

2009

# We had faces then: Sunset Boulevard and the sense of the spectral

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## Publication details

Post-print of: Cooke, G 2009, 'We had faces then: *Sunset Boulevard* and the sense of the spectral', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 89-101.

Published version available from:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509200600737762>

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## **We Had Faces Then: *Sunset Boulevard* and the Sense of the Spectral**

Sunset Boulevard (1950), a product of the Billy Wilder / Charles Brackett writing team that also produced Double Indemnity (1944) and The Lost Weekend (1945), is one of the enduring classics of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Hollywood cinema. It is a film about film, a Hollywood film about Hollywood, packed with an ironic self-referentiality that never falls into postmodern ennui, but remains firmly within a dry yet theatrical noir tradition. Most importantly, it is a film about the female star and the most valuable ‘asset’ of the female star, her face. As such, the film presents us with a scenario in which to examine the mechanisms of stardom, and highlights the importance of youth and beauty to the star system, with the face of the star at the centre of the system. Further, in its depiction of a silent-movie star enmeshed in the memory of her own cinematic image, Sunset Boulevard invokes what we will call a “cinematic apparatus of the face”, an apparatus that dictates the experience of possessing, or being possessed by, a face.

The face is a vital element in the grand narratives of “being” for contemporary Western culture, a culture obsessed with shiny clean surfaces, a culture enamoured of images of itself, a culture preoccupied with technological prostheses of many kinds. It is the face that appears first when the human is examined; it is the face that we peer into, that we search for and project signs on, that we treat as the document of any person who stands before us. We greet each other, as human beings, and we look into each other’s face. We read what is written there, and perhaps even what has been erased. Yet, simultaneously, the face is also a kind of public-relations exercise for clandestine technological becomings, for it is through an ever-complexifying system of technological and cosmeceutical “cures” that the perfected, cosmetic, clear image of the face appears. The face is everywhere in the media, stage and screen, it sits at the centre of a vast apparatus encompassing lights, cameras, spectators, mirrors, markets, make-up artists and white-coated lab-technicians furtively grinding foetuses into expensive white paste; the cinematic apparatus of the face.

While the use of the term “cinematic apparatus” may seem to imply a nod towards the apparatus theory of Jean-Louis Baudry, I would like to use it in a different sense. Baudry talks primarily about the apparatus as an ensemble of projecting and spectatorial technologies, and through Lacanian psychoanalysis places his emphasis on the effects of the apparatus on the spectator (see Baudry “Apparatus”; and Baudry “Ideological Effects”). As much as the spectatorial environment is important, however, I would also like the cinematic apparatus of the face to be understood as encompassing the broader market in which the faces and images of stars are produced, commodified and consumed. Cinema is always an industry, and what is produced by cinema -- films, spectators and stars, and in the case of Hollywood cinema, merchandise (and cinema as merchandise for other merchandise) -- exists in a capitalist economy. Within this economy, faces play a central role; not merely do they become the hallmark of a star, but, as we have implied, they become one of the star’s most important assets, and are thus the site of much capital investment, and subject to much technological intervention. Faces are commodified, and in that commodification take on a life of their own, existing in a complex, (im)possible

space always inbetween the individual and the market, the real and the image, the biological and the technical, the embodied and the disembodied, the incarnate and disincarnate.

The cinematic apparatus of the face, then, contributes to what we could call, with Derrida in Spectres of Marx, the “spectral” aspect of the face, that aspect of the face that renders it (im)possible, ghostly, there by not being there. Derrida’s project is the process of “hauntology”, the properly deconstructive ontology of beings that are, quite simply, not (10). Taking my lead from Derrida’s hauntology, in this article I intend to firstly analyse Sunset Boulevard in terms of the cinematic apparatus and its production of the face, as well as the role of ghosts and spectrality in this production, and secondly, pose the question of what this analysis can tell us about the face and cinema today.

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The narrative of the film concerns Joe Gillis (William Holden), a down-on-his-luck Hollywood scriptwriter whose car is going to be re-possessed unless he can raise \$200 immediately for the insurance. While on the run from the insurance agents, he ducks into the garage of an overgrown Sunset Boulevard mansion. Weeds in the yard, rats in the swimming pool, and an antique car on blocks in the garage, the house is a metaphor for past glories gone bad or been forgotten. As Joe’s voiceover says, “a neglected house gets an unhappy look; this one had it in spades.” In the house, Joe meets Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), an aging movie star from the silent era, and Max (Erich von Stroheim), her butler and erstwhile husband and director. Although initially preoccupied with the death of her monkey, who somehow seems less like a dead monkey and more like a dead husband, Norma soon asks Joe to edit her script for a movie adaptation of *Salome*, written as a come-back to be directed by her former friend and director Cecil B. deMille (playing himself). Reluctantly Joe takes the position, and is hastily moved in to the bedroom above the garage. Time passes, and soon Joe is Norma’s “kept man”, with a rack full of dinner suits, expensive ties and expensive tastes, and only a modicum of embarrassment regarding his circumstances. Joe continues to edit Norma’s script, which is eventually shown to deMille who, finding himself unable to add one more rejection after “thirty millions fans have given her the brush”, remains silent on the unlikely prospect of its production, leading Norma to assume that it will go ahead. Norma begins a brutal regime of facial rejuvenation, preparing herself for her big appearance, while meanwhile Joe begins work on a new script with a friend’s fiancé, Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olson). These clandestine writing sessions are conducted under cover of darkness, and soon the inevitable happens; Betty falls in love with Joe and Norma finds out about Betty and the other script. Madness, which had already begun to rear its head while Norma prepared her face, arrives fully on the scene, and Norma kills Joe in a fit of jealousy before descending the stairs into the waiting arms of the police and media. “Alright Mr deMille, I’m ready for my close-up.”

