

Discomforting Merrymaking: The Parties of Hitchcock

Paul Branch

It does not seem too great a stretch to assert that Hitchcock had a vested interest in exposing the darker parts of human psychology—certainly his films seem to take joy in pressuring their title characters, spinning out events so as to place maximum stress on their worldview and psychological state, relishing in the strain as both hero and villain struggle against the threat of their collapsing ordered worlds, and more importantly the emergence of their own deeply buried impulses. In *Rebecca* (1940), Mrs. Danvers whispers dark truths in our protagonist's ear, nearly driving her to suicide; In *Strangers on a Train* (1951), Guy sets out for Bruno's house in the dark of night with weapon in hand, with no indication of whether he has finally surrendered to blackmail and intends to kill an innocent man; and Scotty's mad ascent of the chapel stair in *Vertigo* (1958) has his audience delighted by the possibility of his murdering Madeline. This interest of the director runs throughout his films. It becomes especially interesting when coupled with a more specific theme. Following his relocation to America, Hitchcock began to focus not merely on unveiling the darker parts of human nature, but also the way in which society responds to their emergence or, more interestingly, how it refuses to recognize this emergence at all. In *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), the murderous Charlie finds his sanctuary behind the facade of small-town America, protected from public exposure not by any special genius but rather by the hesitance of his suspicious family to investigate his secrets. In many other films, he depicts an inherent sense of denial regarding some horrible truth (or at least a deniability)—an unwillingness to declare,

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to accuse, and to dispel the illusion of normality and nicety, whether for fear of some collateral damage or simply as a result of the refusal of the world to see and believe. Daily life takes on the air of the precise, the practiced, and the disingenuous, a social contract to promote a comfortable atmosphere by denying the evil inherently around us. In a way, the routine life becomes an elaborate party, full of guest lists and dress codes—and a hundred social irregularities which one tries desperately to avoid.

The metaphor is unusual, perhaps, but also not as unfitting as one might initially believe. A party is a social ritual of sorts, a tightly structured mode of interaction designed to produce an engineered outcome: a “pleasant time” for all involved. As such, the ingredients of the evening require strict regulation. The ideal party is made with a careful selection of people in mind, a group of individuals capable of happily interacting with each other for an indefinite length of time. Potential personal conflicts are sifted out, and potentially problematic guests are excluded. Meals are composed with the desires and preferences of the guests in mind, and conversation is carefully tailored to avoid any potential unpleasantness. Unpleasant people are shut out; unpleasant topics are shut away; every corrupt and unhappy thing in the world is politely forgotten in pursuit of an artificial pleasantness.

In fact, the metaphor of party as life arises explicitly in several Hitchcock films. For Hitchcock, the party represents the agreement of society to blind itself to the evils of the world, to speak and think of only pleasant things, and in so doing repress the evils of the world rather than confront them. From this assumption, it seems only natural that Hitchcock—a man whose name has become synonymous with mastery of the dark and macabre—should so enjoy portraying parties in his films, and then summarily wrecking them. More specifically, the Hitchcock party deconstructs the traditional party’s purpose by using its conventions to reveal the evils of the world rather than obscure them.

Two films in particular demonstrate the Hitchcockian party to its best effect, for related yet ultimately different reasons: *Rope* (1948) and *Strangers on a Train*. In the case of the former, the audience is invited to a party hosted for all the wrong reasons, as suspicions peak and half-interrogations run under the surface pretence of sociability

and fun, with the ultimate crime unveiled only after all uncomfortable merrymaking has come to a full and complete stop; in the latter, a surprise unwanted guest appears in flagrant defiance of the etiquette of the gathering, and as such becomes immune to its power.

