

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Jason Zimmerman, MA

North by Northwest (1959)

Alfred Hitchcock

OVERVIEW

Director Sir Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) is perhaps the most well known British filmmaker and a household name. With over 50 films to his credit, Hitchcock helped to shape the modern understanding of the thriller genre. Known as 'the master of suspense', he was noted for his ability to turn the viewer into a voyeur, mimicking the movements of a human head and eyes with the camera, making the viewer feel at the center of the action. His most well known films include *The Birds*, *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, and *Rear Window* which have all earned accolades including preservation by the US Film Registry. In 1960, Hitchcock was inducted into the Hollywood walk of fame with two stars for his work in both film and television. He was also the first recipient of the BAFTA Academy Fellowship Award.

Film *North by Northwest* was an original story by Hitchcock which he had first speculated would be somewhat comic. Though not without moments of comedy, *North by Northwest* is a Cold War spy thriller at its heart. Cary Grant's performance as Roger Thornhill is exciting and energetic. The advertiser mistaken for a spy shows a great will to survive as the odds stack against him. He meets Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) on a train and learns she is somehow connected to the mysterious Vandamm (James Mason) who is hunting the agent 'Kaplan'. In his personal quest to expose Vandamm, Thornhill adopts the persona of George Kaplan to draw his enemy out into the open.

Background This film was a box office hit, earning MGM nearly \$10 million in total theatrical rentals in the US and abroad. For many years before the film's release, Hitchcock's friends, favored actors, and peers all recall the famed director playing with an idea about a spy played by Cary Grant hiding from enemy agents in Lincoln's nose on Mt. Rushmore only to be exposed when the granite president sneezed. The Library of Congress selected the thriller for preservation in 1995, calling it "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant." The film was shot on location when possible and includes notable locations such as the UN general assembly building, The Ambassador East hotel in Chicago, and Grand Central Terminal in New York City.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Roger Thornhill Roger is a willful and sarcastic advertising executive from New York City who is mistaken for a spy named Kaplan.

Philip Vandamm Vandamm is a mysterious man who adopts the persona of Lester Townsend in the beginning of the film and commands the thugs who kidnap and attempt to murder Thornhill.

Eve Kendall Eve is a beautiful and intelligent young spy who works undercover for Vandamm. Her attraction to Roger makes her help him out of several tough situations.

Clara Thornhill Roger's mother who bails him out of jail but refuses to believe his allegations of kidnap and espionage.

The Professor Leader of a powerful espionage organization and think tank who orchestrates the events that lead to Roger's case of mistaken identity.

SYNOPSIS

North by Northwest is a tale of mistaken identity, duplicity, and tenacity. Roger Thornhill is meeting with business partners in a hotel bar when he needs to make a phone call. Just before, some mysterious men ask the bellhop to page Mr. Kaplan. Seeing Thornhill exit the dining room just after Kaplan is paged, they kidnap him at gunpoint and force him into a car. Thornhill meets a man who responds to Townsend who threatens him before ordering his thugs to stage a drunk driving accident for the advertiser, though Roger survives unexpectedly. Upon returning to the manor the next day in an attempt to prove his innocence, he is led to the UN where he meets the real Townsend who is not the man he met.

Now accused of a murder he did not commit, Thornhill flees New York by train and encounters the beautiful and intriguing Eve Kendall. The two share close calls with the authorities and a budding romance in her private cabin on the trip to Chicago where they part ways. Roger learns the man who called himself Townsend is actually Philip Vandamm and seeks the help of George Kaplan to find him. Airborne assassins await him instead of the spy. He survives the attack and continues his mission to find Vandamm who wants him dead and Kendall who betrayed him.

PLOT

Abduction- We see two men enter the hotel in which Roger is meeting with his associates. They summon a worker and ask him to page 'Mr. Kaplan'. When Roger gets up to make a phone call soon after the page goes out for Mr. Kaplan, the two men confront him. He states that he isn't Kaplan and that the pair must be joking, but the men force him at gunpoint into a car. Thornhill complains and makes snide comments the whole trip to a luxurious manor house with the name Townsend on its drive.



