HITCHCOCK: THE MIND OF A MASTER

A VISUAL INVESTIGATION OF NORTH BY NORTHWEST & THE WORLD OF FILM

PART I, CHAPTERS 1-20

by

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“I’m in on the plot.” – from Alfred Hitchcock’s tombstone.

“Hitchcock composed his films with meticulous care, planning every aspect of form, composition, movement, and performance. This makes the practice of close reading especially productive when applied to his work, since it is likely that any given detail was determined by the filmmaker and is not the result of chance or the routine outcome of standardized filming and editing practices.” – *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock,* David Sterritt.

“Well before filming began, every eventuality of every scene had been planned—every camera angle, every set, costume, prop, even the sound cues had been foreseen and were in the shooting script.” – *Notorious- The Life of Ingrid Bergman*, Donald Spoto.

“Hitchcock’s films abound with objects as visual correlatives - the missing finger in *The Thirty-nine Steps* [...] the milk chocolates on the assembly line in *Secret Agent*, the knife and time bomb in *Sabotage*. [...] Hitchcock’s objects are never mere props of a basically theatrical mise-en-scene, but rather the very substance of his cinema. These objects embody the feeling and fears of characters as objects and character interact with each other in dramas within dramas.” – *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929 – 1968,* Andrew Sarris.

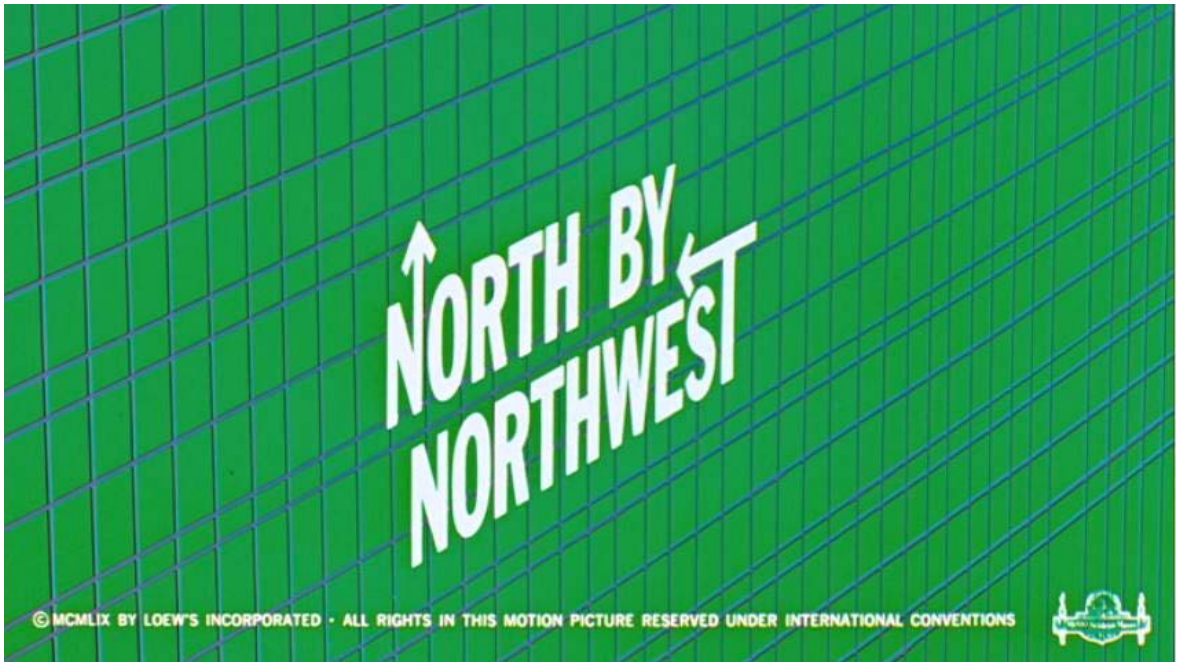
“It is vital in appreciating Hitchcock to recognize that every aspect of every scene is meticulously shaped to fit the story he is telling, and that there are no decorative flourishes.” – *An Eye for Hitchcock, 2004*, Murray Pomerance.

Hitchcock’s films “are philosophically serious . . . thinking seriously about their medium, thinking seriously about themselves, thinking seriously about such matters as the nature and relationships of love, murder, sexuality, marriage, and theater.” – *The “I” of the Camera: Essays in Film Criticism, History, and Aesthetics, 2004,* William Rothman.

" . . . he noticed everything – a shadow on a performer's face, a few seconds too long on a take. Just when we thought he had no idea what was going on, he'd snap us all to attention with the most incredible awareness of some small but disastrous detail that nobody would have noticed until it got on screen. And then he'd be bored again." – Bruce Dern on the making of *Family Plot*.

“You have to use a setting in its depth. It’s not enough to say, ‘This is a background.’” – Hitchcock to Peter Bogdanovich

1. INTRODUCTION



North by Northwest [1959] (00:48)

In 1959, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer distributed Alfred Hitchcock's latest film, *North by Northwest.* It turned out to be one of Hitchcock's most popular films – it had everything: thrills, intrigue, comedy, suspense, adventure, mystery, spies, sex, and a big helping of some very black humor. It had star power: at the time Cary Grant was considered the world's handsomest man and Eva Marie Saint, who just a few years before co-starred as Marlon Brando's mousy girlfriend in *On the Waterfront* [1954] (for which she received an Academy Award), surprised everyone by becoming, under Hitchcock's tutelage, a sultry, powerful, and sexy seductress/spy. With all this going for it, it is no surprise *North by Northwest* was a popular hit with audiences around the world. While nominated for ten Academy Awards, however, it received none.

North by Northwest was, and still is, not only popular, but, as I will show, one of the great masterpieces of filmmaking, a milestone in Hitchcock's own illustrious career, and the apex of his quest of filmic intricacy and complexity.

At the time of its debut, *North by Northwest* was popular with audiences but overlooked by most writers of the day. The film's popularity has

ironically helped obscure its greatness. Many critics and academics have the bad habit of condemning, or worse, ignoring anything that smells of popular acceptance.

With Hitchcock, this is particularly dangerous. Look in the index of any of the myriad academic collections of essays on Alfred Hitchcock and you will find few references to *North by Northwest*. It is difficult to fathom how critics could then ignore – and for the most part, continue to ignore – the film Hitchcock made between his two widely acknowledged masterpieces: *Vertigo* [1958] before and *Psycho* [1960] afterwards.

In the following pages, I will show that *North by Northwest* is not a temporary diminution of Hitchcock's talent between *Vertigo* [1958] and *Psycho* [1960], a pothole in the road, so to speak, but rather superior to both. I will point out a few of the methods Hitchcock uses to embroider his films – methods that, while they deepen character, plot, psychology, sociology, and politics, never detract from entertaining the audience. And always profoundly intriguing.

In pointing out these methods and interpreting them, I am not looking for agreement. For even if you disagree, my goal is accomplished: you are taking *North by Northwest* a little more seriously and hopefully enjoying it more.

It hardly seems necessary to say that Hitchcock and his films have been influential. A random sampling: It was basically for Hitchcock (along with Howard Hawks, Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray and Jean Renoir) that the French cinema critics invented the *auteur* theory. Mel Brooks satirized several film genres, westerns in *Blazing Saddles* [1974], science fiction in *Space Balls* [1987], silent films in *Silent Movie* [1976], but only a single director: Alfred Hitchcock in *High Anxiety* [1977]. Many of Brian dePalma's early films are acknowledged homages to or derivations from Hitchcock's films. With clear nods to the master, Danny DiVito remade *Strangers on a Train* [1951] into a comedy, *Throw Momma From the Train* [1987]. Perhaps the strangest homage is at the beginning of *My Dinner with Andre* [1981] when Andre and Wally order *cailles ax raisins* – the meal prepared for Chief Inspector Oxford by his cuisine-obsessed wife in *Frenzy* [1972]. Hitchcock's

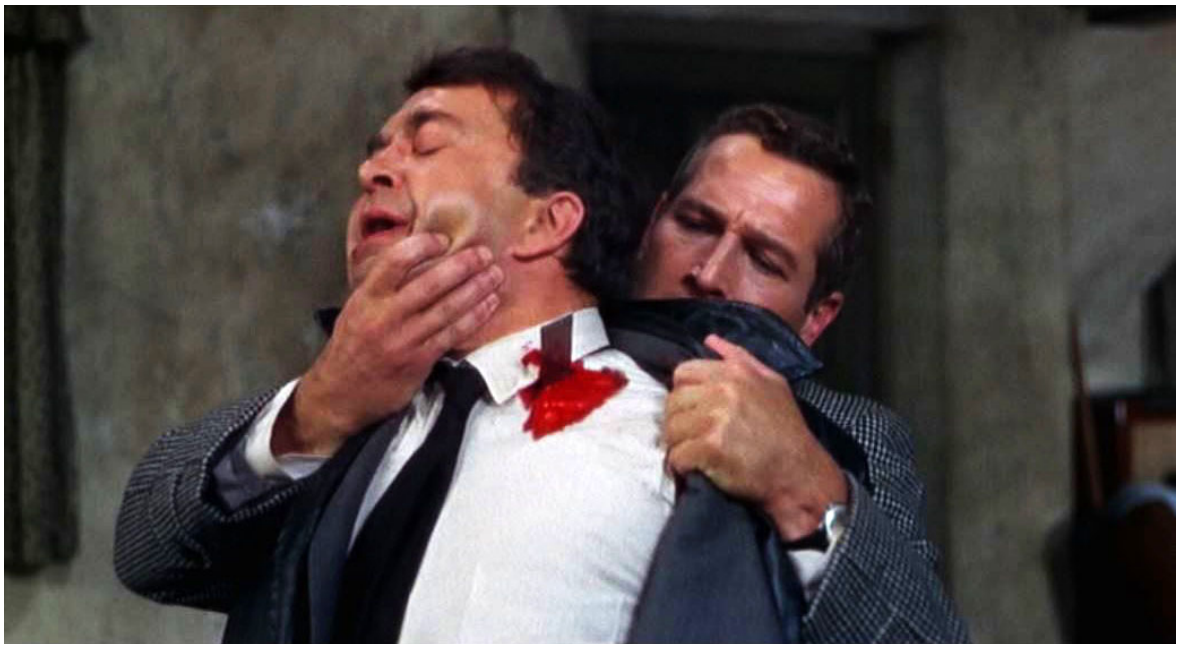
films are the subject of novels. For instance, the Italian writing group collectively known as Wu Ming's 2006 novel *54* is about the characters of *To Catch a Thief* [1955] and *Rififi* [1955] crossing paths in Nice and Cannes. Satires abound: Fritz Freeling in the Tweety and Sylvester cartoon *The Last Hungry Cat* of 1962 is a good example. And later even *The Simpsons* had several goes at the man.

Hitchcock's influence has spread far beyond America and Europe. For instance, Chinese director Lou Ye took several ideas from *Vertigo* [1958] (apparently without a great deal of understanding), transported them to Shanghai, and transposed them into a motorcycle courier who becomes obsessed with two women who look the same in his 1999 film *Suzhou He* (Suzhou River). Video essayist Kogonada used clips from various Hitchcock films to make his own films, for instance, by just concentrating on eyes that appear in Hitchcock films.

Masterpieces of film do not, however, come into being full-blown, like Athena springing from the forehead of Zeus (or Hitchcock). For this reason, it will be necessary to look at Hitchcock's other films. He often develops an idea or a technique over several films, honing and refining it. These include camera movements, editing techniques, color symbolism, puns, literary and art references, clothing, religious subtexts, and many, many more.

Perhaps no other filmmaker has used such a breadth of ideas in putting stories onto the screen. *North by Northwest* is the pinnacle of many of these techniques. The reason may be that this is one of the few films Hitchcock made not based on a novel, a play, or a previous story. Ernest Lehman wrote it specifically for Hitchcock. Lehman admits he wanted to make the most "Hitchcockian" film of Hitchcock's career. Indeed, it feels like the plot was written as an embroidery around Hitchcock's favorite tropes.

After *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock changed considerably in his filmmaking. He seems to have become more interested in how the camera sees an event and how it will appear on screen than in the storytelling itself. Many events become unbelievable and nonsensical (though, as I will point out, *North by Norwest* has a smattering of these); characters become diseased and difficult to identify with. *North by Norwest* is one of the last films in which it is easy to like the characters, even the villains.



Torn Curtain [1966] (45:48)

A good example is the killing in *Torn Curtain* [1966] (seven years after *North by Northwest*). The extended sequence is often attributed to Hitchcock's desire to show how difficult it is to kill a man: Gromek, the East German policeman, is scalded, stabbed, hit in the knees with a shovel and finally gassed in an open oven. Rhythmically and visually the sequence is stunning. But it is also completely unbelievable. Consider all the weapons available in a farmhouse kitchen: knives, forks, cords, wire, shovels, ice picks, frying pans, and on and on. Any normal kitchen is a murder's dream come true. Hitchcock abandoned narrative logic in deference to a filmic logic of his own invention.

And the same holds true of his characters. In *Psycho* [1960], Norman is certainly demented. But our entry into the film, and thus into Norman's mind, is through the (relatively) normal characters of Marion, Lila, and Arbogast. Just a few years later, in *Vertigo* [1958], there is no one for us to identify with – everyone is diseased. Thus, actions seem unbelievable or unmotivated. For instance, would Judy, having just abetted a murder, hang around San Francisco waiting to be identified? And how many (non-ex-Catholic) audience members would jump out of a window when a nun walks into a room?

In what follows, I concentrate on the films, not the man. While psychoanalyzing the man himself – as several books and many articles have done

(Hitchcock's fascination with blondes, for instance, has become a minor feminist academic industry) – may be fascinating, it doesn't forward the purpose of this book: to make watching this film, and hopefully all his films, a deeper, more meaningful and more rewarding experience. In what follows I hope you will join me in playing detective, looking for clues, many hidden and obscure but clues nevertheless, and attempting to discern their meaning.

I am a film watcher, not a critic or an academician. My purpose is to make watching *North by Norwest* or any Hitchcock film, indeed *any* film, more fun. In what follows, I have tried desperately not to exclude anyone who is not familiar with film theory, past or present, or the filmic aspects of sociology, psychology, or any sort of critical exegesis. What is on the screen is most important to me and, with occasional departure, I try to stay there, a place you and I can go as equals.

Finally, the evaluation of Alfred Hitchcock's work presented here is very personal. Since I disagree with many authors, I presume that were they to read this, they would disagree with me. And since there are more of them than there are of me, I am happy to entertain the possibility that they are right, and I am wrong.

2. PLOT SYNOPSIS

In case you have not seen *North by Northwest* recently, here is a plot synopsis to refresh your mind.

Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) is an advertising executive on Madison Avenue. During cocktails with some business associates, he attempts to send a telegram to his mother and is mistaken for George Kaplan. He is kidnapped by spies and taken to a mansion where he is questioned by Philip Vandamm (James Mason), a foreign spy. Refusing to divulge any information (because he knows nothing), he is forced to drink large quantities of liquor and placed in a car so that his death will look accidental. He escapes by being arrested for drunken driving.

He returns next day to the mansion but finds no traces of the spies. He goes to the United Nations to find the mansion's owner, but just as the owner is about to identify someone, he is killed. Thornhill is blamed for the murder and flees the police. On his way to Chicago to continue his hunt for George Kaplan, he meets Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) on the train where she protects him from the police. Soon we find out she is really working for Vandamm. She gives instructions to Roger to go to an isolated roadside outside Chicago to meet Kaplan. There an attempt is made to kill him. He escapes and returns to confront Vandamm at an art auction.

He escapes Vandamm's clutches by again being arrested. He is now informed by "The Professor" (Leo G. Carroll), an operative for a governmental security organization, that Kaplan doesn't exist and was simply a ruse to keep suspicion from falling on the real mole, Eve. They invent a counter-ruse where Eve seems to assassinate Thornhill in front of Vandamm. Eve returns to Vandamm's fold and is about to be taken out of the country with him when Leonard (Martin Landau), Vandamm's assistant, discovers the deception. Roger rescues Eve but cannot escape Vandamm's hilltop compound and is forced to attempt a seemingly suicidal climb down the face of Mt. Rushmore. At the last moment, the Professor's men rescue the couple.

3. HITCHCOCK & SYMBOLISM

One of the most important concepts for understanding Alfred Hitchcock's films is the idea of symbolism, that objects have meanings beyond themselves. Hitchcock uses several levels of symbols. The most powerful are those that connect to concepts buried deep within our minds – Archetypes.

This concept was deduced by the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung from his observation that there are universal patterns in human nature found in all cultures around the world. For instance, there is practically no culture that does not have a vampire myth or a Cinderella story. To explain this phenomenon, Jung proposed that if we look deeply enough into the human psyche, certain things act as universal symbols. He called these Archetypes. These includes representations of love, religion, death, birth, life, struggle, survival, etc.

Among archetypal characters often appearing in films are The Hero, The Mother Figure, The Sage, The Scapegoat, The Lover, The Rebel, The Doppelganger, The Villain, etc. Examples of archetypal situations found in film are The Journey, The Initiation, The Fall, Good Versus Evil, Death and Rebirth, Self-Discovery, etc.

Archetypal symbols are the basic structural elements comprising Hitchcock's films. Through archetypal symbolism, Hitchcock connects his films to a larger system of meanings – the deepest aspects of the human soul. If a film can tap into the visual representation of these archetypes, it will make a great psychological impact on the viewer (this is why, for instance, George Lukas consulted Joseph Campbell – a student of Jung – when constructing *Star Wars* [1977]).

What gives these archetypal symbols their power is that they often bypass the conscious mind and directly affect the unconscious. They are typically unnoticed by the average film-going audience, swept under the rug, so to speak, by the sweep of the story. For the attentive film watcher, they often begin to surface and show themselves on a second or third viewing. By using these symbols Hitchcock consistently ensnares his audiences at the unconscious, psychological level. Indeed, viewers can rarely describe exactly why

they find Hitchcock's films so attractive and fascinating. I ascribe this to his clever and subtle use of archetypal symbolism.

Hitchcock's films, as a body, exhibit several levels of symbolism in addition to the Archetypal.

The Manxman [1929] (01:49)

A very rudimentary example of symbolism appears in one of Hitchcock's earliest film, *The Manxman* in 1929. The film opens with the symbol for the Isle of Man – three legs joined at the center. The title of the film already tells us the story takes place on the Isle of Man, so this image seems superfluous (everyone in England knew what it meant). However, at a symbolic level the three legs, in addition to a place indicator, represent the love triangle at the center of the story.

Secret Agent [1936] (36:07)

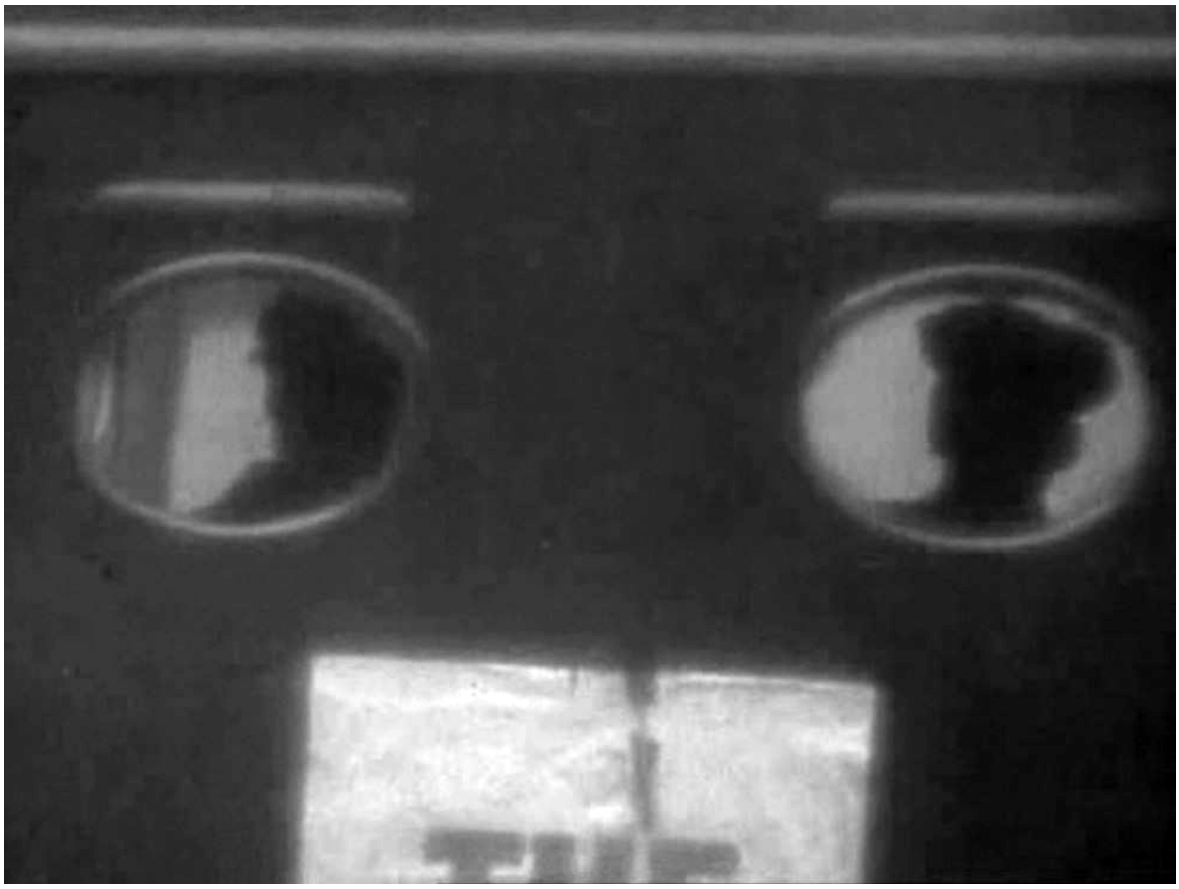
Another elementary example of symbolism is found in *Secret Agent* [1936] where the snuffing out of a cigarette illustrates the decision to snuff out a man's life.

Downhill [1927] (33:20)

Or in the 1927 *Downhill* where we see depressed Roddy, falsely accused of getting a girl pregnant, rejected by his parents, his career ruined, destined to a life of misery, taking a long, slow escalator ride downward into the darkness.

Young and Innocent [1937] (10:34)

A gently humorous symbol of passion is found in *Young and Innocent* [1937]. Erica is having difficulty starting her car. When her future love Robert walks by, the engine suddenly starts of its own accord. It is fair to say what is starting is the engine of her heart.



The Lodger [1927] (04:23)

Hitchcock often gives his symbols multiple layers of meaning as in *The Lodger* [1927] which opens just after a murder. We follow news reporters interviewing and writing, the typesetting and printing of a newspaper. The delivery van has two oval windows through which we see the heads of the driver and a passenger. As the speeding van veers right and left, the heads move back and forth. The overall impression is of eyes looking side to side (there are even eyebrows), searching for something. These eye/windows symbolize the public paranoia about the murderer or perhaps the murderer searching for his next victim or the cold mechanical world searching, observing, but unable to act. Later the eponymous lodger has two oval paintings above his couch. Now the eyes are watching him.

The Lodger [1927] (16:40)

Notorious [1946] (1:02:01)

A more subtle set of interrelated symbols is found in *Notorious* [1946]. The key Alicia steals from her nefarious Nazi husband is a powerful symbol: a means of unlocking mysteries or opening the human soul. The wine bottle in the same film is symbolic of the archetypal womb containing not only feminine mysteries, but also the hope of rebirth and a new life (in addition to the uranium ore to be used for a Nazi comeback). The descent into a basement to investigate the wine bottles represents a journey into the depths of the psyche – it is there in the depths that not only is the despicable plot uncovered, but also the characters' mutual love.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith [1941] (19:15)

In a lighter vein, but still with serious overtones, are the safety pins holding together Ann Smith's dress in the comedy, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* [1941]. It is the dress she wore when Mr. Smith proposed. Their marriage is now falling apart, the rules of relationship they made for themselves no longer fit, etc. It is only their love that is just barely holding them together.

