



Sunset Boulevard directed by Billy Wilder

Teaching notes prepared
by Warren Whitney



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION
FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



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Introduction

Billy Wilder fled Germany in 1933 after witnessing first-hand the Nazi seizure of power and the central importance of the Fuhrer cult in lending the nascent movement a coherent and compelling identity for its followers. After the Nazi catastrophe, sociologist and cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer, in his classic study *From Caligari to Hitler: A psychological history of the German film* (1947), examined the development of the German Expressionist movement of the twenties to postulate the view that in the films of the Weimar period it was possible to see the coming catastrophe of National Socialism in the nightmarish vision of directors such as F.W. Murnau, Fritz Lang and Robert Weine whose films can be viewed as allegories of the emergence of an authoritarian force that has been a central aspect of the German 'social imaginary'. In an early work, such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (dir. Robert Weine, 1920), Kracauer (1947) locates in the film a vision of the threat of a charismatic madman, who exercises an almost hypnotic power of seduction over his followers that they are helpless to resist. In the figure of Caligari, Kracauer argues, it is possible to see the first stirrings of the dark emotions that would later propel Hitler to power. Kracauer saw in these films of the twenties and early thirties the sinister undercurrents of the Weimar period, a psychological projection of the emergent dangers that would finally erupt in Hitler's totalitarian regime.

The lessons of the German Expressionist cinema of the Weimar period can be found in many of Wilder's later films, most notably in *Sunset Boulevard*. Not only did Wilder bring with him a technical expertise in the creation of a dark, ominous, atmospheric mise-en-scène, he also retained a clear understanding that

the cinema had a unique power to capture the wider 'dream life' of a society, even as it helped to shape the dreams themselves. The power of the cinematic image to focus the collective attention of the audience and draw upon deeply felt emotions, at the level of a collective unconscious, the unspoken desires of a people, was already evident in the propaganda films Hitler commissioned such as *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* by director Leni Riefenstahl. After finally settling in the United States, Wilder made a series of highly acclaimed films, often drawing closely from the dark, fatalistic style of German Expressionist cinema. In the definitive example of film noir, *Double Indemnity* (1944), Wilder utilised the genre of the crime drama to examine the base, primal drives of his characters and the inevitable destruction these desires would cause. In the postwar period, Wilder made a trio of films that collectively represent a sustained critique of some of the dominant illusions of postwar society. As the United States enjoyed an unprecedented prestige as the world's most powerful and democratic society, the era of Pax Americana, Wilder's films found a darker, unsettling substrata beneath this structure of global preeminence.

Sunset Boulevard and the two films that directly followed, *Ace in the Hole* (1951) and *Stalag 17* (1953), all examine this moment of American supremacy but discover flaws and contradictions that reveal a society far less confident and assured than its surface appearance might suggest. Wilder's films seek to expose the illusions that can come to be accepted as truth. In *Stalag 17*, also starring William Holden in perhaps his greatest role, an even more embittered character than Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard*, Wilder systematically dismantles the genre of the war film, which had been a mainstay of the industry for over a decade during wartime. *Stalag 17* is set in a German

prisoner-of-war camp and Wilder initially disarms the audience by adopting a comic approach that presents the inmates of the camp as a loveable collection of familiar types who display the courageous ability to withstand their German captors using humor and resourcefulness. Holden's character, J.J. Sefton, is an outsider among the men, a seemingly amoral grifter seeking to profit off his fellow POWs. Sefton's character, however, shatters the illusion, carefully manufactured in countless war films, of universal camaraderie and patriotic feeling that galvanised the allied forces throughout the war. Sefton is hated by his fellow prisoners for his apparent lack of patriotism and sense of military duty and in one scene is savagely beaten by the entire barracks. However, when an act of internal treachery occurs, for which he is the initial suspect, he is the only man capable of exposing the traitor in their midst and rescuing an important prisoner the Nazis have been attempting to locate. Sefton's final speech before he departs is a searing rejection of the patriotic ethos that had dominated the genre and postwar film more widely.

In *Ace in the Hole* (1951), Kirk Douglas plays disgraced reporter Chuck Tatum, a man prepared to prolong and delay a rescue effort of a man trapped beneath a collapsed cliff face so that he can gain maximum advantage and exposure in the national press. Both *Ace in the Hole* and *Stalag 17* carefully dismantle the postwar myth of the patriotic, selfless, duty-bound individual who strives to serve some larger ideal, whether that is nation, faith or personal duty. *Ace in the Hole* shows the rise of a relentless news media that focuses on a single event to create a powerfully unifying narrative of social identity. Wilder understood that postwar society was undergoing a process of the even greater intensification of media spectacle, in which the illusion of reality was capable of directing and defining the 'dream life' of the national psyche. *Sunset Boulevard* can be viewed as Wilder's excavation of the preconditions or prehistory of this postwar 'society of the spectacle'. Norma's grotesque fascination with her 'ageless' self-image becomes a disturbing portent of the collective fascination with national illusions that would come to define the postwar era.

Sunset Boulevard is the first of Wilder's remarkable sequence of films that explore the national psyche. It begins as an ostensible crime drama, albeit with an unusual narrative perspective, but quickly moves into an investigation of the wider crimes of the film industry. Wilder moves from the individual crime of Joe's murder to consider all of Hollywood as a crime scene, the betrayal of its early promise, its abandonment of the creative talents that founded its studios, and

the criminal neglect of the potential of the medium itself – these are all under investigation in Wilder's vision of the film industry at mid-century. Stylistically, *Sunset Boulevard* can be seen as an extended allusion to the great German Expressionist films of the silent era, as it develops a psychological portrait of the film industry, the 'toxic' culture of stardom and celebrity used to attract audiences, and the willingness to exploit creativity and then to abandon these talents in the relentless search for innovation and profit. Throughout the film, Wilder alludes to the darker impulses behind the worship of stars: a fascination with gossip and scandal, the transformation of actors into god-like figures, and the readiness to dispose of these 'gods' – all symptoms of a society that has become mesmerised by the manufactured fantasies that Hollywood has perfected across its short history.

Failed screenwriter Joe Gillis investigates the events that lead to his own murder and uncovers a far larger 'plot'. In *Sunset Boulevard*, Hollywood is exposed as an industry that pitilessly manufactures and then abandons its 'stars', that ruthlessly exploits youth and beauty, that values profit over artistic worth and that has become locked into a system of competing studios that act as business rivals, mirroring the larger economic system of capitalist competition, a true 'culture industry' in the sense theorised in 1947 by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of enlightenment* (2016).

When Joe stumbles across one of Hollywood's famed 'tragic mansions' rising above Sunset Boulevard, 'that grim Sunset castle', inhabited by ageing former star Norma Desmond, he enters a surreal world in which time has been arrested. The image of Norma as a youthful star has been obsessively preserved by her former director and husband Max, now the meticulous curator of Norma's 'dream life'. In every room of the house, endless studio portraits of Norma create a kind of hall of mirrors, but the image Norma sees is not of her real self but the image that the studio manufactured of her decades before. Norma's house is a shrine to her former stardom but also to Hollywood's own prehistory, the silent era, and the decadent excess of the 'crazy twenties', a time locked in an unrecoverable past, separated from the present by Depression and the horrors of Total War, by genocide and atomic destruction. Wilder contrasts this earlier, seemingly more 'innocent' era of unbridled prosperity and artistic confidence with Hollywood's postwar present, a time of fearful, cowardly producers, and the tyranny of a genre system that reduces all creativity to narrow, proven formulas designed to minimise financial risk and appeal to manufactured audience taste. Wilder

dramatically juxtaposes the archaic and largely forgotten, yet grand, baroque world of the silent era, the time of genuine stars such as Valentino and Chaplin, with the artistically timid, diminished and parochial ambitions of present-day Hollywood, whose only possible use for a former icon such as Norma Desmond is to lease her luxury automobile. In the contemporary Hollywood of *Sunset Boulevard*, Wilder makes it indisputably clear that a star of Norma's impossible grandeur and other-worldly gestures and mannerisms has no place amidst the now reduced, quotidian world of Hollywood's postwar austerity. *Sunset Boulevard* is a film that explores madness, derangement, delusion and loss, but these are symptoms of a much wider cultural disturbance than merely the case of one former star.

Ways into the text

The silent era

A vital place to start with students is with the silent era of Hollywood filmmaking, a period with which it can be expected students will understandably have limited knowledge. A helpful way to start would be to set students a research task into the silent era with the aim of presenting findings to the class. Students could start with researching some of the great films of the era, such as *The General* (1926), *City Lights* (1931), *Metropolis* (1927), *Sunrise* (1927), *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), *Intolerance* (1916), *Greed* (1924). These films, made before the coming of sound, represent the startling artistry and creative ambition of the silent era at its stylistic zenith. Students may choose to watch scenes from these films to gain a sense of this artistic scope and to understand why silent films are considered as an essentially different type of film language to that of sound film. Watching scenes from any of these films will also convey why the passing of the silent era is considered by many as the tragic loss of a highly specific and specialised form of film language that represented cinema in its most pure form. Gaining a familiarity with the great works of the silent era may also assist students to understand Norma's eulogy to the greatness of this era and to understand the character of Norma herself as more than just a shallow and vain former star lamenting the loss of her fame. When the greatest of silent films is understood then Norma becomes clearer as an artist who, at the peak of her career, saw all of her achievements reduced to the status of relics within months of the arrival of sound technology. A large part of the psychological depth and tragic nature of Norma's character is that she has lived with the memory of having created these great works of cinema which are now forgotten and unseen.

The star system

As a class, discuss the rise of the star system in Hollywood and why it proved to be such an important component of the emerging film industry, determining the industry's approach to narrative. Questions to consider might include:

- Why did the star system so quickly become an entrenched part of the studio approach to film making?
- How were 'stars' created and promoted to audiences? What qualities were associated with 'stars' and how were these qualities valued?

- Film theorist Richard Dyer (1979) has analysed what he terms the two paradoxes of being a star. Stars are both ordinary/extraordinary and present/absent. Where do we see evidence of this theory of stardom in *Sunset Boulevard*? In what ways is Norma portrayed as both ordinary/extraordinary, and present/absent? What does this theory reveal about the nature of being a star?
- How does Wilder establish the differences between the stars of the silent era such as Norma and how audience expectations have changed since the silent era? What is it in the nature of Norma's star persona that cannot be translated into the sound era? What exactly does Norma mean when she claims that there are no real faces anymore? How does this comment represent a judgment on the nature of being a star in the sound period?

The genre system

Just as it quickly established a star system, so too Hollywood also established a system of genre that neatly classified different categories of narrative. This system of genre survived largely unchanged for decades, even surviving the coming of sound, so deeply embedded were its foundations in the industry. Genres, such as westerns, dramas, war, romance, comedy, musicals, horror, suspense, science fiction and period films, comprised a clear demarcation of narrative possibilities. *Sunset Boulevard* was originally conceived as 'a grotesque comedy about a silent film star who attempts to revive her career' (Hoberman, 2011). The final version far exceeds this narrow genre formula of a comedy that might extract humor from the unlikely and misguided efforts of its pitiful protagonist. Instead, Wilder fashioned a story of genuinely tragic dimensions in which the character of Norma is all too human in her fears and dreams.

- Why were genre films so quickly adopted by the studios? What was seen to guarantee their popularity?
- How do different genres function in identifying a specific audience and appealing to this particular audience's taste?
- By the 1960s, the original Hollywood genre system is said to have collapsed, causing the widespread collapse of the studio system itself. Has the older system of genre been replaced with something new, merely substituting newer, more contemporary categories for those deemed superseded such as the western?

The films of Billy Wilder

Billy Wilder was undoubtedly an auteur working with the constraints of the studio system. Students may wish to discuss what constitutes an auteur and why Wilder himself may warrant such a description. As mentioned, *Sunset Boulevard* is one of a trio of films that comprise an extraordinary sequence, but students will also benefit from watching some of Wilder's other work, beginning with *Double Indemnity* and even lighter comedies such as *Sabrina*, *The Apartment* and *Some Like It Hot*. These comedies contrast with his darker dramas such as *The Lost Weekend* (1945), an unflinching examination of alcoholism and addiction, and *Stalag 17* and *Ace in the Hole*. These films not only display Wilder's well recognised versatility as a writer/director, but also his ability to work within established genres to create highly original works that address their contemporary context in ways that often challenged entrenched audience expectations.

Structure of the text

Sunset Boulevard opens with a credit sequence that features the very road itself as the camera flies across the surface of the asphalt to the dramatic musical score by Franz Waxman, sounding very similar to many of Bernard Herrmann's scores for Hitchcock. The frenetic pace of the credits sequence then opens to a shot of police cars careering into the driveway of a large mansion and a voiceover narration tells us 'That's the Homicide squad' (1:36-1:39) and they are entering the home of a former movie star. Men are seen running along a path to the side of a swimming pool where they find the body of a man floating face down in the water. The voiceover narrator informs the audience that the dead man is a young writer, and this will be his story, 'The whole truth', told in flashback. As the policeman carefully removes Joe's body from the water he observes: 'The poor dope, he always wanted a pool. Well, he got one but the price turned out to be a little high.' The narrator takes us back six months, to his apartment, and we realise suddenly that the narrator and the dead man are the same person as he sits at his typewriter in his dressing gown.

There is a knock on the door and Joe finds two insurance agents demanding his car which has months of payments owing. Joe informs them that he has lent his car to a friend and is met with disbelief and the threat that they will return. As Joe puts on his trousers, the car keys fall to the floor. Joe retrieves his car from a carpark behind Rudy's shoeshine stand. Desperate for money to pay for his car, Joe drives to a film studio to see a producer named Sheldrake who may be considering his latest script for a film named *Bases Loaded*, a baseball picture. Joe pitches the script in Sheldrake's office, emphasising its popular appeal, making casting suggestions and generally promoting its uplifting generic formula. Sheldrake airily refers to the unpromising economic fortunes faced by the industry and the risks of a script such as Joe's. Sheldrake calls a script reader into his office named Betty Schaefer who unknowingly critiques Joe's script while he stands behind her listening. Joe dismisses Betty's evaluation on the grounds that not every film has to have a message or original artistic merit. Sheldrake then declines to loan Joe an advance by recounting a story about other ill-advised investments he has made.

Joe then visits his unofficial office, Schwab's drugstore, and makes a series of calls to friends and associates including his good friend Artie Green, an assistant director who can only lend him \$20. He then contacts his agent who is out playing golf. Joe intercepts him

on the golf course and asks for a loan only to be told that, as his friend as well as his agent, he will not lend him money because that will only forestall his creative inspiration. Joe and the agent have a heated exchange which ends with his agent suggesting that maybe what Joe needs is another agent. Later, while driving in his car and stopped at traffic lights, Joe is seen by the two insurance agents who give chase, causing Joe to blow a tyre and steer into the driveway of a somewhat hidden and dilapidated mansion. Joe discovers a large two car garage in which he hides his own car. Also parked in the garage is an enormous old foreign limousine, with a number plate dated 1932. The car is up on blocks and appears to have been abandoned by its owners. Joe walks up to the house and makes this observation:

It was a great big white elephant of a place, the kind crazy movie people built in the crazy twenties ... it was like that old woman in *Great Expectations*, that Miss Havisham in her rotting wedding dress and her torn veil, taking it out on the world because she'd been given the go-by. (13:03-13:28)

As Joe approaches the house, a voice calls to him from inside and he sees a pair of eyes barely visible behind a blind. Joe goes to the door and is invited inside by a servant who has mistaken him for an undertaker and instructs him to go up the stairs despite Joe's protestations. At the top of the stairs, Joe is met by a woman who orders him into the bedroom where he sees a sheet covering what appears to be a small body. As the woman describes funeral arrangements, the arm of a primate falls from beneath the cloth. The woman slowly pulls back the cloth to reveal the face of a dead chimpanzee. Joe explains 'You've got the wrong man', that he is not the undertaker, and makes a flippant remark as he walks out of the bedroom. As he walks out of the ornate bedroom, he turns and says: 'I know your face ... You used to be in silent pictures. You used to be big.' The camera moves into a close-up of Norma's face as she corrects Joe: 'I am big. It's the pictures that got small.' Norma orders Joe out of her house but before he leaves, he unwittingly reveals that he is a writer. This immediately piques Norma's interest and she asks him to look at a script she has written for a film entitled *Salome*.

