No hay banda

A Long, Strange Trip Down David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*

By Allen B. Ruch

New Introduction

I first wrote this piece in 2001 for The Modern Word. Dedicated to exploring Modernist and post-modern literature, the Modern Word also frequently branched out into other arts, particularly film and classical music. The piece was surprisingly popular, and wound up being printed in various magazines and anthologized by Centipede Press. With the renewed interest in *Twin Peaks*, I thought I'd finally place it back online. I have tried to keep my edits to a minimum, which explains the wordiness of the "Original Introduction."

Original Introduction

I realize that it's unusual for The Modern Word to be reviewing a movie; but for David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* I'll make a happy exception. A film noir "open work," *Mulholland Drive* is rich in textural density, invites multiple readings, rewards repeated viewings, and contains frequent allusions to itself, previous Lynch films, and countless other classics of cinema. Indeed, *Mulholland Drive* shares such a natural kinship with the works featured on this site that I feel obligated to feature it. Oh yes, it is my *duty.*

Of course, this may be my flimsy rationale for publicly airing my latest obsession—from the moment I first saw *Mulholland Drive* in the theaters, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Like most people, my first reaction was a stunned sense of bafflement. While I loved certain parts of the film, and thought it was stylistically brilliant, I was afraid that maybe this time Lynch had finally missed the final exit ramp on the Lost Highway and would never be seen again. But still, I just couldn't get *Mulholland Drive* out of my head. Its images remained fixed in my imagination, Badalamenti's music haunted me at random moments, and its characters dropped by to visit my dreams. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that anything this compelling couldn't be random or pointlessly

surreal; only a puzzle awaiting a solution can engage one's attention for so long. So taking that as a challenge, I set about trying to figure out whether *Mulholland Drive* made sense, or whether Lynch was just nutty. I began discussing it incessantly (some would say neurotically) with my friends, trading theories across the Internet, and matching my theories against a second viewing, this time in the proper sobriety of a Sunday afternoon.

As soon as the DVD was released, I bought a copy and watched it again, and the next day I was back on the Internet. (Just think, we cranks used to be confined to writing letters to newspapers!) I was surprised by Roger Ebert's admission that even after going through it frame-by-frame at the University of Colorado, he was still perplexed. I was also unhappy with Salon.com's explication, which did a lot of good work, but was still incomplete. So, rapidly approaching the limits of geek obsession, I went through the film frame-by-frame myself, scribbling down notes and finally pulling together my various ideas into a unified interpretation. Of course, being abnormally immersed in postmodern literature has given me a somewhat biased perspective, and I couldn't prevent comparisons to *Finnegans Wake*, Pynchon, etc. from creeping in, even if I tried. (And, well, I didn't try. Lynch is one of my favorite filmmakers, and if I had the time, I would add him to the Libyrinth in a heartbeat.) So the following essay is bit of a pop-academic hybrid, a combination of film review, detailed explication, thematic analysis, and fanboy rant. I nevertheless offer it in the hope that it may assist some people who remain baffled, reinforce the theories of other obsessed devotees, and hopefully introduce a few ideas of my own into the general conversation. While I make no claim to having the single correct interpretation of the film, I do believe that I offer a model that *works*; and that's reason enough to throw my hat into the ring. Of course, if you have yet to see the film, stop right here: it is impossible to discuss *Mulholland Drive* without spoiling the plot. And even more importantly, the film should be seen the first time with little or no expectations.

Overview

Mulholland Drive is a puzzle-box of a movie, one that presents hallucination and reality as equal and indistinguishable partners. Set in an overly-ripe Los Angeles, saturated with erotic colors and dark with oblique menace, the film glides through a dreamy landscape where the hyper-real is in constant collision with the fantastic. Identities shift and merge, false trails are projected and abandoned, and the viewer's perception is always hostage to the illusions of the characters. Like the contents of the enigmatic blue box at the center of the film, Lynch allows the logical core of *Mulholland Drive* to remain locked away behind a changing façade of smooth, cool surfaces. Submerged beneath the emotional reality of the characters, we perceive some sort of coherent sense; but reason alone is not enough to understand exactly what's going on. The film is a dream, an illusion; but not in the usual, cheap sense of the term—it's a Möbius strip, an Escher painting, a page from *Finnegans Wake;* it defies waking logic, and yet appears remarkably complete and seamless.

