

North by Northwest (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959)

There have probably been more books and articles devoted to Alfred Hitchcock than to any other film director. The creator of more than fifty feature films, Hitchcock was taken up by French film critics as a prime example of the *auteur*, the director who controlled every aspect of a cinematic production. François Truffaut, a director of the French New Wave, wrote a fascinating book based on extensive interviews with Hitchcock.

Hitchcock, frequently called the “master of suspense,” distinguished between suspense and surprise. “We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, ““Boom!” There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware that the bomb is going to explode at one o’clock and there is a clock in the décor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: “You shouldn’t be talking about such trivial matters. There’s a bomb beneath you and it’s about to explode!” In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second case we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is what whenever possible the public must be informed.” [Truffaut, p.52]

A second important feature of Hitchcock’s films is his manipulation of the audience by making us identify with a character, frequently someone unjustly accused who must try to clear his name, but Hitchcock is not averse to making us identify with a criminal when it serves his purposes. One way to foster this identification is the POV, or point-of-view shot, in which the camera (and therefore the audience) sees and experiences events from the perspective of the main character. We will see a number of examples in *North by Northwest*. Another method of fostering our identification is employing an actor such as James Stewart or Cary Grant with whom we have a long and sympathetic cinematic history. Cary Grant made four films with Hitchcock: *To Catch a Thief*, *Notorious*, *Suspicion*, and *North by Northwest*.

The use of Cary Grant in the leading role raises some interesting questions. In *His Girl Friday*, from 1940, Grant was still playing a character as Walter Burns. But by the time of *North by Northwest* in 1959, he had long since established the persona of “Cary Grant” that audiences expected to see in all of his films: self-confident, debonair, and likeable. The actor said at one point, “Everybody wants to be Cary Grant. I’d even like to be Cary Grant.” The actor serves as an idealized version of what every man would like to be. Examine your own responses to the character in this film: we tend to forgive and overlook faults whose presence is absolutely essential to the story.

What is the story about?

A self-absorbed man, the chance victim of mistaken identity, with his life at stake, embraces an illusion and, in so doing, discovers his true identity.

How do you know that this is what it is about?

"A self-absorbed man"

Roger Thornhill is the classic ad-man in a gray flannel suit, accustomed to manipulating the truth to his own advantage.

- irresponsible, inconsiderate, steals a taxi, covers it with a lie
- heavy drinker (comment by his friends)
- dominated by his mother, divorcé with two failed marriages, a man who lives purely on the surface, refusing commitment or responsibility

"the chance victim"

- favourite Hitchcock theme: universe is a scary place; don't be complacent
- Thornhill is not anybody in particular: it could happen to you
- "Within ten minutes of the start of the film, the ground is cut away from under his/our feet."

"mistaken identity"

- thought by enemy agents to be George Kaplan, a CIA agent
- thought by the police to be the murderer of Lester Townsend, a UN diplomat
- Thornhill searches for George Kaplan, believing that he can solve Thornhill's problems. But George Kaplan doesn't exist. Thornhill undergoes a genuine transformation of personality when he stops depending on others to bail him out and takes charge of his own life.

"with his life at stake"

The loss of life is, of course, the ultimate loss of identity. These threats require Thornhill to develop resourcefulness and imagination and open him to care for someone other than himself. He learns to act as an intelligence agent, not an advertising executive, would act, but he still inhabits a world of illusion. The three attempts on Thornhill's life include:

- arranged car accident
- attack by an airplane
- attack on Mount Rushmore

"embraces an illusion"

- there is no George Kaplan--fictitious decoy invented by the CIA
- Eve Kendall is not a single woman tourist, nor Vandamm's mistress, but a double agent working for the CIA--but Thornhill falls in love with her
- At Mount Rushmore, in order to save Eve, Thornhill adopts the role of Kaplan

"in so doing"

- starts with Thornhill's efforts to save his own life; ends with his willingness to risk his own in order to save Eve's
- a long chase moving *northwest*: beginning: north on Madison Avenue, then west by taxi to the Plaza Hotel; in Chicago, north on Michigan Avenue, then west to the airport; Chicago to South Dakota (via Northwest Airlines!)

"discovers his true identity"

- Thornhill at the end is not the same person he was at the beginning: implication that this marriage may do better than the two previous ones
- Hitchcock makes us identify with Thornhill so that, in a sense, we also change our identities through the course of the film. We identify with Cary Grant because he's a star, but at the beginning he's not a pleasant person. By the end, our identification appeals to our best selves.
- The three sections of the movie correspond to stages of Thornhill's involvement with Eve: unattached; involvement with Eve on train; after Thornhill learns the truth about Eve, he voluntarily accepts the role of Kaplan

What's in a name?

Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant): "hill of thorns"—Christ-reference; the man who risks his own life for another

Vandamm (James Mason): "from the damned," figure of evil

Eve (Eva Marie Saint): "the temptress" (Roger actually calls her this)

Story-Telling through images:

- Camera angle: elevated shots to indicate danger (Thornhill fleeing the United Nations; Vandamm's plan to kill Eve: "This matter is best disposed of from a great height--over water.") Recurring motif for *imminent danger*. Shooting from below exaggerates a character's importance and power; shooting from above diminishes his importance and power. The flight from the U.N. building makes Thornhill seem no more important than an ant.
- Point of View shots: the subjective camera helps to implicate audience--we identify with Thornhill (e.g., drunken auto ride; plane attack; humorous use with punch by park ranger)
- Frame composition: Thornhill between two thugs; Thornhill, disguised as a redcap, amid a sea of redcaps; Thornhill at the far edge of the frame in the crop-dusting sequence.

In film, unlike theatre, you only get to see what the director lets you see, so an important question at every moment is: **what** is the director allowing us to see, **how** are we seeing it, **why** this choice of frame, shot and angle?

Hitchcock is celebrated for his use of storyboards, detailed sketches showing what the camera will eventually photograph in each scene. So detailed has been Hitchcock's preparation before shooting that he has described the actual photography as a mechanical exercise. Compare this with directors who shoot multiple versions of each scene and then put the film together in the editing room. Hitchcock has essentially edited the film before he even begins filming.

Scene-by-Scene Analysis

New York City Section

(Credit Sequence. Interplay of vertical lines, representing the skyscrapers of Manhattan and anticipating the precipitous heights of Mount Rushmore. "Names fall up and down the side of a Manhattan skyscraper prefiguring the final clinging and falling from the steep rocks." Hitchcock's signature appearance: a bus door slams in his face just as we see the words "Directed by"--Hitchcock, like our hero, has less than expected control over his environment.)

CLIP 1 (2:22 Exaggeration)

First portrayal of Thornhill, emerging from an elevator: dictating to his secretary, commandeering a taxi, a man in charge, a man of power. (And not a particularly pleasant person.)

CLIP 2 (2:34 Kidnapped)

Thornhill re-enters the Plaza Hotel, joins his companions. Described as a heavy drinker. He rises to telephone his mother just as the name of "George Kaplan" is being paged. The beginning of the mistaken identity is established and Roger Thornhill's world is about to come apart. The scene ends with Thornhill, formerly the man of power, firmly entrapped between two thugs.

CLIP 3 (4:05 Wrong Package)

Roger meets Vandamm, who has taken on the **identity** of Leslie Townsend. Note the lighting and cinematography tricks as Vandamm enters and "interrogates" Thornhill--closes curtains, stands in light: sinister--violates the norm of high-key, three point lighting; high-angle shots of Thornhill, low-angle shots of thugs, "stalking" movement as Vandamm and Thornhill each trace a complete circle)

CLIP 4 (3:26 Drunk Driving)

Roger is forced to become drunk, escapes from arranged accident. (Roger sees double. Many POV shots. Characteristic of Hitchcock's manipulation of the spectator's perspective and identification with the hero during moments of danger.)

(In Plaza Hotel: Roger learns that George Kaplan is staying at the Plaza Hotel, and counts on Kaplan to clear up the misunderstanding. He searches Kaplan's room, with the assistance of his mother, when the telephone rings, and he learns that Vandamm's henchmen are back on his trail. He finds himself trapped in an elevator with his pursuers. A true Hitchcock moment: you are about to die and your own mother is laughing. Note composition of frame: everyone is laughing except Thornhill.)

CLIP 5 (3:45 The United Nations; He's Got a Knife)

Roger goes to the United Nations, hoping that Lester Townsend, the owner of the mansion where Roger was held prisoner, can straighten out the mess. The real Lester Townsend is murdered. A flashbulb goes off: a **camera image** creates Thornhill's identity as a murderer. (A major theme in Hitchcock--the innocent man, wrongfully accused.) This is the *second* case of mistaken identity afflicting Thornhill. Note bird's eye shot of Roger fleeing: the self-confident advertising man has been reduced to an indistinguishable speck.

CLIP 6 (3:00 Mr. Thornhill)

"United States Intelligence Agency" in Washington. The double dissolve tells us *through images* that:

1. time has elapsed
2. Thornhill has been identified
3. He has so far eluded capture

The images convey both Thornhill's false identity (murderer) and his current true identity (fugitive). Inside the intelligence agency, the Professor explains that George Kaplan is just a fictitious decoy, intended to throw Vandamm off the track of their real agent. Roger Thornhill has conveniently given

flesh and bones to the illusion, and if he dies along the way, that isn't their responsibility. The scene ends with the words, "Goodbye, Mr. Thornhill, wherever you are." Dramatic irony: the audience now has information that the hero does not.

The Twentieth-Century Limited Section

(Meeting Eve Kendall: Roger boards a train to Chicago, George Kaplan's next intended destination. Eve Kendall helps him avoid police. Roger evades conductors. Roger and Eve meet again, apparently by chance in the dining car. They flirt. Note the ROT matchbook. What does the O stand for? "Nothing." And in his life up to this point, there had been an emptiness in the middle of Thornhill's personality. Thornhill is a man whose life lacks significance, a "rootless man, always on the move, never seen in his own home.")

