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This is Not the Film: Narrative Frustration, Indeterminacy, and Silence in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*

Georg Nöffke

'A Love Story in the City of Dreams' ran the coy promotional tagline for David Lynch's 2001 film *Mulholland Drive*. Since its release, this 'love story' – jagged, fragmentary, achronological – has inspired an overproduction of criticism focused on dream analysis. Central to such a mode of interpretation, one which separates content from form, which mines for content at the expense of considerations of form, is the distinction between those facets of the film's narrative marked off as 'fantasy' and those marked off as 'reality'. While these investigations have, in their way, been fruitful, they have also had the lamentable effect of rendering legible, reducing to a *story*, a work of art which, as a time-bound cinematic experience, deliberately resists the consolations of a linear narrative, amounts, in effect, to an *anti-story* that in its non-revelations, its silences, becomes time-less. And though inquiries into the formal features of *Mulholland Drive* have been made (by Jennifer Hudson (2004) and David Roche (2004), for instance), the ways in which Lynch employs narrative frustration and indeterminacy as a disorganising principle in his film have not been adequately explored. This article aims to redress the deficiency by examining *Mulholland Drive* as a film which, like its predecessor and, to some extent, progenitor, Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), undermines its mysteries by foregrounding its own constructedness and historicity as an art object (in Lynch's case, through a parodic treatment of the Hollywood system and noir aesthetics), which occludes and then collapses its narrative proliferations, subverting attempts at a definitive thematic reading, and which as a result establishes a temporality, an atemporality, in which assertions of fantasy and reality are voided, and can only fall silent.

Smoke, an uprush of smoke after the shot has been fired, smoke from all four corners of the bed, a morbid gathering of plumes that grow and shroud the room amid an insistent flickering of light. Then you see that ghastly, that unspeakably ravaged face once more, an imposition, perhaps, on your polite filmgoer's psyche, or then again perhaps not, for it is likely you reached a surfeit of horror – horror *represented*, that is – long before you turned your attention to *this* cinematic piece, and now, alas, you may find that terror, as a spectacle, tends to leave you less than appalled, or entertained. Still, there is that face, a vision turned superimposition, a film, a screen through which you can see, oddly enough, blue curtains, the curtains of what appears to be a theatre. The face fades, is replaced by a face that is soon joined by another, two faces overexposed and overly happy, the two lovers who have occupied most of the scenes, one a blonde woman, the other a woman in a blonde wig. Around them is an ocean of sound: tidal strings that rise, fall, mourn, and weep. Behind them is a cityscape at night, the City of Angels, and as the women perform in slow motion their thin happiness, give the impression of a surprised arrival, a brief meteor shower of lights from the city's glittering constellations travels across their expressions. The blue curtains return, acquire perspective. Indeed, you behold a theatre, or at least a stage, the very same stage, in fact, that belongs to the enigmatic club you saw the two lovers visit one night, a night on which something happened, something dire, cataclysmic, you know not what. The stage is empty. A microphone gleams on its stand, unaccompanied, the hall awash with restless swathes of blue and oppressed by a thrum coming from nowhere in particular. The final image is of the theatre box that contains the blue-haired woman you have also seen before, for she too was in attendance on the night of the lovers' visit. Imperious, immaculately dressed, ridiculous, she refuses to look at you. But a whisper does unfurl from her mouth. '*Silencio*', she says. Darkness discloses itself.