Questioning at Townsend Manor- Thornhill awaits whomever has orchestrated his kidnapping in an ornate study. Suspicious, Roger begins leafing through the contents on the desk in front of him. He discovers the name Mr. Lester Townsend on a parcel before his captor enters the room and begins his interrogation. The two circle around the desk like predators squaring off before a fight. Despite total ignorance of what Mr. Townsend is accusing him, Roger's captor refuses to believe he is anyone but George Kaplan. Making no headway and gaining no information, Townsend decides to deal with Mr. Thornhill by staging a drunk driving accident. His thugs force bourbon down Roger's throat and drag him from the manor.

Assassination attempt The Staged Accident- On a cliff overlooking the sea in the dark of night, Townsend's men force the inebriated Roger Thornhill behind the wheel of a Mercedes convertible. They go through the steps of putting the car in drive and steering it over the cliff, but before they can finish, Roger pushes his captor aside and takes the wheel. For a moment, we simply watch as the drunk advertising executive hangs from the side of the cliff. The thugs are surprised when he gains control of the vehicle and attempts to escape. They hop into the second car and pursue him down the road.



Police Intervention- Incredibly drunk and barely conscious, the tenacious Thornhill tries to keep his car on the road and away from his pursuers. This sequence is made up of somewhat comic shots of Roger's drunken face as he tries to blindly navigate the unfamiliar road in the middle of the night and artful representations of drunken visual impairment. Two Glen Cove police officers see him driving recklessly and give chase. When Roger realizes that the police are chasing him, he slams on his brakes and causes the police to rear-end him. His pursuers turn tail once they see the cops, but Roger ends up in custody for reckless driving.

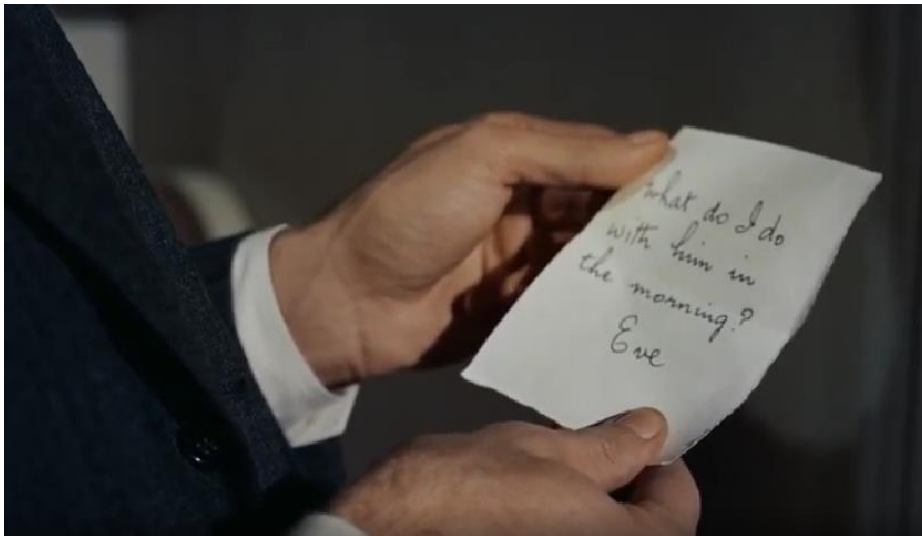
Searching for Townsend Mr. Thornhill arrives at the Glen Cove police department and gets his phone call which he uses to contact his mother. Afterwards, he drunkenly accuses Lester Townsend of abduction and attempted murder which the police -and his mother- don't fully believe. The next day after his trial, Roger leads detectives to the mansion in which he was interrogated and threatened. There they meet a woman who calls herself Mrs. Townsend who claims to be good friends with Roger and that he may have overindulged too much again. Satisfied, the police end the investigation but Roger knows that he's been had and he can't stand it.

Kaplan's Hotel- Thornhill travels with his mother to the hotel Mr. Townsend mentioned Kaplan would be staying in the hope of shedding some light on the mystery. He convinces his mother to use her charms to get the key to Kaplan's room. Inside Kaplan's room, Roger rifles through the spy's belongings, discovering that he is much shorter than Roger. Among his possessions is a photo of a man Thornhill recognizes as Townsend which he keeps. Both the maid and the valet visit the room, calling Roger 'Mr. Kaplan' though both claim to have never seen anyone in the room before today. Curious, Roger answers the room's phone when it rings and finds Townsend is on the other end. He taunts Roger with the fact that his thugs are already on the way. His mother in tow, Thornhill flees the room only to encounter the assassins in the elevator.