With little to occupy him, aside from evading the insurance agents, Joe agrees. He is taken into her enormous living room, a spacious shrine to Norma's former glory and fame, surrounded by countless studio shots of Norma in her silent era prime. The room is luxurious and ornate but oppressive and deathly, akin to a mausoleum whose purpose is to preserve the memory of Norma's former life. Joe is given bundles of handwritten script, tied up with string. Norma sits

watching Joe read, occasionally tossing him further bundles. Joe reads late into the evening, as Max silently turns on lamps. As he reads, Joe's voiceover narration tells us that the script is abysmal, 'that hodgepodge of melodramatic plot. However, by then I'd started concocting a little plot of my own.' Joe offers to assist Norma in polishing the script and preparing it for the studio. Joe's narration explains that this work will enable him to pay off his debts and return to Ohio, escaping his failed career as a scriptwriter. Norma agrees but insists that Joe work on the script in her home as she could not allow the script to leave her house. She directs Max to make up the room over the garage as a temporary residence for Joe while he works on the script. Max shows Joe to his room where Joe finds that the room is already made up and awaiting him. Joe asks: 'How did you know I was going to stay this afternoon?' Max ignores the question and instead launches into an impassioned testament to Norma's former glory: 'She was the greatest of them all. You wouldn't know you're too young.' Max rhapsodises over the 17,000 fan letters she received every week; the Maharajah who begged for one of her stockings and then strangled himself with it. It is clear from this speech that Max is far more than just Norma's manservant; he is the custodian of her legend.

From the garage room, Joe looks down and spies Norma and Max carrying a candelabra and a small child's coffin into the garden, to a grave that has been previously dug. Norma is dressed in black and wearing a veil, 'as if she were laying to rest an only child'. Joe ponders: 'Was her life really as empty as that?' In the morning, Joe is woken from an uneasy dream and discovers that all of his belongings have been brought to the room from his apartment. He rushes into the house and confronts Norma, demanding to know who brought his things to the room. Norma is sitting impassively in a chair and informs him that his back rent has been paid – 'It's all taken care of' – and he is now free to concentrate solely on his work for her. Joe protests and Norma forcefully insists: 'Do you want this job or don't you?' In voiceover, Joe explains that he does indeed want this job as it represents his only possible escape from Hollywood and his past failures. A slow-moving mid-shot shows Joe busily working on Norma's script, buried in the mess of pages, its 'wild hallucinations'. Meanwhile Norma herself sits silently watching Joe at work, observing him in the manner of film noir 'Spiderwoman' or femme fatale.

Joe describes their breaks from work when they would watch Norma's old movies together in her living room, the films projected on a giant screen hidden behind a vast tapestry. As Max projects the films, Joe

and Norma are seated closely together, Joe uneasy at the increasing familiarity, even intimacy they share, while Norma is shown entranced by the projection of her earlier screen self. They watch an old silent film which is in fact Gloria Swanson's own performance in the film *Queen Kelly*. The film depicts a close up of Norma/Gloria Swanson in profile, Norma as a beautiful young girl. The shot symbolises Norma's radiant innocence, her face upturned, her hands clasped in prayer or supplication, she appears in the saintly glow of flickering candlelight. An intertitle appears which reads: '... Cast out this wicked dream which has seized my heart.' The plea in the intertitle might apply equally to both Norma and Joe.

Norma maintains a very select circle of friends who, like her, are former stars of the silent era. Joe is introduced to them at one of Norma's regular bridge games. These former stars are played by actual silent era stars, the most famous of which is Buster Keaton, the great silent comedian and film maker. During the game of bridge, Max informs Joe that the insurance agents have discovered his car and are having it towed away. Joe fails to distract Norma and watches as his car is towed away, one of the few things that tethered him to his previous life and the world beyond Norma's ghostly mansion. Norma saunters outside to see what had excited Joe, only to dismiss his concerns over the lost vehicle and reminds him of her own incomparable luxury vehicle, a 1929 Isotta Fraschini that is to play such a crucial role in Norma's delusion that DeMille wishes her to return to the studio.

In the next scene, Joe and Norma are seen sitting in the back of the Isotta Fraschini, driven by Max as they tour the hills above Sunset Boulevard. The image is redolent of a wealthy celebrity couple enjoying their leisure. However, Wilder's scene, with Max in the role of chauffeur, and Norma and Joe sitting on the leopard skin upholstery, while Norma issues instructions to Max on a gold telephone, captures the unnerving development of Norma's delusion and the increasing extent of Joe's entrapment. On one of these outings, Norma complains about Joe's limited array of clothes and instructs Max to drive them to a tailor where she intends to outfit Joe with a more suitable wardrobe. At the tailor's, Norma imperiously directs the staff to assemble an extensive array of formal clothes while Joe watches on helplessly and clearly embarrassed by Norma's extravagance, but also her refusal to acknowledge his more modest suggestions. In a telling moment that signifies the new status Joe has acquired, the camera moves into a tight close-up of Joe and one of the salesman who urges Joe to consider a more expensive coat made from Vicuna. Joe declines, and

as the camera moves in even closer to frame the two men's faces in tight profile, the salesman whispers conspiratorially to Joe: 'Well, as long as the lady's paying for it why not take the Vicuna?' Joe shoots the salesman a look of angry resentment, yet fails to dispute the suggestion knowing that he has correctly surmised the nature of Joe and Norma's relationship.

Time passes and after a period of heavy rain forces Joe to vacate the room over the garage because of a leaking roof, Max moves Joe's things into a bedroom in the main house. As Joe leaves the garage room, he closes a closet door to reveal the Vicuna coat hanging on the door. In his new room, enormous and ornate like the rest of the house, Joe learns from Max that the bedroom once belonged to one of Norma's former husbands, and as we later learn that Max himself was once Norma's husband, presumably the room had once belonged to him. Joe discovers that none of the doors have locks, just empty holes. Max explains that there are no locks anywhere in the house: 'Madame has moments of melancholy. There have been attempts at suicide.' This is the first direct mention that Norma may be suffering from more than just loneliness or a lost career. Joe also learns that the weekly fan letters Norma receives are not genuine – Max warns Joe not to look too closely at the postmarks. Along with his other duties in maintaining Norma's fragile world, Max is also the author of the letters.

That evening Joe walks down to Norma's New Year's Eve party. He finds Norma dancing alone on her newly polished dance floor – the tiles recommended by Valentino – before a small orchestra. As Joe and Norma dance, he discovers that there are to be no other guests and that she has designed the evening as an intimate celebration of their romantic relationship. As the night, for Joe at least, wears agonisingly on, Norma becomes intoxicated and sensing Joe's boredom, gives him the gift of a gold cigarette case. As with the gift of his clothes, Joe is clearly uncomfortable with Norma's generosity. Norma, covered in jewels, announces that she has a million dollars, real estate 'downtown' and oil wells in Bakersfield, 'pumping, always pumping'. When she declares 'What's it for but to buy us anything we want?', Joe springs to his feet and tells her 'Cut out that us business', challenging her assumption by asking: 'What right do you have to take me for granted?' Norma mockingly replies: 'What right? Do you want me to tell you?' The exact terms of their relationship as employer and employee have been made plain and Joe's re-defined status as more than a mere script consultant has, at least in Norma's mind, been unquestionably cemented. A scene of intense melodrama follows, with Joe attempting to

assert his independence which Norma receives as a cruel denial of her love for him. The scene plays out as if taken from one of Norma's own silent films. Norma is seen reflected in one of the ornate mirrors running up the stairs as Joe stands staring at her retreating figure. Max is seen silently polishing a champagne glass and as the orchestra plays on, Joe dons his expensive Vicuna coat and walks out into the rainy night.

Walking along the side of the road, Joe hitches into town bound for his friend Artie Green's New Year's Eve party, to be among young people who, like him, have also failed to find success in Hollywood, but who can face their situation with stoic amusement. An extremely lively, crowded party is in full swing at Artie's apartment. Artie warmly welcomes Joe who immediately stands out because of his elaborate formal attire, prompting Artie to compare Joe to another old star Adolph Menjou, known for his old-world sophistication. The comparison does suggest that Joe has come from another era with its own archaic sensibility, one that is remote from the youthful spirit of Artie's friends, and also the extent of Norma's attempted make-over of Joe. At the party, Joe encounters Betty Schaefer and learns that she and Artie are together. Betty immediately attempts to press Joe for details on his current work, however, Joe deflects her inquiries as he merely wants to arrange for his things to be sent over to Artie's apartment.

Retreating to the bathroom, Betty and Joe discuss the script for *Dark Windows*. Artie appears, jealous of this sudden interest the two display in each other but is reassured by Betty that it is just 'shop talk'. The scene between Betty and Joe contrasts dramatically with Joe's earlier 'romantic' evening with Norma and its stilted extravagance. Sitting close together in the bathroom, the pair discuss Joe's script, with Betty praising the flashback involving a teacher which she describes as 'true and moving' because it was based on Joe's actual experience. Joe maintains his cynical attitude: 'Who wants true? Who wants moving?' Joe continues to express his contempt for the ways in which the film industry has transformed audiences into passive, unthinking consumers of genre sentimentality, a sentimentality that he has unsuccessfully attempted to exploit with scripts such as *Bases Loaded*. Betty is undaunted and encourages Joe to return to the script and resurrect the story of the teacher. Betty's sincere belief in the script gains greater depth when we later learn that she is a child of the film industry, having grown up on the studio lots. She understands as well as Joe that Hollywood is a factory that specialises in mass-produced commodities but retains a commitment to something more distinctive. As a way of expressing

their mutual disdain for the outmoded style of Hollywood romance and melodrama – of the kind that Norma has just performed earlier that evening – Joe and Betty perform a mock-romantic scene of their own, their faces almost touching as they recite the hackneyed dialogue from countless old films. The scene represents a parody of the Old Hollywood, and as the two young writers amuse themselves with this game of cliché and exaggerated emotion, they also display their mutual disdain for the ‘dead language’, archaic sentimentality and hollow conventions of the older studio system, the one which Norma helped to build and which her script for *Salome* attempts to resuscitate. The spontaneity and humor of Betty and Joe contrast with Norma’s morbid, ‘hysterical’ performance of her devotion to Joe earlier, as she played the part of the spurned lover. As Betty and Joe’s comic performance appears about to culminate in an actual kiss, they are interrupted and Joe makes a call to Max, only to learn that Norma has made another attempt on her life. The dead hand of Hollywood’s past reaches out and entraps Joe once again.

Joe immediately rushes back to Norma and finds her lying in bed, her wrists heavily bandaged. Norma ‘plays the scene’ with her full range of tragic feeling: ‘Go away. Go to that girl of yours.’ When Joe gently chides her for doing such an idiotic thing, she replies: ‘To fall in love with you, that was the idiotic thing.’ The sheer force of Norma’s tragic devotion draws Joe inexorably into her fatal orbit. As Norma weeps, her face covered with her bandaged wrists, the theme of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ is heard from the orchestra below, still playing to an empty room. The timing of the music and Norma’s incessant weeping prompts Joe to approach the bed and wish her Happy New Year. Norma’s arms reach out for Joe and the musical score is replaced with the more ominous motif that has been used throughout the film as Norma draws Joe into her arms and the fade-out signifies a new phase in their relationship.

Betty attempts to contact Joe at Norma’s house but is told by Max that he is no longer there and not to call again. On another evening, as Max drives Joe and Norma to a bridge game at the home of one of the ‘waxworks’, Joe stops at Schwab’s drugstore for cigarettes and encounters Betty and Artie. Betty excitedly informs Joe that Sheldrake is interested in the idea about the teacher from *Dark Windows* and asks Joe to form a writing partnership to work on the script together. Joe firmly declines the offer.

Days later, Joe is lying on a couch in Norma’s living room while she, dressed in a Mack Sennett bathing beauties costume, attempts to entertain him. Joe lies back silently reflecting on Betty’s proposal while his

voiceover narration expresses the depth of cynicism that, like Norma, continues to entrap him: ‘Audiences don’t know somebody sits down and writes a picture. They think the actors make it up as they go along.’ Joe’s narration captures his cynical dismissal of what he sees as Betty’s unfounded optimism and idealism concerning writing for the film industry. Joe has concluded, on the basis of his own personal failure, that the studios are indifferent to artistic originality and that it has created audiences who merely want the predictable fodder of the established genre system, audiences ‘who don’t know’ that stories originate in some individual’s imagination and personal experience. The camera moves into a close-up of Joe’s face, his eyes closed, as the voiceover begins to resemble some type of confession or personal revelation that Joe might make to a therapist. His bitterness and cynicism are contrasted with Norma’s efforts to create an atmosphere of lightness and gaiety as she nostalgically breathes life into these older screen images. When Joe opens his eyes, he sees Norma transformed into Chaplin’s ‘Little Tramp’, performing some of Chaplin’s iconic gestures with bowler hat and cane. This homage to the greatest character of the silent era fails to penetrate Joe’s own cynical reveries and disillusionment. This juxtaposition of Norma as Chaplin and Joe as unbeliever, of the most mythic figure of Hollywood’s past and an expression of a fatal lack of faith in its present, dramatically condenses the film’s own narrative scope as it is directed at a film industry which has previously reached great artistic heights (Chaplin) but is now stagnant, moribund and cynical (Joe), with no confidence in the audience’s capacity for artistic originality or integrity of the kind that Chaplin once embodied, but which is now locked in the past and available only as the material for comic impersonation.

Norma is interrupted by Max who informs her that Paramount is calling. When Norma learns that it is not DeMille himself, merely an assistant named Gordon Cole, she angrily instructs Max to hang up: ‘I’ve been waiting twenty years for this call and DeMille can wait until I’m good and ready.’ Further calls prompt Norma to relent and visit the studio. She arrives imperiously at the Paramount gates and drives up to a sound stage where DeMille is shooting yet another of his Biblical epics. When DeMille is informed of Norma’s visit he is initially perplexed but realises it must be ‘that awful script of hers’. He is genuinely happy to see Norma, for whom he clearly has an enduring fondness, but he also directs an assistant to find out why the studio has been calling her. When the assistant tells the great director that he can give Norma ‘the brush’, DeMille replies: ‘30 million fans have given her the brush, isn’t that enough?’

He explains further: 'You didn't know Norma Desmond as a lovely little girl of seventeen with more courage and wit and heart than ever came together in one youngster.' He concludes this eulogy for Norma's career by sadly observing: 'A dozen press agents working overtime can do terrible things to the human spirit.'

Norma chides DeMille for allowing one of his assistants to call her about her script and a bewildered DeMille asks to speak with Gordon Cole to find out why he has been calling Norma. Meanwhile, Norma sits in DeMille's chair and is recognised by an old lighting technician who shines a key light on her, attracting the attention of elderly film extras who gather around Norma as if transported back into the past, theirs and Norma's. Norma is shown surrounded by her adoring fans, dressed in the Biblical costumes of the former epics Norma herself once starred in. Wilder captures the eerie effect of Norma at the centre of this group of extras who have lived long enough to see Norma return to the studio she once ruled, but their collective age reminds the audience that Norma is a figure from out of the past whose presence strikes a discordant note in Hollywood's present, a reminder of an era that has been left behind. DeMille gets through to Gordon Cole and learns that the studio was merely interested in leasing Norma's glamorous relic of a car. Before DeMille can explain the truth to Norma, she breaks down with emotion and DeMille then decides against telling her the real reason for the calls.

