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# Lost on Mulholland Drive: Navigating David Lynch's Panegyric to Hollywood

by Todd McGowan

*Abstract:* In *Mulholland Drive*, David Lynch creates a filmic divide between the experience of desire and the experience of fantasy, thereby revealing that, at the same time that it disguises the Real, fantasy also offers us a privileged path to it.

Almost everyone who sees *Mulholland Drive* (2001) notes that the first part of the film makes a good deal of sense—at least for a David Lynch movie. In contrast to the beginnings of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992) or *Lost Highway* (1997), the opening of *Mulholland Drive* is relatively straightforward. In the first part of the film, a woman emerges from a car crash without any memory and, while hiding out in an apartment, meets another woman who helps her recover her identity. While they are living together, the two women fall in love. This, in brief, represents the narrative trajectory of the first part of the film, and although there are bizarre spinoffs from this trajectory, the basic narrative makes sense. In fact, it seems to belie entirely film reviewer Stanley Kauffmann's claim that "sense is not the point: the responses are the point."<sup>1</sup> While one might be tempted to agree with Kauffmann concerning the film's conclusion, the opening definitely has a great deal of coherence. Yet there is also a fantasmatic aura around the opening section that serves to undermine this coherence and give some credence to Kauffmann's contention that the first part of the film is meant to be more evocative than sensible. By combining sense with the texture of fantasy, Lynch uses the first part of *Mulholland Drive* to explore the role that fantasy has in rendering experience coherent and meaningful.

**Separate Worlds.** The narrative coherence of the opening section is especially pronounced when we contrast it with what follows. The first part of *Mulholland Drive* portrays the experience of fantasy, while the second part depicts the experience of desire. A similar type of separation also exists in *Lost Highway*.

The second part of *Mulholland Drive* is structured around the incessant dissatisfaction of desire as Diane (Naomi Watts)—and the spectator—are denied any experience of Camilla (Laura Elena Harring), Diane's love object. By contrast, in the first part, Diane, appearing as Betty, can enjoy the object. This separation between the experience of desire and that of fantasy accounts for—and is accomplished by—

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dramatic changes in mise-en-scène, editing, and the overall character of the shots from the first to the second part of the film.<sup>2</sup>

While the first part of *Mulholland Drive* is not without strange characters and events (such as a humorously botched murder by a hired killer), the mise-en-scène conforms on the whole to the conventions of the typical Hollywood film: scenes are well lit, conversations between characters flow without awkwardness, and even the plainest décor seems to sparkle. The editing also tends to follow classical Hollywood style, sustaining the spectator's sense of spatial and temporal orientation. In the second part, however, the lighting becomes much darker, almost every conversation includes long and uncomfortable pauses, and the sets become drab. The editing is also radically different. For example, just after Diane emerges from her fantasy (and enters the world of desire), she appears to speak to Camilla. Lynch shoots Diane speaking, followed by a reverse shot of Camilla. But after another brief shot of Diane, the subsequent reverse shot depicts Diane again, occupying the same position where we just saw Camilla. This kind of disruption of a shot/reverse shot sequence (which does not occur in the first part of the film) indicates on the level of the editing that these worlds—the worlds of fantasy and desire—are ontologically distinct.

In contrast with the second part of the film, the first part of *Mulholland Drive* seems more real, more in keeping with our expectations concerning reality. But, ironically, this sense of reality results from the film's fantasmatic dimension rather than from its realism. Whereas we usually contrast fantasy with reality, *Mulholland Drive* underlines the link between the two, thereby depicting the role of fantasy in providing reality with structure. In this way, the film supports Jacques Lacan's claim that "everything we are allowed to approach by way of reality remains rooted in fantasy."<sup>3</sup>

As a category, fantasy should not be opposed to reality because fantasy sustains what we experience as reality. This idea—that fantasy supports our sense of reality—is evident in *Lost Highway*; however, *Mulholland Drive* represents an advance on *Lost Highway* in that the former emphasizes not only that fantasy offers a solution to the deadlock of desire but also that fantasy provides a way of staging an encounter with trauma and an authentic experience of loss that would be impossible without it. In this way, *Mulholland Drive* celebrates the fantasmatic dimension of Hollywood cinema—its commitment to the exploration of fantasy.

Because of their formal similarities, one cannot come to terms with *Mulholland Drive* without first thinking about *Lost Highway*. The two are companion films: *Lost Highway* explores the structure of fantasy and desire for male subjectivity, and *Mulholland Drive* does so for female subjectivity. One might even claim that *Mulholland Drive* is a feminist version of *Lost Highway*. In both works, a rigid divide is created between the worlds of fantasy and desire. Each world has its own mise-en-scène, its own editing style, and its own style of music. In *Mulholland Drive*, the fantasmatic world is a coherent place of bright and vivid colors, while the world of desire is dark and fragmentary.

In our ordinary experience of reality—and in most films—fantasy and desire overlap and bleed into each other; we never know the precise moment at which

we move from the world of one to the world of the other. Of course, fantasy informs the structure of every Hollywood movie, but we often cannot identify its precise logic because the worlds of desire and fantasy blend together, obscuring fantasy effects. Lynch's eccentricity as a director lies in his proclivity to expose the extreme situations that exist at the heart of everyday reality. As a result, his films depict the structure of fantasy in a much more unadulterated form than is usual in Hollywood. Lynch's intent as a director does not necessarily involve the desire to explore the structuring power of fantasy in our lives; he is, after all, a filmmaker, not a psychoanalytic theorist. That said, Lynch's willingness to embrace the extreme situation that lies within normalcy leads him to produce films that lay bare the functioning of desire and fantasy. Lynch is largely able to keep desire and fantasy apart. By so doing, he enables us to experience the dimension of the Real that the blending together of desire and fantasy (as in standard Hollywood narratives and in our everyday lives) obscures.

**The Mystery of Desire?** If *Mulholland Drive* in fact depicts the separate worlds of desire and fantasy, it would seem that the opening part of the film represents the former since it focuses on the mysterious identity of Rita (Laura Harring). The film begins with a credit sequence that superimposes an image of Betty (Naomi Watts) over shots of a jitterbug contest, but following this initial scene, Lynch establishes an aura of mystery that seems to be in keeping with the attitude of desire. After a brief shot of a blanket covering someone lying on a bed and a red pillow, we see a close-up of the "Mulholland Drive" street sign (which stands in as the film's title card) and then a black limousine driving Rita up the street. The limo suddenly stops, prompting Rita to proclaim: "What are you doing? We don't stop here." The driver does not answer her question but points a gun at her and says, "Get out of the car." Just after he says this, a car drag-racing in the other direction on the road crashes into the limousine. The crash kills the limo driver and injures Rita's head, producing the amnesia that will affect her throughout the first part of the film.

This scene certainly appears to create a sense of desire and the fundamental uncertainty that we associate with it. In fact, the scene produces desire in a manner very typical of Hollywood genre narrative, with its use of darkness and threatening characters in the *mise-en-scène*, the ominous music, and an editing regime that merely hints at what is really transpiring. The director does nothing extraordinary here. He employs without irony the narrative codes of Hollywood (and especially of film noir) concerning the production of desire. As Hollywood understands well, desire always involves not knowing, being confronted with a question that does not have an answer. The desiring subject confronts a mysterious, enigmatic object that is never isolatable as *the* object.<sup>4</sup> As Lacan points out, "As long as I desire, I know nothing of what I desire."<sup>5</sup> Hence, to portray desire, a scene must situate spectators in a position of nonknowledge, which is exactly what the opening of *Mulholland Drive* does. It does this through the *mise-en-scène*—the near-total darkness of the setting, the isolation of the mountain road, and so on. The low, haunting music contributes to the pervasive sense of mystery.

