MORE THAN AN IMAGE:
REEVALUATING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD STYLE

By

MELANIE BRUNELL

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2012
To my family
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the professors, both past and present, who have helped me become a better reader, writer, and researcher. I want to extend special thanks to all my English professors, and especially to film professors Chuck Maland, Chris Holmlund, and Bill Larsen from the University of Tennessee for helping make my dream to study film a reality. I also want to thank Robert Ray for his commitment to intellectually challenge me and to push me to become a stronger writer. His assistance throughout my master’s degree has been invaluable. Finally, I want to thank my parents, especially my mother, for raising me with a love and appreciation for music, art, literature, and, of course, the cinema.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 HOLLYWOOD STYLE: A CLOSER LOOK</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 A HOVERING SILENCE: TRACY’S DUAL REFLECTIONS IN THE PHILADELPHIA STORY</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 BREAKFAST FOR DINNER: CRUMBLING ILLUSIONS IN LIBELED LADY</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 THE TWO SIDES OF JERICHO: PAUSES AND REVELATIONS IN IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 THE FINAL CLOSE-UP: SILENT GOODBYES IN ROMAN HOLIDAY</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF REFERENCES</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts

MORE THAN AN IMAGE: REEVALUATING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD STYLE

By

Melanie Brunell

May 2012

Chair: Robert B. Ray
Major: English

Classic Hollywood Cinema made style the servant of story, privileging the narrative at almost every opportunity. In the Classic Hollywood romantic comedy, in particular, the narrative exhibits even greater prominence over style. In some rare instances, however, Classic Hollywood comedies deviated from the dream factory’s rigid conventions. In this essay, I specifically consider deviations in shot length, shot duration, and uses of lighting in four Classic Hollywood romantic comedies to illuminate the importance of seemingly insignificant and uneventful moments in these films. I discuss short scenes from four Classic Hollywood films—The Philadelphia Story (1940), Libeled Lady (1936), It Happened One Night (1934), and Roman Holiday (1953)—that all reveal ambiguities about the different characters through specific cinematic techniques. In these four inquiries, I attempt to shed light on the power behind cinematic style in order to gain a richer understanding of these films. In probing these brief anomalous moments, we can see how no part of the filmed image, no matter how seemingly mundane or undramatic, should be glossed over or forgotten.
CHAPTER 1
HOLLYWOOD STYLE: A CLOSER LOOK

Committed as it was to efficiency in stylistic choices, Classic Hollywood cinema offered few glimpses of alternative methods of filmmaking. In one genre especially, the classic Hollywood romantic comedy, the narrative assumes even greater dominance over style. V.F. Perkins even argues that close stylistic analysis of the genre would be fruitless:

Images and sounds are simply the means of presenting the essentials of the action as clearly as can be. The picture exists solely for what it shows and we gain nothing by attempting to interpret its structure. Its qualities as an image are submerged in its function as a document. Much film comedy, for example, operates along these lines. The camera is a privileged spectator as it records, say, the desperate gallantry with which Mr. Grant [in Bringing Up Baby] wields his top hat to shield Miss Hepburn’s unwittingly exposed and obstinately mobile rear. Why, in such a case, should it bother itself with questions of line and texture? The purely ‘filmic’ criteria fade into irrelevance. That is why the greatest comedies, with their insistence on action and their indifference to cinematic elaboration, have proved so difficult to assess within the terms proposed by traditional film theory. (98)

With the advent of DVDs’ rewind and pause functions, however, close scrutiny is now possible. Using these tools allows certain brief anomalous moments to begin to emerge. These moments have to do with three deviations: shot duration, shot length, and uses of lighting. I will explore four scenes from four different Classic Hollywood romantic comedies—The Philadelphia Story (1940), Libeled Lady (1936), It Happened One Night (1934), and Roman Holiday (1953)—to reveal these films’ brief but exceptional departures from Classic Hollywood’s stylistic conventions.
In George Cukor’s 1940 comedy, Tracy Lord is the center of most scenes, and the other characters constantly talk about her when she is on- or off-screen. Nearly every principal character attempts to define Tracy, to categorize her with terms such as “goddess” and “queen.” But what does Tracy think about? Cukor gives her a few seconds of privacy when day turns to night. Halfway through the film, Tracy goes for a swim in the family pool. She invites Mike Connor (James Stewart) to join her, and, although he changes clothes, he never gets in the water. Tracy’s former husband Dexter (Cary Grant) shows up to give her a wedding present. They exchange heated words, and she ends their discussion as she climbs the diving board.

As Dexter leaves, she looks back at him before she straightens her posture, fixing her gaze straight ahead. She will not let memories from her former marriage affect her future plans. She stands confident and defiant at the top of the board, away from other people and the world around her. She appears statuesque, but she swiftly dives into the water, doing what a statue could never achieve. Tracy places herself on a temporary pedestal, but the diving board enables Tracy to leave her pedestal and her ascribed “throne of perfection.”

