

# North by Northwest (1959)

Andreas Teuber

"You gentlemen aren't really trying  
to kill my son, are you?" Clara

## PRODUCTION CREDITS:

A Metro Goldwyn-Mayer Production.  
Directed by Alfred Hitchcock.  
Screenplay by Ernest Lehman  
Cinematography by Robert Burks  
Original Music by Bernard Herrmann  
Running Time: 136 minutes (in Technicolor)

## CAST

Cary Grant as Roger O. Thornhill  
Eva Marie Saint as Eve Kendall  
James Mason as Phillip Vandamm  
Jessie Royce Landis as Clara Thornhill  
Leo G. Carroll as The Professor  
Martin Landau as Leonard

## Thinking about North by Northwest

As with *Rear Window*, Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* can be seen as a metaphor for cinema itself, only here Hitchcock opens a way for us to view the film as an exploration of what it means to occupy the chair of the director of a film and what it means to be subject to a director's vision. If *Rear Window* can be seen as a film about movie-going, *North by Northwest* can be seen as a film about movie directing.

*North by Northwest* can be seen, too, as both a primer on how to go about directing a movie as well as a "guide" to directing a Hitchcock movie, hence, viewed as a meditation on the role of the director in film. Following what Mary Keane has to say about the film, there are two characters in the film in particular, if one does not count Hitchcock himself who seem to "stand in" for directors of a sort. There is Vandamm, played by James Mason, and the Professor, played by Leo G. Carroll. Both Mason and Carroll play roles in the film, roles quite different from one another, but roles that put them in the position of a director or someone who sees the world [viewing their worlds] with a "director's eye."

Given that one thing a director does is direct actors, there is, in this film, too, a good deal about acting in film and, more specifically about what it might be like, what it means, to "appear" in one of Hitchcock's films.

## **Casting Cary Grant in *North by Northwest***

As Jimmy Stewart was at the center of *Rear Window*, Cary Grant plays the lead role here. But here in *North by Northwest*, Grant seems far less in control than Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window*. Stewart occupies *Rear Window* as its founding presence: we see what he sees. Here although we're *with* Cary Grant for much of the film; we follow him *through* the film. What he sees is not what we see. Indeed what we appear to be watching a movie that Cary Grant is in, whereas in *Rear Window*, it is as if we're in Jimmy Stewart's movie. Stewart, of course, is also in a movie but, in Grant's case, he seems to be in someone else's movie, i.e., in a movie other than his own.

Whose movie is that? The movie starts with a kidnapping. Cary Grant, perhaps I should say Roger O. Thornhill, is nabbed by two thugs and shoved into a yellow and red cab and whisked away. That kidnapping and that cab set the tone and he stage for the entire film. Grant is constantly being thrown into and out of things or seen climbing in and out of them. Might we begin to "see" being thrust into a cab as a metaphor for what I might be like to be cast in a movie? What do you think? Stanley Cavell suspects this may be the case.

## **Casting Cary Grant as Thornhill and Thornhill as Kaplan.**

As if to make the case for us, the kidnapping, leads, almost immediately to a case of mistaken identity, to a debate between Grant and his abductors about whether they have the right or the wrong man. Grant insists they have the "wrong man"; he's the "wrong man." But what do you think? Is there any actor more right for this role in this Hitchcock movie than Cary Grant? Putting the answer aside for a moment, we discover quite quickly that Grant is mistaken for someone else, for a George Kaplan.

Who is George Kaplan? Well, we do not know at first. Grant, however, suddenly finds himself cast in a role for which he never tried out, mistaken for someone by the name of George Kaplan. But now Grant's predicament has developed into a situation that seems to underwrite the notion that the kidnapping at the outset was itself a set-up, setting up Grant's being cast in the role of Kaplan.

## **Who's Directing This Movie? (I)**

Who cast Grant in this role; how, pray tell did he come to land this part, the part of Kaplan? Enter Vandamm or as he calls himself when he enters the film, Lester Townsend.

Several film critics, Mary Keane is one, have commented on Vandamm's entrance in the film. He enters, if you recall, through a set of double doors in the library of a large house on a large estate perhaps in Westchester County where Grant has been taken. Vandamm's entrance, maybe I should say, James Mason's, is, as has been noted, rather theatrical. We get a shot of the closed doors before Mason enters; the doors swing open and "ta ta" in comes Mason. The doorway resembles a frame that in turn resembles a stage set. Under the circumstances we are led to believe at this stage we are going to learn what is going on, why Grant has been taken to this place, and to what end. We are led to believe by the authoritative position that Mason occupies, as the apparent owner of the estate and the mastermind of Grant's kidnapping, that he, Mason, is in charge and knows what's going on.

In a movie the person in charge and who purportedly knows what will happen next is the director. But as the scene unfolds we come to suspect that things may not be as they appear to be. When the scene is over, we are let in on the little secret, perhaps it's a big secret, that Vandamm was pretending to be somebody he's not, pretending, only pretending to be the owner, to be Lester Townsend. And although he accuses Grant of acting, of pretending to be someone other than Kaplan, we discover Mason is acting, pretending to be somebody other than Vandamm. So perhaps Mason as Vandamm is not to be trusted. Or perhaps Mason as Vandamm is not really in charge. Somewhat ironically, however, Mason as Vandamm whom we discover was acting accuses Cary Grant as Thornhill of acting.

