Suspense is a paradigmatic instance of the manner in which a spectator’s emotional responses to narrative can be manipulated, and Hitchcock’s skill as a film director has long been identified with his mastery of suspense. Narrative suspense develops out of a basic and pervasive feature of storytelling – the manner in which stories sustain our interest by encouraging us to anticipate what happens next. However, narrative suspense is more than simply a question of anticipating what happens next; it involves the generation of a state of anxious uncertainty about what happens next. How is this anxious uncertainty engendered? Noël Carroll argues that this state of anxious uncertainty is created in a narrative where the question ‘what happens next?’ is dramatized through the representation of two alternate narrative outcomes of a specific kind. One is a moral outcome and hence, conventionally speaking, desirable, yet it is unlikely. The other is an immoral outcome that is conventionally undesirable, yet it is likely to happen. For example, in D.W. Griffith’s The Lonely Villa (1909), villains pin down the heroine in her isolated house. Will the absent hero rescue her before they overpower her? It seems unlikely. On the one hand, the villains are nearby and she seems defenseless; on the other, the hero is a long way off and does not know what is going on. How is the hero going to get back in time to rescue the heroine? Carroll puts forward his theory of suspense in explicit contrast to the theory offered by Roland Barthes and, in a slightly different form, by François Truffaut in his interview with Hitchcock. Both Barthes and Truffaut argue that suspense is essentially generated through the fact that we do not know the nature of the narrative outcome whose resolution is deferred or delayed, and it is this ‘suspension’ of the narrative outcome that causes suspense. In this paper, I shall argue through an investigation of Hitchcock’s theory and practice of suspense that Carroll’s theory of suspense requires a two-fold qualification. Hitchcock’s practice not only calls into question the moral underpinnings of Carroll’s definition of suspense, as Carroll himself recognizes, but also Hitchcock’s theory and practice of suspense require us to reconsider the theory of suspense as narrative deferral or delay that is rejected by him. Furthermore, by investigating Hitchcock’s prac-
In the light of the theory of suspense, I hope to derive a clearer understanding of the nature of Hitchcock’s achievement as the ‘master of suspense.’

**The Moral Structure of Suspense**

It is a critical commonplace about Hitchcock’s work that he works almost wholly within the genre of the thriller, a narrative idiom that usually involves, amongst other things, the articulation of clear-cut moral co-ordinates that discriminate the good guys from the bad through the commission of a criminal action that usually involves murder. Suspense in Hitchcock’s works is broadly structured around these moral co-ordinates and the allegiance they give rise to in the spectator. In *The 39 Steps* (1935) Hannay is framed for a killing he did not commit. Will he be wrongfully arrested or escape? In *Notorious* (1946) Alicia Huberman is sent on a dangerous mission to penetrate a murderous German spy ring that is working on a nuclear bomb in Rio. Will the spy she marries in order to further the allied cause – Alex Sebastian (Claude Rains) – find out that she is trying to expose him, and what will he do? In *Strangers on a Train* (1951) Guy Haines (Farley Granger) is caught up in a diabolical plot in which the villain, Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker), kills his wife and threatens to frame him for the murder unless Guy kills Bruno’s father. Will Guy fall victim to Bruno’s web of blackmail or will he escape his snare?

Furthermore, in Hitchcock’s work, the suspense generated around the plot involving the conflict between the hero (or heroine) and the villain or villains is linked to the suspense generated by the romance plot. Hitchcock himself insisted that suspense is as much a feature of the romance as it is of the pure thriller, although, as Knight and McKnight point out, the emotional emphasis of romantic suspense is different. In a thriller our concern lies with the threat posed by the agents of evil and fear for the hero’s safety, whereas the emotional emphasis of romantic comedy lies in our wish for a happy outcome and the way in which that wish is frustrated by obstacles placed in the way of the romance. By combining the elements of the thriller and the romance in his ‘wrong-man’ and, sometimes, ‘wrong-woman’ narratives of the 1930s and after, Hitchcock augments the parameters of suspense, as they are outlined by Carroll, and intensifies our emotional investment in the narrative outcome. For the romance narrative adds to the anticipation of a fearful outcome that is characteristic of the thriller or the horror film an intensification of the wish for a happy ending that characterizes the romance narrative. The obstacles placed in the way of the hero in a ‘wrong man’ narrative such as *The 39 Steps* – he is wanted for murder – are precisely the obstacles that need to be overcome for
the romance to be cemented. For example, in *Strangers on a Train*, the ‘wrong man’ Guy must clear his name in the murder of his wife in order for his romance with Ann Morton (Ruth Roman) to flourish. *Notorious* is a ‘wrong woman’ narrative that focuses upon the notoriety and hence apparent untrustworthiness of the woman who is required to prove herself to the man. By risking her life as a double agent, Alicia atones for her past in order to win the love of Devlin (Cary Grant).

However, while Hitchcock’s works invoke clear-cut moral co-ordinates, those co-ordinates are also systematically undercut in a number of ways. The ‘obstacles’ that delay the realization of the romance often, paradoxically, involve something that is desired by the hero or heroine or their would-be partner. In a wrong man narrative such as *The 39 Steps* or *To Catch a Thief* (1955), the hero is rendered desirable to the heroine on account of the fact that he occupies a position outside the law. In *Strangers on a Train*, the murder of his wife is something that Guy explicitly wishes for since she refuses him a divorce and hence blocks his path to marriage. In *Notorious*, clearly part of what attracts Devlin to Alica Huberman is her ‘notoriety’ even though it is a source of resentment to him. Even where the ‘wrong man’ character threatens the innocent heroine, she admires him, as in *The Lodger* (1926), *Suspicion* (1941), or *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). More generally, where a character is perceived as a source of threat they are also rendered alluring or desirable because they are endowed with the sympathetic traits of the dandy: flamboyance, grace, charm, intelligence, wit, and gregariousness – traits that often contrast positively with the dull, flat characters of Hitchcock’s nominal heroes who are often policemen. Compare the Lodger (Ivor Novello) with Joe (Malcolm Keen) in *The Lodger*, or Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotton) with Jack Graham (MacDonald Cary) in *Shadow of a Doubt*, or Bruno Anthony with Guy Haines in *Strangers on a Train*.