Scholars have begun to explore the underlying tenets of the Hitchcock Party. In describing the subtlety with which Hitchcock approaches the darker elements of his films, Slavoj Žižek deals peripherally with the phenomena of Hitchcock's unpleasant parties. "True," he argues, "in the majority of his films Hitchcock 'does not go all the way,' but merely hints at the sordid underside of his idyllic surfaces; that is because he is only too well aware of the imposture of 'radical unveiling'—in which what is lost is a necessary part of, the structural role of, the mask as such. The frightful content 'behind the mask' is frightful only insofar as the mask conceals it, it is, in fact, the retroactive effect of the mask itself" (107). While Žižek does not directly consider the party, his conception of the "mask" still readily applies. Horror becomes the more horrifying for the refusal to recognize and confront it. Hitchcock was well aware of this, as Mary Corliss understands. In her article for the Museum of Modern Art, she claims that Hitchcock "certainly knew that viewers could distinguish between the queasy ache of fear in real life and the acute pleasure of experiencing it second-hand on screen. But it was not merely a game, or even the sublime trick of 'cinema.' It was the use of thriller conventions to call up and comment on the deepest anxieties of twentieth-century life and death: the feeling that the world had spun off its moral axis, that the end was near and could come without warning or reason. Behind the suave smile of a Hitchcock villain was the grimacing skull of chaos" (14). The act of concealing evil serves to enhance its potency, as demonstrated by Hitchcock's films in which the party is subverted and employed in service of the dark agendas which it is engineered to ignore.

To understand the Hitchcock Party in context of its social criticism, however, there are certain tenets which must be accepted, the first of which is this: for Hitchcock, there is no party for the party's sake. To phrase it another way, there is no party free of an individual agenda, despite the unofficial rule in the codebook of social etiquette that one should leave work at the door and enter into a realm of mutual

relaxation. In Hitchcock, the agreement is disingenuous. In his films, the party is almost always used as the backdrop for a particularly unique form of confrontation. Brandon and Philip transform the party in *Rope* into a social challenge much like the murder of David itself. They twist its purpose from providing hospitality to quietly displaying their triumph over social norms. The arrangement of the guest list, even, is intended to amplify this triumph and challenge by including David's family and loved ones. "They're a dull crew all right," Brandon responds to Philip, "but we did have to have them—after all, they are David's mother and father." In *Strangers on a Train*, Bruno uses the protection provided by the party atmosphere in order to get closer to Guy, the better to pressure him into murdering Bruno's father. The party serves as a "cover" of sorts. Conventional interactions allow the revelers to ignore the real subjects of importance.

Which leads into the next point regarding parties, and particularly the Hitchcockian variety: the party denies reality and embraces pretence. One dresses in one's nicest suit, makes the least offensive conversation, and enjoys *hors d'oeuvres* and rich desserts. Partygoers aim to forget difficult truths of the world as they strive to make positive impressions on the other guests. "Charm," becomes the by-law: to be charming, and be charmed in turn, is the agreement to render oneself pleasant, and by exchange recognize pleasantries in others. The ultimate effect is a form of mutual deception, in which all attendants quietly applaud the magnified virtues of their compatriots without attention to the mirrors and smoke which make up the illusion. The parties Hitchcock throws in his films are doomed to failure in this sense because of his insistence on sully them with the darker features of life, populating his guest-list with spies, murderers, and blackmailers.

Rope is a particularly strong example of this method of party-wrecking, as the entire party literally orbits about the corpse of David, the body hidden within Brandon's makeshift serving table. Party favors are lifted from the top of his impromptu casket, while in the corner of the room Rupert is chastised for talking too glibly about murder. Death is present and in the room, a horrible reality just waiting for admission, yet it is covered with a tablecloth and set with candles. Brandon's true triumph here is his ability not merely to murder for murder's own sake, but also to flout it before the world, veiling his handiwork only

with his guests' unwillingness to see. In *Rope*, people wonder, suspect, and complain quietly to one another about how this is "such a queer party," yet their suspicions are ultimately too light, and unwilling to tackle the gravity of Brandon and Philip's actions—the closest which Janet comes to deciphering the homicide is to accuse Brandon of a romantic conspiracy. Only Rupert, with his unsettling assertion that "murder is—or should be—an art" plumbs the depths of their actions. Notably, he only expresses this idea after the party has ended, and he has reentered the house under a different pretense to begin a more personal investigation.

