Identity Politics in Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* (1951)

This is not the first essay to examine Alfred Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train*, a film starring Farley Granger as an apparently respectable tennis player and Robert Walker as the lawless, scheming yet seductive stranger whom Granger meets onboard the New York to Washington D.C. train; nor is it the first that seeks to untangle the identity politics at play in this film that more often than not could be said to resemble a mathematical matrix as much as it functions as a thriller. Readings of the devious Bruno Anthony (played by Walker) situate him as a subversive within the American system, a deviant who is marked out as such from the opening moments of the film in which his conspicuously showy footwear is contrasted with the plain ordinary shoes of Guy Haines (played by Granger). Hitchcock’s stranger on the train has been interpreted as a not-so-veiled portrayal of a homosexual with an Oedipal relation to his mother who, due to his deviant sexuality, is capable of any form of criminal, indeed un-American activity (e.g., see Barton, Corber, Hepworth, and Wood). The menace that Bruno represents oscillates between his desire to subvert the domestic patriarchal order (by plotting to kill his father) to a possibly flippant, but also the film suggests possibly not, wish to blow up the White House, arguably the central symbol of American patriarchal order. Bruno is replete with a variety of schemes about the status of which the audience is never completely sure: are they the crazed notions of a madman, or are they the inner workings of a dangerously anti-American renegade until now unnoticed by the nation’s systems of governance and law? Wood summarises best the situation regarding the link between Bruno’s sexuality and his unstable, thus un-American, character when he notes
It seems to be generally accepted that Bruno Anthony in *Strangers on a Train* is supposed to be gay. "Supposed to be" strikes me as the appropriate way of putting it, because once again the attribution seems to rest more on popular heterosexual myths about gay men than on any actual evidence the film (caught in the constraints of censorship) can provide: he hates his father, is overindulged by his silly mother, seems rather to enjoy murdering women, and dresses flamboyantly. It is probable that Hitchcock thought he was gay. What must be said is that Bruno forms a link in a chain of fascinating, insidiously attractive Hitchcock villains who constantly threaten to "take over" the films in which they appear, not only as the center of interest but even, for all their monstrous actions, as the center of sympathy[.] (Creekmur and Doty, 1995: 206-07)

Whatever our personal preferences in terms of which characters to admire or abhor, it is clear that *Strangers on a Train* places the audience in some uncomfortable positions precisely because our interest is steered toward Bruno’s subversiveness and away from Guy Haines’s rather mundane and standardised American lifestyle. That Bruno is offered to us not just as a possible patricide but also a would-be plotter of treasonable acts and presidential assassination creates a tension within the film between opposed American identities and the politics that underlie their possibility. Guy’s ambition to enter politics after his tennis career ends, helpfully abetted by his possibly strategic romance with Senator Norton’s daughter Anne, positions him as the normative American man in contrast to Bruno’s erratic and eccentric notions of what constitutes proper social behaviour. However, as Corber points out, it is precisely because Guy Haines is both back page and society page news that he himself constitutes the central security risk in the film (Corber, 1993: 71). Indeed, set against his apparently stable character are other factors which question Haines’s own all-American identity: his first wife Miriam, now pregnant by another man and refusing to grant Guy the divorce he wishes, is a seemingly indelible blot on his character; his apparently throwaway and impulsive exclamation on the phone to Anne that he could strangle Miriam (preluding how she would be murdered shortly afterwards); and most
notably his inability to resist outright the attentions and machinations of Bruno, both during the initial train journey and afterwards. The film develops a portrait of how Haines is drawn into the plots of other people’s lives, discovering himself almost powerless to act in defence of his own.

*Strangers on a Train* marked the beginning of a sequence of Hitchcock movies made in and/or about the United States and its citizens that would define him as the leading director of his generation and arguably of the twentieth century. Following fast in its trail came *I Confess*, also in 1951, *Dial M for Murder* and *Rear Window* (both 1954), *To Catch a Thief* (1955), *The Trouble With Harry* and his second version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (both 1956), *The Wrong Man* (1957), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), *The Birds* (1963) and *Marnie* (1964). As the master of making suspense films, Hitchcock was also fascinated with the possibilities and vagaries offered to him by the particular intrigues underpinning identity politics with the United States, and this sustained period of production tallies with a steady focus within the movies he made on the facets and character of the American psyche. That *Strangers on a Train* sets this filmic trajectory in motion is possibly no coincidence, as it weaves together a number of intricate and interwoven patterns in the field of American identity construction and deconstruction that would interest Hitchcock for more than a decade.

