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The Fearless Press, and Other Legends

By A. O. SCOTT
Published: April 8, 2010

The clatter of typewriters and the rattle of whiskey bottles in desk drawers; the haze of cigarette smoke in the air; the fedoras and notepads, the sleeve garters and eyeshades; the cries of “Copy!” and “Get me rewrite!”

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FILM FORUM.

Kirk Douglas in Billy Wilder's "Ace in the Hole."

Remember newspapers? Neither do I, to tell you the truth, even though I've been working at this one for more than 10 years. But you have to go back a lot further— nearly half a century — to sample the sights, sounds and smells that still evoke the quintessence of print journalism in all its inky, hectic glory.

Or you could go to [Film Forum](#), where a 43-movie monthlong series called The Newspaper Picture opens on Friday with [Billy Wilder's "Ace in the Hole."](#) The program is a crackerjack history lesson and also, perhaps, a valediction. Not a day goes by that we don't read something — a tweet, a blog, maybe even a column — proclaiming the death of newspapers, either to mourn or to dance on the grave. And even if those old newsprint creatures survive, say by migrating to the magic land of the [iPad](#), they sure ain't what they used to be. Where are the crusty editors and fast-talking girl reporters of yesteryear? I'm peeking over the cubicle wall, and all I see are Web producers and videographers.

But maybe those old-school newshounds are mythical creatures after all. Maybe no newsroom couple ever talked as fast or flirted as sharply as Hildy Johnson and Walter Burns, played most memorably in 1940 by [Rosalind Russell](#) and [Cary Grant](#) in "[His Girl Friday](#)." The same

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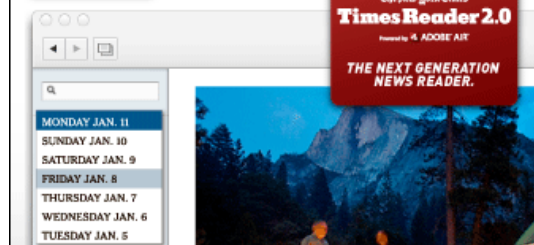
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characters were played, with a bit less sparkie, nine years earlier by Adolph Menjou and [Pat O'Brien](#) in [“The Front Page.”](#) Both versions are naturally part of The Newspaper Picture —how could they not be?—and they mark out one area of this vibrant and protean genre.

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A newspaper, as envisioned by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur in their 1928 play, “The Front Page,” and as set in motion first by the director [Lewis Milestone](#) and then (though not for the last time) by [Howard Hawks](#) — is a hive of clashing ambition, hectic incident and (especially in Hawks’s rendering) nonstop talk. The perfect setting, in other words, for a comedy.

But those same traits also make newspapering a scene of ethical drama, dark intrigue and even tragedy. [“Citizen Kane”](#) may transcend the newspaper genre, but it also fulfills its implicit promise both by dwelling on the details

MOVIES

Critics' Picks: 'His

of the journalistic enterprise and by allowing that enterprise to attain Shakespearean gravity and complexity. And the grandeur of [Orson Welles](#)’s conception of the American press in its heroic late-19th-century phase is answered by the stylish scrappiness of Sam Fuller’s [“Park Row,”](#) from 1952.

Fuller had been a reporter and retained a jaundiced affection for his old trade. His 1963 thriller, [“Shock Corridor”](#) — strictly speaking perhaps more of a loony-bin picture than a newspaper picture — turns a reporter’s investigative zeal into a perverse cautionary tale. And while it is fashionable these days to rhapsodize about the civic spirit and democratic value of traditional journalism, a survey of the movies that explore that tradition reveals a more shaded, ambiguous, even cynical picture.

Reporters are crusaders after truth and scourges of corruption, for sure, but they are never squeaky clean. Observe Hildy nonchalantly paying bribes, massaging quotations and spinning sources in “His Girl Friday,” and you will in essence witness the ethics handbooks of any decent paper going up in flames. The urge to get the big scoop can be noble but also unscrupulous, and the moral tension between candor and exploitation emerges, especially after World War II, as one of the newspaper picture’s great themes.

Consider Chuck Tatum, played with exhausting, exhilarating intensity by [Kirk Douglas](#) in 1951’s “Ace in the Hole.” A onetime big-city hotshot exiled to a sleepy paper in the Southwest, Chuck stumbles across a mishap — a guy trapped in a cave — and turns it into a media spectacle. In the process he risks an innocent man’s life and his own soul, and the movie acutely maps the queasy terrain where the public’s desire for information bleeds into something more predatory.

Movies like “Ace in the Hole” and Alexander Mackendrick’s [“Sweet Smell of Success”](#) (1957) might have been a bit too cynical for 1950s audiences, but in the gossip-mad, fake-news atmosphere of the present they seem stringent and prophetic. There is power in being a champion of the underdog, and we all know power corrupts, just as institutions proudly devoted to the truth can become magnets for liars.

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The Film Forum series will close, four weeks from now, on a high note of idealism, with [Alan J. Pakula's "All the President's Men,"](#) from 1976. It's an old favorite of mine, and also by a good decade the most recent selection in the program. Only a small handful of the newspaper pictures in The Newspaper Picture were released after the 1950s, and the years between the introduction of sound and the rise of television were clearly the genre's heyday. Like the western, it survives in somewhat ghostly, self-conscious form, since an on-screen newspaper job can still provide action, laughter and intrigue. [Jennifer Aniston](#) has one in "[The Bounty Hunter,](#)" which I have now evoked in an article that also mentions "Citizen Kane." Get me rewrite!

But if the historical parameters established by Film Forum define a golden age of print journalism on celluloid, this marvelous series also suggests a sequel. Start with "[A Face in the Crowd](#)" and work forward to, say, "[Wag the Dog](#)" and you could fill a month with something not yet widely known as The Television Picture. And maybe 50 years from now there will be a retrospective devoted to the Web News Aggregator Picture. By then, thankfully, I'll be as dead as dead-tree journalism.

The Newspaper Picture series runs through May 6 at Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, South Village; (212) 727-8110, [filmforum.org](#).

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