But *this* – this version of a film's ending, this textual rendering of a visual representation replete with viewer's reaction, viewer's confusion, this take on a take, or rather, a vast sequence of takes – is not the film. And neither is what happens after you, the ill-defined *you* of the current narrative presided over by a mysterious, as-yet-unannounced *I*, have seen David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Naturally you, being to some extent familiar with Lynch and his position as a Hollywood connoisseur of bizarrerie, a teller, if telling is the word, of twisted tales, if tales are what they are, knew to expect what, by the standards of mainstream cinema, would be termed *strange*. You were prepared for that. You knew already that Lynch's film started life as a television pilot for a series that was subsequently cancelled, but which was then resuscitated as a full-length feature, which could, you suspect, account for the knottedness you just witnessed. But now your uncertainty over what you have just seen gnaws at you. To be sure, certain elements of the story, insofar as you could discern a story, were visible, seemingly decipherable. A dark-haired woman is in a limousine. The car snakes along Mulholland Drive at night, then stops. A gun is pointed at the woman, but she survives this apparent attempt on her life when another car full of frantic merrymakers crashes into her vehicle. She survives that event as well. Emerging from the flaming wreckage, from a looming dimension of smoke, she, glazed with incomprehension, makes her blank, stumbling way toward the blinking lights of Los Angeles. She steals into an apartment an older woman has just vacated. Back at the site of the car crash, two police detectives, characters so clearly caricaturised their presence seems incongruous to you, muse ineffectually about what the accident could reveal to them. A woman, they conclude, is missing. That woman, the amnesiac, later has her hideout uncovered by Betty, an aspiring actress who has come to Hollywood in a haze of incandescent optimism, and who will be staying in her aunt's

apartment. At the airport Betty was escorted and wished well by an elderly couple so kind, so cheery as to be wholly disturbing. Betty harbours a dazzling talent for acting, which she will later unleash at an audition. Unable to identify herself, the dark-haired woman claims the name 'Rita' after spying on a bathroom wall a film poster for Rita Hayworth's *Gilda* (Vidor 1946). (The film's tagline reads, 'There's no one like Gilda!') But Rita soon confesses to her confusion. She and Betty discover in her purse a large amount of money, and an odd triangular blue key. Then Rita remembers dimly the car crash on Mulholland Drive, and the two women set out to unravel the mystery of her identity.

Only, this part of the film's narrative is hardly its *only* narrative. Other scenes, other events crowd in on Rita and Betty's quest for a clarified self and, as a result, your consciousness. Their relation to Rita and Betty, indeed, to one another, is frequently unclear. There is the scene in a diner, where an anguished man tells a friend of a dream, a nightmare he had about a terrifying figure appearing behind the very diner they are now sitting in. The two men investigate, and the wretched figure emerges, causing the beleaguered dreamer to collapse. (That same horrific face shows up at the film's end.) There is the narrative of fictional director Adam Kesher, whose Hollywood production, *The Sylvia North Story*, is overrun by shadowy mobsters who insist he cast the unknown actress Camilla Rhodes as the lead in his film. 'This is the girl', you hear again and again. Kesher is accosted in particular by a mythical cowboy who, behind a scrim of niceties and niceness, threatens him into compliance. *Another* narrative features a bungling hitman, who murders three people in order to secure a black book of telephone numbers. And then there is Rita and Betty's narrative itself, which somehow becomes denatured halfway through the film. After Rita remembers the name 'Diane Selwyn' – it comes tumbling from the darkness of her mind when she and Betty visit the beleaguered dreamer's diner, are served by a waitress named Diane – their quest narrows its focus. They must discover who this Diane Selwyn is, if Rita's actual name is, in fact, Diane. They locate the number and address of a D. Selwyn in a telephone directory, dial the number. 'Strange,' Betty says, 'to be calling yourself'. An answering machine is the only response. Later they find their way to Diane Selwyn's supposedly-empty apartment, go so far as to break in, and discover in a bedroom the days-old mouldering corpse of a woman. This sight, this bloated approximation of a body, repulses you as it repulses the women. They rush out, their horror surging to a pitch, and now the camera turns stroboscopic, captures their fraying psyches when ghostly doubles trail and mimic their every movement.

You ask yourself, has Betty and Rita's story bled into the hitman's obscure operations? But the film is frustrating your hope for smooth causation. You watch as Betty, that night, helps a fearful Rita disguise herself with the use of a blonde wig. Like you, Rita apprehends some enclosing doom. Side by side the two women stand before a mirror, nigh-mirror images of one another. When Betty invites Rita to sleep in her bed, they become lovers. Anguish and confusion are cowed quickly by erotic discovery, a topography of intensity, the co-ordinates, you learn, of love. For twice Betty whispers, 'I'm in love with you'. Rita does not respond – not verbally – but does later talk in her sleep. '*Silencio*', she breathes, and then repeats, more loudly, again and again, '*Silencio, silencio*'. '*No hay banda*', she adds, '*No hay orquesta*'. Betty wakes up, wakes Rita up. 'Go with me somewhere', Rita asks her.

