North by Northwest and Hitchcockian Romance

Lesley Brill

When, in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest,* Roger Thornhill arrives at "Prairie Stop" to face attempted assassination by crop-duster plane, the landscape turns a desiccated and lifeless brown. The camera surveys the desolate scene from a high panoramic viewpoint. The audience is unlikely to find anything notable about either of these facts; and, if it does notice them, it is unlikely to find them awkward. Yet for a viewer with realistic expectations, both the scorched landscape and the camera placement could be jarring. The foliage elsewhere--in New York, Long Island, and South Dakota--is lush and verdant; the elevation of the camera in the Prairie Stop scene provides a point-of-view that nobody in the film, including the men in the moving airplane, could possibly have. A viewer with realistic prejudices might raise other questions as well. Why does the plane, so maneuverable throughout the rest of the scene, crash awkwardly into the gasoline truck at the end? Why does it first buzz Thornhill and begin firing at him only with its second pass? What sort of fool would lure Thornhill to the country and try to run him over with an airplane, anyway? Surely a gun, rope, or knife would be more efficient, more plausible.

One can answer such questions only by pointing out that they are largely irrelevant. Phrased as logical objections, they have nothing to do with the sort of film *North by Northwest* is, and trying to explain them away obscures more than it clarifies. To ask why such questions are not to the point, however, tells us a good deal, not only about *North by Northwest* but about Hitchcock's work in general.[1] Nobody, so far as I know, has objected in print to the Prairie Stop scene, but complaints about implausibility have been a general motif in Hitchcock criticism for fifty years. The obvious rear-projection in *Marnie* and *Spellbound,* the painted backdrops and artificial sets of

Under Capricorn, the trainwheels that say "save Ashenden" in *Secret Agent*, the comically speeded-up fireworks of *To Catch a Thief*, the subjective shot of Markham sinking into impossibly plush carpet in *Murder!*--these and similar moments in Hitchcock's work could be (as many have been) criticized as gross disruptions of the realistic illusions of the films in which they appear. The description is accurate; the complaint is unjust. Though their importance varies from movie to movie, anti-representational techniques in Hitchcock's films establish the basic assumptions of much of his work. They signal a romanticism, a self-conscious sense of the fiction as a story of a certain kind, which is the dominant mode of many Hitchcock films and an important element in almost all of them.

Since I will be using the word "romance" in a limited sense, a brief definition is in order.[2] By romance I mean to indicate the relatively fabulous narrative genre which we associate with such things as folklore and fairytale and their literary and cinematic offspring. In film, such narratives may be as clearly related to their mythic and folkloric forebears as Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* or Murnau's *Nosferatu;* they may be modernized fairytales like *The Gold Rush* and *Star Wars;* or they may be such rationalized and relatively distant relations as *Grand Illusion* or *She Done Him Wrong.*

In the world of romance, whether in literature or film, the ordinary constraints of natural law are loosened. As in dreams and nightmares, the reality principle mixes with projections of desire or anxiety. This mixture produces an animism and a psychological transparency considerably greater than are found in more realistic fictions. As folktales swarm with talking plants and animals and grudge-bearing or grateful landscapes, the romantic world of more sophisticated fiction is peopled with extreme and relatively pure human traits--"stylized figures," in Northrop Frye's phrase, "which expand into archetypes."[3] Heroes are brave, handsome, and unentangled by previous commitments; they seek and serve women who are lovely and pure of heart despite dreadfully compromising circumstances; and they oppose villains who reek of carrion and the smoky fires of hell. Characters fit epithets right off the rack: good old king, unjustly disinherited prince or princess, evil magician, wicked stepmother But for all its sympathetic clarity, the characterization of romance is not drawn in the pitch blacks and unsullied whites of melodrama. Circumstances are frequently perplexed and characterization, though uncomplicated by abundant detail or delicate shading, avoids simple uniformity. The hero or heroine does something equivocal; the villain attracts justifiable sympathy.

The plot of romance leads to adventure, with the killing of a hyperbolically evil figure the usual penultimate action and the winning of a mate the conclusion. In fairytales the destruction of a wicked king, dragon, or troll precedes a wedding to a prince or princess. In the more realistic but still romantic world of most of Hitchcock's films, the grouping of characters is analogous but the stratifications take modern symbolic forms--the upperclass background of the hero in *Murder!*, for example, the beauty of Grace Kelly and Ingrid Bergman, or the association of villains with lower classes,

foreigners, or sexual deviates. The plot normally revolves about a quest (in Hitchcock often thrust upon the hero rather than chosen) and entails the perilous journeys, violent struggles, mountaintop epiphanies, disappearances and apparent deaths, and triumphant returns that make up such stories. Rather than being rationalized or made plausible, such plots depend upon lucky coincidence and exhibit a high degree of conventionality and artificiality. Human wishes and their enemies and obstructions are anatomized and segregated more sharply in romance than in ironic or realistic fictions. Good and evil figures embody radically competing world views, especially when there is an important political element in the action. Frye calls this conflict the struggle to maintain "the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience."[4] This innocence is partly manifested by the prominence of the miraculous, which, along with an accompanying emphasis on the fictionality of the narrative and occasional antirepresentationalism, clusters with other romantic elements.