Outside on the lot, Max and Joe wait by the Isotta Fraschini and Max reflects on the unparalleled stature Norma once enjoyed at the studio. He reveals that he formerly occupied the entire upper floor of offices that now house the Readers Department, but without explaining his position. As Joe looks up at the offices, he sees Betty Schaefer walking on the upper balcony. He leaves Max and visits Betty in her office, offering her the script for *Dark Windows*. Betty implores Joe to work with her to develop the script. Joe also learns that Betty and Artie are engaged. Joe breezily pitches ideas to Betty who praises their merit, but at the sound of Max sounding the car's horn, Joe cheerily but firmly declines Betty's offer of a partnership. When he returns to the car, Max informs Joe of the real reason the studio has been calling. DeMille and Norma share a warm farewell and Norma departs, still under the illusion that the studio wants to produce her script. Neither DeMille, Max or Joe has the courage to enlighten her and put an end to her dangerous delusions and detachment from reality. Norma leaves the studio as a victim of this collective deception. The scene ends with an angry DeMille ordering his assistant to tell Gordon Cole to forget about Norma's car.

A montage follows of Norma undergoing a stringent regime of punishing beauty treatments as she prepares for DeMille's call to commence filming *Salome*, to be 'ready for those cameras that would never turn'. Norma's face is seen covered in a thick impasto of beauty cream, her shoulders smeared with mud, her body pummeled by a masseuse and her face masked by heavy steam hoods that resemble medieval torture devices. Her eyes are shot in extreme close-up, seen through the lens of a magnifying glass to identify any flaws. The musical score features a violin that gives expression to Norma's nervous tension, rising beneath these unremitting physical examinations. In this montage, Wilder poses the notion of beauty as a commodity, produced under strict quality controls and subject to highly technical processes of assessment. In these scenes, Norma's face becomes the signifier of her value to the studio; it is the product that must undergo the strictest of production processes. Norma's desperation to regain her status ensures that she will undergo this painful regimen, her willingness also suggestive of the idea that she has been familiar with this 'price of fame' for perhaps her entire career.

While Norma endures this torture, Joe escapes the house at night to work with Betty on the script for *Dark Windows*. Norma informs Joe that she is aware that he has been taking the car out at night, but his partnership with Betty remains a secret. As he drives the Isotta Fraschini to the studio, Joe muses nostalgically:

Yes, I was playing hooky every evening ... it made me think of when I was twelve and used to sneak out on the folks to see a gangster picture. This time it wasn't to see a picture, it was to try and write one. (1:18:43-1:18:54)

The film's central theme, of the urge to create authentic films that are not reducible to the studio's tired and outmoded genre formulas, is foregrounded here. Ironically, Joe's renewed determination to write the script for *Dark Windows* in a more authentic style is also told within the genre formula of his and Betty's emerging romance. Nevertheless, the necessity of forging a new style of film writing and leaving behind the dead weight of Hollywood's past emerges sharply in Joe's scenes with Betty. His life with Norma and witnessing firsthand the extent of her delusion, but also the cruelty of her abandonment by a studio that she had been essential in creating, has convinced Joe to accept Betty's offer of a creative partnership and the two young writers work on the script together each night while the studio is deserted. The scenes of the empty studio at night convey the idea that true creativity is only possible

when the studio is not functioning according to its usual production values. While the studio sleeps, Joe and Betty unlock a new style of film writing.

These scenes of the two at work together in the cramped office are the most optimistic in an otherwise highly cynical narrative. Wilder depicts their partnership as a symbol of something new amidst the dead ends of the studio system. Together, Betty and Joe represent a new generation of film writers capable of producing more than the tired, outmoded genre pieces that Joe himself had finally settled for in his solitary pursuit of success. As a partnership, Joe and Betty represent a distinctly youthful, and most importantly, distinctly postwar perspective in their writing. The scenes depict their youthful energy, vibrancy, humor and unaffected personal style. They indulge heavily in ironic 'quotation', betraying an almost proto-postmodern sensibility as they reference the established film styles of various dominant genres in their playful dialogue, betraying the fact that they are both 'children of the movies'. What they also unmistakably represent is a break with Hollywood's dead past, as embodied by Norma and Max and enshrined in their haunted mausoleum to the silent era. As they work together on *Dark Windows*, their combination of talents and a combined male/female perspective begins to define a new set of possibilities for the postwar film industry, which Wilder's film has implied must recapture an audience jaded with the standard product the studio system has been churning out unchanged for decades. This new sensibility is defined by Wilder in terms of its authenticity but also in terms of generational change, a new and more authentic approach to story-telling that is attuned to the equally changed sensibility of postwar audiences, tempted by television and requiring a more compelling reason to remain avid film-goers.

As they work, Betty spies Joe's expensive gold cigarette case with a handwritten testament from Norma that reads: 'Mad about the boy'. Curious how a penniless writer could own such an extravagant accessory, Betty asks who Norma is. Joe evades her question, only describing Norma as a friend, 'a middle-aged lady, very foolish, very generous'. When Betty playfully suggests that Norma will leave Joe her fortune, he replies: 'That's the trouble with you readers. You know all the plots.' Throughout the film, Joe's dialogue reveals that he himself views the world through the lens of Hollywood formulas, repeatedly reviving generic phrases and clichés in a tough, hard-boiled style of commentary on the fatalistic nature of the human condition, particularly the 'Hollywood condition'.

Joe and Betty share the frame, suggesting their growing physical closeness, underscored by the romantic music that accompanies these shots of the two standing close together, often in tight profile, their intimacy more than a matter of shared artistic values. As Joe places the closed cigarette case next to his typewriter, he looks pensive and troubled, musing not only on the status of his relationship with Norma, symbolised by the gold case, but his conflicting attraction to Betty and their burgeoning relationship, which represents professional redemption for Joe but also a possible escape from his entrapment by Norma.

In the following scene, Betty and Joe are seen walking at night among the deserted sound stages and empty sets. Betty reveals that she in fact grew up on the studio lot amid these sound stages: 'Look at this street, all cardboard, all hollow, all phony, all done with mirrors. You know, I like it better than any street in the world. Maybe because I used to play here when I was a kid.' Betty explains that she is a third-generation child of the studios: 'I come from a picture family.' Her father was an electrician with the studio and her mother worked in wardrobe. Despite strenuous training and even some cosmetic surgery, Betty failed to become an actress: 'they didn't like my nose'. With her nose fixed, she did another test: 'This time they were crazy about my nose. They didn't like my acting.' Joe teases Betty about 'those lost close-ups' but she forcefully denies any bitterness: 'What's wrong with being on the other side of the camera? It's more fun.' This healthy, grounded and ultimately disillusioned perspective contrasts increasingly with Norma's own delusory, desperate, and finally murderous efforts to get back in front of the cameras.

In playful, mock homage to Betty's \$300 nose, Joe offers her a kiss. However, they embrace in a tight close-up and as they look into each other's eyes, and despite their habit of breaking into ironic parody of romantic screen dialogue of the kind they would never include in the script for *Dark Windows*, their newly discovered attraction is unmistakable to the other. Joe recognises the danger this might pose to their professional relationship, not to mention Betty's engagement to Artie and advises her that they should never get that close again; in other words, they should remain outside of any intimate moment that might be worthy of a close-up.

Joe returns to Norma's house and parks the Isotta Fraschini in the garage. He discovers Max standing in the shadows. Max advises him to enter the house discreetly as 'Madame may be watching'. Joe defiantly tells Max that he is writing another script which he

is determined to finish. Max further explains that he is 'greatly worried about Madame' and Joe accuses both Max and himself of feeding Norma lies, stoking her delusions and fantasies of a return to the screen, asking Max what will happen when Norma discovers that the picture will never be made. Max answers 'she never will, that is my job, and it has been for a long time'. Max reveals the truth about his relationship with Norma. He was once a great director: 'I discovered her when she was sixteen. I made her a star. I cannot let her be destroyed.' Max explains that in Hollywood's early years: 'There were three young directors who showed promise in those days. D.W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille and Max Von Mayerling.' Fiction and fact become instantly entwined here, as the role of Max is played by the great German silent director Erich von Stroheim, who was indeed among the young directors who showed promise in those early days. von Stroheim was famous for his artistically ambitious silent film *Greed* which became somewhat notorious for its epic scope and vision at a time when film was still attempting to establish the parameters of what a film could be.

Hearing this account of Max's own lost career and forsaken ambition, Joe accuses Norma of having transformed Max into a servant. Max demurs, describing that after Norma left him, he asked to come back, unable to face the emptiness of life without her. He also reveals, to the sound of a crashing musical score, 'I was first husband'. The camera zooms in to a close-up of Joe's face, expressing a mixture of shock, but also belated recognition and acknowledgement. There is also a discernible awareness of his own impending fate derived from hearing Max's account. While Joe had earlier boasted that he had concocted a plot of his own to exploit his position in Norma's life, it is now clear that Max has not only been the chief enabler of Norma's escape into a world of fantasy, but he has also, still the great director, enabled Joe's own escape from destitution and the reach of those insurance agents, and facilitated his place among Norma's permanent retinue of adoring admirers, specifically Joe's role as Norma's latest romantic partner, a role that Max has carefully directed from the outset of Joe's arrival in the house.

A distraught and anxious Norma is seen pacing in her spacious, opulent bedroom. She enters Joe's adjoining bedroom while he is asleep, whispering aloud her fears that Joe has found another romantic interest to replace her. Her softly uttered dialogue is highly melodramatic and she delivers the lines as though reciting many familiar scenes of romantic distress: 'Oh Joe, where were you? Is it a woman? I know it's a woman. Who is she? Why can't I ask

you? I must know.' Norma's stream of emotionally charged questions are directed to the right of frame, while Joe is shown sleeping at the left of frame. The scene is eerily similar to the earlier scene taken from one of Swanson's silent films, *Queen Kelly*, in which the young Swanson looks out to the right of frame silently beseeching an unseen interlocutor until an intertitle informs the audience of her speech. Norma repeats this performance once again before the sleeping Joe in a demonstration of Norma's own entrapment within her former screen persona.

Spying the script for *Dark Windows* in Joe's coat pocket, Norma takes it back to her room. As she looks at the first page, the camera closes in tightly on the script, revealing the words: 'Untitled love story, by Joseph C. Gillis and Betty Schaefer'. The musical score intensifies, crashing in melodramatic waves as if to confirm Norma's worst fears of betrayal. In the following scene, Betty and Joe continue working on the script together at night, but Betty appears preoccupied and stares at Joe. Joe fears that she may have heard something about him but it concerns Artie's request that she join him in Arizona and get married. Betty confesses that she no longer wants to marry Artie – not a moment of shocking revelation given the nature of her preceding scenes with Joe – because she has fallen in love with Joe. Working so closely together on their untitled love story has culminated in their own and they passionately embrace and kiss in an image of the type of youthful feeling that contrasts so dramatically with the tormented and neurotic jealousy exhibited by Norma. The image of Joe and Betty embracing appears as an affirmation of the power of cinema to incite emotion in its audience, the type of romantic emotion that Hollywood has consecrated throughout its history. Yet, their emergent love is shadowed by Norma's jealousy, Nosferatu-like, stalking the young lovers like a portent of doom.

Joe returns to 'that peculiar prison of mine' wracked with guilt over the competing claims on him represented by Betty's genuine love and Norma's possessive jealousy. Joe's hard-boiled, cynical voiceover captures his divided self: 'She was a fool not to sense there was something phony in my set-up and I was a heel not to have told her.' Joe expresses his emotional crisis in the language of a Chandler or Hammett novel, or perhaps more accurately one of the anti-heroes in a James M. Cain story such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* which features a similarly charismatic but amoral heel. Wilder intensifies the noir-ish atmosphere of the film from this point as Joe increasingly feels himself trapped in his own web of deceit. These scenes show Joe struggling with his conscience but

also with his own desires; for success, status and for Betty herself. But he also struggles to extricate himself from another web, the one that Norma and Max have trapped him in, his 'peculiar prison': 'Maybe I could get away with it. Get away from Norma. Maybe I could wipe the whole nasty mess right out of my life.' Dialogue such as this places Joe firmly in the camp of many other film noir protagonists, trapped by their own concocted plots (*Double Indemnity*), doomed and fatalistic (*Out of the Past*), as they are forced to confront their own flawed characters. This represents one of the film's highly meta-cinematic meanings. Joe himself is trapped in the past, just like Norma, trapped by a lifetime of 'sneaking out' to watch gangster pictures. His imagination is locked into these genre formulas as tightly as Norma is locked into the ancient melodramas of the silent era. Joe's inability to sustain his professional and personal 'partnership' with Betty is a symptom of this conditioning.

As Joe schemes to escape from Norma, he overhears her making a telephone call to Betty. Norma is lying on her bed, conspiratorially warning Betty about Joe: 'Do you know where he lives? Do you know how he lives? What he lives on?' Betty has been drawn into Norma's web; the scene portrays Norma in the classic noir persona of the 'Spiderwoman' as she whispers menacingly into the telephone. In the background of the frame, a door opens and Joe enters, the score is ominous, suggesting a moment of final confrontation between Joe and Norma. As Norma lies on the bed attempting to destroy Betty's romantic dreams as she refers to Joe as 'a man of his sort', she has slipped into the role of Salome/Spiderwoman, a sinister temptress.

Joe approaches unseen by Norma as she continues her efforts to poison Betty's image of Joe. He snatches the telephone away from her and speaks to Betty who is distressed and confused. Joe invites Betty to come out to the house and 'see for yourself'. He slams the phone down and begins to slowly walk out of Norma's bedroom. A sudden reverse shot shows Norma in the unforgiving light of a table lamp, without make-up and appearing harshly exposed under the light. She has instantly transformed from Salome to the reality of her life as an ageing, abandoned former star and a jealous woman: 'Don't hate me Joe.' She has been drained of her power and laments the strain she has been under in preparing for her comeback. A cut to Joe shows him staring silently and dispassionately at Norma, his arms folded, as if appraising the full extent of Norma's fall from the heights of her former glory and the miserable, deluded life she now leads. As she lies on the bed, Norma intensifies the emotional pathos of her performance: 'don't just stand there hating me'. She

announces that she has bought a gun. Joe paces beside her bed but refuses to answer any of her questions.

The scene cuts to Betty and her roommate Connie driving out to Norma's house. Betty gets out alone and walks towards the entrance. In Norma's bedroom, Joe stops pacing when he hears the doorbell and walks purposefully out of the room. Norma lifts herself up from the bed revealing a pistol lying on the mattress. Joe lets Betty into the house, greeting her warmly, seemingly indifferent to the drama of the telephone call. He proceeds to conduct a tour of Norma's palatial home: 'Ever been in one of these Hollywood palazzos? This one's from when they were making \$18,000 a week and no taxes ... Valentino used to dance here.' Adopting the manner of a museum guide, Joe escorts Betty through the enormous rooms that evoke a forgotten era of carefree and reckless extravagance and unparalleled wealth. When Betty asks whose house, it is Joe who indicates a large, almost lifesize portrait of Norma: 'Just look around. There's a lot of her spread about. If you don't remember the face, you must remember the name.' Betty's confusion increases but Joe maintains his role as tour guide: 'Did you ever see so much junk?' Framed in the midst of Norma's temple to the past, Betty looks decidedly out of place. In one shot she is seen in the middle of the frame while Norma's imperious, lifesize portrait looms over her shoulder in the background of the frame. Betty appears to be a figure from another time, a time traveler from the future sent back into Hollywood's past. Betty is dismissive of Joe's tour and the relics on display, indicative of her status as a new generation of Hollywood 'creatives': 'I didn't come to see a house. What about Norma Desmond?'

