Wilde and Wilder

DANIEL BROWN

[I]

THE CHOICE OF OSCAR WILDE'S *SALOME* AS THE GROUND for the silent-screen star Norma Desmond's film script and character in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is central to the film but oddly neglected by the film's critics. Since its first screenings, *Sunset Boulevard* has been discussed primarily as a realist critique of contemporary Hollywood.[1] For such a reading, Wilde's definitive text of 1890s aestheticism functions as another of the props that mark Norma's character as madly aberrant and anachronistic. The following discussion inverts this established critical perspective by reading *Sunset Boulevard* through its apparently discordant invocation of *Salome* and exploring the broader engagements with cultural history and formal aesthetics that this reference highlights. *Sunset Boulevard* takes stock of Hollywood at mid-century, and its inventory of old stars and directors—including Gloria Swanson, Eric von Stroheim, Cecil B. DeMille, H. B. Warner, and Buster Keaton, all playing either themselves or someone easily mistaken for them—not only lends verisimilitude to its portrayal of contemporary Hollywood but also gestures insistently toward Hollywood's past. Displaying its dioramas composed of these "waxworks" and guiding its audience through the crowded museum of Norma's mansion, much as Joe Gillis does for Betty Schaefer when she visits the house late in the film, *Sunset Boulevard* assesses present-day Hollywood by scrutinizing a history that reaches back to the beginnings of cinema in the decadent 1890s.

In bringing the aging silent-screen star Norma Desmond and the young scriptwriter Joe Gillis together to generate its plot, *Sunset Boulevard* dramatized a crisis in the Hollywood studio system. The film's representation of Norma echoes a contemporary perception that the Hol-

DANIEL BROWN, associate professor in the Department of English at the University of Western Australia, is the author of *Hopkins' Idealism: Philosophy, Physics, Poetry* (Clarendon, 1997), *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century*, with Hilary Fraser (Longmans, 1997), "Science and Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge UP, 2000), and *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, in the series Writers and Their Work (Northcote, in assn. with the British Council, 2004). He is completing a monograph on poetry by Victorian scientists, which is funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council.

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lywood star was becoming redundant. The great independent producer David O. Selznick, for instance, comments in 1948, "It is much less public taste than traditional and outmoded thinking in the industry itself that keeps the illusory stellar names working" (qtd. in Powdermaker 251). A series of articles in *Variety* magazine during 1948–49 record that good scripts have eclipsed stars as the basis for box office success: "Weighing stars against stories in a survey of top grossing films of the year [1948], balance appears definitely on the story side in terms of profit to the producer" (252). This rivalry between star and story, between Hollywood's past and its present, is represented and heightened allegorically in the figures of Joe and Norma. Joe is of course the more contemporary figure, the sort of "average Joe" who populates film noir and signals the primary importance to this popular genre of a good story over glamour and stardom, while Norma represents stardom at its height, during the silent era, when the film star not only was invented but also had an international mass audience. She was "the greatest star of them all," like the sun, the greatest star in our universe, although by the time we meet her, she has been set, fixed in her decline, on Sunset Boulevard for two decades. Norma asserts the image and ideology of the Hollywood star through her identification with the aestheticist figure of Salome, while Joe not only writes film scripts but also, with his peers Artie Green and Betty Schaefer, foregrounds narrative conventions in his efforts to organize and control his life and experience in the film.

In the earliest script of *Sunset Boulevard*, the film script that Norma writes is envisaged first of all as "[t]he memoirs of an egomaniac, not even spelled correctly," but in a few scenes it is changed to the story of "Salome" (Brackett and Wilder 25, 29). Despite this change, the script remains autobiographical. Written by her as a star vehicle for herself, the Salome script ultimately sums up Norma's life and identity, indeed her peculiar madness, for it is all that she is and remembers at the close of the film. The story that she sketches in the film is clearly derived from Wilde's *Salome*, the version that invented the Dance of the Seven Veils and reaches its climax when the princess kisses the decapitated head of Saint John the Baptist (Wilde 616), a detail that Norma savors: "The princess in love with a Holy Man. She dances the Dance of the Seven Veils. He rejects her, so she demands his head on a golden tray, kissing his cold, dead lips." Although she does not succeed in renewing Salome for mid-twentieth-century Hollywood, her identification with Wilde's character highlights the essential modernity that belongs to her idea of the star, a modernity that can be traced back through Wilde to Charles Baudelaire.

"What is the modern conception of pure art?" Baudelaire asks at the beginning of his unfinished essay "Philosophic Art" (1859). "It is the creation of a suggestive magic containing both the object and the subject, the world outside the artist and the artist himself" (187). He elaborates and illustrates this thesis democratically in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1859–60) by glorifying the women and men strolling the boulevards of Paris, who use such artificial means as cosmetics and fashion to make themselves into works of art: "Fashion should thus be considered as a symptom of the taste for the ideal which floats on the surface of all the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-à-brac that the natural life accumulates in the human brain; as a sublime deformation of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her *reformation*" (32–33). Opposed to the unclothed natural state, the "taste for the ideal" is especially interested in organizing and representing sexuality. Much of "The Painter of Modern Life" is devoted to elaborating a feminized modernity that fuses Eros and artifice. This model is exemplified and extended decadently in Wilde's *Salome*, where the sexually engaged gazes of Herod for Salome, as of Salome for Iokanaan, are sublated in their ultimate perceptions of the other as an art object. The structured and shaped eroticism of the

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Dance of the Seven Veils, which Herod demands of Salome, furnishes the full expression of her being, after which she is killed, while Iokanaan's body is constantly transmuted by Salome's words into statuary made of precious materials: "Thy body was a column of ivory set upon feet of silver" (328).

