

# *Sunset Boulevard*

and the

Peril of Nostalgia

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Often times nostalgia plays a large part in the forming of the cultural zeitgeist. Society likes to take ideas from the past, reminisce and perhaps build on them. Take for example the 1950s revival of the 1970s with films like *Grease* (Kleiser), or the revival of 1980s synthpop in the 2000s (Reynolds). *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder) itself comes from a decade where nostalgia for the 1920s was rampant, with the revival of New Orleans style “trad jazz” and frequent “roaring twenties” parties. This culture is exemplified by the release of another highly regarded film from the era *Singin’ in the Rain* (Donen and Kelly), another film about silent film stars which instead glorifies the era. Nostalgia though, when left unchecked can be a trap and is frequently used as a springboard for extremist rhetoric. We see this in many nationalist movements, who look to the idealised depictions of life in historic media as justifications for regressionism. *Sunset Boulevard* is a film that rejects the positive view of nostalgia, providing a character study of its pitfalls in Norma Desmond. In the film, Norma has built a cocoon of her glory days

around herself, protecting her from the advancing outside world she can't bear to face. Her rejection of technological progress and attachment to the past causes her deep-seated mental instability, and this is best exemplified in her introductory scene.

After a brief getaway from some repossession agents, Joe pulls his limping car into the garage of a seemingly abandoned mansion. Joe gets out of his car and a panning shot slowly follows him to reveal an out-of-commission 1929 Isotta Fraschini (the make is named later in the film), an obviously older vehicle. This juxtaposition of *mise-en-scène* is our first clue that Joe has now stepped into another, anachronistic world. The state of the car in contrast with Joe's more contemporary vehicle is also the first blatant rejection of Norma's rose-tinted glasses, demonstrating how fragile the cocoon she has constructed is. Joe leaves the garage, and a tracking shot follows him, revealing the estate as he sees it. This movement, coupled with deep focus, gradually and ominously reveals the situation of the place he has stumbled upon. He briefly pauses in front of large, overgrown vegetation which consumes the background of the frame, then the camera transitions into a crane shot. Slowly the camera rises such that as the monumental mansion is revealed, Joe is utterly dwarfed as it consumes the frame. This choice of cinematography depicts the mansion in much the same way one may depict ancient ruins, as if Joe has made an archaeological discovery. Compare this shot to the earliest photos of the Pyramids of Giza (Zangaki). We see similar use of deep focus and framing to document the immense size of the ruins compared to people in the foreground. A sense of curiosity for what once was pervades both.

The setting itself is of considerable interest. The scene is filmed at the William O. Jenkins House, known during its time as the “Phantom House” due to a long period where it remained vacant (Anonymous). The architect, Thomas Beverley Keim, Jr., interestingly committed suicide. The house was designed in a Mediterranean Revival style that draws on renaissance palaces and was common for buildings of its type in the 1920s. Seeing the decadent location on the cusp of ruin conveys the fragility of the superfluous time from which it hails and reflects the decrepit state of the person that dwells within. This setting coupled with its history, which was known to Hollywood residents of the time, also functions as a modern gothic one. It could be said to follow the haunted house trope, and it places the viewer on edge accordingly. The uncanny nature of such a grand building in disrepair again reflects on its inhabitant’s mental state. As the viewer we are left wondering how someone who chooses to surround themselves with this environment could be of sound mind.

After the exposition of the setting, we are introduced to the antagonist of the film and our character of interest. From out of frame, we hear a female voice call out to Joe. The call is distant and echoes, again conveying the sense of space and emptiness. A slow zoom shot reveals the voice’s source, her unsettling presence growing as the camera lingers and she takes up more of the frame. Norma is obscured by the broken blinds of her home, symbolic of the thin façade of her glory days that she protects herself with. Her sunglasses are all that is clearly visible, indicating that Joe has been stalked by her for some time, and generating further suspicion of Norma. Joe is commanded inside, and he reluctantly moves towards the entrance.

He hesitates as he attempts to begin to reason with Max, dwelling in the liminal space of the doorway. The length of the shot places importance on this moment. The doorway is a portal between two distinct worlds, the world in which Joe lives, and the world where Norma hides. We've seen the fragility of the world Norma has built up and Joe prepares himself for what he might find on the inside.

A riveting examination of the more sinister sides of nostalgia, *Sunset Boulevard* dismantles society's sometimes romanticized view of nostalgia and instead explores the dangers of an overly strong attachment to the past. Billy Wilder exposes a setting that is particularly illustrative of these dangers, conveying this to us through careful camerawork and choice of mise-en-scène. Norma Desmond has built up for herself a protective shell in her mansion, but we see that it is all but defenseless against the sands of time. The film rejects society's recurring infatuation with the past, putting on display the culmination of its downfalls and leaves us wondering if perhaps when left unchecked, there may be a Norma Desmond in all of us.

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