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When William Blake wrote in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (1810) that “Time & Space are Real Beings, a Male & a Female. Time is a Man, Space is a Woman,” he pinpointed a latent gender stereotype in Western thinking.¹ As a poet-painter, Blake obviously conceived of time and space in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s famous dichotomy; Lessing in his *Laocoön* categorized literature as a temporal and painting as a spatial art. Even Lessing had subliminally evoked a gender-specific deep structure associated with the arts when he, for example, condemned the influence of French literary pictorialism as an effeminization of masculine German poetry.² It is therefore not surprising that the medium of film, which combines the temporal and the spatial in multi-faceted ways, uses these gender terms for meta-cinematic reflections. According to Lessing’s conceptual grid, film would employ spatiality, or the spatial arts, by relying on visual images, and it would feature temporality, or temporal art, by joining pictures with language. However, temporality is not only present through superimposing syntactical speech over silent pictures, but also literally through converting still photographs into a temporal succession, thus producing moving images. Film is therefore, at least when conceptualized through the traditional binaries of time and space, a multi-layered hybrid of these two contending dimensions.

Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is a striking example of how these meta-cinematic dimensions can be rendered in a major feature film. In a manner reminiscent of medieval allegorical personification, Wilder incorporates Time and Space, or Word and Image as physical human beings, in the manner of Blake: “Time & Space are Real Beings, a Male & a Female.”³ *Sunset Boulevard* is the story of a destitute scriptwriter, Joe Gillis (William Holden), an aging silent movie diva, Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), and her butler, Max von Mayerling (Erich von Stroheim). Chased by car repossessors, Gillis accidentally maneuvers his car with a blown-out tire into Desmond’s driveway on Sunset Boulevard, using her garage as a hiding place. Mistaking him for an undertaker who is supposed to dispose of a dead pet monkey, the butler asks Gillis into the mansion. When Norma Desmond realizes that Gillis is a scriptwriter for the Hollywood talkies industry, she hires him to rewrite her own movie script, *The Story of Salome*. Gillis accepts the offer as an unavoidable escape from his dreary financial and professional situation. However, he soon realizes that the script which Norma considers her ticket to a successful comeback as a movie star is too bad for any studio to accept, and he also learns that Norma is too stubborn to accept any of his proposed changes. Given his financial troubles and his physical immobility — the financing company soon found his car and towed

1 – William Blake, *The Portable Blake*, ed. Alfred Kazin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 667.

2 – On the gender-specific dimension of Lessing’s *Laocoön*, see “Space and Time: Lessing’s *Laocoön* and the Politics of Genre,” in W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 95–115, particularly the charts on p. 110; see also W. J. T. Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (1992): 698–719, at 698.

3 – Blake, *The Portable Blake*, 667.

it away — he stays with Norma and eventually becomes her lover. After Paramount turns down Norma’s script and Gillis threatens to leave her for a younger woman, Norma shoots Gillis. The voiceover reflections of Gillis, floating dead in the swimming pool of Desmond’s mansion, are one of the opening scenes of the movie. The plot leading up to Gillis’s death unfolds as a long flashback, continuously commented on by the first-person narration of the deceased protagonist.

It is quite obvious that Wilder, when staging Norma and Gillis’s first meeting, also suggests an allegorical encounter between the two major structural features of modern movies — Word and Image. Here the allegorical Image, the diva of the old days of silent film, engages in a debate with the incarnate Word, the scriptwriter of modern talkies.

GILLIS: I know your face. You’re Norma Desmond. You used to be in pictures. You used to be big.
 NORMA: I *am* big. It’s the pictures that got small.
 GILLIS: I knew there was something wrong with them.
 NORMA: They’re dead. They’re finished. There was a time when this business had the eyes of the whole wide world. But that wasn’t good enough. Oh, no! They wanted the ears of the world, too. So they opened their big mouths, and out came talk, talk, talk . . .
 GILLIS: That’s where the popcorn business comes in. You buy yourself a bag and plug up your ears.
 NORMA: Look at them in the front offices — the master minds! They took the idols and smashed them. The Fairbankses and the Chaplins and the Gilberts and the Valentinos. And who have they got now? Some nobodies — a lot of pale little frogs croaking pish-posh!
 GILLIS: Don’t get sore at me. I’m not an executive. I’m just a writer.
 NORMA: You are! Writing words, words! You’ve made a rope of words and strangled this business! But there is a microphone right there to catch the last gurgles, and Technicolor to photograph the red, swollen tongue!⁴

