



Hitchcock's Mastery of Suspense on Full Display in North by Northwest

Description

Reviewed by Larry Gleeson during the annual TCM 31 Days of Oscar

[North by Northwest](#), is considered by many to be one of cinema's greatest films. Director Alfred Hitchcock, a master of suspense, is at the peak of his powers as a director, having been making films in the United States for two decades. In addition, the film's musical conductor, Bernard Hermann, is at the peak of his powers as a conductor. The result are great, veteran actors, Cary Grant (Caplan, Eva Marie Saint (*On the Waterfront*), and James Mason (*Lolita*), who know their cues, and informative non-diegetic, music creating arguably Hitchcock's best cinematic suspense. Hitchcock and Herman had worked on five films together. This was their sixth and final film working together.



In a typical Hitchcock fashion with cheeky humor, romance, and popular monumental locations – this one is Mount Rushmore – *North by Northwest* checks all the boxes. And, as most Hitchcock films

involve a mystery, chase or revelation, so does this one. Moreover, the audience is treated to espionage. Roger Thornhill (Grant) is a Madison Avenue Ad Man (*Mad Men*), who is kidnapped, due to mistaken identity, forced to drink a copious amount of bourbon whiskey, by spy Phillip Vandamm (James Mason) and gets put behind the wheel of a convertible at nighttime on a roadway as narrow and treacherous as Pacific Coastal Highway through Big Sur. Eventually, Thornhill winds up in a police station after some dramatic driving and several close calls. He calls his mother, Clara Thornhill (Jesse Royce Landis), highly intoxicated, and has to tell his mother he has not been drinking when she asks. A courtroom appearance for the drunk driving charge has its moments and sharp quips.



But the film heats up energetically when, on a moving train, Eva Kendal (Eva Marie Saint) appears to save Thornhill from capture due to murder at the United Nations. In beautifully orchestrated intimate moments Kendall and Thornhill hit it off over dinner before retiring to her compartment. Seemingly, Thornhill is smitten while Kendall seductively encourages him. The two eventually part ways as Kendall gives Thornhill an address to meet the mysterious Caplan, the man Thornhill was mistaken for in the beginning of the film. Thornhill takes the bait and one of the most recognizable scenes in cinema takes place. Afterwards, Thornhill realizes he's been set up and confronts Kendall. Kendall begins to reveal her secret identity, all but outright admitting she'd been toying with Thornhill. She also reveals the man she works for, Vandamm, and what he does – he's a spy. After a hilarious escapade at an auction, the film moves to the Mount Rushmore area in South Dakota.



While *North by Northwest* is a bit cheeky it is also very stylish and has an air of sophistication. The film was released in December, 1959. With the costuming â?? think of *Mad Men* â?? sharp-looking suits and dresses (Harry Kress), well-groomed characters, and stylish haircuts ([Sydney Guilaroff](#)). As far as the cinematography and mise-en-scen are concerned. I imagine a high angle shot of Thornhill escaping his office building as Vandammâ??s thugs are pursuing him, is the impetus for Roger Deakins high angle, rooftop setup in *Fargo* (1996). *North by Northwest* was produced by MGM and was the first film Hitchcock made with MGM. According to the American Film Instituteâ??s film catalog details, Hitchcock suggested the murder at the United Nations and the Mount Rushmore scenes.



With the rapid pacing of the film going from one locale and one chase to another â?? seemingly the film only slows down to capture the chemistry and the intimacy between Grant and Marie Saint â?? the run time of two hours and sixteen minutes is not only fast, it flies by. I also enjoyed the opening of the film with credits rolling in unique typography juxtaposed against a dynamic green, line-infused background with a very interesting musical composition. And, as heâ??s known for often doing, Hitchcock has a cameo â?? one of my favorite discoveries in watching a Hitchcock film. Iâ??m not giving it away. *North by Northwest* is a â??must-seeâ?• film. Highest recommendation.



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