

North by Northwest

The classic Hitchcock motion picture
in relation to its time

Essay

by

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During the 1950s America was intoxicated with the Cold War, the hunt for communists on the home front, and a growing menace of Soviet nuclear threat and space exploration superiority. In Hollywood, the blacklisting of writers and artists inspired by the 1947 investigations by the House Un-American Activities Committee and the subsequent Waldorf Declaration of the Motion Picture Producers Association, was in full swing, and Senator Joseph McCarthy held the United States in the firm grip of the Red Scare¹. This left the motion picture industry feeling compelled to assert its patriotism and join the fight against the common enemy by producing films that highlighted the concerns and fears of the time and ultimately portrayed success on the American side.

At the closure of the century, Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* went on the silver screen, portraying a successful, smart, fast-talking Roger O. Thornhill (played by Gary Grant), an advertising man believing with an aura of over-confidence that, "In the world of advertising, there's no such thing as a lie. There's only the expedient exaggeration."² This very assertion, stated before his world is propelled out of balance by a coincidental misunderstanding, sets the tone for this spy - anti spy thriller that forces a common man into the underground world of Cold War intelligence trade, murder, and above all, deceit. Thornhill is mistaken by foreign spies to be a man named George Kaplan, a federal agent with the CIA, on their heels and about to uncover their operations, and is pursued across the United States while attempting to solve the great mystery and simultaneously desperately trying to stay alive.

¹ Nancy Lynn Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers' Wars* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982), p. 278.

² *North by Northwest* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Alfred Hitchcock, 1959)

Many ideas and concepts of the period of its release can be found in the film, as the very theme – the good innocent guy battling foreign spies – is central to the Cold War conflict. Philip Vandamm (played by James Mason) and his right hand Leonard (played by Martin Landau), the chief antagonists and agents for an undisclosed (though very much implied) foreign country, are smart, well dressed, and look and behave like genuine American gentlemen, demonstrating that the communist threat is not easily perceptible to the naked eye. Vandamm's two henchmen, who along with Leonard try more than once to kill Roger Thornhill, have an obvious aura of homosexuality, connecting a sexual orientation illegal in 1950s America to their communist agendas.

On the American side, sexual roles are reversed, as Roger Thornhill has a closer relationship to his dominant mother than anyone else, while Eve Kendall, an American counterspy, uses her looks and sensuality to full extent in seducing Roger as part of her job, posing as the perfect *femme fatale*. In the end, however, this is reversed, as Roger comes to her aid, rescues her from a murderous Vandamm, and marries her off; the traditional, conservative model succeeds. As she tells Roger soon after their first meeting, she was looking for a man with traditional values to marry and have children with all along, but never found any, and Roger had been unsuccessful in his own way. Her duty in the Cold War kept her from marital fulfilment, and only after the foreign agents are caught and the government secrets secured can they both share their future lives with one another. Patriotic duty, the film advocates, precedes personal interests.

In all this, money never poses an obstacle: both Vandamm and Thornhill seem to draw from an unlimited supply of cash, especially the latter distributes bank notes carelessly wherever he goes. Big mansions, first class hotels, and expensive suits and dresses litter the scenery, leaving not a hint of the depression or the then just bygone recession of 1957-59.³

Many hints to a communist threat are woven into the film in details: the red cab the foreign agents follow Thornhill in, the red plane he gets attacked by, the red exterior of the hotel “Ambassador East”, or the red-and-black dress Eve wears when he – and the audience – believe her

³ Edward L. Ayers, Lewis L. Gould, David M. Oshinsky, and Jean R. Soderlund, *American Passages – A history of the United States* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2000), p. 989.

to be a foreign spy.

A more in-depth analysis of the film would unquestionably bring further connections to its cultural and historical context to the surface, such as the significance of setting the climax atop Mount Rushmore and the fact that Vandamm has his headquarters right there, practically under the nose of the founding fathers. This, however, would unfortunately go beyond the limited scope of this text.