The real Townsend is killed at the UN General Assembly- After escaping his pursuers by taxi and removing his mother from the situation, Roger Thornhill makes his way to the UN. In the iconic lobby, he asks a receptionist to help him find Mr. Lester Townsend, saying that he is expected. The receptionist helpfully directs him to the lunch room where Townsend should be dining. Roger enters the dining room and pages Lester Townsend, but the man who comes forward is not the same Townsend who attempted to have him killed. The real Townsend is rightly confused and, stunned, Thornhill tries to clarify the situation. Roger tries to show the real Lester Townsend the picture of his impersonator only to watch as the UN speaker falls to the floor, a knife protruding from his back.

Escape from New York- In a panic, Roger flees from the UN, but not before a reporter snaps his picture with blood on his hands. Thornhill decides to leave the state. He makes his way to Grand Central Terminal to purchase express tickets to Chicago. He is recognized by the teller despite his sunglasses as a wanted fugitive, but he evades capture by slipping onto a train. There, he literally collides with the beautiful Eve Kendall. The young woman helps him evade the police by lying, saying she saw the man they were looking for exit through the other door. He thanks her then they part. Roger Thornhill has avoided the police, but now he is a stowaway on a train headed to Chicago. Roger and Eve meet once more in the dining car. They share a meal and conversation before the train makes an unscheduled stop and police enter the train looking for Roger. Eve hides Roger in her private compartment and the two share a blossoming romance. At some point in the evening, the valet knocks on the door to prepare the room for sleeper service and Thornhill hides in the bathroom. Eve gives the valet a note which he passes to an unseen man in another room. In the note, Eve asks "What should I do with him in the morning?" The next day Eve and Roger exit the train in Chicago, Roger disguised as a porter. Eve offers to help Roger contact Kaplan, revealing herself to be a spy.



The Think Tank- For the first time, the focus moves from Roger Thornhill to a mysterious group of professionals in a nondescript meeting room. Among them is The Professor who discusses the situation with his subordinates: Kaplan does not exist. He was a construction made by this group to throw an enemy spy, Philip Vandamm, off of his footing and expose his plans. The group shares some small sympathy for Mr. Thornhill, but ultimately decide to use the unlucky advertiser to complete their plans.

Another assassination attempt- Mr. Thornhill accepts Eve Kendall's help and, after a shave and change of clothes, boards a bus destined for rural Illinois. On the roadside near fallow fields and dry corn stalks, Thornhill awaits Kaplan or his agent. Trucks and cars pass without slowing, and his only conversation is with a man who is dropped off to wait for a bus. Before the man's departure, he notes that the crop duster which has been flying over the nearby fields seems to be spraying empty fields. The bus departs and the plane changes course, flying low and buzzing Roger. He understands quickly what is going on and dives into a ditch just in time to avoid automatic gunfire hurled his way by the plane's passenger. Thornhill escapes when the plane swoops into a passing fuel truck and explodes, allowing him to steal an onlooker's car.



The Auction- Back in Chicago, Thornhill tracks down Kaplan's hotel room but finds that he has checked out early. Obviously dejected about his failure to find Kaplan, he notices Eve Kendall and follows her to her hotel room where he confronts her. She leaves, but Roger follows her to an art auction where he discovers Philip Vandamm buying a Mexican Purépecha figure. Vandamm tries to have him killed, but Roger causes a disturbance and is removed from the auction house by police.

To South Dakota- Roger Thornhill is removed from police custody by a man who introduces himself as The Professor, Eve's handler, who reveals that Ms. Kendall's actions were not malicious and that Roger has placed her in great danger. At an airstrip in Chicago, The Professor offers him a chance to save Eve's life, which Thornhill accepts. The following day in the Cafeteria beneath Mt. Rushmore, Vandamm and his men sit with Eve Kendall. They discuss her loyalty and potential fate because of her connection to Roger whom they still believe to be Kaplan. Roger Thornhill spots and confronts Eve. After a short and public struggle, she shoots him repeatedly and flees the scene. A man, who turns out to be the Professor, examines the body and displays a bloody handkerchief to Vandamm as the body is removed.

In the Pines- The Professor, Roger, and Eve meet in the forest near Mt. Rushmore and discuss the success of their plot. Roger is ready to sweep Eve off her feet and elope, but The Professor makes clear his organization's plans for the beautiful and cunning spy. She drives off to rejoin Vandamm and obtain the Purépecha figure which contains critical microfilm and Roger is knocked unconscious by the park ranger who accompanies The Professor when he attempts to stop her. Thornhill awakens in the hospital and escapes The Professor, making his way back to Mt. Rushmore.



