

Teaching Sound Film

A Reader

R. J. Cardullo



SensePublishers

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**ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
*TEACHING SOUND FILM: A READER***

“Every once in a rare while, a critic comes along who not only helps us appreciate why movies are magic but also clarifies the meaning and mechanics behind their rituals of looking. R. J. Cardullo is just such a critic. His work is of special value to filmgoers who truly want to understand the occasionally challenging and puzzling films by some of the greatest cinematic artists in film history. With the consummate skill of a film scholar and historian but also the deft touch of a genuine movie-lover, Cardullo provides immediate and accessible understanding of some often demanding material.

His approach is both personal and critical as well as evenhanded and even poetic. Few critics have managed to penetrate the dreamlike obscurities of Federico Fellini, Abbas Kiarostami, Hong Sang-soo, and Michael Haneke with the wit, grace, and charm of this author. His criticism is for anyone who has ever burst out laughing or burst into tears at a movie, without really knowing why. R. J. Cardullo tells us why, but without removing the essential mystery of the magic ritual of watching and sharing films. Reading his work will make you want to see the movies all over again, or for the first time.”

– **Donald Brackett, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, Canada**

“I have been impressed over the years with not only how thorough R. J. Cardullo is in his research and writing but also how international he is, with books on German dramatic comedy, American theater, Asian film, and—perhaps his first love—European cinema. There is more: Cardullo is not just a film scholar but also someone who has done a lot of interviewing of famous filmmakers, so his ‘research’ has been first-hand in many cases. Beyond cinema, he is also an expert on film adaptation (from literary sources) and thus takes a cultural as well as ‘cinematic’ approach to film. Finally, R. J. Cardullo writes in such an engaging style that is comprehensive as well as accessible—not falsely or overly ‘academic.’ I read him regularly, and so too should others interested in film and the allied arts: especially students.”

– **Andrew Horton, University of Oklahoma at Norman, USA**

“R. J. Cardullo’s highly readable and often brilliantly elucidating essays on world cinema reveal intricate connections and parallels between film content and film form. This is perhaps his greatest contribution to film criticism—his insistence on relating form to content, as opposed to celebrating cinematic style for its own sake. There are few critics who read films as closely, and finely, as this man.”

– **André Loiselle, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada**

“In *Teaching Sound Film: A Reader*, R. J. Cardullo provides readers with highly valuable accounts of the context in which each film was made (and released). Although this may sound trivial, lack of context is one of the great weaknesses of film criticism. Cardullo, by contrast, provides a comprehensive and detailed survey of what has already been said about each film, while at the same time demonstrating how genuinely new his own analysis is. Moreover, the author brings to this discussion the sort of global perspective to which American academics pay lip service but then ignore.

Frankly, positing a canon of significant films, as Cardullo does here, and then re-evaluating them—or rather, validating their importance—is a critical act of serious merit. Some critics bristle at the whole idea of aesthetic value, of creating a canon of ‘great works.’ Not being in their number, I would disregard such claims, for the idea that everything is equal ends up leading people to the conclusion that nothing has any value. Serious film criticism nowadays thus takes an excessively microscopic view of the cinema. In short, the significance of *Teaching Sound Film: A Reader* is precisely that it creates a canon and makes a convincing argument for the place of these particular films within it. Cardullo writes clearly and convincingly, without resorting to the arcane critical jargon or bizarre theorizing that disfigures most academic writing, and he has a mastery of his material that, candidly, is quite rare in the field of film studies.

This well-researched, carefully reasoned work would have an appeal to any serious student of film, particularly at the university level. In fact, *Teaching Sound Film: A Reader* could—and, in my view, will—be read with profit by a very wide audience. At the same time, the book’s lucid counter-arguments to the usually run-of-the-mill accounts scattered about in film histories challenge the assumptions most professors have. One of Cardullo’s strengths as a critic is precisely what he has to say about major films of the kind found in this book. I think he’s at his best tackling landmarks, European, American, or otherwise: that’s where his revisionist insights place him head and shoulders above academic film critics. R. J. Cardullo does an excellent job of simultaneously showing why these works are landmarks and why to a great extent they’ve not been properly understood—until now.”