The action of the scene also works to keep us questioning. We see the limousine driving up a dark mountain road, and we have no idea where it is going. When the driver stops the car, the spectator is in the same position as Rita: we do not know why he has stopped, or why he pulls a gun on her. This moment foregrounds the essential question of desire—"What do you want?" Like Rita, the spectator has no idea what the driver wants, and it is this very ignorance of the other's desire that triggers desire in the subject. By placing the spectator in the same position as the desiring subject on the screen—and by immersing both in total uncertainty—Lynch sets up the first part of *Mulholland Drive* as a world of desire.

The essential role of desire becomes even more apparent after the car crash. Following this trauma, Rita wanders the streets of Los Angeles, uncertain about where she might go or even who she is. Again, the spectator is in the same position as Rita—like her, we have no foundation on which to make sense of the situation. Here, Rita's uncertainty is an uncertainty about the desire of the Other—that is, not knowing who she is results from not knowing who she is for the Other. At this point, Rita has lost all sense of where she exists relative to the Other. This complete uncertainty about what the Other wants from her places Rita even more directly in the position of desiring subjectivity. As Lacanian psychoanalyst Bruce Fink points out, the enigma of the Other's desire is unbearable for the subject, which is why the subject necessarily has to resort to fantasies about what the Other wants. Fink writes:

Rather than anxiously waiting to find out what you are, you may well prefer to jump to conclusions (precipitate answers) about what the Other wants of you, with you, from you, and so on. The unknown nature of the Other's desire is unbearable here; you prefer to assign it an attribute, any attribute, rather than let it remain an enigma. You prefer to tie it down, give it a name, and put an end to its angst-inducing uncertainty. Once it is named, once you conclude that *this* is what the Other wants of you—to stay out of the way, for instance—the angst abates.<sup>6</sup>

One may eliminate the anxiety that the enigma of the Other's desire produces by fantasizing a resolution to that enigma, which is what Rita does. After she wanders the streets, Rita falls asleep on the ground outside an apartment complex, and the next morning she wakes up to a world that has become far less mysterious.

If Rita falls asleep tormented by the mystery of the Other's desire, she awakens in a world that is much more congenial. In the apartment complex, a woman is conveniently leaving her apartment for an extended trip, and Rita procures a place to stay by sneaking into the woman's residence. Subsequently, having just arrived in Los Angeles, Betty, the niece of this woman, enters her aunt's apartment, where she discovers Rita. Betty soon realizes that Rita does not even know her aunt, but Betty befriends Rita anyway and assists her in her quest to determine her identity. These events clearly indicate that the film has entered the terrain of Rita's fantasy: the discovery of the apartment and Betty's arrival function as wish fulfillments for Rita as a desiring subject.

Lynch underlines Betty's fantasmatic status in the way he shoots her arrival in Los Angeles. As Betty walks through the airport terminal, the scene is brightly lit,



Figure 1. In Hollywood, it always comes down to chasing a dream. In David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, Betty (Naomi Watts) and Rita (Laura Elena Harring) look for answers to the age-old question "Who am I?" (Universal Focus, 2001).

and soft, comforting music plays in the background. We see a shot of Betty's smiling face and then a reverse shot of a "Welcome to Los Angeles" sign. An old couple that Betty has presumably met on the flight accompanies her through the terminal and wishes her well as she enters a taxi. As she says good-bye to the couple, we see her looking for her bags, fearing that someone has stolen them. The shot of Betty looking down and exclaiming "My bags!" builds a sense in the spectator that someone has taken advantage of Betty's naïveté about the big city. In the next instant, though, a reverse shot shows the cab driver placing her bags in the trunk of his car and asking her "Where to?" This is not a Los Angeles where thieves steal the bags of unsuspecting visitors but one in which everyone is eager to help. It is, as Betty says to Rita later, a "dream place." But it is Betty herself who appears to be the dream, as she enters the film in order to help Rita solve the enigma of her desire and thus occupies the central position in Rita's fantasy.

Throughout the first part of the film, Betty assists Rita in tracking down the details of the accident that triggered her amnesia and helps assemble the fragments of her memory. All of Betty's efforts to help Rita—and her eventual declaration of love—suggest that Betty is nothing but a fantasy object for Rita, a way for Rita to put a stop to the anxiety her desire arouses. However, as the second part of the film unfolds, it becomes apparent that the first part has *not* been structured around Rita's desire but around a fantasmatic resolution of the desire of Diane Selwyn (also played by Naomi Watts). Whereas it initially seems that Betty arrives

as a fantasy figure for Rita, in the second part we discover that, in fact, Rita has been playing the central role in Diane's fantasy all along and in this fantasy Betty is Diane's own ideal ego. As a mysterious, unknown object, Rita provides a way for Diane/Betty to escape her unbearable desire. The fantasy relationship that develops between Betty and Rita is a reimagining of Diane's failed relationship—which is depicted in the second part of the film—with the movie star Camilla Rhodes (also played by Laura Harring).

Although we usually associate mysteriousness and uncertainty with the difficulty of desire, the enigma surrounding Rita is far more bearable for Diane than the impossibility that haunts her relationship with Camilla. Diane's fantasy transforms Camilla Rhodes, the impossible object, into Rita, the mysterious object. This transformation offers Diane an escape from the impossibility of what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*—the object-cause of the desire of the subject. The *objet petit a* is what sticks out and cannot be smoothly integrated into the subject's world. It is, as Lacan points out, “the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier.”<sup>7</sup> The desiring subject must recognize the impossibility of integrating the *objet petit a*, but a sense of mystery obscures and provides respite from the constitutive impossibility of desire. This is why Diane shifts her attention from Camilla to Rita. As Lynch shows, not only does fantasy resolve the mystery of desire but it also creates a sense of mystery in order to obscure the necessary deadlock that all desire animates. With Camilla, Diane desires, and yet she knows that this desire must remain unsatisfied. Unlike Camilla, Rita offers Diane (as Betty) a mystery that she can solve; Rita is *not* an object that remains always out of reach, despite her enigmatic status.

By initially setting up Rita and the first part of *Mulholland Drive* as an exemplar of desiring subjectivity and then later revealing that situation as itself part of a fantasmatic scenario, Lynch shows how mystery does not sustain desire but is itself a flight from desire, an attempt to escape the horrible deadlock that desire produces. Fink is right to claim that “the encounter with the Other's desire is anxiety producing,”<sup>8</sup> but what gives rise to anxiety is not the enigma of the Other's desire; instead, the subject feels anxiety because she grasps the impossibility of this desire—that there can be no answer to the question that it asks, not that the subject simply does not know the answer. *Mulholland Drive* leads us (through the use of *mise-en-scène* and editing) toward the error of seeing Rita as a figure of desire not simply to toy with our expectations but to reveal the extent to which fantasy determines our experiences. Thus, not only does fantasy provide answers to our questions about our identity, it also presents the questions themselves. The film reveals that the province of fantasy extends much farther—and its power is much greater—than was envisioned in Lynch's previous films.

**Fantasized Temporality.** If both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* split into worlds of desire and fantasy, the latter represents a major step forward in how we might conceive of the dynamics of this split. *Mulholland Drive* radicalizes *Lost Highway* because it creates a world of desire that is far less coherent and thus displays more emphatically the role that fantasy plays in rendering experience

meaningful. The world of desire in the second part of *Mulholland Drive* lacks even a sense of causal temporality. Events occur in a random order, without a clear narrative logic. At the beginning of this part of the film, Diane's former roommate (and, it seems, lover) retrieves her belongings, including an ashtray shaped like a miniature piano, from Diane's apartment. But in a subsequent scene, the same ashtray is on Diane's coffee table, as if the roommate had not yet removed it even though we know she did. The same sequence occurs with a blue key. It is lying on the coffee table as the second part of the film begins, and then it is gone until the end of the film, when Diane again sees it on the coffee table.