Undeterred, Joe provides a backstory: 'It's lonely here so she got herself a companion.' Joe moves leisurely around the room, as though it were a set, with its ornate, sculpted arches, elaborate floral arrangements and the countless framed portraits of Norma that stand on every available surface. This endless photographic sea of Norma's face creates a metaphor of her stardom, her face endlessly reproduced by the Hollywood apparatus. Joe's explanation has taken on the tone of a script idea he seems to be pitching to Betty, as he stands in the photographic maze of Norma's fame and wealth: 'Very simple set-up. Older woman whose well-to-do younger man who's not doing too well. Can you figure it out yourself?' This generic explanation, which is all Joe is prepared to offer Betty, appears to represent his retreat into the familiar conventions of sentimental melodrama. What follows is a contest between Joe's insistence on a conventional genre version of his relationship with Norma and his present

circumstances and Betty's categorical refusal to accept such an outmoded explanation: 'No. I haven't heard any of this. I never got those telephone calls and I've never been in this house. Now get your things together and let's get out of here.' In this moment, seen alone in a mid-shot speaking forcefully and with conviction, the film portrays Betty as a new possibility for Hollywood; she is fully versed in Hollywood's past but prepared to cut off the dead weight of the past when it threatens to suffocate her relationship with Joe. What might be considered the political unconscious of the film can be identified at this level where it dramatises the contest between the film industry's past and present.

Unlike Betty, Joe remains a prisoner of this past. He lists the many extravagant gifts Norma has showered him with, metaphorically weighing him down, and pessimistically declines Betty's invitation, unable to believe that their script will ever sell. This judgement is presented as a verdict on their personal relationship and its chances of success: 'I've got a good deal here, a long-term contract with no options.' Joe hides behind the transactional business jargon of the industry, almost impersonating Sheldrake, cynically appraising his situation, but also wishing to 'save' Betty from any further involvement with 'a man of his sort'. He encourages Betty to go out to Arizona and marry Artie. In one shot, Joe is in the foreground looking down and out of frame, Betty stands behind him to the right of frame, looking at him intently but unable to see his face. Joe is clearly attempting to do the 'noble thing' by sacrificing his happiness for Betty, and allowing her to escape this 'whole nasty mess'. Joe's expression is one of emotional restraint, even suppression, as he masks his true feelings and lies to Betty: 'I like it that way.' When Betty admits that she can't look at him, Joe suggests: 'How about looking for the exit?' The whole scene has played out as if on a film set, Joe and Betty surrounded by the set decorations of Norma's career, with Joe scripting the end of their relationship according to a standard set of melodramatic conventions.

As the music swells, Joe escorts Betty out of the house; the scene cuts to a shot of Betty walking towards the formidable, ornate black iron doors at the entrance to Norma's house, as if she were exiting an ostentatious prison. Joe wishes Betty luck in finishing the script and invites her and Artie over for a swim, as he switches on the pool lights. Betty takes one last look at Joe and then runs to Connie's car. After Betty leaves, a shot cuts to Norma, her face framed by the iron gates, looking down on Joe as he re-enters the house and closes the gates, an image of her power and of Joe's entrapment. Joe slowly ascends the stairs and

walks past Norma into his bedroom. In an eerie shot, Norma pauses before a hallway mirror to gaze at her reflection as she removes sticking plaster from her face, as if preparing for her next 'scene', the moment indicating Norma's gradual descent into her own pure manufactured image and its attendant madness.

Norma enters Joe's room as he is packing his suitcase, clearly having intended to leave all along. A close-up shows Norma's distraught face, her hands gripping the door frame, she is overcome with desperation and terror. Joe informs her that is returning to his job on the copy desk in Dayton. Norma becomes increasingly desperate, calling for Max and imploring Joe to stay: 'I can't face life without you ... I'm not afraid to die.' Joe remains unmoved by Norma's pleas and threats and while she runs to retrieve the gun, Joe removes a pair of expensive cuff links as though removing hand cuffs. Norma returns cradling the gun, presenting it to Joe who coolly dismisses her threats of suicide: 'Oh sure, if it would make a good scene ... wake up Norma, you'd be killing yourself to an empty house, the audience left twenty years ago.' Joe finally attempts to awaken Norma from her delusions by telling her the truth about DeMille's lack of interest in *Salome* and the real reason for the studio's calls: 'he didn't have the heart to tell you'. Max enters and Joe demands that he tell Norma the truth about the fan letters. Norma appeals to Max who replies stoically: 'Madame is the greatest star of them all.' He then offers to take Joe's bags to the car. Norma is spiralling further into her delusion, gazing into an imaginary future of reclaimed stardom, as she grips the gun to her chest: 'I'm the greatest star of them all.' Norma appears to be losing touch with reality as she falls deeper into her fantasies of returning to the screen, seemingly unaware of Joe's presence until he leaves her, prompting her to whisper: 'No one ever leaves a star, that's what makes a star.'

Joe walks down the stairs and out of the house, followed by a desperate Norma still carrying the gun. As he walks towards the pool, Norma shoots, hitting him twice in the back. Joe stumbles around and Norma shoots a third time hitting Joe in the chest. Joe falls back into the pool, floating face down in the water. The scene cuts to Norma, standing next to a pillar, alone in the frame whispering to herself: 'The stars are ageless.' A slow fade-out and then a shot from below of Joe floating lifeless in the water; police and photographers are seen in the background staring down at him. While his dead body floats in the pool, his voiceover reminds the audience: 'This is where you came in. Back at that pool again, the one I always wanted.'

Joe's voiceover describes the frantic scene, crowds of police, reporters and news cameramen flood Norma's house. As his dead body is placed on a gurney, Joe ponders the irony of the care they show him: 'Funny how gentle people get with you once you're dead.' He also ponders Norma's fate, expressing compassion for her imminent ordeal when the scandal breaks: 'Forgotten star a slayer, yesterday's glamour queen.' (1:44:37-1:44:42). The scandal is already breaking as we see famous Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper filing the story from Norma's bedroom: 'As day breaks over the murder house Norma Desmond, famous star of yesteryear, is in a state of complete mental shock.' The scene anticipates the infamous 1959 study, *Hollywood Babylon* by Kenneth Anger (1987), that revealed the sordid lives of Hollywood's biggest stars. The camera slowly pans to a shot of Norma seated at her dressing table, gazing at her reflection in a mirror; this time surrounded by police detectives questioning her about her relationship to the dead man. Norma gazes up, out of the frame, her hands twirling, seemingly oblivious to the detectives' questions.

The problem of how to arrange Norma's exit from the house in her current state of 'mental shock' is ingeniously but characteristically solved by Max, who persuades the detectives to allow him to direct one final scene with Norma. Max descends the staircase and begins to direct the waiting news cameramen. He stands among the cameras, assuming what must once have been a customary position, and issues directions for the lights and camera angles as Norma pauses at the top of the stairs. Max points his white gloved hand for the cameras to follow: 'Lights. Are you ready Norma?' Norma, clearly dazed and disoriented, plaintively asks: 'What is the scene? Where am I?' From among the assembled cameramen, Max leans out and declares with authority: 'This is the staircase of the palace.'

That is all the direction Norma requires. Max barks 'Action' and the cameras begin to roll as Norma makes her descent. Joe's voiceover describes this final act of mercy: 'Life which can be strangely merciful had taken pity on Norma Desmond. The dream she had clung to so desperately had enfolded her.' Norma walks slowly down the stairs as if hypnotised, raising her arms and twirling her hands in imitation of Salome. She stops and breaks out of character, becoming herself again. Mistaking Max for DeMille she asks if she can say a few words of gratitude: 'I just want to tell you how happy I am to be back in the studio again making a picture ... You see, this is my life.' As she speaks, Norma looks directly into the camera, addressing both her imaginary and her real audience, 'those wonderful people in the dark'. After informing Max/DeMille that she is ready for her close-up, Norma dances slowly and seductively towards the camera, back in the character of Salome the temptress, as the musical score rises to a crescendo and Norma's face fills the screen one final time.

Characters

Joe Gillis

The audience first sees the character of Joe Gillis lying face down in a swimming pool, dead, shot three times. What is remarkable about this introduction is that we learn these details from Gillis himself who describes the manner of his death in the film's opening voiceover narration. The unsettling inclusion of Gillis's narration provides a key feature of his character. As Gillis recounts the story of his own murder, in a flashback that opens with the struggling writer attempting to keep his car out of the hands of two insurance agents attempting to repossess it because of overdue payments, his voice has the familiar tone of hard-boiled detective fiction or one of the doomed characters in film noir. Gillis's narration is unsentimental, pitiless and cynical. We learn that Gillis is a former newspaper man from Dayton, Ohio, who came to Hollywood to make his name as a screenwriter but whose scripts are failing to attract any interest from the studios. Gillis's most obvious trait is his hard-bitten cynicism and this is explained succinctly as the result of coming to understand that Hollywood is a ruthless economic enterprise that views films as products or commodities. It is clear that Gillis has had to adjust his own expectations to survive in this system but even his efforts to write popular genre films such as his script entitled *Bases Loaded*, a baseball film that would seem to meet all the criteria for a mass audience film, with its stock characters and familiar plot, are met with a lack of interest from producers.

Wilder portrays Gillis as a man who bravely came to Hollywood to become a writer but who has been defeated by the narrow parameters of the studio system. While he once produced scripts that are described by Betty Schaefer as showing genuine talent, he has been willing to compromise that talent and attempted to write scripts in line with what he sees as the formulaic standards of the studios. This willingness to compromise his literary talent or integrity is an important signpost for what later transpires when he meets Norma Desmond and decides to take on the job of 'polishing' her own chaotic and outmoded script for *Salome*. As played by William Holden, soon to become the leading male star of the fifties, Joe is a handsome, likeable and seemingly uncomplicated young man merely trying to achieve success in a highly competitive, profit-driven industry. Yet both female characters, Betty and Norma, detect an underlying weakness in Joe's character, which the

former attempts to redeem and the latter to exploit. Joe is representative of a highly distinctive era of male protagonists. Holden himself came to specialise in such roles, whether as the cynical prisoner of war who profits from his fellow concentration camp inmates in *Stalag 17*, or as yet another opportunistic prisoner of war in *Bridge on the River Kwai*, Holden typified a character unafraid to display his moral ambivalence. In all of these roles, Holden portrays a character who accepts the immoral circumstances that surround him and attempts merely to take his own personal advantage of them to survive. In these films, and in particular in the role of a failed writer in *Sunset Boulevard*, Holden plays a character facing his own individual crisis and who chooses to become a cynical opportunist as this reflects the nature of his situation.

Norma Desmond

The character of Norma Desmond is undoubtedly the most audacious and the most memorable feature of *Sunset Boulevard*. Wilder's decision to cast former silent film star Gloria Swanson in the role was calculated to startle audiences with the shock of recognition. Only two decades earlier, Swanson had indeed been one of Hollywood's greatest stars whose swift disappearance from the screen must have left audiences at the time with a sense of some unexplained mystery. Wilder trades precisely on this sense of a recognisable face that suddenly reappears out of the past; Joe himself remarks, 'Wait a minute, haven't I seen you before? I know your face'. (16:27-16:30) speaking on behalf of the audience as we gaze at Norma's half-forgotten, half-familiar features. Wilder's calculation was based on his conception of Norma as a ghost who continues to haunt the imagination of the film industry. Seemingly forgotten after being cast aside with the advent of sound, Norma floats through her crumbling mansion, part spectre but also, as Joe observes, like a Miss Havisham, permanently caught in a moment, frozen in time, at the precise moment when one particular cultural formation ended – the silent era – and another commenced, the sound film or the 'talkies'.

Wilder presents Norma's existence in a ghoulish light, her home is not only museum-like, filled like an Egyptian tomb with the artifacts of her former reign, but she is also a prisoner of this carefully curated exhibit, as her former director/husband and now manservant Max maintains the house in the manner of an immaculately designed mise-en-scène, each detail perfectly arranged to sustain the illusion of her past greatness. In this sense, Norma is more victim than monster, though initially she appears to personify the monstrous vanity of deluded celebrity and stardom.

As the story progresses, Wilder carefully reveals Norma's very human qualities: her vulnerability, and the terrible price she has had to pay for being the vehicle of the dreams of others, whether those of her famous directors, Max or Cecil B. DeMille himself, her lovers, such as Joe, or her countless fans for whom her image became the screen upon which to project their own desires. Wilder makes clear in the film that Norma's grotesque vanity and self-absorption are the products of the dream factory itself. Norma has gone from being Hollywood's Ego ideal to its Id, its dark, abject and dangerous unconscious. Norma is Hollywood's past, but *Sunset Boulevard* examines this past as a place of trauma, a trauma brought about by rapid and destructive technological change which has left stars such as Norma and her friends adrift in a half-life.

With the character of Norma Desmond, Wilder presents a merciless portrait of the star system that had served the film industry so effectively for most of its history. In one stunning scene, Norma and Joe sit together in her living room watching one of her earlier films which is, in fact, one of Swanson's own films, *Queen Kelly*. In the scene, Norma appears to feed off the luminous beauty of her former youth while Joe watches on disturbed by the juxtaposition of the youthful image on screen and the desperate woman engorging her younger self with a ravenous gaze. Norma's character is variously portrayed in the film as a type of vampire or 'spider woman' who lures men to their death, either the actual death of Joe himself or the living death endured by Max. Yet, in this highly affecting scene, the audience views Norma watching herself and drawing some form of vital sustenance from her own silent image which appears to preserve a youthful, beautiful earlier self, an ideal that she can consume endlessly. Norma is both vampire and victim, feeding off her past youthful glory. Wilder, however, presents this fate as a terrible punishment for her former fame and adulation. Norma is now her own solitary audience, condemned by the force of circumstance to gaze upon herself in adoring isolation, cut off from a world that has left Norma and her screen persona locked away in a forgotten past.

Max Von Mayerling

'In the twenties there were three directors of promise. D.W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille and Max Von Mayerling.'^(1:25:42-1:25:54)

Max is speaking with Joe while they wait for Norma on the Paramount lot. He could easily have added a fourth name, that of Erich von Stroheim himself, director of the mythic, silent epic *Greed*, a film that epitomised the emergent ambition and scope of the silent film medium. Just as the casting of a great former silent era star in the role of Norma, so too, casting Erich von Stroheim in the role of her former director and husband was an inspired choice by Wilder. Max attends to his duties as Norma's man-servant with an air of Germanic gravity and efficiency; in all his interactions with his employer and with Joe, Max is discreet and dispassionate, never betraying his former status as either a great director or as Norma's husband. When he shows Joe into his room in the mansion, Joe asks whose room it was and Max perfunctorily replies: 'It was the husband's room'. Max is at once the curator of Norma's delusions – he is revealed as the writer of the weekly fan letters she receives – but also as the tragic former director/lover who cannot let go of the image of the young star he helped to create, any more than Norma herself can emerge from her existence as an eternal cinematic sleepwalker. Max is a tragic and pitiable figure because he is still in love with Norma, or at least, with the young woman he molded into a star. He now serves a kind of penance or punishment as her servant and the enabler of her delusions. One of the film's bitterest moments comes when Max must drive Norma back to the studio that they had both helped to establish, with Max attired in the uniform of a chauffeur. Max learns that the reason for the calls from the studio is that someone working for DeMille wants to lease their ostentatious foreign automobile, not because of any interest in Norma's script for *Salome*. Max receives this information with the kind of emotionless resignation that typifies his character as someone who has stoically accepted their fate as if serving a life sentence for some ambiguous crime. In another of the film's uncanny moments of self-reference and cinematic allusion, Max is momentarily restored to his position as a visionary filmmaker as he arranges for Norma's arrest in the form of a final, grand exit from her mansion. As Max takes his place among the assembled news cameramen, he gives precise, authoritative directions for the positioning of the lights and cameras; he takes charge and his authority is not questioned. Norma arrives at the head of the stairs surrounded by police detectives and photographers.

She stares down, clearly confused and disoriented, but seeing Max flanked by the cameras she plaintively asks him: 'What is the scene?', 'Where am I?' (1:47:27-1:47:31) Norma has fallen completely into the dream world of her own past, unable to distinguish reality from illusion. Max gently provides Norma with the most familiar direction possible, taken from one of her innumerable past performances: 'This is the staircase of the palace'. (1:47:33-1:47:36) As Norma begins her final descent, Max orders: 'Alright cameras. Action'. Max's last merciful act as a director is to allow Norma to enter into a character from which she may never emerge.

