

# Review #90 : *North by Northwest* (1959)

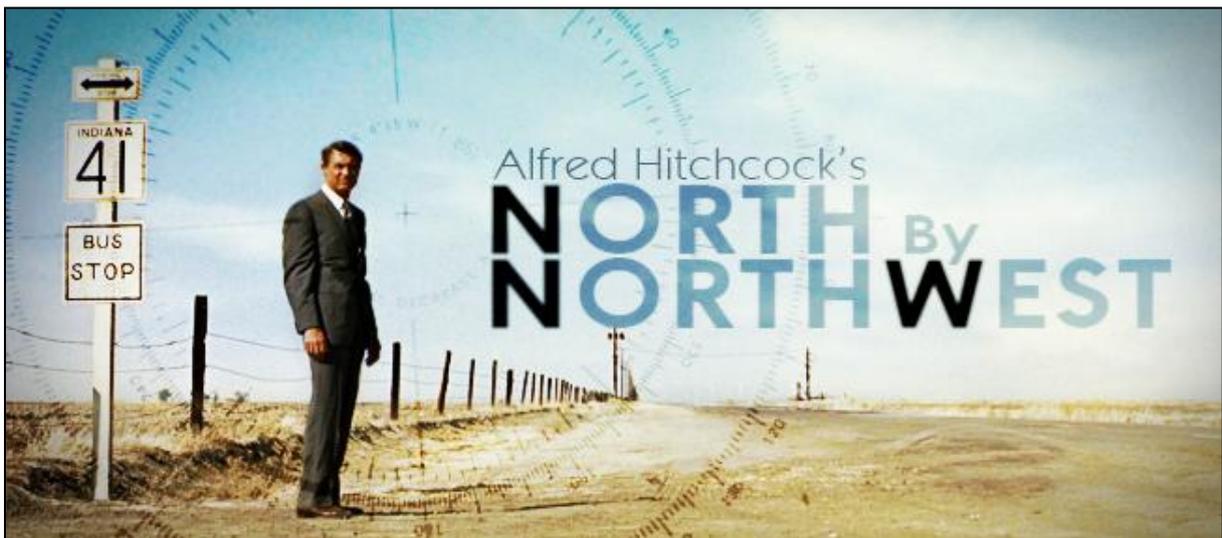
Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint

## TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZmbbx2p4yI>

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*North by Northwest* is the apotheosis of **Alfred Hitchcock's** wrong man / mistaken identity / double chase formula. Scripted by **Ernest Lehman** (*Sabrina*), it is a combination of urbane comedy, romance, suspense, mystery and thriller, with very modernist production design by **Robert F. Boyle**, and of course, the musical score by **Bernard Herrmann** — one of the most distinctive in his *oeuvre*.



## SYNOPSIS

Madison Avenue advertising executive Roger O. Thornhill (**Cary Grant**) is mistaken for a spy by the associates of a mysterious figure, Lester Townsend (**James Mason**). Thornhill is driven to a sprawling Glen Cove, Long Island estate, ostensibly belonging to Townsend. There, despite his witty protestations — witty in part because Thornhill is unaware of the danger he's in — Townsend accuses him of being **George Kaplan**, an undercover spy for an unnamed U.S. intelligence agency. The scene culminates in Thornhill's attempted murder by bourbon and car wreck. Forced to drive a car along a cliff-side highway — a favourite scenario of Hitchcock's, as he had already proved in *Suspicion* in a similar scene.

**Arrested by the police, Thornhill is accused of driving while intoxicated and of stealing a car.** Out on bail, Thornhill attempts to uncover the truth behind the previous night's events. The trail leads him to **George Kaplan's suite in the Plaza Hotel in NY City**, and later to the United Nations, where he discovers that the Townsend he encountered the night before was, in fact, an **impersonator**. Unfortunately, before Thornhill can unearth additional details about the false Townsend, the **real Lester Townsend is murdered in a public space** surrounded by diplomats as witnesses, and a nearby photographer snaps Thornhill, knife in hand.