As Tracy swims toward him, her fiancé, George Kittredge (John Howard), places Dexter’s gift, a model of the True Love sailboat that Tracy and Dexter sailed on during their honeymoon, into the pool. We never see the “happy” moments of Tracy and Dexter’s marriage (which Cukor could have shown through a series of flashbacks, as in the 1956 remake High Society), but with the sailboat, we do get a physical representation of those days. Tracy turns the boat from side to side, examining its fine...
detail, recapturing the moments that have slipped away. “My she was yare,” she says dreamily. George does not sail, so Tracy explains the meaning of yare: “quick to the helm, fast, bright, everything a boat should be. That is, until it develops dry rot.” She pushes the boat away, out of our view, and swims in the opposite direction. The camera returns to the boat throughout the scene, and the True Love’s physical presence (on- and off-screen) hints at an aspect of Tracy’s character we have not yet seen.

Energetically climbing the pool ladder, Tracy exclaims, “Oh, George, to get away! Somehow to be useful in the world.” George stands ready to drape her in a towel, poised to protect and care for her. They stand by the pool for a few seconds, and we can hear the faint ripple of the water. The soundtrack competes for our attention. In response to Tracy’s desire to “be useful in the world,” George tells her, “I’m going to build you an ivory tower with my own two hands.” George and Tracy dominate the frame (with the water no longer in the shot), but we continue to hear the water’s movement, the rippling sounds reminding us of the pool’s existence, suggesting that Tracy belongs to a world of movement, of flesh and blood. Why does the sound of flowing water produce such a compelling effect? Perhaps the answer involves the water’s movement. At this moment, the water’s sound hovers gently at the edge of our attention, implying that Tracy will abandon an active life (physically manifested in the True Love) if she marries George. Without the water’s ripples on the soundtrack, George’s words would carry more authority, and Tracy’s future would seem more inevitable. The water’s faint whispers call Tracy back to the diving board where she can choose her fate.

As the scene unfolds, daybreak turns to nightfall. Within one scene, we witness a complete change in atmosphere, mood, and tone. The subtle transformation of the light
complements the softly rippling water. Once George leaves to dress for the party at Uncle Willie’s, Tracy walks down the pool-house steps and gazes at the boat floating in the pool. Tracy’s journey from the steps to the house (marked by a dissolve) lasts only twenty-two seconds. These twenty-two seconds represent one of only two instances in the entire film in which we witness Tracy alone (the other moment occurs a few minutes later, following a confrontation with her father, when she quickly drinks three glasses of champagne). When Tracy descends the steps, we now notice the darkness enveloping her and the water, as her white robe matches the boat’s white sails. Next to the sailboat, her reflection appears in the water. We see Tracy descend the steps while looking at the sailboat. She cups her hands close to her (almost as if in prayer), but we cannot see what thoughts occupy her mind. The water gives us a portion of her physically mirrored image, but we lack access to her inner life. The shot’s mise-en-scéne, however, helps us to infer Tracy’s thoughts. She descends on a slight diagonal, stopping at the pool’s edge. Positioned sideways, the boat shifts in the water, and Tracy mirrors its position, with her front side facing the left half of the frame. Neither Tracy nor the boat remains static. They both move towards the left, but Tracy goes much faster, and ultimately abandons the sailboat to the pool. For a brief second, however, Tracy and the sailboat move as one.

The long-shot treatment of this moment further complicates the desire for a more specific and confident reading of the scene. Cukor does not use a close, intimate shot here. Why not? First, a tighter shot would eliminate the sailboat floating in the pool. Cukor could have established the moment with a long shot and then cut to Tracy (or cut between Tracy and the boat, as he does between George and the boat earlier in the
scene). He does not choose this approach with Tracy, however, instead keeping us some ways from her. Does the camera positioning establish an emotional distance between the viewer and Tracy? Or does the space merely add to the mystery of her character? The shot conveys Tracy’s movement, synchronized with the sailboat, as both remain nearly motionless, caught in a brief moment of tranquility and silence.

Passages without much dialogue are scarce in *The Philadelphia Story*. Tracy’s moonlit interlude, however, plays like a short silent film. The soundtrack features a non-diegetic melody here (the one that recurs throughout the film), but the image is what compels us to look, to wonder, and to retain these shots in our memories.

The image does not hide the things it records, but it gives Tracy privacy to reflect on thoughts the camera can only imply. While George and the other characters assign labels to Tracy, these twenty-two seconds illuminate Tracy’s ambiguous identity. She seems to reflect, on her self, with her own image reflected in the water. This scene bridges the transition from day to night, and it signals Tracy’s shift from her elevated pedestal (atop the diving board) to a simple request to “be loved…really, truly loved.” The physical sailboat leads the way for her to escape George’s ivory tower; indeed, this pause in the narrative gives Tracy a chance to realize that she must change course. After this scene, George and Tracy are never alone again. Moving with the sailboat, Tracy gestures toward her future renewed life with Dexter. The small boat leads Tracy to rewrite her own destiny; indeed, after reflecting on her past, Tracy begins to piece together and restore its lingering fragments.

