

## Making light of the dark:

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DOI:  
[10.2307/20688604](https://doi.org/10.2307/20688604)

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
Walters, J 2008, 'Making light of the dark: understanding the world of 'His Girl Friday'', *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 60, no. 3-4, pp. 90-102. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20688604>

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**Making Light of the Dark: Understanding the World of *His Girl Friday***  
**James Walters**

**THE MEANINGS OF WORLDS**

In the final sentence of a study of performance in Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), Andrew Klevan makes claim for a particular achievement of the film's cast, whereby "They embrace [the plot's] linearity to create other dimensions, seamlessly, so that straightforward narratives become worlds" (102). Although focused closely upon the special intricacy of the central performances in Hitchcock's film, Klevan's remark holds further value for the broader study of cinema, referencing the extent to which our horizons for speculation about a film's fictional world can often surpass the somewhat narrower concerns of "plot development" and, crucially, how such conjecture is profoundly influenced by the complex behavior of people in films. The following discussion expands upon these two issues, outlining in precise terms some ways in which the actions and attitudes of characters in Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday* (1940) function to construct the tone and nature of the fictional world they inhabit, and the extent to which an appreciation of this fundamentally shapes our understanding of Hawks' film.

The intricate tenor of *His Girl Friday*'s fictional world motivates its selection. Although undeniably comedic (often described as "screwball"), the film harbors elements that evoke a darker mood more usually associated with the melodramatic, resulting in a blend defined succinctly by Robin Wood as a "disturbing complexity of tone" (70). Whilst the play between Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) and Walter Burns (Cary Grant) in particular is a source of pleasure and amusement, a more oppressive environment exists around the

characters, one that becomes entwined with the somewhat lighter story of their prolonged (re)courtship. This fusion originates, of course, from a series of creative choices that Hawks made in adapting *His Girl Friday* from the stage play *The Front Page* by Charles McArthur and Ben Hecht, of which a film had already appeared in 1931, directed by Lewis Milestone. Hawks' famous key decision was to change the gender of reporter Hildy Johnson from male to female (Hillier & Wollen 57). This transforms the story from one in which a controlling editor schemes to keep hold of his ace male reporter, to one in which he wishes to claim back his ex-wife "in other capacities than that of a star reporter" (Wood 66).

A central ramification of this alteration is that Hawks' film debates gender politics in a way that Milestone's film never attempts, exploring how a female reporter can exist within the ostensibly male world of newspaper reporting, an interest I shall return to later in my account of the film. Furthermore, the result of Hawks' decision is a narrative pattern focused far more on the dynamics of the relationship between Walter and Hildy, now male and female, involving a brand of effervescent, sparring dialogue which Hawks had displayed his particular comedic genius for two years earlier with *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). In generic terms, this crucial shift blurs the film's status from belonging firmly to a cycle that deal with the ruthlessness and moral ambiguity of the press,<sup>1</sup> to incorporate traits strongly associated with romantic comedy, or more specifically still, the comedy of Remarriage, as Stanley Cavell has termed films of this kind (a concept discussed more fully in a further section of this essay). The integration of these generic elements results in the thematic complexity that forms the basis for critical discussion in this article.

Within this structure, the film's organization of space and narrative events results in a compound pattern of the comedic and the melodramatic, so that moments of inventive banter and improvised teasing become inextricably bound to darker instances involving desperate outbursts, near-suicide and wrongfully-ordered execution. Dismissing the uneasy integration

of these events as merely symptomatic of “screwball comedy” logic unhelpfully averts our attention from the precise nature of the film’s narrative composition, providing a convenient but unfulfilling account. A more sustained appreciation of these contrasts, I suggest, is useful in understanding the film’s playfulness and its oppressiveness, and in explaining the characters’ ability and need to play in the oppressive world they inhabit. The film’s dramatic structure requires that we attend to the melodramatic and comedic not as dichotomous modes, but as dramatic inflections that combine to create a world.

This type of tonal fusion in *His Girl Friday* complicates the division of its fictional world into discrete thematic categories. Deborah Thomas, writing specifically on Hollywood films, presents an example of this type of partition, suggesting that “on the one hand there are narrative worlds that feel repressive and full of danger and, on the other hand, those that feel more benevolent and safe. Settling down to watch a film is, crucially, a case of getting in the mood for the sort of film one is about to watch” (Thomas, *Beyond Genre* 9). In one sense, this kind of division is familiar to us: it is unlikely that we cannot decipher to some degree what sort of world is being presented in a Hollywood film at a relatively early stage of viewing. Likewise, it is unusual that we do not possess any broad anticipations of a film through prior knowledge of its nature and tone, disseminated through reviews, advertisements, word-of-mouth and so on. However, as it stands, the strong distinction of worlds that Thomas makes reference to proves unsatisfactorily clear-cut to serve all cases. My contention in the following discussion is that repression and danger are significantly coupled with benevolence and safety in the world of *His Girl Friday* and, as a consequence, it becomes difficult to settle securely into one viewing mood as the film itself resists settling into a single defining mood.