Betty Schaefer

Desperate for a studio to pick up one of his scripts, Joe stands in the office of the producer Sheldrake, who calls in a script reader to give her verdict on Joe's latest effort. Unaware that Joe is standing behind her, Betty offers a technically precise evaluation of the script's shortcomings as an already tired rehashing of generic formulas that would be unlikely to attract audience interest. This is far from a superficial or uninformed critique as the audience later learns that Betty grew up around the studios with both her parents working in technical roles for the studios. Betty herself was groomed to become an actress but, in the eyes of the studios, lacked the qualities of a potential star. She does have a lifetime understanding of how the studio system operates and has become an aspiring scriptwriter herself. Joe listens to her evaluation of his script *Bases Loaded* and dismisses her as 'one of the message kids, just a story won't do', (7:00-7:03) referring to the emerging trend in Hollywood to produce films that addressed important contemporary social issues. Joe places himself at the opposite end of this spectrum, defending the merits of films as pure entertainment. Yet, in making this defense of film as mere entertainment, Joe is aligning himself with Hollywood's past, in a bygone era in which films required no wider social importance. Betty is accused of being one of those 'message kids' because she represents a new generation who value the medium of film as a vehicle of social commentary and artistic originality. Betty justifies her criticism of *Bases Loaded* by explaining that she recognised Joe's name from other scripts which had shown the promise of originality and genuine feeling, a script such as *Dark Windows*, for example, which contained a portrayal of a teacher and her 'threadbare existence'. It is this script that Betty and Joe attempt to 'resurrect' together, forming a writing partnership in which their respective talents and differing sensibilities are combined.

Although Betty is already romantically involved with Joe's best friend Artie Green, who has previously warned Joe that Betty is 'his girl', the pair fall in love while they work to complete the rewrite of *Dark Windows*, Betty having successfully reawakened Joe's belief in his talent and artistic principles. The scenes of Betty and Joe working together on the new script of *Dark Windows* contrast dramatically with the scenes of Joe working on Norma's script for *Salome*, attempting to patch together something that will never reach the screen. Like its original author, *Salome* is a relic of Hollywood's past, a ghost script, and the image of Joe attempting to resurrect Norma's gargantuan vanity project is an allegory of the film industry itself still attempting to breathe life into bloated biblical epics because of the fear of new mediums such as television, in the belief that television cannot compete with the scale of such productions. Against the lugubrious atmosphere inside Norma's living room that depicts Joe artistically imprisoned in this cinematic mausoleum, the scenes in which he and Betty are working on their script radiate a hopefulness, an optimism about the potential for a new Hollywood cinema. Betty herself is presented as this prototype of the new Hollywood, well-versed in its history, but determined not to repeat it. The dream of a 'New Hollywood' cinema would not actually take shape for another two decades, testament to the tremendous weight of Hollywood's past and the difficulties of uncoupling itself from this legacy.

Issues and themes

Hollywood's postwar role

Film taste in the postwar era

Filmed in 1949 as the initial dynamics of the Cold War were emerging and Hollywood was addressing other domestic threats such as the arrival of television, *Sunset Boulevard* clearly examines the kind of role that the film industry will play in this new social order. The war years themselves had seen Hollywood maintain its steady production of genre films for an audience that was conditioned to see this system as the natural order of narrative filmmaking. After the war, it was to be expected that a changing world order would be accompanied by a changing popular taste in films. After more than three decades of an established studio system, it was not immediately apparent how Hollywood could change sufficiently to engage new audiences. Such a generalised cultural anxiety over the role of the film industry in the postwar world is given expression in *Sunset Boulevard's* own examination of Hollywood's forgotten past, embodied in the character of Norma Desmond, and the relationship this past has to Hollywood's present and the possibility of a crisis in its continued relevance for postwar audiences. The essential and disturbing question posed by the film concerns the sudden disappearance of the silent era with the coming of sound; if this established and successful culture of silent films, with its original stars and great films that enjoyed international popularity, could suddenly disappear overnight, what was to prevent a similar fate from befalling Hollywood in this new era?

Sunset Boulevard poses the question, unsurprisingly, in the form of a hybrid genre picture – part-melodrama, part-film noir, part-horror film. Just as Norma was suddenly and completely abandoned by her millions of once-adoring fans, so too the film industry itself faces the prospect of such abandonment in a changing society with the rise of suburban living and the postwar investment in consumer society, most notably television and the unstoppable rise of commercial advertising which served its role of promoting the idea of the family as the key component of a postwar consumer society. Instead of attending the cinema for entertainment, families now gathered around their TV set in the evening all watching together, the whole nation watching the same shows at exactly the same moment, the ultimate dream of a captive

audience of potential consumers. In the face of such fundamental change, *Sunset Boulevard* dramatises the threat of extinction to the existing studio system, which may be subject to the same theory of cultural selection that rendered the silent era extinct.

When Joe drives into Norma's house on Sunset Boulevard, he enters a lost world, akin to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's vision of a re-discovered world of dinosaurs who have escaped extinction by remaining cut off from history. Norma's antediluvian existence symbolises the current crisis facing Hollywood. Like the dinosaurs, and like the silent era, how can Hollywood adapt to new and challenging circumstances, to the complexities of generational change that the film presciently foresees on the threshold of the fifties as the arrival of the teenager and of rock music and an entire world of youth culture is waiting to explode in the coming decade? The uncertainty of the answer is what lends *Sunset Boulevard* its strangely haunted atmosphere. Norma, Max and the other waxworks are ghosts from the past life of a once vibrant era synonymous with modernity, the 'crazy twenties', with its own iconic stars such as Valentino, Chaplin, Keaton and, of course, Swanson herself. Yet, this world has now effectively vanished and its memory is only barely kept alive by Max's strenuous calculations and Norma's stubborn refusal to surrender her fantasy of a return. *Sunset Boulevard* looks closely at Hollywood's past, delving into its archaic myths and excesses and its greatness. But like Conan Doyle's dinosaurs, it too is cut off from history and out of place in the new contemporary world order, in which Hollywood can expect to be called upon to perform a new role at the moment of Pax Americana when the United States was projecting a triumphal image of itself across a conquered world.

The culture industry

The role of art and the artist as individual creator

As the camera slowly pans across the façade of the Alto Nido apartments and into the window of Joe Gillis's living room, the audience is shown a classic image of the solitary writer/artist at work. Joe is sitting on a bed, hunched over his typewriter, a pencil in his mouth, concentrating intently on the latest script he is laboring to finish. His voiceover informs us: 'So I sat there grinding out original stories, two a week, only I seem to have lost my touch. Maybe they weren't original enough, maybe they were too original. All I know is, they didn't sell.' (3:01-3:18). Joe's concentration is interrupted by the sound of his door buzzer and two insurance agents demanding the repossession of his car for failing to make the necessary payments. In this brief scene, the film outlines the predicament of the writer/creative artist working in a creative industry, with all of the contradictions that that phrase suggests. Joe is a worker in the culture industry, he works from a one-room apartment and cannot pay his bills. We learn from his voiceover that he is caught in a paradox, producing stories that may not be sufficiently original and unable to catch the attention of a producer, yet might also be too original and therefore outside the acceptable narrative parameters of the studios. The fine calibrations required to meet the studio's expectations are a mystery that he cannot fathom alone in his room.

This scene establishes the predicament that sets Joe on his path to Norma's house but it is also representative of the film's wider concern with the role of the artist in such an enormously complex industrial system designed to produce commercial works of culture. Joe attempts to work from the traditional position of the individual creative artist, harnessing his imagination and his talent to write stories with popular appeal to audiences. Yet Joe has quite clearly reached a crossroads where he can neither judge the originality or the derivativeness of his stories. Joe has already abandoned what was once considered the lesser literary field of journalism – he formerly worked on the copy desk on a Dayton newspaper – to write 'original stories' for the movies. When the audience meets Joe at the beginning of the film's extended flashback, he is facing the existential crisis of all artists – destitution, the lack of a clear artistic vision, and living in Los Angeles without a car. Desperate to keep his car, Joe visits the producer Sheldrake who merely confirms Joe's previous confusion by suggesting that

his script for *Bases Loaded*, intended to be a gritty, heartwarming baseball picture, might be transformed into a vehicle for Betty Hutton: 'If we made it a girls' softball team, put in a few numbers. Might make a cute musical.' (7:48-7:57) While in Sheldrake's office, Joe has also listened to a young reader's harsh assessment of his script as derivative and unfilmable. As Betty leaves, Joe calls after her, 'Next time I'll write you *The Naked and The Dead*,' (7:29-7:31) alluding to the acclaimed postwar novel by Norman Mailer. The exchange with Sheldrake and Betty appears to make clear Joe's choices; either to compromise any artistic ambitions he might have and work strictly with the formulas demanded by the studios, or abandon the culture industry and seek to create something undeniably original on the scale of a novel such as Mailer's classic story of the Second World War.

While the scene in Sheldrake's office is played largely for comic effect – at one stage, as Betty leaves, Sheldrake mistakenly refers to her as Miss Kramer, a reference to the socially progressive writer and director Stanley Kramer, whose films, such as *The Defiant Ones*, were attempting to address significant social issues in postwar America, such as race and segregation – Joe's situation is desperate, which he fails to persuade Sheldrake to see. When he later pleads with his agent to lend him money to deter the insurance men, his agent, who is playing golf, explains that he will not lend Joe the money because that might delay the flow of his creative powers. *Sunset Boulevard* makes the clear link between money and culture, the situation of the individual artist and the demands of a culture industry organised along strictly industrial lines of mass production. Joe's strategic retreat into Norma's house might initially have been taken to evade the insurance agents, but it is also a clear response to the generally philistine customs of the studios and their refusal to take any economic risks on a creative 'project'. Joe cynically agrees to work on Norma's script after he has surrendered any hope of ever meeting the demands of an industrial system of cultural production, itself based cynically on profit and the careful minimisation of risk, with scant regard for the needs, economic or otherwise, of the artists and writers who provide the raw material for the industry.

The price of fame

The star system and the dream factory

In his seminal study *Stars* (1979), film theorist Richard Dyer identified a specific narrative around stardom that had commenced as early as the thirties, what Dyer calls ‘the dream soured’. In the fan magazines of the thirties, articles were already appearing that reported the tragic fall of great stars into obscurity, ‘through the star system, failures of the dream are also represented’. Dyer (1979) notes that consumption and extravagance are the ‘key notes of the image of stardom’. *Sunset Boulevard* takes up this idea but also illustrates the price of such unfettered success and the expectations of an adoring public that stars should not live like ordinary people. Wilder dramatises what Dyer (1979) identifies as the dark reality of such conspicuous consumption:

Consumption can be characterized as wastefulness and decadence, while success may be short-lived or a psychological burden. The fan magazines carried articles such as ... ‘They, Too, Were Stars’ (about big stars who have declined into obscurity), ‘Tragic Mansions’ (about superstitions that have grown up around dwellings that stand as ‘monuments of shattered careers’) and ‘The Price They Pay for Fame (‘In Hollywood, Health, Friends, Beauty, even Life Itself, are Sacrificed on the altar of Terrible Ambition’... These are all from the thirties. The themes of decadence, sexual license and wanton extravagance emerged more strongly in the fifties and sixties, not only in fan magazines and the press but also in novels, and even films set in Hollywood.

It is clear from Dyer’s analysis that there was already a clear context for *Sunset Boulevard* that had been defined decades earlier. The very image of ‘Tragic Mansions’ is central to Wilder’s vision of Norma as stubbornly existing in an unchanging world while the rest of society changes around her, akin to the tragic literary figure that Joe compares her house to; Miss Havisham in her decaying wedding dress. Norma’s house perfectly illustrates the idea of a ‘monument to a shattered career’. Joe comes upon her house as though discovering a lost civilisation: the relic of a luxury automobile gathering dust in her garage, the empty swimming pool that Joe imagines as the long-ago scene of famous stars at play enjoying the spoils of their celebrity, which he later sees infested with rats. Norma’s house conforms closely to the themes outlined in an article such as ‘Tragic Mansions’: ‘Yet even the Tragic Mansions article is sub-headed “the strange story of heartbreak houses in heartbreak town”, implying that the idea of tragedy and suffering being endemic to Hollywood was commonplace’.

It is clear that Joe already has such an image in mind when he arrives at Norma’s house, and this image of wanton extravagance is lent a macabre twist when he is mistaken for the undertaker and shown the dead chimpanzee in Norma’s bedroom and learns that Norma intends to bury him in a luxurious coffin.

Sunset Boulevard makes the case that the star system has something cruel and inhuman at its centre. Both DeMille and Max comment on the very young age at which Norma was discovered, she is variously referred to as just a girl when she rose to stardom. The image of Gloria Swanson in *Queen Kelly* that Norma and Joe watch together is one of radiant youthfulness and beauty. The star system is viewed in *Sunset Boulevard* as a system for exploiting such youth and beauty, qualities which Norma clearly possessed to rare extent and which directors such as Max and DeMille identified as the precious material for their films. Max observes ‘she was just sixteen when I discovered her’, the idea of a star’s discovery comparable to the discovery of a precious metal. The cruelty of this system is revealed in the film as one that is based on an elaborate deception. Norma believes that as a great star she will always remain one, hence her immortal rebuke to Joe: ‘I am big, it’s the pictures that got small.’ Norma lives in her own tragic mansion still believing that she will one day return to the studio, to DeMille, and will take her place once again on the screen. Her script for *Salome* testifies to the depth of her self-delusion, believing that as a middle-aged woman she can still perform the role of a much younger character. *Sunset Boulevard* also comments directly on the exploitation of female stars for their beauty, a finite resource in each individual female star, but one that merely needs to be replaced when the time comes. Even the figure of the great director DeMille, who is treated generously and respectfully in the film, confesses that the last time he saw Norma was the day Lindbergh landed in Paris, which was May 21, 1927. While DeMille is still afforded the luxury of filming biblical epics, while old enough to be Norma’s father, Norma herself is rendered an archaic figure from the past because she has lost the precious commodity that once made her a female star.

Hollywood's historical past

The Ghost in the Machine

J. Hoberman in his 2011 study, *An army of phantoms: American movies and the making of the Cold War*, observes that:

With *Sunset Boulevard* the movies recognize themselves as history. But while the silent era, as James Agee would write in *Sight and Sound*, is 'granted a kind of barbarous grandeur and intensity', present-day Hollywood is a ruin ... Swanson and Stroheim are supported by other silent 'waxworks' ... It's over; they are all ghosts. *Sunset Boulevard* is narrated from beyond the grave – Wilder had actually shot an opening scene, discarded after a disastrous preview, with the dead protagonist perched on a slab in the morgue, recounting his tale to an audience of fellow corpses. It's as if the movie colony was, as Diana Trilling called the world shown by Orwell's 1984, 'a perpetual nightmare of living death.'

In its short history, Hollywood's film industry had already been marked by a series of decisive breaks, some technological, as the impact of sound, like a giant asteroid, instantaneously rendered extinct an entire film ecosystem; others on the scale of world events, the Depression in the thirties ushering in the era of the 'talkies' and a newly sophisticated style of movie speech, and the Second World War, perhaps the most decisive break of all. *Sunset Boulevard* looks back at Hollywood's past from a perspective of gradual decline and fall. It is not only the great silent stars themselves who, living on inside their 'tragic mansions', provide an object lesson in the faded glory of a once great industry struggling to remain significant in a new era of world history. The studios themselves appear diminished in certain essential aspects. When Joe pitches his script for *Bases Loaded* to the producer Sheldrake and speculates that the film could be made for around a million, Sheldrake is horrified at the expense and the economic risk. His solution is to turn Joe's script into a low-risk vehicle for an established musical star and bank on her current popularity to make a profit, despite the farcical nature of the changes. When Norma visits Cecil B. DeMille, perhaps the greatest director of the silent era to still be working in the current period, he is still making the same biblical epics as he was in the twenties, and the cast of aged film extras who recognise Norma are themselves ghosts from this ancient time.

