

# Twilight of the Idols: Performance, Melodramatic Villainy, and *Sunset Boulevard*

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THERE IS A PARTICULAR VARIETY OF FILMIC EVIL that demands a correlative degree of imaginative simulation from a viewer: this is the villain of the melodramatic tradition. Any melodramatic villain worth the upturn of his moustache will be adept in the arts of trickery, disguise, and deception. In other words, he will be an actor. Indeed, in Victorian stage melodrama, the villain's willingness to adopt a false persona sets him apart from the virtuous characters, who shun deceptive behavior. Historically, these deceptive cads were reviled because they privileged their sense of a unique, private subjectivity above the social order. "Melodrama is an anti-intellectual genre which eschews subject-centered, psychological modes of identity. In melodrama, the villain is a threat because he is individualistic, valuing self before society" (John 49). By contrast, the imperiled heroine and her stalwart protector are little more than callow paragons of virtue, without recourse to the villain's protean gifts of duplicity. To put it another way, wickedness in nineteenth-century English melodrama is delineated by the mobility between a private self (one of undisclosed personal desires) and

a public self (one of counterfeited sociality)—a duality that is antithetical to the hero(ine)'s singular altruism. Plots frequently turn on an act of mendacity perpetrated against an innocent whose virtue is predicated upon an utter lack of guile, which renders the hero(ine) vulnerable to the threat of corruption. Performance is more than a weapon in the melodramatic tradition; it is the very mark of Cain.

The coding of villainy as inherently histrionic extends beyond the silent melodramas of the early twentieth century, which ostensibly appear more indebted to Victorian theatrical conventions than their successors beyond the late teens. This conflation of performance and deception largely accounts for the secret frisson that often characterizes one's encounters with all filmic villainy influenced by stage melodrama's Manichean polarities. In performing immorality, a screen actor offers sets of signs that are interpreted and pleurably reconstructed as villainous by a viewer. These acts of decipherment can be doubly captivating in films indebted to melodrama's lineage, whereby villainy itself is conceptualized as a kind of performance. Films inspired by melodramatic traditions posit villainy as a theatrical venture—a wantonly aesthetic enterprise that is an affront to bourgeois propriety.

The insidiousness of the villain's ostentatious schemes is a constant source of vexation for virtuous characters, yet it is often an unmistakable source of pleasure for audiences. Just as a film's heavy adroitly deceives his or her naïve victim, so too does she or he seem to "trick" the bemused spectators out of their

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usual or learned moral responses to immoral situations. A villain will be doubly practiced at the art of deception, and this adeptness is integral to the character-type's entertainment value. Delight in villainy is not always an act of overt moral disassociation—the familiar expulsion of breath hissing through the teeth; it is often a matter of illicit excitement. Taking pleasure from a melodramatic representation of evil is often a complex form of aesthetically oriented appreciation. Our fascination with these types of wrongdoers is often located in our relation to them as performers and in their aptitude for coaxing responses marked by a corresponding and commensurate degree of performativity.

Gloria Swanson's reflexive performance in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) as washed-up film star Norma Desmond provides us with a particularly sophisticated model of the histrionic representation of wickedness. I argue that the reception of Swanson's signs of villainy entails an imaginative performance on a viewer's part in which she or he may become the appreciative recipient of a villainous transmission. A mildly perverse consanguinity, one's enjoyment of ostentatiously histrionic villainy is an aggregate of intertwining pleasures, including: (1) admiration for an actor's technical prowess; (2) delight in a film's mobilized formal antipathy between "theatrical" and "illusionist" performance styles; and most important (3) the satisfaction derived from entering into a virtual performative contract as an admirer of the art of villainy.<sup>1</sup>

### **"It's the Pictures That Got Small": Melodramatic Performance**

As the authors of the Production Code worried, "the enthusiasm for and interest in the film *actors and actresses*, developed beyond anything of the sort in history, makes the audience sympathetic toward the characters they portray and the stories in which they figure. Hence they are more ready to confuse the actor and the character, and they are most receptive of the emotions and ideals portrayed and presented by their favorite stars (qtd. in Doherty 350). Hollywood's

moral reformists despaired of the stars—their trails of glory blanketed all good, common moral sense. Journalist Eileen Percy's complaint concerning the charisma of the gangster in 1931 (played by electric heavies such as James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Paul Muni) is a typical example: "Our gunmen are presented to us in such a manner that we find ourselves pulling for them in spite of ourselves, due to the subtle persuasions of the drama" (qtd. in Maltby 131). The fear that these "subtle persuasions" make unwilling monsters of men were not limited to the 1930s; Orrin E. Klapp wrote in 1962 that "to cast a popular favorite as a criminal might be itself almost a crime against the public" (156); even as recently as 1993, in *Hollywood vs. America*, the conservative film reviewer Michael Medved decried the "attractiveness" of violence.

Historically, the villain is a close relative of the actor. To put it more accurately, performers have long been marked as inherently deceitful and immoral: Plato declared that actors' penchant for falsification disqualified them for his Republic; in France, actors were excommunicated from the Middle Ages until the early eighteenth century; Puritan reformists sought to close theaters and publicly censure performers in Elizabethan England; actors in India belonged to the lowest castes until the early twentieth century. While Jonas Barish reminds us that biases against acting are specific to their respective sociohistoric emanations, all of the examples cited here share an underlying affiliation between theatricality and falsity. This "antitheatrical prejudice" is partly metaphysical—informed by a lingering Platonic suspicion that an actor only aspires to an "inauthentic" duplication of forms—but mostly ethical. For antitheatrical moralists, imitation and exhibitionism are betrayals of an authentic self, "a radical defalsification of our inner experience" (Barish 258).<sup>2</sup> After unperformable sincerity in public relations becomes enshrined as a social ideal in the early eighteenth century, equations are increasingly made between acting and bad faith, if not outright hypocrisy.

Such antitheatricalism, "with its demand

for a sincerity that cannot be performed and its celebration of an unplayable own self," was even internalized by the theater itself (Wikan-der 198). The association of acting with hypocrisy accounts for the anxiousness at the heart of Victorian melodrama. "Reverent Victorians shunned theatricality as the ultimate, deceitful mobility. It connotes not only lies, but a fluidity of character that decomposes the uniform integrity of the self" (Auerbach 4). Itself a forum for conventional gestures made spectacular by virtuosic performances, melodrama's blatant artificiality was rendered palatable by containing the histrionic within a system of Manichean moralism. Again, the "deceitful mobility" enacted within popular sensational English melodrama was the villain's unique province, set in opposition to the transparent sincerity of the hero(ine). Indeed, the very capacity for duplicity undermines the holism of Victorian sincerity. Thus, as a superficial form of homiletic allegory, the dramatic thrust of late-nineteenth-century melodrama is to expose the villain as a deceiver, an imposter, a mounteback, a swindler, a wearer of masks.

