



“It Doesn’t Pay to Antagonize the Public”: *Sabotage* and Hitchcock’s Audience

When discussing his films, Alfred Hitchcock almost invariably emphasized neither theme nor characterization but rather techniques of audience manipulation. By the late 1950s he had solidified his signature style and his legendary reputation, as well as his stock answers and familiar explanations. One of his best-known stories involves the distinction between surprise and suspense, using the premise of a ticking bomb set to go off in ten minutes. In the first scenario, neither the three men in the room with the bomb nor the audience knows it is there. They talk desultorily and then it goes off. “What is the result?” asks Hitchcock. “The unsuspecting audience gets a surprise. *One* surprise. That’s all.” In the second scenario, the audience knows about the bomb but the men do not.

The men still talk inanities, but now the most banal thing they say is charged with excitement. The audience wants them to get out of the room but they talk on, and when one finally says, “Let’s leave,” the entire audience is praying for them to do so. But another man says, “No, wait a minute, I want to finish my coffee,” and the audience groans inwardly and *yearns* for them to leave. This is suspense. (qtd. in Kapsis 36)

Hitchcockian suspense is built upon dramatic irony: the viewer knows something that the characters don’t, and the director uses that privileged but limited information to manipulate the audience. It scarcely matters whether we sympathize with the men or not; the skillful director forces us to take part in the scene. It does matter, however, whether the men escape unharmed: the audience must experience the same relief that the men do for the scene to work emotionally.

Anyone familiar with Hitchcock’s career can name any number of sequences in which he

employs this technique: the poisoning scenes in *Suspicion* and *Notorious*; Uncle Charlie's attempt to asphyxiate his niece in *Shadow of a Doubt*; virtually the entire length of *Rope*, in which only the audience and the murderers are aware of the body in the trunk around which the guests eat and drink. But Hitchcock's early British films, though at times manifesting his mastery over audience emotions, seem less certain of which emotions to evoke. One reason is, as Robert Kapsis has suggested, that Hitchcock's relationship with the British public was "considerably less personal and direct" than the strong bond he later cultivated with American audiences (21). Several critics have argued, in fact, that critics were the director's real audience, because it was they who determined the fate of a picture (Ryall 91).

Hitchcock's 1936 film, *Sabotage*, loosely adapted from Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* and the fourth of his "classic thriller sextet" of the '30s, illustrates this uncertain relationship with the public. *Sabotage*, I shall argue, displays a confusion of aims, as Hitchcock attempted both to please and to challenge the public, while also striving for the critical acclaim that would solidify his reputation and, eventually, garner a Hollywood contract.¹ Hitchcock cast the well-known American actress Sylvia Sydney as Mrs. Verloc in an attempt to appeal to the audience, at that time predominantly female. But he also had other, more serious aims, which he spells out in the opening shot, an iris close-up of a dictionary definition of "sabotage": "Wilful destruction of buildings or machinery with the aim of alarming a group of persons or inspiring public unease." I propose that *Sabotage* illustrates how films can be used similarly to sabotage audience emotions and expectations. Unfortunately for the popular success of his film but fortunately for his overall development as an artist, Hitchcock succeeded all too well in his act of cinematic sabotage: by portraying the death of a young boy named Stevie and rendering ambiguous the responsibility for this and other crimes, the film offended audiences, inspiring so much "public unease" that it was banned in some places.² *Sabotage* dramatizes Hitchcock testing the limits of what the public will bear, and marks an important advance in his development as both an artist and a commercial filmmaker.

After Mr. Verloc (Oscar Homolka), the film's apparent protagonist and owner of the Bijou Theater, sabotages a power station and hence causes the electricity to fail in his section of London, audiences exit his cinema with a mixture of amusement and resentment. One patron angrily confronts his wife at the box office: "You broke a contract. Therefore, you broke the law." *Sabotage* likewise violates implicit contracts—particularly about character identification and moral judgments—between director and audience. After Verloc returns from his mission, he tells his wife to refund the patrons' money because "it doesn't pay to antagonize the public." This is, ironically, the lesson that Hitchcock himself learned from *Sabotage*: a filmmaker may alarm his audience, but he must also provide them with an emotional pay-off that dissipates the unease he has inspired.³ Rather than pacifying the audience, *Sabotage* violates it.

