

## The Symbol of the Train in Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and *North by Northwest* (1959)\*

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Alfred Hitchcock's fascination with trains began in his childhood when he spent much of his free time poring over timetables and maps of train lines.<sup>1</sup> In later life, many of his films would reflect this early interest, with trains and train journeys playing a major role in several of his movies.<sup>2</sup> In *Strangers on a Train* and *North by Northwest* it is on a train that the two main protagonists meet for the first time. Trains also serve an important function in the plot development of these two movies. The fact that Hitchcock used the train motif both in the first film he made in the 1950s, and in his last movie of that decade appears to be more than purely coincidental.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as opposed to his British train movies, the trains featured in these two films could almost be considered as characters in their own right as they would have been easily identifiable to the American public and, as such, brought with them their own specific history and role in U.S. society. In *Strangers on a Train*, the characters meet aboard the Pennsylvania Railroad which connected Union Station, Washington D.C., to Penn Station in New York and was the largest American railroad of the first half of the twentieth century. In *North by Northwest* the train featured is the *20<sup>th</sup> Century Limited* which at the time was particularly symbolic of American modernity.<sup>4</sup> The choice of these two trains is not without significance as they bear witness to the strength and modernity associated with the United States at the time. In the history of the USA, the 1950s has commonly been described as an era of excessive consumerism, as well as of technological progress, accompanied by political conformity.<sup>5</sup> After the Second World War, Americans enjoyed a period of economic boom, while the country was facing the threat of atomic warfare due to the Cold War waged against the Soviet Union. The beginning of this period was also marked by McCarthyism as the country turned its attention upon itself in order to find and flush out those who, by their words or by their deeds, did not conform to a more standardized image of Americanness. By

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<sup>1</sup> "At home he continued to study timetables, and astonished his family by reciting from memory the schedules of most of England's train lines." Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (London: Plexus, 1983), 20.

<sup>2</sup> *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Secret Agent* (1936), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1942), to name but a few of Hitchcock's movies where trains play a key role.

<sup>3</sup> Both films were produced the year before their release, which explains possible discrepancies in dates in critical studies of the two movies.

<sup>4</sup> The choice of the *20th Century Limited* is significant as it was advertised for many years as "the greatest train in the world", thereby underlining the modernity and technological advances that America is so often said to represent. See Lucius Beebe, "'The Greatest Train in the World': For sixty years the Century has rolled between New York and Chicago. 'Greatest Train in the World'", *New York Times Magazine*, June 10, 1962.

<sup>5</sup> This point of view was widely held by contemporary intellectuals who formed the consensus school of history, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Richard Hofstadter being among the most influential.

the late 1950s, the geopolitical situation was visible in Hollywood through the large number of spy movies produced – a genre which would continue to thrive throughout the Cold War period.<sup>6</sup>

This era, and the contradictions present in American society at the time, proves particularly interesting when viewed from the standpoint of a British director who arrived in Hollywood with an already well-established career. The present article suggests that Hitchcock chose to begin and end the decade with films featuring trains as this means of transport provided the perfect locus in which to explore the contradictory trends which marked the period. By studying films that date from 1951 and 1959, the symbolism of the train is highlighted and allows for an assessment of how Hitchcock's use of trains evolved in his work during the 1950s. The narrative function of the train unfolds within both a public and a private space that enables different characters to meet in the flux provided by the train when people are momentarily no longer bound by society's norms. The train serves thus a liberating function. Finally, the symbolic function of this means of locomotion will be considered as representative of 1950s' America, as well as of Hitchcock's position in American society of the time. Ultimately, the symbol of the train can be seen as both destabilising *and* reassuring within Hollywood cinema.

The train has long been considered emblematic of modernity and progress. In nineteenth-century America it was the symbol of the ever-expanding frontier and the race to map out the national territory, bringing civilisation to the far reaches of America, and confirming, once and for all, the conquest of the Far West. As a means of transportation, the train has always been one of the most democratic ways of travelling, and even today, trains represent a somewhat neutral public space where people from all walks of life are brought together, united by their common objective of travelling to, and arriving at, a final destination.