The melodramatic realization of a villainous role is a theatrical style that externalizes immorality, rendering it recognizable, knowable, and essentially tolerable for audiences. Peter Brooks has argued that classical stage melodrama is not so much concerned that the hero win the day and the heroine prove her innocence, but rather that the forces of good and evil be easily recognizable (42). In the interest of "moral legibility," melodrama provides us with a series of performance cues through which the moral universe of the narrative is articulated. Similarly, Richard Dyer concisely defines melodramatic performance as "the use of gestures principally in terms of their intense and immediate expressive, affective significance," and he points out that these cues are not merely emotional articulations, but more importantly, are interpreted as "moral categories" (137). Thus, the stage villain employs a stock series of gestures and postures to clearly indicate his or her moral identity—physiognomic signals that cue our evaluations.

This semiotic approach to performance—in which physical movement is codified to achieve concise, unambiguous expressivity—was often articulated in prescriptive terms. Thus, while crafting a villainous role, a performer could draw on a repertoire of poses and movements illustrated in any number of acting manuals inspired by François Delsarte's postural exercises. From the late 1880s into the early twentieth century, proponents of the Delsartian system (Steele MacKaye, founder of the Lyceum Theatre School, being the most active American advocate) promoted a standardized performative lexicon that could encapsulate and telegraph emotion via instantly recognizable, iconic mannerisms. Roberta Pearson dubs this reflexive system the "histrionic code" (20). Significantly, the system favors the virtuoso performer, for whom the declamatory foregrounding of technical skills is always paramount. To perform is to "make points," to ostentatiously display protrusive emotion, to present rather than represent.

Melodramatic villains, then, are accompanied by a strong cachet of recurrent textual indicators. These indicators have changed very little in their systemic implementation throughout the decades and are typically marked by their excess—that is, they are often extremely obtrusive. Recognizing a character as villainous often requires a number of indirect informants that visibly exemplify iniquity. Within a Pearl White serial—*The Perils of Pauline* (1914), say—a deformity, a black costume, a tendency to sneer, and an upturned moustache all indicate moral flagrancy. In keeping with melodrama's appropriation of phrenology in the use of typage, we have the idea of "criminal" physiognomy, based on corporeal abnormality (a hump, a scar, a disfigurement) or excess (physical size, singularity of expression, emphasis on a particular gesture).

A prototypical early example can be found in the person of "Battling Burrows" (Donald Crisp), the brutish heavy in *Broken Blossoms* (1919) (see fig. 1). Depicted here advancing towards Burrows's brutalized daughter, Lucy (Lillian Gish), Crisp mugs outrageously for Billy

Bitzer's camera, which in turn registers every abhorrent feature in horrific detail. Indeed, it recoils from the flattened bulldog nose, the cancerous mole, the upper lip drawn back like a freakish orangutan, the monstrous eyebrows that threaten to overtake a prehistoric forehead, the eyes themselves that see naught but red. To call Burrows a lout would be akin to describing Atilla the Hun as a ruffian; he is a troglodytic obscenity, and Crisp intends him to register as the very emblem of degenerate piggery. In short, melodramatic villainy frequently registers corporeally as a literal grotesque. This is the anthropomorphic externalization of irredeemable evil as a frozen mask. At its most hysterical, melodramatic villainy will manifest itself as monstrosity: Musidora as the feral Irma Vep; Lon Chaney as the skeletal Phantom of the Opera; Conrad Veidt as the somnambulistic Cesare. These illuminative faces are the very quintessence of silent-era horror. In *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma Desmond expresses her contempt for the talkies, which she believes have destroyed this unique form of pantomimic expressivity. "We didn't need words," she declares. "We had faces."

The performative corollary of this grotesquery is often a piquant alternation between checked and unchecked displays of the histrionic code. The difference between these displays is a matter of inflection and degree. As stylistic indicators, Pearson attributes speed, repetition, emphatic movement, and the full extension of limbs to unchecked histrionic display, while languidness, delicacy, and gestural compactness are markers of the checked code (27).



While giving a definitive account of enacted villainy is impossible—too many permutations of the histrionic code are available to an actor—some generalizations can be made.

Essentially, the melodramatically villainous performance is based on the correlation of two sets of binaries: the actor's unchecked and checked histrionic displays and the character's public and private roles. In enacting oily perfidy, the actor moves with an extravagant briskness, all dynamic extension and deliquescent flourishes. The aim is a predatory bedazzlement, a cobra slithering through high society. There is an emphasis on angularity and outward supplication: the conspiratorial crouch, the too-familiar arm snaking around a victim's shoulders, the impudent forward thrust of the thorax—all familiar unchecked histrionic poses that signal the villain's deceptive public persona.

A shift in register to the unchecked code is often disconcertingly abrupt—the outward signal of the villain's menacing private self. Such a shift usually occurs when his or her iniquity has been publicly exposed, or, more significantly, when she or she makes her schemes known to the audience through conspiratorial soliloquies and asides. The menace of personal desire is articulated in weighted and laconic actions. There is a deliberate heaviness to the villain's posturing here—a compacted inwardness that contrasts with the fluidity of his or her outward public insinuations. We might notice the darkly purposeful lowering of chin and eyebrows, the impulsive rubbing together of hands in gleeful anticipation, the slight raising of shoulders as the cobra unfurls its hood, or the supine

Figure 1: A melodramatic grotesque.

gait. Again, the intended effect is singular: we behold the coiling of some poisonous reptile, unadulterated evil in an act of boastful self-nomination.

The moral purpose of these physical cues, then, is to assist in the nomination of a character. To be a villain is largely to look and act like one—what Michael Booth describes as an “instant character” (Booth 14–15). Moreover, part of the pleasure we derive from engaging with melodramatic villains can be located in the moral clarity they provide. They allow us to put a face on evil. Transgressors in the real world could look like anyone at all. Michael Rooker’s largely inexpressive psychopath in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986)—a film disconcertingly free of attitudinal cues—is a notable example. Because of his “ordinariness” and lack of physiognomic signals of deviancy, Henry seems to be a much more inscrutable, and thus, frighteningly “realistic” character.