4 – Quotation from the typescript of the screenplay for *Sunset Boulevard*. Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, and D. M. Marshman, Jr., *Sunset Boulevard* (Paramount Pictures Inc. P. 11454, March 21, 1949; rev. through July 19, 1949), 22.

Wilder juxtaposes the two figures in the tradition of the *paragone*, the debate about the hierarchy of the arts. Norma’s connection to visuality and pictures is as obvious as Gillis’s association with writing and language. The silent movie star Norma literally embodies the visual arts, or spatiality, and the screenwriter Gillis represents language or temporality, a binary which *Sunset Boulevard* reinforces on a number of levels through a tightly knit web of allegorical allusions.

Norma’s self, for example, is closely associated with pictures, stills in particular (figure 1). When Gillis and Norma quarrel whether or not to cut a particular scene out of her script, Norma equates her fame with still images: “Then why do they still write me fan letters every day. Why do they beg me for my photographs? Because they want to see me, me, *me!* Norma Desmond.”⁵ In the same scene, photographic still images of Norma become the overbearing presence in the room. “On the table in front of her are the photographs which she is signing. On the long table in the living room is a gallery of photographs in various frames — all Norma Desmond.

5 – *Ibid.*, 37.



Figure 1. Still from *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), directed by Billy Wilder (Hollywood: Paramount Home Video, 2004). DVD.

On the piano more photographs. Above the piano an oil portrait of her. On the highboy beside him still more photographs.”⁶

Wilder thus uses Norma as one of the fundamental elements of film — the still photograph. The immobile image in a photographic frame is like a framed painting and thus to be associated with the spatial arts. It is therefore not surprising that Wilder characterizes Norma through spatiality. Gillis, for example, connects the myriad photographic images of Norma with claustrophobia, insinuating that she takes up so much space that he is left without any room for himself: “Norma Desmond! Sometimes I felt I couldn’t breathe in that room, it was too thick with Norma Desmonds. Staring at me, crowding me, stampeding me — Norma Desmonds, more Norma Desmonds, and still more Norma Desmonds.”⁷

However, it is not necessary to go into detailed interpretive strategies to uncover Norma’s link to spatiality. She is closely associated with her mansion, whose spatial dimensions the film continuously foregrounds, as in the script’s directions to the scene when Gillis enters the house for the first time: “It is grandiose and grim. The whole place is one of those abortions of silent-picture days, with bowling alleys in the cellar and a built-in pipe organ, and beams imported from Italy, with California termites at work on them.”⁸ Wilder’s diction in describing spatiality is revealing — it is abortive, i.e., stillborn or dead, rotting away, eaten by vermin.

While Norma’s realm abounds in space, Gillis’s world lacks space but throbs with movement. Wilder comically contrasts Norma’s “half paralyzed” mansion, which is “crumbling apart in slow motion,”⁹ with the tiny but lively apartment of Gillis’s writer friend Artie: “It is the most modest one-room affair, jam-packed with young people flowing over into the miniature bathroom and the microscopic kitchenette.”¹⁰ Space is of minor importance in

6 – Ibid.

7 – Ibid.

8 – Ibid., 19.

9 – Ibid., 31.

10 – Ibid., 55.

11 – Ibid.

12 – Ibid., 56.

13 – Ibid., 63.

this world; it is instead characterized by temporal movement or, as we learn from the directions in the script, “everybody is having a hell of a time.”¹¹ Allegorized time manifests itself in various ways as, for example, in books: “Artie rolls up the Vicuna coat and tucks it above the books on a bookshelf.”¹² When Gillis leaves in a rush, he pulls the coat “from the shelf, some books tumbling with it.”¹³ The syntactical, temporal flow, which characterizes writing, produces movement, the major element of Gillis’s allegorical self.

