

Sequence Analyses Sound And Image In His Girl Friday

Last Updated on Sat, 04 Aug 2012 | [Narrative Film Technique](#)

The first shot of the film is a lateral tracking shot nearly encompassing the length of the entire newsroom that is reminiscent of the "unchained" camera movement that opened [The Last Laugh](#). The rapidly moving camera, combined with the rapid overlapping dialogue of men and women purposefully, if somewhat frantically, at work, perfectly expresses the excitement of this world, the thrill of living life in the fast lane. An almost imperceptible dissolve¹¹ takes us to shot 2, a medium-close shot of women busily operating a switchboard. The camera pauses on them briefly and then follows a reporter on his way out of the newsroom who just catches an elevator on the way down. The adjoining elevator door opens, and out walk Hildy Johnson with Bruce (Ralph Bellamy), her fiancé. The camera then reverses direction to follow Hildy, who strides into the newsroom, leaving Bruce at the entrance gate on which is posted a sign reading "no admittance." Because the camera immediately follows Hildy's movements, she becomes identified with the vital world of newspaper reporting, a world to which Bruce is pointedly denied entry.¹²

Hildy greets everyone by first name or nickname—"Hi ya Skinny, [hello](#) Ruth, hello Maisie"—her words reinforcing our sense of her comfortable familiarity with the world of the press. Her language, moreover, is rich in irony and verbal play, confirming her identity as a lover of words, a born [writer](#). At the switchboard, she refers to Walter Burns as "the Lord of the Universe." One of the switchboard operators offers to announce her, but she answers, "Oh, no. I'll blow my own horn." At this point the camera follows Hildy back to where she left Bruce at the gate. Her speech to Bruce is plain and literal in contrast with her earlier verbal playfulness, and the change is a subtle indication of all she will have to give up if she marries Bruce. "He's in," she informs him. "Wait here. I'll be back in ten minutes."

The camera starts to follow Hildy as she hurries off in the direction of Walter's office, but Bruce calls after her, his words literally stopping the camera in its tracks. "Even ten minutes is a long time to be away from you," he says. Hildy stops, turns around and walks back to Bruce, the camera following her movement until she and Bruce are framed in a static medium two shot. "What did you say?" she asks. Bruce says, "Well..." and bashfully hangs his head. "Go on," Hildy urges. At this point there is a cut to a medium-close shot of Bruce from over Hildy's shoulder. "Uh ..." Bruce mutters. "Go ahead," Hildy coaxes. "All right—Even ten minutes is a long time to be away from you," Bruce repeats.

The line, "Ten minutes is a long time to be away from you," is not in and of itself necessarily sappy. One can imagine that if someone like Humphrey Bogart delivered it with the right intonation, it would sound sexy. But when said (twice) by the soft-featured Bellamy in a slow, slightly hesitant manner (in contrast to the fast-talking Hildy—who never says "well," or "uh"), the words make Bruce seem babyishly dependent, like a child who can't tolerate being away too long from his mother. A dynamic woman like Hildy, we imagine, will not be charmed by such devotion for very long. In addition, the close-up on Bruce in which Hildy obliges Bruce to repeat his sentimental words seems to skewer him in his embarrassment. He hangs his head and casts down his eyes. It is something of a surprise and relief (if we at all identify with Bruce) that Hildy seems pleased by his words: "I can stand being spoiled a little," she replies, as the camera cuts to

a reverse angle close-up of her, smiling. "The gentleman I'm going to see did very little spoiling."

Although her words, and the close-up that gives them emphasis, both suggest that she is charmed by Bruce's affection, and that she is happy to leave the newspaper world to settle down with him, an element of the film's mise-en-scène, the design of Hildy's outfit, gives us pause. The jaunty hat and stunning, matching zigzag design on her suit visually establish her as a dynamic, powerful person unsuited (pun intended) to a partner as bland as Bruce appears to be. (See figure 21.) And when Hildy reassures Bruce that "I'll come runnin', pardner" if she needs help with Walter, she delivers this line while running away from Bruce and toward Walter, a wonderful instance of dialogue in subtle counterpoint to the image. Once Hildy is back in the newspaper world, her verbal playful-



Figure 21. The jaunty hat with the matching zigzag design of her suit defines Hildy as a dynamic and powerful woman, and not a fit mate for the bland Bruce. (*His Girl Friday*, 1939, D3K Films.)

ness returns, in her rapid-fire responses to the greetings and comments of her ex-colleagues. The fundamental incompatibility of Bruce and Hildy so carefully set up aurally and visually in this scene is further reinforced in the next scene between Hildy and Walter. Here Hildy's voice rhythms, so different from those of the slow-speaking Bruce, mirror and match the fast-talking Walter's, suggesting once again that the two are meant for each other.

I have gone into these opening moments in detail in order to demonstrate how dialogue in conjunction with editing and dynamic camera movements work together to create a highly sophisticated and delightful melange of mixed messages. The combination of sound and image makes us feel viscerally that despite Hildy's words—her spoken commitment to Bruce—he is not the right man for her and Walter, her ex-husband, is. This, of course, sets up suspense in viewers'

minds. Will Hildy ever come to realize her mistake? And if she does, how will she ever get out of her engagement to Bruce?

Not only do Hawks's characters (with the exception of Bruce) talk fast, their conversations often overlap, and in some instances up to three separate lines of conversations occur simultaneously in one scene. At one point in the film, when the reporters are phoning in the news that Earl Williams, a man who is supposed to be hanged the next day, has escaped from jail, Hawks combines rapid-fire editing with rapid-fire dialogue, all in the service of viscerally conveying the adrenaline rush a newspaper reporter experiences when breaking a big story. In Eisenstein's silent films, it was the fast editing that created the exciting sensation of events occurring at breakneck speed; in *His Girl Friday* it is the pace of the dialogue in conjunction with the editing. By overlapping dialogue, Hawks was able to eliminate all pauses between speakers, further speeding up the pace of the talk.¹³ Later, when the same reporters phone in dramatic accounts of Earl Williams' recapture even as it is happening before their eyes, they embellish their accounts in ways that are in hilarious counterpoint to the image. Williams is very much awake, but a reporter phones in the news that he was completely unconscious when captured. Another reporter relates that "he put up a desperate struggle, but the police overpowered him," when in fact we see him surrender quietly. Another reports that Williams broke through a whole cordon of police, when in fact only one policeman is involved in the arrest. In the tradition of the best modern sound films, the respective contributions of cinematography, editing, and sound are truly equal and complementary.