While more typically located more on the fringes of his oeuvre as well as on the margins of the usual academic debates about his more famous films, much like *The Man Who Knew Too Much* this film establishes its importance in a number of intriguing ways: both films exist in two versions; both are structured around couples, doubles and doppelgangers; and both deploy a politics of American seeing that is tethered to issues of American display culture indicated through American versions of
carnival and visual entertainments. Whereas the young boy Hal at the opening of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) likens the north African landscapes near to Marrakech to those en route to Las Vegas, Bruno Anthony in *Strangers on a Train* is killed off on the film’s return to the Crafts 20 Big Shows funfair, executing a neat mathematical resolution to this “algebraic” film that Hitchcock believed one could “study forever” (Truffaut, 1985: 198). Bruno’s death results from his own need to return to the fair to plant evidence (a cigarette lighter) incriminating Guy Haines in the murder of his estranged wife Miriam, killed earlier by Bruno at the same amusement park. Based on Patricia Highsmith’s debut novel of the same name, published in 1950 and chosen by Hitchcock himself as “the right kind of material for me to work with” (Truffaut. 1985: 193), the film makes a couple of significant alterations to Highsmith’s plot. Haines (a tennis star now rather than an architect) meets a stranger, Bruno Anthony, on the Washington-to-New York train (in the novel, the train commutes between New York and Connecticut) who offers to exchange murders in a crisscross strategy that would leave both men above suspicion after the events. Bruno will kill Guy’s faithless and pregnant wife if Guy will kill Bruno’s hated father with whom he has “an unresolved Oedipus complex” (Corber, 1993: 72). Guy, while attempting not to provoke Bruno, does not condemn the plan outright; neither does he take Bruno seriously until Miriam is found murdered on the Magic Isle at the Crafts fair. Inevitably, Guy becomes the chief suspect, which threatens his tennis career, his romantic involvement with Senator Morton’s daughter, and his future hopes for a political career in Washington. Once Bruno realises that Guy will not keep to his part of the ‘agreement’ (to kill his father), he informs Guy that he intends to establish Guy’s guilt conclusively by planting a monogrammed cigarette lighter (a gift from Anne to Guy, bearing crossed tennis rackets above the inscription
“A to G”, accidentally left in Bruno’s possession on the train after their initial meeting) on the island where Miriam was murdered.

The return to the fair for the film’s climax at once reactivates and completes a politics of American seeing that is intricately bound up with systems of display and punishment signalled in U.S. carnival culture. This is not to claim that other critics have not noted the significance of the amusement park in Strangers on a Train before now. Martin Rubin reads Hitchcock’s conspicuous deployment of the fair as a link to the “sensation-oriented ‘cinema of attractions’ prominent in early film history” going on to connect the thriller genre with “popular amusements such as the carnival, the funhouse, Ferris Wheel, merry-go-round, and rollercoaster” (Rubin, 1999: 6). Laura Mulvey similarly notes how Hitchcock’s expulsion of the villain “often takes place in public so that the spectacle has its own built-in or ready-made audience” (Allen and Ishii-Gonzáles, 2004: 235) citing Strangers on a Train as a key example of this motif. For Robin Wood, “the fairground and the amusement park is a symbolic projection of Miriam’s world: a world of disorder, of the pursuit of fun and cheap glamour 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” (Wood, 2002: 88). Rubin’s analysis goes the furthest, linking the futile circularity of the rides at the amusement park to its antithesis in the film, the train journeys taken by Guy and Bruno (indeed, Guy takes four train journeys in the film). Concerned with the overlap between Hitchcock’s settings and the thriller genre, Rubin argues that the amusement park “evokes the sense of disorientation one finds in the thriller, as well as the sense of moving into a heightened, transformed environment” (Rubin, 1999: 210).

Furthermore, it corresponds with the “flashy, chaotic side of Bruno’s world” (Rubin, 1999: 212) in contrast to the regulated order of Guy’s main spheres of movement.
(tennis courts and Washington D.C.). Connecting the opposed worlds of law and lawlessness around which Hitchcock plots his film is the Washington to New York train: it “serves as a medium of contact and passage between the two worlds – a relationship brought out most strongly in the crosscutting that links tennis court, train, and amusement park in the extended suspense climax of the film” (Rubin, 1999: 212).

