Howard Hawks' film HIS GIRL FRIDAY (1940) represents one of the major paradoxes of American narrative cinema — Hollywood's ability to incorporate images of social change into films that ultimately deny and frustrate the possibility of such change. HIS GIRL FRIDAY suggests that new possibilities lie in the roles of the sexes. The film offers the alluring mirage of a sexual relationship based on equality rather than exploitation, with a woman achieving political-sexual parity through her intelligence, creative energy and economic independence. In the process of creating this relationship, however, the film mythologizes the roles of men and women. It establishes as "natural" some modes of conduct that are in fact economically and socially determined and that actually predetermine the possibilities of meaningful change.

In his collection of essays Mythologies, Roland Barthes defines myth as "depoliticized speech."

"Myth does not deny things; on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact." (1)

Barthes shows that myths operate at every level of modern life by constantly taking historical and ideologically motivated relations and denying their historicity and ideology. The semiological implications for film analysis are apparent immediately. For instance, when we see a woman running in high heels with her skirt pulled up around her knees, we recognize a certain level of signification, woman, through mode of dress and activity. The function of myth becomes clearer when we consider the assumptions contained in the sign: that it is natural for women to dress differently than men and for their clothes to emphasize certain parts of their anatomies; that it is natural for them to wear high heels (women tend to be shorter than men, and height is a sign of power); that it is natural for physical activity to be less becoming for women, and that their clothing makes such activity more difficult. But beneath all these layers of appearance and activity myths teach us to regard as natural the social and economic exploitation that the myth of femininity has been created to validate.

The principal myths operating in HIS GIRL FRIDAY are femininity, manliness, domesticity and adventure. On the surface the film seems to be attacking these traditional values. Despite the perversity of the title, "his girl Friday" turns out to be a strong-willed, sharp-minded and talented woman reporter. The reporter's boss (and ex-husband) satirizes the romanticized violent image of men. He is equally zealous about his profession and the fanatical pursuit of his ex-wife, and his blending of the two pursuits results in humor and irony. The film as a whole presents a more open and tolerant range of sexual values than one might expect. Its irreverence occasionally borders on the risqué particularly for a film made under the Hays Code. Finally, HIS GIRL FRIDAY asserts that...
corruption and injustice are the real foes and the proper targets of
democracy and a free press. Yet the illusions on the screen vanish
when the lights come on. Male dominance, female inequality, the family
as the basic unit of society and the ultimate impotence of political
struggle come home to the audience as enduring truths.

In shaping HIS GIRL FRIDAY, Hawks and screenwriter Charles Lederer
adapted the 1928 stage play, The Front Page by Ben Hecht and
Charles MacArthur. In doing so, they changed the male reporter Hildy
Johnson to a female reporter, to be played by Rosalind Russell, and
they complicated matters further by making Hildy the ex-wife of editor
Walter Burns, played by Cary Grant. Structurally, these changes had
two major effects. They permitted the rapid-fire dialogue between Burns
and Johnson to incorporate the tension and feeling of a romantic
situation and created a framework within which to explore the sex roles
of the characters more fully. Moreover, by making Hildy a woman, the
filmmakers could draw on the popularity of the wisecracking,
independent screen heroine, who had emerged from the screwball
comedies of the mid-30s and had been given a good measure of depth
by actresses such as Barbara Stanwyck, Jean Arthur, Claudette Colbert,
Bette Davis and, of course, Rosalind Russell.

I'm not suggesting there is no sexual tension in The Front Page. Part of
the reason the Hildy Johnson character transfers so well to HIS GIRL
FIRDAY is that Hecht and MacArthur were exploring the levels of male
friendship that go beyond superficial camaraderie. The characters in the
play have a forced air of masculinity that works partly as a defense
mechanism against suggestions of effeminacy. When Hildy
acknowledges Walter's friendship at the play's end, he becomes
embarrassed and says, "Aw, Jesus, no, Walter. You make me feel like a
fairy or something." (2) Hildy recognizes the strength of their relationship
even while denying its implications.

