

# Rewriting American foundational Myths in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*

Autor(en): **Straumann, Barbara**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **14 (2002)**

PDF erstellt am: **30.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99996>

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Rewriting American Foundational  
Myths in Alfred Hitchcock's  
*North by Northwest*

Barbara Straumann

[M]aps bring to light the *internal* logic of narrative: the semiotic domain around which a plot coalesces and self-organizes. Franco Moretti (5)

In the case of *North by Northwest* (1959), the formulation of a plot idea appears to have been a particularly difficult process. Weeks of pondering, “two months of back-and-forth ping-ponging of ideas” between the scriptwriter Ernest Lehman and Hitchcock did not produce a storyline. According to Lehman’s recollection, the project started to come off, however, when Hitchcock “murmured wistfully, ‘I always wanted to do a chase across the faces of Mount Rushmore’” and then “one day” said that he “‘always wanted to do a scene [. . .] where our hero is standing all alone on a wide open space and there’s nobody and nothing else in sight for three hundred and sixty degrees around, as far as the eye can see . . . and then along comes a tornado. No place to run’” (Lehman, vii-ix). Although, for palpable technical reasons, the tornado was replaced by a plane attack, the plot of *North by Northwest* is largely structured by colorful settings as well as a movement through space so that, in fact, the geographical trajectory figures as the film’s predominant plot function.

Following the title’s northwesterly direction, the film’s protagonist Roger O. Thornhill (Cary Grant), a Madison Avenue advertising executive, embarks on a journey in the course of which he visits prominent sites and places: among others a number of elegant Manhattan buildings such as the Plaza Hotel and the United Nations Building, Grand Central Station, followed by the Twentieth-Century Limited Train along the Hudson to Chicago, an out-of-the-way bus-stop called Prairie Stop on a vast plain of

mostly bare cornfields, a Frank Lloyd Wright house and, finally, in South Dakota, the Mount Rushmore Monument with the gigantic portraits of the American presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt. However, Roger Thornhill's journey is not simply a picaresque and picturesque passage. Nor does it exclusively follow the Oedipal trajectory emphasized by a number of critics,<sup>1</sup> although the mother's boy Roger certainly does have to substitute his overpowerful maternal love object for a more mature libidinal attachment, namely the very attractive but also duplicitous blonde Eve Kendall (Eve Marie Saint). As I shall argue, Roger's journey is also – thanks to its westward direction as well as to the mythic iconicity of the traversed terrain – an odyssey of “national importance.” Following the trajectory of Thornhill's itinerary, the film (re)visits a number of quintessentially American sites and places as well as certain American foundational myths which are firmly grounded in the (mental) geography of the United States. However, in its postwar rewriting or, to invoke Lacanian terminology, in its traversal of national myths and fantasies, *North by Northwest* symptomatically enacts and critically exposes a tenuousness in the nation's foundation as well as a crisis in American masculine subjectivity, both of which are articulated in spatial terms. Thus rather than conceiving of Roger's traveling as a trope of Oedipal self-discovery, I am reading it as a symptomatic performance and articulation of a historio-cultural crisis.

The plot of *North by Northwest* can be seen to (cor)respond to the American Cold War culture and its obsession with control and surveillance practices within the nation's borders as well as its fear of intrusion from beyond. Quite in keeping with this cultural climate of internal and external menace, the “innocent” citizen Thornhill finds himself threatened by two agencies at once. A spy racket mistakes him for a supposed government agent called George Kaplan and hence pursues him in order to get him out of the way. On the other side, the national intelligence office does nothing to clear up this mistake or to help Thornhill elude the spies' attempts on his life. Thus, interestingly enough, it is not only Vandamm, the cultivated as well as ruthless head of the spy racket, “a sort of importer-exporter” of “government secrets,” who tries to force Kaplan's identity upon Thornhill. But the American symbolic law, represented by the national counter-