– **John Mosier, Loyola University of New Orleans, USA**

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INTRODUCTION

Film editing, or the instantaneous replacement of one moving visual field with another, was once not part of our daily experience. So nothing in 400 million years of vertebrate evolution prepared us for the visual assault of cinema. But amazingly enough, the process succeeded and we became accommodated to the idea of motion pictures. Even more, a mysterious extra meaning was gained from the juxtaposition of two images that was not present in either of the shots themselves. In short, we discovered that the human mind was predisposed to cinematic grammar as if it were an entirely natural, inborn language. Perhaps it is inborn, because we spend one-third of our lives in the nightly world of dreams. There, images are fragmented and different realities collide abruptly with what seems to have great meaning. In this way we can see film editing as, probably unwittingly, employing the power and means of dream.

For many millions of years, then, human beings were apparently carrying within them the ability to respond to film and were unconsciously awaiting its arrival in order to employ their dream-faculty more fully. Some of us have long believed that, through more recent centuries, theater artists and audiences themselves had also been longing for the film to be invented even without a clue that there could be such a medium. Many tricks of stagecraft in those centuries (particularly the nineteenth) were, without knowing it, attempting to be cross-cuts and superimpositions, or double exposures. Some dramatists even imagined their work in forms and perspectives that anticipated the birth of the cinema (most notably, and excitingly, Georg Büchner in *Danton's Death* [1835]). In his essay "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today," Sergei Eisenstein shows how the novel itself—specifically, the novels of Charles Dickens—provided D. W. Griffith with a number of cinematic techniques, including equivalents to fades, dissolves, the breakdown into shots, and the concept of parallel editing. These novelistic and theatrical attempts at prognostication a few centuries earlier are puny stuff, though, because for millions of years homo sapiens had been subliminally prepared for the intricacies of film, had indeed been getting ready for them every night. Indeed, in a sense the last century, the mere centenary of film's existence, was the emotional and psychological goal of the ages—and continues to be into the twenty-first century.

When the first moving picture flashed onto a screen, the double life of all human beings thus became intensified. That double life consists, on the one hand, of actions and words and surfaces, and, on the other, of secrets and self-knowledges or self-ignorances, self-ignorings. That double life has been part of man's existence ever since art and religion were invented to make sure that he became aware of it. In the past 150 years or so, religion has receded further and further as revealer of that double life, and art has taken over more and more of the function; when film art came along,

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it made that revelation of doubleness inescapable, in fact more attractive. To wit: on the screen are facts, which at the same time are symbols; for this reason, they invoke doubleness at every moment, in every kind of picture. They stir up the concealments in our lives, both those concealments we like and those we do not like; they shake our histories, our hopes, and our heartbreaks into consciousness. Not completely, by any means. (Who could stand it?) And not more grandly or deeply than do the other arts. But more quickly and surely, because these facts, these symbols do their stirring and shaking with visuals as well as with motion, serially and cumulatively.

Think of this process as applying to every frame of film and it is clear that when we sit before a screen, we run risks unprecedented in human history. A poem may or may not touch us; a play or novel may never get near us. But movies are inescapable. (In the case of poor films, we often have the sensation of fighting our way *out* of them.) When two screen lovers kiss, in any picture, that kiss has a minimum inescapability that is stronger than in other arts—both as an action before us and a metaphor for the “kissingness” in our own lives. Each of us is pinned privately to such a kiss in some degree of pleasure or pain or enlightenment. In romances or tragedies, in period films or modern dramas, in musical comedies or historical epics, in Westerns or farces, our beings—kissing or otherwise—are in some measure summoned up before us, in our own private visions. And I would like to suggest that the fundamental way, conscious or not, in which we determine the quality of a film is by the degree to which the re-experiencing of ourselves coincides with our pride, our shames, our hopes, our honor.

Finally, it follows, distinctions among movies arise from the way they please or displease us with ourselves: not *whether* they please or displease but *how*. This is true, I believe, in every art today; it is not a cinema monopoly. But in the cinema it has become more true more swiftly and decisively because film has a much smaller heritage of received aesthetics to reassess; because film is bound more closely to the future than other arts seem to be (the reason is that, by its very episodic or “journeying” form, film reflects for viewers the belief that the world is a place in which man can leave the past behind and create his own future); and because film confronts us so immediately, so seductively, and so shockingly (especially on the larger-than-life screen) with at least some of the truth about what we have been doing with ourselves. To the extent that film exposes the viewer to this truth about himself, in his experience of the world or of fantasy, in his options for action or for privacy, to the extent that he can thus accept a film as worthy of himself or better than himself—to that extent a film is necessary to him. And it is that necessity, I am arguing, that ultimately sets its value.