We might profitably expand this critical notion to address a number of films whose fictional worlds feature a blending of tones and moods. A comparable work here is Preston Sturges’ *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941), released within a year of *His Girl Friday*, which confronts

its central character's (John Sullivan, played by Joel McCrea) high social ideals with the reality of the impoverished communities that exist outside of his sheltered lifestyle as a Hollywood director. His questionable endeavor to research real poverty for a film he wishes to make by dressing up as a tramp and spending time in the slums--and then distributing fifty dollar bills to the individuals who reside there--is made dramatically precarious when he is mistaken for a hobo and, through a series of misunderstandings, incarcerated in a prison work camp. In the course of its narrative, Sturges' film undergoes a series of transitions in mood from the light-hearted, high-paced society of the opulent Hollywood studio moguls to the empty hopelessness of the slums that exist outside of its parameters. Such tonal shifts might compromise the coherence of this fictional world as a world at all, and thus our investment in its dramatic goals. Yet, it might be realistically suggested that, as his story progresses, Sturges inventively expands the boundaries of his fictional world, contrasting dichotomous social spheres with the precise intention of showing up his central character's patronizing view of those communities to which he will never belong. In this sense, neither the comedy nor the melodrama of the film is compromised as these modes are effectively combined within Sturges' directorial intentions.

The debate I have constructed thus far necessarily involves acknowledging the film's fictional world *as* a world, a concern that corresponds with a series of interests expressed by V. F. Perkins in his essay "Where is the World?", in which he sets out "both to show that the world of a movie is indeed a world and, by means of a few concrete examples, to sketch some of the ways in which it matters that a fictional world is a world" (Gibbs and Pye 16). In doing so, Perkins explores not only the nature and boundaries of the fictional world in film but also the nature of its resonance with the film viewer's world. These debates arise from the conviction that "film studies has in the main ignored the fictional world, at best taken it for granted" (22). Indeed, the sparseness of sustained attention to such a fundamental issue is

curious since awareness and understanding of fictional worlds in film informs a range of debates, not least definitions of diegetic and non-diegetic space and sound.<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting on the general lack of scholarly attention to the fictional world that Perkins' observes, we might also consider the myriad versions of the term "world" that occur in film criticism (and in abundance across the critical study of narrative art). For example, contrasting social spheres are regularly described as different "worlds," so that reference is often made to a character's "world of work" as opposed to, say, their "domestic world." Of course, such distinctions are inherited from our everyday culture and it is logical that the term "world" should be employed to describe strongly contrasting social spaces in films. In Max Ophüls' *The Reckless Moment* (1949), for instance, the disparity between Lucia Harper's safe (if stifling) Balboa and Donnelly's threat-laden Los Angeles is pronounced so emphatically by the film that the two environments might seem to be two different "worlds," replete with hermetically sealed customs and orders.<sup>3</sup> Yet, crucially, the use of the term "worlds" here is figurative. For all its potential merits in describing a key cultural/spatial divide, this practice of defining the two locales as two "worlds" avoids considering an encompassing fictional world that contains the two divergent social spheres. This is more than simply a question of vocabulary: our inflections of the term "world" fundamentally impact upon our understanding. In assessing the nature of the fictional world in a film like *His Girl Friday*, I am concerned with its world in an actual rather than figurative sense.

This critical stance has broader value as it relates to the very nature of our relationship as audience members to worlds depicted on screen. In his defining work on cinema and cognition, Edward Branigan has endeavored to explain some of the processes that are at work when we watch films, stating that: "Narrative in film rests on our ability to create a three-dimensional world out of a two-dimensional wash of light and dark" (33). At once, Branigan concerns himself with the form of the cinema screen, its two-dimensionality, but goes on to

highlight the viewer's role in interpreting that apparent flatness as essentially three-dimensional, creating a textured world. Indeed, filmmakers would appear to have sought to exploit this interpretive process almost from the beginning of cinema. Whilst various writers have challenged the authenticity of accounts that describe audiences' terrified reactions at seeing the Lumière Brothers' 1895 film, *Arrivée d'un train en gare à La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train*), for the first time (Christie 15), there is no denying that this film makes early reference to the cinema audience's inclination to interpret two-dimensional images as three-dimensional worlds, so that a train moving towards the camera apparently connects with the audience's world-making cognitive process as outlined by Branigan: it looks like a train traveling towards the audience. The fun for some audience members may or may not have rested upon the make-believe notion that the three-dimensional world of the film could penetrate our real, three-dimensional world, regardless of the two-dimensional screen that separates them, rather than any serious belief in the possibility.<sup>4</sup> At the very least, the passage of a train across a diagonal axis from background to foreground highlights the extent to which we have assumed the existence of a world in three-dimensions. In this way, the mere fact that we can speak intelligibly about the foreground and background of a shot is perhaps the most arresting proof that we understand the world to extend beyond the screen, three-dimensionally.

Branigan further distinguishes that "Light and sound in narrative film are thus experienced in two ways: virtually unshaped *on* a screen as well as apparently *moving within*, reflecting and issuing from, a world which contains solid objects making sounds" (33). Here, Branigan makes clear the duality, as he sees it, of the cinematic image: the fact of its two-dimensionality allied with its simultaneous illusion of a real three-dimensional world 'moving within.' Duality is a useful term here, as we are surely always aware that we are watching a projected, two-dimensional image and yet instinctively accept the cinema's convention of

three-dimensionality. The images have been captured in the real world, and that realness remains intact as they are projected for us in the darkness.