Hitchcock’s use of the carnival as a location of display and punishment is fitting given that this is a film that presents subversion and transgression, indeed deviance (Bruno’s murderous intents are closely aligned to his implied homosexuality and his Freudian relationships with both his mother and his father), as random variables within a larger geometric design of American political and social relations, power systems and psychosexual dynamics. The Metcalf carnival is the space of criminality in the film or, more accurately, for the commission of a criminal act, namely the murder of Miriam by Bruno. The carnival site is an extra-social arena in which Miriam’s own subversive identity can be eliminated by the film’s other subversive force, Bruno Anthony who, after the murder, rises as a dark blot on the white political world of Washington where Guy wishes to have both a romantic and a political future. The island where Bruno strangles Miriam offers an ideal location for surreptitious encounters (shadowed outlines of courting couples can be seen here for instance in the lead-up to Miriam’s death). Bruno’s own relation to the carnival site is multi-faceted: first, he is an interested observer of Miriam; next, he partakes in side show attractions; and finally he capitalises on its position outside regular systems of social order and the law to commit murder. Bruno is both part of the carnival picture at the amusement park and apart from it: the elements of excess in his clothing choices for instance (his shoes that mark him out from the opening tracing shots of the film, the tie-pin that he wears given to him by his mother and which bears his own
name) allow him to be positioned readily within a carnival reality, a reality askew from regular society in which difference is both held up as spectacle and contained as a sideshow monstrosity; but he is also a subverter of traditional codes of behaviour, the best example of this his popping of the boy's balloon with his cigarette just after he first enters the fair. The carnival grounds become a location for the commission of irregular acts not usually permitted in 'normal' society: Miriam goes there accompanied by two men; she attracts and encourages the attentions of a third (Bruno) who blatantly tracks her every move until finally strangling her after a trip through the Tunnel of Love to the Magic Isle. Once out of the carnival, he reverts to more expected social behaviour, guiding a blind man across the street before leaving the scene of the murder. While in the carnival, he is cloaked by the anonymity accorded to all of the fee-paying fairgoers, using this to his advantage particularly on Magic Isle where he is just one among many of apparently regular Americans. That he enters the Tunnel of Love alone (in a boat called Pluto, suitable no doubt for entry into this particular American underworld of subversion and violence) is no more noteworthy to the attendant than the fact that Miriam enters with two men rather than one; indeed, it is only because of the cries of help from the Magic Isle that the attendant’s suspicions are raised and he subsequently notices the lone Bruno for the first time. Now no longer a man of the crowd, Bruno moves against the crowd of concerned fairgoers (all in couples naturally enough) who are drawn by the cries for help. His identity, which had masked the commission of his act up until this point, is at odds with the regular identities of the other fairgoers in this scene and is now marked as, at the very least, incongruous by the boating attendant. Once Bruno is returned to the carnival grounds in the closing scenes of the film, it is his difference, his very aloneness in a place designed for couples, in the moments after the murder of
Miriam (and which subconsciously registered him then as a potentially suspicious individual in the attendant’s passing gaze) that is recalled by the attendant and which ultimately confirms his guilt.

