The Designs of Authorship: An Essay on North by Northwest

Marian Keane

North by Northwest occupies a central, though not easily grasped, place in Hitchcock’s work. It immediately precedes Psycho, one of Hitchcock’s darkest films, and brings together threads and themes of his earlier work, especially The 39 Steps, which it explicitly echoes. In the character of Eve Kendall, much of the Ingrid Bergman character in Notorious is duplicated; and in the Grant character’s plea for help at the end of the film, a harbinger of Marnie can be heard. Yet North by Northwest marks the occasion of many endpoints in Hitchcock’s work. In a way, it is his homage to Hollywood films and his farewell to them, and it is also his declaration of his own place within Hollywood’s history. It is the last time he employs a star cast that survives in the film; the last time his wit and comedy fill a film to his audience’s deep satisfaction; the last time he grants his audience what feels like a completely happy ending.

North by Northwest is and is not a comedy. As a comedy it stands as Hitchcock’s working of a Hollywood genre of comedies, identifiable in part by their witty, fast-paced dialogue. The Cary Grant persona from these comedies emerges fully through his role and the film’s explicit allusion to his earlier film roles. Like the 1930s comedies, North by Northwest ends with (something like) a remarriage. At least, it is the Grant character’s third marriage, and the Saint character’s second intimate liaison that we know of. They take the train back to Chicago, in repetition of their first erotic encounter because, Grant tells her, “I’m sentimental.” And their collapse onto the train berth closes with not quite an embrace, though their union is something we do not doubt. Won in the face of its alternative fall, which would have been to their deaths, their marriage conjoins and closes the dual strains of the film’s plot, one of which called for their deaths, one of which allowed and affirmed their love, and specifically, their marriage.

1. I refer here to the body of critical and theoretical works by Stanley Cavell that set out the nature of, and read in the particular, a genre he has isolated and named “Comedies of Remarriage.” I refer specifically to his brilliant essay, “Leopards in Connecticut,” Georgia Review 30, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 233–262, and to “The Pursuit of Happiness: A Reading of The Lady Eve,” New Literary History 10 (1979): 581–601. This essay owes a great debt to Cavell, not only to his writings, but to the numerous lectures by and conversations with him, to which this essay only represents a part of my debt.
2. This feature of the Comedies of Remarriage of closing on an “awkward” embrace or kiss is discussed by Cavell in “Leopards in Connecticut,” 247–248, as a crucial feature of the genre.


Though on the one hand North by Northwest is a romantic comedy and true to characteristics of a Hollywood genre, it is also a Hitchcock film. Thus, there are ways in which Hitchcock inserts himself, the history of his own filmmaking, into the generic aspects of the film. (This is one way of announcing that the history of Hollywood film genres is both encompassed by, and cannot be considered without the inclusion of, Hitchcock’s work.) This film incorporates the romantic comedy features with classic Hitchcockian strategies: Thornhill/Grant’s mistaken identity (as in The Wrong Man), a deep concern with theater, the threats of murder and violence. Most importantly, alternative plots, or scripts, share the world of the film’s romance. Thus the possibilities of North by Northwest are both comic and tragic, where tragedy not only stands in the possibility of Thornhill’s and Kendal’s deaths, but in their metaphorical deaths by continued service to the Professor or Vandamm.

In the characters of the Professor and Vandamm, Hitchcock continues a lineage of figures whose intentions resemble and also challenge his own act of authoring the world of the film. Both characters have scripts that are subversive to Hitchcock’s own, and both devise little acts of theater, of playacting and violence, in order to achieve their ends. The Professor’s plot is inseparable from Vandamm’s, and both strategies are inseparable from Hitchcock’s. Through these characters, and by distinguishing himself from them, Hitchcock announces who he is as a filmmaker, asserts his own presence, and contemplates the conditions of his authoring presence behind the camera. Within his work, these surrogate, subversive author-figures function centrally as one means of meditating on his own art and act of filmmaking.

