

GRANTA

GRANTA 94 | TODD MCEWEN

Cary Grant's Suit

1.

North by Northwest isn't a film 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, into his job, before our very eyes. Indeed some of the popular 'suitings' of that time ('windowpane' or 'glen plaid') perfectly complemented office buildings. Cary's suit reflects New York, identifies him as a thrusting exec, but also arms him, protects him: what else is a suit for? *Reflects and Protects...* a slogan Cary's character, Roger Thornhill, might have come up with himself.

But, as Thoreau wrote, 'A man who has at length found something to do will not need to get a new suit to do it in.' Cary may cut quite a figure but as a person he is meaningless, so far. We find him in the Suit, but certainly he has not found himself, or 'what to do'.

The recent idiom 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 barrelling out of the elevator, yammering business trivialities a mile a minute, almost 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 beauty, a perfectly tailored, gracefully falling lightweight dusty blue—it might be a gown, you know. It's fun to think of it as 'dusty' blue because of what befalls it later. It's by far the best suit in the movie, in the *movies*, perhaps the whole world. The villains, James Mason and Martin Landau, wear suits of funereal, sinister (though sleek and pricey) black, while their greasy henchmen run around in off-the-peg brownny crap. 'The Professor', head of Intelligence, bumbles about in pipe-smoked tweed and a revolting shirt of old-man blue.

In 1959, the year *North by Northwest* was released, America was a white-shirt-and-black-suit nation: the 'revolution', if you want to dignify it that way, was ten years off. There's a nice photograph of Ernest Lehman, who wrote

this picture, sitting in Hitchcock's office, a typically late Fifties black-and-white office, natty in a white shirt and narrow black tie. Some could make this look good but if you were *forced* to dress this way, if you worked for IBM, say, it contributed only to the general gloominess of the age. Sometimes you can find yourself wondering if life itself was conducted in colour 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, the white shirts blind you, but not one of them is quite so white as Cary's. (As someone with a slight experience of applying 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 commands 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 pyjamas. You can go around all day doing business in your pyjamas.' 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, Cary inside it, strides with confidence into the Plaza Hotel. Nothing bad happens to it until one of the greasy henchmen grasps Cary by the shoulder. *We're already in love with this suit* and it feels like a real violation. They've mistaken Roger Thornhill for a federal agent called George Kaplan. They bundle him into a cab 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 the suit. But next moment 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' 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, conks out on a table and appears before the judge next morning, and the suit and the shirt both look great. But this is the point in the picture where you start to worry about Cary's personal hygiene. Start to ITCH. Cops aren't generally too open-handed with showers.

It's back to the bad guy's house, then back to the Plaza, looking good. I always hope he'll grab a quick shower in the hotel room—he keeps gravitating towards the bathroom. There's a good suit moment when he tries on one belonging to Kaplan, the guy he's looking for, who doesn't exist. Kaplan's suits are stodgy, old-fashioned, unbelievably heavy for a summer in New York—with *turn-ups on the trousers*. So much for the sartorial acumen of the US government. 'I don't think that one does anything for you,' says Cary's mom, and boy is she right. She also jokes that Kaplan maybe 'has his suits mended by invisible weavers', which is what happens to Cary's suit throughout the

picture! His suit is like a victim of repeated cartoon violence—in the next shot it's always fine.

Off to the United Nations, where the Secretariat looks even more like Cary than his own office building. He sublimely matches a number of modern wall coverings and stone walls here and throughout the picture. He pulls a knife *out* of a guy, but doesn't get any blood on himself. There's a curious lack of blood in *North by Northwest*; it must be all to save the suit, though there must be ten or even twenty of them in reserve, no? Cary evades the bad guys again and scoots over to Grand Central Station, where they have, or had, showers, but he's too busy...

2.