The violence of the male reporter — which is mainly verbal — transfers
easily to the female character, as does his professional competence
and some of his rowdiness. (The female Hildy smokes and drinks but
doesn't throw liquor bottles out the window.) Hawks always has
revealed a fondness for women who can hold their own with men, but
he also likes to manipulate our sexual preconceptions about these
women. For instance, in both the play and the film, Hildy tells Walter,

"I'm going to walk right up to you and hammer on that
monkey skull of yours until it rings like a Chinese gong."

With the male Hildy, the wit of the verbal imagery depends on our
knowing it's a bluff. The threat is neither immediate (it's spoken into the
telephone) nor real. But in HIS GIRL FRIDAY the words are spoken by
a woman whom we already have seen kicking Walter under the table,
and we certainly can imagine her pounding him over the head with her
fist or a shoe. For Hawks, physicality and violence are masculine
realms, so the intrusion of a woman into this territory provokes laughter
— a mirthful response to the inappropriateness of the situation. (Hawks
later reverses the situation and gets the same response when Walter
offers to kick Butch's woman friend in the teeth.) Yet the wit and pacing
of the dialogue mask this inappropriateness to some degree. We laugh
at Hildy even while we root for her. Even while we recognize that her
behavior is not "natural" for women, Rosalind Russell makes it seem
natural for Hildy. The delusion lies in myth's reaffirmation of what is
"natural" feminine behavior.

This kind of myth making seems to have been overlooked by many
critics of HIS GIRL FRIDAY. They pluck Hildy Johnson out of the
broader context of the film and label her "an image most relevant today."
(3) In an excellent analysis of the film, Molly Haskell strives to find in
Hildy a model for some broader perspective the film itself actively
resists. In analyzing Rosalind Russell's portrayal, Haskell says she
"does not-become an imitation male; she remains true to the two sides
— feminine and professional — of her nature, and as such promises to exercise a healthy influence on the hard-boiled, all-male world of criminal reporting. It is as a newspaper reporter, rather than as wife and mother, that she discovers her true 'womanliness,' which is to say, simply, herself.\(^4\)

"You're a newspaperman," Walter Burns (Grant) tells his once and future wife, Hildy (Russell). It's a line Hildy echoes later in the film: "I'm no suburban bridge player — I'm a newspaperman." The dichotomy is already established. The world of meaningful, male activity, work, is set against the woman's world, the home. \(^5\) "Can you picture Hildy singin' lullabies and hanging out diapers?" says one of her fellow reporters. "And swapping lies over the back fence?" adds another. No, but the questions draw on the old values even while pretending to invoke new ones. They aren't questions the all-male reporters would ask about each other, even though their activities in the courthouse pressroom are not far removed from back-fence gossiping. Hildy herself endorses this notion of "feminine" conduct when she overhears the reporters later. She says,

"It's getting so a girl can't leave the room without being discussed by a bunch of old ladies."

Throughout the film both men and women are measured against certain standards of conduct and achievement that Hawks considers specifically masculine. The men can stray from these standards — like the reporters — or can fail to meet them completely, in which case they become objects of derision, unmanly men. Women, on the other hand are not expected to meet these standards, and only the exceptional one does. The film establishes Hildy Johnson as a woman who blends traditional notions of feminine vulnerability and attractiveness (Walter calls her "a doll-faced hick") with the masculine, Hawksian concepts of toughness and competence.

To emphasize the uniqueness of her position, the filmmakers contrast her with two stereotyped extremes of female conduct: the hysterical female, who is a victim of men, and the dominating woman, who accepts her own exploitation in order to manipulate men. Mollie Malloy (Helen Mock) is a caricature of high-strung female sensitivity who throws herself out the window in a fit of hysterics. The film version plays down any notion that Mollie is a prostitute \(^6\), not merely to "purify" her love for condemned murderer Earl Williams but also to make her even more of a victim, the too-fragile representative of the frail sex. This allows Hildy some leeway in expressing her emotions without the risk of appearing too feminine. Likewise, Hildy's toughness does not approach that of Evangeline, the blonde hooker Walter Burns employs to cause trouble for Hildy's fiancé. Evangeline has perverted the male notion of femininity. She coldly uses her sex appeal to exploit the men who would exploit her.