Since the terms romantic and realistic are relative, one cannot speak of pure romance or pure irony. Hitchcock's most romantic works include *Young and Innocent, To Catch a Thief,* and *North by Northwest;* his films become more ironic as the importance of their political content increases, as in *Secret Agent, Notorious,* and *Torn Curtain.* Yet the first three films all contain some politics and considerable ironic realism, while in the latter there remain elements of the miraculous quest with a bride or husband to be claimed at its completion. Romantic and realistic elements mix in all of Hitchcock's films, with one or the other providing a dominant modality. If we exaggerate either, we distort our account of his work. Such distortion will be evident in parts of the argument of this essay, for I believe that Hitchcock has been regarded too much as a realist and too little as a maker of romance, and it is my object to redress the balance.

North by Northwest provides an especially clear illustration of Hitchcock's romantic tendencies. The story line coils intricately. Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), a youthfully middle-aged advertising man, is seized by a pair of thugs when he joins a group of business acquaintances for drinks. Having been mistaken for "George Kaplan," a nonexistent decoy agent of an unnamed U.S. intelligence agency, he is carried off by their equally unidentified adversaries, forcibly intoxicated, and put into a stolen car in which he is meant to die. Aided perhaps by a toleration for alcohol which comes from the habitual drinking already established as part of his life, he manages to escape to an arrest for drunk driving. His story of abduction meets skepticism and the police are easily deceived by the sister of VanDamm (James Mason), the leader of the foreign spies. Thornhill goes to the fictional Kaplan's hotel room, escapes another encounter with VanDamm's thugs, and proceeds to the United Nations Building to seek Lester Townsend, whom he mistakenly believes VanDamm to be. One of VanDamm's enforcers makes yet another assassination attempt, but the knife he throws at Thornhill ends up in Townsend's back, and Thornhill ends up "wanted for murder on every front page in America." Attempting to clear himself, he heads for Chicago on

the 20th Century Limited in pursuit of the fictitious Kaplan. During the journey he is picked up and concealed from the police by Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint), VanDamm's mistress, who half seduces him and sends him to Prairie Stop the next morning. He returns to Chicago, finds Eve, and discovers her connection with VanDamm, from whose thugs he escapes again. At this point, "The Professor" (Leo G. Carroll), head of the U.S. intelligence agency, intervenes to inform Thornhill that Eve is their counterspy and to arrange for him to "die" as Kaplan in a faked shooting in Rapid City, South Dakota, the jumping off point of VanDamm, who is leaving the country the next day. Afterwards, the Professor seems to promise, Thornhill and Eve will be free to pursue their romance. The fake shooting goes as planned, but the Professor has deceived Thornhill about Eve, who is scheduled to leave the country with VanDamm and continue her counterespionage. The love-stricken Thornhill is confined to a hospital room to keep him out of the way until Eve has left the country with VanDamm. He escapes, however, and goes to VanDamm's house. From concealment he overhears a conversation between VanDamm and his private secretary Leonard (Martin Landau), who has uncovered Eve's real identity. As Eve is about to be taken off to be murdered in VanDamm's plane, Thornhill rescues her. Pursued by VanDamm's agents across the stone faces of Mount Rushmore, Thornhill and Eve narrowly escape and, in the famous closing shots, they return on the 20th Century Limited as newlyweds.

If exuberance of plot is a prime signal of romance, then *North by Northwest* clearly qualifies. Like Sinbad the Sailor, Thornhill sails from adventure to adventure. In literal fact, a ship is practically the only common conveyance that Thornhill does not take. When things grow most desperate, he runs--away from his assassins in the elevator, out of the UN building, back and forth over the dusty fields of Prairie Stop, through the woods and across the Mount Rushmore monument. Airplanes, which threaten both Eve and Thornhill, play the role of modern Orc to Thornhill's Sinbad. (The creator can send his hero on such peregrinations, but he cannot accompany him, as the film suggests in the wry cameo appearance of Hitchcock with bus doors closing in his face.)

All Thornhill's rushing about emphasizes the importance to the film of its quests. The "MacGuffin," a well-known idea in Hitchcock criticism, refers to the nominal goal of a film's characters which is in fact essentially irrelevant to the real concerns of the movie but which provides an excuse for them.[5] In *North by Northwest* the MacGuffin is unspecified information, both that being smuggled out of the country by VanDamm and the knowledge of VanDamm's organization being sought by the Professor. Like the Grail quests of medieval romances, the MacGuffins of Hitchcock's films give motive force to the characters--get them out having adventures, falling in love, slaying dragons. Although Hitchcock maintains interest in VanDamm and his information through the end of the film, the fundamental object of the quest in *North by Northwest* lies elsewhere, in Roger Thornhill's search for identity and a proper mate--two aspects, it usually turns out, of a single goal.

Thornhill's continuous wayfaring epitomizes his personal rootlessness. With the exception of his last trip home as a newlywed, Thornhill crosses the country in a series of conveyances that are stolen, forced upon him, or associated with some sort of deceit. The taxi he takes from its rightful passenger in the first sequence, Van-Damm's limousine, "Laura's Mercedes," the taxi he gets by brushing ahead of a waiting couple at the Plaza, his ticketless ride on the 20th Century Limited, the bus he is lured into taking to Prairie Stop, the truck he steals to get back to Chicago, the police car he "summons" to escape the auction, the ambulance that carries him away from the faked shooting in Rapid City, and the Ford sedan in which he effects his last minute rescue of Eve--together all suggest the extent to which he is dispossessed and unable to establish his real identity That VanDamm and his underlings insist on taking him as Kaplan throughout the film further underscores the tenuousness of his existence as Thornhill.

