

The everyman spy film in north by northwest essay samples

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The thrillers of Alfred Hitchcock have not been strangers to unconventional protagonists – from *Vertigo*'s cowardly, power-hungry Scottie Thompson to *Rear Window*'s incapacitated paranoiac LB Jeffries, to the hapless journalists and playboys of his early British spy capers like *Foreign Correspondent* and *The Lady Vanishes*. Part of the thrill of Hitchcock's thrillers is seeing a clear sense of comedy and irreverence mingling evenly with the serious, atmospheric cinematography of his films. *North by Northwest* is no exception, mining comedy out of an otherwise highly tense spy thriller through the haplessness of his protagonist, ad executive Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), who finds himself embroiled in a spy caper due to a case of mistaken identity. Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* provides a fascinating spin on the spy thriller genre, with many tropes and elements of the genre subverted through an increasingly comic tone and the use of the 'average joe' protagonist as the driving force in the story.

Roger Thornhill, as the conduit through which the spy caper is viewed by the audience, lightens many of the trappings of the spy genre merely by his hapless presence and charming flaws. As played by the effortlessly handsome Cary Grant, much of the humor in the movie is derived from his affable, understated reactions to ostensibly dangerous events. Even when he is dragged from his business lunch to Lester Townshend's home, only to be asked to wait in a study full of books, he jokes, "I'll just do some light reading." Never far from a quip or a wry joke at a villain's expense, Grant's gregarious personality is part performance, part ignorance – a trait decidedly unlike the typical spy you would get in a conventional spy thriller. As Thornhill is constantly out of his element, Grant must instead use one of the

few weapons he has left: his wit.

Part of Thornhill's appeal, and the way he unconventionally slips into the role of a spy fairly easily, involves the unique differences and surprising similarities between the roles of a spy and an ad executive. Both spies and ad execs have to lie and perform, which is likely what makes Grant's identification as the false spy Kaplan so compelling. His charming presence is commonly mistaken for acting and feigned ignorance; as Vandamm tells him in their first conversation, "with such expert play-acting, you make this very room a theater." Late in the film, he even argues to the Professor that he is "an advertising man, not a red herring" – Thornhill's constantly shifting between taking the situation in stride and genuinely fearing for his life. His own suaveness, likely cultivated in the high-stakes world of New York advertising, is likened to the sophisticated nature of the gentleman spy, Hitchcock and Grant utilizing his everyman presence to full effect.

In a regular spy film, Kaplan would simply be the real protagonist, the film following his overt attempts to stop Vandamm; however, in *North by Northwest* Hitchcock makes him a ghost, an imaginary spectre whose shoes Thornhill temporarily fills. The specter of George Kaplan, the man whom Thornhill is mistaken for, looms large over much of the film, being the real, suave spy that Grant's character symbolically replaces. Kaplan's journey is effectively Thornhill's, as he spends the lion's share of the film trying to track down the mysterious figure from city to city, hotel room to hotel room, and eventually taking on the false Kaplan's crusade to take down Vandamm. In this way, Thornhill takes on the responsibility and patterns of the (false) man he is mistaken for, right down to being identified as Kaplan when framed for

the murder of the real Lester Townshend. Thornhill's unsuitability for the role of spy is made manifest in the hotel room scene, where Thornhill puts on Kaplan's suit only to find it does not fit him. It is only after spending some time on the run, and learning to think on his feet and use his wits, that Thornhill willingly takes on the mission of taking down Vandamm – even then, this is in the context of his romance with Eve.

False identities are de rigueur in the world of North by Northwest, by no means exclusive to Thornhill; nearly every major character in the film has their own secret identity which they employ to great effect. Eve Kendall pretends to be an amorous bystander in Thornhill's escape onto the train, but she turns out to be the real spy the false Kaplan personality was invented to cover for. She must also 'play-act' the role of Vandamm's mistress in order to get close to him. Vandamm, meanwhile, masquerades as Lester Townshend to use his home for Thornhill's interrogation. Also, the mysterious intelligence handler Thornhill spends time with is only known as The Professor. In these contexts, Thornhill's mistaken identity is taken sincerely as yet another aspect of the spy game, his protestations being read as deflection or defensiveness against the espionage he is evidently performing.

Despite Thornhill's haplessness and ordinary-ness as a character, he manages to acquit himself well in the role of spy. The film itself shows him starting out as a confused, drunk and helpless victim of circumstance; however, he gradually learns to become an effective spy through experience, improvisation and his predilection toward 'play-acting.' His chameleonic, curious nature allows him to both acquit himself well in the role

of the spy character and also provide some comedic frustration to his circumstances. Even before he is abreast of the whole scheme, Thornhill finds himself playing the role of amateur detective, dragging his mother to the hotel where Kaplan is said to stay and rifling through

Along with the ride is Eva Marie Saint's Eve Kendall, who enjoys the complex and endlessly shifting roles of lover, target, ally and enemy, often within the same scene. Her relationship with Thornhill is complicated, becoming infatuated with him almost immediately (to be fair, the film frequently features men and women alike commenting on Grant's handsome face) and, despite understanding his deeply complicated role in the events at which she is the epicenter, engages in a session of passionate kissing on that very same train ride. Throughout the film, Thorndill and Eve enjoy an incredibly flirtatious, physical relationship, though Thorndill is cagier with her the more he finds out about how much she is in on the scheme. It is only after he discovers that she is the real spy Kaplan was made to distract from that he recontextualizes her betrayal as protectiveness and cares for her.