The interpretive principles of cinema spectatorship Branigan describes are fundamental to the fact of worlds created in film, and central to our accepting them *as* worlds. Furthermore, as we experience those worlds we do so from a position of separation, a “disembodied viewer, unreflected in mirrors, unseen by characters within the film” (Thomas, *Reading Hollywood* 114). Stanley Cavell centers upon this relationship to the cinematic world’s ontology as he asks: “What does the silver screen screen? It screens me from the world it holds--that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me - that is, screens its existence from me” (Cavell, *The World Viewed* 24). Considering further this temporary invisibility that the cinema experience grants us makes us alert to our separation from the world that “exists” beyond the screen, and also heightens our awareness of the extent to which the fictional world’s happenings have been shaped in particular ways for us as absent spectators of that world. Events from that world are displayed, rather than simply relayed, to us through a process of selection, emphasis and omission. Compositional features such as camera position, editing, items of set, properties, the words characters speak, the moves that they make and so on impact upon our understanding of the fictional world. As Branigan suggests, it is a propensity of the audience to create three-dimensional worlds from two-dimensional images and, as “disembodied” or “invisible” witnesses to that world, we are significantly well-placed to further contemplate the meaning of its arrangement. Further to this, and in relation to my own concerns here, I would contend that a number films present worlds involving an intricacy and depth which invites extended scrutiny. In the case of *His Girl Friday*, the thematic amalgamation of light and dark in the film’s fictional world presents extensive opportunity to further evaluate the behaviors and attitudes of the characters which inhabit that world, individuals who create its complex tone.



## A FAILURE TO ACT

Central to my account of *His Girl Friday* is the arresting moment when a character, Molly Malloy (Helen Mack), throws herself from the window of a pressroom several flights up, a scene inherited almost directly from *The Front Page* in terms of dialogue and also in the intensity of its stylistic representation. This is Molly's final act in the film. Up to this point she has been cast as a singularly desperate character, unable to penetrate the film's central community of newspapermen and convince them that she is not having an affair with a convicted murderer, Earl Williams (John Qualen). This inability to a large extent involves her failure to use words powerfully within a society where language is perhaps the strongest currency (a fact addressed more fully later in this article). Having been pushed to the periphery, Molly's leap brings her temporarily to the foreground. It is a striking moment in the film's action and, consequently, critics have occasionally used it as a starting point for discussion (cf. MacKillop 189-200; Roth 160-75). We might easily be convinced by the impact of the moment but, whereas it could be argued that Molly's leap also 'leaps out' incoherently from the surrounding action, I want to suggest a number of ways in which it can be seen to fit with the world of the film as a consistent rather than incongruous event.

Molly's act is one of self-sacrifice. Earl is hiding in one of the pressroom desks having escaped from prison on the eve of his execution. Hildy Johnson, a reporter, has hidden him there and is the only other person in the room who knows of his whereabouts. However, Hildy had earlier told her slow-witted fiancé, Bruce Baldwin (Ralph Bellamy), that she'd got Earl Williams, and when Bruce's indignant mother (Alma Kruger) enters and unhelpfully makes

reference to a murderer Hildy is hiding (hilariously looking across the faces of the assembled reporters and exclaiming haughtily: “they *all* look like murderers to me”), the game seems to be up. With Earl figuratively free but literally trapped and Hildy cornered by a pack of fellow reporters growing more suspicious and brutal by the second, Molly chooses her moment and stages her dramatic distraction.

As the reporters close hungrily in on the floundering Hildy--pulling at her arms, clutching at her lapels--we cut to a shot of Molly rising from her chair and launching herself towards the foreground of the frame crying out “Stop it! Stop it!” cutting their interrogations dead. From this advanced position, Molly’s hands rest against the back of another chair in front of her. She seems to gain composure as she uses its frame for support, becoming calmer as she continues “She don’t know where he is...” pulling herself upright and raising her chin on “...I’m the only one that knows.” But as the reporters quickly swarm on her, Molly deflates, her gaze dropping momentarily to the ground and one hand falling loosely from her chair-support. This failure of physical confidence coincides with Molly’s critical vocal error as she invites the reporters to “Try and find out.” With these words, she enters into a hopeless game with little chance of success: a pack of reporters, whose very instincts are to chase their story, present a challenge too ruthless for her brittle defense. Her stalling tactic unravels almost as soon as it begins. The men close in, probing her with sharp, assured, well-rehearsed interjections. Molly’s response--“Talk? Now you want me to talk...”--is shot through with bewilderment and despair as her thoughts turn self-pityingly inward. Her continuing with “You wouldn’t listen to me before, not even for a minute, and now you want me to talk...” might be read as Molly delaying her distraction, inserting a complicating vignette to spin out her diversion, yet her breaking voice betrays the real emotion rising within her, undermining any control she might have sought to exert. As she speaks, she looks pleadingly into the eyes of a reporter to her right, slightly raising her right hand to him in a tiny half-gesture of one

human reaching desperately, instinctively, out to another in spite of their fundamental divide. Mack lowers her gaze and visibly exhales the final word “talk,” causing her whole frame to wilt from the centre and her voice to wither as though Molly were finally losing her will, retreating again into self-pity as she momentarily breaks contact with the world.