*Sunset Boulevard* “examines the aftermath of the transition to sound, in which the power of the writer (and the spoken word) displaces the acting skills of the silent stars” (Ames 196). It is both futurological and archaeological, heralding the ascendancy of the writer

and the screenplay, and picking through the pieces of the silent era. On a narrative level, the film is a noir thriller about the death of a Hollywood writer, murdered in some oblique way by the machinations of the system he works in. On a discursive level the film is a meditation on the star system, and the face of the silent film star as this system's most emblematic manifestation. Of prime importance to the star system is the spectral nature of this face, and the way in which the star system hinges on the production of ghosts.

Ghosts and spectrality give this film its poignancy and bitter ironies, as well as its touches of dark humour. Most obviously, the film is narrated by a ghost. Joe Gillis, whose death brackets the film in a strange but not unheard-of narrative convention, speaks to us from beyond the grave. The stories of ghosts are always cautionary, and the ghost of Joe Gillis returns to us, and to the film, to tell his woeful tale. We first see Joe floating dead in the water. The camera is submerged and we are down there, in the waters of death, we are *with* Joe on the "other side". And then, like all ghosts, we rise out of the waters, we look *back*, and the ghost story begins. Joe meets Norma, and becomes her ghost-writer, her literary prosthesis, the servo-mechanism of her desire to return. Indeed, Norma surrounds herself with ghosts, the "waxworks", her bridge partners, all older actors who, like her, have experienced better days. Discussing the filming of Sunset Boulevard, Swanson described the waxworks and their milieu of bridge parties, caviar and cigarette smoke as a "ghostly world", kept separate from the world of the living: "Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett had cleverly kept [the] ghostly world of oldies separate from the young Hollywood...therefore, I had no scenes with Nancy Olson or Jack Webb" (Ames 205).

Norma's house is the archetypal haunted house. The opening shots are gothic; a swimming pool empty save for rats fighting over a rotting orange, the "ghost of a tennis court". Overgrown, rambling and in disrepair, Joe assumes the house is uninhabited, and he is only half wrong, for it is less inhabited than possessed. When Joe first enters the house and is mistaken for the undertaker, Max ominously tells him "if you need any help with the coffin, call me". The house is dark and eerie, candelabras gather dust in the hallway, their flames guttering slowly in the gloom. Joe encounters Norma, dressed all in black, wearing dark glasses even though it is daylight outside; she leads him to the massage table, upon which lies a curiously small corpse. Throughout the film, the house maintains a distinctly vampiric air. The curtains are almost always drawn, not simply to keep out the light but to maintain a strict separation between the incarnate world of '50s Los Angeles, and the strangely "disincarnate" world of Norma, Max and their collective memories, their photographs, paintings and memorabilia, relics of the *ancien régime* of '20s silent film.

The vampiric air of the house is celebrated most succinctly in the scene in which Joe rushes into the house to ask why his belongings have mysteriously arrived in his bedroom overnight. Accompanied by the evocative strains of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, from an exterior long-shot we cut to an interior close-up in deep focus, with Max's white-gloved hands in extreme foreground hovering above the keys. Apart from the high-kitsch overtones, the use of the Toccata and Fugue completes the referential chain. Like Nösferatu's coachman, Max announces that he brought Joe's belongings, and

our questions regarding how Max did such a thing overnight, without knowing where Joe lived, without a key, and with the car on blocks in the garage, are resolved without being resolved; the house operates on a logic all its own, and its inhabitants are subject to a law that is thoroughly other than that which governs Joe and the outside world.

Norma herself is the arch-ghost of the film, possessing her house as she is possessed by, and preoccupied with, her face and image. Lucy Fischer, in "Sunset Boulevard: Fading Stars", reads Norma as a vampire, one of the cinematic "undead", and finds in her depiction the conflation of fears of aging with fears of bodily decay; the figure of the vampire encapsulates these fears and packages them into a form for which it is acceptable to feel revulsion. Fischer notes how Joe Gillis' attitude towards Norma's aging, and most specifically her aging body and face, is expressed in his description of her house, "which is alternately described as 'rundown' or 'neglected'" (102).

