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A Non-hero Gone Wild

Ben Stiller's Adaptation of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, a short story by James Thurber which appeared in *The New Yorker* in March 1939, tells the story of a nobody whom the reader accompanies on a round of shopping. Mitty is not only an Everyman, he is a non-hero who does as he is told by his wife although his own impulses would tell him otherwise; for example, he does not feel quite old enough yet to wear overshoes but does so anyway because his wife tells him to. To compensate for his dissatisfaction in real life, Walter Mitty drifts into daydreams which turn his everyday actions into heroic adventures. Instead of driving a car he is piloting a hydroplane through a storm, then suddenly performing life-saving surgery on a dying patient, and minutes later bombing German ammunition dens while really sitting in a hotel lobby waiting for his henpecking wife. It is his dream-world achievements that take Mitty through the meaninglessness of his real-world life and transform him into "*Walter Mitty, the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last*" [Thurber's emphasis in text]. Thus, the protagonist of the story is most strongly characterised by all those things he is *not*. The discrepancy between his wish to be extraordinary and his real-life actions serves to highlight his mediocrity, his non-heroism.

In 2013, the story, the appeal of which lay mostly in the fact that every reader could relate to Walter Mitty in his rather unremarkable, normal life that does not live up to his big dreams, was brought to the big screen. Ben Stiller is the second director – after Norman McLeod in 1947 – to turn the story of little more than 2000 words into a full-length film, and in his version the world of Walter Mitty seems to be all about certainty and security. In the opening scene, the audience sees him sitting in a sparse apartment in pale colours. A small, plain man is using his spare time in the morning to balance his checkbook and to pine for his co-worker on an online dating site because he is too insecure to talk to her in real life. Even the decision to send her a "wink" online takes him minutes of deliberation, and when he

finally clicks on the smiley-face the system does not work. Being an orderly guy, Mitty calls the dating service's hotline about the malfunction and is openly confronted with his mediocrity:

"You left a lot of this stuff, like the 'Been There, Done That' section, you left it blank."

"Yeah, I think I skipped it."

"Okay, you got to help me out here, man. Don't skip stuff."

"Okay, well, I haven't really been anywhere noteworthy or mentionable."

"Have you done anything noteworthy, mentionable?"

(*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* 00:04:00)

Upon this cue question, Mitty "zones off" as he calls it later on, into a daydream about saving his co-worker's three-legged dog from a building which is about to explode and giving her a self-designed prosthetic leg for the animal, thereby winning her admiration. The dream sequence ends with her exclaiming, "God, you're noteworthy!" (00:05:00) In real life, however, his dream only results in him missing his train and being late for his job at *LIFE Magazine*, where he works as a 'negative asset manager', an analogue position endangered by the impending digitalisation of the magazine. When he meets his crush Cheryl at work, the self-confidence of his daydream is gone. The camera captures him from a high angle, thus presenting a small, mousy man who is lost for words (and actions) when facing a situation which outcome he cannot predict.

Having presented the private man, the film then goes on to show the professional Walter Mitty. Although as unconfident and shy as in his personal relations, he is introduced to the audience as a man who loves his work and the images of spectacular places and extreme activities he is dealing with and who is passionate about the magazine. There is a sequence in which a coy Mitty dressed in old-fashioned grey clothes is standing under the magazine's motto, bolted in big letters to the lobby wall – "To see

the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls, draw closer, to find each other, and to feel. That is the purpose of *LIFE*" (00:06:51). This might make the audience laugh, but nevertheless one genuinely believes that Mitty wants to contribute to the realisation of his motto.