The dance is, as W. B. Yeats reminds us, a form of art in which the artist and the art object are inextricable (st. 8). Salome demonstrates Wilde's Baudelairean conception of the artist as a created selfhood that constitutes the artist's greatest work, an understanding that Wilder was familiar with most likely from its adoption and development by his Viennese literary hero Karl Kraus (Sinyard and Turner 280; Zolotow 273). Wilder's principal fellow writer and the producer of the film, the Harvard-educated Charles Brackett, who was the theater critic for the *New Yorker* from 1926 to 1928, would have known of it through his professional interest in theater. With the character of Norma Desmond, *Sunset Boulevard* traces the principle of the Hollywood star back to Wilde's conception of the artist, for the artifice of the script she writes is realized as her selfhood. Norma regards her self as an object of artifice, not only through the meticulous and individualistic clothing she wears and the odd "half a pound of makeup" she puts on but also, and more radically, in the way she subjects herself to "a merciless series of treatments" in order to hone her image as the "ageless" star. The starting point for her characterization is kenosis, a complete emptying or lack of an original selfhood. Capacious absence or hollowness provides the condition for an entirely artificial subjectivity, so that the fulfillment of that subjectivity, the complete presence and expression of her character, occurs accordingly with the mad scene at the close of the film, the dance of her close-up when she is the composite star-Salome. As well as writing the "Salome" script for herself, she affirms her self-identity through the fan letters that her servant, Max von Mayerling, forges for her. The letters provide Norma with objective recognitions of herself as the star, a reflected image that becomes concrete in the form of the posed photographs that she is called on by her "fans" to reaffirm and authenticate with her signature. Her beauty regime, her orientalist gestures, and the screenplay she writes for herself are all directed toward her ultimate incarnation as the princess Salome, a figure of the star as a female oriental potentate who will, she believes, exercise power not only over Max and Joe but also over a vast constituency of fans.

As well as furnishing the ground for Wilde's conception of art as the cultivation of the self, Baudelaire's extension of the aesthetic field to include such things as fashion and cosmetics locates art firmly at the heart of modern consumer culture. Wilde follows Baudelaire's example in giving parity to art and fashion, recommending, for instance, "One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art" (573). In "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire finds the exemplary instances of his aesthetic principle in the courtesan and the prostitute, women who are at once the seller and the commodity they sell. More like these women than the dancers and actresses that Baudelaire's essay also discusses, the virgin Salome is not only a living and pure work of art but also an erotic object to be consumed; she names her price from Herod for displaying this dual nature in the Dance of the Seven Veils. This identity is renewed in the Hollywood star, who, as Norma serves to highlight, creates, commodifies, and sells herself on the basis of image alone. She has her raison d'être as a commodity: "I'm not just selling the script. I'm selling me. DeMille always said I was his greatest star."

Besides identifying its star with the fin de siècle ideology of art for art's sake, *Sunset Boulevard* makes the related observation that the type of the vampish female silent star can be traced to the stylized theatricality developed by *Salome* and more particularly by Sarah Bernhardt, for whom Wilde reputedly wrote the play (Powell 40–54; Ellmann 324). In the shooting script of the film, Artie Green jokingly sug-

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gests that Joe's script "Dark Windows" could be reworked as a vehicle for Bernhardt (Brackett, Wilder, and Marshman, Sunset Boulevard 77), who was Norma's age at the time of the deferred first production of Wilde's *Salome* and was notorious for keeping younger men as lovers. Brackett, with his knowledge of the theater and of French language and culture, was most likely responsible for introducing this detail to the script. Among many passing references to film that Brackett makes in his theater reviews for the *New Yorker* is a knowing mention of "A[dolph] Zukor" (26 Mar. 1927: 32), who founded Paramount Studios and had his first great success with an imported film starring Bernhardt. The advent of the successful four-reel feature in the United States comes with the French film of Bernhardt in *Queen Elizabeth* (*Les amours de la reine Élisabeth*), which Zukor's company Famous Players in Famous Plays partly financed and then distributed in 1912. Bernhardt's acting had been hugely popular with English audiences since her first tour of England in 1879, even though she spoke only in French and most could not understand what she was saying. Wilde's play, written in French for English audiences, is very much like the other "star plays" that were being written for her, vehicles that brought to the fore her exotic physical appearance, poses, and movements. Such qualities, which caused her acting to be described in visual terms of painting and statuary (Powell 46, 52), were ready-made for silent film and help to account for the great success of *Queen Elizabeth*. With this film Zukor attracted middle-class audiences from the theater to the cinema and established a profitable vogue for feature films, which he immediately began making in America with Edwin S. Porter. As the Famous Players name indicates, Zukor distinguished his more expensive product from the prevailing nickelodeon entertainments and shorter features as an artistic form of cinema. By drawing on the prestige of the theater, Zukor's version of the feature facilitated the migration of the star system from plays and opera to the film industry. Bernhardt represents this crossover, effectively being one of the first stars of the American screen and furnishing a powerful model for the silent feature's artistic style of acting, which was, as Eileen Bowser writes, paraphrasing a contemporary exhibitor's report on *Queen Elizabeth*, "of the old school, larger than life, grandly eloquent, deliberately artificial and stylized" (92; see also Zukor 41, 47–49). This style of acting became prevalent with the rapid rise of the feature film, as Zukor merged his Famous Players with Jesse Lasky's Feature Play Company and bought the newly formed distributor Paramount Pictures Corporation in 1914, a conglomerate that he ran from 1917 as Paramount Studios. Norma Desmond's identification with Salome sketches the genealogy of her particular brand of stardom back to the stylized, sensual, and exotic values that make Wilde's play such an apt vehicle for Bernhardt.