Gillis points out its "ghost of a tennis court with faded markings and a sagging net." It is clear from these descriptions that a horror of bodily decay lies at the root of Joe Gillis' attitude toward the mansion - a fact that emerges when he refers to the place as "crumbling apart in slow motion." Thus the aging process is viewed as somehow repulsive, to be shunted away. (Fischer 102)

Gillis' revulsion at the aging body, of the house and of the woman, is legitimated in the film, Fischer argues, by the depiction of Norma Desmond as a vampire, one of the undead, neither alive nor dead, feeding on death and maintaining only an illusion of life (103). Within the narrative, we can easily see how Norma appears to "feed" off Joe's youth, and how this nourishment improves her appearance. At one stage, she says "I've never looked better in my life...because I've never been as happy." Like all vampires, this feeding on the life-blood of the young brings Norma back. It returns her to an earlier state, reanimating her and preparing her for her come-back. Likewise, we see Joe feeding off Norma's wealth; indeed, popular conceptions of the "kept-man" scenario have these readings built-in, and Sunset Boulevard constantly plays with these conceptions, neither entirely critiquing nor justifying them, doing little to endear either Joe or Norma to the spectator looking for some kind of positive identification.

However, there is another kind of feeding in Sunset Boulevard, which has more to do with the relation of the star to her image. Fischer notes that as Norma watches her younger self in silent films, "she seems almost to 'feed' on her youthful persona", as if nourished by this image of her own youth in the circular logic of auto-consumption (103). Norma produces herself at the same time as she consumes herself; constantly trying to put herself back together, she re-members herself in order that she can devour herself again and again. Indeed, we could say that Norma's ultimate goal in the film, a goal she pursues with all her power, a goal Max serves to facilitate and foster, is to re-member herself, to reconstitute that which she was, and to become that re-membered self. In so doing Norma essentially haunts herself, for it is her image she wishes to become, her image which is always becoming and always receding. Yet this image exists solely as a function of the cinematic apparatus of the face, it is the specular, spectral other, the other that is unutterably other, the other which exists never as that which was and *will be*, but

that which *promises* to be again. “At bottom, the spectre is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back” (Derrida 39). One of the central ironies of the face in the star system, then, is that it ensures that the face, and the individual attached to the face, will be immortalized and forgotten *at the same time*, in one and the same movement, and this is the logic of the spectral. The cinematic image of the face suggests at the same time immortality and disappearance, which is the state of existence characteristic of ghosts, those beings that are neither here nor not-here, in the present only by virtue of an eternally recurring past, which is thus also a future.

As a product of the silent screen, Norma Desmond is pure spectrality, and pure face. Norma, decrying the rise of the writer, tells Joe “We didn’t need dialogue, we had faces then.” And as Christopher Ames notes, “silent film acting, with its reliance on gestures and close-ups, puts more emphasis on acting with the face than do stage acting or talking motion pictures. Sunset Boulevard reminds us frequently that the face of Desmond/Swanson is *cinematic property*” (Ames 199; my italics). The duplicity of “property” is made clear. Norma lives inside and is defined by the remains of the cinema’s image of herself. She is surrounded by photographs of herself in her heyday, and entranced by private screenings of her movies in which she appears always young and beautiful. While Norma lives surrounded by images of herself, however, it is not the case that she therefore possesses her image; rather she is possessed *by* her image. Her image was produced by and remains the property of the Hollywood star system, and of the cinematic apparatus; in other words, the market. As Walter Benjamin notes, commenting on the rise of the star system and Hollywood cinema, “This market, where [she] offers not only [her] labour but also [her] whole self, heart and soul, is beyond [her] reach” (224). Norma’s physical body may remain her own, but her face, and thus her image or appearance, is mouldering on Paramount’s asset register, and has been considerably depreciated. Norma’s sense of self, which we could call use-value, the use to which she wishes to put herself, has been entirely supplanted or defined by an exchange-value wherein her self/image is subject to the whims of the market. Even this exchange-value is primarily imagined; in the New Hollywood of talking pictures, her image has value only as nostalgia. Like a diva-style Phantom of the Opera, Norma is the ghost of Hollywood, and her face is the purest expression of the commodity fetish, a thing which has had any sense of use-value entirely subsumed by the mysterious movements within the cinematic apparatus of the face, and the social relations it feeds and feeds upon (Marx 77). Walter Benjamin concurs: “The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality’, the phony spell of a commodity” (244).