Tracy’s walk from the pool to the side of the house lacks dramatic action. No dialogue or character interactions disrupt her ghostly journey. The filmed elements,
however, suggest hovering meanings. In his detailed analysis of the essence of film in *The Material Ghost*, Gilberto Perez rightly asserts, “Between…absence and presence, past and present, narrative and drama, material and ghost, the film medium seeks its poise” (49). All recorded from a distance, the physically present elements in this scene—the drifting sailboat on the rippling water, Tracy’s white robe, her pacing movements and partial reflection—lead us to consider things absent from the camera’s gaze. Without voiceover, cinema lacks literature’s access to a character’s inner life. The camera can only imply a character’s thinking through a variety of tactics: performance, props, sets, costumes, camera distance and movement, editing, lighting, etc. Cukor chooses not to use a voiceover or a flashback to make Tracy’s thoughts explicit, leaving Tracy’s twilight journey mysterious. Everyone tries to label Tracy, but her silent image floating across the screen evades any simple definition of her.

Classic Hollywood fears ambiguity, but such rare moments as Tracy’s moonlit interlude exist. Strategically placed around the halfway mark, the scene marks a shift in the film’s tone and atmosphere. Tracy’s demeanor transforms from confident defiance on the diving board to a reflective questioning. She has the rest of the film to explore her life, choices, and future. Propelling the sailboat forward, the barely moving water also transforms Tracy’s mirrored image. The rippling water distorts her reflection, allowing Tracy and the viewer to contemplate her internal ambiguities. The distance of the camera obscures her facial expressions and gestures. If tears well up in her eyes, for instance, the viewer will never know.

Tracy receives three proposals in the film, but she chooses the man who refuses to worship her; Dexter, instead, will simply love her. Surveying Dexter’s wedding gift
floating in the pool prompts Tracy to choose the life she desires. She does not need a man (or marriage) to fulfill her but, upon reflection, decides to return to a life she abandoned too quickly. In the film’s opening scene, she angrily breaks Dexter’s golf club over her knee; now, the night before her second wedding, the sailboat brings back memories she had planned to forget forever. The morning of the wedding, Tracy and Dexter discuss their memories of *The True Love*. The sailboat’s absence from this scene magnifies Tracy’s desire to resurrect her past. She no longer needs the boat’s presence to recall her memories; now, she fondly calls them up on her own.

These twenty-two seconds of a quiet moonlit stroll free the bride from her suffocating ivory tower. Tracy’s second and final marriage to Dexter does not stem from her feelings of need or female inferiority; rather, the moonlit pool scene testifies to Tracy’s newfound desire to restore her broken past. Completely alone, Tracy rests her gaze on the floating sailboat, making her elusive past a present (yet unspoken) reality. Walking down the aisle to her desired groom, Tracy sees her moonlit, immaterial dreams turn into a physical reality.
CHAPTER 3
BREAKFAST FOR DINNER: CRUMBLING ILLUSIONS IN *LIBELED LADY*

Released just four years before *The Philadelphia Story*, Jack Conway’s *Libeled Lady* (1936) has much in common with the Cukor romantic comedy: an all-star cast, witty dialogue, and characters who play roles to mask their true identities. Mike and Liz try to hide their true identities (as newspaper reporters) in order to get a first-hand look at the Lord household, but Tracy quickly learns the truth behind their façade. Although she no longer questions Mike and Liz’s identities, Tracy finds herself questioning her own identities as wife (both past and future), daughter, and woman. As Mike and Liz’s fabricated identities crumble, the other characters easily and readily accept them. Tracy, on the other hand, must grapple with questions, insecurities, and revelations that lack simple answers and concrete solutions. A single pause in the narrative, however, permits Tracy to ask questions she would have never acknowledged otherwise.

While Tracy needs isolation to transform herself, Bill Chandler (William Powell) and Connie Allenbury (Myrna Loy) need each other. On the surface, Bill Chandler fulfills the masquerading role in the film. Unlike Mike and Liz, Bill must juggle several identities at once. He plays the husband (for two women), lover (again, for two women), author (of travel/nature books), and Mr. Wilderness himself (i.e., fisherman extraordinaire). Bill performs in different ways for Connie, Gladys (Jean Harlow), Warren Haggerty (Spencer Tracy), and Connie’s father, Mr. Allenbury (Walter Connolly). As the film progresses, however, his “performances” become harder to distinguish from one another. We question if we ever see the “real” Bill Chandler because the film refuses to clearly mark the times he is acting. Digging a little deeper into the narrative, however, we find Connie to also be an “actor.” Initially appearing to fit perfectly the role of the
distant, icy millionaire’s daughter, Connie slowly unveils “the many sides to [her] nature.” Connie and Bill gradually reveal their natures, gifts, and dreams. In their moments together, Bill and Connie forget to perform; with each other, they learn how to be.

In order to persuade his audience of his fake identity, Bill goes to great lengths to impress both Mr. Allenbury and his daughter. Bill must catch Connie in a real scandal to keep her from suing the newspaper that published a false story about her. Bill must win her heart and subsequently break it when his “wife” (Gladys) discovers his love affair with Connie. To gain intimacy with the Allenbury family, Bill learns everything he can about Mr. Allenbury’s favorite hobby, trout fishing. Bill quickly memorizes as many facts as he can about the sport, but he possesses natural talent with the underhand cast (which, according to Bill’s fishing coach, is very rare). Roughly halfway through the film, father, daughter, and houseguest head outdoors for a day of fishing. Mr. Allenbury and his daughter appear at home in nature, but Bill must refer to *The Anglers’ Handbook for Beginners*, hidden in his tackle box, for fishing tips and guidance. Within seconds of entering the water, Connie and Mr. Allenbury catch several fish. Bill, however, distances himself from them so he can consult his manual. While still quite skeptical of Bill, Connie begins believing his performance when she sees him cast his fishing line. A novice fisherman should not be able to perfect that cast; she trusts his actions much more than his words.