That Hitchcock’s relationship with the characters of Vandamm and the Professor involves the act of authorship is apparent in the shots that introduce either character. Vandamm is the second author-figure to enter the camera’s gaze, during the intricate, and to his mind unsuccessful, encounter with Thornhill/Grant in the elegant Townsend library. Vandamm (James Mason) enters the room through a set of double wooden doors, which, framed in long shot, heighten the

3. William Rothman’s study of Hitchcock’s authorship, Hitchcock: The Murderous Game (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), deals centrally with the author-figures and their significance in Hitchcock’s work as they appear in five Hitchcock films. The debt this essay owes to Rothman’s work is but a small fraction of its real debt to him for his patience in seeing it to its completion. Throughout, my reading of North by Northwest is modeled on Rothman’s manner of reading Hitchcock films.
4. The first author-figure to appear is Hitchcock himself, in a telling and humorous shot. During the title sequence, as his name cuts across the screen, Hitchcock runs to catch a bus, which shuts its doors in his face. The shot comments ironically on New York City’s rush hour rudeness, and also suggests that Hitchcock is necessarily closed out of the world of his film. As with Octave/Renoir’s realization at the end of Rules of the Game, Hitchcock here acknowledges that his position behind the camera mandates his physical omission from the world viewed.
City home, the camera ascends to a high-angle position at a particular moment. The Professor declares that the CIA will “do nothing” to save Thornhill now that he faces the real consequences of their invented decry agent. His survival is, the Professor states, “his problem.” The camera assumes a high-angle, vertiginous position at this moment when Thornhill’s fate seems sealed. “Good-bye, Mr. Thornhill, wherever you are,” intones the female advisor; framed within the shot, on an angle, is the desk surrounded by the scriptwriters, inclusive of the empty chair that invokes Hitchcock’s presence. The camera moves to the same high position when Vandamm tells Thornhill/Grant that his confession will at least afford him “the opportunity of surviving the evening” in the Townsend library. And again, Hitchcock marks the moment of an incipient death, or its threat, when he raises the camera above Vandamm and Leonard at Vandamm’s home. Eve will be disposed of, Vandamm states, “from a great height. Over water.”

Significantly, the place occupied by the camera in the initial views of the Professor and Vandamm is assumed at later moments in either scene by the would-be author-figure. When Vandamm reads Thornhill/Grant the sparse itinerary of George Kaplan’s past, present, and future travels—a document that stands as his only information about the Professor’s script—he stands behind the desk. In the CIA sequence, the Professor recounts the story of Kaplan’s invention as a fictive character and, to the dismay of his advisors, asks, “What can we do to save him, without endangering our own agent?” Raising the safety of the agent and the secrecy of her real role in relation to Vandamm as his priority concern, the Professor relinquishes responsibility for Thornhill’s future. At these moments, he stands behind (Hitchcock’s) empty chair, with the room’s large windows squarely behind him.

The introductory shots of these characters and the subsequent occupation of the camera’s positions in them by the Professor and Vandamm reveal aspects of Hitchcock’s presence in North by Northwest, two of which we will set out here: first, that he is in opposition to the plans of these characters, and second, that the specific challenges each raises for Hitchcock, threats of which he is aware, are those of authorship. Clearly, the Professor’s invention of George Kaplan, a name or character without a player, poses the same problems as a film script’s characters prior to the selection of performers. This status of the figure of Kaplan is borne out in the Professor’s request that Thornhill/Grant “go on being [Kaplan]” through the Mount Rushmore scene.

Though Vandamm is ignorant of important elements of the Professor’s script, such as that Eve is a spy, he nonetheless has a plotted strategy all his own. Like the Professor’s plot, Vandamm’s play requires (play)acting with the intent of deception for realization. His performance as Townsend, his sister’s part as his wife (Mrs. Townsend), and Eve’s act of seductress are all pieces of theater directed by Vandamm. The Professor’s play, on the other hand, rather than attacking and exposing Vandamm’s operations, takes up a role within them, penetrating them by performances designed for Vandamm as audience and for his deception. Though the Professor’s play is more completely worked, Vandamm’s harbors a special
secret; what that secret really is, we never learn. What we do know is that his secret is embodied in a little film, itself embodied, engorged, or swallowed, into the belly of a miniature demigod statue.

The character of Vandamm dwells in what Norman Bates will aptly name "a private trap" in Psycho; in certain ways, he and Norman resemble each other. Whereas Norman will continue to "light the lights and change the beds" even in the absence of clients for his motel, Vandamm maintains a similar routine of formalities. Vandamm's "private trap" is the world of theater, of mere performances rather than actions truly meant, feelings really felt. His initial interview with Thornhill/Grant proves him to be both an admiring audience and a disbeliever of reality. "So you see," he says warily, "there's very little sense in maintaining this fiction [we can read: Hitchcock's script] that you're deceiving us, any more than we are deceiving you."