There are four key sequences in Sunset Boulevard that depict the functioning of the cinematic apparatus of the face. Each sequence implicates the next in an expanding matrix of technologies, until the tragic cinematic finale is played out. The first of these sequences is the scene in which she and Joe watch one of her early films (incidentally, the film they watch is the never-released von Stroheim film Queen Kelly, which starred a young Gloria Swanson; one of the many insider-references Wilder and Brackett packed into the film). It ends with Norma exclaiming “I’ll show them, I’ll be up there again, so help me!”. The “up there” Norma speaks of is the space and time of the screen. To be “up

there” is to be in a way that her current form of being cannot compare with; her being is always oriented towards this being up there, elsewhere, floating through the air like a ghost and projected onto the screen. As Derrida notes, “[t]he specter is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects -- on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see” (101). In this scene, after the camera focuses for some time on the film on the screen, in which a young Norma/Swanson lights a candle and prays for her wickedness to be cast out, it switches to Norma and Joe. Standing up, lit by the flickering beam of the projector, Norma’s profile is harshly backlit, and the contrast between the youthful figure “up there” on the screen, and her current state *down here*, is brought sharply into focus (Ames 200).

The second key sequence occurs during Norma’s visit to Cecil B. deMille on set. Norma arrives at the Paramount studio gates, and after finally being recognized by an older security guard, she is ushered onto the set by deMille and seated in the director’s chair while deMille makes a phone call. A microphone brushes Norma’s hat and she angrily pushes it away, whereupon a lighting technician recognizes Norma and turns a spotlight on her. “Let’s get a good look at you” he says, and the apparatus springs into action. It is suddenly as if, there in the middle of the soundstage, the screening of an unexpected film begins. Where before, unlit, Norma entered the set unnoticed, now, in the spotlight, her “presence” re-asserts itself. Cast-members become spectators and flock around, fascinated with this apparent resurrection, drawn to the light of this spectacle unfolding in their midst: “There’s Norma Desmond”, they exclaim; “Why, I thought she was dead!” Norma basks in the light that is shone upon her, which is concurrently the light of a technical projecting apparatus, and the light of public adoration, the light of the spectatorial gaze. For a moment the ghost is real, and Norma becomes a spectator upon her own spectrality. Back from the dead, lifted from down here, the resurrected Norma is momentarily up there again, bathed in the light of the projector and the light that glints in the eyes of the audience. Of course, the light is extinguished as quickly as it began; deMille arrives and orders the technician to “turn that light back where it belongs”, the light turns away and the crowd disperses. The spectacle is over, Norma is left to compose herself after her brief foray up there. “Did you see them? Did you see how they came?” As Christopher Ames notes, we are left with a powerful sense of the “transforming power of movie technology, its power to turn a person into an icon and, conversely, to extinguish that transfiguring light” (206).

In an eerie foreshadowing of the contemporary obsession with the makeover and the technologies of appearance, the third sequence is the “makeover frenzy” montage sequence that follows Norma’s visit to the set. Convinced that the filming of *Salome* will go ahead, Norma begins what Joe’s voiceover calls “a merciless series of treatments”, a gruelling regimen of therapies designed to ready her “for those cameras that would never turn”. Her skin is subjected to electric shocks, heat treatments, steam, massage, mudpacks and lotions. Through a magnifying glass every pore and wrinkle is examined and every impurity excised. The sequence ends with Norma examining her face in a make-up mirror, her features rigidly locked in place by a series of straps. She has been immobilized, conditioned, examined minutely by an abstract cinematic eye as much as by the eye of the beauty technician. As Ames notes, “[I]ight, mirror, magnifying glass, and

giant eye symbolize the remorselessness of the close-up and its demands” (201). If, as Deleuze & Guattari suggest, the face is by nature a close-up, the face is also necessarily a function of the apparatus that gives us such a thing as a close-up, and the industries that condition the form and appearance of the face in close-up (Deleuze & Guattari 171). The face is technologically produced in two senses. Firstly, it is conditioned by cosmetic technologies, it is scraped clean, sucked dry, plucked and re-surfaced. Secondly, it must “pass” in the abstract but no less judgemental eye of the cinematic apparatus of the face. Both Sander Gilman, in Making the Body Beautiful, and Deleuze & Guattari, in the “Faciality” chapter of A Thousand Plateaus, argue that the face’s public appearance is conditioned by a mechanism of “passing”, wherein faces are judged to pass or fail in their degree of fitness to be recognized as a face as such (Gilman 22; Deleuze & Guattari 177). For Deleuze & Guattari, the “abstract machine of faciality” which governs processes of passing is intrinsically computational, a mechanism of the “yes/no” type; the question is of whether a certain face can pass as a certain type, whether its organization of traits is *proper*, or in accord with, the recognized organization of traits proper to that type. The face that appears upon the screen, the face that is projected and which “passes” before the eye of the spectator, must first “pass” under the discriminating eye of the cinematic apparatus of the face.

