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## **AN IDENTITY VIEW OF NORTH BY NORTHWEST \***

*«На Північ через Північний Захід» з погляду ідентичності» є останнім розділом у докторській дисертації Віктора Китастого «У пошуках теорії ідентичності літератури», захищеній 1984 р. У цьому розділі всі теоретичні постулати, визначені у попередніх частинах дисертації, застосовуються для аналізу конкретного фільму. Об'єктом розгляду тут стає кінофільм Гічкока «На Північ через Північний Захід». Дисертація Віктора Китастого поєднує два підходи: психоаналітичний та читацької реценції. У першій частині розглядається те, що автор визначає як психологічно мотивуючі фактори в поведінці людини, які впливають і на створення літератури, і на процеси її реценції. Тут тлумачаться такі поняття Фрейда, як «ідентичність», мотив «liebestod» та інші, а також «воля до влади» Ніцше і «втіха» Лакана. Спільним фактором в обговоренні цих понять є те, як саме вони стосуються формування людської ідентичності. У другій частині праці висвітлюється, яким чином згадані вище категорії можуть бути застосовані до літератури (послужити новим підходом до неї) і в самому акті читання, і в тлумаченні внутрішнього світу тексту. Тут показано, як читач занурюється в текст, орієнтуючись одночасно і на світ тексту, і на свою власну ідентичність із цим світом. Дослідження Віктора Китастого, що і сьогодні є надзвичайно актуальним, прояснює складні процеси людського сприйняття, в якому творення тексту та його реценція є нерозривними початками, що взаємно впливають одне на одне. У пропонованому читачеві розділі автор висвітлює процес ідентифікації як центральну тему фільму. Дослідник*

\* Уривок з докторської дисертації.

аналізує фільм на двох рівнях – популярному (рівень втечі від реальності – яким чином жанр трилера включає глядача у свої процеси) і фаховому (ідентичність як центральна тема фільму).

## Introduction

I have chosen Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* as a subject of application of theory for a number of reasons, primary among them is that this film contains a multiplicity of elements, which allows it to readily illustrate some of my main points. *North by Northwest* is also a rare sort of work, in that it can be examined on both escapist and masterly levels, and is well-crafted in both. It is a deceptively simple work, at least simple in that it allows its inner workings and themes to be readily examined and discussed. And most importantly, I firmly believe it to be a superior work of literature well worth an intensive scrutiny.

I will discuss the film first on the escapist level and focus on how it utilizes elements of the popular "thriller" to involve the audience in a reliving of an adventure. I will discuss the investment into character, plot, situation, and emotion, and the involvement of the audience into the suspense and drama of the plot. The gratifications of the escapist text will also be examined, as well as the satisfactions of the surface elements, such as the use of exotic settings, Hollywood stars, and a light, witty script.

On the masterly level I will discuss the question of identity as the central theme of this film (and a theme which recurs in many Hitchcock films), as well as the themes of appearance, reality, truth, morality, will, striving, jouissance, and *liebestod*. I will also discuss the aspects of the craft of the film itself, from the semiotic to the metaphoric, and show how the sum of these elements produces a superior text of complex codes and responses.

Hitchcock is called the master of the thriller, or the "master of suspense". He is often regarded as the smooth craftsman of the popular film, and as the director of films more concerned with commercial success than with intellectual content. He is now beginning to be taken more seriously, especially with the efforts of the French film critics (many of them film-makers themselves) in the uncovering of philosophic themes and deep psychological contents in his films. It is no longer heresy to regard him as a serious master of literature. But even among his greatest admirers and supporters the film *North by Northwest* is sometimes regarded as a light comedy, as something which is well done but lacks serious content. It would seem that the light wit and humor which pervades the film, as well

as its popular adventure format, leads some to associate this humor with a lack of seriousness. This ignores the fact that there are other themes and elements in the film of a more serious nature. Also, even some of the most tragic and serious works of literature (*King Lear* is one example) contain humor. To answer these reservations, I shall begin with the examination of *North by Northwest* as a popular "thriller."

## 2. As escapist thriller

*North by Northwest* is a Hollywood film which aims at a wide audience and contains all the Hollywood trappings of glamour; movie stars, exotic locations, fast action, splashy photography, and a light and witty tone. In this sense it is similar to many films of that genre, some of which (many critics identify the James Bond series here) supposedly use *North by Northwest* as a prototype. Even at just this level the film is considered to be one of the best examples (if not the best) of its genre. The audience response was excellent, the reviews were good, and it made money. The film audiences expecting a rousing thriller were not disappointed. Hitchcock used the thriller elements to perfection in arousing the emotional response of his "popular" audience.

