

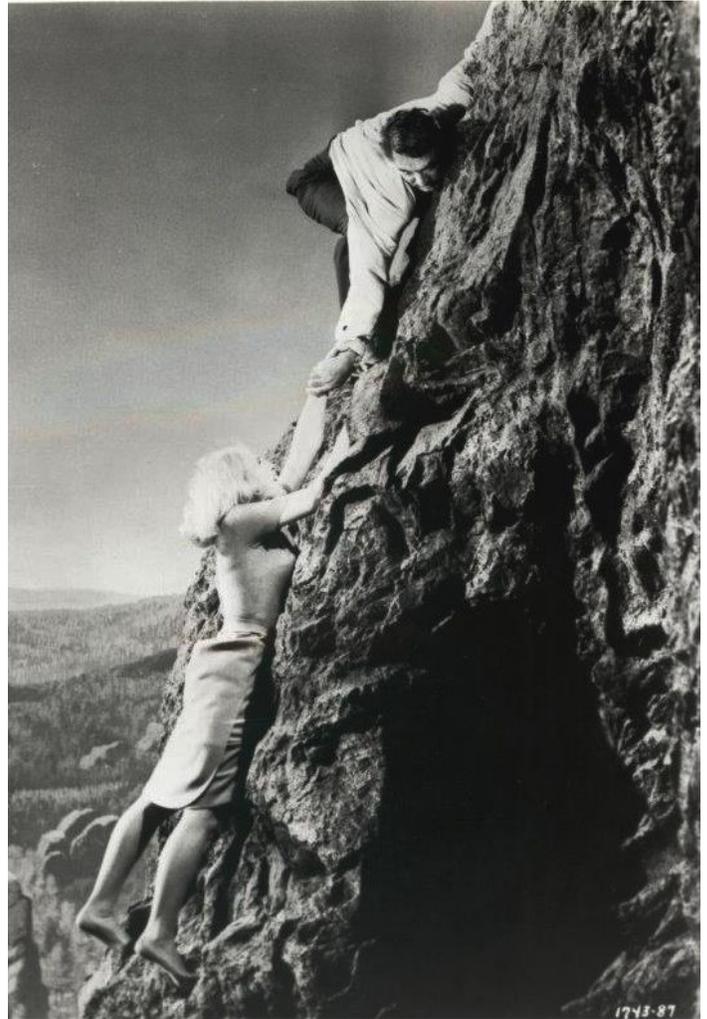
North by Northwest

By Thomas Leitch

Few flukes in Hollywood history have turned out as brilliantly as “North by Northwest.” The film’s roots, as Leonard J. Leff (author of “Hitchcock and Selznick: The Rich and Strange Collaboration of Alfred Hitchcock and David O. Selznick in Hollywood”) has pointed out, lie in the 1950s retooling of the industry that left once-powerful studios scrambling to attract stars and directors who had turned independent and incorporated themselves.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, once the preeminent Hollywood studio but now virtually the last holdout to sign on to the new deal, sought Alfred Hitchcock, a quasi-independent who was currently working for Paramount, to produce and direct “The Wreck of the Mary Deare,” based on a property the studio owned, and assigned screenwriter Ernest Lehman to work on the screenplay. Meeting every day to brainstorm the project, Hitchcock and Lehman swiftly discovered that neither one wanted to make “The Wreck of the Mary Deare.” Instead, in one of the classic bait-and-switch tales in Hollywood annals, they began riffing on a subject the journalist Otis Guernsey, Jr., had once pitched to Hitchcock: an innocent man who became embroiled in international intrigue when he was mistaken for a nonexistent spy some government agency had invented as a distraction from the real spy—a story with its own bait-and-switch baked in from the beginning.

Lehman’s fears that MGM would hold the pair to their contract were allayed when Hitchcock told the studio that they were putting “The Wreck of the Mary Deare” aside temporarily in order to develop the new project. Entranced at the prospect of getting two Hitchcock films instead of one, rookie studio head Joseph R. Vogel agreed, freeing the pair to work on the project they first called “In a Northwest Direction,” then “Breathless,” then, as the story took more definite shape, “The Man on Lincoln’s Nose,” and finally “North by Northwest.” In the meantime, Hitchcock, whose contract gave him control over every aspect of the film subject to budgetary approval, turned down MGM’s suggestions of Gregory Peck and Cyd Charisse, among the studio’s few remaining contract players, for the leads, and cast Cary Grant, Eva Marie Saint, James Mason, Martin Landau, Jessie Royce Landis, and Leo G. Carroll (in his record sixth Hitchcock film), none of them under contract to MGM—still another bait and switch. Lehman and Hitchcock had soon agreed on the broad outline of the film’s opening movement. Madison Avenue advertising executive Roger O. Thornhill