In replacing the porn shop of Conrad's novel with a fleapit movie theater, Hitchcock is directly commenting on his own art and the people who consume it. His audiences may have sensed that the attitude toward crowds displayed in this film—as in earlier Hitchcock films such as *The Lodger* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps*—is deeply ambivalent: they appear genial, but can easily be stirred up into a bloodthirsty mob.⁴ Thus in the Verlocs's cinema the audience is often shown laughing uproariously (and seemingly inappropriately), while feasting on the least elevated forms of popular entertainment: slapstick, cartoons, pulp crime stories. This love of violence is demonstrated by their familiarity with a film called *Bartholomew the Strangler* and by an early scene in which Ted Spencer (John Loder), a detective masquerading as a neighborhood grocer's assistant, hears screaming while visiting the Verlocs and comments, "I thought someone was committing a murder." Verloc answers: "Someone probably is—on the screen there." In addition to presaging this film's later crimes, his remark reveals, as James Goodwin notes, that movies express "antisocial drives latent among their audiences" (221), perhaps acting as safety valves, but perhaps not, for it's not on the screen but behind it, in the Verlocs's apartment, where one of the film's murders takes place.

Yet we cannot even be sure that it is a murder. Indeed, although *Sabotage* strays quite far from Conrad's brilliantly ironic novel in many respects, Hitchcock ingeniously invokes one of its main themes: the indeterminate nature of all action and the consequent difficulty in assigning blame. The key event of *The Secret Agent*, a terrorist bombing, is never dramatized; thus the novel has a gaping hole, a bomb crater, where its center should be. Conrad employs this strategy to suggest that all action is reaction, and to emphasize the meaninglessness of the idea of free will. Hitchcock introduces the theme comically when, during the blackout, Ted smugly declares to the crowd that an act is "any activity activated by actual action." The film's later events raise the issue more seriously: in a film filled with what Thomas Leitch calls "passive agents and murderous victims" (103), it's never clear to what degree anybody is responsible for anything. Ted himself, albeit much more attractive than the jealous cop Joe in *The Lodger* or the morally compromised detective Frank in *Black-mail*, is an ambiguous figure who ends up protecting Mrs. Verloc by withholding evidence about her role in her husband's death.⁵ Similarly, Verloc, although he gets his brother-in-law Stevie blown up, is not entirely culpable, and Mrs. Verloc's apparent killing of her husband is extenuated by his previous crime, by his apparent desire for punishment, and by Hitchcock's cleverly indeterminate staging.

The film sets up other parallels between Ted and Verloc, between the symbol of law and the emblem of disorder. Both, for example, act as paterfamilias in dining scenes early in the film: in one, Verloc complains about the cabbage; later Ted dines with Mrs. Verloc and Stevie (Desmond Tester) in order to gather information about her husband. Here the three are presented as a more "natural" family than the troubled Verloc household (Goodwin 220). These dining scenes foreshadow the later violence that occurs at the Verloc table, with its distasteful overtones of sacrifice and cannibalism.⁶ But more important for my purposes are two sequences that unite Verloc and Ted visually and morally as each one confers with his superior.

The day after the blackout Verloc tells Ted that he's going to a trade show to acquire more films. Ted encourages him to get movies with "plenty of murders" in them; that "love stuff," he adds, "makes me sick." Verloc, like Hitchcock aware of his audience's desires, counters that "the women like it, though."⁷ In fact, Verloc is meeting his superior at the aquarium to get his response to the blackout. During the meeting, Verloc very quietly says, "I hope you're satisfied with last night's show." In response, the agent shows him a headline reading, "London Laughs at Blackout," and admonishes Verloc, "When one sets out to put the fear of death into people, it isn't helpful to make them laugh." Of course, this mixture of mirth and mayhem, wit and terror, is exactly the savory blend that Hitchcock offered in many of his films. The humorless boss, however, reminds Verloc that "we're not comedians," and orders him to execute an action at which nobody will laugh—a bombing in the heart of London. In this scene, then, Verloc and his superior assume the role of director and producer, with the latter voicing the audience's desire to be more thoroughly frightened. Verloc, the director surrogate, must visualize the next "show" in advance and anticipate its effect on the audience. Like Hitchcock, he must perpetrate a more outrageous act of sabotage.