First of all, Hitchcock chose as his leading character a popular and well-known actor, Cary Grant. Hitchcock wanted an actor with whom the audience could immediately identify and be involved with. Here is an actor whose screen persona is immediately recognizable as the icon of Cary-Grant-playing-this-role. At the first sight of him on the screen the audience already knew who he was, knew that he was playing the leading role, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, knew the type of role which he would be playing. Investment is immediate and complete. And the first few minutes on the screen confirm this persona to the viewer. Roger O. Thornhill (Grant's character) is a suave, confident, and charming, albeit somewhat shallow, character. The fact that Thornhill is a borderline alcoholic, a liar, a manipulator, a cheat, and an irresponsible person is something which the audience is prepared to accept and still invest in that character because of the persona of Cary Grant. As I will later discuss, it is precisely this investment into the charming Grant character which allows the audience to also invest in the negative aspects of that character. With an unknown actor it would have taken a good deal of narrative to establish the same kind of audience investment into a negative character. The audience would have taken the negative aspects as representative of the true nature of that character. Cary Grant

gives us the projection of ourselves (one critic describes Grant as Hitchcock's projection of the self he would like to be) in which even the negative elements are somehow charming.

In the adventure to come, this investment is important as we have to see the events of the world through Thornhill's eyes. And nowhere does Thornhill let us down. He finds new resources within himself to deal with all the dangers, and at the same time overcomes the initial negative aspects of his character. Investment, in other words, continues through the whole film, and the audience lives and grows with Thornhill.

The second investment is into the situation of the abrupt adventure. Thornhill is on the screen for but a few moments when he is suddenly (as in Hitchcock's earlier *The Thirty-Nine Steps*) plunged into adventure. He is mistaken for another man, plucked out of his comfortable life and routine, and an attempt is made on his life. This leads to a concatenation of events into which he is drawn and out of which he cannot escape. This, as we have already seen, is a common trick of investment. An author has an everyday man plunged into an exotic adventure. He is either mistaken for someone else, happens upon some scene by accident, is called upon by his government for help, or his particular skill (which may be mundane or everyday) makes him necessary to the accomplishment of some great deed or adventure. This is an identifiable situation. The theme of "this could happen to me, even though I'm not connected with spies, treasure, or adventure" involves the reader, and he sees himself to be just like the protagonist drawn into some wild, exciting, and sexy adventure. Hitchcock shows his skill here by having Thornhill go through all of the events of sudden adventure listed above. As the events change, so does the character, until at the end he is master of his own destiny and no longer the pawn of inexplicit events.

The lure to the audience is the escape from the everyday humdrum to the exotic adventure. Other lures into involvement (described in detail in the section on Involvement) include the worthiness of the goal, the magnitude of the obstacles, and the rising tension of the action. The first, the worthiness of the character's actions, is developed gradually. At first he is just trying to escape, and since the audience is invested into Thornhill, his escape is our escape. The next step is his conscious effort to find out the truth, which is always perceived of as a worthy goal. Thornhill next is approached by the government to help in matters of "national importance," and to help remove suspicion from Eve Kendall (the romantic interest). Finally Thornhill takes matters into his own hands

to save his lover from a fatal destiny. This steady increase in the worthiness of the goals parallels the steady involvement of the audience.

The escape into the exotic would not be complete without strong elements of sexuality and romance. Here these two are separate themes which gradually merge. At the moment of his greatest pursuit, Thornhill runs into (quite literally) a beautiful woman in the corridor of the train. The development of a sexual relationship seems to blend in nicely with the sense of danger. This, on the popular level, is a requirement for adventure, without which the adventure would seem incomplete. This purely sexual relationship quickly develops into a romantic one, with genuine affection between the two characters. Thornhill's love for Eve becomes an important sub-plot which provides the main motivation for Thornhill's later actions. His sense of betrayal, for example, seems to be the main reason he returns to her room in Chicago, and certainly the only reason he goes to the art auction. And of course it is his love for Eve that motivates his rescue efforts at the end of the film. Hitchcock takes the standard theme of the love interest of the adventure story and combines the elements in a masterful blending of interactions, each affecting the other.

The magnitude of the obstacles speak for themselves. At one time Thornhill has the police, foreign spies, and his own government out to get him. That he is able to find the ability within himself to cope and to survive is one of the gratifications of the film.