It would be simplistic, however, to consider only the modernistic, egalitarian aspects symbolised by the train. In their article on *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), an earlier Hitchcock train film, Noel King and Toby Miller remind us of the ambivalence of modern machinery:

Between 1850 and 1920, a vast array of culturally significant machines appeared, such as planes, railways, typewriters, lights, radios, and phones. These devices were the very image of a mechanical dream, or nightmare, depending on where you stood.<sup>7</sup>

When evoking the more sombre realities of the construction of the railroad in the history of the American West, Philippe Jacquin and Daniel Royot note, in *Go West! Histoire de l'Ouest américain d'hier à aujourd'hui*, that the project was plagued, from the very start, by financial problems and political corruption. The working conditions of the railway builders were particularly harsh: accidents were commonplace and often fatal, outbreaks of epidemics decimated the ranks of workers, and violence was an everyday occurrence. Journalists who visited the worksites described them as "Hell on wheels"<sup>8</sup> where prostitution and gambling

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<sup>6</sup> *North by Northwest* belongs to this genre, while the *James Bond* franchise is perhaps the best example of Cold War-inspired cinema.

<sup>7</sup> Noel King, Toby Miller, "The Lady Vanishes, but She Won't Go Away." In *Hitchcock at the Source: the Auteur as Adapter*, ed. R. Barton Palmer, David Boyd (New York: SUNY, 2011), 110.

<sup>8</sup> Philippe Jacquin, Daniel Royot, *Go West! Histoire de l'Ouest américain d'hier à aujourd'hui* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 146. My translation.

were rife and excessive alcohol consumption commonplace. Once the railroad was finished, construction flaws emerged, and rails sometimes began to rust, while other design faults meant trains had to approach certain sections of track slowly, or run the risk of being derailed.<sup>9</sup> The ultimate symbol of nineteenth-century modernity thus hid a far darker truth.

Unquestionably, in the realm of early cinema, the train emerged as one of the favourite subjects in a number of films which, in various ways, contributed to the evolution of cinema genres and techniques. Today, Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is considered not only as the first American narrative film, but as the first ever western. Moreover, only a few years earlier, in the Lumière Brothers' *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1895), the train was already the subject of the first long shot, medium-long shot and medium shot in one single take. This short film is also the subject of an oft-quoted claim according to which the first screening of a locomotive approaching the camera caused true panic among the spectators.<sup>10</sup> Ever since this foundational train film, countless other trains have marked cinema screens around the world in films that keep resonating with this apocryphal claim. It would be impossible to disregard the impact of these early moving pictures of the iconic object, nor the myths surrounding them, when dealing with Hitchcock's own, much later train films which, in their own particular ways, resonate with the celebration of modernity, as well as with the shock and terror that the train remains associated with since the early stages of cinema history.

### The narrative function of the train

In *Strangers on a Train* and *North by Northwest*, Alfred Hitchcock takes advantage of the function of the train as a public space to create unlikely pairings. The train operates as a frontier between two worlds, that of the public figure – a professional tennis-player, Guy Haines (Farley Granger), in *Strangers on a Train* and an advertising executive named Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), in *North by Northwest* – and that of a more dysfunctional character – Bruno Antony (Robert Walker) in the former, and Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) in the latter film. Bruno Antony and Guy Haines meet on a train where Bruno comes up with the idea of a “perfect ‘crisscross’ murder.”<sup>11</sup> Both men want to get rid of someone, why not organize a “murder swap”. Bruno will kill Guy's unfaithful wife, and in turn Guy will murder Bruno's father. Bruno decides to carry out his part of the deal, and then tries to force Guy into fulfilling his side of the contract. In *North by Northwest*, Roger Thornhill is mistakenly identified as an FBI agent by a spy ring, which then pursues and tries to kill him. At the U.N. General Assembly building, the spies accidentally slay another man standing next to Thornhill who thus becomes the prime murder suspect. Pursued by the police and the spies, he flees New York on a train where he meets and quickly falls under the spell of Eve Kendall,

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>10</sup> It has since been claimed that this story is apocryphal, and that the early cinema audience's terror came from the transformation of a still image into a moving picture, rather than from the conviction that the train itself posed a physical threat: “The audience's sense of shock comes less from a naive belief that they are threatened by an actual locomotive than from an unbelievable visual transformation occurring before their eyes, parallel to the greatest wonders of the visual theatre.” See Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator”, *Art and Text*, Volume 34, Spring 1989, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Straumann, *Figurations of Exile in Hitchcock and Nabokov* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 133.

who, as will be discovered, is part of the spy ring.