Hildy attempts guidance--“Don’t tell them anything Molly”--but Molly, confused and frustrated, has lost track of whom she is fighting (does she feel she is fighting the whole world now?) and responds impatiently, ironically: “Let me alone, I know what I’m doing.” Molly’s uncertainty over what she is doing is clear to us and perhaps equally apparent to her, so that her statement of assurance only draws attention to her inadequacies. When Molly turns back to the reporter on her right, she tilts and shakes her head forlornly, imploring wearily: “Why didn’t you listen to me? Why couldn’t you...?” Another reporter to her left moves to grab her arm and this action triggers a new desperation within her. Suddenly her gaze flicks wildly around the room; her frantic speech overflows relentlessly, punctuated only by short rasping intakes of breath; her hands become clasped in front her body and she rolls them over each other in frantic, nervous motion. Backing away from the reporters, she delivers her climactic line: “I’ll give you a wonderful story...only this time it’ll be true...” and suddenly Molly is running across the room, the camera tracking her progress with a casual pan left, and then she’s at the window shouting into the night air: “You’ll never find him now!” As she falls, she screams.

Molly gives the reporters their “wonderful story” through action rather than speech. This contrasts with those men’s ability to create stories with words, the mark of their profession. Molly profoundly lacks the storytelling craft and is made to realize the limits of her language as soon as she begins. In this world, vocal eloquence is a strong currency, perhaps the strongest, exchanged between characters with interest, yet Molly lacks such linguistic assurance and perhaps this is precisely what drives her to such desperate action.

Molly's failure with language sets her apart and ultimately cuts her adrift in her world, leaving her powerless and defeated.

Given the bitter tone of this sequence, it is easy to forget that the scenario itself offers the director a range of potentials, some of which are actually comedic. A particular path is chosen, but others are suggested by the dramatic arrangement. The figure locked in the news desk, for example, is a potent comic detail. This potency is exploited later in the film as one of the reporters attempts to sit down and work at the very same desk. Yet here any comedy is resisted. Similarly, the performance of Molly's words and actions could conceivably be over-emphasized for comic rather than melodramatic effect, causing the character to become funny to us rather than tragic. Yet Mack invests Molly with an unsettling emotional intensity. Finally, the act of jumping out of a window might well carry a comic weight of its own, perhaps displaying precisely the kind of chaotic logic that screwball comedies often exhibit, whereby our inability to fathom the logic of events in no way restricts our pleasure in observing them. Certainly, Hawks was no stranger to such comic strategies and this film has its share of what might be termed "screwball" moments. Yet the depiction of Molly's leap displays none of the director's comic instincts. Given this director's particular skill at making events funny, and given the fact that he had already altered many sections of the original text, the absence of humor suggests a purposeful resistance of the comedic.

Hawks' choice of tone for this scene is not out of place within his film, however. We might recount that Molly's tirade against the reporters that encircle her fits a pattern: there is a history between this woman and these men. She had confronted them in an earlier scene, accusing them of fabricating an illicit relationship between her and Earl Williams. Their responses then were sour and sarcastic as they made an act of their cold disregard. In that earlier scene, the reporters' heartlessness was exposed *as* an act only when Hildy protectively ushered Molly from the room and they were left uncomfortable and silent, unable to find any

smart lines to mask the guilt they each felt. Hawks lingered on that moment of silence (exploiting it beyond the weighting afforded in Milestone's version of the story) making it uncomfortable for the audience as much as for his characters. In this later scene, Molly's words before her plunge are made no easier for us to bear as Hawks trains his camera upon her and doesn't relent until her final departure. The pared down nature of Hawks' *mise-en-scène* might mislead here, as its apparent simplicity achieves a sophisticated effect. The camera's staying back from Molly, observing her in a distanced, apparently passive, manner translates into a sustained watchfulness which demands that we attend to her actions.

The callousness of the reporters' earlier act can be read as a survival mechanism, "the camouflage that allows them to do their job" (Mast 226). Listening to Molly, we are reminded that she too performs an act, attempting her own camouflage as she distracts the reporters from their inquisition of Hildy, and so from discovering Earl. Unlike those reporters, however, Molly exerts only a tenuous control over her performance. Trapping herself by the rules of her own game, she can only improvise her escape through the window, catching the reporters by surprise and surely the audience as well since this action occurs with startling pace and without warning. Indeed, the use of a smooth continuous shot to capture Molly's speech and leap lends an unnerving naturalness to her final action; the absence of any cut to heighten or even extend the drama of the moment renders the event perhaps more shocking to us, leaving us somehow unprepared. Again, it is Hawks' diminished visual style that creates resonance here. Likewise, Molly's pathetic scream as she leaps into nothingness provides an understated but unsettling punctuation to the event.<sup>5</sup> The contrast of Molly's act with the reporters' brings to mind the question of whether, in this world, the ability to perform is itself a *condition* of survival. The reporters managed the exteriority of their performance in front of Molly, reverting to interior reflection only when she has left, whereas in the later scene Molly confuses the pretence of performance and her real emotion, letting the mask slip too easily.

