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# Films of the 1950s: Two Perspectives on Post-War America

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Films of the 1950s: Two Perspectives on Post-War America

by

Stephanie J. Baker

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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SKIDMORE COLLEGE**

## Abstract

Although it is not possible to ascertain with certainty the mood of an entire country at a particular time in history, films of an era can reflect glimpses of the prevalent milieu of a society. The films of the 1930s reflect a grim view of life as Americans struggle to overcome the Great Depression, while films of the 1940s espouse great patriotism as Americans fight for freedom in World War II. Post-war America of the 1950s is an enigma: great prosperity mingled with Cold War fears. Filmmakers of this era are challenged to reflect the American psyche during this period. The horror film genre emerges in response to the hidden fears of nuclear annihilation. This is balanced out with movies that include musicals, comedies and stories of the good life in suburbia. This paper will look at post-war American society through the lenses of two renowned directors of the time.

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## INTRODUCTION

A wave of prosperity swept across America in the middle of the Twentieth Century. World War II ended, and soldiers enthusiastically returned home to start careers and families. After years of rationing and hardships, U.S. citizens now enjoyed material goods and services in abundance, and a new capitalist consumer society began to emerge in its midst. In addition, mass production of goods allowed Americans to export goods and technology to facilitate the rebuilding of Europe and Japan, thus allowing President Eisenhower to forge strong international relationships. Ironically, just as jobs and material goods flourished, a new cloud of darkness seemed to hover over America's bright future.

Poor relations between the United States and the Soviet Union largely accounted for this perceived sense of gloom. Like a ticking time bomb, the prospect of a third World War sat just over the horizon. The 1950s began with involvement in the Korean War and ended with involvement in the Vietnam War. Wars interfere economically and psychologically with a life of peace and prosperity, and Americans wanted this perceived good life. Consumerism created a new paradigm: people did not work to exist; people worked to accumulate more wealth. This decade created conflict in the American psyche between materialism and morality, and it is within this milieu that filmmakers of the 1950s framed their perspectives on post-war society.

In this thesis I will explore two particular films from the vantage points of the protagonists as they struggle with feelings of alienation, angst and despair in order to ascertain the quality of life during this era. Did material wealth improve psychological

well-being, or, conversely, did material wealth psychologically impoverish a nation? I will assess the implications of their struggles, evaluate the underlying causes and show, ultimately, how each character finds happiness through innate resilience.

## POST-WAR AMERICA

Prior to this decade of surplus, a very different and humbler American society had stood in its place in the 1940s. During World War II, items such as sugar, milk and cigarettes were rationed, and many items such as metals and nylon were needed exclusively for the war effort and were not available to the people at home. The United States was at war with an enemy who threatened American freedom and the American way of life. Patriotism superseded material wants as Americans banded together with a common goal of defeating the enemy and restoring American prosperity. Post-Depression Americans were a tough and determined people who looked ahead to a brighter future. Viewed through this collectivist lens, sacrifice was a means to an end. The end of World War II signaled the end of hardship and the beginning of an era of abundance.

Post-war America was ready to embrace a more peaceful and prosperous way of living. Husbands, sons and brothers returned home to reap the rewards of their hard-fought victory. Women left their factory jobs to make room for this new influx of labor by the men. Many women willingly left the work force and returned to their homes to resume lives as wives and mothers, and some women left reluctantly due to a sense of independence and empowerment that employment had afforded them. Many younger women married and had children, and the birth of the baby boomers created new demands on the economy. The housing market expanded on many fronts, including a

need for large houses in the suburbs to raise these babies. In addition, deprivation of goods during the war spurred an ever-growing demand for consumer goods. Abundant consumption abetted the arrival of television and was the hallmark of the 1950s.

Between 1948 and 1955, television was installed in nearly two-thirds of the nation's homes. Magazines, advertisements, radio and films espoused the virtues of television as a status of domestic entertainment (Spigel, "Make Room" 1). In fact, in 1950, the prefabricated homes in Levittown, Long Island got a new "built-in" feature: Admiral televisions permanently embedded in the living room walls of each new home. In the social climate of post-World War II, television was supposed to restore family togetherness (2). Despite the skeptics who believed that television could impact negatively on family relationships, televisions were the most sought-after appliances in America and renewed faith in the splendors of consumer capitalism (3). Its true impact was immeasurable at the time; this nascent medium of television was a clean slate for advertisers and the news media to exploit.

Behind the scenes, early journalists and executives "experimented, argued, tested and eventually settled on a format to exploit the strengths of the small screen as a communications tool" (Foust). Audiences had to be imagined, and programming was fashioned to suit the needs of this imaginary group. Advertisers tended to downplay differences within a heterogeneous American public and present a homogenous public for national advertisers (Spigel, "Make Room" 6). Advertisers often referenced women's magazines to ascertain ideal viewers to whom to market their goods. Women wanted modern conveniences that afforded them more leisure time. Appliances and food prep tools were found everywhere on the small screen. Programs such as *Leave It to Beaver*,

*Father Knows Best* and *I Love Lucy* presented home furnishings, fashion and a lifestyle that every viewer hoped to attain. Spending became the new norm; lack of debt was no longer honored as a virtue. “The 1950s begins the credit-card revolution and reflected a profound transformation in attitudes about debt” (Young 2). In addition, women were lured away from chores with the pleasant distraction, and heavy advertising, of daytime programming. One of the very new conveniences for mothers were shows for their children: temporary babysitting from a little box.

The numerous consumer goods introduced through this new medium required people to go to stores and purchase the items that they now needed. Automobile production and sales rose in response to the need for the suburban homeowner to move around. Both necessity and status created this demand, and cars began to roll off assembly lines. Spigel (“Make Room” 4) notes that Henry Ford’s genius was his ability to market his automobile as both a means of transportation and as a family car for leisure purposes, thus meshing the car with the core values of American social life. Driving gave rise to the suburban shopping malls, drive-in theaters, fast-food shops and created the need for new roads. The government now had to deal with America’s infrastructure.

Congress had been working for years on a plan to expand the nation’s highways, but the wars precluded them from proceeding. President Eisenhower did not make infrastructure his first priority when World War II ended, but he noted that highway expansion would produce manufacturing and construction, open up rural areas and essentially change the face of America (9). In 1956 Congress passed the Federal Aid Highway Act, and this ensured that the country’s infrastructure would be able to



accommodate the vehicles that were becoming an intrinsic part of the American way of life (Weingroff).

Consumerism can become insatiable and create unrest when it is not satisfied. Americans could produce anything, buy anything and travel anywhere in the country. Family vacations arose from these conditions being in place, and leisure resorts grew into a flourishing industry across America. Travel alone, however, could not satisfy the restlessness that seemed increasingly pervasive in America. While the 1950s were often portrayed as a time of peace and prosperity, there were, in fact, many Americans who were left out of this equation. The white middle-class reaped many benefits of this post-war boom, while minorities and the poor only watched from the sidelines. Civil rights were still being violated through discrimination in education, jobs and housing, and African-Americans were taking their fight to the streets in the South. “With increased economic opportunities in the post-World War II period, the 1950s was also a period of heightened tension, growing out of an increasingly strong determination to alter the structural barriers of discrimination” (Price-Spratlen). All was not as it seemed in America, and young and old alike saw the fraying seams in the American tapestry. The common thread that transcended American class warfare was fear of nuclear annihilation. All Americans lived with this fear, and all Americans looked for ways to assuage their fears. In a newly prosperous nation, consumerism was seen by many as a pleasant distraction.

Consumerism, however, could not fully shield Americans from the fears brought on by the Cold War. “In those years, some children embraced with gusto the secret despair of adults who claimed to be living happily in the freest, richest, most generous

country on Earth” (Engelhardt 8). America’s post-war enemy, the Soviet Union, now had the same nuclear bomb as the U.S. government. Communism was everywhere and nowhere; the Soviets had permeated American society. Because this enemy lived in the shadows and could not be targeted, imaginations were left to wonder if tomorrow was guaranteed. Bomb shelters were being built in the suburbs, and children had survival drills in school. Engelhardt notes that many children and adolescents turned their fears into thrills and embraced science fiction and horror comics.

The dichotomy of wealth and fear evoked varying reactions. For some older, middle-class Americans there was a sense of complacency: money, jobs, housing, consumer goods and freedom should be enough to ensure happiness. Money did not allay everyone’s fears, however. For emerging adolescents and young adults, discontent with consumerism and inequality for certain people set the stage for rebellion against the status quo. Hollywood and television would react to this emerging discontent in America and capture snapshots of a country which was wealthy and confused in equal measure. Rebellion replaced patriotism as the 1950s came to an end.

## MEDIA REACTION

Just as television provided entertainment and promoted products, so did it become a tool for molding citizens in an era marked by atomic threats, racial violence and class-war (McCarthy). This new medium added a visual dimension of reality into American homes in the post- war era.

The TV set...in the suburban home...was not a simple slide-show of pastoral splendor, but just as often considered a ‘window on a world’ that brought

problems associated with city life – especially violence, sexuality and unwelcome strangers – into the home (Spigel, “Welcome” 2).

Television was transmitting graphic images of a diverse American society that stood in stark contrast to comfortable, wealthy suburbia. This, in turn, stirred a sense of discontent in many. Some chose to ignore such disparity and decided to enjoy the American way of life they felt they had fought for and earned. Perhaps this same reasoning helps explain the different feelings among the baby boomers of the time who had been given everything without having contributed any personal sacrifice. A combination of guilt for the less-fortunate, fear of an invisible bomb, judgment of complacent parents and a need to fit into this confusing establishment caused an angst that manifested itself as rebellion and restlessness. Like steam, pent-up tensions require a release valve, and the mediums of pop culture and entertainment can serve this purpose in society.