Sunset Boulevard represents a very early example of what the theorist Frederic Jameson has identified as a dominant feature of postmodern Hollywood films, what Jameson describes as a 'nostalgia for the

present'. This is most clearly evident in the style of period films that faithfully reproduce the style, fashion, manners, or 'total look' of a recent period, usually associated with a particular decade, the twenties, thirties, forties, fifties etc. This period style is then explored for its distance from the present, seen as some long-ago time, when in truth it might only be a decade or two earlier. A nostalgia for the present manifests itself most strongly in a society that cannot imagine an alternative future other than the dominant capitalist vision of a market society, social classes and the desires of the privatised, individual subject. *Sunset Boulevard* provides its audience with a prototype for this idea of a recent past that is both close and yet distant in time. *Sunset Boulevard* was made only twenty years after the demise of the silent era, but this recent period appears in the film as some version of film antiquity, essentially foreign and unknowable, its customs and manners strange and archaic. Norma herself is presented as some version of the aristocracy, Hollywood's ancient regime, who, after the revolution of sound, were long ago sealed up in their mansions and forgotten by the outside world.

Wilder examines this legacy of the film industry's past to investigate what it might reveal about the possible future for the industry. One disturbing question that arises in the film concerns the prospect of continued decline, particularly in terms of the new technological competition that the film industry faces with the arrival of television. The silent era then stands in *Sunset Boulevard* as both object lesson and portent of an inescapable fate. Does Hollywood's past teach the lesson that all great cultural empires will crumble and fall when faced with an all-conquering rival? Are those who currently enjoy their positions of lofty eminence within the studios – stars, producers, directors – destined to face the same fate as Norma, Max and the other waxworks who were once great stars and visionary filmmakers? What lessons might the past provide that could enable those in the present from being condemned to such a fate? The atmosphere of a kind of gothic terror that hangs over the world of *Sunset Boulevard* is produced by this fear of being trapped within the tomb of one's own past, a kind of Poe-like 'premature burial', (See Edgar Allan Poe's classic short story 'Premature Burial') entombed alive within the cultural paraphernalia of one's time. For Hollywood, this is the true terror of Norma's fate, that it may represent the fate of an entire industry unable to escape its own past, its own extravagance and excess, its own fixation with an image of itself that has lost its lustre and hence, its popular appeal, condemned to exist within the tragic mansion of the studio system itself.

Language and style

Sunset Boulevard is a difficult film to classify according to the dominant system of Hollywood genres. It is largely a drama, but contains elements of a period film (with its references to the silent era and Norma's period style mansion summoning the 'crazy twenties'); a horror film, combining the themes of a haunted house, ghosts from the past and Norma herself as a monstrous embodiment of Hollywood illusion and fantasy; a psychological thriller that probes the twisted, unstable mind of a former star turned murderer; and finally, 'a nightmare self-portrait' (Hoberman, 2011) of Hollywood itself, holding up a mirror to the industry and its crisis of identity. *Sunset Boulevard* is therefore a multi-layered genre film that self-consciously comments on the genre system as a staple component of the film industry and the production of narrative films.

However, the genre which *Sunset Boulevard* perhaps most closely resembles is that of film noir, and the macabre opening scene that reveals the dead body of the narrator lying face down in a swimming pool immediately establishes the close relationship of the film to this wider genre of films from the previous decade. The voiceover narration provided by the dead man himself introduces a strangely supernatural element that requires the audience's willing suspension of disbelief, but is perfectly in keeping with the film's consistently morbid tone. Joe Gillis, the failed screenwriter, narrates the story of his own murder, his own final posthumous masterpiece. The style of Joe's voiceover narration conveys the familiar tones of the film noir protagonist conducting an investigation. Upon witnessing the outcome of Joe's murder, the audience is plunged into an extended flashback, another conventional narrative technique of film noir. Joe takes us into the past, back to the starting point at which the story of his demise can be traced. From this, we are carefully guided through a netherworld of studio offices, drug stores, sunny golf courses, Hollywood streets, and finally into the seemingly abandoned mansion of a forgotten star. Joe arrives at Norma's house after a chase scene and stashing his car in Norma's garage. He immediately senses that he has stumbled into a disturbingly uncanny place, a haunted house, inhabited by dead

chimpanzees and former movie stars. As Joe walks past the swimming pool, he passes the scene of the future crime, the scene of his own death, already known to the audience but not to Joe at that moment. As the story is told in flashback and the audience knows that this is the place where Joe will eventually die, there is a sense of doom that hangs over the film, the tragic apprehension of an inexorable fate that cannot be evaded, of the powerlessness of the narrator to escape a murder that has already taken place.

The genre of film noir is typically seen to have emerged during a period of darkness across the world in the shape of the Second World War. However, instead of commenting on international conflict such as war, film noir was located in the urban world of crime, an essentially anti-social world that despite its metropolitan setting delved among the basest human drives such as greed, ambition, lust, desire, savagery, fear and revenge. The world of film noir that *Sunset Boulevard* borrows from most directly is comprised of these elements of base desire and ambition, personal delusion and naked calculation. Like the anti-hero of *Double Indemnity*, Joe believes he is smart enough to concoct a plot that will see him resolve his past failures and defeat his adversaries. Joe is clearly not motivated by greed or ambition when he concocts his plan to use Norma to pay off his creditors and escape Hollywood for Dayton; however, he does surrender to a fatal character flaw, believing that Norma will prove an easy mark, that he can exploit her vulnerability and isolation. The jaded, world weary tone of Joe's narration suggests that it is only posthumously that he comes to fully realise the extent of his mistake.

The film's black and white cinematography was not unusual at the time; color only became a standard format in the later fifties as Hollywood competed with television for a more spectacular viewing experience, while also introducing larger screen ratios such as Vista Vision and Cinemascope. The film's black and white photography is in keeping with the dark vision of a world that is hidden from public view. Norma exists among the shadows of her past, Max and the waxworks her only contacts. The black and white cinematography also functions to place the film in the tradition of Hollywood's past, a look that has not changed since the silent era and the image of Norma projected on her living room screen as a young silent star.

The visual aesthetic of film noir has often been likened to the great German Expressionist films of the twenties. Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, *The Golem*, *Nosferatu* and *Phantom* displayed a highly singular aesthetic. Concerned with using the medium of film to explore heightened states of psychological distress, terror and the fear of the unknown, these films used many of the visual devices of Expressionist painting and sculpture. Expressionist films were also concerned with themes of madness and betrayal, the psychic aftermath of the terrors of the First World War and the precarious economic and social relations that defined Germany in the postwar period. These works gave rise to one of the greatest studies of cinema, Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), in which Kracauer examined these films as representing a portent of the rise of Nazism a decade later. Wilder himself was a German émigré who came to Hollywood after working in the German cinema and was familiar with these works. Along with other émigré German directors such as Fritz Lang, whose two great films *Metropolis* and *M* were highly influential, Wilder was among a number of directors such as Orson Welles, Carol Reed and Otto Preminger who translated the visual aesthetic of German Expressionism into the genres of crime drama and horror. *Sunset Boulevard*, with its combination of elements from both genres, borrows heavily from the legacy of German Expressionism. Norma's house, while not as visually disorienting as irrational geometry of the set design in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, retains a sense of that earlier film's evocation of an unsettling space, stuffed with relics from the past and threatening to entomb those who enter it.

Where film noir adopted elements of the cinematic language of German Expressionism, Wilder took from both these film languages a visual aesthetic that revealed the crude psychic reality that lies beneath the carefully manufactured facade of Hollywood sophistication and glamour. Norma exists in a netherworld of resentment. Since being abandoned by her fans and the studio, her life is defined by an acute sense of betrayal, she is the victim of constant deceit and a lifetime of extreme psychological manipulation, as DeMille himself admits when he alludes to the effect of a dozen press agents creating an unsustainable image of the self that will haunt Norma as she waits for her moment of redemption in her 'tragic mansion'. The film aesthetic of *Sunset Boulevard* bears a remarkable resemblance to a cinematic quality that Siegfried Kracauer observed in *Greed*, the great flawed masterpiece directed by Erich von Stroheim: '... physical reality is revealed out of a desire to pierce the fabric of conventions. Erich von Stroheim in *Greed* and elsewhere has his camera dwell on life at its crudest – all that rankles beneath the thin veneer of civilization' (Kracauer, 1960). *Sunset Boulevard*, too, lays bare 'all that rankles beneath the thin veneer' of Hollywood's conception of civilization – its industrial system of cultural production, its star system, the disposability of film icons, the calculation of profit from the work of artists, the cynical exploitation of talent, the commodification of youth and beauty and the transformation of female beauty into spectacle.

Perspective on the text

In his nostalgic ode to the Hollywood star system, 'To the Film Industry in Crisis', Frank O'Hara (1957) names both those legendary figures who reappear as forgotten star Norma Desmond and tormented former director Max Von Mayerling:

'Eric von Stroheim, the seducer of
mountain climbers' gasping spouses,'

'... Gloria Swanson reclining,'

O'Hara's poem 'To the Film Industry in Crisis', published just seven years after the release of *Sunset Boulevard*, frames its melancholy homage in a remarkably similar tone to Wilder's film, emphasising the reality of both an industrial system and the crisis it was undergoing in the postwar era. Hollywood's origins are very much a central concern of Wilder's film, and the emergence of a motion picture industry that was organised from the beginning as a business enterprise that would have to make room for the artistic talents that created its products. This contradiction between the artistic imagination and business was perfectly captured in the defining image of Hollywood as a 'dream factory', a place where the imagination of artist would collide with a Fordist model of economic organisation. The idea of the 'dream factory' was an early example of Hollywood's mastery of public relations, selling itself as a place where 'stars' were created. Yet, like any industry, despite its uniquely mythical products and personnel, Hollywood was liable to enter periods of crisis. *Sunset Boulevard* is an investigation of such a crisis, a report on something more deeply disturbing than the standard economic cycle of decline and renewal, boom and bust.

Wilder's dark reappraisal of Hollywood's history, and what appears as its haunted present, is memorably dramatised in the film's prologue, or 'flash-forward'. As police cars speed along the iconic Sunset Boulevard, a voiceover narration informs us of a murder, the murder of the narrator himself, who is seen dead, lying face down in a swimming pool. This startling image, shot from below the surface of the pool and revealing the dead man's face frozen in an expression of what appears to be surprise or bewilderment, a now unchanging expression of fatal recognition, suggesting knowledge of his killer but a final instant of confusion or failure to grasp the meaning of the event itself. As the audience watches the body of the dead man floating in the water, the narration is delivered in the familiar style of hard-boiled crime

fiction, the genre of film noir, cynical and fatalistic in tone, grimly amused at the absurdity of the narrator observing the circumstances surrounding his death.

The opening scene in *Sunset Boulevard* perfectly condenses an atmosphere of dread, scandal, sensation and the bitter resignation of the narrator's acceptance of his fate, almost acknowledging that it could not have been otherwise. The image of the murdered man floating face down in a swimming pool on the grounds of a Hollywood mansion evokes a combination of violence and privilege, fear and opulence, luxury and corruption, contradictory oppositions that set the mood for the story to come. This violent act occurring in one of those 'grim sunset castles' suggest dark and malevolent forces surging beneath the veneer of Hollywood exclusivity. Wilder's stylistic audacity in this scene, depicting the dead man as though floating in mid-air, introduces the film's own atmosphere of theatricality, artifice, performance and surreal spectacle, the 'staging' of real life according to the demands of the telling image, the revealing shot or pose. Joe's death at the opening of the film provides a dramatic example of the staging of an elaborate scene, the first of a series of morbid tableaux.

Wilder plays with the familiar conventions of the crime genre, but as the murdered man is himself the controlling voice of the film, the question of detection is rendered largely defunct; the murdered man presumably knows the identity of his killer. What then is the object of the investigation? What replaces the standard element of detection is a more forensic procedure, an examination of the causes of death beyond the identity of the killer, an account of how the narrator came to be lying face down in a swimming pool belonging a famous, former star in one of the 'tragic mansions' atop Sunset Boulevard. The exact cause of the man's death is then not a mystery to be solved, but rather, the wider circumstances that preceded it. This way of framing the narrative allows Wilder to expand the scope of his investigation, to focus on a much wider crisis or mystery than just the death of one unknown screenwriter.

The murder of Joe Gillis and his subsequent narration from some mysterious realm beyond the grave, or the morgue, a kind of after-life that allows him one last chance to create a story, suggests another of the film's principal concerns. Wilder depicts Hollywood as a haunted domain, haunted by its own past, by the ghosts of previous eras whose presence cannot be dispelled as their earlier selves have been captured and preserved on celluloid, therefore to enjoy a permanent

half-life. In one typically haunting and uncanny scene, Joe and Norma sit in her living room, itself a theatre to Norma herself, decorated with countless portraits of her at the peak of her stardom, watching one of Norma's silent films projected on a giant screen that appears when a painting of Norma is hoisted to the ceiling. The film they watch together shows the image of a supposedly young Norma in close-up, pleading emotively and silently with someone out of frame. The face of the young actress is shot luminously, testifying to her youthful purity and beauty, an almost religious portrait of the young star and the legendary status we have been told that she enjoyed. The sequence is taken from one of Gloria Swanson's own early films, *Queen Kelly* (1919) and the young Swanson is shot in profile, alone in the frame, which intensifies her mesmerising presence, the shot almost seems as if it is intended as a form of worship as the young Norma/Swanson silently emotes, confirming Norma's earlier claim that she can 'say anything with my eyes'. The scene is intended to convey Norma's intensely narcissistic fascination with her own image, however, as she watches herself on screen, she seems to become just another adoring fan, entranced by the image she is watching. Wilder's choice of this particular scene from Swanson's own silent career also captures the undeniable beauty, not only of Swanson herself but also of the silent film image; it shows audiences unfamiliar with silent film, the kind of rapture it could incite in spectators – the austere and haunting beauty of its images.

As Joe sits watching beside Norma, his discomfort is palpable; unlike Norma, he cannot lose himself in the image and its archaic silent world. Joe, like the audience for *Sunset Boulevard*, is too acutely aware of the startling disjuncture between the youthful actress he is watching on screen and the ageing, former star beside him, whose mesmerised adulation of her younger self disturbs him as he begins to grasp that his role in this 'plot' is to act as witness to this uncanny relationship between Norma's past and present selves and to assist in polishing the script for *Salome*, in their merging once again. While dramatising Norma's enraptured worship of her former self, and intensifying the divided self that Norma clearly struggles with, the unmistakable sign of her growing madness, the scene also functions on a meta-narrative level, signifying the system-wide crisis of the industry that *Sunset Boulevard* is investigating. Wilder poses the question here of what precisely is the relationship between the industry's past and present? What responsibility does the industry have towards those pioneers who were essential to its growth and success as a medium?

Is there a debt owed to former stars such as Norma or directors like Max? Norma herself is rich, as she drunkenly informs Joe, with extensive real estate holdings and oil wells, 'pumping, always pumping'. But these forms of financial prosperity hold no value for her. She feels the acute pain of her exclusion from the film industry, the psychological trauma of being forgotten by thirty million fans. In an effort to reclaim her place and to re-insert herself back into the Hollywood narrative, she has written her own script, *Salome*, which she believes will allow her to re-materialise in the present and end her existence as a ghost from Hollywood's past. Joe gradually perceives this as the true plot he has stumbled into when he parked his car in Norma's spacious garage, that Norma is the ghost in the machine, the spectre haunting the motion picture industry.

In *An army of phantoms: American movies and the making of the Cold War* (2011), film critic and historian J. Hoberman writes:

'Populated by capricious producers, hungry writers, and indifferent agents, *Sunset Boulevard* trades on an insider's view of Hollywood. But even as it works to dispel the notion that motion pictures are made in heaven ('audiences don't know somebody sits down and writes the picture, they think the actors make it up as the picture goes along'), *Sunset Boulevard* evokes their uncanny aura-satirizing as its attests to the power of motion pictures to reanimate the past and restore the dead to life.