Downhill [1927] (39:20)

Hitchcock, who never shies away from a rude comment or two, uses a very carefully arranged set-up in *Downhill* [1927]. Isabel, a gold-digging actress, is about the take Roddy for every dime of his large inheritance and then cruelly abandon him. The action of the syphon clearly states she will soon be "pissing on him."

Downhill [1927] (1:03:49)

In the same film Hitchcock shows Roddy, having been degraded to working as a taxi dancer, leaving a night club through doors that make him look ridiculously small, the opinion he has of himself at that moment.

Symbols not only connote psychological implications but can also be used as landmarks in the progress of telling the story. For instance, a symbol is often used to indicate the film's introduction (where we typically meet the characters, learn a little about them, and learn where all this is going to happen) is over and the body of the plot is about to commence.

The Wizard of Oz [1939] (11:27) – Victor Fleming

Brigadoon [1954] (21:01) – Vincent Minnelli

Crossing over a bridge – moving from one territory to another, from the known to the unknown – is perhaps the most commonly used symbol for this transition. In *The Wizard of Oz* [1939] for instance, we learn we are in Kansas, we meet Dorothy and her dog, we see the farm, meet the farm hands, and

are introduced to the villainous Miss Gulch. When the "meat" of the story is about to begin, Dorothy crosses over a bridge, out of the safety of her farm home and into unknown territory, where she will meet Professor Marvel, AKA the Wizard. The bridge separating the two worlds in *Brigadoon* [1954] (and hundreds of other films) works in much the same way.

The Lady Vanishes [1938] (30:07)

Hitchcock certainly uses his share of traditional bridge images. In *The Lady Vanishes* [1938], the train crosses a bridge just before Miss Froy vanishes, thus "bridging" the film's introduction of the characters, setting, etc., and moving the viewer into the body of the story. (That the train is moving from right to left, an important symbol, will be discussed below.)

Shadow of a Doubt [1943] (01:40)

However, as is Hitchcock's wont, he often takes a traditional trope and modifies it to a new use. For instance, in *Shadow of a Doubt* [1943], the very first thing we see is a bridge on New Jersey's Pulaski Skyway. Not wasting any time, Hitchcock has dispensed with the traditional introduction altogether. Here the bridge is not a transition from the introduction to the body of the film, but a headlong plunge from our world into the world of the psychotic serial killer, Uncle Charlie. The elegantly placed and posed hoboes in the lower right corner of the frame clearly indicate this is not "our" world.

The Man Who Knew Too Much [1934] (26:23)

Never satisfied to use a symbol in the most common and traditional way, Hitchcock invents several new uses for the image of a bridge. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1934], for instance, he uses a bridge to mark the psychological transition of the parents of the kidnapped child moving from passively and blindly following the directions of the inept police to becoming active and beginning to investigate on their own.

Frenzy [1972] (02:05)

In *Frenzy* [1972], Hitchcock uses bridge symbolism in yet another way. By putting his name as director over an opening bridge (at the opening of the film), he is inviting us to enter into world of the film he himself constructed.

Images deeper and less obvious than a bridge are often used to connote a transition from an old, often debilitating psychological state to a new, healthier state. These images often resemble the physical process of birth. Squeezing out of a narrow space into a larger one is quite common.

Shawshank Redemption [1994] (1:57:57) – Frank Darabont

A good, though hardly subtle, example is the birth image in Frank Darabont's *Shawshank Redemption* [1994] when prison escapee Andy Du-Frane emerges from Shawshank Prison having wriggled down a long pipe full of excrement into a cleansing rainstorm to begin a new life.

Casablanca [1942] (07:53) – Michael Curtiz

A slightly more subtle version of this idea appears in *Casablanca* [1942]. After the opening newsreel and a tour through the city that introduces many of the characters we will meet later, the camera moves from a moderate elevation down toward the door of Rick's Café and squeezes through that door into the saloon itself. In this way, we the audience, through the eye of the camera, are thrust into a new and different world, that of Rick's Café.

Jamaica Inn [1939] (45:03)

But, like almost everything he does, Hitchcock typically uses these "birth images" in a slightly different way from most other filmmakers. For instance, in *Jamaica Inn* [1939], instead of using a birth image to connect the introduction to the body of the story, as in *Casablanca* or *The Shawshank Redemption,* he gives it deeper meaning: Jim and Mary, trapped in a cave (a nice womb-symbol), shed their clothing (symbolic of their life up to this point), dive into the ocean (a common symbol of the unconscious), and swim away from the danger. They emerge, newly born, wet and in their underclothing. Jim then dons the uniform of an upper-class man only to reveal he is not a bandit at all, but a law officer and Mary is given the clothing of an upper-class woman. Clearly, they have been born into a new life.

Rear Window [1954] (05:00)

A little more complex is L. B. Jefferies' cast in *Rear Window* [1954]. Stuck in a cast because of a broken leg, he is immobilized (physically and emotionally); he needs to mend something that is broken (physically and emotionally). The cast provides him with a hard, physical shell to protect him (physically and emotionally) from what is around him (physical and emotional). He even calls it "my plaster cocoon." And like a cocoon, changes are taking place within (physical and emotional). When he eventually emerges from his cast/cocoon, he will hopefully have become a "new man."

North by Northwest [1959] (55:01)

Still deeper and more complex symbolism can be found in *North by Northwest*. One example: Roger Thornhill is trapped in a closed upper berth (a pun – berth/birth – that may or may not have been intended) of a train. He emerges with his dark glasses broken. This symbolizes that his old life, plagued by an obscured vision, has ended and he has been born into a new life, one benefitting of clearer vision.

To Catch a Thief [1955] (1:12:32)

To Catch a Thief [1955] (1:30:33)

Here's how Hitchcock attaches symbolic significance to something as ordinary as an umbrella. In *To Catch a Thief* [1955], Frances Stevens is in love with John Robie but cannot admit to herself she has fallen for a thief; instead she displaces her feelings into anger. As she describes her anger, she picks up a furled umbrella and begins hitting it into the palm of her hand much as a threatening policeman would a baton. The activity stresses the anger she feels.

Here, however, it is the specific object Hitchcock selected that is significant. The umbrella symbolizes protection from the elements – the natural element in this case being love. A furled umbrella can offer no protection and thus we are told through symbolism that it is inevitable she will recognize her love for him. In addition, the furled umbrella symbolizes her attempt at closing herself off from her own feelings. Indeed, during the costume ball later in the film, after she acted on her love for him, she appears under an open umbrella now gaily multicolored as in celebration of their love. The open umbrella is now protecting their love from the threats of the outside world. In addition, her new feelings, open to the world, are represented by the bright colors and the festivity of the event.

Vertigo [1958] (05:22)

Hitchcock uses a variation of this device in *Vertigo* [1958]. Vertigo-sufferer Scottie is seen trying to balance a cane on his finger. Used to help him walk and balance after his physical injury, the cane is symbolic of the general state of his stability both physical and emotional. It is his means of propping himself up and at the same time grounding himself in a balanced manner. His inability to keep the cane vertical and keep it balanced foreshadows the adventure into which he is about to plunge, an adventure that will unbalance his mind first into obsession and then into madness.

Foreign Correspondent [1940] (04:09)

As in the examples above, Hitchcock delights in using symbols to present us with information that only later, often much later, will we understand. At the beginning of *Foreign Correspondent* [1940] reporter Johnny Jones is rebelliously cutting pages of his boss' newspaper into paper doilies. He holds one over his face with his nose sticking through. Symbolized here is the web of intrigue into which he will soon plunge. Additionally, it also strongly resembles a windmill that will turn out to be a key to his investigation. And we cannot ignore Hitchcock sense of humor: like a good reporter, Jones will poke his nose right into the center of the whole mess.

Foreign Correspondent [1940] (46:31)

Later in the same film, Hitchcock is far less subtle though just as pointed in his comment on the coming war in Europe: Huntley Haverstock (aka Johnny Jones), escapes kidnapping and possible assassination by climbing along a roof where he accidentally damages a neon sign reading "Hotel Europe." Immediately, it changes to the ironic but certainly apt "Hot Europe."

The Manxman [1929] (19:16)

Hitchcock often uses body language symbolically: In *The Manxman* [1929], Pete is courting Kate with the help of his friend Phil in a variation of the Cyrano de Bergerac story. To talk with Kate at her window, Pete stands on Phil's shoulders. But since Phil is intervening on Pete's behalf with Kate's father, Pete is figuratively and literally being supported by Phil.

Narrower in scope than these universal symbols are cultural symbols. These are tropes an audience would respond to, though still unconsciously, based on knowledge acquired from living in a specific culture.

Day the Earth Stood Still [1951] (05:07) – Robert Wise

A good example of an American cultural symbol is found in Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951]: peace-loving alien Klatuu lands his flying saucer in the middle of a baseball diamond – the site of the "all-American pastime." While the film's text states that Klaatu's message of world peace is for all countries, it is rather obvious the filmmakers have directed their anti-nuclear, anti-war message to their fellow Americans.

Spellbound [1945] (1:10:38)

A slightly more sophisticated example of cultural symbolism is in *Spellbound* [1945]. Professor Brulov, a psychiatrist, clearly resembling Sigmund Freud, who will ultimately solve the mystery of John's psychosis by opening John's mind to the childhood trauma he repressed, handles a huge letter opener – a wonderful symbol of the psychoanalytic process.

The use of symbols like these is certainly not unique to Hitchcock; filmmakers of even modest skill use them. However, inept filmmakers will draw attention to their use of symbols, bring them to conscious awareness and thus reduce their impact on the unconscious. Filmmakers of skill, like Hitchcock, use them so elegantly and subtly the viewer is often unaware of them, at least on first viewing or until they are pointed out. This is why, I believe, so many first-time viewers of any of Hitchcock's films come out with the feeling of "I don't think I saw it all," and with the strong desire for a second viewing.

4.- THE CREDITS

North by Northwest [1959] (00:04)

Hitchcock is renowned for packing his films with textual and sub-textual information, references, and cross-references. And Hitchcock is known as a director who exercises complete, almost compulsive, control over his pictures.

His purpose is to control the audience's intellectual and emotional responses to his films – one could call him an early exponent of psychological micro-management. In an interview, Ernest Lehman mentions that Hitchcock's fantasy was to have an organ-like machine wired to an audience's mind in which Hitchcock would press of key and the audience would laugh, press another and they would cry. In this way Hitchcock could dispense completely with the film and just manipulate the audiences directly.

There is no film in Hitchcock's oeuvre that can top *North by Northwest* for the sheer density and complexity of this information/manipulation. In literally the first frame of the film – long before the story or even the titles begin – he almost overwhelms us with multiple layers of meaning. And from this very first frame, he never lets up.

The very first image of *North by Northwest* is both ordinary and extraordinary: the MGM logo. The studio in which *North by Northwest* was produced, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, receives its due in the first image on the screen as customary with all films from this and other major Hollywood studios of the day (even though this would be the only film Hitchcock made for MGM).

The familiar logo is all there: the curled ribbon of sprocket-holed film forming a mandala around a growling Leo the Lion, MGM's filmic mascot; the name of the studio; "trade" and "mark;" the theatrical mask with stylized laurel leaves. But in *North by* Northwest, this is neither the elegant full-color black-and-red MGM logo (as in *Ben-Hur* [1959] of the same year) nor the black-and-silver version (in, for instance, *Fiend Without a Face* [1958] from the previous year). It has been transformed.

Ben-Hur [1959] (00:04) – William Wyler

Fiend Without A Face [1958] (00:03) – Arthur Crabtree

Rather than using the color version of the MGM logo, as would be appropriate for a color film, Hitchcock takes the black-and-white logo and transmutes it. The normally black background is replaced with green! And a green that is not a pure Vista Vision green but a green that is both dark in tone and pale in color. Ominous, threatening, even sickly.

In the 1950s, what is used as a background behind the credits is usually very benign, not to take the audiences' attention away from the egos of the people who made the film. (An exception being many of the *films noir* of the day that often started their action before the titles.) Thus, what Hitchcock has done is quite unusual and most remarkable.

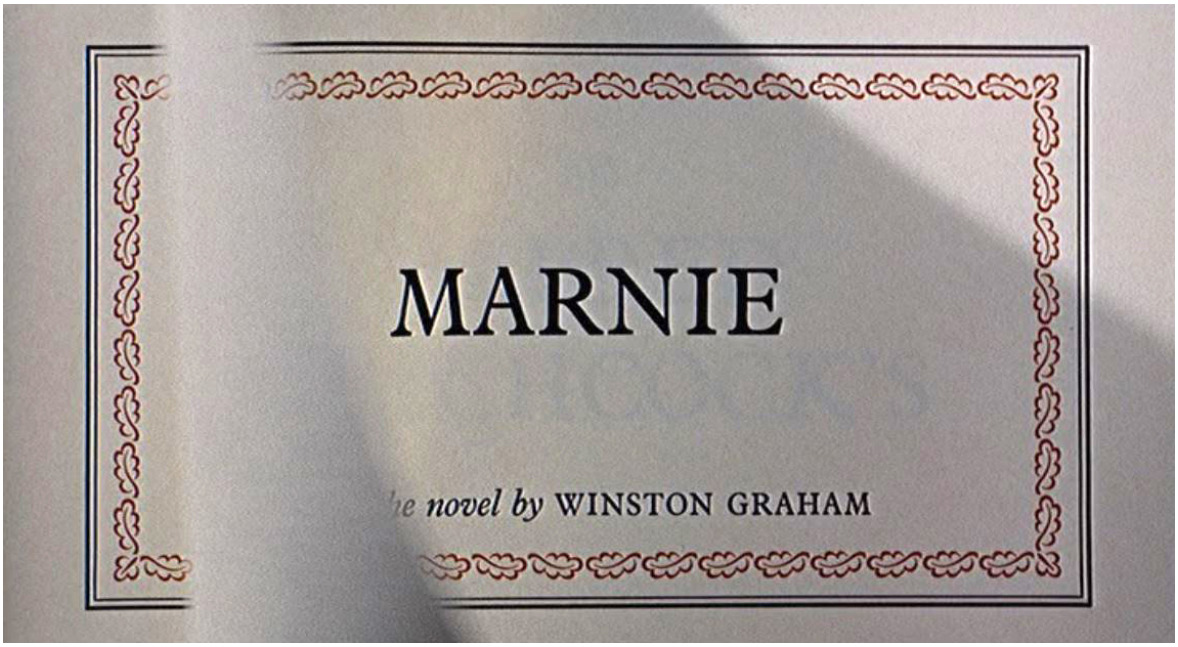
There are two aspects of this change in logo that we must consider. First, that Hitchcock *could* manipulate the normally inviolable studio credits, and second, the specifics of the manipulation.

While many writers have pointed out Hitchcock's cameos are intended to underscore his role and power as a director – he steps in from outside the film to appear as Alfred Hitchcock, not an actor, but as the man himself – this act of manipulating the MGM logo is a much greater monument to his power. The logo is not a part of the film in the normal sense, it is a representation of the powerful studio that financed the film. And if Hitchcock can tinker with

its logo, he is claiming to be more powerful than even the studio itself. Clearly, Hitchcock took MGM's motto "Ars Gratia Artis" to heart – "Art for Art's Sake." (Another example of Hitchcock's power in Hollywood at that time is that Paramount Pictures allowed him to remove the floor from one of the studio's sound stages to form a three-story set for *Rear Window* [1954].)

Foreign Correspondent [1940] (00:40)

This is not the first time Hitchcock tinkered with credit sequence, though never so boldly. For instance, he inserted material beneath opening titles of *Foreign Correspondent* [1940] to give us information relating to the theme of the film. The individual titles are seen over a spinning globe. However, the globe is no ordinary one, here the lines of latitude and longitude are metallic, thickened and raised. This world seems encased in an iron cage, a cage symbolizing the divisions between countries and the threat of the coming war.



Marnie [1964] (00:26)

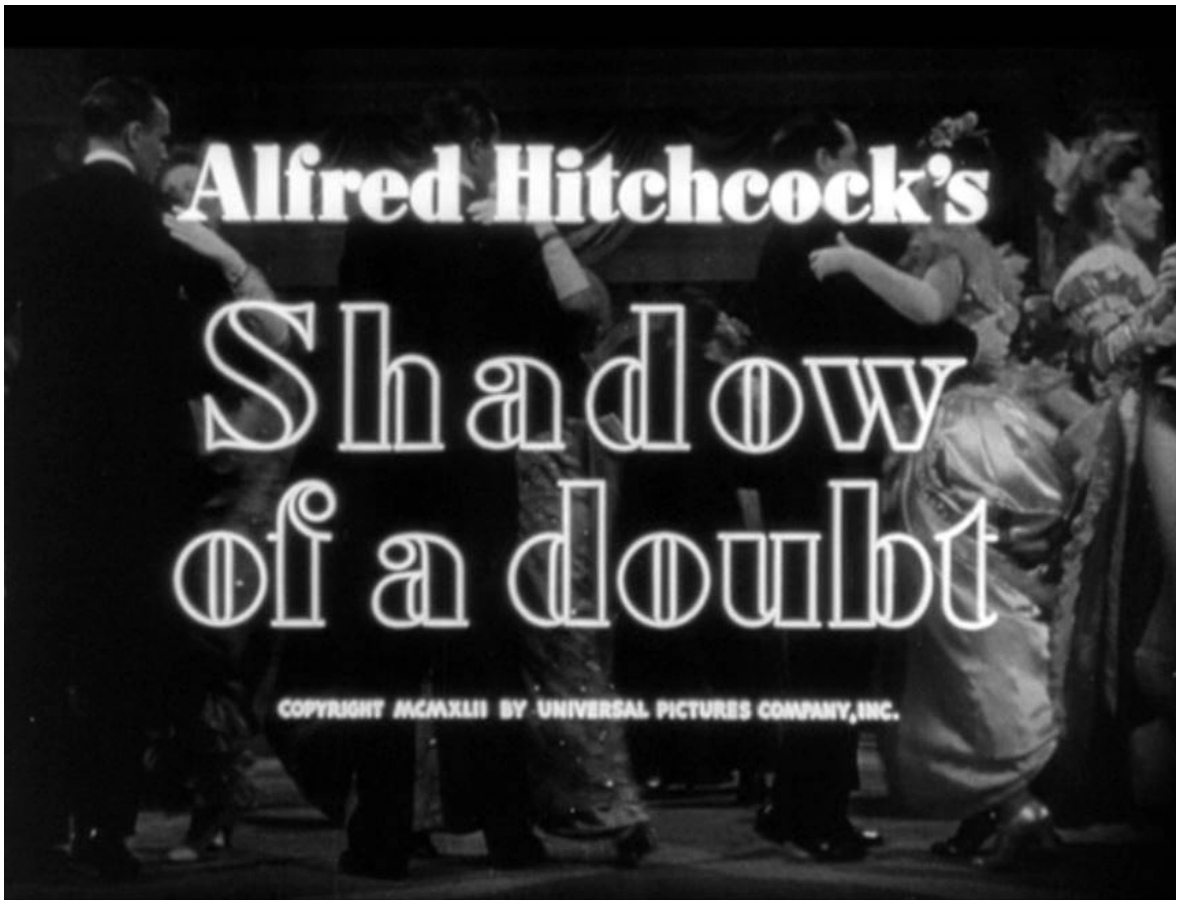
Like so many devices Hitchcock uses, he repeats this tactic refining it over time. Fourteen years later, Hitchcock manipulates the title sequence to give the audience symbolic information, however far more subtly than before. *Marnie*'s [1964] titles are printed on the pages of a book. Were this an ordinary film, the pages would be *lifted* one at a time as if we are reading the book. However, Hitchcock reverses the process – the pages are lowered thus giving the impression the main character's name, Marnie, is slowly being buried.

Rebecca [1940] (01:41)

Sometimes Hitchcock's comments are strictly personal. In *Rebecca* [1940], a film he did not want to make and complained about rather vociferously, Hitchcock has his name as director accompanied by a large puff of smoke/fog entering and eclipsing the scene beneath as if the director wanted to erase the film or at least his name. A nice bit of visual sarcasm.

The Man From Planet X [1951] (00:06) – Edgar Ulmer

Other directors have played with the title sequence, but never with the Hitchcock's panache. Manipulation of the type face of the titles is the most common. For example, in the Edgar Ulmer's cheapie, *The Man From Planet X* [1951] the typeface selected to introduce the film has nothing to do with the story. The letters are made of what appears to be rough boards crudely cut and cobbled together with obvious nails in what I presume is a little in-group joke about the miniscule budget.



Shadow of a Doubt [1943] (00:26)

Even in something as mundane as typography, Hitchcock makes sure it contains meaning. In *Shadow of a Doubt* [1943], for instance, his name is solid while the film's title is transparent. It is as if he were inviting us through the title see what is inside while himself remaining impenetrable.

5. THE WRONG COLOR

North by Northwest [1959] (00:04)

It is obvious Hitchcock did not go to all this trouble of tinkering with MGM's logo without a purpose. Here are some of the possibilities.

The color's most obvious effect is to get the audience's attention. This visual jolt immediately sets a mood of tension and dis-ease (aided by the thrumming pulsations from Bernard Herrmann brilliant score). This mood continues unabated for several minutes without comic relief (an unusual length of time for Hitchcock).

But any color – purple, orange, red, or green – would serve the purpose of getting the audience's attention. Going on here is more than just the visual shock value of a color effect. In his color films, Hitchcock depends strongly on color symbolism. He gives this particular shade of green specific associations.

Hitchcock uses three types of color symbolism: universal, culture, and hermetic.

Universal or "natural" color symbolism is most often associated with "nature" where red represents blood and thus anger or danger, green represents foliage and thus growth, etc. The interpretations remain constant over an extremely broad spectrum of cultures, nationalities, contexts, and/or locations.

Suspicion [1941] (1:23:46)

A good example is in (the colorized version of) *Suspicion* [1941]: Lina thinks Johnnie is innocent when he enters the bathroom in his yellow-gold pajamas. While he is bathing, she reads a letter causing her to suspect he has murder on his mind. He emerges from the bathroom less than a minute later in a red dressing gown. The color change reflecting her view of her husband, from desirable gold to threatening red.

Suspicion [1941] (1:24:27)

A narrower version is cultural symbolism where, for instance, in America red might indicate a stop sign and green might represent money (or perhaps the psychological diseases of modern society associated with it). National colors take on special significance.

Blue Velvet [1986] (03:14) – David Lynch

A good example of the use and manipulation of cultural color symbolism is the opening sequence of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* [1986]. The film opens with an all-American fire engine replete with Dalmatian. We then see red roses, a white picket fence, and blue sky – red, white, and blue to continue the theme of heartland America. The camera then moves to include a yellow tulip in the frame – a shocking color. Yellow is a disturbance in the red-white-and-blue color scheme. While roses are associated with America, tulips are foreign. Thus, Lynch cleverly assigns the color yellow to signify something not traditionally American. And, indeed, a yellow jacket of a color almost identical to that of the tulip later becomes an important aspect in the working of the plot.

To Catch a Thief [1955] (04:42)

Hitchcock himself uses this same color scheme in *To Catch a Thief* [1955]. To establish early the soon-to-be-suspected hero's innocence, Hitchcock tells the audience very clearly he is good and honest: John Robie wears a blue and white striped sweater and a red and white polka-dot scarf. Close enough to an American flag to get the point across.

Similarly, in *The Wrong Man* [1956], while the film is in black and white, the falsely accused Manny, a typical working-class American, is described in court as wearing a blue suit, white shirt and a red tie.