The fourth key sequence is the final scene, in which Norma prepares herself for the cameras as police and media fill the downstairs foyer, and she descends the stairs to utter her famous last words, “Alright Mr deMille, I’m ready for my close-up.” Both before killing Joe and after, Norma stares upwards and off-screen-right, her eyes wide as if stretching to encompass a huge picture of herself, yet also as if in terror, as if some horrible/beautiful thing is unfolding “up there”, where the stars are. It is her own ghost she stares at, the ghost of her that the cinematic apparatus of the face still projects above her, beyond her, and back upon her, and which she is possessed by. Ironically, Norma is simultaneously star *and* spectator. Later, as the policemen interrogate Norma in her bedroom, she sits silently at her dressing table, entranced by her image in the mirror. We can interpret this scene in a number of ways. With Lucy Fischer, we could see in this image a depiction of the narcissism frequently projected onto women in painting and cinema, just as we could read in it a “regression” of the Lacanian type to the possession of and with the self characteristic of the mirror stage. “Clearly she is ‘subordinated’ to her screen persona, and, like the Lacanian infant, stands ‘jubilant’ in the ‘assumption’ of her specular image. While the infant has only commenced to be distanced from its true identity, Norma has had a lifetime to experience the radical loss of self visited upon women in our culture” (Fischer 108-109). Rather than revert to the now quite commonplace usage of Lacanian theory, however, let us highlight the slippage between specular and spectral, between what appears on the screen as in a mirror, and what appears by not appearing, by haunting the screen and possessing the spectator. With the mention of the cameras that the news-reel men have arrived with, Norma’s attention returns to the present. Max assures her that “the cameras have arrived” and she prepares herself for her scene. We cannot be blind to the presence of the apparatus here, and its promise of a ghostly becoming. Regardless of where – mirror or screen - her image appears, it is the cinematic apparatus, with its promise of appearing “up there”, that defines Norma’s preferred mode of “being”.



Max, playing the part of deMille, directs the scene. Through a frozen tableau of police, newspaper reporters and photographers, Norma descends the stairs as the Princess Salome. Cameras and lights follow her down; ironically however, it is the Paramount *news* team, and we are presented with the cruel conjunction wherein Norma's fantasy of returning to bask in the uplifting light of the cinematic apparatus, is abruptly juxtaposed against the harsh and comparatively "real" light of the news media. At the bottom of the stairs she breaks character briefly to express her happiness at having been allowed to return to pictures. She admits that this thing she has returned to, this cinematic apparatus that has apparently re-admitted her, is her whole life. "There's nothing else. Just us, and the cameras, and those wonderful people out there in the dark." And then she is ready for her close-up; she advances menacingly on the camera and on "those wonderful people out there", twirling her hands like Nösferatu, her face blurring to fade-out.

Norma's final admonition is telling, for a number of reasons. Firstly, she succinctly describes the cinema in its entirety as the only thing that exists. Actors, cameras and spectators are joined together in a single apparatus which is all-encompassing, and within which she finds herself and defines herself. Secondly, it is an acknowledgement that the ghost of her that the apparatus presents her with is "real", and that there is nothing else. She wishes to be her ghost and to have no existence outside of that spectral state. To be, finally, ready for her close-up, is to be ready once again *to be pure face*. When she is up there, or at least preparing to be up there, she exists; when she is down here, she does not exist. As we mentioned earlier, Norma's possession by the cinematic apparatus of the face is such that the only form of being she values is the being that is *not*, the being that is immaterial, that is pure light, that is absolute. Pure star, pure face, nada. Norma's "face value" is not her use-value, it is her value as something that does not exist, that will never exist, that flits about at the periphery of her gaze, off-screen-right, where she stares enraptured at the sight.

It is therefore through spectrality that we wish to understand a film like Sunset Boulevard, and consequently the cinematic apparatus of the face. Norma Desmond surrounds herself with ghosts; Joe Gillis, a ghost-writer; the "waxworks", those silent ghosts of Old Hollywood. Her house is the archetypal haunted house, and Norma herself is depicted as some kind of vampire, explicitly feeding off Joe's youth, implicitly feeding off the *image* of her youth, which is also her ghost. This image, this ghost surrounds her, she wallows in it, it is apparent in paintings, photographs, old films, letters and the adoration of Max, who perhaps more than any other character in the film represents a sanctioning and legitimating force behind Norma's possession of and by her image. Indeed, Max "conjures" Norma's ghost, in the various senses Derrida inflects "conjunction" with in Spectres of Marx.

