The *Secret Life of Walter Mitty*: James Thurber's short story remade

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Directed by Ben Stiller; written by Steve Conrad; based on the short story by James Thurber

The new film *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, directed by Ben Stiller, is adapted from the well-known 1939 short story by American humorist James Thurber (1894-1961). Thurber's brief tale of a man who escapes into a fantasy life to get away from his humdrum, middle-class existence, and his bossy wife, is a charming and bittersweet tale.

Mitty's complex daydreams involve giant leaps that proceed from small, everyday cues; in his imagination he becomes a surgeon, a pilot, or a man bravely facing execution, while in real life he is putting on gloves, scanning a magazine or lighting a cigarette in the rain. The story is relatable and inviting—the reader follows Walter Mitty willingly through these scenes and shares with him the letdown of being returned to the banal errands Mitty is performing in suburban Connecticut with and for the impatient Mrs. Mitty.

The 1947 Danny Kaye vehicle (directed by Norman Z. McLeod) significantly altered the story to highlight Kaye's comedic abilities, but did retain some elements of the original. Thurber, who was consulted on the film, but whose advice was not apparently followed, was not happy with the outcome; however, the film has its admirers.

Stiller's effort departs yet further from the story. This Mitty is an absent-minded "negative assets" manager at *Life* magazine. He has a crush on a co-worker, Cheryl (Kristen Wiig), but is too shy to say anything to her. He has joined a web dating site and we are introduced to Mitty as he sits in his colorless apartment hesitating over whether to send a flirtatious, electronic "wink" to her. This scene is well constructed and Stiller convincingly conveys the spirit of a man who is cripplingly unsure of himself—and not just in the romantic sphere.

Sadly, these first five minutes of the two-hour film are its most honest. Pressing the button that would send the wink, Mitty is frustrated by a computer glitch. He eventually reaches Todd (Patton Oswalt) at tech support. In an awkward exchange not worthy of either of these performers, what we already know is revealed: Walter Mitty has not been anywhere or done anything.

At work, the *Life* employees are frantic as the magazine has just been taken over and Ted Hendricks (Adam Scott), a corporate manager, is eyeing people for potential downsizing. He announces that the next issue of the magazine will be the last paper edition, and a photo sent by the famed Sean O'Connell (Sean Penn) will appear on the cover. Predictably, the negative, which had been sent directly to Mitty, has disappeared.

Although those around him are losing their jobs, and his is also threatened, Mitty remains obsessed with Cheryl and most of his fantasies revolve around heroically saving her or otherwise attracting her attention. There is one amusing segment in which he declares his love for her but also reveals that he has "that Benjamin Button disease," which will ultimately render him a tiny baby.

In his desperation to find O'Connell's negative, Mitty sets out to track down the photographer himself. The adventure takes him to Greenland, Iceland and ultimately—through a series of coincidences—to the Himalayas, where he meets up with his hero.

Stiller moves through *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* with listlessness and displays no real connection to a life, any life, from which he needs to escape. The inhumane downsizing at the magazine is something with which many in the audience can certainly identify, as this scene plays out in companies across the globe, but it seems a mere backdrop for Mitty's personal problems.

Scott's cartoonish Hendricks, a snide and unfeeling raider, begs for a come-uppance, but when he receives it at the hands of Stiller's Mitty, punches are pulled. A hurried scene, in which the people who worked at *Life* —and supposedly lived by the magazine's (and film's)

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inane motto: “To see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to, to draw closer, to see and be amazed and to feel that is the purpose of life”—are declared to be the real heroes, is a scattered, unfocused mess.

The motto, which runs through the film engraved on wallets, mountains and other scenery, contributes to the feeling of disconnectedness that pervades the work. At no point is the spectator exhorted to be anything other than a spectator—“Look, but don’t bother acting on what is witnessed.” Stiller’s Mitty embarks on a supposed journey of self-discovery, but the world in all its splendor and complexity is not something into which a person should delve; rather, it is there solely as scenery while one proves (and improves) oneself. The soundtrack’s relentlessly swelling anthemic choruses inform the viewer that real progress is being made by Mitty—he is undergoing important experiences and becoming … precisely what?

Penn’s O’Connell turns out to be similarly self-absorbed. Ridiculously, Mitty finds O’Connell, described as the foremost war photographer, pursuing a shot of a rare mountain cat, rather than documenting the lives of those affected by the conflicts in the area. In Stiller’s film, Afghan warlords are yet another opportunity for supposedly amusing bits in the course of Mitty’s finding the photographer and getting hold of the missing negative.

By the end of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, the viewer barely has interest enough left for the tacked-on paean to the displaced *Life* workers. The contents of the found photo leave one cold, and the success of Mitty in getting a date comes as no surprise and offers little satisfaction. These are supposed to be victories, but there is little joy in seeing someone so uninterested in and *still* disconnected from the world around him.

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