

“This is the girl”:

Queer Nightmares, Fantasy, and Reality in *Mulholland Drive*

By Justin Holliday, Tri-County Technical College, USA

Abstract:

The article discusses how David Lynch’s film *Mulholland Drive* (2001) offers many filmic clichés to deconstruct assumptions about queer identity. Although some critics of the film have suggested that the film upholds heteronormativity, Lynch unravels the limits of linear space and time to contest a singular reality. Analyzing *Mulholland Drive* via theories of queer temporality will suggest that a singular, supposedly correct reading of this film’s chronology may not be easily determined. In fact, approaching this film from a queer theoretical perspective offers the opportunity to show that, despite the alleged privileging of the heteronormative order, the tropes of neo noir allow the characters to celebrate the possibility of queer desire through the negation of a unitary self.

1 “We don’t stop here,” says Rita, played by Laura Elena Harring, in the opening line of *Mulholland Drive* (2001). This scene offers a surreal dissection of time: as the men in the front seat are about to murder her, joyriding teenagers hit the car, leaving her the only known survivor and an amnesiac. The trope of amnesia—featured prominently in lowbrow entertainment like soap operas and made-for-TV movies—becomes a prominent signifier regarding David Lynch’s intertextual practice with genre. This approach creates a space for him to play with concepts like a convoluted diegesis mediated through clichés. As Frida Beckman posits, “Lynch overtly invites Hollywood clichés to fill new functions in an eccentric universe that thereby becomes simultaneously very familiar and very strange” (31). Although many of the events and character types in *Mulholland Drive* are allusions to tropes in films, particularly in noir, these characters are more than just carbon copies of characters from past films. Lynch offers a space for these complex, mysterious characters to experience love and tragedy. Their experience overlap times and spaces, blending such tropes, often found in lowbrow entertainment with highbrow ontological exercises—namely, a seemingly impossible narrative structure that resists coherence. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam borrows Stuart Hall’s concept of “low theory” to explain that this way of thinking “makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal” (2). Solving the mystery without equivocation is not the point of the film; rather, the audience should view Lynch’s film as a way to critique aesthetic

attempts “to disengage the high from the low” to use a phrase from Kriss Ravetto’s analysis of neo noir (210).

2 Lynch’s film reveals that in a culture saturated with popular allusions, high and low art may be integrated to contest boundaries. *Mulholland Drive* critiques the restrictions of desire and shows alternative possibilities for people, especially queer people, to exist. Rita seems to become psychologically untethered to the past, although she intuitively avoids police and makes her way to an apartment of a supposed stranger named Betty, played by Naomi Watts. Betty, who has just arrived in Hollywood to fulfill her dream as an actor, seems so hopeful and willing to do anything to obtain a role, yet she initially appears to be a stereotype to counteract the dark, mysterious woman: blonde, young, and innocent, or to put it succinctly, an ingénue. Instead of calling the police, Betty decides to help Rita recover her memory, leading the two women to develop a bond that surpasses friendship and even romance. Their relationship becomes queer not only because of their physical desire for one another but also because of their need to unravel the mystery whose strangeness becomes attached to their bodies, as emphasized by the growing erotic tension between them that culminates in a sexual encounter. While the characters’ motivations and connections may appear unknowable, the audience can only begin to interpret the mystery by rejecting this dreamlike truth as a unitary, logical force. Rather, freedom in *Mulholland Drive* is based on the making and un-making of the self by deconstructing temporal boundaries to find different lives (or at least ways of living), even if such an existence does not cohere into a unitary identity.

3 Because *Mulholland Drive* features a narrative pattern that rejects linearity, my reading will be based on theories of queer temporality, which refute normative chronology (or linear patterns of time) in favor of promoting new ways of existing. Halberstam, who originally discussed this concept in *In a Queer Time and Place*, explains, “‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6). Therefore, Halberstam’s earlier work on queer time facilitates later work on low theory to show how queer people may not always adhere to heteronormative structures, such as marriage, childrearing, and monogamy (although rejection of such practices is not limited to LGBTQ people). The queering of time results from opposing what Elizabeth Freeman refers to as “chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum

productivity” (3). Freeman’s work centers on the idea of time “binding,” emphasizing, “naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” (3). The queer body may twist time and point the narrative in multiple temporal paths; thus, *Mulholland Drive* opens up the possibilities of different interpretations that may be logically opposed to one another. This reading, which resists normative temporal structures, will evince the lesbian desire of Watts and Harring’s characters as more than just self-reflexive or illusory. *Mulholland Drive* is particularly transgressive as a film that engages in tropes (like the femme fatale and the ingénue) popularized during the Hays-Code era of Hollywood, which functioned as “a solution to the ways movies lower Americans’ moral mass resistance,” such as promoting forms of supposed sexual deviance, which include but are not limited to portrayals of homosexuality (Tratner 58).