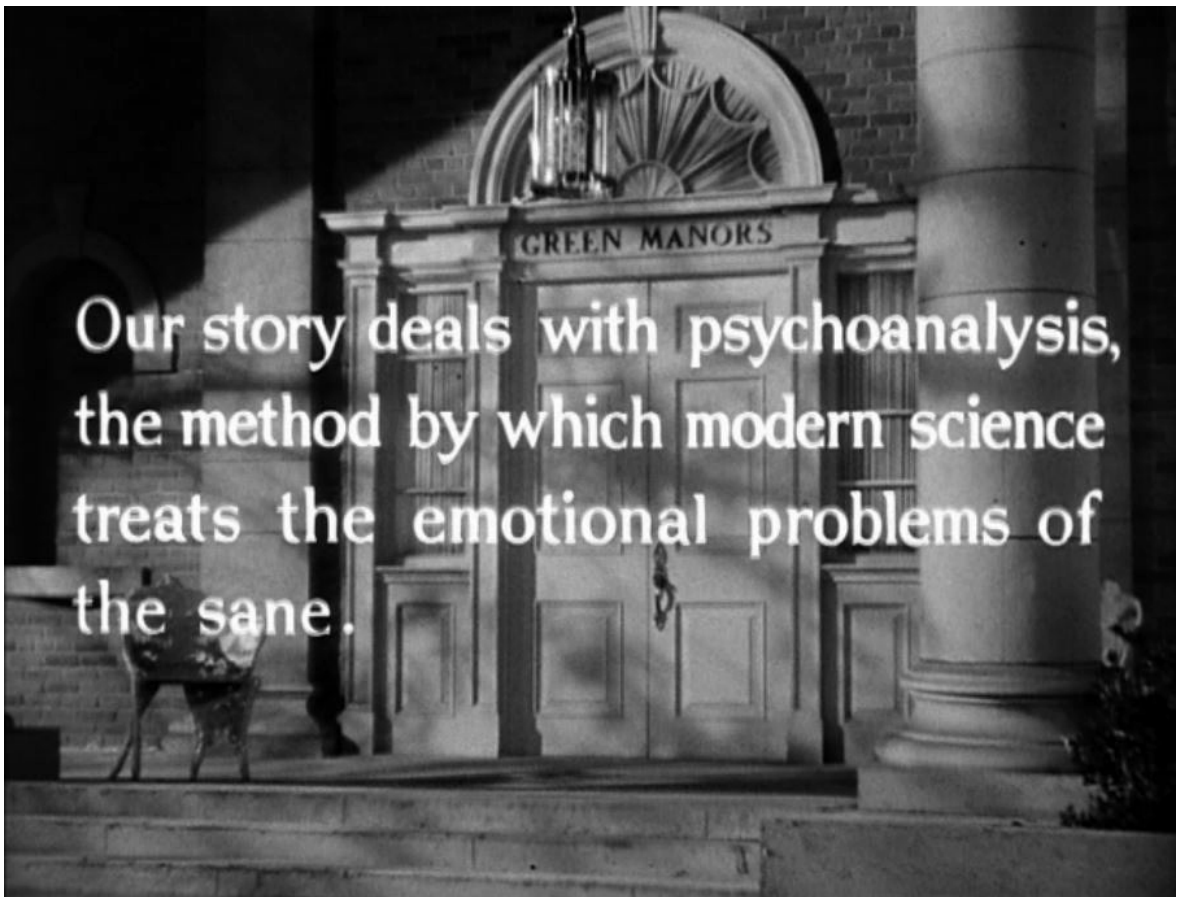
The Trouble with Harry [1955] (13:26)

Sarcasm is to be expected of Hitchcock, especially in a black comedy like *The Trouble with Harry* [1955]. The gray-flannel-suited Harry, representing conservative, traditional America, is dead. His red and blue socks filling the screen make the point quite obvious.

Hermetic color symbolism is quite different. A director assigns a meaning to a color that applies only within the confines of a single film, or, in Hitchcock's case, a series of films. As we shall see, Hitchcock seems to dote on hermetic symbolism, not only color symbolism, but editing styles, hair color, camera movement, and almost anything else that goes into the making of a film.

Knowing all colors have meanings, in *North by Northwest* Hitchcock places a good portion of the sub-textual and symbolic information in the colors he uses. But the green he selects as background for the MGM logo now acquires a distinct mood of negativity not only through the ominous, minor mode music accompanying the scene but also the impurity and desaturation of the green itself – a shade that could never be mistaken as a symbol for growth, nature or even money.

Hitchcock has generated a hermetic color assignment. And throughout this film, green will be associated with feelings of evil, trouble, and foreboding.



Spellbound [1945] (02:40)

In earlier Hitchcock films, there are several "mentions in passing" of the color green with similar implications of evil. In the 1938 *The Lady Vanishes*, Hitchcock gives us a hint that the famous and highly respected surgeon is really a villain: he orders a Green Chartreuse. And association of green with mental disease is spelled out in *Spellbound* [1945], in which the mental institution where all the nefarious goings on take place is called "Green Manors."

The Man Who Knew Too Much [1956] (1:44:36)

The villain/assassin/kidnapper/false priest in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956] wears a strikingly large green ascot.

The Birds [1963] (40:30)

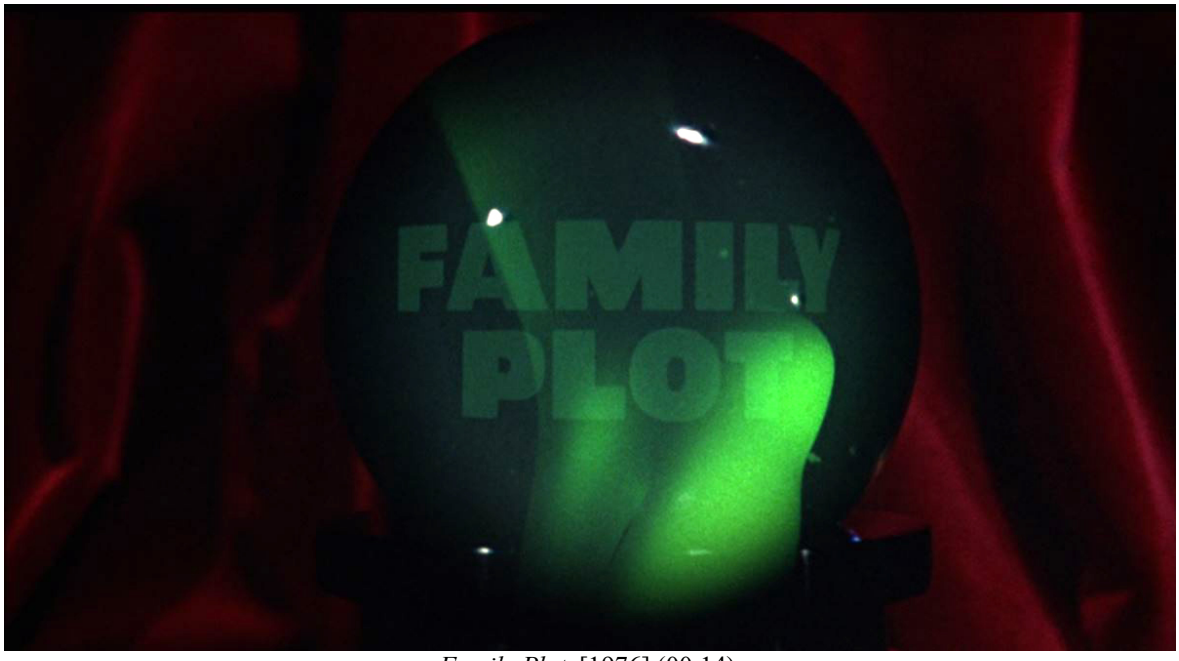
A yellow-green bile/jaundice version of green appears a few years after *North by Northwest* in *The Birds* [1963] in Madeline Daniels' lime green outfit the color of which designer Edith Head referred to as *Eau de Nil* (Nile water).

Marnie [1964] (13:56)

The very next year, at the very moment Marnie reveals her attachment to her mother, her mother's rejection, and her jealousy of a girl her mother favors over her, she wears a green suit of a color simply a few shades darker than what Melanie wore in *The Birds* [1963].

Frenzy [1972] (33:42)

And in *Frenzy* [1972], Mrs. Blaney, Rust/Robinson's first on-screen victim, wears similarly colored green clothes.



Family Plot [1976] (00:14)

Hitchcock explored color symbolism in many of his films for many different effects. For instance, in *Family Plot* [1976], under the opening titles there are swirling blobs of bright red and bright green. This ballet of opposite

colors sets the mood for the next two hours where all the characters will continue this dance of opposites. The title is overlaid on a crystal ball through which a séance will appear, perhaps riffing on *The Exorcist* [1973] which became a popular sensation three years previously.

Vertigo [1958] (18:48)

North by Northwest looks like a warmup for using green in very significant ways for *Vertigo* [1958], the film Hitchcock made just after. When we first see the false Madeline, she is dressed in green. This helps her stand out in the red environment of Ernie's restaurant in San Francisco. This "attention getting" device, however, quickly mutates into presenting other possibilities.

Vertigo [1958] (1:34:22)

During the course of the film, Hitchcock keeps presenting us with the color green. Scottie's first sight of Judy is a symphony in green: she is wearing a green dress and standing, isolated from her companions, and bookending the frame are two green cars!

Vertigo [1958] (1:37:15)

Vertigo [1958] (1:46:48)

Later associating green with Madeline's deception, Judy appears in a green dress. And later the green light behind her becomes a clear indicator as to her intentions. She even drives a green car while leading Scottie around San Francisco on his hopeless, circular sojourn. Once Scottie is emotionally trapped, he appears in a green sweater. With apologies to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Hitchcock might well have named *Vertigo* [1958] "A Study in Green."

While *Vertigo*'s [1958] use of hermetic color symbolism is complex, Hitchcock pushes the envelope even further in *North by Northwest*. Throughout the film he uses not only the color green symbolically, but its color opposite, as we shall see below.

6. SYMBOLISM IN BLACK & WHITE

Psycho [1960] (04:10)

Psycho [1960] (10:58)

Even in his black and white films, Hitchcock uses color symbolism. For example, in *Psycho* [1960], Marion Crane wears white underwear in the

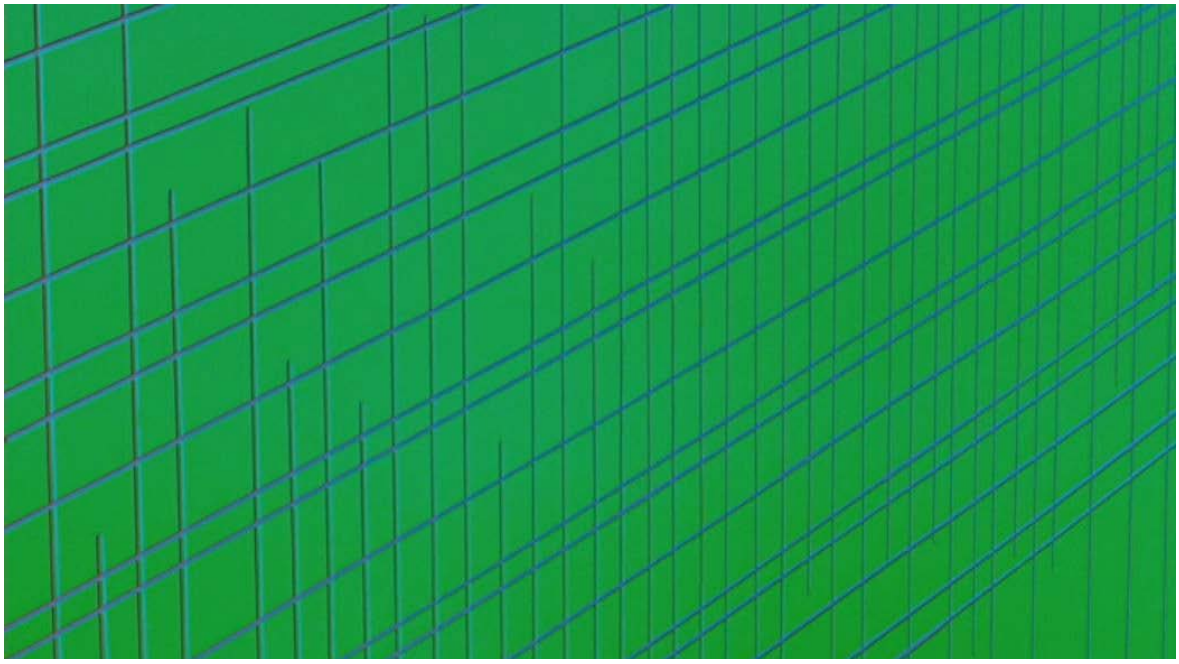
opening scene. In Hitchcock's universe, the fact she is having a noontime tryst with her lover does not disqualify her from wearing the color of purity. On the other hand, as soon as she steals $40,000, she dresses in black underwear.

Murder! [1930] (1:02:39)

Murder! [1930] (1:02:46)

In fact, Hitchcock used this idea of black versus white very early in his career. In *Murder!* [1930], Sir John goes to visit Diana Baring in jail. They are separated by a long table with a black chair at one end, for the (presumably guilty) prisoner, and a white one at the other end, for the (presumably innocent) visitor.

7. GRID LINES & GRAPH PAPER



North by Northwest [1959] (00:18)

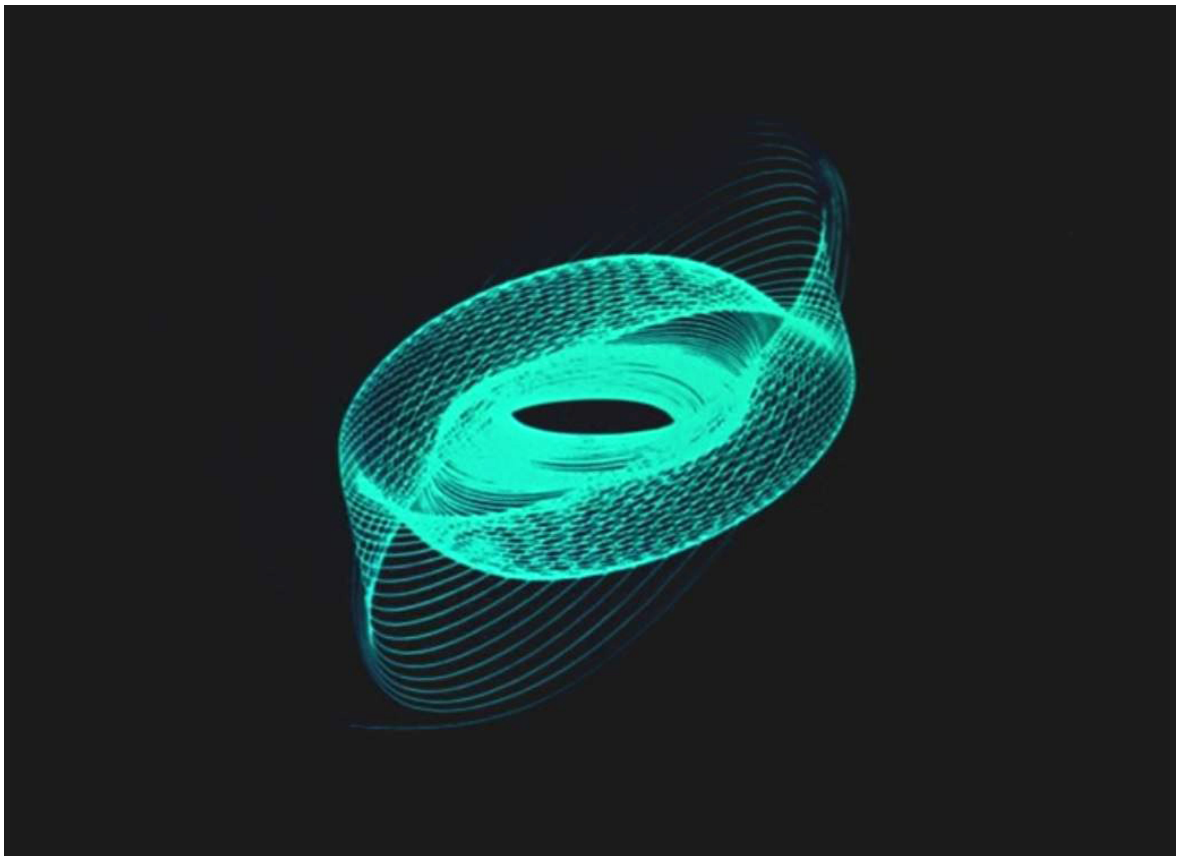
After three roars, Leo and the logo quickly fade leaving *North by Northwest'*s screen filled with that odd green color. After a few pulses of Bernard Herrmann's score, Saul Bass' amazing title sequence begins.

Several thin, dark lines begin driving across the screen from the upper right edge of the frame moving toward the lower left while descending at almost a 30° angle. Almost immediately, another set of lines begins descending from the top of the screen. A third set rises from the bottom. As they complete their traverse of the screen, they cross and cut the screen up into an oddly lopsided, repeating but irregular grid.

Like the odd color that preceded it, this angular grid is a visual shock. It is disorienting and tilted, off-balance like the adventure to follow. And like the solid color that preceded it, it is rife with meanings and associations.

The solidity and regularity of this image contrasts Hitchcock's previous film, *Vertigo* [1958], in which the title graphics, also designed by Saul Bass, are primarily circular in reference to the psychological progress (or lack of progress) made by hero Scottie as he goes around in circles – literally and

psychologically. Clearly Hitchcock and Bass designed the title sequence of *Vertigo* [1958] with symbolism in mind. And in *North by Northwest* they did nothing less.

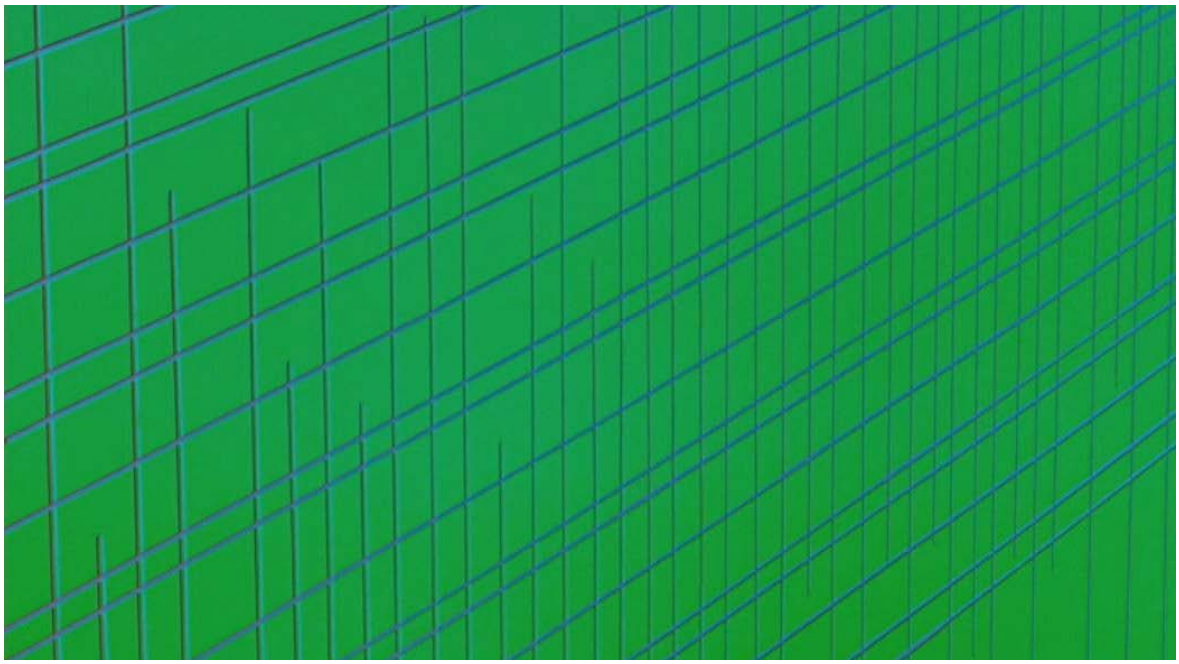


Vertigo [1958] (03:05)

Our first association with this grid is that these regular vertical and horizontal lines are an oblique view of a piece of strange, green graph paper. Were this so, we might further assume the graph paper we are seeing suggests that we are being introduced to a world of conformity, order, and scientific regularity.

This graph paper, however, is not viewed in the expected manner, that is, flat to the screen. We see it at an angle, distorted, skewed. This implies some disturbance in the regularity of the world. Furthermore, the left side of this grid is closer to us than the right side. This too, like almost everything Hitchcock touches, has meaning.

8. RIGHT/LEFT SYMBOLISM



North by Northwest [1959] (00:18)

What does it mean that the left side of the green grid is closer to us than the right side?

There is a long tradition of meaning associated with "right" and "left." In language, for example, left is associate with negative values: "out in left field," "left wing," "left over," "left behind," "having two left feet," "a left-handed compliment," "left in the lurch," and so on. Left's homonyms mean "forsaken," "abandoned," "alone," "jilted," etc. Indeed, the Latin word for "left" is "*sinistra,*" with obvious associations, and in French it is "*gouache*" meaning clumsy. In Russian, the term "nalyevo" literally means "on the left," but is commonly used to connote that taking of bribes. Right, on the other hand (pardon the pun), is associated with things positive, "the rights of man," "right on," "being in the right," "upright," "right on time," "upright," "as right as rain," "give one's right arm," "on the right track," "waking up on the right side of the bed," "Mr. Right," "right-of-way," and so on. Right's homonyms mean "appropriate," "good," "legal," etc. In French, the word for "right," "*drioux*," also means "the law." Clearly, "right" and "left" are loaded concepts. Even the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes says (in opposition to physiological reality), "A wise man's heart is at his right hand, but a fool's heart is at his left."

In traditional and some contemporary theater, entrances from stage left often introduce the villains while entrances from stage right indicate the heroic characters. Hitchcock is clearly aware of this tradition and uses it in many ways. Here are a few examples.

The 39 Steps [1935] (28:36)

In *The 39 Steps* [1935], the greedy, jealous, miserly, wife-beating, religious fanatic crofter John, a minor villain in Hitchcock's panoply, enters from the left while our hero, Hannay, enters the scene from the right.

Sabotage [1936] (02:30)

In the *Sabotage* [1936], saboteur Verloc enters not only from screen left, but from the lower left giving him an even more ominous and menacing quality. Note that in this scene, Hitchcock places the light at the opposite corner from Verloc's face thus contrasting light and darkness, both physical and moral.

Foreign Correspondent [1940] (06:44)

By 1940, Hitchcock loads this idea with new subtlety. In *Foreign Correspondent* [1940] when the kindly, fatherly, peace-loving Fisher enters from the left, Hitchcock reveals the villain to us a bare six minutes into the film. In the text of the film, we will not learn of Fisher's perfidy until an hour later.

Rebecca [1940] (30:25)

Rebecca [1940] (1:04:29)

In *Rebecca* [1940], the unblinking Mrs. Danvers, one of Hitchcock's few female villains, enters from the left, her face being the only one in obvious shadow. And Jack Favell, the ultimate cause of everyone's woes, also enters from the left.