In fact, I think that *Finnegans Wake* is a very useful point of comparison. Joyce's intentions in writing the *Wake* were to capture a dream-like sense of the reality beneath wake-a-day logic, where every person and object are invested with multiple layers of meaning. Identities shift, merge and replicate, and the "story" is revealed in successive spirals of allusive and elusive stratification. While it would be groundless to suggest that Lynch was inspired by Joyce, they certainly share a similar aesthetic, and *Mulholland Drive* contains many cinematic analogs to the literary techniques pioneered in the *Wake*. The two works

even share a similar conceit—both take place in the dreaming subconscious of a single protagonist. Moreover, both protagonists have populated their world with archetypes drawn from people they know, and both dreams are haunted by a sense of primordial guilt and a longing for a prelapsarian state of blissful unity.

Also like *Finnegans Wake*, its layers and convolutions make *Mulholland Drive* a bit tricky to explain. In order to illuminate the film, a critic must first untangle it into several strands. Hopefully the reader will follow each until the end, where an intuitive leap may be required to recombine them back into a whole. To help, I've broken this essay down into five sections. In the first, I detail the basic story that serves as the foundation for the film's successive iterations. While this "plot" is revealed in the final third of the movie, it's never set forth in a linear fashion, and so I'll begin with its "untwisted" chronology. This is followed by the "illusory" Betty/Rita narrative, which may be seen as a fantastic elaboration of the base story. Next comes the "real" Diane/Camilla narrative, in which the base story will be revisited in the non-linear form as presented by Lynch. Following this, I include a section exploring some of the central mysteries of the film, such as the blue box and Club Silencio. And finally, as a postscript I list a few "dangling threads," or parts of the movie that still leave me perplexed.

The Base Story (Linear chronology)

Diane Selwyn is an ostensibly nice girl from Deep Rivers, Ontario, who may possibly have some serious psychological problems. After winning a jitterbug competition, she becomes interested in acting. The death of her Aunt Ruth leaves her with enough money to travel to Los Angeles, where she takes up residence in a seedy bungalow complex called Sierra Bonita. She auditions for the starring role in *The Silvia North Story*, directed by Bob Brooker. Unfortunately, she loses the part to a woman named Camilla Rhodes.

Although Diane is filled with jealousy (certainly tinged by denial), she is very attracted to Camilla, and the two begin a love affair. As Camilla's star rises, she secures occasional small roles for Diane in her films. By now, Diane has fallen utterly in love with Camilla, although her emotions are complicated by envy and perhaps some darker feelings—there is a part of Diane that wants to consume the object of her desire. (Their names play upon several literary allusions as well, with the virginal huntress of the moon staking the lesbian vampire Camilla as her prey.) Camilla is no angel either, and Diane is not the only lover she's taken in her rise to fame. It's obvious that Camilla uses her sex appeal to get ahead.

Events take a dramatic shift when Camilla falls in love with a recently divorced director named Adam Kesher, who's making a film featuring both Camilla and Diane. Camilla makes an attempt to break off her affair with Diane, who throws her out of her apartment in a rage. Still, things are not as simple as a change in affections. For one thing, Adam and Camilla's relationship is not without its kinky side, and they seem to enjoy taunting Diane. While they might be trying to lure her into a lopsided ménage-à-trois, Diane remains obsessed with Camilla, who still retains some affection and tenderness for her old lover. Returning to Sierra Bonita, she tries to explain herself to Diane, but she's rebuffed, and Diane masturbates desperately as the room grows blurry.