Fatal chance encounters are, of course, a mainstay of Hitchcock's cinema,<sup>12</sup> but it is worth noting that in the films studied here the unexpected encounters are rendered possible by a train that connects the characters who otherwise would not have met: social climber Guy<sup>13</sup> and affluent and idle Bruno, as well as New York advertising executive Roger and undercover FBI agent Eve. Eight years separate the two films, but the train remains the perfect means by which Hitchcock, quite literally, "throws people together" in order to ultimately send them off in a completely different direction. King and Miller have commented on the effects on the characters of this kind of train environment: "destabilizing moments and characters emerge in environments of flux – a hotel and a train – where everybody and everything is on the move, unmoored from norms and ready for crisis as much as pleasure."<sup>14</sup>

The idea of flux is highlighted visually by the camera focus on the railroad tracks at the beginning of *Strangers on a Train*. The film opens by following the two main characters (actually their feet) and their separate arrivals at the station. The scene then fades into a travelling shot through railway track intersections, the camera following the tracks as they weave together, before they separate off into different lines. Through this visual metaphor, deliberately placed at the very beginning of the film, Hitchcock draws the viewer's attention to the train's function of bringing people together for a brief period of time, and the different directions that their lives take after (and because of) the chance encounter.

Strikingly enough, during this opening sequence the train does not appear to be going in any particular direction, seeming to weave its way randomly through the crisscross of tracks. The train's movement may, furthermore, be viewed as symbolizing some of the film's characters: Guy gives the impression of having lost his way, hoping to marry Anne, a Senator's daughter (Ruth Roman), and thus gain access to the higher echelons of society, despite the fact that he is still tied down to his annoying, small-town wife who takes pleasure in frustrating his plans. Bruno is a somewhat similar character in the sense that he, too, lacks a sense of direction: rich enough, thanks to his family, to need no paid employment, yet harbouring deep resentment towards his father. Both men appear directionless at the beginning of the film, and their chance meeting will give meaning and form to their lives, setting in motion a chain of (ultimately tragic) events.

On a different, more historical level, the opening sequence of the crisscrossing tracks seems to echo and recall America's search for direction during the post-Second World War years, when the international geopolitical balance was being realigned and the country found itself in fierce competition with the Soviet Union, the only other superpower to have survived six years of fighting. By the early 1950s, the world had outwardly readjusted to the situation, yet was symbolically split between the Communist and the Capitalist blocs. After having fought together against the fascist threat, the USA and the USSR were now heading in resolutely opposite directions – a split that was to shape much of the latter half of the twentieth-century.

The opening credits of *North by Northwest* seem to mirror the visual metaphor of the

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<sup>12</sup> *Psycho* (1960) is a prime example of this.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Murray Pomerance, *Alfred Hitchcock's America* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 197.

<sup>14</sup> King and Miller, "The Lady Vanishes", 109.

train tracks, the horizontal and vertical lines which scroll across the screen, and the names of the actors and the production team that move up and down, arriving from opposite ends of the frame and exiting in the opposing direction. The lines gradually fade into the glass windows of a New York skyscraper, mirroring the constant movement of traffic on the street below. From the very beginning, the audience knows that this is a film about movement, and that motion, not stasis, will be a crucial element of the plotline. In comparison with *Strangers on a Train*, where the train tracks undulate indecisively across the screen, the opening is more precise – the straight lines that the credits follow forming a grid-like pattern on the screen.

The first minutes of the two films also serve to indicate the type of story that is about to develop. With its bright Technicolor palette and its main protagonist, representing the world of advertising, *North by Northwest* is a distinctly modern story: an idea conveyed by the constant movement of the plot, already perceptible through the opening credits. Indeed, some of the actors involved in the film found the plot overly complicated<sup>15</sup> as it relies on various examples of false or mistaken identities, the scenario hinges on a chase motif consisting of several parties (the FBI chasing the spies, who are chasing Thornhill, who in turn is chasing Kaplan), and the truth remains, throughout the film, an elastic concept.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the basic pattern is actually quite simple: a girl meets a boy, they experience misunderstandings, yet finally get married once the villains have been arrested. Thus, despite appearances, the story-line, just like the opening credits in *North by Northwest*, is constantly moving towards a definite and in a sense pre-determined conclusion. In comparison, and just like the opening shot of the rail tracks, *Strangers on a Train* seems less clear-cut, while the ultimate destination and meaning of the storyline remains uncertain. The ambiguity of this film has often been underlined, and nowhere is it more obvious than in the use of the train motif.