The moral inversion that renders villainy alluring in Hitchcock is further sustained through systematic strategies of visual and narrative parallelism and doubling between hero and villain that undercuts the ostensible moral opposition between hero and villain in a manner that may upset our allegiance to the romance itself as a desirable narrative outcome. What is wished for may be feared, and what is feared may be desired. In *Notorious* the anti-hero, Alex (Claude Rains) has many desirable qualities that the nominal hero, Devlin, lacks. He is attentive, generous, and kind to Alicia, until he finally realizes that she is a double agent and intends to kill her, and he has an endearingly vulnerable, feminine quality that is registered in his tremulous facial muscles. The ‘perverse’ marriage he makes with Alicia is in some ways more wholesome than the romance. Furthermore, his colleague, Dr Anderson (Reinhold Schunzel), portrays qualities of concern with her welfare conspicuously lack-
ing in the cold, affectless CIA operatives. At the conclusion of the film, along-
side the structure of suspense that engages our wish for Alicia and Devlin to
escape exists the knowledge this very wish will lead to the demise of Alex.
This knowledge complicates the suspense situation so that the situation itself
rather than the narrative outcome becomes the object of fascination. The rea-
son we are prepared for Alex to be ‘sacrificed’ is that he is plotting with his
Lady Macbeth-like mother to murder Alicia. Yet we also know that he finds
himself in this situation in the first place only because he has been manipu-
lated into marriage by another woman who is stronger than he is.

It is in the context of such pervasive narrative ambiguity that in ‘local’ sus-
pense situations Hitchcock completely subverts the moral co-ordinates that
Carroll argues characterizes suspense and we are encouraged to sympathize
with the devil. Consider the moment when Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins)
in Psycho (1960) pauses in momentary trepidation when the car that contains
the body of the dead Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) fails for a moment to sink into
the swamp. We do not, of course, know yet that Norman is the killer – we be-
lieve it is his mother – and Norman has been rendered quite sympathetic on ac-
count of the way he cares for her. The fact that he cleans up after her mess is an
extension of his helpless dependency, and we pity him. Nonetheless, Norman
is here trying to cover up a crime, and Hitchcock invites us to wish for the car
to sink, something that is at once morally undesirable and, momentarily at
least, improbable. In Strangers on a Train, the anti-hero Bruno Anthony
(Robert Walker), whom we know to have murdered the hero’s wife, drops a
lighter down a drain that he wants to use to implicate the hero in the crime,
and Hitchcock’s camera presents his desperate attempts to retrieve it in excru-
ciating close-up, in such a way as to render a morally undesirable event one
that is wished for by dramatizing its improbability. Again our alignment with
Bruno is fostered by the fact that Bruno displays the sympathetic qualities of
the dandy figure in contrast to the dull, wooden and rather self-serving hero,
Guy Haines. In Frenzy (1972), the mass murderer, Robert Rusk (Barry Foster),
tries desperately to retrieve a tiepin that will implicate him as a murderer from
the clenched fist of the naked murder victim in the back of a potato truck in a
manner that parallels the suspense situation in Strangers. In Frenzy, once
again, Hitchcock goes to great length to negatively contrast the qualities of the
nominal hero, Richard Blaney (Jon Finch) – he is egotistical, pusillanimous,
and full of sour grapes – with the endearing qualities of the smooth, savvy,
popular, and mother-loving villain. In each of these cases the audience is at
least temporarily encouraged to root for the successful completion of an action
whose success would contribute to an immoral outcome to the story by being
placed in sympathy with the predicament of a morally undesirable character
whose likelihood of success is presented as being improbable.
These examples are undoubtedly privileged moments of ‘local suspense’ within larger suspense structures that at least on their surface articulate more conventional values. But there is at least one film in which this moment of ‘local suspense’ occupies the entire film – Hitchcock’s ‘experimental narrative’ Rope (1948). In Rope the suspense is created in large part by the fact that the audience is encouraged to wish for the murder to remain concealed to the ‘audience’ of guests in order not to spoil the party; Hitchcock encourages us to enjoy, alongside Brandon (John Dall) who orchestrates the party, the way in which discovery of the body is postponed and deferred. Part of the reason for the distinctiveness of Rope is that, like Psycho, it lacks the narrative armature of romance to sustain conventional moral values. Indeed, in a sense, it is the possibility of heterosexual romance that is killed off at the very beginning of the film by the murder of Kevin, the suitor of the film’s nominal heroine Janet Walker (Joan Chandler), just as this possibility is killed off by the murder of Marion Crane in Psycho. Furthermore, like Strangers on a Train, Rope articulates a suppressed counter-narrative to that of the heterosexual romance; namely, the ‘perverse romance’ of the veiled homosexual couple that finds its expression in the enjoyment of crime and its concealment. Since their adversary in the film, Rupert Caddell (James Stewart) is a man who has tutored the hero in their pursuit of perversity, the restoration of conventional morality is tenuous at best. Furthermore, the fact that the narrative outcome turns out to be a moral one doesn’t alter the fact that we are encouraged to wish for Brandon to succeed, against the odds, in his enterprise.