That 'somewhere', it transpires, is a place called Club Silencio, where the lovers witness an unsettling performance. On stage a man repeats Rita's words. '*No hay banda*', he declares, 'There is no band. This is all a tape recording, and yet we hear a voice ... It is an illusion'. In a theatre box to his left you see a blue-haired woman seeing him. The man summons recorded thunder, and

at this Betty is overcome by a paroxysm of shaking. A singer appears, appears to sing in Spanish a heart-rending rendition of Roy Orbison's 'Crying Over You'. The lovers weep liberally. Then the singer collapses with a theatrical gesture. Her devastating song, rich with coloratura, carries on, even as she is carried off. Their grief suddenly stilled, the lovers look on in something approximating disbelief. Betty reaches for her purse, finds inside it a blue box with a triangular keyhole. Back at the apartment, Rita retrieves the key, but cannot locate Betty: she has disappeared. Unnerved, fearful again, she opens the blue box. The camera lurches towards its black hole, a maw at once so large it seems to swallow Rita whole. The box falls to the floor with a thud.

Bewildered, you have begun to worry that Lynch is leading you through a bedraggled dream, and that this dream is eating up your purchase on exegesis. But then the filmic funhouse seems to reassemble itself for the briefest spell as Betty's aunt returns and inspects her bedroom. There is no sign of the blue box. The scene changes to the bedroom Betty and Rita intruded upon earlier, the bedroom belonging to Diane Selwyn. That body is still lying on the bed, just as it was before, only now it is clearly no longer dead. The mythical cowboy makes another appearance. 'Hey, pretty girl. Time to wake up', he says. At this point the narrative axis of the film shifts dramatically. For the remaining twenty or so minutes of this two-hour-and-22-minute long film you will observe the unravelling of Diane Selwyn, who is played by the same actress who played Betty. She, a down-and-out actress, is driven to extremities of consciousness by her crippling yearning for Camilla Rhodes (played by the actress who played Rita), the star of Adam Keshner's *Sylvia North Story*, the romantic partner of the director. Diane is invited to a party of Adam and Camilla's. She travels to the celebration in a limousine (Camilla's patronising treat), the car snaking along Mulholland Drive, then stopping. Camilla opens the door, leads Diane up a secret garden path to the party. For Diane this gathering – brimful of the characters who populated the earlier part of the film, characters who have come to occupy different roles – is utterly un congenial. She reaches the peak of her private panic, a twitching despair, when Adam and Camilla, caught in the throes of an agonising display of closeness, are about to make an announcement. The sound of a spoon or a knife or a fork clinking against glass is a bladed pain that arrogates her entire being. The words of the announcement are being formed, are coming, are about to come, but do not come because the film yanks you into another scene: Diane, once again in the diner, the bungling hitman opposite her, the two of them served by a waitress named Betty. Diane has a large amount of cash with her; she is paying for the murder of Camilla. The hitman shows Diane a blue key, says she will find it where he told her it would be after he has completed his job. He does not reveal what it will open. At the back of the diner, you see the figure with the wrecked face once more; he, she, it holds the blue box which swallowed Rita, places the box in a paper bag. Out of the paper bag creeps the elderly couple that ushered Betty out of the airport at the beginning of the film. Miniscule creatures, homunculi chirping and laughing hysterically, they make their way to Diane's apartment, knock on her front door, crawl in under it, grow in size, terrorise her with their grim mirth until she utters cries enough to rend the universe and flies to her bedroom, where she takes out a gun from her bedside table, and puts it to her mouth. Smoke, an uprush of smoke after the shot has been fired, smoke from all four corners of the bed

Of course, you do not know what to make of all this. You decide to consult sources. Perhaps you have the original DVD release of the film, the disc of which you placed in the player of your impressive home theatre system. (Naturally, you would never watch the film on your computer or, worse still, your smartphone – *that* is not the film either.) The DVD came with a card that offers 'David Lynch's 10 Clues to Unlocking This Thriller'. You scrutinise these clues.

