

## Gender and Ideology in *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940)

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*His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940)

Auteur theory has dominated criticism of the Howard Hawks film, *His Girl Friday*. Critics have understood the film in terms of how it relates to its director's oeuvre. Readings of the film, therefore, have relied heavily upon understandings of Hawks' thematic obsessions and recurring motifs. Peter Wollen, for instance, claims that "the meaning of the films of an auteur [like Hawks] is constructed *a posteriori*" from the director's entire body of work.<sup>1</sup> That is, the film's meaning depends upon a systematic knowledge of the director's worldview, the "outlook" that produces what Wollen calls "the Hawksian heterocosm," the director's cinematic "alternate world," the parameters of which determine the possibilities for analyses of any particular Hawks film.<sup>2</sup> Such auteur readings of *His Girl Friday* have been productive and convincing, as far as they go; this essay claims, however, that they do not go far enough.

Wollen's influential, auteur analysis tends to reduce Hawks' comedies, including *His Girl Friday*, to a "systematic series of oppositions" or "antinomic pairs." Such a film, the argument goes, infantilizes men and masculinizes women according to the Hawksian "theme of sex-reversal and role-reversal." *His Girl Friday* offers "a clear identification between women and the animal world," while men "strive to maintain...mastery."<sup>3</sup> Such an analysis appropriately identifies *His Girl Friday*'s general thematic terrain, but it misrepresents the film's specific effects. *His Girl Friday* goes further than simple "reversal" of the binary oppositions it represents; it deconstructs the very logic through which such oppositions produce meaning. A mere reversal of the polarity of an antinomy would maintain its logic of opposition. Male privilege over women turned topsy-turvy for the sake of comedy would still work through the hierarchical opposition male/female. In what follows, this essay demonstrates that *His Girl Friday* goes beyond such reversals to disable the binary systems it represents and therefore destabilize the ideologies such systems of meaning support. This specific understanding of *His Girl Friday* can therefore help us rethink the generalized conclusions produced by the auteur analyses that critics have heretofore relied upon in interpreting Hawks' comedies.

About halfway through the film, Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) tears up the news story she's written for Walter Burns (Cary Grant). Claiming she is leaving the newspaper business to "live like a human being" instead of a reporter, she likens Walter to a "chimpanzee" and a "monkey."<sup>4</sup> She wants to be a "woman" instead of a "news-getting machine"; she wants to have babies and "watch their teeth grow." She directs much of her diatribe at Walter through the telephone until, in her pique, she accidentally cuts the conversation short by ripping the cord out of its connection. She directs the remainder of her speech at the assembled reporters, whom she calls "chumps." Here, as throughout much of the film, Hildy expresses her desire to leave the newspaper business. Her rhetoric suggests, quite accurately as it turns out, that the world of reporting is dehumanizing—an animalistic world of counterfeit, double-crossing, and corruption. She longs to leave the city behind for an idealized "Albany," coded as a "human" space in which she can be a domestic "woman" who nurtures children. As elsewhere in the film, her dialogue relies on binary oppositions such as unfeeling masculinity opposed to nurturing femininity, the bestial opposed to the human, the "chumps" manipulated by the system opposed to those with the power to manipulate it, and so on. Nevertheless, for all her longing to escape the masculinized world of the press, marry an insurance salesman, and embrace traditional womanhood, the gathered reporters correctly observe that Hildy fits uneasily into such a role. "I give that marriage three months," one of the reporters says, "and I'm layin' three to one." The film makes it difficult for its audience not to agree; Hildy seems ill-suited for a domestic life in Albany.

In the film's terms, Hildy is an accomplished "newspaper man" who longs to reject her male persona and affirm her (already visually obvious) status as "woman" by embracing stereotypical domesticity. The film thus defines what it means to be male in opposition to what it means to be female even as it highlights Hildy's paradoxical status as both. This tension drives the narrative. Throughout the film, Hildy seeks a resolution for the competing masculinized and feminized desires she embodies, going back and forth between rejecting masculinity and embracing it, rejecting femininity and embracing it. Though Hildy remains uncomfortable with her conflicted and aleatory gender position, the film seems to delight in both the paradox she embodies and the resulting confusion in her choices. She is, in the film's terms, both woman and man: she is the best "newspaper man" in the room *precisely because* she can give her stories a "woman's touch"—stories which, according to Walter, need "heart." The fact that Hildy so often frustrates the binary