Another element of the popular level is the use of suspense, particularly the suspense of the action sequences. These can be subsumed under the two main headings of "on the run," and "hanging over a precipice". In the first case, the suspense is based on the question of escape-will Thornhill (and by investment, the viewer) get away? In the second, the question becomes more of avoiding danger, but not just for Thornhill himself, but also how he can save Eve. Hitchcock's little touches in suspense are legendary, and are based on a subtle concept of the audience knowing or realizing some fact before the characters in the story do. The audience then agonizes over this knowledge, and yearns for the character (at least those characters with whom the audience is in sympathy) to become aware of the impending danger. I want to point out only two examples of this. In the crop-dusting scene, the farmer's words before he gets on the bus are: "That plane's dustin' crops where there ain't no crops." This, as well as the fact that the audience has seen Eve's telephone conversation with one of the thugs setting up this meeting, gives the audience the fore-knowledge of the impending danger. Thornhill, however, stares with disbelief at the plane even when it

comes straight for him. The second example takes place in the house on top of Mount Rushmore, where Thornhill has managed to climb into Eve's room too late to find her there. He tosses his matchbook with a message inside down beside her. She does not see the matchbook, as it falls to the floor, but Leonard, one of the villains, sees it, picks it up, holds it for a moment, and then places it on the coffee table next to Eve. At this moment, of course, the audience holds its collective breath with the anxiety of being found out. Such suspense insures the involvement of the audience by its very nature.

The gratifications on the popular level are many. First is the simple projection of the self into an admired object (Cary Grant) who acts in an admired fashion. He relives an exotic adventure, and falls in love with a beautiful woman – both pleasurable vicarious actions. He overcomes tremendous obstacles and triumphs over evil. He faces the greatest dangers and finds abilities within himself to persevere, therefore giving a sense of mastery and power to his invested audience. The ending is a light happy one, thereupon allowing a release of tensions.

There are also the satisfactions of the film. One can see one's favorite actors on the screen, one can see beautiful photography of beautiful places, and one can both laugh and cry over the action. The theme of common man against the universe is bearable, and even delicious to the viewer because of the light, almost comic tone of the film. This tone tells the audience that everything will end happily. It is this tone which allows laughter at moments of otherwise desperate danger. In this sense the film gives the satisfaction of an escape from the reality of the everyday to a true fantasy, one where we *know* that nothing can go wrong (at least at the end). This gives us the familiar (in the earlier discussed sense of knowing the function of the form), in that the outcome is beyond doubt, and gives us the new, in that the plot constantly surprises us with its twists and revelations. All of this is done in a competent and coherent fashion, even if the elements can be said to be quite standard. The craft of the film is superb, and supports the elements of suspense and adventure without any cinematic false step. *North by Northwest* has often been called the consummate "thriller".

### 3. As masterly literature

*North by Northwest* is more than a thriller done in a compelling style. It contains serious themes which both stand on their own, and in a co-supportive combination with the escapist adventure story provide a richness of detail and consistency which produces the

multiplicity of response of a superior work of literature. To show this, I shall examine separately the themes, the craft, and the overdetermined nature of this text.

Beyond all the chase scenes, suspense, danger, and witty dialog of this movie lie the central themes of identity, morality, personal growth, and will. At the beginning of the film the main character Roger Thornhill does not have a strong sense of identity, and what he does have is very heavily soaked in alcohol. His sense of moral responsibility is slight, and he sees nothing wrong with lying and cheating to get his own way. He seems to care little about other people, unable to give even a small part of himself in commitment (as his two previous marriages show). He lives in a comfortable world of cocktail lounges and theatre evenings, satisfied with the appearance of the reality of his world around him. He is an advertising man whose job it is to convince other people about "reality" and "truth" no matter what the underlying realities may be. By being abruptly plunged into adventure, he is made to confront all these issues in order to survive. The physical confrontation becomes the scene of a metaphysical growth and understanding process. In this sense the physical adventure parallels the metaphysical, and both aspects reinforce the other.

The first two minutes give us a complete picture of his shallow character, which Robin Wood describes as, "a man who lives purely on the surface, refusing all commitment or responsibility". He is shown to be insincere and incapable of any true relationship with women (in conversation with his secretary Maggie):

*Thornhill (grimaces): Send her a box of candy from Slum's. Ten dollars. The kind . . . you know . . . each piece wrapped in gold paper? She'll like that. She'll think she's eating money. Say: 'Darling, I count the days, the hours, the minutes.'*  
*Maggie (interrupting): You sent that one last time.*

He is a breezy liar, as in his lie to steal a cab from the man about to enter one:

*Thornhill (to the man): I have a sick woman here. Would you mind terribly?*

And his justification for his action presents the audience with his philosophy of life:

*Thornhill: In the world of advertising there is no such thing as a lie, Maggie. There is only The Expedient Exaggeration.*

He is notorious for his constant and excessive drinking, "there is nobody faster down the homestretch". And he has regressed into a rather juvenile relationship with his mother:

*Thornhill (to Maggie): Soon as you get back to the office, call my mother ... I'll have had two Martinis at the Oak Bar, so she needn't bother to sniff me.*