Since Bill naturally can perform an underhanded cast with ease, he should be able to catch something noteworthy. He does not perform the underhanded cast, however, when he catches the biggest trout in Glen Arden. With his fishing pole resting on his
shoulder, Bill back-flips into the stream once the fish grabs his bait. In a chaotic rush to capture the fish, and after some struggle, Connie finally grabs the trout in her net. Mr. Allenbury scolds Connie’s actions, telling her, “nine-tenths of the fun is reeling him in.” She replies, “I’m sorry. I was so excited.”

Bill and Connie’s fast-thinking teamwork provides the turning point in their relationship. Before this scene, Connie interacted with Bill in an affected, distant manner; she refused to let down her guard around him. Now, caught by surprise, Connie has no time to question Bill’s motives. Like a kid, Connie cannot contain her excitement. Bill tries repeatedly to impress Connie with clever sayings and elaborate plots; ironically, he gets her attention when he stops trying altogether.

While most viewers will not fail to recognize the fishing scene’s narrative importance, the following undramatic scene (in the Allenbury home) may initially seem simply a transition. Bill and Connie’s exchange in the dining room, however, carries more significance than the fishing scene. Chaos and adrenaline propelled Connie to join in on the sport; now, standing beside Bill in her dining room, Connie consciously reveals more of her true nature. Opening with a close-up of the fish, the camera pans up to Mr. Allenbury and Bill sitting at opposite sides of the table. Flipping pancakes on a griddle, Connie stands between the two men (but closer to Bill). After ruminating on Bill’s success and finishing his meal, Mr. Allenbury leaves to take a walk and head to bed. Connie tells him they need help to finish the food, but Mr. Allenbury distractedly exits in search of his pipe.

The camera follows Mr. Allenbury as he exits the frame. Cutting to a new shot, the camera shows Mr. Allenbury pass behind Connie. We now see Connie and Bill from
new angles; the grand opening shot (with the three figures) at the dining table no longer exists. The entire scene consists of two shots, and the second angled-shot lasts 45 seconds (roughly double the length of Tracy’s walk alongside *The True Love*). Nothing particularly “dramatic” transpires; two people simply eat, cook, and talk. Connie pours batter on the griddle while Bill continues to eat; through playful dialogue, they casually learn more about one another. Bill tells Connie he thinks her cooking skills are a trick. Scooping the batter onto the griddle, Connie replies, “Nothing in my hands, nothing up my sleeves.” Pouring syrup over his pancake in a circular motion, Bill answers, “I know—it’s all done with mirrors.” Fighting to prove her authentic cooking skills, Connie tries another response: “Young man,” she confidently says, “there are many sides to my nature. Depths you’d never dream of.” Connie then asks if Bill wants to go for a midnight swim; despite the cold temperatures, Bill (“Polar Bear Chandler”) heartily accepts her invitation. With her single request for a midnight rendezvous, Connie invites Bill to be a part of her world (without urgings from her father).

The pair’s dialogue suggests a lingering, flirtatious distance; their actions and body language, however, are familiar, almost intimate. In addition to surveying gestures and expressions, the static camera captures the characters’ every movement without invading their space. In its angled position, the camera does not privilege Connie over Bill (or vice versa); no tighter shots or camera movement draw our attention to specific details. The soundtrack similarly presents us with the “facts” (i.e. diegetic sounds); the shot leaves no room for non-diegetic music to influence our analysis. Given the shot’s ordinary content and simple filming techniques, why linger here for an entire 45 seconds? Why not give us a series of shot-reverse-shots between Bill and Connie? Had
Jack Conway done so, the scene would have lost its key elements. (Similarly, in *The Philadelphia Story*, tighter framing on Tracy would lose the sailboat—even if only for a second). The unedited shot, therefore, gives greater authenticity to both characters’ actions.

No prop assistant or stagehand pours the batter or perfects the circles on the griddle. Myrna Loy does not have “anything up [her] sleeves,” and she physically cooks pancakes before our eyes. The camera records her greasing the griddle and pouring out the batter, and the surface “sizzles” when the batter hits the hot surface. The batter, syrup, and silverware comprise the film’s props, but no outside forces manipulate them. These unedited 45-seconds capture two people completing ordinary activities without any special help from the camera. In the fishing scene, cinematic “tricks” create Bill Chandler’s great fortune with his fishing expedition. Indeed, in an underwater shot, the camera shows the fish circling the hook; we now know more than Bill does about the outcome of events. In the pancake scene, Conway puts aside such cinematic wizardry. Gilberto Perez says the cinema seeks a balance between documentary and fiction; through these two back-to-back scenes, *Libeled Lady* vividly illuminates the medium’s alternation between these two poles.