The revival of Wilde's Salome in Norma's persona of the star is representative for many of her generation. The menagerie of Medusas presented by European literature around the turn of the twentieth century emerges again in post–World War I cinema to shape the generic personae of the sexually potent female star. G. W. Pabst's 1929 film *Pandora's Box* renews Frank Wedekind's Lulu in the person of Louise Brooks, an actress henceforth identified with the character of the beautiful prostitute who exercises her sexuality as a reckless force of nature. Similarly, in *The Blue Angel* (1930), Josef von Sternberg's adaptation of Heinrich Mann's 1905 novel *Professor Unrath*, Marlene Dietrich's persona is established in the public mind by her portrayal of the vamp Lola Lola, who, the director writes, was "named by me and inspired by Wedekind's Lulu" (230). Gloria Swanson acquires a sexualized star persona in a titillating series of films that DeMille made from 1919 to 1921, including *Male and Female* (1919) and *The Affairs of Anatol* (1921), which was based on a play by Arthur Schnitzler. Similarly, in the unfinished silent film featured in *Sunset*

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Boulevard, Eric von Stroheim's *Queen Kelly* (1931), she plays the protagonist, who progresses from innocent convent girl to prostitute and then queen. The postwar sexual revolution in Europe and America fueled a market in film for representations of independent female sexuality and relations between the sexes that was in a large part supplied by the culture that Wilder was born into. This culture was, as Edward Timms observes (91), obsessed with the idea of a radical affinity between sex and death, an idea theorized by Freud and further explored and mythologized in Richard Strauss's opera based on Wilde's *Salome* (1905), in Gustav Klimt's and Egon Schiele's paintings, and in the various fictions of Schnitzler, Wedekind, Oskar Kokoschka, Thomas Mann, and Robert Musil.[2] The mythic icon for this conjunction of sex and death is the vampire, which Norma is often identified with by her critics. Morris Dickstein notes that *Salome* is one of many fin de siècle representations of the female vampire and that the film DeMille is directing in *Sunset Boulevard*, *Samson and Delilah* (1949), reiterates this image of woman draining man of his essential vitality (181–82; see also Lawrence 156n and Orr 16).

A further generation after the silent screen revives fin de siècle representations of female sexuality, the aging Norma tries to reinvigorate the sadistic figure of Salome. In doing so, she is supported and sustained by the complementary figure of Max von Mayerling, whom Stroheim plays through Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, as Severin to Norma's Wanda.[3] Her first husband as well as her first director, Max abandons his career to serve Norma after their marriage fails: "It was I who asked to come back, humiliating as it may seem." He recalls proudly a maharaja's extravagant suicide—the maharaja strangled himself with a stocking he had earlier begged from Norma—a parallel to the young Syrian's self-slaying in *Salome*, which is similarly seen to be a consequence of his obsessive looking at the princess. Max cherishes this idea of his powerful mistress, devoting his life to maintaining Norma's static sense of herself as the queen of the silent screen, "the greatest of them all."

Norma and Max's sadomasochistic domestic equilibrium is threatened by the arrival of Joe Gillis, the representative of a new generation and aesthetic, that of film noir, which like Norma's aesthetic can trace its ancestry through the European art tradition back to the fin de siècle and Freud. With Joe's arrival, Norma's thousand and one nights of writing her script are over, and she contemplates the fatal prospect of returning to the outside world, a prospect that Max has been protecting her from. She finds in Joe an Iokanaan to lend validity to her Salome. In Wilde's *Salome*, Herod shares the Syrian's visual obsession ("I have looked at thee and ceased not this night" [324]) and pleads with Salome to dance for him, promising her anything she wants in return. She agrees to this and, after dancing for him, demands the head of Iokanaan. In an ironic reversal of this transaction, the killing of Joe is the price that Norma pays to perform Salome for the cameras. Her clash with Joe brings her Salome story to life and paradoxically facilitates the full realization of her static being as the star-Salome.

[II]

Salome articulates Norma's fantasy of being constantly looked at and begged to perform again. As she makes clear in her final soliloquy, she has her life only in front of the cameras and through the audience's gaze: "You see this is my life. It always will be. There's nothing else—just us and the cameras and those wonderful people out there in the dark." This conceit of art coming to life only through its audience is foundational also for *Salome*.[4] Norma's coming into being as the star-Salome figure at the end of the film has a parallel at the start of Wilde's play, where Salome is effectively summoned, brought into being, by the fantasizing gazes of the Page of Herodias and of the Young Syrian. The Page tries to distract the Syrian from his "dangerous"

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obsession with watching Salome to look instead at the moon. This attempt, however, serves only to conflate the two, as the Syrian identifies the moon with a dancing princess wearing a veil, while the Page sees it as a female vampire:

> THE YOUNG SYRIAN. How beautiful is the Princess Salome tonight!
>
> THE PAGE OF HERODIAS. Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things.
>
> THE YOUNG SYRIAN. She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing. (301)

The moon is figured in the play as a predatory "dead woman" and "a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers" (311). Such analogies establish Salome's identity as a femme fatale and by extension gloss Norma's characterization as a vamp who shades into a vampire. The moon is dead in the sense that it draws its light, its semblance of life, from the sun's light. It is a decadent, vampiric symbol of art as absorbing and reflecting light from other bodies, parasitically drawing its life from its audience, the "fancy" of the Page and the Syrian, much as in *Sunset Boulevard* the star draws her life from "those wonderful people out there in the dark."