systems offered by the film suggests that she functions as an agent of aporia. If we understand “aporia” to mean a point of doubt or instability within a seemingly natural and logical system of meaning, we can understand Hildy’s embodiment of both male and female, both masculinity and femininity, as an instance of it. In fact, Hildy’s aporetic function goes beyond deconstructing gender binaries. As the film articulates each of its ideological systems, Hildy exposes their workings, effectively deconstructing them by occupying multiple positions within them. She calls her fellow newspaper men “chumps” even as she herself is manipulated again and again by Walter’s machinations. She wants a life of seclusion and domesticity, yet she proudly asserts her expectation that she will one day ride in a “Rolls Royce” and give “interviews on success.” She decries the corruption of the newspaper business and the state, yet she unethically bribes officials and feeds Earl Williams a narrative she invents to write a compelling news story. There is hardly a binary opposition articulated in the film that Hildy cannot destabilize by occupying each side. This essay seeks to draw out the ways in which Hildy’s embodiment of aporia—her unintentional deconstruction of ideologies—provides *His Girl Friday* with depth, relevance, and interest. The film posits naturalized gender relations based on stereotypical binary systems that perpetuate ideology only to interrupt those systems by drawing our attention to the aporia they create. The film’s deconstruction of the very binaries it posits suggests that *His Girl Friday* functions as a critique of the ideologies such binaries support.

Much of the scholarship on *His Girl Friday* concentrates on adaptation, focusing specifically on how Hildy enhances the narrative. In adapting Ben Hecht’s and Charles MacArthur’s stage play, *The Front Page*, Hawks and screenwriter Charles Lederer change Hildy’s sex from male to female. Some critics praise this choice, arguing that writing Hildy as a woman enhances the comedic potential of the narrative. Jeffrey A. Smith, for instance, proposes that the film must “converge” the professional and romantic aspects of the narrative as part of a successful transition from theatrical to cinematic comedy: “Hawks saw that a female Hildy might accomplish this fusion.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Robin Wood suggests that Hawks’ decision to cast Hildy as a woman makes the narrative more believable.<sup>6</sup> Laura Mulvey also agrees that the gender switch works well for the film, adding that the adaptation allows Hawks to articulate his habitual “themes” having to do with “same-sex” relationships, but in heterosexual “masquerade.”<sup>7</sup> While understanding *His Girl Friday* as an adaptation leads critics to interesting insights, one might also keep in mind that the script of the film takes only a plot outline and some of its character sketches from the play. The film represents a radical enough rewrite to merit analysis on its own terms. The following argument seeks to honor the film’s distinct methods and ends, which differ substantially from those of the play. The Hildy of the play does not function as the kind of aporia that the film’s Hildy does.

Critics often cite *His Girl Friday* as a paradigmatic screwball comedy, “a variation of romantic comedy,” William Castanzo writes, that typically involves fast-paced, “hostile” exchanges between the characters.<sup>8</sup> Ed Sikov understands Walter and Hildy as products of screwball, adding that the genre “is better at exposing social and sexual tensions than at resolving them.”<sup>9</sup> This essay is interested in screwball comedy insofar as the genre clearly encourages the possibility of exploring such tensions—gendered, sexual, social, or otherwise—by virtue of its tendency to exaggerate stereotypes for comedic effect. Indeed, the film’s consistent reliance on diametrically opposed stereotypes in conflict invites this essay’s analysis of the aporia such a clash can produce.

The opening scene demonstrates how the film, from its beginning, relies on binary gender stereotypes. Following an establishing title card that sets the scene in the “dark ages” of the

newspaper business, the film opens in the press room. Both men and women sit working at desks, engaged in paperwork or feeding information through telephones. As the camera tracks left across room, interrupted by a dissolve to two women working the telephone lines, a gendered division of labor begins to emerge. A male reporter informs the female switchboard operators that if “anybody asks for me, I’m down at the courthouse.” The camera catches him running for the elevator, followed by another male reporter, and two more men rush through the gate into the press room. Men come and go, foreshadowing the film’s concern with how men control and define the functions and limits of the newspaper business, while women such as those operating the switchboard serve as facilitators and conduits of exchange.



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A small swing gate reading “NO ADMITTANCE” separates the workroom from the entrance lobby. The clear split between the workstation and the outside indexes the film’s preoccupation with clear divisions and oppositions—newspaper business insiders and outsiders, systemic knowledge and ignorance, Albany (or the country) and the urban, and so on. Both *mise-en-scène* and cinematography demonstrate how wielding the gate of the press room signals masculine activity, but as Hildy and Bruce walk out of the elevator and approach the gate, Hildy pushes against his chest, signaling that he must wait passively outside its limits. Hildy’s passage through the gate and Bruce’s exclusion from the workstation are aberrations. If only men pass in and out of the gate as agents of the system, then we might begin to suspect that Hildy’s entrance marks her as an exception. Likewise, Bruce’s status becomes suspect. Why must he remain outside the gate, unlike the other men? When Hildy returns to the gate to inform Bruce that she will only be ten minutes, he claims (sounding like a stereotypical melodramatic woman) that “even ten minutes is a long time to be away from [her].” Momentarily charmed, Hildy baits him to repeat himself, but Bruce grows bashful and repeats in a clunky, informative manner. He doesn’t understand that Hildy simply enjoys receiving his affection: “I heard you the first time. I like it. That’s why I asked you to say it