This is what's ingenious about this picture, at least as far as the SUIT goes—Cary's able to travel all over the country in just this one beautiful suit because the weather has been *planned for the suit by Ernest Lehman!* It's the perfect weather for an adventure in this suit, and that's why it happens. At the same time, there's a CREEPINESS about the whole escapade generated by our own fears that in some situation Cary will be inappropriately dressed (Cary GRANT?) and this will hinder him; or that the thin covering of civilization the suit provides him with will be pierced and here he is, thousands of miles from home, with not so much as a topcoat. Men ought to admit that they can experience suit-fear: the fear of suddenly being too cold in the suit you thought would do (in Glen Cove, Long Island, even on a summer night) or too hot (the prairie, to come). Exposed, *vulnerable*. Cary does have some money though, we know that, so he could buy something to wear if he had to, assuming his wallet isn't destroyed along with the suit. But it would be too traumatic to see this suit getting totalled, that would be way beyond Hitchcock's level of sadism. This feeling of exposure, the idea of having suddenly to make a desperate journey in just the clothes you have on, comes up in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (book and movie): Richard Hannay is alone in a desolate landscape in inappropriate town clothes when a menacing autogiro spots him from the air...

In the suit are a number of subtle tools for Cary. It's so well cut you can't tell if he's even carrying a wallet (turns out he is). Here's what he's got in that suit! He goes all the way from New York to Chicago to the face of Mount Rushmore with: a monogrammed book of matches, his wallet and some nickels, a pencil stub, a hanky, a newspaper clipping and his sunglasses—but these are shortly to be demolished when Eva Marie Saint folds him into the upper berth in her compartment. (Really this is a good thing, because Cary Grant in dark glasses looks appallingly GUILTY.) All this stuff fits into the pockets of the most wonderful suit in the world. Does the suit get crushed in the upper berth as his Ray-Bans are smashed? No. Cary keeps his jacket on in the make-out scene that follows. The suit defines him, he's not going to take off that jacket. I know this feeling.

3.

When Cary and Eva Marie walk from the train into La Salle Street station the next morning, he's wearing a purloined red-cap's outfit, open at the neck and showing a triangle of snowy-white undershirt. She has the same white triangle peeping from under the jacket of her dark suit, which rather matches the suit James Mason wore the night before. But here are two little white triangles who spent the night together on the train. There might be an opportunity here in Chicago for a shower, you itch, but it looks like he chooses merely to loosen his shirt and have a quick shave, with Eva Marie's minuscule razor. His suit was temporarily stuffed into her luggage while he made his exit from the train in disguise. Has it suffered? Has it hell. It looks like a million bucks; his shirt still blazes out. But now comes the suit's greatest trial, the crop-dusting scene at 'Prairie Stop'. This begins with Cary and the farmer eyeing up each other's attire across the hot highway. The farmer wears a clean though saggy brown suit and a slouchy hat. Going to town? Here Cary gets covered in dust from giant trucks passing by (a deliberate and somewhat comic *attack on the suit*), sweats like a pig (or should—we do), has to throw himself into the dirt, gets sprayed with DDT by an evil crop-duster plane, then practically gets run over by a tanker; he grapples with its greasy undercarriage and writhes around on the asphalt.

After all this, and having fled the scene in a stolen pickup truck, Cary has only his hanky with which to make himself presentable at the Chicago hotel where he thinks 'Kaplan' is staying. Still, he's done a pretty good job with it—he looks like he's been teaching school all afternoon—just a bit chalky. His tie is still pressed and the shirt is white, even the collar and cuffs. You cannot violate the white shirt of the Sixties. You might kill me but you will never kill this shirt.

Eva Marie enters this scene in a really luxurious red-and-black dress—a sign of her decadent double life with James Mason—and it's all pretty uncomfortable because now Cary is dirty, a DIRTY MAN loose in civilization, too easily spotted... But the *suit* gets rescued here! Eva Marie tells Cary she'll have dinner with him if he'll let the valet clean it! Cary tells her that when he was a kid he wouldn't let his mother undress him. Eva Marie says, 'You're a big boy now'—Cary's growing up, from an impressive but essentially childish New York executive and, you suppose, a playboy, into a man taking charge of his life. He *grows into his suit* over the course of the adventure and finds a life (and wife) to suit him. In another sense, though, he maybe has a BONER—he's been sniffing round Eva Marie and suggesting a skirmish. This is all very good neurotic Fifties movie dialogue. I don't know who suffered more, who was the more repressed: the writer, the actors or the audience in those days.