Carroll himself points out that one way of accommodating this kind of subversion of the moral co-ordinates that seem to characterize the orthodox suspense situation would be to simply modify the theory. Suspense is generated not between an outcome that is morally desirable yet unlikely and one that is morally undesirable yet likely, but simply between an outcome that is desired yet unlikely and one that is undesired yet likely. However, while such a formulation could fully account for these examples of suspense in Hitchcock, it also fails to capture what is distinctive to them and by extension to Hitchcock as a whole; namely, the manner in which Hitchcockian suspense is bound up with the subversion of conventional moral co-ordinates, especially as they are enshrined in the romance narrative. Carroll seems to appreciate the significance of Hitchcock’s example in this respect. Hitchcock’s work gives the lie to any theory of suspense that wed the question of whether or not an outcome is desirable too closely to whether or not the outcome is moral. On the other hand, it also suggests the importance of moral evaluation to the cultivation of emotional response. For to the extent that Hitchcock’s films subvert conventional moral options, they do so only by strenuously and self-consciously chal-
lenging the customary moral assumptions that are embedded in the conventional suspense structure anatomized by Carroll.

**A Note on Suspense and Humor**

The inversion of orthodox suspense in Hitchcock’s films is supported by the way in which Hitchcock uses black humor to solicit our identification with the figure of the dandy or anti-hero. For example, in *Rope*, our knowledge of crime in contrast to the ignorance of the partygoers makes us complicit with wrong-doing, but as Thomas Bauso points out, our complicity is fostered by the fact that we are encouraged along with Brandon to take perverse pleasure in the situation: ‘We may be appalled at Brandon’s “warped sense of humor,” but since we can’t help getting the morbid jokes, we are compelled to laugh at them, and our laughter implicates us in the act of murder.’ As Susan Smith has argued, the killing of Stevie in *Sabotage* can be understood in part in relationship to the unacknowledged desire of Verloc, the saboteur, to get rid of his burdensome nephew. If Verloc functions partly as Hitchcock’s authorial surrogate in the film, Verloc’s actions here serve to express Hitchcock’s own sadistic impulses towards his audience. But arguably, Hitchcock also invites the audience to sympathize with these impulses rather than to simply be victimized by them. That is, perhaps he invites us to derive a certain sadistic satisfaction from seeing the child blown to pieces rather in the manner that in *Rope* Hitchcock invites us to enjoy, along with Brandon, the irony of the dining over a corpse. The potato truck scene in *Frenzy* begins with the killer, Rusk, wheeling out the dead body of his murder victim and lifting it like a sack of potatoes into the back of the truck. A series of jokes encourage our identification with Rusk. Hitchcock puns on the idea of the body ‘weighing like a sack of potatoes,’ which reflects the point of view of Rusk. Rusk’s sense of relief is echoed in the number plate FUW on the truck and also by a melody that combines discordant strings with a playful trill on the piccolo accompanied by strangely disconcerting laughter.

But, while black comedy encourages us to wish for a narrative outcome that conflicts with conventional moral values, it also encourages the audience to step back from an engagement with the content of the fiction and to entertain an appreciation of its form. That is, Hitchcock uses humor to make the audience self-aware of his role as narrator in soliciting fearful anticipation and shock and of the willingness of the spectator to enjoy not simply ‘negative’ emotions but a reversal of their customary moral allegiances. Thus, while black humor encourages the audience to enjoy morally iniquitous deeds, it
also contributes to the diffusion of suspense. Smith, who explores this aspect of Hitchcock’s work in great detail, points out that often a moment of incongruous laughter, like the moment cited in *Frenzy*, has this effect. For example, when Daisy laughs at the moment that the menacing lodger enters into the boarding house in Hitchcock’s *The Lodger*, her laughter, while signaling her vulnerability, also functions to diffuse the suspense by commenting on its self-conscious melodramatic nature. Speaking of the scene in *Sabotage* after the bomb explodes killing Stevie following a sequence of prolonged suspense, James Naremore writes: ‘The sequence ends with a visual and sound dissolve that takes us from the exploded bus to Winnie Verloc’s parlor, where the sound of the explosion melts into polite, rather strained laughter among her guests – a laughter that, in this context, resembles nothing so much as the sound of broken glass or shattered debris.’

In practice, the line between the use of black humor that contributes to suspense and the use of black humor that detaches us from suspense is a thin one. For in the sense that humor allows us to sympathize with the anti-hero, it does so by detaching us from the moral consequences of what we see, enabling us to find amusement in the absurdity of the situation. It is linked, as it were, to the aestheticization of the moral question, where murder is turned into a fine art or a joke, as it is in Hitchcock’s *Rope*.

**Two Types of Suspense**

According to Carroll suspense involves not only the postulation of alternative, morally contrasting narrative outcomes, but also probability or relative likelihood. Carroll argues that it is this dramatization of probability – of the relative likelihood of a bad outcome versus the relative unlikelihood of a good outcome – that is central to the aesthetics of suspense. A formalized countdown system with a deadline set in place dramatizes the calculus of probability, because the closer we are to the moment of impending doom the more it becomes unavoidable and hence fearfully anticipated. A deadline is set, say, for a bomb to explode, and the time to the explosion is then registered by the ticking of a clock, the ticking of the bomb itself, and by the rhythms of musical accompaniment. Even the less fearful suspense situations characterized by romantic comedy rely on narrative deadlines. For example, in Howard Hawk’s’s *His Girl Friday* (1940), the drama of the situation turns on the fact that Hildy (Rosalind Russell) and Bruce Baldwin (Ralph Bellamy) are to depart on the 4:00 p.m. train to Albany and marry that very day. This looming deadline renders improbable the fact that Hildy will stay to work on the paper and, hence, also remarry Walter Burns (Cary Grant). The aesthetic of suspense that arises out of narra-
tive deadlines entails an ever-increasing amount of information about what is happening on a moment-to-moment basis, which is articulated in cinematic terms through visual montage of the kind perfected by D.W. Griffith. Faster and faster alternation between the position of the victim under threat and the rescuer reflect the ever-diminishing time frame and the narrowing of the possibility of rescue to an ever-diminishing sliver of time.

