



## The Soul-stealing Camera and Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*

By Simona Josan

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The new miracle of photography that swept over the world in the mid-nineteenth century, when the world had for the first time the possibility of gazing at its own image, was only a vague reflection of the wonders of the moving pictures and the celluloid industry soon to come. From the invention of the photographic process, to the stereographic image, and finally to the appearance of motion pictures, people have been mesmerized by this new universe of forms and shapes that



seem to have a life of its own, life borrowed or even stolen from the original scene or person. People were amazed and often scared of the machine that was able to capture such a close reflection of their own self on a glass plate or piece of paper. For a long time, many believed that the black box was capable of stealing their soul, which shows how little of a distinction they made between the physical image of self and the essence of their being.

That which they saw in the mirror was the true self, the being that existed in the singularity of their own body, which could not be separated or even duplicated. Photographs -- literally translated as "drawings of light" -- were often referred to as "mirrors with a memory." It is thus easy to understand the effect that the invention of the photography had on the population of Europe and United States. No other medium of representation has had this effect -- not painting, because of its subjectivity, not sculpture, despite its three-dimensionality. The camera, believed to be an impartial instrument, could obtain a perfect liking of the subject just by the use of light. The almost magical look of the [daguerreotype](http://www.geocities.com/Paris/7671/) (<http://www.geocities.com/Paris/7671/>), an image on metal plate that could only be seen with the light falling at a specific angle, and the mysterious process that created it, helped create this early view of the photograph as an object with power over the souls of its subjects.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the photograph was common in society, from the drawing rooms of the aristocracy to the pockets of the poorest. The appearance of moving pictures revived the old mystery of the

first daguerreotype. However, between the apparition of the first motion picture and its frozen image ancestor, one other invention is crucial to the understanding of this argument: the stereograph. [Oliver Wendell Holmes \(http://www.comptons.com/encyclopedia/ARTICLES/0075/00873472\\_A.html\)](http://www.comptons.com/encyclopedia/ARTICLES/0075/00873472_A.html) (1809-1894), its inventor, created the stereograph with the intention of divorcing form and matter, and believed that his instrument had achieved just that. The principle behind it is a simple one: a double exposure of one scene, sometimes two different images shot a small distance apart, viewed through a special device, through specially designed lenses, creates the illusion of a single three-dimensional reality. The world was once again mesmerized and entertained with this alternate vision of reality, depicting anything from faraway lands to erotic imagery. The stereograph provided the viewer with a preexisting place, person, or scene, with illusionary depth and volume, and sometimes even motion -- some subjects would move in the interval of time needed to prepare a second plate and their trail was visible as a blur. Hence, after the "skins," as Holmes refers to his images, have been captured, the real world becomes uninteresting, useless, unoriginal: "Form is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact, matter as a visible object is of no use any longer, except as the mold of which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please" ([Classic Essays on Photography \(http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/091817208X/qid=995698048/sr=1-1/ref=sc\\_b\\_1/102-4653586-8575354\)](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/091817208X/qid=995698048/sr=1-1/ref=sc_b_1/102-4653586-8575354)).

Crucial to Holmes's theory of seeing is the concept that it is multiple views of the same object that allows us to perceive depth and understand reality the way we do. The mind "feels round the object" to clasp it as a solid, as opposed to a surface. The starting point in Holmes's theory of optics is another theory attributed to the Greek philosopher [Democritus of Abdera \(http://www.wku.edu/~garreje/democ.htm\)](http://www.wku.edu/~garreje/democ.htm), borrowed by Epicurus, according to which "all bodies are continually throwing off certain images like themselves, which subtle emanations, striking on our bodily organs, gave rise to our sensations" ([Essays on Photography \(http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/091817208X/qid=995698048/sr=1-1/ref=sc\\_i\\_b\\_i\\_1/102-4653586-8575354\)](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/091817208X/qid=995698048/sr=1-1/ref=sc_i_b_i_1/102-4653586-8575354)).

Holmes refers to the continuous chain of images that the body radiates or sheds as form, effigy, membrane, or film. Today we might not think of movies in quite those terms, but subconsciously the effect is still there, maybe even more so today. More and more often we compare our actions, movements and looks with the films we watch. We film ourselves with a home camera and watch millions of others on flat screens which give the illusion of depth and reality. We constantly survey ourselves and our emanated effigies, and they often become the only reality of self we are familiar with or we allow others to see. We control, or we try to, every possible angle of our image and form, since now, thanks to the film, we are much more aware of their effects.