Hollywood is known for catching the wave of popular culture and taking viewers along for the ride. So it was in the 1950s when directors Nicholas Ray and Alfred Hitchcock put their spin on two quintessential films of that era. Ray’s 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause* and Hitchcock’s 1959 film *North by NorthWest* captured two perspectives on this confusing time in American history. Although Ray and Hitchcock differ stylistically, post-war disillusionment viewed through the eyes of their protagonists is the common thread that links these two classic films.

Much of Nicholas Ray’s work dealt with post-war disillusionment. He viewed the Eisenhower era as a combination of bland optimism and inhibited conformism. Ray was distinguished as “a film-maker whose special interest was the exploration and

depiction of melancholy, angst and alienation” (Frost). Accordingly, the teenage years resonated with Ray as fertile ground for examining confusion in life. Frost notes further that Ray’s bisexuality in the repressed 1950s undoubtedly influenced his perspective on life and perhaps caused him to feel himself like a misfit. The angst of Jim, “If I just had one day when I wasn’t confused and ashamed of everything...” [sic] (*Rebel* quote), might well reflect the sentiment of Nicholas Ray himself. It is within this context that Ray directed *Rebel Without a Cause*.

James Dean stars as the protagonist Jim Stark, a teenage misfit who struggles to find his place in the mainstream culture of wealthy suburban California. He comes from an upscale “good” family with both parents at home. However, his family continually moves in order to stay ahead of Jim’s many delinquencies; appearance is everything. As the new kid who once again tries to fit into a new school and neighborhood, Jim cannot understand why his efforts always end with him being in trouble. He wants to be happy, and he wants to fit in to no avail. He continues to break the rules, refusing to conform to suburban middle-class values. He rebels against authority, which he believes has failed him. Struggles, tragedy, family and love are examined over a 24-hour period as *Rebel Without a Cause* unfolds. This film is the work of an American director with a youthful perspective.

*North by NorthWest* is another classic film of the 1950s, but this work of Alfred Hitchcock looks at society with a more mature lens. Hitchcock comes to filmmaking from the perspective of an outsider looking in on post-war America. As a British director, his early films were “set upon a foundation of traditional authority and rigid class structure,” and when he comes to America his films center on “existential

crisis...and cash nexus where desires meet things” (Pomerance 19). Hitchcock could not ignore the aspects of material obsession that dominated American culture in the post-war 1950s. War-torn Europe was in the process of rebuilding, and resources were still scarce by comparison. Perhaps he wondered why this country’s immense prosperity was not translating into immense contentment. Perhaps he believed that Americans suppressed Cold War fears by hiding behind consumer-driven success. Either way, Hitchcock had “incisive examination of the naivety and idealism he saw in the myth of small-town American life” (Blowen). In *North by Northwest* Hitchcock takes a seemingly light-hearted look at material success and Cold War paranoia.

Cary Grant portrays the protagonist of this film, Roger O. Thornhill. Roger is a successful advertising executive on Madison Avenue who seems to be living the proverbial American dream. He exists in a whirlwind of business meetings and travel, and the fact that he is twice-divorced might be the only indication that he may have some priority issues in terms of marriage, family and traditional American values. In fact, his life is rather sheltered and mundane despite the brisk pace he maintains in order to ignore his increasing feelings of emptiness. All this changes, however, when Roger attends a business meeting at the Plaza Hotel, and he is mistaken for a spy named George Kaplan. Roger is taken on an adventure that will alter his life in ways he never could have imagined. Hitchcock is not interested in the perpetrator of the action or in the action itself; rather, he emphasizes “the set of relations in which the action and the characters are taken” (Encyclopedia of Modern Europe).

The common thought process and philosophy of a capitalist, consumer society is that more is always better. “Through the mechanism of mass production this ethos

actually drove the standard for shiny appliances, automobiles and other goods that permeated mainstream culture” (Nickles 582). Working class America was forming a new social identity, and it remained to be seen if this would translate into psychological well-being for its participants. Few would argue that poverty is superior to prosperity, but some might question whether or not ‘more’ of everything eventually leads to personal satisfaction and growth. Nicholas Ray and Alfred Hitchcock suggest that human nature demands more from society than mere consumerism can provide. In fact, these directors use their films to highlight the underlying hypocrisy of smiling American faces that mask discontented souls.

#### RAY’S VIEW

All the main characters of *Rebel Without a Cause* exhibit internal stresses related to the demands put upon them by the expectations of society in post-war America. Prosperity had created many changes in families that challenged the traditional roles of fathers, mothers and children. The strong man going off to war to preserve freedom, the frugal mother going to work to make ends meet, and the children helping the mother at home were no longer the norm. Fathers now worked to accumulate wealth, education and consumer goods for their families, mothers enjoyed their new leisure time and their husbands’ money, and children were born into a world that expected nothing from them other than that they conform and enjoy the fruits of their parents’ labor.

Frank Stark, Jim’s father, epitomizes this post-war suburban breadwinner. Freed from having to guarantee his family’s survival, Frank now seeks to keep everyone satisfied. His need to please a whining, domineering wife translates into subjugation, and

his need to veil his son's problems translates into negligent parenting. As he leads a life of leisure and self-indulgence, Frank's traditional male image begins to disappear. His wife responds to his weakness with disgust. Frank's new social identity also affects the social and psychological identity of manhood for Jim, as he pleads with his father: "What do you do when you have to be a man?" (*Rebel* quote).

This question resonates throughout *Rebel Without a Cause*; male weakness in the home versus machismo and survival on the streets. The film opens with a scene at a police station. Jim's parents and grandmother arrive to pick him up after he is brought in for drunk and disorderly conduct. "U.S. News referred to...suburban middle and upper classes delinquents...as 'concealed delinquents'...mainly the problem of parents and child psychiatrists – not the police" (Rathgeb 5). We can see this dynamic in *Rebel* as Frank tries to assuage his guilt by loudly reminding Jim that he gives him everything, his mother interrupts the father and implies that Jim is a troublemaker, and the grandmother is cold toward all of them. Family dysfunction is clearly on display and sets the stage for the events that will transpire over the next twenty-four hours.

In the midst of the chaos at the station, Jim seems to distance himself from the adult discourse. Ray has a unique directional perspective in *Rebel*. "Youth is always in the foreground and adults for the most part only to be seen as the kids see them" (Frascella 12). As if to distract him from his parents' fighting, Jim notices a teenager who has been brought in for shooting and killing puppies. This boy, Plato, tells Jim that his parents are divorced and that he is left in the care of a housekeeper. Jim quickly empathizes with Plato, and Plato responds to this empathy by attaching himself to Jim. At the same time, Jim has also noticed a very pretty girl, Judy, who has been brought in

for defying curfew and being out alone after dark. She is sarcastic and dismissive of Jim, but he is impressed with her nonetheless. The next day, as Judy is shown in the dining room of her house, the viewer is given a glimpse into her unhappy home life. Her father displays a misogynistic demeanor both toward her and toward her mother. In this house, women exist to serve men. As Judy leaves her house, she runs into the new neighbor, Jim, who is also on his way to school. They recognize each other from the night before at the police station but remain aloof. The halls of Dawson High School are filled with students experiencing emotional bankruptcy in the midst of great wealth. “The fathers were buying the world off, terrified appeasers, while the mothers were collapsing in thoughtless surrender to any authority” (Slocum, “Approaches” 39).

At school, Jim is confronted by a local bully, Buzz. Although he does not want any trouble, Jim gets involved in a dispute. Rays wants to contrast Jim’s home life with school and the streets. With Frank as a role model, Jim has no hope of being different than his father. At school, Jim has options to become the man he wants to be. Appeasement, like his father’s, does not work at school; confrontation is necessary in order to establish one’s place in the social hierarchy of the streets. This must be so, because Jim notices that Buzz is the boyfriend of Judy, the same girl who has all but ignored him. That afternoon, Jim goes on a class trip to the Griffith Observatory, where the students are shown a presentation of the death of the universe at the Planetarium. Jim makes sounds during the presentation in hopes of being seen as one of the guys. Instead, Jim watches Buzz and his boys randomly slash his car tire and wait for his reaction. They further taunt him by calling him “chicken,” and Buzz challenges Jim to a knife fight. Jim refuses to be seen as weak like his father; he accepts the challenge and wins



the fight. Buzz, however, will not be seen as weak either; he challenges Jim to a “chickie run” that night. They will each race stolen cars toward a cliff, and the first one to jump out is the loser, the chicken, the coward. Ray presents the “chickie run” as a form of male bonding. “If (Jim) can formulate a plan for acting like a man, then the social life his parents’ combative protection has previously denied him might now be attained”(41).

As the event approaches, Judy, Plato and some other students come to observe the challenge. Buzz takes Jim aside and tells him to practice opening the door and jumping out. Ray wants to show that this competition is not framed in hostility. “The boys have a constructive purpose rather than conflict...simply being added to the gang roster”(42). They take off and the cars go over the cliff. Jim looks around to see who has jumped first, not realizing that Buzz has not made it out of the car; his leather jacket got caught on the car door. Jim is devastated and runs home to tell his parents and get their advice about what to do. When they dismiss his concerns by telling him that he should not get involved, Jim goes to the police station to talk to Ray, the empathetic sergeant he had encountered the previous night. “Jim’s response to his father’s indecisiveness is an anguished physical assault and raw emotional outcry” (Slocum, “Senses”). Jim leaves the station, however, when he discovers that sergeant is not there. Unfortunately for Jim, several of Buzz’s friends see him and assume he has told the police about the “chickie runs.” They want revenge and go after him.

