Anthony D’Amato's straight job is professor of law at Northwestern Law School. His stealth job is producing and writing musical comedies for the stage. You can see his name on a billboard in the opening credits of Grease (Randal Kleiser, 1978). He has written the scores for original musicals that have been produced in Chicago, Toronto, and London.

“The best movie actor that ever was” (said Alexis Smith). “The most handsome, witty, and stylish leading man” (Eva Marie Saint). “What he did, he did better than anyone ever has” (Charlton Heston).

Yet others were more talented: think of James Cagney or Charlie Chaplin. Better looking: Clark Gable. Unique presence: Humphrey Bogart. None of them, however, had his comic touch. Only Carole Lombard, I think, came close to him in the field of light comedy. (Of Grant’s 72 feature films, he was paired with Lombard only once: In Name Only [John Cromwell, 1939].)

Nobody doesn’t like Cary Grant. Why was he so phenomenally appealing?

I’ll call my guess about the nature of Grant’s appeal the “androgyny theory”. It’s based on the postulate that if a star is going to appeal to the widest possible audience, he or she must be equally attractive to men and to women. Cary Grant was the most androgynous male actor of all time. I can’t think of any female star in Hollywood’s golden era who fit that bill, although today we have Julia Roberts and maybe Angelina Jolie.

This biography of Cary Grant, beautifully written by Marc Eliot, does not speak of, or even come close to, an androgyny theory. Yet there are many clues in it about Grant that I can cite to fill in three main components of my speculation.

First and most obviously, Grant was your basic bisexual.
He lived openly with Randolph Scott and had serial affairs with other men. He also married, for love, five women. "Every one of my wives left me", he told The New York Times in 1971.

In addition to the five Mrs Grants, Cary became totally smitten with several of his leading ladies such as Katharine Hepburn, Irene Dunne, Eva Marie Saint, Sophia Loren, and Grace Kelly. It’s noteworthy that every one of these world-class beauties rejected his passionate advances. Was it because they detected a certain insincerity in Grant, a certain incapacity for true love? One cannot tell on the screen – a mysteriousness that’s indeed part of his magnetism. Cary Grant and Grace Kelly.

Remember the scene in Singin’ in the Rain (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952) where Gene Kelly kisses his co-star Jean Hagen? She finally comes up for air and says, "You can’t kiss me like that and not love me just a teensy-weensy bit!” Gene replies, "Meet the greatest actor in the world! I’d rather kiss a tarantula."

Hollywood’s first generation of leading men, Eliot continues, were the courtly European types with sculpted moustaches such as Ronald Colman, elderly lechers like Adolphe Menjou, or devilish hedonists like Rudolph Valentino. Then as the talkies took over in the early 1930s, the image shifted toward the humorless hunk – Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Gregory Peck, and John Wayne.

When one of Cary Grant’s greatest hits, The Philadelphia Story (George Cukor, 1940) was remade into the magnificent musical High Society (Charles Walters, 1956), there was one actor who was definitely not faking it. Watch closely Frank Sinatra’s song and dance with Grace Kelly. I’ve never seen anyone in the movies – or in real life, come to think of it – as blown away as Ol’ Blue Eyes.

Grant’s performance in The Awful Truth (co-starring Irene Dunne) was "remarkable for the extent to which gender characteristics assigned to women could be presented as being desirable and attractive in a man."

This androgyny made for high-voltage comedy on the screen as Cary Grant and Irene Dunne continually tried to one-up each other. But the lasting impact of the film and those that were to follow was on world culture – it was OK for men to be like Cary Grant.

The third component of my androgyny theory is the consummate care that Grant took with his image, both...
Cary Grant: A Biography” by Marc Eliot

He only wore custom-made suits and shirts. Eliot tells us: “He advised men who wanted to emulate him to never wear suspenders, belts, or garters but instead to go with hidden waist-tabs to keep their pants up and straight.” His most important obsession was keeping his waist slim. He also carried a toothbrush with him at all times, and after a smoke or after lunch or dinner with his friends, he would excuse himself and go to the men’s room to brush his teeth. He worked out every day. He paid as much attention to his face as Marilyn Monroe paid to hers. During the filming of *Blonde Venus* (1932), director Josef von Sternberg took a comb and parted Grant’s hair on the right side rather than the left, the way Grant had always combed it before. For the rest of his life Grant kept his hair that way. I had never noticed the right-sided parting until Eliot’s book brought it to my attention. However, I have always noticed subliminally that there was something magnetic about Grant’s hair, something that created a pleasant kind of tension. It’s like the well-placed beauty mole near Cindy Crawford’s lips – the mole that made her a model.