The disappearance and reappearance of the ashtray and the blue key do not indicate anything magical at work. It is just that this part of the film operates according to the atemporal logic of desire. There is no chronology in the world of pure desire because desire does not move forward; instead, it circulates around the *objet petit a*—in this case, the impossible *jouissance* in Camilla that Diane longs for but cannot access.<sup>9</sup> As a world of desire, the second part of the film moves according to the compulsion to repeat rather than according to the dictates of time.

By contrast, the first part of the film—the elaboration of Diane's fantasy—operates according to a familiar temporal logic. Events occur in chronological order and follow the laws of causality. This is precisely the opposite of what we might expect: we are accustomed to thinking of fantasy as an imaginative flight that enables us to violate the various exigencies that constrain our experience of reality, including, perhaps especially, that of temporality. However, the film reveals here the role fantasy plays in constructing our sense of temporality. Although classical Hollywood films also rely on the power of fantasy to construct a sense of temporality, they take pains *not* to reveal this power in the way that *Mulholland Drive* does. The classical Hollywood film hides the role of fantasy in producing temporality by not depicting any moments that are bereft of fantasy—that is, moments of desire as such, in which neither fantasy nor temporality operates. In *Mulholland Drive*, however, we see Diane's experience of pure desire in the second part of the film. As a subject of desire without any fantasmatic supplement, Diane experiences only the repetition of the drive. However, Betty, the fantasy figure who allows Diane to escape this repetition, does experience temporality. The point here is that we do not employ fantasy to escape from the horrors of time but to construct time as a respite from the horrors of repetition.<sup>10</sup> As the theorist Slavoj Žižek notes, "Fantasy is the primordial form of *narrative* . . . [and] *narrative as such* emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism."<sup>11</sup> By providing a narrative and temporal structure through which we can have experiences, fantasy delivers us from the timeless repetition of the drive.

Not only does fantasy provide temporality, it also constantly works to fill in the gaps that populate the fragmentary experience of desire. Without fantasy, our experience would lack a sense of coherence, as in the latter section of Lynch's film. This role of fantasy becomes apparent in the way that fragments of experience from the second part of *Mulholland Drive* are elaborated on in the first part. This



process is crucial to the subject's ability to make sense of a situation: we understand and discover meaning because fantasy provides the background for fragmentary experience. For instance, when we hear the disembodied voice of a disk jockey on the radio, we fantasize a physical body that corresponds to that voice even if we have no idea what the disk jockey's actual body looks like. By filling in gaps in this way, fantasy helps us produce a seamless experience of the world.

At the party of film director Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux) in the second part of the film, Diane hears Adam's brief account of his recent breakup with his wife. She overhears him saying, "So I got the pool, and she got the pool man." This sentence presumably provides all the information Diane has about the split. The comment exists for her—and for us as spectators—as just a fragment of sense, unconnected to any coherent narrative about the relationship Adam had with his wife. However, in the first part of the film, we have already seen the events Adam's statement alludes to. Diane creates a fantasmatic scenario surrounding this fragment of knowledge that renders it completely sensible.

In the first part of the film, Diane's fantasy produces the background for Adam's statement about the pool man. After losing control of his film for refusing to bow to mob pressure and hire Camilla Rhodes for the female lead, Adam returns home and finds his wife, Lorraine (Lori Heuring), in bed with the pool man (Billy Ray Cyrus). Rather than feeling guilt for her infidelity, Lorraine begins berating Adam for coming home at the wrong time. She says, "Now you've done it," and asks him, "What the hell are you even doing here?" Adam says nothing but proceeds to douse Lorraine's jewelry box (and the jewelry in it) with pink paint, which occasions a fight between Adam, Lorraine, and the pool man. Finally, Adam leaves, his clothes covered in pink paint and his nose bloody. In light of this scene, we have a context through which to understand the statement Adam makes at the party about his wife and the pool man. But it is only the elaboration of Diane's fantasy that produces this narrative context. The fantasy takes a fragmentary piece of experience and provides it with a coherent past that explains the emergence of this piece of experience in the present. In this way, fantasy offers subjects respite from the incoherence that plagues their daily experiences.

**Diane's Wish Fulfillment.** Not only does fantasy fill in the gaps of our experiences but it also delivers us from the dissatisfaction constitutive of our status as desiring subjects. In the second part of *Mulholland Drive*, which depicts a world of desire without fantasy to supplement it, Diane feels the perpetual sense of lack caused by her desire: she longs for Camilla but cannot have her; she wants a career as an actress but struggles in bit parts; and she sees the opulent lifestyle of Hollywood's elites but lives in relative squalor. The second part of the film shows the originary, dissatisfying events of Diane's life. Most obviously dissatisfying is Diane's relationship with Camilla, which in Diane's fantasy becomes the relationship between Betty and Rita.

Further frustrating her desire for Camilla, Diane must endure Camilla's open displays of affection for Adam and for other women as well. Camilla flaunts her *jouissance* in front of Diane, but always in a way that excludes Diane. What is



Figure 2. Diane (Naomi Watts) fears Camilla (Laura Elena Harring) is losing interest in her. Rita/Camilla and film director Adam Keshner (Justin Theroux) “act” on their attraction to each other. (Universal Focus, 2001).

more, Camilla seems purposefully to stage her *jouissance* for Diane in order to sustain Diane’s desire. This becomes apparent when we see Diane with Camilla on the set of Adam’s film. At one point in the shoot, Adam clears the set so that he may demonstrate—privately—how he wants an actor to kiss Camilla. Camilla asks Diane to stay while everyone else leaves the set, and as Adam passionately kisses Camilla, she looks at Diane, who is the sole audience for this kiss. Lynch emphasizes Camilla’s concern with Diane seeing her *jouissance* by showing Camilla looking at Diane during the kiss. Camilla invites Diane to stay on the set and kisses Adam solely to arouse her desire.

Immediately prior to this scene, we see Camilla and Diane together in Diane’s apartment, lying naked on the couch. As they begin to kiss, Camilla stops, and what she says makes clear the position into which she is pushing Diane. She tells Diane, “You drive me wild. We shouldn’t do this anymore.” Camilla lures Diane toward her at the same time that she keeps Diane at a distance. When Diane feels she is close to Camilla’s elusive *jouissance*, Camilla withdraws it and bars access to it. After Diane responds, “It’s him, isn’t it?” Lynch immediately cuts to the scene on the film set where Diane witnesses Camilla and Adam kissing. Throughout the second part of the film, Diane remains within the deadlock of desire: she cannot attain the elusive *jouissance* that her object seems to embody, and she cannot cast the object aside and begin to look elsewhere.

When Camilla becomes Rita, however, the love object is no longer inaccessible. In Diane’s fantasy, not only do Betty and Rita become lovers but Betty also comes to

Rita's rescue. Envisioning oneself as the rescuer of one's love object is, of course, the ultimate fantasy scenario; the rescuer wins the love of the love object by proving that the subject *deserves* this love. When Betty discovers Rita, Rita has no idea who she is, not even her name. (She adopts the name "Rita" from a *Gilda* movie poster.<sup>12</sup>) Rita is completely helpless. Whereas in the world of desire, Camilla occupies a position of mastery relative to Diane, in her fantasy, Diane strips Camilla of this mastery. By transforming Camilla into the nameless woman who becomes Rita, Betty (Diane) can rescue Rita and assist her in seeking out her identity. The fantasy transforms Diane's relationship to her love object, making that object accessible to—even dependent on—Betty, Diane's representative in the fantasy. The attractiveness of fantasy stems from this ability to deliver the goods, to provide the subject with a narrative in which it is possible to access the inaccessible *objet petit a*.