Judy joins Jim as they retreat to an abandoned mansion to hide out. It is a place that Plato knows well, and Plato eventually meets up with them. The three of them lie down and fantasize that they are a real family: Jim is the dad; Judy is the mom, and Plato is the child. Fantasy for Jim and Judy is a form of temporary escapism and hope for the

future, but Plato's fantasies meshed with a deeper emotional instability. Ray displays Plato's homoerotic side throughout the film: "his locker shows a picture of Alan Ladd...he stares at Jim from his locker mirror...he nicknames Jim 'Jamie'...as his obsession with Jim intensifies, so does his mental stability decline..." (Castiglia 32). Plato desperately wants Jim to view their relationship as familial in nature; Jim is his surrogate father and Judy his surrogate mother. In fact, Castiglia (32) suggests that the combination of repressed homosexuality and failure to attain a traditional nuclear family leads to Plato's demise. This character perhaps best reflects the demons in Ray's life. A divorced bisexual in the repressed 1950s, Nicholas Ray was known to be a conflicted soul. "If there was a dark side to Ray's talent, it was an intensity that hovered at the edge of emotional instability..." (Rathgeb 13).

As Judy and Jim walk off to be alone, Buzz's friends find the mansion and threaten Plato. "In a slightly Freudian model of the return of the repressed, the overly macho boys appear to terrorize Plato" (Castiglia 32). Plato, in a clearly unstable state, snaps and pulls out a gun he has taken from home. He shoots one boy and then shoots at Jim and a police officer before running away to the Observatory. Jim and Judy run after him, and Jim finally convinces Plato to give him the gun. Jim quietly removes the bullets before returning the gun, and Plato exits the Observatory. However, the lights and sirens send Plato into a panic, and, as he begins to run, a police officer shoots and kills him before Jim can explain that the gun is empty.

The police have brought Jim's parents to the scene, and they rush to Plato's body thinking it is Jim, because he is wearing their son's red jacket. Perhaps the realization that lack of patriarchal strength could have caused him to lose his son now allows Frank

to comfort Jim and emboldens him further to promise he will be there for him in the future. Perhaps as Jim leans over Plato's corpse and zips up his red jacket, "a symbol of ambiguous sexuality that need no longer be Jim's mantle" (32), Frank can finally bond with his son. Either way, it is only with Plato's death that Jim is reconciled with his family. As the film ends, Jim introduces Judy to his parents, and they drive off together as night ends and dawn emerges.

Ray's film exemplifies the need for traditional family values to coexist with a prosperous society. Rebellion is a reaction to a disruption of the nuclear family, and consumerism cannot fill this void. Ray also shows that misfits remain on the fringes of society when they are unable to conform due to sexual orientation, delinquency or any form of non-compliance to the norm. Jim finds happiness when he is accepted by his father and loved by Judy; conformity saves him. Plato dies as he lives, a rebellious misfit. "Perhaps Ray's intention was to espouse neither rebellion nor conformity, but to document the contradiction between the two in American society and their war for ascendancy within the individual" (Fujiwara).

#### HITCHCOCK'S VIEW

In *North by NorthWest*, Hitchcock portrays an apathetic post-war American society that uses consumerism and its new-found wealth to mask its Cold War fears. This film posits that post-war alienation is due to "malaise rather than rebellion" (Taviss 54). The 1950s for the middle and upper classes is an era of complacency, lives steeped in prosperity mindlessly move forward toward more prosperity. Because Madison Avenue perpetrates this movement, an advertising executive is the perfect protagonist for

Hitchcock in this film. Roger Thornhill represents the quintessential successful American: a man whose external riches masks an internal poverty. “As the man in the gray flannel suit, Thornhill is never seen in his own home; he’s always on the run, transplanted – still wearing the same suit...” (Spoto, “The Art” 304). Roger’s success is predicated upon his spending endless hours at the office, and, eventually, the job both consumes and defines him. Tavis (55) notes that identity problems connected with career choice appears only in the 1950s.

Roger lives a very comfortable, scheduled, fast-paced life with “...not a moment of boredom” (Spoto, “The Art” 311). Boredom might lead to reflection, and reflection might lead to confronting the shallowness of his existence. Roger is a lone man in the midst of a chaotic urban society, and he believes that any fears he may be experiencing can be assuaged by avoidance of any significant human interaction. Hitchcock knows this character well: “From his earliest years, Hitchcock was a loner...an observer rather than a participant” (Spoto, “The Dark Side” 9). In this film, Hitchcock draws on many of his personal life experiences to highlight the fact that the adverse psychological effects of the Cold War in America were not mitigated by wealth alone. Spoto (10) asserts that Hitchcock had an uncanny ability to uncover the delusion and sickness that lies just below the surface of polite society.

*North by NorthWest* opens with a scene showing Roger at his Madison Avenue office dictating a letter to his secretary. It is interesting that Roger references a “war on capitalism” in his dictation; Hitchcock only includes deliberate details when they are significant. Before leaving for the day, Roger reminds the secretary to call his mother to confirm their theater date, and then he rushes off for drinks and a business meeting at the

Oak Bar of the Plaza Hotel, "...a gastronomic setting for high consumers" (Pomerance 20). In Hitchcock's films, a high consumer is usually a financier or spy, which conveys the message that capitalism, consumerism and corruption all go together. Since a consumer society cannot exist without advertising, Roger is guilty by association.

While at the hotel, Roger suddenly realizes that his secretary will not be able to reach his mother by phone, so he decides to send her a telegram. This random decision will set in motion a series of events that will transform Roger's life as he has known it. At the very instant Roger raises his hand to signal for a bellhop to send the telegram, the bellhop is paging a man named George Kaplan. This is most unfortunate for Roger, because the two seedy characters who assume he is responding to his name abduct Roger at gunpoint and shove him into a waiting car. "Order breaking down...expressed in Hitchcock's films...results in the sudden eruption of chaos and disorder into a life of apparent security and evokes psychological and emotional reactions" (Spoto, "The Dark Side" 38).

They drive in silence to a secluded mansion on Long Island. A maid lets them in, and the unknown gentlemen lock Roger in the library. He sees mail addressed to Mr. Lester Townsend, and he remembers seeing the Townsend name on the entrance gate. Suddenly the door opens, and two men enter. Roger assumes the man with the British accent is Townsend. The other man is identified as his secretary, Leonard. "Townsend" (who is actually a foreign agent named Vandamm) refers to Roger as "Kaplan" and begins interrogating him in such a way that Roger realizes he has been mistaken for some sort of spy. "The pathology of paranoia may be utilized to inform our understanding of American post-war culture" (Cosner). When Vandamm is not able to extract from Roger

what Kaplan knows about their organization, he rejoins his wife and tells Leonard to work on him. The two men who kidnapped him, Valerian and Licht, assist Leonard in forcing a fifth of bourbon down Roger's throat. When the alcohol does not help elicit any information from Roger, the men decide to dispose of him. They place the seriously intoxicated Roger behind the wheel of a car and guide it down a seaside cliff. Roger is highly inebriated, somewhat giddy and surprisingly alert. He eventually manages to push Valerian out of the car and proceeds to drive to the bottom of the winding road with Valerian and Licht in pursuit. Interestingly, Hitchcock had a life-long love of the bottle. A drunk but capable Roger may have justified his own demons. "He (Hitchcock) had to be kept away from strong drink...he had an undiminished appetite for undiluted alcohol" (Spoto, "The Dark Side" 9). As Roger gets to the bottom of the hill, he slams on his brakes, causing a police car to smash into him. As he is taken into custody for drunk driving, Roger feels safe, and Valerian and Licht leave the scene.

Due to his lack of sobriety, Roger cannot convince the police that his story of kidnapping and espionage is the truth. They simply tell him that the Mercedes he was driving is a stolen car, and he will be spending the night at the station. He immediately calls his mother to tell her the news. The reference to Roger's mother in this film is significant to Hitchcock, because his own mother was a dominant character who remained at his side throughout his life. "Long hours at the studio, attentiveness to his mother at home, attendance at a matinee when he had a free day...this was the pattern of his life in the 1920s" (56). Fast-forward to Roger's life in the 1950s, and the similarities cannot be denied. It might also be a subtle reference to the fact that both he and Roger honor duty to mothers at the expense of true love; Roger is twice-divorced, and

Hitchcock, despite staying in a long marriage, was always longing for the elusive love of the blond beauties he put in his films, "...a restless search for the ideal woman to worship" (9).

After spending the night at the police station, Roger is released when his lawyer, Larrabee, and his mother, Clara, arrive to get him out. The judge allows Roger to have an extra day to prove his story, and two detectives drive them back to the Townsend mansion. As they enter the library where Roger had been held the night before, nothing is as it should be. The couch has been cleaned of the spilt alcohol, books are now in the liquor cabinet, and 'Mrs. Townsend' expresses her relief that Roger has survived his ride home after having left in such a drunken state. She also feigns surprise that Roger has not simply borrowed the Mercedes from one of her guests. Totally confused, and with his mother looking on with a smirk, Roger insists on speaking with Mr. Townsend. The wife tells him that her husband is addressing the General Assembly at the United Nations that afternoon. Clara Thornhill impatiently tells her son to pay the fine, and they leave the mansion. The gardener watches as they leave; it is Valerian.