As befalls innumerable folktale heroes who leave home to seek their fortunes, Thornhill ends up with wife and something that looks suspiciously like a "happily ever after." The defects in his character and the circumstances which the ending remedies have been discussed (and, I think, somewhat overemphasized) by several other critics, so I will only sketch them here. Incipient alcoholism, frivolous and perhaps promiscuous relations with women, prolonged dependence upon his mother, and a readiness to lie to and impose upon other people are among the shortcomings hinted at in the opening scenes. In describing Thornhill's deficiencies, however, it is easy to misrepresent the tone of the film, which makes its hero a strongly sympathetic figure from the beginning. Indeed, he may be the more sympathetic for his venial sins. His marriage to Eve represents, nonetheless, a maturing and a serious mating--the making of his fortune. In Thornhill's strivings with VanDamm and his agents, in his fake murder and his subsequent incarceration, and in his reappearance as savior and newlywed we can see the outlines of the four stages of the romantic quest which Frye calls the conflict, death, disappearance, and reappearance/elevation.[6]

Eve shares Thornhill's personal defects and emotional voids. She too is deceitful, frivolous about sexual relations ("I had nothing to do that weekend, so I decided to fall in love," she says by way of explaining her relationship to VanDamm), and involved with a man who seems more a father than a lover. Like Thornhill, she is too old to be unmated: "I'm twenty-six and unmarried. Now you know everything." When she marries Thornhill, she finds an identity and a legitimate place. It is typical of Hitchcock, and of romantic fictions, that the concluding marriage should resolve the problems of both partners. There is a structural logic behind such plot configurations. Humans, injured and deficient by nature, can be healed and made whole only by the mundane miracle of love. It follows, since the love must be reciprocal and not adulterous, that both partners before their meeting are to some degree ill and in need, and that their redemption must be mutual.

An odor of dragon-killing lingers in the deaths of VanDamm's

knife-throwing gardener and that of Leonard, from whom Thornhill saves Eve with the providential aid of a sharpshooting state trooper. The death of the latter is of particular interest, in part because Hitchcock has spoken with satisfaction of dividing the villain's role among VanDamm and his associates.[7] By splitting the villain, Hitchcock presents evil as demonic and worthy of extirapation, while at the same time he shows it as human and pathetic. With their dark suits and cold refinement, VanDamm and Leonard are strongly associated when they first appear in Townsend's library. Thereafter they are increasingly split. Leonard, left behind in the library as VanDamm goes to join his guests, becomes an angel of death. He administers a gargantuan "libation" to Thornhill at Townsend's house, orchestrates attempts to kill him at Prairie Stop and the auction, pushes Eve off the face of Mount Rushmore, and stands on Thornhill's fingers. He also serves as commander to the two thugs who seize Thornhill in the Plaza Hotel.

Leonard as dragon, moreover, shows traces of the deviant or equivocal sexuality that Hitchcock typically assigns to the thoroughly wicked figures who are killed or captured at the end of his films. Similar antagonists include the androgynous Fane in *Murder!*, the hyperlibidinous General in *Secret Agent*, Squire Pengallan in *Jamaica Inn*, Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt*, Norman in *Psycho*, and the fruiterer-rapist in *Frenzy*.

Suggestions of effeminacy attach to Leonard ("Call it my woman's intuition," he says at one point) and there are indications of homosexual feeling between him and VanDamm. When Thornhill, for example, is disguised as a redcap and walking with Eve from the train to the station in Chicago, he lightly remarks that she is "the smartest girl I ever spent the night on a train with." Eve looks rather tensely away because, no doubt, she is aware both of her growing affection for Thornhill and of her duplicitous role. At this moment the soundtrack reintroduces the "lovers' theme," a motif associated with the tenderest moments of the couple's unconventional courtship. Simultaneously, the camera pans from Eve's face to VanDamm and Leonard who are walking behind and to the right of Eve and Thornhill. The "lovers' theme" continues as the camera returns to Eve's face, then once more shows Eve and Thornhill together. The camera movement and cutting emphasize Eve's connection with VanDamm (which the audience learned of earlier); but the continuous playing of the "lovers' theme" on the soundtrack during the shots first of Eve and Thornhill, then of VanDamm and Leonard, then of Eve and Thornhill again obliquely suggests an amorous attraction between the two men as well as between the man and the woman. VanDamm and Leonard are shown similarly paired in parallel with Thornhill and Eve on the 20th Century Limited and at the Mount Rushmore cafeteria. Leonard's doubtful sexuality, and that of other evil figures in Hitchcock's work, should not be dismissed as a reflection of the director's prudery. As I will argue later in this essay, true heterosexual love between well matched partners approaches divine grace in many of Hitchcock's films. Deviance, therefore, is generally demonic, and it is artistically

consistent that Hitchcock's villains often show signs of sexual perversity.

The love of VanDamm for Eve cannot accurately be called perverse, but it is egotistical and possessive and thereby antithetical to the selfless feelings Hitchcock associates with true love and lovers. VanDamm nonetheless attracts considerable sympathy, for his wit and affection are genuine, if menacing, and his loyalty to Eve is deep. He does not even appear to consider Thornhill's proposal that he "turn over the girl," and he expresses intense anguish when he learns of his mistress's double agency. In his last appearance, standing beside the Professor as Leonard is shot, he preserves an urbanity under pressure which he shares with his chief adversary. "Not very sporting," he murmurs, "using real bullets." As Eve's lover, he opposes the murderous Leonard to the extent of slugging him when Leonard uncovers the truth of the sham shooting of Thornhill. But his rebellion against his evil side, expressive as it may be, is momentary. He remains of the devil's party, willing to murder Eve for her duplicity and unredeemed by his love for her. Since the monstrous side of the villain has been partially split away from him and attached to his secretary, VanDamm gives rise to more pity than terror, even though we are never allowed to forget that he remains, in the Professor's apt phrase, "rather a formidable gentleman."