Now a wanted fugitive (*wrong man* formula), Thornhill's goal is simple : to **find George Kaplan** while temporarily eluding the police onto a Chicago-bound train.



On the Chicago-bound train, the **romantic subplot is introduced** as Thornhill meets Eve Kendall (**Eva Marie Saint**), a sensuous seductress befitting her Biblically-inspired name. The dialogue between the two characters is freighted with humour and sexual suggestiveness — very *risqué* for the time period, but I suppose effective for contemporary audiences, as the characters fall short of describing or revealing their true intentions to each other, except through body language. The romantic subplot culminates in an unjustifiably **extended ‘dialogue’ scene in tight quarters**, in a sleeping compartment aboard the train. Instead of using the 360° camerawork he employed in *Vertigo*, Hitchcock instead leaves the camera in a fixed position, while the characters spin and embrace during their exchange. Younger viewers might feel uncomfortable watching this scene.



The romantic subplot inexorably leads to another complication : the Townsend impersonator, now revealed as **Philip Vandamm**, an importer/exporter of government secrets, is also linked to Eve Kendall. While the romantic plot simmers and is put on temporary hold, Thornhill renews his search for George Kaplan. The search leads Thornhill outside of Chicago and into a cornfield, where the film's iconic set piece, an attack via crop-duster, unfolds. **Meticulously scripted by Lehman, the crop-duster scene unfolds in *near real time***. Once Thornhill decamps from a bus at the side of an empty, desolate highway, Lehman and Hitchcock use the **‘slow burn’ approach to suspense** : the shots cut from wide-angle camera shots, forcing Thornhill into a corner of the expansive frame, to medium shots and close-ups that reveal his

increasing agitation and confusion, as his promised rendez-vous with the elusive Kaplan fails to materialize. Thornhill first spies the crop-duster innocently skirting the horizon. Another bus passenger, who, after commenting on the crop-duster's odd trajectory, quickly exits the scene via a conveniently approaching bus, leaves Thornhill alone at the side of the road. As Thornhill's discomfort grows, and as the crop-duster turns in the sky and begins its slow approach toward him, Hitchcock has the audience's rapt attention. By this scene in the film, the audience is completely immersed in Thornhill's predicament, caught between the spies who want him eliminated and the police who suspect him of murder. **Thornhill's narrow escape leads to suspicion and doubt as to Eve's motives**, and to the not equally famous confrontation scene with Eve and Vandamm at an art auction.



Thornhill finds himself surrounded by Vandamm's henchmen with **no viable escape route except his verbal wit**. As befits Hitchcock's *wrong man* formula, the protagonist rarely uses violence to escape a dangerous situation. Instead, he uses his verbal skills to hinder the villain's plans, play for time, and finally escape. Here, Thornhill's escape isn't without a trace of desperation, as he comically upends the auction's careful rules of procedure and decorum, much to the displeasure of the auctioneer and high-society patrons attending the event.

**The auction scene provides the second act with its climax** : a senior intelligence official, the Professor (**Leo G. Carroll**), introduced briefly in the earlier cutaway scene, soon reveals George Kaplan's real identity to the main character.

From that moment on, the new question driving the narrative seamlessly combines both the main plotline and the romantic subplot : **Thornhill is no longer interested in saving and exonerating himself, but in saving Eve**, whom he has inadvertently placed at risk.



**The Third Act leads to a confrontation between Thornhill, Vandamm and Eve at the Mount Rushmore** information center and itself culminates in an extended, *bravura* set piece, with Thornhill first discovering the villain's plans *via* convenient eavesdropping at their mountain hide-away, and an attempted night-time escape with Eve across Mount Rushmore with the villain and his henchmen in close pursuit.

The third action sequence in *North by Northwest* is a blend of location work, *matte paintings*, and sound stage, effectively (or not) supported by Hitchcock's fluid camerawork and visual compositions, with **rhythmic editing tightening the sequence and length of shots**, and, of course, the musical score by **Bernard Hermann**, that serves to underscore the increasing danger experienced by the main character and the female lead.