4 Lynch’s film refutes chrononormativity by offering a mystery with few clues and two disjunctive narratives. In addition to the search for Rita’s identity, Adam Kesher, played by Justin Theroux, is a director of a film, but his life soon turns to shambles when he refuses to heed the exhortation to cast an actor named Camilla. In other words, he refuses to accept that “this is the girl,” a repeated line that eventually takes on various meanings and underscores the possibility of slippery significations of what language means in this dreamlike world. These two narratives move back and forth, suggesting that they must be related. However, none of the characters meet until more than halfway through the film, suggesting that Lynch refuses the regulation of time in the name of productivity. Instead, he chooses a more ludic approach to add to the mystery, which facilitates the failure of narrative coherence.

5 Amidst this narrative dissonance, the film is hard to classify, and this combination underscores the vacillation between cinematic familiarity and strangeness. The film hybridizes various forms of lowbrow entertainment: comedy, horror, thriller, the Western, drama, romance, musical, and noir in order to uphold what many viewers consider an extended fantasy. Critic Debra Shostak argues that implementing so many tropes from different popular genres gives the film a working lexicon, claiming, “The multifarious fantasies that are the customary material of Hollywood illusions—the clichés of the genre film, for example—allow us compensations for the impossible real.” This symbolic presentation of allusion as illusion allows Betty, along with the audience, to find comfort in what is familiar even as this boundary is pushed further from the traditional reality of most mainstream films. Offering a singular, linear, and easily accepted true

path of Betty's life may in fact be impossible, as scenes in the final act of the film show, and exploring the narrative's layers in terms of multiple temporal paths will emphasize the overlapping of fantasy and reality.

6 The film engages with the surreal but often is grounded by the language of cliché, which may be the most fitting language to compensate for the incommensurability of fantasy and reality, as mediated through cinema. Lynch even presents this citationality to cliché in obvious ways, such as when Betty convinces Rita that she can make an anonymous call from a payphone to find out if there was an accident on Mulholland Drive. Betty says, "Let's check the police report. It'll be just like in the movies." This metafictional moment accumulates a surreal quality not only because Betty makes a statement about the movies within the movie, but also because Rita, the mystery woman, wants to avoid the police as if she intuitively knows she is in some sort of extralegal trouble. On the surface, Rita appears to be the femme fatale as she drags Betty into her problems, yet as with most of Lynch's films, the narrative is more obscure than the well-known if occasionally narratively complex twists in noir films that audiences may be familiar with. Furthermore, unlike many other films in noir, the goal is not to discover the mystery. For instance, Rita has thousands of dollars in her purse, but the audience never learns for certain why. Instead, the focus often turns to the twists and turns of the characters' paths, emphasizing the ineluctability to know a unitary truth behind the mystery.

7 Furthermore, this juxtaposition of strange incidents and cliché diction reflects the centrality of cinema within cultural consciousness. Jean Baudrillard posits, "[W]hat you are presented with in the studios is the degeneration of the cinematographic illusion, its mockery, just as what is offered in Disneyland is a parody of the world of imagination...Ghost towns, ghost people" (58). This sense of spectrality—of some trace—suggests although language, cliché or otherwise, cannot fully express characters' motivations, cinema holds some key to exploring these motivations through images, however peculiar they may seem. Perhaps the most telling instance of this metafictional allusiveness to the film as film occurs after a scene of Kesher meeting a character known as the Cowboy who tells him he will say to the executives, "This is the girl," in effect casting Camilla, although he has only seen her headshot thus far. Lynch never fully resolves why this "girl" must be the actor, instead linking clues that may defy the conventional logic of propelling a straightforward chronological narrative or divulging the incontestable identities of characters. Still, *Mulholland Drive* creates patterns based on such

clues that add to the mystery, effectively couching it within the realm of noir, while also maintaining a queer resistance to conclusive explanations or linear timelines.