Indeed, Mason as Vandamm thinks Grant is playing the part consummately well, taking Grant's denials that he is Kaplan and his claims that he does not even know who Kaplan is, as all an "act," just the sort of thing Kaplan, whoever Kaplan is, would say.

Still whatever we may or may not understand at this point in the film, it seems that Grant as Thornhill figures to have been thrown into some story, some plot of Vandamm's, of Mason as Vandamm's, own devising. Indeed Vandamm seems to know George Kaplan's itinerary, and has it written out on a piece of paper. Such knowledge of an actor's past, present and future scenes is just the sort of knowledge a director would have. He has a storyboard.

## Who's Directing This Movie? (II)

Having grown suspicious whether Vandamm knows the whole story or whether he is fully in charge of the events unfolding in Cary Grant's world we are suddenly given a glimpse into another world behind the scenes where people are talking of Kaplan as if they know all about Kaplan. The film jumps to a sequence in an office of the CIA where several agents are sitting around a conference table with their boss, the Professor, having a discussion about the mysterious George Kaplan. In this scene we learn that Kaplan is fictitious, a character invented by the CIA, a decoy to distract and fool Vandamm who is the head of a spy ring that the CIA is trying to penetrate. Film critics have remarked about this scene that it resembles a "script-writing" conference with the agents at the table standing in as writers and their boss, the Professor, who's overseeing the story, cast in the role of the director. Indeed, we seem to have arrived at last at a place where someone really "knows" who Kaplan is, only to learn, that Kaplan does not exist, is a figment of someone's imagination, although now the CIA, the scriptwriters have a problem because Grant as Thornhill has been thrown into their plot and assumed the role of George Kaplan who, presumably, according to the CIA, the scriptwriters, nobody was supposed to play.

The Professor, even if we view him in the role of a film director of sorts, does not seem all that interested in the fate of Thornhill, who has suddenly and quite unexpectedly been thrown, cast into the role of Kaplan, a character of the Professor's invention. Indeed the Professor insists he will "do nothing" to save Thornhill, Grant. And one of the CIA advisors cavalierly dismisses the consequences for Thornhill in the demise of Kaplan which the CIA's story-line calls for, "Good-bye, Mr. Thornhill, wherever you are." And the Professor offers his opinion that Thornhill's ceasing to exist now that he has assumed the role of Kaplan whose life is about to end is Thornhill's "problem."

Of course it is also Hitchcock's problem since Cary Grant is not only playing Thornhill in his movie, Grant is playing Kaplan in the Professor's movie. One way to view *North by Northwest* is as a movie made by its director on a mission, a mission to rescue his star and lead actor, from the roles and movies into which he has been cast by two directors manque, Vandamm and the Professor.

### **Who's Directing This Movie? (III)**

If Vandamm and the Professor are directors manque or surrogate directors, where does that leave is Hitchcock whom we know is the person who is really directing this movie? Will the real director please stand up? Who and where is Hitchcock? Is Hitchcock in their movie or making his own

Well, we know, it is common knowledge, Hitchcock is *in* all his films. Hitchcock makes a cameo appearance in each and every one and a game that moviegoers like to play while watching one of his films is the game of who can spot Hitchcock first. There are several Websites on the Internet devoted to listing Hitchcock's cameo appearances and the best one of these sites can be found at

### **Hitchcock Cameo Appearances**

<http://hitchcock.tv/cam/cameos.html>

Very early on in *Northwest by Northwest* Hitchcock can be seen trying to board a bus, only to have the doors close, leaving him standing by the curb. This moment stands in sharp contrast to the experience of his lead actor who is grabbed from the sidewalk, tossed into a cab and driven away as well as to the grand entrance of Vandamm through those double doors.

Hitchcock misses the bus.

It's as if the movie takes off without him.

Or perhaps, since he cast himself in the role of someone who misses the bus, perhaps he's decided not to go along for the ride. Perhaps he's decided not to be in the picture. Can this be? Remember this movie is laced with deceit and deception. Vandamm pretends to be Townsend. Roger Thornhill is mistaken for George Kaplan; Eve is a double agent. Think back to those two scenes where we are first introduced to our two surrogate directors, Vandamm and the Professor. Is Hitchcock in either of these two scenes? Well, no, not physically present. But is there a place reserved for him somewhere in the room, in either the library of the Townsend mansion or in the CIA conference room? Mary Keane on her reading of the film suggests that he might be there, not overtly, but there as the master puppeteer pulling the strings.

### **The Director's Chair**

As noted, it is a feature of a Hitchcock film that he always assigns a role to the camera. It views the world only rarely from a third person, objective, point of view. Its view of the world is the view of someone behind it. What it sees, he sees or she sees. With this in mind, we discover something we are likely to have overlooked about the two scenes introducing us to Vandamm and the Professor.

Take the library scene first.

