. As his hands close on the old woman’s throat, Barbara comes up behind her, Bruno sees her and, for the second time, is reminded by her (dark hair, round face, glasses) of Miriam. He goes into a “sort of trance,” Mrs. Cunningham is nearly killed, and the sequence ends with Barbara, who has realized that Bruno was really strangling her, in tears. The scene is a superb example of the Hitchcock spectator trap. First, belief in established order has been undermined in the deflation of the judge; then the dialogue with Mrs. Cunningham and her friend, because of its light tone, gives us license to accept the notion of common guilt as something
of a joke, to connive at it, allowing ourselves to be implicated in the “game” of murdering Mrs. Cunningham, who is anyway a rich, trivial, stupid old woman. Then abruptly the joke rebounds on us: we have nearly been implicated in another murder: swift modulation of tone has seldom been used to such disturbing effect. We are horrified to find that we have momentarily identified ourselves with Bruno (the sequence contains a number of subjective shots, where we are placed in his position). We have the feeling, even, that we, through a lack of vigilance, have released these destructive forces by conniving at them. But the final emphasis is on Barbara; and we recall that earlier it was she who was used to make explicit our conventionally suppressed feeling that Miriam’s murder was all for the best. She seemed before to give validity to the release of the anarchic forces of desire: now she is punished by the very forces she helped release, and we with her. The scene leads us straight to the essence of Hitchcock: that ordered life depends on the rigorous and unnatural suppression of a powerfully seductive underworld of desire: and we see the reason for the stiff formality of the world of order in the film.

The scene is rich in other ways too. The three minor characters, the judge, Mrs. Cunningham, and her friend, are realized with marvelous economy and precision, the realization being, as always, as much a crystallization of an attitude toward them as the objective description of character: there is nothing indulgent about the humor with which these representatives of the world of order are presented. The incident also further illuminates Bruno, whose symbolic function in the film is by no means undermined by the fact that he is also a character created in the round. Mrs. Cunningham, like Bruno’s mother, is rich, spoiled, foolish, and indulgent; he is able to handle her so adroitly because he is used to managing his mother, manipulating her reactions. This is the kind of relationship he can manage, a relationship based entirely on power, wielded through a combination of cunning and insidious, self-insinuating charm—his ability to involve others in his sickness. Finally, the sequence shows the toll his life and actions are taking of him, his thoroughgoing cynicism and complete lack of remorse belied by his obsession with Barbara’s (i.e. Miriam’s) glasses and neck, the ineradicable memory of that other relationship expressed in the shot of his anguished face as he tries to strangle Mrs. Cunningham. As his hands are pulled away from her throat, he falls back in a swoon.

It is the near-strangling of Mrs. Cunningham that forces the spectator to come to terms with his attitude to subversive desire, and prompts Guy, under pressure from Ann, to divulge the truth to her: without, however, acknowledging any personal guilt, of which he obviously remains quite unaware. He tells Ann, “I’d do his murder, he’d do mine”; to which she responds suggestively, “What do you mean—you’re murder, Guy?” Her first reaction was, “How did you get him to do it?” The removal of doubts between the lovers marks a necessary stage in the action. Their relationship is now on a surer footing, giving Guy the strength to take steps to extricate himself. The next sequence, in which he visits Mr. Anthony’s house at night, is a turning point and a critical crux.

The emphasis is, again, on suspense: in successive shots we see Guy take the gun Bruno has sent him, elude his “tail” by using the fire-escape, and cross the moonlit lawn of the Anthony grounds in long shot, like a shadow. We don’t know at all clearly what he intends to do or what will happen to him. Suspense is built up as he enters the house (using the key Bruno had sent), consults Bruno’s map to find the father’s room, encounters a snarling mastiff on the stairs, subdues it, finds the room, transfers the gun, hesitating for a moment with it in his hand, from his breast pocket to his side pocket, creeps into the bedroom, approaches the bed, calls in a whisper, “Mr. Anthony . . . I want to speak to you about your son . . . about Bruno.” The dark figure on the bed switches on a lamp and reveals himself as Bruno.