The library scene is a little piece of theater Vandamm expertly designs to achieve an unmasking. His first gestures of closing the drapes and lighting two lamps, which throw light directly and brilliantly on Thornhill/Grant's face, transform the room into a theatrical space, a stage. In one of his customary strategies, Vandamm accuses Thornhill of creating this stage likeness, thereby diverting responsibility from himself. As Thornhill announces that he has tickets for a play at a theater in New York, Vandamm tells him, "With such expert playacting, you make this very room a theater."

The particular means by which Vandamm attempts to effect Kaplan's emergence, to cut through the guise of Thornhill and reveal the real person, is confronting Thornhill with the facts of his "real" identity. By staging a play within which Vandamm assumes he knows the truth about Thornhill, this scene presents the first elucidation of the film's title reference to Hamlet. (Hitchcock explicitly alludes to the same play-within-a-play scene in Hamlet in Murder?) The title of North by Northwest is taken from act II, Scene ii, in Hamlet, in which Hamlet greets the players who come to Elsinore:

HAMLET: Gentlemen, you are welcome to Elsinore.
Your hands. Come then.
'Tappertunance of welcome, is fashion
and ceremony. Let me comply with you in garbe,
lest me extent with the players,
which I tell you must show fairly outwards,
should appear more like entertainment than yours.
You are welcome.
But my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived.

GUILDENSTERN: In what, my dear lord?

HAMLET: I am but mad north, northwest;
when the wind is southerly,
I know a hawk from a handsaw. (379–388)

In Vandamm's play, every line turns on the subjects of acting and deception. Vandamm acknowledges that Thornhill/Grant is a "man of many names" and agrees "to accept [his] current choice." "Roger Thornhill" is understood by Vandamm to be an act, a falsity. On one level, Vandamm is erroneous in his refusal to accept that this man is Roger Thornhill, Madison Avenue advertising executive, master of "the Expedient Exaggeration." At another level, a level of which Vandamm is unaware, the issue uncovered is that of who the actor Cary Grant is, since Roger Thornhill and George Kaplan become two of his many names, two of the roles he plays in front of the camera.

North by Northwest makes a point of being a film tailor-made for Cary Grant, and not merely in the resurrection of his 1930s comedy persona. Every aspect of his charm, wit, and physical ease becomes a part of the character Roger Thornhill. By contrast, George Kaplan is not, at the start, a role for Grant. Clearly the Professor did not have him in mind when he ordered a suit and a comb full of dandruff, outlining features of Kaplan. Kaplan, however, is a role Thornhill/Grant comes to accept, to play in North by Northwest: it is as Kaplan that he dies in the cafeteria at Mount Rushmore.

The part of Roger Thornhill is not altogether different than that of Kaplan; the task of playing Thornhill, though, involves Grant's understanding and acknowledgment that he is acting in a film directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Revealing this process of Thornhill/Grant's dawning realization of the camera, the camera, time and time again, functions independently of his gaze. In these special views, the camera points out particularly menacing, threatening elements of the world of the film of which Thornhill/Grant is unaware. This knowledgeability of the camera is shown, for example, in its sweeping tracking movement, during the Oak Room bar scene, when it focuses on the two ominously waiting thugs in the corridor. Similarly, when Thornhill/Grant and his entourage of disbelievers, his mother and the detectives, leave the Townsend mansion, the shot that views their disappearing car turns to frame the figure of a gardener trimming the hedges. In the next, closer, shot, the gardener raises his head into the frame and turns to watch Thornhill's departure. This figure who frighteningly penetrates the limits of the frame is Vandamm's knife-wielding thug.

Yet another instance of the camera's independent gazing occurs in the United Nations lobby. Here, the camera's movement is almost exactly like the movement in the Oak Room bar scene. Thornhill gives his name ("George Kaplan") to the information desk and asks that Lester Townsend be paged. Thornhill then turns his back to the camera, surveying the room for Townsend's arrival. At the exact moment that his back is turned, the camera pans right quickly, to the doorway, where the knife thrower waits, framed next to a highly polished statue.

These shots emphasize Thornhill/Grant's unawareness of the camera, his denial of its presence. The camera movements undertaken at the times Thornhill turns away reveal its perspicacity in the world of the film and also, with each shot beginning its motion from a frame Thornhill/Grant occupies, imply his absent
view. In other words, these are views that are available to Thornhill/Grant, but that require his acknowledgement of the camera.