Taking this into account, an individual's ability to survive in this world might depend not so much upon an expression of their true nature, but what aspect of their nature they choose to show. In the context of this duplicity, the truth of matters becomes only a question of surface appearance, and so Molly's insistence upon absolute fact is destined only to fail.

### **POTENTIALS AND POSSIBILITIES**

After Molly jumps, we cut first to Walter Burns, Hildy's ex-husband and editor of the *Morning Post*, as he enters the pressroom, and then to a shot from outside the building as the reporters rush to the window, instinctively chasing their story. As we cut to an overhead shot of the courtyard resembling the angle of the reporters' gaze, we fleetingly glimpse Molly's motionless body, bathed in the circle of a police searchlight, before a crowd swarm towards her and shroud her from view. We therefore see very little of Molly and the cut which might have promised revelation and relief provides only concealment and curiosity. Looking down at the scene, one reporter pronounces her dead before another declares that she's alive. Their uncertainty here proves that the fall might have killed her, might still kill her, and so the danger of Molly's actions, and the precariousness of her present condition, is re-emphasized. The reporters rush from the room to chase the story, but we are enlightened no further (and in fact are never told whether Molly survived her fall).

Hawks' representation of Molly's jump is uncompromising, not least the fleeting glimpse we are afforded of her lying still on a ground that seems wretchedly solid (a view not disclosed in Milestone's earlier film). Indeed, this shot offers little hope in terms of Molly's fate and the ensuing comments from the reporters hardly guarantee her safety for us. It is a

dark moment, characteristic of the film's particular fictional world. Yet, it might be tempting to say that Molly's leap and potential death evacuates her *from* the world, thus removing an element that was troublesome for many of the film's characters and perhaps troubling for the audience as we appreciated her failure to fit with her world. Certainly, Marty Roth's somewhat skeptical essay makes this claim: "The film dances over broken bones. At its mid-point, it dramatizes a need to get rid of Mollie [sic] in the sense of both crushing her and forgetting about her" (Roth 161). Roth perhaps confuses the briefness of Molly's leap with an alleged desire of the film to be brief about it, whereas it might satisfactorily be said that the film presents a world in which the possible death of a young woman is treated in a remorselessly brief fashion. Rather than treat Molly unfairly, as Roth seems to suggest, Hawks may indeed be drawing attention to her unfair treatment within her world. Further to this, I would suggest that Molly's act is insightful about the fictional world, indexing its tone and nature, rather than clumsily shuffling a character out of her world.

Stanley Cavell usefully attends to the temperament of *His Girl Friday's* world in his landmark essay on the film, contained within his study of a genre made within Hollywood between 1934 and 1949: the Comedy of Remarriage.<sup>6</sup> Cavell finds the world of *His Girl Friday* to be fundamentally divergent from the other films contained within his study: "It is a place seemingly so unlike any other place we witness in the remaining comedies of the genre of remarriage as itself to cast doubt on the placement of this film within the genre" (169). For Cavell, such is the disparity between this film's world and the worlds of other remarriage comedies that it can even threaten the placement of *His Girl Friday* alongside those other examples. Cavell further distinguishes the film's fictional world as "black," containing no haven of a "green world" that exists within other Remarriage Comedies offering "a pastoral alternative to the desperations of city life" (172). The result is that the characters are rooted to their world, and even the prospect of flight to some other place is made undesirable: a life

spent in Albany with Bruce presents only a different brand of trap for Hildy rather than an escape. Evidently, Cavell's definition of a "black" world is fundamental to this discussion of the fictional world's intrinsic tone and mood. (Moreover, his meticulous attention to the complex attitudes and motivations of the film's characters constitutes a guiding approach for anyone wishing to write usefully about the film.) Cavell's description of the black world also forms a thematic link with the film's opening title card which informs us, sarcastically, that the story takes place in the "dark ages" of newspaper reporting, so establishing a murky tone for the fictional world but also acknowledging that murkiness, the explanatory words occurring away from that world in order to show up its brutality.

The dramatization of Molly's leap contributes to the particularly dark tone and mood that Cavell ascribes to the film, but it also helps to establish the potentials and possibilities of the fictional world. We might remember that Molly stages her leap, premeditating its impact as one would a performance ("I'll give you a story...only this time it'll be true..."). Yet, unlike other performed leaps from buildings, this act includes no safety net. It is certainly conceivable that something standing in for a safety net might have been provided for Molly's descent; we can imagine other films including some complicating detail to break her fall: a thicket of bushes, a shop awning or a stack of boxes. This film might have provided those cushions but a different choice has been enacted, resulting in the presentation of a world without such safe guarantees, where a fall from a window has very real consequences. Molly's fall is left unbroken and so she is left mercilessly broken by her fall. Hawks refuses to soften this blow and refrains from giving the sequence a point of relief, leaving his character unsatisfactorily poised between life and death. The depiction of Molly's leap fundamentally shapes our expectations of the fictional world, defining it as a place where life is made precarious in the absence of benevolent rescue.