For all the sympathy he attracts, VanDamm remains identified with a world that is low and cynical, when contrasted with that inhabited by Thornhill and Eve after they have fallen in love. The views of the Professor place him in the world of experience inhabited by VanDamm, and guarantee that the U.S. agency also will eventually become inimical to the lovers. Both VanDamm and the Professor, although they have considerable affection for Eve, are willing to sacrifice her. VanDamm decides to murder her after he learns of her treachery and the Professor is willing to send her off with VanDamm probably, as Thornhill says accusingly, "never to come back." "Much more than her life is at stake," the Professor exclaims after he has revealed to Thornhill that Eve "is one of our agents." For Thornhill, of course, nothing could count for "more than her life." The Professor and VanDamm share vaguely academic identities, the Professor by virtue of his name and VanDamm because of the newspaper photo that shows him on what appear to be the steps of a University library. Both deal in information: VanDamm exports government secrets and the Professor refuses to have him arrested because "there's still too much we don't know about his organization." In contrast to the intelligence traded in by the Professor and VanDamm, Thornhill has the knowledge of love and a clear sense of the value of human life. "War is hell, Mr. Thornhill--even when it's a cold one," intones the Professor complacently. "Perhaps we'd better start learning to lose a few cold wars," Thornhill replies.

Thornhill does not dwell in this more gentle and innocent world at the beginning of the film; he attains it in the course of his adventures. Somewhat later, so does Eve. Their love lifts them above the muddled worlds of business and espionage. The crucial scenes en route to their final state of gratified desire take place, characteristi-

cally for both Hitchcock and romantic fictions, in elevated settings. In his quest for the truth, Thornhill ascends. He goes up to Kaplan's room at the Plaza and up to confront Townsend at the UN, but both of these unsuccessful attempts at clarification soon find him on ground level again. His most important encounters with Eve take place in elevated settings: her 4th floor hotel room in Chicago, the pine forest after the fake shooting, her upstairs bedroom at Van-Damm's, the top of the Mount Rushmore monument, and finally an upper berth on the 20th Century Limited. These climbs to illumination and love symbolize ascent to a higher plane of existence. Indeed, the vertical movement in the film may be more important than the horizontal northwesterly movement that gives it its title.

Though they are neither static nor uncomplicated, the central characters of *North by Northwest* have the moral and empathetic transparency and the slightly oversized quality that we expect from figures in romance. Human in their failings, Thornhill and Eve are slightly greater than human in their virtues. For VanDamm, the reverse applies.

Roger Thornhill is the sort of man who thinks of the perfectly aimed reply immediately, not later while brushing his teeth before bed. Although he has the defects of an ordinary man, he is handsomer, wittier, "better tailored," and more persistent than an ordinary man could be. His wit is partly that of a quick thinking *picaro*, but its comic gaiety is equally important to his survival. A boyish playfulness inspires his escapes from the elevator at the Plaza and from the auction--where, even as the police lead him away, he insists on reiterating his absurd bid. His light touch seems partly to control a hazardous world. It keeps tragedy at bay and the fortuitous escape and happy ending in sight. Taller than anyone else in the film, he is capable of such feats of strength as surviving uninjured a collision with a truck and holding Eve above a precipice with one hand while hanging on to a cliff face with the other--as Leonard deliberately stamps on his fingers. It is his persistence, above all, which raises him to heroic proportions. He never flags in his determination, never retreats in the face of fear, self-doubt, or exhaustion. This doggedness, as it has for romantic heroes since Odysseus, eventually rewards him with a wife and a return home.

"Where will I find you?" Thornhill asks Eve, a bit desperately, as they are parting in the train station at Chicago. Eve does not answer, but the story eventually does, and just as one would expect of a fairytale: in the dragon's lair, needing to be rescued. "The reward of the quest," writes Frye, "usually is or includes a bride...often to be found in a perilous, forbidden, or tabooed place...often rescued from the unwelcome embraces of another and generally older male or from giants or bandits or other usurpers. The removal of some stigma figures prominently."[8] VanDamm, an older male who is also a bandit and usurper (as his appropriation of Townsend's home suggests) offers Eve embraces not only unwelcome but about to become lethal at the end of the film. The close-up in the auction sequence of VanDamm's hand threateningly encircling the back of Eve's neck suggests that even before he learns of her double role his affection may be danger-

ous. The removal of Eve's stigma and her rescue from VanDamm are essentially equivalent, because her escape from him and her marriage to Thornhill bring an end to the vulnerability and emotional idleness which led her into that relationship.

Like most of Hitchcock's heroines from Daisy in *The Lodger* onward, Eve retains hints of Persephone, the goddess of flowers and vegetative fertility kidnapped by the king of Hades and finally rescued through the agency of Demeter and Zeus. She is shown with flowers on the dining car of the 20th Century Limited, on the bureau of her hotel room in Chicago and on the wallpaper there as well, and in the spectacular floral gown she wears to the auction. She resembles Persephone most, however, in her association with VanDamm who, along with Leonard and his thugs, persistently attracts demonic imagery. I have already discussed the suggestions of sexual perversion attached to VanDamm and Leonard and their connection with a lower world than that inhabited by Thornhill and Eve after they fall in love. It remains to mention the shadow and dark colors regularly associated with VanDamm and the sense we sometimes have of him--in part because of the figurine in which he smuggles microfilm--as a temple robber. Eve, his captive for all practical purposes, occupies the place of Persephone in Hades or Scheherezade in her thousand and one nights, or any of innumerable romantic heroines whose wits keep them alive in dens of danger until their true loves arrive to carry them away.