again.” As the exchange begins, Hildy is immediately inside the gate, while Bruce is just outside. The camera shows them from the waist up and includes the gate that separates them; however, as Bruce fumbles through the romantic moment, the camera cuts to over-the-shoulder shots of their faces. In these shots, the camera momentarily obscures the gate, suggesting that, ideally, nothing can separate them. Even with the gate out of sight, however, their rhetoric reminds us that Hildy and Bruce are indeed divided. The incommensurable gap between Bruce’s naïve, sentimental rhetoric and Hildy’s rhetorical finesse suggests inherent differences between them: that Bruce is a dope and Hildy is keen, that this is foreign territory to him and native to her, and that he isn’t manly and she evidently is. Bruce attempts to recover his masculinity by offering to become violent with Walter—“I’d like to ‘spoil’ him just once”—suggesting that he might be of use “if things get rough.” But Hildy brushes him off, assuring him that she can “handle it.” The scene upsets the stereotypical, hierarchical difference between men and women. No sooner does she endearingly ask Bruce to repeat his affection than does she feel the need to explain the scripted romance between them (as if to a child) and wave off his assertion of physical prowess. “I’ll come a-runnin’ partner,” she assures him, mocking his attempt at cowboy valor. Meanwhile, Hildy stands within the limits of the press room, having swung open and walked through the gate. She is neither man nor woman; she crosses such borders from the film’s beginning.

This essay’s argument expands on those by critics who understand the film’s interest in Hildy’s gender by understanding the filmmaker, Hawks. “Hawksian Women,” in Naomi Wise’s words, tend to have similar characteristics. Women in Hawks films often take on lead roles as heroines, Wise notes, entering the world of danger in ways typically reserved for men.<sup>10</sup> Hildy, she argues, is an apt model of the Hawksian woman. Molly Haskell reads Hildy similarly. In identifying the roles of women in films in the first half of the twentieth century, she uses the term “superfemale” to describe the overly feminine woman who, while ambitious, fails to realize any sort of rebellion against “traditional society” as opposed to the “superwoman,” the intelligent woman who “adopts male characteristics in order to enjoy male prerogatives.”<sup>11</sup> She credits Hawks’ “intuitive genius”<sup>12</sup> in changing Hildy’s character from a man to a woman, a switch ultimately resulting in the sharp-witted “superwoman.” Pushing this kind of argument further, this essay understands Hildy as aporetic within what Haskell calls “male logic and ideology,” suggesting that her actions are neither defined by what it means to be a “woman,” in the film’s terms, nor circumscribed by the choice of either joining or opposing patriarchy.<sup>13</sup> In fact, by both joining and opposing, signified as both man and woman, she effectively denaturalizes the film’s “male logic and ideology,” which relies on clearly defined, hierarchically arranged binaries.

In *His Girl Friday*, the currency of patriarchy is counterfeit. (In fact, counterfeit is so pervasive that it becomes one of the very binaries—in opposition to truth—that the film seeks to destabilize.) The film introduces counterfeit in its rhetoric of blame. As Hildy leaves Bruce behind, she crosses the press room, greeting its occupants. “Hello Beatrice,” she says to a middle-aged female writer, “how’s advice to the lovelorn?” “Fine,” Beatrice responds, “my cat just had kittens again.” Without breaking stride, Hildy comments, “it’s her own fault.” This seemingly random ascription of blame for a natural event brings into question the film’s coding of fault, blame, and the privilege of ascribing it. It is evidently awry, for how can one blame a cat for giving birth? Furthermore, why does Hildy, a woman and a newspaper man, ascribe the blame? This could be dismissed as an offhand quip, except that the converse of the moment occurs soon after in Walter’s office. Walter feigns a telephone conversation with Sweeney in which Walter pretends that Sweeney is out on emergency leave to “have a baby.” Hildy responds, “Well, he didn’t do it on purpose, did he?” Again, Hildy

assumes the right to assign blame. Meanwhile, Walter continues a tirade about lack of “honor” in the business, referring to Sweeney’s dedication to domesticity over professionalism. But Walter’s ascription of blame, much like Hildy’s blaming of the cat for having kittens, makes no logical sense because it is detached from any legitimate occasion for its exercise. It is, rather, a performance of masculinized power that manufactures its own occasion (in this case, procreation: kittens or babies). It counterfeits social currency. The film makes a point of demonstrating both Hildy’s and Walter’s authoritative power in assigning blame, associating such power with masculinized professionalism over and against the feminized domestic realm.