As in other of his films, Cary Grant's dilemma in North by Northwest is that he does not know about the world he inhabits, how it works or what lies in store for him; he also does not know, on a deeper level, what he is to do. His manner of surviving his thrownness in the world he discovers himself to inhabit relies upon his intelligence and physical agility and most importantly on his comic wit.

Grant appropriates the gaze and frame of the camera at a crucial moment in North by Northwest. On the runaway of the airport in Chicago, the Professor tells Grant that Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) is a double agent. In a close-up shot, Grant's look of sudden realization is underscored by the increase of light illuminating him. This shot fades into a long shot of Mount Rushmore, within which a binocular iris movement enlarges and isolates the faces carved in its surface. In the third shot of this point-of-view sequence, the camera frames Grant peering through a large, cameralike, tourist's binocular. His possession of this frame is complete, however, only after his discovery that the Professor's plan does not allow him to leave with Eve. His escape from the hospital window, echoing by opposition his inability to escape from the car taking him to Townsend's mansion, (where he is framed completely, and enclosed by the car window) leads to his act of contacting Eve through the ladderlike (and framelike) windows of her room at Vandamm's house.

However, fully apparent from the beginning of North by Northwest is the fact that the Thornhill figure framed by the camera is Cary Grant. He himself disparages the name (as Vandamm disparages Kaplan and Thornhill) to Eve, telling her that the "O" middle initial stands for "nothing." The film's finest sight gags occur when Grant tries, unsuccessfully, to disguise his face or when the camera frames his face making faces, such as in his drunk driving sequence. . . . "I know. I look vaguely familiar," Grant admits, "You feel you've seen me somewhere before." "Mmmmm," she responds. If North by Northwest is, as Hitchcock tells Truffaut, "one long joke" in any way, it is as an extended comedy revolving around Grant's face. The joke is its unmistakable singularity, familiarity, sculptural fitness in the frame.

Grant's entrance into the world of North by Northwest repeats, as many of the film's images do, features of the film's opening credit sequence. The initial single-color blank screen hinges itself, graphically, to the wall of (what we take to be) a building previously invisible as window frames take their shape. These rectangular outlines, resembling film frames, transform into a reflective, mirror-like surface containing the image of traffic moving on the street below. The screen, in this sequence, conjures itself a screen on which frames take shape and which open onto reflected depth. Cary Grant enters the world of North by Northwest from an elevator, the doors of which are initially shut. Thus his appearance occurs in an image that begins in flatness and opens onto depth, a depth from which he steps. This opening movement of the elevator doors duplicates features of the opening sequence's flatness. Like the image conjured in depth, Grant's appearance marks his "birth" or magical emergence into the film. And he is born into the frame of North by Northwest already in possession of his screen identity.

Without doubt, Grant's entrance is also theatrical. Like Vandamm's entrance into the Townsend library, or Eve Kendall's sudden appearance from an unviewed doorway into the long, thin train corridor, or even the Professor's withheld presence in the CIA office scene, North by Northwest makes theater as much its subject as it does film. The importance of the opening credit sequence lies in its deeply meditative relation to the subjects addressed by the film. At the outset, it declares the film's relationship to the worlds of Hollywood films wherein magical powers oversee lovers to their proper conclusions.

Further, this opening sequence speaks to the dilemmas Grant faces within the world of the film, specifically that he must learn what that world is and whose magic obtains. The deep issue raised in the magical appearance of the film's image regards what the world so conjured actually is. Partially, this is a question about the presence of the director, whose hand, itself a secret, creates the image of the world we view. But also, this is partially a question about the nature of the film image conjured out of the screen itself. This magic remains that of one unseen; the world conjured announces itself as a miniature, the reflection of a world projected on the flat and receptive screen.

In turn, Grant's magical appearance into the world of the film raises issues that are repeated in the question addressed to him—who is he?—throughout the film; the most anyone knows is his familiar face and his ability to act. His entrance and presence, seemingly an importal presence affirmed by the failures of repeated attempts to kill him, revolve around the issue of who it is that Cary Grant becomes (who anyone becomes) on film.

