

The Lodger

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Introduction

It was the first time I exercised my style. In truth, you might say that *The Lodger* was my first picture. (Truffaut 44)

Alfred Hitchcock (13 August 1899 – 29 April 1980), the famous English film director and producer, is known largely because of his work in the suspense and psychological genres. Hitchcock began his work in films when he became an intertitle¹⁾ designer for London-based Islington Studios in 1920. In those fluid and chaotic days of the silent cinema, he took on many duties, such as, screenwriter, art director, and assistant director. His directing debut came in 1922 with the partially completed *Number 13*. *The Pleasure Garden* (1925) and *The Mountain Eagle* (1926) followed. Both were largely unsuccessful.

It was, however, with his first thriller, *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1927), that Hitchcock met with his first success. The film was based on Marie Belloc Lowndes' 1913 novel *The Lodger*, which, in turn, was largely based on the sensational London serial killer of the late 1880s who was never caught—Jack the Ripper. As the quotation above suggests, *The Lodger* might be considered the first real Hitchcock movie, and as such, it is filled with elements that the public has come to identify with a Hitchcock movie: suspense, thrills, surprises, etc. For the purposes of this paper, however, I wish to concentrate on one element that, while central to Hitchcock's work, is perhaps often overlooked: humor. As Hitchcock himself famously said, "In the mystery and suspense genre, a tongue-in-cheek approach is indispensable." (Truffaut 202)

Hitchcock considered his job as director to be similar to that of a conductor who is orchestrating the emotions and reactions of his audience. Lighting, camera position, sound, music, acting, dialogue, special effects, etc., can all be used to manipulate the audience's experience. In the mystery and suspense genre, however, there is a delicate balance to strike: too little tension and the story fails as suspense and might lose the interest of those watching; too much tension and the film ceases to be pleasurable and the audience may tune out. For Hitchcock, humor was "indispensable" to help him fine tune the level of tension in his films. In this paper, I'll use *The Lodger* to analyze Hitchcock's use of humor. First, I'll give a brief background to the film and a synopsis of the story told in the film. Then I'll look at the first fifteen minutes in detail and point out instances of humor. Finally, I'll attempt to categorize Hitchcock's humor based on the types of humor he injects into the film during the first fifteen minutes.

The Lodger **A Story of the London Fog**

Background. Hitchcock's *The Lodger* was based on the 1913 novel *The Lodger* by Marie Belloc Lowndes. This novel, in turn, was loosely based on Jack the Ripper. Jack the Ripper is the name generally given to the serial killer who is credited with a series of grisly murders in the London Whitechapel area. He would typically target prostitutes, first slitting their throats and then mutilating them by slitting open their abdomens. In some cases internal organs were removed. Since the culprit was never caught, it is difficult to know for certain which of the eleven similar murders which took place between 1888 and 1891 were actually Jack the Ripper's work. Most experts agree, however, that at least the first five, which took place between 31 August and 9 November, were his work. The police department at the time was baffled, and largely because of the plethora of penny newspapers in London at that time, the events were sensationalized, and there was a large public outcry against perceived police incompetence.

The Novel. Marie Belloc Lowndes' novel supposes that there is a series of murders in London by a self-named "Avenger". She further imagines that this murderer lets a room in the house of Mr. and Mrs. Bunting, impoverished retired domestic servants. We are kept up to date on the series of murders by Joe Chandler, a young policeman who happens to be a friend of Mr. Bunting and often visits. However, the story in the novel revolves less around the murders than on the growing suspicions of the Buntings (especially Mrs. Bunting) that their lodger (Mr. Sleuth) is none other than the Avenger. They especially worry because

Daisy, Mr. Bunting's daughter by a previous marriage, has come to visit, and they feel she might become a victim. Before anything can happen to Daisy, however, Mr. Sleuth leaves town after finding out that the police know his true identity and are close to finding him.

The Film.ⁱⁱ⁾ Elliot Stannard and Alva Reville (Mrs. Alfred Hitchcock) adapted Marie Belloc Lowndes' novel for the screen. The film retains many key points of the novel: the suspense as Mrs. Bunting begins to suspect that the lodger is the Avenger, the mob morality, etc. However, there are important differences. Some scenes from the novel were deleted from the film, and a love affair is introduced between the lodger and Daisy, who steadfastly believes in his innocence. In addition, in the film all of the victims are blonde. This is not true in the novel. This fact helps tie into Daisy's role in the film. In the novel she is Mr. Bunting's daughter by a previous marriage and thus Mrs. Bunting's step daughter, but in the film she is Mr. and Mrs. Bunting's daughter. Both because Daisy is blonde and her daughter, Mrs. Bunting is much more worried about Daisy. In addition, in the novel Daisy meets the lodger late in the story and her relationship with him is very limited. As mentioned above, in the film, they have a love affair and Daisy is his biggest supporter. The biggest difference between the novel and film, though, is in the lodger himself. In the novel, the lodger *is* the Avenger. There is no doubt about his guilt. In the film, however, the question of the lodger's guilt or innocence is one of the central concerns of the story. At the end of the film, we find out that the lodger is indeed innocent,ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ and, almost as an afterthought (albeit a necessary one that establishes the lodger's innocence), the real Avenger is caught off screen.