Cary Grant lends Eva Marie Saint a helping hand in the film’s climax at Mount Rushmore. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

(Grant), getting up from a business meeting at New York’s Plaza Hotel to send his mother (Landis) a telegram, is mistaken for the nonexistent spy George Kaplan by a pair of criminal underlings (Adam Williams and Robert Ellenstein) who whisk him off to a Glen Cove mansion where he is interrogated by suavely menacing Philip Vandamm (James Mason), then forcibly intoxicated and sent off to crash to death in a car accident. Once Thornhill survived the accident and set forth on his quest for vindication, however, Lehman and Hitchcock were faced with a paralyzing range of possibilities.

At different points they considered sending him to Yankee Stadium, a Detroit auto-assembly line (where opening the door of a newly assembled car would disclose a corpse inside), and a missile base in Alaska. Only after Lehman conceived the idea of having Vandamm’s mistress Eve, who has fallen in love with Thornhill after their night together aboard the Twentieth Century Limited, shoot Thornhill with blank cartridges in order to fool Vandamm into thinking him dead did the rest of the script fall into place,

complete with three of Hitchcock's most memorable set pieces: Thornhill's pursuit by a murderous crop-dusting plane as he frantically seeks refuge in an Indiana cornfield, his escape from the killer awaiting him outside a Chicago auction house by bidding so wild and obstreperous that the auctioneer calls the police to cart him off, and the climactic sequence in which Vandamm and his henchmen, now aware that Eve is the undercover agent whom George Kaplan was invented to conceal, pursue Eve and Thornhill to the edge of Mount Rushmore, and then down between the faces of the monumental sculptures that stand as the film's ultimate symbols of the patriarchal authority Thornhill's adventures keep butting him up against.

In outline, the story is a familiar man-on-the-run tale of the kind associated with Hitchcock films otherwise as different as "Spellbound" and "Frenzy." Certainly the film's central situation—an innocent man wrongly suspected of murder goes on the run to escape both the police and the real criminals — is borrowed from "The 39 Steps," Hitchcock's first big international success, and "Saboteur," which adapts the earlier film's story to the landscape of World War II America. Like both "The 39 Steps" and "Saboteur," "North by Northwest" follows an innocent on a cross-country odyssey studded with improbable set pieces until he is finally vindicated in a highly theatrical climax. This time, however, Hitchcock corrects the mistake of "Saboteur," in which Barry Kane (Robert Cummings) tried in vain to rescue villainous Frank Fry (Norman Lloyd) as he dangled from the edge of the Statue of Liberty's observation deck, by showing instead the hero and heroine, menaced by Vandamm's homosexual "right arm" Leonard (Landau), dangling from the edge of an iconic landmark of American civic identity. In addition, "North by Northwest" deepens the story of the man on the run by giving the hero more of a history, partly because he is played by the iconic Cary Grant instead of the relatively unknown Robert Donat in "The 39 Steps," or Bob Cummings, partly because he is an unfinished man who has a

great deal to learn about himself as well as the country he is traversing. As Thornhill struggles to navigate a topsy-turvy world of patriarchs in blue-gray suits like Vandamm and the Professor (Carroll) and russet-clad matriarchs like Mrs. Thornhill and Eve, the man on the run story turns into the coming-of-age story of a twice-divorced Madison Avenue professional who knows both everything and nothing about the world and himself.

One final addition sets the film apart from most of Hitchcock's thrillers. From the beginning Lehman's treatment had incorporated elements of absurdity, from Thornhill's phone call to his mother (in which Grant delivers a perfect Dean Martin imitation) after the police pick him up for drunk driving to the moment when Thornhill and his mother come face to face with Vandamm's assassins in a crowded elevator and Mrs. Thornhill asks, "You gentlemen aren't really trying to kill my son, are you?" to the moment when press photographers just happen to be on hand to snap pictures of Thornhill holding up the knife he has just plucked from the body of Lester Townsend (Philip Ober), murdered before his eyes inside the United Nations. So it is no surprise that the film, buoyed by Bernard Herrmann's exhilarating musical score, became Hitchcock's most successful melding of espionage, comedy, and romance, and a surprisingly prophetic template for the James Bond movies that would follow only a few years later, proving that the success of "North by Northwest" was no fluke.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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