The names of its central characters illustrate the tendency of *North by Northwest* to evoke the archetypes behind them. If my sense of the film is accurate, then VanDamm, Eve, and Thornhill retain some of the qualities of the devil, the biblical Eve, and the savior who wore a crown of thorns and was crucified on a hill. To represent *North by Northwest* as religious allegory would convince few of its viewers, but to argue that some of its resonance derives from its embodiment of a struggle between good and evil for the heart and life of a woman named Eve is not fundamentally antithetical. That Eve's rescuer "dies," disappears, and returns to save her enforces further an archetypal interpretation, as does the fact that Thornhill spends precisely three days and nights among the demons of international espionage in a kind of harrowing of hell.

Like its characters, the settings of *North by Northwest* are stratified and moralized. Counterpoising Thornhill's ascents to love and illumination are declivities in which he confronts confusion, evil, and danger. The first time we see him he is emerging from an elevator which has just descended to ground level; a little later he is hustled down the stairs of the Plaza and into his kidnappers' limousine; later still he is almost trapped by VanDamm's assassins in a descending elevator. The depth of the film's lower worlds is often established by an elevated camera looking conspicuously down on the action. After Townsend's murder, Thornhill flees the United Nations Building and we peer down the facade at a tiny speck far below, running for a cab. The scene in the conference room of the US intelligence agency is photographed partly from an elevated camera position, a perspective that becomes emphatic at the end of the sequence, when we hear

Thornhill rather pitilessly consigned to his fate: "Goodbye, Mr. Thornhill, wherever you are." Cut to Grand Central Station where more elevated camera placements give the scene a distinctly subterranean appearance. The camera looks down at VanDamm's hand on the back of Eve's neck at the beginning of the auction. The startlingly elevated point-of-view at the opening of the Prairie Stop sequence helps to establish that landscape as depressed and dangerous. The high camera angles in the train station at Chicago warn us that Thornhill will not soon find Kaplan or escape danger there. When Thornhill looks down from the second floor of VanDamm's home at Eve far below in the living room, we are presented with a particularly clear image of her entrapment in a lower world that threatens to destroy her. The fact that airplanes are uniformly associated with danger may be one of the reversals of this intermittently ironic film; or, since we never see anyone in an airplane, they may serve as a reflection of the menace conveyed by elevated camera angles. In either event, the main pattern is not seriously disrupted; heights are associated with truth and love, depths with deceit and hostility. Two of the most desperate conflicts in the film, Thornhill's struggle not to succumb to his enforced drunkenness and the whole of the sequence on the face of Mount Rushmore, center on Thornhill's (and later Eve's) attempts to avoid being thrown off high places. Cinematographically and geographically, *North by Northwest* sets Thornhill and Eve the task of climbing above a corrupt world and resisting the people and circumstances that would pull them back down.

Within the romantic contexts of *North by Northwest,* the apparent anomalies of the Prairie Stop episode appear as consistent developments of emphatic patterns. The bizarre assassination attempt, Thornhill's journey to meet Kaplan and learn the truth of his inexplicable circumstances, the downward-looking camera, and the nightmare quality of the whole incident echo and anticipate similar events and settings throughout the film. The sere vegetation which contrasts with other verdant landscapes may perhaps be explainable as an early maturing corn crop, but it clearly functions more importantly to emphasize the infernal world to which Thornhill has been sent. Dusty and deslolate, Prairie Stop is as hot as hell, and as dangerous. It is a wasteland of the sort familiar to modern readers from Eliot's poem or the stretch between West Egg and New York City in *The Great Gatsby.* Hunted for murder by the police and for counter-espionage by VanDamm's spies, abandoned by the Professor and his agency, deceived by the woman he is already in love with, isolated and exposed, Thornhill reaches the nadir of his journey at the hellish Prairie Stop. After he returns to Chicago, his isolation begins to decrease and his ignorance is gradually replaced by understanding. But for the moment he can fall no lower, and the desolation of the place reflects the desolation of his fortunes.

Characteristic of romantic narratives, of Hitchcock's romantic films generally, and of *North by Northwest* in particular, is an intermittent antirealism which takes three main forms: 1) explicit references within the work to its own fictionality and to ideas of fiction generally; 2) the frequent use of marvelous plot elements; 3) occa-