*Maggie: She doesn't do that.*

*Thornhill: Like a bloodhound.*

In short, he is a man who lies, cheats, and drinks himself into semi-oblivion. He is presented in very negative terms, and yet because the part is played by Cary Grant, who is a particular icon in the popular films, these negative elements of his personality do not prevent the investment by the audience into his character. Robin Wood calls him a "modern city Everyman, whose charm and self-confidence and smartness make him especially easy for the spectator to identify with".\* So when Thornhill is rudely abducted, the viewer is involved with the action, and does not just remain a spectator. This investment into the suave, but somewhat shallow, character also has implications for the theme of moral growth. Since Thornhill is accepted, blemishes and all, by the audience, then his growth in both awareness and morality is shared by the audience. The "message" of the film is less didactic, and more a personal journey of awareness for each member of the audience. The theme of the film is growth, and the finding of oneself in a hostile world. Identity is the key concept.

It is fitting that a man with Thornhill's weak concept of identity be confused with another man. It is poetic irony that he later is forced to assume the identity of this man, the government agent Kaplan, a man, furthermore, who does not even exist! As he is taken out of his comfortable world and his comfortable identity he is thrust into a world in which appearances are false, and other people are not what they seem to be. He is indignant at this, but it is a weak indignation as it is precisely an extension of his advertising credo. He is abducted, made drunk (another measure of irony) in order to kill him, and barely (perhaps because of his long experience with alcohol) escapes. Making this even more difficult for him is that he cannot persuade either the police, his lawyer, or even his own mother of the real truth behind those appearances. And this for an advertising man who specializes in convincing people of the truth of possibly untrue things. This conflict with truth and appearance is his first real conflict, not the mere mis-adventure with his abductors. It is here that he makes his first positive step. Rather than to just dismiss the whole episode as a bad dream, and maybe to drown the memory in drink, he starts on a search for truth. He takes matters into his own hands and searches the hotel

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\* *Wood Robin. Hitchcock's Films.*— N. Y.: Castle Books, 1969.— P. 101.

room of the non-existent Kaplan. We like this curiosity in him – it shows an inner strength of character which he hasn't revealed before. We also like a character confronting the world and asking questions. This action Thornhill takes here is still self-centered, but he is on the road to discovery. The scene in the elevator is his second step to awareness. He is caught in an absurd situation with death at his elbow and the world laughing at him. This is no small philosophically revealing moment. He escapes a second time, jumps into a cab (brushing aside two people about to get in, but this time at least, he is justified in stealing the cab), and contemplates his dilemma:

*Driver: Where to?*

*Thornhill: I don't know. Just keep going.*

He needs to make sense of this, and after a moment of thought instructs the driver to proceed to the United Nations building where he imagines his abductor from the day before to be speaking. Symbolically, he is going to the United Nations, which stands for (at least ideally) nonviolence and truth. He is still seeking answers, but still depends on the appearance of his world to provide the answers.

The man he meets, Townsend, is not the man he expects – another switch in identity and appearance. He is caught again in his old world here. At the moment of the picture with knife in hand and body at his feet, a most successful “advertising” campaign has been created on him with everyone quite ready to believe his guilt. He is now completely alone with, it seems, the whole world against him. To his credit he does not back down, but pursues the truth with vigor. In the audience's eyes he grows in stature because of this inner resolve. With the investment into his character, the audience has already undergone a sympathetic co-involvement with his troubles and vicariously triumphed in his escapes. As he grows in stature here, so does the audience. There is a gratification in the finding of hidden strength even while there is anxiety at being chased by the powers that be.

Up until this point Thornhill has found no help from anyone around him. His pleas for help, as in the elevator, and understanding have gone unanswered (even from his mother). As he used people, so people used or rejected him. On board the train he is helped by another person for the first time. He boards the train pursued by the police, and disillusioned about his perception of reality and truth – he no longer believes in the values of his comfortable world. He is therefore surprised when he meets a helpful (and beautiful!) woman who senses his troubles and hides him from the pursuing

police. In response to her sexual come-on he regains his suave and smooth manner, although he is not now able to trust anybody. He is enchanted, therefore, with her response to his newest identity:

*Thornhill: Jack Phillips. Western sales manager of Kingby Electronics.*

*Eve: No you're not. You're Roger Thornhill of Madison Avenue and you're wanted for murder on every front page in America. Don't be so modest.*

Her straight-forwardness impresses him – has he found truth? This, combined with her sexual appeal, creates a certain bond between them. We see a certain honesty in him which we haven't seen before. He tells her about his name, and about the nothingness at the center of his existence which is revealed on his matchbook by his initials, ROT:

*Thornhill (explaining): My trademark-rot.*

*Eve: Roger O. Thornhill. What's the O. for?*

*Thornhill: Nothing.*

His awareness, which obviously existed before in a submerged form, of the meaninglessness of his life is not easy to admit. It must seem to him at this moment in the film that he has found at least one truth – that of trust in an other person. In Chicago this shows itself in his concern for her even when he is in great danger himself. He goes off to Prairie Stop with a new-found trust and commitment.

