

“A Modern Warning to the Classical artists of 1940s Hollywood”

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The Hollywood studio system of the 1930s was a monumental time in film history, making its mark on many classic films and studied by many theorists and students of the twentieth century. Most known as “The Golden Age” of cinema, saw the production of new genres, studio styles and the development of star contracts. Many great artistic developments and technologies emerged from this time such as the development of sound and color, and some of the most well known performers in history. Money in the arts was not difficult to curate for the biggest studios. However, as the monopolization of these studios increased, independent films and culture began to dwindle. In 1948, the court case *The United States V. Paramount Pictures* made it illegal to own distribution chains and stars were released from contracts and studio styles became less associated with their modes of distribution. Along with this dismembered system the transition from silent to sound film left cherished actors behind that were associated with the silent brand of films. Leaving these actors behind caused many of them to be jobless and stranded from the industry. The depiction of the luxurious life of these actors under the Golden Age of cinema and silent film into their “after life” is depicted in *Sunset Boulevard*. Here the new industry is represented in the form of Joe as it confronts the classical industry represented in Norma Desmond. Many film goers and film purists look back at this time with nostalgia and recall the pre-blockbuster and commercial era. In 1988 Warner Brothers produced the film *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* set in 1947, one year before the 1948 Paramount Decision. The film memorializes the classics and presents a theoretical warning of the industries future and the fate of the actors portrayed in *Sunset Boulevard*; A film that takes place one year after the Paramount Decision.

The setting of both films automatically sets them up for analysis, comparison, and commentary. *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* takes place in 1947 Hollywood. Just one year later

in 1948 United States V. Paramount abolishes the industry's monopolization. One year after that, *Sunset Boulevard* is set in 1949-1950s Hollywood. The silent era of films ended in the early 1930s and the Golden Age began to decline in 1948, but fully declined by 1969. In the film *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* the main antagonist is a cartoon character Judge Doom, whose main goal is to buy out the biggest companies in the film industry as well as the public transportation in order to abolish "toon town" to build a freeway and force people to buy their own cars and travel along the highway of cheap commercialized entertainment. These characters can be seen as the embodiment of the Paramount Decision, destroying the monopolies and big studios, along with it the Golden Age of Hollywood. Therefore, the death at the end of the film symbolizes a theoretical world where the modernity of commercialism is halted, and the Golden Age characters can live on. In this theoretical world the effects of *Sunset Boulevard's* Norma Desmond, would not have occurred and the same expensive classic pictures could have continued with their star and studio duos.

Sunset Boulevard and *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* may not seem connected due to their production date differences, however there are direct references between them that puts *Sunset Boulevard* into the influence and commentary of *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit*. The first example is the showcase of the Paramount Gate (or R.K. Maroon studios in the case of *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit*). At around the exact same time of an hour in four minutes in both films, the Paramount Gate is shown at the exact same angle and framing composition, both with a car driving into the studio lot. The only difference is that rather than "Paramount" being above the gate in *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit*, its R.K. Maroon (since Warner Brothers, rather than Paramount, made the film). In the beginning of *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* a bus bound for Sunset Boulevard takes over the foreground of the frame. The bus, known as "little red car" has

become the face of clover leaf public transportation company, and has fallen victim to antagonist Judge Doooms agenda to dismember the company in the name of his new freeway idea. This shot is representative of the actors that were the “faces” of the big film companies and fell subject to whatever fate the “higher ups” decided for them. Stars were greatly dependent on what the studios produced for them, and whereas studios needed stars, they had an expendable amount of people to curate one from. A relationship which was demonstrated by Norma Desmond’s inability to accept the new reality that film no longer needed her in *Sunset Boulevard*. Lastly, one of the first songs played in *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* in a bar is sung by one of the newer cartoon characters for the time. It describes the industries situation and how it has fallen in the past 20 years, looking back on it with the knowledge of new cinema.