The final scene rapidly cuts to a **brief denouement and consummation** with the image of the train speeding through the tunnel, one of Hitchcock's subliminal phallic jokes that somehow circumvented the censorship code — not mine.

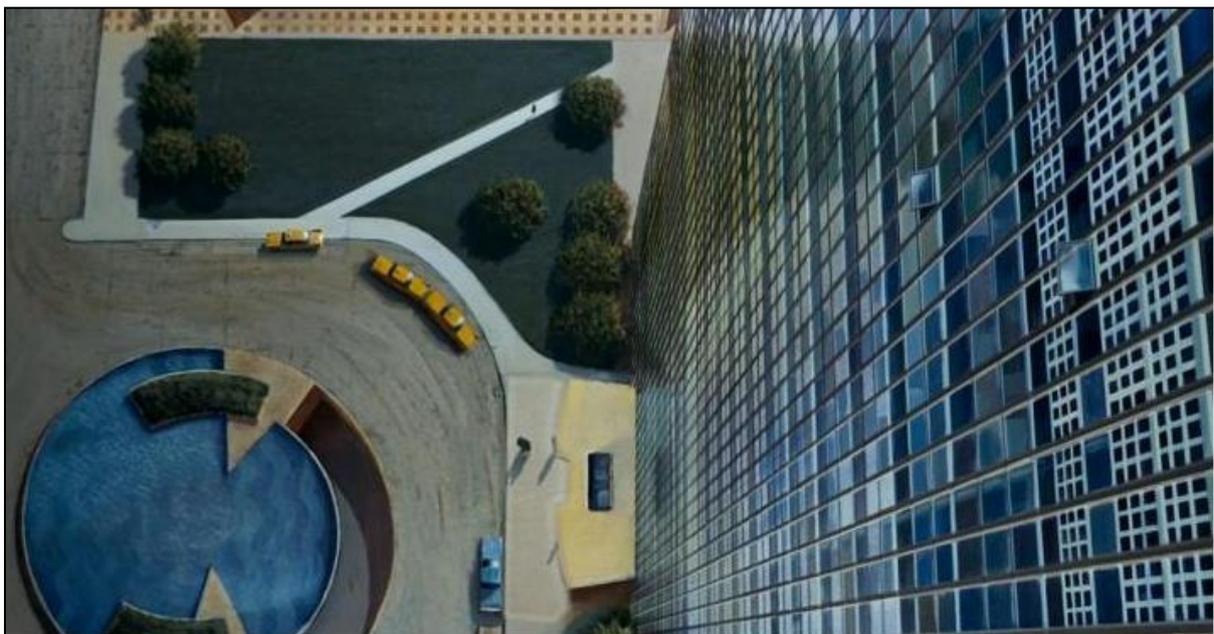
## UNDERLYING THEMES

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*North by Northwest* has many underlying themes, such as **play-acting, performance, and double identities seen as necessary to survive in a duplicitous and overpowering world** steeped in Cold War and utilitarian calculations.

### 1 – Overpowering bureaucracies

*North* has a strong ideological base in its indictment of **overpowering bureaucracies and their (ab)use of individuals**. It's an interesting reversal of the kind of individual / community dichotomy established in many classical Hollywood films like *Casablanca* (1942), where the importance of the community always ended up outweighing the importance of individuals. In *North by Northwest*, on the contrary, the community is represented by heartless bureaucracies like the CIA, who are willing to sacrifice innocent people for secret causes involving the Cold War. Community is symbolized by the huge, emotionless stone faces on Mount Rushmore and the towering glass building that houses the United Nations. Visually, the **isolation of the main character in the expansiveness of the environment** is a consistent theme throughout the film. In every scene Hitchcock is conscious of the **placement of his characters in space and architecture**. The UN scene is a good example. His wide shots frame in the high ceilings and lengthy staircases of the interior design, and the final exterior overhead shot of the building, which shows Thornhill leaving in a cab, is framed to shrink the character against his surroundings, towering over ant-like characters trying to escape it.