Walter Mitty seems to be the epitome of a non-hero in the sense that lacks any heroic characteristics. Under *LIFE*'s banner of extraordinariness, he is living a life of mediocrity, conventions, and unobtrusiveness. This is emphasised through various contrasts; not only do the magazine's spirit and Mitty's daydreams of heroism and daring highlight his real life of security, but he also – like the negatives he is working with – seems to be the complete opposite of how his co-worker Cheryl describes her Mr. Right: "Adventurous, Brave, Creative" (00:01:27). Mitty himself is neither adventurous ["I haven't really been anywhere noteworthy" (00:04:00)], nor brave [when a group of 'transition managers' working on the digitalisation of the magazine talk down on him, he is lost for words and can only stand up to them in his daydreams], nor creative, since he only works with other people's creativity, processing their photographs.

However, Walter Mitty's ordinary, non-heroic life takes a rapid turn; *LIFE*, which is going to be transformed into an online publication, is working on its last printed issue, and when the negative of the last cover image, depicting what the photographer terms the "quintessence of life" (00:11:55), cannot be found, Mitty goes on a globe-spanning hunt to find it. Motivated by his sense of duty [it is his job to produce the image] and with the persuasion of Cheryl, who tells him to "connect the clues" (00:18:28), he embarks on an unrealistic, near-absurd trip to track down the photographer. His journey first takes him to Greenland, where he jumps out of a helicopter into the sea, is attacked by a shark, and escapes death by seconds. A ship then takes him to Iceland, where he skateboards towards an erupting volcano. His action-hero trip – which is so surreal the viewer sometimes expects it to turn out to be a daydream – is frequently interrupted by phone calls from Todd, the online dating service staffer, who is delighted that he can now update Mitty's "Been There, Done That" section and who finally, when Mitty is standing on the ridge of a Himalayan mountain, proudly informs him: "You have a profile now, congratulations!" (00:30:41)

As Mitty grows bolder and his surroundings become more and more impressive, the camera angles change, showing the protagonist taller and in saturated colours. The small grey man is transformed into the unshaven, active, broad-shouldered, and tanned man Walter imagined himself to be in one of his first daydreams in

which he took Cheryl by storm. When this new and improved version of Mitty finally finds the photographer, he not only discovers that he had the negative all along but also learns a life lesson: The photographer tells him that – in the most beautiful of situations – he does not take pictures because they distract him from the fullest possible experience of life and that living life to the fullest should be Mitty's goal. Thus, he returns from his journey of self-discovery a changed man: an action hero returning to a non-hero's life. Equipped with his new confidence – and his new "adventurous, brave and creative" style – he has the courage to talk to Cheryl, and together they look at the cover of the last print-version of *LIFE*, the picture for which Mitty had passed on to the layout department without peeking at. The cover is a black-and-white image of Walter Mitty himself, dreamily looking at a sheet of negatives, withdrawn into a world of his own. With this shift of focus from the grand scenes of life [or *LIFE*] to the small, seemingly unimportant negative asset manager, the non-hero gets his acknowledgement and attention and the reassurance that he is worthy of admiration just as the adventurous men who want "to see the world, things dangerous to come, ..." (00:06:51). However, this is where the film goes wrong, since the version of Mitty depicted on the cover, the small, slim man in his grey jacket lost in the images of the wide world that inspire his daydreams, does not exist anymore. Not only is the Walter walking hand in hand with Cheryl in the New York sunshine now the tanned, broad-shouldered version of his older self who has learned to dress better, but he has lost his imagination as well. When Cheryl asks him, "How's the daydreaming going?", he answers: "Lately less" (01:29:20). Thus, the story of the ordinary fellow finally being recognised does not play through, since Mitty has to become a different person in order for his former, ordinary, non-heroic self to be validated.

One critic entitled his review of the film "Everybody Knows a Walter Mitty" (Huber) – I'd argue just the opposite. Everybody might have known a non-hero like Thurber's Walter Mitty, but Stiller's Mitty seems to be a non-hero gone wild, a mousy man transformed into a superhuman action hero that the audience can only relate to through the representation of his past self. The audience might have been able to identify with the unheroic man depicted on the cover of *LIFE Magazine*'s last issue, the average, everyday guy. This Walter Mitty that "everybody" might know, though, does not exist anymore by the end of the film.

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