Firstly, conjunction involves a "swearing together" or conspiring, the taking of an oath, which is an oath to keep something secret. In its first moments, conjunction keeps revelation in reserve. Derrida's primary example comes from Hamlet; having seen and spoken with the ghost, Hamlet enjoins Horatio and Marcellus to swear together to keep silent regarding what they have seen, just as the ghost, from beneath the stage, enjoins the

group to swear to secrecy also. “It is the apparition that enjoins them to conspire to silence the apparition, and to promise secrecy on the subject of the one who demands such an oath from them” (Derrida 41). With this sense of conjuration in mind, we can see that Max maintains Norma’s ghost by keeping silent about it. Max protects Norma from the knowledge that she has, essentially, ceased to exist; the fans no longer write, Paramount doesn’t want her, she no longer matters, and is in that sense “immaterial”. Max maintains Norma’s desire to become her image, to become her ghost, by hiding from her the fact that she has already become a different kind of ghost, and by keeping “alive” the fiction of her ghost as something she is, still, yet to become.

Thus, secrecy leads us to the second meaning for conjuration, whereby conjuration signifies the incantation or spell necessary to *bring forth* some spirit or spectre (Derrida 41). Max hides Norma’s awareness of herself *as* a ghost by bringing forth the fiction *of* her ghost as something that had been attained once and will yet be (re)attained. Through his insistence that “Madam is the greatest star who ever lived”, through his constant refusal to let Norma lose her grip on the old Hollywood in which she reigned, Max conjures Norma’s ghost again and again, projecting it above and around Norma so that she sees it constantly, and wishes to join it and merge with it up there. Let us not forget that Max is not merely Norma’s ex-husband, but that more importantly, he is Norma’s director, the architect and choreographer of her spectrality; while Cecil B. deMille is given a privileged status as her director *par excellence*, it is Max who was with her at the beginning and who is with her at the end. As Norma descends the stairs in the final scene, it is Max *playing* deMille who directs the scene, and who presides over her final transfiguration.

As well as a function of Max’s machinations, Norma’s ghost is a function of the cinematic apparatus of the face. The cinematic apparatus has given her an image of herself which haunts her, and which thus possesses her. Norma is possessed by her image, controlled or dominated by a spectral force, it haunts her, returns to her again and again, calling to her, beckoning her on. From the screen and in the mirror the ghosts call to her, exhorting her to become one of them, to ascend to their realm. It is thus as if she is the property of her image, rather than the other way round. While it is normal to possess one’s image, in that it is one’s property, and has one’s properties, here, Norma’s image possesses her, she is a property of her ghost, she is “pre-occupied” with and by her image. This image in turn is possessed by the vast system of studios, executives and spectators which functions on the circulation of images, on commerce with ghosts. Cinema trades on ghosts, it is trade with ghosts and, most significantly, the ghosts trade amongst themselves. Cinema produces and commodifies the spectral dimension of the face.

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If Sunset Boulevard tells us about the face and the star at a certain moment in the history of Hollywood cinema, can it also tell us something about the face and the star today? Our formulation of the cinematic apparatus of the face places the face at the centre of a system concerned with the production, dissemination and consumption of images of

beauty and youth. Time and aging are thus also central concerns; the face must remain young, it must not admit of any of the flaws wrought by time and age, it must exist out of time, forever calcified in the world of the image. There is thus a disjunction between “real” life and time as they are physically lived, and the life and time of the image. In Norma’s case at least, it is real life which is subordinated to the life of the cinematic image, and we are presented with the fascinating conundrum of a star being both a star and a spectator upon her own stardom. She is always both and neither “up there” and “down here”, and that is her problem. This disjunction, and subordination of life to image, is echoed in the problematic relation of the star to herself as a commodity. Where we might expect her face to be her own property, here, it is the property of the cinematic apparatus. To have a face is to be had by the face, possessed or haunted by the spectral face that will only ever exist as a promise, as something always yet to come but never to arrive.

This scenario relates to contemporary cinema and its context in many ways. Stars, obviously, continue to play a vital part in cinema, and in culture more widely. They are part of an ever-morphing celebrity culture which is distributed across numerous industries, such as the entertainment, fashion, cosmetics and beauty industries. As Benjamin argued, stars have an intrinsic relation to the commodity, and this is as true today as it was in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The relation of the contemporary star to the commodity is complex and multifaceted. With what some have dubiously labelled the “triumph” of liberal democracy, globalization and the explosion of intellectual property law, commodities have become increasingly ephemeral, frequently existing purely as signs and symbols, gestures, logos and brands. Stars are marketed not merely as commodities themselves, or as the value-add of faces and names attached to products via product endorsement, but as the intellectual property of their own production companies. After attaining office as Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s holding company sued a toy maker that had produced a “Schwarzenegger-like bobblehead doll”, arguing that “Schwarzenegger is an instantly recognizable global celebrity whose name and likeness are worth millions of dollars and are solely his property” and that the doll infringed on this property (Epstein 299). Not merely do stars (and their production or PR companies, and to a large extent we need not recognize any separation between the two) own and attempt to control their own images, but they can also legally own and attempt to control the image of this image – their *likeness*, divorced from any photographic and physical reality, is still able to be trademarked and copyrighted.