Camilla continues to reach out, and she begs Diane to come to a glamorous party at Adam's house. She surprises Diane by intercepting her limo on Mulholland Drive, leading her to the party through a romantic shortcut in the woods. Here, Diane encounters several intriguing people, including a mysterious Italian (played by Angelo Badalamenti), a man in a cowboy hat (who may have been sent to check up on her earlier in the evening), and a blonde starlet who obviously has a "thing" with Camilla as well. She also meets Adam's mother Coco, who immediately grasps Diane's emotional situation, and offers her a condescending form of sympathy. After Diane nervously explains her experiences in Hollywood and her "professional" relationship with Camilla, Coco's knowing "I see" and consoling hand-pat are devastating. It's obvious that Diane is seen as a nobody, a pathetic loser suffering from unrequited love and worthy only of pity. When Adam and Camilla have a laughing fit trying to announce their engagement, Diane's humiliation is complete.

Consumed by rage and jealousy, the increasingly unstable Diane decides to have Camilla killed. She meets Joe, a scruffy-looking hit man at Winkie's Diner, where a waitress named Betty serves her coffee and a strange young man glances at her from the cash register. Sitting in the harsh glare under the window, Diane seals the deal and orders her lover's execution, handing the hit man a wrinkled stack of hundreds and Camilla's headshot photo. ("This is the girl," she says, in a phrase that will echo throughout the film.) Joe informs Diane that he'll leave a sign when he's completed his task—a blue key. She naïvely asks what the key opens, and receives only harsh, mocking laughter in return.

Soon after this meeting, Joe fulfills his contract and the blue key is left behind on Diane's coffee table. Plunged into a spiral of guilt and fear, Diane sinks further into depression, and learns from a neighbor that a pair of detectives are seeking her for questioning. Suffering from hallucinations of her murdered lover, she sits on the couch and stares at the blue key, red-eyed and trembling. Suddenly a knock on the door triggers her repressed guilt and despair, and she experiences a psychotic break. Overcome by a vision of her grandparents (or parents?) convulsed in shrill laughter and flailing at her with clawing hands, she runs screaming into the bedroom. Falling to the bed, she pulls a gun from a drawer and shoots herself in the mouth.

The Fantasy—The Betty/Rita Narrative

The above "base story" forms the palimpsest for a secondary narrative, an alternate version of reality created by Diane during her final days of despair. This self-generated world allows Diane to escape into a delusion of wish fulfillment, in which all her desires are realized and events beyond her "waking" control are given overwrought explanations. Although presented by Lynch as a fluid and coherent narrative, I don't believe it takes place at any single instant in Diane's life, as would a simple dream or fantasy. It is rather a conglomeration of desires and projections, a parallel interior world fueled by Diane's possible schizophrenia and advanced during moments when she "disconnects" from the real world. (Her grief-stricken masturbation, her nearly-comatose states of depressed sleep, and of course when she confronts the blue key in the moments before her suicide.) Nor does Lynch present it cinematically as a traditional dream sequence. It exists as an entity in itself, and seamlessly penetrates Diane's "real" narrative at several junctions which function on an emotional level outside of logic, merging the two sides of the Möbius strip into one. Having said all that, for the sake of simplicity I will continue to

label the Betty/Rita narrative as a "fantasy," which scans better than "possibly schizophrenic parallel interior world."

Although it takes much of its inspiration from Hollywood movies in terms of tone and plot structure (Diane seems to favor film noir, idealized fifties classics, and crime dramas from *The Godfather* to *Pulp Fiction*), the Betty/Rita narrative draws most of its raw material from Diane's actual life. Important people are invested with magnified significance, casual figures are revealed as shadowy operators, locations resonate at higher energy levels, and props such as espresso cups, address books, and headshot photos reappear in altered states. Perhaps the best cinematic precursor to this is *The Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy fills Oz with people and objects drawn from her own daily experiences and wishful imaginings. (It may be useful to recall that Lynch's *Wild at Heart* used *The Wizard of Oz* as a loose template.) But Diane is no Dorothy; despite the generally self-rewarding nature of her fantasy, she can never escape the dual horrors of what she has done and what she has lost. This sense of repressed reality lurks at the very core of her delusion, exerting its dark gravity as a force of disintegration, always pushing the illusion towards a revelatory unmasking. At two related points this force acquires physical manifestation—Club Silencio, and the mysterious blue box. Both forms fluoresce with multiple layers of meaning, and will be discussed later in greater detail.