After Verloc agrees to set off the bomb, he stares at the fish tanks, which dissolve into a scene upon he envisions the destruction of London. At once audience and director, Verloc must activate an "actual action"—but one dictated by his "producer" and encouraged by Ted ("lots of murders"), whose role as a symbol of order is again put into question. As Verloc tries to leave the aquarium, he gets caught in the turnstiles, which now resemble prison bars: Verloc is no more free, Hitchcock implies, than the ungainly turtles who swam behind him in the glass tank. But he is not alone in his plight; all of the characters (and the audience as well) are trapped by some combination of higher forces and their own ambivalent desires. Thus two scenes later, when Ted meets with *his* superior, Hitchcock places behind them large windows that recall the aquarium tanks. Later Ted explains to Mrs. Verloc why he must catch her husband: "there's nothing personal in all this. You have to do as you're told." Throughout *Sabotage* humans are pictured as imprisoned animals; just as the

fish represent Verloc and the rest of Londoners, later the bomb is eventually delivered along with two caged birds representing Verloc and his wife. Acts are not free. Rather, both real and fictional acts are performed in anticipation of a particular reaction; filmmakers, like saboteurs and detectives, must respond to the expressed desires of their producers and the implicit desires of their "victims."

Verloc procures the birds from a rather engaging man who runs a pet store and who bears a striking resemblance to Alfred Hitchcock himself. Seemingly innocent, even cuddly—and certainly a far cry from the chillingly nihilistic "Professor" in Conrad's novel—this figure also reveals one of Hitchcock's recurrent themes: the violence at the heart of domestic life. The bomber stores his materials in the kitchen cupboard next to the food, and explains to Verloc that he must never accidentally mix the "tomato sauce" with the "strawberry jam." Unfortunately, Stevie, whose ineptitude in food preparation was established in an earlier scene, accidentally consumes a lethal "sandwich" concocted by the other bomber, Alfred Hitchcock. Both bombers are torn between the appeal of domestic virtues such as love and family and much darker urges to inspire public alarm. But many of Hitchcock's consumers, like Stevie and Verloc, found his cinematic repast distasteful.

Verloc receives the birds and the bomb the next day, along with a note reminding him that "the birds will sing at 1:45." However, Ted's clumsy eavesdropping has made Verloc aware that he is under surveillance. Thus he sends Stevie to deliver a package containing the bomb (which he tells him is a "projector gadget") along with the film canisters for *Bartholomew the Strangler*. In delivering both to the imaginary recipient, he tells the boy, he can "kill two birds with one stone." As Stevie dawdles before departing, Verloc blows up in impatience, thereby modeling our response to the brilliantly executed scene that follows. In this famous sequence Hitchcock cleverly ratchets up the suspense by exploiting a contemporary law that prohibited films, as flammable agents, from being brought on public conveyances. Thus Stevie must proceed to his destination on foot. He is delayed twice, first by a street vendor who uses him cruelly to demonstrate the effects of toothpaste and hair oil, and then by a parade for the Lord Mayor's Show Day. In these scenes the crowds seem both sadistic—as they delight in Stevie's harsh treatment by the vendor—and gullible, as they gawk at the parade. This is the same crowd, one recalls, that has made *Bartholomew the Strangler* a huge popular hit, as well as an image of the audiences who flocked to Hitchcock's own serial killer film, *The Lodger*. Hitchcock is thus depicting—and preparing to blow up—a version of his own audience. And yet the director may have been trapped himself: seeking at once to appease them with the cute Stevie and to appeal to their buried yearning for violent upheavals, he gave them what they didn't want to admit they wanted. Ironically, in doing so the director may have underestimated the incendiary power of film.