Young and Innocent [1937] (03:31)

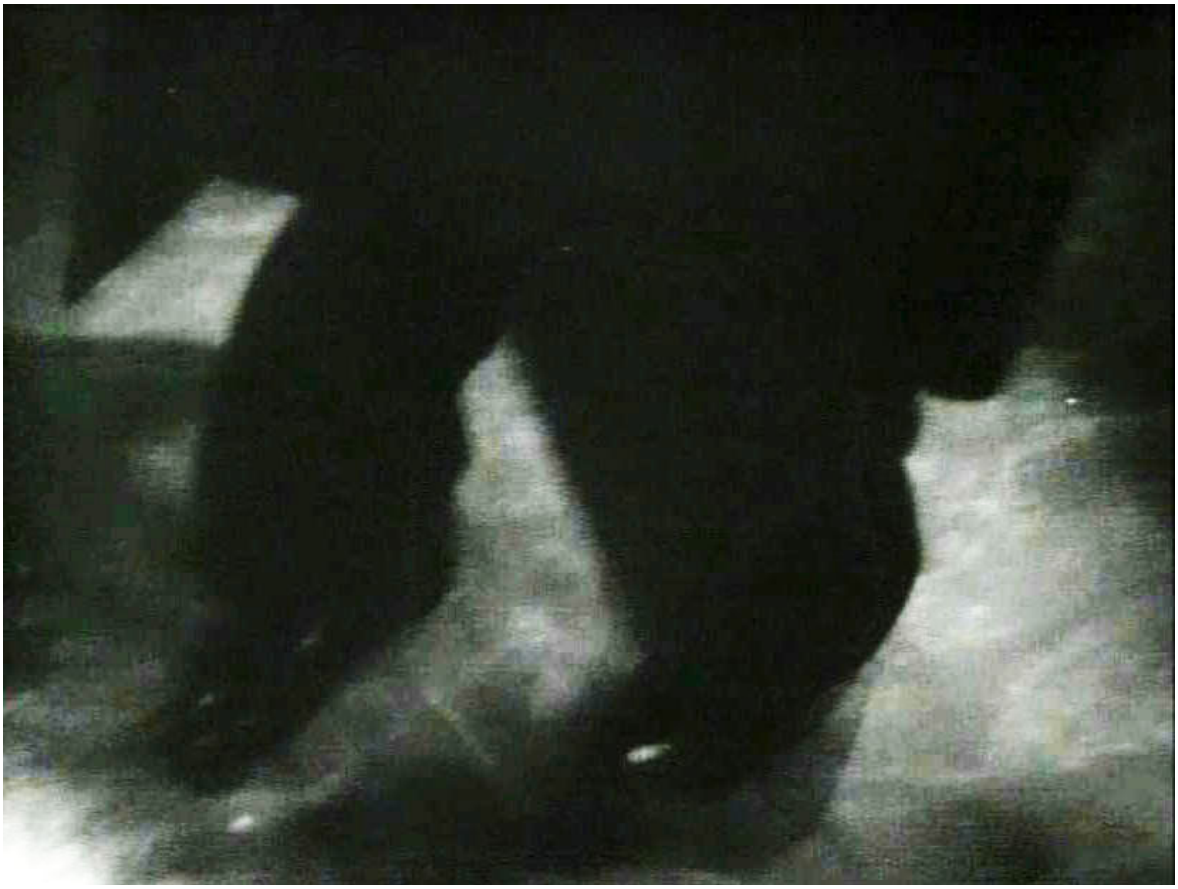
On the "good" side: Hitchcock used this device throughout his career to indicate the virtuous characters by their entrances from screen right. For example, in the early *Young and Innocent* [1937] the hero enters from the right.

To Catch a Thief [1955] (04:35)

In *To Catch a Thief* [1955], John Robie is introduced in the right-center of the frame. As with his clothing, mentioned above, this reinforces his innocence even though at the level of the text through much of the film we are unsure whether he is or is not a jewel thief. Thus, being slightly to the right of the center of the image is an appropriate reflection of our doubts about him.

The Birds [1963] (02:23)

Decades later, in *The Birds* [1963], in a remarkably similar scene, Melanie enters from the right almost instantly after the credits finish. I have often wondered if the "No Left Turn" sign is something Hitchcock was aware of or simply coincidence.



Secret Agent [1936] (09:46)

Secret Agent [1936] (19:44)

Aware of this convention, Hitchcock manipulates it in many ways. In *Secret Agent* [1936], Hitchcock uses the right/left device to give the audience information that the characters in the film do not have. A man, Caypor, who enters from the right – who we therefore know is not evil – is thought to be an enemy spy by counterspy Ashenden and killed. Only later Caypor is tragically proven innocent. Caypor's entrance is quite subtle as we only see his feet. Later, the real enemy spy, bearded and pipe-smoking, enters from the left.

Shadow of a Doubt [1943] (19:13)

Shadow of a Doubt [1943] (1:43:45)

By 1943 in *Shadow of a Doubt* [1943], apparently feeling his oats and wanting to push the envelope, Hitchcock has it both ways with a wonderfully symbolic train. Evil Uncle Charlie arrives in Santa Rosa on a train that begins in the back, slightly right of center. But as it rolls into Santa Rosa, its direction changes. It enters, belching ominous black smoke, from screen-left. At the end of the film, the same train now taking Charlie out of town – and incidentally to his death – enters from screen right spouting only light gray smoke.

Notorious [1946] (03:26)

In addition to the positive figures entering from screen right and the negative figures entering from screen left, Hitchcock finds other uses for this device. If a character has both positive and negative traits, as does Devlin in *Notorious* [1946], Hitchcock introduces him ambiguously. We first see Devlin as a black silhouette, back to the camera in the very center of the screen – neither good nor evil, but a bit of both and certainly very dark.

Frenzy [1972] (05:48)

Another example of intended ambiguity is seen in *Frenzy* [1972]. Blaney, who we suspect might be a murderer (but is really innocent), is introduced simultaneously from the right and the left through a very clever mirror shot. This has the added effect of portraying him as "two-faced."

Vertigo [1958] (1:50:37)

Parenthetically, Hitchcock used this “two-faced” mirror device before in *Vertigo* [1958], but with far less subtlety. Both characters are playing double games, both are hiding something.

Psycho [1960] (35:07)

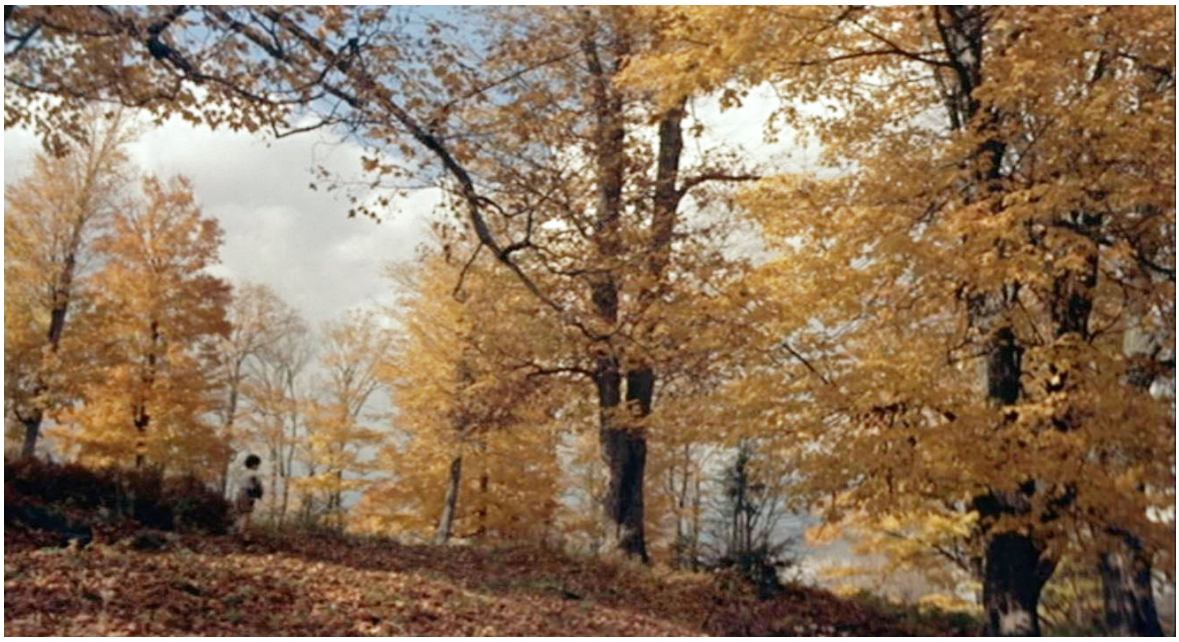
In *Psycho* [1960], Norman Bates’ bifurcated personality is represented by his shadowy reflection in the window behind him. Notice Norman is cleverly lit so it appears we are seeing the same side of his face twice, an effect worth of a Picasso cubist portrait.

Psycho [1960] (1:37:49)

And later in the same film when duplicitous Sam questions Norman, trying to keep him occupied while Lila ransacks his home and searches for Mrs. Bates, Hitchcock uses a mirror shot clearly portraying him as "two-faced."

Downhill [1927] (44:35)

Surprisingly, one of Hitchcock's most complex mirror shots appears incredibly early in his career. In *Downhill* [1927], gold-digging actress Isabel discovers naive Roddy just inherited £30,000. She will soon take him for every penny. Hitchcock portrays her not only two-faced in a mirror, but with her head completely severed from her body. And with a limply hanging male doll dressed as a clown, clearly representing Roddy, on the wall placed centrally between her real face and her false face.



The Trouble with Harry [1955] (02:13)

Hitchcock occasionally takes advantage of his audience's unconscious response to this device to play against it. In his black comedy *The Trouble with Harry* [1955], for instance, he tweaks the effect for comic purposes: as the film begins, we see the same figure enter twice from screen left in a long shot – obviously a villain. In a medium shot, however, we see it is a child, so thus he could not be a villain. Yet in the very next shot, a medium close shot, we see the child carrying a toy machine gun.

Spellbound [1945] (09:27)

We have seen Hitchcock will give information to the audience through this right/left device, information the film's characters do not have. However, on other occasions Hitchcock will intentionally withhold information from the audience. In *Spellbound* [1945], the fatherly Dr. Murchison enters from stage right causing us to think he is a positive character – something we must do until the very end of the film in order to be taken in as are the hero and heroine even though the entering Dr. Murchison is darkened by deep shadows. Similarly, the false Dr. Edwards enters from the right. This leaves the audience without a villain . . . until Hitchcock is ready to reveal him.

Suspicion [1941] (01:10)

Instead of deflecting suspicion from a character, as in the case of Dr. Murchison, above, in *Suspicion* [1941] Hitchcock plants false suspicion on Johnnie since we first see him at the left edge of the frame while Lina is at the right. As the scene plays out, we find Johnnie to be rude, crude, and quite socially objectionable. It takes quite a while for us to realize that while he is troubled in many ways, he is not a villain.

The Manxman [1929] (23:08)

Another use to which Hitchcock puts this right-versus-left tradition can be found in his last silent film, *The Manxman* [1929]. Pete is leaving to make his fortune and charges Phil to care for his girlfriend in his absence. The left-handed handshake on Pete's departure does not bode well: Phil will woo and win Kate in Pete's absence.

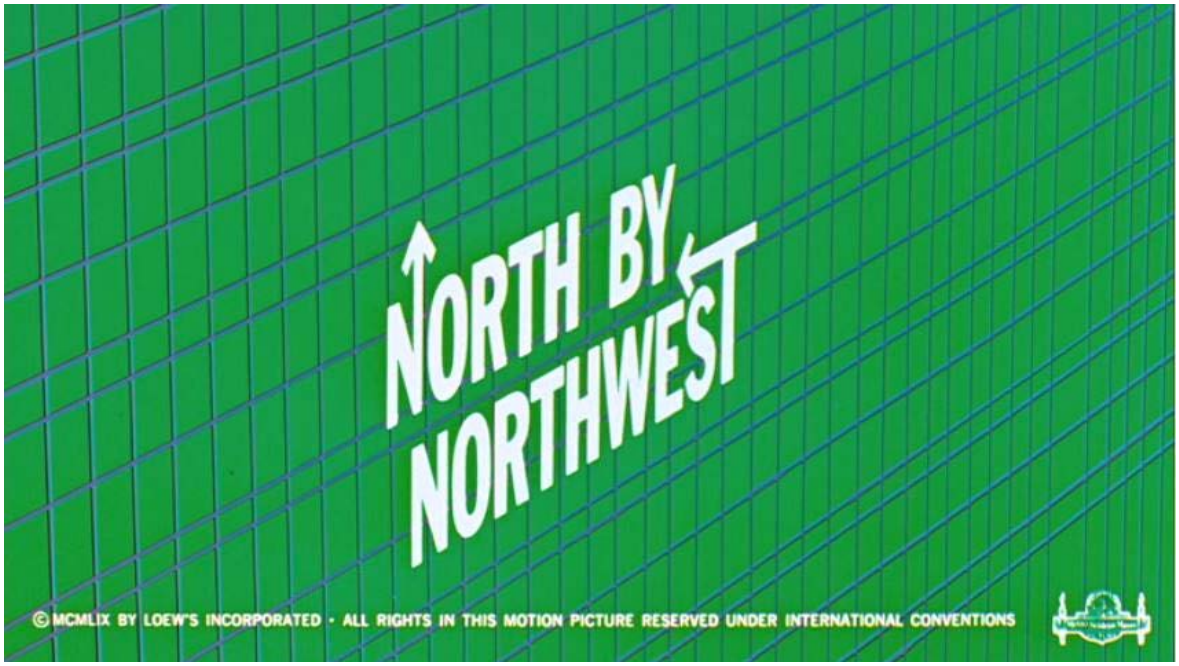
Bon Voyage [1944] (02:19)

Perhaps the cleverest and most subversive use of this right/left symbolism is found in Hitchcock's short World War II propaganda film, *Bon Voyage* [1944]. Everything is wrong. Escaped POWs Stephan and John enter riding a cart from screen left, their helpers in the underground enter from the left, etc. However, this is not sloppiness or an oversight on Hitchcock's part for half way through the film we learn the supposed hero Stephan is actually a Gestapo spy trying to penetrate the French resistance and John has been duped into helping him. The remainder of the film consists of the same incidents now viewed from the point of view of the spy (predicting Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* [1950] by a few years). Again, Hitchcock gives away the game using symbolism long before the revelations appear in the plot.

Bon Voyage [1944] (16:24)

If we apply these ideas about symbolism derived from linguistic and theatrical roots to *North by Northwest*, we can interpret the graph paper image as follows. Since the left (i.e., evil) side of the green (i.e., evil) grid is closer to us, evil is closer to us than good. And since a regular grid represents conformity, the closer we get to conformity, the closer we are to evil and disease. This indicates that what is coming in *North by Norwest* is nothing less than a critique of conformist, mid-20th century American culture!

9. THE TITLES SLIDE IN



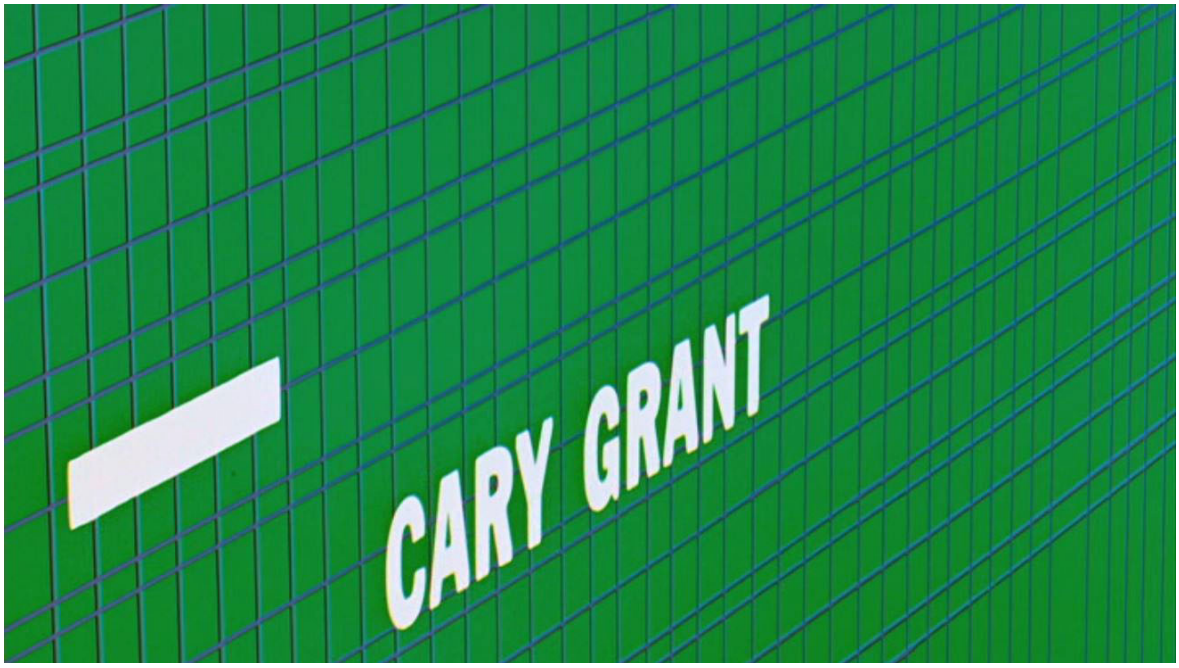
North by Northwest [1959] (00:48)

Over this skewed geometry, the titles slide in and out of the frame with great aggressive energy. The movement of the titles prepare us for the seemingly endless motion soon to engulf Roger Thornhill. The names, Cary Grant, James Mason, and Eva Marie Saint are skewed to conform to the shape of the grid as if they are caught in this web of green.

While the ominous music of *North by Northwest* reinforces the color's mood, it also reinforces the idea of the movement we see in the titles. The repeating pulse of Bernard Herrmann's music sets the scene for Thornhill's constant movement: He dictates to his secretary on the run. Meals are taken in moving trains. Locked in a hospital room, he paces. Even while making love, he is still in constant motion.

To echo the film's title, the title's letters have two arrowheads attached to them, one pointing up – North – and one pointing left – West. We are led to assume the title itself is a reference to a geographical direction (more on this later).

All the titles' movements are counterbalanced with other words or small white rectangles moving in the opposite direction like a counterweight in an elevator shaft. For instance, the words "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer" enter from the top balanced with "presents" entering from the bottom. Cary Grant, Eva Marie Saint, and James Mason are counterweighted with small white rectangles moving in the opposite direction of their names. This may imply Thornhill's movements will have to be balanced by some sort of counter movements in order for him to achieve the ultimate resolution of the Hitchcockian chaos that will soon envelope his life.



North by Northwest [1959] (00:25)

All this, however, changes when Hitchcock's name appears: the white rectangle is moving *with*, not against, his name. Hitchcock needs no counterbalance! Thus, Hitchcock again stands out as the manipulator and controller of the film. This device subtly continues his self-demonstration of his power as a director.

Given the complexities and meanings we have discovered so far – and we are less than a half-minute into the film – it should come as no surprise the film's title itself is very complex. At first glance *North by Northwest* seems like a direction. However, there is no point on the compass corresponding to "N by NW."

There are a few times in the film when Thornhill travels north and then west: From the view out the back window of the cab ride in New York City, we can deduce the cab he takes from his office to the Plaza Hotel goes north on Madison Avenue and then west on 60th Street to the Plaza. Later in Chicago when the police arrest/rescue Thornhill, they drive north on Michigan Avenue and then west to Chicago's Midway Airport. However, typical of Hitchcock, there is much more going on here than simple compass directions.

North by Northwest takes its title not only from the direction of the flight Roger Thornhill and Eve Kendall take to escape miscarried justice, but also from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

> I am but mad north-northwest: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a hand-saw. – Act II, scene ii.

There are many striking parallels between the two stories, the film, and the Shakespeare play.

- Like *Hamlet*, *North by Northwest* is about a man in search of his identity while at the same time trying to solve a crime involving a man who doesn't exist.
- Both contain a play-within-a-play in which someone is killed.
- There is an attempted murder by forcing a liquid into a man.
- There is great anxiety about getting a message to an overbearing mother.
- The villain has taken over another man's mansion and cast his own sister in the role of wife.
- The hero feigns madness.
- A library is an important place of interaction.

But *North by Northwest* is not *Hamlet*. Though there are echoes of the play throughout, Hitchcock's concern is with other issues. Perhaps that is why the film is not called "North-Northwest."

Strangers on a Train [1951] (1:14:54)

That Hitchcock references Shakespeare should come as no surprise. He uses many literary references to embellish the psychological themes in his films. One of the most interesting is in *Strangers on a Train* [1951]. About to play his tennis match, Hitchcock photographs Guy and Ann from a low angle so that we can see written on a lintel behind them, "And treat those two . . . just the same . . ." This is a quotation from Rudyard Kipling's poem *If*. And the whole stanza is quite an appropriate comment on Guy's situation:

> If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
> If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
> If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
> And treat those two impostors just the same;
> If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
> Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
> Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
> And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

Marnie [1964] is another example. Mark Rutland quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, "When Duty whispers low, Thou must, The youth replies, I can!" Far more subtle (or obscure) are Hitchcock's references to Edgar Allen Poe in *Marnie* [1964]. Poe, whom Hitchcock credits for his interest in the suspense genre, figures large (or very, very small) in the film: Marnie Elmer's name (in the novel) is changed to Edgar; Poe lived most of his life in New York, Virginia, and Philadelphia, the three locations where the film takes place; the final confrontation is filmed in Baltimore, the place of Poe's mysterious death in 1849; and Marnie's mother's name is changed from Edith Elmer to Berenice possibly in honor of the short story of the same name by Poe.

This is similar to the connections between Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* [1943]. At the very beginning of the film, the landlady closes the blinds in the recumbent Charlie's room. He arises out of a seemingly death-like trance only when the room is dark. Detective Graham tells Ann to recite the story of *Dracula*. The telepathic link between Mina Harker and Count Dracula is echoed in the unspoken communication between Uncle Charlie and his young cousin. And, finally, Uncle Charlie says, "The same blood runs through our veins." This is an exact quote from the 1931 film version of *Dracula*.

Other literary references abound in Hitchcock's oeuvre. One of my personal favorites is in *The Lady Vanishes* [1938] when Gilbert praises Iris' deductive skills and playfully presents her with a fountain pen calling it a "Trichinopoly cigar." A Trichinopoly, a cheap Indian cigar made for export in the Victorian period, is a central clue in *A Study in Scarlet*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story.

However, the greatest link between *North by Northwest* and *Hamlet* is the search for identity. The search for identity (and/or its loss), which forms the psychological core of *North by Northwest*, is a constant theme running through many American films since at least World War II.

It's A Wonderful Life [1946] (2:02:41) – Frank Capra

One of the first major films to treat this paranoid theme is *It's a Wonderful Life* [1946] in which a man experiences a terrifying world in which he never existed. With this film, director Frank Capra predicts the flood of "identity problem" films to appear in the 1950s that clearly reflect a land swept with Cold War paranoia where the greatest fear is that a person is not what they seem, but a Communist spy (who the sci-fi films of the day translates into various alien invaders, monsters, or ordinary-looking people who are not really human).

We need to keep this in mind, for the era in which *North by Northwest* was made, and presumably the audience for which it was made, were not far removed from the height of "Red Menace" paranoia. The film, after all, is all about spies stealing secrets, counterspies, and patriots (male and female) willing to sacrifice their lives for their country. Thus, the implications of these "Communist Peril/Loss of Identity" films are relevant to understanding the political implications of *North by Northwest*.

The idea that “people are not what they seem” fed the paranoia of both the political right and left of the day.

In the films of the 1950s that dealt with these issues from the perspective of the political right, the majority view: the aliens or monsters symbolized either the communists or their dupes ready to subvert anyone and everyone to the goals of the international communism conspiracy. This fear, it turns out was not completely unjustified, for in fact the Soviet Union’s spy apparatus did obtain a number of America’s military secrets.