Hitchcock’s ending requires a return to the fair for the mathematical arc of the film to be completed; it also redeploy the carnival site as a space in which such anti-social forces as Bruno Anthony can be ‘legitimately’ punished for their un-American actions. By contrast, Guy Haines rises somewhat unsatisfactorily as the all-American hero, saving a boy’s life after he had been thrown from the carousel ride by Bruno; his normative American identity is one that does not stand out as excessive or subversive in the carnival zone; indeed, it is, as the attendant confirms, not one that has had any place in the funfair before. Haines is unknown in the carnival and this, along with the discovery of the lighter in Bruno’s hand, is what saves him and simultaneously condemns Bruno. The return to the fair has exorcised one demon from the American psyche and reset the balance between right and wrong, good and evil, guilt and innocence that had been disturbed by the initial incursion of Bruno’s disruptive and subversive personality. The carnival template allows Hitchcock to maintain the other spaces of the film, in particular Washington D.C., as locations of expected behaviour, and not of murder; as territories in which law and order can operate without manipulation by social oddities such as Bruno; and as once again coherent spaces of regular social interaction freed from the dark force of an anti-patriarchal, patricidal murderer bent on bringing chaos into an honest if naïve American world. The carnival allows for the expulsion of the two blots on Guy Haines’s world (Miriam and Bruno); it is the necessary home in the film for such subversive forces as well as the location best suited to bringing about their violent ends.
The heroism of Haines’s character though is a central concern in the film and is only made possible in the climactic scenes at the funfair by the exposure of Bruno’s guilt and his by contrast wholly un-American behaviour. An apparently rather neat conclusion that absolves Guy of any guilt in relation to Miriam’s murder overlooks a number of unresolved issues that lie at the heart of this American hero’s character. While not guilty of Miriam’s murder he has at the very least considered its potentially beneficial ramifications for his own life, both personal and political. “You’ve got me acting like I’m a criminal” he remarks to Bruno as the pair stand behind railings opposite Guy’s Washington apartment in the aftermath of Miriam’s murder, and Hitchcock leaves us with the implication that Guy’s culpability arises from more than just the power of Bruno’s suggestion. Once he realizes his error in leaving his lighter behind and how Bruno plans to use it to incriminate him, Guy’s mission in the film is to reclaim it, an act that he fails to accomplish: the police confiscate it as evidence after Bruno’s death at the fair. Indeed, as Michael Walker points out, “Hitchcock’s emphasis on the lighter during [Miriam’s] murder scene emphasizes Guy’s presence in the murder: in using the lighter to illuminate Miriam’s face, Bruno is stressing, almost consciously, that he is doing this for Guy; in picking it up after the murder, he is – quite consciously this time – protecting Guy” (Walker, 2005: 28). Complete absolution for Haines is not on offer in this film; ultimately, it appears not to be sought, Haines turning his back on a clergyman onboard another train at the close of the film who, just as Bruno had at the film’s opening, asks “Aren’t you Guy Haines?” Experience has schooled Haines to be suspicious of inquisitive strangers, whatever their apparel or their potential is in this instance for redemptive grace.

Although the central pairing in the film, Guy and Bruno, dominates discussion of it, there is no doubt that Hitchcock allows for the forming and dissolving of other
pairs and doubles with which to overlay and multiply the possible mathematical dimensions of his text. Spotted attempting to board the train in Metcalf as Guy alights after his first journey, Hitchcock struggles with a double bass (an instrument bearing a remarkable resemblance to himself) while elsewhere he allows for other couples, doubles, and pairs to take centre stage, however briefly: Guy and Miriam argue over their divorce in the sound booth in the music shop in which she works, watched by another couple in an accompanying booth; Ann and Guy, forever figured in the monogrammed lighter, are brought together and moved apart on a number of occasions throughout the film; two policemen are assigned surveillance duties on Guy and his movements; Bruno entertains the attentions of two women, Mrs. Cunningham and Mrs. Anderson, at a party thrown by Senator Morton at which he arrives unexpectedly; Guy notices Bruno’s still head in the crowd watching a doubles tennis match; Bruno asks the train attendant for doubles when ordering drinks for himself and Guy after they have first met; Miriam, attended by two men at the fairground, loses them to be fatally paired with Bruno. The opening of the film, where the intercut shots of Bruno’s and Guy’s shoes at Union Station in Washington D.C. are followed by an in-motion shot of sets of train tracks crossing and intersecting as the first train journey begins, signals how the remainder of what the audience will see will be dominated by issues of pairs and doubles. As Barton illuminates, via Kuntzel, “a film’s opening serves as a microcosm or ‘matrix’ for the film as a whole” (Creekmur and Doty, 1995: 219). Indeed, Kuntzel’s argument concerning Shoedsack and Pichel’s 1932 film The Most Dangerous Game in his 1980 essay ‘The Film-Work, 2’ makes explicit the mathematical arrangement of that film, from its opening credits to its close, with particular relevance to Strangers on a Train: “[b]etween the opening and closing, a highly structured narrative unfolds: a plot is formed, developed, renewed
and resolved; a threatened order is reestablished after a series of tests; enigmas are
posed and resolved” (Kuntzel, 1980: 8). If ever there was a mathematical matrix of a
film, it is Hitchcock’s take on Highsmith’s debut novel. Within the complex interplay
between the various pairs and couples Hitchcock produces a series of algebraic
possibilities, the resolution of which is withheld from the audience until the last
possible moment: will Guy shoot Bruno’s father when he travels to their house with
the Luger and the map given him by Bruno? Can Guy win his final tennis match in
time to prevent Bruno planting the lighter at the funfair? When Bruno accidentally
drops the lighter into a storm drain, will he be able to recover it? Could the exchange
of murders theorem actually work in the crisscross way that Bruno suggests? Has the
whole film’s premise been posited on a wholly random encounter on an average
American commuter train? Bruno embodies the possibility that regular society is open
to subversion and that his random nature could subvert not just the mathematical
arrangement of the film but also the orders and codes of U.S. society. His monstrous
intrusion into Haines’s life as Wood describes it (Creekmur and Doty, 1995: 207)
recalls Bataille’s contention that “[m]onsters […] would be the dialectical opposites
of geometric regularity” (Bataille, 1985: 55).