Accordingly, and in contrast to the trend in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary stars exert massive influence over the content of today’s cinema, their “star power” frequently functioning as an independent brand that must be marketed, massaged and disseminated like any cinematic product. The publicity machine that markets Tom Cruise is a case in point: during the filming of Mission Impossible II (2000), back-stories were circulated that asserted Tom Cruise performed all his own stunts, despite the fact that up to six stunt doubles were used for Cruise’s part, and the insurance company that underwrote Cruise’s appearance in the film would have been highly unlikely to allow their client to risk himself, and thus their investment, in such a manner (Epstein 180-181). Questions of

veracity aside, the back-stories functioned to emphasize the heroic persona of Cruise-as-Star, and his supposed similarity to the fictional hero of M:I-2, Ethan Hunt.

The face of the star is still one of the central mechanisms of stardom, one of the star's primary assets, and the site of much capital and technological investment; it is also the site where questions of property become even more complex, and where the logic of the spectral re-emerges. The cosmetic treatment frenzy which has gripped the entertainment industry over the past few years is due testament to this, and it is testament also to cinema and culture's continuing emphasis on youth and beauty, and continuing problem with time. Despite the power that comes with playing a pivotal role in celebrity and commodity culture, then, as in the case of Norma Desmond, stardom is still beholden to filmed entertainment, and to the many industries, such as the entertainment and tabloid media, that encircle the cinema industry and which disseminate images of stars. Disappearing from the tabloids, while it may be a fantasy for many stars whose private lives are so regularly exposed to the cruel light of the media, is also tantamount to media suicide. Whether a star gets to appear in the tabloids in a positive or negative light is hardly the point; as always, it is the appearance that matters.

Botox and the panoply of cosmetic technologies Botox fits within is central to this issue. Since the cosmetic use of Botox entered the mass-market in the early 1990s, questions have circulated regarding its long-term effects, and its status as simultaneously a "miracle cure" and a derivative of one of the most powerful poisons known, Botulinum Toxin. The tabloid obsession with "has he/she had work done?" has spawned an entire hermeneutic genre consisting of the paparazzi portrait and the medical interpretation of their cosmetic history, which along with frock-shots and relationship gossip makes up a sizable contingent of the appearances of stars in tabloid publications and magazines. Most importantly for this analysis, recent accounts of Botox use in the film industry have focused on the problems faced by casting agents and film directors, who find that Botoxed actors can no longer emote as required. In maintaining the face required of them by the cinema and entertainment industries, some stars are faced with the irony that this very maintenance can exclude them from appearing in film altogether. Stars may own their faces as intellectual property, but if their faces no longer look like their faces, this form of ownership becomes highly questionable. Indeed, it starts to look less like ownership and more like licensing; the face of the star is not so much owned as licensed to them for a certain period of time, and for a certain set of uses, and when the time period runs out, or when the face is overly tampered with, the licensing contract is rendered null and void.

Of Mickey Rourke, London casting agent Jeremy Zimmermann notes: "I had to veto Mickey for the leading role in a British film I'm working on. I had to explain to his agent that we wouldn't be using him because his face looks so frozen after his recent operations...He looks so strange now" (NW Magazine, April 21, 2003). Martin Scorsese and Baz Luhrmann have also been frustrated in their ability to find actors able to express non-verbal emotion, especially anger. As Luhrmann notes, "their faces can't really move properly" (MX Magazine, Feb 10, 2003). Denise Chamian, casting director for Tim Burton's 2003 film Big Fish, comments: "You look through magazines and watch

television and you see that a lot of these women don't even look like themselves anymore" (Weiner 34). Although not looking like oneself is a common epithet used to describe someone who seems out of sorts, Chamian's comment is telling. Only within a culture in which a person's image circulates and precedes them, and indeed subordinates their physical self to their publicized image, is it possible to not look like oneself in the manner Chamian proposes, and it is precisely this problem that haunts Norma Desmond, stranded as she is in the nympholeptic pursuit of the image of her younger self. There is an increasing pressure on stars to maintain a youthful, fit and healthy appearance despite the inevitable effects of time, and the explosion of Botox and other cosmetic treatments is indicative of this pressure.