The adoration of self-image that began with the invention of the

daguerreotype was criticized by many opposers of photography, the French poet [Charles Baudelaire](http://www.ets.uidaho.edu/eng258_1/Baudelaire/) ([http://www.ets.uidaho.edu/eng258\\_1/Baudelaire/](http://www.ets.uidaho.edu/eng258_1/Baudelaire/)) being one of them: "From that moment onwards, our loathsome society rushed, like Narcissus, to contemplate its trivial image on the metallic plate. A form of lunacy, an extraordinary fanaticism, took hold of these new sun-worshippers. Strange abominations manifested themselves" (*Essays on Photography* ([http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/091817208X/qid=995698048/sr=1-1/ref=sc\\_b\\_1/102-4653586-8575354](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/091817208X/qid=995698048/sr=1-1/ref=sc_b_1/102-4653586-8575354))). This "lunacy" that Baudelaire is so appalled by resurfaces with motion pictures, except that this time only a few have the possibility of admiring their image; but these few, the actors of the silent cinema, become the truly fanatic "sun-worshippers" to an extent that the poet couldn't foresee.

Billy Wilder's [Sunset Boulevard](http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Theater/6980/) (<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Theater/6980/>) is a movie that created great commotion in Hollywood circles on its release. In a certain sense, there was nothing particularly risqué about the movie that would have shocked audiences; in another sense, though, it broke taboos surrounding some of the deepest secrets of the movie industry and its actors: the bizarre and almost grotesque relationship between the light of the reflectors, the celluloid film, and the people it captured. Many stars saw their own lives described in the movie, and many refused to participate in its making.



The film revolves around Norma Desmond, superbly acted by [Gloria Swanson](http://home.hiway.net/~oliver/swanson.htm) (<http://home.hiway.net/~oliver/swanson.htm>), a diva from the silent movie era, sacrificed to the new "talkies" that have cut her career short, but left her rich. Disregarding time and fashion, she believes herself to still be one of the great stars of cinema, and preserves her youthful self-image by keeping a young lover, Gillis, and by surrounding herself with hundreds of images from her glamorous past. She is a victim of film and its power to render reality. She identifies herself to such an extent with the two-dimensional image on the screen that she loses her identity, metaphorically destroying her three-dimensional self for the sake of the projected form. She is then able to come back to life only in the presence of the spotlight that flattens her back into the silent movie diva she once was.

Frozen forever in her silent films and the hundreds of photographs that fill her mansion on Sunset Boulevard, Norma does not exist outside the reflections of herself. She is, in a most literal sense, a surface that gives the illusion of life because of its many multiple angles of view. The film understands Holmes's theory and takes it to the extreme, where not only the two views of a stereograph are possible, but an infinite number of views. The reality of this projection is thus almost undeniable.

Stripped from the screen of her reality, Norma is lost, without any sense of personal identity. She breathes and feeds off her image, her form, while her substance has been lost in her madness. The camera has truly stolen her soul and exposed it to the world; without the images that she has shed through her life (for her fans, and to satisfy her own hunger for image), she lacks substance and a sense of self. She remains useless, a mere decoration, another reproduction of self amongst the many crowding her living room.

If Norma Desmond had had a different identity before the creation of her screen image, it's hard to detect through her present self. In a way, she had to destroy her original self, much in the way that Holmes prophesied almost a century earlier, in order to give life to the diva she became on the screen. What is left to walk amongst the living is a ghostly impression of her, not without the morbid quality implied by the comparison. When not acting for Gillis, her walk is slow and her body looks fragile, almost weightless. The big empty mansion with its self-playing organ and strange, almost creepy, devoted butler, only add to this effect. Bernard F. Dick, in his book about Billy Wilder's movies, has an interesting and relevant point of view: "Movie making is the transformation of living beings into dead images that are then given life by being projected on a screen. Movie going is watching dead images coming out of a projector, ordinarily at the rate of twenty-four frames per second. Since the stars have 'died' by giving up their image to celluloid, they can be immortal both in their lifetime and after their death."

This is very much the message that *Sunset Boulevard* tries to present to its audience. In Dick's words, "moviemaking is necromancy; it is literary bringing the dead to life." Norma is the embodiment of this zombification, a walking corpse that is not able to let go of her past. This effect is even more powerful considering that Gloria Swanson herself was in fact a fading silent movie diva, and the films that her character watches on her mansion's movie screen are actually her own old films as directed by none other than the German director who plays her devoted butler. The uncanny parallels between her real life, the lives of so many other actors, and the mad character of Norma was incredibly disturbing to Gloria Swanson's colleagues, some of whom, at the release of the movie, walked out of the movie theater in anger.