CLIP 7 (2:44 Beats Flying)

Love scene in Eve's compartment. Note impossible omniscient camera angles and the kiss. Instead of having the camera circle the lovers, as in *Notorious*, Hitchcock has the actors rotate along the wall. (Message for the Lady: Porter delivers message to Vandamm and Leonard: "What do I do with him in the morning--Eve?" Impact on audience--For us, Eve's identity has changed.)

Chicago and Cornfield Section

CLIP 8 (2:34 Too Many Redcaps)

Roger escapes in a sea of redcaps. High-angle shot--danger--will the authorities rushing into the crowd of redcaps locate Thornhill? Your eye is drawn to red among all the grey flannel. Safety through loss of identity: all redcaps look alike.

CLIP 9 (8:00 Prairie Stop Traffic; Catching a Bus; Crop Duster Attack; Crashing Halt)

Note the number of POV shots. Note the editing and composition: the earlier shots are longer and seem to contain "nothing". A deliberate attempt on Hitchcock's part to induce a state of relaxation and boredom in the viewer. In the climax, the shots come machinegun-like at an explosive pace.

Ernest Lehman and Alfred Hitchcock spent a year composing the remarkably detailed screenplay for this film. Eve has set Roger up to be killed, but Hitchcock wants to avoid the usual clichés of the genre, as he explains in an interview with filmmaker François Truffaut: "I found I was faced with the old cliché situation: the man who is put on the spot, probably to be shot. Now, how is this usually done? A dark night at a narrow intersection of the city. The waiting victim standing in a pool of light under the street lamp. The cobblestones are 'washed with the recent rains.' A close-up of a black cat slinking along against the wall of a house. A shot of a window, with a furtive face pulling back the curtain to look out. The slow approach of a black limousine, et cetera, et cetera. Now, what was the antithesis of a scene like this? No darkness, no pool of light, no mysterious figures in windows. Just nothing. Just bright sunshine and a blank, open countryside with barely a house or tree in which any lurking menaces could hide." [Truffaut, p.194]

CLIP 10 (4:30 Your Very Next Role; Bid for Survival)

Roger learns that Eve has gone to an art auction and follows her there, where he confronts Vandamm and Leonard, who are bidding on a pre-Columbian figure containing microfilm. Vandamm: "Has anyone ever told you that you overplay your various roles rather severely, Mr. Kaplan?" Identity. "Your next role will be playing dead." Later, Thornhill does play dead. Illusion. Trapped, Roger disrupts the auction by wild bidding, hoping to get arrested in order to escape Vandamm's henchmen. Police take him away as Professor is seen making call. (An improvised escape: another role, "acting the fool." Title of film comes from Hamlet, "I am mad north by northwest," i.e., only pretending.) (Not a Red Herring: At the airport scene, the Professor fills Roger in: Kaplan doesn't exist, and Eve is a CIA agent. Note how Hitchcock covers the Professor's explanation with airplane sound. We already know what he's telling Thornhill. Plane light suddenly illuminates Thornhill's face: enlightenment as he accepts responsibility and commitment for Eve's safety. For the first time in his life, Thornhill is doing something for someone else.)

Rapid City Section

CLIP 11 (4:38 Mount Rushmore)

Mt. Rushmore cafeteria scene. Roger finally embraces the role of Kaplan, after spending the entire movie avoiding this identity. Eve's "murder" of Roger is staged. Forest meeting scene. Note compo-

sition: Thornhill and Eve on opposite sides of screen--echo of prairie stop. "For the first time in the film we are among trees, cool calm sunlight and shade--an apt setting for a new life."

(Meeting in the Woods. Roger, resurrected, learns from Eve and Professor that Eve is to fly off with Vandamm. Roger, furious, makes a little Cold-War-and-Nice-Girls speech and then is knocked out by a stunning POV shot.)

CLIP 12 (3:16 Leonard's Revelation)

Roger overhears and sees Leonard shoot Vandamm with Eve's gun full of blanks, proving she's a CIA agent. ("This matter is best disposed of from a great height--over water." Thematic use of high-angle shot.) Roger climbs into Eve's room; uses the ROT matchbook to warn her of her discovery. Leonard touches the matchbook. High angle shot. Eve about to board plane with Vandamm when we hear gunfire; Eve and Roger escape with microfilm.

CLIP 13 (6:45 Across the Monument; One Man Down; Leonard's Footwork; Sentimental Ending)

Chase scene. Through forest, down Mt. Rushmore. Roger and Eve try to scramble down the rocks while Vandamm's henchmen try to kill them. Cliffhanger: Roger pulls Eve from cliffside into upper berth of train. "Thornhill's long and arduous journey becomes a possible voyage toward self-discovery and toward love for another."

When Eve asks about Thornhill's previous marriages, he says his wives divorced him because they found his life too dull. This is another self-deception. I believe the women ended the marriages because they found the self-absorbed Thornhill incapable of intimate engagement. The Thornhill at film's end has shown himself capable of extending himself for the sake of another, a working definition of love. Note Hitchcock's sly sexual reference at the end as the train enters the tunnel.