If, as Richard Dyer suggests in Heavenly Bodies, stars are important because they "articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society" (8), and if we can generalize from the star as depicted in Sunset Boulevard, to the experience and function of stars today, what can our analysis of this film tell us about the face in contemporary society? Obsessions with youth and with Botox, cosmetic surgery, and makeovers to halt the effects of time, are not confined to those stars and celebrities whose existence is defined by the cinematic apparatus of the face. These obsessions, and the melange of cosmeceutical and technological interventions that accompany them, are now commonplace in many cultures. Anti-aging treatments have existed for many years, but it is only recently that the market has grown so quickly, and with such variety in cosmetic products, cosmeceutical treatments and technological interventions. In part, this may be a function of the aging of the baby-boomer generation and their increase as a percentage of the population in many countries; not merely are baby-boomers aging and thus becoming more concerned with the appearance of aging, but baby-boomers also tend to be those in power, the cultural elites who dictate directions in policy and technological development. As Dion Dennis predicted in "Late Boomerology And Beyond: Singing The Body Virtual/Geriatric", "[t]hese virtual elites will become, over the first half of the 21st Century, geriatric cyborgs (geriborgs), deploying a remote and detailed net of technology to extend their bodily and informational privileges over an extended time-span". It would be difficult to pinpoint exactly what is behind the growth of the anti-aging industry, and we are only making general points here. No doubt the baby-boomer phenomenon or incipient "gerontocracy" play some role in this, but there are most likely a number of other causes working together. Regardless, it is fair to say that Norma Desmond's issues with time and aging and the conflict between the physical self and the imaged self are common issues in contemporary society.

This is also to suggest that the commodification of oneself as image is now a commonplace fantasy. In this fantasy, materiality is produced *as* immateriality, to be is to be an image in circulation, and the image only has value by virtue of its place in the market. This much has already been theorized in many postmodern critiques and most particularly in Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum. But there is also a temporal aspect to this imaging, a conflict between the temporality of life as it is lived and experienced, and the atemporality of the commodity image. As it was for Norma Desmond, time is still a problem, more so now perhaps than in previous eras; in Derrida's borrowed phrase, "the time is out of joint". Given the temporal equivocation of the commodity image, it is

worth asking the question of what is really bought and sold here; is it the image, or is it in fact a certain relationship to time that is the commodity, a certain appearance of the cessation of time?

At the same time that issues faced by those in the public eye have spread out into the public sphere more widely, with the rise of reality television, the cult of celebrity has become far more egalitarian, although no less virtual; “stardom” of one sort or another is now only a Big Brother or Survivor audition away. There is a kind of celebrity-lust at work here, an incessant and roaming search for the signifiers of celebrity without the extensive production infrastructure and talent necessary for stardom; someone like Paris Hilton can only be explained by virtue of such a phenomenon. Celebrity-lust is intrinsically cinematic, it places us all potentially on show, projecting us all “up there”, or rather, projecting before us the spectacle/spectre of ourselves projected up there. If cinema is now, in some metaphorical or projected sense, a way of being, then it is the face that continues to stand as the paradigm of this mode of being-cinema. The face stands as that thing which is seen, which defines one’s appearance, which smoothes and eases one’s way through the world, but which must be maintained through a constant and ongoing series of technological interventions and capital investments. It is in this very maintenance -- this maintenance of the *maintenant*, the now -- that the face loses any relation with the here and now and enters the conflicted space-time of the spectral.

As we can see, while Sunset Boulevard is ostensibly concerned with a certain moment in the history of Hollywood, echoes of its concerns regarding the face and the star are still sounding today, louder, even, than in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many parts of the world we now live within a cinematic society, a society of the spectacle and the commodification of increasingly ephemeral items of cultural and industrial production, and the ephemerality of capital marks it out, like the film star, as a spectral form *par excellence*. In employing the spectral to analyse the fleeting, eternally-retreating and temporally troubled face of the star, I have only touched the surface of the concept as Derrida uses it in Spectres of Marx. There, it is used to analyse discourses of the end of history and the triumph of liberal democracy, as well as to elucidate Marx’s own spectres, the spectres of communism and of capital. Derrida does not even mention cinema, concentrating more on the theatrical scenario of Hamlet and his father’s ghost. He does, however, place spectrality within a scenario of looking, and much is made of the etymological relation of the spectre to spectacles and spectatorship. It is for this reason that I have chosen to use the spectral in my examination of certain cinematic and wider cultural structures. The spectre is looked for and looked at, and being both there and not-there it is seen and not-seen, requiring always more effort to be apprehended. In a cinematic society, we are all spectral, and are thus surrounded by spectres.

Crucially, however, in Derrida’s formulation at least, the spectre also looks back at us: “[G]host or *revenant*, sensuous-non-sensuous, visible-invisible, the specter first of all sees *us*. From the other side of the eye, *visor effect*, it looks at us even before we see *it* or even before we see period” (101). The visor effect describes a scenario of seeing without being seen, or conversely, of being watched by someone or something that cannot be seen; it is a screen in both senses, enabling *and* denying the look. Norma Desmond

experiences this also, for her watching of herself is always thwarted by the visor effect, by that mechanism that ensures she hides from herself at the same time as she searches for herself. As we stare into an increasingly cosmeticized and commodified future, and as we try to predict what role cinema will play and what form it will take in the future, thinking this (im)possibility, this hauntology of searching for oneself while hiding from oneself, remains a vital task.

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