So we "begin" at the "beginning." The movie opens with a surreal jitterbug sequence in which we see a glowing young Diane flanked by a smiling old couple, presumably her grandparents. (Some critics and viewers have postulated that they may be her parents, or possibly the judges of the Jitterbug contest. The script suggests they are her grandparents.) She is surely a model teen, and obviously much loved. After a slow pan across what will later be revealed as Diane's death-bed, we sink into her pillow (perhaps symbolic of beginning a dream?) and the movie proper begins.

We enter Diane's fantasy on a cloud of brooding music, gliding over Mulholland Drive—the location where Camilla secretly met Diane before finally crushing her hopes. A black limo pulls to a stop. Two assassins are about to shoot their passenger, a lovely brunette in a slinky black dress. (That this woman is Camilla is concealed from us until later in the film, when we enter the "real" world.)

Although we are now in the fantasy narrative, we have no way of knowing so—Lynch offers none of the standard cinematic tropes to suggest we are in a dream sequence. Our perceptions are hostage to the demands of the fantasy itself, and by initially focusing on Camilla/Rita instead of Diane/Betty, Lynch allows us to assume the brunette will have the starring role, one of the film's many sleight-of-hand tricks used to divert our attention. And of course, the very fact that Lynch *begins* the movie with Diane's fantasy is disorienting; until the blue box is opened two-thirds into the film, we can only assume that what we are seeing is "real." Our expectations are used against us, and we fall into the traps of perception and logical thinking. It is a lesson that will be brought home later at Club Silencio.

In order to begin her fantasy, Diane must "rescue" Camilla from the fate that Diane herself has set in motion. Though we never know where (or if?) the hit took place, if we assume that Diane felt as though her life had ended the night of the party, it's

understandable that she'd convert the black limousine into a vehicle of death. After all, didn't it ferry her to her own grim fate? But Camilla is allowed to escape her doom through the intervention of joy-riding teens, who crash into the limo, killing her film noir executioners. Camilla stumbles away, dazed but alive. This catastrophe also serves another purpose. While the auto accident in *Wild at Heart* was merely a diversion, designed to disorient Sherilyn Fenn for the sake of a haunting image (and to provide a sharp reminder of reality for the film's lovestruck couple), here the crash carries its sexy brunette past disorientation into total amnesia. In Diane's dream, she'll get the Camilla she wants: a blank screen upon which she can project her fantasies. (Which also works well in setting up the film's exploration of perceived reality, and its implied critique of Hollywood. See the Salon.com article for more on this second theme.) Scared and numb, the now-nameless woman wanders past Sunset Boulevard. Finding a bungalow temporarily vacated by its tenant ("Aunt Ruth" on the way to Canada), she slips inside and falls immediately asleep.

After this, Lynch complicates the matter further by inserting several parallel narratives before we return to our brunette *tabula rasa*. The first is the most problematic, and it involves a young man who's been plagued by a dream. The location is Winkie's Diner; but of course, a first-time viewer is unaware of its significance as the location where Diane arranged for Camilla's death. Here we see a young man with wide, staring eyes (and an uncanny resemblance to H.P. Lovecraft), talking anxiously to an older man who might be his psychiatrist. His problem is a recurring nightmare, in which he walks from the diner to an adjacent alley and sees a monster with a horrible face. Prompted by the psychiatrist, the man walks around the corner and, in a chilling scene, sees the creature and faints. (Later in the film, we will see this monster again, packing a blue box into a bag and releasing the tiny, animated figures of Diane's grandparents.)