At Prairie Stop this city man finds himself totally alone and exposed in the wide open spaces. The plane attack shakes his new convictions at the same time his world is shattered anew. He returns to Chicago to learn of Eve's complicity in the attack on him. Again things and people are not what they seem. He faces the fact of his betrayal, and yet he finds himself still deeply involved with Eve. He is hurt, but it is possible to say that his growth has given him a sense of implicit trust in another, even when all the facts would argue against such trust. When she leaves him in the shower to go to the art auction, however, he views this as another betrayal. He follows her and betrays her in return, although he doesn't yet know to what extent. That he risks death in order to confront her only reveals the depth of his involvement with her, maybe without his conscious (yet) knowledge.

The character of Eve Kendall here becomes an interesting one. In many respects she is the female counterpart of Roger Thornhill, as Robin Wood holds: "The superficial Eve ... wordly, amoral, quite

without depth or feeling quite uncommitted to anything or anyone.”<sup>4</sup> She had become Vandamm’s mistress on a whim: “I met Philip Vandamm at a party one night and saw only his charm. I guess I had nothing to do that weekend, so I decided to fall in love.” She became an agent for the government almost out of desperation: “Maybe it was the first time anyone ever asked me to do anything worthwhile.” There is also the underlying suspicion that her actions with Thornhill on the train were also based on a whim. Regardless, when she sees him in Chicago she is genuinely happy (and relieved) to see him. They have each become involved with the other.

At the auction Thornhill plays three new roles in rapid-fire fashion. First he is the “preevish lover”, then the lunatic art bidder, and finally the escaped killer (for the benefit of the police). He has lost whatever sense of identity which he had left, and could be said to have given up here. He is ready to take his chances with the police, and is no longer searching on his own for answers. But he has come too far and has learned too much, and so when he is propositioned by the Professor from the intelligence agency he is ready to accept. He is now safe and no longer has to worry about running away from his “crimes”. The earlier Thornhill might have left everything at that, but now he agrees to help Eve for two reasons: first, he feels responsible for her troubles, and second, he finds himself caring deeply for her. He has come a long way in his moral sensibilities and in his sense of commitment. He has learned to care for other people as humans. He not only agrees to act out a part for the intelligence agency in order to remove suspicion from Eve, he later takes things into his own hands and risks his life willingly in order to save her life. The scene beneath Washington’s nose is important because it shows Thornhill’s total devotion to his new moral sense. He is holding the dangling Eve by one hand while a killer is slowly prying loose his grip on the ledge by his other hand. Thornhill, even to save himself, does not let Eve go. Even more importantly, he looks up at the would-be killer and instead of lying or bribing as he would have earlier, he asks person-to-person, “help me”. This understanding of the human in the other person, the Buberian I-Thou relationship, the seeing of part of the self in the other (it doesn’t help in this case, although the villain does hesitate), is all part of Thornhill’s new discovery.

Implicit in the finding of a moral sense and identity is Thornhill’s striving and will to overcome. At the beginning of the film he is a person with a blunted will, stuck in a dull life dulled by alcohol and mother. His only outlet is in his work, which by its nature dulls

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<sup>4</sup> *Wood Robin*. Hitchcock’s Films.— N. Y.: Castle Books, 1969.— P. 104.

his sense of morality. He is awakened out of this coma by his troubles which strengthen his will. He is given obstacles and he finds the will to pursue the truth and to search for answers. He stands firm in his struggles with the whole world against him. By the end of the film he has developed a masterful, humane character, or rather that aspect of him has been awakened. Perhaps all he needed, as Nietzsche might have said, was a significant opposition, or worthwhile obstacles to overcome. In the overcoming he would then realize his will to power, and in realizing his will, he could then create his own self or identity. Thornhill moves from being a puppet, with forces acting on him, to being an agent (for the government), to being a free agent and acting on his own beliefs and responsibilities. His will created his identity in his Oedipal (not in a Freudian sense) search for truth.

