

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Escaping from mother</b>
Author(s)	David Sundelson
Source	<i>University Publishing</i>
Date	1979
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	North by northwest, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1959





After the crowded and frantically kinetic opening of *North by Northwest*, the hero's utter solitude in the silent Midwestern prairie rivets our attention. The scene is the perfect prelude to his desperate escape from a crop-dusting airplane that seems at first a part of the innocent landscape. Roger Thornhill, wearing a business suit while standing in what amounts to a desert, is an emblem of Hitchcock's frequent theme: ordinary man, stripped of his comforting milieu, is tested by the bizarre and the terrifying. In another famous episode, the hero and heroine, pursued by their enemies, make their way at great peril down the enormous stone faces of Mount Rushmore. Once again common folk are dwarfed by their setting, in this case the grand but indifferent images of the fathers of their country—a country whose spies they have unwillingly become. Earlier, studying the monument through a telescope, Thornhill imagines that Teddy Roosevelt is warning him not to proceed any further in his dangerous enterprise. *A Family Plot?*

*North by Northwest* is satisfying because so much of what is amusing is also part of a

else's taxi. If Van Dam and his creepy minions threaten Thornhill's life, the major threat to his dignity, no small matter in a film so concerned with style, comes from a surprising quarter. "That was Mother," he says with mingled awe and dislike, having made the single phone call permitted to a drunk driver. Mother is oddly prominent in the New York section of the movie.

She "sniffs my breath like a bloodhound," Thornhill complains. She also grunts sarcastically in court when his lawyer assures the judge that Thornhill is a reasonable man, refuses to believe his story of abduction and attempted murder, and, in the film's most delicately painful scene, joins everyone in a crowded elevator, including two would-be assassins, in laughing at her son. "Will you be home for dinner?" she cries, as Thornhill flees from the thugs and from her. The situation poses a question: which is to be the victorious side of Thornhill—this grotesque, infantilizing

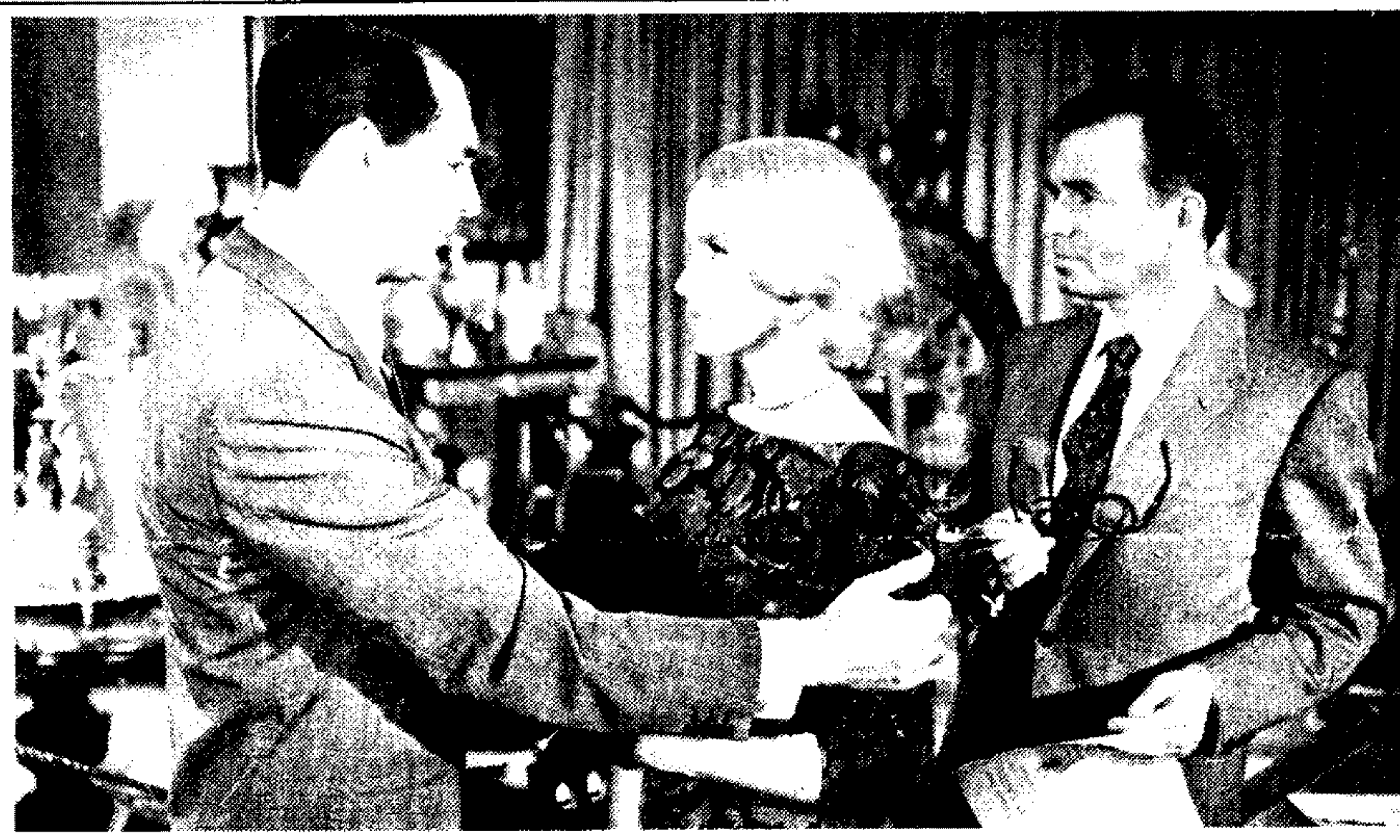
ters her as the temptress who "lures men to their doom on the Twentieth Century Limited," scarlet when she has betrayed him and seems to be Van Dam's whore, and white in her final incarnation as "Mrs. Thornhill."