The film’s obsession with the way in which masculinized ideological systems assign blame introduces its themes of corrupt counterfeiting. There is hardly a news story described in the film, for instance, that does not falsify the truth to assign guilt. From its beginning, the film insists that counterfeit functions as a modality for masculinized patriarchy, normalizing falsehood within the film’s narrative. As soon as Hildy walks into the newspaper’s office to confront her ex-husband, we begin to witness such corruption. Walter is not alone in the office. Louie holds a mirror while Walter shaves. He calls Walter “boss,” suggesting that Walter employs him. But Louie’s accent and dress suggest the typical movie gangster. Confirming this impression, Hildy greets him by asking, “how’s the big slot-machine king?” By way of “slot-machines,” the dialogue associates Louie with gambling and therefore gangsters.<sup>14</sup> “I ain’t doin’ that no more,” Louie responds. “I’m retired.” But why does the editor of a respectable paper employ a gangster, even a “retired” one? Just after we meet Louie, Walter improvises a plan to strong-arm the Governor into reprieving Earl Williams. Walter will back the republican Governor in his bid for Senator despite the fact that the paper has been “a democratic paper for over twenty years.” Walter himself describes the plan as a “double-cross.” Finally, we discover later that Louie is walking around with \$450 in counterfeit money, which makes its way into the plot and literalizes the film’s interest in cover-ups, double-crosses, half-truths, and lies.

Counterfeit becomes one of *His Girl Friday*’s most consistent motifs. The film roots nearly all stories and actions in counterfeit, demonstrating just how easily truth can be repressed or distorted. The restaurant scene provides at least two major instances of this. When Walter raises the subject of the Earl Williams case, Hildy soon formulates a plan. Walter asks, “What’s the scheme, Hildy?” Her “scheme,” which may help to reprieve Earl Williams, invokes untruths or counter-truths to combat political lies: “Look, Walter, you get the interview with Earl Williams. Print Egelhoffer’s statement, and right alongside of it—you know, double column—run your interview. Alienist says he’s sane; interview says he’s goofy.” The model of the “double column” news story epitomizes the film’s investment in truth. That is, the film cares much less about exposing the truth than about demonstrating how easily counter-truths can obscure it. To seek truth becomes code for naiveté and ignorance. It is appropriate, then, that Bruce inquires, “Don’t you think you could just show that the man wasn’t responsible?” As an outsider from Albany, Bruce doesn’t understand that both the newspaper business and the political machine function through counterfeit, and that truth is superfluous, to be manipulated rather than simply demonstrated.

Walter bluffs an interest in Bruce’s business, insurance sales, and he bribes Hildy into letting Bruce write him a policy—a twofold lie. “Now look Bruce, you persuade Hildy to do the story, and you can write out a nice fat insurance policy for me.” Hildy agrees to the \$1000 bribe, but before leaving, she adds, “I think you better make that a certified check.” “What do you think I am,” Walter asks, “a crook?” “Yes,” Hildy responds. Walter (and by extension the newspaper business) is knowingly

corrupt. Hildy expects the money to be counterfeit, so she demands a certified check. Even this “honest money,” however, must be secured with a lie. Hildy fabricates a superstition so that Bruce will unwittingly hide the check. “There’s an old newspaper superstition that the first big check you get you put in, uh, the lining of your hat. It brings good luck.” Later, Hildy uses most of the five hundred dollars she gets from Bruce to bribe the prison guard for access to Earl and later to bribe the Warden for the scoop on Earl’s escape. And, of course, when Hildy demands her money back from Walter, he gives her counterfeit money, which ultimately lands Bruce in jail. This repeated obsession with counterfeit exchanges suggests a binary in which counterfeit prevails over truth. Such is the case with the certified check. As valid currency, it cannot endure the corrupt, counterfeiting newspaper and political machines without becoming tainted; consequently, it must be hidden in a lie. Just so, feminized characters such as Bruce and Mollie who try to rely on or defend the truth are either repressed or expelled.

Critics interested in how gender operates in the film tend to focus on Mollie Malloy. For I. D. MacKillop, Mollie is necessarily cast out of the film (when she jumps out of the window) so that patriarchy can triumph.<sup>15</sup> Tom Powers suggests that Mollie is nothing more than a stereotypical hysteric who fails to meet standards of masculinity—standards of the kind that Hildy does meet.<sup>16</sup> These readings depict Mollie as the converse of Hildy. Marty Roth adds nuance to this contrast, suggesting that Mollie functions as an index of the repressed and “forgotten” in the narrative.<sup>17</sup> Mollie serves as Hildy’s double as well as her antithesis. Whether in comparison, contrast, or both, all of these analyses highlight the feminine and its relation to masculine privilege as a central concern. This essay finds such concerns at the heart of the film as well, exploring the possibility of a viable alternative to the systemic opposition of masculinized privilege to feminized abjection through aporia. Understanding Hildy as aporia suggests, as Roth indicates, that Mollie functions as both Hildy’s analogue and opposite.