This kind of classical suspense situation that builds up the pace of editing as the threat becomes more and more inevitable against a looming deadline is illustrated in the sequence that leads to the destruction of Stevie in Hitchcock’s _Sabotage_. First Hitchcock establishes very clearly a deadline of 1:45 p.m. for the bomb to explode. When Stevie sets out on his journey he is beset by delays—he gets lost in the market-day crowds and is lured into being cleaned up by a street peddler. To remind us of the imminent catastrophe, Hitchcock periodically intercuts close-ups of the bomb under his arm and superimposes the instructions written by one of the saboteurs, ‘Don’t forget the Birds will Sing at 1:45.’ But Stevie gets distracted again, this time by the Lord Mayor’s show, and Hitchcock interposes a montage of a clock reading 1:00 p.m., the inner cogs engaging in a manner that suggests the relentless momentum of time, and a minute hand moves in fast-forward to 1:15. But Stevie continues to ‘dilly-dally’ at the show. He gets onto the bus and snuggles a dog held by the neighbor blissfully unaware; he looks around behind him at a clock outside and feels the package next to him. His fidgeting registers his worry that he is late, but also, ironically, evokes the much deeper anxiety of the audience. We pass a clock reading 1:30, then again, 1:35. Hitchcock cuts at an increasingly frequent place between shots of Stevie petting the dog and looking outside, shots of a clock getting near the time of the explosion, shots of the bomb, shots of the conductor at the back of the bus that has a diagonal bar across the window that evokes ‘no entry’ or a barricade, and shots of the bus caught up in serial delays: it is stopped by a policeman, then by a traffic jam, and then by traffic lights indicating ‘STOP.’ When the lights change to ‘GO’ Hitchcock cuts rapidly from Stevie to ‘1:45,’ then to a close-up of the clock face moving to ‘1:46,’ then to three shots in rapid succession of the bomb, and finally the explosion, as if detonated by the montage. The salience of the temporal deadline and the accelerating tempo of the sequence are underscored by an orchestration that features rhythmic sounds like the ticking of a clock, punctuates the shots of the clock face with ominous chords, and increases tempo with the accelerating montage. The entire sequence is a lesson in the aesthetics of classical suspense and illustrates Carroll’s rationale for the way it operates.

But Carroll claims that the explanation of suspense in terms of a ‘calculus’ of probability not only explains paradigmatic instances of suspense such as this, but that it also argues conclusively against the alternative interpretation
of the aesthetics of suspense suggested by Truffaut and Barthes. In his conversation with Hitchcock, Truffaut claims that ‘the very nature of suspense requires a constant play with the flux of time, either by compressing it, or, more often, by distending it.’ According to this theory, temporal retardation or delay engenders suspense. The theory of suspense as temporal retardation or ‘suspension’ requires comparing the event that is presented to the spectator the moment that a state of anxious uncertainty is generated with another event – the delayed one. But what is the delayed event? One candidate for the event against which the delay is measured is the event as it would have taken place in real time. However, awareness of the real time that events take is not usually invoked or called upon in suspense situations. It would seem to be an accidental side effect rather than a necessary feature of suspense. Furthermore, the distention of screen time in relationship to real events is not sufficient by itself to generate suspense. Eisenstein’s Odessa Steps sequence from Battleship Potemkin (1925) equally involves prolonging the massacre on the steps in terms of screen time relative to actual time, but the sequence is not in the least suspenseful, in part because the audience already knows the outcome and in part because Eisenstein makes sure the audience knows the outcome by presenting the conclusion of the action – the Cossacks cutting down the fleeing citizens of Odessa – at the beginning of the sequence.

Barthes offers a more promising candidate for the delayed event in relationship to which suspense is to be measured – the narrative event that would resolve the suspense situation itself. For Barthes, suspense involves a temporal retardation or delay in narrative resolution. In terms of the question and answer structure of narrative posed by both Barthes and Carroll, suspense, according to Barthes, entails a delay in the answer of the question proposed by the narrative: ‘Under the hermeneutic code we list the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed.’ Of course, delay in the resolution of narrative is part and parcel of all narratives. Every story delays and defers its outcome and thereby engages our interest in what happens next. To define narrative suspense simply in terms of delay renders all narrative suspenseful and thereby robs the definition of suspense of any distinctive characteristics. This is one of Carroll’s motivations for developing an account of suspense in terms of a competing answer to a question where temporal delay per se seems to play no role. But does this mean that the idea of temporal retardation or delay has no independent explanatory value in understanding the role of suspense and in Hitchcock’s work in particular?