“You had lots of money, 1922

If you had prepared 20 years ago

You wouldn’t be wandering door to door

Get out of here, get me some money too”

These lyrics directly reference the personnel of the Hollywood industry that were thriving in their “hay day” but became poor and begging for work with the more modern form of the industry. The song later mentions “if you ain’t got no money, they will put you out” which is very telling of Joe’s situation in *Sunset Boulevard* who was cased from the industry. Early on in the film, Joe needed \$290 to pay for his car. In order to make the money, he planned to rely on a seemingly strong connection with a Paramount producer to buy one of his original screen plays, which didn’t work. He asked his agent for money to which the agent said no because “the finest

things in the world have been written on an empty stomach” metaphorically starving and depriving crew in hopes of receiving quality material for basically free. When Joe disagreed to this, he lost his agent. However, because he was unable to pay for the car, he felt forced to run from the law, beginning his life with Norma Desmond. He had no money, and his agent (representing the industry) did not care for his well-being, in the end ostracizing him. This also speaks on the expectations of cast and crew to work long hours for little pay if not free labor.

The most prevalent case made by both films was the display of mistreatment of actors from the studio system contracts. In this context, *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* makes this case by having R.K. Maroon explain how excited he is to get half of the cast of *Fantasia* contracted to him for half the price with the benefit that because they are animals “they work for peanuts”. In reality this alludes to the idea that actors of the industry will work long hours for little pay. Workers abuse is also seen in the stunts of the cartoon characters such as fridges and safes being dropped on their heads with no consequences, which has been proven to kill the other humans within the same world. The justification for this was “you can’t hurt a toon” which was how the workers of the industry with little rights were treated and still expected to perform well. This later affected Rodger Rabbit in the film when he is performing and the record skips and he gets stuck saying “no pain” over and over as he smashes plates on his head. As if he is a machine for the disposal of the producers that can be run into the ground.

The mistreatment of cast and crew was represented in *Sunset Boulevard* with the difference between the new film industry new year’s party and Norma Desmond’s classical style party. At Norma’s new year party they are able to drink as much as they would like, with a hired servant (Max) and a live band all for themselves in a big open ball room floor. Norma even had spare cash to have the floor replaced for this single event. In the new industries party, which took

place in an overcrowded self serve bar with no ornamentation in the architecture, drinks were restricted due to budget cuts. Joes ostentatious suit was seen as out of place with the cheap modern clothes. The old Hollywood of Norma's party could spend wastefully on luxuries, while the new industry party had to watch what they spent and ration it among themselves.

Another comparison can be seen in the dialogue of Norma and Joe. Norma is occupied with the questions of "haven't they got any eyes? Have they forgotten what a star looks like" meanwhile Joe is busy with the idea that after he dies, "It's funny how people get with you once you're dead." The characters comment in their own way how the industry brought both actors and crew members to their own downfalls, then proceeded to act like they care about the tragic occurrences.

The writers of these films showed a clear desire to cope with the loss of classic performers and artists which they did through dialogue between characters of the old and new industry. In *Sunset Boulevard* this is best represented in Joe and Norma's banter. Joes expressed his view of Norma's classical style by saying to Norma, "the audience left 20 years ago. Now face it!" to which Norma replies "That's a lie; They still want me". Joe retaliates by saying that "they" do not, and no one had the heart to tell her it's all a lie. After this confession Joe is killed, as if to say anyone who attempts to bypass the glorious achievements of the stars and studios is wrong. At the same time, throughout the film, Norma critiques Joe's modern style. This is especially seen in the first car ride they have together where she comments on Joe's clothes being plain, boring and don't fit. She also complains about his poor gum chewing habits which becomes ironic as she begins to smoke.

Another illustration of this dialogue is in the bar scene of *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit*, where BettyBoop speaks to the main character, Eddy Valiant, about how her film career has

“been slow since color toons came around” but she’s “still got it Eddie” as she performs her signature dance and melody. Betty expresses her desire to be looked at through this dance that no longer encapsulates the men of the bar. She represents an existing fetishization of women that when compared to Jessica appears subtle and dull. Right after this exchange, Jessica Rabbit enters the stage to perform in glamorous costume of technicolor red and bright purple to represent the exact animation that took Betty Boop out of work as well as a new form of fetish for the male gaze in comparison to Betty who is overlooked by the men for Jessica in this scene.