Throughout history, two factors have formed people’s taste in any art, their valuing of it, that is: knowledge of that art and knowledge of life. Obviously this is still true, but the function of taste seems to be altering. As formalist aesthetic canons have come to seem less and less tenable, standards in art and life have become more and more congruent, and as a result the function of taste is increasingly the selection and appraisal of the works that are most valuable—and most necessary—to the

individual's very existence. So our means for evaluating films naturally become more and more involved with our means for evaluating experience; aesthetic standards do not become identical with standards in life but they are certainly related—and, one hopes, somewhat braver.

Of course the whole process means that human beings feed on themselves, on their own lives variously rearranged by art, as a source of values. But despite other prevalent beliefs about the past connected with theology and religion, we are coming to see that people have always been the source of their own values. In the century in which this responsibility, this liberation, became increasingly apparent—the twentieth—the intellect of man simultaneously provided a new art form, the film, to make the most of it.

That art form is obviously still with us, and now, in the twenty-first century, more than ever, it seems. And its critics proliferate in number, in part because of what I describe above: the “personal” element involved in the watching of any movie, and the ease nowadays with which, through the Internet, one can communicate that personal response to others. If, as Oscar Wilde once said, “Criticism is the highest form of autobiography”—because only by “intensifying his own personality” could the critic interpret the personality and work of others—then film criticism must be an even higher form.

This particular collection of film criticism, *Teaching Sound Film: A Reader*, attempts to offer readable analyses, in survey-form, of what the author considers to be some of the most important international films, and film artists, from the onset of the sound era to the first decade of the twenty-first century—or from a relatively early point in the history of motion pictures to the emergence of a new (digital) aesthetic. Written with university students in mind, these essays cover some of the central films—and central issues raised—in today's world cinema courses and try to provide students with practical models to help them improve their own writing and analytical skills.

The book proceeds chronologically and treats films from the following nations: France, Italy, England, Belgium, Russia, India, China, Cuba, Germany, Japan, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Brazil, Taiwan, Austria, Afghanistan, South Korea, Finland, Burkina Faso, Mexico, Iran, Israel, Colombia, and the United States. All these geographically representative films are artistic landmarks in one way or another, or in several ways: because of their very subject matter; because of their style and technical or formal advances; because of the historical periods, social settings, or religious backgrounds that gave impetus to their creation; and, ultimately, because of each picture's unique vision of the world. All the entries are supplemented by bibliographies, film credits, directors' filmographies, topics for writing and discussion, and a thoroughgoing index. From a glance at the list of entries in *Teaching Sound Film: A Reader*, the reader will quickly discover not only that most of the films treated are international in origin, but that most of them are also “art films.” Hence, with a few exceptions, American entertainment movies—the bulk of the U.S. cinematic output—are excluded, and this requires some comment.

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By about 1920, long after American films had cornered the world market, a rough, debatable, but persistent generalization had come into being: America made entertainment movies, while Europe (and later, the rest of the world) made art films. Even back then some observers knew that there were great exceptions on both sides of that generalization, particularly the second part. (*Every* filmmaking country makes entertainment movies; they are the major portion of every nation's industry. But no country's entertainment movies have had the success of American pictures.) That generalization has become increasingly suspect as it has become increasingly plain that good entertainment films cannot be made by the ungifted; further, that some directors of alpine talent have spent their whole careers making works of entertainment.

Nonetheless, for compact purposes here, the terms "entertainment" and "art" can serve to distinguish between those films, however well made and aesthetically rewarding, whose original purpose was to pass the time; and those films, however poorly made and aesthetically pretentious, whose original purpose was the illumination of experience and the extension of consciousness. In this view, the generalization about American and European films has some validity—less than was assumed for decades, still some validity. And that validity has determined the make-up of the collection of pieces in *Teaching Sound Film: A Reader*. Which is to say that I write here predominantly about films made beyond American borders.

To be sure, I wish there were more American art films, but the nature of movie production in the United States—which is almost totally commercial and unsubsidized—prevents their creation. There was some hope, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, that this situation would change due to the collapse of the Hollywood studio system, the increase in foreign-film importation (and therefore foreign influence), the soaring expense of moviemaking, and the rise of the independent, "personal" film (to satisfy, as it were, the increasing number of "personal" critics such as Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Dwight Macdonald). However, American filmmakers soon learned that "independent" means independent only of the old assembly line. Indeed, in some ways the new system is more harried, less self-confident than the old studio procedure, where picture-people knew precisely what they were doing, or thought they did, and for whom they were doing it.