Freed from the parade crowd, Stevie races to a bus; a kindly conductor allows him to board after reading the name on the film canister: "Oh, it's you, Bartholomew. You can stay . . ." The unwitting bomber is allowed on the tram *because* he's a murderer! The suspense—which Hitchcock has already initiated by twice dissolving from close-ups of the package to the note ("The birds will sing at 1:45") and then to a clock ticking toward 1:45—culminates in perhaps the most skillfully edited scene in Hitchcock's early oeuvre. After Stevie sits down next to a woman in a fur coat with a puppy, Hitchcock uses 38 shots in just over two minutes to draw the viewer completely into the scene. He cuts from Stevie—shown from the chest up as he plays with the puppy and looks out of the window—to shots of four different clocks, moving inexorably to 1:45, back to the film/bomb package, and occasionally to the conductor and the packed streets. For much of the sequence, the editing is executed with its own clockwork precision: for the first minute and a half, the standard length for each shot is just under three seconds; as the explosive moment approaches, the cutting speeds up almost imperceptibly before returning to the earlier tempo near the end (see the appendix for a numbered analysis of the sequence). The exceptions to this pace occur when the camera holds on Stevie in his cap (sporting a "B" for bomber?); each of these shots (numbers 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 14, 16, 21, 26, 29 and 31) lasts between five and 10 seconds; with these slightly longer shots, the director reminds us of the focus of our sympha-

thy and gives us just enough time to squirm in our seats with anticipation and dread.

As the scene proceeds, the shots of the package (numbers 4, 9, 13, 15, 18, 25, 28, 34-36) vary in angle and range, beginning with a medium close-up (shot 4), and two shots from Stevie's point of view (shots 9 and 13), then moving to a close-up from above (15 and 18), then to a series of extreme close-ups (25, 28) at eye-level, and culminating in three very rapid shots from three different angles (eye-level, above, and below)—each of less than a second—in the last moments before the bomb explodes. The third important component of the scene's suspense mechanism, the clocks (shown in shots 2, 6, 17, 27, 32, 33), punctuates this dual rhythm. We see three different clocks from Stevie's point of view as he passes them on the bus, and the fourth clock three times in ever nearer close-ups. The final two shots move from a close-up of the clock hands at 1:45 to an extreme close-up as it ticks to 1:46. Now we breathe a tentative sigh of relief: zero hour has passed and nothing has happened! But the three rapid shots of the package start our hearts again—here it comes. As Wollaeger observes, Hitchcock cuts in more than one sense here: Stevie is decomposed not only by the bomb but also by the editing, which reduces him to an arm, a kneecap, or a hand; hence "the prescience of Conrad's describing Stevie's exploded body as 'nameless fragments'" (Wollaeger 344; Conrad 107). The master of culinary suspense serves his sacrificial victim for the audience's consumption already cut into bite-sized bits.

The power and horror of the sequence are largely the result of this brilliant montage by Hitchcock and editor Charles Frend, but derive also from Hitchcock's canny use of the puppy and the old woman in her fur coat (two more animals) to heighten our sympathy.⁸ Yet our response is complex: as the scene proceeds, we don't really believe that the boy and the dog will be blown to bits, even though the rising tension (emphasized by the ominous music) forecasts that outcome. Surely these two adorable innocents won't die horribly! But the degree to which we are drawn into the suspense is precisely the degree to which we also desire this violent cataclysm; indeed, we need it, or the scene will fizzle out anticlimactically, leaving our emotions with no place to go.⁹ What hostile viewers objected to most, then, may have been Hitchcock's seemingly cynical exploitation of their own secret wishes. For *Sabotage* turned out to be almost as explosive as *Bartholomew the Strangler*, and certainly more flammable than Hitchcock had anticipated; audiences felt that the director had played a nasty practical joke on them.

This chilling undertone of a gruesome joke is reinforced by the scene that immediately follows the explosion. After a brief blackout, we cut to Ted and the Verlocs laughing. Verloc says, "Well, now, everything seems to be all right," and asks Ted, "Would you have your drink, after all?" In context, their conviviality is worse than ghoulish: it smacks of cannibalism. Equally unsettling is our recognition that their response is but a slightly distorted version of our own: we were just laughing at Stevie's antics, fully aware that he was in grave danger. Thus the scene brilliantly reflects, and forces us to examine, our own deeply compromised and conflicted responses.