At first glance this seems, indeed, to be that “mere” suspense that is all Hitchcock’s detractors see in his films: externally applied, rather cheap. And if we assume that Guy knows precisely what he is going to do in Mr. Anthony’s house, the criticism is unanswerable. Hitchcock is cheating, basing the suspense on a deliberate misleading of the spectator. There are, however, points which suggest that this is too superficial a reading: that Guy has indeed made up his mind to visit Mr. Anthony, but there remains a possibility, right up to the moment of hesitation outside the bedroom door that he will change his mind and shoot him. With this in mind, the sequence assumes quite a different aspect.

The first hint comes in fact several scenes earlier, when Guy is talking to Hennessy in his rooms before the party. The camera looks down as Guy opens the top drawer in which Bruno’s gun is lying, and we see the two men with the gun strongly emphasized in the foreground of the
screen. Guy has just been telling Hennessy he will have an early night: he is in fact planning to visit the Anthony house. But they are now discussing Hennessy's suspicious colleague, Hammond, and, as we see the gun in the drawer, Hennessy says, "He doesn't trust anybody—not even himself." The whole shot is framed and directed in such a way as to give a particular significance to the remark, linking it with the gun. Then, in the house, we have the moment of hesitation itself. This is either the decisive moment of the scene or a very cheap trick indeed: cheap, because it falsifies a character's behavior for the sake of producing a shiver—if the gesture doesn't imply uncertainty as to what to do with the gun, then it has no meaning at all. Finally, shortly after the discovery that it is Bruno on the bed, Guy tells him, "You're sick," adding, "I don't know much about those things..." It is the nearest to an explicit statement in the film of that lack of self-awareness so plentifully illustrated elsewhere. The "suspense" of the sequence, then, has a point: the spectator's uncertainty as to what Guy is going to do corresponds to the character's own inner uncertainty. And the moment of final decision is the turning-point of the film: henceforward, Bruno is openly against Guy, no longer wanting anything but revenge. The conflict has changed levels, and the struggle for self-preservation is the price Guy must pay for his involvement; an involvement partly expiated by the decision taken outside Mr. Anthony's bedroom.

But, this said, it must then be admitted that to raise such doubts is to acknowledge a dissatisfaction with the sequence. Guy's uncertainty is not sufficiently realized, a fault due perhaps to the limitations of Farley Granger as an actor, which led Hitchcock to put more weight on that one gesture with the gun than it can stand. But the criticism is of a misjudgment, a local failure of realization, not a major lapse in artistic integrity. [—Now, I'm not so sure. The compromise over the hero figure that fatally flaws Torn Curtain offers a close parallel, and one cannot but feel that Hitchcock's uncertainty of handling in the scene of Guy's visit to Bruno's house has its roots in his fears of the effect of so morally dubious a "hero" on box office response. "Major lapse in artistic integrity" is perhaps not too strong a description—R. W. 1968.]

Ann's interview with Bruno's mother is the next step in the working out of the situation on its new level, the protagonists now ranged openly against one another. In Mrs. Anthony's insanity we see (as we are to see it later, more extremely, in the amalgam of Norman Bates and his mother at the end of Psycho) the ultimate extension of the chaos world. The woman's very existence depends on the complete rejection of all value judgments, the final denial of responsibility. In fact, "irresponsibility" is the word she uses to excuse Bruno: with a smile of maternal indulgence, a little knowing shake of the head, she says, "Sometimes he's terribly irresponsible." To which Ann returns a moment later, "He's responsible for a woman's death."

The famous cross-cutting between the tennis match and Bruno's journey with the lighter gives us a very different sort of suspense—simpler, less disturbing than before, as befits this phase of the action. The tension we feel now is not uncomplicated by conflicting responses (who hasn't wanted Bruno to reach the lighter?), but the struggle has become clear and simple, the forces of good and evil are now separate and clearly aligned. Despite this, some very interesting points arise.