Eve's real nature as a spy contrasts nicely with Thorndill's charming improvisation, Eve seemingly fascinated at his unerring ability to get by despite everyone wanting to kill him. In many ways, their courtship throughout the film is an effort not just to win Eve's affections, but to 'earn' the privilege of having sex with one another. Unlike, say, a James Bond film, where the spy would sleep with the ingénue right away and never hear from her again, Thorndill and Eve maintain a comparatively virginal relationship until they are married at the end (Hitchcock cheekily ending the film with a cut to a train entering a tunnel – a phallic symbol if ever there was one). This

allows the relationship to play out both straightforwardly (as they are two spies doing their job and competing with each other) and comedically (carrying out a typical Cary Grant-ian slapstick romance), acting as further evidence of this blending of genres.

Hitchcock's love of high angles and sophisticated compositions manage to cinematically tell the story of the world of espionage that revolves around Thornhill, and subsequently his increasing skill and comfort level with becoming a spy himself. There are three major types of shots that Hitchcock uses to sell the tension of the spy antics in *North by Northwest*: first, there is his use of high angles. Whether running out of the UN building after being framed for murder, or climbing across Mount Rushmore, or sneaking through the upper decks of Vandamm's home to warn Eve, many of Thorndill's tenser moments are filmed from incredibly high angles, as if to hammer home the precarious tightrope act Thorndill walks by acting like (and being mistaken for) Kaplan. In many of these shots (such as the wide shot of him running from UN Headquarters), Thorndill himself is as small as an ant, insignificant and powerless against the forces that are working against him.

Thorndill's desperation and danger is also sold through a repeated motif of 'stand-off' shots, in which Grant and another figure stand in profile to one another on either side of the screen. This happens first between Grant and the other mysterious bus passenger in the rural countryside, just before the crop-duster scene. After Thorndill fakes his death by Eve's hand, the two reunite in a forest, Hitchcock balancing the frame with each of them standing next to their cars, which are facing each other in this jungle void. Finally, as Thornhill is captured, he is held at gunpoint by Mrs. Vandamm, the two again

sharing a 'stand-off' balanced framing.

These shots occur during some of the few moments that Thornhill has a sense of equilibrium with (or advantage over) the other individual – Thornhill's active engagement with the bus passenger indicates his increasing confidence in dealing with unknown entities, his reunion with Eve a happy acknowledgement of their equal respect and love for one another, and the stand-off with Mrs. Vandamm actually features a standing Thornhill higher in the frame than the sitting Vandamm – as he knows the gun she's holding carries blanks, giving him an advantage. These shots show the progression of his growing comfort and confidence in this spy scenario, as he turns from unwilling hero to a real one.

The major setpieces of *North by Northwest* help to sell this progression of Thorndill into a proper spy, allowing the conventions of a spy thriller to be played out by a man who is somewhat unprepared for them. Thorndill's initial drunken escape and car ride away from his captors intercuts between rear-projection shots of a bug-eyed, woozy Grant and dim, fast POV footage of the car winding down dark roads, with only the headlights to illuminate his passage. The infamous crop-duster scene in *North by Northwest* shows Thornhill desperately, fearfully running from the homicidal cropduster, taking refuge in a cornfield, nearly getting killed by a tanker truck and serendipitously causing the crop duster to crash into that vehicle. The climactic scene at Vandamm's house (and the chase on Mt. Rushmore) demonstrates Thornhill's complete transformation into a spy, the cinematography taking on a more atmospheric sense of geography as Grant himself springs into direct action.

North by Northwest, through its use of mistaken identities, a hapless, everyday protagonist, and thrilling, atmospheric shot compositions, solidifies itself as a spy thriller that effectively balances the necessary elements of spy action and romantic comedy, offering a unique blend of the two genres that happens to innovate both. Grant's Thorndill character puts a spanner into the works of what would normally be a perfunctory spy thriller, as his inexperience with spying is contrasted with his familiarity with the basic concepts of espionage – lying, trickery, derring-do, allowing him to improvise his way into the role with aplomb. This results in a thrilling combination of action, comedy and romance that makes North by Northwest an excellent example of Hitchcock's unconventional approach to spy thrillers.

Works Cited

Alfred Hitchcock, North by Northwest (film), perf. Cary Grant (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959).

Film.