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<sup>1</sup> For readings of *North by Northwest* along Oedipal lines, see Lesley Brill, Robin Wood and, above all, Raymond Bellour's seminal analysis of *North by Northwest* “Le blocage symbolique.” Elsewhere Bellour goes as far as to argue that all Hollywood narratives are dramatizations of the masculine Oedipal trajectory and hence of the entry of the masculine subject into the symbolic order (Bergstrom, 93).

intelligence office, does so, too, and in so doing reveals itself to be fallible. In fact the film's language establishes the national secret service as visually representing the US government. When we are first introduced to the national intelligence office in Washington, we see, on the exterior of the office building, an engraved plaque reading "United States Intelligence Office," the shiny surface of which mirrors the reflection of the Capitol dome so that the national secret agents stand in as a *pars pro toto* for the national symbolic order. Significantly, its main representative, the "Professor," who acts as the head of the counterespionage, turns out to be as ruthless as Vandamm. He supports the spies' accidental mistake of Thornhill for Kaplan well knowing that this will expose an innocent citizen to considerable danger. What is more, George Kaplan is actually a fictitious decoy the "Professor" has created himself in order to mislead the spies. As a result, Thornhill finds himself threatened quite literally by the irresponsible plotting and secret script-writing which the representatives of the national symbolic order engage in.

Given these Cold War conspiracies, *North by Northwest* could indeed be said to follow a plot of Cold War paranoia. However, I would like to suggest a somewhat different reading. With its intertextual allusion to Hamlet's line "I am but mad north-north-west," the film's title refers to the "space" of literature and the imaginary. It therefore invites us to read the film's space not so much as a mimetic rendering of American landscape but rather as a psychic reality or, to be more precise, a staging of the subject's imaginary relation to the particular formations of the symbolic law which it finds itself confronted with – note the often dreamlike quality of the film's *mise-en-scène*. Furthermore the intertextual reference brings into play doubts and discontents arising, as in *Hamlet*, from a sense that "all is not well" in this nation state and foundation. In fact my wager is that, very much along the lines of *Hamlet*, *North by Northwest* acts out a discontent with the nation's body politic. Although at some point Thornhill pretends that the O of his trademark R.O.T. signifies "nothing" (rot!), it hints at the fact that (as in Hamlet's Denmark) something is rotten in the law of the national symbolic.<sup>2</sup> As a con-

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<sup>2</sup> See Stanley Cavell's suggestion: "Thornhill's identifying 'rot' as his trademark [. . .] irresistibly suggests to me Hamlet's sense of something rotten" (253). In his study *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity*, Eric Santner develops the interesting argument that starting in the late 19th century a "crisis of investiture" comes to articulate itself in the individual's relation to social and institutional authority. As a result of their sense that something is rotten in the law, subjects (mostly masculine as well as socially empowered) do not see themselves in a position to maintain their symbolic mandates. It is from Santner and his rereading of Walter Benjamin's text "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" that I derive the notion of symbolic rottenness. However, whereas Santner is interested in the analysis of para-

sequence, what is acted out in the film is not a paranoid fantasy of persecution or a psychotic foreclosure of the law. Although he is chased by the police because they mistake him for a murderer, Thornhill is all but a fugitive from the law. Instead the film stages a hysterical negotiation, critique or a deconstruction of the national symbolic law, its particular historio-cultural formations and interpellations. In fact, Thornhill's extensive traveling is reminiscent of a male form of hysteria, the so-called hysterical fugue. The "mad travelers" – as Ian Hacking calls them – repeatedly follow a compulsion to set out for the road and to walk for weeks on end.<sup>3</sup> Just as the feminine hysterics, the hysterical fugueurs take recourse to bodily symptoms (in their case, protracted wandering) in order to articulate their sense that something is wrong or even rotten in symbolic constructions and formations.<sup>4</sup> Thus Thornhill's excessive traveling can be seen to symptomatically act out a discontent with the national law and, at the same time, to critically point to the precarious state of the nation's foundation, notably to the fallibility, if not obscenity of the national symbolic order represented by the government agents, who do not shrink from sacrificing citizens in the name of national security.

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noid fantasy structures which are developed as a result of a vacuum in the symbolic law, I am here more interested in the hysterical negotiation and rewriting of a symbolic crisis.

