

North by Northwest

Stanley Cavell

Philosophy's all but unappeasable yearning for itself is bound to seem comic to those who have not felt it. To those who have felt it, it may next seem frightening, and they may well hate and fear it, for the step after that is to yield to the yearning, and then you are lost. From such a view of philosophy I have written about something called modernism in the arts as the condition of their each yearning for themselves, naming a time at which to survive, they took themselves, their own possibilities, as their aspiration—they assumed the condition of philosophy. What I found in turning to think consecutively about film a dozen or so years ago was a medium which seemed simultaneously to be free of the imperative to philosophy and at the same time inevitably to reflect upon itself—as though the condition of philosophy were its natural condition. And then I was lost.

But this is said after the fact. Over and over I have had to find again my conviction in these matters, to take my experience over the same path, finding the idea of film's philosophical seriousness first to be comic, then frightening, then inescapable. To achieve this conviction in the films of Alfred Hitchcock is not something I can imagine apart from a continuing conversation about film and about philosophy with William Rothman, whose conviction in the precision of Hitchcock's self-consciousness and passionate exploration of that self-consciousness in his films has convinced me to find this for myself. My remarks on *North by Northwest* are guided, more specifically, by two ideas from Rothman's forthcoming book on Hitchcock, *The Murderous Gaze: Readings of Five Hitchcock Films*:

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first, that Hitchcock's interpretation of the power of the movie camera—for example, its power of interrogation of its human subjects—is something Rothman calls its murderousness; and second, that the Hitchcock film, hence Hitchcock, is first fully formed in *The Thirty-nine Steps*, in its weaving of Hitchcock's interest in his themes of the murder thriller together with the themes of romance.¹

I have myself just completed a book on film, entitled *Pursuits of Happiness*, in which I put together seven Hollywood romances of the thirties and forties and claim that they define a particular genre, something I call the comedy of remarriage. It happens that Cary Grant is in four of the seven; Katharine Hepburn is the only other principal to appear in more than one. In my account of Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby* (one of the seven films in question) I claim that Grant's saving Hepburn from falling, at the close of the film, by hoisting her hand in hand onto the ledge of a scaffold, a place that also looks like a crib or treehouse, upon which they embrace, is alluded to by the conclusive hoisting in *North by Northwest* from a ledge onto an upper berth. If I will not ask you out of the blue to believe this connection, still less will I ask you to believe an allusion from *North by Northwest* to *The Philadelphia Story*, another of the seven films with Cary Grant, when Grant (or rather Roger Thornhill) early in *North by Northwest* tries to make the police and his mother believe what happened to him at the mansion in Glen Cove, and the place of liquor bottles is shown to be occupied by books. Thornhill's drinking is the subject of much attention in the opening sequences of *North by Northwest*, that is, as long as his mother is present, and C. K. Dexter Haven (Grant's role in *The Philadelphia Story*) cured himself of alcoholism by reading books, a process apparently from which he acquired the authority to affect the destiny of his love. I will wind up saying that *North by Northwest* derives from the genre of remarriage, or

1. I am also indebted to Marian Keane's "The Designs of Authorship: An Essay on *North by Northwest*," *Wide Angle* 4, no. 1 (1980): 44–52. I should like to mention here Robin Wood's *Hitchcock's Films* (New York, 1970), an intelligent, literate statement about the films of Hitchcock, which, while comparatively early as these things go in English-speaking circles, continues to repay reading. For an account of *North by Northwest* at once more suspicious than mine (about the value of the film) and more gullible (about Hitchcock's remarks about it and about the film's apparently casual evaluation of itself, so to speak), see George M. Wilson's "The Maddest McGuffin: Some Notes on *North by Northwest*," *Modern Language Notes* 94 (1979): 1159–72.

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rather from whatever it is that that genre is derived, which means to me that its subject is the legitimizing of marriage, as if the pair's adventures are trials of their suitability for that condition. Perhaps this only signifies that *North by Northwest* is a romance. It is in any case the only one of Hitchcock's romantic thrillers in which the adventurous pair are actually shown to have married. It is also the only one in which the man of that pair is shown to have a mother—a mother, needless to say, whom he is shown to leave, and to leave running (out of the Plaza Hotel, away from his abductors, but at the same time away from his mother, who shouts after him to ask whether he will be home for dinner). The fate of the mother in *The Birds* will complicate this story. And naturally certain of Hitchcock's villains, and certain of his heroines, are allowed to have mothers.