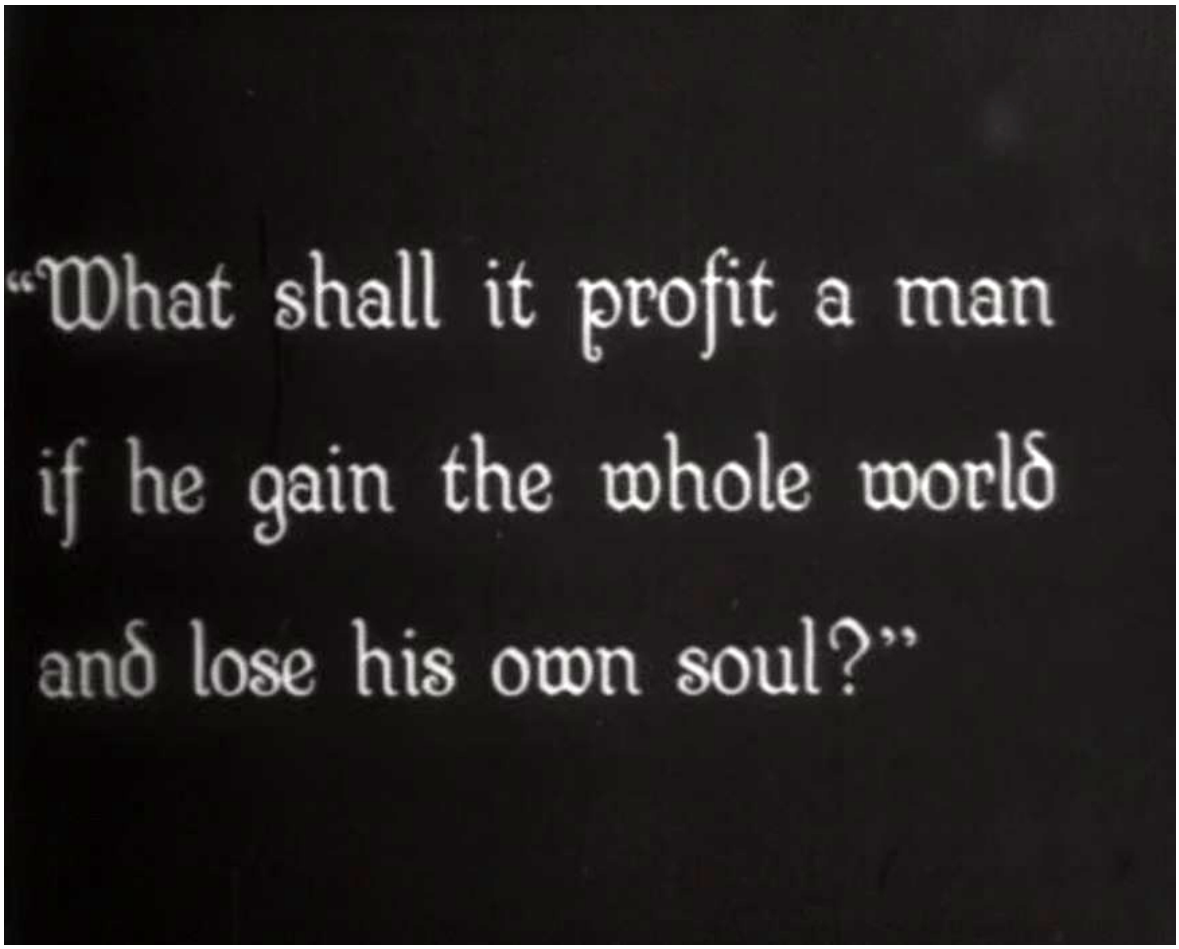
From the perspective of the political left , these people-who-are-not-what-they-seem are the ordinary people around you, often family, friends, or co-workers, ready to turn you in to the various witch hunting governmental and private investigating committees that, who, with even the slightest hint or the flimsiest of suspicion of communist affiliation, will ruin your life and your career. In fact, a large number people working in the Hollywood film industry were black-listed; most lost their jobs, some left the country, a few committed suicide.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers [1956] (47:11) – Don Siegel

Of the dozens of films that dealt with these topics, the most interesting are those that disguise the issues (unlike *I Was a Communist for the FBI* [1951] which makes its intent pretty clear in the title). The most famous is Don Siegel’s science fiction masterpiece *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956], in which, most significantly, it is not bodies that are snatched, but

minds. This theme continues through the 1960s with films such as *Manchurian Candidate* [1962], and further with films like *Total Recall* [1990], *Groundhog Day* [1993], *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* [1994], *The Truman Show* [1998], *EdTV* [1999], *The Sixth Day* [2000], and *Oblivion* [2013] amongst many others.

It is in the midst of this complex, confusing, and overtly paranoid political environment that Hitchcock made *North by Northwest*. But Hitchcock's response to the prevailing political/psychological atmosphere was, like much of his output, unexpected. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956], for instance, posits little hope for the "Organization Man" or "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" (the hero/victim is a suit-wearing doctor) ever regaining his soul. Most of the films dealing with loss of identity take a similar tack – hopelessness. Hitchcock, despite his rampant cynicism, takes a more positive view.



The Manxman [1929] (01:40)

In *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock demonstrates that regaining one's soul is possible and healing is a valid alternative to emotional death. Being controlled – by society, by business, by government, by mother – is neither inescapable nor inevitably debilitating (Hitchcock rethought the "mother" aspect of this statement in *Psycho* [1960]). However, as Hitchcock shows, regaining a life lost is never easy. It involves struggle, physical danger, psychological self-investigation, and, last but certainly not least, a committed relation with a woman. He dealt with the same theme in his last silent film, *The Manxman* [1929] which opens with a quote from the Gospel of Mark (8:36), "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

Psycho [1960] (1:41:02)

While he seems to have begun his interest in loss of identity in the 1929 *The Manxman*, he didn't return to it until the late 1950s. In the 1958 *Vertigo*, the film he made just before *North by Northwest*, Scottie tries to turn the real Judy into the non-existent Madeline. This effort leads to her physical destruction and his psychic dissolution. In *North by Northwest*, Thornhill temporarily becomes Kaplan, a man who does not exist, to find his true self. In the following film, *Psycho* [1960], Norman permanently becomes his non-existent mother. Most psychologists would agree the road to health is to visit and understand the darkness within the psyche (as in *North by Northwest*). On the other hand, being swallowed by that selfsame darkness (as in *Psycho* [1960])

or becoming obsessed by it (as in *Vertigo* [1958]) both lead to destruction. On this journey, one must tread a very narrow road.

Another important social/psychological issue Hitchcock addresses in *North by Northwest* is conformity. Made in 1959, it is at the end of the decade known for its penchant for valuing conformity on the surface of society while trying very hard to ignore the discontent brewing underneath (the beat generation, abstract art, rock and roll, and the burgeoning youth cult). It is rewarding to compare this film in terms of how Hitchcock deals with these concerns by comparing it to a film made just few years earlier, in 1956, *The Wrong Man*.

The Wrong Man [1956] is about a working class man, Manny Balestrero, who lives on the fringes of conformist society – he's a musician in a dance band – and who chooses to conform because he believes in the validity of the system. That system lets him down. He is accused of a crime he did not commit. After considerable suffering, he is eventually found innocent, not by the efforts of the police, but by sheer coincidence. However, this comes too late. By then his life has been destroyed: his wife suffers a mental breakdown, his family dissolves, and his already meager resources completely exhausted. He is a broken, but innocent man.

North by Northwest's Roger Thornhill is at the other end of America's social food chain. Like Manny in *The Wrong Man* [1956], he chooses to conform. But there the similarity ends. While Manny Balestrero is an innocent, Roger Thornhill is complicit not only in choosing conformity, but, as an advertising executive, actually perpetuating it.

By looking at the upper strata of society rather than the lower depths of the Balestrero family, Hitchcock is actually probing much deeper into the ethos of the 1950s. While we might expect Manny to realize the hopelessness of his situation (at least partially generated by the Thornhills of the day), we would never expect a comfortable and terminally bland Thornhill to do anything but blissfully march lock-step down the one-way street society was heading during that decade.

The Thomas Crown Affair [1968] (24:51) – Norman Jewison

Hitchcock's prescience is striking. Almost a decade later, in the patently subversive *The Thomas Crown Affair* [1968], it is not the youth that is disaffected, but the rich, wealthy upper crust. A phi-beta-kappa Bostonian multimillionaire turns bank robber basically to assuage his ennui. Thus, if the most comfortable few percent of the population can find no satisfaction within society, who can? *North by Northwest* asks a parallel question about the previous decade. And Hitchcock has some surprising answers.

10. THE BUILDING FADES IN & OUT

North by Northwest [1959] (00:56)

As *North by Northwest*'s titles continue, we find what looks like the green graph paper slowly shimmering into transparency. Graph paper becomes grid. And through this grid, we see cars and traffic moving exactly on the lines as if to confirm our notions about conformity. The grid seems to be trying to parse this world into smaller, more manageable segments, while at the same time demonstrating a visual monotony that represents the high-rise business world of New York City.

Once we realize what we are looking at is a building (at 650 Madison Avenue), we must ask about our looking. Where could have the camera been placed to obtain such a view? We are floating in mid-air, looking down on the busy world of New York City. Hitchcock uses this "camera position," if one can call it that, many times. I think it would be fair to call this a "God's point-of-view shot."

As the titles continue to introduce the costars, Ernest Lehman the writer, Bernard Herrmann the composer, the director of photography Robert Burkes, and others, they seem now to be sliding precariously up and down the

building that has slowly appeared. This may predict the end of the film where Roger Thornhill and Eve Kendall precariously descend the gigantic faces of the presidents on Mt. Rushmore.

Slowly, the green itself dissolves. Visually, we either see the green color sink into the building or feel the building is absorbing it. This might imply whatever evil or disease the green color represents moves inside the building. Considering that the Madison Avenue skyscraper houses at least one advertising agency where a lie will soon be called an "expedient exaggeration," this is not too farfetched.

The idea of transparency – seeing the traffic through a grid – passes quickly as we realize we are not looking *through* a glass wall but seeing a *reflection* in a glass-fronted office building. As the green color fades, what we had momentarily perceived as being inside the building is now clearly on the outside. However, the idea of reflections and this fleeting confusion – inside versus outside – will both become important elements during the film.

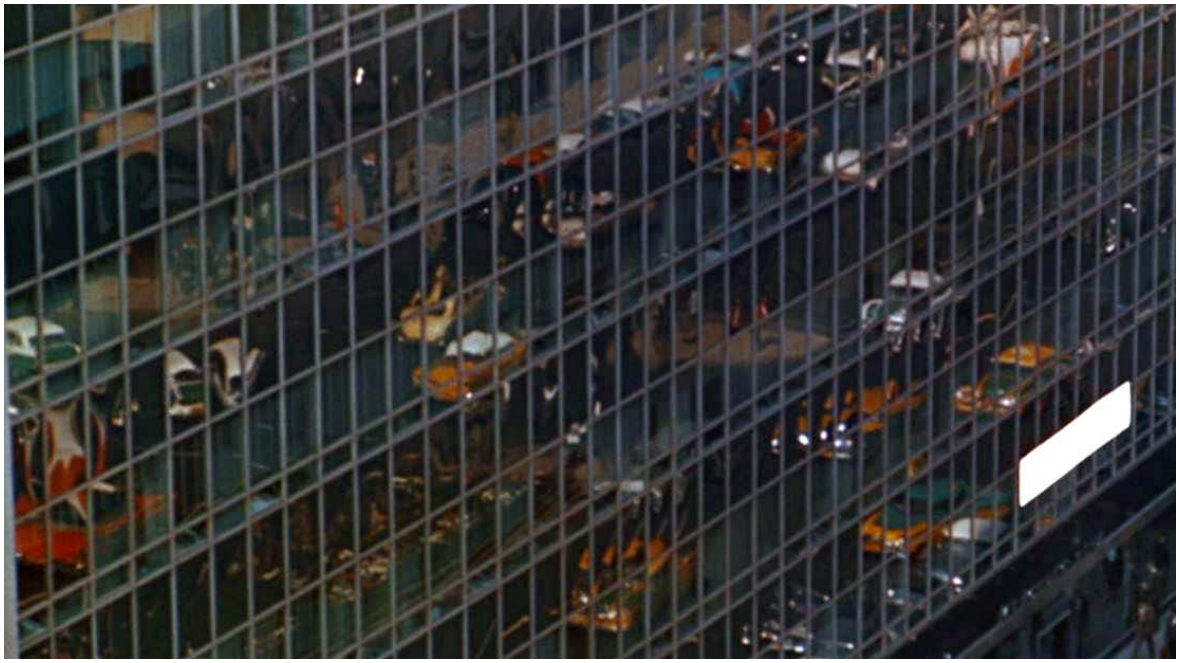
Traffic and pedestrians all in a hurry represent well the ant-nest activity of Manhattan. This visual glide from opacity to transparency to reflection implies the hubbub and chaos we see outside may also be happening inside. At the same time, the graph paper windows impose on this scene a sense of regularity and conformity. Remember, the building is not photographed head-on, symmetrically, and because the resulting image is skewed, we know something, both inside and outside, is amiss.

Another metaphoric implication is that of solving a mystery. Opacity implies a blockage: there is something we cannot see or understand. Transparency, then, implies understanding. And reflection, that is, self-understanding, seeing one's self truly, appears as the final goal. Like a thesis, antithesis and resolution, this process of opacity, transparency, and reflection leads to psychological self-understanding. This is the process the typical Hitchcock hero passes through: confusion, apparent and false assumption of understating, and final self-revelation and true understanding.

Additionally, this confusion of surfaces – opacity, transparency, and reflection – effectively and economically introduces the idea that, in the future, "appearances may be deceiving." Moreover, the people Hitchcock will

shortly introduce to plague and surround the hero will themselves confuse opacity, transparency, and reflection.

11. LOCATIONS – FAMOUS & OBSCURE



North by Northwest [1959] (01:11)

We finally have the full scene: rush hour traffic reflected in a glass-fronted high-rise building. There is little question this is New York City.

Very few of Hitchcock's films take place in unspecified locations. He clearly wants us to know exactly where the action is taking place and to bring our knowledge of and/or prejudices about the locale to the film. In this way he is assured his viewers will recognize all the cultural symbolism he packs into his films.

Blackmail [1929] (1:14:44)

The Man Who Knew Too Much [1956] (1:28:31)

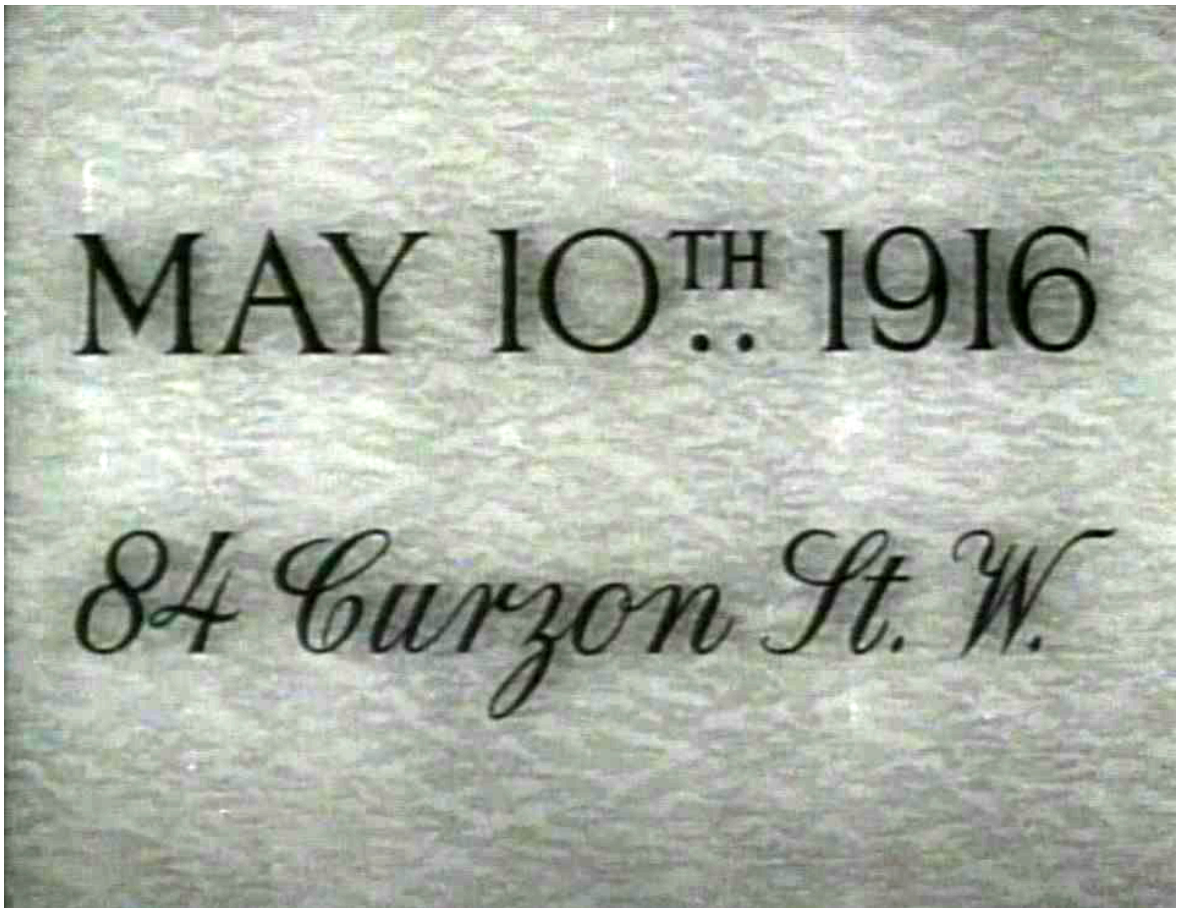
Saboteur [1942] (1:47:23)

Many of his film feature famous and easily identifiable locations: The British Museum in *Blackmail* [1929], London's Royal Albert Hall in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956], and the Statue of Liberty in *Saboteur* [1942] are typical. And with each location, the knowledge of that location that we the audience bring to the film not only helps place the story within our world, but also saves Hitchcock the time and energy to bring this information to us. Known locations are economical.

In one way, this is simply another device to get the audience involved in the film. On the other hand, it is Hitchcock's way of spreading fear: if nefarious goings on can occur in these famous and public places rather than in dark alleys and dank basements, then we are all in constant danger. Just as seeing a famous site gets our attention, so the crimes happening in these legendary places engage us far more effectively than were they taking place in an obscure locale we would have little hope of experiencing in real life.

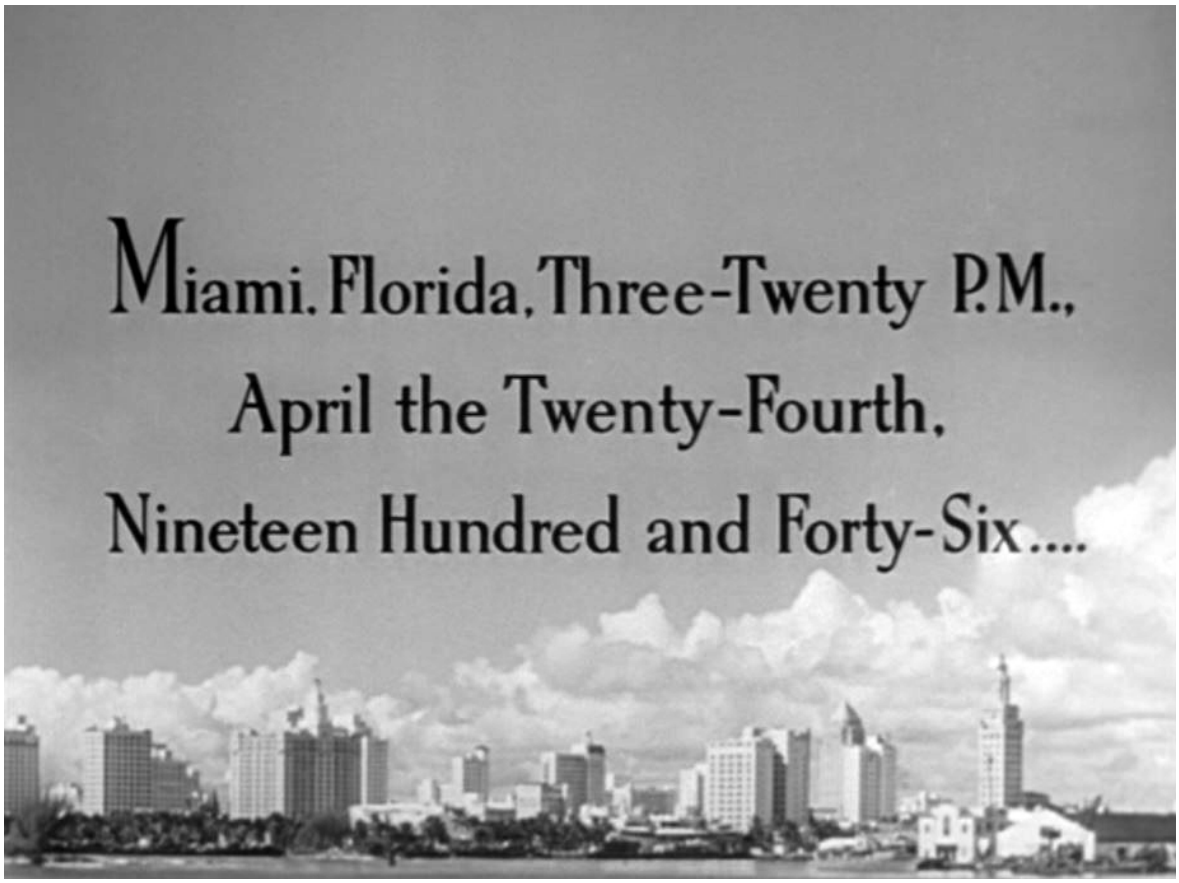
North by Northwest has more than its share of famous sites: Mt. Rushmore, the United Nations, and, in its opening scene, a site we immediately recognize as New York City. The streets of New York City are so well-known no further specificity is necessary as in some of Hitchcock's other films.

For lesser known places, Hitchcock gives us informative titles:

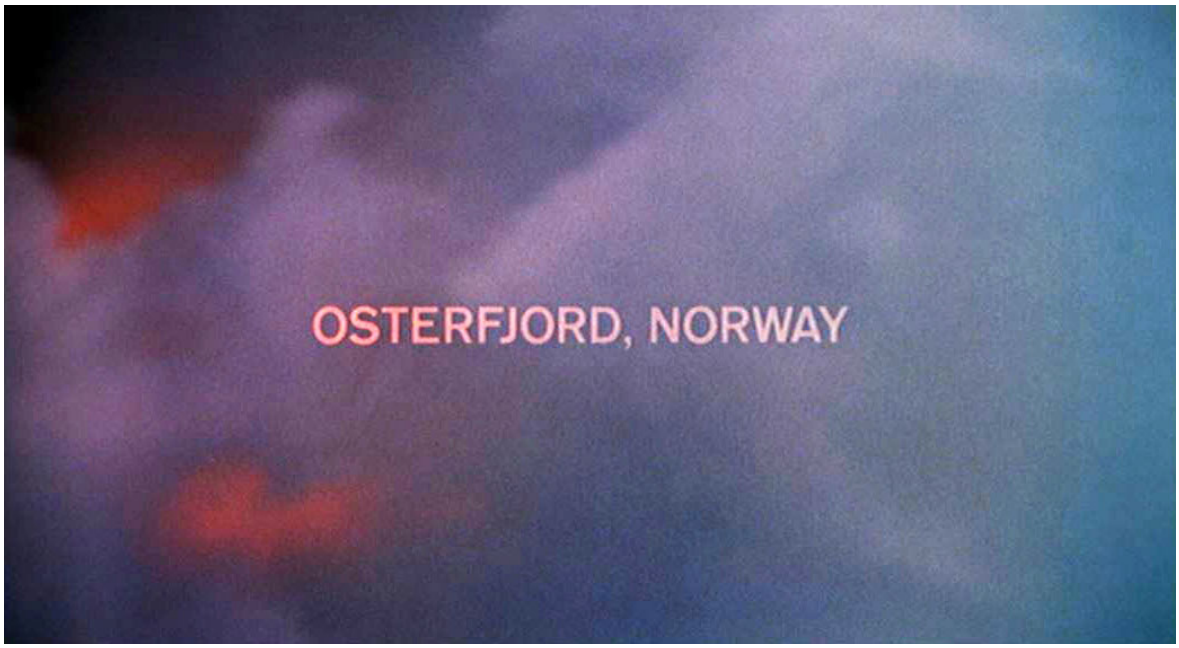


Secret Agent [1936] (01:14)

Psycho [1960] (02:00)



Notorious [1946] (01:25)

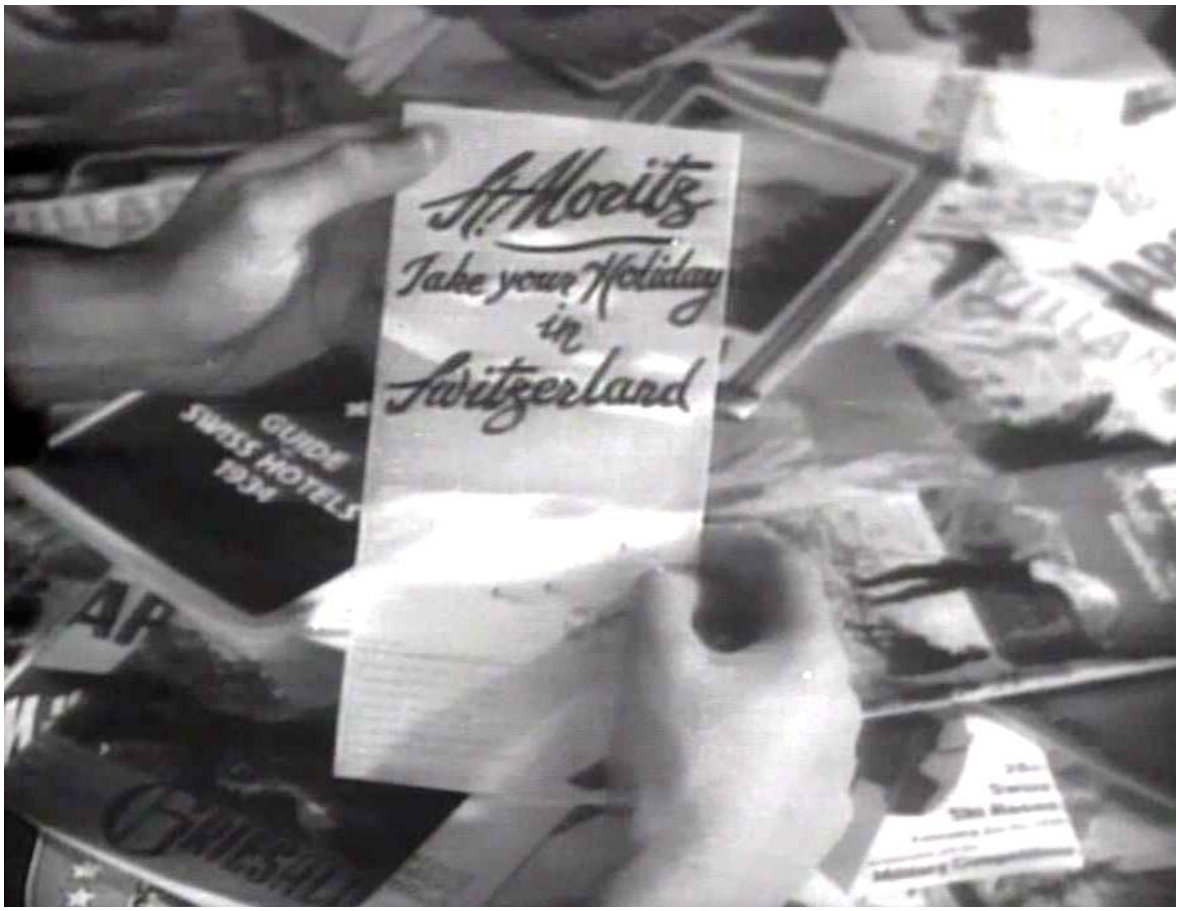


Torn Curtain [1966] (01:59)

Topaz [1969] (02:15)

For instance, *Secret Agent* [1936], *Psycho* [1960], *Notorious* [1946], *Torn Curtain* [1966], and *Topaz* [1969], all begin with a title indicating the specific time and location: "Phoenix, Arizona; Friday, December the Eleventh; Two Forty-Three P.M," "Miami. Florida. Three-Twenty P.M, April the Twenty-Fourth, Nineteen Hundred and Forty-Six ...." and "Osterfjord, Norway." Phoenix, Miami, Osterfjord or even Copenhagen are not locations we

would instantly recognize as we do New York City. The outstanding exception is Hitchcock's last film, *Family Plot* [1976], where he went to great lengths to avoid all references to a specific location.