It’s conceivable that there is a direct relation between parting on the right side and the theory of androgyny. The right side of the brain controls activities traditionally related to femininity. All right, I quit. There’s such a thing as pushing a theory too far.

There was no “method” in Grant’s acting of the kind we might associate with the early Marlon Brando. Grant was a “natural” actor, which means he had to work furiously hard in order to appear natural. In this respect he reminds me of the sublime natural actress Nicole Kidman. What made it especially hard for Grant, however, was that his naturalism was based on an androgynous model that he was inventing at the same time that he was trying to be true to it. He was his own work-in-progress.

In preparing for this review, I revisited many Cary Grant movies with my eye mostly on Grant. Doing this allowed me to see something I hadn’t seen before. In *The Philadelphia Story*, there’s about a four-minute scene with an inebriated James Stewart talking to, advising, and cajoling Cary Grant. They are seated at a table with Grant at the left, in profile, looking at Stewart. Theatre audiences would of course look at Stewart who was doing all the emoting, and normally I would too. But instead this time I watched Grant to catch his subtle facial reactions to each of Stewart’s rants and raves. There were none. Grant was as motionless as the bottle of wine on the table. Not a flicker of an eyelash, not a hint of a smile or frown, no reaction whatsoever to what Stewart was saying. How extraordinary! I realised that what Grant was doing was throwing all the focus on Stewart. It was Stewart’s scene, and Grant did not want to detract from it in the slightest even by “reacting” to it the way a listener normally would, because if he did, the audience would glance now and then at Grant to catch his reactions. Was Grant being noble? I’d say he was simply being a great actor, one who realises that there are times when the emotional power of a scene belongs to someone else and it’s your job to help it happen by not taking any of that focus away.

Perhaps Grant threw too much focus on Stewart. In the Academy Awards that year, the industry idiots gave Best Actor to James Stewart. They didn’t even *nominate* Cary Grant for an Oscar.

In addition to being a natural actor, Grant was

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Marc Eliot agrees with the general consensus of the time that Stewart, Grant, and Hepburn gave their greatest
an interactive actor. He worried over the scripts, taking notes and discussing lines with his directors. He came up with witty lines not only for himself but for his co-stars. Some directors are annoyed when the actor on the set "knows better". But the best directors, such as Alfred Hitchcock, positively welcome creative input from the actors. Indeed, Hitchcock cast his movies on the expectation that by choosing great actors, they would make important contributions to the production. It should come as no surprise that Hitchcock's all-time favourite actor was Cary Grant.

As if to return the favour, Cary Grant gave the best performances of his career in films directed by Hitchcock: *Suspicion* (1941), *Notorious* (1946), *To Catch a Thief* (1955), and *North by Northwest* (1959). Marc Eliot's favourite is *North by Northwest*; mine is *Notorious*.

When he was directing movies in London, Hitchcock watched Grant's movies with great interest. On the other side of the pond, Grant was an avid student of Hitchcock's films. When Hitchcock came over permanently to Hollywood in 1939, he lost no time in contacting Grant for a new project eventually called *Suspicion*. Hitchcock's interest in Grant was not just because of marquee power. Rather, Hitchcock saw something in Grant's screen performances that wasn't there. What Hitchcock saw, as Eliot so well describes, was the possibility of a hidden dark interior in Grant's screen persona. Given the right role, Hitchcock thought, the dark interior could be brought out and pitted against the light comedic exterior, with the result that Grant would be a walking composite of precisely the good vs. evil tension that makes a screen thriller exciting. The audience would be torn between rooting for Grant as the good guy and hating him for being the bad guy. And Grant, with his precise facial control and body language, would be the person to pull off this feat.

When Hitchcock explained to Grant what he had in mind, Grant jumped at the challenge. He felt that he had always played roles that were too light and inconsequential. Of course, he didn’t look like a screen “heavy” and could never pass himself off as one. But he could do something better: he could leave audiences in doubt.