But let us begin as uncontroversially as we can. *North by Northwest* contains as one of its stars Cary Grant. It underscores this uncontroversial fact in two principal ways: first, by remark after remark about his nice-looking, vaguely familiar face and about his being irresistible and making women who don't know him fall in love with him, together with several double takes when strangers look at his face (a man going into a phone booth Grant is leaving, a woman who, after as it were seeing who he is, wants him to stop in her hospital room); and second, by allusions to each of the other films Hitchcock made with Grant. *To Catch A Thief* also has him at the end holding a woman by the hand over a precipice, and in that film he is comically shown to be irresistible; *Suspicion* climaxes with a wild ride down a coast road in a convertible driven by Grant, from which he seems to shove someone out and from which someone who might be poisoned almost falls over a cliff into the sea; and the basic situation of *Notorious* is gone over again (a loose woman's liaison with something like a foreign agent is exploited by an American intelligence agency; the assignment thwarts Grant's desire; it leads to the woman's mortal danger from which Grant rescues her).

There seem to be two immediate reasons in *North by Northwest* for insisting upon the presence of Cary Grant: first, to redeem him from certain guilts acquired in those earlier environments, especially in allowing him to overcome the situation of *Notorious*, as if film actors and their characters get stuck to one another, and as if he is being readied for something purer in this context; and second, to inscribe the subject of film acting, and acting generally, as a main topic of this film, which is to say, a main branch of its investigation of the nature of film. The topic is invoked over and over in *North by Northwest*: Philip Vandamm (James Mason) hardly says a word to Grant that does not comment on his acting; the Professor (Leo G. Carroll) requests him to act a part; and Eve (Eva Marie Saint) compliments him on his performance in the scene they have just acted out for Vandamm's benefit. The theme of theatricality is generalized by the fact that the part Thornhill is asked and forced to

play is that of someone named George Kaplan, who doesn't exist; but to play the part of a fictional character is just what actors normally do. It happens that in the fiction of this film this new fictional identity is imposed by reality, thus generalizing the theme further into the nature of identity and the theatricality of everyday life.

It is, I think, part of Hitchcock's lingo to be referring to these facts, and more, in the exchange on the train between Thornhill and Eve about the monogram on his matchbook. "Rot," he says, "it's my trademark." She asks what the "O" stands for. "Nothing," he replies. In a Hitchcockian context this means both that this man knows that the advertising game (and the modern city generally which it epitomizes) makes up words that are rot but also that it would be rot to think this is all he means. Thornhill and Eve have already questioned his identity and spoken about his familiar face. So in part what or who is "nothing" is the film character (here, Roger Thornhill) in comparison to the film actor playing him. Cary Grant would be more or less who he is if Roger Thornhill had never existed, whereas Roger Thornhill would be nothing apart from Cary Grant (a form of consideration broached as long ago as Erwin Panofsky's "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures"). "Nothing" equally means that the film *actor* is nothing in comparison to the power of the camera over *him*. This is not so much in need of argument as of interpretation. *North by Northwest* interprets the actor as a victim, as if of foreign views of himself. This thought puts two figures in the film in the role of directors, the Professor and Vandamm, who create scenarios and make up parts for people.² On Vandamm's first encounter with Thornhill he draws some theatrical curtains across proscenium-sized windows, shutting the world out, and arranges for Thornhill to be killed, as if punishing him for acting; the Professor lets this go on until forced for the sake of his own script to intervene.

The "nothing," or naught, in the ROT monogram equally appropriately stands for origin, so its simultaneous meaning is that the actor is the origin of the character and also the origin of what becomes of himself or herself on film. The further thought that the human self as such is both an origin and a nothing is a bit of Cartesianism that is conceivably not called for in the context of this film. (To say that Hitchcock is up to it if he wants it is to say that Hitchcock is as intelligent as, say, Samuel Beckett and that he is as good at what he does as Beckett is at what he does.)

But I was trying to begin uncontroversially. The film is called *North by Northwest*. I assume that nobody will swear from that fact alone that we have here an allusion to Hamlet's line that he is but mad north-northwest; even considering that Hamlet's line occurs as the players are

2. A consequent moral equation between these figures is being drawn, another point I took away from a conversation with Rothman and Keane.

