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Michael R. Griffiths

Rice University, michelg@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

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Keywords

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Abstract (summary)

This essay analyzes the aesthetics of capitalist economics at the threshold of the transition from fordist to postfordist modes of production. The essay organizes this analysis around a close reading of Alfred Hitchcock's 1959 film *North by Northwest*. At stake is the relation between aesthetic productions which engage the economic base and thematize this engagement. In making this claim, the notion of capital's "axiomatic"--a concept by which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari designate the relative autonomy of the economic base--is employed to examine the way that, from as early as the 1950s, U. S. capitalism's prodigious industries of entertainment and popular culture began to change to ungrounded, flexible, representational economies. An instance of this shift is the emerging pre-eminence of advertising, which the essay finds signaled in the "value" attributed to Cary Grant's Roger O. Thornhill in the farcical spy plot. This value is referred to as "advertising agency," and signals the collapse of such discrete spheres as the economy and state, as well as of production and consumption. Because of its historical position and its content, *North by Northwest* is a remarkable text for investigating the transformation of twentieth-century economic modes to a dereferentialized form which we continue to inhabit.

Full text

During their famous series of interviews, Alfred Hitchcock describes to Francois Truffaut a telling scene from the early drafts of the script to *North by Northwest*. Hitchcock recalls that "one of the stops on the way [from New York to Rapid City] was Detroit, where they make Ford automobiles" (Truffaut 256). Becoming exuberantly concerned with the aesthetics of production, Hitchcock asks the French New Wave director:

[h]ave you ever seen an assembly line? . . . They're absolutely fantastic. Anyway, I wanted to have a long dialogue scene between Cary Grant and one of the factory workers . . . Behind them a car is being assembled piece by piece. Finally, the car they've seen being put together from a simple nut and bolt is complete, with gas and oil, and all ready to drive off the line. The two men look at it and say, "Isn't it wonderful!" Then they open the door and out drops a corpse.

(256)

Why would production be figured by a sign of death--a corpse? Before beginning to read the film closely, I want to position this scene in a series of meta-textual questions. What happens to the Fordist economy and to its correlative aesthetic productions, particularly in the U.S., once its institutions lose their grip on economic and semiotic reference--a loss of reference that has come to be associated with postmodernity? Related questions include how aesthetic expressions of capital and of capitalism transform along with this loss of reference and how such transformations bear upon the persistence of the state as an organizing political form. The emblematic U.S. aesthetic of productivity was always at least partially invested in a project of modernist formalism, even as the United States came to exceed either the aesthetic of functionalism or the correlative Fordist logic of production that undergirded it. Where "Ford" is, in some sense, an iconic sign of the American economy *per se*, what economic transformations are encoded by the representation of the death of production?

There is an old history of cinematic fetishism for productivity and the production line as images of modernity. Soviet filmmaker and theorist Lev Kuleshov uses the term "Americanist cinema" to describe his interweaving of technological fetishism and functionalist *mise-en-scène* in the 1910s and 1920s. For Kuleshov, "American shots" combine the latest montage techniques with the most technologically "modern" cinematographic content: the majesty of factories and mass transportation. Here I attempt to trace the continuance of this modernist aesthetic in the commercial cinema of the United States with an exemplum of the late 1950s output of one of Hollywood's key imports, Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock is exemplary because his oeuvre straddles and registers modernism and postmodernism, making it a useful site to examine the vicissitudes of both (Žižek 1-14). Indeed, for such significant figures as Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson, Hitchcock is not merely one filmmaker among many, but the convergence point for a certain late capitalist zeitgeist. His aesthetic formalism comments on and participates in the production of surplus value from signs themselves. Hitchcock is not only a classic filmmaker but has also become a site for testing and explicating contemporary ideas in cultural and critical theory. Here I attempt to render those ideas from contemporary cultural and critical theory consonant with the historical moment from which *North by Northwest* inscribes U. S. capitalism.

Before attempting to read Hitchcock's excised scene of a production line, it would do to position the question of the role of cultural production in the economic and political life of the Cold War Western democracies. Jameson draws out the illusions of the U.S. capitalist system nicely when he observes that

in the period some call post-Fordist, the Soviets used to joke about the miracle of their system, whose edifice seemed comparable only to those houses kept standing by the swarm of termites eating away inside them . . . some of us had the same feeling about the United States. After the disappearance (or brutal downsizing) of heavy industry, the only thing that seemed to keep it going (besides the two prodigious American industries of food and entertainment) was the stock market.

(Jameson 247)

Like Hitchcock's corpse in a production line, for Jameson, the American entertainment industry is a locus for the accrual of finance capital that conceals a decaying center not unlike a termite mound. The recent wave of economic collapses lies at the latter end of such cold war concerns, revealing the limits of what David Harvey calls flexible accumulation. These insistent collapses foreground the way neither state centralization of resources and productive means ("socialism") nor any semblance of free market circulation best describes the contemporary economic world system after the displaced centrality of Fordist production and Keynesian statism (Harvey 141-172). The recent international housing bubble has connected global financial flows to such U. S. state capitalist institutions as Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Cultural responses to this catastrophe have been many and diverse: from *Saturday Night Live* comedian Tina Fey's aesthetic assault on the Palin-McCain campaign to AMC's *Mad Men*, which, in drawing out the increasing influence of marketing on political campaigns like the infamous Kennedy-Nixon race, also evokes the political economic transformations of mass media political intervention in the twenty-first century.¹ *Mad Men*'s setting in the early 1960s is the moment whose media I want to examine here: when this edifice, as Jameson has it, is beginning to crumble.

The opening credit sequence of *Mad Men* plays like Kuleshovian Americanist cinema--where fetishism surrounding technology (shots of technologies of industry and mass production) has given way to a fetishism attached to signs themselves (an animated New York skyscraper drowning in images of 1960s ad campaigns collapses beneath the feet of a stylized silhouette of an executive; see Fig. 1 below).

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 1.

Shot from titles to *Mad Men*. A citation of Saul Bass's own titles for *North by Northwest* (see also Fig. 3 below). © AMC, 2007. Image from the author's personal collection.

To comprehend the lineage of this semiotic transformation, one must note both its base economic genealogy and its aesthetic-cinematic, superstructural one. *Mad Men*'s credits are a clear citation of Saul Bass's credit sequence for Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* with key nods also to *Vertigo* (1958). The resemblance between *Mad Men*'s animated collapsing building and the opening of Hitchcock's film (see Fig. 3 below) underscores the way both texts are deeply concerned with the role that techniques of marketing, spin-doctoring, and aestheticization of consumption have in the organization of the political life of the state. According to such Marxist economic historians as Harvey (and, in a comparable but divergent analytic register, Giovanni Arrighi), the transformation from Fordism to a post-Fordist regime of flexible accumulation is best located with the diminution of Keynesian economic policy and social welfare in the 1970s. As such, Hitchcock's film, while remaining tied to the high Fordist moment, can be read as providing a glimpse into the increased role of cultural forms of consumption in late twentieth-century economic life.

Here it is not my intention to offer an exhaustive account of Fordism and post-Fordism, but rather to work out the critique of the not-yet-post-Ford aesthetic which Hitchcock's 1959 film offers. In so doing, I suggest that the film's apparent lightness exemplifies not only the connection between a cartoonish version of Foucaultian state policing and the specter of transnational commerce; it also points to the means by which a commodity aesthetics can effectively intervene in the political economy of both the state and the global financial order. In other words, the film describes a formal cinematography inherited, in part, from Kuleshov and tailored to the pre-emergence of Harvey's "flexible accumulation." Harvey argues that the recession of Keynesian state capitalism is confronted by "the rigidities of Fordism," precipitating a shift to "flexibility with respect to labor processes, labor markets, products, and patterns of consumption" (147). He also notes "shifts on the consumption side, coupled with changes in production, information gathering, and financing" (147). I suggest that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's reading of capitalism can provide the analytic basis for identifying the apparently imperceptible cultural logics of such a shift to flexible accumulation. Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on the tension between the invisible operations of the movements of capital and their relative accessibility to the realm of culture and representation is a highly useful and underutilized theoretical resource.