Interestingly, these standard melodramatic signals have outlived the dramatic style that prompted them. They are to be found especially in the screen actor’s reliance on pantomimic gesticulations. Indeed, it is the very muteness of early cinema that makes it so conducive to melodrama’s expressive articulation of unambiguous moral categories. Even as late a film as *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) contains near-archetypal examples, the actors resurrect-

ing a pantomimic style of purely externalized expressivity. The seductive Woman from the City (Margaret Livingston) is the personification of vice, drawing the hapless Man (George O’Brien) into debauchery and attempted murder. When alone, her movements are drowsy undulations, exemplifying her moral torpor. We observe her lazily lighting a cigarette from a candle, a delicious, casual gesture that, according to superstition, condemns a sailor to a watery grave (see fig. 2a). Or, hiding from an angry mob, she entwines herself in the branches of a tree like a panther thwarted of its prey. By contrast, the public exertion of her wiles is an unbridled display of sexual energy. In the muck of the swamp—the site of their trysts—the Woman whirls like a dynamo in a frenzied parody of a flapper, finally coiling about the Man with succubine dexterity (fig. 2b). Such histrionic display is infectious. As he steels himself to murder his devoted wife (Janet Gaynor), the usually demure Man adopts a mannered, lumbering stance and his face is transformed into a mask of hate. Again, at its most perverse, illicit private desire in the melodramatic tradition registers as theatrical grotesquery.

So, although various technological, cultural, and aesthetic developments have prompted less mannered acting styles and have altered the dramatic framework to which these styles are essential, the villain can still be identi-



Figure 2a: “Checked” menace.



Figure 2b: “Unchecked” seduction.

fied through histrionic gestural signification. Thus, in his Mutual films, Chaplin relies on melodramatic typage, with Eric Campbell's bullish eyes often glowering beneath outrageous stage eyebrows at the Tramp. Griffith's more theatrical villains are also played according to a modulated version of the histrionic code. Notable examples include the shifts in expressive register by George Siegmann as the menacing Von Strohm in *Hearts of the World* (1918) and Lowell Sherman's caddish Lennox Sanderson in *Way Down East* (1920). Abrupt movements from unchecked to checked pantomimic display also lent themselves to the department of seductive diabolism. Such expressivity is at its most untrammelled in Emil Janning's turn as Mephisto in *Faust* (1926), and it serves as the animus fueling Erich von Stroheim's various scoundrels, particularly his "Count" Karamzin in *Foolish Wives* (1922).

Residual melodramatic villainy survived long after the silent era, for example in Robert Mitchum's pantomimic overtures as the demonic Reverend Powell in Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). These are especially evident when the Reverend pursues his stepchildren (recall their flight from the cellar, with Powell in pursuit, his arms extended like something from a nightmarish cartoon), or attempts to woo wealthy widows with proselytizing, revivalist zeal. Billy Wilder's film, then, is contemporaneous with Laughton's resurrection of melodramatic performative traditions. However, *Sunset Boulevard* is a much more reflexive

exercise in which villainy is largely a matter of theatrics and attention is drawn to the intimate relationship cultivated between audience and histrionic villain.

Gloria Swanson plays Norma Desmond as a debauched and neglected former star whose commitment to a self-aggrandizing (but now outmoded) performance style transcends both rationality and moral responsibility. Because Norma remains devoted to unchecked histrionic indicators of character, the process of nominating her as a villain is relatively simple. She is almost always feral, even when indolent: her eyes blaze beneath raised, penciled eyebrows; her hands arch like talons and have a tendency to flutter into the air when she makes proclamations; her head often arches back majestically; nearly every line is delivered through bared teeth. In essence, Norma is another melodramatic grotesque. Yet one cannot help but admire the incessant pomposity of these histrionics, to say nothing of Swanson's bravery as an actor. Such courageously outré cravenness would not be seen again from an aging Hollywood star until Bette Davis constructed a similar monument to monstrous self-delusion and depravity in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962).<sup>3</sup>

So the performer's technical skill is often a major component of the viewer's enjoyment of melodramatically inflected villainy. Again, our hypothetical viewer, whose engagement with Norma (or with other characters whose wickedness is similarly articulated) is more or less

favorable, can be described as an appreciative spectator. At its most basic, hedonic emotion experienced in response to histrionic villainy is not necessarily sympathetically motivated, but is instead a sign of approbation directed toward the performer, as evidenced by the critical accolades bestowed on performers given to crafting explicitly “theatrical” miscreants: Glenn Close as the Marquise de Merteuil (*Dangerous Liaisons* [1988]) or Cruella De Vil (*101 Dalmatians* [1996]); John Malkovich as Mitch Leary (*In the Line of Fire* [1993]) or Cyrus “the Virus” Grissom (*Con Air* [1997]); Alan Rickman as the Sheriff of Nottingham (*Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* [1991]) or Severus Snape (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* [2001]). Yet how might one’s approval for the actor be reconciled with melodrama’s insistence that villainy be equated with hypocrisy, bad faith, deception, and, by extension, with acting itself?

### **“The Valentinos” vs. “Some Nobodies”: Theatricality and Illusionism**

Although Swanson’s performance is geared toward coaxing a relatively straightforward nomination of her as the film’s villain, this performance style functions diegetically in a highly complex way. Specifically, the film invites us to morally evaluate not only Norma’s actions but also her means of expressing these actions—it prompts an evaluation of melodramatic behavior itself. Within the narrative, Norma’s villainy lies in her commitment to performance above rationality, and in being thus committed, she places her desires above moral duties. *Sunset Boulevard* is therefore in keeping with melodrama’s internalization and dramatic mobilization of the antitheatrical bias, but it also reflexively comments on this prejudice. The film vividly illustrates how taking “perverse” pleasure in melodramatic villainy is also a byproduct of a constructed formal antipathy between “theatrical” and “illusionist” performance styles. One is consciously aligned with the indulgence of “acting out” over the thanklessness of comportment.

In order to appreciate Hollywood’s frequent actantial pairing of an understated protagonist against an exhibitionist antagonist, we can refer again to the dramatization of behavioral ideals in Victorian theater, where “transparency” and “sincerity” were enshrined as the goals of public deportment. But as melodrama’s popularity began to wane, it was replaced by a performance style that associated the entire histrionic code itself with an unacceptable “artificiality.” Thus, the pantomimic expressivity of melodrama was antithetical to the emerging “verisimilar code” of the early twentieth century (Pearson 20). This was a form of naturalist acting whereby the actor sought to mimetically recreate “actual behavior” via observationally based techniques such as “byplay” (character established through subtle physical details) and “affective memory” (the dramatic recollection of emotion personally experienced by the actor). The style was popularized by successful “realist” performances mounted by producers such as David Belasco and André Antoine, and such distinguished actor-managers as Henry Irving and William Gillette. Rather than create emblems of an “occulted,” desecralized morality by relying on prescriptively codified declamations of iconic emotional states, the actor now aspired toward psychological credibility and mimetic representation.