One of the most powerful symbols that aids the allegorical identity of Gillis as Word, or temporal movement, is the car. We have to remember that the delays in Gillis’s car payments serve as the catalyst for the unfolding plot. Gillis’s self is thus closely associated with his automobile. The car is both his “auto” — Greek for “self” — as well as his mobility, which is the major feature of his allegorical persona. As a screenwriter he is, or should be, endowed with the ability to provide the syntactical movement of language to the visual images on the screen. Gillis’s professional problems are thus always linked with car problems. In a conversation with his agent, for example, he explicitly equates the loss of his car with amputation: “If I lose my car it’s like having my legs cut off,”¹⁴ and the directions in the film script call Gillis’s car with a flat tire a “limping vehicle.”¹⁵ When Norma Desmond asks Gillis if he really is a writer, he answers “I think that’s what it says on my driver’s licence,”¹⁶ again connecting his persona with cars and driving, i.e., movement. When Desmond hires Gillis, she makes him stay in “a room over the garage,”¹⁷ thus associating him once more with automobiles.¹⁸

14 – Ibid., 15.

15 – Ibid., 17.

16 – Ibid., 23.

17 – Ibid., 29.

18 – Gillis always reflects on his situation in relation to his car: “I took the rest of the script and Max led me to the room over the garage. I thought I’d wangled myself a pretty good deal. I’d do a little work, my car would be safe down below, until I got some money out of her” (ibid., 30).

19 – Ibid., 41.

20 – Ibid.

21 – Ibid., 17.

22 – Ibid.

When the financing company finally finds Gillis’s hidden car and tows it, he engages in a dialogue with Norma about the vital importance of the car for his self, “a matter of life and death.”¹⁹ Norma, however, introduces a new dimension when she points out that: “We don’t need two cars. We have a car. And not one of those cheap new things made of chromium and spit. An Isotta-Fraschini.”²⁰ Upon his first arrival at Norma’s mansion, Gillis was overwhelmed by the empty car space: “It is an enormous five-car affair, neglected and empty.”²¹ On closer inspection, however, he finds a “large dust-covered Isotta-Fraschini propped up on blocks. . . . It had a 1932 license. I figured that’s when the owners must have moved out.”²² Thus it has probably been sitting there for seventeen years.

Until now we have been given the impression that the driver/writer Gillis is the only “moving agent” in this cinematic allegory. However, with the old Isotta-Fraschini, Wilder introduces the third allegorical dimension crucial to the film’s self-reflexive plot, a dimension personified by Max von Mayerling. When Norma reactivates the old automobile after Gillis’s car has been repossessed by the financing company, Max turns out to be the driver and therefore the second male persona linked to cars, or temporal movement. The script reads: “Max is at the wheel, dressed as usual except for a chauffeur’s cap.”²³ Throughout the film Max is associated with movement, or the loss of movement, thus structurally resembling Gillis’s “automobile” persona. We learn that Max “is semi-paralyzed,”²⁴ i.e. restricted in his ability to move or, to express it in Gillis’s automobile diction, “part of his brain wasn’t hitting on all

23 – Ibid., 42.

24 – Ibid., 18.

cylinders.”²⁵ Max’s temporal movement has structural similarities with that of Gillis but manifests itself in different ways.²⁶

A prime example for Max’s allegorical function is the scene following the one in which we saw Norma’s living room with hundreds of her still photographs. Wilder turns Max into the moving agent of cinema by literally endowing him with the power to make still images move. He superimposes moving images over framed pictures when a huge oil painting in the living room turns out to be the cover for Norma’s private movie projection screen. “Max . . . shoves the painting up towards the ceiling, revealing a motion picture screen.”²⁷ It is telling that Max is the one who changes the still frame into a moving one, i.e., transforms “stills” into “movies.” Gillis’s voiceover reflects on this matter: “They were silent movies, and Max would run the machine, which was just as well — it kept him from giving us an accompaniment on that rusty organ.”²⁸ Max provides all the temporal movement that makes the silent film work: the mechanical flow of pictures through the projection machine and, as we witnessed before, the music that accompanies silent film.