I want to touch here briefly on the theme of danger and sexuality (which is touched but not stressed in the film) which is related to the concept of *liebestod*. Robin Wood sees the relationship between Eve and Thornhill as a romantic one: "Hitchcock gives us no simple 'redemption through love', no abrupt transformation; just a delicate intimation of the potential healing power of a balanced, permanent relationship". While this may be true (arguably) at the end of the film, it does not reflect the primary tone of their relationship as it develops. Thornhill meets Eve when he is in full flight from the authorities. He is intrigued by her sexuality, and the combination of the danger and the sexuality becomes mutually stimulating. There is an overtone of death and danger even in their talk of lovemaking:

*Eve: How do I know you aren't a murderer?*

*Thornhill (to her neck): You don't.*

*Eve: Maybe you're planning to murder me, right here, tonight.*

*Thornhill: Shall I?*

*Eve (whispers): Yes ... please do ...*

Even after his perception of her betrayal of him he is still attracted to her. She is a dangerous woman, appealing because she is dangerous. It is instructive to note that the *liebestod* element persists even after they join forces. She shoots him in the cafeteria (with blanks) just before their first real (in that they both know the real other for the first time) love meeting among the trees. And even while dangling beneath the Mount Rushmore monument they banter about propositions and proposals just before the quick cut of Thornhill pulling Eve up from certain death onto a berth on the train. The intricacies of their love-death relationship adds much to the psychological texture of the film, and certainly provides an edge

to their relationship. It definitely furnishes the motivation for their mutual involvement, the depth of which obviously escaped each one of them in their relationships before.

I will only mention in passing some of the existential themes of anxiety to be found in this film. Among them are the themes of paranoia of the innocent man falsely accused (a recurring theme in Hitchcock), the man on the run with the whole world against him, and the man hanging from a precipice. These are part of what Francois Truffaut described as: "The texture of your films is made up of three elements: fear, sex, and death... They are nighttime anxieties, therefore, metaphysical anxieties." These themes provide the opportunity for the development of specific themes discussed earlier, and therefore I see them as broad "motors" for such developments.

The script is well-written, but the dialogue is only one of the many signifying elements of importance. The themes discussed up to now are revealed as much by the cinematic use of metaphor, symbol, and icon, as they are by the spoken word. It was Hitchcock's debt to the German film-makers that he strived to present themes visually: "My models were forever after the German filmmakers of 1924 and 1925. They were trying very hard to express ideas in purely visual terms." It is with this in mind that I wish to turn to the various elements of nonverbal signification which make up such an important part of the film. The focus will be on the craft of using the technical to present or reinforce the ideational, and how this combination of form and content produce the consistent textual universe of the superior text.

*North by Northwest* is full of movement. The main character is constantly running, hiding, and escaping pursuers (the film's first working title was *Breathless*). He travels by various modes of transportation from New York (with a side trip to Glen Cove) to Chicago, Prairie Stop, and Rapid City. All this movement parallels and presents his growing awareness and growing moral sense. The first scenes are shots of the city skyscrapers and the bustling crowd scenes of New York City. It is among the city bustle that we are introduced to Thornhill, and we get a sense of a rushing about without reason. We see him in control of his world, which includes the stolen taxi and the comfortable cocktail lounge. Contrast this world with the midpoint of the film both temporally and thematically which occurs at Prairie Stop. He finds himself in a different universe; a flat, quiet and empty plain: "In the midst of this he stands, an isolated speck with the whole world against him, absolutely exposed and vulnerable: modern man deprived of all his amenities and artificial

resources." He has been stripped of all his comforting misconceptions of the world which had been disguised by the bustle of the city. As he stands isolated physically, so is he now isolated mentally and morally. It is fitting that he can now proceed after this to a jagged landscape again, but this time to real mountains instead of man-made ones. He can now perceive the dangerous situation, and can face up to it with his new-found strength of character. As Robin Wood puts it: "There is every point in having Roger Thornhill, the previously irresponsible, unattached advertising man, having to hang on to a ledge on Mount Rushmore by one hand, holding the woman he loves by the other, while the homosexual spy Leonard, the film's ultimate representative of the sterile and destructive, grinds the hand with his foot".

Hitchcock uses the symbolic meaning of his settings to underline themes. In the best example of this, the United Nations building becomes a signifier. Thornhill escapes his assassins in the elevator and jumps into a cab. After a minute's indecision he asks to be taken to the U.N., probably to find Townsend. He is searching for truth in the symbol of the building dedicated to the concept of truth. In the first shot we see the building as the cab pulls up. It is a low camera angle, cab in the foreground, and steps leading up to the familiar glass up-thrust of the side of the building. Second shot, Thornhill is walking across the lobby with the sweeping, dramatic lines of the interior flowing behind him in the background. In the lobby Thornhill talks with a clerk who seems not to be an actress, but an actual U.N. clerk put on camera. This reinforces the message of truth – this is not a place for falsity or acting. The delegates in the visitor's lounge are of various nationalities, so that the whole world witnesses Thornhill's "guilt". In the final shot, Thornhill runs away, and the camera cuts to the top of the U.N. building and shows him running diagonally out of the building. He is ant-sized, insignificant, with the building on the right of the screen, imposing and much more important than this isolated individual.