Although, by the turn of the century, private desire was no longer superficially equated with antisociality, sincerity remained a privileged cultural value. Thus, the classical Hollywood hero(ine) is typified by adherence to a relatively simple, clearly articulated personal ethic. Faithfulness to this ethic underlies all psychologically motivated illusionist styles, where the actor strives to embody a fully realized character rather than an abstract moral category. Thus we might speak of the Stanislavskian “supertask”—the unconscious complexes that the actor creatively attributes to a character’s actions. Or one could reference the Hollywood principle of the “character arc”—a bowdlerized version of Aristotelian *anagnorisis* whereby the protagonist gradually acquires a new form of “self-knowledge.” It is not that pantomimic

expressivity disappears; rather, histrionic gesticulation is subsumed within verisimilar imperatives.

The point here, of course, is that performative gestures are no longer figurative; instead they are emblematic of a character's occulted personal ethic or "inner truth."<sup>4</sup> Even more pertinent for our purposes is the gradual disparagement of melodrama's histrionic style as connotative of bourgeois deportment—an aesthetic shorthand for "stilted, pretentious behavior" (Naremore 53). Theatricality becomes a euphemism for mannered excess. Contemporary realists such as David Mamet have articulated their contempt for the residual signs of melodrama in their prohibitions on mugging and the excesses of characterization. In his advice to actors, Mamet claims that attempts to physically manifest a particular moral identity are pointless because "the work of the characterization has or has not been done by the author. . . . You don't have to portray the hero or the villain. That's been done for you by the script" (114). In this light, Richard Widmark's performance as the giggling, psychopathic Tommy Udo in *Kiss of Death* (1947) would be an example of a "dishonest" or "untruthful" performance because it "overstates" the character's villainy, which is already evident in his actions (such as pushing an old woman bound to her wheelchair down a flight of stairs).

Thus, in fashioning a melodramatic villain, the modern screen actor implicitly actuates the antitheatrical bias. The villain's wickedness is compounded by his or her penchant for excessive display, especially when set against a comparatively taciturn hero(ine). Consider the antagonistic performance styles of Norma Shearer and Joan Crawford in *The Women* (1939), Edmund O'Brien and James Cagney in *White Heat* (1949), Sterling Hayden and Mercedes McCambridge in *Johnny Guitar* (1954), Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson in *Batman* (1989), and Ethan Hawke and Denzel Washington in *Training Day* (2001). The moral polarization of theatricality versus illusionism is integral to classical Hollywood's agonistic dramatic structure.

In *Sunset Boulevard*, villainy is explicitly and intrinsically linked to theatrics. Norma dramatizes each moment, turning everyday interactions into star turns. Because she flits incessantly from role to role (from *belle dame sans merci*, to bored decadent to scorned lover), she seems to lack a grounding sense of self. A husk without a center, her emotions are merely grandiose, empty signs played out in an inhumanly Delsartian fashion. She cannot help but act out (that is, perform) her emotions, even when alone—as when she swoons onto a bedpost and recites a jealous, tortured soliloquy ("Why can't I ask you, Joe? *Why?*"). Each gesture is played as if to an adoring audience from her heyday as a silent deity. Even the earthly incarnation of the deity becomes enraptured by its own glory. Consider Norma's urgent pursuit of Joe Gillis (William Holden)—her kept boy and the film's narrator—down a hallway in order to prevent him from leaving; her pursuit is cut short when she becomes transfixed by her reflection in a mirror. She executes a brief series of poses in the glass before she storms into his bedroom to play out one final scene. Such unnatural devotion to emotional affectation necessitates an equally unnatural system of personal morality: star ethics, if you will. "No one ever leaves a star," she hisses at one point, as her self-aggrandizement turns monomaniacal. In fact, she will eventually murder Joe for exiting the scene prematurely and for blasphemously casting aside an idol.<sup>5</sup>

So performance may be considered as the textual shaping of a viewer's inwardly directed moral response: behavioral cues prompt an evaluation of character that adheres to the film's internal conventions.<sup>6</sup> But performance may also be outwardly directed, at an object that lies beyond the text. Although we are invited to negatively evaluate Norma's performances, the film is not as straightforward regarding these performances as it seems. For a viewer may also regard Norma as a victim, recognizing that it is not only her age but her commitment to an archaic mode of performance that keeps her from reentering the kingdom of Hollywood.<sup>7</sup>



The extrinsic object of *Sunset Boulevard's* moral critique, then, is the film industry itself.

The film brilliantly employs Swanson's performance style as an element in its critique of an industrial art that does not revere its past. While some have argued that casting an "all too visible player" as a familiar character "seems unduly to circumscribe the character despite the brilliance of the performance," the film depends on Gloria Swanson's extreme visibility (Chatman 119). Norma's performative excessiveness is a self-imposed critical response to a Hollywood that has lost its sense of grandeur: "I *am* big," she declares. "It's the pictures that got small." Correspondingly, the film employs Swanson's faded star image to superbly ironic effect, melding biography with fiction to critique the fickle institution of Hollywood—a machine that churns out stars, only eventually to discard them.<sup>8</sup> Consider another moment of self-adulation, when Norma pays homage to her own image by gazing spellbound at her onscreen incarnation, which blazes with youthful light from the darkness of her parlor-cum-cinema. The film she forces Joe to watch with her features a sequence from *Queen Kelly*—a shelved vehicle for Swanson from 1929 (partially directed by Erich von Stroheim, no less)—and her silent radiance stands in sharp contrast to the decay of her present condition.<sup>9</sup> Swanson and the performance style she embodies are relics of a discarded era.

To that end, we can see how Norma's performance is ethically motivated—that it is a reaction to the values of the modern cinema embodied by Joe. Compare Swanson's hyperpresence with William Holden's simple presence, which is characterized by a kind of transparency and disappears within her shadow. Popular and critical acclaim for Holden had ebbed since his breakthrough in *Golden Boy* (1939). Although he had appeared in more than twenty leading roles by 1950, his star appeal was still relatively amorphous. Moreover, his features are fairly indistinct (consider his contemporaries: Brando's Romanesque profile, Mitchum's reptilian slow-burn, Douglas's heroic

chin), especially compared to the heavily made-up Swanson.