On top of Mt. Rushmore- Eve is in peril in Vandamm's mansion atop the national landmark: One of Vandamm's men is on to her after discovering the blank cartridges in her pistol. Roger overhears Vandamm's plan to kill Ms. Kendall by throwing her from the plane over the ocean. Thornhill manages to get her a message hidden in a matchbook bearing his initials. She steals the figure from Vandamm and escapes with Roger in a car, but a locked gate bars their way. They escape into the woods and stumble onto the monumental carvings of the presidents' heads. Their pursuers reach them but tumble from the cliff one by one. The climax of the film happens in its last moments as Eve dangles from the cliff face and Roger reaches for her, begging her to hold on.



THEMES

Mistaken Identity- The themes in *North by Northwest* are hard to identify by design, but mistaken identity is a common theme repeated by many characters. Both ignorance and deception drive the many instances of mistaken identity in this film. Roger Thornhill is the first to encounter mistaken identity when Vandamm's thugs kidnap him at gunpoint, believing him to be George Kaplan, an enemy spy. This theme is cemented in Thornhill's first confrontation with Vandamm at the Townsend mansion. Roger denies any knowledge of Kaplan or Vandamm's identity but Vandamm refuses to hear it. Here we can see the second instance of mistaken identity; Roger (Kaplan in Vandamm's eyes) calls Vandamm 'Townsend', believing him to be the owner of the mansion. This second case of mistaken identity drives Roger through

the midpoint of the film. Not only does he have to clear his name -first of drunk driving, then of murder- but mistaken identity eventually leads to curiosity and spite as Roger uncovers more evidence: What are Vandamm's plans and how can they be stopped?

Roger's case of mistaken identity is addressed by The Professor and his underlings at length after the murder of Lester Townsend. There is a heated debate about whether they should help the man or use him to further their plans. In this scene, they reveal that George Kaplan is nothing but a construction, a ruse to ruffle their enemy Philip Vandamm's feathers and cause him to slip up. They decide to leave Thornhill to his fate, using this case of mistaken identity to their advantage. Eve too uses mistaken identity. As a double agent working under The Professor, she uses both Roger and Vandamm to complete her goals. Her mistaken identity by Vandamm becomes Roger's saving grace. Twice, she helps him to slip out of immediate danger, knowing that he isn't Kaplan but someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He blames her for the crop duster attack and almost blows her cover when he confronts her. Vandamm realizes that Ms. Kendall may not be what she seems and this potential mistaken identity drives the conflict of the film until its climax.

Moral Relativism- Moral Relativism was a consistent theme of the Cold War, and being a Cold War spy thriller, *North by Northwest* can't help but touch on the subject. This theme first presents itself in the film's second scene where Thornhill rides in a taxi with his secretary. She is upset that he lied to someone to take their cab and he responds to her, saying "In the world of advertising, there's no such thing as a lie. There's only expedient exaggeration." While Vandamm and The Professor represent two different factions, their desire to see their side win the vague conflict leaves room for moral relativism: Vandamm kidnaps and kills to achieve his goals, and The Professor allows an innocent man to take the rap for a murder he did not commit and potentially die for a case of mistaken identity. The Professor promises Roger Eve's safety and freedom if he helps to undo the damage his confrontation at the auction house did to The Professor's plans. This is a lie, however, as Eve is prepared to rejoin Vandamm and continue The Professor's plans in Europe. Roger is knocked unconscious and imprisoned when he tries to stop Eve, treated similarly as with Vandamm's men at the very beginning of the film. Many such 'expedient exaggerations' threaten Roger Thornhill's life and goals throughout the course of the film.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ROGER THORNHILL **Open** (Tenacity – Witty – Loyal – Curious) Roger is the protagonist of the film. He is a powerful advertising executive in New York City, going about his daily life when a case of mistaken identity hurls him into a world of lies and subterfuge. He survives with a bit of luck, his personal grit, and the help of the beautiful spy Eve Kendall.