The actors’ authentic actions (in preparing and eating the pancakes) illuminate their gradual transparency with each other. The bantering dialogue fails to mask the characters’ growing familiarity and comfort with one another. While Connie and Bill are not married, they compose a convincing marital image in this shot. Bill struggles to play the husband with Gladys but naturally fits the role with Connie. Bill and Connie’s relationship succeeds because they embrace compromise. Bill hooks the fish, but he
needs Connie to net it. Connie makes pancakes for Bill, but she refuses to be isolated in the kitchen while he eats. The 45-second shot records two people in a sustained, comfortable partnership. The lingering camera becomes a prophet, predicting that this couple will endure without tricks, mirrors, or fancy editing patterns.
CHAPTER 4
THE TWO SIDES OF JERICHO: PAUSES AND REVELATIONS IN IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT

Like Tracy, Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) glimpses a different life as a nighttime rain falls against a motel’s window. Ellie has a lot of things in common with Tracy: she comes from a rich family, plans to marry her fiancé very soon, and confidently believes she knows exactly what she wants for her future. Necessity, however, forces her to delay her marriage, and the pause permits her to reflect on her dreams, and, as we will see, leads her to new ones. Watching the sailboat, Tracy vividly sees what she had abandoned; lying beneath a rain-streaked window, Ellie begins to see a world she has never known.

On the bus trip to New York (after fleeing her father’s yacht), Ellie finds herself traveling with newspaper reporter Peter Warne (Clark Gable). As luck would have it, Ellie loses her suitcase and money; Peter cares for her and lets her share his cabin for the night. He freely admits his charitable act is self-serving: he plans to use his time with Ellie to write a news story about her. In fact, when she confronts him about his intentions, he replies, “If you’re nursing any silly notion that I’m interested in you, forget it. You’re just a headline to me.” Peter simply puts her up for the night so he can get his sensational—possibly even scandalous—headline. The scene that chronicles their first night together, however, is far from newsworthy (indeed, I doubt it would even make the society column). The event itself—an unmarried man and woman sharing a room together—appears the start of a good bit of gossip, but Capra creates a venue for his characters to become more mysterious and human. The pair’s rainy night together, with only the walls of Jericho between them, lets us see these characters in a new light.
It Happened One Night fits, and even establishes, the criteria of the screwball comedy genre, but if this nighttime scene were representative of the entire film, we would not classify it as a screwball comedy. Some comic exchanges begin the scene, but once Ellie “joins the Israelites,” very little is said and even less happens (at least what we would typically consider narratively “eventful”). The unadorned room features two beds beneath the windows on opposite sides of the room. Peter begins undressing before Ellie, and, once he begins to remove his pants, she rushes to the opposite side (i.e., the “Israelite” camp) as she holds Peter’s pajamas. The following two minutes crosscut between Ellie and Peter, with only two long-shots recording both of them in the frame (complete with the walls of Jericho separating them).

In the first shot from her side, Ellie looks disconcerted and turns to the window. The rain continues to fall across the glass as she raises the shade. The camera briefly leaves the cabin, and, as if she were a prisoner, the camera shows Ellie search the outdoors for traces of hope or comfort. The camera then returns inside the cabin, and Ellie momentarily sits. Peter calls out (off-screen): “Still with me, Brat?” Clutching her purse, Ellie springs up at his question. Capra cuts to Peter, lighting a cigarette, who continues: “Aww, don’t be a sucker. A good night’s rest will do you a lot of good.” Cutting to Ellie and then back to Peter, the camera remains on Peter as he offers Ellie additional words of wisdom: “Besides, you’ve got nothing to worry about. The walls of Jericho will protect you from the big bad wolf.” To test the sturdiness of the “wall,” Ellie gently pokes at the blanket. Confirming its physical existence proves to be enough for her, even if she only verifies that a cloth draped over a string divides her from this unknown (and still nameless) man. (Later in the film, Ellie again touches the walls of
Jericho—but the second time she helps unfold the blanket; she shifts from testing the constructed walls to building them with Peter).

Even though she tested the wall’s strength, Ellie asks Peter to put out the lights as she unbuttons her blouse. Peter switches the lights off, and darkness covers both figures. Continuing to unbutton her shirt, Ellie gazes up and then out the window. Cutting back to Peter, the film records him lifting the window shade, but he only raises it part way (not all the way up as Ellie had done). The contrast in the heights of their window shades affects the light that covers them. Ellie’s shade, raised most of the way, lets the light pour over her bed, but not her face. Raised only part way up, Peter’s shade, by contrast, illuminates his facial features and expressions. As the scene continues, we see Peter in a clearer light, but Ellie remains largely obscured from our view (despite the larger amount of light pouring onto her side of the room). Indeed, like the light that covers them in different ways, their final words before sleep reveal more of Peter and obscure more of Ellie. Learning about him, however, lets Ellie focus on learning about a man—and a world—outside her realm of experience. Capra’s decision to let us see and know more of Peter, and less of Ellie, suggests that she cannot be neatly defined. Like Tracy, she will no longer conform to the definitions imposed on her.