Put another way, independent production now means that, for each project, a producer not only needs to acquire a script and director and actors and facilities and distribution, he also has to acquire an audience—possibly a different audience for each film he produces, or at least not a relatively dependable general, homogeneous audience as in the past. No longer, then, is there any resemblance in the movie industry to a keeper throwing fish to trained seals. Making motion pictures is now much more like publishing books: each venture is a separate business enterprise, a separate risk and search. And the moment "personal" films do not make any money, they stop getting made in large numbers—as they have already done in comparison with the period of the late '60s and early '70s, when we saw such personal (and in some cases hugely moneymaking) pictures as *Easy Rider*, *The Hired Hand*, *Five Easy*

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Pieces, Wanda, The Conversation, Badlands, Bonnie and Clyde, Alice's Restaurant, The Wild Bunch, The Rain People (treated in this volume), *The Graduate, Midnight Cowboy*, and many more.

The operative term at the start of the previous sentence is “money.” The operative term in *Teaching Sound Film: A Reader*, by contrast, is “art.” I have nothing against money (who really does?), but I like my art divorced from it, or divorced from dependence on it, as much as possible. I hope the reader will agree and read on with pleasure—as well as profit.

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***THE FRONT PAGE, DRAMATIC FARCE, AND
AMERICAN (FILM) COMEDY***

The success of the play *The Front Page* (1928) made Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, both former newspapermen, famous as dramatic collaborators. Together they also wrote *Twentieth Century* (1932), a farcical comedy about flamboyant movie people, and other plays, as well as a number of screenplays for such popular films as *Gunga Din* (1939) and *Wuthering Heights* (1939). Later, they briefly became writer-directors, with one of their pictures, *The Scoundrel* (1935, from Hecht's play *All He Ever Loved*), winning an Oscar for each of them. (Hecht even wrote a biography of a kind of his co-author, titled *Charlie: The Improbable Life and Times of Charles MacArthur* [1957]; and Hecht's *Letters from Bohemia* [1964] devotes a whole additional chapter to MacArthur.)



Figure 1. Howard Hawks: His Girl Friday, 1940 (United States)

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Hecht in particular is remembered for his labors in Hollywood. Over a period of nearly forty years he received screen credit, alone or in collaboration, for the stories or screenplays of some seventy films, but he was also known to have collaborated on many more productions credited to other writers: notably, *Topaze* (1933), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), *Lifeboat* (1943), *Gilda* (1946), *Rope* (1948), and *Roman Holiday* (1953). Hecht did in fact get credit for wholly scripting two of the best Hitchcock movies (*Spellbound*, in 1945, and *Notorious*, in 1946), and he helped invent several genres. One of them was the gangster film (with the silent *Underworld* [1927], succeeded by the talkie that Hecht scripted, *Scarface* [1932]), and another genre was the madcap or screwball comedy. The first of these comedies was Howard Hawks's adaptation of *Twentieth Century* in 1934, to be followed in 1940 by Hawks's *His Girl Friday*, a version of *The Front Page* that featured a woman in the role of Hildy Johnson.

As for the play *The Front Page*—more or less faithfully adapted to the screen, with the same title, in 1931 by Lewis Milestone, with a screenplay by Bartlett Cormack and Charles Lederer—all three acts are set in the Press Room of the Chicago Courts Building, which is crowded with journalists covering a hanging that is to take place early the next morning. The execution of Earl Williams, an anarchist in an age of “Red Menace” hysteria and the murderer of a black policeman, has been twice postponed so that it will have maximum effect just before an imminent election. In it the black vote and the law-and-order platform will be pivotal factors—so pivotal that the cynical newspapermen dwell on them expansively during intervals in their card-playing and banter about women. Also on their minds, however, is a rumor that Hildy Johnson is retiring from court reporting after fifteen years to leave town and get married. This rumor is confirmed by Hildy on his arrival, with the additional news that he is going into the comfortable world of advertising in New York City, where his pay will more than double. Hildy is booked on a train with his fiancée, Peggy Grant, and prospective mother-in-law that night, and he takes advantage of the situation to make a last abusive telephone call to Walter Burns, his boss.