about to enter and that *North by Northwest* is notable, even within the oeuvre of a director pervaded by images and thoughts of the theater and of theatricality, for its obsession with the idea of acting; and considering that both the play and the film contain plays-within-the-play in both of which someone is killed, both being constructed to catch the conscience of the one for whose benefit they are put on. But there are plenty of further facts. The film opens with an ageless male identifying himself first of all as a son. He speaks of his efforts to keep the smell of liquor on his breath (that is, evidence of his grown-up pleasures) from the watchful nose of his mother, and he comes to the attention of his enemies because of an unresolved anxiety about getting a message to his mother, whereupon he is taken to a mansion in which his abductor has usurped another man's house and name and has, it turns out, cast his own sister as his wife. (The name, posted at the front of the house, is Townsend, and a town is a thing smaller than a city but larger than a village, or a hamlet.) The abductor orders the son killed by forcing liquid into him. It is perhaps part of the picture that the usurper is eager to get to his dinner guests and that there is too much competitive or forced drinking of liquor. Nor, again, will anyone swear that it is significant that the abductor-usurper's henchmen are a pair of men with funny, if any, names and a single man who stands in a special relationship with the usurper and has a kind of sibling rivalry with the young woman that this son, our hero, will become attracted to and repelled by. These are shadowy matters, and it is too soon to speak of "allusions" or of any other very definite relation to a so-called source. But it seems clear to me that if one were convinced of *Hamlet* in the background of *North by Northwest*, say to the extent that one is convinced that Saxo Grammaticus' *Danish History* is in the background of *Hamlet*, then one would without a qualm take the name Leonard as a successor to the name Laertes.

We have further to go. In Saxo Grammaticus' telling of the story the son's enemies send a beautiful woman to seduce him; he is to believe that he and the woman meet by chance. When questioned about what happened between them he says he raped her; she has agreed to back his story since they had known one another in the past. This figure is, as editors have noted, a peculiar prototype for Ophelia, but we can take her as near perfect for Eve Kendall. Thornhill does not, it is true, say that he raped her, but he describes something happening between them, in the name of love, that they both call murdering her. Hitchcock here is following one of his favorite identifications, that of killing with intercourse, the other side of a metaphysical wit's identification of dying with orgasm. It is also to the point, thinking of Thornhill's attention to his clothes, that Hamlet's prototype in Saxo Grammaticus is pictured as covering himself with dirt. That Hitchcock has gone back to the source or origin of the story of Hamlet, as well as to the play, is a reason not to have the title *exactly* from *Hamlet*.

I note two or three further echoes of the play. Thornhill's problem begins when he is confused with, so to speak, someone who doesn't exist, let us say it is a nothing, or let us say a ghost; and when the woman betrays him he finds her out by following the itinerary dictated by the ghost. And then the son protects himself, saves his life, by what I would like to describe as feigning madness—in the auction scene in which he pretends not to know how you join in bidding for things. The auctioneer at one stage says, "Would the gentleman please get into the spirit of the proceedings?" that is, be decorous, be socialized; but society has been forcing an identity and a guilt upon him that he does not recognize as his own, so the natural hope for a way out is to abdicate from that society. Thornhill's identifying "rot" as his trademark by now irresistibly suggests to me Hamlet's sense of something rotten.

Allow for the sake of argument that *Hamlet* is present in the film in some fashion. Of what interest is this, I mean of what interest to Hitchcock? I have various speculations about this based on my claim that *North by Northwest* invokes *Hamlet* in conjunction with the source of the story of Hamlet and on my sense that *North by Northwest* plays a special role in Hitchcock's oeuvre, a summary role. I take Hitchcock, as it were, to be saying something like the following. Granted that it is not necessary for anyone, let alone a filmmaker, to disclaim the intention of trying to compete with the quality and the importance of *Hamlet*, it is nevertheless my intention, as the filmmaker I am, to compete with Shakespeare in his handling of sources and in this way, or to this extent, to show myself to do whatever it is I do as well as Shakespeare does whatever it is he does. It is with sources as Coleridge famously remarked about Shakespeare's stories: "My belief is that he always regarded his story, before he began to write, much in the same light as a painter regards his canvas, before he begins to paint—as a mere vehicle for his thoughts—as the ground upon which he was to work." But then of course (still speaking for Hitchcock) the question is what one means by "sources." The story is one source, lifted often from indifferent places that would not constitute sources unless I had been inspired to make them such. So is the past body of my work a source, as *North by Northwest* makes explicit. So are what some people call "locations," which for me are places whose genius I wish to announce or to become. So are what other people call "actors," whereas for me what is called "Cary Grant" is considerably more than what that may be taken to mean. So is what you might call the camera a source. . . . You see the point.