In his lecture to students at Columbia University Hitchcock contrasts what he calls the objective aspect of suspense exemplified in the parallel editing or cross-cutting that was perfected by Griffith and his own approach to suspense
that adds a ‘subjective factor’ by which he means ‘letting the audience experience it through the mind or eyes of one of the characters.’ But Hitchcock wishes to get at something more, for he suggests that subjective suspense contrasts with objective suspense not simply through the presence of a character’s point of view but also in presenting the spectator only one side of the suspense situation and hence ‘making the audience suffer.’ In other words, Hitchcock is concerned to pinpoint the role of narrative suppression in generating suspense. This is an idea that Hitchcock is usually assumed to have rejected. When he makes his famous distinction between suspense and surprise, he defines the difference as whether or not the spectator is fully informed about what is going on in the scene. In the situation of suspense we are fully informed about something the characters are unaware of, for example, that there is a bomb about to explode under the table around which they are sitting. In the situation of surprise we are as ignorant as the characters are about the events that are about to happen. Furthermore, when Truffaut raises the idea to him that suspense may rise out of a hidden danger Hitchcock directly contradicts him: ‘To my way of thinking mystery is seldom suspenseful. In a whodunit, for example, there is no suspense, but a sort of intellectual puzzle. The whodunit generates a kind of curiosity that is void of emotion, and emotion is an essential ingredient of suspense.’

How is it then that mystery generated by suppressive narration can be suspenseful? Hitchcock is undoubtedly right about the whodunit lacking suspense, for what is involved here is less a sense of hidden danger that arouses emotional response than an intellectual puzzle about which one of multiple possible candidates for the murderer is the right one. However, the kind of mystery Hitchcock has in mind when he speaks of subjective suspense is not the intellectual puzzle of detective fiction but the situation that is created when a character – and the spectator who is aligned with the character – is placed in a state of uncertainty about the narrative outcome, and this uncertainty becomes a source of fear and anxiety. The mystery contains something incipiently threatening and we need to find out what it is. Something more is involved than mere curiosity about the answer to a question; rather, what is posed in the narrative is an enigma that the narrative situation demands us to resolve, for something is fundamentally at stake for the character in the fiction and hence for the spectator. Mystery is not inherently suspenseful, but it becomes suspenseful when uncertainty breeds anxiety that fuels the wish to resolve it. Furthermore, in Hitchcock’s films, as we shall see, not only does a wish to resolve the mystery arise from the fact that it is incipiently threatening but the fact that the mysterious event is incipiently threatening may also be a source of allure. It is for these reasons that Hitchcock’s description of this form of suspense as subjective suspense is a good one, for it pinpoints the difference between the
intellectual uncertainty of detective fiction and the anxiety-provoking uncertainty of the suspenseful mystery, where the lack of knowledge itself is in some way threatening to the character and thus a source of concern to the sympathetic spectator.

The use of suppressive narration that restricts us to the epistemic and often to the perceptual point of view of a character in a state of anxious uncertainty and that sustains suspense by restricting us to that point of view is ubiquitous in Hitchcock’s work. For example, in *Rebecca* (1940) when the second Mrs. De Winter (Joan Fontaine) arrives at Manderley, she has been primed to think of Rebecca, her husband’s first wife, as a figure of awe and fascination, about whom she both desires and fears to know more. By restricting us to the epistemic viewpoint of the character, Hitchcock suppresses our knowledge of who Rebecca really was and the nature of the ‘threat’ she poses until Maxim’s (Laurence Olivier) confession scene late in the narrative. During the second Mrs. De Winter’s first prolonged encounter with Rebecca’s housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson), she experiences the overwhelming presence of Rebecca in the house of Manderley. Leaving her bedroom on Danvers’ cue, she enters diminutively, like a girl in a fairy tale, a hall filled with towering, bulbous (feminine) forms projected as shadows onto the curved white plaster walls. And with Danvers following silently, as if her escort, Mrs. De Winter glides, with her back to Hitchcock’s camera, through a long, cathedral-like corridor shimmering with watery light, echoed by mystical strains of tremulous violins. They hesitate at the top of the stairs, framed from behind in two shot as Danvers points out the doors of Mrs. de Winter’s room. First Danvers, then Mrs. de Winter, peel off, leaving Hitchcock’s camera to venture, to be lured, a little closer to the gigantic doors that look like the entry gates to some forbidding Masonic temple until, as it were, stopped from approaching any closer by Rebecca’s dog Jasper who stands guard. The suspense that is invoked here is the fearful anticipation of something whose character is wished to be known and it is registered as a delay or forestalling of the moment of narrative disclosure. *Vertigo* (1958), in ways that parallel *Rebecca*, wroughts a massive deception upon Scottie (James Stewart) and the spectator alike. Hitchcock’s signature use of a forward tracking point-of-view shot and backward tracking reaction shot in this film provides a very precise evocation of the manner in which mystery builds into suspense the force of a lure.

But if we are to recognize a form of suspense in which temporal delay has an intrinsic rather than extrinsic or incidental role in the generation of anxious uncertainty, what relationship does this form of suspense bear to the case of suspense in which suspense is generated through the relative probability of a bad outcome versus the improbability of a good outcome? In suspenseful mystery or impure suspense, the anxiety-provoking situation takes the form of
an enigma that we seek to resolve because it is incipiently threatening. We do not know the relative probability of a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ resolution to the enigma, or alternatively, we might say that in this situation a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ outcome is equally possible. Narrative delay postpones the resolution of the enigma and thereby prolongs the initial condition of narrative suppression. In this way anxious uncertainty, generated by the narrative enigma, is sustained and suspense created. In this kind of suspenseful situation our state of anxious uncertainty does not rise or fall but remains more or less constant until the narrative enigma is resolved. However, in the case of pure suspense, with the narrative possibilities resolved into a clearly defined good option and a clearly defined bad one, the spectator is no longer simply placed in a condition of anxious uncertainty about narrative outcome but is placed in a situation where their anxious uncertainty is itself subject to manipulation and control. The suspense situation becomes one in which suspense can be increased or decreased according to the ‘calculus’ of probability. Once the narrative options are posed in this way, the factor of delay per se drops out of significance, for delay plays its role as a suspense generator only when the nature of the narrative answer is an anxiety-provoking, because incipiently threatening, enigma. In pure suspense, since the nature of the threat is a known quantity, the delay in narrative resolution is keyed to delays that are dramatized in the story, delays that serve to increase the likelihood of a bad outcome as the suspense sequence from Sabotage exemplifies. Every time Stevie’s progress is hindered the chances of his being blown up increase.