‘Notice appearances of the red lampshade’, they tell you. ‘Notice the robe, the ashtray, the coffee cup’. You watch the film again; clarity does not come. You suspect that the clues are red herrings. You turn to the internet, that democratic repository of depthless information. In 2001, the same year in which the film was released, three journalists writing for *Salon.com* offer ‘Everything you were afraid to ask about *Mulholland Drive*’ (Wyman, Garrone, and Klein). ‘Everything’, it turns out, is a quite specific reading of the film which sees parts of it as fantastical construction, that is to say, as a dream projection, and parts of it as a bleak reality. You discover that, in the following year, *The Guardian* ‘challenged six top cinema critics to explain the plot’ (Lewis). Four of the six critics, Jonathan Ross, Neil Roberts, Tom Charity, and Philip French, favour interpretations that mark off sections of the film as belonging to fantasy and others as belonging to reality. *Whatculture.com* puts forward ‘5 Theories That Help Explain David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*’ (Kacar). Here, too, the emphasis is on what in the film may be deemed illusory, unreal, and what may be deemed actual, real. (By which, you feel you must assume on the website’s behalf, they mean ‘actual’ or ‘real’ within the unreality of the fictive medium.) You stumble upon *Mulholland-drive.net*, a website which proffers what it calls a ‘pool of theories’. Negotiating these heaving cyber-waters, you soon recognise that you are dealing with a glut of analysis, a superabundance of explanation stunningly unafraid to declare that *this* or *that* is what the film is about. But once more the bulk of these ‘theories’ fall under the banner of ‘dream and reality’ (though others point elsewhere, to parallel universes, for instance). Indeed, your intertextual leaps and their fervent reliance on hyperlinks show that attempts to distil the film into contexts and themes congregate around dream analysis.

An instructive instance of this tendency is Jean Tang’s 2001 article on Lynch’s film, ‘All you have to do is dream’, also published on *Salon.com*. Tang, who makes clear the theoretical underpinning of her appraisal (and the underpinning implicit in all the dream-heavy hypotheses floating around the internet), champions a Freudian cause. She dismisses film critics who have expressed their bafflement, *Entertainment Weekly*’s Owen Gleiberman, who describes the film’s plot as ‘a pretzel that never connects with itself’ (cited in Tang), and Roger Ebert, who states bluntly, ‘there is no explanation’ (cited in Tang). While ‘*Mulholland Drive* is odd and surreal, fractured and dreamlike,’ she explains, ‘it’s not as complicated as these experts make it out to be’. Having spoken to a Freudian dream analyst and clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia Medical School, Tang can now reveal that ‘stray plot lines [click] satisfyingly into place’. What she goes on to present as a solution to the film’s mysteries is echoed and summarised neatly by Slavoj Žižek in the documentary film, *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (Fiennes). Žižek aligns *Mulholland Drive* with the similarly-puzzling film Lynch directed before it, 1997’s *Lost Highway*. ‘*Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* are two versions of the same film’, Žižek avers:

What makes both films ... so interesting is how they posit the two dimensions, reality and fantasy, side by side, horizontally, as it were The logic here is strictly Freudian. That is to say, we escape into dream to avoid a deadlock in our real life. But then, what we encounter in the dream is even more horrible, so that in the end we literally escape from the dream back into reality.

The implications for *Mulholland Drive* are as follows: according to figures like Tang, Žižek, and those critics and internet ponderers who espouse a similar position, the first and by far the largest part of the film is a dream projection, an idealised fantastical realm that is supposed to supplant reality. The dreamer is Diane Selwyn, the failed and lovelorn actress of the last section. Desperate

and embittered, she has had the object of her unrequited affection, Camilla Rhodes, murdered. Consumed by grief and regret, she replaces her appalling reality with a fantasy that reconfigures the unappetising details. Camilla survives the attempt on her life, becomes the hapless amnesiac Rita who must be taken in, rescued by the impossibly naïve and talented Betty, a re-imagined Diane. But the production stutters, buckles, begins to reveal its thinness – ‘*No hay banda*. It is an illusion.’ The burgeoning love between Betty and Rita is pierced by a death, a dead body; the fantasy falters, and along with Diane you crash on the dry plains of actuality. That which does not add up in this reading, that which cannot be explained away – the diner scene with the horrible figure, for instance, or the shrunken elderly couple – is, presumably, merely dream detritus, superfluous symbolic repetition, part of the fevered machinations of an overheated mind.