When Mollie first enters the press room, she admonishes the newspaper men: “I’ve been looking for you tramps.” Her interest in the newspaper men lies in her connection to Earl, whom she hopes to save from the gallows. The newspaper men mock her naïve affection for a man due to be hanged in the morning. She has sent roses to Earl in jail, and the men ask her, “What do you want done with them tomorrow?” She responds by calling them “a bunch of wise guys.” One of them responds, “You’re breaking up the game, Mollie.” His response epitomizes the role feminine agency plays in the newspaper business: it is merely a nuisance that threatens to “break up” exchanges between men. But Mollie opposes the newspaper men’s interest in such counterfeit exchanges; she questions their ability and willingness to write an honest story. Despite their claim to have written a “swell story” about Mollie and Earl, she refutes its allegations: “I never said I loved Earl Williams and was willing to marry him on the gallows. Ya made that up.” And of their claim that she has been spending all her time with Earl since his imprisonment, she says, “That’s a lie.” In attempting to defend the truth, Mollie describes how she met Earl the day before the shooting, when he was outside looking like a “sick dog.” She approached him “like any human being would.” As an analogue for Hildy and her quest for the “human” world of Albany, Mollie wants to “live like a human being.” Unlike Hildy, however, she does not understand nor can she perform the masculinity necessary to survive in the newspaper business. She breaks down, crying out her story, insisting that “Earl Williams treated [her] decent and not like an animal.” It is precisely this naïve humanism that feminizes her in the film’s context. Her humanism is naïve in that she believes she can combat “the animals” of the patriarchy by honestly describing Earl (who apparently just shot a “colored” policeman) as “a poor little fellow that never meant nobody no

harm.” As two patriarchal powers—the newspaper’s social sphere and the mayor’s political sphere—wage war for the right to use Earl Williams, Mollie still believes that her testimony might bring change. She does not understand the masculinized social and political contexts that silence her. She understands neither that the Mayor and Sheriff want Earl executed to court the “colored vote” nor that the newspaper men, for the most part, want only to capitalize on the event by printing sensationalized stories about it. (It is worth remembering that the main concern around the newsroom when the Sheriff first enters is not to thwart the hanging but to move it up two hours so that the reporters have time to get their stories into the morning edition.) Mollie only knows that the newspaper men seem incapable of either truth or empathy. A naïve humanist, Mollie serves as a mirror for Hildy’s desire to escape the dehumanizing newspaper business and become an uncomplicated “woman.” Nevertheless, Mollie’s inability to survive the masculinized exchanges of the newspaper and political systems also renders her Hildy’s converse. Hildy knows better.

Mollie embodies stereotypical femininity, representing sexuality, nurturing, and emotion. So conceived, femininity can either accept abjection within patriarchy or uselessly rebel in a language fated to fall on deaf ears until forcibly removed. Mollie aspires to the kind of femininity that Hildy idealizes: a version of femininity that enjoys a peripheral role within patriarchy, signified in the film as “the country,” or Albany, or in Mollie’s frame of reference, the “warm room” in which she can comfort and console Earl, who is suffering at the hands of a social system they both understand as cruel, deceitful, and unreasonable. The film’s world depicts femininity as passive and even absent—outside of the social, its feeble intrusions consistently silenced and rebuffed. Bruce’s mother, for instance, makes a brief appearance only to be gagged and carried off by the gangster Louie. In the film’s terms, femininity cannot operate within the spheres of agency and engagement (i.e. politics and the newspaper business). It must be relegated to the periphery (i.e. the country or Albany), the place of domesticity, another representation of passivity. The film codes these feminine spaces as so passive, in fact, that they begin to signify death.<sup>18</sup> Walter first relates femininity to death early in the film. In an effort to open the door for Hildy’s return to the newspaper business, Walter feigns a telephone conversation with Sweeney while talking to Duffy.

HILDY: What’s the matter, Walter?

WALTER: Sweeney

HILDY: Dead?

WALTER: Oh, he might just as well be. The only man on the paper that can write, and he picks today to have a baby.

Sweeney is supposedly absent “to have a baby,” and despite being “the only man on the paper that can write,” he may as well be dead to Walter. To be absent in the name of femininity—for the sake of childbirth, in this case—is code for radical uselessness, or death. Mollie reinforces this association when she attempts to kill herself by jumping out of the window.

Where Mollie fails to understand the context of her appeal, relegating her to naïve and death-inflected femininity, Hildy’s identity as embodied aporia allows her to survive in the realms the film codes as masculine. We can understand Hildy’s character in opposition to Mollie’s. Mollie is feminized to the utmost, representing the extreme of a continuum that includes others who also remain relatively powerless in the face of the system such as Pettibone, Bruce, and Earl. Hildy, meanwhile, is masculinized. When the camera shows her writing a story for Walter during Mollie’s tirade against lies, for instance, it demonstrates how Hildy perpetuates the counterfeiting that Mollie hopes to overthrow. When it becomes clear that Mollie’s speech is useless in the context of the press room, however, Hildy grasps Mollie to escort her from the situation. “I’m being human,” Mollie



cries to Hildy in a last-ditch effort to be heard. Hildy responds, "I know; they're newspaper men." Hildy's ability to recognize Mollie's desire for humanity, as well as her kind escort from the room, would seem to associate her with the human empathy and nurturing kindness so consistently feminized by the film. Yet even as Hildy hopes to live like a human in Albany, she clearly possesses an insight that Mollie lacks: the knowledge to explain that "they're newspaper men" and they speak neither the language of empathy nor that of honesty. This consciousness again masculinizes her even in the midst of her feminized desire to leave with Bruce for Albany, allowing her to embody aporia.