Bruno accomplishes much the same feat in his surprise appearance at the party in *Strangers on a Train*, yet his particular style of party-ruining is entirely different: rather than playing host to a party designed to flaunt and disguise a cruel reality, Bruno enters the room as though he's always been there, nonchalantly asking all the sorts of questions which a party is intended to make one forget. In his interpretation of the character of Bruno, Robin Wood adds an interesting sense of charged power to this whole exchange. To his mind, Bruno represents not merely a particularly chaotic guest but rather the whole tantalizing air of chaos and freedom itself: "[the scene] 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 irreverent deflection of a dignified, self-righteous judge: how is he able to sit down to dinner after sentencing someone to death? The way the judge responds to the insolent question plainly makes the point that his way of life depends on such questions never being asked" (93). Bruno is, like Rupert, a man willing to talk about death at parties, yet the way in which he does so is profoundly different from Rupert. Whereas Mr. Kentley chastises Rupert for bringing the subject to an unwelcome place, Mrs. Cunningham fawns upon Bruno for his audacious charm and engages with him as a fellow socialite. Mrs. Atwater and Mrs. Cunningham are both seduced by the language of murder and the charm of the socialite, but Mrs. Cunningham seems the more important of the two given that she and Bruno dominate their respective scenes. In a sense, Bruno manages to pervert the party in an intriguing way by his choice of conversation topics: murder, a subject banned as "too

dark” for a party atmosphere, finds willing reception amongst partygoers when introduced with a sense of lightheartedness. Because the talk of a party is understood as not pertaining to subjects of gravity, the inherent human fascination with murder can be discussed with humor and enthusiasm. Happily, Mrs. Cunningham rattles off a multitude of methods for disposing of her husband, while the charming tutor Bruno offers guidance regarding practicality. Murder reenters the party room, yet in even more disturbing form, as it is recognized as an extant factor of the world yet not treated with any real seriousness or consideration. At a party, one refuses to think about the dark world outside, until as a demonstration Bruno nearly throttles Mrs. Cunningham to death on the ballroom floor—and even then, the reaction is that “she was just scared, that’s all.” Only Barbara perceives the significance of Bruno’s visit, and the introduction of murder to the party room; the senator merely requests that Bruno be removed “as soon as you *decently* can,” and registers his concern for the subject of gossip columns. The haunting implication for this scene is clear: through charm and humor, the villains seduce Mrs. Cunningham and the viewing audience into making murder the subject of laughter. Yet the laughter abruptly ends with the realization of the harsh reality behind it, and one is left to make moral sense out of one’s own complicity in the crime.

The seeming invincibility of the party atmosphere, even in the face of a murder attempt, brings to light the next Hitchcock party tenet: the frivolous atmosphere of a party must not be broken, despite the many indications that dark forces have invaded. In *Shadow of a Doubt*, this sentiment arises when the two Charlies confront each other. The innocent niece and the murderous uncle both know that the other possesses dangerous knowledge and neither takes direct action for fear of the effect it would have on young Charlie’s mother. In *Marnie* (1964), an encounter very much like this occurs when Mr. Strutt arrives on the screen, recognizing and quietly accusing Marnie for robbing his bank—Strutt is, in effect, paralyzed by the compulsions of social nicety. This sentiment is at the very core of the Hitchcock party and its widespread appeal in his films, yet is displayed perhaps most wonderfully in Rupert’s interrogation of Philip roughly halfway through *Rope*. Philip plays atmospheric music, while Rupert quietly and subtly questions him, pressuring the limits of party conversation when he

prods, “You know Philip, I get quite intrigued when people don’t answer questions.” Yet even in this inquiry and counter-inquiry, Rupert never forces the issue, merely alluding to his accusation. Much like Brandon’s many daring hints and double-entendres throughout the film, his delicate investigation suggests his implicit role in the murder. “If you want to know something come out with it,” Philip challenges, and Rupert immediately backs down. Similarly, when Philip directly confronts Rupert with the question “What do you suspect?” his dissatisfactory reply is “Oh, I’ve forgotten.” The air of the party prevents anything more direct than this sort of peripheral interrogation. Yet at the same time, that air enables the drama to tensely unfold by trapping these two together by the force of social circumstance. Philip endures Rupert’s questioning not just in an effort to convince him that there is nothing to fear, but also because he too is at this gathering of friends and therefore obligated to be tolerant of this mode of interaction.

