



RAZOR SHARP: THE FABULOUS WOMEN OF HOWARD HAWKS

Only Angels Have Wings

Only Angels Have Wings

Directed by: Howard Hawks

@/Production Company:

Columbia Pictures Corporation

Presented by: Columbia Pictures

Screen Play: Jules Furthman

Photography: Joseph Walker

Aerial Photography: Elmer Dyer

Special Effects: Roy Davidson

Film Editor: Viola Lawrence

Art Direction: Lionel Banks

Gowns: Kalloch

Music by: Dimitri Tiomkin

Musical Director: M.W. Stoloff

Technical Adviser/Chief Pilot: Paul Mantz

uncredited

Producer: Howard Hawks

2nd Unit Directors: Sam Nelson, Richard Rosson

Assistant Director: Arthur S. Black

Screenplay Contributions: William M. Rankin,
Eleanore Griffin

Story: Howard Hawks

Cast:

Cary Grant (*Geoff Carter*)

Jean Arthur (*Bonnie Lee*)

Richard Barthelmess (*Bat MacPherson*)

Rita Hayworth (*Judith 'Judy' MacPherson*)

Thomas Mitchell (*Kid Dabb*)

Allyn Joslyn (*Les Peters*)

Sig Rumann (*'Dutchy' van Ryder*)

Victor Kilian (*Sparks*)

John Carroll (*Gent Shelton*)

Donald Barry (*Tex Gordon*)

Noah Beery Jr (*Joe Souther*)

Maciste (*the singing guitarist*)

Milissa Sierra (*Lily*)

Lucio Villegas (*Dr Lagorio*)

Pat Flaherty (*Mike*)

Pedro Regas (*Pancho*)

Pat West (*Baldy*)

uncredited

Vernon Dent (*ship's captain*)

Budd Fine (*first mate*)

Rafael Storm (*Rafael, purser*)

Charles Moore (*servant*)

Forbes Murray (*Harkwright*)

Bud Wolfe, Ky Robinson, Eddie Foster,

Lew Davis, James Millican, Al Rhein,

Curley Dresden, Ed Randolph (*mechanics*)

Elena Duran, Cecilia Callejo (*blonde señoritas*)

Forbes Murray (*Harkwright Sr*)

Stanley Brown (*Harkwright Jr*)

Sammee Tong (*cook*)

Victor Travers, Francisco Maran

(*plantation overseers*)

Tex Higginson, Jack Lowe (*banana foremen*)

Wilson Bengé (*assistant purser*)

Enrique Acosta, Raúl Lechuga, Dick Botiller,

Harry Bailey, Aurora Navarro, Tessie Murray

(*tourists*)

Cecilia Callejo (*Felice*)

Candy Candido (*musician*)

Inez Palange (*Lily's aunt*)

Robert Sterling

USA 1939©

121 mins

Everyone drawn to action cinema is drawn to Howard Hawks. And those who love Hawks love *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) in a particularly intense way. It is a virtual encyclopaedia of his gestures, obsessions, and stylistic manoeuvres, and I think it has defined, in a way still unsurpassed, what Hollywood action cinema has been in the subsequent six decades.

I esteem *Only Angels Have Wings* to be the central work in the Hawks canon, but with caveats. It's not as visually beautiful a film as *Scarface* (1932) or *Red River* (1947). Its central romantic pairing of stars, Cary Grant and Jean Arthur, is not as charismatic as that of Bogart and Bacall in *The Big Sleep* (1946) or *To Have and Have Not* (1944). Its humorous moments are not as wildly funny as the best moments in his comedies, and its action sequences, while well done, are not particularly memorable by contemporary standards. What *Only Angels* does have going for it is a unique completeness of vision. Of this film you can say what you can say of few films: that it is a thorough creation of a world, a complete expression of one artist's programme. To me this is as good a pragmatic definition of a masterpiece as there is.

To talk precisely and critically about this film, and about Hawks' art in general, is fiendishly difficult. His importance is anything but obvious, and though he has attracted astonishingly articulate supporters over the years (Rivette, Truffaut, Andrew Sarris at his best, Robin Wood at his best), I feel that the difficulties involved in accounting for him have been glossed over. His films are not as well photographed as Ford's, not as beautiful as von Sternberg's, not as excitingly innovative as Welles', not as violent as Aldrich's or Fuller's or Mann's. Though he is not devoid of sheer pictorial skill when so inclined, the superiority of his movies is not reliably measured by a proportional superiority of visual means. How can such a figure have won over so much critical opinion?

What criticism thus far has been unable to describe precisely with respect to Hawks is that his directorial style is not a discernible, material phenomenon. Rather it is the interesting, distinctive unity of a world that synthesises disparate rhetorical, verbal, visual and dramaturgical capacities. What happens when we watch a Hawks film is that all its elements – visual and literary alike – solicit from us a particular kind of analytical scrutiny. Camera position and editing prompt that process, as does Hawks' particular concentration on his stars. And then of course there's the question of what narrative information he decides to include or exclude.