In creating access to this object, the fantasy structure removes and repositions the obstacles that block Diane's access to Camilla in the world of desire. One such obstacle is Adam. In Diane's fantasy, Adam is stripped of his power and is forced to succumb to various rituals of humiliation. Adam not only finds his wife in bed with the pool man, he also finds himself stripped of his film by the mob. When he tries to hide from the mob (the Castigliane brothers) at a downtown hotel, he learns that their reach extends everywhere, as Cookie, the proprietor of the hotel, tells him, "Whoever you're hiding from, they know where you are." The mob has also taken all of Adam's money. Cookie tells him, "You're maxed out at your bank, and your line of credit has been canceled."

When Adam receives this information, we see him all alone in a dingy downtown Los Angeles hotel. Lynch uses this setting to indicate the depths to which Adam has fallen; he has lost everything. In addition, during most of the first part of the film, Adam has pink paint splattered over his expensive black jacket. The paint constantly reminds us—and Adam himself—of his humiliation in finding his wife in bed with the pool man.

Adam finally recovers his former station but only after he capitulates to the demand of the Castigliane brothers and hires Camilla Rhodes to star in his film. Thus, in Diane's fantasy, Adam is transformed from a figure of mastery into a victim and a pawn. He is both punished for standing in the way of Diane's access to Camilla and removed as an obstacle in her way. Through Adam's transformation, Lynch reveals the power of fantasy to clear the way to the object of desire.

Through the turn to fantasy, Adam's situation changes dramatically, but his basic personality remains intact. In the case of Coco (Ann Miller), though, the fantasy demonstrates its transformative power even more as not just Coco's situation but her personality undergoes a complete change. In the world of desire, Coco is Adam's mother, and in Diane's only interaction with her, she upbraids Diane in a harsh maternal tone for being late to Adam and Camilla's party. In Diane's fantasy, Coco remains a maternal figure, but she becomes wholly benevolent—an ego ideal who sees Betty as Betty wants to be seen. Coco is no longer Adam's mother but the manager of the apartment complex where Betty's aunt lives. When Betty arrives at the complex for the first time, Coco greets her with hyperbolic warmth. She smiles and says, "Ten bucks says you're Betty." Coco's first

words to Betty indicate the extreme transformation she has undergone since her incarnation as Adam's mother in the world of desire, where Coco's first words to Betty were a rebuke; in the fantasy world, Coco's first words cheer up Betty and let her know that she has a place in this world.

Later, as Coco shows Betty her aunt's apartment, Coco offers to acquaint Betty with her neighbors: "If you'd like, later on, I'll introduce you around." When Betty does not respond right away, Coco adds, "Well, no hard feelings if you don't." Here, Coco accommodates Betty completely, welcoming her to her new environment but at the same time giving Betty her own space. In Diane's fantasy, Coco is the perfect maternal figure.

We can also understand the first part of the film as a fantasmatic response to the second part if we compare Diane and Betty physically. Naomi Watts plays both characters, which initially suggests that they represent different versions of the same person. But the characters look so dissimilar that it almost appears as if a different actor is playing each part. When we first see Betty in the airport, she is not only bathed in light but also colorfully and attractively dressed. She wears a blue shirt, a red sweater, and black pants. This outfit looks stylish, and it combines with Betty's smiling demeanor and bright blue eyes to indicate her cheery hopefulness. When he introduces Diane, Lynch emphasizes the contrast. We first see her in her underlit, shabby apartment, where she is dressed in a bathrobe. Diane's disheveled, dirty hair also contrasts with Betty's, which looks freshly styled. And whereas Betty constantly smiles and seems eager to meet the world, Diane is morose and seems defeated by life. Betty offers Diane a way of seeing herself as she wants to be seen.

Though Betty first appears as a naïve, hopeful ingénue from Deep River, Ontario, her character actually ranges widely. The extreme variations in Betty's subjectivity confirm her status as Diane's fantasmatic ideal ego. This becomes apparent when she arrives at a studio for an audition.<sup>13</sup> Up to this point, Betty has exhibited the attractive innocence of a new arrival in Hollywood, someone eager to make her way as a performer. But during the audition, the actor with whom she is working, Woody Katz (Chad Everett), wants to play the scene not as it is written but in a way that will be sexually stimulating. Lynch lets us know this by showing Betty practicing with Rita before the audition; we see Betty performing the scene well (and as written). Despite the fact that the words are the same at the audition, the scene seems entirely different. But rather than rebuff Woody for distorting and sexualizing the scene, Betty follows his lead and even ratchets up the degree of sexualization. Lynch uses a close-up of Betty moving Woody's hand onto her buttocks to demonstrate this. Betty completely defies the naïveté she exhibited earlier and shows herself to be sexually experienced. As a fantasmatic figure, Betty accomplishes the impossible: she is innocent yet sexual; she is naïve yet aware of how the world works; she is hopeful yet not easily duped. In short, Betty occupies subject positions that are contradictory and mutually exclusive. This is possible only because she represents a fantasized version of Diane. The distortion of the fantasy enables Betty to be Diane's perfect ego.

The fantasmatic distortion is most extreme in the case of Camilla. This is because Camilla represents the fantasy's nodal point: she contains the *objet petit a*. As such, the fantasy separates the name "Camilla Rhodes" from her body in an effort to distinguish between her pathological, undesirable part and what is in her more than her, the *objet petit a*. The *objet a* is the remainder that the process of signification leaves behind, and as such, it always escapes the province of the signifier (and the name). In the fantasy, the name "Camilla Rhodes" comes to signify corruption and undeserved success.

We first see this name attached to a picture that two members of the mob show Adam. They insist that Adam cast this woman in his film, telling him repeatedly, "This is the girl." Through this gesture, the fantasy accomplishes a double purpose: it tarnishes the acting success of the actual Camilla by suggesting that she got her big break because of mob influence, and it impugns the unnamed woman whom Diane sees kissing Camilla at a party (who is the woman in the mobster's photograph identified as Camilla Rhodes). At the same time, Laura Harring, the actress who plays Camilla in the second part of the film, appears in the first part in an entirely different guise, as Rita. Rita, the desirable part of Camilla—embodied by the actor Harring herself—persists in the fantasy, minus her undesirable part, now linked to the other Camilla. Lynch uses the same performer to play Camilla in the second part of the film and to play Rita in the first part but changes the name to illustrate how fantasy attempts to deliver the *objet petit a* in a pure form, free of any pathological taint.

The first part of *Mulholland Drive*, the fantasy world, enacts a nearly complete transformation of the different aspects of Diane's life. In that part, the dreariness and the dissatisfaction of that life are remade into a fully developed narrative. The fantasy replaces the dissatisfaction of desire with images of *jouissance*. Subjects flee into fantasy precisely because it seems to cure the dissatisfaction they cannot otherwise escape. As we have seen, fantasy works to cover over the many sources of discontent that plague the subject, but it saves the abundance of its power to bring forth an image of a successful sexual relationship. Through both parts of the film, Lynch shows that the failure of this relationship is the primary impetus for the turn from desire to fantasy.