Ellie continues to undress, and Capra cross-cuts between the two characters. No words are spoken and no music plays; the continuous rainfall provides the only soundtrack. Ellie removes her belt as Peter puffs his cigarette and looks towards Ellie’s side. The walls still stand (even though they are not in the shot), but just how safe are they? Peter assured Ellie that he has no trumpet, but his eyes suggest he wishes he had one. The camera, resting on Peter’s side, reveals an “invasion”—an invasion of
undergarments. Peter responds quickly to the intrusion, telling Ellie, “I wish you’d take those things off the walls of Jericho.” Off-screen, Ellie exclaims, “Oh, excuse me,” and she snatches the items off the wall. Recording her magic trick, the camera stays on Peter’s side. As the camera crosscuts between the couple, the film now shows Ellie from the shoulders up. The soft-focus lens, coupled with the close camera distance, blurs Ellie’s features. A close-up typically removes ambiguities, but Capra uses the tight framing to show Ellie in a different—and less defined—light. Blurring Ellie’s physical features, the soft focus lens similarly reflects her ambiguous side that has so far remained hidden.

Ellie finds herself slowly stripping away everything she once clung to for comfort. In the motel, her social status gradually diminishes. For instance, in order to use Peter’s pair of pajamas, a foreign object from an unknown world, she must remove her outfit from her sheltered and spoiled life with her father. Immediately upon putting on the pajamas, the camera records her with a close-up and soft-focus lens. Following the intimate soft focus shot, the scene chronicles both characters’ mysterious natures. Like the light pouring over the characters, the camera lets Ellie and Peter’s complexities emerge in waves. In the film’s opening scene, Ellie’s spoiled behavior fulfills the needs of the plot; similarly, Peter’s first appearance (drunk in the telephone booth) leaves us with few questions about his character type. In a different film, these characters would remain largely unchanged from beginning to end. With Capra’s direction and writing, however, the film’s characters slowly transform and surprise us.

Finally climbing into bed, Ellie pulls the covers close to her as the outside light cascades over her head. Wearing her mystery man’s pajamas, Ellie seeks information
about him. Looking towards Peter’s side of the room, Ellie asks, “By the way, what’s your name?” Still smoking, Peter replies, “What’s that?” Surprisingly, Capra does not immediately return to Ellie’s side. Instead, he cuts to a long-shot with Peter and Ellie on either side of Jericho. The metaphorical wall between them begins crumbling in this scene; like the walls of Jericho separating them, however, they still have many barriers to overcome.

Determined to learn more about her elusive roommate, Ellie continues questioning him. Rephrasing her question, she asks, “who are you?” Gazing upward, Peter commences his monologue: “Who, me? I’m the whippoorwill that cries in the night. I’m the soft morning breeze that caresses your lovely face.” As he speaks, he shifts his focus from the ceiling to the wall that keeps him from Ellie. Peter gazes heavenward, but an off-screen wooden ceiling keeps him from looking at the stars and feeling the rain on his face. The dangling blanket, suspended by a rope, also keeps Peter from the woman he is just beginning to know. The camera records Peter’s evasive, transcendental response (where he is both the whippoorwill and the soft morning breeze) from an intimate shot distance. The close-up framing leads us to match his facial expressions and gestures with his poetic message. We witness him speak his words while Ellie only hears him. Peter’s upward gaze, however, reveals brief traces of his longings for a different life.

Cutting back to a close-up of Ellie, the film covers her in almost total darkness. Despite her ghostly appearance, Ellie refuses to back down from her line of questioning. Continuing her interrogation, she asks, “You’ve got a name, haven’t you?” He replies, “Yeah, I’ve got a name. Peter Warne.” Capra cuts back to Peter as he gives his reply,
but he films Peter’s response from a medium-shot distance. In addition to the new distance, the camera films Peter’s response from a new angle. In the close-up shot (when Peter answers his first question), the camera records Peter diagonally (so that the camera faces the corner). In this single shot, Capra combines an intimate yet elevated camera distance from a diagonal angle to let us search Peter’s character from a privileged perspective. Furthermore, Peter’s brightly lit face provides close study of his character. This single shot shows Peter clearly, but the camera only remains on him for a few seconds. In contrast to this close-up, the medium shot (when he tells us his full name) focuses on Peter and other objects. To the left of the frame, a nightstand, complete with a burning candle atop it, stands next to the walls of Jericho. The camera pulls away from Peter when his answer lacks ambiguity. Indeed, this scene, much like the whole film, is concerned not with statements of “what” but with questions of “who.”

While Peter appears in the spotlight for a number of shots, Ellie becomes increasingly harder for us to see. No longer under Peter’s metaphorical microscope, Ellie desires to know more about Peter. By the scene’s end, Ellie has shifted from lead actor in Peter’s news story (where he dictates her actions) to an interviewer herself; Peter directs, but Ellie inquires. In the scene’s beginning, Peter confirms that he will write a big news story about the unapproachable Ellie Andrews. He knows she will easily provide a headline for his news story; he does not yet realize, however, that she cannot be neatly defined within a single line or a short news story. She gradually becomes more than a headline to him—and to us.