The allegorical function of Max as the moving, temporal agent receives full meaning when we learn towards the end of the plot that Max is not just a servant but also Norma’s former husband and the director of her most successful movies, including the one being shown in the living room. Not only is he the moving agent operating the projector but also the prime mover, the director of the very films he projects. “I directed all her early pictures. There were three young directors, who showed promise in those days: D.W. Griffith, C.B. deMille, and Max von Mayerling. . . . You see, I was her first husband.”²⁹

Wilder even adds another dimension to this meta-cinematic scenario when he uses part of the unfinished *Queen Kelly* (1928–), Erich von Stroheim’s alleged masterpiece, as the inset movie clip projected within *Sunset Boulevard*. The figure of Max von Mayerling is not only Norma Desmond’s former director/husband in the movie but in real life Erich von Stroheim was the director of the movie *Queen Kelly* with Gloria Swanson in the leading role.

An independent producer had commissioned Erich von Stroheim, one of D.W. Griffith’s most gifted students, to write and later direct *Queen Kelly* as a “star vehicle” for Gloria Swanson. However, the project *Queen Kelly* turned into a professional disaster for Erich von Stroheim, damaging his reputation as a director to such a degree that he never fully regained his previous position in the Hollywood industry. While still shooting parts of *Queen Kelly*, von Stroheim was removed from the set at the insistence of Swanson, who feared that censorship of sexually explicit scenes could harm her public image. Salvaging *Queen Kelly* ultimately proved impossible, partly because of the movie industry’s conversion to talkies. Hollywood’s turn to sound served as a pretext for Erich von Stroheim’s enemies to deny him further projects as a director. Wilder thus uses Swanson and Stroheim as major “real life” figures in the historic struggle between silent film and talkies in the early 1930s in order to problematize self-reflexively archetypal questions of cinematic media.

But Wilder also addresses this historical aspect of the Hollywood industry on a very subliminal level when Norma and Max, for example, bury the

25 – Ibid., 31.

26 – For example, he engages in music — also a syntactical, temporal activity akin to language but ultimately different. On his first morning in the mansion organ music coming from the main house wakes Gillis. The script reads “A PAIR OF HANDS IN WHITE GLOVES, PLAYING THE ORGAN . . . They belong to Max von Mayerling. He is sitting erect, his bull neck taut as a wrestler’s as he fights out somber chord after somber chord” (ibid., 34).

27 – Ibid., 37.

28 – Ibid., 38.

29 – Ibid., 98.

30 – Ibid., 27.

dead chimpanzee, whom Gillis deemed “a very important chimp. The great grandson of King Kong, maybe.”³⁰ *King Kong* (1933) was one of the first widely successful talkies and is therefore an allusion to the death of the silent movie industry as well as to the birth of a new era in film. The plot of *King Kong*, which is also about filmmaking, shares the meta-cinematic bent of *Sunset Boulevard*. It is important to remember that in *King Kong* the movie director Denham embarks on a journey to a faraway island in order to shoot a movie.

The alliterative title *King Kong* parallels as well as provides a contrast with the equally alliterative title *Queen Kelly*. In Wilder’s scenario, the “talkative,” male *King Kong* is victorious over the female, silent *Queen Kelly*. When Norma and Max bury the symbolic successor of King Kong, they do so in the spirit of a new beginning in which the new Norma Desmond and Max von Mayerling, with the aid of Joe Gillis, will reshape the Hollywood industry. Also the expired license plate on the Isotta-Fraschini establishes a connection to *King Kong* as the turning point in the Hollywood movie factory. The 1932 plate is only valid until 1933, the year *King Kong* was released; 1932 was also the year when Erich von Stroheim directed his last movie, his only talkie, *Walking Down Broadway*, which was released under a different title a year later after massive re-shooting and changes by a number of other directors. Until 1932 Max von Mayerling’s, i.e. Erich von Stroheim’s, old Hollywood silent movie industry was still “moving.” When the new momentum of sound took over, the “old car” was no longer the sole motor of the medium. The Isotta-Fraschini was put on blocks as a quasi-museum piece and replaced by the nimble “Plymouth convertible with the top down,”³¹ the screenwriter Gillis’s automobile.