Whereas Betty Boop was a real life character designed to subtly appeal to the male gaze of the 1930s. Jessica Rabbit is a character made to highlight the objectification of women in cinema. One way her character exemplifies this is with a clear display of “strong visual and erotic impact” in her exaugurated genital features that clearly stun the male audiences (Mulvey, P. 624). According to feminist film theory “conventional close ups of legs, or a face, integrated into the narrative a different mode of eroticism” by dismantling and dehumanizing the female to be an object to be looked at (Mulvey, P. 625). With Jessica Rabbit’s first introduction to the screen all that is shown is a singular leg and exaugurated drawn breasts through a stage curtain. From this point forward in the performance, every other shot is of her knees down, and any shot her entire body is denied seeing her face or eyes by her hair being put in the way. Further emphasizing her display as a sexual object. Animation of this character also adds more intention to this eroticism because an animator had to knowingly draw the hair to cover her face, compared to live action where it could unintentionally have fallen out. One shot consists of a composition where her chest and legs frame the males face, but head is cut off by the top of the frame. According to Laura Mulvey’s feminist film theory, women are compared to musical numbers as a way to allow time to freeze specifically to be looked at without guilt from the

viewer. She states that the woman's "visual presence tends to work against the development of the story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into the cohesion with the narrative" (Mulvey, P.625). Jessica Rabbit's performance literally slows down the pace of the film. The shots are longer and the men are literally frozen and unable to move, getting pushed around by Jessica who breaks their personal space with suggestive movements. The scene is very hyper sexualized, but with the intention to call attention and display the male gaze more than the female spectacle with an increased number of reaction shots of the male audience and Jessica's interaction with them. This is important especially since Jessica Rabbit has such a big role in the solving of Mr. Acme's murder and is not just a passive bystander as in traditional narrative cinema. Later, the writers of the film have her directly state when confronting Eddy "I'm not bad I'm just drawn that way". Calling attention to their argument that women aren't always intending to be looked at but are born in a world and ideology that forces it upon them.

Betty shows in her face that she realizes she can no longer do what Jessica does for the male audience. This is similar to how Norma realizes she is no longer desired by Joe compared to Betty in *Sunset Boulevard* and her ability to work and live in the new age of cinema that requires young women for male desire.

Only, after Norma saw Betty's name at the top of the screen write for a love story, Norma acts with aggression and violence that is not in Betty Boop's nature of *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit*. The difference in reactions emphasizing the different attitudes in the shift toward the new male gaze. The older one being of jealousy and hatred and the more recently developed attitude of longing and admiration. In these same scenes, *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* shows the shift

from black and white cartoons' effect on characters while *Sunset Boulevard* demonstrate the transition the transition from silent to sound film and its effect on actors.

A key characteristic to these films are their character cameos, that speak a lot to what the films main messages seek to convey. The most obvious one is in *Sunset Boulevard* with what Joe calls "the waxworks" card game which memorializes the fallen artists to the introduction of sound sync technology to film. The stars that appeared in this scene include Buster Keaton, Anna Q, Nilsson and H.B. Warner. They also honor icon Charlie Chaplin through a performance by Norma later in the film. Another cameo includes Cecil B. DeMille who confronts Norma himself saying that the industry no longer has the budget for the big film idea and that the industry has changed a lot since her time. As if he is trying to console Gloria Swanson in real life, the silent film actress who played Normal Desmond. The last cameo in this production was Max Von Mayerling played by Erich Von Stroheim who in real life discover Gloria Swanson and feels responsible for her life after film. He admits this in his character of Max in his lines "I discovered her when she was sixteen" and "I made her a star, I cannot let her be destroyed."

In *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* the significant cameo is Stubby Kaye who was an actor and comedian in real life, and played the role of Marvin Acme in the film, who was the owner of toon town. In other words, the king of comedy. Acme in Greek means the highest point. In the film, toon town (the world of cartoon characters that represent real life old industry actors) thrive under the ownership of Acme. When he is killed it's as if the film is portraying the death of the height of cinema, or in the context of its 1947 setting, foreshadowing the death of the golden age with the results of the Paramount Decision.