But why is it *Hamlet* about which this is all, according to my speaking for Hitchcock, being said? I think there are two reasons. First, *Hamlet* is perhaps the most popular, or famous, of the greatest works of world literature; the man who on the basis of his kind of thriller became perhaps the most famous director of films in the world, and for a longer period than any other, and whom just about any critic recognizes as in some

sense brilliant, may well be fascinated by and wish to comprehend this fact. Surely the play's fame cannot be the result of its actually being *understood*. Second, *Hamlet* is the subject of what is still probably the most famous Freudian interpretation of a work of art, Ernest Jones' *Hamlet and Oedipus*. Given the blatant presence of Freudian preoccupation and analysis in Hitchcock's work I see in his allusion to *Hamlet* a kind of warning to Freudians, even a dare, as if to say: of course my work, like any art, is subject to your interpretations, but why are these interpretations so often so obvious, unable to grasp the autonomy, the uniqueness, of the object? (Hitchcock would not be the first artist of this century to feel he has to pit his knowledge of human nature against the thought of the man who is said to have invented its science.)³

The origin of Eve Kendall in Hitchcock's own past work is explicit enough. She succeeds the prim, good-looking, blond stranger in *The Thirty-nine Steps* whom an earlier Hitchcock hero had met on a train as he was trying to elude the police and get to a person who could clear him of the suspicion of having put a knife in someone's back; and at the end of that train ride there was also a professor. But this time, over twenty years later and in another country, the woman *offers* rather than refuses him help. This proves, initially, to be treachery rather than salvation, but it affords a picture of a relationship to women that this man, now and in the past, had not known. This woman's apparent faith in him succeeds both Madeleine Carroll's early skepticism about his predecessor (Robert Donat), who spends much of *The Thirty-nine Steps* trying to overcome it; and her faith succeeds more immediately the skepticism of his mother, whom he had said goodbye to just before encountering Eve on the train. The effect of these substitutions is elaborate and paradoxical, and all in favor of Eve.

Aligning, in retrospect, the Madeleine Carroll figure with the present mother, doubt is cast on the picture of marriage in the final shot of *The Thirty-nine Steps*; the man puts his arm around the woman with the handcuffs still dangling from his wrist, a picture suggesting that marriage is a kind of voluntary handcuffing (a portable version of the ball and chain). On the other hand Eve is made to incorporate both the good woman and the adventuress of *The Thirty-nine Steps*, that is, both the marriageable and the unmarriageable woman. The most delicious linking of them is made openly by Eve when she explains her interest in Thornhill to him by saying, "It's going to be a long night and I don't particularly like the book I've started. Know what I mean?" The Madeleine Carroll figure had been reading a book when Donat burst in on

3. Even Raymond Bellour's useful and sophisticated study of *North by Northwest* ("Le blocage symbolique," *Communications* 23 [1975]: 235-350), judging from one hurried reading, has not, it seems to me, cleared itself of this question. My remark is directed only to the first half of this monograph-length paper. The second half, devoted to a geometry of the crop-dusting sequence, I have not looked at sufficiently to have a judgment of.

her. Thornhill knows what she means, as if seeing a dream coming true. And in that dream, and its responsibilities, the man's task will not be just to save himself and save his country's secrets from leaving it and thus win himself a suitable mate. He has first of all to save the bad woman, to rewrite the earlier plot which in effect began by killing her off, to rescue or redeem or resurrect her, that is to say, to put the good and the bad together. This is rather more like *creating* a suitable mate for himself.

Why is she his to rescue? Both the Professor and Eve tell him he is responsible for her condition, the one because he has cast suspicion on her, the other because men like him don't believe in marriage. But I think the film shows two further causes. First, in addition to her incorporating at least two of the women from *The Thirty-nine Steps* she also incorporates the mother, perhaps the mother he never had, protecting him from the police by hiding him in a bellying container that shows she holds the key to his berth. (This wasn't necessary: the fact that she subsequently hides him from the porter sufficiently well in the washroom proves that.) It is every bit this birth he is reciprocating in his closing gesture of the film. Second, he has passed some kind of ordeal at her hands in the crop-dusting sequence, and his survival here somehow entitles them to one another—as if his survival, or revival from a Frazerian cornfield, had given them the key piece of knowledge with which to overcome their unlucky erotic pasts, which accordingly would be the knowledge that ecstasy such as she invites is not necessarily death dealing. I am taking it that she is not purely reluctant to send him to meet Kaplan. She is not worried that he is a murderer but that she is. They are both about to undergo an education in these matters. Redemption for them both is underway. But it is not a simple matter to put such knowledge into the world—say, in the form of marriage—and there is danger ahead.

How is it that he is equipped to meet the danger, I mean how does he know that the attempt is the most important thing in the world? I must now put the uncontroversial aside and put forward a bunch of assertions.