Music is a very vital part of the film, melodramatic in the real sense without being quite melodramatic in the popular sense. Jarring, without being unpleasant, the music with its nervous short repeated staccato three note phrases highlight the action and the feeling of suspense, and lead to a higher synthesis of meaning and feeling. How many of the absurd elements of plot would we accept here if it were not for, just as in opera, the music? The opening credits are accompanied by music, with the diagonally rushing lines of the graphics resolving themselves into the side of a skyscraper just as the music subsides. The music plays its most important role not

during the action sequences, but as a forewarning of danger and conflict to come. The best examples of this are: 1) Thornhill being driven up by his abductors to the Townsend mansion; 2) Thornhill crossing the U.N. lobby; 3) The coffee shop at Mount Rushmore before the shooting, and 4) Thornhill climbing the girders of the Frank Lloyd Wright house to warn Eve. The music preserves the tension and the "breathless" pace even when the action has slowed.

Some of the small touches have import and deserve to be mentioned. In the cocktail lounge, at the same time that it is established in the dialog that Thornhill is a heavy drinker, we see a shot of Thornhill in the background with a cocktail glass in the foreground, very large against his chest. The tendency of the viewer is to ignore the glass, although it is very large, because the attention is on Thornhill's face, but the feeling still sinks in. Similarly, at Prairie Stop several cars zoom by, with the last being a large black hearse. It is out of place out of the city (just as is Thornhill), and out here in the open creates an ominous forewarning. Some of the fades have specific signification also. At the train station in Chicago, Eve has just sent a man she cares for to his certain death. She stares at his retreating back as he runs across the station away from the police, and the scene fades from her face to the wide open and desolate spaces of Prairie Stop. It is a slow fade, and we see both the face and the isolation at the same time. We sense the emptiness and despair in her soul through this montage of images. In another fade we see Thornhill's face illuminated by light at the airport in Chicago just before the cut to the first shot of Mount Rushmore. Robin Wood sees this as a juxtaposition which, "abruptly defines for us the evolution of the hero".

A recurring emphasis is on the perception of hands. When Thornhill and Eve first kiss on the train the camera focuses on Eve's hands on the back of his neck. They are sincere. She really likes him. His hands in contrast are around her neck in connection with their banter about killing and its connection with the sexual. The irony here is that it is Thornhill who is in danger from her hands, as he almost dies by her hand. During their last embrace in this sequence, Eve opens her eyes and looks to her right out of the frame. Something is not right. We "follow" her gaze to a note in the hands of a porter, who in turn delivers the note to another pair of hands. The camera pans back and we see that the hands belong to the fake Townsend, Vandamm. Thornhill's hands are also prominent in the Chicago hotel after his return from Prairie Stop. Upon seeing him safe, Eve rushes into his arms and embraces him. Thornhill holds his hands in back of her up in the air, but he doesn't touch her. There is indecision

here, he feels suspicion and distrust, and yet also an intense longing for her. So his hands hover in back of her—he doesn't have to keep them there, he could have kept them at his side in a sign of total rejection. But he is caught in a dilemma and conflict between thought and feeling, and his hands reflect this.

Control of such elements is vital to the texture of feeling in this film. Sigfried Kracauer considers such control to be Hitchcock's forte: "What distinguishes him from the rest of the film directors is not primarily his superior know-how but, more, his unrivaled flair for psychophysical correspondences. Nobody is so completely at home in the dim border region where inner and outer events intermingle and fuse with each other ... his preference for that borderland ... enables him to venture deep into the psychological dimension and there single out particulars apt to be thrust upon us by a gesture, a garment, an interior, a noise, or a silence. His chases are frequently psychological chases which are developed from a minimum of physical clues." It is in the totality of elements that we see the mastery of this film. The sharpest philosophical insights occur not in the dialog, but in the context of the dialog revealed by the visual. The four moments which stand out in my mind are Joycean-like epiphanies which provide deep and sudden insight and understanding. The first is the elevator scene, which I have already discussed. It is a situation, however, where the main character, and the audience invested with him, is caught in an absurd moment of time which, short as it may be, allows reflection and subsequent awareness. Thornhill, in this scene, with the laughter around him gazes straight at the camera, and thereby strengthens the investment bond between him and the audience in this absurd aloneness of self against the ridicule of the world.

The second moment occurs at Prairie Stop with the appearance of the farmer, who is driven up to the road and left off on the other side across from Thornhill. In the middle of nowhere are these two men. The camera first shows Thornhill in a close-up, then cuts to the farmer, and then back to Thornhill. Suddenly the cut is to a wide angle which shows the desolation and emptiness, the road in between the two men, and the two men facing each other at the opposite ends of the screen. The artificiality of convention, the self-imposed isolation, and the absurdity of the situation hits with a comic suddenness.