Norma is identified with photographic stasis, fixed in a past age like the ubiquitous pictures that memorialize her and make a misnomer of the "living room" that contains them. But this room is also a cinema, and its transcendent images of Norma, like the vampire, assume a semblance of life only in the darkness. If, as Roland Barthes argues, the frozen moments of photographs function as memento mori (92–97),[5] then the moving pictures that share their silence of the grave have the ontological ambiguity of the undead. The silent footage from *Queen Kelly* that we watch with Norma and Joe presents yet another image of her face, an impassive glowing profile, but here it is sustained and enriched by the light from the candle flames that encircle it. The flickering candlelight lends an illusion of movement and life to inert objects, much as does that other trick of light that since the 1920s has been referred to as "the flicks." The star here is like the moon in Wilde's *Salome,* which is animated by an external light source so that "[o]ne might fancy she was dancing." Norma is like a dead star in that she gains her appearance of life from an external source, the projector that infuses her "celluloid self" with light. The candlelit image from *Queen Kelly* and the projector's "flickering beam" from which it proceeds (Brackett, Wilder, and Marshman, Sunset Boulevard 44) foreground the nature of cinema as a play of light, while one of the film's intertitles draws attention to its delusory nature, which is at the heart of its star and the medium: "this wicked dream that has seized my heart."

Norma Desmond's living room of silent pictures privileges stillness over movement. This occurs not only through the impassive motion picture footage from *Queen Kelly* but also through the sequences that precede this screening, beginning with Norma's signing photographs of herself and then moving to other such images in the room: "On the long table in the living room is a gallery of photographs in various frames—all Norma Desmond" (Brackett, Wilder, and Marshman, Sunset Boulevard 42), a series that the camera pans over here, as if to deconstruct the illusory movement of the cinematic image itself, the silent version of which occurs when photographic images, frames, are presented to the eye at the more rapid rate of sixteen per second, as they are in the screening that immediately follows. The static image is prior to the moving image in this sequence, and indeed stillness is at the heart of the footage of Norma's profile, just as it is in the arrested temporality of her Miss Havisham–like existence in the house. The face of the star shines in an eternal stasis—

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"Stars are ageless, aren't they?"—and is, as the footage from *Queen Kelly* and Norma's final close-up and monologue highlight, sustained by its repeated presence on the screen. The protensity of cinema is reduced here to the melancholy and futureless stillness of the photograph.[6]

Norma enacts the paradox of stillness in movement through her characteristic circling gestures and poses, which arch around the still, aloof point of her face, a face that is veiled, made up, and later treated by "an army of beauty experts" to correspond to the idealized static form enshrined in the living room. Throughout *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma's character, her cinematic being, is defined imagistically by such circling motifs. Early in the film, Joe observes that "she sat coiled up like a watch spring," the cramped Gothic claw of her hand turned in on itself and her body. In other scenes, she arches her arms above her head or around Joe's head or body. Similar circling movements associated with her are the spinning of umbrellas and walking sticks in the "Norma Desmond Follies" and the recursive circling of her tangos and of her hand flourishes. The rolling, exotic arabesques of Norma's musical theme, which Franz Waxman based on the tango, rush in to meet her distinctive personal choreography in the New Year's Eve party and subsequent scenes. They culminate in the final staircase scene, which, as an earlier draft of the script makes clear, is based on the Dance of the Seven Veils: "Oh, yes, yes. They're below, waiting for me to dance the Dance of the Seven Veils" (Brackett, Wilder, and Marshman, Draft script 117). The release dialogue script specifies that "as she reaches bottom of stairs . . . [s]he stops, moves hands a la Salome . . . and speaks to imaginary audience, with elaborate gestures" (Brackett, Wilder, and Marshman, Release dialogue script, reel 6B, p. 8). Originating in the physical expressivism and grace required of the "artistic" silent star, Norma's poses and gestures now enact her self-enclosure in her nostalgic fantasies and in the house on Sunset Boulevard. They emblematize her closed world, like the hermetic economy of the fake fan letters and the picture signings with which she answers them, a short circuit engineered by Max. Norma's circling movements and poses are both an aggressive occupation of space—a symbolic marking out of the larger subjectivity that belongs to the archstar ("the greatest star of them all")—and a defensive buffer to preserve from the outside world the fragile being at its core. Throughout the film, her arching arms and flourishing hands frame her face gracefully and protectively; they are her Seven Veils. Softening and obscuring barriers against external reality, such movements gesture toward her complete incarnation as Salome at the close of the film.

[III]

While the cinematic unit by which Norma asserts and reaffirms her identity as a star is the still image to which film reduces, the single photographic frame that she surrounds herself with and sends off to her "fans," Joe Gillis is identified with a unit of repetition that encompasses almost the entire film, a complete and discrete narrative that ends as it begins—with him dead in the pool, ready for it to play again. He knows his fate and describes it, from his newly disinterested position in death, as a complete cycle that, by not departing from "the facts, the whole truth," is depicted here as rescreened rather than represented. This conceit of rescreening brings to the fore the nature of film as repetition, as something that not only can be relived but also has its commercial raison d'être in being shown repeatedly. While the repetition of Norma's fixed image ("More Norma Desmond and still more Norma Desmond") reiterates the stasis of the "ageless" star, the cyclic narrative that Joe presides over is by definition dynamic, a progression of events in accordance with the broad conventions of narrative plot. The meeting of these opposing principles of resolute stasis and restless movement leads logically and remorselessly to tragedy.