Having received her answer, Ellie evaluates her husband’s name. “Peter Warne,” she muses, “I don’t like it.” Peter, however, reassures her not to let his name bother her
since “[she'll] be giving it back to [him] in the morning.” Clutching the bed covers, Ellie lies down. With both figures settled in bed, they exchange their final words. Ellie chimes in first, saying, “Night to meet you, Mr. Warne,” to which Peter replies, “The pleasure is all mine, Mrs. Warne.” Peter may have the last word, but he does not have the final close-up. The camera records Ellie one more time from a close position; in the final close-up, still in shadows, Ellie looks toward the blanket and clutches her pillow with her left hand. Light touches the top of her head and pillow. Sighing deeply and readjusting herself, Ellie can finally go to sleep. Why does Capra include this final shot of Ellie? In the absence of dialogue, the final close-up revives the scene’s ambiguity.

Ellie’s two close-ups form bookends for her questions for Peter; and, despite the answers she receives, Ellie looks searchingly towards Jericho. What are her thoughts at this moment? What else does she want to know about Peter? The film does not definitively answer these questions; with close-ups that grant partial access to Ellie’s features, the scene defies complete exposition. Ellie learns Peter’s name, but what do we learn about Ellie? The dialogue privileges Peter, but the ambiguous camera dwells on Ellie. The camera finally leaves her, though, and cuts to a final long shot. Mirroring the previous long shot, the film gives one final glimpse of Ellie and Peter before fading out. The light illuminates the right side of Peter’s face while it fails to capture Ellie. Mirroring the light covering him, Peter’s identity slowly emerges; hiding in the shadows, Ellie must mold her new identity before she can come into the light. The room’s mise-en-scène reflects the characters’ internal realities. Indeed, Stanley Cavell termed such scenes Capra’s transcendental moments because they “display the mood of a character stretched across that character’s setting” (4). The motel scene shows the film’s
character types transform into complex human beings. The characters do not radically change within a single scene; however, Capra’s close-ups, soft-focus lens, and patterns of light underscore their unexpressed yearnings.
CHAPTER 5
THE FINAL CLOSE-UP: SILENT GOODBYES IN *ROMAN HOLIDAY*

In the motel scene in *It Happened One Night*, Capra films a series of close-ups that actually restrict our ability to see Ellie clearly. Low-key lighting and a soft focus lens obscure Ellie’s features and expressions; Peter plans to make her a headline, but Capra refuses to put her on display. Ellie and Peter’s first night together provides dual discoveries. Ellie probes Peter with questions about his identity while Capra hides Ellie from our eyes. Ellie realizes she has a lot to learn about her “husband;” similarly, through her partial absence in shadows, Ellie shows us we have a lot to learn about her. In *Roman Holiday* (1953), released nearly twenty years after Capra’s romantic comedy, William Wyler saves his series of close-ups until the end. Every scene I have discussed in the first three films shows its characters on the brink of new beginnings. In *Roman Holiday*, however, Princess Anne (Audrey Hepburn) does not discover a new beginning. In the final scene, she struggles not to lose her new identity in a heartbreaking farewell.

William Wyler approaches the final scene from a conventional manner; indeed, these moments do not deviate from Classic Hollywood conventions much at all. Despite two slightly long takes (where Princess Anne greets the press and later when Joe exits the room), Wyler does not linger for extended time periods on characters or record them from odd angles. The close-up shot-reverse-shots between Anne and Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck) keep nothing from us; no external elements obscure Princess Anne from the camera’s view. Our unobstructed and privileged view, however, raises questions and uncertainties about Princess Anne. Does a close-up, without physical interference (such as shadows), guarantee greater understanding? Nothing keeps us from clearly informing Anne’s thoughts in her final close-up—nothing, that is, except her.
While Peter quickly revealed his newspaper identity to Ellie, Joe Bradley keeps his news affiliation from Anne. He convinces the princess he simply wants to help her enjoy her holiday exploring Rome. Irving Radovich (Eddie Albert), Joe’s photography friend, joins them in order to snap as many secret photographs as possible. (After all, what’s a story without pictures?). By the day’s end, Joe has numerous possible headlines to choose for his story, but he no longer needs any of them. Joe and Anne fall in love, but they never once verbalize their affection for one another. Wyler wisely lets the actors’ expressions and movements convey it. Joe and Anne embrace three times in the film, but their eyes express most fully their yearning for each other. In their penultimate scene together, Anne resolutely tells Joe not to follow her as she disappears into the night. Twenty-four hours ago, Anne could not refuse her ritual milk and crackers; now she finds the strength to tell the man she loves he must not come after her.