Carroll is right, I think, in identifying the contours of pure or objective suspense but he fails to recognize the distinctive character of impure or subjective suspense or suspenseful mystery. The distinctive character of this form of narrative suspense lies precisely in the way in which a state of anxious uncertainty is sustained by narrative delay. What lies in common to both forms of suspense is the condition of anxious uncertainty generated by the possibility of a good or bad outcome to a narrative. Where they differ is that in impure suspense, whether the outcome will be good or bad is an equal possibility, since the nature of the ‘threat’ encountered by the characters is an enigmatic one. In this context, the relative probability of a good or bad outcome to the narrative is not the distinctive suspense-generating mechanism; rather, suspense is generated by the withholding of narrative information that fails to bring clarity to the narrative situation and thereby sustains at once the possibility of a threat and our interest in finding out the nature of the threat.

One lesson of Hitchcock’s work, then, is that there are at least two aesthetics of narrative suspense that correspond roughly to the objective and subjective aspects of suspense that Hitchcock distinguished in his ‘Columbia Lecture.’ The first aesthetic corresponds to the pure suspense situation in which the
spectator is placed in a position of knowledge superior to that of the character and elements of the scene are orchestrated according to a calculus of probability that intensifies the likelihood of an undesirable action, relative to the likelihood of a desirable action taking place. This kind of suspense is defined by a relative emotional detachment towards character psychology and the fate of character in favor of a logic of action and the calculus of probability. This aesthetic of suspense, in Hitchcock at least, often has a ludic, comic quality, displaying self-conscious awareness of the artful manipulation of the spectator it involves. The second aesthetic of suspense – ‘subjective suspense’ – corresponds to the impure suspense situation of ‘suspenseful mystery’ where narrative is suppressive about narrative outcome, and we are aligned to the psychology of a character rather than being placed in a position that is superior to them in the sense that we enter into the same sense of uncertainty about narrative events. This form of suspense aligns us with character feeling as opposed to detaching us from it, and typically, in Hitchcock’s films, this involves an alignment with a female character, such as in Rebecca, Suspicion, or Shadow of a Doubt, or with a ‘feminized’ male character – that is, a male character who has been reduced to a situation of passivity or uncertainty such as characterizes the situation of Scottie (James Stewart) in Vertigo. This subjective aesthetic is much more serious; it leads us, for example, to experience the lure of perverse desire as in Rebecca, rather than making a joke out of it as in Rope.

Although Hitchcock’s career tends to involve an alternation between these different aesthetics of suspense – for example North by Northwest (1959) follows Vertigo – many of his works combine both aesthetics. I have already described a paradigmatic case of objective suspense in Hitchcock’s Sabotage but the same film also exhibits subjective suspense. After the death of Stevie we are encouraged to identify with the suffering Mrs. Verloc, who has not only lost her brother but also learns from her husband that he is responsible for Stevie’s death. She wrestles with this knowledge as she begins to serve her husband’s evening meal, and the proximity of a knife attracts her to the thought of murder. The question, ‘What will she do?’ is posed, and suspense is created through a delay of the answer. This narrative situation is particularly instructive because, while we anticipate that she might kill her husband, we don’t exactly want her not to kill him, given what he has just done. We just want to know what will happen. Furthermore, what actually occurs defies our expectations. When Verloc realizes that Mrs. Verloc has her hand poised over the knife, he slowly edges around the table towards her, and the camera assumes his point of view as it tracks forward towards Mrs. Verloc as if he is being drawn towards her, not to prevent her but to be killed by her. When he arrives by her side he grabs for the knife, but she gets it first. The camera tilts up to their faces as he advances upon her slightly, and she (out of shot) drives the
knife in to him. The whole scene commences in silence – that itself generates anxiety by cueing us to the overwhelming, inchoate emotions experienced by the characters.

A Note on Suspense and Surprise

When mystery is entwined with suspense through suppressive narration, then surprise becomes a corollary of suspense, rather than being opposed to it in the manner suggested by Hitchcock’s own contrast between suspense and surprise. Hitchcock’s suppressive narration emotionally engages us, in part, because it encourages us to anticipate a surprise. Surprise contrasts with ‘objective suspense,’ but it is complementary to ‘subjective suspense.’ Furthermore, we also need to be careful to distinguish between surprise and shock. While objective suspense excludes surprise it does not exclude shock, for an event that is wholly anticipated can nonetheless be shocking when it actually occurs. Shock is compatible with both objective and subjective forms of suspense.

Psycho functions as Hitchcock’s tutor text in the relationship between suspense and surprise. Indeed, it illustrates the three fundamental relationships that obtain between them. The murder of Marion Crane comes out of the blue, and at first sight, seems like the case of Hitchcock’s bomb suddenly blowing up from the table; that is, a question of pure surprise. As Steven Schneider points out, we do glimpse the murderer from a point of view inside the shower that is not that of Marion. However, this moment of objective suspense does not lessen the overall surprise involved in killing off the heroine in the first reel, though it does allow us to anticipate the shocking event just before it occurs. In the second murder, we now think we know the identity of the criminal, and the case is one of pure suspense in which we fearfully anticipate the unhappy end of Arbogast. The death of Arbogast, while shocking, is not surprising. The sequence that leads up to Norman’s attempt on Lila Crane’s life illustrates a third relationship of suspense to surprise, for while Hitchcock appears to have revealed to us the identity of the killer, the narrative seems to be suppressing something through the evasiveness of Norman and suppressive strategies of the camera movement and placement. This suppression paves the way for the surprising and shocking disclosure at the conclusion of the film.