I begin by reinterpreting, or interpreting further, Thornhill's survival of the attack by the plane. The attack is the central image of his victimization. I said earlier that this is the form in which his being an actor is to be declared; and just now I said that his sexual redemption depended on what you might call his survival of a kind of victimization by, or a willing subjection to, an assault of feeling. Something cataclysmic happened to Thornhill and Eve the night before, and I understand the attack the next day to be simultaneously a punishment for the night and a gaudy visual equivalent of it. Then I understand the crop-dusting plane, instrument of victimization, as a figure for a movie camera: it shoots at its victims and it coats them with a film of something that both kills and preserves, say that it causes metamorphosis. I claim evidence

for the association of the prairie with the so to speak inner landscape of the train compartment, in the way a close-up of Eve's face at the Chicago train station dissolves into the establishing aerial shot of the road and fields of the plane attack. That conjunction of color and mood I claim asks for an allegorical identification of the woman and this stretch of land, but this is just something further each viewer must try out on his or her own. It is on this ground that the man undergoes his Shakespearean encounter of nothings—the nothing of Thornhill meeting the nothing of Kaplan—the attack on his identity, as it were, by itself. The recognition of the plane sent by Vandamm as a figure for the camera accounts satisfactorily for his gathering his stolen secrets on microfilm. This, in turn, would be a way Hitchcock has of saying that film—anyway in his camera—is the recorder of state secrets.

Put this together with the other overt declaration of the movie camera, this time by synecdoche rather than metaphor: I mean the telescope on the terrace of the Mount Rushmore Memorial focussed on the faces of the presidents. A lot is being woven together here. We have cut to the presidents' faces from a close-up of Grant's face, turned toward us and suddenly illuminated as for examination by a harsh light from what we understand fictively to be a plane turning in his direction, hence what we understand literally and figuratively as a piece of photographic apparatus. We are being told that this face belongs to just one person on earth and that we are going to have to think about what that means. The cut from that image to the image of the presidents evidently poses some matching of Grant's face with the faces of stone, a matching generally prepared of course by the insistent references to the familiarity of his face but prepared more specifically by his having shaved with the minuscule razor and brush. Letting the phallic symbolism alone for awhile the question is certainly being posed about the sizes things are. Thornhill and Eve have had an exchange about whether he is a little boy or a big boy, and now the issue is about what size the human face of flesh and blood is in comparison with faces on the face of a granite mountain and the size of both in comparison with the photographic projection of the human face. A question is thus raised about what Grant is (made of), about what it means that he has become a national monument, and hence about what a monument is. So at the same time a question is raised about what presidents are and about what it means to know and remember them. These comparisons are underscored when it turns out, directly, that our initial view of the presidents' faces is an image of them as seen through a telescope set up for the pleasure and instruction of tourists. The image is possessed for us by, let us say, Thornhill, but there is no reason to think that anyone present wouldn't see the same image, the one we have now. Its being Grant who looks through the telescope at the famous stone faces identifies the conditions of his existence as a screen actor and thus identifies the mode in which we see him and think

we know him. And I would be willing to swear from the fact alone of the way Grant is standing behind that telescope that he is also meant as a surrogate for the one who is capturing these images for our pleasure and instruction. But the Professor is there with Thornhill as we cut to him standing before the telescope, so the matter of directorial surrogates must be complicated.

Let us run through the evidence for Grant/Thornhill as surrogate for Hitchcock. There is, first of all, the hint laid down by Hitchcock's having autographed himself in this film as someone who misses a bus: Thornhill is the only (other) character in the film before whom a bus shuts its doors and drives off. Again, however we are to understand Thornhill's participation in the killing of the real Lester Townsend in the United Nations building, we must understand him as what this moment visually declares him to be, someone who betrays by showing a picture, that is, a picture which is, or which causes, a knife in the back—a reasonable, or anyway Hitchcockian, description of Hitchcock's narrative procedure. Now take the telescope and the two men on the terrace. Thornhill's initial reaction to the view through the telescope is to say "I don't like the way Teddy Roosevelt is looking at me." And he will say, "I think he's telling me not to go on with this harebrained scheme." This could be a line Hitchcock is allowing Grant to use about himself, perhaps about his role in this strenuous film, perhaps about his career as an actor. (I wouldn't put it past Hitchcock to be alluding to the fact that Grant shares a name with a president of the United States, one famous for drinking, and one in particular that only Teddy Roosevelt among the four presidents figured at Mount Rushmore would have known was a president.) But the Professor's response suggests something else first: "He's telling you to walk softly and carry a big stick." This makes a certain amount of sense said either to Grant or to Thornhill. It makes much better sense said to Hitchcock, hence said as it were to himself, that is, by one directorial surrogate to another. The exchange about a harebrained scheme and walking softly, as behind a big camera, would express a moment of self-doubt on Hitchcock's part to be overcome by the course of this film; and since this film is a kind of summary or anthology of his mature career as a whole the doubt must be about the course of his mature career as a whole. If one were prepared to believe this, one would be encouraged to take the title *North by Northwest* not as naming some odd direction but as titling a search for directedness, a claim to have found it, as of the course of a career. (We will come to a more general reason for taking the title this way.) Hitchcock's identifying himself with the actor figure permits him a certain opposition to the two more explicit director figures, that is, permits him to claim opposition to the way other directors operate; his testimony is to show himself the victim as well as the inquisitor of his trade, the pursued as well as the pursuer, permitting himself to be looked back at.

