

# NORTH BY NORTHWEST

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock  
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
Released in 1959

Hollywood's greatest studio only made one picture with Alfred Hitchcock, the universally beloved *North By Northwest*. Famously, the director was having trouble with *The Wreck of the Mary Deare* (later directed by Michael Anderson) so he and scribe Ernest Lehman began developing an original story (very rare for Hitchcock) which the director, under pressure to show some progress, pitched to M-G-M brass. Concluding his sell with a flourish at the death of Lester Townsend, Hitchcock begged their leave as he was late for a (non-existent) meeting. The studio execs were left reeling with awe at the quicksilver character of the plot and the prospect of getting two Hitchcock films for the price of one.

The director only had a half-hour's-worth of the plot sketched out. But he knew where it would end—a lethal chase across Mt. Rushmore.

It's been often said that *North By Northwest*, when it manages to take itself seriously, is a discourse on the nature of identity. Less abstractly, it is by turns a comedy, a romance, an adventure yarn, and, as an afterthought, a thriller.

Whatever it is, the film is distinguished by its careful balancing of shock and suspense, along with its creative use of perspective.

Hitchcock, years after he filmed his early classic *Sabotage*, said it was a mistake to blow up the boy who unwittingly carries a bomb onto a bus. The suspense was good, but the audience was revolted by the boy's death, thinking it not just tragic, but in bad taste. But there's another reason the sequence fails. If there's a bomb and the audience knows about it but the characters don't, the obvious option is for the bomb to blow them up. Less obvious is, the bomb blows up, but the characters originally in harm's way, by twist of fate, escape.

More interesting possibilities include: One of the characters, we know, is aware of the bomb, but does nothing (he's planning a suicide-murder). Or, we don't know what a character knows, but when he survives, we find out he'd arranged for his protection in advance.

And if a third party arrives in the nick of time to defuse the bomb, and we were not made aware of his approach, then we have a shock. But the audience may think this a cheat. The best option is, we see a shot sequence of: the unwitting guys sitting at a table, a close-up on the bomb's timer, then the third party hurrying to the 'rescue.' This is what the audience expects. The shock would be, when the third party arrives, instead of defusing the bomb, he shoots the guys at the table and, ironic retribution, gets blown up, himself.

Instead of favoring shock or suspense the ideal is to have both.

This is the kind of delicate balancing *North By Northwest* manages. Let's look at several sequences. Rummaging through the hotel room of 'George Kaplan,' Thornhill is presumed by the maid to be Kaplan. Then the valet arrives with a suit for Kaplan. Finally, the telephone rings and, feeling cocky, Thornhill decides to answer it. We had no idea that Vandamm's thugs were lurking in the lobby—but it makes perfect sense since that's where they picked up 'Kaplan'

the day previous. It's his hotel. So it's a shock to hear them on the phone, but a well-supported development (shocks can't be allowed to undermine suspension of disbelief).

What follows is one of the great comic jolts of the movie—"You gentlemen aren't *really* trying to kill my son, are you?" And this surprise now yields suspense—how are they going to handle this? Their faux-incredulous laughter gets them off the hook and is a good metaphor for the whole movie—an elevator-full of people all laughing except for Roger Thornhill, 'cause the joke's on him.

When Eve, at the end of the train love scene, looks away, defeated, we know something is terribly wrong. We cut to the porter, the unwitting agent of evil, delivering a message (since we stayed with Thornhill in the lavatory during the porter's visit, that's when she gave him the message). A hand takes it and we don't know whose hand it is. We read the message. Then finally the message is handed over and we pull back to reveal Edgar and Vandamm. Thus we know Eve is treacherous, Vandamm is on the train, and they're working together. That's a bracing cocktail of shock and suspense.

The ultimate shock of the movie is the knife penetrating Lester Townsend just as he's shown the picture of Vandamm. But even this was sufficiently foreshadowed by the shot of the killer donning sinister black leather gloves, and in a great reveal at the Townsend house (establishing that Thornhill did not imagine the previous night's happenings), he rises from his garden work looking cold and grasping hedge clippers.

Other shocks include the reveal of the Professor at the auction and the revelation that Eve is going on the plane with Vandamm.

Great suspenseful moments include wondering where the kidnap car is going, the maid pinning down Thornhill with a gun as Eve is led to the plane, wondering how Thornhill will escape the auction, and whether Thornhill can resist Edgar's shoe and pull Eve back from the edge of destruction.

Suspense relies on perspective. The best movie suspense means one or more characters not knowing what the audience knows. For this to happen the audience must be granted a quasi-omniscience—the audience must be able to look down into the story of the film, and know everything important as it is proceeding, but still (this is why it's not total omniscience) discover the resolution at the same time the characters do.

Before we embark on a brief discussion of perspective in *North By Northwest*, let's define some terms. Perspective and point-of-view are almost synonymous. If the camera shows exactly what the protagonist is seeing, the story is unfolding according to the protagonist's perspective. If the camera is following the protagonist around, we're still experiencing the story from his perspective. If we see things from a vantage point denied the protagonist but nothing is revealed that he doesn't know, we're still seeing things from his perspective. We'll define these as Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3, respectively.