Determined to clear his name, and with his mother in tow, Roger takes a cab back to the Plaza Hotel. He calls Kaplan's room and is told that nobody has answered the phone in two days. Roger asks his mother to obtain the key to room 796 from the front desk. She begrudgingly complies but shows some indifference to her son's predicament. Roger reassures her that she has nothing to be nervous about. She retorts "I'm not nervous; I'll be late for the bridge club." They proceed to Kaplan's room, where the house staff acknowledges Roger as Kaplan, the elusive man they have never seen. Roger spots a photo of his host from the night before and puts it into his pocket. At that same

moment, Roger answers Kaplan's phone and recognizes the voice of one of his captors. When he traces the caller to the hotel, he grabs his mother and runs toward the elevator. On the way down, Valerian and Licht manage to enter the crowded car. Clara looks at them and, despite seeing her son's obvious discomfort, mockingly asks these two if they are going to kill her son. Feigned laughter rings out from everyone except Roger. As the doors open, Roger is able to elude his captors, and he runs out into the street. It also the last time Clara Thornhill is seen in this film. Hitchcock allows Roger's character to escape from the bonds which he himself could never escape.<sup>1</sup>

Once outside, Roger hails a cab and heads to the United Nations. He pleads with the driver to speed up, because he realizes that Valerian and Licht are on his trail. He arrives at the General Assembly building and pretends to be George Kaplan when he asks to see Lester Townsend. Roger is sent to a public lounge, and Townsend is paged. When he arrives, the real Townsend is not one of the people from the previous night. Townsend explains that he does own a property in Glen Cove, but the mansion is unoccupied except for two caretakers, a gardener and his wife, because he always stays in the city when the General Assembly is in session. The gardener and his wife turn out to be Valerian and the maid. When Roger inquires about his wife, Townsend replies that she has been dead for several years. More confused than ever, Roger pulls the photo out of his pocket and shows it to Townsend just as Townsend grimaces and falls over. Valerian has thrown a knife across the room and into Townsend's back. Shocked, Roger instinctively withdraws the knife, just as a photographer takes a picture. Realizing how the scene must look, Roger

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<sup>1</sup> "While Cockney boys in his village played sports...he was content with...his mother's close and constant companionship" (Spoto, "The Dark Side" 21).



drops the knife and rushes out the door and into another cab. “In Hitchcock’s classics...there is often the theme of the innocent man hounded by the police as well as the arch-villains” (St. James Encyclopedia).

The following day, while Roger is executing his escape plan, a meeting of a government intelligence agency is simultaneously taking place in Washington, D.C. As a group of men sit in a boardroom and look at a newspaper with Roger’s name and picture as the U.N. murderer, they ponder how to proceed. They have invented George Kaplan as a diversion for their real undercover agent, and now this Roger Thornhill has been mistaken for their phony decoy.<sup>2</sup> Their real agent has managed to infiltrate an enemy group headed by Vandamm, and the elaborate Kaplan ruse has been set up in order to keep this agent safe. Now an innocent citizen is in grave danger if they do not come to his defense. The intelligence chief, known only as the Professor, decides that it is in the best interest of the agency to do nothing; they will monitor Thornhill, but they will not risk the safety of their agent to save an innocent man. Patriotism is not espoused in this film. In fact, after the war, filmmakers took note of “a post-war mood... which created the public’s desire for a more honest and harsh view of America” (Schrader 10). Hitchcock had a cynical view of government institutions, and his films do not distinguish one side or the other as being significantly different; human life is expendable for secrets considered vital to government interests. The Professor can be as callous as the enemy: “War is hell, Mr. Thornhill,” says the Professor, “even when it’s a cold one” (*North* quote).

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<sup>2</sup> Hitchcock often comments on “government leaders committing mayhem in the name of necessary intelligence activities.” (Spoto, “The Art” 302).

Back in the city, Roger is at Grand Central Station preparing to follow Kaplan to the Ambassador East Hotel in Chicago. Kaplan is the only one who can help Roger understand what is going on, but leaving the city without being recognized will not be easy. Roger dons sunglasses as he approaches the ticket agent for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Limited, naively thinking that his cool demeanor and masked eyes will shield him from reality. When the ticket agent asks him if something is wrong with his eyes, Roger replies that they are sensitive to questions. This exchange reflects a dimension to Hitchcock's psyche. According to Spoto ("The Dark Side" 8), Hitchcock was cordial, with a cautionary coolness in his manner, as if he feared a sudden unmasking of his real, carefully hidden feelings. The ticket agent recognizes Roger from all the media coverage and signals for security, forcing Roger to quickly and quietly board the train without a ticket. He bumps into a beautiful woman as he tries to evade the police by ducking into an empty compartment. When the police approach this woman, she misdirects them, and Roger eventually walks out of the compartment and makes his way into the dining car.

The steward happens to seat Roger with the beautiful woman he has encountered earlier on the train. She introduces herself as Eve Kendall, but Roger introduces himself with a phony name. She quickly reproaches him, telling him that she recognizes him from the newspapers. Eve, however, assures Roger that she will keep his secret, because the night is long, and she does not like the book she has brought with her. Finding her intriguing, Roger lights her cigarette, and she notices his monogrammed matchbook with the initials R O T. When she inquires about his middle initial, he replies that the O stands for nothing. Roger admits to Eve that he does not have a ticket, and she says that he can share her compartment. They leave quickly when the train stops and two unidentified

men get on board. Eve has stolen a key from a porter, and she unlocks the top berth for Roger to hide in. While lying on the lower bed and speaking to Roger in the closed upper bed, the police knock on the door and ask Eve about the man in the dining car. She assures them that he made small talk and left, and that satisfies them.

Now Eve can unlock the top berth, and she and Roger get to know each other better. As the night and the train simultaneously move along, the couple find themselves embracing and falling in love at a pace equal to the train's speed. The sexual innuendo of their banter reflects Hitchcock's own fantasies: "...his feelings were poured into the creation of startling images, his disarticulate longings onto the lips of his many characters..." (9). The film flashes to a different part of the train, where a porter is handing a note to Leonard. As he subsequently hands the note to his boss, the viewer reads its contents: "What do I do with him in the morning? Eve." The train finally arrives in Chicago on schedule, and Roger dresses in a stolen redcap's uniform and carries Eve's luggage to avoid the attention of the police. Eve tells Roger to change back into his suit, which she has hidden in her case, while she calls Kaplan for him. She glances back and is aware of the presence of Vandamm and Leonard. In the meantime, the police have been alerted about the missing uniform, and Roger is forced to duck into a men's room where he quickly changes and avoids recognition by slathering shaving cream on his face.

Eve is seen in a phone booth scribbling down notes, just as Leonard is giving instructions in a phone booth several feet away. They leave their respective booths at the same moment, exhibiting no recognition of one another. Eve meets up with Roger and tells him that Kaplan will meet him at 3:30 p.m. in Indianapolis. He is to take the bus and get off at a destination known as the Prairie Stop. Although in a rush to comply with the

instructions, Roger asks Eve how he can find her. She becomes agitated as she looks toward a door and tells Roger to go, because agents are coming. Roger displays a “fundamental impotence of his self-confidence in the face of chaos unleashed by political intrigue” (Spoto, “The Art” 302). He rushes to the bus, and by that afternoon Roger has disembarked from the bus and finds that he has indeed arrived on a vast open prairie; civilization has not yet come to this part of the country.

Lone vehicles pass by at long intervals as Roger patiently waits for the elusive agent. “Camouflaged in the modern metropolis, Thornhill is not a unique ad executive, rather, he is one of many men... but out in the open country where the pioneer farmers...once lived, he can ...reflect upon his own identity” (Millington 138). When a man finally emerges from a car on the opposite side of the road, Roger assumes it must be Kaplan and approaches him. The man is actually there to catch the next bus, and Roger continues to wait. Roger notices a crop-dusting plane flying over a corn field in the distance, and the man remarks on something curious about this before boarding his bus: “That’s funny, that plane’s dustin’ crops where there ain’t no crops” [sic] Once Roger is alone again, the plane approaches, flies low, and strafes him with machine gun fire. He runs to an approaching car, but it does not stop, so he takes cover in the corn field. Just as Roger begins to feel safe, the plane flushes him out of the stalks by dropping pesticides on him and making him choke. Desperate, Roger runs toward an approaching gasoline tanker and stands in the middle of the road, forcing it to stop. The driver slams on the brakes just in time, and Roger is thrown to the ground uninjured. However, the low-flying plane cannot avoid contact with the tanker, and the impact

causes a horrendous explosion. As flames shoot up into the air, and passersby stop to gawk, Roger steals a pickup truck and flees.

This is both a pivotal scene in the film and a profound existential moment for Roger. He is exposed and vulnerable and forced to face his own demons. “Cold War spies...are transformed into fantastic reflections of a deep-seated cultural paranoia” (Cosner). Hitchcock chooses to derive suspense by placing Roger in a setting from which there is no cover and no escape. Roger is seemingly safe in a cornfield on a sunny day when danger comes from an unexpected threat. Hitchcock might have drawn from his early childhood fears of bombings in England: “...war-time shelling near his home...aggravated the boy’s fear of the unexpected...” (Spoto, “The Dark Side” 38). Undeterred by his close call with death, and perhaps proud of his own response, Roger drives the stolen pickup to the Ambassador East Hotel in Chicago to continue his pursuit of Kaplan. A new restlessness propels Roger into action; a purposeful journey replaces aimless running. Similar to Hitchcock’s life quest, Roger is on a “search for a deeper, authentic identity and establishment of a relationship” (“The Art” 303).

Arriving at the Chicago hotel, Roger is informed that Kaplan has checked out very early that morning but has left a forwarding address for a hotel in Rapid City, South Dakota. While pondering the fact that Kaplan’s itinerary does not coincide with Eve’s instructions, Roger shockingly spots Eve entering the hotel and getting into the elevator. When it stops at the fourth floor, Roger tells the desk that Eve Kendall is expecting him in room four “something” and is given the correct number. When Eve opens the door and sees Roger, she seems both surprised and delighted and rushes to embrace him. Roger’s confusion is now mingled with suspicion, and he views Eve as a new piece of the

puzzle that he is trying to solve. Eve says she has plans for the evening just as the phone rings. As she writes an address on a pad, Roger notices a newspaper detailing the horrific collision out at Prairie Stop. No longer trusting her, Roger insists that she cancel her plans and have dinner with him. Eve tells Roger to leave and forget about her. When Roger will not take no for an answer, Eve acquiesces but insists that she call a valet to clean his dirty suit. She gives his clothes to the valet as Roger pretends to run the water in the shower, and she slips quietly out. Roger quickly makes out the address from imprints left on the pad and decides to follow her.