The rest of the action involves the hour-by-hour deferral of Hildy's plans, as the mayor and sheriff collude in concealing a reprieve, the condemned man escapes, a hunt takes most of the reporters across the city, and the escapee crashes in through the window of the press room to give himself up to Johnson, who immediately becomes immersed in the best scoop in his career. The resolution contains an element of melodrama, with the release of the handcuffed Hildy and Burns after the general exposure of corruption and blackmail, and with the couple departing to take a later train. In a final wry twist to the plot, however, Burns ensures that Hildy will be arrested during a stop in La Porte, Indiana, and returned to Chicago.

After try-outs in Atlantic City, *The Front Page* opened in New York on August 14, 1928, and since that first night this madcap comedy about Chicago newspaper life has become one of the most frequently produced plays in American theatre. (The play has already enjoyed three movie versions—one of them, as previously suggested, macerating this hard-nosed farce into a gender-reversed romantic comedy,

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with Rosalind Russell as a female Hildy Johnson and Cary Grant doing one of his incomparable comic turns as her editor-lover, Walter Burns; and the third, *Switching Channels* [1988], updating *His Girl Friday* to the satellite-television/cable-news era, with Kathleen Turner and Burt Reynolds in the leading roles.) One reason *The Front Page* has remained alive is that it is simultaneously the best-known critique and cliché of American journalism, a work that newspaper people have spent over seventy-five years trying to live up to. There are still editors who enjoy behaving like the play's Walter Burns in front of their young reporters, who in turn delight in perpetuating the myth of Hildy Johnson for their own newsroom audience. This situation has created a kind of ethical schizophrenia whereby journalists are expected to talk like cynical scoundrels while behaving with the exaggerated conscientiousness of seminarians.



Figure 2. Lewis Milestone: *The Front Page*, 1931 (United States)

As early as 1934, one nationally known newspaper editor, Stanley Walker, counseled young hopefuls to ignore everything *The Front Page* told them about journalism. Such warnings have only increased, as changes in the news business have made the milieu of this play look more and more antique. Yet homage persists to the tradition that it created. And that tradition is bolstered by all the later plays, films, and novels about the press that somehow entrench rather than debunk the

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stereotypes Hecht and MacArthur created. *The Front Page* and its progeny have thus generated healthy suspicions about journalism and its servants in the minds of millions of people who otherwise would have no knowledge of either. In at least a couple of ways, then, *The Front Page*, in its effect on popular culture, is one of the most powerful and lasting works in American literature.

What most people don't know, however, is that the play is a *pièce à clef*. Not only is its whole flavor actually that of a frantic and long-vanished age of American journalism, but some of the names of characters and institutions, some situations, even some bits of dialogue, were taken from real life, even though the co-authors felt that they had to tone down what they knew to be the truth. For one thing, the language of the streets was diluted, to be restored to something like its original vulgarity only in Billy Wilder's 1974 film version (the third movie adaptation). Still, the famous curtain-closer of cunning editor Walter Burns ("The son of a bitch stole my watch!") created a stir, much more than the sprinkling of goddamns and such in the rest of the play. Indeed, the New York police wanted to arrest the cast; and even in the first movie version (perhaps best known as one of the first films in the sound era to use a constantly moving camera and overlapping dialogue), a well-placed clatter from a typewriter obscured the coarsest part of the closing line. As late as 1970, when the second Broadway revival was adapted for television, one critic felt obliged to comment, "This particular production marks a break-through for TV profanity because the play's classic last line, which is the essence of the character of Walter Burns, is intact."

To address now the real-life counterparts of the characters in *The Front Page*, Earl Williams, the condemned prisoner, is a composite of various radicals, but his escape from the Cook County Jail derives from the case of Terrible Tommy O'Connor, a thirty-five-year-old Irish immigrant convicted in 1921 of killing a night watchman during the robbery of the Illinois Central Railroad's downtown station. He broke out days before he was sentenced to hang but, unlike Williams, was never recaptured; one rumor had it that he returned to Ireland and perished fighting the British. For decades, the gallows in Chicago remained intact in the event he should ever be caught. The year before *The Front Page* appeared, Hecht had used the O'Connor escape in his script for Josef von Sternberg's *Underworld*—which, it's worth repeating, was the first of the Hollywood gangster films.