## 2 – Shifting and mutable : The world of advertising

In the first scene that introduces our protagonist, we're invited into the 'world of advertising', where 'there's no such thing as a lie. There's only expedient exaggeration.' These lines serve to introduce the audience into the world of **shifting identities**, and to amplify the film's opening credits, a grid of horizontal and vertical lines that dissolve to reveal the facade of a glass and steel New York City skyscraper. The audience can't see the interior of the building — hidden from view by the treated glass and the reflection of the late afternoon sun —, but the building's windows reflect back the bustling, teeming multitudes at work and play.



**Surface and appearance**, and the hidden depths and meanings underlying the narrative, are thus subtly introduced through graphic representation as part of the credit sequence.

## 3 – Thornhill or Kaplan ? Impersonating someone else

Thornhill's introduction, as an advertising executive who essentially lies and exaggerates for a living, serves to further visualize those themes. His verbal dexterity, exemplified by his financial success and social status, will immediately come into play as he attempts to talk himself out of the increasingly complex and dangerous situations engineered by hostile forces. But as the narrative unfolds, **Thornhill's identity as an advertising man proves insufficient to overcome the plot's obstacles**. In fact, despite his initial protestations, he gradually begins to assume the identity of the elusive George Kaplan, as secondary characters he encounters begin to identify him so. In an early scene, both the hotel maid and valet both confuse him for

Kaplan, not because his appearance matches Kaplan, but because **they've never seen Kaplan** and presume the man in his hotel room must, in fact, *be* Kaplan...



**Duplicity and multiple identities run deeply throughout the plot** : besides Thornhill's impersonation of Kaplan, Vandamm is first introduced impersonating a UN official, **Lester Townsend**, with Vandamm's sister impersonating his wife. **Eve Kendall** may or may not be what she seems and, finally, Vandamm's personal secretary, Leonard (**Martin Landau**), is obviously coded as gay — he speaks of having a ‘woman’s intuition’ — **and overtly jealous over Vandamm's relationship with Eve.**



#### 4 – Dialogues suggest play acting and performance

Lehman reinforced these themes through references peppered unobtrusively throughout the screenplay. For example, in the scene of Vandamm's first appearance, Lehman closes the curtains, **darkening the room and focusing the audience's attention** — a gesture best read as a theatrical reference. The dialogue also connects to the subtext : ‘*With such expert play-acting, you make this room a very theatre.*’ Later in the film, Vandamm chides Thornhill for overplaying his various roles, including the ‘*peevish lover, stung by jealousy and betrayal.*’

### REVIEW

**Hitchcock’s sprawling cross-country epic adventure has never been a favourite of mine.**

Perhaps it was the preposterous *macguffin* plotting, or the extensive and distracting over-use of rear projection process shots, or its length (135 min) or simply its actors ?

- The **crop dusting scene**, with its clever use of composition and editing, is far from amazing or teeth-shattering yet there *was* some genius in being able to create suspense and *claustrophobia* — in the middle of nowhere, in an **open space in broad daylight**.
- **The resolution is long** and takes too much time trying to explain the narrative. It’s too dramatic, and we’re also left without much to resonate with.
- I also have a major problem with **Hitchcock’s insistence on cheating studio interiors for exteriors**, even into the late 1950s when *on location* shooting was commonly used in Hollywood. Hitchcock even places his characters on hideous studio-confining treadmills against pre-recorded backdrops to do exterior walk and talks.

Although tightly controlled and well scripted, *North by Northwest* is definitely not perfect. In a way though, it appears to be the predecessor of modern action films, especially the *James Bond* series, which debuted with *Dr. No* three years later. The *James Bond* series has kept its adventurous and exciting side, its **humour**, and of course it’s extremely sensual as well — as Eve Kendall, Eva Marie Saint plays the traditional Hitchcock blond whose **cold exterior is only a mask for the heated passion beneath** — like Grace Kelly, Janet Leigh, Kim Novak, and many others.