sional conspicuous artificiality. The first of these forms of anti-realism, often called "self-consciousness," is less specific to romance than the other two, but seems to be associated with them in romantic narratives. In *North by Northwest* it takes the form of a pervasive concern with acting and assuming false identities. The unfolding of the plot is determined largely by the conflicting and mutually misunderstood roles and the concealed aims of its main characters. His abduction having prevented him from going to the "Winter Garden Theatre," Thornhill is told by VanDamm that his "expert play-acting make[s] this very room a theatre." As it happens, VanDamm is wrong in this particular case, but the accusation nonetheless rings broadly true for all of the major and many of the minor characters in the film. VanDamm, by appropriating Lester Townsend's estate, plays the role of the true owner. He also plays the role of art collector and, after he has discovered Eve's real identity, the continuing but no longer sincere part of devoted lover. Those about him act supporting roles: his sister as Mrs. Townsend, the knife-throwing assassin as a gardener and his wife as a housekeeper, Leonard as private secretary. Eve plays VanDamm's mistress while spying for the American intelligence agency, and she also adopts the role, for VanDamm, of a *femme fatale* on the 20th Century Limited. The Professor appears as an onlooker at the auction in Chicago and as a passing doctor in Rapid City. Most versatile as an actor is Thornhill, the majority of whose parts are thrust upon him. For much of the film he plays, however unwillingly, George Kaplan. But he is also, as VanDamm says, "the outraged Madison Avenue man," "a fugitive from justice," and "the peevish lover, stung by jealousy and betrayal." In the first sequence of the film he plays, in order to get a cab, the shepherd of "a very sick woman." In Chicago he plays a redcap, an expected visitor to Eve Kendall's hotel room, and the drunk and disorderly disrupter of a genteel auction; in Rapid City he dies in the cafeteria and is reborn in the hospital where he manages to convince the Professor that "I'm a cooperator" in order to escape.

That this role-playing is at least partly to be taken as theatrical is made evident by the frequent allusions to acting and the theatre that permeate the dialogue: "What a performance!" says Thornhill of VanDamm's sister at the Townsend mansion; "you fellows could stand a little less training from the FBI and a little more from the Actor's Studio," remarks VanDamm at the auction, but he later congratulates Thornhill on his "colorful exit" from that scene; Eve critiques Thornhill's performance as shooting victim in the Mount Rushmore cafeteria. The film is rich in allusions to other kinds of fictionality and artifice as well. As Marion Keane points out in her essay on "The Designs of Authorship" in *North by Northwest*, the title alludes to the entrance of the traveling players in *Hamlet*. She further shows that shot composition often depends on frames within the larger frame of the screen and that the film exhibits a persistent concern with "its very nature as a film."[9] The housekeeper at VanDamm's Rapid City home discovers the lurking Thornhill when she sees his reflection in a television screen. Finally, the government secrets which VanDamm is smuggling out of the country are recorded,

appropriately, on a strip of film concealed inside a work of art.

The plot of *North by Northwest* progresses through a series of playlets scripted and staged by its characters but never wholly controlled by them. The first consists of the death-by-drunk-driving arranged for George Kaplan/Roger Thornhill; the second is the performance that VanDamm's sister mounts to reassure the police the next day. Thornhill then bribes his mother to "put on that innocent look you do so well" in order to get the key to Kaplan's hotel room. The sequence on the 20th Century Limited, another play-within-the-play which takes an unforeseen turn (its cast falls in love for real), is followed by the elaborate scenario of Prairie Stop and by further charades at the auction that evening. At the auction the main players congregate to perform and to misinterpret each other's performances. Thornhill plays rejected lover and fugitive from justice--both parts he wrongly believes to be truly his--then consciously adopts the role of "drunk and disorderly." The Professor plays member of the crowd. Eve is attempting to play VanDamm's mistress and Thornhill's antagonist, the latter a part which she is fast becoming unable to maintain with conviction for anybody but Thornhill, who mistakes her entirely. VanDamm plays art collector and joins Thornhill as peevish lover. The collision of these mutually deceived and deceiving figures leads to a complex confusion that, like many of Hitchcock's plots, has a touch of the intricacy of Restoration drama. The next day at Rapid City, the Professor casts Thornhill and Eve as victim and murderess for the benefit of VanDamm in the last of the major internal productions of the film. Only in the final sequences, for the first time in *North by Northwest*, is everyone both playing and being perceived as himself.

It ought to be added that in this film playacting and other feigning are not necessarily equated with falsehood. Role and reality melt indistinguishably together. Eve Kendall the real lover of VanDamm becomes Eve Kendall the agent pretending to be a lover; Eve Kendall the sham lover of Roger Thornhill becomes Eve Thornhill. VanDamm may really collect art, and his associates doubtless perform their domestic duties along with more violent and exotic ones. For much of the film Thornhill almost seems to become George Kaplan, a role so pure that it needs no actor. It is an "expedient exaggeration," but not a very gross one, to say that in the world of *North by Northwest*, like that of advertising, "there are no lies." The fact that characters are most likely to accuse each other of lying at precisely those times when they are being unequivocally truthful indicates how fluid the relation between truth and fiction is.

Associated with its theatricality and more specifically typical of romantic fictions is the conspicuous artifice and artificiality of *North by Northwest*. The arresting abstraction of intersecting lines on which the titles appear and the excited music that accompanies them draw the viewer's attention, from the first frames, to the film's dazzling technique. The opening also serves to introduce the important compositional principle of strong vertical lines, a motif which will reappear throughout the film, most notably perhaps in the UN sequence and in the pine forest meeting of Thornhill and Eve. Like the intersecting rails at the start of *Strangers on a Train*, the intersecting

lines during the titles of *North by Northwest* serve as an emblem of the coincidences by which human fates come together. But what is finally most notable about the opening is also most obvious: the conspicuous virtuosity by which it shows the real world with its quotidian shapes and sounds emerging almost insensibly from graphic design and striking music. This blending of real world and artifice anticipates the theme of fictionality in plot and language in which, as I have argued, the made-up and the real persistently interpenetrate. Hitchcock's cameo appearance immediately following the title sequence further draws attention to ideas of fiction and artifice. A voice-over which was written for the screenplay but abandoned somewhere in production may have had a similar intent.[10]