The Man Who Knew Too Much [1934] (00:16)

Occasionally, Hitchcock indicates locations indirectly. In 1934 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Hitchcock establishes the locale by showing us a travel brochure for Switzerland. The brochure does double service for at the same time it introduces the grisly idea that a "Holiday in Switzerland" includes international spying, kidnapping, and murder.

To Catch a Thief [1955] (02:05)

In *To Catch a Thief* [1955], Hitchcock uses a slight improvement on this idea: he dollies in on a travel poster, "France." Again, the poster's blurb, "If you love life, you'll love France," is slathered with irony.

The Birds [1963] (02:43)

But by 1963 the device becomes perfunctory. In *The Birds* [1963], for instance, Melanie passes in front of a sign, "San Francisco" as if the cable car

and Union Square were not indicators enough. Here the scenario is for Hitchcock's convenience; the poster allows him to cut, almost seamlessly, from a location in San Francisco to a studio set.

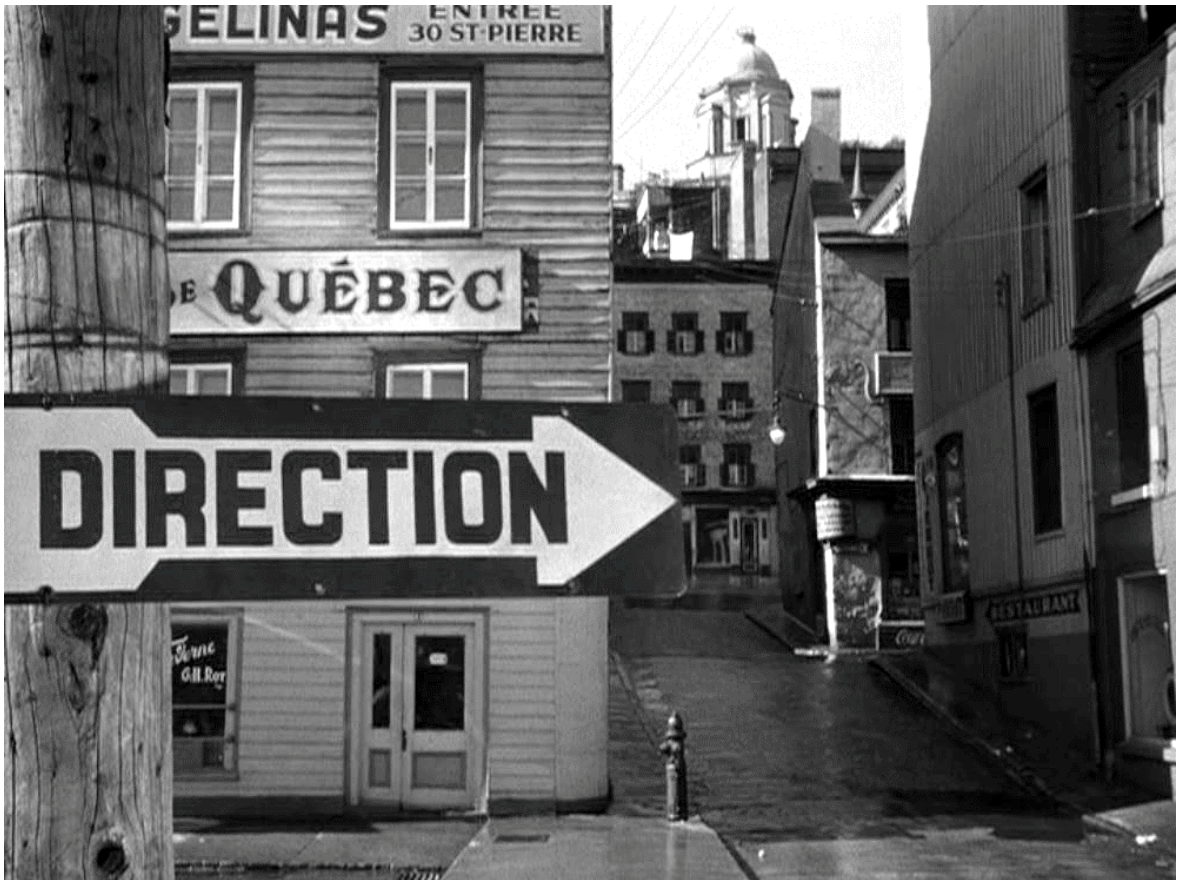
Frenzy [1972] 00:07

By 1972, in *Frenzy,* the idea of identifying the location has become redundant and unnecessary. The unmistakable image of London Bridge and the River Thames is overlaid with the heraldic symbol of London and the words "The City of London." Unfortunately, this opening sequence has all the mystique and suspense of an introduction to an upscale travelogue.

The Farmer's Wife [1928] (02:00)

Very early Hitchcock combined this indicator of location with a clever bit of symbolism. *The Farmer's Wife* [1928] opens with a sign, "Applegarth Farm" lettered on a broken, slightly out-of-focus board indicating something on that farm is broken – the inability of farmer Sweetland to find a wife. And the reason behind Sweetland's inability to have a relationship is his "out-of-focus" view of social relationships. And all this surely bodes ill for farmer Sweetland as the sign points to the left. Sweetland, by the way, lives in a land that is anything but sweet.

Hitchcock returns to this idea in a self-reflexive variation in his last film, *Family Plot* [1976], in which a background street sign reads, "Bates Ave," in reference to his own *Psycho* [1960].



I Confess [1953] (01:31)

Hitchcock expands this idea in *I Confess* [1953] which opens with two signs, "Quebec" to indicate the physical location of the film and a huge "Direction," a highly symbolic sign with multiple meanings: pointing to the right it indicates the "right" path taken by the hero, at the same time it points down a rather dark, foreboding, and empty street, a metaphor for where the hero must travel, and, by following a series of these signs, we are led to the scene of the murder central to the film.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith [1941] (00:32)

In his screw-ball comedy, *Mr. and Mr. Smith* [1941], Hitchcock makes the introductory location-establishing shot do double duty. New York is clearly represented by the architecture. However, under the title we see a street divided by a dark, seemingly impenetrable barrier extending to infinity – a good representation of the story to follow: a marriage divided.

Hitchcock can also turn the specificity of locale around when necessary. Near the beginning of *The Trouble with Harry* [1955], Captain Wiles speaks of his adventures with a "Turk" on the Oronoco. The Oronoco is a river in South America!

Just as specificity of location is important, so is the idea of the city. Hitchcock begins many of his film with a broad view of a city often followed by a closer inspection of some detail. (Very few of his films occur outside urban areas – *Suspicion* [1941], *The Farmers Wife* [1928], *The Manxman* [1929], and a few others.)

Juno and the Paycock [1929] (08:51)

As early as 1929, in his second sound film, *Juno and the Paycock,* Hitchcock slowly moves the camera from ground level, up two stories, to a window. As with many of his devices, Hitchcock would refine and elaborate this idea over the years.

Foreign Correspondent [1940] (01:50)

A decade later in *Foreign Correspondent* [1940] Hitchcock, rather than simply lifting the camera, now moves it over some rather obvious models and, through a rather clumsy fade/dissolve, enters through a window into a newspaper office.

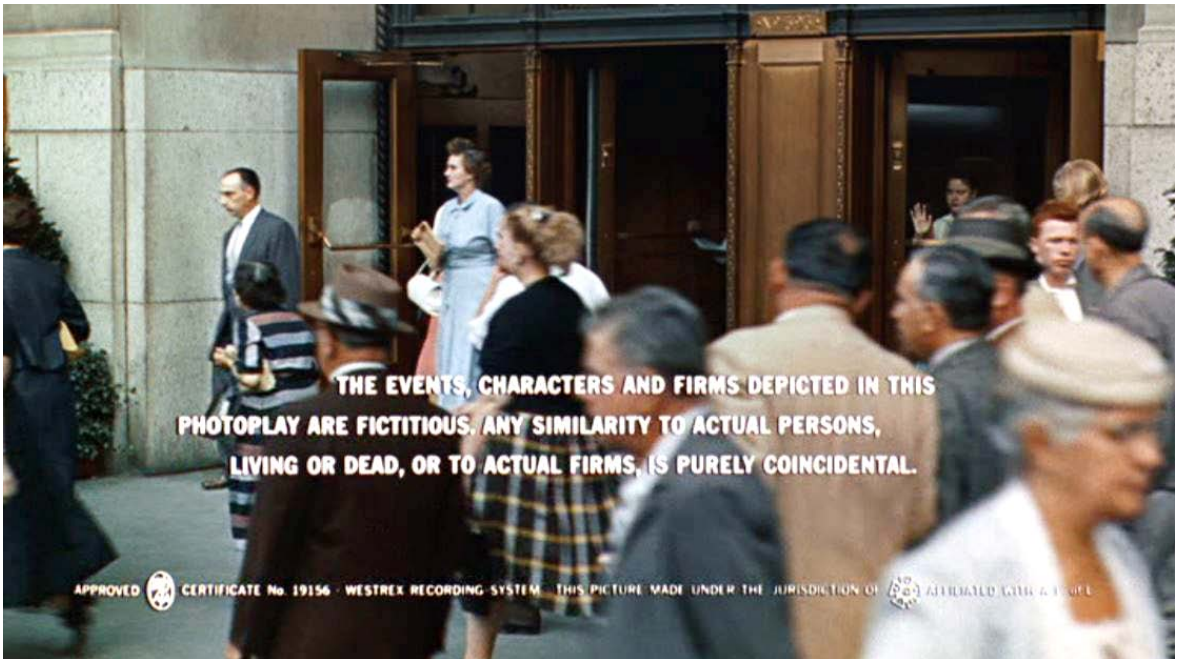
Psycho [1960] (02:31)

Two decades later in *Psycho* [1960], we see the opening of *Foreign Correspondent* [1940] repeated but with greater sophistication. Now Hitchcock begins with one of his favorite introductory camera positions – suspended in mid-air as if we were viewing a scene from God's point of view. A single swooping gesture across the Phoenix cityscape takes us through an almost closed window into a hotel room to observe a trysting couple.

Topaz [1969] (02:34)

In *Topaz* [1969], Hitchcock uses a variation in which the camera moves from a Soviet Flag atop a flagpole down toward a window, but this time settling on a mirror reflecting a malicious face inside the window rather than the window itself, symbolizing the evil within so horrifying we cannot look in, as if fearing it to be the home of a Medusa.

12. PEOPLE ON THE STREET



North by Northwest [1959] (01:51)

In *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock's sly sense of humor is on display. Often, as in this case, the humor is cynical and sarcastic: he doesn't place the disclaimer, "The events, characters and firms . . . are fictitious and similarity to actual persons . . . is purely coincidental." over the building where one would expect it to follow the other credits. Instead he unexpectedly cuts to the street level and places it on the very first scene in which we see people on the street rushing about like disturbed ants in a nest. Thus, the placement of the disclaimer becomes a comment on the denizens of New York.

Because these people on the street seem so natural, so ordinary, and move without grace or apparent purpose, it is difficult to realize they are all actors. Under the supervision of the notorious perfectionist Hitchcock, each "extra" is hired, paid, dressed, and given specific instructions on when and how fast to walk, what to do, and where to look (not at the camera).

The Lodger [1927] (1:06:34)

Throughout his career, Hitchcock demonstrates a mastery of organized chaos in terms of pedestrians and crowds. His close attention to a seemingly random and unorganized mass of people is demonstrated in the 1927 *The Lodger* where, in an interview, he said the composition was not quite right. To solve the problem, he placed himself in the crowd for a better visual effect and, incidentally, began his career-long cameo appearances. One can see his attention to the shape of a crowd by simply noting the placement of the arms on the people behind the barrier, all pointing toward the central figure of the eponymous lodger.

The Lodger [1927] (03:39)

While this may be apocryphal – Hitchcock was not beyond making up a good story to feed to gullible critics and reporters – an earlier scene is without doubt the director. With his back to us, he is busy on the phone, presumably telling others what to do, before him are multiple windows, each a beehive of activity, and overhead over a dozen lights – sounds very much like someone directing a film.

Rich and Strange [1931] (01:46)

In the same year, Hitchcock used the image of a mass of anonymous humanity to further his ideological purposes. *Rich and Strange* [1931] opens with an image similar to *North by Northwest* (also strangely reminiscent of the opening of King Vidor's 1928 *The Crowd*): masses of office workers milling around at quitting time, heading out of the building and into the subways. However, in 1931 Hitchcock's answer to the problem of conformity was far more sarcastic – the couple will ask for their inheritance before their uncle dies and go on a wild spending spree but learn nothing. The protagonist of *Rich and Strange*, Fred Hill, is an earlier version of Roger Thornhill. It makes sense that over the decades Hitchcock's philosophy matured to consider the problem of mass conformity as far more serious than in *Rich and Strange* and to propose a more serious answer.

The 39 Steps [1935] (05:51)

Perhaps the best demonstration of Hitchcock's ability at crowd manipulation is in the opening of *The 39 Steps* [1935]. Each person peopling the theater is carefully chosen – each face is "just right," each perfectly lit. And matching the music hall gaiety, the peripatetic camera moves everywhere with great energy, always following the action, always at the right spot at the right time, even in the scene of the fight and riot. It is a masterpiece of choreography between the "crowd" and the camera. Just as in *North by Northwest*, the crowd looks ordinary and random, but it is anything but.

Rear Window [1954] (02:11)

Another good example of the care Hitchcock gives the "random" people in an almost unseen background is the tiny view of the very densely populated, very busy street outside the Greenwich Village apartment in *Rear Window* [1954]. To bring attention to easily unnoticed pedestrians and cars passing by Hitchcock highlights them with a small, red neon sign hovering over them – just about the only bright red object in the film.

Foreign Correspondent [1940] (1:04:50)

Still another instance when Hitchcock carefully controls the seemingly random people apparently walking haphazardly in the background is in *Foreign Correspondent* [1940]. At the very moment Rowley is explaining to Johnny Jones that the British police don't carry guns, a policeman walks by in the background!

Rope [1948] (02:08)

And the people who populate these "crowds" are equally well chosen. They are never just generic people, each person is in the middle of living a life of their own. For example, as we peer fleetingly down into the street of *Rope* [1948], a film shot almost entirely indoors, we see a policeman escorting two children across the street, a woman sweeping stairs, another pushing a baby carriage, a man with a briefcase, and so on. It is as if every person was extracted for a moment out of a completely different story. And the blue car next to the red and white fire hydrant gives us the color symbolism needed to know exactly where culturally this is going on.

As in these other films, the pedestrians in *North by Northwest* are anything but pedestrian. Let us see what we can discover in Hitchcock's direction of something so trivial as a bunch of people walking down a street.

Now at street level, we see a jungle of people and traffic. In all this hustle and bustle everyone looks the same. The men are dressed in suits; the

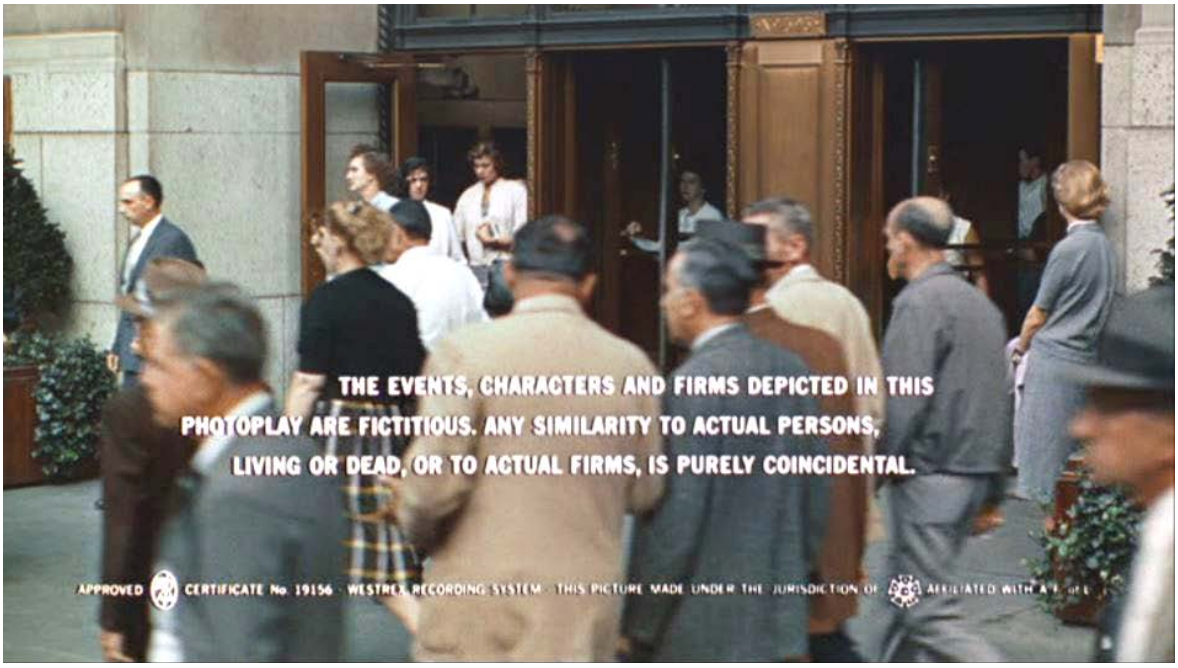
women are uniformly unremarkable; everyone is anonymous. The movement reminds us of the seemingly random activity and pitched energy inside an ant-hill or a beehive. And all the political and social implications of this association are probably intended. Whether they seek it or not, these people are mired in turgid anonymity. In 1955, a character in *The Trouble with Harry* disparagingly describes the people on the streets of New York City as "little people, little people with hats on."

However, let us consider some details. Almost everyone is moving from right to left with the exception of an older woman in a hat and white gloves who, perhaps because age brings wisdom, is moving from left to right. Behind her are two easily identifiable women: one in a blue, white, and brown striped dress and another in a plaid skirt. Then a black woman carrying a red sweater leaves the building a joins the crowd. Let us look more closely at each of these people.

First, we have the older woman in hat and gloves. Her movement is coordinated with the next title to come on the screen – the copyright notice and the denial of the film's reality. She seems to be dragging the title across the screen since the speed at which they cross the screen is identical. This is not a coincidence as Hitchcock will use this coordination between title movement and the movement of a person beneath the title again is a few moments.

North by Northwest [1959] (01:49)

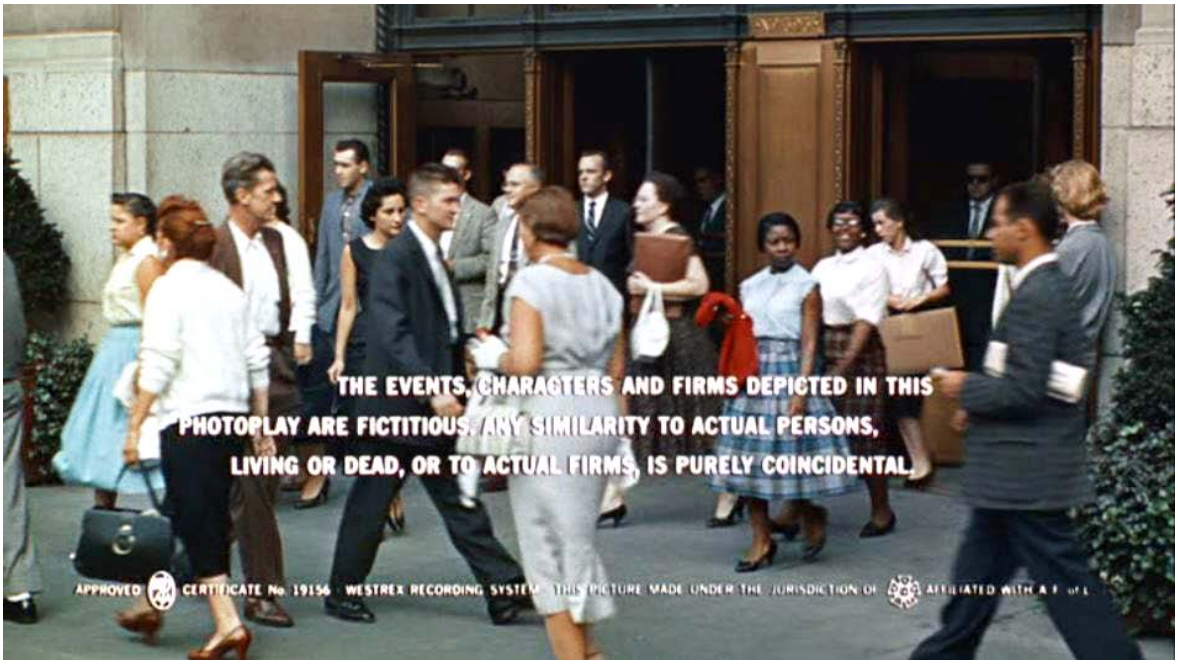
At the same time as the older woman is "dragging" the copyright notice across the screen, a woman with red hair enters the scene from the right. Women with red hair will figure prominently in the film: Thornhill's debilitating mother and the false Mrs. Townsend.