First, the development of that elementary yet elemental light-darkness symbolism: Guy fights for victory on the brilliantly sunny tennis court as Bruno struggles to reach the lighter which has slipped through a grating down a drain. One doesn't want to reduce the film to simple, pat allegory (Hitchcock resolutely defies any such treatment), but the cutting between sunny open court and shadowy enclosed drain carries powerfully evocative overtones: underlying the whole action of the film, we can see as its basis the struggle for dominance between superego and id. Second, we remember that tennis has been established from the start as Guy's means of access to the ordered word, his ladder from the previous life with Miriam to his projected political career: it is therefore appropriate that his fate should depend now on his ability at tennis. Furthermore, this test is made explicitly one of character, even of character development. Guy, in his desperation to finish the match in time, has to change his whole manner of playing (as the commentator points out) —he abandons his usual cautious long-term strategy in favor of a "grim and determined" open battling style. His whole career—even the desire to marry Ann—has been a matter of careful strategy: now he is forced to fight openly for what he wants. Third, it is significant that the outcome of the entire film should be made to depend upon the retrieving of the lighter, symbol of Guy's involvement with Bruno, of his placing himself in Bruno's hands. Great emphasis is laid on it—and on the "A to G" inscription—every time it appears. It is Guy's strongest concrete
link with the ordered world; now he must reenter the chaos world in order to retrieve it, thereby risking final submersion.

The fairground climax gives us the ultimate development of that world in its magnificent symbol of the roundabout that gets out of control. Guy struggles for his life—for more than his life—on the insanely whirling machine beneath the metallic hoofs of hideously grinning and prancing dummy horses: the horses on which Bruno, with Guy's implicit consent (the lighter) set about "seducing" Miriam. Guy is denied the satisfaction—we are denied the release—of a straightforward victory: the roundabout terrifyingly breaks down, Guy is thrown clear, Bruno is crushed under the wreckage. He dies obstinately refusing repentance, and Guy seems involved forever. Then, as he dies, Bruno's hand opens: the lighter is in his palm.

The very last scene of the film (where Guy and Ann move away pointedly from a friendly clergyman on a train) shows us, with light humor, Guy, united with his senator's daughter, resolutely—even somewhat extremely and rigidly!—resisting the possibility of further temptation. The stiff unnaturalness of the couple's behavior is perfectly logical: Guy's involvement with Bruno has been worked out in action—he has never faced its implications, and his personality remains to the end unintegrated, his identity still potentially unstable, the threat of disorder to be held back only by rigid control.

Strangers on a Train draws together many themes already adumbrated in earlier films, which will be taken further in later ones: the theme of what Conrad calls the "sickening assumption of common guilt" (developed especially in Psycho); the theme of the search for identity (Vertigo); the theme of the struggle of a personality torn between order and chaos (perhaps the most constant Hitchcock theme); and, in close conjunction with this, the notion of experience therapy—the hero purged of his weaknesses by indulging them and having to live out the consequences (Rear Window). We find here, too, the characteristic Hitchcockian moral tone: the utterly unsentimental and ruthless condemnation of the forces that make for disorder, coupled with a full awareness of their dangerously tempting fascination; a sense of the impurity of motives: does Guy love Ann, or is she merely the way to success? Clearly both: good and evil are inseparably mixed. And, running through the film, there is that Hitchcockian humor which itself represents a moral position: it is the manifestation of his artistic impersonality, of his detached and impersonal attitude to themes which clearly obsess him. Yet the film leaves one unsatisfied (not merely disturbed). The fault may lie partly with the players: Farley Granger, a perfect foil to John Dall in Rope, is too slight a personality to carry much moral weight, so that we feel that Guy's propensity for good or evil is too trivial: Ann (Ruth Roman) is a cold, formal woman, so that there is little sense, at the end, that Guy has won through to a worthwhile relationship. There is not enough at stake: his triumph over too slight an evil (in himself) has won him too equivocal a good. Consequently, the effect seems at times two-dimensional, or like watching the working out of a theorem rather than of a human drama, and the film, if not exactly a failure, strikes me as something less than a masterpiece.

One has no qualifications about Robert Walker's Bruno, or about any of the scenes built around him. The film's two classic sequences, in fact, seem to me the first fairground sequence and the scene of the Mortons' party. Here the characteristic Hitchcockian moral tone is felt in all its disturbing complexity. [13]