When the valet returns his suit, Roger gets dressed and follows Eve with a taxi. The address proves to be an auction house, and Eve's companions at the gallery reveal an even bigger surprise for Roger. The bogus Lester Townsend stands over a smiling Eve, affectionately stroking her shoulder as Leonard looks on. Overcome with jealousy, Roger approaches the trio and shows his displeasure with Eve. His captor, 'Townsend,' slowly removes his hand from Eve as he gives her a reproachful glance, and she responds with a look of fear. As Roger angrily continues to make disparaging remarks about Eve's character, his former captor is suddenly distracted by a primitive figurine that is up for bid. Once his captor wins the figurine, we discover that his real name is Vandamm. He signals for Leonard to finish Roger off, and Leonard blocks the back entrance while Valerian appears and blocks the front. Once Vandamm and Eve leave, Roger causes a disruption at the auction with his rude and outrageous behavior. This ruse gets him to be arrested and allows him to evade his captors. As the police escort Roger out, the viewer gets a glimpse of the Professor making a phone call as he blends in with the crowd.

Safely inside the police cruiser, Roger proudly proclaims himself to be the U.N. murderer and tells the cops that they will be famous for bringing him in.<sup>3</sup> Excited, the police officers call ahead to the station to announce the news. Suddenly dejected, the officer tells his partner that they must say nothing and deliver him to the airport instead. The Professor is waiting at the NorthWest Airlines terminal to take custody of Roger, and he leads him out to a plane destined for Rapid City, South Dakota in close proximity to Mount Rushmore. The Professor explains that, although George Kaplan is a fabricated agent, government agents in Washington need Roger to continue the charade to assure that Vandamm suspects nothing. It is imperative that Vandamm leave the country that night as planned from his house near Mount Rushmore. The concealed agent must be able to obtain information about Vandamm's overseas spy organization and learn how it is able to smuggle national security secrets in and out of the U.S. Although initially refusing to comply with this scenario, Roger relents when the Professor confesses that Eve is the undercover agent who needs protection. This is especially critical now that her candid reaction to Roger at the auction gallery may have placed her under a cloud of suspicion as having an emotional relationship with a known enemy of Vandamm. "Guilt...is a predominant theme in Hitchcock's films"(17). Hitchcock places Roger at another cross-road on his journey to find himself. He can refuse to be involved and retreat back to his comfortable yet lonely life, or he can risk his life for Eve and possibly reinvent a new and fulfilling life for himself. "Thornhill is the embodiment of... 1950s stereotypes. He is...the Madison Avenue advertising executive who drinks too much, and he is the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit...In contrast, George Kaplan is a daring and

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<sup>3</sup> According to Spoto ("The Art" 9), the police in Hitchcock's boyhood village were corrupt, took bribes and exploited their power.

inventive spy” (Wilson 1160). Ironically, Roger’s alter ego is a false identity that encourages him to develop a true identity.

Without hesitation, Roger agrees to mitigate the damage he has created for Eve and willingly goes undercover as Kaplan. “He has a chance to manifest at last an unselfish heroism” (Spoto, “The Art” 302). Hitchcock makes it clear that Roger has a single-minded purpose; the government’s interests are not a motivating factor for him in any way. Roger agrees to a meeting between himself and Vandamm in the Visitor’s Center of Mount Rushmore. At a set time, and with the Professor monitoring the proceedings, Vandamm, Eve and Leonard arrive to meet Kaplan. Roger brokers a deal with Vandamm: he will not interfere with the foreign spy group leaving the country that night, but Eve must be turned over to Kaplan so that she can be properly disciplined. As Vandamm agrees to Kaplan’s terms, Roger grabs Eve, and Eve, in turn, grabs a gun from her purse and shoots Roger. As she flees the scene behind Vandamm and Leonard, the Professor rushes in and examines Roger. He slowly shakes his head to indicate it is not good, and park employees take Roger’s body on a stretcher and load it into an official vehicle and drive off.

The scene shifts to a wooded area where Roger steps out of the vehicle and is reunited with Eve. She has asked the Professor to arrange this meeting so that she can confront Roger in person. Eve explains that she met Vandamm at a party and fell in love with him. The Professor was monitoring the relationship and enlisted Eve’s help in extracting information from Vandamm and his organization. Once she realized the true character of her lover, she agreed. She explains further that accepting this assignment allowed her to feel important for the first time in her life. With this revealing statement,



Hitchcock links Eve and Roger as similar souls; they both assume new identities in the hope that they will find new lives. Both of them, in their roles as double agents, are “depicted as masks without knowable interiors” (Morris 49). Roger assures Eve that all is forgiven and that they can now resume their relationship since Vandamm is leaving the country. Roger did not realize that Eve was scheduled to continue her assignment and board the plane that night. When Roger tries to physically restrain her, the Professor orders his driver to knock Roger out, and Eve returns to meet Vandamm at his house as scheduled.

That evening, Roger finds himself in a locked hospital room with his clothes missing. The Professor arrives with some new clothes and tells him that he will be a ‘guest’ at the hospital for several days. Spoto (“The Dark Side” 21) indicates that Hitchcock’s early readings of Dickens stayed with him and enhanced his grim distrust in any public institution. When Roger asks the Professor what agency of the government he works for, the Professor replies: “FBI, CIA, ONI...we’re all in the same alphabet soup” [sic]. Roger’s intentional relaxed demeanor and banter puts the Professor at ease, and when Roger asks for some bourbon to alleviate the boredom of his stay, the Professor leaves to comply with the request. Roger then dresses, climbs out on a ledge, enters a window of a room next door and, ultimately, manages to escape from the hospital.

The viewer next sees Roger at Vandamm’s house. Flashing lights at a nearby landing strip signals an incoming plane, and Roger knows that time is of the essence if he is to save Eve. He goes up to the living room window and hears Vandamm saying that the plane is ten minutes away. Eve goes upstairs as Leonard tells his boss that he needs to speak with him. Leonard confides that he has gone through Eve’s luggage and

examined her gun. He says that, despite her apparent show of loyalty at the Visitor's Center, Eve has tricked Vandamm by shooting blanks at Roger. To demonstrate this fact, Leonard fires the gun at Vandamm. Leonard is adamant that Eve cannot be trusted to know that the auction figurine contains secret microfilm. His ego bruised, Vandamm punches Leonard, but, eventually, he composes himself and gets back to business. With Roger still listening outside the window, Vandamm assures Leonard that Eve will be dropped from the plane once they are over the ocean.

Frantic, Roger climbs up to the balcony of Eve's room to warn her just as she descends the stairs to return to the living room. He writes a quick note inside the cover of his famous monogrammed matchbook to let her know that she is in danger and that he is in her room. He throws the matchbook down toward her, and it lands on the floor. Leonard nonchalantly picks it up and tosses it on the table. Thankfully, Eve recognizes the initials, reads the message and excuses herself to return upstairs. Roger tells her everything: Vandamm knows about the blanks, he is planning to kill her, and the figurine contains stolen microfilm. Roger's pleading with her to escape falls on deaf ears; Eve goes back downstairs with the intention of boarding the plane. As the trio leaves the house and heads toward the landing strip, Roger decides to follow them. When the housekeeper, Anna, spots him and keeps him from leaving by pointing a gun at him. She is Valerian's wife, and she tells Roger that both Leonard and her husband will return to the house after the plane takes off.

At the very moment that Eve appears reticent about boarding the plane, shots ring out from the house and distract Vandamm, Leonard and Valerian. Roger sees that Anna has Eve's gun, and, realizing that it contains blanks, he runs out of the house, jumps into

a car, and heads toward the plane just as Eve grabs the figurine from Vandamm. Eve runs toward Roger's car, and they drive to the gate with Valerian and Licht on foot; these two know that the gate is locked and that the car is trapped on the property. Once Roger and Eve discover that they can go no further, they exit the vehicle and run into the woods. They suddenly stop running, however, when they find themselves standing on the precipice of the Mount Rushmore monument.

Aware that Leonard and Valerian are close-by, the couple makes the heart-stopping decision to scale down the faces of the monument. With the prospect of his own mortality looming just below, Roger must choose his true identity. Roger "... is demoted from a man above the economy – a controller, a manipulator, a power so aloof..." (Pomerance 23). The reserved and cautious man of the past has been replaced by an open and brave man who can face danger and commit to a relationship. He tells Eve that he plans to marry her. When she questions why his previous marriages failed, his response indicates that the reasons no longer apply to him; that dull man no longer exists.

Valerian and Leonard watch the couple as they boldly descend the stone faces, and they decide to split up and follow them down. The cautious movements of Roger and Eve are interrupted when they are startled by the appearance of a knife-wielding Valerian. As Roger and his assailant struggle on a precarious ledge, Valerian suddenly falls to his death. With this distraction, Leonard manages to reach Eve, grab the figurine, and shove her off the ledge. She manages to hold onto another ledge just below, and Roger rushes to save her by grabbing her wrist. He is supporting himself by hanging on a ledge with one hand, as his other hand barely holds onto Eve below. Hitchcock explored "the deepest areas of his inner life...refracted through the angles and shadows of a film

narrative...an alternating series of violent and tender images” (Spoto, “The Dark Side” 8). Roger looks up and sees Leonard standing above him and pleads for his help. Instead, Leonard stomps on Roger’s fingers with his shoe at the very moment that a shot rings out. Leonard is dead and falls off the monument, and the figurine he was holding smashes into pieces, exposing the microfilm. Hitchcock never reveals the contents of the microfilm; it is of no importance to him. In his view, government institutions justify their actions with insignificant details.

The film pans to the top of the Mount Rushmore monument and shows a park ranger putting away his gun as the Professor and a handcuffed Vandamm gaze down on the scene. With the sudden realization that he is the only one around who can save Eve, Roger musters all his strength and manages to pull her up. Before the viewer can catch his/her breath, the scene shifts instantaneously to a smiling Roger pulling his bride into the upper berth of a train that swiftly enters a tunnel, and the film ends. Spoto (42) notes that Hitchcock was not unlike other artists in his craft who permitted the pleasant resolution that life so often denied.