This prompts me to collect one of the last of Hitchcock's inclusions in his anthology: his reference to *Rear Window*, whose hero (James Stewart) also looks through a telescope, now explicitly a telescopic camera lens and thus more explicitly conferring an identification as a film director, and whom someone or something eventually also looks back at through his telescope in a way he does not like. The Stewart figure has a kind of comic Hamlet derivation in that he sees everything and is debarred from taking action (by a broken leg in a cast). The thing that looks back at him, locking gazes with him, is the man whose murdering of his wife and dismemberment and disposition of the pieces of the body Stewart's camera has divined; and this too feels like an act of identification, between viewer and viewed, between director and subjects. Hitchcock's confession is a terrible one. (It may just be worth remembering that the Hamlet figure in Saxo Grammaticus dismembered the body of the figure that became Polonius and disposed of the parts in a sewer; and just worth putting this together with Thornhill's early dictation to his secretary of a note to accompany a gift of gold-wrapped candy: "This is for your sweet tooth, and all your other sweet parts.") The brighter side of Hitchcock's sensing an identification of himself with Hamlet claims his position as that of an intellectual, as possessed of a metaphysical imagination, and as unknown (partly because of the antic disposition he puts on).

What I just called Hitchcock's terrible confession—it is something I understand by Rothman's detection of Hitchcock's murderous camera—was going to be the guiding subject of these remarks, the thought that filming inevitably proceeds by severing things, both in cutting and, originally, in framing, and that Hitchcock is fully sensible of this fact and responsible to it. While it is buried in *North by Northwest* in the rarified reference to the original Hamlet story it is, if you allow the subject, blatantly posed by the gigantic heads of the monument and by the matching of Grant's head with them. The suggestion is that these memorializations have required acts of severing. This would be something else Grant does not like when he sees something looking back at him through the telescope. And it is this fate that Thornhill is saved from in earning the rescue from the faces of the monument. So when I say that Grant's looking through the telescope represents our perception of film, of something I mean by viewing, I am proposing that a theory of this mode of perception will be given in a theory of the perception of part-objects, as this is broached in the work of Melanie Klein. Such a theory should be able to help account for a pair of familiar facts in looking at film: that there may apparently be the most fantastic disproportion between what is actually shown on the screen and the emotion this elicits; and that this disproportion can be resisted, the emotion fail to appear. After all, many people think, or think they think, that *North by Northwest* is a light comedy. But while I have left the theme of severed objects as an undercurrent

of these remarks I decided against making it explicit (then I partly changed my mind).

What is it that looks back through the telescope at Thornhill, who presumably has no special relation to those heads (anyway not Grant's relation)? It is puzzling that he should say it is Teddy Roosevelt since that head is, from the angle taken, quite retracted in comparison to those of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln and is not facing in the right direction. We are in any case being asked to let ourselves be puzzled by what it is we see when we are looking at the results of a movie camera and also by what the Mount Rushmore Memorial betokens. I figure what looks back through the lens not to require eyes, not even images of eyes, but to be whatever it is that a movie camera looks at, which is to say, whatever power it is that is solicited from us in perceiving things on film. I once said that the images of photography are of the world as a whole, and now thinking of what looks back at a director—an image's original audience as emblemized by these mountainous heads of the presidents, cliffs turned into faces—I would like to say that what looks back, what reveals itself to the viewer's gaze, is the physiognomy of the world, say the face of the earth. To animate, or reanimate, or humanize the world and so achieve a reciprocity with it is a recognizable aspiration of some poetry and some philosophy, as for example when Thoreau writes in the chapter "The Ponds" in *Walden*: "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature." Thornhill's capacity for beholding nature in this way—as unsevered—would be a sign that he is to be saved.