Humor in The Film

A close examination of the opening scenes of *The Lodger* serves to highlight the many uses and techniques of humor that Alfred Hitchcock incorporates into the film.

Title. The opening title screen, with its shadows, angles, and non-linear script, almost shouts of the influence of German Expressionism. The fact that the figure is cloaked with his back to us immediately announces that we are dealing with a mystery. Importantly, the shadow of the figure hints that we are dealing with some kind of duality, the nature of which becomes clear as the film progresses. Hitchcock's humor and playfulness is seen as the angled lines close on the figure like a pair of scissors. Just before they close and conceal the figure completely, they tease us by opening up just a little bit before closing fully. After the opening credits are completed, the title screen appears again only to have the angles lines reappear

and open up to reveal the mysterious figure again and to signal that our story has begun.

Prologue. The first approximately thirteen minutes of the film—up to the point at which *The Lodger* makes his first appearance—is filled with some of the techniques that Hitchcock called upon again and again. The very opening frame is nothing but a close-up of a screaming girl's face. Hitchcock firmly believed that the emotional impact of a shot for the audience is directly proportional to the perceived viewing distance. In other words, long shots are basically emotionally neutral, but the emotional power of a shot continues to increase as the distance decreases. Recall Janet Leigh's face in the famous shower scene in *Psycho*. Of course, a corollary of the idea of close-ups revealing emotion is that they also reveal importance. Hitchcock's films are rife with close-ups of important objects: the stuffed birds and the stolen money in *Psycho*, the flat key in *Dial M for Murder*, curled hair in *Vertigo*, a piece of rope in *Rope*, newspaper articles in multiple movies, etc.

Hitchcock uses this part of the film to establish the fact that there is a serial killer in London who kills blonde girls on Tuesday nights. His calling card is a note with the words "The Avenger" written within a triangle. Much of this eight minutes is basically a long montage^{iv)} revealing the reaction of the populace, the police, the press, and the radio to the murders. Finally, we are introduced to the potential victims, the "fair" girls who work in nightclubs or as mannequins. We meet Daisy Bunting, one of the mannequins.

There are several examples of Hitchcock humor in this section of the film. After one of the witnesses to the latest murder describes the Avenger ("Tall he was—and his face all wrapped up"), a bystander turns up his collar in imitation of the Avenger. Seeing him, the witness panics, but everything settles down when the bystander turns down his collar. The other bystanders seem to accept all this as good-natured fun. As the news of the latest murder spreads, we see the hectic scene at a newspaper office where all are rushing to put out a newspaper extra. Among those in the office is none other than the director himself, Alfred Hitchcock. This is the first of Hitchcock's famous cameos. In the dressing room of a nightclub that promises, with flashing neon, "To-night Golden Curls", the performers react to the news of the murder of another blonde girl. The brunettes make fun of the blondes. A comic scene takes place in the dressing room when a girl with her cloak pulled up over her face peers down on a girl at her dressing table. When the seated girl panics, the other pulls down her cloak and they both laugh. The scene changes to introduce the blonde-haired Daisy Bunting working in her job as a mannequin. In the dressing room, one girl intones, "No more

peroxide for me”, and another puts on a brown wig to cover her blonde hair, all the while smiling and laughing.

The last section of the film before the lodger arrives at the Bunting house also contains a humorous vignette that serves as a counterpoint to the gruesome news of the serial killer. At the Bunting home, as Daisy reads the newspaper about the gruesome news of the latest murder, her policeman boyfriend Joe uses a heart-shaped cookie cutter to make hearts out of dough. He silently places the hearts in front of Daisy, only to have them returned. He expresses his sadness by tearing one of the hearts in two.

The Lodger. As the lodger approaches the Buntings, we see only his shadow and the ominous number “13” on the Buntings’ door. Opening the front door, Mrs. Bunting sees a tall figure with coat, hat, and scarf standing in the doorway surrounded by fog. We are immediately reminded of the earlier words of the witness: “Tall he was—and his face all wrapped up.” We see a medium close-up of Mrs. Bunting’s face as she seems to start with fright. Then the camera returns to the figure in the doorway. The scene ends innocuously enough when we soon discover that the stranger has seen the “Room to Let” sign in the window and wishes to let the room. After seeing the room, he agrees to let it and pays a month’s rent in advance. Bracketing the tension of the lodger’s arrival is the winding of a cuckoo clock. Just as the lodger arrives, Mr. Bunting climbs a ladder to wind the clock, and, just as Mrs. Bunting realizes that the stranger is just someone who has come to enquire about a room, Mr. Bunting falls from the ladder with a crash, causing Daisy to come running and reducing her to a fit of laughter.