When Bruno arrives at the senator’s party, he also hides beneath its conventional atmosphere. When Bruno first enters the room, Guy immediately approaches him; yet Bruno escapes into the light-hearted crowd. Before Guy can object, Bruno is shaking the senator’s hand. The response of Guy, in this case, is to retreat to another room and maintain acceptable distance from the guest wreaking social havoc on this whole closed affair. While Bruno remains a shadowy stalker, sticking to back alleys and late night phone calls, Guy is able to reject him, to ignore him, and suppress him—yet when Bruno brings his offer of murder into the light of the party, and metaphorically into the open air of society itself, Guy is powerless to confront him. Bruno’s perversion of the party by making murder a conversation topic, as well as his own invincible status as a party guest, robs Guy of his ability to escape his pursuer, because Guy needs the party and the ordered system of approval that it represents. Simultaneously, it should be noted that this is the first instance of Bruno choosing to ignore Guy. While his pursuit had heretofore been dogged, upon entering the party room Bruno gently floats past his target. Employing all the myriad powers of dramatic irony in its service, the party becomes a highly charged neutral ground between conflicting factions. The atmosphere of the party is, essentially, a heightened social pretence.

As Hitchcock repeatedly shows us, even murderous enemies can meet at a party and maintain a sociable air. Strutt again serves a powerful example of how the party can facilitate contact between hostile individuals—Marnie is pinned by her social obligations, yet at the same time Strutt is unable to directly convict her as the guilty party. Devlin rescues Alicia at the conclusion of *Notorious!* (1946) by employing this principle as a weapon, using the threat of Nazi retaliation to maneuver his way out of the house. In similar vein, from the moment Rupert enters the apartment *Rope* is a film hinged on this central tenet, an extended process of approaching and retreating from the ultimate moment of unveiling. While true that the extension of this device functions in keeping with Hitchcock's theories of suspense, his reluctance to openly unveil his concealed mystery contributes its part to his larger theories regarding the concept of cinematographic mystery. One of the many ways in which *Rope* flaunts the conventions of hospitality is by the employment of its ambiguous protagonist in order to decipher the host's agenda, to attempt to "unmask" the role of Brandon and Philip in David's disappearance. The ideal party is composed of small talk, not logical interrogations, yet Rupert continually flies in the face of this concept, which is of course why he is ultimately the one to open the chest and effectively solve the murder. The act of investigation and prying is seen as a sordid and unseemly affair, much like Jeff's vigilant voyeurism in *Rear Window* (1954). Typical party guests are unable to solve crimes.

While by no means involved with parties, Jeff is a useful tool for interpreting the Hitchcock party precisely because of his estrangement from them. The character is defined and maligned for much of the film for his voyeuristic tendencies, habitually spying from his lofty vantage point upon the affairs of his neighbors and recording their comings and goings. The film makes a point of the negative social response he receives for both his solitude and his insistent vigilance, yet it is this same combination of traits which affords him insights into the murder across the street. Jeff, in a sense, can be interpreted as Hitchcock's investigative ideal, as indeed for much of the production the director's camera acts as a representative of Jeff's vision, sharing with the audience the sights their protagonist sees. In his party scenes, Hitchcock also guides the audience's vision—to force us to confront

the darkest impulses in the world. But in these scenes, he does not affiliate this tendency with any one character's perspective.