Where earlier systems of value tied accumulation directly to social ideas of status, hierarchy, and class, for Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism is exceptional in that it conceals this connection. Such ideas of status, hierarchy, and class, as well as notions of cultural meaning as familial, or ethnic and religious belonging were frequently tied to the economic base of pre-capitalist societies. Deleuze and Guattari call these pre-capitalist organizational forms "code." Under capitalism, something fundamental shifts in the relation between code and economic value, as well as between representation and its reference to the economic base. As the theorists put it: "capitalism is the only social machine that is constructed on the basis of decoded flows, substituting for intrinsic codes an axiomatic of abstract quantities in the form of money" (139). For Deleuze and Guattari, the flows of capital are governed by a partially visible system of "axiomatics" which precedes the codes of social and cultural convention through which value appears. Axiomatics are the nonlinguistic means by which capital evaluates its chances for return--they are the bottom line of a cost benefit analysis. Yet capitalism cannot do without codes. The imperceptible flows of capital require a certain disingenuous quantitative easing. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, capitalism "overcodes," relying on the capacity to manipulate competing and even contradictory messages about cultural value--the traditional heteronormative nuclear family, the importance of judaeotheistic religious values in maintaining a morally upright household or nation, the status value of a new automobile, or the national pride vested in the production process that manufactures it (read: Fordism). It is in relation to such codes that advertising becomes a central tool for "overcoding." The semiotic register of capital is fully able to adapt to the ideological dimensions of any system of cultural value, and sloganeering is the means by which this can be accomplished.

In *North by Northwest*, Cary Grant's advertising agent protagonist Roger O. Thornhill finds himself in a landscape of both statist and mercenary capitalist speculation--a landscape that at once aestheticizes Fordist production and foregrounds its receding centrality. Where Deleuze and Guattari have been accused at various times--most famously by Gayatri Spivak (272-6)--of reinstalling a fetishization of capitalism through their language of desiring production and decoded flows, more recent and nuanced evaluations of their work reveal that although for the pair, "capitalism is indeed the limit of all societies," its transformation of all entities--living or not--does not touch the schizophrenic logic of those at the margins of either production or, to use Althusser's terms, the reproduction of productive relations. That is to say, capitalism relies on *codes* of social convention (family, organized religion, political nationalism, or market doctrines be they Keynesian, Friedmannian or otherwise), even as capital itself circulates through an imperceptible "axiomatic" of calculations of the flow of futures, interest rates, currency speculation, and the exportation of debt. Capital "axiomatizes with one hand what it decodes with the other" (Deleuze and Guattari 267). Capital operates in spite of sociocultural codes, even as capitalists rely upon the manipulation of these codes in order that capitalism be reproduced within and across units of social and political organization--nations, classes, territories. It is precisely at this level that one can identify capitalism's reliance on language, "the language of a banker, a general, an industrialist, a middle or high-level manager, or a government minister" (267). In this way, Deleuze and Guattari deploy a theory of the relative autonomy of capital, while retaining a means of critiquing the agency of its capitalist and even statist manipulators. Paul Patton usefully emphasizes that "the functioning of the capitalist axiomatic implies agents of decision, administration and inscription, in other words a bureaucracy and a technocracy which function as an apparatus of regulation" (98). As Deleuze and Guattari note, the function of language for capitalist social actors is to operate as "perfectly schizophrenic language[s], but that function[] only statistically within the flattening axiomatic of connections that puts [each] in the service of the capitalist order" (267). Implicit in these assertions is the notion that cultural production in mass media exploits even as it reflects this very system of overcoding.

This semiotic degree zero--the overcoded manipulation of value by marketing signs--is emphasized by the film's opening line, in which Thornhill staves off a client's criticism with the sloganizing quip: "if you believe that a high Trendex automatically determines a rise in sales . . . I, incidentally, do not." This opening is accompanied by a barrage of slogans whose acme is the reference to the jargon of marketing (sales figures correlated to the Trendex television ratings system).² The language of marketing, a superstructural device, is shown to be capable of injecting effects into the economic base, as Thornhill spins his way out of the bind in which he has apparently left his unseen client: falling sales. It is not hard to detect here the language of a "middle or high level manager," attempting desperately to manipulate and control the flows of desire and expenditure which are out of his control (Deleuze and Guattari 267). Through the film's chase, the schizophrenic language of advertising agencies brings this "middle or high level manager" to the attention of an American Cold War spy agency that would exploit and transform his expertise to intervene in the political export of commodified "secrets."

In this light, *Mad Men's* Don Draper seems like today's nostalgic rendition of a radicalized schizophrenic capitalist as he emerged from the twilight of the Fordist period: the advertising executive. Here I want to posit that *North by Northwest's* Roger O. Thornhill is the instantiation of an archetypal capitalist manipulator of codes. The film can be read as the narrative of the oedipalization of the conventions which Thornhill deploys--their taming by the state's paternal power (Bellour 77-92). That is to say, the film's narrative depiction of the co-optation of Thornhill's skills as an advertiser can be read as an allegory for the state's battle to control the increasingly fluid and mobile technologies of capitalism. In some ways, the film's narrative resolution of locating the advertising agent as an agent of the state is an imaginary answer to the kinds of exacerbated questions we see every night on CNN: why couldn't "our" politicians control the over-speculation of Wall Street? If so, what are the consequences of the advertising agent's movement towards sloganizing as a prop to flexible accumulation? Texts like *Mad Men* and *North by Northwest* at once reflect and participate in the manipulation of codes of cultural significance in pursuit of capital. Each of these texts is significant because it foregrounds an awareness of the political economic order of flexible accumulation in which it nonetheless participates.

It is ultimately agents of the state who seek--successfully or not--to appropriate capital's decoded flows through the overcoding of such agents as Draper and Thornhill. Where Patton asserts that "the state has always performed [a] regulatory role" (98) as an "apparatus of regulation," we might consider agents like Draper and Thornhill as intermediaries--subject to the state as an apparatus of capture, but unwilling to be reduced to bureaucratic functionaries. Jeffrey A. Bell is right, then, to emphasize that for Deleuze and Guattari "schizos . . . are not salable" (96). Draper spins the Nixon campaign; Thornhill reluctantly comes around to playing the spy. *North by Northwest* seems a particularly opportune *topos* for a discussion of the American context of this formalism of flexible accumulation. Truffaut canonized the film as "the picture that epitomizes the whole of [Hitchcock's] work in America" (249). Hitchcock's knowledge of Kuleshov is recorded in a number of interviews, yet the connection of Hitchcock's high period with American cinema is apparent only through the texts themselves (59). With its populism and use of Hitchcockian "pure cinema," *North by Northwest* reconfigures Kuleshovian "Americanist cinema," turning it from a modernist experiment in formalism and techno-fetishism into a pop-cultural postmodern play with the language of marketing; one that converts formal experimentation into a saleable commodity of the "prodigious" American entertainment industry.³ Even in the way it was marketed, the film was presented as a "tour" of the United States. In a promotional trailer Hitchcock stands before a map of the U.S. and announces his "coming attraction" as a commodified journey across the country.⁴ It is not my contention that *North by Northwest* reveals an already post-Fordist landscape, especially because the film precedes the transformation to post-Fordist modes of flexible accumulation as Harvey's chronology would have it. Rather, insofar as Thornhill's advertising agent draws his expertise from the Madison Avenue marketing world and employs it to intervene in a network of international spying, the film represents a commodified intervention into the iconically American process of "information gathering and financing" that is coming to outmode Fordist orthodoxy. For Hitchcock, a landscape of spin effaces and supplants that of production, like the spectacle of a crop-duster soaring across empty fields. As had also been the case in contemporary debates over the economics of industrial design, the cathected image of production is retained in the film's aestheticization of American modernity, even as the film calls into question the centrality of production. In a seeming contradiction, *North by Northwest* codes flexible accumulation by concealing it within overcoded figurations of production and functionalism. The film dramatizes the value not so much of production as of its marketable sign.