Even his illusionist performance style is eclipsed—his cynical sensibilities are overwhelmed—by Norma's fustian proclivities. Her predilection for melodrama actually bleeds into the scenes between Joe and his potential amour, Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olsen). Consider the "love scene" they play out with mock seriousness in the Rainbow Room at Artie's (Jack Webb) New Year party, as well as the final dissolution of their relationship into theatrics: "I can't even look at you, Joe," Betty sobs as she shields her eyes; "Then try looking for the exit," he replies, leading her towards the door. Joe is both figuratively and literally a ghost—dead before the film even begins—and as if to make up for his lack of presence, his narration is nearly incessant, filling the film with "talk, talk, *talk!*" Such a "stranglehold of words" justifies Norma's complaint about the modern cinema, for which Joe (as a screenwriter) is a synecdoche. He continually disparages his art, and his lack of devotion marks him as a nowhere man, as dollar-driven marks as the studios for which he hopelessly labors. His "flat and trite" dreams cannot match the grandeur of his mistress's schemes for reclaimed glory, and he ends up as just another "nobody" screenwriter, facedown in a swimming pool. Despite the tenacity of her fierce imagination, Norma—like Swanson—is ground up in the machinery of a greater dream factory. Unsurprisingly, Norma Desmond was Swanson's final major Hollywood role.

So performance is an element that can be used to evaluate a subject within the text, but it can also be morally directed at an external object. Swanson's performance in *Sunset Boulevard* has a conspicuous moral valence, and the film couples this performance style with Swanson's highly visible star image as a means of ethically critiquing the capriciousness of contemporary idolaters. Appreciation for the theatrical villain, then, is not just a measure of our respect for an actor's technical skill; *it is also a matter of recognizing and resisting an*

enduring antitheatrical bias, embodied by the grandiloquence of the villain's histrionics.

### **"Just Us and Those Wonderful People Out There in the Dark": Spectatorship as Complicity**

There is a third dimension to one's allegiance with a melodramatic villain, however; it can be discussed in terms of the pleasure she or he evokes due to his or her sheer, excessive theatricality.<sup>10</sup> In spite of both the internal and external ethics of the melodramatic villain's performance, his or her theatrical nature tends to circumvent the genuineness of moral engagement. In fact, the pleasure one takes in a villain's melodramatic performance tends to override the moral reservations we might have about his or her actions and our willingness to condemn them. It is not simply that Swanson's high visibility as a former star disrupts an authentic moral engagement with the film. Murray Smith claims that "when a star plays a role, our awareness of the fictional status of the character she plays may be heightened, and this may license our imaginative play with morally undesirable acts to an even greater extent" ("Gangsters" 227). Such may be the case, but occasionally it is the star's performance style itself that promotes this "imaginative play."

We recall that the antitheatrical bias is partly predicated upon the conflation of acting and deceit. Our residual cultural suspicion of actors contains traces of Victorian injunctions against artifice in social interaction, but that suspicion has more to do with the actor's apparent transcendence of a plebeian morality during a performance. More crucially, actors are suspect because they seem to "trick" us out of our learned moral responses (recall Eileen Percy's earlier complaints against the Hollywood gangster, or, if you prefer, Plato's rancor for drama's capacity to elicit "irrational" emotion). At the very least, they are a source of anxiety because they seem to invite us to treat these responses as mere "dramatics." In the case of melodramatic villainy, we are often required to abandon our usual moral prohibitions outside

the theater and assume the role of appreciative spectators of the character's immoral art.

Such assumed amorality is not just figurative—a metaphorical conceit that prettifies affective displays that seem drastically inapposite to the dramatized situation at hand. A popular position in aesthetic philosophy is that our moral responses to fictions differ in degree and intensity from their real-world analogues.<sup>11</sup> In fact, they are occasionally characterized by a conspicuous degree of theatricality, or moral simulation. Simulating a moral position allows for 1) the mobility of our allegiance, 2) the reduction of inappropriate reactive states (mock rather than actual outrage) and thus, 3) pleasure in the villain free of perversity's stigma. Typically, it is the melodramatic tradition of villainy that encourages an appropriately theatrical moral response from viewers. But are we being "seduced" into taking on such a "role?"

Contemporary assumptions that certain films engage in sophisticated moral deception stem from the residual Victorian affiliation between villainy and bad faith. Recall that in stage melodrama, wickedness was located in the ability to assume an insincere public persona in order to fulfill private, antisocial desires. The apex of such dramas occur at the moment of the character's public self-nomination, when she or he un.masks and declares, in the homiletic interests of moral clarification, unrepentant villainy. These climaxes feature in classical Hollywood's more explicitly melodramatic moments as well. Thus we have climactic confessions of deception enacted with wicked relish by performers such as Kay Francis in *In Name Only* (1939), Joan Bennett in *Scarlet Street* (1945), and Ann Blyth in *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Both actor and character luxuriate in their coterminous performances, their capacity for unscrupulous pretence.

Norma is another unapologetic performer, but the interesting difference here is that she does not aim to deceive others; rather, her entire life is a monument to self-deception. Every action is dedicated to the scrupulous maintenance of a crucial fabrication: that her celebrity is undiminished, that she is still a star. Finding her delusions of grandeur pitiable, two

of her former directors—Cecil B. DeMille (playing himself) and Max von Mayerling (Erich von Stroheim)—dedicate themselves to its preservation: DeMille lavishes attention on her when she visits his set at Paramount, and Mayerling continues to ghostwrite daily fan mail. So far, so understandable.

The problem, however, is that her pathetic narcissism balloons into voracious megalomania. That is, Norma demands that others respond to her as a majestic performer rather than as a subject. In this regard, Joe's murder is just another scene in Norma's self-constructed tragedy: she is an actor rather than a killer. For his part, Joe's final effort to disenchant her is not an exhibition of tough love but an act of malice driven by exasperated disgust. Therefore, her incessant performativity represents a barrier to the formulation of genuine sympathy: she would be a piteous creature and the film could be an uncompromising study of an aging, discarded celebrity were it not for its subject's inability to cease playing for some unseen camera.

One might still try to argue that this compulsion toward performance is integral to the film's pathos—that Norma's retreat into delirium in the final sequence (in which she believes herself to be on a Paramount soundstage as she descends her staircase to meet the police who have come to arrest her) is quite pitiable. But although her compulsion to perform is neurotic, it is also in keeping with the conventions of the mode of theatrics that she favors. Because her villainy is explicitly and reflexively melodramatic, she must perform, and, again, she privileges this proclivity toward performance above an adherence to moral duty. In doing so, she sacrifices the sympathy available to her from both characters and audience and instead demands a performance from her viewers to match her continual histrionics.