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The film's opening premonition of Joe's body in the pool and the unremitting obsession that defines the character of his killer give *Sunset Boulevard* its pervasive mood of fatalism. Norma Desmond lives and kills in accordance with the ideology of the Hollywood star: "No one ever leaves a star. That's what makes one a star." But she also puts her faith in the stars in another sense, looking to astrology to determine her big decisions to employ Joe and to send her script to DeMille on a particular day. For Norma, Hollywood stars have a mythic status and destiny akin to the star signs of astrology and the titanic movements of the planets that astrology interprets. The mythic ideology of the star defines her character, and she voices its dicta to herself in low tones as sibylline utterances: "Great stars have great pride." She expands this ideology into an entire world that she inhabits. It merges with the deterministic cosmology of astrology to furnish a tragic, fatalistic universe, one that both clashes and strangely coalesces with the universe inhabited by Joe Gillis, the star-crossed lover.

Joe's character is constructed as an ironic play on an observation he makes: "Audiences don't know somebody sits down and *writes* a picture. They think the actors make it up as they go along."[7] Joe, a screenwriter in the film, apparently makes up his lines as he goes along: he is both a writer who narrates and a character who acts. His predicament is a poised and teasing restatement of the problem of free will and determinism. From his transcendent position as a posthumous scriptwriter, he is able to repudiate contingency and discern in the events of his last months of life the ultimate narrative pattern of fate, even though when alive his character acts out of the conviction that he has free will and so can influence his destiny.

Joe's characterization as a scriptwriter is elaborated existentially to include his apparent freedom to determine the plot of his life. Indeed, he habitually looks to his scriptwriting work as the means to take control of his life, first of all to deliver himself from his desk job in Dayton, Ohio; then, with Norma, to save his car; and finally, with Betty, to escape from Norma. In reading Norma's draft script, "that silly hodgepodge of melodramatic plots," Joe devises what he describes as "a little plot of my own" to exploit the situation. He is both screenwriter and noir protagonist in his cynical will to plot here, to manipulate the situation to realize his will: "I felt kind of pleased with the way I'd handled the situation. I'd dropped the hook, and she'd snapped at it." Ostensibly a collaboration, Joe and Norma's relationship is from the start a battle of wills in which he underestimates her independence and strength. His "little plot" is soon reduced to the rubble of a day job as a gigolo.

From the first time we meet him alive and in retrospect, Joe is identified with both the typewriter he is using (the same one he is carrying when Norma shoots him and ends his story) and his car, the 1946 Plymouth convertible that is threatened here with repossession: machines for tracing and generating narrative lines in writing and in life, respectively. Joe's car not only brings him to Norma's house, when, after its tire punctures, he turns into her drive to escape from the repossession agents; it also becomes the reason behind his "little plot" to have Norma employ him to edit her script. It functions as the original motive, indeed the motor, for the film's story: "That's why I came to this house. That's why I took this job." His effort to keep the Plymouth engenders a chain of events that will by the end of the film render literal the figure of speech that Norma uses when she learns of its repossession: "Oh . . . and I thought it was a matter of life and death." Joe responds solemnly with ironic prescience, "It is to me."

The automobile functions as an important metaphor for existential agency and narrative possibility in *Sunset Boulevard*, much as the trolley car does in *Double Indemnity* (1944). In the earlier film, once Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson decide to proceed with their plot against Mr. Dietrichson and the insurance

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company, they repeatedly affirm to each other that they are going "straight down the line" together to realize it, a trope that Barton Keyes elaborates and clarifies with his fatalistic theory of the trolley car. The trolley car, attached to its cable and its tracks, is an emblem of a mechanistically inflexible fate, which as Keyes predicts takes the couple directly to the cemetery. There is, however, no fixed and predetermined route to the dead end of Joe's story. The automobile embodies the principle not only of mechanistic determinism but, being an autonomous vehicle largely controlled by its driver, of agency also. The trope of the car suggests that there are a number of preexisting trajectories, different routes, that can deliver Joe to the day and place of his death, into his sunset. The car represents for him the capacity to move on and along a narrative course of his own choosing, a parallel to the work of the scriptwriter and to the unfolding plots he elaborates in his lines of typing (and talk). Just as Joe can move freely through the world in his car only via roads that have been traversed by thousands of others, so his self-determination in life is both facilitated and curtailed by established narrative possibilities. The parallel between the typewriter and the automobile is maintained throughout the film, as his writing and the events of his life in art are marshaled mechanically along preexisting lines of narrative convention.

[IV]

The play that *Sunset Boulevard* makes on the problem of free will and determinism is not only the basis of Joe's character but also fundamental to the audience's experience of the film. While the overarching narrative shape of the plot is announced at its start with the shot of the corpse in the pool and implicit in Joe's voice-over, the temporal experience and enjoyment of the film as it unfolds depend on keeping alive in the minds of the audience other narrative possibilities, the sense that the characters exercise free will, as if the scripted action occurs spontaneously and proceeds from their individual choices. Whereas in many noir films, and indeed crime stories from Edgar Allan Poe onward, the audience is encouraged to identify and compete with the detective who works to solve the crime, in *Sunset Boulevard* the mystery is presented in the more radical and self-reflexive terms of narrative. The audience is with Joe and his peers accordingly encouraged to complete the story, solve the mystery of the body in the pool, by considering the various narrative possibilities that the film facilitates and brings self-consciously to the fore.