Tenacity- While simple luck does come into play for Roger as he tries to survive the bizarre situation in which he finds himself, his own personal tenacity makes up the bulk of the reasons he survives. He is rapidly characterized as a tenacious and successful executive before he is kidnapped by Vandamm's thugs. We see his tenacity in his pursuit of Vandamm. Thornhill has a ceaseless urge to get to the bottom of this mystery. At several points he could just walk away, such as when he is left at the Glen Cove police department and when he is imprisoned in the hospital in Rapid City, yet he adopts the persona of George Kaplan, sinking himself further into the murky plot. Before his first encounter with Vandamm, Thornhill has the guts to rifle through what he believes to be his captor's belongings, finding a clue in the mail scattered on top of the desk. When his captors attempt to stage his drunk driving death, his relentless will to survive allows him to throw off his captors and navigate the strange road in the middle of the night with half a handle of bourbon in his belly. Were it not for his tenacious will to survive, he would have never escaped police after the murder at the UN nor would he have lived through Vandamm's airborne assassination attempt.

Witty Thornhill is witty to the point of near-perpetual sarcasm. The very first scene of the movie includes him quickly crafting a lie about his secretary being sick to take a cab from another man. We hear more of Roger's witty cracks as the movie continues, such as when he tells a prying teller that his eyes are "sensitive to questions" when the man mentions his identity-concealing sunglasses. At the end of the film we see Thornhill make two especially witty decisions. First, he uses a matchbook bearing his initials to get

a message to Eve without raising suspicion. Then, he realizes that the gun being used to detain him is the same one Eve used to fool Vandamm and that it's loaded with blanks. Roger's quick wit saves him from Vandamm's plans at the auction when instead of simply trying to flee the situation, Roger creates such a disturbance that the police become involved. This is an incredibly smart plan, inspired from Vandamm's unwillingness to involve the police in the past.

Loyal Roger's loyalty is impressive. He is quick to trust Eve because of his loyalty and this works out for him during his train ride to Chicago. Along with their budding romance, this is part of what drives Roger to follow Eve to the auction. He spends most of the confrontation at the auction house berating and insulting Eve for her lack of scruples and loyalty. Inversely, Roger comes to Eve's aid quickly and easily once The Professor explains the situation, assuring him that Eve's betrayal was not personal but a matter of life and death. To repay his debt to her, he throws himself into a dangerous situation only to be betrayed by The Professor. After escaping from the hospital, Roger proves his ultimate loyalty to Eve by traveling unaided to Vandamm's house to warn her of the danger she faces. In a small moment at the beginning of the film, as he dictates instructions to his secretary, we can see that he is still on good terms with his ex-wife, a rare trait for media of the 1950s that displays great capacity for loyalty.

Curious The main thing driving Thornhill through the entirety of the film is a desire to solve the mystery behind George Kaplan and Philip Vandamm. After discovering the coverup at Townsend manor, Roger could just walk away and prove that he isn't Kaplan. Instead, Roger mirrors Kaplan's movements and even dons his identity to embroil himself further. It was his own desire to solve the mystery that drove Thornhill to the UN. There, his use of George Kaplan's identity ends with the real Lester Townsend's death and Roger being framed for the murder. Though it often drives the conflict, Thornhill's curiosity isn't always his downfall: At the house on top of Mt. Rushmore, Roger's curiosity allows him to overhear that Eve is in terrible danger and allows him to get her a message before it's too late.

EVE KENDALL Conscientious (Subtle – Adaptable – Intelligent)

Eve is a beautiful and intelligent spy. She is a secondary protagonist and the main love interest in the story. Our introduction to Eve is on the 20th Century Express from New York to Chicago where she allows Roger Thornhill to hide in her private cabin. We also see her skill for duplicity when she betrays Roger and is revealed as a double agent by her handler, The Professor.

Subtle Eve doesn't draw any more attention to herself than a situation requires. When Roger barges into her hotel room in Chicago to confront her, she decides not to make a scene though she could easily alert staff or guests to a man entering her room unwelcomed. She clearly wishes to explain the situation to Roger, but can't because of her position as a double agent. In her first moments on screen, she becomes a concerned passerby for the police to protect Roger. She repeats this same act when detectives ask to search her compartment where Roger is hiding in the pull-out bed. She proves herself a master of subtlety when she receives Roger's message in Vandamm's house: We can see suspicion and panic flash across her face as she realizes that Roger must have planted the matchbook for her to find and again when she reads the message within. Despite the obvious unease it brings her to learn of her certain demise, she acts normally, excusing herself to find a pair of earrings which she forgot. Eve's subtlety is mistaken for meekness by Vandamm, who allows her close enough to snatch the microfilm-filled figure at the end of the film despite his knowledge of her betrayal.

