

Sunset boulevard: a fresh avenue for a familiar genre



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Sunset Boulevard: A Fresh Avenue for a Familiar Genre

In Billy Wilder's 1950 classic *Sunset Boulevard*, an unwitting male protagonist, played by William Holden, falls into the grips of (and is eventually murdered by) a dangerous and scheming former actress portrayed by the great Gloria Swanson. Though this may sound like the setup for a fairly run-of-the-mill film noir, a series of profound alterations to the well worn conventions of the genre not only save the film from mediocrity, but lift it into the ranks of the most lasting and celebrated film classics. Director/screenwriter Billy Wilder, along with fellow writers Charles Brackett and D. M. Marshman Jr. add a daring meta element to the film by pointing a critical eye at a stratum of American society that is unusual for noir films to examine: the film industry. And through use of clever casting, along with a protagonist who defies genre stereotypes, they craft a powerful indictment of Hollywood's rickety and ruthlessly superficial foundation.

The primary purpose of film noir has always been to shine a light into the dark crevices of urban life in order to expose some form of moral corruption. *Sunset Boulevard* is no exception to this rule, but while noir usually looks to black markets, police forces, gambling circuits, or organized crime rings to expose such corruption, Wilder chose instead to look at the corruption in his own back yard: the film industry. Gloria Swanson plays an exiled has-been actress named Norma Desmond. Norma has fallen out of the spotlight due in part to the paradigm shift from silent films to "talkies", but just as much she is a victim of Hollywood's constant need for fresh young starlets to occupy the screen. She deals with her exile by clinging to the lavish lifestyle built upon her dormant career and by socializing only with those who are willing

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to uphold the delusion of her continuing elevated status. Norma claims to be plotting “ a return to the millions of people who have never forgiven [her] for deserting the screen.” Such claims are never countered by the enablers she surrounds herself with and the dilapidated mansion she lives in stands in contradiction to the idea that her vacation from the spotlight is only temporary. The directors whose craft revolves around suspension of disbelief and inflation of the truth are partly responsible for this, but they are only servants of the film studios who are themselves servants of the public’s need for escape. This web of deceit has a complexity that is a staple of the noir genre, but the fibers of which it’s woven are fresh, unusual and relevant more than ever today when the public eagerly devours news of celebrity culture. Hollywood studios and mansions may be far from the dark, seedy alleys that noir fans are used to exploring, but they are no less populated by unscrupulous and deceitful characters.

As Dashiell Hammett’s detective stories were legitimized by the fact that he worked for a time as a detective himself, so is *Sunset Boulevard* legitimized for being a product of the industry it critiques. In genre film, casting conventions typically call for utilizing actors who are familiar as staples of the genre and whose names alone carry pre-established meaning, thus helping ease the audience into the narrative world. Wilder and Brackett chose to cast faces that were indeed familiar and meaningful to the audience, but for different reasons: directors played directors and actors played actors, adding both an interesting meta element and mirroring reality in a way that is atypical not only of noir, but all genre films. When Norma Desmond’s servile butler, Max is revealed to be her ex-husband and the

director of the silent films that made her famous, the casting decision takes on a profound new meaning. Max, after all, is played by legendary silent film director and screenwriter Erich von Stroheim. For audiences, particularly those of the time who were likely familiar with Stroheim's work, this revelation was doubly meaningful. They knew that he, like his character, had directed Gloria Swanson in his early silent films so this revelation of his character's past as well as his involvement with the film in general carried extra weight, as if he as an artist had signed off on the film's scathing criticisms. Equally significant was the casting choice of legendary director Cecil B. DeMille as himself. DeMille had also directed Gloria Swanson in the real world, and in the film demonstrates genuine sympathy for Norma Desmond's plight, showing respect and affection for her, even inviting her to sit in the director's chair when she visits his set. When DeMille notices that a crowd of people has gathered around her, he sees the situation for what it is: nostalgic fans admiring what they see as a Hollywood relic. Knowing that the attention is the last thing Norma needs and perhaps feeling guilty as a participant in crafting her stardom, he disperses the gathered crowd. DeMille, as a director, makes his living by crafting the illusions that have been so damaging to Ms. Desmond and as a result feels protective of her, but is powerless when it comes to lifting the heavy veil of delusion. In addition to Stroheim and DeMille's involvement, numerous bit parts were taken on by former silent actors such as Buster Keaton and H. B. Warner playing themselves. These daring, progressive casting choices validated the film's message and emphasized the versatility of the noir genre as a mirror of corruption.

Sunset Boulevard's main character, Joe Gillis, played by William Holden, appears at the start of the film to be a classic noir protagonist; he's jaded, witty, down on his luck, and being pursued by thuggish debtors. However, as the film progresses we realize that the similarities end there. Film noir almost invariably utilizes protagonists—usually private eyes—with unshakable moral codes who narrowly escape being consumed by the seedy world they're investigating. Joe Gillis however, is not a detective but a screenwriter who becomes so complicit in supporting Norma Desmond's delusions that his own morality, as well as his life, are lost by the end of the film. Shortly after meeting Nora, Joe begins accepting her money in return for his companionship and his help in editing her hopelessly crummy screenplay. Realizing that she may be the ticket out of his financial mess, he remains with her, stoking the fires of her illusory status even well after his debts have been paid. In his voiceover narration, Joe rationalizes his enabling by saying " You don't yell at a sleepwalker - he may fall and break his neck." He's become used to the good life and Nora's delusions keep him comfortable, so much so that his devotion to her begins to resemble that shown by Max. By the film's final act, Joe's behavior resembles that of a femme fatale more than a protagonist. Norma's love for him is unrequited, yet rather than put an end to the relationship, he maintains a secret nightlife collaborating with a young and vulnerable aspiring screenwriter named Betty who is oblivious of Joe's relationship with Norma. Betty, played by Nancy Olson, is engaged to another man, she's new to Hollywood and still ignorant of its various destructive forces. Joe does not realize that he has become such a force himself by lying to Betty about his situation with Norma, and by jeopardizing her engagement as well as her innocence. When Joe finally does <https://assignbuster.com/sunset-boulevard-a-fresh-avenue-for-a-familiar-genre/>

realize who he's become, he breaks off his relationship with Betty and packs his bags to leave Norma for good – except, it's far too late. He's in too deep with Norma and she won't let him leave. She shoots Joe as he's walking away from her, killing not only the film's protagonist, but one of its primary villains.

Sunset Boulevard serves as a bold and original approach to the film noir genre, and this fact was not lost on audiences. After its release it was nominated for eleven Academy Awards and won three, including Best Screenplay. Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett earned this award through visionary use of theme, casting and characters to challenge the limits of the genre. The film not only implicates actors, directors, studios and screenwriters in Hollywood's depravity, but the audience as well, whose insatiable appetite for escape is the impetus that drives the industry. Norma, in her famous monologue at the end of the film, reminds us of our complicity by looking directly into the camera and addressing us as “ those wonderful people out there in the dark”. The film recognizes that the symbiotic relationship between celebrities and their fans, as well as the industry built on it, is a force to be reckoned with.