So while melodramatic performance can have both inwardly and outwardly directed moral valences, the third property, attributable to the villain, tends to override the first two: this is his or her aesthetic dimension. The sheer, excessive theatricality of the villain's immorality can evoke a pleasurable response

that is at odds with moral critique. Our pleasure is in not only in Swanson's acting, but also in her character's ability to turn every moment into a scene to be played. More important, the ubiquity of Norma's performance demands that we recognize and approve the dramatic potential of her actions. Playing along with Norma's fantasy means that we admire her performance rather than critique her behavior. We appreciate the murder she commits as a scenario well played by a brilliant performer, rather than condemn it as the vindictive action of an emotionally unstable woman. Our conscious admiration for Swanson's performance as an actor, and our conscious resistance to the antitheatrical prejudice it embodies, are two important elements informing our allegiance with the character she plays. But it is our attendance to Norma's theatricality as a character that is the most crucial component of our engagement, since it requires the simulation of an amoral identity.

Carrying on the tradition of audience-baiting initiated by Vice—the stock figure of evil in medieval Christian mystery cycles—the melodramatic villain continually seeks out the audience's approval. Melodrama is a continuation of homiletic drama's construction of the villain as *bête noire* but also as *prima donna*: a creature who craves the intimacy of the footlights as often as she does the eventual glory of the spotlight. Villainy seeks to declare itself in melodrama not simply to make moral categories clear, but also to establish a collusive intimacy with the audience. Sympathetic allegiance is the hero's domain; the villain would rather put on a show, performing his or her schemes for us as much as herself. Because of her close proximity—her apparent yearning for our endorsement, her implicit desire to entertain—the villain becomes a source of pleasure for us. The emotional baggage that accompanies her rival, the hero, does not hamper our engagement with her; we do not have to care about her welfare. Indeed, "it is hard to feel anything for characters who are on such easy terms with us because they do not seem to be undergoing anything but a play" (States 30). *Sunset Boulevard* makes this tendency explicit,

with Norma invariably declaiming her yearnings as if on a studio soundstage.

Again, one of the reasons for the continued popularity of melodrama as a dramatic form is the relative ease with which one can recognize and nominate its actants—an ease that is largely absent from a real-world context of contradictory values and ambiguous actions. But pleasure is also taken in the knowledge that this obvious villainy is being performed for our benefit, so we must become mock viewers who appreciate the performance.<sup>12</sup> The external signs of a character's villainy are therefore reappraised: they are no longer evaluated negatively as a codified immorality; instead, they are recognized as invitations to share the energy of a dramatic scenario. By entertaining us, the villain asks us to disengage from our moral grievances and imagine becoming a subject who appreciates her actions as a kind of fiendish art. As a measure of our thanks for her implicit desire to please, we sacrifice our inclination to condemn and simulate the role of enthusiastic accomplices.

Take, for example, a sequence in which Norma fantasizes about her return to the cinema. In a tour de force of histrionic pantomime, she enacts an abbreviated version of her pet project, "Salomé," the epic star vehicle she recruits Joe to help her write. Because Swanson's performance is informed by the codified gesticulations of the unchecked histrionic code, we are able to break down each of her movements into separate expressive signals. On the

one hand, Swanson's movements encapsulate Norma's obsessions and we are tempted to morally interpret her performance. On the other, Swanson's performance speaks to our role as mock viewers, and invites us to respond with aesthetic approval rather than moral disapproval. Norma's performative tendencies (especially when she is alone) are akin to the villain's acknowledgement of the camera in certain works: both strategies deny our innocence as viewers.<sup>13</sup> Their enacted villainy transforms us from moral critics to amoral enthusiasts.

Framed in medium close-up to take advantage of her intense gestural expressivity, Norma rages at Joe's suggestion that the "Salomé" project would be a "comeback" (see fig. 3a). Slamming her sunglasses onto a desk, she exclaims, "I *hate* that word," through typically clenched teeth. Looking back up in defiance, she corrects him with a grand proclamation: "It's *return!*" Even within these two brief movements there is evidence of her twin defining attributes: slamming down the sunglasses is a gesture of violence—the aggressive denial of her diminished celebrity—while the snap of her head signifies a retreat into delusion.

She qualifies her statement with magnificent egoism: "A return to the millions of people who have never forgiven me for deserting the screen." Her eyes widen and her chin is driven forward, while her hands wave up around her face in what will be a familiar melodramatic gesture and then extend outwards as she descends (fig. 3b). She plays the line to an

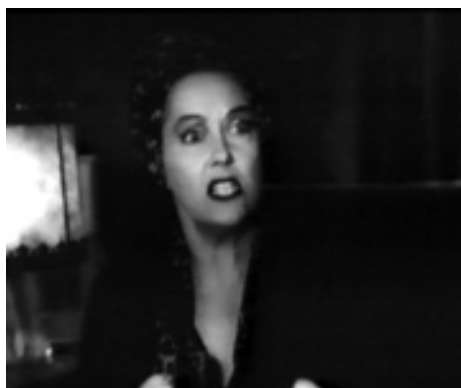


Figure 3a: "I hate that word! It's 'Return!'"



Figure 3b: “A return to the millions . . .”

invisible audience, while her eyes fix on that precious negative space beyond her imagined footlights. Calming herself, she looks downward and begins to imagine her next performance.

“*Salomé*,” she breathes. “What a woman!” Her eyes are closed in contemplation and imagined (not actual) respect (fig. 3c). Both hands rise up as if to caress the woman in question and her head tilts back slightly, simulating ecstasy. But Norma’s art is really only to play perpetual variations on her favorite theme. This is a facile attempt at imagining being someone else and is put on merely for show; she can imagine being no one but herself. Her monstrous ego rips through the façade as she opens her eyes and looks downward and right (fig. 3d). “What a *part*,” she rasps, and her wrists turn subtly while her fingers clench into talons to grasp her phantom vehicle to celebrity.



Figure 3c: “*Salomé*--what a woman!”

She next makes the pretence of trying on the role for our benefit. “A princess in love with a holy man,” she narrates, adopting an imperiously haughty posture (fig. 3e). Her eyes close again, her chin lifts, and her hands drop. But this royal pose contains an underlying derisiveness—the suggestion that the relationship is a mere trifle, beneath a princess. Norma’s version of the biblical story (which has more in common with Oscar Wilde’s play than with Scripture) is interesting. If we consider this version as an allegory of the relationship between herself and Joe, her attitude here takes on a troubling resonance and foreshadows disastrous tensions to come.