North by Northwest flaunts its polish and deftness. It is the opposite of that art which modestly conceals itself from its audience. Rich interior sets, such astonishing exterior scenes as the (recreated) Mount Rushmore Monument, the florid wit of the dialogue, attention-getting camera angles and movements, laboratory razzle-dazzle like the subjective double images of the drunk-driving sequence, opulent technicolor crashes, explosions, and cliff-hangings--the continuous glittering parade gives the film an atmosphere of technical exuberance. The cinematic *tour de force* of *North by Northwest* draws attention as much to the style of its presentation as to what it presents. Furthermore, stylization and emotional intensity increase together. The most technically arresting scenes--the UN sequence, Prairie Stop, the final chase--are also the most emotionally gripping. Among the artistic effects which become more conspicuous as emotional intensity increases, we may include the sound track. The lovers' theme, for instance, from its introduction on the train to its resolution as the returning 20th Century Limited enters the notorious vaginal tunnel, recurs with increasing emphasis as the love between Thornhill and Eve grows.

Plot development proceeds mainly by way of marvelous coincidence and elaborate obliquity. The quality of the action is thus associated with the antirealism implicit in the film's conspicuous artificiality and its emphasis on themes of pretense and the theatre. Once we, like Thornhill, are compelled to accept the initial improbability of his mistaken identity, we are unlikely to protest any of the implausibilities by which the rest of the plot develops--so long as they bear with superficial consistency some relation to preceding events. Thus the theft of "Laura's Mercedes" and the damage to several other vehicles are cleared up for "two dollars" and pursued no further by the Glen Cove Police Department. The errant knife meant for Thornhill skewers Townsend just as he looks at VanDamm's picture; a photographer flashes Thornhill holding the knife in an action so contrived that audiences invariably forget the innocent Townsend's death to laugh at the impudence of a film which frames its hero so shamelessly. Eve manages to connect with Thornhill on the 20th Century Limited, another coincidence whose fortuitousness is emphasized by the frantic improvisation of the fugitive's flight through Grand Central Station. And so it goes: when Thornhill needs

quick transportation back to Chicago, a pickup truck presents itself; Eve writes the address of the auction on a pad that retains the impression of her writing; Thornhill overhears Leonard disclose Eve's real connections to VanDamm; the gun the housekeeper levels at Thornhill is Eve's, loaded with blanks; another vehicle presents itself for the planeside rescue. The world of *North by Northwest* is one of miraculous coincidence, not always happy but finally beneficent. It is a world in which the maker not only disdains to conceal his hand but insists on showing it through improbable plot manipulations, breathtaking artifice, and continuous musings on the interpenetration of the fictional and the true.

To what does the romantic journey of *North by Northwest* lead? Generally speaking, critics of Hitchcock's films have answered, "entertainment"--"mere" entertainment if they are hostile and "superior" or "resonant" entertainment if they are friendly. Arguing that romantic fictions are more entertaining than realistic or ironic ones seems to be a dubious enterprise; Hitchcock's ironic films--*Blackmail, Psycho,* or *Frenzy*--have been as popularly successful as his romantic ones. The romantic mode of *North by Northwest,* and of similar films, is crucial not for entertainment value but because it determines the sort of world and human nature the film represents, the moral ideas it embodies, and the relationship it implies between itself and the rest of the universe.

To judge by the condition of all the characters at the beginning of the film, humans are personally fragmented, anomic in masses, and ruled by laws which regulate their disorder but do not meliorate it. To judge by the condition of Thornhill and Eve at the end of the film, the maladies of being human are not beyond remedy. The cure is love, the most miraculous and unreasonable of the implausibilities of romance. And, of course, the most common. As in Shakespeare's *Tempest* in which not only does Ferdinand find a wife, but also "all of us ourselves/When no man was his own"; so in *North by Northwest* Thornhill and Eve find not only each other but also themselves, their place in the world, and understanding.

Before they achieve their love, both Thornhill and Eve wander unmated and misplaced in a world of crowds and confusion. We first see Thornhill as one of the rush hour herd at the beginning of the film, and it quickly becomes evident that despite his two previous marriages he is still under the aging wing of a domineering mother. He will spend most of the film establishing, literally, his right to be himself Eve is twenty-six and unmarried, the mistress of a man she no longer cares for, and the employee of an agency that cares nothing for her. The sex lives of both Thornhill and Eve are trivial and loveless, at best. Early in the film Thornhill instructs his secretary to send goldfoil wrapped candy, like money, to an unnamed mistress: "For your sweet tooth and all your other sweet parts." In addition to her treacherous relationship with VanDamm, Eve uses her sex appeal for hustling Thornhill on the train. But true love is fated, and not even the worst motives of counterespionage and frivolous promiscuity can undo its ties. Eve and Thornhill begin by playing at love on the 20th Century Limited and end as Mr. and Mrs. homeward bound on the same train.