North by Northwest [1959] (01:51)

The penultimate title stops in the middle of the screen. As mentioned above, in addition to being a legal notice this statement also acts as a commentary on the people in the background, "… any similarity to actual persons, living or dead … is purely coincidental." Hitchcock at his sarcastic best.

13. RACE & ETHNICITY



North by Northwest [1959] (01:55)

Hitchcock next introduces a major symbolic theme that continues through the film. And he introduces it in a way to make it almost invisible. Two African-American women leave the building; one carrying a bright red sweater (and dressed in white and blue).

Let us first consider the appearance of these black women and then the significance of the color red in this film.

Before the Hollywood revolution of the 1980s, African-Americans were portrayed in film in typically servile positions: maids, butlers, boot-blacks, bartenders, porters, valets, (some also sang and danced) and so on. And in *North by Northwest*, we have our share of these. But Hitchcock does more than this; he uses people of color both sociologically and symbolically. The black woman with the red sweater is a prime example. The fact she is wearing red, white, and blue, especially when compared to the sea of drabness surrounding her, is certainly not without meaning.

In the society Hitchcock portrays, the 1959 Madison Avenue world of advertising, blacks have no place. They two women are clearly outsiders. As we will discover, by having this African-American woman hold a bright red sweater, she is the bearer of one of the most important symbols in the film. While she is seen for no more than a second or two, as will be detailed below, she is the symbolic core of the film. This person, an outsider because of her race, is the most important person we have seen so far, far more important than all the whites in the vast crowds of New York.

Broken Blossoms [1919] (04:31) – D. W. Griffith

Hitchcock, of course, is not the first to make complex characters of ethnic outsiders. A good example of this complexity is D. W. Griffith's use of an Oriental character (played by a Caucasian) in *Broken Blossoms* [1919] (whose complete title is, "Broken Blossoms or The Yellow Man and the Girl"). There the "Chinaman," as he is known, represents a culture not our own; he is simultaneously a victim of the dominant culture and superior to it – the consummate outsider.

The Ring [1927] (02:48)

In parallel to Griffith, in his silent *The Ring* [1927], Hitchcock shows us a Black man as part of a circus entertainment who is repeatedly degraded by being dunked into a large bucket of water. That Hitchcock sympathizes with the man's plight as a victimized outsider is clear, for we see him later as a well-dressed guest at the hero's wedding reception treated equally with three white friends. Hitchcock not only places him in the center of the screen, but emphasizes his presence with a "V" shaped arrangement of the heads to his right and left – a device Hitchcock uses in almost every one of his films to indicate the importance of a character. However, a totally modern attitude cannot be ascribed to this 1927 film, for one of the hero's boxing opponents is referred to as a "nigger." Still, we must remember this was acceptable language in 1927.

The Ring [1927] (35:58)

Downhill [1927] (1:06:23)

The same year in *Downhill* [1927], the down-and-out Roddy is rescued and fed by a Black woman and a Black sailor with no particular comments on their race. They are simply kind, caring, generous, and responsible people.

Rich and Strange [1931] (10:44)

In *Rich and Strange* [1931], four years later, Black performers are seen at the Follies Bergère in Paris: a Black minstrel, some Black jazz musicians and a group of dancers performing highly stylized African dances. Surprisingly, given the date of the film, a racial slur against some Chinese later in the film quickly turns into respect and admiration.

Blonde Venus [1932] (26:44) – Josef von Sternberg

We must compare this to the more common representation of minorities in the films of that day. Perhaps the most outrageous, at least to our contemporary eyes – even though it is comparatively sympathetic to its black characters – is Josef von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus* [1932] in which Marlene Dietrich does a striptease out of a gorilla suit before a chorus line of "African" dancers and then dons a blonde Afro wig complete with arrows shot through it. She sings,

Hot Voodoo
Hot Voodoo, black as mud
Hot Voodoo in my blood.
That African tempo
has made me a slave…

Young and Innocent [1937] (1:12:58)

In another six years, in Hitchcock's *Young and Innocent* [1937], the white murderer, employed as a drummer in a dance band, wears blackface, as does the rest of the band. Since the leader does not, it would be easy to interpret the blackface as a symbol of subservience. However, it would be just as easy to see him donning blackface as a disguise – thus using an ethnicity that is not his own – as part of his villainy.

Lifeboat [1944] (10:15)

An interesting view of African-Americans appears in *Lifeboat* [1944]. The pretentious Constance refers to George Spencer as "Charcoal." Yet he not only saves the life of a woman and her baby, he is also the only one who refuses to participate in the horrifying mob murder of Willy, the Nazi. Perhaps this is Hitchcock's comment on the lynching of Blacks common in the America of that day. And Spencer is the only character in the picture who has a stable personal relationship and a full home life.

Topaz [1969] (40:50)

By 1969 in *Topaz* a Black man from Martinique becomes a major and very competent actor in the spy world. His "cover" is that he works for Ebony magazine (the 1959 mainstream movie-going audience probably didn't know such a magazine even existed).

Frenzy [1972] (04:26)

In *Frenzy* [1972], a Black woman is one of the first to discover the strangled woman floating in the Thames.

Family Plot [1976] (56:59)

Over the decades, it is clear Hitchcock rethought his position on many issues, including the representation of race in film. Always aware of current social structures and their ever-changing complexion, by 1976 he would include a Black lieutenant of police in *Family Plot* [1976] without bringing any particular attention to his race. For 1976, this was relatively early compared to the rest of Hollywood. And, unlike most of Hitchcock's police, he does not prove a fool.

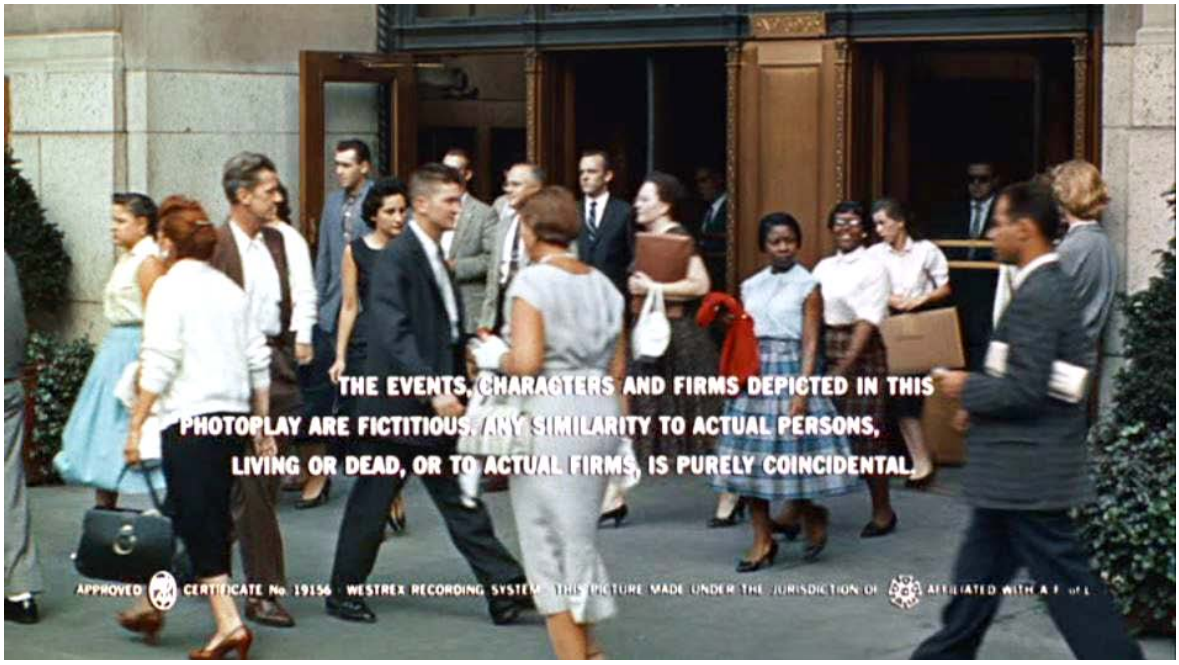
Juno and the Paycock [1929] (1:10:16)

In *Juno and the Paycock* [1929], Hitchcock does something quite unexpected by a modern audience. In the Sean O'Casey play on which the film is based, there is a character named Mr. Nugent, a typical Irishman. In the film adaptation, he becomes Mr. Kelly, an obvious Jew – a tailor usuriously demanding his money, hook nose, stereotypical accent, and all.

Hitchcock's true positions on race, ethnicity, and religion, I believe, are revealed in the conversion of *The 39 Steps* [1935] from novel to screenplay in 1935. The 1915 John Buchan novel, on which the film is based, is clearly racist in addition to being anti-Semitic and anti-gay. And to top it off, women are almost completely absent. In the film version of the story, none of this appears. The adjustments were made, presumably, under Hitchcock's tutelage.

In each case, Blacks (and other minorities) are almost always represented as outsiders who are somehow different, yet often superior to the culture at large. And this idea is very important to *North by Northwest*.

14. USING COLOR SYMBOLISM



North by Northwest [1959] (01:55)

Let us return to *North by Northwest* and the Black woman leaving the office building carrying the red sweater. While concentrating on her and her sweater may seem like the ultimate in trivia, we must remember no matter how realistic, ordinary and unrehearsed this New York street scene seems, every person we see is a hired and trained actor, set into motion at the director's bidding and, most importantly in this case, dressed by studio workers under the director's command. To fully understand what Hitchcock is doing in this scene and how it will influence the rest of the film, we must look at two additional aspects of this scene: color symbolism and the idea of clothing.

In his films, Hitchcock uses all three types of color symbolism: natural, cultural, and hermetic. Since it is this last that is the most complex and most rarely used, we need to look at it more closely. While it is not unique to Hitchcock, there are very few filmmakers who have used it with such subtlety and deftness. Hitchcock here eschews the more common, universal symbolism of red – blood, anger, etc. – and assigns the color, as we shall see, a very specific meaning that only holds for this film.

Hitchcock uses that speck of red for multiple effects. First, this splash of red draws (in this case almost subliminally) the viewer's attention to a specific area of the screen and the Black woman (whose significance as the symbolic outsider has already been noted). And second, and more important, red is the opposite color of green – as seen in the color wheel below.

Thus, Hitchcock broadens the scope of his use of hermetic color symbolism. By assigning negativity and perhaps even evil to the color green, the opposite color takes on the opposite meaning: positivity and health.

Over the next few minutes, the screen will almost constantly be occupied by some red object. Throughout the film, we will see our hero, Roger Thornhill, either following a red object and being chased by a red object. In Hitchcock's universe, the color red marks *North by Northwest*'s road to health.

Similar hermetic color symbolism was explored by Hitchcock before, almost as a warmup to *North by Northwest.* In 1956, in the color version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much,* Hitchcock uses the same hermetic color assignments as in *North by Northwest* – green = bad; red = good – but in a far more restrained and limited way.

The Man Who Knew Too Much [1956] (1:51:58)

The Man Who Knew Too Much [1956] (01:44:35)

During and after the attempted assassination in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956], we see the traitorous diplomat wearing a green sash (and sitting on the left) and the good diplomat a red sash (and on the right). The false priest in league with the assassins wears a green ascot.

The Man Who Knew Too Much [1956] (39:07)

In the same film, Hitchcock mixes this hermetic symbolism with the more universal form in which red denotes danger. When Ben and Jo McKenna are hauled into the Marrakesh police station after witnessing a murder, the chairs in which they are to sit are bright red (hot seats?). The questions they are about to be asked will endanger the life of their kidnapped son.

The Man Who Knew Too Much [1956] (01:04:29)

The Man Who Knew Too Much [1956] (01:05:35)

As we have seen in the right/left symbolism, Hitchcock is not above establishing symbolic references, expecting the viewer to respond as before . . . and then pulling the visual rug from under our feet. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956], with the established hermetic color assignments of red as good and green as evil, were we to see a man in a green sweater entering a green door, just on the basis of the color, we would assume that behind that door is the locus of evil. And Hitchcock's little joke is on us: what is behind the green door at Ambrose Chappell Taxidermy is perfectly innocent. Actually, what follows is one of Hitchcock's wonderful slapstick comedy scenes. Actually, there is a more serious side to this reversal: Dr. McKenna is a totally inept in his investigation of their son's kidnapping and, since he gets everything else "all wrong," Hitchcock has him get the symbolism of colors all wrong too.

Clearly, not all of Hitchcock's color symbolism is hermetic; he often uses the more common (in the film world) natural color symbolism: red for passion or danger, blue for coldness, etc.

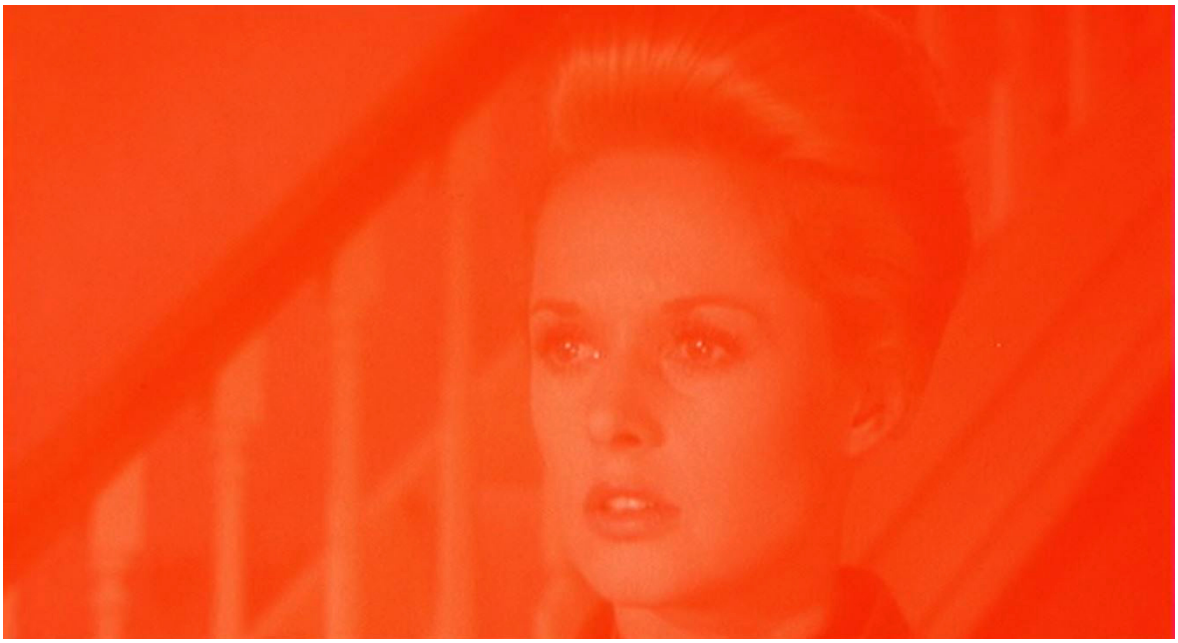
Dial M for Murder [1954] (01:24)

Dial M for Murder [1954] (02:22)

A good example is found in *Dial M for Murder* [1954]. Here Hitchcock uses the meaning of the color red in its broadest possible sense: blood, passion, anger, lust, and danger. Margo's clothing changes dramatically over the progress of the film. She begins in a pale off-white dress kissing her husband. While this color may represent innocence and/or purity (I presume Hitchcock did not dress her in pure white for a very obvious reason), moments later she is kissing her lover in a bright red dress (and, just so we have no questions about the degree of their passion, there's a fire going in the background). As this adulterous woman becomes more and more deeply involved in blackmail, murder, and an intricate web of lies – and as she approaches execution for the crime she did not commit – her clothes change dramatically: they lose their bright passionate hues to become colorlessly drab reflecting her loss of energy and encroaching depression.

To Catch a Thief [1955] (32:28)

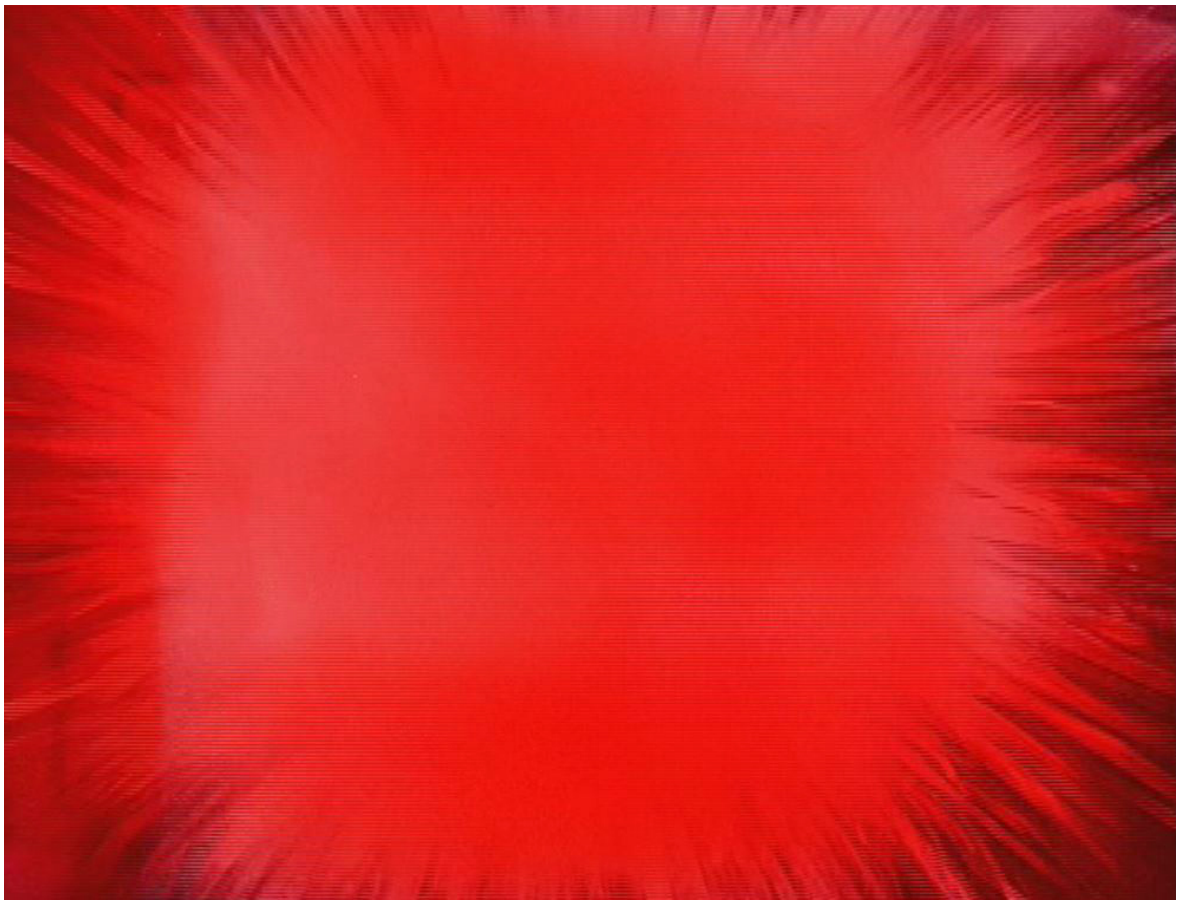
In *To Catch a Thief* [1955], Hitchcock achieves a more complex effect using the same methods. He dresses Frances Stevens in a filmy gown of several shades of pale blue to represent her coldness. However, the dress is bare shouldered with only the thinnest of spaghetti straps holding up the bodice. Thus, we have something highly sexual enveloped in a cold wrapper – a good description of Grace Kelly's role in the film.



Marnie [1974] (10:38)

Rear Window [1954] (1:48:12)

Five years later, in *Marnie* [1964], Hitchcock abandons all subtly in the use color symbolism. He gives us an emotional experience through Marnie's mind by flooding the screen with a red-orange flash. While this device communicates at an expressionistic level, it is far less refined than the color symbolism he uses in *North by Northwest* or, in fact, any of his other films. It is so clumsy it feels more like the blinding flash Lars Thorwald experiences in *Rear Window* [1954] a flashbulb is set off in his face.



Spellbound [1945] (1:57:06)

In the 1945 *Spellbound*, Hitchcock accomplished something similar but in a much more restrained manner. Filmed in black-and-white, three frames of a gunshot directed at the audience are hand-painted in red and orange.

Frenzy [1972] (09:10)

In 1972, Hitchcock returns to using hermetic color symbolism in *Frenzy* by assigning specific meaning to the color orange. In a seemingly innocent scene at the beginning of the film, a bright orange frame surrounds a news announcement about "Another Neck Tie Strangling." Thus, Hitchcock makes an association between the color orange and the serial murderer. Note the orange bags of (phallic) carrots. A bag of the same color will appear later.

Frenzy [1972] (1:09:36)

Frenzy [1972] (1:11:28)

Later in the film, Babs has just been murdered. In a very famous shot, the camera backs down a staircase, out a hall, and into the street. Pedestrians (remember, these are extras) begin moving back and forth as soon as the distance between the camera and the building allows (and an almost invisible cut from the studio to the London location). One man passes carrying a large sack over his shoulder, a bright orange potato sack in echo of the sack of carrots. It is also the same color as Babs' dress. To push the visual relationship even further, Babs' body is later hidden among a number of potato sacks.

Frenzy [1972] (17:53)

Frenzy [1972] (17:54)

In the same film, Hitchcock also uses universal color symbolism. Just after the angry Blaney crushes a box of green grapes under foot, his anger is symbolized by two red busses appearing in the street behind him.

Torn Curtain [1966] (1:58:48)

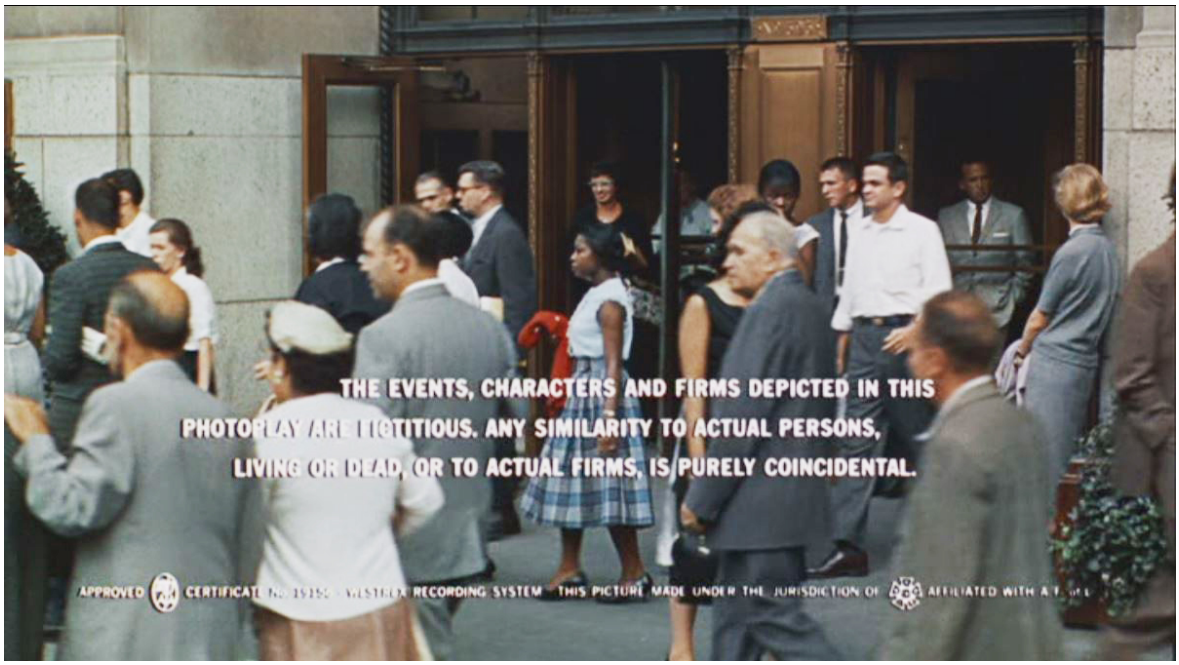
In addition to hermetic and natural color symbolism, Hitchcock occasionally uses cultural color symbolism. For instance, in *Torn Curtain* [1966] red is used for its cultural meaning: at that time, 1966, Red = Communism and the "curtain" referred to in the title is, of course, the Iron Curtain. The film's politics are clear: The East Germans are the villains. In the middle of the film we are treated to a scene from *Francesca de Rimini*, a ballet about a trip to hell, all decked out in Communist red so that Hell is Communist and Communism is Hell.

