

Lessons from Hitchcock: 1

The most important boundary in human life is that between life and death; this is not a single but a double line (explanation below, eventually). What — and why — does Hitchcock’s film *North by Northwest* teach us about this resulting “imaginary space” between life and death?

I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk
from a handsaw.

—Hamlet, in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, scene 2, act 2

If one wants metaphors, it would be better to say that the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 138.

Hysteria

What better way to approach the classical philosophical problem of the relation of mind and body than through the notion of hysteria, where popular culture and medical practice intersect with the utmost precision.

The clinical definition of “conversion disorder” — clinicians have generally avoided the term “hysteria” — focuses on two primary characteristics.¹ First, the hysterical symptom (loss of eyesight, hearing, motility, etc.) is an “expression of an underlying psychological conflict or need”; second, the sign is *involuntary*, not as a conscious “call for help” of a patient who seeks to draw attention to some social or mental condition. Despite this, the patient often seems to “enjoy the symptoms.” Pleasure in the a-symbolic mechanisms of hysteria are the key to how hysteria relates to art. In Lacan’s expanded view of Freud’s classic placement of hysteria as one of the four “psychic structures” (hysteria, obsessional neurosis, perversion, and psychosis). Hysteria inverts the relation of orgasm to pleasure. In orgasm, the individual is unconscious of the

actual pain involved (an increase of tension) and is aware only of the pleasure (*jouissance*) of the sexual act. The hysteric inverts this relation, being conscious of the pain of symptoms while being unaware of the pleasure they actually cause. This converts *jouissance* into the broader concept of the unsymbolizable “object-cause of desire,” particularly in situations where consciousness is artificially suspended, as in art’s use of techniques to sublimate and conceal themes, identities, and/or lines of action.

The pleasure of pain might be called the discerning characteristic of the crime thriller, where victims of violence abound and wrongfully accused heroes confront seemingly insurmountable obstacles and the audience is subjected to suspense, fright, and shock. The idea of “unconscious pleasure” might also attach itself to the artistic principle of the sub-plot, suspense, doubles, travel through time, contamination of reality, and other techniques by which the audience is allowed to “possess” knowledge without consciously knowing they possess it and experience pleasure under the conscious flag of fear and suspense.

A quality of hysteria equally useful to art is the “negative geometry” by which the hero, confronted by pains and difficulties that the audience knows will be liquidated by the end of the story, becomes the center of hostile attention. In *North by Northwest*, Roger O. Thornhill goes to the United Nations to meet up with Lester Townsend, the alleged owner of the mansion where he was imprisoned and drugged. Townsend turns out not to be the same man who threatened him the night before, but a kindly diplomat who stays in his city apartment while the U. N. is in session. Before Townsend can identify the false host’s identity in a photograph Thornhill has found, he’s hit by a dagger tossed by a Russian spy lurking at the edge of the room. Townsend falls into Thornhill’s arms, Thornhill grabs the dagger, and everyone turns towards him fully believing him to be the assassin. To put a really fine point on the matter, a photographer, who was seconds before documenting the visitation of African delegates, takes an incriminating shot of Thornhill holding the knife over the fallen corpse of Townsend (Fig. 1.1).



Fig. 1.1. A U.N. photographer captures Thornhill “in the act.”

This assassination elevates Thornhill to the status of the “most-wanted” — the hysteric’s perfect formula of the unconscious desire for “unwanted” attention. The subject’s conflict is double-layered. There is the threatening presence of the Other (the police at Penn Station, the suspicious ticket agent, the detectives searching the train); to this we must also add the Other *of* the Other, the ring of spies headed by the cultured Vandamm, who think that Thornhill is the non-existent decoy, George Kaplan. What has held these competing Others at bay, what has kept them in a harmless gavotte, has been the “idiotic symmetry” sustained by the decoy Kaplan. The circularity of the forces of East and West, the stasis of the Cold War, is maintained *as long as* Kaplan’s absurd/idiotic status is maintained.

How is that status disrupted? Thornhill arranges to meet friends for lunch at the Plaza Hotel. In a lounge, the chums chat together over drinks. A bell-hop pages George Kaplan. At that same moment, Thornhill realizes he must call his secretary to say that his mother is playing bridge and won’t be reachable by phone that afternoon. He stands up and consults with the bell-hop, but the spies observing from the side of the room conclude that he is Kaplan replying to the page.