An example of Level 1 perspective is Thornhill looking out the doors of the Townsend estate study, seeing Edgar drop the croquet mallet. A Level 2 would be when Thornhill is in court protesting his innocence before the judge, as we see the entire tableau of the court. A Level 3 is Thornhill walking up the steps outside the UN or when he steps off the bus at the

Prairie Stop in a long shot of monotonous brown farmland. While the distinction between a Level 2 and Level 3 is fuzzy, with a Level 3 the camera follows the protagonist from a distance.

The most memorable example of a Level 3 is the vertiginous matte shot portraying Thornhill as an ant running for his life after escaping from the scene of Townsend's murder. This shot provides a great transition to the scene in Washington where the Professor's team mulls over the bizarre twist of fate resulting in the decoy agent Kaplan coming to life. Since a Level 3 shot is the most distant first-person perspective, it's the perfect transition to this, the first extended scene not privy to Thornhill.

Alternately, a Level 3 may briefly stray from the protagonist's immediate viewpoint to show something that he would not be surprised at. An example is the medium close-up of Vandamm's thugs, in their own car, following the drunk Thornhill in his.

With Middle Perspective we briefly leave the protagonist to collect information not available to him. Two revelations informing the audience but leaving Thornhill in the dark include the disconcerting dolly-tracking shot from the finger-snapping Thornhill to Vandamm's thugs, and the above-mentioned clippers-killer reveal.

And last there is Other Perspective, where we see something totally divorced from Thornhill, of which he has no knowledge, and he is nowhere in or near the scene. A great example is the dolly shot revealing that Eve and Edgar are commiserating inconspicuously via separate telephone booths.

Basically this story is about Roger Thornhill. When the camera leaves him it's to benefit the audience by establishing suspense, and everything we see does, or will, affect Thornhill directly. Two scenes near the film's end stretch perspective to maximum effect.

The first is the fake shooting. We know a plan is afoot, but we don't know what. Thornhill's words when Eve pulls out the gun—"You little fool!"—could be interpreted as Thornhill in his act of scorned lover, or Thornhill trying to signal Eve that she's straying far from their pre-arranged plans. She shoots, he falls, and the music plays the horror of it. We just don't know. So when Thornhill is loaded into the ranger wagon, it's not clear whether he's hurt or feigning injury. It's possible (Hitchcock would go all the way with *Psycho* a year later) that the protagonist is dead. So we don't know if we're in a Level 3 shot—we've lost perspective. This makes for great tension and reinforces our fears that the hero is vulnerable, and, in his final showdown at Mt. Rushmore, may perish.

Another great scene is Eve walking to the plane, escorted by Vandamm. We know Thornhill is pinned down in the house by the maid, but she doesn't know that and she can't figure out why he's not making a move to save her. She looks back anxiously but tries to play it off. Vandamm, for his part, doesn't want Eve to suspect him of suspicion! So he tries to keep looking ahead and nudging her forward persuasively. Since Eve is the protagonist's girl and her protection is his primary objective, it's appropriate that we stay with her. Because she's looking back for Thornhill, it's a Level 3 shot.

When Thornhill spied outside the house, he had the knowledge, and Eve didn't, but we were strictly with Thornhill's perspective. Now we're going a step further. The suspense is reversed from the typical set-up of *North By Northwest*; Thornhill knows what is going on, but Eve doesn't. From the time Thornhill urgently warns Eve in her bedroom, they are, if not physically together, spiritually together. This shot of Eve walking to the airplane closes the

gap—it gets us used to the idea of them, even when apart, as being inseparable. Once she gets in the car, they are together the rest of the movie (save for the brief moment when we're not sure if Edgar has pushed her off the mountain), so we're seeing the film from, arguably, their shared viewpoint as co-protagonists. This ingenious use of perspective is setting up their ultimate unification as husband and wife at the film's conclusion.

So shock/suspense and perspective are seen, in *North By Northwest*, as interrelated. They are carefully modulated by the director to achieve ultimate audience identification with, and sympathy for, the hero.

But the suspense must alternate between seeing *as* the protagonist, and seeing *for* the protagonist. For example, in the crop duster sequence, we wonder, with the protagonist, whether the truck will stop in time. Alternately, we could know things the protagonist does not. We wonder whether Thornhill will survive the Prairie Stop 'meeting,' knowing, unlike Thornhill, that it's a set-up.

The first kind of suspense increases audience identification with the hero, and the second increases sympathy/concern for the hero. Too much of the former means we put ourselves in the story and gradually displace the hero, while too much of the latter means we never get into the story, but watch it from a distance.

Of course, Hitchcock's balancing act approaches perfection. In *North By Northwest* the Master of Suspense demonstrates, once more, his uncanny ability to mold an audience's response in the service of a ripping good yarn.