I. Of Ford and Film: America and the "Emptiness" of the MacGuffin

The seriousness of Hitchcock was guaranteed by his reception among the French auteur theorists of *Cahiers du Cinema*. Yet, ironically, because Hitchcock's films--particularly such apparently light, entertainment-driven endeavors as *North by Northwest*--appear to function as mere entertainment while being taken thoroughly seriously in academia, critics have come to position Hitchcock as the guarantor of any number of theoretical reading strategies--most conspicuously Lacan psychoanalysis in the work of Žižek and his followers.⁵ Here I want to

take seriously the Jamesonian connection between Hitchcock and late capitalism for precisely the reason of the coincidence between Hitchcock's capacity to mediate serious critical and cultural theorizations and, more importantly, because of the economic meaning of this concurrent, relatively entertainment-driven eschewal of seriousness. The underlying political stakes of Hitchcock's work have precipitated a dazzling array of interpretations because his communicative apparatus appears to predominantly emphasize style, suspense, and entertainment--"art for art's sake," as *North by Northwest's* studio MGM has it. As testing grounds, Hitchcock's films function not only to elucidate theoretical methodologies but also to precipitate assertions about the cultural embodiment of otherwise imperceptible (or, at least, murky) transformations in the logics of late capitalism. The present essay, in its reading of the film itself, treats *North by Northwest* as just such a zeitgeist text, but with a key caveat. Hitchcock's notion of the form and thematics appropriate to cinema for the late capitalist moment does not so much reflect the filmmaker's predilections (as if such intentionality could be identified), nor the centrality of the truth value of any external theoretical rubric (Lacanianism, Deconstruction, etc.) as it does the relation between capitalist production and cinematic production. The key referent here is the old question of art for art's sake, where, Hitchcock asserted, he "put first and foremost cinematic style before content" (292). As such, a reading of *North by Northwest* is burdened not only to locate the film's meaning, but its position within late capitalist aesthetics of style. The morbid lacuna of content at the center of production exemplified in the Detroit scene is doubled by the emptiness of the film's MacGuffin--a microfilm--and the meaning vested by Hitchcock in film at all, beyond its mere entertainment value. This confluence between form and content is not incidental, I argue, but points to more serious transformations in capitalist society as well as to the film-commodity's participation in them.

A number of materialist critics have attempted to unpack Hitchcock's relation to the quasi-dialectical oscillation between Fordism and post-Fordism.⁶ Richard H. Millington situates *North by Northwest's* idea of "America" at the *telos* of an individualism supposed to originate with Alexis de Tocqueville. The multiplicity of the genealogy asserted by Millington cannot be accounted for by shuttling back to Tocqueville only. Amidst this multiplicity of "imported analysts" of "American character"--Millington's term--Kuleshov is the most relevant to Hitchcock's cinematic aestheticization of "America" and its shift from Fordism to post-Fordism (135).⁷ In Kuleshov one already finds the aesthetics of Russian formalism deanchored from economic reference to the Soviet statist mode.

Kuleshov places "America" and its relation to the technicity of modernist functionalism at the heart of effective cinematic communication (Millington 135). His "Americanist cinema" is invested in a technological figuration of indexical signs of the United States consonant with--and, indeed, essential to--the formal dimensions of film. Kuleshov and his crew experimented with different kinds of *mise en scène*, concluding that such technologies as the props and sets that appear in the American studio films of the 1910s facilitate the most effective communication with audiences. Kuleshov insisted on "[c]onstructing our cinematography based on American examples . . . we noticed that the most distinct, convincing shots were those of a technological and architectural content. Railroad bridges, sky-scrapers, steamships, airplanes, automobiles, etc., by appearing, best of all created the film aesthetic of the time" (41-123, 77-78). Sounding like a list from any number of Hitchcock's production designers, but particularly Robert Boyle (who designed *North by Northwest* and *Saboteur* [1942], among others), Kuleshov installs an association between the image of America and technologies of modernity and transport within early cinematic theory. Hitchcock's style is compulsively driven toward motifs of technological transport: trains, automobiles, hulking ships--not to mention his cameos on buses and trains (for instance in *Blackmail* [1930], *To Catch a Thief* [1955], and *North by Northwest*). Such a shared compulsion toward a pre-eminently technological understanding of what it means to film "America" implicates Hitchcock's project in rethinking Kuleshov's "Americanist cinema."⁸ However, the question then becomes how the transforming contemporary economy of production and consumption reposition Americanist film aesthetics in a mid-century context at the horizon of economic applicability.

Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* foregrounds crucial connections between industrial production and the politics of the Cold War. Nonetheless, much criticism on the film has either elided this context in favor of meditation on reflexivity or treated the Cold War historical context as a pre-given ground to be reflected, as though the formal machinations of cinema were without their own ends. A brief examination of the treatment of the film's MacGuffin reveals this double bind pointedly.⁹ Hitchcock consistently introduced the MacGuffin as more a cryptic play between presence and absence than a transparent approach to film hermeneutics. He defined the term anecdotally as a device for trapping mountain lions in the Scottish highlands. Since, as he gleefully notes, there are no lions in the Scottish highlands, then "that's no MacGuffin," where "that" is any motif of apparent narrative or hermeneutic import (Truffaut 138). Yet the MacGuffin is always already functional, driving the narrative of the given film. The apparent use value of such a device, offset with the clear absence of a referent to its use, situates the MacGuffin in precisely the terrain I think is pertinent to the film's concern with the transformation of use and exchange in the mid-twentieth century American economic sphere.

The MacGuffin's effects are primarily functional--whether their use value allows them to catch nonexistent lions or to drive a film's narrative--but if there is inevitably "no MacGuffin," then the useless procedure of narrative film is automatically called into question. Employing an excessive preponderance of tactics, critics have attempted to describe, situate, and fix the paradoxical status of the Hitchcockian MacGuffin in general and of *North by Northwest's* MacGuffin in particular. For Ken Mogg, in *North by Northwest* the MacGuffin is "'government secrets', whatever they may be" (101). Yet "Hitchcock considered that this was his 'best' MacGuffin, because virtually non-existent" (Mogg 101). If Hitchcock prefers the nonexistent MacGuffin, then a related preference for uselessness refers neither solely to his attitude to narrative, nor to his sense of film's economic use value, but rather, to the interrelation of either to the political and economic context encountered through the box office. The MacGuffin's ironic deconstruction as "virtually non-existent" must not be overstated. Such overstatements foreground a reflexivity that evacuates film's relation to any cultural, political, or economic context. It is precisely the *virtuality* of this non-existence that is glossed in this reading, which consequently fails to grasp the wider dimensions of the virtual and actual (in Deleuze's terms), which are always at play in the space of the capitalist socius. George M. Wilson and Stanley Cavell have suggested that the film's MacGuffin stands for cinema itself, foregrounding hyperreal cinematic reflexivity in "a context such as *North by Northwest*, where films are the stuff reality is made of" (Wilson 181). That one can locate the film's MacGuffin in a microfilm reportedly containing "Government secrets" lends some credence to this position. However, the tiny microfilm also travels in the pre-Columbian statuette of a Tarascan Warrior, a piece of pre-colonial indigenous art. It is in this form that James Mason's Vandamm purchases the microfilm at a Chicago auction. Reading the MacGuffin as virtuality means that even where the MacGuffin refers to nothing in particular, this does not mean it refers to nothing at all. Just as the MacGuffin has a housing in the Pre-Columbian, so it already begins to code or overcode the meaning of the American political and economic scene from its inception.

The MacGuffin microfilm, then, tours through Hitchcock's own film enveloped by a strange citation of America's prehistory. To turn to the readymade aesthetics of reflexivity, then, obscures the wider chains of contextual citation surrounding *North by Northwest's* MacGuffin.

Millington and Truffaut recognize that *North by Northwest* is deeply concerned with America, but such a concern cannot be disassociated from either the politics of the American state, nor the transforming ethos of capitalism, nor can it neglect the pre-eminence of "film" (observed by Wilson and Cavell) in the political economy of mass-cultural aesthetics. It should not suffice to return to the outside of film as "production history," because this undertheorized allegorization would reinscribe a materialism blinded to the oscillation between formalism and its multiplicitous, intersecting contexts. Robert J. Corber for instance situates the film in allegorical terms, asserting that "Mount Rushmore" can be said simplistically to "translate[] into visual terms the Cold War conflict at the heart of the film" and to "stand[] for the democratic principles at stake in the recovery of the microfilm stolen by the Communist spies" (56). From its offscreen, pre-originary Detroit, the film's tour indeed careens toward the monumental faces of American political Nationalism at Mt Rushmore, but this spectacle is commodified from the moment of its suture to Cary Grant's gaze through coin operated tourist binoculars (see Fig. 2 below).

10

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 2.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. Mt Rushmore: wry Hitchcockian framing through tourist binoculars reveals Nationalist icon as commodity spectacle. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

Far from incidental, the MacGuffin's pre-Columbian shell draws Cold War political secrecy into a commodification of American history and its occulted colonial past. The reflexivity of film form, then, should be understood as a means to what Deleuze calls the actual and not an end in postmodern virtuality, as it effectively becomes in Cavell's and Wilson's respective readings. However, my turn to the content is, as should already be clear, not a turn to the materialist outside offered in allegorizations such as those of Corber or Millington.