In later years Hitchcock insisted that he had made a terrible mistake by killing the boy with whom audiences so strongly sympathized (Truffaut 109). In an essay called "The Enjoyment of Fear," he describes how filmmakers and audiences collaborate in placing an "invisible cloak" around sympathetic characters to keep them from harm. In killing Stevie, he penetrates that cloak, while also violating his dictum never to combine suspense and terror, forewarning and surprise ("Enjoyment" 120-21). Hitchcock, like Verloc, antagonized the public by breaking a contract whereby the audience must never be forced to "pay the price" for its fear and longing for violent cataclysms (120). Indeed, since the bus is filled with passengers, Hitchcock has committed the cardinal sin of murdering, by proxy, his own public: "here's the violence you want," he smiles, thereby calling our bluff. A better way to handle it, Hitchcock told Truffaut, would have been to have Verloc "kill the boy deliberately, but without showing that on the screen, and then for the wife to avenge her young brother by killing" her husband (Truffaut 109); the audience would be given the pat satisfaction of a revenge fantasy. Hitchcock's comments, however, suggest that the scene as filmed violates expectations in other ways: Stevie is dead, but we cannot entirely blame

Verloc (see Cohen 45). After all, the boy was warned to deliver the bomb by 1:30; and anyway Verloc was really just trying to improve his family's economic position by performing sabotage for money. Nobody was supposed to be hurt.

After Mrs. Verloc finds out about Stevie's death—she does so because Ted discovers the label from *Bartholomew the Strangler*—she confronts her husband, who claims it was an accident. She then wanders into the theater during a screening of a Disney cartoon in which a shadowy figure shoots an arrow into a crooning bird, as the chorus sings, "Who killed Cock Robin? . . . Who, Who, Who, Who, Who?" Once again in context the audience's hilarity seems insensitive, even cruel. Numbed and traumatized, Mrs. Verloc returns to the dinner table and begins cutting the meat and dishing out the vegetables. Filmed until Verloc's death without the couple together in the same frame, this sequence emphasizes their irrevocable separation and fragmentation: once again the characters become little more than body parts. As she cuts up the food, Mrs. Verloc realizes what else she might do with the knife and drops it like one of her hot potatoes. But once she looks at Stevie's empty chair she seems to change her mind again, and we see her hands and the knife in close-up. After a series of shot/reverse shots of her hands and her husband's face, Hitchcock cuts back to her hands tentatively touching the knife as if reconsidering her course. An exchange of glances reveals that Verloc has read her thoughts.

The final ten shots of the sequence quietly but eloquently convey not only Mrs. Verloc's rage and sorrow, but her husband's horror and guilt. After a close-up of Verloc's frightened face, he rises in fear and approaches the camera. At this moment the audience is standing right next to him—uncomfortably close. As Hitchcock told Truffaut, the spectator should feel as if he or she must "recoil to make way for him. Instinctively, the viewer should be pushing back slightly in his seat to allow Verloc to pass by" (111). After the camera rests for a moment on his profile, we cut to his point of view as he slowly approaches his wife. The next shot portrays—or rather does not portray—Verloc's stabbing. It begins with a two-shot in profile, then tilts to the knife on the plate; both sets of hands remain in the frame as we approach the knife and Mrs. Verloc snatches it up. Then the camera tilts back up to the faces; Mr. Verloc seems to lean into the knife. He cries out, she gasps. Now Hitchcock's reticence replicates Mrs. Verloc's: neither one seems willing to cut. Finally the director does cut to a close-up of the knife, held by Mrs. Verloc's hands, plunged into her husband's abdomen. The camera then pulls back to a two-shot as he falls.¹⁰ A close-up of Mrs. Verloc's face follows, and then we cut to a shot of the caged birds: has she killed Cock Robin? Nearly in tears, she moans, "Stevie, Stevie," and then we are given a low-angle shot in deep focus. Verloc's shoes are visible in the right foreground as his wife stumbles into the other room. Whereas Conrad emphasizes Verloc's lost hat as evidence of his death (236), Hitchcock shows us the bottom of his shoes, the same shoes we heard creaking as he walked around the table toward his rendezvous with the knife. Verloc has now become his shoes—hapless, clownish, plodding—and as dead as leather. Buried in this final shot is an instance of outrageous Hitchcockian wit: as we stare at the shoes we understand that Verloc has been "sabotaged," a word deriving from the French "sabot"—shoe.¹¹