The Mount Rushmore Memorial is a crazy American literalization of this ambition of reciprocity with the world. More specifically it literalizes such an idea as Walt Whitman's that America's mountains and prairies are the greatest of its poems. It is as if the monument proposes a solution to an American ambivalence as old as the pilgrims about the land of America: that it is human, in particular female, a virgin and yet a nourishing mother, but at the same time that we have raped her, blotted nature out by wanting our mark upon her.⁴ (I have suggested that the film *North by Northwest*, in the crop-dusting sequence, invokes that ambivalence and calls for a solution to it.) The proposed solution of the monument is that if the mark is big enough and art enough and male enough, the doom of progress may be redeemed. Hardly a saving message to be drawn from the observation and memory of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln.

4. Two valuable accounts of the history of American attitudes toward the American land are Edwin Fussell's *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton, N.J., 1965), and Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975).

The *Encyclopedia Americana* notes that the faces of the monument measure some sixty feet from chin to forehead and adds, rather proudly I thought, that this is twice as high as the head of the Giza Sphinx. But what else is there to think about but their monumentality, and what more to conclude on their basis than that America has become twice the land of Egypt, twice as enslaving and twice as mysterious? Hitchcock shows that for a projected screen image to encompass the size of these faces is the work of an instant, and thus he at once declares his work in competition with Mount Rushmore as a monument to America, about America, and asks for a meditation on what can now constitute monumentality, on what can be made so as to show the value in commemorating. This is a reason that this film is at pains to anthologize the whole body of Hitchcock's mature, mostly American, work, to throw it all into the balance as a kind of rededication. Rededication is an appropriate mood before a monument, particularly in a moment of self-doubt. And even if this monument exemplifies competition and domination as much as it does commemoration, still it is about founding fathers, a wish, however awkwardly expressed, to get back to origins. Hitchcock has been careful to dissociate his attitude toward the monument from Vandamm's contemptuous dismissal of it with his opening question to Kaplan/Thornhill at the cafeteria: something like, "Now what little drama have you invited me to witness in these gay surroundings?" (*This Englishman* does not belong to the place but owns a structure mythically close to it, pitched out from the land, less a dwelling than a space station.) And what better rededication than to compete with this monument's way of remembering by showing your fellow inhabitants a better way—a way that does not attempt to petrify and sever the past but to revise the inheritance of it, to reinherit it?

Before giving the answer I have, I pause to note that we could loop back and recount the main topics of *North by Northwest* as topics of seduction—our seduction by one another, by beautiful women and beautiful men and beautiful things, by mothers, strangers, liquor, fame, monuments, politics, America, art, film. The present film asks us to consider our attachments to things less in the light of what things they are than in the light of what mode of attachment we take toward them—for example, fetishistic, scopophilic, masochistic, narcissistic, or in general, to use a key word of Emerson's, partial. One result of such consideration might be the thought that a healthy suspicion and testing of our attachment to film should extend to our attachment to, say, literature as well and that film and literature are each capable of helping us in this extension.

The mountain-monument seems to have become just another landscape of a cold war, the scene of an escape, as though we had lost the capacity for attachment altogether; but then it is the site of the playing out of one of drama's oldest subjects, the rights of love against the rights,

anyway the requirements, of politics. We might come to think that the escape of this pair is seen by Hitchcock to be of national importance. Who are they, and what are they doing on this monument?

I will, as said, assert that they derive from, or from the same source as, the American comedy of remarriage, which I said means to me that their goal is the thing I call the legitimizing of marriage, the declaration that happiness is still to be won there, there or nowhere, and that America is a place, fictional no doubt, in which that happiness can be found. The structure of these comedies, making the goal achievable, takes responsibility over a longish, extendable list of features, two of the principal ones being the achieving of a new innocence and the establishing or reestablishing of an identity. These are pieces of an ancient Hitchcockian problematic. So are the two further features of remarriage comedies that I call the capacities for adventure and for improvisation. I mean by these capacities the virtues that allow you to become at home in the world, to establish the world as a home. The capacities permit, if necessary, living together on the road, as if loving were the finding of a direction, that is, of a directedness, just, as I mentioned, as Hitchcock's title *North by Northwest* names more than just a given direction. So important is it to get this capacity for adventurousness straight that in the middle of their escape down the monument the pair pause, comically, surrealistically, to discuss it (as silent comics used to pause, in the middle of chasing one another, to catch their breath). After his proposal to her she asks what happened to his two earlier marriages. He says his wives left him because they found he led too dull a life. For Hitchcock so daringly to mock the suspense he has been building up over this escape, virtually declaring that the two are now standing on a platform in a studio, must mean that he wants to illustrate the significance of this exchange, to enforce the assertion that dullness, taken as the opposite of adventurousness, where these are characteristics of human relationship, spiritual matters, is not something that running around the face of the earth proves or disproves, except allegorically. With those wives even this monumental situation of life and death would have been, spiritually speaking, dull; whereas with Eve the "importance" of the time and place is unimportant for the opposite reason, that anything and everything can be an adventure, however untellable as such from outside. (This is roughly the sentiment of *Bringing Up Baby*.)