To the degree that Hitchcock asserts his contribution to cinema style, it is by refusing what he called "content" in favor of "pure cinema," in which "I put first and foremost cinematic style before content" (Hitchcock 292). When describing this formalism in *North by Northwest*'s crop-duster sequence, Hitchcock insists that the "movement of the subject within the frame" is merely "axiomatic." He continues, "the action is self-evident. For example, as many variations as one can get of a plane attacking a man" (287). The trope of the axiomatic characterizes Hitchcock's formalism, his "style"---multiplying consumable thrills by showing action from multiple angles in order to extract cash from the box office. Hitchcock's formalism instantiates the empty aesthetics of late capitalism and develops a formula for these logics that is directly analogous to the overcoded formula that Deleuze and Guattari identify with capital. Insofar as it is a non-linguistic mechanism for the accrual of thrills, box office value, and therefore, capital, the form of film--like its action--is "axiomatic."¹¹ The precedence of "style" over "content" is not merely an index of Hitchcock's assertion of anti-intellectualism. Rather, it points to the way an axiomatic approach to film form indexes the axiomatic of capital. Like the "movement of the subject within the frame," the movement of capital flows is imperceptible. But either axiomatic can be reframed, spun, given a narrative or slogan that assures its meaning--however empty and MacGuffinesque it may be. When ideological codes such as "industry" (the production line), the fight for freedom (Corber's Cold War reading), or nationalism (the question of "America") manifest under late capitalism, they cease to possess independently determinative power; that is, they no longer refer to the critical traditions in which they are mimetically inscribed. Such codes become signs to be consumed in their own right, traces whose ultimate form and reference is to profitable spectacle. *North by Northwest* reveals the way signs can be consumed by reference to affecting codes to which they, in fact, no longer refer: production, function, America. Within the logic of these overcodings, each of these signs becomes metonymically linked. The overcoding of production, function, and America as signs refers to a web of values and valences even as, for capitalism, their primary value is turnover, which is to say, surplus value.

The Rushmore climax sees Thornhill slinging coins¹² left and right in order to clamber to the top of the villainous Vandamm's Modernist safehouse--based on Frank Lloyd Wright designs--in order to rescue Eve Kendall and to retrieve the Tarascan MacGuffin with its "Government secrets."¹³ Here conspicuous consumption and the cinematic aesthetics of "height" come into contact. There are many high shots in the film, crane tilts to high angles, and monuments of height and perspective. From the Seagram's building that opens the film to Mt. Rushmore (and the Frank Lloyd Wright house) that closes it (see Figs. 3 and 4 below), via a Mercedes Benz teetering off a cliff and a matte painting of the United Nations building (see Figs. 5 and 6 below), height of perspective pervades the film.

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 3.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. The Seagram's building reflects the New York street below and provides the backdrop to the film's titles. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 4.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. Vandamm's hideout atop Mt Rushmore, based on Frank Lloyd Wright designs. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 5.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. Sutured to Thornhill's gaze, the camera teeters off the edge of a cliff. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 6.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. An internationalist monument of height and perspective: the U. N. Headquarters, designed by a team which included Le Corbusier. © Metro-Goldwyn- Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

In the final climactic movement to a greater height (so that Thornhill will sneak into the house and observe Vandamm and Leonard from above [see Fig. 7 below]), the visual index of the high angle shot comes to trope "inflation" and "ungrounded" economics and unchecked consumption. The overcoding of a "high trendex" connects the language and expertise of the schizo-capitalist manager with the cinematography of height.¹⁴ This is nowhere more clearly emphasized than when, after rescuing Eve, Thornhill's gaze is sutured to that of the domed stately heads of Mt. Rushmore (see Fig. 8 below).

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 7.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. Interior from Vandamm's hideout atop Mt Rushmore as Thornhill observes his adversaries from above. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 8.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. Thornhill's gaze, sutured to that of the domed stately heads of Mt. Rushmore. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

Thornhill's climb to rescue Eve--with the surveilling gaze it affords him over Vandamm and Leonard--repeats shot constructions that have built up to it (see Fig. 9 below), notably at the auction scene when Thornhill, Vandamm, and Leonard gaze down on Eve (see Fig. 10 below). With this high perspective, commodification becomes a function of the male gaze (Mulvey 58-69).¹⁵

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 9.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. Crane track to a view over Thornhill, Vandamm, and Leonard visually materializes the "high trendex." © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 10.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. The three men gaze down on Eve. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

The last shot from above is that of the policeman who, on the order of the Professor, closes down the rogue spy scheme with "real bullets," as if the state order gains the strategic overview of cinematographic perspective, communicating an ideal governmental regulation of effervescent market flows. The film's America, then, is more a form of state strategy than a set of ideas. The montage of attractions that connects the citation of film-as-reality (microfilm) to the aesthetic commodification of (pre-)America opens a possible analysis of film form and its contexts that would be obscured if one were to reduce these scenes to the self-reflexivity of the medium.¹⁶ What I am suggesting is the necessity of critically addressing what "America" figures for "film" both in form and content in order to sidestep the dialectic into which the capitalist order of overcoding and axiomatics casts it. The journey of Hitchcock's decoy spy George Kaplan is supposed to have progressed via Detroit, a conspicuous metonymic notation of that great sign of Fordist assembly-line capitalism: the automobile industry. Here one can see more clearly the significance of the planned sequence with which I opened, wherein Hitchcock "wanted to have a long dialogue scene between Cary Grant and one of the factory workers . . . Behind them a car is being assembled piece by piece" and out pops a corpse (Truffaut 257).

The film limns a pre-emergent post-Fordist terrain whose character emerges from the intersection between the nature of the commodity form and the aesthetics of "film," both of which are housed in the "pre-Columbian." Since this microfilm housing secrets, hidden in a commodified pre-Columbian statuette enfolds film, political secrecy, and America, none of these terms can be privileged within such a nexus. The political economy of signification matters particularly to the diminishing Fordist economic edifice because the continuing stability of such a trepidatious "termite mound" parasitizes and overcodes the privileged sign of production. Production is now not valuable for what it produces, but for the surplus value its very sign accrues since Fordist efficiency is not only a mode of production but itself a sign to be consumed. Within this new semiotic realm, such a sign of production comes to replace its referent. What I call "advertising agency" situates *North by Northwest*'s collapse of political and economic sign-making within a cinematic motif called "America." Advertising agency names the form of American cinematic style by which the film represents the schizophrenic language of the capitalist--the language of an overcoding that retains ideology in order to manipulate the flows of capital that nonetheless escape the capitalist gaze.

Hitchcock's narrative of mistaken identity limns the transformation of advertising agent Roger O. Thornhill--expert in the packaging of commodities--into a decoy spy. This process, which he calls "a decoy *business*," entangles the postmodern logics of consumer-capital within the politics of the Cold War. The word "business" recurs many times in the film, and, as Thornhill suggests, consistently as a decoy. Here it figures the way the United States becomes not only a political space of decoy counter-spying, but also and inseparably, a landscape of speculative capital toured by an agent of semiotic capital. Before returning to the context in which Fordist production and American "industrial design" were undergoing reconfiguration when the film appeared, it is first necessary to situate the primacy of advertising agency in the film's capitalist America.

II. Advertising Agency

During a key moment in *North by Northwest*, the American spymaster known as "the Professor" defuses a question of Thornhill's as to the exact agency for which he works, noting that the CIA, FBI, and other agencies are all merely part of the same "alphabet soup." The shifting dereferential landscape that pulls capitalist sign-play into this "Alphabet soup" marks any spy agency as a mass-produced canned good. The film's advertising executive protagonist is equally drawn into the indeterminacy of the film's spy chase--an indeterminacy littered with such letters whose commodity form he possesses the finesse to market. The Professor also informs Thornhill that Vandamm is

exporting "government secrets," but, when doing so, adds a cryptic "perhaps." Neither a mimetic reference to Cold War "government secrets," nor a reflexive reference to--as Cavell put it--"the present film" (263), this indeterminate "perhaps" is more than a coy disruption of the spy genre. It signals instead a web of contextual conveyances, especially since the film for which the MacGuffin is a synecdoche has citational content, referring namely to the occulted past and fading functionalist logics of American industry. The film's title is as much a slogan as the first few lines uttered by Thornhill. A memo to Hitchcock from the studio notes that while "we are all aware that technically there is no such point on the compass, our feeling is that the amount of publicity containing this title with yourself and Cary Grant, has built up a tremendous *value* for the title" (Krohn 205). Advertising agency emerges from the film's sloganeering.