Perhaps the most troubling of the minor female characters is Mrs. Baldwin (Alma Kruger), Hildy's prospective mother-in-law. Her part is small and intentionally comic but important to deal with, for she is the logical extension of the "suburban bridge player" Hildy might have become. The figure of the respectable woman who dominates men — a figure the courier Pettibone's off-screen wife embodies also — is the most threatening to Hawks' notion of the balance of the sexes. She evokes the specter of male impotence and thus makes the idea of sexual equality seem precarious and dangerous, an undertaking for exceptional people only. Moreover, she strikes at the male's definition of himself — not merely his sexual identity, but the identity he achieves through what he does. Hecht and MacArthur describe Peggy, the male Hildy's fiancée in *The Front Page* in terms applicable to Mrs. Baldwin:

"As a matter of fact, Peggy belongs to that division of womanhood which dedicates itself to suppressing in its lovers or husbands the spirit of D'Artagnan, Roland, Captain
In her unconscious and highly noble efforts to make what the female world calls 'a man' out of Hildy, Peggy has neither the sympathy nor acclaim of the authors.

In many ways the female Hildy is virtually one of the boys. When one of the reporters addresses her as "Hildegard," we realize how deep their level of acceptance runs: they can even kid her about having a woman's name. They invite her to join their poker game and read her interview with the condemned murderer in tones of awed reverence. Yet they define her possibilities in terms inapplicable to themselves:

"I still say that anybody who can write like that ain't gonna give it up permanently to sew socks for a guy in the insurance business."

Hildy's competence is not a threat to the reporters but the price of admission to their all-male world, the price she has to pay to escape the world of female entrapment in domesticity.

Yet Hildy's acceptance by the men also results in her mistreatment as a woman. Part of the film's humor lies in the frustration of Hildy's desire to be "feminine," to have men light her cigarettes and open car doors for her. In one shot Hildy gallantly holds open one swinging gate for Walter, who graciously acknowledges her gesture. He then proceeds to shut the next gate on her knees, with the tracking camera movement leaving Hildy behind as thoughtlessly as Walter does. Walter's conscious violation of the rules of chivalry — wearing his hat around Hildy, grabbing her light for his own cigarette, smirking while she struggles with a heavy suitcase — reinforces the notion that Hildy must struggle to become part of the men's world. The audience is made to root for her, particularly since the alternative is marriage to her sickeningly sweet fiancé, Bruce (Ralph Bellamy). Yet we also laugh when Walter discovers a soft spot in Hildy's facade of toughness.

Away from Walter, Hildy is much more in command, so much so that we realize her only logical partner is her ex-husband. Hildy has courage (she takes a gun away from the escaped Earl Williams and lays a flying tackle on Warden Cooley) and wit. She can talk roughly ("...shot the professor right in the classified ads") and sometimes even brutally (Louie: "You better give me a receipt"; Hildy: "I'll give you a scar"). She smokes and drinks and her actions contrast with the men who don't, particularly Bruce and Earl.

But the film never allows us to forget Hildy is a woman and must conform to certain "womanly" patterns of behavior. When she runs after Warden Cooley, her skirt pulled up around her knees and her high heels making her totter precariously, we realize to what degree the humor of the film depends on our assumptions of how women normally behave, and we realize how many conventions of femininity Hildy embraces. When the reporters kid her about her new hat, she laughs them off, but a tinge of defensiveness comes through. She says,

"I paid twelve bucks for that hat."