The confusion stems from a switch. What was simply an “artifact” of lounge behavior was seen to be “representative” of the identity of Kaplan. An unconscious

movement, the consequence of an unrelated motive, was interpreted as a meaningful gesture in the context of the search for Kaplan. Artifact is what is used in acts of representation but what “should remain neutral” in conventional circumstances. Thus, conventional communication “assigns” customary meanings but suppresses other, accidental features of the artifact. “Goodbye” no longer conventionally means “God be with you.” It can be uttered by atheists and believers alike, since the etymological artifacts and the poetic undertones are suppressed. When Thornhill uses sunglasses (a symptom of his conversion hysteria?) to avoid the gaze of the Other, he makes an artifact — an optional article of attire — into a *sign* of his guilt, recognized by the alert clerk at the ticket window.

Artifact and representation are graphically “orthogonal” in that, like two vectors at a right-angle, they are connected but independent, like the x-y axes of statistical data. Significantly, hysteria is a similarly “orthogonal” relationship of the “vectors” of mind and body. The mind in turmoil leads to an external, bodily symptom. The relation has to be guessed by the therapist; it is unconscious and involuntary for the patient. In *North by Northwest*, Thornhill is a hysteric on several counts. His garrulousness in the opening scene with his secretary reveals him to be a man with a troubled personal life. He’s dictating letters to his fiancé to elude harsh judgment. At the same time, he steals a cab from a fellow pedestrian by claiming that his secretary is unwell. When she protests this lie, he defends his action by noting that “In advertising, there’s no such thing as a lie, only expedient exaggeration.” Besides, he notes, he did the fellow a favor by making him feel gallant and unselfish. Thornhill, a typical advertising man, subscribes to a degraded pragmatism, the arrangement of dubious and sometimes unethical methods to produce the desired effects.

Like the opposition between Big Others, Thornhill’s cynicism might have continued uninterrupted because of the same “idiotic symmetry” that was sustaining the Cold War. In close proximity, cause and effect are not linear but circular. The ethics of one depends on the lack of ethics of the other. In the logic of electronic circuits, the model would be of an “transitive” condition. In a closed circuit, two inverter switches are required to stabilize a circuit into positively and negatively charged sides. One switch converts the

current from positive to negative, the other from negative back to positive. In *North by Northwest*, the American CIA creates a non-existent spy, George Kaplan, whose staged movements leads the Russian KGB on a wild goose chase. The stimulus effectively elicits the desired response. When Thornhill accidentally fills the place of the empty sigifier, however, the effect is as if one of the inverter switches has been removed (Fig. 1.1).

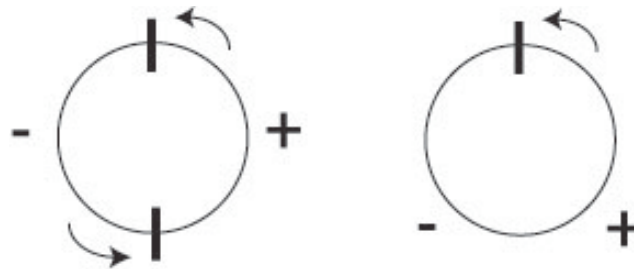


Fig. 1.2. Electrical circuit analogy of collapsing the symmetry of the CIA's Kaplan scheme.

One way of “reading” *North by Northwest* as a circuit is to say that, in the transitive position (left), the KGB (+) is always arriving at a place “vacated” by Kaplan (-) and will continue to do so because their arrival triggers a move by the CIA. When Thornhill fills the empty spot, one of the converters is removed (i.e. the empty spot is no longer empty) and the circuit is “intransitive.” This is equivalent to the phenomenon of “feedback” or “self-reference.” This elusive, *circulating gap* continues to separate contradictory parts of this model *as long as they and it are in motion*, but the stability of the “circuit” has been undermined by this gap.

What is this gap in broader cultural terms? To borrow a phrase from Lacan, who appropriates it from ethnology, it is the gap “between the two deaths.”

Between the two deaths: art in general as haunting

The idea that there are two deaths, not one, and that the first death is “merely” corporal while the second “settles the soul for good” by fixing it in within an imagined cosmic domain, is present in almost every culture.² Perhaps this interval “between the two deaths” is a necessary reconciliation of the equally widespread conception of human being as both body and soul. The body’s relative vulnerability in comparison to the more symbolically durable components of the soul — personality, qualities, fate, name, rank — must be resolved by *two deaths*, if only to recast the relation of mind and body as an *interval*, which we must later characterize as an *interpolation* that projects the interval as a puzzle, journey, trial, or dream.