Obviously, Hitchcock does not reveal his intentions so early on in the film. A degree of ambiguity unquestionably marks both scenarios, and the train proves central to the further intensification of ambivalence in both films. As one of the few means of public transport that can act both as a public and a personal space, allowing passengers to move around freely, the train creates more opportunities for chance meetings, while restricting their movements within a given space. This is underlined by Philip J. Skerry in *Dark Energy: Hitchcock's Absolute Camera and the Physics of Cinematic Spacetime*:

In terms of 'pure cinema', the train represents the perfect opportunity to present a claustrophobic mise-en-scène. [...] a character becomes 'trapped', as it were, in the spacetime [*sic*] of the railroad car and by the characters within it.<sup>17</sup>

Hitchcock's train films tend to reinforce the dual image of space. *North by Northwest* and *Strangers on a Train* proceed from a public space (the bar or a dining car), into a more

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<sup>15</sup> Cary Grant is said to have claimed: "It's a terrible script. We've already done a third of the picture and I still can't make head or tail of it." François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1984), 249.

<sup>16</sup> For more on the importance of lies and double-speak in *North by Northwest*, see Pomerance, *Alfred Hitchcock's America*, 133-137.

<sup>17</sup> Philip J. Skerry, *Dark Energy: Hitchcock's Absolute Camera and the Physics of Cinematic Spacetime* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 67.

intimate one, that of the private compartment, to signal the developing relationship between the characters. It is also worth noting that it is in public spaces that the main protagonists experience claustrophobia: there is no space for Guy to eat in the dining car, while Thornhill feels that everyone is looking at him in public areas. In both films, the characters encountered on the train seem inoffensive to the outside world: Bruno Anthony is a jovial chatterbox, and Eve Kendall introduces herself as an industrial designer. Yet these are masked identities dissimulating their more complex personalities, which are revealed only when the relationship becomes more intimate. Once in the private compartment, the main protagonists misjudge the space they find themselves in. Guy Haines believes he is still in a public space and underestimates the seriousness of Bruno's proposal, keeping a polite distance. Thornhill believes he is in a private space, one where he and Eve are attracted to one another, only to discover later on that she was paid to seduce him. Although they represent contrasting attitudes regarding what actually takes place in the private compartments, these events will put both heroes in danger. By using trains as the films' settings, Hitchcock transforms a familiar, public space into a more intimate, and ultimately more dangerous realm. However, intimacy proves treacherous for the main protagonists as Thornhill lets his guard down, and Haines underestimates the risks of the situation. Consequently, it is possible to claim that in *Strangers on a Train* and *North by Northwest*, the boundary between the public and the more impulsive private spaces remains ill-defined, allowing a series of misunderstandings, and creating a perfect backdrop against which the plots develop.

Fittingly for a film whose central motif is present from the title onwards, the train plays a significant and equivocal role in *Strangers on a Train*. Not only does it provide the backdrop for Bruno's murder plans, but later on, when Guy phones his girlfriend to discuss his potential divorce, the noise of a train suddenly covers his angry words about his wife. The rumble of the passing train forces Guy to shout out his murderous desires: "I could strangle her!" In a sense, the train now seems to work like a truth serum, forcing the character to reveal his darkest thoughts and intentions, and providing a setting conducive to such confessions.

Later on, the train fails to provide Guy with an alibi for the murder of his wife. The audience knows that he was in a train carriage with another passenger, and that they spoke together, but the passenger was too inebriated to remember their conversation. Once again, the train fails to provide an alibi, or the safety of a public space for Guy Haines. At the end of the film, Guy arrives on a train in Metcalf where he plans to prove his innocence. Hitchcock cuts between Guy on the train and Bruno at the amusement park on three occasions, to reinforce the impression of time passing slowly before the train draws into Metcalf, and Guy is finally able to confront Bruno.

At the very end of the final American release version of *Strangers on a Train*, a final scene occurs aboard a train, this time with Guy and his fiancée. A clergyman recognises Guy and tries to strike up a conversation, but Guy does not reply, and simply gets up and changes seats. He has finally come to realise the danger represented by an encounter with a stranger on a train.