7. Specifically, I refer to Grant's work in the 1930s comedies, most importantly in Bringing Up Baby, but also in The Awful Truth and His Girl Friday. Henry Fonda suffers the same dilemma in The Lady Eve.
8. Stanley Cavell discusses the problem of thrownness in its philosophical context in "What Becomes of Things on Film," Philosophy and Literature, 2, no. 2 (Fall 1978): 249-257. I refer to pages 249-251 specifically.
9. Magic is an especially important feature of the genre of comedies set forth by Cavell. Usually, as in The Lady Eve, the father (or Senex figure) holds the magical power in the world of the film. Ibid. See also Cavell's critical and theoretical work on this subject, particularly "The Pursuit of Happiness," pp. 584-589.
10. This is the problem Cavell sets out at the close of "What Becomes of Things on Film" as "an undertaking of what we might call film theory," that is, "to explain how these appearances are made possible by the general photogenesis of film altogether, by the fact, as I more or less put it in The World Viewed, that objects on film are always already displaced, trouvés (i.e., that we as viewers are always already displaced before them)" would be this undertaking (p. 256). It was this statement of Cavell's that led to my understanding of this problem in North by Northwest.
North by Northwest confronts this problem through the designs invented by the Professor and Vandamm, in part. It is in juxtaposition to the playacting that both demand that another acting, one that Hitchcock stands behind, presents itself. And this alienation of acting and its opposite, or playacting and its real counterpart, is also at the core of Hamlet. In a scene earlier than the one of the title's reference, Hamlet sets out the problems of acting revived and explicit in North by Northwest. Hamlet is responding to his mother's accusation that his grief at his father's death "seems so particular" on him. He replies:

*Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems.
’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected ‘bavior of the visage,
Together with all forms, modes, shows of grief,
That can denote me truly; these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within me which passeth show;
These, but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.iii.78–86)*

It is Vandamm in North by Northwest who makes the claims that Grant’s performances are playacting, that they, in fact, "seem." He charges Grant with playing the outraged Madison Avenue advertising man, the peevish lover, and the wrongly accused fugitive from justice at the art auction scene in the same way he accuses Grant of "playacting" the role of Thornhill in the Townsend library. Vandamm’s plight in North by Northwest is of a man who cannot see; it is to him that we might direct Gloucester’s statements to his son in King Lear, when he claims that Edgar is a man "that will not see because he doth not feel" (IV.i). At the close of North by Northwest, we witness not the single, simple demise of Vandamm’s import-export trading of national secrets, but the cataclysmic plunge of his world, its ways, its old routines. Believing everybody capable of (play)acting, of falsifying who they are, what they feel, and where their loyalties fall and reside, Vandamm knows he can be deceived at every turn, each encounter. In the face of this possibility, to ward it off, he himself playacts, masks who he is to preserve his feelings.

Yet believing the world capable of lying, Vandamm tragically misplaces his trust. He cannot see that Thornhill/Grant is not Kaplan, but neither can he see that Eve no longer loves him or that Leonard does love him. Vandamm’s inhumanity is registered in his timely exits from the scenes of violence happily executed by Leonard. Grant’s coerced drinking at the Townsend library . . . , and Eve’s seduction of Grant on the train, are performances that occur at Vandamm’s demand. In a similar way the Professor runs inside the Mount Rushmore cafeteria the moment Vandamm, Leonard, and Eve arrive to meet Thornhill/Grant. Both author-figures, maintaining the privilege of keeping themselves on the periphery of the acts they command, or hidden but aware of them, take their physical removal to mean they are not responsible for the things that take place.

The deeply sympathetic strain of Vandamm’s character is his aestheticism. There are formalities to Vandamm’s world and authorship, routines that Hitchcock proves do not hold in the world of the film. Vandamm asks that Eve seduce Grant, but expects her to have no feelings about it; even Leonard’s declaration of his feelings shocks Vandamm at the close of the film. One formality that obtains for Vandamm is that the world carry with it no real consequences for actions, and it is for him that the ending of North by Northwest stands as a tragic revelation. In a film full of fake bullets, fake deaths, and fake identities, Leonard’s fall to death forces Vandamm to say, “That wasn’t very sporting, using real bullets!” His sense of theatrical formality throughout the film caused him to deny the reality of his own situation and those into which he placed others. And, without acknowledging the actions, feelings, and human beings in North by Northwest to be real, Vandamm artfully placed himself above its world. It is Vandamm at the film’s close who suffers most for the turn Hitchcock’s film took toward the dimensions of its own reality, warranting deaths, affirming love.