Clothes are a major concern of the depression-era screen heroine, one of the clearest places where economic hardship challenged male-dictated notions of fashion and femininity. (8) Hildy clings to those notions even when it hurts. She is a woman and wants to be treated like a woman, not like a frilly object and not like a fake man. At the end of the film, when she breaks down and cries, she reveals an emotional honesty none of the men is capable of, a strength of feeling that would be a weakness for them. In a way it costs her. At the end of the film she cannot be considered Walter's equal. She is a woman and a reporter, but she also is in love, an eager puppy grateful for her acceptance into a world in which she does not yet belong.
As editor Walter Burns, Cary Grant creates a depiction of manliness that in some ways is a more subtle manipulation of our preconceptions than Russell's femininity. We know how women are supposed to behave, and we recognize deviations from that behavior as either humorous or intrepid. Men have more leeway. They can be strong without being physical, passionate without being weak. Walter Burns reeks of power. In the film's terms this is economic and political power (Walter apparently controls the newspaper), but Walter seems to personalize it. People respond to his character because of who he is, not because of the position he holds. They are swept away by his wit, presence and fanatical zeal for the newspaper game. But Walter Burns also is a man in love, and his pursuit of Hildy is no less fanatical. At times he's like a juggler keeping plates spinning in the air, with Hildy on one side, the Earl Williams news story on the other, a host of lesser concerns all around him.

The effect is not to nullify any one of his passions but to give them all a sense of irony. It is a much more complex role than the very similar parts Grant plays in THE PHILADELPHIA STORY (1940) and THE AWFUL TRUTH (1937). In both those films he tries to win back an ex-wife, and in the latter he even tries to prevent her marriage to Ralph Bellamy, yet neither film clearly defines him in terms of what he does. His ardor consumes his character in these films and makes him seem one-dimensional.

In HIS GIRL FRIDAY, Rosalind Russell clearly is the only person in the film who comes close to matching Grant's energy and wit, and Hildy is the only reporter talented enough to write the interview Walter Burns needs. This intermeshing of personal and professional interests proves to be the battleground where Walter Burns ultimately wins back both his reporter and his wife. Hildy cannot play both games at once: she is too honest, but she also is too vulnerable. Her heart wins out in the end.

In the crucial confrontation between editor and reporter, a long tracking shot done in one continuous take, Walter restrains Hildy from running after Mrs. Baldwin and begins gently but firmly pushing her around the pressroom. She backs away from him, but he guides her as if in a dance, prodding her, turning her, physically dominating her, all the while weaving a hypnotic spell with his ceaseless talking, his glib rendition of what Hildy stands to accomplish as a reporter, saving Earl Williams, cleaning up corruption, giving the city a chance for "the kind of government New York's having under LaGuardia," the whole rhythm of his lies expressing the singularity of his purpose: to win Hildy back to him, as reporter and as lover. "But Walter," she says, "I never figured it that way." "Nah," says Walter, "you're still a doll faced hick, that's why." By the time Hildy emerges from her delirium of professional glory and realizes how she has been manipulated, she is incapable of fighting back even on the personal level. She concedes, she cries. Walter, on the other hand, is back spinning plates, combining plans for a second honeymoon trip to Niagara Falls with the chance to cover a strike in Albany.

Walter's physical domination of Hildy is another level at which the film reinforces our assumptions. Men operate in a sphere of violence. The film begins on the eve of an execution and ends with the outbreak of a strike. In between there are shootings, kidnappings, fights, a jailbreak and a car crash. Hawks turns much of this violence into parody: the ineptness of the Sheriff and police, the bumbling earnestness of Louie the gunsel, the glib viciousness of the mayor. Walter vacillates between childish fantasies of violence — dynamiting the four o'clock train to Albany ("Could we?"); hoping Mrs. Baldwin was killed in the auto accident ("Was she? Was she?") — to sophisticated satirizations of the tough-guy role. He wears his hat throughout the second half of the film, using it as a prop to reinforce the mugging and posturing of his hoodlum characterizations. Yet when Walter grabs Hildy's wrist, there's no question who's the stronger. Hildy may make isolated physical gestures, but they're intrusions into the male domain. It simply takes a strong man
Like Hildy, Walter occupies a middle ground between two extremes of supposedly traditional behavior. He can be aggressive and physical without approaching the violence of a character like Louie (Abner Biberman) or be sensitive and sincere without seeming weak, like Bruce or Pettibone (Billy Gilbert). Yet all these men adhere to certain standards of male behavior that in turn enrich their characters. Louie may be a hood, the traditional overcompensating small man, but he also is incongruously vulnerable. He allows Walter to lift him up like a child in order to let him get a look at Bruce on the other side of a partition. He gallantly defends Evangeline's reputation ("She ain't no albino. She was born right here in this country.") He even politely introduces himself to the elderly Mrs. Baldwin before carting her off bodily. The harried Pettibone, on the other hand, is exploited constantly by everybody yet nevertheless finds the courage to resist the corrupt mayor's bribe and deliver Earl Williams' reprieve.