A good Merlin to counter the evil Van Dam appears in the intelligence chief known only as "the Professor," actually a fairly ambiguous figure. He seems perversely manipulative and as indifferent to hero and heroine as the stone faces of Mount Rushmore. Early in the film he abandons Thornhill to his fate with scarcely a hint of regret, and later, after promising his blessing to the lovers, arranges secretly for their separation. He wants Eve to stay with Van Dam; for a time, all fathers seem to be on the same side, whatever their politics. At first Thornhill cooperates with the Professor by playing the part of his brainchild, "Kaplan," although not without grumbling.

Father's child is no better off than

Eve. Thornhill finally acts on his own; pre-tending further cooperation, he escapes from his hospital prison and goes to rescue Eve from Van Dam's mountain lair. This self-assertion brings the Professor's help at the very moment when his death and Eve's seem inevitable. The Professor is a good father after all, but only to a son manly enough to disobey him.

If *North by Northwest* celebrates Thornhill's liberation with enormous zest, it also suggests that autonomy, especially at first, can be truly frightful. Van Dam's men mistake Thornhill for "Kaplan" at the very moment he interrupts a meeting to send Mother a telegram: their error gives Thornhill a less childish identity, but the change brings immediate danger. "I don't see why you want me along," his mother tells Thornhill when he begins his adventure, but we do, when we see him quite alone, pursued by an airplane or driving at high speed after swallowing a bottle of bourbon. Images of terrifying helplessness abound, especially threats of falling. "You want me to jump off a moving plane?" Thornhill asks Mother in their final conversation, and



coherent psychological substructure. Take what is virtually the opening shot, apparently a throwaway: Hitchcock himself tries to board a bus; the door closes in his face and the bus pulls away. This small joke about city life prepares us for the famous concluding image of heroic sexual entry: as hero and heroine, the aptly named double agent Eve Kendall, prepare to make love, their train plunges into a tunnel. The movement from one image to the other defines a pattern of comic triumph as Hitchcock celebrates the power of play over danger and the fusion of acting, in the theatrical sense, with action—assertion and achievement. Witty in itself, the film is also about wit. At one point the villain, Van Dam, congratulates Thornhill for the playacting that preserves him from danger. It is Cary Grant's performance as the hero, the urbanity that is his hallmark, that becomes Hitchcock's subject.

Our first glimpse of Thornhill reveals nothing but elegance and assurance. He dictates a letter at great speed while steering his secretary through a crowd and, every New Yorker's dream, deftly steals someone

attachment or his air of adult competence and dash? No wonder Thornhill seems half-willing to take on a new identity, even one so dangerous as that of the fictive spy "George Kaplan." *North by Northwest* is the direction of more than *Rapid City*: like certain fairy tales, the entire film is a parable of growing up.

While Mother is the film's most conspicuously possessive parent, a brace of fathers also troubles the hero. As the evil father, the master spy Van Dam, James Mason oozes a perverse, weary version of Grant's urbanity. When the audience and Thornhill first see Van Dam together with Eve, she is seated with her back turned, her blond hair loose, and Van Dam's hand caressing in a slightly menacing way her bare neck and shoulders. She is Van Dam's possession, the maiden enthralled by a wicked magician. "I met Philip Van Dam at a party," she explains to Thornhill, "and saw only his charm." Having himself escaped from Mother, Thornhill must rescue her from her degrading attachment. Like a figure out of Spenser, she wears symbolic colors: black when Thornhill first encoun-

ters her, however, as we learn from the fate of Van Dam's chief lieutenant, Leonard. Van Dam calls him his "own right arm," which may be why Leonard has no last name (the housekeeper refers to him as "Mr. Leonard"). In any case, his excessive attachment to Van Dam makes him jealous of Eve and cold or overtly sadistic toward everyone else. Leonard clearly enjoys Thornhill's vulnerability, and when the hero is hanging from the mountain by one hand, slowly crushes it with his heel. Leonard manifests the ugly and dangerous impulses which could darken Thornhill's character. Thornhill limits himself to righteous indignation about the Professor's tricks, but Leonard's jealousy leads him to parricidal gestures when he shoots Van Dam with a blank cartridge and wounds him in earnest with the truth about Eve. Retribution follows swiftly: first his patron's fist and then a bullet from the Professor's sharpshooter as Van Dam, already a prisoner, watches coolly.

Such a fatal attachment is not for Thornhill: he must end his dependence on the Professor before he can be a fit husband for

this joke ceases to be funny when Van Dam announces his plan to push Eve out of his escape plane. Although planes bring only danger, in trains the hero finds safety as well as the erotic rewards of his new independence. "Beats flying, doesn't it," Thornhill tells Eve after their first long kiss on the way to Chicago.

In the brilliant finale, Eve is clinging desperately to a ledge on Mount Rushmore. Just as she slips, Thornhill's hand grabs one of hers. We see her from Thornhill's point of view: struggling, struggling, as he strains to pull her to safety. "I can't make it," she gasps. "Yes you can," he says, pulling with heroic determination, and the shot dissolves: he is pulling her up to the top bunk in a railway sleeper as they laugh together and embrace. One can fall out of the parental grasp and still survive, pulled to safety by the attractions of adult sexuality and independence. With dazzling speed, Hitchcock dramatizes our deepest fears about growing up and then shows us the pleasures of adulthood at their most glamorous.

□ by DAVID SUNDELSON.