This interpretation is, you admit, compelling, for it softens jagged edges, tames the unruliness of a film that has so far defied your capacity for order and logic. And yet, you are troubled by the way in which it reorders a manic chronology, separates content from form by violating the time-bound presentation of scenes, establishes a new timeline, and mines, finally, for content at the expense of considerations of form. Caught in the certain glare of an answer, you long for the dark uncertainty of the question. It is worth pointing out, you want to point out, that nothing in the narrative plenitude of *Mulholland Drive*, in the presentation of its various, often-disjointed scenes, indicates unequivocally that *this* is how the film should be understood. Moreover, those ‘clues’ from the clue card do not suggest to you a definitive Freudian dilemma (unless the assumption is, in true Freudian fashion, that *everything* is a Freudian dilemma, an unpleasant possibility you will, for now, repress). And during interviews Lynch, as the *New Yorker* (Lim) has told you, is ‘elusive’, is reticent about his films to the point of seeming aphasic, meaning that he himself has certainly not proposed this particular solution. You begin to sympathise with the critics who avow that an all-embracing explanation cannot be found. You decide to obtain scholarly articles – those palliatives of higher thought – for you are scholarly, or would like to be.

The realm of intellectual exposition concerning *Mulholland Drive* is, unsurprisingly, subtler, more nuanced than what teems so freely on the web, and yet the preponderance of dream analysis persists. In Todd McGowan’s ‘Lost on Mullholand Drive: Navigating David Lynch’s Panegyric to Hollywood’, you read that the

first part of *Mulholland Drive* portrays the experience of fantasy, while the second part depicts the experience of desire ... The second part of *Mulholland Drive* is structured around the incessant dissatisfaction of desire as Diane ... – and the spectator – are denied any experience of Camilla ... Diane’s love object. By contrast, in the first part, Diane, appearing as Betty, can enjoy the object. (67)

Vernon Shetley, who sees Lynch’s film as a ‘powerful revisionary encounter with [Hitchcock’s] *Vertigo*’ (115), states that ‘Diane’s fantasy, like a dream, [casts] the persons she knows into new roles, and, like a daydream, [rewrites] reality through wish-fulfilment, granting her the career success and romantic satisfaction that life has denied’ (115–116). David Andrews acknowledges the ‘various logics’ (26) of *Mulholland Drive* (one of these ‘logics’ is the possibility of a supernatural reading to account for what happens, seems to happen, in the film), but gives precedence to the ‘oneiric reading’ (26) in which (and here you hear the familiar refrain) the ‘Betty-Rita narrative is Diane’s dream. The Diane-Camilla narrative provides a waking, albeit frequently hallucinatory, frame for that dream and provides psychological explanations for many of its

particulars, including its identity switches' (26). Jay R. Lentzner and Donald R. Ross are on Dream Team Freud too; in fact, Lynch's film, it is revealed to you, follows Freud's dictates – his work is to be used as a manual, it would appear – very faithfully: 'the key to understanding *Mulholland Drive*', Lentzner and Ross say, 'begins with the recognition that its diabolically intricate form is a dream that obeys the rules set forth a century earlier in Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)' (102). Even Maria San Filippo, who in her book, *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television* (2013), provides a compelling inquiry into the 'racial and sexual transgression[s]' (72) evident in *Mulholland Drive*, takes for granted that the 'dream film' (72), as she calls it, deals with a fantasy that comes into conflict with a reality.

San Filippo draws parallels between *Mulholland Drive* and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), another film in which two closely-associated women, one a silent actress, the other a nurse tending to the silent actress, endure the blurring and blending of their identities. 'The two women who team up to solve a mystery in *Mulholland Drive* are caught up in a role-play fantasy much like that between Elisabeth and Alma in *Persona*' (72), she writes:

Both films' female fantasists attempt to escape reality by adopting personae conjured in a dream or constructed in a star image. Even as she realises that were Elisabeth to inhabit her, Alma's "soul would stick out everywhere", Alma fantasises being Elisabeth no less than Diane desires to be and to have Camilla. These duelling selves, locked in a symbolically schizophrenic battle between repression and exhibition, gradually morph into a united though conflicted ego or split personality – epitomised in *Persona*'s shot ... of [Elisabeth and Alma's] faces merging, but also illustrated in both films when the heroines compare mirrored reflections. (72–73)