It is not unusual for comedies like *His Girl Friday*, often grouped and called “screwball,” to express cynicism and to reverse certain received notions regarding love, romance, ambition, reason and so on. Indeed, this tendency to reverse rules is part of their fun. Yet, at times, *His Girl Friday* goes beyond this general propensity for reversal and cynicism, finding instead abject bleakness. The event of Molly’s leap contributes to a pattern of occurrences represented with a style so dark that it renders the fictional world starkly oppressive. We might recall instances in the film such as an earlier view of the gallows portrayed in foreboding silhouette outside the pressroom window or the grim, claustrophobic space of Earl Williams’ isolation cage in the prison. These moments constitute a brand of structural oppressiveness, indicative of a civilization that fashions objects or spaces in its own psyche, imbued with a particular bleakness. Additionally, there exists a type of behavior in *His Girl Friday* that also fits the dark pattern of representation. We might recall the vociferousness of Molly’s earlier rage against the reporters that leaves them guilty and silent or even Earl crazily pointing a gun at Hildy as she tries to talk him down from his frantic confusion. Here we appreciate characters responding to their abject world and, through their own behavior, becoming one with its tone and mood. These moments, in combination with Molly’s eventual demise, reveal this world’s dark possibilities.

## **FACING THE WORLD**

It is this bleakness, innate to the film’s world and expressed in the stories of Earl Williams and Molly Malloy, that Hildy must ultimately contend with. She becomes inextricably linked to the world’s dark tone as she bears witness to each of those moments described briefly

above. After Molly's leap Hildy remains by the window, apparently dazed, murmuring to Walter: "Did you see that...She jumped out of the window...Anyway she isn't dead...She didn't kill herself..." Walter's grabbing her shoulders and telling her "come to Hildy" has little immediate effect. Even when he strides over to check on Earl in the desk, she lingers at the window, perhaps checking what happened, perhaps in her bewilderment re-checking that it really happened at all. The impact of Molly's leap followed by the briskness of Walter's actions might cause us to overlook Hildy's murmured words. But we should attend to what she says, for her words are almost always important in this film.

Listening once again, it is as though Hildy speaks not so much to Walter as to herself, reminding herself of facts this world has revealed to her. The effect is not so much of a person coming to terms with their world but rather extending a moment that occurred in that world in order to understand it, or at least understand that it happened. (And perhaps Hildy speaks our thoughts at this moment as well, as we comprehend the fictional world's events.) Therefore, Hildy revisits the moment to examine the terms of her world, rather than necessarily accepting them: her distanced manner succinctly representing her inability to find comfortable resolution. Further to this, I read Hildy's lingering by the window as her act of staying *close* to Molly, wordlessly observing her closeness to her in an unforgiving world that leaves all potentially close to Molly's desperation. And here, perhaps, the film speculates upon Hildy's role in her world. As she perches out of the open window, suspended between the pressroom and the site of Molly's impact, Hildy hesitates between at least two of the roles we have seen her play: a woman, capable of the "sisterly" (MacKillop 195) compassion shown to Molly earlier, and a "newspaperman" herself, aligned with that culture of near-persecution. This world, which ruthlessly divides its inhabitants into victims or survivors, has presented to Hildy the tangible consequences of being caught in the wrong camp. And so she is lost for a moment, frozen to the spot in an effort to slow her world as she faces its realities.

Our reading of Hildy's response to Molly's leap necessarily involves a consideration of her gendered role within the world she inhabits: a female reporter existing within a society of newspapermen. I have suggested that Hildy experiences a closeness to Molly's predicament as she stands by the open window and, in this sense, the proposition is that Hildy sees something of her own situation in Molly; her dilemma of being caught between the roles of dutiful wife or "newspaperman," for example, melodramatically recreated in Molly's harsh choice between the mental agony of interrogation within the office or the physical, perhaps even fatal, suffering incurred through jumping from the window. The transitory connection between the characters relies upon their relationship as women within their world, thus hinging upon Hawks' decision to make his Hildy Johnson female. Crucially, in Milestone's *The Front Page*, even though the male Hildy's (Pat O'Brien) response is not dissimilar to the female Hildy's here, because of his maleness it reads as *sympathy* for a desperate character, whereas in Hawks' film Hildy's response is borne out of *empathy* for another woman whose plight, at a certain level, she finds herself momentarily relating to. And this may give Hildy further cause for reflection as her moment of empathy has come too late to benefit Molly: she has already jumped.

On the face of it, then, Walter's contrasting *lack* of interest in Molly's fate seems heartless. He walks over to Hildy but, crucially, does not look out of the window, enquiring instead about Earl, checking on him in the desk and, after a little complicating dialogue, instructing his sidekick Louis (Abner Biberman) to escort Bruce's mother out of the room (her own relentless pursuit of the truth having continued even after Molly's leap). Louis obliges by hauling her over his shoulder and marches with her out of the office whilst Walter stuffs a handkerchief into her mouth. Throughout this sequence of actions, Grant adopts a theatrical style of performance that references the very act of performing: moving with an exaggerated, staccato rhythm; projecting to the world his short bursts of words in that funny,

effortless voice which defies regional identification. James Naremore notes that: “Grant’s performances often suggested a man who was simply having fun making a movie” (220) yet in this scene, at this pace, we might lose track of who is having the fun: Cary Grant or Walter Burns. Perhaps it is both, as the fusion of actor and character offers those irresistible traits they share alike. Nevertheless, the fun of Walter’s actions is out of step with preceding events and Molly seems callously overlooked. Although Walter’s performance is infused with instinctive humor, the film’s move from dark to light risks eliciting only guilty laughter.