**The Successful Sexual Relationship.** The essential quality of fantasy is not simply its ability to deliver wish fulfillment. Instead, as *Mulholland Drive* reveals, its fundamental function consists in its ability to address desire on the most important level, to figure (the illusion of) a successful sexual relationship. According to Lacan, the sexual relationship—or, more precisely, its failure—represents the primary stumbling block in human relations, a stumbling block that results from our insertion into language. As Lacan puts it, "No relationship gets constituted between the sexes in the case of speaking beings."<sup>14</sup> "There is no sexual relationship" because the categories of male and female indicate a structural impasse: each position is structured so that it looks for what the other does not have, not for what it has. The desires of the sexes are thus not complementary. This dooms relationships between the sexes to be antagonistic, and it dooms both sexes to a

continual battle to overcome this antagonism. The only way out of this antagonism is to turn to fantasy, although fantasy can only overcome this conflict in an imaginary way. Fantasy allows the subject to discover, through producing a narrative around it, a way of creating the illusion that the successful sexual relationship is possible. While the world of desire in *Mulholland Drive* emphasizes the failure of the sexual relationship, the film's depiction of fantasy shows how the subject tries to overcome that failure. An emphasis on this function of fantasy does not begin, in Lynch's body of work, with *Mulholland Drive*; it is also the salient feature of *Lost Highway*, and it again indicates the link between these two films.

*Lost Highway* depicts the failure of the sexual relationship in a narrative about Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) and his wife, Renee (Patricia Arquette). Despite Fred's many efforts to approach Renee's *jouissance* in the first part of that film, this *jouissance* continually eludes him, leaving him haunted by his failure to enjoy and by his failure to relate successfully to his wife. But as the fantasmatic figure of Peter Dayton (Balthazar Getty), Fred is able to construct a narrative in which he can enjoy Alice (also played by Patricia Arquette), a fantasized version of Renee. On the terrain of fantasy, within the narrative that it constructs, the impossible sexual relationship becomes possible. This is what leads Žižek to insist that "fantasy is ultimately always the fantasy of a successful sexual relationship."<sup>15</sup> Fantasy enables the subject to bypass the structural impasse that constitutes the failed sexual relationship because fantasy ignores the restrictions of the symbolic order. In fantasy, the love object can occupy two contradictory positions simultaneously: it can be both out of the subject's reach and within its reach at the same time. In this way, fantasy makes the impossible possible. *Lost Highway* illustrates this operation of fantasy as it depicts Fred's attempt to compensate for the failure of his sexual relationship with his wife.

In *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch pushes the failure of the sexual relationship and its fantasmatic resolution one step further. Here, the impossibility of the sexual relationship manifests not just between a male and a female but between two women. In the second part of the film, Lynch depicts Diane's failed sexual relationship with Camilla. The fantasmatic first part represents Diane's effort to narrate a terrain on which this relationship can succeed—and it is clear that the fantasy works: in the first part, Betty and Rita (the fantasmatic counterparts of Diane and Camilla) manage a successful sexual relationship. By showing that relationships fail (and require a fantasmatic supplement) even in the case of lesbian lovers, the film does not enforce heteronormativity, thereby reducing the lesbian relationship to the model of the heterosexual one. Instead, it evinces a refusal to romanticize the lesbian relationship or to imagine that such relationships escape the exigencies of the subject's insertion into language.<sup>16</sup> No matter what its makeup, *no* sexual relationship can succeed, and thus every such alliance, out of the inevitability of its failure, spurs the subject in the direction of a fantasmatic resolution.<sup>17</sup>

If the fundamental role of fantasy consists in creating the image of a successful sexual relationship, this also represents the site of the primary danger of fantasy. By convincing the subject that the sexual relationship can succeed, fantasy obscures the antagonism that haunts the functioning of the symbolic order. Covered over by

the veil of fantasy, the symbolic order seems to operate without a hitch. It is at this point that one can see the political problems that the turn to fantasy produces. When subjects immerse themselves in fantasy, they blind themselves to the contradictions of the prevailing ideology. Lynch's films do not ignore this dimension of fantasy. Indeed, *Mulholland Drive* illustrates repeatedly the way in which Diane's turn to fantasy obscures her position as a desiring subject. But for Lynch the positive political possibilities of fantasy—like its ability to take us to the point at which the ruling symbolic structure breaks down—are much more intriguing. The main emphasis in *Mulholland Drive* lies in this direction, in showing how fantasy might hold the key to experiences otherwise unthinkable.

**Going All the Way in Fantasy.** If *Mulholland Drive* is a critique of the fantasizing that we usually associate with Hollywood, then it is not the usual indictment. Whereas most critics reprimand Hollywood for its excessive commitment to fantasy (at the cost of verisimilitude), Lynch takes Hollywood to task for not going far enough in the direction of fantasy. Fantasy allows us to experience the Real because it makes evident a place where the symbolic order breaks down. As Lacan points out, "There is no other entrance for the subject into the real than the fantasy."<sup>18</sup> This becomes especially clear in *Mulholland Drive* as a result of the strict separation that Lynch establishes between the world of fantasy and the world of desire. Lynch uses film to create rigid boundaries, and their very rigidity enables us to see what occurs at the point where fantasy and desire come together.

In discussing *Twin Peaks* in his book on Lynch, Michel Chion points out that its structure works by "joining each and every level without blending them together."<sup>19</sup> This structural logic manifests itself in *Mulholland Drive* as well. Because Lynch avoids blending together the levels of fantasy and desire, he is able to join them together in a way that reveals the traumatic Real that exists at their point of intersection. The intersection of fantasy and desire is always a point of trauma because it is a point at which signification breaks down. We construct fantasy to cover over a gap in the symbolic structure, a place where there is no signifier. Hence, the hinge that links fantasy to the symbolic structure (i.e., the world of desire) is the Real, a traumatic moment that resists all symbolization.

The first time *Mulholland Drive* depicts the Real at this intersection occurs when Betty and Rita discover Diane dead on her bed in her apartment. Because they are within the fantasy and perceiving through its lens, Betty and Rita cannot recognize the body as Diane's (and neither can we as spectators). Nonetheless, the very narrative structure of the fantasy—its mystery story—leads Betty and Rita to the point of the origin of the fantasy, the traumatic point of nonsense that does not fit within the fantasy structure.

After seeing the body, Betty and Rita quickly flee the apartment, and the film depicts their exit in a way that suggests that this encounter with the Real has been traumatic for them. As they run out, not only does Lynch use slow motion, but he also blurs both characters' images. We see several images of them on each frame, and consequently Betty and Rita seem temporarily to exist outside themselves, as if their encounter with the Real has disrupted their existence relative to time. The

use of conventional filmic techniques—slow motion and multiply exposed frames—plays a precise role in the narrative structure, suggesting a disruptive encounter with the Real because of the place of these techniques relative to the events of the narrative. But this disruption merely presages the more significant events that follow the dissolution of Diane's fantasy.

Fantasy offers the possibility of such traumatic encounters with the Real when we follow the logic of fantasy to its endpoint, when we play out the fantasy completely. In this sense, as Lynch illustrates, fantasy holds the key to its own traversal because the logic of the fantasy itself pushes the subject to the point of the dissolution of the fantasy. As Alenka Zupančič puts it, "We cannot 'get beyond' the fantasy by giving up on the Cause that animates us but, on the contrary, only by insisting on it until the end."<sup>20</sup> In short, the subject cannot escape fantasy simply by opting out of it. Attempting to do so places the subject under the power of fantasy all the more because it allows the fantasy to operate without any awareness. But when we commit ourselves to the fantasy without reserve, the radical potential of fantasy makes itself visible, as Lynch's film clearly shows.