<sup>3</sup> In his book *Mad Travelers*, Hacking focuses on a wandering epidemic which, towards the end of the 19th century, developed among lower and middle-class males in the area of Bordeaux. During their protracted wandering that took some of them to such faraway places as Moscow and Constantinople, mad travelers would often lose their identity papers (note Thornhill's mistaken identity). When stopped, arrested and checked by the authorities, the hysterical fugueurs could neither remember who they were nor where they came from. In a sense then, "pathological tourism" and its concomitant amnesia allowed a certain group of men (employed, emplaced) to take flight not only from boredom and their identity but also to articulate their discontent with hegemonic norms and social control. It is not to pathologize the Thornhill figure that I refer to the phenomenon of "mad traveling" but rather to highlight a similarity between the hysterical fugue and Thornhill's performance, i.e. a shared imagery and rhetoric as well as a specific relation to the symbolic and a cultural discontent which come to be performed and articulated in the excessive wandering. Historio-culturally Thornhill's traveling is also to be seen in relation to the contemporary road movies and "road novels" such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) but also Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), which clearly show that the symptom of the fugue is by no means limited to 19th century France but also forms a quintessentially American phenomenon.

<sup>4</sup> The excessive wandering of the fugueurs recalls the imagery disseminated by older medical discourses according to which feminine hysteria can be accounted for by the unhooking and the consequent wandering of the discontent uterus through the patient's body. While the feminine hysteric has to act out her displacing discontent within the parameters of her bodily confinement to the domestic space, the masculine fugueur articulates his distress by means of a bodily traversal of spacious landscapes.

Yet while articulating his discontent with the national symbolic order and its obscene underside, Thornhill is at the same time also troubled by a crisis in American masculinity. While, in the mythic fantasy of the nation, a tough autonomous masculinity helps consolidate the national foundation and is in turn sustained by this national project, masculinity in *North by Northwest* no longer stands in a transparent relation to the national foundation. In fact, Thornhill finds himself having to fight on several fronts at the same time. On the one hand, he stands in a simple opposition to both the spies and the government agents but, on the other hand, he is also involved in the more opaque antagonism between the sexes, which troubles the mutual representation of masculine subjectivity and the nation as well as the transparent relation of the simple masculine oppositions. The crisis of the masculine subject in relation to the national foundation is resiliently brought to the fore in the well-known scene in which Thornhill, exposed to utter vulnerability on an endless plain of fields without cover, is suddenly attacked by a crop-dusting plane. The completely flat landscape is reduced to an iconic simplicity and prototypical Midwestern all-Americanness which recalls *the* paradigmatic foundation myth of the American nation as well as of American masculine subjectivity, namely the westward shifting of the frontier as a result of the progressing civilization of both nature and the native population of the "Wild West." At the same time, the barrenness of the fields reminds us of a combat zone, the waste- and no-man-land of a field of conflict. The setting of this scene therefore evokes the figures of both the cowboy and the soldier. In the gesture, which Leslie Fiedler and Michael Wood have shown to be literally vital to the subject position of the American male, the soldier and the cowboy embrace the front or the frontier, respectively, to avoid the home. In American film, Wood (41-42) argues, the home functions as the site where the greatest danger lurks for the American male.

Home is what we know we ought to want but can't really take. America is not so much a home for anyone as a universal dream of home, a wish whose attraction depends upon its remaining at the level of a wish. The movies bring the boys back but stop as soon as they get them back; for home, that vaunted, all-American ideal, is a sort of death, and oblique justification for all the wandering that kept you away from it so long.