The concrete expertise of consumer-capitalist product placement that is exhibited by Thornhill defines an agency shared by spies and businessmen in the film. Their expertise, in turn, indexes the consumer economics through which the film metatextually inscribes its very own decoy business. Advertising agency foregrounds the capability of marketing expertise to uncouple economic signs from their reference to such modernist master terms as are central to the understanding of Fordism: function and production. This agency turns out to be highly lucrative for the depoliticizing aims of Cold War aesthetic politics. There are two bands of spies in the film: the Professor's American band and Vandamm's offshore transnational "exporters of Government secrets." Vandamm's spy-ring and the Professor's intelligence service vie for control over Thornhill. Each codes the interweaving of Cold War politics and American capitalism in a competition over the spectacular commodification of politics (advertising agency) that will yield returns not reducible to MacGuffin political secrets. Thornhill names the group of "importer/exporter[s]," "Vandamm and Company," figuring the spy ring as a business.

To thwart Vandamm and Company, Thornhill must use his expertise at spin-doctoring, sloganeering, and conspicuous consumption--the chameleonic expertise of an advertising agency. What Tom Cohen calls Hitchcock's "secret agency" elucidates the semiotic dimensions of such political MacGuffins as *North by Northwest's* microfilm of secrets.¹⁷ Cohen reads Hitchcock's visual ciphers and figural puns as intervening in film's cultural politics. By emphasizing the circuitous repetition of motifs at work in Hitchcock's insistent chains of self-citation, this reading strategy reveals the simultaneous containment and hyperbolic reference at work in Hitchcock's oeuvre. For Cohen, America is already a technical and aesthetic enterprise undermined by the "cinematic assault" of secret agency (*Hitchcock's Cryptonymies* 1: 193). It is a space where, "allegorizing cinema's threat to the home state . . . what had been secret agencies and saboteurs outside its borders descend into the totalizing horizon of the media-state 'America'" (193).

Citing the MacGuffin central to my discussion, Cohen insists that such technical signficatory modes as "semaphoric networks, mnemonic techniques, phonetic and graphematic figures . . . devolve at times to micrological marks, like the 'microfilm' hidden in the pre-Columbian 'figure'" (*Cryptonymies* 2: 7). As I have already suggested, this marked citation of American prehistory is not merely figural, as Cohen's inverted commas want to insist. The statuette also subtly cites the 1950s economic context where production is in the process of being supplanted by consumer-oriented markets. Cohen's intense deconstruction of the Hitchcockian citational *desoeuvrement* reveals a disfiguration of politics that operates through an assault on memory by media itself. But such political disfiguration continues to rely on the commodification of the figural cipher in question. The ciphers of secret agency, like the commodity pre-Columbian statue with its conspicuously consumptive belly full of microfilm, not only cite and disfigure political content. Beyond this, they *sell* media as an arsenal of images to be consumed. What I call "advertising agency" supplements Cohen's "secret agency" since Cohen's analytic trope risks deemphasizing the commodity status of such empty politicized ciphers. The signs that secret agency remarks and dismembers, advertising agency reconverts for consumption, rendering them tools for the reproduction of the relations of image-making within the mass-media industry. Secret agency enters *North by Northwest's* frame as an absent presence--a misrecognition like that of the spies' confusion of Thornhill for the nonexistent Kaplan. This misrecognition reprograms secret agency for the purposes of consumer landscape, where secret agents like the Professor appropriate the semiotic skill of advertising agents like Thornhill. Confusing Thornhill for the invisible (but nonetheless effective) decoy spy Kaplan can be read as referring to the confusion of codes for overcoding, slogans for reality, and the appearance of prosperity for its some more substantive prosperity.

In *North by Northwest*, modern modes of transport convey the wily spin-doctoring ad agent across America. The efficacy of the agency wielded by advertising--sloganeering, for instance--is co-opted throughout the film by the "Professor." The United States is revealed to be guarded as much by advertising agents and spin doctors as by political spies. Neither Vandamm's spy ring nor the Professor's agents can simplistically be located on either side of a cold war binary. In order to achieve his end of continued surveillance and monitoring of the "importer/exporter" spy, the Professor solicits and manipulates Thornhill's smooth façade of slick performance, as he "overplay[s] his various roles" in order to stage the death of his decoy alter-ego "George Kaplan." Decoy spying is converted into what the film calls "decoy business." This commodification of death again sells the false production of identity for political ends. In the Mt. Rushmore café, under the lofty gaze of an American Presidential monument--itself a tourist commodity--political agency operates only as the empty content of a shell that relies on the spectacular performance better formulated by Thornhill, with the sloganeering sleight of his advertising agency.

Thornhill's role in the spying and counter-spying of the film is controlled and manipulated by the surveillance of the Professor's own agency (in both senses), which further implicates the application of marketing expertise in governmental tactics. In the establishing shot of the ring's first scene, the tight framing excises the letters I-N-T from the government agency's brass placard, rendering the word "intelligence" as merely "elligence" or, perhaps, "elegance" (see Fig. 11 below). In this way, the guardians of the state are marked *as a business* by the citation of the consumerist sign *elegance*--intelligence agency reconstituted as an international boutique.

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 11.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. Sign outside the Professor's elegant spying agency. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

In Lehmann's shooting script, the names of the (int)elegance agency's cadre of operatives smack of consumption (one is named "housewife"), finance capital (another bears the epithet "stock broker"), and spectacle *per se* (59-62). Similarly, *North by Northwest's* importer/exporter spies do not appear to be allied to any state; rather, they seem to work for the highest bidder. The *elegance agents* work for the United States but insist on "only interfering with the police when absolutely necessary." The Professor and his agents, while primarily responsible to the "United States," cannot be said to simplistically align with the order of internal state surveillance. In fact, the cold war agencies operate like a transnational business, even allowing Kendall--agent "Number 1"--to be exported along with Vandamm

and the pre-Columbian statuette with its consumptive "belly full of microfilm." In this way, "elegance" obscures the "I-N-T" of international. The Professor's elegance agency pitches a strategy like a talent agent attempting to option a film whose formal mode straddles secret agency and advertising agency. The intelligence agency *qua* elegance agency reveals the transforming postmodern logic of political surveillance, with its remediation of the practices of the private sector's "decoy business."

Cold war state binaries cannot be decoupled from the financial overcoding that circulates through the cold war thriller as a plethora of techniques, slogans, and the high shot itself--a form of spin doctoring evinced in the visual pun of a spinning wheel in the foreground of a vertiginous shot from atop a cliff (see Fig. 5 above). "War is hell," Thornhill is told by the Professor, who has never "pitched" his name--another pun on marketing terminology. As business practice is implicitly politicized, the stakes of the conflict come to rest on the capacity of each group of spies to better utilize the signs of the political for monetary advantage (in the case of "Vandamm and Company"), or tighter state security (in the case of the "elegance agency").

As such, advertising agency threatens to destabilize the conflict, while offering mechanisms for governmental control. One might also consider Roger Thornhill's self-marketed performance, "overplaying his various roles" in order to disrupt an art auction, which then leads him to enter the clutches of the state's policing function. As he is captured by the bumbling Chicago police, the advertising agent remains ever a spin doctor, insisting to his captors: "I'm valuable *property*! Imagine the headlines, 'Chicago Police Capture United Nations Killer'" (emphasis added). The auction scene underscores Thornhill's capacity to subvert the standards of value so as to further inflate and untether their already floating value.

In response to Thornhill's inflationary interventions, the auctioneer anxiously requests that "the gentleman" tacitly accept the rules of the auction's polite bourgeois convention and "get into the *spirit* of things," as if such conventions were already spectral, haunting an economic order with values it cannot control and prices it can no longer fix. The auctioneer's pleas for the "spirit" of convention are to no avail. Thornhill's spin doctoring undercuts the auction's standards of value, misrecognizing prices, as he cries out that "twelve dollars" is "more than it's worth," and excessively inflates the price of an item to "three thousand" (when the bid is only twelve hundred). There is, at this point, no longer a fixed gold standard to curb the inflationary subversions of such interventions.¹⁸ The auction scene foregrounds the floating instability of value and reference that accompanies Fordism's recession--allegorized by the cinematography of height.