When Vandamm enters through those double doors his entrance causes Grant to look up from his position by the window opposite the doors. Grant is standing between a desk and the window. He has to turn 180 degrees to catch sight of Vandamm. Grant was looking out the window when the doors behind him open. We look out into the garden from Grant's point of view. But Vandamm's entrance is not from Grant's point of view. The camera then records Vandamm's entrance, but it does not do so from Grant's angle of vision. Grant is off to one side of the desk, between it and the window and the shot of Vandamm as he enters is from directly behind the desk as if someone who was sitting at that desk saw Vandamm come in. The camera angle is either from no one's point of view, no one in the movie or from someone who is outside the film, someone behind the scenes. That someone is – how much you want to bet? – is Hitchcock. Having missed the bus at the beginning of the movie, Hitchcock underscores his presence behind the scenes throughout the movie. He makes no other entrances, but he does make room for himself as the person ultimately in charge. The shot in the library from behind the desk is the answer to a question: "Who's really in charge here? Vandamm? The Professor? Or Hitchcock?" And the answer is . . . "Hitchcock."

A similar reading can be given of the scene shot in the CIA conference room. Here, too, there is a rather pronounced moment where the camera leaves the standpoint and point of view of someone in the film and takes a position outside it. The camera shoots the Professor from the opposite end of the conference table. And when one of the agents/scriptwriters says, somewhat blithely "Good-bye, Mr. Thornhill, wherever you are," the camera leaves its position at the table and rises at a sharp angle to a p.o.v. above it, looking back at and down upon those seated at the table.

But then we notice something. There is a chair at the end of the table from which the Professor was shot and from which the camera rose to look down on those remaining at the table. Only the chair, that chair is empty. There's no one in it. All the other seats around the table are occupied except for the one, that one empty chair where the camera was earlier on in the scene. As Mary Keane, among others have noted, that chair, that empty chair is "Hitchcock's chair."

## **Who's the Boss?**

There is a ton to say about *North by Northwest* but say with this, this one idea for a moment longer: the film is about directing and what it means to be the director of a Hitchcock film. Since Hitchcock is ultimately the director of all of his films, this film is a set of self-reflections, Hitchcock's reflections on the stamp he puts on all his films. It can therefore also be viewed as a "battle of wills" among three individuals each with a claim to being in charge, Vandamm, the Professor and Hitchcock. Vandamm thinks he is, the Professor knows he isn't. The Professor thinks he's calling the shots; Hitchcock knows he isn't. Hitchcock is.

As mentioned quickly in passing, the Professor's declaration that the death of Kaplan called for in his script is Thornhill's "problem," can also be viewed as Hitchcock's problem. Thornhill may have been thrown into a role, cast in a role, invented by the Professor, but Hitchcock cast Cary Grant in *North By Northwest*. If Kaplan disappears too soon there will be no role left for Cary Grant as Thornhill to play since Thornhill has taken on the role of Kaplan and if Grant is out of the picture that spells disaster for the box office.

The star has to remain in the movie throughout, from beginning to end. Hitchcock who is directing this picture, cast Leo G. Carroll as the Professor and he, Hitchcock, writes into his script for the picture, he's making, the story he is telling, lines for the Professor prompting him to ask Cary Grant as Thornhill to go on playing "Kaplan" by merely staging his death in the scene at Mount Rushmore and thereby giving Thornhill a lease on life. In a similar vein we might view the problem created by the Professor having written a role, created a part, without someone to play that role or part to be a problem for any director. A role without an actor makes for a *casting* problem.

### **Casting of Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*(II)**

A film role needs an actor to fill that role for there to be a film at all, for there to be something, someone to film. Hitchcock comes to the rescue and has Cary Grant fill the "empty" role that the Professor has created. If you think carefully about the film and its unfolding, it dawns on you that Grant resists playing Kaplan for quite some time, until there is no point resisting anymore and he lets go and resigns himself to being Kaplan.

The critical moment of acceptance (resignation) comes at the United Nations where Grant has gone to find Lester Townsend. As he steps forward to greet Townsend, a knife is thrown into Townsend's back. Townsend collapses forward into Cary Grant's arms. Grant sees the knife, grabs the hilt or handle and, at that moment, a photographer takes a photograph that frames Thornhill as the killer. Grant with knife in hand is also simultaneously fixed as Kaplan. An instant make-over.

How did Kaplan get into the picture? You might wonder.

But Hitchcock knows, however he got in, he, Hitchcock has to keep him in the picture in order for his star, for Cary Grant, to stay in the picture. The photograph is displayed on the front page of every newspaper in the country, and Cary Grant as Thornhill is now a "wanted" man, albeit wanted as Kaplan for the murder of Lester Townsend. Grant has little choice at this point but to accept the role in which he's now been cast or perhaps one should say, "framed?"

Whose idea was this? The presence of a photographer at the U.N. was surely not part of the Professor's plan. Or was it? As far as the Professor is concerned, it is a bit of nuisance that Thornhill/Grant has taken on the role of Kaplan, although he, the Professor seems willing to work with it. Vandamm certainly did not stage this scene. There is only one person left who could have done it : Hitchcock, Hitchcock himself, who now, once this scene is complete, has Cary Grant in his picture.