*North by Northwest* differs from this film, because the male lead uses various means of transportation, to the extent that one might claim that it is not the means so much as the

*action* of travelling that matters. However, not only does the train provide the principal meeting place for the two main characters, it also compares favourably to other forms of transportation throughout the film. Interestingly, the train is repeatedly associated with safety. The central protagonist tells his mother that he wants to travel to Chicago by train, because there are more places to hide than on a plane. Thornhill thus acknowledges the dual nature of the train, as a public, as well as a private space – something that Guy Haines realises only after being exposed to danger. Having boarded the train, Thornhill manages to flee the police thanks to a beautiful, mysterious passenger, Eve Kendall. She first sends the police officer in the wrong direction, then hides him in her compartment, and finally, as the train is drawing into Chicago, helps him leave the train disguised as a porter. Nevertheless, the sense of safety is illusory. Eve works for Philip Vandamm (James Mason), the leader of the spy organisation (also aboard the *20th Century Limited*), and she later receives orders to send Thornhill to a secret meeting place where an almost certain death awaits him. The train is, once again, highly ambiguous, promising temporary safety for the hero, whilst providing the impetus for his downfall.

### The liberating function of the train

Both Hitchcock films depicting chance encounters aboard trains create pairings that go against socially acceptable behaviour; especially at a time when sex outside of marriage was frowned upon by traditional American society, and when a more blatantly flirtatious relationship would easily have been censored.<sup>18</sup> The mutual attraction between Roger and Eve is nevertheless such that the dining car waiter tells the police how well the pair seemed to be getting along during supper, thus causing the detectives to suspect they already knew each other, with the implicit reminder that young women of the time were not expected to be too friendly with complete strangers.

The train-located pairing engendered in *Strangers on a Train* was similarly unacceptable as – although toned down due to the Motion Picture Production Code – the relationship between Guy and Bruno is overly intimate, and has provoked some discussion on the portrayal of homosexuality in Hitchcock's films.<sup>19</sup> Once inside his private compartment, Bruno's attitude is flirtatious. He lies back on the seat as if physically offering himself to Guy; he keeps hold of Guy's lighter, carrying it around like a fond lover, and akin to a spurned lover, plans to get his ultimate revenge at the end of the film.<sup>20</sup> In both movies, the train enables the more dysfunctional character to take control of the relationship, and both Eve and Bruno stand out clearly as the sexual driving forces within the couples. Conversely, the conclusions of the two films seem to rectify both the social and sexual imbalance caused by the chance pairings, and even though the train may be absent in both

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<sup>18</sup> Indeed, their conversation over dinner was censored, Eve's initial comment "I never MAKE love on an empty stomach" was dubbed over at a later date and became "I never DISCUSS love on an empty stomach." See: <http://www.filmsite.org/nort2.html> (last accessed 10/7/2017)

<sup>19</sup> For ground-breaking work on the subject, see Theodore Price, *Hitchcock and Homosexuality: His 50-year Obsession with Jack the Ripper and the Superbitch Prostitute: a Psychoanalytic View* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> For more details on the importance of the cigarette lighter in *Strangers on a Train*, see Michael Walker, *Hitchcock's Motifs* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 27-29.

movies' dramatic climax scenes, it does mark their endings.

At the end of *Strangers on a Train*, Guy takes the train back to Metcalf to confront Bruno in an amusement park. With the police behind them, Bruno tries to escape by jumping onto the merry-go-round, followed by Guy. A policeman fires a shot which knocks the ride's lever and the merry-go-round starts to swing round faster and faster, until it spins out of control. Right before this, during the dramatic climax, as the two protagonists are still fighting, Guy starts to slip off the ride, barely managing to grab hold of a bar to stop his fall. Bruno begins slowly and methodically to kick Guy's fingers in order to make him let go.

These shots are reworked into the end of *North by Northwest* where Thornhill and Eve are chased across Mount Rushmore by members of the spy ring. Pushed over the edge, Eve grabs on to a ledge. Roger leans down to try and pull her up, his fingers reaching out along the rock face. As he calls for help, Leonard (Martin Landau), the personal secretary of the spy leader, approaches and deliberately steps on Roger's hand, pressing as hard as he can. In both scenarios, fate seems, until the end, to be weighed against the hero, who is on the point of literally letting go when sudden salvation arrives. Here, the police shoot the secretary from the top of the mountain, while in *Strangers on a Train*, the merry-go-round derails, allowing Guy to escape unharmed, leaving Bruno to die in the tangled mass of wood and metal.

Things are thus, paradoxically, "put back on the right tracks" in *Strangers on a Train* by the symbolic derailing of the train (represented by the merry-go-round). If the meeting between Bruno and Guy had caused both characters to "go off the rails", i.e. lose control of their lives, it is through the derailing of the fairground ride / train that the journey can recommence with everyone heading in the "right" direction.