As Hildy's fiancé, Bruce, Ralph Bellamy gives a remarkable performance. He is the classic milquetoast, an insurance salesman from the sticks who lives with his mother and doesn't go out without his umbrella and rubbers. He is graceless in contrast to Walter's smoothness, bumping Hildy's hat as he helps her on with her coat; full of untested bravado ("If things get rough, remember I'm here."); naïve and gullible amid the flurry of put-ons and putdowns that whiz past his head; and rather depressingly confident of his own worth and that of his profession. His very dullness stands out in contrast to the mystique of adventure that "real men" are supposed to embrace. Yet Bellamy gives his character such depth and gentleness that one can appreciate Hildy's attraction to him.

Walter does not recognize Bruce as a true rival, but he sees the need to adopt some of Bruce's sensitivity toward Hildy if he's to win her back. His smugness toward Hildy in the opening scenes gives way to tenderness at the film's conclusion. When he tells Hildy to go back to Bruce, he says,

"I'm trying to do something noble for once in my life ... I was jealous. I was sore because he can offer you the kind of life I can't give you."

It's a lie, of course, but in its own way it's also a concession. Beneath all the glibness and cynicism there lies a certain sense of loss, of incompleteness. For just a moment Walter offers Hildy his vulnerability.

It's hard to imagine Walter and Hilda maintaining the same frantic pace for the rest of their lives together. The impulse towards domesticity is a strong one. Earlier in the film Hildy declares,

"I'm gonna be a woman, not a news getting machine. I'm gonna have babies and take care of them and give 'em cod liver oil and watch their teeth grow and, and — oh dear, if I ever see one of 'em look at a newspaper again, I'm gonna brain 'em ..."

Throughout the film there are numerous references to people's families and children. People getting married and settling down and raising children appears as the natural order of things. If Walter and Hildy's unconventional behavior strikes at the dullness of this order, it nevertheless validates the conventions that define bourgeois marriage: jealousy, fidelity, monogamy, heterosexuality, the separation of home and work, and the preeminence of romantic love.

The film adopts a sophisticated pose toward sex, but the pervasiveness of traditional values makes the pose humorous. Walter pretends to be shocked when he hears that Bruce and Hildy are taking the sleeper train to Albany the night before their marriage. (Bruce assures him that Mother will be chaperone.) Later Walter and Hilda laugh over their own
premarital affair. ("Yeah, we could've gone to jail for that, too, you know that"). But the activities of one sophisticated couple do not present an alternative to the "naturalness" of the established order. Wit and zaniness and frantic activity may be an antidote to boredom, but they offer no remedy for the systematic, structured inequalities that produce boring lives. All the characters' energy — and all the viewers' attention — is misdirected. One is left with the feeling that it's possible to change one's own life but not human nature. And since the film presents domesticity as a natural state, even the possibilities of personal growth seem limited. (9)

In a world where political action is not a viable alternative, the pursuit of adventure tends to take on special significance. Hildy and Walter are journalists on a quest: for them the activity is an end in itself. City politics, Earl Williams' hanging, Mollie's attempted suicide, fires and strikes and jailbreaks are only secondary concerns. Their real interest is the adventure of being a reporter. When Hildy tells Walter that insurance is an honest profession, he laughs in her face.

"Oh, certainly it's honest. It's also adventurous, romantic."