Hitchcock’s film exposes the shallow nature of a consumer-driven capitalist society that promotes consumption through advertising. “In the world of advertising, there’s no such thing as a lie. There’s only expedient exaggeration” [sic] (*North* quote). The lie is not confined to products; it extends to the quality of life itself. Success is measured in wealth, but wealth without meaningful relationships does not translate into happiness. Roger is “...forced to find a deeper identity, disabused of the illusion that his tailored city life in advertising has any meaning: (Spoto, “The Art” 308). Cold War paranoia is confronted and conquered, and neither Roger’s job nor his money is a factor

in his victory. Loneliness and apathy are replaced by love and optimism only after Roger rebels against complacency. It is interesting to note that Hitchcock settled for complacency in his own life; he attained commercial success, but true happiness eluded him. “His life was, in fact, riddled with disappointments, unhappy surprises, interjections of chaos and of cruelty” (“The Dark Side” 9).

## SIMILARITIES

Although Jim Stark and Roger Thornhill are very different protagonists in these two iconic post-war films, they do share certain similarities. Happiness seems to allude them both, despite the fact that neither lacks for anything materially. What is wrong with them? Why do they feel like outcasts in their own society? Jim is a rich boy from the suburbs who feels lonely and abandoned by everyone around him, and Roger is a successful businessman who has no identity apart from his career. Both characters are on a quest for their place in a confusing world. Their separate journeys and revelations give rise to Jim’s rebellion and Roger’s conformity. Ironically, both *Rebel Without a Cause* and *North by NorthWest* espouse a need for a balance between the two. Jim needs to control his rebellious tendency, and Roger needs to rebel against an overly structured life in order for each of them to create new and authentic lives.

Another similarity between the two protagonists is a shared sense of restlessness, due in part to the newly created mobile culture of the 1950s. Americans were in a hurry in this decade like never before. Internal unrest could manifest itself in car rides in the suburbs and public transportation in the city. Boredom in the suburbs could be satisfied with rides to meet friends. “They owned cars, cruised the highways and frequented the

fast-food outlets and drive-in movies” (Shmoop Editorial Team). Likewise, businessmen could hop on subways or jump into cabs to maneuver around the city efficiently and rapidly. Both *Rebel Without a Cause* and *North by NorthWest* show their protagonists in motion as if symbolizing their need to escape from their unsatisfying lives.

At the core of *Rebel Without a Cause* is the notion that post-war consumerism provided young people a material world devoid of emotional attachments. Jim’s parents come to the police station to bail him out and remind him that they have given him everything a boy could want. Jim responds that these things are never rooted in love, a notion lost on his parents. Conflict arises in Jim, however, as he simultaneously denounces the materialism of his parent’s generation and epitomizes the consumer culture of the 1950s. His shiny black Ford, stylish blue jeans and rebellious, flashy red bomber jacket are symbols of consumerism prominently displayed in the film.

In *North by NorthWest* Roger makes his money by being a creator of the consumer culture and, as such, he does not buy into the whole propaganda. Pomerance (21) suggests that Roger views no product as being true enough to interest him. Hitchcock uses symbolism to show that Roger tries to remove himself from this culture. “At Shaw & Oppenheim, as a careful reader of the auction scene would demonstrate, he is above consumption; in the dining car of the Twentieth Century Limited he does not eat; at the Oak Bar he does not imbibe; at the cafeteria at Mount Rushmore he does not nibble” (25). His conflict lies in having no desire to indulge in the very consumer industry he perpetuates. “In the consumer paradise that was America in the 1950s, advertising had become the epitome of language, and so billboards and magazine ads

were our poetry and financial success”(21). This quest for more of everything resulted in the restlessness embedded in the wild good chase that characterizes *North by NorthWest*.

The impact of consumerism on post-war American society plays a prominent role in both films. Jim lives in a dysfunctional consumer-driven household while Roger is a perpetrator of consumerism who lives in denial of its consequences. When Jim screams out “Let her see it!” (*Rebel* quote), referring to his father nervously cleaning up a mess he had made so that his wife would not find out, he is “suggesting that for life to be worth looking at, the world does not have to be manicured and made-up, costumed with garnishes, neatly carved and sauced” (Slocum, “Approaches” 39). When Roger is kidnapped, his money cannot save him. “There’s no preventing this thing; even Thomhill’s habit of bribing, of over-tipping for favors, accomplishes nothing” (Spoto, “The Art” 302). While neither film finds inherent fault with prosperity, both films do highlight the negative impact it can have on individuals when money and success replace meaningful relationships. This results in alienation. The external images of Jim’s red jacket and Roger’s gray suit merely serve to disguise their internal angst. They only shed these images after they have transformed themselves through incisive choices: Jim finds his individual resilience at the “chickie run,” and Roger realizes that the superficial trappings of life cannot save his life from the crop-dusting plane. This plane is “an instrument of victimization...that causes metamorphosis” (Cavell 768). Jim and Roger confront their fears and prevail in the end.

## LOCATION

Film directors put great thought into the specific locations needed to enhance their works. Prior to production, both inside and outside scenes are imagined in order to achieve the intended impact of a given film. When Nicholas Ray decides to tell a story using a narrow time frame, he has to avoid superfluous details. The setting of each scene must have relevance in developing the characters and theme of the movie. Ray is therefore concise: one suburban town and several families going about their daily lives over a twenty-four hour period in post-war America.

In *Rebel Without a Cause*, Ray chooses upscale suburban Los Angeles for his backdrop setting in order to best exemplify the lifestyle of ‘normal delinquents’ of the 1950s. This location then allows him to incorporate Griffith Park and the Observatory as settings for the most pivotal scenes in the film. Since all the action is covered over a brief period, using an iconic structure for multiple internal and exterior shots is both insightful and economical. According to Schleier, Ray chose the Observatory because it represented ‘the immense cycles of time’ in the story, and he felt that it imbued the film with the feeling of ‘a classical Greek tragedy.’ It sits atop the Hollywood Hills and lends itself to the drama created by the main characters. The Planetarium lecture, the knife fight, the “chickie run,” the mock family scene, and Plato’s death were all shot at this location.

The Observatory serves three major functions in *Rebel*. Its planetarium show creates a parallel between celestial and terrestrial events, especially its ‘end of world’ lecture, which parallel the rebellious teenagers and their chaotic familial relationships. It is the setting for Plato’s isolation, and,



finally, at the film's conclusion, the existential loneliness of all humans.

Lastly, its architectural properties – temple-like appearance and domical structure – serve as a microcosm of the universe and ultimately as an image of stability (Schleier).

The settings of the police station, the school, and the homes of the central characters, though brief by comparison, provide necessary components of the film as well. These individual locations allow the viewer to gain insight into each character's motivation for wanting to escape to the Observatory in the first place. The family dynamics within the homes of Jim, Judy and Plato help explain the unique pain each exhibits. Without such background information, the actions of the characters would seem random and of very little interest to an audience. Ray ensures that these teens are not seen as dramatic spoiled rich kids. Jim's personal angst and family dysfunction is revealed at the police station, the dynamics of teenage acceptance and rejection are explored in the school setting, and the home settings of the three main characters are crucial in making sense of their empathy and connection towards one another. "*Rebel's* critique of society is biting, because it targets exactly those institutions of...bourgeois life – family, home, school –meant to be...safe, but that can turn out to be alienating and victimizing" (Slocum, "Senses").

Schrader (13) notes that Nicholas Ray began his career in film noir, a style that works out its conflicts visually rather than thematically: film noir creates artistic solutions to sociological problems. An example of this cinematic influence is the nighttime scene on the bluff in Griffith Park, "a dark and alienating milieu," chosen by Ray to convey the

angst of the protagonist (Slocum, “Approaches” 41). Choosing the appropriate locations in *Rebel* gave Ray the opportunity to incorporate visual scenes that evoked intense emotional response from the viewer. Having worked under Frank Lloyd Wright in his younger years, Ray “learned the importance of space and geography” (IMDb, “Nicholas”).

Hitchcock was also known as a director who focused on the visual. Frayne (78) notes that ‘messages’ decay very fast, but genuine visual effectiveness is more enduring. Hitchcock chooses his settings and locations in *North by NorthWest* to intrigue the viewers and further enhance the suspense of his film. He selects affluent New York City as his initial backdrop to showcase Roger’s lifestyle and job on Madison Avenue; advertising and consumer-driven malaise coexist within chaos. The Plaza Hotel and the mansion on Long Island are settings that merge wealth with corruption; danger can lurk in brightly lit upscale settings and dark highways alike. The United Nations Building is a location that epitomizes America’s prominent role in maintaining world peace, but even here international spies are able to murder an innocent citizen in broad daylight. Washington, D.C. is the setting for clandestine meetings of government agents who put national interests above those of the innocent civilians they are supposed to protect. When the location shifts to Chicago, the Midwest initially seems no different than the East: another city, a different hotel. In stark contrast, the spacious prairies of the Midwest in Indianapolis set the stage for the most dramatic scene in the movie. Here the viewer is exposed to the sense of Cold War paranoia that existed in the 1950s; there is no safe place from the foreign agents who plot America’s demise.

Hitchcock carefully selects the film's final location of Mount Rushmore in South Dakota to counterbalance this sense of post-war paranoia. This monument stands as a significant symbol of American resilience. "For people who perceive it in grand terms, Rushmore is a patriotic psalm in stone, one that catches the national spirit in the true national setting, as opposed to a memorial set in a corrupt, bureaucratized capital" (Freund). Although Hitchcock sees the potential weakness of a post-war society that is sinking under the weight of its own prosperity, he also sees a country that refuses to capitulate to evil forces. The Mount Rushmore monument is more than a symbol, it is "an accomplishment born, planned, and created in the minds and by the hands of Americans for Americans..." (Boime 143). This sculpture is rooted in strength as is the democracy in which it was created. Hitchcock chooses this specific location to emphasize America's resilient spirit. Millington (137) contends that Roger Thornhill's character unfolds as a series of ordeals in places that trace the mythological history of American individualism.