As “she dances the Dance of the Seven Veils,” her hands again butterfly up around her face and her eyes are excited by the performative possibilities (fig. 3f). They become



Figure 3d: “What a *part!*”

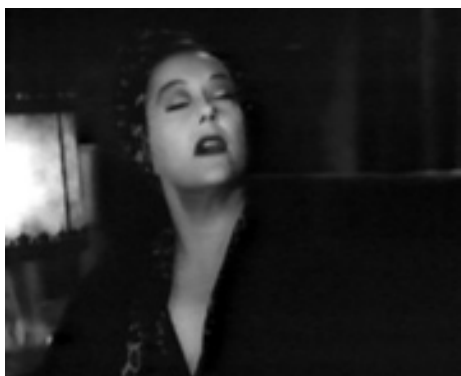


Figure 3e: “A princess in love with a holy man.”



Figure 3f: “The Dance of the Seven Veils.”

enraptured as she executes a brief, sultry twist. By impersonating the temptress, she is momentarily seduced by her own performance and her compulsion to perform. But then she enacts the outrage of the princess—eyes bulging, hands clutching toward her breast—when the

Baptist “rejects her . . .” (fig. 3g), a murderous incredulity she will enact a second time, when Joe rejects her. The princess will avenge her outraged sensibilities, “so she demands his head on a golden tray.” Norma mimes laying the saint’s head on a platter and gazes down

on it with triumphant satisfaction (fig. 3h). No one ever leaves a star.

The final moment of horror arrives and Norma completes her narrational summary with Salomé “kissing his cold, dead lips.” She seizes the “head” and brings it toward her face, teeth bared as if to rend the flesh from the Baptist’s face, eyes ablaze one last time (fig. 3i). But as this instant of violence reaches the completion of its arc (in which Salomé-Norma’s true savage nature emerges), her hands soften, her head arches back, and she closes her eyes in bliss (fig. 3j). Enacting revenge is sweet rapture, and she is carried away by the delusion of triumph, of a satisfying performance played to an adoring crowd.

Although Joe shatters the illusion with one of his smarmy jibes (“They’ll love it in Pomona”), Norma is unruffled. His lack of appreciation for the scene she has played is inconsequential,

for he is not the intended recipient of her art; as always, both Swanson and Norma have been playing to us and for us.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, this sequence is remarkable for the way it enables Swanson to make expressive reference to a group of fictional personalities: her own star persona, the character Norma Desmond, the biblical figure of Salomé, and Norma’s own version of this figure. It is a deliciously arrogant display of agglomerated egoism.

By enacting their immorality in an intimately theatrical fashion, melodramatic villains interrupt and reroute the currents of our usual evaluative assessments of dramatic situations. While it is tempting to evaluate Norma’s performance in the sequence above at a moral level, its very nature as performance directed at a potentially appreciative spectator short-circuits the attempt. Just as the film’s moments of genuine pathos are at odds with its

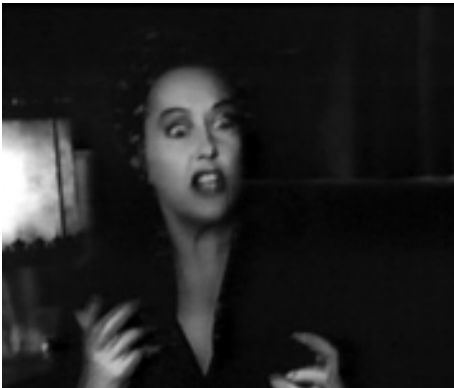


Figure 3g: “He rejects her . . .”



Figure 3h: “She demands his head on a golden tray . . .”



Figure 3j: “Kissing his cold, dead lips.”



Figure 3j: A satisfying performance.

grotesque elements (the dead monkey, the vermin-infested pool, the “wheezing” pipe organ), moral critique of the villain is at odds with the pleasures of performance. On the one hand, we might consider Norma repulsive in manner and behavior if we respond morally to the attitudinal cues of the text (Joe’s narration, the *mise-en-scène*, Swanson’s performance) and adhere to the cotext of intersubjective principles (“murder is wrong”). On the other hand, these responses are suspended by the aesthetic dimensions of Norma’s melodramatic performance, dimensions that are incorporated into a viewer’s appreciative relationship with the villain. We do not always condemn the melodramatic villain outright because, at some level, we are aware of and appreciate her willingness to entertain.

In sum, the moral evaluation of melodramatic villainy is invited by attitudinal cues and

adherence to intersubjective ethical principles. At the same time, the aesthetic dimensions of a melodramatic performance have the potential to override such an evaluation. Like the Bond villain who masterminds a scheme not simply for personal gain, but also for us, as a tribute to his own his genius, Norma cannot help but perform her own iniquity. Therefore, her repulsiveness and reprehensibility are accordingly reevaluated as signs of an aesthetically admirable performance. Her murderous passion is admired in the same way one admires the intricacies of the villain’s well-conceived plan. Stroheim’s presence in the film is an indicator of this melodramatic lineage: “the Man You Love to Hate” was infamous for playing warped, aristocratic masterminds. His role as Field Marshal Rommel in another Wilder film, *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) has relevance here. In that film, the “Desert Fox” has captured three British officers,



but instead of confining them to prison, Rommel (like any Saturday matinee baddie) cannot resist regaling them with details from his latest “brilliant” victory over the Allied forces in Egypt. Even the heroes attest to its genius, and following their lead, our moral critique gives way to aesthetically based appreciation. It is not that this appreciation requires a mere detachment from the dramatic world—an attendance to the film’s external conventions only; such engagement is a form of simulation because perverse allegiance with the melodramatic villain requires us to temporarily assume a set of values drastically different from our own.

Thus, and most important, in our appreciative relationship with the character we imaginatively simulate a quasivillainous position of our own—taking on the values of an amoral subject able to appreciate wickedness as a kind of artistry—not unlike another one of Wilde’s infamous characters, Dorian Gray. Norma’s performative alacrity explains why we might not condemn her actions outright, and why we might not engage in a sympathetic relationship with her. The moral reprehensibility of her actions is diminished, and these actions, in turn, take on value for their dramatic potential. In the villain’s theater of cruelty, nothing could be more pleasing than a good murder, and each of us are actors whose moral noises are only ever the articulations of approval.

Moral performance is one of the possible methods by which a viewer might enjoy a pleasurable response to scenes of histrionic immorality in the cinema. Pleasure is located at the level of a villain’s performance, for although a character’s affective and expressive articulations have certain inwardly and outwardly directed moral valences, their melodramatic deployment inspires pleasurable appraisal over critical evaluation. In particular, it is the villain’s performance that invites the simulation of an appreciative role in which we admire the artistry of a wickedness that is largely enacted for our benefit. It is not simply that the melodramatic villain reflexively calls attention to our role as an audience; rather, perverse allegiance with her requires that we imagine ourselves

“descending to the level of fiction” and taking on a diegetic role as coconspirators. Her performance is a kind of metalepsis, in which the boundaries between text and world dissolve. The playfulness of one’s engagement with the melodramatic villain is one way around the “problem” of a pleasurable response to filmic representations of transgressive actions.