Joe starts from the premise that films rework a repertoire of stories rather than attempt radical originality, a presupposition that Betty Shaefer easily criticizes as formulaic: "So you take Plot 27-A, make it glossy, make it slick." The repetitive cycle within which Joe recalls the events of *Sunset Boulevard* means that the film furnishes a story that purports to be authentic but not original. In his altercation with Betty in Sheldrake's office, he speaks up for narrative and accuses her of making a category error in requiring films to have a "message." "Just a story won't do" for Betty, Joe observes, while as far as he is concerned a story will for the most part do, and he cites *Gone with the Wind* as an example of the primacy of narrative for film.

Subsequent interactions between Joe and Betty establish principles of narrative and generic convention over originality. At Artie Green's New Year's Eve party, they withdraw to the bathroom to improvise a romantic melodrama, each of them competent in manipulating the elements that belong to this film genre. An amusing concatenation of film clichés provides the medium for their flirtation, playfully establishing the love story as the genre in which they renegotiate their incipient relationship. This collaboration foreshadows their later nocturnal reworking of Joe's script "Dark Windows" into "Untitled Love Story," during the course of which they provide the film's self-reflexive

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love interest. As writers they sit down to write the film script, while parallel to it their actual love story develops more casually. They apparently "make it up as they go along." The film foregrounds the open genre of "Untitled Love Story," in which the characters act and the audience interprets and anticipates their actions.

Joe and Betty have different approaches to their relationship, just as they do to the script they are writing. He works in a range of narrative possibilities that gravitate toward the preoccupations of film noir. She tries to re-form "Dark Windows" by eliminating its noir content, "all that psychological mess—exploring a killer's sick mind," and turning it into a realist story about teachers and "their threadbare lives, their struggles," a loose analogy to the situation she shares with him as a struggling young Hollywood aspirant. The dramatic situation and narrative that Betty sketches suggest that the story she expects to share with Joe as they work on the script will be one of professional association rather than the romantic relationship of the "untitled love story" it becomes. Joe, however, mischievously suggests a greater intimacy between the two main characters, developing Betty's premise of the teachers' poverty to justify bringing them closer, so that not only do they share the same room but, "[a]s a matter of fact, they sleep in the same bed—in shifts, of course."

Artie Green, who will be doubly betrayed by Joe and Betty's relationship, jokingly aligns Joe, his rival, with criminal narratives. He introduces Joe at his New Year's Eve party as "the well-known screenwriter, uranium smuggler, and Black Dahlia suspect" and in Schwab's drugstore apprehends him as a fellow gangster, whom he charges with treachery, and then as a traitorous spy. There are a homosocial flattery and camaraderie in Artie's addressing Joe as outlaw and sexual rival, but they also work to suggest that the "untitled love story" to develop between Joe, the closet gigolo, and Betty, the fiancée of Joe's best friend, might follow a noir trajectory. In the shooting script of the film, Betty tells Joe that Sheldrake thinks the script "could be made into . . . something for Barbara Stanwyck," the actress who largely defined the genre's femme fatale in *Double Indemnity* and subsequently starred in such Paramount noirs as *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), *The File on Thelma Jordon* (1950), and *No Man of Her Own* (1950). It is at this point that Artie suggests to Joe an anachronistic alternative: "Unless you'd rather have Sarah Bernhardt" (Brackett, Wilder, and Marshman, Sunset Boulevard 77). The choice that the authors have Artie unwittingly offer Joe here is to continue with Norma and Salome rather than become involved with his girlfriend on another script.

Joe of course comes to fulfill the characterization that Artie offered him earlier in jest. He identifies the object of his nightly drives in the Isotta-Fraschini, the "untitled love story" he is writing and enacting with Betty, as "a gangster picture." His restless nocturnal drives to see Betty and work on their script together represent the libidinal drive that, along with the death drive, is recognized by the vulgar Freudianism of film noir as the principal motive force for character and narrative. In the foundational scene of *Double Indemnity*, Walter introduces a motoring analogy to make a sexual pass at Phyllis, to which she responds by observing that the pace of his advances warrants a speeding ticket. The scene invokes the familiar commercial and popular-cultural identification of cars with male libido. In *Sunset Boulevard*, Joe also turns to the analogy of the car to express his erotic attraction toward his young female lead, although here it is softened by romantic love. He explains why Betty "smell[s] real special" to him: "That's no shampoo. It's more like freshly laundered linen handkerchiefs, like a brand-new automobile." While Norma did not allow Joe the means of saving his car from repossession, Betty's "real special" smell restores to him, as if by a Proustian involuntary memory, the pristine moment of taking possession of "a brand-new automobile." Betty

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holds out the hope of a fresh start for Joe, as if he were to be given a second chance to set out again in his 1946 Plymouth convertible and make his way in the world, regain control of his story.

Joe's life in the second half of the film takes the form of a diurnal "Bunburying," which is initially apprehended by Betty, just as John Worthing's double life is by Algernon Moncrieff in Wilde's 1895 play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with the discovery of an inscribed cigarette case. Brackett describes Wilde's play in one of his theater reviews for the *New Yorker* as "the most sparkling play produced by the nineteenth century" (21 May 1927: 29), and it would seem that he had it in mind here, since Betty's mock apology, "I don't usually read private cigarette cases," echoes Worthing's reprimand to his friend, "It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case" (Wilde 483). *The Importance of Being Earnest* furnishes a model of selfhood as story in which the artifice of that selfhood is highlighted by its duplication in a double life. In Wilder's film, as in Wilde's play, a person's commitment to having two separate and discontinuous lives means that their claim to authenticity is undermined, for each story of personal identity affronts the integrity of the other.