In order to better understand how the film expands its field of reference from gendered oppositions to other binary systems supporting ideologies, it will be useful to draw on Louis Althusser's description of how such ideological systems work. Althusser makes the distinction between the "State Apparatus" and "Ideological State Apparatuses." The former "functions by violence, whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function by ideology."<sup>19</sup> The State Apparatus includes such entities as "the government... the police, the courts, the prisons..."<sup>20</sup> *His Girl Friday* references and represents all of these. The film aptly demonstrates Althusser's claim that such entities "function by violence" through both the indiscriminate and overabundant gunfire from the Sheriff's men and the desire to hang Earl Williams for political ends. Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), on the other hand, are such things as education, family, communications (i.e. the press), and other cultural institutions. Again, *His Girl Friday* represents many of these social mechanisms, which function in symbiotic relation to the state (as both check and support). The important ISAs in the film are the family and the newspaper business. One might add the psychoanalytic establishment by suggesting that the Freud wannabe, Egelhoffer, represents such a cultural institution by virtue of his presumed expertise in defining the border between sanity and insanity as well as his desire to give a public statement on the Earl Williams case, presumably to publicly assert his expertise on sanity and the social. This too the film lampoons.

Ideology depends largely on "know-how."<sup>21</sup> For Althusser, education is the primary Ideological State Apparatus in the late capitalist era because it provides the knowledge, the know-how, with which people participate in the State and its ideological systems. Education allows people to understand their roles, be they proletariat, bourgeois, or ruling class. When Hildy sells Earl on the "production for use" excuse for firing the gun, for instance, she is offering him an ideological explanation for his behavior—a way to understand his place in the system as its dupe, a member of the uneducated proletariat. Earl has neither the know-how nor the resources to understand himself or act in relation to the higher levels of the State system, rendering him susceptible to Hildy's ideologically charged explanation. Earl claims to have heard the phrase "production for use" from a public speaker in the park. The film's Earl (unlike the Earl of *The Front Page*) clearly does not understand the reference to the imagined threat of radical communism. Hildy clearly does. She uses her superior knowledge of the ideological context to situate Earl as a Bolshevik dupe. The film makes many references to Earl's naiveté, most obviously in the interview scene as Egelhoffer probes Earl's level of awareness: "Mr. Williams, you know of course that you're going to be executed. Now, who do you feel is responsible for that?" Earl cannot understand himself as guilty, even though he clearly admits to firing the gun: "I'm innocent," he claims. "It wasn't my fault."



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Althusser claims that “Ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”<sup>22</sup> That is, what’s at stake in ideology is not a direct and transparent description of the real but a way of conceptualizing (imagining) the individual’s *relationship* to the real. Hildy’s descriptions of a “newspaper man” and a domestic “woman” are ideological insofar as they are imagined ways of representing her relationship to her conditions of existence. (They are also, of course, binary oppositions.) She can be both a “man” and a “woman” precisely because those terms do not reference the real but a representation of it. In the jail scene, Hildy helps Earl imagine a representation of his relationship to his own experience. “You didn’t mean to kill that policeman,” she tells Earl. “Why, of course not,” Earl responds: “I’m not guilty; it’s...it’s just the world.” The “world,” which Earl clearly does not understand, must somehow be responsible for his actions. Earl desperately needs an ideological context for his actions. Hildy provides just that. “Now look, Earl,” she coaxes, “when you found yourself with that gun in your hand and that policeman coming at you, what did you think about?”

EARL: I don’t know exactly...

HILDY: You must have thought of something. Could it have been “production for use”?

EARL: I don’t know...

HILDY: What’s a gun for, Earl?

EARL: Why, to shoot of course.

HILDY: Oh, emm... maybe that’s why you used it.

EARL: Maybe.

HILDY: Seems reasonable?

EARL: Yes, yes, it is. You see, I’ve never had a gun in my hand before. And that’s what a gun’s for, isn’t it? Maybe that’s why.

HILDY: Sure it is.

EARL: Yes, that's what I thought of: "production for use." Why, it's simple, isn't it?

HILDY: Very simple.

EARL: There's nothing crazy about that, is there?

HILDY: No, nothing at all.

EARL: You'll write about that in your paper, won't you?

HILDY: You bet I will.