It is precisely to avoid the lethal impact of the home that the figures of the cowboy and the soldier leave the civilian community and the feminine do-

mesticity of the home and instead constitute themselves over the neat boundaries of the all-male front and frontier.<sup>5</sup>

The American myth of the masculine escape to the battlefield and the frontier appears to illustrate the thesis of the German romantic philosopher Hegel that masculinity and its activity at large stand in for “[h]uman law in its universal existence,” which, permanently threatened by domesticity and femininity, “is, moves, and maintains itself by consuming and absorbing into itself the separatism of the Penates, or the separation of independent families presided over by womankind.”<sup>6</sup> In the mythic American imagination, the figures of the cowboy and the soldier can be understood to leave home in order to preserve the community’s universal interests by repressing its “hostile principle” or “internal enemy,” namely femininity, which represents the particular and individual as it “changes by intrigue the universal end of government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family” (Hegel 288). It is in the interest of the national collective that the cowboy and the soldier leave the community and return to the wilderness or go to war, respectively. Promoting the civilisatory progress of the nation or fighting for national interests and security, they engage in activities which guarantee a homeostatic relation between masculine subjectivity and the national foundation. Yet, in so doing, the soldier and the cowboy at the same time escape the domestic source of effeminacy and particularity, which lure them away from virile independence. This is a vital move since, as site haunted by the “internal enemy,” i.e. by the antagonisms of gender trouble, the home puts a threat to the transparency of masculine subjectivity. Following Hegel, who juxtaposes the par-

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Cavell argues: “When the man [in the movies] goes home to his wife, his life is over. [. . .] In a thousand other instances the marriage must not be seen, and the walk into the sunset is into a dying star: they live happily ever after – as long as they keep walking” (1979: 49). In his classic study *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler develops a similar argument for the American novel (see in particular the chapter “The Failure of Sentiment and the Evasion of Love” [337-390.]) The idyllic site where the American male feels at home “cannot be [. . .] city or village, hearth or home; for isolation is the key, the non-presence of the customary – in the words of Henry James, ‘the absence of what he didn’t want.’ And what ‘he’ especially does not want is *women!*” Thus, Fiedler goes on to argue, “[i]n America, the earthly paradise for men only is associated, for obvious historical reasons, with the ‘West’; and it is possible to regard the classic works which we’ve been discussing, in this sense, as ‘Westerns’” (Fiedler, 355).

<sup>6</sup> Hegel, 287-88. I would like to thank Jan Freitag for his inspiring idea of relating Hegel’s passages on the necessity of war to Judith Butler’s notion of gender trouble as well as the thesis that the performance of gender difference can be understood as articulating an unresolvable antagonism.

ticularity of feminine domestic space with the necessity of war, “the absolute freedom of the ethical self from every existential form” (Hegel 289), the cowboy and the soldier replace gender antagonisms “by corporate masculine adventures, of which war is the most common and most available” (Wood 43). In other words, both the soldier and the cowboy substitute the unresolvable antagonisms of gender trouble with the homogenous male bond as well as the simple opposition of the front and the frontier, which allow a seemingly transparent self-constitution.

However, in the case of Thornhill, the impossibility of this scenario is played out. He precisely does not find himself in the position of the nostalgic cowboy hero, whose dignified and even glamorous wandering and lonely autonomy are bound up with his paradoxical compulsion to return again and again to the wilderness and hence to turn his back on the civilized community, on whose foundation and consolidation he is constantly working but which he can nevertheless have no part of. In contrast to the cowboy hero, Thornhill, the urban sophisticated figure in the gray flannel suit, is totally displaced in this vast expanse of land, which is liminally positioned between nature and culture just like the cowboy’s or the settler’s habitat. Although exposed on the plain of fields without any means of defense, Thornhill is actually involved in a masculine combat action. However, the simple opposition scenario is tainted as he is all alone without the support of an all-male group and hence completely vulnerable. Furthermore, he implicitly has to fight on two fronts at once, namely against the spies’ plane attack as well as against the clandestine plotting of the government secret agents. Even more importantly, the simple opposition is disturbed by the antagonistic war of the sexes. In a sense, Thornhill seeks – like the soldier and the cowboy – to escape from femininity and domesticity. He is not only a twice divorcé but also the son of an overpowerful mother figure – a particularly resonant filial constellation at the time since “momism,” the monstrous version of fifties domestic ideology and a contemporary refiguration of the Hegelian “internal enemy,” flood the Cold War imaginary which equates powerful mother figures with the Red Scare.<sup>7</sup> However, Roger flees from domesticity only to be

