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9 Dec 2024

Analyzing Cary Grant's Evolution in *North by Northwest*

Cary Grant's on-screen persona is defined by a joint effort of charm, physicality, and comedic timing. In his screwball comedy work of the 1930s and 1940s, he can be seen as a quick-witted romantic lead, which often blurred the lines between masculinity and vulnerability. One example of this would be *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), where the events in this film and others in the genre find him working with playful absurdity and what I would personally call 'comedic chaos'. As we get to the 1950s, Grant's career sees a shift, as his roles lean into a different kind of tone and image; Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) serves as a culmination of Grant's evolution. In his exploration of Cary Grant in *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock, 1959), Ian Smith argues, "in the most successful, post-war years of Grant's career... the 1950s especially, his screen image operates within an apparent contradiction... The Grant persona is regarded by a series of films with great skepticism; in them we see an overt process of negotiation, a search to find a means or system whereby Grant's apparently excessive charm, grace, and beauty can be synthesized into a coherent, productive and economical system" (Smith, 31). I agree and argue that *North By Northwest* is a strong example of Grant's evolution from his screwball comedy roles that have defined his early career.

To start, let's take a brief look at Grant as an actor in the screwball comedy genre. Eleonora Chiaia and Lucrezia Bariselli, when referring to his work in the screwball genre, argue that Grant's characters reveal a deconstruction of the male image through their costumes on the screen (Chiaia & Bariselli, 51). In his early work, his physical comedy and vulnerability, an

example being his acrobatic moves, contrast with the personality crafted through his wardrobe (primarily suits). By doing this, the male image shifts, and his own persona becomes more unique. In *Bringing Up Baby*, for example, one specific scene sees Grant's character out of clothes, as they were sent to the cleaners. Immediately, we see his vulnerability through begging for his clothes back, but also through his choice of clothing instead of his normal suits. He wears a women's robe, a costuming choice that clashes against masculinity in the form of comedy; this scene also features Grant leaping in the air as he yells, "because I just went gay all of a sudden", playing his vulnerability for laughs. Grant in *North by Northwest* plays a different kind of character, playing more into his costuming as a trait. Looking at his suit throughout the film, it goes through a lot of damage, like tears and dirt marks. The irony in this is that the suit overall represents a part of his character, that of a put-together man. As he wears suits in his screwball comedies, he plays against them through his vulnerability, but in the case of physical comedy and playfulness. Here, he plays against the suit through its wear and tear and using that as its own form of degradation, using his physicality as a means for survival. This is seen through the iconic crop duster scene, as he is forced to get dirty in order to survive. This overall deconstructs the male image of being perfect or untouchable, something Grant does often, however this was a different way it was done.

Another point that shows Grant's evolution is the type of character he plays in *North by Northwest*. Ian Smith argues that *North by Northwest* makes repeated play on our knowledge that the figure on screen is not Roger Thornhill but Cary Grant, thinly disguised as that fictional character (Smith, 36). This is true; Grant's overall image as a charming actor bleeds into the character of Roger. Roger being mistaken for George Kaplan is a parallel to the audience understanding that they are watching Grant act as Roger. He has similar character traits to his

screwball roles, yet these traits are much more essential for his character's survival and he is aware of them, making it a departure from his work in those roles. Some of these similar traits are his charm and resourcefulness, as well as his quick thinking. In *North by Northwest*, these are essential to Roger's survival and overall triumph. One example would be the auction scene. This scene is painted out quite comedically, but the overall stakes are different. This highlights a departure from his former roles as here, he uses his quick wits and comedic timing to escape a tight situation, mirroring how he'd use them in his older work for less serious circumstances. I'd like to go back to the crop duster scene again; here, his quick thinking isn't seen through funny dialogue. Instead, we get more on his physicality. Looking at his screwball work, his physical comedy works through his acrobatic movements, but here, his physicality helps improve the scene in his constant running and diving to avoid the plane. In fact, this scene doesn't feature Grant speaking at all. I think this highlights a true departure from his early work, as he still carries this scene through his physical movements.

In *North by Northwest*, Cary Grant's performance offers insight of an evolution of his screen persona, showing audiences a full transition from the vulnerable, playful charm into more complex use of his traits for a higher staked purpose. The film's narrative uses Grant's image as a star to propel itself forward; his costuming, along with his physical performance, highlight his persona being used for a more demanding and serious tone. Ultimately, the film takes Grant's usual on-screen identity and amplifies it: the transition doesn't suggest abandonment of his vulnerability within the male image, rather it recontextualizes it and props it into a different direction.

Works Cited

Chiais, Eleonora, & Bariselli, Lucrezia. 'Clothing as a Vehicle of Gender Stereotypes. The Case of Cary Grant.' *ZoneModa Journal*, 2024, pp.47–58.

Smith, Ian. 'My Name's not Chaplin': *North by Northwest* and the Screen Persona of Cary Grant. *Film Studies*, 2000, pp.29-43.