The Professor, too, holds himself outside the world of North by Northwest. "Getting too old for this kind of work," he grumbles to Thornhill/Grant as they run to catch the plane to Rapid City. His intervention became warranted only when Grant “severely overplayed” his part at the art auction, endangering Eve’s life. The Professor’s reemergence into the world of the film, after his declaration that he would do nothing to save Thornhill, is necessitated by the fact that the play has swung out of control. Thus he designs one last act, one that “will satisfy” Vandamm: the act of Kaplan’s death. Whereas Vandamm’s goal is the preservation of a little statue, the Professor’s is national security. And like Vandamm, the Professor’s aim and methods are not vindicated by Hitchcock in the end. The Professor’s tragic flaw, although not laced with the homosexual undertone revealed in Vandamm, is that his desire for national security outweighs his humanity. He lies to Thornhill/Grant, telling him that after meeting Vandamm in the cafeteria, he and Eve will be together. And like Vandamm, the Professor undertakes no actions on his own; the state trooper fires the fatal bullet that kills Leonard from the top of Mount Rushmore.

Both surrogate author-figures are present by proxy in the difficult scene between Eve and Thornhill in her Chicago hotel room. There, they appear in the form of statues, two Chinese sculptures placed on the bureau, next to a television set.11 The restraint with which she asks that Grant leave, “no questions asked.”

---

11. Television sets appear in North by Northwest in three scenes, each time representing one of the author-figures’ access to the other characters in the film, particularly Eve and Thornhill, by viewing them from a hidden location. In brief, these television sets duplicate features of the film frame and
reveals the controlling power these two figures wield over her, the force with which they demand that she deny her real feelings and relinquish them in the acts they demand of her. The (re)marriage desired by Kendall/Saint and Thornhill/Grant requires their acknowledgment, not only that they act out of love, but that they act under Hitchcock’s gaze. Their escape occurs at Grant’s discovery that both the Professor and Vandamm are birds of prey, called by Hamlet a hawk and a handsaw, or his uncle-father and aunt-mother. The kernel of Grant’s ability to deceive these watchful, plotting authors derives from, Hitchcock reveals to us, his immortality on the screen once he acknowledges Hitchcock’s camera.

Yet this is not to say that Hitchcock shares nothing with these birds of prey. Surely the designs of the Professor and Vandamm, their efforts and desires to kill and demand performances, are also those of Hitchcock’s camera. His camera’s own immortality as a mythical bird with an appetite for murder becomes the subject of Psycho. Even in North by Northwest, Grant and Saint are pressed to the extreme, to begging for assistance to survive their perches on Mount Rushmore. It is Grant who must look directly into the camera, which represents at that moment Leonard’s point of view, and beseech it for help. Hitchcock’s allegiance with Leonard here is not accidental; the faces of the camera are revealed in both of their possibilities, human and inhuman. Hitchcock also speaks to the desires of his audience in this shot, desires that contain both the wish to see Grant and Saint fall and the wish to see them survive.

In accepting the conditions of a romantic comedy of remarriage, Hitchcock declares that its world, like the world of any film (a world that happens before and includes the camera), is not without its dark desires. The myth of the Hollywood screen romance, which emerges from and creates “such stuff as dreams are made on,” is revealed to include the preying possibilities of the camera’s (and audience’s) gaze under Hitchcock’s magical hand. North by Northwest affirms the comedy of remarriage, but reveals tragic possibilities that reside in its (film) myth as a result of its very nature as a film.

screen and reveal the author-figure’s private viewing access to the world of the film. One television set is in the Professor’s CIA office, where it symbolizes a global control in much the same way as the Professor’s globe in The 39 Steps (cf. Rothman, The Murderous Gaze, Chapter 3) symbolizes this. Most clearly, the television set on which Vandamm’s housekeeper spies Grant, in reflection, sneaking down the stairs and arrests him (with Eve’s fake gun) reveals the privileges of viewing they permit.

12. This awareness of the camera, or of a film genre, is not to be found in North by Northwest alone. Though Hitchcock’s camera, and the film’s acknowledgments of it, are different from those in the other comedies of remarriage as set out by Cavell, the comedies he reads share this self-consciousness, and address the issues of the screen and camera, and that of the viewer. Thus the specific working of the genre is Hitchcock’s in North by Northwest, but this central characteristic of the film as a comedy of remarriage is shared by the other films Cavell isolates, each in a different way.