8 Immediately after the scene with Kesher, the next scene cuts jarringly to reveal Betty shouting at Rita, “I hate you. I hate us both.” Seconds later the camera pans to show that the two women are reading a script for a role that Betty wants, which ends with both women breaking up into uncontrollable laughter as Betty holds a knife. In the following scene, Betty is at a studio doing the real audition. Her costar, a man about twice her age and named Woody (a name that offers a space for a juvenile phallic joke, considering the scene), says they should “play it close...just like in the movies,” echoing Betty’s comment during the payphone scene. Between the two women, the scene appears comical, but with Woody, the scene becomes devious and uncomfortable. Betty readily takes charge and assumes the role of femme fatale, speaking in a sultry voice, grabbing Woody’s hand, putting it on her buttocks, and kissing him. She so easily creates this new noir interpretation for the role, as opposed to the maudlin interpretation reminiscent of a soap opera in the previous scene. Consequently, the audience can infer two things about Betty: she may only be playing the role of ingénue with Rita, and she may find it currently impossible to acknowledge her lesbian feelings.

9 Displacing this erotic energy onto a man whom she does not care about suggests that Betty knows how to perform and assume different identities; this performance of the self speaks to her desires, both conscious and subconscious, which are mediated through social constructs, including the tropes of films. This performance, made possible through tropes like the ingénue and the femme fatale (or more broadly the dichotomy of the supposedly good, innocent woman and the bad, devious woman), is not merely personal fantasy. Even for audiences unfamiliar with film noir, such identities as good and bad characters are reinscribed in cinema that audiences have viewed for decades, which underscores how the social realm shapes perceptions of identity. According to Derrida, whether speech is private or public, it is already purloined from the subject; in order to signify, this “working lexicon” (to reiterate Shostak’s term) must come from outside the subject. Derrida explores how “Difference,” which he cites as duplicity, “simultaneously opens and conceals truth, and in fact distinguishes nothing—the invisible accomplice of all speech—is furtive power itself” (194). Betty’s different interpretations of the same role are furtive, for she has learned how to perform these roles through careful social inscription. Hence, the differences cannot reveal to the audience who the true Betty may be. The

juxtaposition of these conflicting roles demonstrates this concealment, suggesting that a unitary true self may not exist outside social performativity, which is learned throughout an individual's life and therefore more complex than a performance at an audition.

10 This bending of narrative may make even less sense unless the film is considered as part of the cinematic landscape and America itself. By alluding to tropes from so many genres in addition to including scenes on a film set, Lynch exposes the ways that the often elusive, illusive American Dream is represented as both the goal of the conscious self and the “dreams” of subconscious motivation. In his book *America*, Baudrillard writes, “When I speak of the American ‘way of life,’ I do so to emphasize its utopian nature, its mythic banality, its dream quality, and its grandeur,” naming Los Angeles, the setting of Lynch’s film, as one of the locales that epitomize such qualities (103). Although Baudrillard also emphasizes the blurring of dream and reality earlier in his book *America*, the dream, or perhaps myth, of achievement, particularly achievement in Hollywood, saturates Americans’ cultural consciousness.

11 The shifting of Betty’s roles not only foreshadows the strange narrative turns toward the end of the film but also reflects the way Lynch works within the neo noir framework even as he stretches it to its limit by showing characters whose actions may seem familiar to audiences based on other noir films while also rejecting a linear or even fully resolvable narrative. Jerold J. Abrams contends that in neo noir, “one self is always ahead, and the other is always behind. And this is precisely why the idea of time is so very important to the structure of all neo-noir” (10). The past and the future always already seem ungraspable, and therefore, a coherent identity becomes difficult, if not impossible, for Betty in particular to maintain. Furthermore, the film’s ability to play with time reveals its queerness. According to Heather Love, queer people may be temporally “backward”: “[E]ven when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow also recall the past” (6). As Betty attempts to live in the present, she is caught in disjunctive narratives that do not seem to fully reconcile with one another. Moreover, her lesbian desire for Rita is anti-chrononormative for a film that features Kesher’s film about a saccharine 1960s biopic of the fictional singer Sylvia North, a film that appears to focus on straightness, both in terms of heterosexuality and a straightforward narrative.