The third scene is another frozen moment which seems to last far longer than its actual few seconds—the murder at the U.N. visitor's lounge. As Thornhill pulls the knife out of Townsend's body and looks around bewildered, a photographer snaps his picture. At that

instant Thornhill realizes much of what has eluded him before, primarily that there is truth behind appearance, and that unlike advertising, what is believed to be true is not necessarily so. As he looks around at the accusing faces he is reduced to inarticulation—he has no words to convince them of the truth.

The fourth scene has at its center not Thornhill but Vandamm. The character of Vandamm is only briefly on the screen, and so is generally not very well developed. He is a smooth, suave, and well-mannered man, although he is coldly evil. He betrays no emotion and no inner fire throughout much of the film. Towards the end of the film, as he is awaiting the arrival of the plane to take him and Eve out of the country, his inner emotions do break through for a brief instant. Leonard is trying to persuade him that Eve is a government agent:

*Leonard: You must have had some doubts about her yourself, and still do—*

*Vandamm (disturbed and trying to conceal it): Rubbish...*

Leonard is especially obnoxious in this film in that he seems to enjoy violence and destruction. In this scene he is manipulating the dialog to set up the fake shooting. The audience sides with Vandamm in this confrontation because of the slithering aspects of Leonard.

*Vandamm: You know what I think? I-I-I-ha-I think you're jealous. No, I mean it. I'm very touched. Very.— At this moment Leonard brings the gun out from behind his back and fires point blank at the startled Vandamm:*

*Leonard (softly): The gun she shot Kaplan with. I found it in her luggage.*

Vandamm struggles to control himself, but this is a moment of intense emotion and insight. He breaks his cold reserve and hits Leonard with his fist. It is this moment of outburst, shared by the audience because of its momentary investment with Vandamm, which is the climax of this particular epiphany. We sense the sudden realization of betrayal, hurt, and embarrassment on Vandamm's part. These emotions reveal a Vandamm we haven't seen before — he really did care for Eve, and that was perhaps the reason he was unable to see her real role before.

In all four of these cases there is a combination of elements which present the insight to us. The script cannot, as in written literature, be examined alone in this respect. But, as in the example of opera, the meaning of varying elements present in cinema have to be examined concurrently. In all four cases the sudden picture in the context of the action presents us with a philosophic break in the

action. The meaning of the script, in other words, is interrupted by the meaning of the visual presentation, and the incongruities present the insight.

*North by Northwest* is a comedy, and is clearly so labeled. It is not a comic film, but rather it is a witty, almost light-hearted effort. It is a comedy in that it never allows the main character Thornhill, or his audience, to despair of the existential situation, no matter how serious it is at the time. There is always the knowledge and hope that everything will be overcome, and goodness (and Cary Grant) will prevail. The themes are serious, but the presentation of them are not.

If there is a major fault to this film, it is in this un-serious presentation of serious themes. It is in the tragedy that the reader so immerses himself that easy gratification, or easy escape, is eschewed. The positive is seen through the despair of the negative, and the reader is made stronger because of it. In *North by Northwest* the serious is allowed to be skirted by the viewer, so catharsis, as opposed to simple gratification, is never reached. The seriousness of the content also suffers from the conventional and happy ending. This does not allow for the contemplation of the themes of the film, but rather it smooths and resolves them.

The ending raises questions. With his new self, new wife, and new insights and morality, Thornhill is journeying back to New York. Will he return to his old occupation of advertising? Will he refuse accounts he thinks are misleading? Will he develop human relationships? Will he maintain a commitment with his wife? We certainly hope some of these things will happen. He has learned the lesson of false appearances. And yet he is returning to his former life and the audience is left with a sense of a happy ending but with an underlying shadow of a doubt.

Regardless, the film works on different levels, from the popular to the masterly. It illustrates both the dramatic elements of the popular, and the complex, overdetermined nature of the masterly. It shows the importance of investment and involvement, and is centrally concerned with identity. At the depth of its motivation is the concept of will and growth, with the main character enveloped in a search for identity, meaning, and strength of will. The investment into a popular actor playing the part of a shallow character allows the audience to grow with the character. It might have appealed to the audience on one level if Grant-Thornhill had been a strong and upright character from the beginning, but the text works on many more levels by having this "empty" character grow, persevere, and develop his strength against the world. For those in the audience

with self-doubts, this ability to find strength under excessive situations is an important inducement to investment.

The levels of involvement are many; the film works as a thriller, a romance, as a moral work, as an example of expansion of the will, and as comedy. There is pleasure in the cinematic and literary craft of the film, and in the various elements including music and the use of architecture. There is dramatic strength and intellectual content. It is the combination of all these elements which make this a superior work of literature, one which (in my prediction) will be considered a major work long after certain currently popular and critical successes are dumped upon the Salieri-heap of history.