Verloc has already been established as a directorial surrogate, and in the previous scene Mrs. Verloc was shown watching a violent film. It would appear, then, that a director is killed by an audience member for perpetrating a violent act. But according to Hitchcock, the knife acts as a "magnet" in this scene, which makes Verloc appear almost to commit suicide (Truffaut 110). In an essay entitled "Director's Problems," he declares that he "wanted to make the murder inevitable without any blame attaching to the woman. I wanted to preserve sympathy for her, so that it was essential that she fought against something stronger than herself" (186). Again culpability is compromised: the surrogate director may have wanted punishment for his unwonted killing. But even if she is not guilty of murder, Mrs. Verloc is at least to blame for breaking her vows to honor and protect her husband. Thus Lissa Schneider may be correct that one of the film's acts of sabotage is its subversion of the institution of marriage (71). In any case, just as Mrs. Verloc violates a contract in killing her husband but escapes responsibility for it, so Hitchcock is able to have his cake and eat it: we

are horrified yet satisfied that the murder has been avenged. Or has it? Once the scene is finished, we reflect back on the Disney cartoon: now "Cock Robin" refers both to Stevie and to Mr. Verloc (Cohen 41). Two birds are killed with a single stone. But who killed them? Who? Who? Who? Who? Who?

That Verloc dies at the dinner table also troubles us by suggesting that, as in *Frenzy*, domestic relations are deeply connected to ritual sacrifice and cannibalism. Earlier we watched Stevie clumsily prepare food; then Verloc got him killed, as if in retaliation. Like the ogre in a children's tale, Verloc has eaten Stevie up; now Mrs. Verloc slays the ogre. But Ted, the phony grocer, provided some of the Verlocs's food. Thus his roles as counterfeit grocer, undercover cop, and secret agent of both murders converge: his inept surveillance forced Verloc to send Stevie on his lethal mission and indirectly set up Verloc's death as well. Thus he has contributed to this ghoulish feast. Ted is further compromised by his suspicious motives: even before he discovers Verloc's body, he tells Mrs. Verloc that he loves her. Once he discovers the corpse, he assures her that "it was an accident," because he "know[s] the facts," although in reality he has nothing to go on but his own belief in her—and his own designs on her. Making plans for an escape to the continent, he briefly assumes the role of Conrad's womanizing opportunist Ossipon (who later abandons Mrs. Verloc and steals her money). A few moments later Mrs. Verloc tries to confess to Ted's superior her part in Verloc's death but is prevented by Ted's interruptions and tight grip on her wrist. Ted is far from innocent; he too is interfering with the mechanism of the law.

Ultimately Ted is aided in his suppression of the truth by the bomber himself. On orders from his daughter, the bomber has gone to the Verloc house to retrieve the bird-cage with the bomb. In another role reversal, the bomber is immediately trapped by the police, who have the theater surrounded. He threatens to blow it up, but the police evacuate the premises, thereby recapitulating the blackout scene—only now the forces of law counter the bomber's sabotage with their own. During this scene we are invited to reconsider again our attribution of blame. Isn't the bomber at least as guilty as Verloc, since he is the one who provided the explosive materials? Indeed, now the bomber seems to reassume the directorial role from the deceased Verloc, and attempts to stage-manage the violent act to come. Unfortunately, the chubby bomber, like the chubby director of *Sabotage*, is forced to face the consequences of the flammable device he has brought to the theater. The saboteur is sabotaged by his own device: at the end of the film, the theater is destroyed along with the bomber/director.