The film also connects to some of the early reactions and emotions surrounding the invention of the first "light drawings." For Norma, what creates the transitory tunnel from the real present into the illusionary surface of the screen, her reality, is light. Henry Fox Talbot, the British inventor of the photographic process, recorded his observations in 1839: "Now Light, where it exists, can exert an action, and, in certain circumstances, does exert one sufficient to cause changes in material bodies." Although he was referring to the glass plate and chemicals used in his processes, Norma herself is a perfect illustration of this effect. Like a true "sun-worshiper," Norma Desmond uncoils from her cocoon in the presence of the spotlight and undergoes a spectacular metamorphosis. There are numerous instances when she is represented lit up by candles, reflectors, matches, and the sun when she emerges as the glorious beauty she represents on the screen. In one scene, when the light of her own

movie projector floods her figure, she slowly turns to face the life-giving light as if in a trance, an ephemeral moth attracted by the flame, and she feeds off the glow with hungry eyes.

It is thus highly symbolic that the first person to recognize her when she arrives at a set to make a talkie is Hog-Eye, the lighting technician. A stage microphone passes her head and she pushes it away as if brushing a fly away from her face. Hog-Eye then turns his light toward her, and she sits bathed in light, proud and beautiful, without blinking. After actress and light have been reunited one more time on the set, she is recognized by some of the costume extras, who flood towards her. She looks as though she is giving away the light that envelops her, and she is once again in power. The director orders the spotlight back into place, and she falls back into the fragile anonymity of her existence. She is then just an old actress to whom "thirty million fans have given her the brush," and the extras step away.

When she is not herself, she retreats into the dark. When undergoing a rejuvenating cosmetic treatment, she stays in the shadow and doesn't want Gillis to see her. The aging woman sees herself as a broken image that needs to be put back together. But Norma herself can only be beautiful, can only be a star.

Another scene illustrating the same concept is the famous [closing scene \(http://s1.amazon.com/exec/varzea/ts/exchange-glance/Y01Y1990603Y3481775/qid=995700378/sr=1-](http://s1.amazon.com/exec/varzea/ts/exchange-glance/Y01Y1990603Y3481775/qid=995700378/sr=1-2/ref=aps_sr_z_2_2/102-4653586-8575354#image)

[2/ref=aps\\_sr\\_z\\_2\\_2/102-4653586-8575354#image\)](http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/Content/filmtxt/demille.htm) of Norma's last performance. With her room full of cops interrogating her and journalists reporting the news of the murder of Gillis she is accused of having committed, Norma is held captive by her own mirror reflection. She slowly and methodically arranges the curls around her face, and gives the glassy surface one of her famous seductive looks. Nothing can distract her from her captivation with her image, nothing but the news that cameras are waiting for her downstairs. With a jerk, she pulls herself away from the mirror. Fire replaces the melancholy in her eyes, and the thought of being once more captured eternally on a celluloid surface restores motion to the nearly frozen pose that she hold in front of the forgetful mirror: "All right, [Mister DeMille](http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/Content/filmtxt/demille.htm)

[\(http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/Content/filmtxt/demille.htm\)](http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/Content/filmtxt/demille.htm), I'm ready for my close-up." She walks into the light, then she symbolically fades out of view into the shadow. The spotlight becomes her symbolic passage towards immortality.

Holmes spoke of the uselessness of the object once it has been captured through a photographic process, separating form and matter. History, more specifically art history and photo-journalism, has taught us that even the mechanical eye of the camera is subjective and limited in rendering likeness, and, given the abundance of photographic, cinematic, and video imagery in our modern culture, it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to feel that we become less whole by having our images perfectly captured on paper, film, or



video. On the other hand, easily available means of reproducing images and a better understanding of the photographic process has allowed a more manipulative use of images. Now, more than before the beginning of the age of mechanical reproduction, we describe ourselves, and view others, based on the images they emanate. We constantly try to use them to our advantage with the hope that these images are as close to our true selves as the image on the [celluloid surface \(http://s1.amazon.com/exec/varzea/ts/exchange-glance/Y01Y6227311Y4417866/qid=995700601/sr=1-1/ref=aps<i>sr</i>z<i>2</i>1/102-4653586-8575354\)](http://s1.amazon.com/exec/varzea/ts/exchange-glance/Y01Y6227311Y4417866/qid=995700601/sr=1-1/ref=aps<i>sr</i>z<i>2</i>1/102-4653586-8575354) eventually became for the actress.



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