Thus *Only Angels*, the ur-Hawks action film, is much more a comparative and analytical discussion of action than a depiction of action. At the start of the movie – which is about commercial aviators flying the mail from a tiny outpost in Barranca, Colombia – a character, Joe, introduced centrally in the opening minutes, dies. This death is entirely offscreen, monitored on radio by the hero, Geoff (Cary Grant), and by almost all the crucial supporting characters who will make up the rest of the story. Misleadingly, Joe has been introduced to the audience as a potential protagonist. His death is abrupt, and Geoff, the real central figure, the firm's boss, sums things up: 'He wasn't good enough.' Many things are extraordinary about the sequence, but most impressive is the speed with which the situations are created and then surpassed. After only about ten minutes of film, we are made to feel that the discussion of action by the characters (the analysis of who is good at what they do and who isn't) has a

RAZOR SHARP: THE FABULOUS WOMEN OF HOWARD HAWKS

Razor Sharp: The Hawksian Woman Revisited

Thu 1 Jun 18:15

Twentieth Century

Thu 1 Jun 20:40; Fri 16 Jun 18:30;

Thu 22 Jun 21:00

Barbary Coast

Fri 2 Jun 18:20; Thu 15 Jun 20:40

Bringing Up Baby

Sat 3 Jun 12:00; Mon 19 Jun 20:40;

Fri 23 Jun 18:20

Only Angels Have Wings

Sat 3 Jun 15:45; Thu 15 Jun 14:30;

Tue 27 Jun 17:50

Ball of Fire

Sat 3 Jun 17:55; Tue 20 Jun 20:30

To Have and Have Not

Sun 4 Jun 19:00; Fri 23 Jun 20:40

I Was a Male War Bride

(aka You Can't Sleep Here)

Wed 7 Jun 20:35; Sun 25 Jun 18:30

Rio Bravo

Mon 12 Jun 17:50; Sun 18 Jun 14:30;

Fri 30 Jun 20:20

His Girl Friday

Wed 14 Jun 20:50; Sat 17 Jun 13:30; Thu 29 Jun

18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London)

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

Thu 15 Jun 18:15; Thu 29 Jun 21:00

The Big Sleep

Wed 21 Jun 18:25; Wed 28 Jun 20:45

The Thing from Another World

Sat 24 Jun 18:30; Fri 30 Jun 18:15

Philosophical Screens:

The Philosophy of Marriage: His Girl Friday

Thu 29 Jun 20:15 BFI Reuben Library

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine.

Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk



BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

strange, almost philosophical rigour, without ever having become explicitly intellectual. We immediately sense, without being nudged or told, that we're not just talking about flying, but perhaps about making films, or about how to live.

In this universe of constant evaluation and judgment, acts of physical prowess are essentially forms of interpersonal communication. There is no moment foregrounded in Hawks that is not a modification of the status of interpersonal relationships. *Rio Bravo* is all about Dean Martin, Ricky Nelson and Walter Brennan proving to John Wayne in one episode after another that they are competent to stand by him in scenes of danger. The comparable central situation in *Only Angels* involves Arthur's progress in proving to Grant that she comprehends the flyer's code and way of life, demonstrating that [Richard] Barthelmess can regain his lost connection with that code – and finally there is the question of whether Geoff, the hyper-rational, hyper-professional leader, can balance the constant adjustments in the problems issuing both from his employees and from that ultimately irrational force, nature itself.

In addition to working with his colleagues, and facing the blind chaos of natural forces, Geoff must also define himself by how he deals with women. The Hawks hero is not necessarily the biggest, scariest, most dangerous man around, but he is immediately the most attractive to women, and that's a double-edged capability. That a man is suitable as an erotic choice marks him for risk; his enjoyment of that capacity seems to depend on his ability to repudiate it.

Basically, to appeal to women is to court the unstable, to enter that sphere of human action that cannot be completely known or defined by any code. What a Hawks hero does with women at the end of the day is to consent to the risk of being with them, just as he risks being a hunter or a flyer (the analogy between women and 'big game' is expanded comedically in both *Bringing Up Baby*, 1938, and *Hatari!*, 1961).

The sexual aggressiveness of Hawks' women is much commented on. Is he an early feminist, or are these women just men in drag, or worse, an adolescent's dream of girls who are 'easy'? There is still another possibility – Hawks may simply have been averse to the stereotypical genteel studio female of his day. He decided to give women more authority and power and sexual aggression, borrowing from his understanding of men, simply so as to do something a bit different. The Hawks heroine (in this case, Jean Arthur) has her specific talent (Arthur's first sit-down at the piano, performing to prove she's one of the bunch after Joe has died, is a showstopper) and she is aware of her charisma. Such women walk around aware that they are different from other women in the world of the particular film, and maybe they are also aware of their difference from women in other movies. The heroine's superiority is reflexive with respect to movie-conventions.

In another sense, Hawks' women are identified with the audience. In *Only Angels*, as well as *Hatari!* and *Rio Bravo* and in a different way *Red River*, a woman enters the closed world of men as she enters the story, in order to have the story of the film told to her. She learns about the configuration of friendships, jealousies and angers, so as to enable the audience to learn. She evaluates whom she ought to love and why, as an emblem of whom the audience ought ultimately to side with and love.

Larry Gross, *Sight and Sound*, February 1997