Hildy feeds Earl an ideological frame of reference whereby he can understand his experience. To Earl, this makes "reasonable" and "simple" truth out of the event that he could not previously conceptualize. Why did he pull the trigger despite the non-violence he claims to have "stood for"? Before Hildy provides the ideological apparatus, the event was an "accident" to Earl. He could not ascribe intentionality to it (despite the fact that he himself performed the action.) All he knows is that he is "not guilty" and somehow "the world" is at fault. The binaries guilt/innocence and sanity/insanity must function within an ideological frame of reference. Hildy provides the frame of reference whereby Earl can judge himself both innocent and sane. It was the world's fault; it was the gun and its use value, not his will that killed the policeman. The Marxist frame of reference signaled by "production for use" effectively shifts the blame onto a social message (the "speeches" in the "park" that told Earl what to do with the gun). Delighted, Earl happily embraces the role of an unwitting Bolshevik—a brainwashed, proletariat dupe.

In the course of providing Earl with an ideological framework with which to understand his behavior, Hildy performs her role perfectly as a corrupt newspaper man peddling counterfeit information to the rest of the "wage slaves" and "motormen's wives" who make up the paper's readership. She packages Earl's story by situating it within a larger ideological context of the struggle between the State and its imagined enemies, the Bolshevik sympathizers—in the film's terms, "the red army" that the men of the press jokingly suggest is going to show up at noon tomorrow. The audience watches, in other words, as Hildy displays precisely the kind of vile behavior she has come to despise from those in the newspaper business. This scene with Earl in the jail cell shows that Hildy is both aware of the ideological context in which she operates and capable of performing a range of positions within it.

Hildy's embodiment of aporia deconstructs each binary the film puts forward, exposing ideology as mere performance of naturalized oppositions. Hildy's conversation with Walter during the film's conclusion is unique insofar as Walter steps outside of his performance as editor of the newspaper, "lord of the universe" as Hildy titles him, the one who leads and represents the Ideological State Apparatus of the newspaper business. Though we see Walter outside of his own ideology, only through Hildy's embodiment of aporia do we see ideology collapse.

Despite her longing to live as a human and a woman, Hildy seems to feel rejuvenated by her return to the newspaper business amidst the chumps. She hopes to stay and write the final Earl Williams story, but Walter shoos her away. "Get going, Hildy!" he barks. Brushing off her appeals to stay, he continues, "Now look honey, can't you understand? I'm trying to do something noble for once in my life. Now get out of here before I change my mind." Far from seeing him as "noble," she retorts, "Oh, I get it, Walter. The same old act, isn't it? Try to push me out of here thinking I'll be stupid enough to want to stay." Hildy balances on a tipping point between the "honest" insurance industry and the newspaper business, the domestic Albany and the counterfeiting patriarchy, woman and man. Aiming to be "noble," Walter confesses: "Now I know I deserve that Hildy, but this is one time you're wrong. Look honey, when you walk out that door, a part of me will go right with you. But a

whole new world is going to open up for you. I made fun of Bruce and Albany and all that kind of thing. You know why? I was jealous. I was sore because he could offer you the kind of life I can't give you." Here Walter speaks outside of his performance as the "lord of the universe." In effect, we begin to see behind the scenes; we begin to see ideology as nothing more than the sum of naturalized, illegitimate binaries. Albany, which Walter once defined as death, is "a whole new world." In his sincere confession, Walter seems to put aside his habitual counterfeiting and lying, the currency of patriarchy, so that he can speak truthfully. So read, Walter cannot be the "chimpanzee" or "chump" that Hildy has dubbed him; rather, his willingness to be "noble" suggests that he is performing as a human being, a behavior purportedly incommensurable with the newspaper business. Where Hildy is concerned, Walter cannot finally sustain his familiar ideological position. If there is triumph at the end of Hildy's narrative trajectory, it must be that she has finally forced Walter out of his ideological frame of reference. It is within the space of uncertainty, of aporia, that Walter and Hildy can finally see eye to eye, suggesting the possibility that there is an alternative space for the couple—a space apart from the reductive and rigidly partitioned binary extremes. In true Hollywood fashion, the moment is signed and sealed with a kiss.

The conclusion of *His Girl Friday* makes any single ideological position untenable, opting instead to resolve the narrative in paradox and aporia. To accept one side of the ideologically charged binaries the film satirizes as a point of departure for interpretation, therefore, will necessarily problematize that very interpretation. Wood, for example, reads the ending in ethical terms. He suggests that amorality is the film's major shortcoming: "the only morally acceptable ending would be to have Hildy walk out on *both* men; or to present her capitulation to Walter as tragic."<sup>23</sup> While the film does deal with the concept of humanism, it does not invite a moral framework for evaluation. On the contrary, it specifically precludes a moral lens because it refuses to champion either side of the binary (moral or amoral, human or animal) and instead opts to confuse the difference between the two. In establishing and then destabilizing oppositions between human and animal, truth and counterfeit, and so on, the film problematizes not only morality, but any interpretation based on it. Such is also the case for gender. The film provides little opportunity for us to read its ending as a triumph of the kind of emotionless, power-hungry counterfeiting it has heretofore associated with masculinity and patriarchy. Hildy still wants and expects love, a relationship, and a honeymoon. But we are not especially encouraged to hope that she will achieve all these things along with her goal to live as a human "woman." Is her elopement with Walter a capitulation of femininity to masculinized patriarchy, or the triumph of romance—of emotion and sincerity—over counterfeit? The film does not finally support either reading. Instead, it embraces paradox and aporia. Hildy decides that Walter does in fact love her precisely because he cares enough to frame Bruce with counterfeit money. "I thought you were on the level for once.... I thought you didn't love me," she says to Walter when she gets off the phone with her jailed fiancé. "What did ya think I was," Walter scolds, "a chump?" Bruce, it turns out, is the chump, and Hildy chooses the newspaper business over Albany in large part because Walter isn't.