31 – Ibid., 8.

When Wilder places Norma, Gillis, and Max in the Isotta-Fraschini, where “Max is at the wheel” and “Gillis sits beside Norma”³² (figure 2), he suggests how in an ideal modern cineastic world all three elements — in this case, all

32 – Ibid., 42.



Figure 2. Still from *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), directed by Billy Wilder (Hollywood: Paramount Home Video, 2004). DVD.

allegorical personae — form a symbiotic whole. Max is the driver/director who provides the motion for Norma, the Image, just as in the days of the silent movies when the two were a married couple. Now the scenario is different. Although partly paralyzed, Max still provides motion as the chauffeur but he is aided by Word, Image's new lover.

The idyll of the three in the car is not meant to last. This new partnership has been in danger right from the beginning, partly because of Image's urge for dominance. Image, still relying on the resources of Movement, took Word as her new lover in order to guarantee her eternal fame. Before the license plate expired in 1933, the partnership of Image and Motion in silent film promised to make Norma immortal. With the change to talkies the sexual union of Norma and Max could no longer ensure Image's eternal fame. A second sexual partner had to replace "that rusty organ"³³ of Max, substituting Max's partly paralyzed mobility with the additional, temporal movement of language.

However, it is clear from the very beginning that female Image only superficially seeks the aid of masculine Word. Already Norma's film script, *The Story of Salome*, is indicative of a sexual hierarchy that corresponds to the struggle for dominance between the two modes of film. *Salome* is the story of decapitation as an allegory of castration. The film script thus foreshadows the climax of *Sunset Boulevard* when Norma shoots Gillis, i.e. Image castrates Word. This castrating power of Image is a leitmotif in the discussions of media. G.E. Lessing, for example, subliminally evokes it when he associates the visual arts with a doubly mutilated male guard in a harem: "It is as though a man who can and may speak were at the same time using those signs which the mutes in the Turkish seraglio invented among themselves for lack of a voice."³⁴ Lessing associates visuality with muteness as well as indirectly with castration since the tongue is not the only organ the guardians in a seraglio are commonly bereft of. This almost Freudian conceptualizing of the visual arts as feminine, i.e. an art that is defined through lack (of a penis), predates Lessing's *Laocoön*.

The symbolic equation of visuality and castration is not Lessing's invention but the gender-specific deep structure of the Medusa myth. The head of Medusa, surrounded by phallic snakes, is in itself an image of the castrating power associated with her. Medusa's petrifying gaze takes away the (male) individual's ability to move; it freezes the object of her vision and turns temporality into spatiality. The power of image is to take away masculinity, or to put it in French feminist terms, defeat phallogocentrism. W.J.T. Mitchell calls the Medusa myth ekphrastic poetry's "primal scene." Medusa is "a dangerous female Other who threatens to silence the male voice."³⁵ Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* reenacts this archetypal situation in which a Salome-like female figure struggles for dominance over men and by doing so paralyzes Max and kills Gillis; i.e., she freezes movement into a still image and she silences the word. Wilder's sexually charged allegorization of cinematic dimensions therefore very much resembles the representational spirit of the mid-twentieth century informed by a modernist mimetic climate which is still based on Lessing's dichotomies of time and space.

33 – *Ibid.*, 38.

34 – Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 59. The German original reads: "Wäre es nicht, als ob ein Mensch, der laut reden kann und darf, sich noch zugleich der Zeichen bedienen sollte, welche die Stummen im Serraglio des Türken, aus Mangel der Stimme, unter sich erfunden haben?" Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoön oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, ed. Kurt Wölfel (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag, 1988), 81.

35 – Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 709.

36 – Brackett, Wilder, and Marshman, *Sunset Boulevard*, 70.
37 – *Ibid.*, 99.