Just before the explosion, Mrs. Verloc tells the inspector that her husband is dead. Fortunately for her, afterward the cop can't remember whether she said so before or after the bomb went off. Ted says nothing, and at the end the two walk into the departing crowd. Ostensibly, then, Hitchcock gives us a happy ending: the saboteur and the bomber have been killed, the seedy theater blown up, and the two lovers may now freely pursue their affair. But like *Blackmail*, the film leaves a sour taste in our mouths: although we sympathize with Mrs. Verloc, she is at least partly culpable for her husband's death. If we let her off, should we let him off, too? And what of Ted? Not only does he break the law by withholding evidence, but his motives seem compromised as well: is he protecting her out of a sense of justice, or only in order to possess her as he has desired to do all along? As in *Blackmail*, the couple is bound together not by love but by secrets: each one has something on the other. Their bond is not a wedding ring but metaphorical handcuffs; they are as trapped as the birds in the cage. Nobody is fully to blame, but all are guilty.

Sabotage may have antagonized the public, then, not only because of the way it portrays the death of the innocent Stevie, but also for its ambiguous glossing of the characters' motives and behaviors, and most of all because of its ruthless scrutiny of filmgoers' habits of response. We are denied the security of our moral judgments, our sympathetic identification with the characters, and the safety of our desire for justice. The film may have failed commercially precisely because Hitchcock was caged by his audience's own conflicting desires for both "lots of murders" and for "love stuff" (the latter of which, in context, may make us sick); in trying both to satisfy and to challenge his public, he sabotaged both aims. Yet these

multiple ambiguities are also what makes the film so artistically fulfilling, as Hitchcock invites us to confront our complicity in the violence: didn't we wish Verloc to be killed? Didn't we want his wife to escape? Didn't we wish the bomber to be killed? Are we any better than the cruel crowds who laughed at "Who Killed Cock Robin" and who gleefully watched as Stevie was so harshly used? *Sabotage*, in short, explodes the conventions of cinematic response almost as definitively as it blows up the Bijou. And we, like Hitchcock and the other bombers, must consider our own responsibility as we depart the theater.

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Notes

¹ Rohmer and Chabrol, in a generally negative (and, to my mind, wrongheaded) assessment of the film, claim that Hitchcock's "sole purpose" in *Sabotage* was to gain "personal prestige" and thereby attract the interest of Hollywood studios (47); Mark Wollaeger repeats this argument (336). Rohmer and Chabrol somewhat disgustedly conclude that Hitchcock, "for the first and, happily, the last time in his career . . . condescends to the public instead of raising the public to him" (50). As I aim to show, the film's self-reflexive portrayal of cinematic audiences betrays a more complex relationship between Hitchcock and his public.

² Soon after its release the picture was banned in Brazil as an "incitement to terrorism and a threat to public order" (Spoto, *Dark Side* 175). It also received mixed reviews, including a lukewarm notice in *Variety* (3 March 1937), and an outraged reaction from journalist C. A. Lejeune (Spoto, *Dark Side* 174). Thus it is hardly likely that Hitchcock believed that Hollywood studio heads—then as now interested above all in profit—would hire him on the basis of such a disturbing and commercially questionable piece of work. In fact, it was *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), a much lighter and more accessible film, that finally won Hitchcock the interest of producers such as David O. Selznick.

³ As Wollaeger notes, the customers' response is "Hitchcock's doubly proleptic concession to his audience's possible revulsion over Stevie's death" (341).

⁴ Ruth Marantz Cohen (40) argues that Hitchcock's cinema was designed specifically for lower-middle and working-class crowds such as the one we see leaving the Bijou. She speculates that Hitchcock, a Cockney grocer's son, "must have" conceived of himself as one of them (42). But the director's alienation from groups is amply shown in interviews, where he generally depicts audiences as gullible tools for his manipulation. Cohen is certainly right in locating Hitchcock's class allegiances in this milieu, but she errs in assuming that he desired simply to disappear into such crowds. Hitchcock's cameos, for instance, far from making him anonymous, announce his presence by drawing attention to his famous wit and girth.

⁵ Although Goodwin (226) overstates in claiming that Hitchcock identifies criminals and police as thoroughly as does Conrad, most critics have recognized that the characters in *Sabotage* are morally compromised. Only Leitch (101) argues that the film provides "clear heroes and villains." Lesley Brill, though acknowledging the equivocal nature of Ted's affection for the married Mrs. Verloc, suggests that his generosity is clearly differentiated from Verloc's "cold venality" (25). Spoto also notes the pervasive ambiguities in the film, and points out that Mrs. Verloc is "both guilty and innocent of [her husband's] death" (Art 58).