Adaptable Ms. Kendall proves herself to be a competent spy at many points in *North by Northwest*. We learn that her lot in life has been rough, but this gives her the ability to change and react without losing her footing, such as her first encounter with Roger. We are unaware that she is working under Vandamm -and subsequently under The Professor- because of her ability to hold her emotions in check even under duress. We see this behavior again in the cafeteria when she pretends to kill Roger to get back into Vandamm's good graces and once more when she receives the message from Roger in Vandamm's house. Though we see her poker face slip for a moment in the house on Mt. Rushmore, she never lets slip that anyone is in the house, changing her plan in an instant and covering for her retreat back to the bedroom without raising any suspicion. This skill makes Eve an excellent spy.

Intelligent It's hard to get anything past Eve Kendall. We rarely see someone match Roger's wit, but she leaves the man speechless in their meeting in the dining car. Eve knows what a precarious situation she is in as a double agent and never shows or tells more than she needs. In the house on top of Mt. Rushmore, she quickly and intelligently infers that the matchbook Vandamm's man tosses onto the coffee table bears Roger's personal trademark. Such intelligent observations allow her to keep one step ahead of Vandamm as a double agent.

UNCONSCIENTIOUS

PHILIP VANDAMM **Unconscientious** (Ruthless – Methodical – Irascible)

Vandamm is the mastermind of a mysterious plot and the main antagonist of *North by Northwest*. He is originally introduced to us as Townsend, though we eventually learn of his true identity when Roger confronts Eve at the auction. Though menacing and central to the plot, Vandamm receives relatively little screen time, often acting through the proxies of his agents and assassins.

Ruthless Vandamm proves himself to be cold-blooded on many occasions. While he always has someone else handle his dirty work, he is the mastermind behind every attempt on Thornhill's life and good name. We first encounter his ruthlessness in his first attempt on Roger's life, the cliffside staged drunk driving accident. While simply killing someone would be ruthless, Vandamm prefers more ornate methods which tie up loose ends or add complications for his enemies. The stabbing at the UN and the sheer complexity of the crop duster assassination attempt illustrate both Vandamm's ruthlessness and his bizarre strategic playfulness in conspiracy and murder.

Methodical Vandamm is nothing if not methodical. His defamation of Roger Thornhill's character at the beginning of the film is so complete that he simply considered the matter finished: Not even Roger's mother believed his story about an attempted murder or forced intoxication. At his most baroque we can see Vandamm's methodical mind at work. Using a crop duster as a murder weapon seems strange to some, but even a trained spy would overlook such an innocent object in rural Illinois. The stabbing death of Lester Townsend at the UN displays methodical planning: Though it could be argued that Vandamm's man was trying to kill Roger and missed, Roger instead is caught with blood on his hands. Believing Roger to be Kaplan, Vandamm has made it impossible for the enemy spy to operate in public, being a wanted fugitive. The only thing Vandamm seems unable to plan for is Roger not being Kaplan.

Irascible Despite his level-headed demeanor and strategic methodology, Philip Vandamm shows himself prone to bouts of uncontrollable anger and paranoia. It seems at times that he is nearly unstoppable, such as when his agents frame Thornhill for murder, until he hits some frustration. Moments like his interrogation of Roger at the beginning of the film show that frustration spurs him to act rashly or with cruelty. Unable to get the information he wants out of Roger, he opts to kill the man, treating Roger as an insect, an annoyance. His irascibility often leads to cruelty, shown in how he plans to deal with Eve once he learns of her betrayal: Instead of a quick and methodical assassination, he plans to push her from the plane over the ocean and ensure that she suffer.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

While tight interior scenes display Hitchcock's subtle trademark voyeur style, there are many outdoor scenes where the grand and striking composition of the shot simply cannot be ignored. Most striking among them is Roger's flight from the UN building which is shot straight down from the top of the building. Thornhill becomes a speck running across a modernist minimalist painting of blue, gray, and yellow. Hitchcock shows himself to be a master of motion in many sequences, but notably the film's introductory credits on the busy streets of New York City and the iconic crop duster scene in a desolate corn field. Both of these scenes rely on impeccable choreographic timing by not just the actors and extras, but the camera itself which gives the viewer the feeling of being lost in the crowd and hunted respectively.