According to seemingly universal practice of exporting ideas created in one context to serve in other contexts, this interval is virtually — literally “virtually” — everywhere in the human world. It is most certainly in art, where it serves as a model for the *experience of art itself*, where the audience “dies” in the implicit command to sit still and be silent, and dies a second time in the conclusion of the work (*anagnorisis*), just in time to return to the everyday world.³

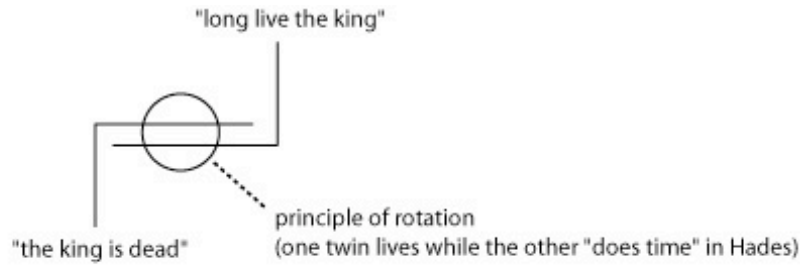
This crossover from mortuary myth to rules of entertaining puts so-called “reception theory” in a new light. If art is, in truth, most like the interval between the imagined *two deaths* of the human being, then metaphors that treat human death — themselves a matter of art and imagination — are even more informative about art itself. In this matter, “haunting” might be an accurate and fair description of the reception of art; and the technical, mechanical operations of the creation, performance and display of art might be better represented by the paraphernalia of haunting in the uncanny particulars of phantasms, ectoplasm, spirit possession, and reincarnation.

What if theory were to explore the crossover between eschatology and art? It would first benefit by taking a few lessons from the cultural practices that have mined the same connection. As venerable a source as Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* records the adventures of Romanian entrepreneurs who facilitated the protection of new buildings with human sacrifice. To avoid the gruesome and illegal practice of ritual murder, an unknowing victim’s shadow was captured by measuring it with a string. The strings, charged with souls of various status, were collected by “shadow salesmen” who marketed

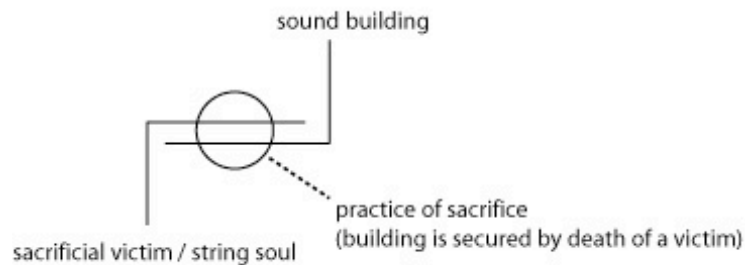
them to builders. A builder selected a string charged with a soul corresponding to the prestige and expense of the new edifice and then plastered the string within the foundations. The victim, quite unaware of the theft, would later sicken and die “of natural causes” without implicating the contractor or unscrupulous shadow salesman.

Between the theft of the soul using the string to measure the shadow of the victim and the final “empirical” death of the victim, the interval of transport and salesmanship substituted handily for the more traditional selection of victims in less politically correct times. In some cultures, a stranger passing through town would be elected mock king and given privileges and honors until the moment of sacrifice. Behind this notion that death secures life is the idea of the twin heroes, kings, or city founders who take turns in Hades to insure continual rule by embodying the balance of death and life. *The king is dead; long live the king* summarizes this logic, whose “idiotic symmetry” is actually a proposition about the radical, internally self-distinguishing nature of the human world. Topologically, “we” (humans) are a self-distinguishing distinction capable of creating symmetries that, in their characteristic “falling short of perfection” — the left and right are always *slightly* but *fundamentally* different — achieve both autonomy and fecundity.

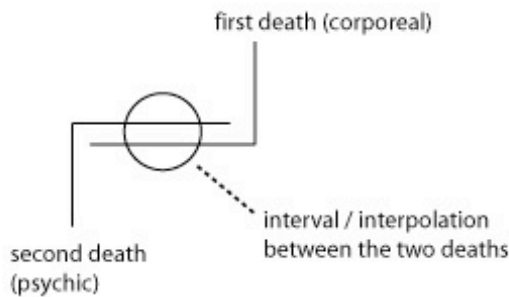
These examples suggest that the geography, or rather topology, of the space-time between the symbolic two deaths is quite complex. In a sense, the circuit diagram describing Thornhill’s accidental removal of the negative side of the equation separating the KGB and CIA applies to the general condition of the soul “between the two deaths.” The instability corresponds to the necessity for taking ritualized psychic care. The “short circuit” in this more general case is the connection between the “free radicals” at the top and bottom of the diagrams (Figs. 1—3), where simple contradiction is complemented by an “anamorphic” element at the juncture of the two conflicting systems that condenses and intensifies the conflict. In effect, Thornhill is that anamorphic (disguised, fugitive) element.



which is the same logic as ...



which is the same logic as ...