In both *Rope* and *Strangers on a Train*, there is some significance attached to the fact that it is the "villain" who defies the conventions of hospitality, and summarily spoils the organized dream for the rest of the partygoers. Before exploring this idea further, it must be clarified that this is not always true. Particularly in his espionage films such as *Notorious*, Hitchcock employs the device of the sympathetic spy as a party-wrecker. Devlin, the hero of this movie, twice attends and sours parties in the service of Uncle Sam. Where this differs from the model of the films above, however, is that while Devlin represents the interdiction of law and order into either a chaotic medley (Alicia's party from the opening) or an organized evil enterprise (Alex's Nazi weapons smuggling scheme), the villains discussed here brazenly view themselves as above or beyond the normal herd of man. Brandon's murder of David displays his prowess as a superior being, while Bruno seeks to prove himself by an impressive list of singular and reckless accomplishments. Because they are uninterested in integrating, equalizing, and socializing with their fellow humans (beyond Machiavellian manipulation), these villains represent agents of chaos, warping this dreamy system of preserving society into a corrupt vehicle for its usurpation.

Brandon openly states that he wishes to create the perfect murder, which to his mind involves bringing the corpse tantalizingly close to David's friends and family. However, it can also be easily argued that Brandon *wants* to be caught, or at the very least discovered by his mentor. To a certain extent, he desires recognition for his actions. Philip accuses Brandon of such at gunpoint: "It's what you wanted, isn't it? Somebody else to know, somebody else to see how brilliant you are." This would certainly help to explain to an extent the recklessness of some of his choices, such as securing the body in a chest without a lock. He dares his attendants to break the conventions of the party, to open the chest and reveal his crime. Yet he does go to the trouble of concealing the body, and makes no real admission of guilt beyond the slightest implication. Is he merely straining his own intellectual limits as a superior being, reaching for the hair-width boundary which separates him from indictment? His gambit is not

only to accomplish his murder, but also to destroy the party which he has engineered, and metaphorically dispel the blind-eye delusion of society itself: while at a party, at the height of all rigorously enforced ignorance of the dark truths beyond it, Brandon wishes for one of his guests to discover a body at its very heart.

Bruno's agenda is difficult to interpret as much other than a straightforward objective, yet his ultimate effect is perhaps more powerful than murder, at least as it relates to damaging the party's social structure. Again employing Woods' interpretation of the character, Bruno is a charismatic, flamboyant, and dangerous representation of repressed desires, which lends him enormous destructive potency in a party situation. Significance again must be placed on the fact that when Bruno is discovered, he is already in the room: as far as the camera is aware, he simply "manifests" in a corner and proceeds to do his work. His symbolic significance is, then, the suggestion that he is born out of the mind and desires of Guy or, perhaps, the general wishes of the partygoers themselves, able to express what thoughts must be kept silent in order for the party to perform its function. The addition of these ideas, however, Hitchcock suggests something perhaps more dangerous to the social institution than Brandon's attempts to bring a corpse into a party setting. If Bruno represents something inborn, an attractive indulgence in freedom, then the failure of the party is secretly desired by the guests and the broader sphere of humanity they represent. The guilt for its ruination cannot be outsourced to one deviant murderer but must rather be acknowledged as inherent in everyone.

Before indulging in such topics as guilt and blame, however, I want to consider another complicit character in Hitchcock's scenes of hospitality: the roaming camera, and through it the metaphysical eye of the director. Between these two scenes, the presence of the camera is a constant, and its particular role cannot be overlooked in importance. Hitchcock's camera acts as a bridge of sorts, providing a means under the director's guidance for his audience to indulge in this repressed urge for party-wrecking, and striking a powerful blow against social blindness. In a sense, the director is capable not merely of providing examples or constructing distant facades of parties destroyed by vigilance, but actively forcing his audience to engage in the