Where the reporters are concerned, the Canadian writer Vincent Starrett, who knew Hecht and MacArthur when he worked on the Chicago dailies, recalled years later in his *Born in a Bookshop: Chapters from the Chicago Renaissance* (1965), "There was no newspaper slave in Chicago but swore he recognized every figure on the boards." Certainly the most obvious of the shanghai victims is the ace reporter Hildy Johnson. He's based on a Swedish immigrant named Hilding Johnson, who once broke into a jury room with a deadline pressing, learned of the verdict by going through old ballots in the waste-paper basket, then left phony evidence for a competitor he knew would be breaking in later. "Poor Hildy!" wrote Starrett. "He died a few years after the play was produced (in 1931, at age forty-five)—I saw

him laughing in his box opening night—and it was said that his determined effort to approximate his reckless counterpart on the stage had hastened his untimely end.”

In fact, the eccentricity of *The Front Page*'s characters was considerably de-emphasized in the paste-pot process by which Hecht and MacArthur fashioned their finished product. As Hecht was said to have remarked, no one in the audience would have believed the real thing. The character of Walter Burns is a case in point. It was based on Walter Crawford Howey, for whom MacArthur had worked on both the *Tribune* and the *Herald-Examiner* and who possessed one of the most robust personal legends in Chicago journalism. One of his early triumphs was a series of muckraking articles that drove Mayor Fred Busse (according to notes in *The Front Page* script, the original owner of Bensinger's rolltop desk) out of office. As city editor of the *Tribune*, Howey became notorious for a style of news-gathering that included intimidating witnesses and blackmailing municipal, county, and state authorities, whose signed but undated resignations he kept in his desk for use in emergencies. He and a few of his rivals came to symbolize daily journalism in the 1920s, a time when each big story was a melodrama.

In 1910, Howey blew up at the owners of the *Tribune* and transferred his allegiance to Hearst's *Herald-Examiner*, the “Madhouse on Madison Street,” according to George Murray in his book of the same name (1965). Dion O'Bannion, the notorious gangster later shot down in his flower shop by Al Capone's henchmen, was the circulation manager of the *Herald-Examiner*. His job (not unlike Diamond Louie's in the play) was to persuade vendors to carry the Hearst paper in preference to the *Tribune*. Soon full-blown circulation wars developed. Howey had only one eye, and some said he lost the other one fighting in such wars. Others contended that he lost it by falling on a copy spike while sitting drunkenly at his desk. Whatever the case, Hecht remarked that he could tell the glass eye from the natural one: the glass eye, he said, had warmth. The *Herald-Examiner* folded in 1939, and thereafter Howey's career declined steadily. He died in 1955 at age seventy-three. In a last tribute to his old boss, MacArthur visited him in the hospital during his final illness and gave him a watch engraved “To the Best Newspaperman I Know”—just like the one in *The Front Page*.

Initially, the authors had intended to reflect their “intellectual disdain of and superiority to the Newspaper,” but in writing the play they found they were “not so much dramatists or intellectuals as two reporters in exile.” Thus, despite its “oaths and realisms,” the work became for them “a Valentine thrown to the past, a Ballad full of *Heimweh* and Love.” The managing editor Walter Burns is emphatically excluded from the Valentine, however, when he is described in a stage direction as “*that product of thoughtless, pointless, nerve-drumming unmorality [sic] that is the Boss Journalist—the licensed eavesdropper, trouble-maker, bombinator and Town Snitch, misnamed The Press.*” Inasmuch as other factors of disdain remain in the play, they are directed at local government, which unfolds as a maze of nepotism, self-advancement, and other corruption. A secondary—and much lighter—filament of dramatic satire focuses on the emergent vogue for popular psychoanalysis, picking

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as targets a policeman who analyzes Williams as a “dual personality,” a reporter who has a phobic obsession with dirt, and a psychiatrist who, assessing Williams’ sanity, gets him to re-enact the crime with the gun he used to escape.

Though *The Front Page* has often been termed a “comic melodrama,” it is closer to a farcical or physical comedy, with a complicated and implausible pattern of intrigue, concealment, coincidence, and situational absurdity, maximizing the resource value of every door, window, desk, and even watch on stage. In fact, one could argue that action leads to objects in farce of this kind, and objects are always defeating the characters, no matter how single-minded they have been in their fervent, fast-paced pursuit of a short-range goal or immediate gratification. Where real-life characters think, such farcical ones—caught as they are in the thick of things—use instinct to get what they want. And though they may finally be defeated in a high-stakes game, even a life-and-death situation, there are no real consequences for them, because there is no visible or irreparable harm.