For the identity politics central to American carnival to operate, another binary
system of representation and interpretation is required. The carnival attracts the film’s
two dissident American citizens, Miriam and Bruno, and it becomes the key location
for their observation and containment. Their lawless natures, transparent in the
outside world of normative behaviour, can be temporarily cloaked by the carnival’s
excesses, but they cannot be allowed to continue lives without consequences within
its confines. As I have argued elsewhere, the production of a “generic figure of
difference” within American carnival’s systems necessitates “an economy of seeing
and observation that requires binary categorizations to distinguish ‘them’ and ‘us,’ observed and observer, Other and American” (McGowan, 2001: 18). Miriam’s world, recalling Wood’s argument, is synonymous with that of the amusement park where “the pursuit of fun and cheap glamour [is] the aim of life” (Wood, 2002: 88).

Informing Guy of Miriam’s death, Senator Norton reprimands his younger daughter Barbara (played by the bespectacled Patricia Hitchcock, and consequently bearing more than a passing resemblance to the ill-fated Miriam) for calling Guy’s former wife “a tramp”: “She was a human being. Let me remind you that even the most unworthy of us has a right to life and the pursuit of happiness.” Upholding the American Declaration of Independence, Senator Morton’s role as the patriarchal defender of the nation is assured. Moreover, his stable American perspective allows him to refer to the carnival site of Miriam’s final moments as being “evidently a sordid atmosphere”. His upholding of both the law and the normative values of American identity by quoting the words of the Declaration of Independence positions him as the male that Guy wishes to become, though his paraphrasing of Thomas Jefferson’s famous aspiration for an American freedom and independence centred in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is no doubt undercut by Barbara’s retort, “[f]rom what I hear she pursued it in all directions.” That Jefferson is the touchstone for core American values against which to define Miriam is important, for it will be on the steps of the gleaming white Jefferson Memorial (completed in 1943, eight years before the movie’s release) that Bruno places himself in his own pursuit, this time of Guy, on his appearance in the nation’s capital the very next day. His dark-suited figure against the neoclassical backdrop of the Memorial appears as a shadow over Guy’s political aspirations and a dark mark on one of the central tenets of American democracy. Jeffersonian idealism is under attack from the dissonances
within American identity that are recognized and find their ultimate definition in the nation’s extra-social arenas such as the carnival and the funfair.