Figures 1.1-1.3. The internal (“idiotic”) symmetry of the interval between the two deaths.

One way to approach interpolation is through the model of Hegelian dialectic: not the popularized distortion of “thesis, antithesis, synthesis” but the real sequence of the *Phenomenology*, where each motion of the mind to liquidate some lack is met with a new kind of problem, an insoluble kernel that sparks a new motion towards a refined but more perplexing target. This model affects all kinds of pairs defined by polar opposition. In effect, it argues that there is no “resolution” of such problematic contrasts as that between body and mind. Instead, the relationship is an *interpolation*, where two visible points (the

poles) are regulated by one — sometimes more than one — seemingly remote, nearly invisible remainder or surplus element. As Wallace Stevens wrote in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,”

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

The lesson of Hegel’s dialectic is that the motion of desire towards some articulated goal ends in failure but that this failure opens up a new layer of signification, which brings “depth” to the original back-and-forth motion of desire. Isn’t this also a lesson about what Lacan coined as “sliding signifiers,” the tendency of any system of signifiers to be undermined by an authority that “remains out of sight” but yet binds the subject, who is supposed to be able to decode the incomplete, defective message?

A readily digestible example of the latter is the post-9/11 practice of issuing “alerts” symbolized by colors (green, yellow, orange, red) to indicate danger-levels of terrorist attack. The authority in this case is really an amalgam of invisibles — both the hypothetical terrorists and the government forces intending to stop them — because *both* operate within a cloak of secrecy yet radically trouble the anxious public mind. The desire for safety is thus directed towards an *empty directive* (the instructions are only to “continue behaving as usual”) and meaning is controlled by the *inaccessible locations* of centralized secret decision-making. In this case, two centers recreate the ancient mystic device, the *vesica pisces*, two intersecting circles constructed so that two equilateral triangles fit within their overlap (Fig. 1.4).

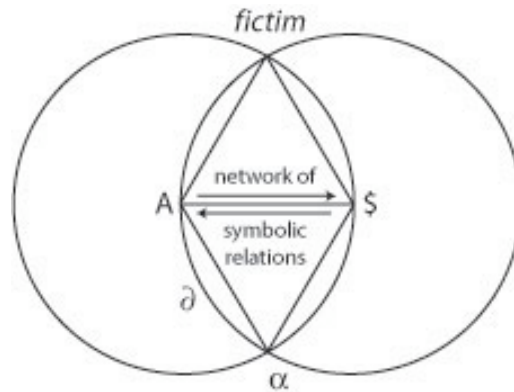


Figure 1.4. The space between the two deaths as the ancient symbol of the *vesica pisces*.

The coincident bases of these triangles constitute the back-and-forth communications (the “network of symbolic relationships”) that bind subjects with authoritarian centers of power. The vertex of the upper triangle locates the position of a subject able, because of the intersection of circles, to access the authority of ‘A’, the Lacanian “Big Other.” The tip of the lower triangle is the object-cause of desire, with immediate connection to the center of the Big Other (a line properly labeled as ∂ , “desire”) though growing out of the barred subject’s immobilized state. The *vesica* can be seen as the folded form of an “unpacked” analemma (Fig. 1.5). Here, circulation along the circumferences accomplishes a narrative that clarifies and orders the subject, desire, and centers of power. The triangles slide past each other until they are joined only at one common vertex. This is the anamorphic edge, which retains its former identity as a subjective and objective center. It is the “Real” location of all appearances, all significations, because it relates the concealed surplus/lack of the Other within a cyclical (actually “figure 8”) roundabout. Taking the process a step further to create the famous “interior 8” (Fig. 6) that Lacan uses to describe the object-cause of desire would obscure the identity of the points representing the subject, *fictim*, object of desire, and perceptual screens that produce and organize the anamorphic experience of the subject, so the analemma is left where it is.

This space is, for the public, *really* a “space between the two deaths,” the first death being the end of innocence with the 9/11 attacks, the second death being the hypothetical actual death as a result of new terrorism.