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<sup>7</sup> See Michael Rogin’s text “Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies.” In the years following World War II, the new postwar domestic ideology separates women from the workplace they entered during World War II and forces them into their new suburban homes where they are glorified and thus domesticated as dutiful wives and mothers (Rogin 241; Halberstam 587-598). As the demonic flip side of the ideology of domesticity which as a public political issue transcends the boundaries of the home, Cold War momism “uncover the buried anxieties over boundary invasion, loss of autonomy, and maternal power generated by domesticity” (Rogin 242). As a consequence, the mother turns into an “internal enemy” and,



haunted again by gender trouble. After all it is the female protagonist Eve Kendall who dispatches him to his rendez-vous with death at this dangerous site. As a "double agent" in the literal sense, that is as spy, government agent and lover, she blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, between feminine domestic space and masculine combat zone. Neither is there a distinct location of gender trouble from which Thornhill could flee in order to reinstate boundaries, nor is there a front informed by simple oppositions and male bonding in which he could find refuge. Instead, as suggested by the visual superimposition of Eve's face onto the aerial shot of the plain of fields, this seemingly empty landscape is flooded with the unresolvable antagonisms of gender trouble. As if to indicate that antagonistic relations cannot be delegated to and thus delimited to a feminine figure or a feminine location, the masculine figure Thornhill, instead of fighting an enemy in a clearly delineated opposition, is engulfed by a dangerous fatality unleashed from its "home."

The rewritten frontier scenario reveals that masculinity and the national foundation no longer stand in a stable relation of mutual transparent representation. *North by Northwest* thus stages what Harry Brod calls "the profound but repressed cultural anxiety over gender identity in the 1950s" (17f.). In so doing, the film refers to the change in historio-cultural paradigms in the postwar period which, fifty years later, allow Susan Faludi to speak of "the betrayal of modern man," namely the shift of the typical postwar workplace from production to white-collar work and alienating corporate identity as well as the fear of the decay of virility in a *cold* war without armed conflicts. And in fact, Thornhill is torn between a plethora of competing and contradictory masculinities. As a Madison Avenue advertising executive he belongs to a new professional class, i.e. the middle-class coalition of college-educated media and managerial professionals who, rather than to produce palpable material products, control representations and manipulate signs. He is thus very much part of consumerist culture in which the prevalent cultural dichotomy of masculine production and feminine con-

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very much along the lines of Hegel, Cold War films "locate the need to make boundaries to protect identity in the fear of being swallowed not so much by Communism as by the mother" (Rogin 245). In other words, "domestic ideology, far from protecting America against alien ideas, generated aliens from within its bosom" (250). Although Roger Thornhill's mother is not encoded as a Communist, femininity and domesticity do posit a problem, and thus *North by Northwest* can be seen to refer to Cold War films as well as to draw on the Hegelian pattern as an underlying blueprint. However, as I am arguing, femininity can precisely not be abjected but instead floods the supposedly all-male space in this particular film.

sumption collapses.<sup>8</sup> At once catalyst and product of consumerism, the new social group of professionals, exerting a hegemonic influence on American society and culture, is haunted by its own semiotic influence. Having to subject themselves to the very signs, words and appearances which they manipulate and commodify, this semiotic haunting of the new professionals suggests that masculinity is as much discursively and performatively produced by signs, images and appearances as femininity.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Roger Thornhill figure embodies a looked-at-ness which is not only due to the visual organization of the cinematic medium.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, to promote his aims, professional and non-professional, Roger has to be a manipulator of words and appearances as well as a product of polished performance. As substance and packaging come to be literally conflated over his body, masculinity is absorbed by consumerist culture.<sup>11</sup> Virility, in other words, is in danger of being eroded as it is “consumed” by consumerism. Feeding on an individual pursuit of materialistic happiness, consumerism blurs the boundaries between “universal” masculinity and the feminine “internal enemy.”<sup>12</sup> Though functioning as “the bedrock of the United States’s postwar domestic economy” (Cohan 54), consumerism puts into question the tough virility

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<sup>8</sup> On the cultural alignment of consumerism and femininity see Andreas Huyssen’s text “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other.”