*Strangers on a Train* makes clear that identity is not as stable as it might at first appear. Bruno mis-interprets his mother’s painting of St Francis to be a Expressionist take on his father. Peucker notes how the painting is inspired by the work of the French Fauvist artist Georges Rouault (1871-1958) and “gains sympathy from her son since it represents his father as a king who exerts despotic control over his wife and son alike: Hitchcock’s double allusion to Oedipus and *Hamlet* is not lost on us” (Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzáles, 2004: 146), Bruno’s fluidity transcending the film to infect critical interpretations of his character. Who the real Bruno Anthony may be is a plausible question to ask, though arguably the more important question for the security of the American nation is, who is the real Guy Haines? Before his final tennis match, two significant details are recorded by Hitchcock’s alert directorial eye. First, the stars and stripes adorns a flagpole at the tennis tournament. Then, just prior to the commencement of his game, Guy and Ann discuss how he will be able to evade the police after the game in front of a quotation from Kipling’s ‘If’, a two-line comment on fate and imposture that also decorates the entrance to Wimbledon’s centre court: “If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster/And treat those two impostors just the same” (Kipling, 1919: 108). The Kipling quote neatly combines the two possibilities on offer to both Guy and Bruno, the pair of them battling for success in the ensuing intercut scenes on the tennis court and at the fair. In addition, it emphasises the false faces that fame and notoriety offers to the film’s two main protagonists while simultaneously marking out both Haines and Anthony as two sides of a similarly questionable coin minted within the constructs of America’s identity politics.
The execution of the finer plot details requires the development of a
doppelganger or alter ego connection between Guy and Bruno. Bruno acts out the
desires that Guy subconsciously holds but is able to police. In this he is assisted by his
political ambitions, his constant police tail following Miriam’s death, and ultimately
his mostly passive role in the film’s proceedings. Nevertheless, it is Guy who
instigates the initial encounter with Bruno by accidentally knocking against his foot in
the train carriage; furthermore, he ‘accidentally’ leaves his lighter in Bruno’s position,
a fact that is read as a signal of consent by Bruno with regard to his plan of
exchanging murders. Guy’s role, while hapless, is not altogether helpless. His actions,
however regulated and within the law, permit the ensuing actions of Bruno in the
film. Bruno adopts Guy’s position as the wronged former husband, literally takes
matters into his own hands and strangles Miriam. Hitchcock’s debt to Edgar Allan
Poe has been noted before now, most particularly by the man himself: “[a]t sixteen I
discovered the work of Edgar Allan Poe. I happened to read his first biography and
the sadness of his life made a great impression on me” (quoted in Spoto, 1983: 39).
This film’s particular relation to Poe’s ‘William Wilson’ (1839) is worth noting.
Bruno, while apparently a random stranger on the train, knows everything about
Guy’s life, his new relationship with Anne Morton, his hopes to become a politician,
and his messy relation with his first wife. When he travels to Metcalf to follow and
eventually murder Miriam, it is as a much more soberly dressed Bruno Anthony that
he commits the deed. Armed with Anne’s lighter and enough knowledge about
Miriam to know where to find her and how to attract her attention, Bruno doubles as a
would-be Guy, even proving himself in a show of physical prowess while at the fair
with Miriam and her two impotent male companions as spectators. It is Bruno’s
ability to change guises, to adopt roles, and to move between different social milieux
that makes him such an elusive and transgressive identity in the film. His success at imposture allows him entry into the inner circle of Washington high society life, right on the doorstep of the White House and the Capitol building which illuminates the background of a number of the film’s scenes. It is the fluidity of Bruno’s character that permits the near successful execution of his crisscross plan and thus the subversion of the stable co-ordinates of Americanness plotted elsewhere in the film by such figures of unimpeachable American identity as Senator Morton.

Executing and imposture are significant terms in the film’s investigations of American identity politics: Bruno’s final scene death at the funfair comes as the apparently arbitrary achievement of justice following his own execution of Miriam in the same location earlier in the film. Betweenetimes, Bruno is discovered menacingly in Washington D.C., as a Hitchcockian blot, in Žižek’s terms, on the white sepulchres of American monuments (notably the Jefferson Memorial), or as a disturbing interloper within the wheels of government who nearly strangles a woman (Mrs. Cunningham) during a supposed game at a cocktail party, having already challenged a judge (Judge Donoghue) on the morality of capital punishment: “After you’ve sentenced a man to the chair, isn’t it difficult to go out and eat your dinner after that”? Bruno’s wry questioning of the very nature of state-sanctioned murder is met with, what he terms, the judge’s “impersonal” response in defence of the status quo: “When a murderer is caught he must be tried. When he is convicted he must be sentenced. And when he is sentenced to death he must be executed.” By the film’s close, it is clear that the machinations of the justice system do not cover the entire population: Bruno is neither caught nor tried, certainly not within a court of law at any rate. Rather, he is returned to the scene of his crime and is killed by the tumultuous crash of a carousel that has careened out of control due to a random shot fired by a
policeman. Moreover, Bruno’s demise is the spectacular conclusion to the film’s incorporation of the politics of American carnival where the freakish, monstrous and uncontainable un-American identities find their place within its endless cycles of display and punishment. The carnival, while a seemingly autonomous space of lawlessness beyond the boundaries of American society, is actually the ultimate site in the film of social control and quasi-legal justice; its “hybridity and potential for transgression or subversion [is] wholly negated by the power systems of U.S. society” (McGowan, 2001: 19). The balance of American society, threatened by the deviance of both Miriam and Bruno, is reset by their necessary deaths. Both executed within the carnival’s precincts, their transgressive potential finds expression then spectacular punishment (Bruno crushed beneath the carousel, Miriam’s death reflected in her own glasses that have fallen to the ground) in an extra-social American space in which the normal rule of law appears to hold limited if any jurisdiction.

Bibliography