*Suspicion* is a psychological thriller in which Joan Fontaine superbly expresses her interior torment whether Cary Grant is simply a charming though irresponsible husband or a diabolical con-man bent upon murdering her. Grant’s knife-edge performance keeps
throwing the audience one way and then the other. We watch him, we think we’re sure, and then suddenly we don’t know. The role Fontaine is really playing in the movie is that of the audience watching the movie. She is our surrogate, signalling our doubts as she expresses her own. As for Grant, except for the unsatisfying *Sylvia Scarlett* (George Cukor, 1935) in which he displayed elements of a cockney con-man that should have discommodated a rather wooden Katharine Hepburn, he was displaying for the first time his almost uncanny ability to play light comedy and dark villainy simultaneously.

The movie icon of all movie icons is the glass of milk that Grant carries upstairs to give to his bed-ridden wife. As we stare at it, it seems to glow on the darkened stairway. Indeed, Hitchcock had daringly installed a light inside the milk. Its freaky incandescence is the perfect detail that sums up *Suspicion* and makes it eternally memorable. For the point is not, as some critics have said, that we realise the sinister implications of the glowing milk. Rather, the point is that even as we stare at it, we cannot be entirely sure whether the milk is poisoned or is radiating a redemptive purity.

A big studio battle about the ending ensued during the filming of *Suspicion*. I am unhappy with the decision reached between Hitchcock and his producers. For me, the movie ends on a false note.

Hitchcock’s next important project, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), was essentially the same movie. The major difference in its structure was that there was no character like Joan Fontaine expressing the audience’s doubt whether Joseph Cotton is sinister or sincere. Instead, the audience is on its own without the help of a screen surrogate. Although *Shadow of a Doubt* is surely a minor masterpiece and perhaps Hitchcock’s most underrated film, it could have been a major masterpiece if Cary Grant had played the lead role. Hitchcock wanted Grant, who alas was tied up in contractual commitments at the time. I’m not saying that Cotton wasn’t good in the role, but he wasn’t knife-edge. Lacking the comedic touch to play the light side of his character, he comes across as overly brooding. There seems to have been no way for Hitchcock to direct Cotton into balancing the dark side with the light side. If any one piece of evidence is the clincher in proving Grant’s greatness, it is our realisation of what the lead role in *Shadow of a Doubt* could have been if Grant had played it.

Maybe the hardest thing to do in criticising a movie is to imagine what it would be like with a different actor playing the lead. Would *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957) have been improved if Grant hadn’t turned down the William Holden role? I think so, to the following extent: that Grant would have been better playing off against Alec Guinness and making him more believable. Holden’s serviceable acting gave Guinness too much room to sail off into the domain of the comic book. Grant also rejected the lead in *The Music Man* (Morton DaCosta, 1962), which then was given to Robert Preston. Preston was splendid in the role he had originated on the Broadway stage, and his comedic timing was as good as Grant’s would have been. But the musical sags badly when Preston tries to romance the town librarian Shirley Jones. Preston is simply not believable; he looks too old and worn for her. Grant would have been completely believable and the movie at that point would have soared instead of sagged. But get this: Grant was in fact fourteen years older than Preston.

I could go on and on with the Reject Filmography of Cary Grant. Let me list just a few with the name of the actor who eventually got the lead role:

- *Can-Can* (Walter Lang, 1960) – Frank Sinatra
- *Guys and Dolls* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1955) –
Marlon Brando
*Lolita* (Stanley Kubrick, 1962) – James Mason
*My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964) – Rex Harrison
*Roman Holiday* (William Wyler, 1953) – Gregory Peck
*Sabrina* (Billy Wilder, 1954) – Humphrey Bogart
*A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954) – James Mason
*What’s Up, Doc?* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1972) – Ryan O’Neal

These films are all-time classics. Could they actually have been *improved* if Grant had accepted the lead role? Readers can answer this question for themselves. It is a question we perhaps would not even think of asking of any other movie star.

I like Marc Eliot’s near-poetic conclusion so much that I end this review by just quoting him:

> In the universe of the imagination, as long as there are movies and audiences who seek to find in them the reflection of their highest hopes and their deepest dreams, Cary Grant’s star will indeed shine forever, offering the illusion of the pleasure of his company...

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