Hildy's decision to choose the newspaper business over Albany represents how her embodiment of aporia deconstructs ideology. Whereas inverting the film's binaries (e.g. privileging women instead of men) might suggest a traditional Hawksian maneuver, Hildy's aporia threatens the very notion of stable binary structures. While Hildy may triumph in forcing Walter out his ideological frame of reference—a triumph that might appear as mere gender inversion—her decision to embrace Walter and the newspaper business is, in fact, a decision to embrace paradox and aporia. By displacing

Walter from naturalized patriarchy, Hildy transforms him into an embodiment of aporia much like herself. Walter's honest, "noble" confession makes little sense amidst counterfeiting, masculinized patriarchy because, at this moment, he is both newspapering chimpanzee and human, counterfeiting and truthful. Earlier in the film, the newspaper men regarded Mollie's entrance into the press room as "breaking up the game." Much like Mollie earlier, Hildy is vulnerable. The final decision to choose either Albany or the newspaper business looms. And Hildy, like Mollie, interrupts exchanges between men with her plight. "Now, I know I deserve that Hildy," Walter says, then into the phone, "Wait a minute, Duffy," then back to Hildy, "but this is one time you're wrong." This time, however, Hildy's interruption is met with Walter's aporia. In Walter's simultaneous dealings with both Duffy and Hildy, the film gives us reason to believe that Walter has suddenly become "noble" even as it gives us reason to believe that he is scheming yet again over the telephone. Hildy's choice of Walter and the newspaper business, therefore, cannot be read in the context of a simple inversion of binaries. Rather, her choice renders binaries insufficient altogether, unable to maintain their speciously derived, hierarchical meaning.

Returning to the telephone, Walter asks Duffy, "Strike? What strike? Where? Albany?" Breaking up the exchange yet again, Hildy interjects unproblematically, "Oh, all right. We'll honeymoon in Albany." Both death and a new world, Albany itself becomes aporetic, offering both a romantic honeymoon and a professional news story for the couple-to-be. "I wonder if Bruce can put us up," Walter muses, driving home the irony. By double-crossing its ideological binaries, the film yields to aporia, disabling a fixed, ideological reading of its conclusion. In fact, Hildy deconstructs each binary the film offers—the country and the city, male and female, counterfeit and truth, romance and professionalism. The delight of *His Girl Friday* lies in the savvy way in which it denaturalizes and effectively satirizes these binaries and the ideologies they support. Through aporia, Hildy shows us just how silly it would be to truly believe either that women should run the world or that men should while women get to choose between making babies and throwing themselves out of the window.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Wollen, "From *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, Seventh Edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 455–70, 456.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 460–62.

<sup>4</sup> For this and all subsequent citations of the film, see *His Girl Friday*, DVD, directed by Howard Hawks (1940; Culver City, CA: Columbia Tristar, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey A. Smith, "His Girl Friday in the Cell: A Case Study of Theatre-to-Film Adaptation," *Literature Film Quarterly* 13.2 (1985): 72–76, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 72.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Mulvey, "His Girl Friday," *Sight & Sound* 7.3 (1997): 64.

<sup>8</sup> William V. Costanzo, *Great Films and How to Teach Them* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2004), 87.

<sup>9</sup> Ed Sikov, *Screwball: Hollywood's Madcap Romantic Comedies* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1989), 173.

<sup>10</sup> Naomi Wise, "The Hawksian Woman," in *Howard Hawks: American Artist*, ed. Jim Hillier and Peter Wollen (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 111–119, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1974), 214.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>14</sup> Slot-machines became associated with organized crime in many cities, including New York. In September of 1934, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia famously had 1200 confiscated slot-machines smashed and thrown into Long Island Sound in an effort to combat the mafia. (See, for instance, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a42BphkVqhc>.)

<sup>15</sup> I. D. MacKillop, "Scram Svengali! Remembering *His Girl Friday*," *Cambridge Quarterly* 12.2/3 (1983): 189–200.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Powers, "His Girl Friday: Screwball Liberation," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 17 (1978): 25–28.

<sup>17</sup> Marty Roth, "Slap-Happiness: The Erotic Contract of 'His Girl Friday'," *Screen* 30.1/2 (1989): 160–175, 160.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, see Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), 348–351.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001): 85–126, 97.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>23</sup> Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks*, 77.