⁶ The theme of cannibalism, exploited so disturbingly in later films such as *Frenzy*, may have been borrowed from Conrad's novel, where Stevie (not a child but a mentally handicapped young adult) is panicked by overhearing a member of Verloc's group comparing economic exploitation to eating "the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people" (Conrad 80). Although he swallows this statement like "swift poison," Stevie is physically unharmed; later, however (in a typical instance of Conrad's savage irony), he is reduced by the bomb to "an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast" (106; see Wollaeger 339). For detailed discussions of the changes Hitchcock rings upon Conrad, see Anderegg, Cohen, Fleishman, and Goodwin.

⁷ Hitchcock's addition of a romance between Mrs. Verloc and Ted is probably a response to the same audience preference.

⁸ In the original script the puppy and the older woman are absent, which renders the bombing a good deal less dramatic (Aulier 26).

⁹ Wollaeger argues that the bravura execution of this sequence draws more attention to itself than to the events unfolding, thereby partly undermining the desired effect. It is true that this setpiece has become famous among film critics and, as my own analysis suggests, is a textbook example of montage technique. But the responses of my students rebut the implication that most viewers watch the technique instead of the events: they are thrilled and

shocked by the scene, only afterward registering that they have witnessed a technical tour de force. In addition, as Ryall notes (160), directors as far back as D. W. Griffith were creating tension through similar forms of cross-cutting, and so the device was not new enough to strike viewers as novel, even in 1936.

¹⁰ Again Hitchcock departs from the script to create this montage. In the original screenplay the scene was treated quite differently: "Verloc is riveted to his chair—a flash of knife midair—he slumps forward" (Auilier 26).

¹¹ Although this (perhaps fanciful) etymology is noted by Wollaeger (343), he does not connect it to the Verloc death scene.

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Appendix: The *Sabotage* Bombing Sequence.

The analysis begins with the first shot after Stevie sits down on the bus.

1. Stevie on bus, playing with a puppy.
 2. His POV of a clock as the bus passes it. Time: 1:31.
 3. Slightly closer shot of Stevie with puppy (this set-up is reused in each shot of Stevie noted below).
 4. Close-up of the bomb package.
 5. Stevie with puppy.
 6. Stevie's POV of a second clock as the bus passes. Time: 1:35.
 7. Shot of traffic cop.
 8. Stevie with puppy; Stevie looking out of window.
 9. Package—in close-up, from above: Stevie's POV. Stevie's hand clasps it down.
 10. Stevie and puppy.
 11. Stevie's POV of bus conductor.
 12. Traffic in street: conductor's POV.
 13. Package: close-up at eye level; Stevie's kneecap visible in foreground.
 14. Stevie with puppy.
 15. Package: close-up from above; Stevie's arm in foreground.
 16. Stevie with puppy.
 17. Stevie's POV of third clock. Time: 1:44 (time has been condensed).
 18. Package (same as shot #15).
 19. Traffic in street.
 20. Traffic light changing to "Stop." Bus halts.
 21. Stevie with puppy.
 22. Stevie's POV of conductor, looking out of window.
 23. His POV of traffic on street.
 24. Traffic light: "Stop."
 25. Extreme close-up of package with Stevie's right hand on it.
 26. Stevie with puppy.
 27. Stevie's POV of fourth clock. Time: 1:45.
 28. Package—eye level close-up, with Stevie's kneecap in foreground; right hand on package.
 29. Stevie with puppy.
 30. Traffic light, changing to "Go"; bus moves.
 31. Stevie with puppy.
 32. Close-up of fourth clock with hands at 1:45.
 33. Extreme close-up of same clock's hand as it ticks to 1:46.
 - 34-36: Three rapid close-ups of package from eye-level, above, below, respectively.
 37. Shot of bus exploding.
 38. Second shot, slightly farther away, of bus exploding.
- Blackout. Cut to the Verlocs and Ted laughing.