The symbolism inherent in the derailed fairground ride is reiterated in the ending of the final release version where Guy is seen in the company of his fiancée, travelling on a train. The train now seems to have become representative of polite society; it is heading towards Washington D.C., with among the passengers, a clergyman and a Senator's daughter. Guy's reintegration into respectable society is underlined by the heterosexual pairing he is now a part of, as well as by their sitting in a communal carriage. The train is once more a public and, more notably, a socially acceptable, inoffensive environment. Yet it is important to remember the claustrophobic *mise-en-scène* represented by the train. By choosing to end the American release version with the main protagonist on a train, Hitchcock implied that Guy was trapped in a destiny he could not escape from: marriage and integration into the Establishment. The pained expression on Guy's face in the final shot suggests that this is not necessarily a happy ending. Thomas Hemmeter has pointed out the awkwardness present in Guy's relationship with Anne:

With a wink, Hitchcock the narrator may be conveying the impossibility of closure for this odd couple, whose strained intimacy, far different from the behavior of the romantic couple in a classical plot who have achieved their desired goal, suggests that they remain strangers on this train, bumping through life on a vehicle provoking chance encounters and ever-shifting stories.<sup>21</sup>

As for *North by Northwest*, the final sequence shifts from Thornhill pulling Eve up the side of the mountain, to Thornhill (now) pulling Eve up into the top bunk of their private

<sup>21</sup> Hemmeter, Thomas, "Hitchcock's Narrative Modernism: Ironies of Fictional Time" in Thomas Leitch and Leland Poague, eds., *A Companion to Alfred Hitchcock* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 74.



train compartment. As previously underlined, the train's dual function of private and public spaces is essential for the evolution of Eve and Roger's intimate relationship. At the end, it takes on a phallic symbolism as the newly-weds are left in the privacy of their sleeping car, the camera cutting to a shot of the train entering a tunnel at full speed. Hitchcock was fully aware of the sexual connotations of this editing choice, and remarked, with his typical sense of irony, that the closing sequence was "one of the most impudent shots [he] ever made."<sup>22</sup> Yet, when the train speeds the two protagonists into the dark tunnel, the sequence could also be interpreted as a symbolic, momentary, moralistic ending. For nobody knew, at the time, when, where and how they would come out. At the end of the film (which also coincides with the end of the 1950s), society seems to have reintegrated Eve and Thornhill into its midst, Eve is no longer a *femme fatale* secret agent nor Thornhill a fugitive from justice. Conspicuously and ironically enough, Hitchcock chose to end his last train movie of the decade with an ostensibly normative heterosexual couple, and it is the only one of his romantic thrillers where the love interest is officially approved by marriage. As Barbara Strauman observes,

While many of [Hitchcock's] films veer towards a romantic formation of the couple, *North by Northwest* is his only romantic thriller that shows the pair actually getting married.<sup>23</sup>

In his typically implicit manner, Hitchcock's ending of his last film of the decade thus seems to ultimately defend the 1950s' American social structures and strictures, contrasting with the conclusion of *Strangers on a Train* a decade earlier.

### The symbolic function of the train

The ambiguity surrounding the train in these films can be seen to stem from both the political situation of the time, when traditional symbols of America were often manipulated into political motifs, as well as from Hitchcock's own ambiguous relationship with the United States. As a director who spent much of his career working between his native Britain and America, Hitchcock never fully embraced his adoptive country. Despite having lived and worked in the United States for over a decade before *Strangers on a Train*, and in spite of the fact that his wife and daughter had pledged allegiance to the US ten years earlier, Hitchcock would not become an American citizen until 1955. Even after he had officially obtained American nationality, he continued to refer to England as his "mother country,"<sup>24</sup> never losing his Cockney accent, nor his British sense of humour.

Among the different approaches of foreign directors to working in Hollywood, identified by Jean-Loup Bourget in *Hollywood, un rêve européen*,<sup>25</sup> Hitchcock could fit into the category of those European directors who tended to maintain a critical distance in their attitudes and relationships with America. The fact that *Strangers on a Train* was produced shortly before Hitchcock officially became American, and that *North by Northwest* was made soon afterwards, makes them all the more interesting. It would suggest that Hitchcock's still-foreign viewpoint allowed him to take a more critical stance towards his adoptive country,

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<sup>22</sup> Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 150.