12 Betty’s desire to help Rita solely seems based on identifying with the ingénue cliché because she fulfills this character type so well. Later, however, her lesbian desire for Rita becomes ostensible, and their interactions acquire a more surreal quality that extends beyond the

original innocent role Betty fits in. In her article about *Mulholland Drive*, Jennifer A. Hudson affirms that Betty's subconscious motivations cause her to "reverse coherence" and that the film depicts "the language of dreams...which resists the order of signification" (19). An audience familiar with the different genres Lynch integrates likely knows that the film traipses through various cinematic tropes, which juxtapose the obscure meanings in some of the scenes that are revealed only later if at all. In contrast, Betty, so caught up in her desire to realize her dreams, remains unaware that she seems to be living in a cinematic pastiche. This lack of awareness allows Betty and other characters to experience scenes that do not have always clear signification as if they are living in a dream world wherein the pieces may work together, but the lack of linearity indicates that the narrative may not necessarily form into a unitary whole. Furthermore, the concept of dreaming works in terms of developing a goal. Betty, who moves to California to become a movie star, has fallen for what takes precedence in American culture: "*the passion for images*, and the immanence of desire in the image" (Baudrillard 59; original emphasis). Her language lives in the images of film genres she knows, and that in fact, Lynch would expect his viewers to know. Consequently, the audience can begin to make meaning out of these familiar tropes while also discovering that a single comprehensible meaning may be unattainable because these signs have become detached from linear coherence.

13 This desire for the image even affects *Mulholland Drive* outside the narrative world itself. David Lynch has what may seem an unorthodox method when casting actors because most actors do not have a traditional audition for roles in his films. Casting director Johanna Ray explains in an interview Lynch's preferred casting method: "That's how he [Lynch] picked most of the actors for *Mulholland Drive*—out of a photo album." In a different interview, Naomi Watts claims that Lynch talks to his potential actors, creating a dialogue based on intuition: "He wants to tap into your gut too because I feel like there's more freedom if that's what's leading you than thoughts in the head" (Lynch and Watts). Watts's experience reaffirms the role of dream logic, a matrix of feelings that seems to defy the conventional restrictions of language, including the reductive need to label clear identities or characters' motivations and reveal a unitary meaning of all details in the film. Thus, even the creation of this film rejects the normative practice of traditional auditions and instead focuses on the way fantasy and reality overlap, reinforcing the queerness of the film as Lynch makes decisions based on headshots similar to what happens in the film when the "girl" Camilla is designated as the one who must have the role.

14 In *Mulholland Drive*, Watts's character consistently rejects heterosexual possibility, instead following queer temporalities. After the uncomfortable audition with Woody, a casting agent takes Betty to Adam Kesher's film set, and the two separate narratives finally converge. Betty and Kesher's eyes meet in perhaps the greatest cliché of cinema to underscore heterosexual desire as the default position; however, Betty then runs away, telling the casting director she has to meet her friend. While lesbian desire has remained latent so far, this scene is not a case of a missed romantic connection. Rather, Betty running away signifies her choice of Rita over Kesher, even if she currently can only situate that desire within the language of friendship. Having the two almost meet acts as a rejection of the heteronormative script wherein the leading male and female characters must eventually fall in love. Because Kesher is filming *The Sylvia North Story*, a 1960s musical that plays on ersatz nostalgia, Betty running away enables an even greater freedom from a filmic cliché: she rejects the Hays Code-era heterosexism that Kesher's film likely would portray.

15 Still, the narrative only pretends to have achieved coherence. Betty and Rita go to find a woman named Diane Selwyn and discover that she is dead. Rita screams in horror while Betty tries to cover her mouth so that no one will know they have broken into the apartment. This scene defies linguistic signification as the mystery becomes more gruesome and contrasts with the time of supposed chrononormative safety on the film set. Afterward, Betty and Rita consummate their relationship, and Betty tells Rita she is in love with her, which pushes the false safety of the ostensibly clean-cut, wholesome, and heteronormative narrative world of *The Sylvia North Story* even farther away, both in terms of the chronology of the film and in the sex between these two women.