In the rest of that film Hitchcock's color sense seems mostly concerned with how colorful are Sweden and Denmark and how drab, monotone and gray is East Germany. This jingoistic effort at color symbolism is rather simplistic, especially when compared to the complexity of the color symbolism in *North by Northwest*.

This is what we have so far deduced of Hitchcock's use of color in *North by Northwest*: First, he tells us that for this film, green is associated with negativity, evil, and disease. Second, he shows us the opposite color, red, so we will associate it with positive values. Now, third, and most complicated, Hitchcock associates the color red with African-Americans. And since in 1959 America, African-Americans are outsiders, red becomes a hermetic color symbol associated with sense of being an outsider, now a positive value.

Advertising executive Roger Thornhill begins the film by "belonging" to the dominant culture; to regain his soul, he will have to reject the comfort of "belonging" and become a man "outside" the mainstream. He will have to become an outcast, an outsider, not belonging to the conventional culture of 1959 just as much as the two well-dressed Black women "don't belong" coming out of a Manhattan skyscraper.

While it may be getting ahead of ourselves, in *North by Northwest* and indeed in many Hitchcock films, being an outsider is not a bad thing. The director presents his thesis clearly, if symbolically: the African-American (outsider, minority) women (subservient) carrying a red (opposite of the green disease color) leave a building that, moments before, was a graph-paper symbol of uniformity, convention, regularity, and conformity. In fact, Hitchcock sees removing oneself from the world of American conformity as the only possible solution to Thornhill's psychological problem. In this way, Hitchcock brilliantly reveals the film's message less than two minutes into the film, but in a hidden, symbolic manner.



North by Northwest [1959] (01:58)

If we look carefully at this sequence, we can clearly see Hitchcock's intent. As the red-white-and-blue-dressed Black women leaves the building, she enters the street, turns to her right, and for no apparent reason pauses. She

then begins to walk. In an amazing piece of choreography, the crowd moves in a way to reveal her once again, this time in the exact middle of the screen and totally unobstructed. Clearly, Hitchcock is making sure we get the point.

North by Northwest [1959] (02:02)

We next see a number of people descending a stairway, their movement reminiscent of water spiraling down a drain. In the very next scene, a crowd crosses a street. But the crowd parts to reveal a woman in a red coat crossing the street. She is placed in the frame in the same place as the African American woman was a few moments before. This is reminiscent to the opening of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* [1941] in which a small lighted window remains in the same position on the screen through a number of different shots portraying a number of different scenes: gates, gardens, zoos, etc. This repetition leaves little doubt Hitchcock was in complete control of the scene and had intended the use of the color red in this symbolic way. As if to cap the symbolic intent, a red bus passes in the background.

We then see several people descending a flight of stairs. Two women fight over a cab. And over this fight, Hitchcock's own directorial credit enters from stage right. It stops in screen center over a mass of people on a street corner. We then see a man getting on a bus. And we are ready for Hitchcock's fabled cameo appearance.

15. HITCHCOCK'S CAMEOS

North by Northwest [1959] (02:15)

Just after the director's title, we see Hitchcock's cameo appearance. Most viewers familiar with Hitchcock's films look forward to spotting his famous cameo appearances; we delight in watching him sneak into his own films.

His first cameo was in 1927 in *The Lodger*. He continued appearing in other of his films. However, he soon realized this "hunt for the Hitchcock" distracted the viewers from becoming fully involved in the film's story. He recognized the physical presence of the director ironically interferes with his role as director, that is, the director's effort to make the screen disappear and for the audience to submerge itself completely into the world of the film. His solution was to move his walk-ons to the first few minutes of the film, as if saying, "Okay, let's get this over with and get on with the film."

It is remarkable Hitchcock chose this specific solution to his self-generated problem. By far the simplest solution would be to simply not appear in his films at all. I am sure there are several reasons he chose not to opt for his own absence, not the least of which was the publicity value it brought the

consummate showman. But there are two additional possibilities of special interest here. The first has to do with his role as director and the second is specific to *North by Northwest*.

It is well known that Hitchcock strove to exercise the greatest possible control over his films. This is extensively discussed in almost every book written about him. I believe his cameos are an extension of his desire to be in control of his films. It is not enough for him to remain invisible, behind the scenes; his need is for direct recognition as the author of the story we are watching. This can be sensed in that he almost always appears in his films appropriately costumed, but always as a presence that has – at the level of the text – no effect on the plot of the film. In this way he simultaneously stands both inside and outside his films, just like a film director.

Foreign Correspondent [1940] (12:36)

Hitchcock's appearances are rarely just him simply dropping himself into his films. While not participating in or affecting the plot, almost always

his cameos have some meaning within the film. For instance in *Foreign Correspondent* [1940], a film about a newspaper reporter, we see him strolling down the street reading a newspaper at the very moment reporter Huntley Haverstock meets the about-to-be-kidnapped Van Meer. Not only does this cameo stress the newspaper aspect of the film (perhaps even equating the newspaper Hitchcock is reading to the script), but the director's presence implies his presence as a director, directing a crucial moment of action.

Shadow of a Doubt [1943] (18:24)

Sometimes this effort to symbolize control though his cameo is quite apparent. In *Shadow of a Doubt* [1943], for instance, he makes it quite obvious: he is a bridge player holding a complete run of spades, from deuce to ace. His controlling hand here clearly symbolizing his controlling hand as a director.

Young and Innocent [1937] (15:50)

In another cameo, *Young and Innocent* [1937], he is even holding a small camera in his hands.

The Birds [1963] (03:00)

In *The Birds* [1963] he appears leading his two Sealyham Terriers out of a pet store (one appeared before in *Suspicion* [1941]). This could be interpreted as the two dogs being parallel to the two birds Melanie will later take as a gift for Mitch's daughter or as a metaphor for Hitchcock's own role as a director.

Strangers on a Train [1951] (10:46)

In the 1951 *Strangers on a Train*, Hitchcock is seen boarding a train carrying a double bass (perhaps punning on his own physique) moments before Guy enters a music store to confront his surly wife.

Lifeboat [1944] (24:23)

While many of his cameos have a comic flair – the child-beleaguered bus passenger in *Blackmail* [1929] or the weight reduction ad in *Lifeboat* [1944] – most have a serious note just beneath the droll surface. In *Lifeboat*, for instance, his image appears in a newspaper as a testimonial to weight loss while the passengers are faced with starvation.

Family Plot [1976] (44:38)

In the 1976 *Family Plot,* he appears as a shadow in the office of a "Registrar of Births and Deaths." This being his last film, this cameo is at the same time ironic and sadly prescient.

The Wrong Man [1956] (00:16)

As a side note on Hitchcock's cameos, in *The Wrong Man* [1956], Hitchcock's answer to European Neo-Realism, he chose not to appear because he felt it would impinge on the overall seriousness of the film. Rather he personally introduces the film in a very dramatically back-lit shot of himself walking onto a huge, unlit sound stage. We see him bringing light into the darkness, clearly his role as a film director.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith [1941] (00:58)

In *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* [1941], a comedy, Hitchcock uses a variation of this idea. A doorbell is seen under the directorial credits. At the first level this indicates we are about to enter through this door into the eponymous couple's lives. However, it can also mean that it is Hitchcock who has total control of the film: he is the one who will, so to speak, be "ringing the bell," and it may also be seen as a "start" button for the film itself.

By bringing attention to himself as the filmmaker, he breaks the "fourth wall," the unspoken agreement between filmmaker and audience that, for the duration of the film, what is going on the screen is "real" and not merely a

projection. By breaking this agreement, he reminds us we are watching a film!

It was only in the 1980s that this self-consciousness on the part of filmmakers became a significant driving force in film. Often called Postmodernism, many contemporary filmmakers constantly remind the audience they are watching a film. The most common device is to make references to other films that are part of the audience's shared filmic experience.

A good early example of this system of references is *Star Wars* [1977]. It is fully possible to see almost every scene in the film as a quote or a reference to previous films: the robot C3PO refers to the Maria robot in Fritz Lang's silent classic *Metropolis*, the relation between C3PO and R2D2 echoes Laurel and Hardy, the final destruction of the Death Star is a quote from *Dam Busters* [1955], and much of the story is derived from Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* [1958] and *The Wizard of Oz* [1939] from whence we have the destruction of the farm, the companions who include a lion and a tin man, and even the "melting" of Obi Wan Kenobi.

There is rarely a film made today that does not make film references. But not so in the 1950s. Hitchcock predicted this contemporary penchant for making the audience aware it is watching "only a film" by several decades. He even has the audacity to refer to his own films: in *Rear Window* [1954] Lisa comments about a "dog who knew too much."

Unlike the cynicism with which we view films today, this breaking of filmic illusion caused by Hitchcock's cameo did not prevent the audience from getting fully involved in the story a second or two later. It almost feels as if Hitchcock is testing his power as a filmmaker: Let's have a laugh that has nothing to do with the film, and then let's see how long the audience can stay outside the film before they are totally engrossed again. This speaks to his power as a storyteller who could involve his audience in his fables like few other directors.

Like the manipulation of the MGM logo and his cameo appearances, Hitchcock used other devices to demonstrate his power as a director. These include breaking the basic rules of filmmaking like killing off the central

character halfway through the film (*Psycho* [1960]) and, for first time viewers, in *North by Northwest* or using a flashback that doesn't tell the truth (*Stage Fright* [1950]). (Perhaps the "lying flashback" in *Stage Fright* has its precedent in the "lying" dream sent to Agamemnon by Zeus in Homer's *Iliad*.)

Frenzy [1972] (15:17)

Another intentional misdirection happens in *Frenzy* [1972] where Hitchcock invites us to participate in a case of guilt by cinematic association: while a lawyer in the foreground describes the murderer as a "criminal, sexual psychopath" we see Richard Blaney sitting innocently in the background. Moments later the lawyer says "they kill especially when their desires are frustrated" at the exact moment Richard complains about being cheated on the size of a drink. Of course, he turns out to be innocent, but only after he is arrested, tried, and jailed.

We have seen that Hitchcock's cameos in his other films relate to (though do not affect) the story, let us look at Hitchcock's cameo specifically in *North by Northwest*.

16. COLOR SYMBOLISM PREDICTIVE

North by Northwest [1959] (02:15)

In *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock's cameo offers several possible interpretations. First, in this cameo he is just another one of a huge mass of men dressed in gray flannel suits (actually blue), distinguished only that he misses his bus. (He first used a very similar image in 1932 where a conductor misses his own bus in *Number Seventeen*.) But we do not see a man missing a bus – we see Hitchcock and we chuckle along with him on the inside joke he shares with us. Of course, master filmmaker Hitchcock rarely "misses the bus."

A second interpretation of "Hitchcock missing the bus" relies on the color symbolism he established during the first few moments of the film. Green was the first color we saw as the picture began: a shocking green substituted for the elegant black background normally seen under the MGM logo. That Hitchcock doesn't get on the green bus indicates he symbolically rejects the world represented by green, a world of conformity, disease and depression, and opts instead for a more positive world, perhaps a world with a happy ending. Happy endings are a rarity in Hitchcock's oeuvre and *North by Northwest* is one of the few.

That Hitchcock should opt to transmit this choice at the beginning of the film is significant, especially when we realize the two films he made before this, *The Wrong Man* [1956] and *Vertigo* [1958], and the film he was already planning as his next, *Psycho* [1960], all have tragic endings. At the end of *The Wrong Man* [1956], Manny's life, relationships, and ambition are all destroyed. The end of *Vertigo* [1958], with Scottie immobile and transfixed, unable to move, stuck forever in the bell tower of his guilt and obsession contrasts so shockingly to the end of *North by Northwest* it seems hard to believe they were made by the same filmmaker. Perhaps Hitchcock found the ultimate study in failure, *Vertigo*, not to his psychic liking and thus turned his back on his usual cynical negativity (temporarily) in *North by Northwest*.

Perhaps Hitchcock needed a respite from the dark psychic forces he was planning to investigate after *North by Northwest* (*The Birds* [1963], *Psycho* [1960], *Marnie* [1964], *Frenzy* [1972], etc.) and thus, in addition to the happy ending, he laces *North by Northwest* with a lustrous sparkle that has not been seen since *Foreign Correspondent* [1940], *The 39 Steps* [1935], *Rear Window* [1954], or *Strangers on a Train* [1951].

In many ways *North by Northwest* is the polar opposite of the 1937 *Young and Innocent*. In this film, a young couple goes through a series of both physically and emotionally exotic (for them) experiences any of which contain the potential for psychic growth. Yet they return to their original existence of bourgeois conservatism and psychological safety having learned nothing except a fear of exploration both external and internal. Perhaps *North by Northwest* is both a rethinking and a retraction of a philosophy espoused two decades earlier.

Another aspect of Hitchcock's cameo is an extension of the playful visual device he used but a few moments before. In the transition from the building to the crowded streets, I pointed out an older woman walking across the screen at a pace identical to the movement of the "reality disclaimer" title. It is as if she is dragging the title onto the screen. Hitchcock now reverses the process: as he walks on the screen, he "pushes" his own name off. It is as if he is substituting the "real thing" for the words.

17. END OF INTRODUCTION

North by Northwest [1959] (01:49)

North by Northwest [1959] (02:20)

The two stills above are identical. However, notice the time codes: 01:49 versus 02:20. Hitchcock uses the same piece of film twice!

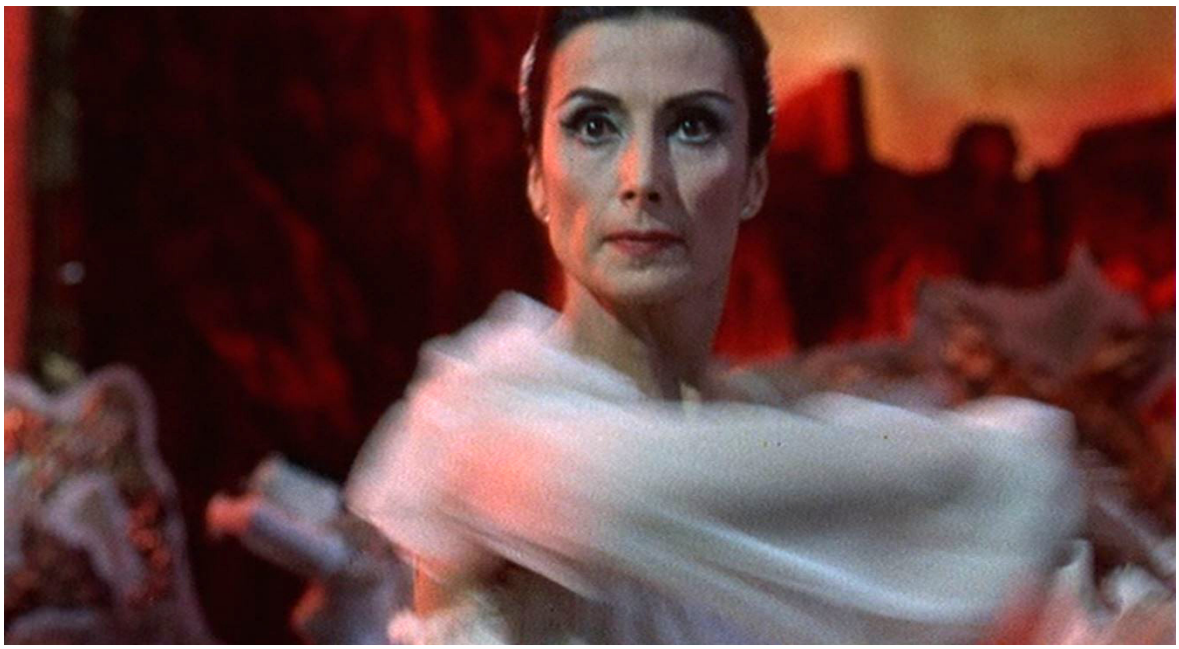
As I indicated above, many filmmakers use various devices to signal the film's introduction is finished and the body of the story will now commence. Bridges and birth images are the most common. Hitchcock, however, does it differently. His device is far subtler and works at a much deeper level than bridges or narrow spaces. What he uses here may be unique in the history of film.

Hitchcock divides the introduction to *North by Northwest* into two parts. The credits constitute the first sequence of the film – grid lines, building, traffic, etc. The second section is our introduction to the streets and crowds of New York City – and to the director himself. After this second sequence concludes, the body of the film begins: beginning with the introduction of Roger Thornhill. To signal the close of this second sequence, he repeats the very piece of film with which he opened this second sequence!

Hitchcock goes to a lot of trouble to accomplish this effect. Ordinarily, the camera negative is printed on positive stock, viewed, edited, and then after the thousands of bits of film are correctly spliced together to form "the film," the results are printed as the master negative from which release prints will be struck.

To obtain this duplicate bit of film, an extra piece of film had to be printed from the original negative (or the positive had to be duplicated – even more complex). This is something that is simply not done in the studio routine, especially using the still relatively rare Vista Vision process where the film moves through the camera horizontally (we will see an example of the Vista Vision process later when the "pumpkin" is broken exposing the "microfilm" containing government secrets). Probably the studio's special effects department would be needed to do this. In any case, Hitchcock had to go to great lengths to obtain this second bit of film and, from this, we can conclude it was important to him. If Hitchcock had not wanted to repeat the scene it would have been much easier just to let the camera run a half-second longer. And there is further evidence this was intentional and planned on Hitchcock's part: he does it again later in the film!

Using a single piece of film twice forms almost invisible cinematic "bookends" to the introductory sequence. The same imagery opening and closing a sequence gives it a solidity and an isolation from what has gone before and what follows. All the energy of the hustle and bustle of the dense crowds in the streets of New York City is encapsulated; it is as if we drew a deep breath and plunged into the streets of New York and, upon experiencing it, release our breath with a sigh … ready for the story to begin.



Torn Curtain [1966] (1:55:51)

Later in his career, Hitchcock uses a similar device in *Torn Curtain* [1966], but with far less subtlety and effect. The Czech ballerina, jealous of Michael Armstrong for stealing her press glory on her arrival in East Germany, spots him in the audience during a performance. Hitchcock repeats the same pirouette three times, each time freezing the frame on her penetrating eyes spotting on Michael.

18. THE BUSY MR. THORNHILL

North by Northwest [1959] (02:26)

We suddenly move inside the building (at least we assume it is the same building) – our first major location. Here we meet the world of New York advertising. Using advertising as a background emphasizes one of Hitchcock's favorite themes: the essence of advertising is that things are not what they seem or what we assume them to be.

Hitchcock will soon compare the ethics of advertising – the falsity, the lies, the cynicism – with the idealism and stability of other locations: the mansion in Glen Cove, the United Nations building, the mid-western farmland, and even the faces of the presidents on Mt. Rushmore. Yet, as we shall discover, each of these locations houses a corruption of its own: the United Nations becomes a place for murder; the farmlands, parched and barren, are the site of an attempted assassination; and even Mt. Rushmore is topped with a den of spies.

Our first view of the film's central male figure, Roger Thornhill, is through parting elevator doors that simultaneously reveal and release him as part of a crowd spilling into a hallway.

Just as we have traveled downward in our journey from seeing the office building from some undesignated point in the sky down to street level, so has Roger Thornhill made a parallel downward journey within the building. This downward motion will be repeated several times – in an elevator in a hotel, down the face of a mountain, and so on. In this first downward movement, we see our hero coming down from a perch in the upper reaches, coming out of his isolation in those rarefied heights of the Manhattan elite. Moving from the domain he controls, his territory of comfort, down to ground level, he will prove vulnerable.

Saboteur [1942] (01:47)

The opening of the elevator doors visually resembles the parting theatrical curtains at the beginning of a stage play that often, like here, introduce the main character. Hitchcock uses curtains or something visually similar in many of his films to introduce the main character. Almost parallel to the elevator doors in *North by Northwest* are the factory doors opening at the beginning of *Saboteur* [1942].

We will return to Hitchcock's use of the theater and theatrical references later, after we meet the most theatrical Mr. Vandamm.

19. THE WOMAN IN RED

North by Northwest [1959] (02:25)

Before Thornhill leaves the elevator, however, several people get off in front of him. Most significant is a woman in a red dress. As I mentioned before, Thornhill spends the whole film, up until the final scene, literally following the color red – this film's hermetic color symbol for healing.

Here we see the introduction of the idea of the feminine as the source of healing.

20. MARRIAGE & RELATIONSHIPS

North by Northwest [1959] (02:29)

Hitchcock's films can be conveniently divided into the male-hero films, *Saboteur* [1942], *The Lodger* [1927], *Vertigo* [1958], *I Confess* [1953], *The Wrong Man* [1956], *Frenzy* [1972], and so on, and the female-hero films, like *Shadow of a Doubt* [1943], *Psycho* [1960], *Suspicion* [1941], *Rebecca* [1940], *Marnie* [1964], and *Sabotage* [1936]. This leaves the films where the focus is on both a man and a woman, often on their relationships, *Rear Window* [1954], *The Birds* [1963], *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956], *Secret Agent* [1936], *The 39-Steps* [1935], *To Catch a Thief*, *Notorious* [1946], *Spellbound* [1945], and, not the least, *North by Northwest*. It is in this last group of films Hitchcock's true art of psychological filmmaking is most fully demonstrated.

In many of these films he casts a negative pall on relationships. For example, in his penultimate film, *Frenzy* [1972], a lonely-hearts business has just put together "two lonely people" who, in a few words while walking down a flight of stairs, say more about the poor man's impending misery in their future life together than could several motion pictures.

Within seconds of introducing Roger Thornhill, the ostensible hero of the film, Hitchcock makes a comment on marriage. After leaving the elevator, Thornhill walks rapidly and purposefully through the building's lobby while at the same time dictating to his beleaguered secretary. His comment to the elevator boy is the first introduction of a theme that will continue throughout the film: strife between men and women: "Say hello to the missus," says Thornhill. "We ain't talkin'," is Eddie's response.

There are several important implications in this seemingly trivial incident. First, Eddie and his wife are not communicating. This introduces a theme that will be repeated many times in this film – the inability of people, especially men and women, to communicate. And second, the fact that Roger knows an office boy's name indicates they have talked before. Roger seems to react positively and with interest to the various working-class men and women he meets: Eddie and later Victor, the maître at the Oak Bar, and his secretary Maggie.

The Wrong Man [1956] (05:03)

Two years before *North by Northwest*, in *The Wrong Man* [1956], Hitchcock gives us the almost mirror image of this scene but with similar intent: Manny is on his way home from work and stops to buy a cup of coffee whereupon the man behind the counter asks, "How's the family." This is brutally ironic: Manny's family will be disintegrating over the course of the film.

The film becomes the ultimate story of the breakdown of a relationship. (With only a half-second of "happy ending" perfunctorily tacked on at the close of the film demonstrates clearly where Hitchcock's interest lay.)

While Thornhill may be mildly accommodating to the working-class people he encounters, he is rather abusive to his secretary: he uses his tired secretary to dictate letters on the run. Unlike the other women he will encounter, Thornhill's secretary is the only women in the film he totally dominates. Because she is the first woman we meet, we can assume this is his normal attitude – to use women for his own purposes with little consideration for them (beyond listening to complaints about sore feet). Thus, the rest of the women in the film, with the exception of his mother, are an opportunity for him to explore new territory in male-female relationships.

He will have a completely different relationship with the other women he meets: primarily his mother and Eve – removing himself from the first and aligning himself with the second. Later, minor characters, the hotel maid, Vandamm's sister, and the gardener's wife, will also have a great influence on him. After this interaction with his secretary, he will never again dominate the feminine. As part of his growth, he will learn to rebel against the negative feminine and let the positive feminine propel him down the path leading to a healthy life.

Continue reading Part II