Solemnly, Joe honors her request—until morning. He attends the press conference cancelled the day before because, as he tells Irving, “it’s an assignment.” Wyler films the press conference in a vast, richly adorned Roman palace galleria; simply walking across the large hall takes the characters over half a minute. Despite the royal setting and crowds of reporters, Wyler ensures Anne and Joe’s ultimate farewell will be just between the two of them. How? With close-ups. In her final close-up, Anne expresses with her eyes thoughts and emotions she can never put into words. Indeed, Joe and Anne speak to one another in a professional manner, but Anne’s tortured gaze nearly gives away her secret affection. Joe is the secret-keeper for most of the film, but Anne must bear that weight in the final scene.
After learning his houseguest is the princess, Joe immediately sells the soon-to-be story to his boss. Throughout the film, Joe diligently strives to keep Anne “in the dark” about his identity. In the final scene, Joe shows what he could not tell; and, for the first time, Anne knows everything about him. Indeed, by the end, Anne expresses things that lie beyond our reach. She enters from the left of the frame and halts at center-stage. Standing tall and confident, she surveys the room. Looking to her right (our left), Anne gently smiles as she conducts her gaze across the crowd. She abruptly halts and her smile dissolves, however, when she reaches Joe. Hepburn’s eyes reveal her new discovery, but Wyler still cuts briefly to Peck in the audience. As the scene continues, Anne must address her public while privately processing her new knowledge. Anne’s expressions reveal her surprise at Joe’s identity, but what specific things does she think about? Does she recall the previous day in a different light? Does she replay their moments together with Joe’s true identity in mind? Will she give up her love for the man who betrayed her trust? Anne may consider some of these questions, but her final gaze towards Joe obscures more than it reveals.

Anne’s first close-up decreases ambiguity because it highlights her crucial discovery regarding Joe. The scene’s emotional power lies with Anne’s recognition, so Wyler ensures the camera records the moment from the best possible angle and distance. As the scene continues, the camera rarely leaves Anne; indeed, it lingers on her in search of clues about her reflections. After answering some questions with unrehearsed answers (to the horror of the duchess and others), Anne says she wants to meet the ladies and gentlemen of the press. Deterring her entourage from following her, Anne descends the steps and greets her audience. With a deep-focus long take, Wyler
captures Anne slowly move down the line. Finally reaching the men she already knows, she gets from Irving the photographs he took of her (which he could have sold for a large profit). Showing relief in her eyes, Anne thanks him for the “commemorative” photos. Wyler cuts to a close-up of one of the photographs followed by a close-up of Anne thanking him. In the same close-up, the camera dwells on Anne as she looks at Joe. As she walks towards him, he says, “Joe Bradley, American News Service.” Extending her hand, Anne replies, “So happy, Mr. Bradley.” Hovering for another second, Anne turns her gaze from Joe and continues down the line. Her eyes, however, no longer light up the room; she performs her duty, but her vacant eyes betray her downcast soul.

An overly long handshake would raise suspicion; anything more would shatter Joe’s and Anne’s performances. Taking one more look backward, however, will raise no suspicions. Indeed, for most members of her audience, her final survey of the room means little; for Joe Bradley, however, it says everything. But what exactly does her look “say?” In her first close-up, she had discovered something about Joe; in her final close-up, she repeats her scan of the room with a completely different frame of mind. Her actions mirror the first close-up, but, in the second one, her expressions remain ambiguous. In The Philadelphia Story, Tracy’s distance from the camera as she walks by the sailboat protects her facial expressions from intense scrutiny; similarly, Connie and Ellie, although filmed from closer distances, remain partially obscured through camera positioning, a soft-focus lens, and dark lighting. Wyler, however, puts Anne in the spotlight; with tight framing, shallow focus, and high-key lighting, the shot illuminates her every feature. As Anne surveys her audience once more, and, looking again at Joe,
her glowing smile gradually dissolves. Subtly nodding, Anne seems to accept her life apart from him; her head twitches slightly, however, as if she might renounce her resolve to fulfill her royal responsibilities. Hepburn’s subtle gestures infuse the character with complexities that even a close-up cannot explain.

Within the final scene, Wyler uses the close-up both to decrease and increase ambiguity. In the first close-up, Anne unexpectedly glimpses the man—and life—she gave away; in the second close-up, she gives him up for the final time. Looking across the room for the second time, Anne has another chance to pursue her dream life. The princess fulfills her duty to her country, but her heart lies elsewhere. Like Tracy reflecting on her past with Dexter, Anne keeps returning her gaze to the man she thought she would never see again. Anne, again like Tracy, must turn to the side and abandon her past. Tracy leaves the sailboat, and Anne leaves Joe Bradley in a sea of reporters.

Entering the room, Anne performs her royal role before the press—until she spots Joe. Nonetheless, she regains her composure and never exposes her secret. Every time she looks toward Joe, however, Anne’s eyes suggest longings, feelings, and yearnings that defy language. William Wyler does not force his characters to put their feelings into words; he lets their movements and faces express what they do not say. As viewers, we do not imagine Anne’s reaction to Joe but see it. We witness their exchange, but can we unveil its subtle mysteries? By the film’s end, have we “figured out” the characters and their thoughts? The close-up technique seems to let us know so much; in reality, close-ups (such as Wyler’s) show us just how much we will never know. In the four films I have discussed, the camera shows us much more than simply
the unfolding action. Indeed, close analysis of variances in shot duration, shot length, and lighting sheds light on films we thought we knew from every angle. Close scrutiny of these shots, however, shows how much we stand to gain when we reflect on their composition.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Melanie Brunell holds a Master of Arts in film studies and 20th century studies from the University of Florida. Her research interests include Classic Hollywood cinema and representations of interiority and memory in film. She is currently revising an article for publication that focuses on previously unavailable archival documents from the production of Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936).