By the end of the two films, it is clear both are showcasing in their own way an appreciation of the classical artists of the cinema in both cast and crew. This is seen in the end

resolution of their plots. In *Who Framed Rodger Rabbits* Judge Doom dies. Doom committed voter fraud to become the judge of toon town. He then became the sole share stockholder of the cloverleaf industries which controlled the icon “little red car” public transportation company, with the intent to destroy it. This way people would be forced to spend money on their own cars and use his new commercial freeway. Then Doom killed Acme, the leading production studio, for control over toon town to eradicate the art for space for the highway. With this context understood, Doom represents the actual result of the Paramount Decision where the studio monopolization was ended, and the classical art was demolished. His death at the end of the film represents the preservation of this golden age and characters that can live on beyond the world of *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit*.

In the end of *Sunset Boulevard* Norma’s delusions of returning to her place in front of the camera (even if it is a news camera) is achieved with the murder of Joe. In this ending scene Norma is arrested in the belief that people want her for her acting (rather than arrest). She believes that she has always been and will always be a star. Max does everything to keep her within this idea and she is forever in denial of the truth. As with other stars, most of their private decline was not revealed to the public to save the company’s image because the studios promotion and stars image are so intertwined and controlled by the studios that the only truthful publicity was the scandals (Dyer, P. 446). In the case of Norma Desmond, this was dangerous for the studios because any criticism of her actions are “situated in the stars’ image. They are media products, part of the cinematic machine” which influences the “way publicity relates to promotion [of studios] and films” (Dyer, P. 455-456). Which, in the context of *Sunset Boulevard* would influence how people view Paramount. Especially since even though the star is seen as the voice of a film, “any voice can only be returned to its author as the point of decision making in

production” (or the studio heads) that would be criticized for letting Norma reach such a deep point in her mental state (Dyer P. 457). Nonetheless she is preserved in her idealization of herself in the name of her own self-image (or ego). The end of this film presents the idea that we should remember the great things such celebrity icons have done but with the understanding of the struggles they endured as a “semiotic Construction”, especially coming out of their careers.

To further their appreciation, the two productions have a moment set aside in each film that honor the past beloved characters. In *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* this moment came at the scene of Judge Dooms death when the wall to toon town was knocked down, and all the cartoon characters from the 1940s and 50s emerged together and posed as if in a group photo in front of a camera. This shot held for a while before the characters said goodbye and returned to their stable environment singing a song of happiness.

In *Sunset Boulevard* this moment is seen when Norma Desmond visited the Paramount studios and a grip turned a spot light onto her while she sat in the directors chair. Everyone in the studio, young and old shouted her name and gathered around to celebrate her and her achievements. Then Cecil B. DeMille came over and commanded the light return to the set and said a nice goodbye to Norma. He acknowledges her time at the Paramount both in her career as well as the half hour she visited before instructing the crew to move on from her era.

With the rise of modernism there was a disregard for the historical past. There was an attempt to create a new image of the century with no ties to past events. However this style in many other mediums has been pushed back against, for a disregard to identity which developed into the post modernism movement. *Sunset Boulevard* represents a moment in time that *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* gets to honor as a historical picture that shaped the industry of modern cinema. Such stand stills in time and honors are exhibited in the expression of the director

throughout the films. One significant notoriety came from Cecil B. DeMille himself about both Norma but in reality, also Gloria Swanson when he said “thirty million fans have given her the brush. Isn’t that enough?” He also says to her when she is in the studio talking about how she misses being in pictures that “we’ve missed you too” but knows that its time to move on by reminding Norma that “things have changed quite a bit”. An important commentary from *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* came from the main character Eddy Valiant as the end when Judge Doom reveals his plant to eliminated expensive entertainment of the golden age with the cheap commercialism of the yet to be developed freeway by eliminating toon town. Eddy replies “That lame brain freeway idea could only be cooked up by a toon” which plays into the irony that to the people of the 40s the idea of cinema without these key studio elements was outlandish. Lots of artistic developments and stars were lost with the new film technologies and transitions. However, rather than just forgetting about or disregarding these once loved people, *Sunset Boulevard* and *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* insist that audiences take a moment to acknowledge these achievements before moving onto the next agenda. *Who Framed Rodger Rabbit* even presents an alternative world where the old age wins and prevails into the future. With the conclusion of the Paramount Decision studios did not want to throw out everything they accomplished, but felt it was necessary to adapt and rebuild in the new modern world of cinema.

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