16 Afterward, Rita repeats the word "silencio" in her sleep as if she is undergoing a persistent nightmare, which may foreshadow the nightmarish reality the two women are about to enter when Rita asks Betty to go with her to Club Silencio. According to Hudson, "Club Silencio acts as a liaison between the worlds presented in *Mulholland Drive*...Club Silencio is the 'no place' filled with contradictions, where things both are and are not" (23). A magician opens the show by assuring the audience in Spanish, "*No hay banda*" ("There is no band."). After disappearing in smoke, a singer, known as La Llorona de Los Angeles, comes onstage and performs a Spanish version of Roy Orbison's "Crying." Betty and Rita hold hands and openly weep. This is the first time they have touched one another in public, creating a queer space that

seems to exist outside the restrictive world of chrononormative and heteronormative regulation of fantasy. Club Silencio allows everyone there to revel in the illusion of a live performance; however, the performance is so emotional that the characters treat the illusion as reality. The two women can finally be together in public and express themselves however they wish because this space does not require them to respond within the linguistic realm but rather just to be. In other words, while watching La Llorona in this liminal space, Betty and Rita can express the pain and beauty of living, including living as queer women in a heterosexist world, just by touching one another, expressing their emotional reactions freely, and moving away from the linguistic clichés from earlier in the film. At the end of the performance, though, La Llorona collapses. The vocal recording continues, reminding everyone this performance is all an illusion, which functions as yet another allusion to lowbrow culture in the form of a popular song, showing how the high and the low can blend to contest social assumptions of unitary identity.

17 This shattering of illusion enacts a major shift in the narrative. At the end of this performance, Betty discovers a blue box in her purse, and she and Rita return to solve the mystery. The blue key found in Rita's purse does seem to fit, but now Betty has disappeared. As Rita unlocks the box, the camera pans into darkness to reveal a new world. Betty is not Betty; *she* is Diane Selwyn, the woman whose body is found earlier in the film. No longer is she the ingénue but rather a rude, disheveled woman who wishes to hold on to her fantasies. This scene exposes the film's anti-linearity. Because the rejection of a linear or cohesive narrative is undeniable, Haring metaphorically has revealed the truth in the event of opening the box. Derrida cautiously uses the term "event" to show "[i]ts exterior form would be that of a *rupture* and redoubling" (278). Although Diane (Naomi Watts) cannot exist outside the narrative space of the film itself, through this event, Lynch deconstructs, even "ruptures" the narrative he has crafted so carefully and possibly has committed duplicity to express this difference in Watts's characters. As a result, the audience may not only question the verity of Watts as Betty but also the reality she has created around her and even the Diane character as well.

18 The new Diane so desperately wishes to maintain her fantasy that she imagines Camilla (now Laura Haring) appearing. Diane attempts to force Camilla to have sex but is really just alone as she masturbates in misery. In her seminal essay, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains the radical possibilities of masturbation: "Because it escapes both the narrative of reproduction and (when practiced solo) even the creation of any

interpersonal trace, it seems to have an affinity with amnesia, repetition or the repetition-compulsion, and ahistorical or history-rupturing rhetorics of sublimity” (820). Diane’s masturbatory experience appears to “rupture” the boundaries of her alleged fantasy: this queer temporality briefly returns her to an erotic time with Camilla, whether real or fictional (Derrida 278).

19 However, this return cannot be stable because this fantasy shatters when Camilla exhorts Diane to stop, juxtaposing a prior scene of rupture—finding Diane’s corpse—now that language forces Diane to attach specific meanings to this failed relationship. In other words, there is not sublimity for Diane but rather the dread within her mind and her body that even masturbation cannot protect her from herself now. This example of lesbian desire opposes the tenderness of the previous sex scene, as contrived as it may be, and its very crassness returns the audience to the darker side of noir. It is important to note that Lynch’s dream logic does not privilege one type of Watts’s experiences over the other; instead, the seemingly contrived love scene between Betty and Rita and the crass masturbation scene featuring Diane work together to underscore the slippage of identities.