Hitchcock’s Humor

The Lodger (1927) is a very early Hitchcock film, but even so it already contains many of the basic elements of humor that would repeat time and again throughout his films. Here are some of the major, recurring comedic strains that run through his films as illustrated by these opening scenes of *The Lodger*.

The Cameo. At roughly four minutes fifty seconds into *The Lodger*, we see Alfred Hitchcock sitting at a desk in a newspaper office. The story is that he was running short of extras and stepped in to fill a temporary need. Whatever the reason, Hitchcock’s cameo became a running joke, and movie goers would inevitably search for the rotund figure in his films. He

appeared in various guises: in a newspaper ad for “Reduco Obesity Slayer” in *Lifeboat* (1944), boarding a train with a double bass in *Strangers on a Train* (1951), in the left side of a class reunion picture in *Dial M for Murder* (1954), leaving a pet shop with dogs on leashes in *The Birds* (1963), etc. So as not to distract viewers from the film, he was careful to place his cameo very early in the film.

Gags/Slapstick. Twice in these opening scenes of *The Lodger* someone pretends to be the Avenger in order to frighten someone. At a point of high tension as the lodger is making his first appearance, Mr. Bunting is trying to wind a cuckoo clock, only to fall off the ladder. Similar things happen throughout Hitchcock films. Some gags in latter films were longer. For example, there is an extended gag in *The 39 Steps* (1935) in which a man and woman are handcuffed together.^{v)}

Caricature. Even though *The Lodger* is a silent film, you can almost hear the Cockney accent of the woman witness in the opening scene as she says, “Tall he was—and his face all wrapped up.” Mr. Bunting, as well, seems to be exaggerated in the way he ineptly tries to wind the cuckoo clock. It is common to find this type of overdone, stereotypical character in Hitchcock. *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), for instance, is almost entirely populated with overdone ethnic stereotypes.

Macabre Humor. Perhaps the most pervasive type of humor in Hitchcock’s films is the juxtaposition of the ordinary and/or humorous with the macabre. For example, at about the thirteen minute mark in *The Lodger*, as Daisy is reading the newspaper about the latest gruesome murder, Joe is using a cookie cutter to make hearts out of dough. Of course, the instances in which people pretend to be the Avenger just to get a laugh are other examples of this type of gallows humor. Most Hitchcock movies are filled with this type of humor. *The Trouble with Harry* (1955) deserves special mention because the entire plot revolves around the discovery of a dead body and the reactions to the discovery by the residents of a small town in Vermont. Even such horror classics as *Psycho* (1960) are filled with macabre humor. Hitchcock himself referred to *Psycho* as “a serious story told with tongue in cheek.” (Truffaut 200).

MacGuffin. A very odd, but very Hitchcock-like form of humor is the MacGuffin—“a plot device in the form of some goal, desired object, or other motivator that the protagonist pursues, often with little or no narrative explanation.” (Wikipedia “MacGuffin”) In other words, the MacGuffin is the thing that, while ultimately unimportant in and of itself, provides the goal or motivation necessary for the plot to unfold. In a sense, too, a MacGuffin is

Hitchcock's joke on both the characters in the film and also on us, the audience, because both the characters and we assign value to an inherently worthless thing. Hitchcock's films are filled with MacGuffins. A few examples are (1) *Rebecca* (1940): the character of the first Mrs. De Winter —Rebecca, (2) *Rope* (1948): the rope used to strangle, (3) *The Trouble With Harry* (1956): Harry's cause of death, (4) *North By Northwest* (1959): government secrets on microfilm, and (5) *Psycho* (1960): the \$40,000 cash in an envelope. What then is the MacGuffin in *The Lodger*? It's the Avenger, the search for whom provides the impetus for all the action of the film. In the end, the Avenger is captured, but the capture is done off screen with little fanfare because the only function of the capture is to prove the lodger's innocence.

Conclusion

Although known primarily for the suspense and psychological elements of his films, Alfred Hitchcock's films also contain a comedic element. Although comedy does certainly have its own inherent entertainment value, much of the comedic element in Hitchcock's films is not conceived to be randomly or gratuitously incorporated but rather to be employed to help balance the level of tension in the audience. Some of the more common comedic elements in his films are the cameo, gags/slapstick, caricature, macabre humor, and the MacGuffin.

[Notes]

- i) The cards that provided dialogue and/or narrative in silent movies.
- ii) Much of the information in this section is taken from Neil Sinyard's booklet, which accompanies the 2012 Blu-Ray version of the film.
- iii) Part of the reason that in Hitchcock's film the lodger turns out to be innocent was that he was a big star in England at that time. According to Hitchcock, when the hero is a big star, "You have to clearly spell it out in big letters, 'He is innocent.'" (Truffaut 43)
- iv) Montage is a technique in film editing in which a series of short shots are edited into a sequence to condense space, time, and information.
- v) Of course, there are sexual overtones to this particular gag.

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