Diane commits wholly to the fantasy of herself as Betty and follows that fantasy as far as embracing Rita's quest for the truth. On this quest, Betty even crawls through a window to enter Diane's locked apartment, where she finds Diane dead, although Betty does not recognize her. (In fact, the fantasy causes both Betty and Rita to misrecognize Diane's body and think it resembles Rita's.) Fully embracing her fantasy leads Betty/Diane right into the path of the Real in the form of an encounter with Diane's dead body. As this scene suggests, *Mulholland Drive* is a panegyric to the existential and political possibilities of fantasy.

In the denouement of the fantasy, it becomes clear that *Mulholland Drive* offers a specifically feminine structure to its fantasy, in contrast to *Lost Highway*, which employs a masculine structure. Because fantasy employs narrative, it cannot depict the successful sexual relationship as static: the subject is always either approaching the relationship or in the process of losing it. In each of these positions, the fantasy allows the subject to encounter the trauma of the Real in a unique way, indicative of either a male or a female fantasy structure.

A male fantasy always comes up short; the male approaches a successful sexual relationship but never quite attains it. The *jouissance* of a male fantasy remains a potential *jouissance*, an experience never quite achieved. This is why at the moment Peter could finally connect with Alice in *Lost Highway*, Alice abruptly withdraws and tells Peter, "You'll never have me." Peter approaches the experience of *jouissance* through the fantasy structure, but he never quite arrives at it. The male fantasy holds back; it refuses to give itself over entirely to the object.

By contrast, the female fantasy goes too far. The subject gives herself over entirely to the love object. Thus, the fantasy does not stop short; the successful sexual relationship is achieved. In *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch shows Betty and Rita start to kiss and then, as they begin to have sex, Betty says to Rita repeatedly, "I'm in love with you." Afterward, Lynch shows Betty and Rita holding hands in their sleep, hinting at the bond that now exists between them. However, the fantasy cannot simply stop at this point. It exists within a temporal structure, and it moves



forward with time. Here, the film begins to illustrate the dilemma of the female fantasy. If male fantasy stops too quickly, female fantasy inevitably goes on for too long. The sexual relationship is successful, but inescapable loss follows. In male and female fantasy, the relationship to the Real is fundamentally different. The male subject experiences the Real as always futural, while the female subject experiences it as part of the past, as an experience of loss.<sup>21</sup>

Lynch depicts this loss occurring just after we see Betty and Rita holding hands in their sleep. Rita wakes Betty up in the middle of the night with outbursts of the word "*Silencio*." Despite the late hour, she convinces Betty to go with her to the club with that name. From the way Lynch shoots their arrival, it is clear that at Club Silencio Betty and Rita are nearing the edge of the fantasy world. In a very long shot, we see them arrive in a cab, and as they enter the club, the camera tracks rapidly to the door of the club to enter along with them. This unusual positioning of the camera suggests that Club Silencio is dangerous (thus, the camera keeps its distance) yet alluring (which explains the fast track forward). Inside the club, Betty and Rita watch the emcee, who insists on the unreality of what they are about to see. In a variety of languages, he says repeatedly "*No hay banda*—and yet we hear a band"; "It's all recorded"; "*Il n'y a pas d'orchestre*"; and "It is all on tape." By having the emcee speak in different languages, Lynch suggests the unimportance of the signifiers themselves relative to what they cannot capture—the absence of the *objet petit a*. The emcee repeatedly attests to this fundamental absence. As he speaks, we see a man who seems to be playing a trumpet arrive on stage. However, when the man removes the trumpet from his mouth, the sound continues, indicating that, as the emcee says, "It is all on tape." Here, the fantasy indicates overtly its central concern—the object in its absence rather than in its presence. This scene suggests that Betty and Rita have reached the endpoint of the fantasy, the point at which it will break down.

*Mulholland Drive* depicts this collapse occurring during a song. When the emcee leaves the stage, Rebekah Del Rio sings a Spanish version of Roy Orbison's song "Crying."<sup>22</sup> That she sings in Spanish indicates that, like the comments by the emcee, the words here are not the heart of the matter; what is crucial is Del Rio's voice—the voice detached from her body as an object, the voice as *objet petit a*. Despite their knowledge that she is not live, Betty and Rita get caught up in the singing, disavowing their knowledge. They experience the *jouissance* of the *objet a* in the voice. The song moves Betty and Rita to tears because it communicates a sense of loss. Rebekah Del Rio is "crying" over a lost love object, over a lost sexual relationship, and this touches both Betty and Rita, who also feel the incipient loss of what they have experienced.

This feeling of loss marks the inevitable conclusion of the female fantasy. When we experience the loss of the sexual relationship in fantasy as a result of following a fantasy to its endpoint, we experience the loss of a relationship we have never had. Fantasy effects an identification with the lost object. As Juan-David Nasio points out, "We are, in the fantasy, that which we lose."<sup>23</sup> In this sense, fantasy allows us to mourn the lost object in a way we could not if we were not fantasizing. Since the subject never actually has the "lost" object, the *objet petit a*, the only

experience of loss that the subject can have must occur through fantasy.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the only authentic mourning necessarily involves the illusions of fantasy, which is what we see occurring at Club Silencio.

Ultimately, the female subject cannot hold on to the experience of loss. Just as the male in his fantasy cannot sustain the moment immediately prior to the sexual relationship, the female fantasy cannot sustain the moment of loss of the sexual relationship. The structure of fantasy breaks down when the subject confronts the total emptiness of the *objet petit a*, which is what occurs as Rebekah Del Rio's song continues after she has fainted. At this point, the fantasy collapses. Betty (i.e., Diane) can no longer disavow the illusory nature of the experience because she confronts the pure, contentless *objet petit a*. Betty looks down in her purse and sees a blue box, which represents the point of exit from the fantasy world. When Betty and Rita return to the apartment, Rita retrieves the blue key she found earlier in her purse and that Betty placed in a box in a closet. As Rita moves toward the closet, the camera follows her, leaving Betty out of the shot. But when Rita turns around and Betty should once again be in the shot, she is not there.

As Betty and Rita reach the point at which the fantasy world intersects with the world of desire, Diane's representative in her fantasy can no longer continue to exist. After Rita uses the key to open the blue box, the camera moves into the opening in the top of the box and is subsumed by the darkness inside. The film impels us to experience briefly the void that exists between fantasy and desire, but we are quickly thrust into the world of desire, in which the woman who owns the apartment—Betty's aunt in the fantasy—walks in; there is no trace of either Rita or Betty.

The camera's entry into the darkness of the blue box marks the point at which *Mulholland Drive* shifts worlds—leaving Diane's fantasy and entering the world of desire. Lynch shows Diane lying on her bed, and the shots alternate between images of her dead body and of her sleeping. The Cowboy (Monty Montgomery) walks past her bedroom and says to her, "Hey, pretty girl, time to wake up." The Cowboy here represents another version of the Mystery Man (Robert Blake), who appears in *Lost Highway*. The Cowboy's appearance testifies once more to the link between the two films but also to a crucial difference. Like the Mystery Man, the Cowboy is, on the one hand, a figure of paternal authority, but, on the other, almost completely asexual. Both men have feminine-looking faces, without any facial hair—or even eyebrows. In addition, both men have small builds and speak softly. This is especially noticeable in the case of the Cowboy (in part because of our expectations about cowboys). In *Lost Highway*, the Mystery Man functions as a superegoic presence, an internal representative of the Law, for Fred. He calls Fred to take up his position within the symbolic order. The Cowboy in *Mulholland Drive* performs a similar function: after the dissolution of Diane's fantasy, he pushes Diane in the direction of her symbolic position. Calling Diane back into the world of desire, the Cowboy functions as a superego. But the film also reveals the superfluity of the superego: the Cowboy tells Diane to wake up *after* her fantasy has already broken down. Why? Because his presence *qua* superego allows Diane to believe that her experience of the emptiness of the object was the result of the Law's intervention rather than a revelation about the object itself. That is to say, the superegoic command—"wake up," in this case—

preserves for the subject the idea that but for this command the sexual relationship might have succeeded. The subject creates cowboys and mystery men to avoid recognizing the truth of the object.