The dream factory is Nathaniel West's dream dump, haunted by a pathetic, obsolete, murderous star'. (p. 118)

Norma, Max and their collection of 'waxwork' associates haunt the margins of the industry. Wilder suggests that they have been betrayed in some way by the industry they helped to create. When Norma visits Paramount and DeMille, he appears wracked with guilt that he too has not spoken with Norma for over twenty years and that while he has continued to work, she was abandoned by both her fans and the studio. Wilder's critique of the studio system is that it exists in a state of permanent bad faith, where former stars such as Norma haunt their tragic mansions in the Hollywood hills, their ghostly presence symbolising an indictment of their treatment by the studios that profited from the commodification of their youthful image and talent but is now satisfied for them to remain sealed up in their crypt-like homes. This point is made insistently by Wilder in the lingering close-up on the face of former great director and silent comedian Buster Keaton

whose film, *The General*, is now regarded as one of Hollywood's great masterpieces. Keaton stares into the camera reprising his persona as 'old stone face' but there is a melancholy sadness to his expression, a silent judgement on those who have relegated him to obscurity, one of the true 'greats' of the silent era now reduced to playing a minor role as one of Norma's waxworks. Wilder holds the shot, dwelling on Keaton's forlorn yet stoic expression, his very silence a poignant reminder of the passing of the medium in which he once created such singular and innovative films.

By holding up a cinematic mirror to characters such as Norma, Max and their waxwork friends, all played by significant figures from the silent era, *Sunset Boulevard* invites the audience's condemnation of an industry that could so callously abandon its creative pioneers. The head of MGM studios, the famed tycoon Louis B. Mayer, is said to have 'confronted Wilder, screaming that the Vienna-born filmmaker had disgraced the industry' (Hoberman, 2011). Mayer had correctly read the film's message. As one of the giants of the industry who established perhaps its greatest studio and helped to create the star system and the image of Hollywood as the dream factory, Mayer was understandably provoked by an industry self-portrait that showed Hollywood to be no different to any other commercial enterprise focused primarily on profit, especially so when the Latin motto adorning MGM's famous logo read 'Ars Gratia Artist' or 'Art for art's sake'. Mayer may also have been enraged by Wilder's depiction of how Hollywood, in quintessential capitalist fashion, had managed its first great phase of technological change in the transition from the silent era to the 'age of sound' and the 'talkies'. Wilder renders the verdict in *Sunset Boulevard* that the coming of sound represented a kind of death sentence for those who had worked to build the unique culture of the silent film era. With the passing of the silent film genre, the great creative talents of the era were instantly abandoned, their work rendered meaningless, irrelevant. In Norma's case, she was left marooned in the crumbling ruins of her mansion. But beneath this searing charge of past betrayals, Wilder's film is also haunted by the arrival of another even more threatening phase of technological change; the advent of television. As Hoberman (2011) observes, *Sunset Boulevard* displaces this current and looming crisis to the earlier period of the advent of sound, dramatising the full range of possible casualties.

Filed in 1949, *Sunset Boulevard* marks an end of that period in which cinema could claim to be the unquestionably dominant popular entertainment medium of the twentieth century. Another medium had arrived which would potentially consign films to their own form of growing irrelevance. With the fifties, television begins its long, inexorable ascendancy to a position of unrivalled importance and influence in the popular imagination, ubiquitous and capable of constituting an audience far beyond the dreams of the original Hollywood moguls. Perhaps strangely, there is no reference in Wilder's film to this coming period of transformation. Norma watches her old films projected on a screen, yet the fate of the silent era and its haunted stars hangs morbidly yet prophetically over the current state of the film industry and its impending crisis of hegemony.

Close study

Sequence 1 (10:58–14:45)

After a tense car chase in which Joe evades the two insurance agents attempting to repossess his car, he has a tyre blowout and steers his car into the nearest driveway. He lifts himself up out of the seat to see where he has stopped and his voiceover informs us: 'I'd landed in some big mansion that looked rundown and deserted.' Cut to a shot of a garage, a rubbish-strewn driveway, overgrown grass and an untended garden; the doors of the garage have been left open in what seems a random fashion. Joe observes thankfully: 'If ever there was a place to stash away a limping car with a hot number plate.' His narration adopts the tone of hard-boiled crime fiction, a man on the run looking for a hideout. After parking his car, he looks across at another 'occupant' of the garage: 'an enormous foreign-built automobile ... it had a 1932 license, I figured that's when the owners moved out.' The theme of abandonment is signaled here; the grand vehicle, an Isotta Fraschini, sits up on blocks and has clearly not been driven in many years. The car exudes a faded glamour from a time of careless extravagance and excess; it is a relic of the past, clearly indicating a time long prior to the war and the experience of wartime restrictions, alluded to in Joe's judgement: 'It must have gotten ten miles to the gallon.'

Joe's voiceover mimics the hard-boiled dialogue of film noir crime dramas: 'now those bloodhounds were on me'. This style of narration serves to underscore his sense of desperation and the need for an escape. As he wanders through the garden, shrubs and bushes are wildly overgrown, further creating an image of abandonment, but also of time passing, years of neglect symbolised in the overgrown vegetation, and the sense of the house belonging to another time: 'It was a great big white elephant of a place, the kind crazy movie people built in the crazy twenties.' The symbolism of the house clearly marks it as belonging to a long-ago era, separated from the present by the passing of many years. Joe reflects on the now sorry state of the house: 'a neglected house gets an unhappy look, this one had it in spades.' The camera follows Joe as he comes upon the house rising up out of the overgrown, untended garden. In one shot, Joe approaches a set of steps and is situated in the frame dwarfed by the imposing, monumental scale of the house, a lost monument, like the Mayan pyramids, engulfed by the jungle of overgrown palm trees and bushes. The house fills the entire frame and creates the image of a lost civilisation returning to the jungle. Joe walks up

the steps, gazing up at the enormous house and its ornate windows, elaborately sculpted moldings and other architectural details, marveling at its sheer size.

As he reaches the top of the steps, he pauses and his voiceover narration compares the house to Miss Havisham from Dickens's *Great Expectations*: 'It was like that old woman in *Great Expectations*, that Miss Havisham in her rotting wedding dress and her torn veil, taking it out on the world because she'd been given the go-by.' This is an obvious piece of foreshadowing as Norma will come to resemble Miss Havisham quite closely as a victim of abandonment but also of vengeful patience. Joe stands in the middle of the frame staring at the overgrown weeds of the courtyard, his figure appears dominated by the scale and dimensions of the house. The house itself appears to confirm his suspicions that the owners abandoned it decades earlier – there is no sign of human habitation and the prevailing atmosphere is one of stillness, emptiness but also something ominous and foreboding. The house is a magnificent ruin but also conveys something enigmatic, anomalous.

A cut to a mid-shot of Joe staring around the grounds until a voice calls out, 'You there', and a startled Joe looks up. The voice asks 'Why are you so late?' Cut to a shot of the partially obscured figure of a woman standing behind bamboo blinds, framed between Doric columns. Through the gaps in the blinds, we see that she is wearing sunglasses; the camera moves into a closer view of the figure staring down at Joe. A reverse shot of Joe staring up at the figure, squinting into the sunlight, trying to see who is addressing him. The click of a door opening is heard and cut to a shot of a man standing at the imposing entrance to the house. He, too, is framed between pillars. He is wearing white gloves and formal attire. He stands sentinel-like at the door. The man moves to the side of the entrance and makes a highly formal gesture with his hand inviting Joe to enter, instructing Joe simply 'In here'. Joe looks uncertainly over his shoulder at the garage where he has left his car and appears to be calculating the pros and cons of following the man's instruction to enter.

As Joe approaches the entrance of highly elaborate iron filigree, the waiting man stands to the side and gestures for Joe to enter. Joe offers an explanation about his car and the tyre blowout and appears hesitant to enter but the waiting man disregards the explanation instructing him to 'go on in', but not before he issues another command for Joe to wipe his feet. The man speaks in a heavy accent and displays a kind of military bearing, repeating his command 'Go on.' Joe finally obeys and the man observes: 'You're not properly dressed for the occasion.' A confused

Joe asks: 'What's the occasion?' but doesn't receive an answer. A woman's voice is heard: 'Have him come up, Max.' After Joe again appears to hesitate, Max explains: 'Madame is waiting.' The stilted formality and air of mystery that has pervaded the encounter finally prompts Joe's amusement and he smiles before briskly climbing the stairs. The staircase is grand and ornate in keeping with the rest of the house, almost as if it had been styled on movie sets of the silent era. Railings of iron flowers and vines, tapestries on the walls and decorative stained-glass windows create a period style, but the period is a pastiche of different eras and places. As Joe leaves the frame, Max's bald head comes further into the frame and a close up of Max's profile fills the right half of the frame as he offers one final direction to Joe: 'If you need any help with the coffin, call me.'

- In what ways does this sequence draw from a wide range of Hollywood genres?
- Consider the various forms of personification that Joe's voiceover employs to convey the strangeness of the house he has stumbled upon.
- How is the theme of a haunted past expressed visually in this sequence?
- In what ways is the theme of entrapment foreshadowed in this scene?
- Discuss the idea symbolised in Norma's house of Hollywood's past and the notion of abandonment and the suppression of this past.
- Examine how this scene introduces the idea of psychic trauma through the symbolism of Norma's 'tragic mansion'.

Sequence 2 (1:04:21–1:10:25)

Norma visits the studio, driven in her Isotta Fraschini, Max dressed in the uniform of a chauffeur. As Norma and Joe sit together on the leopard skin seats, Max directs Norma on her make-up: 'Madame will pardon me, the shadow over the left eye is not quite balanced.' The car approaches the famous Paramount Pictures studio, its iconic Bronson gates dating from 1926 resemble the architecture of Norma's home, foreshadowing Norma's claim that she 'built' the studio. Norma sits regally in the rear seat, her face covered with a mesh veil, an outfit of bejeweled fur pieces and a feathered ermine clip-band framing her face. The car is refused entry by a young guard who fails to recognise Norma's name. The scene evokes the mythic quality of a fairytale, the princess or queen barred entry to their kingdom as their identity remains a secret. Growing impatient, Norma hails an older guard by name who immediately recognises her and warmly welcomes her onto the lot. The iron gates are ceremoniously folded back and Max drives onto the lot despite the younger guard's misgivings. Norma's aristocratic bearing has not wavered and she instructs Jonesy, the older guard: 'Teach your friend some manners. Tell him without me he wouldn't have any job because without me there wouldn't be any Paramount Studios.'

The scene cuts to an elevated shot of an enormous sound stage, the frame is crowded with a vast array of overhead lights, scaffolds, cameras and microphones. This is the very image of the cinematic apparatus, the technical reality of the dream factory, with an emphasis on the factory-like conditions of filmmaking, a mechanical process of production. Beneath the lights, a multitude of technicians, assistants and production crew scurry around the stage making adjustments to the apparatus. At the centre of the vast stage is an individual set that appears to represent a biblical scene, its props and design contrast dramatically with the modern, industrial equipment that surrounds it. It appears small, almost toy-like, a carefully arranged model of antiquity in a mechanical landscape of twentieth century technology. Cut to a shot of an assistant answering the phone while two extras wearing biblical costume light cigarettes and cigars. A panning shot follows the message of Norma's arrival being conveyed to DeMille via a series of assistants, symbolising the director's power and importance in contrast to Norma's fantasy of her importance. When the message reaches what appears to be a more senior assistant, he repeats Norma's name with a tone of shocked disbelief and scepticism. The camera continues to follow the path of the message to DeMille himself, seated in his director's

chair, issuing instructions to the crew, while looking through a viewfinder. He is the obvious centre of the apparatus, calmly directing its operation. When he hears the message, DeMille also repeats Norma's name in a tone of surprise and wonderment. The cynical assistant observes that 'She must be a million years old' and DeMille ruefully acknowledges, 'I'd hate to think where that puts me, I could be her father.' This is the first of a series of allusions to Norma as a 'child' of the studio, someone born into an industry that has essentially defined her. This idea is in contrast to Betty's identity as a third-generation child of the studio, but from much humbler origins.

Rubbing his cheek thoughtfully, DeMille surmises 'It must be about that awful script of hers.' He is clearly aware of *Salome* and believes this must be the reason for her visit: 'What can I tell her? What can I say?' DeMille, like Max, is unable to confront Norma with the truth about her changed situation and status, baulking at the idea that she can accept this change in her fortunes. DeMille, also like Max, prefers the option of treating Norma like a child (he greets with her with the welcome 'How are you young fella') and there is a clear sense that Norma has been infantilised by her 'creative fathers' who cannot face the truth themselves that she is a middle-aged woman. When the less sentimental assistant offers to 'give her the brush', DeMille sternly admonishes him: '30 million fans have given her the brush, isn't that enough?' DeMille sadly acknowledges that Norma is a figure from Hollywood's prehistory, abandoned by her public and now largely forgotten, a victim of the coming of sound and the treacherous nature of fandom. The scene reinforces the idea of the male creative artist as effectively ageless, DeMille is still at the creative centre of the film industry, surrounded by a retinue of assistants awaiting his instructions. The scene contrasts the somewhat magical quality of Norma's visit, a choice made from a desperation to return to former glory based on a cruel misunderstanding. DeMille in contrast still occupies a position of power, authority and control over the apparatus and personnel of the film industry, while Norma has been effectively rendered as a ghost or spectre who returns to haunt the studio she once ruled. Acknowledging Norma's ghostly transformation, DeMille eulogises her past self: 'You didn't know Norma Desmond as a lovely little girl of seventeen, with more courage and wit and heart than ever came together in one youngster.'

The transformative price of fame and stardom is alluded to by DeMille as he ponders the tragic effect of the star making system that was the key discovery of the film industry, the commodification of the

performer as 'star': 'A dozen press agents working overtime can do terrible things to the human spirit'. He looks down at the bottom of the frame contemplating the human cost of fame and the requirements of an industry that renders its stars as commercial products for the audience's consumption. The psychic cost of fame is clearly borne by forgotten stars such as Norma.

The scene cuts to a shot of Norma arriving at the door to the sound stage. DeMille appears at the entrance and warmly, affectionately welcomes Norma. They share a memory of the last time they spoke and DeMille recollects that 'Lindbergh had just landed in Paris'. Lindbergh's historic landing was in 1927 which means that Norma and DeMille have not seen each other for over twenty years, long before the war and hence their memories are of another world that has since disappeared entirely. The pair stroll into the sound stage and DeMille apologises for not calling Norma, but adds 'as you can see, I'm terribly busy.' Norma confirms that DeMille has read her script and he assents, gravely and sombrely that he has. Norma chides him for allowing one of his assistants to call her and this news clearly surprises him as he was unaware of the studio's calls. The camera follows them as DeMille conducts Norma to his chair. Norma sits among the moving lights and cameras as they set up for a rehearsal. As Norma watches the flurry of activity on set, DeMille instructs one of his assistants to get Gordon Cole on the phone. Cut to a close-up of Norma framed in profile, sitting imperiously in DeMille's chair, enjoying the fantasy of her triumphal return, surveying the domain she once ruled over. Norma is wearing all the accoutrements of fame and stardom, symbolised by the peacock feather ascending from her furred clip-band. The shot is of a classic profile and Norma does indeed resemble a queen ruling her domain. However, as she sits watching the activity around her, a boom microphone moves behind her and brushes her peacock feather, disturbing Norma's dignified pose. She looks up at the offending microphone with an intense distaste for this technology, the very symbol of sound films and the direct cause of her fall from the lofty heights of silent era stardom. In a gesture of irritation, she swats the microphone away.