You too have thought of Bergman's film during your drive along and around Mulholland, but for different reasons. You found that your mind was winding to an essay on *Persona* by Susan Sontag (1969), and now comparative possibilities of another order announce themselves in the furrows of your brain. (San Filippo is aware of Sontag's essay, actually quotes from it, though it seems she either disagrees with Sontag's larger argument or does not care to mention it.) Irrked by the tendency of critics to make sense of, to render legible the fragmented film through recourse to distinctions between dreams and reality, Sontag writes with dismissive hauteur:

[S]orting out what is fantasy from what is real in *Persona* ... is a minor achievement. And it quickly becomes a misleading one, unless subsumed under the larger issue of the form of exposition or narration employed by the film ... *Persona* is constructed according to a form that resists being reduced to a story ... Such reduction to a story means, in the end, a reduction of Bergman's film to the single dimension of psychology. Not that the psychological dimension isn't there. It is. But to understand *Persona*, the viewer must go beyond the psychological point of view. (131–132)

Lynch, you think, has taken his cue from Bergman, has carried over into the twenty-first century the postmodern disruptions Bergman employs. And these disruptions permit the presentation of an altogether different type of film, one that eschews the consolations of a linear narrative and its teleological unfolding. Sontag describes Bergman's method as follows:

The advantages of keeping the psychological aspects of *Persona* indeterminate (while internally credible) are that Bergman can do many other things besides tell a story. Instead of a full-blown story, he presents something that is, in one sense, cruder and, in another, more abstract: a body of material, a subject. The function of the subject or material may be as much its opacity, its multiplicity, as the ease with which it yields itself to being incarnated in a determinate action or plot. In a work constituted along these principles, the action would appear intermittent, porous, shot through intimations of absence, of what could not be univocally said. This doesn't mean that the narration has forfeited 'sense'. But it does mean that sense isn't necessarily tied to a determinate plot. (133-134)

Like *Persona*, *Mulholland Drive* simultaneously underscores and undermines the processes by which we look for and come to 'know' things in a narrative. Aside from the shifts, the distortions, the breakdowns in the narrative, both films induce this level of self-reflexivity in you, the viewer, by emphasising their own self-reflexivity, their status as art objects. *Persona* showcases the mechanics of film projection, includes seemingly-extraneous displays of images rapidly succeeding one another; in a scene of particular emotional extremity the reel containing the film appears to catch fire. In *Mulholland Drive* the camera hovers, looms, swoops, shudders in and out of focus. You recall the cinematographic anxiety of the scene outside Diane Selwyn's apartment; you remember your perspective careening into the bottomless blue box. Such formal restlessness reiterates the subject material the films explore. For Sontag, *Persona* advances 'variations-on-a-theme', that theme being *doubling* and taking the form of 'duplication, inversion, reciprocal exchange, unity and fission, and repetition'. *Mulholland Drive*, too, is preoccupied with doubling: characters exchange names, blur identities, repeat actions, receive new roles. Indeed, as a deliberately fractured deliberation on the limits of identity Lynch points a finger at an entire industry: Hollywood, that exemplary dream factory of identity-as-performance. His film is deeply indebted to the noir tradition, the gloomy style of filmmaking dating back to the years after World War II, and which involves excessively complicated plots, those plots peopled with femmes fatales and private eyes, figures who trawl an urban underworld of crime and intrigue. This is apposite, for, as Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo argue in their book *Noir Anxiety* (2003) (naturally, you have turned your attention to texts on film noir), the 'distinctive style and investigative narrative structure' of film noir 'displays unconscious anxieties over the borders of identity' (XV). In *Voices in the Dark* (1982), J.P. Telotte states that film noir 'seems fundamentally about ... unrestrained desire, and, most fundamental of all, abrogation of the American dream's most basic promises – of hope, prosperity, and safety from persecution' (2). In Lynch's case, however, the homage becomes nihilist parody: his detectives are dispensed with almost as soon as they appear; his femmes fatales, left to do the work of the detectives, chop and change identities, turn on one another, get swallowed by a blue box, encounter only silence. Lynch pushes his murder mystery to a mocking extreme, turning difficulty into impossibility, presenting the *reductio ad absurdum* of the convoluted noir trajectory toward eventual clarity. Examining the star-making studio system, he transforms Tinsel Town, the originary silver screen on which are projected so many hopes and dreams, and which turns dark in the world view of film noir, into something darker still, an absurd hell lorded over by ludicrous mobsters and an improbable cowboy. By the end of the film all identities are unmasked as acts, and all acting, all performance, is shown to be a sham. This comes to include even you, the viewer.