While the superego provides an alibi for the failed sexual relationship, it also pressures the subject to enjoy itself sexually. Like the Mystery Man, the Cowboy is a superego figure because he represents a pressure to enjoy. As Lacan points out, "Nothing forces anyone to enjoy except the superego. The superego is the imperative of *jouissance*—Enjoy!"<sup>25</sup> Hence, the superego places contradictory demands on the subject—requiring obedience to the Law and to *jouissance*. This is why the Cowboy appears to Diane at Adam's party while she helplessly envies those who are enjoying Camilla (right after Camilla kisses another woman and right before Adam announces their engagement). The superego capitalizes on the subject's sense that the other is enjoying in its stead, which is precisely what Diane feels in this situation.<sup>26</sup> In *Lost Highway*, the Mystery Man first appears to Fred at a similar moment—at a party where he sees others enjoying his wife, Renée. But the Cowboy is a much less terrifying figure than the Mystery Man. If the Mystery Man is a filmic manifestation of the superego, then the Cowboy is a lesser version.

The difference between the Mystery Man and the Cowboy attests to the association of *Lost Highway* with the structure of male subjectivity and *Mulholland Drive* with the structure of female subjectivity. For the female subject, the superego lacks the ferocity that it attains in the male. As Freud infamously puts it:

I cannot escape the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, and so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men.<sup>27</sup>

Critics have, of course, often condemned Freud for this account of the lack of development of a superego in women. But Freud's only mistake consists in his belief that attributing less of a superego to women represents an ethical indictment. On the contrary, as Lacan emphasizes in his seminar on ethics (*Seminar VII*), the superego marks the point at which the subject abandons the ethical position and gives ground relative to the subject's desire. If the male subject has a more developed superego, this testifies to his ethical probity, not to his ethical purity. When we contrast the Cowboy with the Mystery Man, *Mulholland Drive* makes evident the relative timidity of the superego that Diane must face. However, this does not ease the burden of desire, as the second part of the film reveals.

By showing us a world of desire entirely separate from any fantasmatic resolution to that desire, Lynch illustrates how unbearable the subject (Diane) finds the position of pure desire. The *jouissance* that *objet petit a* contains seems to exist right before her eyes—in the figure of Camilla—and yet *jouissance* remains wholly out of reach. Unable to sustain her status as the subject of desire, Diane "gives ground relative to her desire" by hiring a killer to eliminate Camilla. Diane is willing to sacrifice the object because she cannot endure the inescapable dissatisfaction that it produces.<sup>28</sup> But as the conclusion of *Mulholland Drive* underlines, the subject cannot simply eliminate the *objet petit a*. This object is the subject's

correlate. The ontological consistency of the subject's world depends on the existence of the *objet petit a*, the object that resists integration into that world and yet sustains that world with this resistance. Diane's world of desire finally breaks apart when she succeeds in destroying her love object. At the end of the film, a blue key appears on the coffee table in Diane's apartment, signaling to Diane that the killer whom she hired to kill Camilla has completed the job.

With the death of Camilla, the barrier between the world of desire and the world of fantasy collapses and Diane's fantasy life begins to intrude into her life of desire. The intrusion occurs in the form of fantasy figures from the first part of the film. The smiling elderly couple who comforted Betty on her arrival in Los Angeles returns to terrify Diane. The film shows the old man and woman literally crawling out of the fantasy, as they emerge in miniature from the blue box that connects the worlds of fantasy and desire. (The ferocious figure behind Winkie's diner has the blue box in a paper bag when the elderly couple emerges from it.<sup>29</sup>) Lynch shows the elderly couple in this miniature form sliding under the door of Diane's apartment. But in the subsequent shot, they appear in full size, and they pursue Diane into her bedroom, where she shoots herself to escape them.

The elderly couple is so terrifying to Diane—she would rather die than endure their presence—because they belong to another world. The film depicts them in such a way that their terror becomes fully evident: their smiles are now sadistic, as if they are smiling at Diane's impending demise. Diane has fantasized about this couple and clearly finds comfort in their fantasmatic presence. But this in no way means that she actually wants to encounter them. As Freud notes in his discussion of Dora's neurosis, "If what [subjects] long for the most intensely in their phantasies is presented to them in reality, they none the less flee from it."<sup>30</sup> This is what occurs with the arrival of the fantasmatic elderly couple into the world of desire. When Diane confronts them, she confronts the traumatic Real that emerges from the heart of her fantasy and that triggers a breakdown of the very structure of her world. In the end, she opts for suicide rather than enduring the trauma of this encounter.

Except for a brief final montage, *Mulholland Drive* concludes with Diane's death. Through her suicide, the film suggests the intractability of her situation. The world of fantasy, which promises respite from the tortures of desire, always comes back to haunt the subject. In providing an escape from desire, fantasy pushes the subject in the direction of the traumatic Real. As Lynch's film shows, fantasy opens the subject to an otherwise impossible experience. Subjects often retreat from desire into fantasy, but just as often, they retreat from fantasy rather than experience the sense of loss—the encounter with the emptiness of the *objet petit a*—with which the fantasy confronts them. *Mulholland Drive*, though, obeys the logic of fantasy completely. Hence, it is appropriate that a fantasy figure has the last word in the film. In the film's final shot, Lynch shows a woman with blue hair sitting in the balcony at Club Silencio. She utters the word "*Silencio*." Thus, the film's final word is not Lynch's warning to the spectator to abandon the illusions of fantasy. Nor is it a call for quiet after all the rumblings in Diane's fantasy world. On the contrary, *Mulholland Drive* makes clear that only by insisting on fantasy to the end can one arrive at the experience of silence. This is the silence

that exists between fantasy and desire—the traumatic silence of the Real that the noise of everyday life always obscures.

Most fantasies—and especially the mass-produced fantasies of Hollywood—fail to be fantasmatic enough because they refuse to follow their own logic to its endpoint. They thus never arrive at the experience of silence that concludes *Mulholland Drive*. This is precisely the shortcoming that drives Theodor Adorno's critique of Hollywood cinema. As he says in *Minima Moralia*, "It is not because they turn their back on washed-out existence that escape-films are so repugnant, but because they do not do so energetically enough, because they are themselves just as washed-out, because the satisfactions they fake coincide with the ignominy of reality, of denial."<sup>31</sup> For Adorno, Hollywood movies do not fail—they are not ideological—because they go too far in the direction of fantasy but because they do not go far enough. As we have seen, *Mulholland Drive* functions as an implicit response to Adorno's criticism. The film turns to fantasy completely—"energetically enough," in Adorno's idiom—and it demands such a response from its spectators. Subjects today have remained too removed from fantasy, resisting the experience toward which it compels them. But *Mulholland Drive* calls us to fully immerse ourselves in fantasy, to abandon ourselves to its logic. Only in this way can we experience fantasy's privileged path to the Real.