Interestingly enough, Wilder himself undercuts his own gender-specific allegorization of Word and Image in *Sunset Boulevard* through the figure of Batty Schaefer (Nancy Olson), a script reader at Paramount. We encounter her early in the movie during Gillis's unsuccessful attempt to sell an idea to a producer at the studio. She heavily criticizes Gillis's work but later in the film, when they meet again, encourages Gillis to rework parts of an older script together with her. She argues that she does not "want to be a reader all my life. I want to write."³⁶ Later on we see the two cooperating on the movie script for "*Untitled Love Story* by Joseph C. Gillis and Betty Schaefer."³⁷

It is dangerous to over-interpret the film's fourth allegorical figure, the Reader, who paradoxically turns into a Writer. Wilder thus undermines the gender binaries of Word and Image which he originally established. The female figure of Betty Schaefer started out pursuing a career as Image in the footsteps of Norma Desmond. In a conversation with Gillis, Betty reveals that she comes from a family which has been connected with the movie industry for generations. "Naturally they took it for granted I was to become a great star. So I had ten years of dramatic lessons, diction, dancing. Then the studio made a test. Well, they didn't like my nose — it slanted this way a little. I went to a doctor and had it fixed. They made more tests, and they were crazy about my nose — only they didn't like my acting."³⁸ The passage clearly reinforces the stereotypical scenario that Wilder ultimately destroys: Woman is Image, or supposed to be Image, but Woman can also become Word. By putting Betty and Gillis as co-authors onto the cover page of the film script Wilder clearly indicates that their intercourse turned out to be more fruitful than the one between Gillis and Norma.

38 – *Ibid.*, 95.

The big question that remains to be answered is why Billy Wilder produces a movie about the transition from silent film to talkies in 1950, and why is this debate set in 1950 and not in the late 1920s when this issue was a hot topic. In order to approach this question we have to remember that the film deals with a major paradigmatic change in the media landscape that took place in the late 1920s and early 1930s with the introduction of sound. However, a similar landslide of media change occurred in the late 1940s with the advent of television. Norma subliminally hints at this major shift from cinema to television in her first encounter with Gillis, when she claims: "It's the pictures that got small." She thereby also suggests that movies in 1950 have to fit the size of a television screen.

Making recourse to older media constituents is a leitmotif of media changes in general. For example, in the 1890s emerging film evoked older media, such as photography, painting, sculpture, or tableaux vivants, in order to conceptualize the new medium and self-reflexively fashion its own media theory. Subsequent changes within the medium of film followed this very logic by re-projecting and grounding these ruptures through evocations of previous media shifts. It is therefore not surprising that Wilder discusses the advent of television under the guise of a debate about the transition from silent movies to talkies.

What is remarkable is that *Sunset Boulevard* renders the evolution of film through gender allegorizations that imply heterosexual intercourse. The transformation of photographic still images into moving pictures is represented through the sexual union of Norma as Image with Max as

Movement. For the transition from silent film to talkies Joe as Word needs to be added to this allegorical sexual exchange. The advent of television as the final media shift requires a new agent. Betty as the Reader represents the new television audience as a choosing function. Betty thus stands for the selective powers that the viewer adopts in the new medium of home entertainment.

Despite the larger theoretical implications that Billy Wilder's allegories of media evoke in *Sunset Boulevard* there might also be an autobiographically motivated element in the death of the script writer Joe Gillis, staged so prominently in the film's opening and closing sequences. Between 1936 and 1950, Billy Wilder collaborated with Charles Brackett as a screenwriter on thirteen films — the last of which turned out to be *Sunset Boulevard*. After the film's completion numerous personal and professional differences put an end to their decade-long teamwork on film scripts. The death of the screenwriter Gillis in their last collaborative script thus uncannily evokes the termination of Billy Wilder's cooperation with Charles Brackett, who among other offices served as president of the Screen Writers Guild and won Academy Awards for numerous film scripts, including the one for *Sunset Boulevard*. Thus writing, and screen writing in particular, forms the center of the multifaceted allegorizations in *Sunset Boulevard*, spanning both the history of the medium of film and the personal history of Billy Wilder as a filmmaker and screenwriter.