Having banished the intrusive technology, Norma settles herself once again in regal profile when she hears her name repeated from above, from among the array of lights. Cut to a shot of an elderly lighting technician whom Norma recognises and who directs a large key light down upon her, remarking: 'Let's get a good look at you.' Cut to a shot of Norma emblazoned by the intense light, while other technicians stand around her. Norma holds up her arm to shield her

eyes from the blinding glare of the light. A group of elderly extras dressed in biblical costume recognise the illuminated Norma and her name is excitedly repeated around the set, one exclaiming 'I thought she was dead'. They hurriedly surround her and an overhead shot shows a mixture of guards, technicians and extras flocking to the seated Norma to pay homage to this returning monarch. Norma recognises some by name and she basks in the warmth of their collective admiration. The scene cuts to a shot of DeMille speaking with Gordon Cole who explains to DeMille the studio merely wanted to rent Norma's exotic car. Wilder creates a stark contrast here between this conversation by phone of the mundane reality of filmmaking, the prosaic business of securing props for a 'Cosby picture', worlds away from Norma's vision of *Salome*, and Norma's clear irrelevance to the current state of the industry; and the adoring reverence of her older fans and admirers whose worship of Norma is cast in a magical light. The contrast between business and cinema magic is made more intense by the appearance of Norma's elderly fans, also pictured as relics of cinema antiquity, dressed in their period costumes representing a conception of the ancient past that Hollywood is still attempting to exploit, another of DeMille's Biblical epics. DeMille himself is framed in a mid-shot, staring sternly out of frame, contemplating the cruel misunderstanding that has led to Norma's visit and her own misrecognition of a triumphal return. He approaches the group of adoring extras, the overhead light still bathing Norma in its magical and briefly restorative glow. DeMille takes a microphone, that baleful symbol, and directs the technician to 'Turn that light back to where it belongs.' This command has the effect of breaking up the group once the light is turned away, dispelling her magnetic attraction which has been defused by the great director.

- Consider how the scene depicts the studio as no longer a 'dream factory' but a place of technological procedures and industrial organisation.
- In what ways does the relationship between DeMille and Norma resemble her relationship with Max?
- How is Norma made to appear out of place and time in this scene?
- How is the figure of DeMille portrayed in this scene?
- Is there an irony in the fact that amongst this complex technological apparatus of cinema DeMille is still making films similar to those of the silent era? Is Wilder suggesting the idea of an artistic impasse here?
- How does Wilder express the idea that Hollywood is a 'schizophrenic' industry, both highly modern and technological, yet caught in the past, and backward looking?

Sequence 3 (1:44:47–1:49:35)

A policeman uses the telephone at the bottom of the staircase to call the coroner's office but finds the line is engaged; it is being used by the notorious Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper who is already filing the story of Joe's death from Norma's bedroom: 'As dawn breaks over the murder house, Norma Desmond famous star of yesteryear is in a state of complete mental shock.' The camera pans to show Norma seated at her vanity surrounded by uniformed and plainclothes police. She is being subjected to a barrage of questions about her relationship with the murdered man. In the midst of this upheaval, Norma stares calmly into her mirror, once again lost in her image. A policeman informs his superiors that news cameras have arrived and at the mention of cameras Norma's attention is finally gained. Max approaches and silently indicates to the detectives that he can assist with getting Norma to leave the bedroom and accompany them downstairs by directing Norma in her fantasy that she is being called to shoot a scene: 'Tell Mr DeMille that I'll be on the set at once.' Max marches purposely down the stairs and positions himself among the waiting news cameramen, directing them towards where Norma will appear. Norma approaches the head of the stairs but pauses as she looks over the railing at Max below: 'What is the scene? Where am I?' She is clearly disoriented and struggling to make sense of what is happening; she stares into the lights and is reassured by Max's familiar directions: 'This is the staircase of the palace.' As the cameras begin to roll, Norma finally descends while Joe's voiceover takes up the scene: 'Life which can be strangely merciful had taken pity on Norma Desmond. The dream she had clung to so desperately had enfolded her.' Norma appears in a state of hypnosis as she walks towards the cameras, cutaway shots to the surrounding police and news reporters show them in a state of shock and wonder at Norma's strange performance of Salome, their faces betraying a mixture of disbelief and morbid curiosity as they watch Norma gliding down the staircase, twirling her arms in gestures of seduction and temptation. However, she stops abruptly and breaks out of character for a moment to offer thanks to the assembled crew: 'I just want to tell you how happy I am to be back in the studio again, making a picture ... You see, this is my life'. Norma looks directly into the camera as she thanks the audience, 'those wonderful people in the dark.' She then informs Max/DeMille: 'Alright Mr DeMille I'm ready for my close-up.' Norma slowly dances towards the camera lost in her performance as the image fades to black.

- The final scene of *Sunset Boulevard* shows Norma completely consumed by her delusions. Joe comments that life 'had taken pity on Norma Desmond'. Is this view borne out by the final scene?
- Max performs one final act of protection in directing Norma's last scene. Does this action suggest that Max has always made the correct decisions in keeping the truth from Norma?
- Is there a judgment made in this scene concerning the ways in which Hollywood's past stars are offered up to the news media as fodder for gossip?
- In what ways does the film show Norma's final descent into madness as a metaphor of the way cinema blurs the line between fantasy and reality that is destructive for its star performers?

Further activities

- Highly regarded and now veteran director himself, Martin Scorsese, recently compared the spate of superhero movies, and the experience of watching these, to the experience of theme park rides. His comments met with some support from other veteran filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola, but also with considerable opposition from fans of the Marvel movies and from the filmmakers themselves. The ‘controversy’ is certainly nothing really new in film history, as *Sunset Boulevard* makes clear – film has always been in a constant state of change, innovation and the ‘extinction’ of certain approaches to filmmaking. A lively class debate could be had on topics such as: ‘Superhero movies represent the death of serious cinema’ or ‘Popular genres have always been the backbone of the film industry’. It would be highly useful for students to think carefully about film history, the ways in which film has responded to technological change, to the changes in taste that have been shaped by wider social changes, and the question of whether there has ever been a ‘pure’ cinema. Scorsese, of course, was really commenting on what he saw as the relative trivialisation of cinema, reduced to relentless CGI effects and fantastical storylines, with a reduced capacity to ‘shape’ the way in which we view ourselves and the world. This recent debate can be used as a starting point for discussing and arguing over the place of cinema in our lives and its on-going or waning importance.
- Hollywood in the late forties is generally considered to have entered into a period of crisis. With the eerie commencement of the Cold War, the investigations undertaken by the House UnAmerican Activities Commission, and the need for Hollywood writers and filmmakers to ‘prove’ their loyalty, alongside the newly emerging threat of television and the rise of postwar youth in the figure of the ‘teenager’, Hollywood was faced with challenges on multiple fronts. The immediate context for *Sunset Boulevard* is highly charged and contradictory. Despite feeling under threat, Hollywood was still the preeminent popular cultural form. Researching this period will undoubtedly benefit students in gaining a more complex understanding of the issues simmering beneath *Sunset Boulevard’s* narrative surface. Placing students in small groups, direct them to research any of the topics listed above and invite them to present their findings to the class. After the findings have been presented, students can complete an essay on the following topic: ‘Despite having no obvious political content, *Sunset Boulevard* clearly expresses many of the fears that surrounded Hollywood in the postwar period.’
- *Sunset Boulevard* makes a powerful case about the tendency in modern societies to forget the past, even the recent past. Norma’s descent into madness represents both a personal tragedy but also a wider allegory concerning our view of the cultural past as disposable, easily rendered redundant and, therefore, easily forgotten. Such a view of the film compares closely with those social critics such as Frederic Jameson (1990) in his magisterial study *Postmodernism* or Mark Fisher (2009) in his book *Capitalist Realism* who view contemporary society as locked into a perpetual present, a present that is without history or any authentic sense of the past by which the present may be judged. If *Sunset Boulevard* can be considered a kind of horror story, it is in the sense that Norma refuses to accept her status as a ‘waxwork’ along with her friends and demands to be seen again, the ghost that returns to haunt the Hollywood machine. It would be interesting to discuss some of these ideas with students. Does popular culture create a sense of some perpetual present that we can neither look back from or even forwards? Has cinema contributed to this in some way with its unprecedented capacity for representing the present in such a vivid and spectacular fashion that audiences lose any connection with bygone eras? Are we addicted to the unfolding forms of entertainment that technology has been able to provide in such ever-increasing variety? With the arrival of the digital age and the internet, have we merely reached the final horizon promised by the earliest silent films? How is it possible to know the past when we are hermetically sealed in the spectacular present of digital entertainment? Invite students to reflect on the idea that we are now living in a time of peak entertainment represented by the smart phones we carry with us everywhere. While *Sunset Boulevard* meditated on the impact of sound technology replacing the world of silent film, we are now subject to the laws of total information capture. How can some of these issues in *Sunset Boulevard* help us understand our own deeply divided cultural moment?

Key quotes

‘So, I sat there grinding out original stories, two a week only I seemed to have lost my touch. Maybe they weren’t original enough, maybe they were too original, all I know is, they didn’t sell.’ (3:01–3:18)

‘It was a great big white elephant of a place, the kind crazy movie people built in the crazy twenties.’ (13:03–13:09)

‘It was like that old woman in *Great Expectations*, that Miss Havisham in her rotting wedding dress and her torn veil, taking it out on the world because she’d been given the go-by.’ (13:16–13:28)

‘If you need any help with the coffin, call me.’ (14:43–14:46)

‘You used to be in silent pictures, you used to be big.’ (16:34–16:35)

‘I am big. It’s the pictures that got small.’ (16:38–16:43)

‘We didn’t need dialogue, we had faces.’ (32:28–32:41)

‘The plain fact was she was afraid of that world outside; afraid it would remind her that time had passed.’ (31:16–31:23)

‘Well, as long as the lady’s paying for it why not take the Vicuna?’ (37:30–37:34)

‘Who wants true, who wants moving?’ (50:11–50:13)

‘To fall in love with you, that was the idiotic thing.’ (53:54–53:57)

‘Great stars have great pride.’ (54:07–54:10)

‘Audiences don’t know somebody sits down and writes a picture. They think the actors make it up as they go along.’ (1:02:22–1:02:29)

‘I’ve been waiting twenty years for this call and DeMille can wait until I’m good and ready.’ (1:03:55–1:04:01)

‘30 million fans have given her the brush, isn’t that enough?’ (1:06:58–1:07:01)

‘A dozen press agents working overtime can do terrible things to the human spirit.’ (1:07:17–1:07:23)

‘It made me think of when I was twelve and used to sneak out on the folks to see a gangster picture. This time it wasn’t to see a picture, it was to try and write one.’ (1:18:43–1:18:54)

‘That’s the trouble with you readers, you know all the plots.’ (1:20:48–1:20:51)

‘Look at this street, all cardboard, all hollow, all phony, all done with mirrors. You know, I like it better than any street in the world.’ (1:21:43–1:21:52)

‘I discovered her when she was sixteen. I made her a star. I cannot let her be destroyed.’ (1:25:29–1:25:37)

‘That peculiar prison of mine.’ (1:30:06–1:30:08)

‘Maybe I could get away with it. Get away from Norma. Maybe I could wipe the whole nasty mess right out of my life.’ (1:30:55–1:31:01)

‘Just look around. There’s a lot of her spread about. If you don’t remember the face, you must have heard of the name.’ (1:35:18–1:35:23)

‘Very simple set-up. Older woman whose well-to-do, younger man who’s not doing too well. Can you figure it out for yourself?’ (1:36:12–1:36:24)

‘... wake up Norma, you’d be killing yourself to an empty house, the audience left twenty years ago.’ (1:41:04–1:41:08)

‘Madame is the greatest star of them all.’ (1:41:40–1:41:43)

‘No one ever leaves a star ... that’s what makes one a star.’ (1:42:18–1:42:23)

‘Life, which can be strangely merciful, had taken pity on Norma Desmond. The dream she had clung to so desperately had enfolded her.’ (1:48:03–1:48:15)

‘Alright Mr DeMille, I’m ready for my close-up.’ (1:49:25–1:49:29)

Analytical text response topics

1. ‘The conflict between art and business is at the centre of *Sunset Boulevard*.’
Discuss.
2. “You don’t remember a young girl of seventeen.”
‘It is not Norma’s loss of stardom that is tragedy in *Sunset Boulevard*, but the disappearance of the extraordinary young woman that both DeMille and Max remember.’
Discuss.
3. “I made her a star. I cannot let her be destroyed.”
‘It is those around her who fail Norma.’
Do you agree?
4. ‘Norma is not the only one who seeks to escape reality through the dream life of the movies.’
Do you agree?
5. ‘*Sunset Boulevard* explores the dangers of mistaking fantasy for reality.’
Discuss.
6. “That’s the trouble with you readers, you know all the plots.”
‘In the world of *Sunset Boulevard*, it is impossible to experience anything true.’
Do you agree?
7. ‘In *Sunset Boulevard*, the magic of the movies carries also the potential for disenchantment.’
Discuss.
8. ‘Joe’s death is the result of his failure to see the tragic nature of his relationship with Norma.’
Do you agree?
9. ‘*Sunset Boulevard* represents a condemnation of Hollywood’s idea of itself as the dream factory.’
To what extent do you agree?
10. ‘*Sunset Boulevard* exposes the less than benevolent treatment of creative talent in the pursuit of profit.’
Discuss.

Creative text response tasks

1. **Write a scene** in which Betty and Joe discuss/plan their ‘untitled love story’. What ideas do they each bring to the partnership? In what ways does their writing partnership represent a new and necessary combination of perspectives in writing for a contemporary audience? Consider Betty’s view that when Joe writes from experience his work is ‘true’ but when he relies on genre formulas it lacks artistic worth. In what ways do Betty and Joe represent competing versions of originality?
2. **Write the interview** that Max gives to the police after Norma’s arrest. How might Max explain Norma’s situation, her life and struggles since the end of her movie career? How would Max confess to his responsibility in curating the illusions and lies that stoked Norma’s fantasy of a return to the screen?
3. Betty goes on after Joe’s death to finish the script they had begun together. This had been a love story. What final shape does the script take after the events surrounding Joe’s murder? Explore Betty’s thoughts in **writing the final version**.
4. At Norma’s trial for murder DeMille is called as a character witness. **Write the testimony** that DeMille would provide for his former protégé. This testimony could also be delivered as an oral piece to the class.
5. The movie magazines are all covering the case of Norma Desmond, ‘Forgotten star, a Slayer’ and the gruesome murder of her young lover, aspiring writer Joe Gillis. **Write the investigative article** that would appear in one of these typical fan magazines.
6. While she awaits trial Norma agrees to an exclusive interview with famed gossip columnist Hedda Hopper. **Describe the scene** in which Hopper visits Norma in prison and receives Norma’s account of the crime.

7. Many years have passed and Betty is now a successful and much-admired screenwriter. She is approached by a younger writer wanting to develop a script about the tragic lives of former stars who have not been able to adjust to their loss of fame. **What advice** does Betty give the aspiring writer in the course of their interview? With the assistance of another student this interview could also be delivered as an oral piece.
8. It is years earlier before Norma has been discovered and become a star. Max Von Mayerling is casting actresses for the lead role in his new epic. He meets a young, unknown Norma. **Write the scene** in which the two meet for the first time.
9. Many years after the events of the film, Max is now living alone in the mansion on Sunset Boulevard, haunted by his memories of Norma. **Describe Max's solitary life** without Norma to care for, the last remaining ghost in this 'tragic mansion'. Alternatively, Max has been invited by a film society to speak about his years working in silent film. Max chooses instead to use the opportunity to deliver an extended eulogy to Norma. This could be delivered orally to the class.
10. **Write a final supplement** to Joe's voiceover narration as the trial is about to commence that records his observations. In this version, explain Joe's choices and his fatal knowledge of the mistakes he made in attempting to take advantage of a deranged star such as Norma. What does he conclude about the plot he concocted for escaping Hollywood and lost dreams?

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Other films

- Double Indemnity* (1944, dir. Billy Wilder)
- Olympia* (1938, dir. Leni Riefenstahl)
- The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920, dir. Robert Wiene)
- Triumph of the Will* (1935, dir. Leni Riefenstahl)



Sunset Boulevard
directed by Billy Wilder



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