The faded Galahads of the pressroom provide the only true alternative to the pursuit of adventure; they offer the wise and tired cynicism of men who have dealt too long with the seamy side of life and now realize how little can be done to change it. If they seem callous in asking the sheriff to move up the time of Earl Williams' hanging to meet their deadlines, they are vindicated by the fact that the hanging had been postponed twice to accommodate a citywide election campaign.

The reporters wisecrack about everything from national government ("Is this guy Egglehoffer any good?" "Figure it out for yourself. He's the guy they sent to Washington to interview the Brain Trust. He said they were sane") to local politics ("The sheriff has just put two hundred more relatives on the payroll to protect the city against the Red Army, which leaves Moscow at noon tomorrow") to Mollie's tears. ("Aw, go put on a phonograph"). Their conversation is the most blatantly sexual in the film. "Stairway Sam," who spends a good part of his time looking up women's dresses, describes a woman "with big brown eyes" — his hands outlining her torso.

Several films of the 30s nurtured this image of the cynical reporter in the popular consciousness at that time. The movies needed a figure who could combine the cynicism and street wisdom of the gangster (whose popularity in films was declining) with the more positive outlook engendered by the New Deal and endorsed by the Hays Office: someone who was on the right side but wouldn't look like a sap if righteousness didn't prevail. (10) Born amid the yellow journalism of the Hearst-Pulitzer era, given a muckraking conscience by people like Lincoln Steffens and an urbane cynicism by Mencken and the journalists of the 20s, the newspaper reporter emerged as the popular hero of the 30s. The reporter's everyday life was an adventure, and its appeal to Depression audiences was striking. (11)

The appeal was, of course, an illusion — an illusion HIS GIRL FRIDAY fosters. Labor as a meaningful activity does not exist outside the context of adventure, except as the province of fools like Bruce and Pettibone. Earl Williams (John Qualen) is the film's representative proletarian figure: "He was a bookkeeper. Starts at twenty dollars a week and after fourteen years works his way up to seventeen-fifty." The film doesn't allow him the political conscience of the anarchist character in The Front Page but rather reduces him to the status of an ineffectual victim of forces outside his control and understanding. HIS GIRL FRIDAY touches on the contemporary problems of the Depression but offers its audience commiseration rather than analysis, escape rather than solutions. If alienated labor is the natural condition of humankind, then hope lies in adventure or resignation, not in economic and political change.
"In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves." (12)

Myth is seductive. I've seen HIS GIRL FRIDAY several times and look forward to seeing it again. I enjoy its wit and energy and am taken in by its characters. The women I know are not embarrassed or angry at Rosalind Russell's portrayal of Hildy: she's a strong and imaginative character. As Bruce says of her,

"Everybody else I've known before, well, you could always tell ahead of time what they were going to say or do. Hildy's not like that."

Hildy and Walter's relationship approaches a kind of sexual balance, with both partners moving away from the economic imbalance of the home/work separation. Yet this is the film's major deception. It suggests possibilities at the level of individual action while denying the application of such possibilities at any wider political level. It depoliticizes the individual gesture by basing our interpretation of it on the myth of sex roles.

Notes


2. Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, The Front Page (New York: Covici-Friede, 1928), p. 187. This element of homosexuality, which runs throughout the play, is alluded to only once in HIS GIRL FRIDAY, when Hildy tells the reporter Bensinger she might let him be her bridesmaid.


5. In the play, the male Hildy says, "I'm no stuffed shirt writing peanut ads … God damn it — I'm a newspaperman." (p. 138). For him the choice has other implications.

6. In the play she is described as "a North Clark Street tart … She is a soiled and gaudy houri of the pavement" (p. 78).


8. MARKED WOMAN, GOLDDIGGERS OF 1933 and STAGE DOOR all deal with the importance of clothes in terms of women's self-conceptions and economic possibilities.

9. The Polish filmmaker Andrzej Zulawski explores the futility of this good-humored approach to domestic-relations in the 1973 film L'IMPORTANT C'EST D'AIMER (THAT MOST IMPORTANT THING ... LOVE).

10. For further material along this line see Andrew Bergman, We're in the Money (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