Thus, despite all the (offstage) shooting and (onstage) brandishing of weapons in *The Front Page*, no one gets killed—not the psychiatrist Dr. Eglehofer, whom Earl Williams shoots in the stomach; not the deputy who gets shot in the buttocks during the city-wide manhunt for Williams; not Mollie Malloy after she jumps out of the window of the press room; not Mrs. Grant after the car in which Louie is kidnapping her crashes into a police patrol; and not even Earl himself, who is reprieved instead of executed. The one person who does die, the black policeman whom Earl murders, gets shot well before the play begins—accidentally, claims the killer whose cause is “all humanity.”

Yet, for all the physical or corporeal survival of *The Front Page*’s characters, they become as objectified, mechanized, or dehumanized—as spiritually extinct—as the things that are always getting in their way or frustrating their plans, from Hildy’s cane to the sheriff’s gun to Bensinger’s desk to Walter’s watch. Without the time to think or reflect, with only the time to move and shout and do, these figures are placed on the same level as the antagonistic, inanimate objects, or props, that not only get deployed against them but also seem to take on a life of their own. In this way *The Front Page* transcends the “mere” funniness of all farce to become a serious comment on the unthinking, or animalistic, side of human life—particularly as it is lived at such fast pace by these opportunists.

What also takes the play beyond pure farce is the depth of its societal and characterological portraiture, as the characters’ capacity for childishness, callousness, and even sadism provides a subtext to every laugh. The studied insensitivity of most of the journalists is tested through the catalyst of minor characters such as Mollie Malloy, the prostitute who comforted Williams when she found him in a disturbed state the day before the murder and thus became a key witness on his behalf. The reporters, however, have sensationalized her connection with the condemned man well beyond the point of exaggeration, and their brutal baiting of her, which will result in her attempt at suicide in the second act, emphatically registers how out of touch with her humanism they are.

When, with “*a scream of terror and exultation,*” she throws herself through the third-story window, the journalists are mostly “*awed and astonished,*” and even Hildy seems to have forgotten her a little later; such reaction contrasts strongly with the response of the sole policeman present, who is “*sick at heart,*” his body “*doubled up with pain.*” Emotional cauterization seems an essential precondition for journalism, and in the first act this condition is registered through the regular sound of the gallows being exercised, with a “*whirr and crash,*” indicating that sandbags are being used to test the machinery of death.

That journalism is an arena in which manhood is proven, is asserted throughout *The Front Page*. When a reporter’s wife appears, we are told, “*If she is a bit acidulated, tight-lipped and sharp-spoken, no one can blame her; least of all these bravos of the press room, who have small respect for themselves or each other as husbands, fathers and lovers.*” This woman expresses her reservations about Hildy’s marriage, to which another reporter retorts: “If I was married to that dame I’d kick her humpbacked.” At the end of the second act, Hildy’s “*tortured male spirit takes refuge in hysteria,*” and he rejects his fiancée, declaiming, “God damn it—I’m a newspaper man,” which throws Peggy into retreat, “*her sobs filling the room and corridor.*” Hildy’s remorse consists in observing that he treated her “like she was some waitress,” but Walter Burns consoles him by telling him that he “acted like a man for the first time in [his] life!”

Burns’s belief that women are murderers or “Borgias” is scarcely substantiated by the conduct of Mollie or Peggy, but the fundamental misogyny of the play’s tribute to the newspaper world echoes throughout the play. “I was in love once,” Walter tells us in an uncharacteristic moment of Sir Andrew Aguecheek tenderness, only to add, “... with my third wife.” To an ailing reporter, Burns misanthropically shouts, “To hell with your diabetes, this is important.” His passion for his newspaper thus leaves him indifferent to any weaknesses, male or female, that aren’t exploitable. Like the play itself, he has a cartilaginous heart, and by the time he barks the play’s famous final line, Walter Burns has created a comic scoundrel unique in the annals of deception.

The Front Page, then, doesn’t have a soft bone in its body. Though its co-authors may originally have conceived the work as a satire on ruthless reporters and sensationalistic journalism, only to end up in their view with a valentine to the whole newspaper profession, the adduced evidence does not support their claim. (Nor would the casting of an actor who could make Walter ruthless, not just rambunctious, as were Adolphe Menjou and Walter Matthau in the 1931 and 1974 film versions, respectively.) These reporters certainly have their engaging side—so do the hack politicians and corrupt cops who serve as foils for their banter. But for all the double crosses, competitive dodges, sardonic backbiting, good-natured chicanery, and idiomatic wisecracks (expressed in that special urban argot that Eugene O’Neill kept trying, unsuccessfully, to create), the play provides a glimpse of the seamy side of American politics and press practices that is ferociously contemporary.