The battle over the political economy of representation in the film also enlists and reorients gendered subject positions. The intervention of advertising agency offers a further clue to the pre-Columbian commodity sign. The auction scene connects the commodified exchangeability of woman (Eve Kendall) to the prehistory of Americanism marked in the Pre-Columbian statuette. In a montage of attractions, Kendall is identified as a "little piece of sculpture," just as the sale of the statuette is announced. Through this fleeting montage association between gender identity and the specter of America's imperial prehistory, the scene exhibits advertising agency's capacity to trivialize identity (gendered or otherwise) and history (American or otherwise), rendering it as one or other specter left over from the war machine of overcoded commodification. Only specters of value, history, and identity remain in this landscape of spin-doctoring. Thornhill's apparently genuine desire for Eve juts up against the play of convention and subterfuge that can merely insist on "the spirit of things." The question becomes: what does the *spirit* of commodity exchange *do* to the semblances of identity and history that it leaves as *memento mori* in its wake. Further, the logic of height and inflation is implicated in the metaphorization of woman as pre-Columbian commodity and, therefore, film itself. As I have already argued, a key high-angle shot in the series that spans the film takes place at the auction, notably at the moment of the audiovisual montage of attractions: Eve and the statuette (see Fig. 10 above and Fig. 12 below). How then does post-Fordist capitalism make specters of the fragile histories that it commodifies like the spectral reference to Detroit that survived the excised scene of a body in the production line?

Illustration

CAPTION: Fig. 12.

Shot from *North by Northwest*. The Pre-Columbian statuette which holds the MacGuffin microfilm. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. Image from the author's personal collection.

As in the auction scene, the hierarchy of production over consumption is inverted in the Fordist corpse sequence, positioning death and its iterable spectrality within an assembly-line. The production line is a consumer spectacle that allows the motion picture director the opportunity to gleefully imagine an overcoded, "absolutely fantastic" sequence fit for commodified film entertainment, one capable of accruing (box-office) capital through reference to (but not to be grounded in) the idea of "American" Fordist industry. Where Americanist cinema had, for Kuleshov, purveyed propaganda by displaying high technology, for Hitchcock, the display of technological production aligns itself with consumer entertainment. The production line replaces the Fordist process of insistent reproduction by inserting a death whose principal goal is its consumption as "absolutely fantastic" spectacle. In this political-economic context, such mass media expertise as advertising agency becomes essential to capitalism.

Thornhill's spin on the auction's conventions, and his refusal to "get into the *spirit*" of the bourgeois ritual, together threaten to collapse what we might call, following Jacques Derrida, the specters of value. These specters, while once essential to production, come to be rendered as conventions that merely maintain the economic termite mound of the U.S. economic system. For Derrida, capitalism's spectrality emphasizes its plural forms, which insist on commingling within the political sphere. As Derrida puts it, "[T]here was never just capital, nor capitalism in the singular, but capitalisms plural--whether state or private, real or symbolic, always linked to spectral forces--or rather *capitalizations* whose antagonisms are irreducible" (59). If, as I have already suggested, Hitchcock's Americanist cinema is a commodified representation of such a "spectral force," then it should come as no surprise that *North by Northwest* commodifies murder and inserts it into the heart of the Fordist production line. Augmenting the Derridean point with the Deleuzian-Guattarian analytic, it is possible to observe that it is precisely the overcoding of such a plurality of capitalisms that allows the axiomatics of capital to adapt and subsist. In a sense, capitalism's spectrality is the result of its decreased reliance on fixed reference as its precipitant baseline value.

Where the plural capitalisms of advertising agency are in effect, production's death renders it a spectral force, oscillating undecidably between the state and the private sphere. The emphasis, in capitalist society, on the simplicity of production principles, their effective division of labor and their connection with rapid turn-over neither dies nor disappears. Such Fordist principles turn into post-Fordist specters as their capacity to reap surplus value diminishes in favor of the more flexible advertising principles which nonetheless describe

and exalt production's specter. Capitalism is spectral because it lives on in a form that is no longer consonant with the productive ground through which it continues to represent itself--the sign of production outlives its centrality to the economic system. Similarly, film form is, in Hitchcock's words, axiomatic--capable of drawing in any and every spectral code and referent via marketable generic conventions. As such, the film's various high perspectives cross multiple spheres of social, political and economic life: from that of the production and management of big business, to the state and international juridical orders--the Seagram building, Mount Rushmore, the United Nation's plaza.

The Ford assembly line and the pre-Columbian statue are commodity synecdoches of "America" as a space of production. Bodies populate the assembly line, and there "ain't no crops" in the murder scene corn field surveyed from on high by the cropduster. Reeling from such loss of reference between the actual and the internal logics of capitalism, Thornhill returns to Chicago to find the pre-Columbian statuette sold to the collector Vandamm, where Thornhill "thought [he] only collected bodies." Here, the deathly order of the corpse--"bodies"--simultaneously codes the corpses at the heart of the production line, the murders instigated in the barren fields of corn, and the commodity accumulation registered in the villain's penchant for "collect[ing]" dead things.¹⁹ Rendered as a commodified art object, the statuette--MacGuffin of the pre-industrial past--rematerializes the spectrality that haunts the American production-line. Pre-Columbian art is alchemized as an exchangeable, non-referential commodity fetish.²⁰ The technologies of Kuleshov's ideal American *mise en scène* are everywhere shadowed by tropes of death in Hitchcock, signaling both the decay of production, and the consumability of its absence.²¹

For Americanist cinema, consumption supplants the *memento mori* of production. Technology and transport are similarly implicated. In a decoy game of spin and banter aboard the Twentieth Century Limited, Thornhill flashes Kendall his business card bearing what he calls his "trademark," ROT. Where the "O" signifies "nothing," as Thornhill says, advertising agency insists on the commodity form of its own decaying, or *rot*-ting, identity. Identity signifies "nothing." Yet this rotting nothingness can, with sound and fury, continue to be trademarked and sold. If Thornhill's advertising agency signature marks the decay of production, then what is the decoy business of such related motifs as those deployed by Eve? Kendall's own signature marks the aesthetics of American industry, "industrial design" and the Twentieth Century *Limited*, is marked in advance as a brand name. In the next section, I consider the kinds of contextual aestheticization that the film draws in, in order to mark and underscore its place in the history of decline, death, and spectrality that defines its vision of American Industry. Americanist cinema becomes this decline's exultant eulogy.

III. Twentieth Century Ltd.

In flight from the clutches of the police, as well as importer/exporter spies, Thornhill races through Grand Central Station, stopping at a ticket booth to purchase "a bedroom on the Twentieth Century."²² This trademark American train is the setting for Thornhill's first encounter with the decoy number one spy who is strung between the (int)elegance agency and the foreign agents of secret export. She introduces herself as "Eve Kendall, twenty six years old and unmarried [and] . . . *an industrial designer*" [emphasis added]. The viewer eventually learns that this role is a front for Kendall's position as the "number one" spy in the Professor's investigation of Vandamm's importer/exporter spies. Positioned as a front in the film, industrial design becomes, like the femme fatale spy, a marketing façade.

Kendall sends Thornhill on his fool's errand to the cornfield; she spins death which metaphorizes the uncoupling of value from reference. Eve's pretense is like her own form of advertising agency. Insofar as American industrial design is inculcated in the Fordist ideal of the "American assembly line," Eve's advertising agency configures the commodification of femininity as a tool of use to America in the Cold War. Eve is the inverse of Thornhill's advertising agent in the same way that the elegance agency forms a mirror image to the importer/exporter spies. Where the elegance agency codes the use of transnational capitalist technique by the agents of state surveillance, Vandamm's importer/exporter spies instantiate a business that exchanges secrets for monetary advantage. On the one hand we find the techniques of advertising agency employed for the purpose of cold war spying, and on the other, spying as a means to accrue capital. Similarly, where Thornhill stands for the advertising agency necessary for the capture of Vandamm, Eve Kendall's "front" as industrial designer foregrounds her performance of such signs (here, "profession") as a means to carry on her spying.

The "decoy business" that surrounds this citation of "industrial design" foregrounds the primacy of consumption. The scene takes place in a dining car--site of consumption. Here both characters employ the witty repartee of advertising agency that sold the film's mass consumer appeal (after the dismal box office failure of *Vertigo*). Here consumption and heteronormative desire blend together, trivializing femininity as a commodity. Sounding almost like a slogan, Eve's line "I never discuss love on an empty stomach," was a dubbed replacement for Lehman's more explicit, "I never make love on an empty stomach" (Lehmann 72). This ciphering of the consumption of food as economic expenditure is there from the film's opening. In another instance of advertising agency's sloganeering, Thornhill devises a promotional flirtation, suggesting that his secretary send chocolates wrapped in gold paper to a lover: "she'll think she's eating money!"