The candidates for remarriage must, further, not be virgins, they must have a past together, and they must talk well and wittily about marriage, especially about whether they believe in marriage. The past the pair share in *North by Northwest* is just one night, but it proves ample enough. And one or both of the pair must maintain an openness to childhood, so it turns out to be to Thornhill's spiritual credit that although in the course of the film he becomes big he remains a boy. (The childlike capacity of Grant's temperament on film is stressed, I suppose

discovered, in the comedies he made with Howard Hawks.) The man in remarriage comedies is responsible for the education of the woman as part of a process of rescuing or redeeming her from a state in which she keeps herself; this may be characterized as a coldness or an inability to feel, and the education typically takes the form of the man's lecturing or haranguing the woman. In *North by Northwest* Thornhill identifies Eve as a statue and accuses her of having no feelings to hurt, but we are shown by her tears at this moment (at the auction) that what I earlier called the education in his surviving her onslaught has taken effect; to begin her physical rescue, he will later write on his monogrammed matchbook a note that contains information no one else in the world is in a position to impart to her. We may also see in this successful delivery his finally getting a message through to a woman, the difficulty in doing which began this plot.

This is enough to let me outline what I take as the essential difference in structure between the romantic comedies of remarriage and Hitchcock's romantic thriller. The goal of the comedies requires what I call the creation of the woman, a new creation of a new woman. This takes the form in the comedies of something like the woman's death and revival, and it goes with the camera's insistence on the flesh-and-blood reality of the female actor. When this happens in Hitchcock, as it did in *Vertigo*, the Hitchcock film preceding *North by Northwest*, it is shown to produce catastrophe: the woman's falling to her death, precisely the fate averted in *North by Northwest*. Here, accordingly, it is the man who undergoes death and revival (at least twice, both times at the hands of the woman) and whose physical identity is insisted upon by the camera.⁵ Hitchcock is thus investigating the point that the comedies of remarriage are least certain about, namely, what it is about the man that fits him to educate and hence rescue the woman, that is, to be chosen by the woman to educate her and thereby to achieve happiness for them both.

But again, why is the rescue to be achieved from the face of this monument? I have called it the face of the earth, the earth itself become visible, as pure surface. These tiny creatures are crawling between heaven and earth, a metaphysical accomplishment, as if becoming children again. Hamlet, feeling like a child, claims this accomplishment for himself as he decrees that there shall be no more marriages. Thornhill proposes marriage as he and the woman hang from a precipice; a gallant concept, as if marriage were a presence of mind, requiring no assurance of a future. Close-ups of the pair on the surface of the monument faces show them as if on an alien planet. There is no longer nature on the earth; earth is no longer an artifact by analogy, intimating God; it is literally and totally artifact, petrified under the hands of mankind. (To

5. That a given genre yields an adjacent genre by having one of its features "negated" in this way is something I give a little theoretical attention to in the introduction to *Pursuits of Happiness*.

place your film in competition with such an achievement is to place it in competition with film's own peculiar power of preserving the world by petrifying it, or anyway fixing it in celluloid.) The couple in remarriage comedies are isolated at the end, expected to legitimize marriage without the world, which has no help for pain. The surface of Hitchcock's *Mount Rushmore* strikes me as a place of absolute spiritual isolation, civilization engulfing even empty space. In one of his first American films, *Saboteur* (to name a final excerpt in this anthology), a man holds a villain from a ledge at the top of the Statue of Liberty, but the villain's sleeve comes loose and he falls to earth. To fall from Mount Rushmore, as I am imagining it, would be to fall off the earth, down the vast edges drear of the world.

Thornhill lifts Eve up directly from the isolation of the monument's ledge to the isolation of the marriage bed, as if identifying both places as the scene of cliff-hangers and declaring that they are at home in both. At the lift Leonard is overcome and drops the statue Eve has been identified with, which breaks against the granite monument, opening to produce some film, I take it the present film. I in effect describe *The Philadelphia Story* as a film produced by a rescue which takes the form of the breaking of a statue in favor of a woman. I also claim that the remarriage is, using a repeated phrase of that film, of national importance. My ground is the thought that while America, or any discovered world, can no longer ratify marriage, the achievement of true marriage might ratify something called America as a place in which to seek it. This is a state secret.