20 Furthermore, the heteronormative script has been flipped along with another significant identity. Because Rita is now Camilla, she is the girl who must be cast in Keshner’s film. On the film set, where Diane appears to have a small role, Camilla asks her to stay on set while everyone else leaves as Keshner becomes more deeply involved with his film and shows the male lead how to romance Camilla’s character. The rejection of compulsory heterosexual clichés from earlier is now contrasted with the rejection of the lesbian. Shostak claims that despite the beauty of the original sex scene between the two women, which she interprets as mere fantasy, “[t]he film seems...to pass narrative judgment,” citing Diane’s “excessive lesbian desire.” However, lesbian desire is always already excessive, especially on a film set that promotes a limited script of heteronormative sexual desire.

21 If Watts as Diane is the real self and Betty is only a construction of her mind, then the first hour and fifty minutes of the film have only been Diane’s fantasy. Notably, having sex with Rita, in other words attaining her dream, catalyzes the narrative arc in which Diane must open herself up to the truth: she cannot be the good person she wants to be. Such a realization suggests that maybe Diane has repressed this version of herself and created an elaborate fantasy to recapture or at least reimagine the possibility of love with Camilla (whom she recasts as Rita).

Although some critics may view the film after the reveal of Watts as Diane as her real identity, the film does not claim definitively that this is now reality, and the surreal aspects in the final scene underline this uncertainty. Because this difference in identities both conceals and reveals, *Mulholland Drive* refuses to privilege a singular interpretation, instead opting for

the play of substitutions...this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absences of a center or origin, is the movement of supplementarity. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a supplement. (Derrida 289)

The switching of signs, particularly something as socially weighted as people's names, decenters assumptions about who these characters are and what roles they have, including sexual desires.

22 Diane cannot escape herself forever because this truth—her queer desire—is etched on her body, whether Watts is really Betty or Diane. The audience's introduction to Watts as Diane during the masturbation scene may be unsettling but still links this new character to her former one by emphasizing her lesbian desire. This connection between truth and the body configures Diane's desires within Elizabeth Freeman's theory of "erotohistoriography." According to Freeman, "Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter" (95). Bodies come into contact with their histories, which can penetrate and destabilize identity-based boundaries.

23 The body, especially the queer body, offers possibilities to protest against heteronormativity. Judith Butler reads Derrida's "logic of the supplement" as an idea that "entails a rethinking of the social specificity of taboo, loss, and sexuality" (145). Even as it may appear that Diane plays the role of queer outsider, addressing her sexual desire in this mode that resists linearity underscores that she is more than just the tropes she has played earlier as Betty. Her lesbian desire not only addresses the rejection of a presumed heteronormative script but also the postmodern reminder of neo noir that "total, transparent self-consciousness recedes indefinitely into the future and indefinitely into the past, always to be chased but never to be caught" (Abrams 21). Therefore, the clichés of the film actually help to emphasize the complexity of trying to resist an ordered, heteronormative self in favor of blending fantasy and reality so that the queer characters are not just victims or villains, as the case may be in many Hollywood films.

24 In this alternate world, Camilla and Kesher become engaged, once again designating Diane as the queer outsider. Diane only seems to be someone Camilla has helped to get roles. Thus, the final instance of “This is the girl” is the most menacing of all: Diane hires a hit man to kill Camilla, giving him a headshot of Laura Harring while at a restaurant. The image, along with the name, has shifted, exposing the slippage between signifier and signified, as the girl, along with other women, acquires new identities. Now the waitress is named Betty, suggesting that characters like Diane can make, remake, and unmake themselves but only as long as the illusion may hold some semblance of reality, even if that reality contradicts the rest of the film. Rather than privileging just a single narrative, such as affirming that Naomi Watts is really Betty or Diane, this meaning toward identity can be explored as an “infinite omni-temporality and universality” (Derrida 160). Viewing the film as a site of multiple timelines and universes resists giving in to any single version of reality in a fictional work and pushes against the boundaries of the narrative space itself.

25 For many people who have viewed *Mulholland Drive*, the question remains whether the last part of the film is reality, fantasy, nightmare, or somewhere in between. What brings the characters together is a breakdown of coherent meaning sutured across the narrative space by displacing identities. This displacement matters because in the final act, Rita is not an amnesiac but Kesher’s current lover and the real Camilla, showing that the supposedly fictional narrative at the beginning of the film may only be Diane’s fantasy. Perhaps the new version of *The Sylvia North Story* with Harring as Camilla and Watts as a minor actor may just be a metafictional joke, as if queer desire can be displaced by switching women’s identities, which appears to satirize the Hays Production Code era of wholesome, not homosexual, cinema.