<sup>23</sup> Straumann, *Figurations of Exile*, 185.

<sup>24</sup> Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius*, 362.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Loup Bourget, *Hollywood, un rêve européen* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006), 163-203.

especially regarding issues of identity, before this attitude evolved as the director came to terms with his newly-acquired nationality.

Identity was a crucial and increasingly political issue in the USA in the 1950s as the government sought to eradicate all things un-American from society. As Marie-France Toinet has observed, American identity seems to have been built upon a negative:

...to be American, one must forget the history of one's country of birth [...]. Everything which is foreign, those who are foreigners, those who, as Americans, express un-American ideas have to be controlled, forbidden, rejected, removed from the national consciousness.<sup>26</sup>

In Cold War America, one had to constantly prove one's Americanness, or else face the charge of being un-American. By presenting the train – a key symbol in the myth of American identity and the history of the United States – as a fundamentally ambiguous space, Hitchcock pointed to a basic dilemma or flaw: how to prove one's Americanness in a country where national identity was built upon such ambiguous realities.

Derived from the latin "*ambi*" (on both sides) and "*agere*" (to drive, urge, act), ambiguous evokes something "wavering", "uncertain", or "difficult to comprehend", not to say "obscure"; two or more different facets being considered as "ambiguous". *Strangers on a Train* is marked by dualities and the constant play with facets, with the characters frequently appearing as if they were the two halves of a whole, representing the public and the private aspects of society. Even Hitchcock's cameo sequence constitutes a tongue-in-cheek representation of his double, as he is seen holding a double bass case which visually echoes the director's own corpulent morphology. Dual patterns, perceptible through the structure and the aesthetics of the film, and pivoting upon the central characters of Guy and Bruno, can be seen mirroring the dual identity of the U.S. in the early 1950s. America may well have been at that time the wealthiest and the most powerful country of the Western world at that time, representing modernity and the triumph of a capitalist system, yet it was also during the first years of the 1950s that McCarthyism held sway over the American population, forcing people to take loyalty oaths, denounce leftist acquaintances, and negate their political sympathies under the threat of losing their jobs, their reputation and social status in order to prove they were "truly American". These two opposing representations of America in the early 1950s might also reveal the differences between the confident, official image it wished to project, and the more private and paranoid national realities. By using the motif of the train, with its traditional symbolism of modernity and progress, and by associating it with the darker side of human nature, *Strangers on a Train* recalls that the construction of American identity was based upon a myth, or a series of myths, and that these myths should not be used as the basis for political actions in the sense it was during the McCarthy era.

In both *Strangers on a Train* and *North by Northwest*, the motif of the train is highly complex. In the latter, the train's importance in bringing Eve and Thornhill together is repeated so as to constitute the film's main structural element. Its role as a means of transportation is paralleled with that of the aeroplane, until the former becomes one of the recurring images in the film. At one point, Eve tells the police she discussed plane travel versus train travel with Thornhill over dinner and later, whilst they are embracing

<sup>26</sup> Marie-France Toinet, *La chasse aux sorcières : le maccarthysme 1947-1957* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1984), 17. My translation.

passionately he mutters, "Beats flying!" This stated preference anticipates the couple's final return to New York, not by plane, but by train.

In *Strangers on a Train*, aeroplanes stand for modernity and heightened sensations, as when Bruno eulogises about travelling on a jet plane, but in *North by Northwest*, one is reminded that there is nowhere to hide on an aeroplane. And as if to prove the point about the risks of flying objects, Vandamm seeks precisely to kill Thornhill by a plane spraying crops in a cornfield. Moreover, when Vandamm learns the truth about Eve, he decides to have her thrown out of a moving plane at a great height.

As these examples illustrate, there is far less ambiguity in Hitchcock's representations of air travel: aeroplanes are full of risks, contrary to the train which ultimately turns into a positive motif in *North by Northwest*. Railway-related hazardousness is present, but mostly for dramatic purposes, to allow a series of inversions and shifts between the (supposed) safety of private spaces, and the (alleged) risks of public spaces. While dualities remain central to *Strangers on a Train*, the plot of *North by Northwest* looks more like a triangular arrangement, the plotline relying on a triple chase (the spies are following Thornhill who is following Kaplan). In addition, the villainous spy is split into three separate characters: Vandamm the suave sophisticate, Leonard the gay, jealous secretary, and the un-named, but ever present, henchman (Adam Williams) who takes care of the dirty work.