When Norma discovers the draft script "Untitled Love Story," she immediately reads this title as a description of the relationship between the two authors named below it. The broad generic expectations elicited by the title are all that she requires to understand the situation and respond. In so doing, she is untroubled by the implication of inauthenticity that the double life attaches to the idea of selfhood, for, as was noted above of her identification with Salome, she understands and enacts selfhood as an artifice. Not so her rival, Betty. She is "one of the message kids" who conversely treat "real" life as the inspiration for and object of art, exhibiting a prosaic imagination reminiscent of Wilde's Herodias: "No; the moon is like the moon, that is all" (312). Joe admits that he based a scene in "Dark Windows," the "flashback in the courtroom," on one of his teachers, an importation from experience into art that for Betty explains why "[i]t's true, it's moving." She insists that character be unambiguous, purged of "all that psychological mess" and unified by a single motivation, such as that of being a hard-working but poorly paid teacher. She asserts an optimistic, unified humanist subjectivity against the divided noir subject and claims for her perspective the authority of realism. Faced with the evidence of Joe's double life, she struggles to preserve her conception of his character by denying his life with Norma: "No! I haven't heard any of this. I never got those telephone calls, and I've never been in this house. . . ." The neorealist Betty is fresh, attractive, and worthy, so that, as Joe recognizes in this scene, she belongs not with him but with his best friend: "you and Artie can be admirable." Betty leaves Joe and the set of *Sunset Boulevard* as if to embark on a normal real life of marriage with Artie. Joe belongs with Norma: the silent star and noir protagonist share the same fin de siècle provenance and premises, each of them fated by decadent affinities among death, Eros, art, and madness.

[V]

Norma's shooting of Joe as he walks away from the house is a desperate final act of containment, a containment nicely emblematized by the swimming pool that receives his body. As in Wilde's *Salome*, where Iokanaan is imprisoned in a cistern, the swimming pool was always meant to contain Joe, to keep him in Norma's world. We know from the start of the film that "[h]e always wanted a pool," and at her New Year's Eve party the first offer that Norma makes in her effort to retain him is to fill the pool. Shortly after leaving this party, Joe is reminded that this wish for a pool is unlikely to be fulfilled without Norma. When he arrives at Artie's party, a chorus of his peers immediately warn him in song that "Hollywood for us ain't been so good, got no swimming pool," since all they earn are "buttons and

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bows." The pool is filled, and the first scene of the new year finds Joe in it. Just as he settled for a vicuña overcoat earlier, he now opts for the pool, even if this does make him analogous to its previous occupants, the rats from which he averts his gaze early in the film. In Bertolt Brecht's "Hollywood Elegies" (1942), the writers "play the whore," and the established, moneyed interests, the "angels" of Los Angeles, "[f]eed the writers in their swimming pools" (380), as if they were performing seals, a trope reminiscent of the "chimp . . . dancing for pennies" in Joe's prescient dream. A synecdoche for the lifestyle of the successful screenwriter Joe aspired to, the swimming pool becomes another, unforeseen and more final end to his story: "Well, in the end he got himself a pool—only the price turned out to be a little high."

Rather like Wilde's Salome, who through her words transforms Iokanaan's ascetic body into a work of art, Norma has throughout their life together treated Joe as a raw material, a body to shape and enhance. As Iokanaan for her Salome, Joe is for Norma primarily of aesthetic and erotic interest. She appears to retain him as an ornament, one to be found languishing on sofas or "on a rubber mattress in the pool" (Brackett, Wilder, and Marshman, Sunset Boulevard 73), likes to dress him up, and wants to embellish him with "a big luscious pearl." Whether as a clotheshorse or an accessory to melodrama, Joe is consistently constructed and construed aesthetically by Norma as a surrogate leading man. She domesticates him to fit in with her visual aesthetic, drawing him away from his dynamic aesthetic of narrative to incorporate him in her static world. Corresponding to Wilde's *Salome*, in which Iokanaan is not only transformed into an art object by Salome's words but also killed in consequence of them, Norma completes her aesthetic mastery of Joe (and fulfills Wilde's dictum [549]) by killing the thing she loves.

Immediately after the murder, Norma stands "exultant in the strange light from the pool" (122), whispering one of her axioms, "The stars are ageless, aren't they?" She may well mean her words as an affirmation of her identity against Joe's unwelcome last words about her being fifty, but they are also her epitaph for Joe, an "exultant" recognition that he has been drawn finally and resolutely into her world—much as the vampire's victim joins the ranks of the undead—so that they are "ageless" together, united in a sort of *Liebestod*. Norma's statement about the agelessness of stars dissolves into a shot of Joe's corpse viewed from the bottom of the pool. Captured in the floodlit pool, his restlessness arrested, he has been drawn into the star's element of light. In the definitive exposition and proof of Norma's stardom, the sequence from *Queen Kelly*, the heavy luminosity of the candlelight appears to congeal in the dripping of the wax. In its density this light suggests an aqueous medium around the star, thickening and gently distorting, like the floodlit water in the innovative shot of Joe's body in the pool. Death has transformed Joe into a de facto star, "bathed in light" like Norma on DeMille's set (89) and accosted by gawking crowds and flashbulbs, which grimly preserve and multiply his static image ("They must have photographed me a thousand times"), thereby furnishing a macabre set of photographic portraits to match those that compose Norma's shrine to herself in the living room. He is captured and contained in his transparent medium here, much as the photographs of Norma are held in their frames by the reluctant liquidity of glass. He has undergone the Hollywood equivalent of a sea change, the agelessness of stardom furnishing a myth parallel to the aesthetic deathlessness of poetry, as if he were cinema's answer to Milton's Lycidas. The sun has set on Joe's life, and now the stars reign supreme.