26 But where does *Mulholland Drive* actually begin? The initial scene of the car crash is repeated—sort of. Instead of Rita/Camilla in the car, it is Diane. When the car stops, she repeats the line, “We don’t stop here”; however, the tension eases as Camilla opens the door. The two women walk through a secret path, suggesting this temporal loop allows lesbian desire to exist, at least as a brief image. Yet this queer temporality becomes imbued with the heterosexual script: Camilla leads Diane to her party where she and Kesher announce their engagement, leaving Diane as the queer outsider once again. Still, this emphasis on heterosexual desire becomes complicated when Camilla kisses another woman as if to make Diane jealous and to exert her freedom from Diane rather than simply to flaunt a public heterosexual self. Beckman agrees that

this scene shows radical potential with “the classic female identities...renegotiated” to show that Lynch’s twist on neo noir does not resolve fantasy or reality, queer or straight (42).

27 The simple and often accepted reading is that Watts’s character has fantasized most of the narrative; however, Lynch does not want the mystery solved so easily. These sliding signifiers, including names and desires, emphasize the play within the structure of the film itself. Butler’s theory of performativity helps to articulate the elusive identities of these characters:

[E]very signifier is the site of a perpetual *méconnaissance*; it produces the expectation of a unity, a full and final recognition that can never be achieved. Paradoxically, the failure of such signifiers—“women” is the one that comes to mind—fully to describe the constituency they name is precisely what constitutes these signifiers as sites of phantasmatic investment and discursive rearticulation. (142-43)

This opening of identity offers “new possibilities for political resignification,” particularly for traditionally marginalized groups like women who may identify as queer or lesbian (Butler 143). The film acknowledges many cinematic tropes that leave traces of ideas about gender, sexuality, and power found repeatedly in films from various genres. Still, the audience does not have to accept this film as just a story of repression and guilt exposed or queerness punished but can find ways to see how someone often maligned or forgotten in cinema can create a new position for herself even if that position may play with, or even contradict, the narrative space.

28 At the end of the film, miniature versions of people she has met as Betty come back to haunt Diane and seem to prompt her to commit suicide likely because of her guilt over ordering a hit on Camilla and the shattering of her fantasy of saving her. After the sound of a gunshot, images overlay one another: Watts and Harring’s faces from the Club Silencio scene overlap a wide shot of Los Angeles, suggesting ghostliness, loss, and a dreamlike state. Blending the surreal horror and the seeming reality of a gunshot helps to elude the conclusion that this must be what really happens, that Diane must have been the true self all along. Additionally, the oneiric vision suggests that language need not be privileged over a Derridean “surplus” of emotion and that Lynch’s penchant for intuition can help to find new meanings or possibilities for people to live, similar to how the term “queer” has evolved to encompass so many different identities. Queering time allows for accepting the possibility that the purported fantasy may in fact be a movie within a movie or even a reality on a separate plane of existence. This can be a reparative reading, a concept originally proposed by Sedgwick to counteract what she referred to as a

“hermeneutics of suspicion,” which can be applied to the rejection of the queer menace that Diane is portrayed as (*Touching Feeling* 124). In fact, Diane’s suicide may be real, but the Betty character may be a reincarnation rather than fantasy.

29 Although Lynch has had a cult following for decades, *Mulholland Drive* perhaps has made the most significant lasting cultural impact out of all of his films. Based on the votes of 177 film critics from around the world, a 2016 poll shows that *Mulholland Drive* is the greatest film of the 21st century (“The 21st Century’s Greatest”). This film has helped to reshape the cinematic landscape by reminding audiences of what they love about film, whether it is a mystery, a romance, the downfall of a corrupt character, or a chance for a character’s redemption. One of the most important facets of the film is that it rearticulates the portrayal of women, especially queer women. Despite some critics’ claims that lesbian identity and homoerotic desire are punished, the film allows for multifarious readings that push against the limits of the heteronormative script. Queer desire can have another chance to flourish by blending the highbrow of narrative complexity and the lowbrow of cliché so that the impossible becomes not only possible but also strangely familiar.

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