Your attempts to make sense of the piece must – if they do not rearrange it into something which, on a formal level, it is not – begin and end in incoherence.

Such a route, such a mode of approach, one which involves a reinstatement of incoherence (incoherence by more conventional standards), a reinstatement to counter those who would reinstate more conventional standards of coherence in their analyses of *Mulholland Drive*, is, you find out, more aligned with what David Roche and Jennifer Hudson express about the film. For Roche the mystery of *Mulholland Drive* is the death of diegesis, where the role of the detective ‘has been displaced from the main focalizer[s] [be they the inept detectives or Betty and Rita] to the spectator[,] while the mystery has been displaced from the diegesis, the detective plot, to the film’ (2). ‘There is a mystery or a puzzle’ (6), Roche affirms, ‘but it is the film itself, and the detective is none other than the spectator who can no longer rely on [characters] for focalization[,] but must pick up clues as the movie goes along and try to work out its meaning(s)’ (6). ‘Only’, he adds, ‘solving the mystery at a diegetic level, [in other words,] answering the questions “what happened and in what order?”’, turns out to be impossible’ (6). Similarly, Hudson asserts that ‘viewers find themselves taking on the role of detective’ (17), but that ‘Lynch successfully reverses coherence by making the traditional “sense” (logic) of the temporal, spatial, psychological, and linguistic conditions of the film’s characters and surrealist world defer to nonlogical “sense” (intuitive and emotional perception) of those conditions’ (17).

So are you then, you ask yourself, advocating, in Sontagian (1966) fashion, an erotics of art instead of a hermeneutics of art (20)? Yes, but only if you acknowledge that even an erotics of art is also, in its way, a hermeneutics of art. (All thinking, as Sontag (1988) has declared, is interpretation, even a stance *against* interpretation (5).) What you want to avoid is viewing *Mulholland Drive* as a univocal statement suggestive of artistic wholeness or unity. What you want to propose is that the film is intentionally illegible, that its illegibility is not a ploy to prod viewers into making it legible through acts of interpretation, with overarching theories that supply cohesion. Rather than viewing the film as an intricate puzzle that begs for solution, you want to view the film as a puzzle (that puzzle being the highly-selective process of constructing a narrative, the conventions that govern this process) that has self-consciously been smashed. (All thinking is interpretation.) What you are left with are pieces that do not add up, that cannot readily be pieced together, and what these pieces confront you with is your desire to reconstruct the puzzle (so well-established, so deep-rooted is your penchant for puzzle-solving). They also serve to remind you that what you are trying to do is, in fact, solve a puzzle. (For solve narrative puzzles long enough and you forget that that is what you are doing.) It is therefore only right that the film should deal with that enduring mystery, that ur-puzzle, personhood, and that it should depict collapses of personhood, of the performance of personhood, and that this should take the form of role-playing that disintegrates, acting that stutters, stops, changes gear, begins afresh, goes on, gets lost, crashes badly. *Mulholland Drive*, you want to say, occludes and then collapses its narrative proliferations – they are swallowed, as if by a black hole – nullifying attempts at extracting a cohesive story. As a result, it establishes a temporality, an atemporality, in which distinctions between fantasy and reality are voided, can only fall silent. This is the realm of the cinema. It is all a tape recording. It is an illusion. And yet there you are, trembling.

You should write about this film, you tell yourself. You should write an article in which you describe with overblown lyricism, inevitable inaccuracy, a viewer viewing the film, a viewer reading the film, a viewer reading about the film, a viewer writing about the film. You will

begin at the end. *Smoke*, you write, *an uprush of smoke*. You pause; you fall silent. Who are you to presume such a role? And surely *this* is not the article? You cannot say. I cannot say.

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