Figure 3. Lewis Milestone: *The Front Page*, 1931 (United States)

When the governor, for example, sends a reprieve for Earl Williams on the last day of the campaign—his motive, as a Democrat, being to undercut his party’s Republican rivals in the persons of the sheriff and the mayor—the latter bribes the messenger to say he never delivered it. When the prisoner escapes, the mayor orders him shot on sight. (Indeed, in the way that it takes a beady look at human corruption, *The Front Page* suggests how soft we have since become as a democratic republic and an artistic culture.) The truth is, nobody gives a damn about Earl Williams—not Walter Burns, who only wants an exclusive for the *Examiner*; not the reporters, who tailor the facts to suit their purposes; not even Hildy Johnson, who helps to hide him in a rival reporter’s desk but has no intention of saving Earl’s life.

As a matter of fact, aside from Mollie Malloy, that sentimental hooker who jumps out of a window rather than testify—and who, along with the condemned man, is ironically the person in the play with the biggest heart, if not the only heart—Earl Williams has no value for anyone except as an opportunity for greed, ambition, vanity, or worse. For the press, the highest premium is “the great big Scoop”: the reporters want Williams hanged not at seven in the morning but at five, in time for the city edition. For the politicians, whose only motive is perpetuating themselves in office, ideology, conscience, and even human life itself are hostages to expediency. *The Front Page*, one might say, dramatizes Darwin’s survival theory with a breezy

sangfroid equaled before only by Ben Jonson and John Gay, and only by Bertolt Brecht and David Mamet in our own time. Not only in its effect on popular culture, then, but also in its dramatic artistry, this is one of the most incisive and enduring works in the history of American theater.

The fact that Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur are better known for their screen efforts than their stage work, therefore, is significant. For, when they were writing, there was comparatively little pure slapstick or physical humor in the theater, that being the specialty from the start of silent film comedians like Keaton, Chaplin, Harry Langdon, and Harold Lloyd; also strikingly absent from the American playwriting tradition, with rare exceptions, was the sex or bedroom farce of the Feydeau school. As a result, there was little exploration of comedy's anarchic or critical potential in American drama during the first three decades of the twentieth century—or, indeed, of any period except briefly in the 1960s. While audiences in the commercial Broadway theatre were surprisingly supportive of challenging serious drama, they came to comedies for relaxation and escape; they also came with the confidence that they would be able to go home with their values and assumptions unshaken. Thus did these audiences confirm the snobbish, perhaps universal, misgiving that comedy is an inferior art—one better suited for the “lowly” screen—despite the achievement in this genre of such dramatists as Aristophanes, Molière, Shakespeare, and Shaw.

Moreover, with the advent of sound in the cinema, a kind of film did indeed explore comedy's anarchic or critical potential: the aforementioned screwball comedy. Socially aware, dramatically structured, and intellectually based, such comedies depended on dialogue for sophisticated, witty humor, though they still contained marvelous sight gags performed by comedians who were as aggressive and ridiculous in speech as in action. The nature of this sound comedy is always zany and often chaotic; indeed, the nonsense is so consistent and pervasive that it seems to operate with a logical non-logic or irrationality of its own in pictures like Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), the aforementioned *His Girl Friday*, George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), and Preston Sturges's *The Palm Beach Story* (1942) as well as his *Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1940). (The last such screwball or carefree American film comedy, Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* [1959], also happens to be the best original film farce ever made.)

Significant in these films was a very emancipated, taboo-breaking view of womanhood to go along with the liberated spirit of their own scripts; the heroine behaved as independently and aggressively as the male, if not more so, and demonstrated a good deal of intelligence of her own in a brainy, energetic battle of the sexes. Hence the 1940, gender-reversed adaptation of *The Front Page*, in which Hildy becomes a woman reporter who was once married to Walter Burns, and who remarries him together with the newspaper business at the end rather than settling down with a pallid husband and a passel of kids in the provincial backwater of Albany, New York. Ben Hecht even collaborated (though uncredited) with Charles Lederer on the scenario for *His Girl Friday* in addition to being the co-author of