Hitchcock combines objective suspense, subjective suspense, and surprise in the famous sequence from The Birds (1963) where Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) sits in front of the jungle gym waiting for the kids to finish school. At first she is oblivious to an alarming fact that the spectator is made aware of
from the beginning of the scene: birds are gathering on the climbing frame behind her. Hitchcock cuts back and forth between Melanie nervously smoking in the foreground and the birds progressively gathering in the background. This classic rendition of pure or objective suspense is accompanied by the mesmerizing repetition of the children’s song that serves to mark out the passing of time. Then, Melanie notices a single bird in flight, and Hitchcock cuts from a reaction shot of Melanie looking to a long point-of-view shot of the bird flying that, in the context of the narration, serves to restrict our knowledge of what is going on and inclines us to anticipate Melanie’s surprise and shock at what she will see when the bird lands. What she does see turns out to be surprising and shocking for the spectator also since, in the meantime, the birds have accumulated in quite massive proportions. The film then reverts again to an objective suspense structure but one in which the knowledge of the character is now, in contrast to the earlier sequence, aligned with that of the audience, and we fear, with Melanie, for the schoolchildren’s lives.

Voyeurism, Eavesdropping and Suspense

Thus far, I have discussed the moral ambiguity in Hitchcock’s work in relationship to his subversion of the moral structure of objective suspense. However, moral ambiguity is a factor that informs, and is indeed sustained by, ‘subjective suspense.’ As we have seen, Hitchcock subverts our customary moral allegiances by encouraging us to wish for an outcome that runs contrary to what is morally desirable. Suspenseful mystery in Hitchcock subverts our conventional moral allegiances in a different way. For while subjective suspense in Hitchcock does not always disguise or conceal a corrupt or perverse content, it invariably signals something that is perverse through the fact that suppressive narration takes on the aspect of a prohibition or censorship that conceals something taboo and thereby renders the character and the spectator who is aligned with him or her fascinated in the content of what the narrative conceals. Thus in Rebecca, the second Mrs. de Winter’s fascination with the secret of Rebecca takes on the lure of something that is taboo through the manner in which, for example, the second Mrs. de Winter’s interest in her dead predecessor is governed and mediated by the figure of Mrs. Danvers who clearly harbors an erotic attraction to her. As the second Mrs. de Winter approaches the door of Rebecca’s chamber in the aforementioned scene from the film and pauses at the threshold, her gaze at Rebecca’s door is overseen by Mrs. Danvers’s gaze at her from off-screen.
As Arthur Laurents, screenwriter of Rope, suggests, Hitchcock was fascinated with ‘kink,’ that is, with sexual perversity or, more generally, with the idea that sexuality is perverse. Sexuality is endowed with the aura of perversity in Hitchcock, precisely by being forbidden or being rendered in disguise. And by being disguised, sexuality is rendered as something alluring in a very Freudian way. Hitchcock deploys strategies of narrative and representational doubling derived from German Expressionism in order to evoke the sense that appearances are a surface phenomena that conceal perverse secrets. But there is one strategy of conveying the core of perversity that lies within the mystery that is privileged by Hitchcock because of the manner in which it contributes directly to the staging of suspense through suppressive narration. Hitchcock connects suppressive narration with scenarios of eavesdropping or spying on something that is private or secret, taboo activities that, while they are not intrinsically wedded to a sexual motive or content, nonetheless often contain a sexual motive or content and are connected to such content by the fact of being taboo. The second Mrs. De Winter is consistently caught in this kind of situation, as, for example, when she is witness to the conversation between Mrs. Danvers and her dandy cousin Jack Flavell (George Saunders). Often, as in rear window (1954), eavesdropping or spying is represented itself as a form of voyeuristic fascination that colors the mystery with the aura of something that is taboo and implicates the spectator in the same prurient fascination as the character. By placing within the scene a character who takes an illicit fascination in a mystery, the mystery is thereby lent an aura of perversity, over and above the perverse connotations that it may already carry. But the significance of the voyeuristic scenario is not limited to the perverse coloration it lends to subjective suspense.

In his interviews with Truffaut and elsewhere Hitchcock fondly recounted the scene from Easy Virtue (1927) in which the telephone operator eavesdrops on a marriage proposal. Will the proposal lead to marriage? Hitchcock cites this as a suspense situation involving romance that does not include fear. But the context of his discussion with Truffaut also suggests this may be a case of what he calls ‘suspense of situation,’ in contrast to the kind of suspense that involves ‘what happens next.’ Of course, ‘what happens next’ is important to the representation of suspense in the scene; nonetheless, Hitchcock’s idea of ‘suspense of situation’ is suggestive. The content of the suspense here is neither mysterious nor perverse; indeed, the situation presented is one of objective suspense that is morally conventional in its structure. But the suspense is embedded in a subjective situation that is one of eavesdropping on the private lives of strangers. In this way our engagement with the suspenseful ‘narrative’ that we are privy to hear over the phone line is given an aura of naughtiness. I have suggested that the depiction of a character as a voyeur can contribute to
subjective suspense by coloring mystery with the aura of something that is taboo, thereby intensifying the character’s fascination with the content of the mystery. But what is portrayed in the Easy Virtue example is a character eavesdropping on a suspenseful narrative situation. The character’s fascination may color our own interest in the narrative outcome, but, equally, what fascinates the spectator is the situation of a character being held in suspense. That is, the presence of the character renders the spectator’s own relationship to narrative suspense an indirect one.