investigation which he desires. As a rule, the camera is inquisitive, investigative, and determined to out the agendas which party convention determines must remain concealed. The camera of *Rope* is particularly culpable given its experimental intention of displaying the entire picture in a single unbroken shot. This particular camera makes a concerted effort not to blink or dart away from any disturbing detail. It is particularly interested in the exchanges of Brandon and Philip, and in Rupert as he proceeds to gather the pieces of the puzzle. Even Kenneth and Janet receive time under the camera's limelight, but almost exclusively when they are involved in trying to decipher the mystery of David's disappearance. In a sense, the camera functions almost as a human guest at this gathering, remaining largely cast at head height and pacing from room to room as if walking alongside important characters, with comparatively few cuts or unorthodox shots involved. Under the guidance of the director, however, this guest is eavesdropping on the partygoers, defying the norms of sociability by trying to convict the two murderers. Just before *Rope's* party concludes, as Mrs. Wilson is clearing the chest and the Kentleys are preparing to leave, Mrs. Atwater returns from her phone call informing Mr. Kentley that his wife wishes for him to call the police. Rapidly, the camera pans sharply to the right, first showing Brandon raising a hand to his mouth in mock shock, then Philip looking distantly concerned, and finally Rupert with his eyes glued to Philip. Rupert in particular is important to observe, as the camera does not seem entirely convinced of his intentions throughout the film. Although certainly acting as the investigator opposite the concealment of the murderers, he is left undefined morally for much of the film, and much of the picture's tension comes from anticipating his reaction to the killing. Until he refutes his own teachings at the film's conclusion, Rupert falls under more suspicion than Brandon, and so must be kept under the watchful eye of the camera: while Brandon and Philip have already gone on record as throttling a close friend to death, Rupert's opinion of their handiwork is protected by his own reluctance to "push the issue" and break the party atmosphere which allows him to interrogate his hosts. The camera, acting under the director's guidance to draw the audience into this exclusive gathering, is very much representative of the world outside the window, drawing in ever closer as the party progresses,

until ultimately summoned into the secret room by gunfire. If Rupert merely wants to confirm (or refute) his dark suspicions, then the uninvited camera actively seeks to destroy the party by finding the proof needed to open the chest itself. Like Devlin, even if it acts on behalf of the forces of law, it still proves itself to be a rather poor guest. Another blow against the party dynamic, as the interdiction of law and order upon the affairs of the party is seen as unwelcome.

At the senator's party too, the camera proves itself to be a poor guest, although in this instance its lackluster manners are represented more by its complicity in Bruno's seductive chaos. The camera spies him first from across the room, as if by chance, and from then on maintains its surveillance, with only temporary cuts to Guy. The camera acts almost like a guest at the party itself rather than an investigator, glancing away for a whispered word with the normal guests before again fixing its attention on the flamboyant stranger. When Bruno sits down with Mrs. Cunningham, the camera zooms closer as well, almost taking a seat on the couch itself; when Bruno admonishes the women with his declaration that "everybody's interested in murder," his statement is lent credence by the audience's own proximity to the killer. Yet at the same time, the camera is not completely thunderstruck, and is certainly observant enough to note the silent exchange between Bruno and Barbara, even recalling the sounds of the fairground and cementing her connection to Miriam. What is more damning to this particular camera than the one tailing Brandon, however, is that it seems to affirm the interest of murder for everybody—that its special insight into Bruno's thoughts just before his collapse are born out of a fascination with killing rather than the grand justification of ensuring justice.

Thus the party becomes analogous to society itself, raising all its rules of polite discourse and acceptable interactions to a peak of intensity, highlighting all the petty tools employed by modern society in its desperate bid for security. The prevalence of the party is Hitchcock's comment on the multitude of ways in which modern society insulates itself from fearful darkness, silently agreeing not to talk about it, and certainly not inviting it to dinner. The joke of Hitchcock—and the suspenseful, thrilling fear—is that by throwing such bad parties he can spin the system on its head, serving sandwiches

from a coffin and giving voice to all those quiet, dangerous thoughts that everyone is *really* thinking. In the parties he throws, he ensures that the darkness and chaos invades this pretending world. His movies force us to confront the traumatic knowledge that not all existence is civility and sunshine.

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