



alternative worlds
in hollywood cinema

james walters

**Alternative Worlds in
Hollywood Cinema
Resonance Between Realms**

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INTRODUCTION

Hollywood films have always exhibited a general tendency to contrast 'worlds' of particular kinds and orders. We might consider, for example, the ways in which the worlds of domesticity and criminality are brought together in Max Ophüls' *The Reckless Moment* (1949) and how, in that film, Ophüls succeeds in exposing the shortcomings of Lucia Harper's (Joan Bennett) conventionally safe domestic world precisely by having the criminal underworld invade its apparent sanctity. The integral detail in the film's elucidation of these shortcomings lies in the way that a supposedly unscrupulous blackmailer from the criminal world, Martin Donnelly (James Mason) is shown to offer the loyalty, sympathy and tenderness unavailable to her in her own world. Potential threat becomes temporary salvation, therefore, as a character from one world provides unexpected relief for a character who belongs to another.¹

Similarly, we may think of Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) in which Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) is forced to exchange his world of work with the world of international espionage. As with *The Reckless Moment*, this can, on the surface, be read as a move from safety to danger, from order to disruption. However, as with Ophüls before, it might also be said that Hitchcock makes his character's life precarious precisely to illustrate existing deficiencies and, particularly, to exemplify Thornhill's own shortcomings in one world by throwing him unceremoniously into another. This view is taken up in Robin Wood's landmark study as he remarks that, at the beginning, Thornhill is:

a man who lives purely on the surface, refusing all commitment or responsibility (appropriately, he is in advertising), immature for all his cocksureness, his life all the more a chaos for the fact he doesn't recognize it as such; a man who relies above all upon the trappings of modern civilization – business, offices, cocktail bars, machines – for protection, who substitutes bustle and speed for a sense of direction or purpose; a modern city Everyman, whose charm and self-confidence and smartness make him especially easy for the spectator to identify with, so that at the start we are scarcely conscious of his limitations as a human being.²