<sup>9</sup> That masculine identity may well be an effect of performativity and masquerading practices is particularly suggested by Thornhill’s visit to one of George Kaplan’s hotel rooms. Set up by the national counterintelligence in order to endow the fictional Kaplan figure with a more or less distinct identity, Kaplan’s hotel room, in contrast to its blatant absence of a guest, openly displays a plethora of personal items and remnants (such as dandruff) which, by means of their very contingency, insist on the unique personality of Kaplan. To (en)gender identity, thus the suggestion of this scene, it seems sufficient to supplement a name with a couple of arbitrary accessories and metonymical traces. Kaplan’s room thus stores the notion becoming particularly virulent in consumerist culture, that, as much as femininity, masculine gender identity is dependent upon signs and performances. For a reading of *North by Northwest* focusing on masculinity as performance, see Steven Cohan’s extremely insightful and inspiring text “The Spy in the Gray Flannel Suit.”

<sup>10</sup> During much of the film we do nothing but observe the changing expressions of Thornhill/Grant and/or the agile movement and performance of his body in danger. Furthermore, the film harps on Grant’s star image which it sells as a product. “I know,” Thornhill/Grant says, removing his sunglasses and glancing at Kendall/Saint across the table, “I look vaguely familiar to you. [ . . . ] You feel you’ve seen me somewhere before. [ . . . ] Funny how I have that effect on people. Something about my face . . .” See also James Naremore (1988), who emphasizes, in his description of Grant’s body in performance, the spectacle of the star and his image.

<sup>11</sup> As also argued by Brod, the changes of postwar economy turn “the male body from a site of production to a site of consumption [ . . . ]” (19).

<sup>12</sup> Note 50s consumerism’s emphasis on the acquisition of home equipment and domestic appliances, e.g. TV sets, refrigerators and vacuum cleaners. Consumerist culture is effectively a domestic culture.

which the Cold War warrior, as the successor of the World War II soldier, is required to embody in order to guarantee national strength and security. In other words, the transparent relation between masculinity and the nation is jeopardized by the demands of consumerist culture. As this excess of normative interpellations shows, masculinity is marked by an overdetermination, which leaves Thornhill, despite his deft semiotic manipulations as an advertising executive, utterly powerless. Though a controller of signs, he is haunted by these masculine images to the effect that he can do nothing but act out their conflicting demands as well as the antagonistic, unresolvable postwar impasses of the social symbolic in the same way as he also performs his discontent with the symbolic law.

In the final scene, the spectacular chase over the gigantic Mount Rushmore presidential faces, all relations are (seemingly) translated into simple oppositions. Gender boundaries appear to be reinstated as Thornhill gallantly rescues Eve Kendall. A couple now, the two fight together for their survival and thus against both Vandamm and the Professor. Yet the conditions are far more complex in this overdetermined scene. On Mount Rushmore, the film arrives at the “navel” of the nation insofar as it features a site commemorating the national “fathers” and thus the nation’s origins but also insofar as this scene exposes the precariousness as well as the opaque rottenness of the nation as a symbolic construction. In fact, the symbolic national landscape – in the form of the Rushmore Memorial, *the* visual representation of the political representatives of the American law *par excellence* – reverts into a dangerous overpresence of unstructured real matter. While the visual language of *North by Northwest* revels in the display of glossy surfaces for almost its entire length, we are here presented with the rough amorphous material of the monument, overpresent and grotesquely distorted as it is seen in overproximity. The fatal precipices literally reveal the gaping abyss and void of the Real that underpins any symbolic construction. Furthermore, the real matter and abyss materialize an obscene ground or underside to the national symbolic law as the scene brings to the open the cost and consequence of the ruthless plotting of the government representatives.