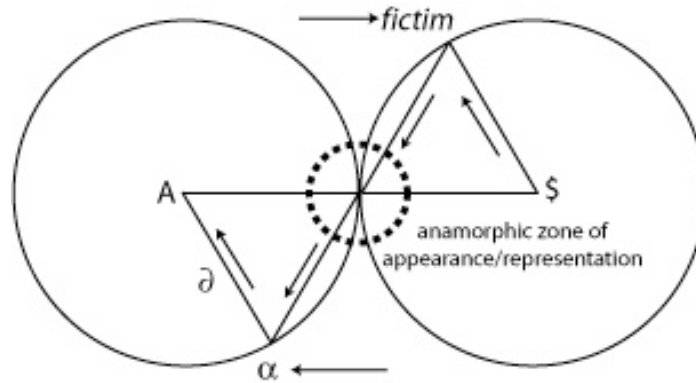


Figure 1.5. Sliding the circles of the *vesica* apart shows the “anamorphic” function of the tangency point, which facilitates a flow of narrative from subject (\$) to object (A), mediated by desire.

The equilateral triangles are important. Their common base connects the centers of authority, the opposed polar points of east and west, Islam and Judeo-Christianity, American hegemony and Middle-Eastern defiance. This is the line along which, presumably, Lacan’s signifiers actually slide as meaning is de-stabilized by such empty expressions as “homeland security” (whose new employment of “land” is reminiscent of Nazi Germany’s similar emphasis), “terrorist” (defined by a legally ambiguous and mostly secret procedure), “democracy” (imposed by an invading army?), and “pre-emptive” (aggression based on easily disprovable justifications). Perhaps the “mother of all sliding signifiers” were the 9/11 attacks themselves, which were nothing other than “faith-based initiatives,” a treasured phrase of conservative political discourse.

The “sliding” of signifiers is not a defect in the communication process, not a problem to be remedied, but a function of the subject’s disadvantageous relationship to the “objects” of authority, the “world out there” that is open for inspection but not fully accessible to reason or knowledge. The best metaphor is that of a wall or screen that *permanently* conceals some aspect of the sense world. Like the mobile chemical-biological weapons laboratories purportedly moved around by terrorist regimes, the invisible-remote is also the key, the controlling fact. In other words, what anchors significance is what can, *by definition*, never be found.

“Never say never,” of course, particularly in the case of literature and art, which makes of this object-never-to-be-found into that particular class of objects that are both

the goal and cause of desire. These are complex objects, to be sure, but not so complex that they can't proliferate and colonize even trivial art occasions. The concentration of value and meaning into a small key, ring, jewel, or other missing thing whose recovery solves the mystery, secures the kingdom, or restores health or happiness is a matter of hide and seek. In particular, it is the *motive* implied by hiding (i.e. that something has not been accidentally lost) in combination with the *action of seeking*, by a subject whose motility sets him/her apart from others "immobilized" by the suppression of the one thing they require.

"Between the two deaths," thus, corresponds to this interval between concealment and a recovery. And, whether the terms of concealment are mortuary myth, where the corpse is simply not able to speak and recovery is the arrival at some place to finally "rest in peace"; or a work of art, where the lost object can be represented vividly and the quest for it dramatizes the process of interpolation using the time-honored logic of narration; the point is the same. Meaning must be destroyed in order to make meaning "out of nothing."

The striking aspect of this seemingly complicated philosophical point is that it's enunciated in popular culture frequently and in ways that not only don't perplex the audience but restore its most clichéd homilies. When, in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy in her final speech rejects future quests, she is really arguing for the *anamorphic* nature of the ordinary:

DOROTHY: If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look further than my own back yard. And if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with. Is that right?

GLINDA: That's all it is. And now those magic slippers will take you home in two seconds.

This probably explains why the "purest" type of mystery story, the so-called "cozy mystery," takes place in familiar surroundings. Moving around too much converts the mystery story into the action-adventure, for the simple reason that the clue must be central in the mystery story, and the clue depends on seeing something of critical value

concealed within appearances that everyone else takes for granted. The clue must be available to everyone, in everyone's "own back yard," rather than, like the golden fleece of Colchis, reachable only by the most intrepid itinerate adventurer.

