

MALICE IN WONDERLAND: HEDDA HOPPER AND LOUELLA PARSONS IN HOLLYWOOD

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Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper were powerful, unconventional women who ruled Hollywood at a time when women were still considered second-class citizens. Thriving amid glamour and wealth, these gossip columnists, with a readership of about 75 million, could make or break the career of an aspiring actor, writer, or director. As actress Mamie Van Doren once said, "If Louella Parsons was the Bitch Goddess of my career, Hedda Hopper was my Guardian Angel."

In addition to writing gossip columns, movie reviews, and having their own radio shows, both Louella and Hedda appeared in films. Today I'd like to discuss how they were represented in film and consider what these representations might mean.

Although Benjamin Franklin is often credited with being the first American gossip columnist, Louella Parsons was the Queen of Hollywood gossip, one hundred percent loyal to the movie industry. For more than thirty years she reined supreme as motion picture editor for William Randolph Hearst's Universal News Service. Louella's byline sold millions of newspapers and Hearst considered her his best reporter giving her absolute power over the content of her column. As Hedda Hopper wrote in her biography, *The Whole Truth and Nothing But*, "With the Hearst newspaper empire behind her, Louella could wield power like Catherine of Russia. Hollywood read every word she wrote as though it was a revelation from San Simeon, if not Mount Sinai. Stars were terrified of her. If they crossed her, they were given the silent treatment; no mention of their names in her column."

By the mid-1930s studio heads grew increasingly alarmed at Louella's fear-invoking demands and her power to influence business deals throughout the movie industry. Louis B. Meyer and others decided to create a rival gossip columnist who would be strong enough to limit Louella's power. Their choice was a fifty-three year old moderately successful character actress, Hedda Hopper, who for years had provided Louella with Hollywood insider gossip in exchange for well-placed publicity in her column. With limited education and no previous newspaper experience, Hedda initially posed no threat to Louella's empire; however, as she filled her column with "bare-nailed bitchery," producers and studio heads steered exclusives her way and Hedda's career flourished. Her column was soon published in the *Los Angeles Times* and syndicated in daily and weekly newspapers throughout the country. Ultimately, as the Louis B. Meyer character notes in the 1985 made for television movie, *Malice in Wonderland*, in his efforts to diminish Louella's power, he didn't get rid of one monster but instead he created two.

Louella and Hedda have been featured in Hollywood films, made for television movies, television shows, documentaries, and an animated cartoon. They have been the subjects of films and documentaries including *The Cat's Meow* (2001), *RKO Production 281* (1999), *Malice in Wonderland* (1985), the *Hearst and Davies Affair* (1985), and *The Power Players* (2005), and have portrayed themselves in films such as *Hollywood Hotel* (1937), *Without Reservations* (1946), and *That's Right You're Wrong* (1939). Louella played herself on the television shows such as "What's My Line" (1953) and "This is Your Life" (1960), while Hedda was featured on shows including "I Love Lucy" (1955) and "The Beverly Hillbillies" (1964). Hedda Hopper also appeared as a supporting actress in more than 130 feature films including a character role of gossip reporter Dolly Dupuyster in *The Women* (1939).

In one sense, when Louella and Hedda played themselves on television and in films, it illustrated the referential ability of an image, which is an image's ability to offer a realistic depiction of a historically specific action. After casting Louella in her debut film, Warner Brothers executive Hall Wallis insisted that no one could play Louella Parsons better than Louella Parsons. Following the release of the film, a *New York Times* columnist noted that "Miss Parsons plays herself better than anyone else could hope to or want to."

Although Louella Parson's character is not a major focus of the 1937 film *Hollywood Hotel*, her inclusion in the film illustrates its referential ability particularly in her realistic depiction of a gossip reporter interviewing a temperamental actress. Louella not only expertly handles her subject but also espouses her own philosophy regarding the dangers of Hollywood. The film also illustrates her symbolic status as a power broker in Hollywood in that her weekly radio program "Hollywood Hotel" is central to the plotline and the title of the film comes directly from the name of her radio show.

