

– Cary Grant’s Suit –

*N*orth by Northwest isn’t about what happens to Cary Grant, it’s about what happens to his suit. The suit has the adventures, a gorgeous New York suit threading its way through America. The title sequence in which the stark lines of a Madison Avenue office building are ‘woven’ together could be the construction of Cary in his suit right there – he gets knitted into his suit before his adventure can begin. Indeed some of the popular ‘suitings’ of that time, ‘windowpane’ or ‘glen plaid’, reflected, even perfectly complemented office buildings. Cary’s suit reflects New York, identifies him as a thrusting exec, but also protects him, what else is a suit for? *Reflects and Protects* . . . a slogan Roger Thornhill himself might have come up with.

The usage of calling a guy a ‘suit’ if you don’t like him, consider him a flunky or a waste of space, applies to Cary at the beginning of the film: this *suit* comes barreling out of the elevator, yammering business trivialities at a mile a minute, with the energy of the entire building. The suit moves with its secretary into the hot evening sun where we can get a good look at it: it’s a real beaut, a perfectly-tailored, beautifully-falling lightweight dusty blue – it might be a gown, you know.

I like thinking of it as 'dusty' because of what befalls it later. It's by far the best suit in the movie: the villains, James Mason and Martin Landau, wear funereal, sinister (though expensive) black, while their greasy henchmen run around in off-the-peg crap. 'The Professor', head of Intelligence, bumbles about in pipe-smoked tweed.

In 1959 we were a white shirt and black suit nation: the revolution was ten years off. There's a nice photograph of Ernest Lehman, who wrote this picture, sitting in Hitchcock's office, a black and white office of 1957, natty in a white shirt and black trousers. Some could carry off this look, but if you were *forced* to dress this way, say if you worked for IBM, it contributed only to the general gloominess of the age. You wonder if life itself was conducted in color then – even the 'summer of love' was largely photographed in black and white. Don't let anyone kid you: the Sixties were dreary.

Outside on Madison there, the white shirts blind you, but none of them is quite so white as Cary's. (As someone with experience in theatrical make-up, I have no idea how they kept it off these white, white collars. It drives me nuts.) Non-streaky Cary's daring and dashing in the most amazing suit in New York. His silk tie is exactly one shade darker than the suit, his socks exactly one shade lighter. In the cab he tells his secretary to remind him to 'think thin', which allows us to regard his suit, how it lies on his physique.

A friend of mine in politics said to me once, 'I love

wearing suits. They're like pajamas. You can go around all day doing business in your pajamas.' It has to be said that his suits were pretty nice, particularly so for *Boston*; whether he meant that he did his business half-asleep only his constituents could say.

The suit strides with confidence into the Plaza Hotel. Nothing bad happens to it until one of the henchmen grasps Cary by the shoulder. We're already in love with this suit and it feels like a real violation. They bundle him into a limousine and shoot out to Long Island, not much manhandling yet. In fact Martin Landau is impressed: 'He's a well-tailored one, isn't he?' He loves this suit. But next Cary tries to escape, there's a real struggle, they force all that bourbon down his throat . . . (He later thinks they'll find liquor stains on the sofa, but if there was that much violence why aren't there any on the suit?) Cut to Cary being stuffed into the Mercedes-Benz – he's managed to get completely pissed without even 'mussing', as they say in America, his hair. On his crazy drink-drive, the collar of his jacket is turned the wrong way round. That's *all*. He gets arrested, jerked around by the cops, and appears before the judge next morning and the suit and the shirt both look great. But this is the point in the movie where you start to worry about Cary's personal hygiene. Start to ITCH.

It's back to the bad guy's house, then back to the Plaza, looking good. I always hope he'll grab a quick