By staging the lure of the taboo in this way, Hitchcock allows the audience to experience the perverse pleasures of voyeurism vicariously in a position of relative safety. The presence of the character in the situation is a way of at once cueing the spectator to indulge in something that is taboo and ‘permitting’ the spectator to entertain the character’s responses at a ‘safe’ distance. For example, throughout Rear Window, Hitchcock represents L.B. Jeffries spying on his neighbors in a manner that colors the nature of our interest in the evolving mystery of the Thorwald murder, and what fascinates us is not simply the outcome of the murder but the situation of the character being held in suspense itself. Consider, too, a scene from Hitchcock’s film The Lodger where the ambiguously perverse hero who may or may not be Jack the Ripper, perched at the top of a ‘Victorian’ staircase – an ubiquitous feature of Hitchcock’s works with its own connotations of the sexual secrecy that pertain to the upstairs rooms of the Victorian household – peers down, transfixed, at the heroine as she struggles to free herself from her policeman boyfriend who has handcuffed her at the culmination of a sexual chase. In staging the scene in this way, Hitchcock authorizes the spectator to enjoy the scene as a displaced expression of sexual perversity (sado-masochism) because we view it through the gaze of a character who is perhaps ‘sexually perverted,’ while at the same time he allows us to distance ourselves from this thought. In part, this distance is afforded by the very presence of the character of the lodger in the scene (we can pretend the perverse interpretation of what we see is being made by the character rather than by us), and in part it is achieved because the motivation of the Lodger himself is ambiguous (we can pretend that the Lodger’s motivation is, like our own, actually quite innocent).

The staging of suspense in the context of voyeurism or eavesdropping functions in a manner analogous to Hitchcock’s black humor. Both are ‘aestheti-cizing’ strategies that introduce the audience to the pleasures of moral corruption by giving them a disguised expression. Black humor ‘allows’ the audience to sympathize with the devil and wish for a morally pernicious outcome by placing us at one remove from the character and the situation by detaching us from our customary moral judgments. Hitchcock’s staging of suspense as a scenario of voyeurism or eavesdropping allows the audience to vicariously ex-
experience the thrill of something that is taboo, but again, in a manner that detaches the audience from responsibility for their alignment. In both cases Hitchcockian suspense is characterized by a high degree of self-consciousness. Hitchcock invites the audience not simply to enjoy suspense but to become connoisseurs or aesthetes of suspense.

I have identified five aspects of Hitchcockian suspense that deviate from the case of pure or objective suspense that is a central point of departure both for understanding suspense and for understanding Hitchcock’s practice of suspense. First, Hitchcock’s work is marked by the inversion of moral co-ordinates, in such a way that he encourages the audience to take delight in the thought of something that is morally undesirable. Second, this inversion of moral co-ordinates may be supported by the use of black humor that fosters our identification with the narrative situation of the dandy or anti-hero and also serves to detach us from the suspense situation and encourages to take delight in the dastardly manner in which Hitchcock has subverted our customary moral co-ordinates. Third, Hitchcockian suspense is informed by mystery created by a suppressive or restricted narration that renders the character and spectator intrigued by what is, conventionally speaking, morally undesirable and transforms the conditions of transparency that govern the orthodox suspense situation. Fourth, narrative suppression in Hitchcock generates the promise of incipient surprise or shock. When suspense is entwined with mystery, surprise is its corollary rather than its antithesis. And fifth, fascination with the wicked and incipiently shocking is fostered by Hitchcock through the way in which his narrative secret is hedged about with taboos that inscribe conventional morality as a set of prohibitions that it is desirable to breach. Furthermore, the spectator’s engagement with a suspenseful situation is itself represented as a form of eavesdropping or voyeurism and hence something that is taboo. Thus, the suspenseful situation becomes a source of fascination and pleasure in its own right.

Although Hitchcock invokes orthodox or pure suspense in its morally conventional form, the defining characteristic of Hitchcockian suspense is its impurity that is in part defined by the inversion of the customary moral co-ordinates that structure the pure suspense situation and in part by the suppression of key information pertaining to the nature of the narrative situation. The position that Hitchcock invites the spectator to occupy is one in which they are forever at the threshold of something forbidden, that is just out of reach, and one in which they entrust themselves to Hitchcock the narrator to orchestra their access to the forbidden fruit whose content must remain elusive for the suspense to be maintained. Within the anodyne public moniker of ‘Hitchcock – the master of suspense’ is the wickedly playful persona of ‘Hitchcock – the master of ceremonies’ who introduces ‘the public’ to taboo secrets, like a Dr.
Caligari who threatens to expose the contents of his ‘cabinet’ to the shocked and thrilled onlooker. Nonetheless, Hitchcock always sought to introduce the public to those secrets in a manner that maintains their disguise and that resists a lapsing into ‘bad taste’ or sheer exhibitionism – though, of course, his whole career involved exploring the limits of what ‘the public’ was willing to be exposed to.

Notes


4. Carroll dubs this morally neutral theory of suspense the ‘universal theory’ in contrast to the ‘general theory’ that is defined by moral parameters. See Carroll, ‘Toward a Theory of Film Suspense,’ p. 112.


7. Ibid., p. 57.


12. Ibid.

13. Truffaut, Hitchcock, p. 73. Susan Smith’s useful discussion of suspense in Hitchcock is marred by her failure to reference sources other than the Truffaut interviews.