Similarly in the 1939 film *That's Right, You're Wrong*, Hedda Hopper is included to lend credibility to the status of a character and to increase the realism of the film. Hedda's interactions with the characters are particularly authentic given that for her column she frequently interviewed the actors and actresses who played the characters in the film and the filmic interactions mirrored their real-world interactions.

In contrast with films and television shows in which Louella and Hedda portrayed themselves are depictions of these journalists found in films and television movies. While the referential qualities are limited in these presentations, the films may be seen to represent symbolic markers, which often represent a type of shorthand for larger issues in society. Films about Louella and Hedda often questioned the relationship between journalism and Hollywood specifically the power of the female gossip columnists in a male dominated industry.

For example, *The Cat's Meow*, *RKO Production 281*, and the *Hearst and Davies Affair* all perpetuated a cruel myth that Louella Parson's career success was attributed solely to a lurid murder and her devious blackmail scheme to profit at William Randolph Hearst's expense. These films all reinforce a popular fiction that places Louella on Hearst's yacht on the November 1924 weekend that producer Tom Harper Ince died. While no charges were ever filed, Hollywood lore insists that upon finding his lover Marion Davies in a compromising position with Charlie Chaplin, Hearst became enraged. Later that evening Hearst supposedly tried to kill Chaplin but

shot and killed Ince instead. The tale maintains that Louella observed the murder and afterwards negotiated a life contract with Hearst in exchange for her silence.

Throughout her life, Louella Parsons maintained that she was never on the yacht that weekend and she instead was in New York working as the motion picture editor of the *New York American*. Louella had already established herself as a Hollywood reporter in 1919, almost five years before she first joined the Hearst newspapers. As George Eeles explains in his book *Hedda and Louella*, “Had Hearst never existed Louella would have wheedled, flattered, flirted, threatened, clouted, wept, bulldogged and done whatever else was necessary in order to succeed.” But this demeaning explanation for her success may have helped to explain the power of a successful female reporter at a time when most journalists were men and many people were conflicted about the role of women in society. Then again, as the Hedda Hopper character notes in *Malice in Wonderland*, if it isn’t true that the only reason Louella kept her job with Hearst all these years is because she witnessed a murder on his yacht, “it’s the kind of story that if it isn’t true it should be.”

Films about Louella and Hedda also focus on their competition with each other as well as their power to destroy the careers of actors, producers, and directors in Hollywood. Terms like “viper,” “bitch,” and “Frankenstein’s monsters,” are used in these films to describe Louella and Hedda, as if they were the only powerbrokers in Hollywood. For example, in *RKO Production 281*, a film about the making of *Citizen Kane*, Hedda is portrayed as a manipulative intruder who sets up Louella and tries to get her fired because she did not know that the film *Citizen Kane* was going to be about Hearst. However, in her autobiography Hedda writes that she was appalled when she first saw the movie and contacted Hearst’s attorneys to warn him about the film. Certainly these gossip columnists had dynamic personalities but it’s important to remember that during the golden era of Hollywood, the public had an almost insatiable appetite for gossip about Hollywood and the studios fought hard to manage the news about their stars. Overall, Hedda and Louella were particularly successful publicizing newcomers and helping to build their careers. Far from destroying Hollywood they truly helped to promote it.

Ultimately, the representations of Louella and Hedda on film may also be viewed as the making of historical icons, presenting a view of strong female journalists through familiar popular culture narratives. I’d like to illustrate this notion by sharing a brief clip from “The Woods are Full of Cuckoos,” a 1939 animated cartoon which concerns a radio program for KUKU set in the woods and stars animals as caricatures of popular celebrities. In this scene, Louella Possums introduces a company performing a scene from “The Prodigal’s Return.”

(SCENE TO COME)

As this example shows, as an iconic image, Louella goes past a purely representational function and may be seen to epitomize the notion of a gossip columnist as a distinct type of journalist.