When a foreign enemy, known or unknown, dares confront America, the fearful, isolated individual will rise to the occasion and fight with an inner strength he/she may have suppressed in order to lead a materialistic, comfortable lifestyle. Eve is willing to go undercover and risk her life when she perceives that her country is being undermined by secretive foreign agents. Roger is willing to confront his vacuous existence as an advertising executive and risk his life to save Eve, even though the elusive foreign agents have tried to kill him on several occasions. Perhaps Roger falls in love with Eve because she is a kindred spirit who understands the deception of materialism. Hitchcock allows his characters, and the American people as a whole, to redeem themselves from the

pitfalls of consumerism. “In South Dakota, the visage of American greatness looms over the vast plain and stares serenely onto...what? A still unfolding manifest destiny...” (Freund).

Ironically, Hitchcock did not like to shoot on location. He preferred to create realistic scenes and props at the studio where he could have full control of lighting and other factors. This is why his films contain special effects composite and rear screen shots (IMBd, “Alfred”). In fact, Mount Rushmore was constructed on a studio lot, and all the action in the monument scenes is staged to look like the real thing. The ability to contrive reality on screen coincides with the nature of the man. Spoto (“The Dark Side” 9) notes that the image Hitchcock portrayed was a carefully edited illusion. Roger is portrayed as such a man in advertising: it is all illusion.

## SILENT FEARS

“Post-war culture in the United States possessed an often somber underside that contrasts markedly with the allegedly optimistic public face of the period” (Dimendberg 8). Although urban renewal and the advent of economic prosperity should have given the country much to celebrate, post-war America often found little reason to rejoice. Throughout the 1950s Americans felt the angst of the Atomic Age. The knowledge that the Soviet Union had both the capability and desire to attack the United States instilled a silent fear in the hearts of many.<sup>4</sup> This was not easy to ignore, because the fear of atomic annihilation was embedded in American pop culture: rock and roll, comic books, literature, and movies were infused with post-war angst.

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<sup>4</sup> Americans struggled to overcome “the sense of alienation and powerlessness, the dread and uncertainty, mania and depression, which the bomb created” (McGuckin).

To compensate for this sense of dread, Americans found ways to busy themselves in the 1950s. Consumerism was used to mitigate fears, and the more people worried about accumulating material goods and wealth, the more they could suppress their fears. Quick impulse buys were used to fix problems and fill the voids created by Cold War paranoia. In addition, the newly formed civil defense movement was gaining momentum. Project East River, for example, was designed by the government to assist Americans in being adequately prepared for a nuclear war. “This( project) made a point of not underestimating the gravity of the Soviet nuclear threat...and stressed that the United States had seriously underestimated the dangers a possible nuclear attack posed to national security” (Oakes 343). This knowledge did not nothing short of exacerbate the demand for ‘more’ of everything: more wealth, more products, more appliances, more cars and more travel. Fear further perpetrated restlessness and alienation.

Jim, in *Rebel Without a Cause*, exemplifies the post-war suburban teenager battling existential despair in the midst of prosperity. Silent fears produce silent screams, and Ray reflects this angst in his protagonist. As Jim sits slumped in a chair at the police station with his mouth hung open, he seems to be mimicking the sound of a police siren heard in the distance. The viewer soon realizes, however, that the sound “is coming from his mouth...coming from inside himself as well as from outside...no siren at all but precisely a wail” (Slocum, “Approaches” 39). His parents fail him because they have been caught up in the trap of this new consumer-driven society. They use their wealth to mask their fears and replace emotional attachments with things. Jim’s rebellious response to his parents reflects the efforts of a fearful and vaguely despondent male beset by post-war angst to find himself (41). Roger, in *North by NorthWest*, exemplifies the

post-war corporate executive who drives the consumerism that is overtaking the country. He masks his fears by staying in motion and not forming emotional attachments to people or things. When Roger asserts that his middle initial stands for 'nothing,' he is acknowledging the meaninglessness of his existence. Paranoia and fear have created a serious shift in society whereby people have lost trust in each other and themselves. In response, Americans feel compelled to create a new narrative regarding their lives.

As the rise of McCarthy and Eisenhower demonstrated, Americans were eager to see a more bourgeois view of themselves. Crime had to move to the suburbs. The criminal put on a gray flannel suit, and the footsore cop was replaced by the 'mobile unit' careening down the expressway. Any attempt at social criticism had to be cloaked in ludicrous affirmations of the American way of life (Schrader 12).

## MOVEMENT

The restlessness spurred on by Cold War fears permeated every aspect of society in the 1950s. Transportation was not the only means used by society to keep people in a constant state of motion. On a deeper level, family members could move briskly around their homes in such a way as to avoid any meaningful interaction with one another; television could be used as a distraction, and cars parked in driveways allowed for a quick escape. The fast pace and crowded streets of urban city life allowed individuals to move about unnoticed. Prosperity created leisure time, and leisure time encouraged individual activities over family time. Fathers golfed, mothers shopped, and teenagers congregated at malls and at drive-ins. These pleasant distractions slowly undermined

family values at the same time that they shielded post-war Americans from their fears. Hitchcock had lived through war in England during his younger years, and he understood the concerns of a post-war society that needed to move forward. “The people of London developed, as people in war do everywhere, a habit of doleful but courageous insistence on trying to go on with life as normally as possible” (Spoto, “The Dark Side” 38). Hitchcock’s concern, however, was that Americans were going down a slippery slope by putting such emphasis on consumerism as a panacea.

It was not accidental that both Nicholas Ray and Alfred Hitchcock kept their characters in states of perpetual motion. Discontent people run away from that which causes them pain, and post-war America was experiencing psychological suffering. On a conscious level, movement has a direction and a known purpose. On an unconscious level, movement is simply an act of physics: a body in motion tends to stay in motion. The movements of Jim suggest the former, and the movements of Roger suggest the latter.

In *Rebel Without a Cause*, Ray expresses the expediency of time and movement by compressing his story to fit within a twenty-four hour span. Schleier notes that the Observatory is invested with the task of structuring time, while at the same time simulating the traumas of war, thermonuclear conflict, and familial dysfunction. Ray’s film “displays a visual flair...marked by restless camera movement” (Slocum, “Senses”). The viewer is quickly made aware that Jim has been moving from neighborhood to neighborhood and from school to school in order to avoid, rather than confront, his brushes with the law. These moves have resulted in alienation from his peers and contributed to his anger and rebellion toward his parents. Jim’s father and mother have

their own agenda for moving; they want to maintain their image of the perfect American family. Ironically, Jim moves outside of his family home in his search for himself.

Likewise, Judy and Plato move away from their dysfunctional homes in pursuit of meaningful relationships in their lives. The characters in this film metaphorically run to the police, run to school, run to Griffith Park and run to an abandoned mansion in a desperate attempt to find a “real” home where they can feel accepted and loved. The rebels in this film know what they are lacking, and they know what they want. Although unsure of how to attain the elusive happiness and love they crave, Jim, Judy and Plato continuously move toward the unknown with the intention of finding a better life. Ray stresses the conscious intent behind the movements of his characters, because “he views the teenage years as a heightened state of awareness” (Frascella, Intro).

In *North by NorthWest*, Roger’s complacency with his comfortable life is reflected in the unconscious movements that take him through his day. Routines and schedules mindlessly propel Roger along. Spoto (“The Dark Side” 22) notes that Hitchcock’s own complacent life was safe, quiet, withdrawn and friendless. Despite being lonely, Roger has no interest in changing the course of his life. Morris (45) refers to the acronym for his name, ROT, and suggests that perhaps it is a foreshadowing of his destiny in life: to rot. Certainly this might be the case if he were to continue on with his shallow life as an advertising executive in corporate America.

Fate intercedes, however, and Roger is randomly and forcefully moved out of his comfort zone and taken on a journey. “We should note that the movie’s absurdist plot rests on a paradox. One “nothing,” Thornhill, is accidentally mistaken for another,



Kaplan, and it is from this confusion of ciphers that all the dizzy consequences flow” (Wilson 1160). Roger must keep moving to various locations around the country in order to save his life both literally and figuratively. Spoto (“The Art” 310) asserts that Roger must deny his apparent identity and enter into a kind of shadow-world of espionage; he must deny himself in order to begin a real identity. Initially, Roger is kidnapped and whisked away against his will. By the end of the film, Roger is in charge of his movements. He charts his own destiny and creates a new inner life that is not defined by geographical location.

Hitchcock was obsessed with all forms of transportation, and, accordingly, he had Roger constantly moved around by cars, cabs, buses, planes and trains. “In his younger years, Hitchcock astonished his family by reciting from memory the schedules of most of England’s train lines (Spoto, “The Dark Side” 20). Hitchcock was also fascinated by maps, timetables, and the direction of movement. “Perhaps they correspond to his training in tidiness...everything regulated and on schedule...perhaps a wish to be somewhere else (21). The title of this film, *North by NorthWest*, signifies the importance Hitchcock attached to the direction of the movements that unfold as opposed to the importance of the characters themselves.

In fact, Morris (44) observes that nobody knows with certainty what the title means. Hitchcock’s love of Shakespeare has led some to speculate that he chose the title from Hamlet: “I am but mad north-north-west” [sic] (Vest 2). Roger Thornhill chasing ‘George Kaplan’ across the country might indicate that he is mad, a possibility that does not escape the audience. Perhaps there is a more plausible explanation: particular places may be used to establish the direction and meaning of the film’s journey. “In a narrative

of essential Americanness: [sic] the move west, the reclamation of the frontier by Laconic pioneer farmers, the notion that the Middle West - here stripped down to iconic simplicity – is the realest America there is” (Millington 138). Traveling northwest from New York, Roger ends up in a vacuous open space where he is able to reinvent himself. In either case, Hitchcock never felt a need to clarify the meaning of the title.