As a way of reconciling this, we might question further Walter’s motivations and, more specifically, his relationship to his world. Thinking along these lines, it may be that Walter’s attitude is representative of his knowing the world he inhabits well enough to know that matters of life and death occur frequently and will keep occurring. This knowledge means that, with others attending to the matter of Molly’s life and death, Walter simply turns to the life and death of Earl Williams. Walter’s perspective is certainly pragmatic, but also uncompromising and cynical: not even a glance out of the window to check on Molly. Cynical and uncompromising, the attitude absolutely belongs to the world of the film and, being Walter’s, represents his absolute belonging to that world. Here, we are likely to see the implications of Cavell’s assessment that “no one could be more absolutely this-worldly than Walter” (177). If Hildy becomes entwined in this world’s bleakness then Walter immerses himself in it. Yet immersion does not overburden the man. Watching Walter, the opposite seems to be true: he quickly injects a new dynamic into events, performing a fast-paced ballet of words and actions that infuses the scene with a comic tone and transforms the room into a site of spontaneous play. By the time he leads a crazy dance across the pressroom, simultaneously stuffing that handkerchief into Bruce’s mother’s mouth and keeping Hildy at arm’s length, everybody is caught up in the fluent pace of his actions.

It might be tempting to say that Walter employs this behavior to remove himself from the reality of the world, using play as a defense mechanism. Yet, he actively engages with his world's facets as he moves and talks, arranging and manipulating to gain greater purchase over events. He seems to understand his world, understands its darkness, and understands that the saving of one life may involve an indifference towards the safety of another (or might even involve the temporary kidnapping of an elderly lady). If Walter's attitudes sit uneasily with us, we might reflect that whilst characters in fiction films are quite naturally evaluated according to a common language of human behavior, they also exhibit characteristics that are special to the world they inhabit. Their world is like ours, but is not ours; they are the same as us but different.

The suggestion is that Walter effectively transforms the terms of his world through his comedic style of speech and action, yet doesn't attempt to escape the oppressiveness of his world in the process. Therefore, his easy humor does not exist in isolation to Molly's brittle anxiety; light does not obliterate dark. Instead there is fusion: Walter's lightness fundamentally engages with the darkness of his world instead of avoiding it. To suggest otherwise is to conveniently overlook that he plays in order to hide a convicted murderer, so averting an execution but also stealing the story. Comedy and melodrama exist cohesively in the film as varying inflections of the same world order. And so a bond exists between the energy of Walter's organizing act and Molly's desperate leap: it is their *responses* to their world that define them, the precariousness of the world exciting Walter, rather than overwhelming him as it did Molly. Whilst she is sunk, he remains buoyant. When Hildy chooses Walter at the end of the film, or at least discards the notion that there might be a choice at all, she is provided with no guarantee of insurance or safety from him. Her fiancé Bruce had promised such things but, as Cavell tells us, his proposed life for them in Albany was merely a "counterfeit of happiness" (165). In contrast, Walter offers Hildy nothing more

than the reality of their world and, crucially, a means of living in it, making it habitable. In a world where hope has become unstable, her hope for survival rests with him, in order that she herself does not become hopeless. Walter's restless pursuit of Hildy suggests the extent to which he needs her and in turn might lead us to speculate upon the nature of his need for her: is Hildy the condition of his ability to face his world?<sup>7</sup>

In this world, at least, these two fundamentally belong together and the film declares this cohesion audibly in the way the characters speak together. They fall into an electric pattern of speech whenever they are close, their rhythmic compatibility exposing the intellectual and emotional affinity they magically share even as they fight. As Gerald Mast elucidates: "The two apparent antagonists speak in an identical rhythm, in identical cadences, singing perfect verbal duets--which reveal that the two are spiritually and truly one. Their minds click away at the same pace and in the same rhythm...just as their words do" (215). The film makes clear Hildy and Walter's delight in controlling language, their near-delirium in playing together with the pace, tone and rhythm of words. Their fluent use of language connects them with a world in which the ability to use words dictates a person's status and likewise, as in Molly's case, an inability signals their collapse. As Mast suggests, Hildy and Walter delight in each other's language, practically mimicking their voices back to one another. We might note this pattern in the moments following Molly's leap, when Hildy has drawn herself away from the window and effortlessly, almost subconsciously, re-engages in Walter's fast-paced patter. It is as though, faced with the dark and unsettling truth of Molly's action, the joyful engagement with words and language keeps the pair afloat, allowing them a means of surviving their world's bitter reality together. Indeed, there is a truthfulness in their shared vocal rhythms and patterns, as though their profound affinity emerges naturally and unavoidably whenever they are together. Cavell best expresses this affinity when he says of the couple that: "They simply appreciate one another more than either of them appreciates

anyone else, and they would rather be appreciated by each other than by anyone else” (167).