On the discovery of Eve's marketed pretext, Vandamm notes that the "neatness" of "business" requires the "disposal," of Eve, "from a great height, over water." Disposal, here, marks not only murder, but also expenditure--an antiquated connotation of the word--one that will covertly cite capitalist patriarchy's subjection of femininity to the exchange economy.²³ Height of perspective here becomes the means for this murderous expenditure, as though femininity itself has been transformed into an overcoded indice of value. The importer/exporter spies, like the Professor, deal in the commodifiable charms of woman for political advantage. *North by Northwest* converts what Gayle Rubin called "the traffic in women" from its premodern sense--exuberant expenditure, or "potlatch," of actual women--to a postmodern commodification and sale of the very sign value of woman (27-62). Eva Marie Saint's real life persona already "sells" this role, so to speak; on television, she had played a "party girl," declaring, "I go out with men--for money."²⁴

The dereferential economy I have been describing is not only symbolic, but can--indeed must--be historicized by recourse to the signs of industrial capitalism that it cites and positions in frame. One such citation, the Twentieth Century Limited, was an icon of post-depression modernist American industrial design. The film's citation of mass transit as commercialized enterprise disfigures of the place of "industrial design" in the mid-century industrial context. As Jeffrey L. Meikle points out, the train signaled the increasing purchase of the consumer economy, selling the ideal of production instantiated in the apparent functionalism of its locomotive. The vicissitudes of this icon allow the film to cite a functionalist aesthetic that further complicates the film's shadow play with economics. J. George Frederick, the editor of "The Philosophy of Production: A Symposium," companion piece to a 1930 conference of concerned businessmen argued that any criticism of

production's place as the principle underlying American industry would be as effective as, "a child playing on the track of the Twentieth Century Limited" (qtd. in Meikle 70).

However, as Meikle has argued, the purportedly functionalist design principle of "streamlining," used on transportation devices such as the Twentieth Century, were gradually adapted to the consumer economy of the nineteen-fifties (1949-1957). The exteriorizing designs of such vehicles as the *Twentieth Century Ltd.* would eventually reproduce themselves in household consumer items like alarm clocks, fridges, and ovens, particularly after the functional value of streamlining came under question (181). Such a streamlined consumer item--a refrigerator--appears on the back of the truck that Thornhill steals in order to drive back to Chicago following the crop-duster attack. Here the film cites the consumerization of "industrial design" quite directly. The advertising executive flees the scene of interrupted industry and barren crops to return to the big city in a stolen automobile bearing consumer goods. This tiny occluded journey is almost a synecdoche for the film's total disruption of 1950s Fordist optimism.

Eve's manipulation of the front of "industrial designer" highlights the importance of the train's relation to American industry. At the same time, it subtly implies the empty commodity form of "industrial design" with its functionalist pretext; the dining car scene deploys food and sex, as the thinly veiled undercurrents of this pretext. The train seen in the film was refurbished in 1938 with a Henry Dreyfus-designed grey steel streamliner casing housing a steam locomotive. It is as if its exterior shell was to be consumed - like its domestic commercial progeny--primarily as style, with little grounding in referential functionality. Meikle notes that

the leading industrial designers contemplated using streamlining as an organizational concept...one critic even identified streamlining as the new national style. [He] observed, 'that numerous curved forms are taking their place in the commercial designs of utilitarian products.'

(181)

The "new national style" increasingly became merely a consumable sign, not unlike other national signs, or the designer persona that the spy Eve adopts to ensnare Thornhill. Consumer engineer Egmont Arens argued for the use of streamlining as a "slogan." Arens spun the idea that domestic consumer goods--like the fridge on Thornhill's stolen truck--"should be 'Streamlined for Selling'-eye resistance eliminated . . . making it always easy for folks to sign the order pad" (qtd. in Meikle 165).

In 1958's *Vertigo*, the film immediately preceding *North by Northwest*, Barbara Bel Geddes--daughter of leading designer Norman--delivers a wry joke about the commodification of the design industry. Norman Bel Geddes was criticized in 1934 for betraying his functionalism to "a blind concern for fashion."²⁵ *Vertigo* develops the virtual critique of this association. Barbara Bel Geddes's Midge Wood keeps a brassiere in her studio, designed "on the principle of the cantilever bridge." Like the transport technologies of American industry, the feminine form is metatextually recommodified in Americanist cinema under the sign of productive innovation.²⁶

If Eve's performance of the value of industrial design has, in a sense, "improperly inflated" the value of this sign, then perhaps her being "dropped from a great height over water," is supposed to facilitate the "neatness" of not only the importer/exporter spy's "business," as he puts it, but also the dangerously untethered values of American industry *per se*. Such a figural stock-market crash in the symbolic exchange of woman parallels the collapse of the purchase of the American design industry at which she masquerades. Each of the pre-modern logics spectrally deployed by the film is brought into montage association at the auction and reveals the commodification proper to Americanist cinema: both the literal pre-Columbian statue and its correlate in the quasi-primitive circulation of Eve, who sells herself for the purposes of state secrecy as sex object and ostensible "industrial designer."

IV. Commodifying Americanist Cinema

Like the Twentieth Century Limited, *North by Northwest* Americanist cinema no longer refers to the modernist aesthetic of functionalism favored by Kuleshov--"simplicity in line" designed to facilitate communication with an audience. For Kuleshov, working in the Russia of the teens and twenties, the aim of this aesthetics was inevitably political and propagandist. While "audience response" was central from the beginning, in Hitchcock's film it forms a privileged relation with commodification. Hitchcock always referred to filmgoers in these agglomerated terms: "the public"--a passive, desiring, but nonetheless inert mass to be manipulated by cinematic shock tactics of formalism. As I have emphasized, there is a formal confluence asserted in the film between kinds of height and inflation, from the film's opening remark on high trendexes--a thoroughly overcoding marketing phrase--to their visualization as so many high perspectives, the Seagram's credit sequence to the Rushmore climax. In this light, the animated collapsing fall of advertising agency imagined in *Mad Men*'s opening appears an increasingly wry citation of the consequence of the normativization of axiomatic dereferentialization. *North by Northwest*'s intervention reveals the late capitalist intersection of commodification and Cold War politics even as the film itself is simultaneously depoliticized and recommodified: "streamlined for selling" in the popcorn marketplace.

Advertising agency's dereferential transformation of America in *North by Northwest* correlates perfectly to the axiomatics of Hitchcock's "pure cinema," rendering it a more effective weapon in the arsenal of late capitalism. The film installs the figure of "pure cinema" in the belly of the pre-Columbian. As such, for Hitchcock's film, "America" becomes an overcoded idea, a brand to be capitalized upon, from the film's trailer to the first appearance of Mt. Rushmore seen by Thornhill from the gift shop through coin-op tour binoculars. *North by Northwest* converts Americanist cinema to "pure cinema," and political content to overcoded exchangeable signs. The film also participates metatextually in this process, converting its formal elements into a set of signs streamlined for "selling" its spectacle, just as the Twentieth Century Limited converted its form--whose function was wind resistance--into a consumable aesthetic principle. As Grant boards the train, he witnesses the feet of his pursuant policeman treading across its red carpet, foregrounding the spectacular setting of this industrial design icon, while recommodifying the sign for Hitch's viewing public. In this way, for the Hitchcockian cinematic project, the political codes (communist/capitalist, America/foreign, politics/economics) informing the desires of the viewing "public" are emptied out formally.

The visual tour of *North by Northwest* recrafts territory and reorients reference to the ends of its consumerist project, even as it eviscerates the discrete division of the economic and the political. The reinscription of American political economic greatness usurps the place of an imaginary community called "America." This space's effigy is no longer the Pre-Columbian Gods but Fordist industry, the "fantasy" of the production line and--metatextually--cinematic entertainment *per se*. So the small black statuette shatters and yields

profits, revealing not so much the reflexivity of medium that some critics saw in the microfilm, but rather the lucrative commodity potential of such reflexivity. This MGM film is converted into another commodity in the M-C-M' chain of Americanist cinematic circulation. Simultaneously, it fulfills Hitchcock's "axiomatic" commitment to "pure cinema"--a reflexive circuit that brands the opening appearance of the studio's logo, with its motto, *ars gratia artis*.²⁷ In these hands, "Americanist" cinema deploys formalism not only to depoliticize the image, but also to sloganize all reference: to the pre-Columbian past, now commodified; to the production line, at turns dead and streamlined for consumption; to political spying, always already "elegant"; or to femininity that is produced by commodity fetishism. Hitchcock's late-capitalist commodification converts Americanist cinema from a high modern exercise in functionalism and simplicity to a hyperreferential consumer form.