The unique opening credits of the movie set the stage for the fast-paced movement and suspense that defines this work. Hitchcock solicited the help of graphic designer Saul Bass to create this deliberate image. The mesmerizing movement of the words going up, down, and sideways on the side of the CIT Financial Building on Madison Avenue is breathtaking and immediately draws the viewer in. In this same way, the ending of the movie holds the interest of the audience by incorporating movement as well. “Like the train, the film ends in transit, movement, or ‘pure direction’ (as in the title), without character change or signification in marriage” (Morris 45).

## RESOLUTION

Americans may have initially turned to consumerism in response to post-war angst, but they also sought refuge in spirituality and religion. When a nation’s prosperity was not translating into national resilience, Americans were forced to re-examine their values and find the source of their weakness. If Communism was the great evil responsible for America’s anxiety, then Christianity might be the antidote for fear. “The extreme anti-communism of this period, which reaffirmed capitalist virtue and celebrated religious faith, transcended politics... in the search for personal salvation and national survival” (Toy 77). In 1955, Eisenhower stated that “without God, there can be no

American...government...or an American way of life. Recognition of the Supreme Being is...the most basic expression of Americanism” (Eisenhower quote).

In 1954, the phrase “under God” was inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance to give the nation a sense of peace; if God was with America, then America was safe. At the same time that this nation was reaffirming God, it also had to reaffirm its faith in capitalism. Although it seemed hypocritical to support a capitalist system that created the consumer society in the first place, Americans were asked to look to themselves for the problems created. Toy (70) asserts that individuals made choices to indulge in excesses and that capitalism was not to blame. “The free market economy informed with the moral and spiritual self-disciplines of stewardship was the only known economic system consistent with Christian principles” (79). As post-war America was seeking resolution to its problems on a national level, so were filmmakers seeking resolution to problems on an individual level. Movies can transcend politics and affect society in a personal way.

Nicholas Ray and Alfred Hitchcock were acutely aware of the challenges faced by young and old alike in a fearful consumer-driven society. “In 1953, supply caught up with demand and consumers had purchased the necessities of life...creating a period of ‘consumption anxiety’” (1950s TV Turns on America). Heightened Cold War fears, fractured family values, meaningless consumption and a sense of alienation were overwhelming people. Jim Stark and Roger Thornhill represent two cohort groups striving to resolve the problems in their lives.

*Rebel Without a Cause* represents “individual rebellion that has the possibility of social reconciliation” (Slocum, “Senses”). Ray’s characters must experience internal pain

and demonstrate great determination before they can reconcile with themselves and others. Jim must confront his parents, confront friends at school, confront his own demons and, ultimately, be willing to change. Judy must mitigate her defense mechanisms and trust that not all males are like her father. Frank must assume his role as the patriarch of his family, and his wife must acquiesce to her new role in the hierarchy.

Even though Nicholas Ray did not find the peace he was searching for in his own life, he surprisingly allows this film to end with most of the characters having hope for a better future through the resolution of their fears and anger. The one exception to this is Plato, a deeply disturbed misfit who, like Ray himself, is unable to overcome his demons. Since the only resolution for an outcast is death, Plato must die. Ray feels dead metaphorically in a society that never fully embraces him personally or professionally. Perhaps Ray's view of life is not as jaded as it appears to be, or perhaps he simply creates an ending that coincides with his own desire for a happier life. In the view of Schrader (12), conflict is resolved in the characters who decide to embrace traditional family values, and the viewer is left with the sense that these characters can now go on to enjoy "the American way of life."

*North by NorthWest* allows the main protagonist to confront the shallowness of a consumer-driven corporate life and find resolution through rebellion against such a life. Roger's "emptiness of interiority" is replaced with meaningful intent (Morris 49). Hitchcock leads Roger on a journey across the American landscape and allows him to renew his spirit and find his true identity in the very place that corporate advertising executives are using to deceive American consumers. "A remarkable number of advertisements contain backgrounds...from the ever-popular American heartland. It is as

if advertisers have decided most Americans are middle-class, living in a Mythical Middletown in mid-America” (Fleming 285).

Madison Avenue sets the standard for the proverbial American dream, and Roger has been complicit in perpetuating this myth by convincing consumers to spend more in order to attain it. Hitchcock seizes on this notion when he includes fake identities and fake scenarios in *North by NorthWest*. It is only when Roger stands alone on the open plains of a Midwest prairie that he reinvents himself; he becomes an open book with a clean slate. Roger’s transformation is made complete on the face of Mount Rushmore as he comes face to face with this element of American culture. “The motif of identities slipping and falling is made literal in the final moments of the film, as people fall from or are saved from the faces on Mount Rushmore” (Spoto, “The Art” 304). Hitchcock advocates American resiliency over consumerism as a means of resolving Cold War fears.

## BACKGROUNDS

Creativity often arises from the deep inner feelings and conflicts that exist within the artist, who looks for a medium to develop this expression. The characters and scenarios that appear in film often have their roots in the imaginations of their directors. *Rebel Without a Cause* and *North by NorthWest* reflect on the lives of their directors as much as in the messages of the films themselves. Authentic artistic expression is the result of authentic experiences, and both Nicholas Ray and Alfred Hitchcock exemplify such artists.

Ray was born in a small town in Wisconsin. As the youngest of four and the only boy, he was doted upon by his sisters. His father was an imposing figure who used corporal punishment on the boy, and his mother deferred to the father in all matters relating to his upbringing. “Fathers are faulted in most of Ray’s films, while mothers linger in the shadows, blurry and complicit” (McGilligan 2). His dark side began to emerge in these years: “drinking, truancy, car thievery, brushes with the police, flirtations with his father’s mistresses and admissions of incestuous feelings toward one sister” (4).

He eventually dropped the family name, “Kienzle,” and moved to Hollywood to pursue his career. Ray was perceived as a “sensitive interloper attempting to create art...but his lack of a protective shell doomed him in that battle” (Rathgeb 13). Ray followed the rules, but he did not accept them; he became threatening to a system that honored conformity and control. He married for the first time and had a son, Anthony. His second marriage to an actress, Gloria Grahame, would prove to be devastating for him. He came home to find her in bed with his son, Anthony, and Ray would deal with the repercussions of this for the remainder of his life; Gloria and Anthony eventually married (IMDb, “Nicholas”).

From this brief glimpse into Ray’s background, the viewer is better able to understand the characters he creates in *Rebel*. Frank Stark represents his own neglectful parenting style; he blamed himself for Anthony’s behavior. Jim portrays a dual-identity: he represents Ray’s immature, rebellious side, who represents Ray’s own rebellious son. Plato represents his shameful sexual deviant side, and he must die. Jim’s mother represents the useless being he perceived his own mother to be. Although directors can

take artistic liberties with their films, something of the artist is often simmering just below the surface.

Hitchcock was born in a small Cockney working-class village in England during the war. His father was a brusque man who had Hitchcock locked up by the police for ten minutes to show him what happens to those who misbehave. His mother, on the other hand, spoiled him. “As a clever, lonely boy, pampered by a doting mother, he was caught between the Victorian world of class and privilege, and the Cockney’s inbred resentment of that world” (Spoto, “The Dark Side” 65).

He eventually went to a Jesuit school, where he developed many lifelong fears. He was forced to take a job in a print shop to support his mother when his father died, a job that eventually put him on the path to filmmaking. He met his wife, Alma, and although “they would share more than a half-century of married life...the union was apparently based on a professional symbiosis rather than a grand passion” (65).

The character of Roger in *North by NorthWest* exemplifies many of Hitchcock’s demeanors. “A man whose truest feelings and fears and yearnings...were hard to gauge and rarely expressed directly. They were controlled, calculated, measured out for the greatest effect with the smallest effort”(8). Hitchcock, who gained experience in advertising when he worked at the print shop, was fascinated by the power of the image in conveying desired messages to the consumer. Although Roger’s mother is initially seen as the dominant person in his life, Hitchcock releases his true feelings in the film and shows the mother as a self-absorbed woman who interferes with Roger’s life before he magically makes her disappear. “His mother accompanied him on holiday with his

wife...and he felt more compelled to satisfy her whims than to attend to his wife's comfort" (17). Roger was allowed to find happiness with a beautiful blond, and Hitchcock had to remain "the frustrated fat boy he always considered himself" (9). Whether using realistic or fantasy depictions of himself in his characters, Hitchcock certainly revealed his true longings on the screen.

## CONCLUSION

"Despite America's dominant economic and military position in the world...the Cold War turned triumphant post-war victory into 'triumphalist despair' [sic] (Engelhardt 9). Despair had set in due to fear, and fear drove people to seek relief through consumerism. Excessive consumerism, in turn, led to self-absorption and too much leisure time. As this trend progressed, traditional American values diminished; material goods and individual interests replaced God and family. This manifested in malaise, complacency, alienation and loneliness for many post-war Americans in the 1950s.

Nicholas Ray and Alfred Hitchcock made their respective movies, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *North by NorthWest*, to highlight the suffering that ensued from the effects of this breakdown in society. Both directors viewed consumerism as a symptom and not as a cause of post-war angst. If necessity is the mother of invention, then consumerism is the child of malaise. Ray posits that individuals have the capabilities needed to turn their lives around. Jim and his family can reconcile once they recommit to traditional roles and family values. Hitchcock posits that Americans have a natural resiliency that they can draw upon when they need to make changes in their lives. Roger finds his own strength when he is faced with life-threatening adversity. These films highlight the fact



that while people may be forced to live within a certain social milieu, they are not forced to accept that their social milieu cannot change.

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