In agreeing with Cavell, we might conclude that, whilst this pair is together, the world may remain dark but it can never be dull.

## CONCLUSION

The fictional world of *His Girl Friday* can ultimately be defined and understood in both comedic and melodramatic terms. The film constructs a world in which comedy and melodrama exist and, most importantly, coalesce. Appreciating the nature of the fictional world’s dramatic boundaries in this way can help us to make sense of the characters, their behaviors and their attitudes. Likewise, the behaviors and attitudes of the characters construct the fictional world’s dramatic boundaries, creating that balance of melodrama and comedy through their actions. The film is ambitious where it attempts to balance the lighter comedy of Walter and Hildy with the darker melodrama of the world that surrounds them, making them part of the same world. We can envisage that, in the sequence discussed, comedy or melodrama might outbalance each other, with the important actions of Molly, Hildy or Walter becoming compromised as a result. This is certainly a possibility that Hawks courts in his adaptation of Hecht and MacArthur’s script. The film’s achievement, I would contend, lies in its ability to amalgamate the two dramatic tones, resulting in a world that is both comedic and melodramatic, rather than one that *either* comedic *or* melodramatic. Crucially, both the comedic and the melodramatic belong to the world of the film, forming a cohesive, consistent and coherent fictional world. As we have seen, Walter and Hildy’s playfulness is

fundamentally bound to their world's oppressiveness, distinct in tone but belonging to the same order.

In the course of this discussion, I have proposed some ways in which a consideration of the tone and mood of *His Girl Friday*'s fictional world can enrich our understanding of that particular film's themes and structures. To expand upon this, I would suggest that all fiction films construct worlds imbued with particular potentials and possibilities, and that a closer appreciation of this can make us perceptive to our experiences and expectations of films as we view and evaluate them. This is perhaps most potently the case in films that construct fantasy worlds imbued with rules fundamentally distinct from reality, so that we are willing to accept the existence of vampires in one fictional world or talking animals in another. But it is also true of films exhibiting less extreme departures. The world of *His Girl Friday* enjoys a series of correlations to our own--sharing people (Adolf Hitler) and places (Albany)--but also possesses a special mood and tone particular to its fictional world, one which guides the thoughts and actions of its characters. An interesting counterpart to my assertions would be to consider those moments in films when events occur inconsistently to the potentials and possibilities of the fictional world that the film has created and whether, ultimately, these are the times when viewer disappointment sets in as a film's credibility dissolves. An enquiry of that kind might further scrutinize the requirement of fictional worlds in film to function coherently and consistently according to the possibilities and potentials they establish through the events they disclose to us.

## NOTES



I would like to thank Tom Brown and Ed Gallafent for their recommendations on the preparation of this article.

1. An example of this cycle, contemporaneous to Hawks' film, is *Meet John Doe* (Frank Capra, 1941). The films share a thematic trait in that Capra also explores the role of a young female reporter within the newspaper profession, which is similarly represented as cynical, exploitative and power-driven. In Capra's film, politics and the press are dangerously entwined and the central character, Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck) becomes entangled in the ambitious plans of newspaper magnate D.B. Norton (Edward Arnold), leaving her ultimately caught between her capitalist desires and her moral convictions. Furthermore, she falls in love with "John Doe" (Gary Cooper) who is central to Norton's political machinations, yet Capra allows none of the highly-charged, comedic interplay between these characters that is evident in Hawks' film (and was a central feature in Capra's 1934 film *It Happened One Night*, which also touched upon the shrewd practices of the modern press). *Meet John Doe* actually climaxes with the attempted suicide of "John Doe," whereas Hawks resists placing any of his central characters in such a precarious position, instead placing their energetic re-courtship within the harsher extremities of the world that surrounds them.

2. However, Thomas' chapter "The space of the spectator: diegetic and non-diegetic, virtual and real" in *Reading Hollywood* is particularly incisive on these issues (95).

3. In Ophüls' film, as with other Hollywood films comprising two or other divergent spaces or environments, the contrast between 'worlds' is made all the more emphatic as the act of travelling between them is elided, and so we travel 'straight' from one to the next without witnessing in full the journey involved.

4. A later film, *The Countryman's First Sight of the Animated Pictures* (R. W. Paul, 1901) would seem to play on the fun of this effect by having a country 'yokel' in the film, watching an image of a train approach and reacting in the melodramatic fashion befitting one who thinks the train might race out beyond the screen and plough into him.

5. The understating of this moment may also have been necessary due to the pervasive influence of the Motion Picture Production Code. Although not mentioned explicitly in the Code, the act of suicide or attempted suicide would certainly sit uneasily with at least two of its stipulations: that sympathy should not be created for the violation of human law and that criminal acts should never be presented with sympathy (Leff and J.L.Simmonds 285-7). The need for the film not to dwell too heavily on Molly's leap would therefore have been intensified given the production context.

6. The other comedies of the genre of remarriage are: *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941), *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), *Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, 1949) and *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937).

7. Read in this way, Hildy's walking into Walter's office at the beginning of the film performs the symbolic effect of drawing him back out again: returning him to his world.

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