The simultaneous availability and opacity of the clue leads to one thing that is crucial to the mystery story's relationship to the rituals of death. The subject/hero is a hysteric. In Lacan's terms, all subjects are hysterical ("barred") by nature. Subjects are required to do something but not told what that something is, or how to do it. This what makes subjects subjects. The crucial words on the instruction sheet are unreadable. The hysterical subject is the basis of the comic appeal of Roger Thornhill, the main subject and hero of *North by Northwest*. Cary Grant's cool delivery of lines such as "I have two ex-wives, a mother, and several bartenders depending on me. And, I don't want to disappoint them all by getting myself 'slightly' killed." Getting "slightly killed" is the point of being "between two deaths," and an indication of the film's intensive exploitation of this theme.

The non-existent American spy, Kaplan, sets up the "idiotic symmetry" between the advertising executive's real but ordinary life and the role he is forced to adopt once he is forced to take up the identity of Kaplan. He no longer "lives" as Roger O. Thornhill but can't be reincarnated as Kaplan, because Kaplan doesn't exist. As he demonstrates in a scene where he and his mother break into Kaplan's hotel room, the suits don't fit. The "zero" of Kaplan is translated into the anamorphic nothingness of Thornhill. When Eve Kimball looks at his name on a book of matches she asks "What does the 'O' stand for?" "Nothing," he replies. The double-edged meaning of this reply mirrors Thornhill's duty as a hysteric subject: to fill the shoes of a non-existent person. Seeming is all he can do, so "nothing" really is *as it seems!*

This takes us to the allusion to madness in the quote from Hamlet ("I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw"). Shakespeare's theory of wind therapy differs from Vitruvius's account, which says that "when the south wind (*Auster*) blows men fall ill."⁴ The Vitruvian combination of the northwest wind (*Caurus*) and north wind (*Septentrio*) would seem to suggest a no more serious threat to health than a slight cough.⁵ Pliny seems to settle the issue by identifying *Thracius* as the north by north-west wind, and Milton constitutes the closest reference for

the qualities of this wind, in *Paradise Lost*, adding physical violence to Shakespearean madness:

“*Boreas* and *Cæcias*, and *Argestes* loud,
And *Thrascias* rend the Woods, and Seas upturn;
With adverse blast up-turns them from the South
Notus and *After*, black with thunderous Clouds,
From Serrationa; thwart of these, as fierce,
Forth rush the Levant and the Ponent Windes
Eurus and *Zephir* with thir lateral noise,
Sirocco , and *Libecchio* .

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, x. 692-706.

The skewness of this compass direction is played out in multiple ways in the film. The opening credits flash before an angled view of a steel-and-glass office building. The mullions are nearly run parallel to make a gridded mirror, reflecting the city in a demonic jewel of traffic turmoil. The compass idea, translated to a clock face, becomes 11:00, the “eleventh hour,” the hour of last resort, appropriate to actions taken at the penultimate moment. Hamlet’s madness, too, stems from his situation “between the two deaths.” His father is dead but his soul is restless. The opening scene is a haunting, a visitation. Thornhill’s first death (abduction) occurs when he is “possessed” by the identity of Kaplan and nearly executed. His escape and flight follow the pattern, the “sinthom” of Hitchcock heroes: wrongful accusation (first death), flight, and ultimate exoneration (second death).

¹ Susan Dufel, “Conversion Disorder,” *E-Medicine: Instant Access to the Minds of Medicine*, www.emedicine.com/emerg/topic112.htm. “Hysteria seems conflated, in many sources, to “conversion hysteria” and, thence, to “conversion disorder.” *North by Northwest* seems to make use of both the Freudian “conversion hysteria” (the reversal of the logic of the gaze results in *tangible* “symptoms” of the visible work of art) and “anxiety hysteria,” the overt personality tone of Roger Thornhill.

² The theme of this chapter is indebted to Slavoj Žižek’s recovery of the Lacanian idea of “between the two deaths” as an idea widely treated in popular culture.

³ See the insightful essay by Henry Johnstone on the subject of silence associated with artistic/literary recognition:

⁴ Vitruvius Pollio, *Vitruvius on Architecture*, I, vi, trans. By Frank Granger (Cambridge MA: Harvard University, 1962), 55.

⁵ In Vitruvius, two winds contend for the prize of being the north-north-west wind. “... At the sides of Caurus, Circias and Corus; about Septentrio, Thracias and Gallicus” (Vitruvius Pollio, *ibid.*, p.63). “Corus” is a candidate, but this is the more commonly accepted Latin name for the north-west wind. Definitively, Pliny (*Natural History* II, 34-56) gives Thracias as the wind coming from north by north-west.