For Aristotle, tragedy did not need to be true but plausible, probable, necessary. For Hitchcock's romantic narratives, the opposite spirit presides. His art is implausible, improbable, and true. In the world of his romantic fictions, human life achieves integrity and joy through the miraculous coincidences and irrational feelings that make people more than a series of premises and conclusions. The antagonists to the world of innocence--VanDamm, the Professor, and the crowds of workers following their enlightened self-interest--live in conditions as infernal as they are logical. It is significant that Hitchcock, who very rarely responded with public impatience to even the most provocative imbecilities about his films, regularly aimed sarcastic blasts at "the logicians" and "our friends the plausibilists." Such critics reject the deepest convictions of Hitchcock's art, judge it, indeed, by the standards of his villains rather than by those of his heroes. Even in love and madness, Hitchcock's villains are logical. For all that he treasures Eve, VanDamm is able to decide to assassinate her when he learns of her true status. Thornhill, who has been quite as badly injured by both Eve and the agency she works for, decides to come to her rescue when he learns the truth.

Love between men and women, the most illogical and commonest of the miracles of romantic fictions, is the central subject of most of Hitchcock's films. Like divine grace, love cannot be earned or deserved; it must always be "amazing." And like divine grace, it brings clarity to a desperately corrupt world. The strongest indications that a quality of grace attaches to love in *North by Northwest* come negatively, from the demonic egotism to which it is opposed. VanDamm and his henchmen, and to a considerable extent the Professor and his aides, wage their struggle in conditions of conflicting self-interest and cynicism that Frye has called "the world of experience" and that is opposed to the higher world of innocence attained by Eve and Thornhill. As heterosexual love in Hitchcock's films tends to be an analogue of divine grace, demonic figures like VanDamm collect tinges of perversion. Even when it is "normal," the love of such figures is distorted by egotism and possessiveness. It is not simply his willingness to kill Eve that distinguishes VanDamm from Thornhill, but the quality of his attachment to her: he possesses her as one of the accoutrements of his refinement, and he uses her as he uses Leonard and the other people around him. In the latter respect, his relationship to Eve resembles that of the Professor. Hitchcock's famous aversion to police (less simple than it is usually represented), whatever the truth of the anecdote of his father's having had him briefly confined at age five, has more to do with the romantic mode of his fictions than with early childhood trauma. The police, like Hitchcock's villains, embrace the world of experience and judge people with logic rather than love. Like their associates the criminals, the police are fixtures of a world of law, necessity, and evil; or like the stony faces of the Mount Rushmore monument, they are the stuff of earth itself, passive and indifferent. Love, spontaneously given and accepted with wonder, has nothing to do with laws, or force, or logic. It redeems a world that law and reason abandon by accepting.

Love heals. In some of Hitchcock's films the central figures

are literally ill before they are cured by their love; in *North by Northwest* Eve and Thornhill are alienated, uncertain of their identities, and in need of appropriate mates. Their love fills their voids and ends their idleness. As they ride back at the end of the film, they go neither up nor down but straight through a mountainside. Unlike the shots of the 20th Century Limited on its journey west--shots which showed landscapes so similar as to seem unchanged and which thereby suggested a voyage going nowhere--the eastbound train is making progress, going home. The startling dissolve from monument ledge to upper berth draws our attention to the artifice of the film at its moment of greatest tension and release. The comically exaggerated symbolism of the train clattering into the tunnel as "The End" appears on the screen reminds us of the power of the jolly director to impose a happy conclusion. In the last sequence we may notice a delicate detail: the fingers of Thornhill's right hand are neatly taped where Leonard stood on them. In *North by Northwest* (and in Hitchcock's films generally) hands are an emblem of intimacy, often frustrated or only potential. On Mount Rushmore they link Thornhill and Eve and, in that linking, save her life. The ending retains a few dissonant undertones: the tunnel raises ironic suggestions, and we may wonder if the new Mrs. Thornhill will fare better than her predecessors. But romantic cadences dominate. Thornhill's earlier proposal to Eve on the stone face of the monument came at a moment in this comic romance that was as convincing as it was implausible. As the movie concludes, his hand is bandaged and healing. He is not only married but he has learned to "believe in marriage"--a point to which the film has been conveying him, and us, from the beginning.

Notes

1. Ivor Montagu, for example, recalls that he broke with Hitchcock over a shot in *Easy Virtue* (1927) which he regarded as unrealistic: "Of all shots I hate most anything that in reality would be impossible to see" (*Sight and Sound*, Summer 1980, p. 191). Roger Manvell calls Hitchcock "a man who was to contribute so much to the realistic treatment now regarded as a necessary quality of most screen fiction" (*Sight and Sound*, Jan. 1951, p. 378). In *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock* (Secaucus, N. J.: The Citadel Press, 1976), Robert A. Harris and Michael S. Lasky complain about "unreal" dialogue in *Strangers on a Train* (p. 154), an inexcusable lack of plausibility in *I Confess* (p 161), and call *Marnie* "lazy movie-making, technically and artistically" (p 227). Raymond Durgnant in *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), p. 363, notes, "Impatient as he claims to have been with American audiences' concern for logical plausibility, he dutifully respected it, until the increasing sophistication of the 60's...." O. B. Hardison, though generally sympathetic to Hitchcock's romanticism, criticizes *Spellbound* for "Ingrid Bergman's flimsy Freudian ministrations to Gregory Peck's equally flimsy symptoms." ("The Rhetoric of Hitch-

cock's Thrillers" in *Man and the Movies*, W. M. Robinson, editor [Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1967], p. 146).

2. The discussion of romance that follows relies heavily upon Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1967) and *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1976) by the same author.

3. *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 304.

4. *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 201.

5. For Hitchcock's explanation, see Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (London: Panther Books, 1969), pp. 157-60.

6. *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 192.

7. Truffaut, p. 117.

8. *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 193.

9. *Wide Angle*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1980), 44-52.

10. Ernest Lehman, *North by Northwest* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 1.