So Cary takes off the suit, goes into the shower; she gives it to the valet and she splits! The suit is not there, so Cary is not there. We get to see that he wears *yellow boxers*, another sign that he's a daring guy in a 'creative' profession—whew!

Once Cary gets to the auction house the suit is *perfectly restored*. That valet is some little 'sponger and presser'. Eva Marie and the bad guys are bidding on a pre-Columbian figure. It's not very well dressed. It's only wearing shorts. Cary

gets in a fist fight (no blood), is arrested, taken to the airport, put on a plane to Rapid City... The next day it's hot as blazes at Mount Rushmore, but the shirt is clean, the suit's fantastically smooth, a hot breeze rustles it a little. The monument itself is wearing a rock-like suit in solidarity with Cary. He's turning into a patriotic rock, too (ignore what I said up there). Eva Marie arrives in mourning, essentially—black and dove grey; she's about to have to leave Cary and her entire life behind. James Mason is in a weird English fop get-up, to suggest, I guess, he's never been one of us, he's not long for these shores now. He's *frail*. Eva Marie 'shoots' Cary: no blood again, of course, as it's a charade, but wouldn't you think the CIA would have some *fake blood*? How else are they going to put this over on James Mason? He's not an idiot. But you can't do this to the suit.

4.

Now the suit is in the woods for the reconciliation scene with Eva Marie. This suit doesn't look too bad in the woods, and you reflect that Mount Rushmore seems a very *formal* national park, there were a lot of people dressed up in the cafeteria, paying their respects... Cary gets punched out for trying to interfere between the Professor and Eva Marie, AND WHEN HE WAKES UP THE SUIT HAS BEEN CONFISCATED! The Professor has locked him in a hospital room with only a TOWEL to wear! He's not going anywhere! (Although you feel a lot of relief that he's had his second shower of the picture.) But then comes the real act of betrayal: the Professor brings CARY GRANT a set of *hideous* clothes from some awful 'menswear shop' in Rapid City (you can just imagine the smell of it, Ban-Lon shirts and cheap belts). He gives him an *off-white* white shirt, a pair of black slacks, white socks and icky black *slip-on* shoes.

You get the creeps because this whole thing is about insecurity, exposure, *clothing anxiety*. When Cary escapes out to the window ledge he's inching his way along in a pair of brand-new slip-ons which may not fit! Your feet and hands start to sweat at this moment. But something major has occurred: *Cary is now in black and white*. Everything is CLEAR to him, and he can act decisively OUTSIDE the suit, in order to be able to win it back. It's all wonderfully Arthurian. Now he knows 'what to do'. And for us there's the thrill of a badly dressed Cary: the situation is now a real emergency.

Now Cary crawls off the hospital lintels and up the stone wall of James Mason's millionaire's-hideaway. It looks like the face of the office building in the beginning, the rectangles of a snazzy suit. And in this white shirt with no jacket, Cary is a sitting duck in the bright moonlight! *A New Yorker without a jacket on*. It is too frightening.

Delightful, though, to discover that in the end, when Cary and Eva Marie are on the train back to New York (she in virginal white nightie), he's got his suit back! He's not wearing the jacket (woo-hoo!) but those are definitely the suit's trousers and his original shoes and the gorgeous socks. The shirt has remained impeccable. Like Arthur, he needs a woman to be safe, to be alive

and to be a king, even on Madison Avenue. Now he really knows how to wear that suit.

I managed to acquire a pair of trousers several years ago that were somewhat like Cary's. They weren't tailor-made, and weren't the same quality of material of course, but the colour was really close and the hang of them wasn't bad. And they turned out to be Lucky trousers, very Lucky. Until I burned a hole in them. The veneer of civilization is thin, fellas. Exceeding thin.