## Notes

1. Stanley Kauffmann, "Sense and Sensibility," *New Republic*, October 29, 2001, 28.
2. This is not to say, of course, that the first part of the film is a pure representation of fantasy and the second part is wholly lacking in fantasmatic elements. Instead, in one we see the general structure of fantasy and in the other the general structure of desire. One cannot entirely separate fantasy and desire because fantasy lays down the initial trajectory that desire takes: there is no initial, pure desire outside a fantasmatic scenario. However, by establishing clear differences in the style of the two parts of the film, Lynch is able to reveal the distinct logic of each. For more on this splitting in Lynch's films, see Todd McGowan, "Finding Ourselves on a *Lost Highway*: David Lynch's Lesson in Fantasy," *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 2 (winter 2000): 51–73.
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 95. This idea finds an echo in the film theory of Stanley Cavell, who claims:

It is a poor idea of fantasy which takes it to be a world apart from reality, a world clearly showing its unreality. Fantasy is precisely what reality can be confused with. It is through fantasy that our conviction of the worth of reality is established; to forgo our fantasies would be to forgo our touch with the world." Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 85.

4. The subject cannot isolate its object because this object is not the goal of desire but the cause. Desire does not come into being in response to an identifiable object; instead, it emerges as lack. As Joan Copjec points out:

Desire is produced not as a striving for something but only as a striving for something else or something more. It stems from the feeling of our having been duped by language, cheated of something, not from our having been presented with a determinate object or goal for which we can aim. Desire has no content—it is for

nothing—because language can deliver to us no incontrovertible truth, no positive goal.” Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 55.

5. Jacques Lacan, “The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety, 1962–1963,” trans. Cormac Gallagher, session of December 19, 1962, unpublished.
6. Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 61.
7. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 270.
8. Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 60.
9. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan draws attention to this movement around the object that desire performs, a movement he associates with desire manifesting itself in the drive. He says, “It is not that desire clings to the object of the drive—desire moves around it, in so far as it is agitated in the drive.” Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 243.
10. We might read Lynch’s revelation of the fantasmatic dimension of temporality as a gloss on Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. According to Kant, the foundation for all experience lies in the subject’s grasp of events in temporal succession, as necessarily linked with one another. Experience as such thus depends on the subject existing in a unified time. But *Mulholland Drive* suggests that the temporality of the subject is not primary—not inherent to subjectivity as such—but the result of the subject’s turn to fantasy. The subject experiences temporality as it chooses to immerse itself in fantasy. In this sense, the film does not disprove Kant; however, it does indicate that temporality is not constitutive for the human subject but the result of a fantasmatic retreat from repetition.
11. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 10–11.
12. It is not at all coincidental that Rita takes her name from a *Gilda* movie poster. As Gilda, Rita Hayworth was clearly a fantasy object, testified to by her famous declaration that men go to bed with Gilda and wake up with Rita Hayworth.
13. The structure of the audition itself is highly fantasmatic: the producer warmly welcomes Betty to the audition, asks her if she wants something to drink, and works hard to make her feel comfortable. There are eight people in the room during the audition, including an agent who immediately takes Betty under her wing. In actuality, of course, new actors trying out for their first part are rarely treated so accommodatingly.
14. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 66.
15. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 117.
16. On this point, one should contrast *Mulholland Drive* with Andy and Larry Wachowski’s neo-noir *Bound* (1996). In *Bound*, a woman is in the position of the traditional noir hero, and the heterosexual noir relationship is transformed into a lesbian one. The result is that the sexual relationship between the noir hero, Corky (Gina Gershon), and the femme fatale, Violet (Jennifer Tilly), succeeds, whereas in traditional film noir the relationship always runs aground (or succeeds because the hero tames the femme fatale, as in Robert Montgomery’s *Lady in the Lake* [1947]). That the directors of *Bound* were conscious of this becomes evident in the final lines exchanged between the women: Corky asks Violet, “You know what the difference is between you and me, Violet?” Violet says, “No.” Corky responds, “Me neither.” At this point, the two drive away together in a shiny-new pickup truck, and the film ends. The concluding dialogue suggests that, unlike the relationship between the *male* noir hero and the femme fatale, a female noir hero and a femme fatale encounter no structural stumbling blocks. The problem

with this characterization is that it dooms the lesbian relationship to lovelessness. We love only in response to the failure of the sexual relationship. As Lacan put it, "What makes up for the sexual relationship is, quite precisely, love." Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 45. If this relationship comes off successfully (as *Bound* insists it does), then no love can emerge.

17. One of the key *political* features of every Lynch film is the insistence on the failure of the sexual relationship. When it does seem to succeed, as in *Blue Velvet* or *Wild at Heart*, Lynch clearly designates the relationship as fantasmatic. This rejection of the successful sexual relationship stands out because, as Raymond Bellour points out, the fundamental ideological function of cinema is the production of this relationship in the form of the diegetic couple. According to Bellour, "The configuration determined by the image of the diegetic couple remains absolutely central to the fiction of a cinema powerfully obsessed by the ideology of the family and of marriage, which constitutes its imaginary and symbolic base." Bellour, "A Bit of History," trans. Mary Quaintance, in Constance Penley, ed., *The Analysis of Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 14.
18. Jacques Lacan, "La Logique du Fantasme," in *Autres Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 326; my translation.
19. Michel Chion, *David Lynch*, trans. Robert Julian (London: BFI Press, 1995), 111.
20. Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2000), 232.
21. The difference between male and female fantasy structures echoes the difference between Kantian and Hegelian epistemology. For Kant, the thing in itself—the Real—remains always outside the subject's grasp and beyond the field of its knowledge. That is to say, the thing in itself is always and necessarily futural. In contrast, Hegel sees the thing in itself as part of the subject's experience that the subject has yet to recognize as its own. As in male fantasy, Kant theorizes the subject approaching the experience of the Real but never arriving at it, while Hegel, following the logic of female fantasy, theorizes the subject as having always already had the experience of the Real.
22. This is the second time that a character lip-syncs a Roy Orbison song in a Lynch film, the first being, of course, Dean Stockwell's famous rendition of "In Dreams" in *Blue Velvet*. Both performances occur at the heart of a fantasy space, at the edge of an encounter with a disturbing Real. For Lynch, Orbison's music combines perfectly to create the nostalgic bliss of the fantasy world *and* its underlying horror.
23. Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 103.
24. Elizabeth Cowie suggests that fantasy has this double role when she points out, "Fantasy, in imagining enjoyment without loss, always posits a loss already enacted to which it answers." Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 299.
25. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 3.
26. In her fantasy, Diane compounds Adam's difficulties by burdening him with the demands of this superegoic figure, who pressures Adam to submit to the dictates of the mob and to hire Camilla for his film, so that he might reap the benefits of this capitulation. Here, we see the traditional role of the superego, offering *jouissance* in exchange for submission.
27. Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," trans. James Strachey, in Philip Rieff, ed., *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 182.

28. If *Mulholland Drive* represents Lynch's most overtly feminist film, it also represents his least romanticized vision of femininity. In this way, the film challenges Martha Nochimson's characterization of the feminine in Lynch's work. According to Nochimson, Lynch identifies femininity with receptivity and the ability to cede control, and, in contrast to most filmmakers, he embraces these qualities. She claims:

The imbalance of value on force to the exclusion of receptivity—often equated with weakness—biases the culture and the movies against much that is associated with women's wisdom. Lynch's belief that the real requires a balance between force and receptivity suspends the usual exclusion of women from centers of cultural and narrative importance. In his films, the hero must get in touch with—or be—what has been excluded when the conventional Hollywood hero "takes control."  
Nochimson, *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 11.

In *Mulholland Drive*, it is clear that the feminine is not "receptivity" but a desire every bit as horrific and destructive as its male counterpart (such as that of Fred Madison in *Lost Highway*).

29. At the point of intersection between the worlds of fantasy and of desire, we see a figure of unrestrained and horrifying *jouissance*, whom Lynch shows existing behind Winkie's diner. This figure embodies the Real, and as such, one cannot endure his presence even for an instant, as we see when a man collapses immediately upon seeing him.
30. Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 101.
31. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1978), 202.