An apt description of the relationship between the villainous actor and her audience might run as follows: “it is the actor’s part to desire and be desired, playing out the half-remembered and half-understood vision of a sacred yet blasphemous entity. It is the audience’s part to consume and be consumed, by the acting out of its own darkest fears and aspirations” (Harrop 103). Such a description seems to have been written with *Sunset Boulevard* in mind. Norma is an actor whose need to be desired consumes her and whose obsession with playing Salomé—a “sacred, yet blasphemous” role—means the return to her “half-remembered and half-understood vision” of stardom. In turn, the audience revels in the spectacle of her neurosis—her enactment of our own preoccupation with fame—and succumbs to the raptures of her delirium. Although the “sunset” of the film’s title suggests a golden age in decline and dissolution, there are moments when Norma’s performance commands a reverence from her onlookers that recalls the idolatry of her glory days. Not only her visit to Cecil B. DeMille, which draws a crowd of well-wishers and the nimbus of a spotlight, but also her final, majestically tragicomic descent of the ornate staircase are transfiguring moments. The surrounding photographers and police are frozen like mannequins in a respectful tableau, and in the subsequent shot of the “gallery” of onlookers in the balcony, it is difficult to determine whether their gazes are enraptured or horrified. Norma undulates toward the camera and “all those wonderful people out there in the dark,” and her final close-up is powerful enough to dissolve both the integrity of the screen and the integrity of our moral identity.

## NOTES

1. I am not suggesting that spectators will exhibit a uniform response to representations of wrongdoing, or that the character-type is inherently melodramatic. Rather, I aim to examine a certain tendency in representations of villainy (described here as melodramatic), and to theorize the reasons behind one type of engagement with such a character (conceived here as appreciative, to some degree). This representational strategy and a viewer's pleasurable response should not be construed as universal or automatic. Indeed, in my unpublished dissertation on film villainy, I consider other ways of representing this character-type and other reasons why a viewer might find a villain gratifying. Therefore, other representational strategies and more antipathetic responses to the villain are beyond the scope of this study.

2. A position articulated principally by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his 1758 antitheatrical polemic, *Letter to d'Alembert Concerning Spectacles*. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer at the *Journal of Film and Video* for bringing Barish's and Matthew Wikander's excellent historical studies of the prejudice against acting to my attention.

3. So perfect are Swanson's arch theatrics that it is difficult to believe Wilder and long-time collaborator Charles Brackett initially offered the role of Norma Desmond to a number of other candidates, including Greta Garbo, Mae West, Pola Negri, and (incomprehensibly) Mary Pickford.

4. *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) offers an example. The anguished pose adopted by Jim Stark (James Dean) after he pummels Ray Fremick's desk is superficially similar to histrionic affectations of "agony," and its apparent theatricality is further underscored by a portentous chord struck on the soundtrack. However, Dean's gestural expressivity is authenticated by virtue of its now signalling the "inner angst" of his character. The "psychological" overtones of Dean's ostensibly pantomimic expressivity are often taken as signs of his affiliation with the American school of "Method" acting. In reality, however, Dean expressed his antipathy toward the technique after a brief stint at the Actors Studio in 1951, citing Lee Strasberg's pseudopschoanalytic practices as invasive and limiting.

5. Significantly, the scene of Norma's ultimate transgression is dramatically flat. Dimly lit and framed in long shot, Norma shoots Joe from the doorway, weakly positioned in the upper right corner of the frame. Joe barely lurches backward, and continues walking left until he is shot again from out of frame. This time, he crumples slightly, drops his bag and turns, only to be shot once more and thrown back into the swimming pool. The scene's lack of stacy qualities seems to be a refusal to provide a theatrical murder. This refusal (aesthetically) cheats Norma out

of dramatically constructing a death scene and thus is a means of distancing us from her.

6. According to the conditions of the "internal convention," characters can be moral agents in spite of their structural status as elements of the text, and our moral approval or condemnation of their actions is made according to this convention, bringing our evaluation "within" the text (Palmer 89). Characters are thus "internally" conceived here as "authors" of their actions and therefore do not follow the demands of a preconceived plot, strictly speaking.

7. Obviously, Norma's gender is a major factor as well, since Hollywood is ruthless in its disregard for aging female stars. And Joe's animosity toward Norma is certainly informed by an implicit, negatively masculinist association between women and masquerade. Patriarchy's conflation of femininity and artificiality is crucial to many historical manifestations of the antitheatrical bias. However, villainy is never exclusively a matter of gender dynamics, and the "gendering" of screen evil is beyond the scope of this study.

8. From 1918 to the early 1930s, Swanson was one of Paramount's major stars, but at the time of filming *Sunset Boulevard*, she had not acted in a studio film in almost twenty years.

9. The appropriation of *Queen Kelly* is another subtle example of the film's vigorous reflexivity. Von Stroheim is cast in *Sunset Boulevard* as one of Norma's former directors and ex-husbands, Max von Mayerling—now retained as a manservant by the former ingénue. Interestingly, the intertitle from the appropriated shot reads, "Cast out this wicked dream which has seized my heart": a plea from a young Norma that goes unheeded by her older, embittered self.

10. I use *allegiance* here in accordance with Murray Smith's definition. "To become allied with a character," he claims, "the spectator must evaluate the character as representing a morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits, in relation to other characters within the fiction. On the basis of this evaluation, the spectator adopts an attitude of sympathy (or, in the case of negative evaluation, antipathy) towards the character, and responds emotionally in an appropriate way to situations in which this character is placed" (*Engaging* 188).

11. For examples of this position, see Boruah; Currie; Palmer; and Walton.

12. The phrase "mock viewer" here is analogous to Walker Gibson's conception of a novel's narratee as a "mock reader": a subject whose personality may be entirely different from that of the actual reader.

13. For an interesting discussion on the villain's penchant for direct address, see Rothman.

14. However, the caustic sarcasm of Joe's comment neatly encapsulates contemporary antitheatrical sentiments. The seemingly throwaway insult also speaks to his dual position within the diegesis. On the one

hand, he is the onscreen surrogate for the negative attitudinal inflections directed towards Norma. On the other, his attempted manipulations of Norma and his programmatic self-deception register as diluted forms of villainy as well. My thanks to Jim Leach for this observation.

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