Joe's death facilitates Norma's return to stardom. It brings the cameras to her and finally grants her a close-up shot. The close-up is, as Tom Gunning notes, a precondition for the phenomenon of stardom: it is the shot that allows

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the audience to distinguish actors and identify most closely with them (Bowser 110). It also marks, as Béla Balázs influentially observes, an abstraction complete in itself and aloof from diegetic time and space (61–62). In other words, it defines the "ageless" star. Here, however, Norma's close-up and dissolve are reminiscent of the menacing claustrophobic shots of the horror movie, for with the loss of focus she threatens to pass through the looking-glass lenses of the camera and projector out to the audience. She exultantly offers her audience intimacy with the "ageless" star, but instead we experience the remorseless approach of the deathless vampire.

The closing scene on the staircase marks Norma's apotheosis, as Joe observes: "The dream she had clung to so desperately had enfolded her." The key to her rather abstract cinematic being—which is at once her tragedy and her triumph—is her circling, obsessive stasis. Her hand and arm movements, which are most clearly articulated in the scenes after she has killed Joe, are centripetal, self-enfolding. Akin to these circling physical gestures (indeed, they are facilitated by it), her writing of the Salome script is a recursive gesture of enfoldment by which she focuses and reiterates her identity. She is swallowed up by such gestures in the final scene, as she dissolves sublimely into the stillness at the center of the vortex of her movements, the heart of light that constitutes the star.

Earlier in the film, on the Paramount set, Hog-eye confers star status on Norma by focusing the spotlight on her, only to have it authoritatively withdrawn by DeMille's order to "turn that light back where it belongs." It is only in the final scene, in front of the news cameras and at Max's orders, that such lights again bestow star status on her, much as at the end of *Salome* "[*a*] *ray of moonlight falls on Salome and illumines her*" (Wilde 329). This symbolic dissolution of Salome's being in the moonbeam, which precedes her killing by Herod's soldiers, returns Salome to the realm of the moon, from which she was imaginatively summoned into existence by the first words of the play. With this stage direction, the two terms of the play's central analogy, of Salome and the moon, are drawn together finally, just as at the end of *Sunset Boulevard* Norma's madness clarifies her being as the star-Salome, and she dissolves in the final punning close-up definitively into the light. Her being here is purely and reverberantly spectral, like that which the Young Syrian ascribes to Salome in Wilde's play: "She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver" (302). The close-up and fade-out mark the dissolution of Norma's discrete cinematic identity and the end of the world of the film: the last flickering rays of Sunset. They parallel the close of Wilde's play, where Salome's triumph ("I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth") is both apocalyptic ("*The stars disappear. A great cloud crosses the moon and conceals it completely*") and the cause of her execution by Herod's soldiers, the point at which the curtain falls (329, 328). "People like Norma Desmond," Brackett observes, "fade out with a bang, not a whimper" (69).

Far from being simply a realist account of Hollywood, Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* is, like Wilde's *Salome*, preoccupied with the formal conditions of its art, and indeed it treats Joe's cynical noir realism and Betty's neorealism as aesthetic styles. While Norma's abstract cinematic being is summed up spatially by the trope of enfoldment, constantly gesturing toward the hollow core of the star, into which she dissolves at the close of the film, Joe's cinematic being is marked by remorseless movement along the unfolding temporal lines of narrative plot and dialogue to his death, the climax of his story, from which he returns with a narrative shape, a meaning, for the last months of his life. His death is not only the close of his story but also the precondition for his success, for in death the failed screenwriter finally gets to write and narrate a big picture. The shot of Joe's corpse viewed from the bottom of the floodlit pool makes literal cinema's metaphor of the "dissolve" as it

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passes into flashbacks of his life through a medium both liquid and light. Whereas Norma's final dissolve indicates the boundary that defines her cinematic being, ultimately retaining her in the film's perpetual present as the "ageless" star, with the completion of Joe's story his being dissolves into an afterlife that reenacts this narrative. In both cases, they fold back into their respective cinematic elements, Norma into the play of light and illusion that constitutes the star, Joe into the story he lives and narrates.

Notes

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[1] E.g., Madsen 85; Armstrong 42–52.

[2] As a journalist working in Vienna, Wilder interviewed Schnitzler, Strauss, Alfred Adler, and (less successfully) Freud (Zolotow 28–29).

[3] Stroheim's conception of the character is highlighted by his suggestion to Wilder of a scene in which Max washes his mistress's underclothes (Zolotow 169).

[4] Wilder and Brackett's abiding interest in this reflexive conceit can be traced back to their use of probably its most famous instance, Prospero's speech in *The Tempest* beginning "Our revels now are ended . . ." (4.1.148–58), in their wayward *Kunstlerroman The Lost Weekend* (1945). Don Birnum, the alcoholic novelist protagonist of the film, quotes from the speech early in the film, thereby furnishing a point of reference that is used to gloss both the nature of his art and his alcoholism. This will be elaborated in a monograph I am researching on the Brackett-Wilder collaboration.

[5] For a wide-ranging consideration of film and photography, see Stewart. I am grateful to Dudley Andrew for this reference.

[6] Barthes elaborates this contrast (89–90).

[7] Wilder reiterates this observation as his own in an American Film Institute seminar with I. A. L. Diamond (59).

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