A further instance of triple structure is revealed in the symbolism of the train in this movie. The train which initially offered safety is, in fact, a space manipulated by the enemy, and thus represents a threat, and yet the relationship started in this space proves to be one built on love and, in the end, leads to the couple getting married and returning to the train for their wedding night. This is not the first time Hitchcock uses a train as a romantic space, as Barbara Straumann has noted: "In *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), the train is the site of romance, dreaming and mysterious disappearing."<sup>27</sup> This also applies to *North by Northwest* where the beautifully filmed sunset shots, the soft greys and pinks marking several train scenes add to the romantic, dreamlike atmosphere, while the untraceable Roger Thornhill also keeps "disappearing" once aboard the train.

The change in plot construction between the two films from a series of dualities to figures of three thus serves to remind us that the Cartesian division of the world – which marked the McCarthy era at the beginning of the 1950s – had evolved into a far more complicated state of affairs by 1959, and the Cold War spy era, when the truth was often dissimulated behind a multitude of false masks. Hitchcock's train films rely on these polarities, and challenge the spectator through their recurring motifs of interweaving tracks and crisscrossing lines, proving, once again, that things are far from being as simple as they appear. As Philip J. Skerry has suggested: "Perhaps the fact that trains run on their own 'moral' tracks is why Hitchcock uses them as cinematic metaphors."<sup>28</sup>

Like the crisscrossing train tracks at the beginning of *Strangers on a Train*, the film follows an unknown, obscure direction. The train remains a *topos* of dualities which allows society's hidden side to emerge and momentarily take control of the situation. As already suggested, Bruno's character functions within a different moral system, in a sense just as the social and political discourse of the early Cold War era did. As Corey Robin states in *Fear: The*

<sup>27</sup> Straumann, *Figurations of Exile*, 133.

<sup>28</sup> Skerry, *Dark Energy*, 72.

*History of a Political Idea*: “During the McCarthy years, officials inspired a fear of their power among liberals and leftists via loyalty investigations, mass firings, and blacklists.”<sup>29</sup> At the end of Hitchcock’s 1951 film, Guy Haines seems to have been reintegrated into society, as the train takes him and his fiancée back to Washington D.C., even if there has been a price to pay. This is how Hitchcock seems to suggest the complicated nature of the social and political realities of the period, underlining its complex undercurrents.

In comparison, the train in *North by Northwest* is alternately a symbol of modernity and of tradition, especially regarding Eve and Thornhill’s relationship. The sexual freedom that the train gives rise to is given society’s seal of approval during the final sequence of the film where the newly-weds return to the train to consummate their marriage. Critics tend to agree that the film is the ultimate example of Hitchcock’s Americanness, as Truffaut suggested to him: “*North by Northwest* is the picture that epitomizes the whole of your work in America.”<sup>30</sup> Nearly fifty years later, Barbara Straumann expanded this idea when she stated: “*North by Northwest* comments on [Hitchcock’s] position in Hollywood and his appropriation of mainstream cinema.”<sup>31</sup> It is therefore possible to postulate that the film could not have been made before Hitchcock took American citizenship, as it is so emblematic of his acceptance of American cinema and the American way of life. By the end of the 1950s, Hitchcock had evolved from a foreigner viewing American society from the outside to a film maker increasingly interested in the various complexities of American identity.

*Strangers on a Train* and *North by Northwest* ultimately present trains that start out by providing a form of escape. For Guy Haines, the train is a way into a morally perilous world of homosexuality and murder, whereas for Roger Thornhill, it allows the hero to flee a domineering mother, two ex-wives, and a murder charge. At the end of both movies, trains nevertheless stand for polite society, reintegrating the protagonists into the coded community. The main difference between these two train films seems to be the protagonists’ attitudes regarding their final reintegration, for while in the 1951 film, Hitchcock’s train is seen trapping Guy into a socially acceptable role, Cary Grant’s Thornhill seems to continue to consider the train as a curiously oxymoronic space of moving, matrimonial stability. Ultimately, Hitchcock’s position in American society may well be responsible for these differing attitudes, and the evolution visible between these two conclusions is largely due to an evolution in his own personal attitude towards the United States of America.

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<sup>29</sup> Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 19.

<sup>30</sup> Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 249.

<sup>31</sup> Straumann, *Figurations of Exile*, 179.