In fact, the Mount Rushmore scene demonstrates that there is no longer an intact symbolic instance, no *sujet-supposé-à-savoir* which could intervene (in time) to avert moments of catastrophe and embody a sense of national coherence. While the stone monument fetishistically commemorates the former paternal metaphors, it simultaneously underlines that the national fathers are irrevocably dead. The empty position is not adequately filled by the government secret agents. Quite on the contrary, the representatives of

the national intelligence office are, just as their un-American antagonists, fallible author figures and as such the cause of fatal catastrophes as they engage in irresponsible scriptwriting. What is brought to the fore in this scene is thus a fissure in the national foundation, an obscene underside of the national symbolic order, the cause, in other words, of Thornhill's discontents and of his hysterical wandering. While it offers a compelling visualization of this crisis, the film does not, however, provide a "solution" in the form of a narrative and/or ideological closure. Instead it fills the void of this gap by the founding of a couple.

However, the protective fiction of love and romance, too, is shown to be fragile and vulnerable. The happy end depends on a phantasmatic dissolve: in a spectacular superimposition of frames (i.e. film images), the two agonized close-ups of Eve and Roger all of a sudden dissolve into their relaxed honeymoon expressions, when Roger, struggling to pull Eve up from the sheer face of a cliff onto the rock ledge and thus to save her from falling to her death, lifts her instead onto the top bunk in a Pullman carriage and addresses her as "Mrs Thornhill." This magic (re)union, however, may well be wishful thinking on the part of Roger. There is no guarantee whatsoever that the love object can in fact be rescued so that it does not fall to death as in *Vertigo* (1957), Hitchcock's preceding film.<sup>13</sup> Given this ambiguous openness, we are left with a literal cliffhanger which keeps us in suspense as to the status of Eve's survival. Although the protective fiction of love and romance eventually veils the crisis in masculinity as well as the tenuousness of the national foundation, there is a persisting sense that nothing is solved, that Roger's and Eve's odyssey will have to continue forever. Significantly the film does not end by finally offering a representation of a home. The only provisional "home" the couple may inhabit is, in Fredric Jameson's words, "as limited and as evanescent as that collapsing upper berth in the Pullman, which can always be folded away without a trace. The berth is, however, not a statement, or a symbol, or a proposition; but rather a problem" (52). According to Jameson, the "togetherness" of Thornhill and Kendall "need never be tested, since – ideal marriage – it lies beyond the closure of the film and thus beyond representation" (52). Or, put somewhat more radically, we could draw the conclusion that Roger and Eve – so as to remain a couple – mustn't ever arrive at home, that to consolidate their relation and forget the

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this dissolve has so phantasmatic a quality that Geoffrey Hartman's suggestion is completely convincing that "[t]he improbable ending is a high-angle shot that saves as it kills; yet that it saves is not for sure. The last image of Roger's and Eve's bedding down may be a fantasy flash" (16).

antagonistic gender troubles, they depend on a third term against which they can fight together, thus covering up the antagonisms of gender trouble with a simple opposition. Indeed, their train trip at the end suggests that they will have to continue their endless quest, renegotiating symbolic codes and confronting fallible fathers as well as America's inner and outer enemies, never to arrive at home but instead forced to be always on the move, to keep forever wandering.

Yet, in spite of the film's deferral of closure, all its visited places taken together produce a totality effect as they condense into a landscape panorama of essential Americanness. Concluding with the geographical trajectory with which I began, I should like to argue that although this film is very much historically embedded in postwar culture, it grounds its coherence in an organic ensemble of sites and sights, which are mythic in Roland Barthes' sense in that they are depleted of history. Although, as I have shown in my reading, the traversed landscapes are overwritten with conflicting meanings, with culturally resonant encodings as well as their ambivalent postwar resignifications, the space of *North by Northwest* is at the same time curiously empty. As Barthes' mythical signifier, it oscillates between overdetermined significations and the simplicity of blank surfaces. In spite of their rich ambivalences, the sites and places of *North by Northwest* also revert to the emptiness of mythic iconicity. It is thus the mapping of a mythic postcard landscape that eventually comes to fill the absence in this film of both narrative and ideological closure and foundation.

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