Michael R Griffiths

Michael R. Griffiths is a Ph.D. Candidate in the English Department at Rice University and Lodieska Stockbridge Vaughn Fellow in the Humanities for 2011-12. His research explores biopolitics, particularly in Australian settler colonies. He has published essays or has essays forthcoming in *Australian Literary Studies*, *Antipodes*, *Humanimalia*, and in edited collections. He also maintains the politics and culture blog *Apparatus* at <<http://mrgculture.wordpress.com/>>.

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Footnotes

1. See for instance: "Top T. V. Series of the Decade."

2. There are also a whole slew of such slogans preceding this moment and these exploit the commodification of signs such as femininity ("here's some for your sweet tooth, and all your other sweet parts") and colonialism ("let's colonize 'The Colony' next week for lunch"), all to identify defined mechanisms for identifying the axiomatic of profit margin.

3. On Hitchcock's notion of "pure cinema," see "On Style: An interview with Cinema," in Hitchcock 285-302.

4. As Steven Jacobs has recently remarked, "by the late 1950s, clearly, tourism has become a Hitchcock trademark" (50).

5. Cohen foregrounds the significance of Hitchcock's lightness in his essay "Hitchcock's Light Touch," in Hitchcock's *Cryptonymies* 2: 197-256.

6. While Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have been the most influential discussants of Hitchcock's relation to, amidst else, capitalism and its postmodern form, I have in mind more recent criticism. Many critics have more pointedly focused on the historically delineate relation between Hitchcock's understanding of America and its relation to politics and economics. See Millington 135-154; Corber; and Cohen, "Extraterritoriality: An In-House Affair at the Embassy of Ao--" in Hitchcock's *Cryptonymies*: Volume 1 (193-238).

7. One could also cite, for instance, Franz Kafka's *Amerika* and Bertolt Brecht's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. At this moment in the oeuvre, Hitchcock's films frequently and subtly thematize the tension between the meaning of "America" and its meaning according to its commentators. Neither Hitchcock nor the film's star Cary Grant is American--the latter, as *To Catch A Thief's* Francy (Grace Kelly) notes, is "unconvincing . . . like an American character in an English movie."

8. To my knowledge, there is no recorded instance of Hitchcock mentioning "Americanist cinema." However, I am not making the case for a causal connection. To identify Hitchcockian "Americanist cinema," one would have to unpack a figural concern with the technology of modernity and its place in the political geography of late nineteen-fifties America.

9. One recent reconsideration of the MacGuffin that leans toward the idea of reflexivity that I critique here is in Walker 296-306.

10. Rushmore conceals its own contextual history of consumer spectacle. When the film was made, the 1920s monument was already home to a whole network of consumerist fund generators for the Park's commission: "an antebellum mansion, waterslide, thirty-six holes of golf, sundry museums, and a surfeit of gift shops" (Taliaferro 159). Thornhill's assassination of his alter ego Kaplan takes place in the consumer space of the monument's canteen. The Hitchcock trope of consumer tourism--at least within the figural space of "America"--is tied into the commercial dimensions of the American geopolitical space. Hitchcock and his family on his first tour of America--in 1937, as part of a promotional tour for *Sabotage* (1936)--took in many of the sights of Washington, D.C., touring the capitol and other government buildings. On the Hitchcock family's Washington tour, see McGilligan 12.

11. For a full account of their concept of the axiomatics of capital, see Deleuze and Guattari (222-261). I am not suggesting a knowing connection between Hitchcock's use of the word "axiomatic" and Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term in their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project. Rather, *North by Northwest* taps into and exploits precisely the entertainment formalism that Deleuze and Guattari so acutely diagnosed in late capitalist functioning. Overcoding uses its referent to accrue capital; when a formula of overcoding functions, it becomes fixed as an axiom.

12. The objects Thornhill throws at the window to attract Eve's attention were designated as coins from Lehmann's shooting script onwards (153).

13. Jacobs provides full details of the design of the Wright-inspired set (297-313).

14. Metatextually, commodity spin continues here. Cary Grant's former acrobat star persona comes into play. As in *To Catch a Thief* (1955), it is Grant's performance of his own persona that effects this rescue. What is on display and for sale here is the personal history of Archibald Leach, the acrobat turned movie star. Postmodern Americanist cinema reinvents the sacrificial expenditure of woman in the Hitchcock heroine and her cinematic commodification.

15. See also Manlove's recent reconsideration of Mulvey's account.

16. My use of the term "montage of attractions" refers to Sergei Eisenstein's foundational film theoretical concept. Eisenstein's montage theory asserts that juxtapositions produce a conflictual dialectic that both collapses together as a synthetic totality and cites a chain of associated connections (35-52). As Eisenstein puts it, "the cinema is made up of juxtaposition and accumulation . . . of associations . . . associations that produce, albeit tangentially, a similar (and often stronger) effect only when taken as a whole" (36).

17. Cohen, *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies*, 1: xi. For a useful summary of de Man's idea of the "material event," see Warminski. For a useful application of de Man's notion of materiality to cinema and to Hitchcock, see Cohen, in *Material Events* 114-152.

18. Arrighi gives a useful account of the various abandonments and reinstallations of the gold standard after 1929 (269-300).

19. Pre-Columbian art consistently signifies not only commodity circulation but simulacral form. The authenticity of pre-Columbian works from the nineteen-fifties to the present has been called into question many times. See McGill, "Pre-Columbian Works Could Be Fakes."

20. Gerald Vizenor underscores the way indigenous identity has become a commodified simulation in late-capitalist American society. He reads signifiers of "Indian-ness" as markers of "manifest manners," pretended and performed inventions of a Western image of the American native that cannot be reappropriated but only unsettled through insisting on the unstable trickery they inevitably unleash. Such figures as the pre-Columbian statue in *North by Northwest* can be read as such commodified forms of manifest mannerism. See *Manifest Manners*; and "Aesthetics of Survivance," in *Survivance* 1-24.

21. Like the body in the assembly line, the cars that Norman Bates feeds to the swamp behind the modernist drab of the Bates motel are, as Leland Poague has noted, associated with Fordism. The license plate of Marion Crane's car, which reads NFB, can be read as "Norman Ford Bates," because the company's logo is present "in nearly every frame wherein the license plate is readable . . . metaphorically shoving the car's FORD logo in our faces," and implying "the familial relation of crazy Norman and the father of American assembly line capitalism" (Poague 344).

22. Jameson has limned the "geopolitical aesthetic" of the film's Cold War moment, arguing that the transformation of private spaces like bedrooms and restrooms into spaces of public intercourse worries the political unconscious of the film's understanding of the private/public distinction. As I argue here, and as Jameson recognizes, where the film displays awareness of its Cold War context it does not refer only to its politics but to the interweaving of politics and economics. See Jameson, 47-72.

23. "[G]et rid of by throwing away or giving or selling to someone else." *Dispose*, v. Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2d.

24. File-footage of Saint's appearance is included in a documentary produced for the DVD edition of *North by Northwest* (1959; 2004).

25. Geddes had been criticized in 1934 by the director of the Museum of Modern Art for pandering to consumer demand. MoMA's director leveled the accusation of a "blind concern with fashion," calling Geddes's designs a "streamline pencil sharpener by one of the highest paid industrial designers" (Meikle 179-187). The director's criticism is symptomatic of a wider concern amongst functionalist designers at the Museum that commercial industrial design meant to "stimulate sales" as Meikle puts it, by rendering serviceable goods "'obsolete' in appearance" (180).

26. In both *Vertigo* and *North by Northwest*, female characters at turns apply their talents to industrial design (Midge Wood) and perform them as fronts for other intentions, commodifications, and desires (this is true of both Kendall and Wood insofar as she is played by Bel Geddes). In either case, this performance underscores the celebrity status of those designers whose work is featured in the film, for instance Bel Geddes, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; the film's initial audience could well have been aware of this celebrity.

27. Marx, "The General Form of Value," *Capital* 1:157-162.

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