First of all, what is this monster? And second of all, why is this thread problematic? Although the monster will be discussed in greater detail below, for now it should suffice to say that it represents the forces of evil and entropy called into being when Diane orders the death of her lover. While the presence of the monster may be directly ascribed to Diane, the scene itself poses a deeper question because it contains a narrative ambiguity allowing for two readings—it can be seen as part of Diane's fantasy, or it can stand alone as an independent but related narrative. We know that the disturbed man was present at Winkie's the day Diane ordered the hit. Is she merely incorporating him into her dream as a possible "guide," meant to lead her to the monster of her own creation? Or does this sequence actually exist in the "real" world? Could the young man be a psychic who sensed the rupture in Diane's moral reality on that day, and has since become haunted by the apparition it called into being?

I actually prefer this latter explanation. Not only does it add an extra vertical dimension to the story, it makes a Lynchian sort of sense, and resonates with the world of *Twin Peaks*. In the Lynchian universe, acts of evil may manifest as spiritual presences on the material plane, which in turn may be interact with those sensitive enough to perceive them. (The Man from Another Place wants his garbonzonia!)

Soon after this sequence, Diane finally enters her own fantasy narrative in the form of "Betty," a name she appropriated from her waitress at Winkie's. Betty is Diane's idealized self-image, and appears as an unbelievably perky blonde, filled with a down-home sense of kindness and a chipper go-get-'em attitude. The scenes of her arrival have a deliberately forced aspect—everything is just too *too*; Betty is too perky, L.A. is too bright, the cabbie is too kind, and so on. This hyper-reality reflects not only Diane's first impressions of L.A., but acts as a protective veneer covering the sordid reality to which she later succumbs. Before leaving the airport, we see Betty bid farewell to an old couple she met on the plane. An astute observer will note that this is the second time they've appeared in the film—they are the jitterbug champion's beaming grandparents. (Of course, at this point a viewer has no idea what the hell that whole jitterbug thing was anyway!) Although re-cast as an anonymous but kindly couple in the fantasy narrative, they become increasingly more invested with powers over Diane, and will return at the end, when they drive her to suicide. A hint of this darker purpose may be seen as they leave the airport and stray from Betty's point-of-view. Sitting together in the back of a cab, they nod at each other crazily, their faces locked in rictus-like grins like dolls preparing to shatter under some terrible pressure. It's an uncomfortable scene, as if Lynch is giving us a peek behind the curtain, where we see the characters as enslaved automatons devoid of free will once their role has been discharged upon Diane's stage.

Before Camilla and Betty meet, Lynch introduces the final thread of this convoluted fantasy—the story of the director Adam Kesher. Unlike the haunted man at Winkie's, this thread can only be understood as Diane's creation, and represents the most free-form of all her baroque inventions. Essentially, Adam is a stand-in for all directors, and he's imbued with a parodistic sense of egoism and brilliance. His purpose in the illusory narrative is simple—to become the victim of a cabal that keeps Diane/Betty from landing major parts. Unable to accept that she lost her first starring role to Camilla, Diane's fantasy insulates her from failure by fabricating a Byzantine conspiracy. While of course "Betty Elms" would be a natural for the starring role in Adam's movie, he is coerced by nearly supernatural powers into casting an unknown actress named Camilla Rhodes. This fantasy version of Camilla, however, is actually a blonde; and she's "played" by the blonde starlet Diane met at Adam's party, an actress who gave Camilla a more-than-friendly kiss. This clever substitution permits Diane to demonize her rival while maintaining the purity of her idealized Camilla. It's also telling that Diane's imaginary conspiracy is aligned *for* Camilla and not *against* Betty. This preserves Betty's wholesome lovability (who could possibly conspire against *Betty*?), while simultaneously implying that Camilla lacks the talent required to earn the role on her own.

Unsurprisingly, Diane incorporates more of the party guests into the conspiracy, reinscribing Adam's associates as malign forces preventing her success. This hallucinatory re-casting happily gives Lynch license to engage in all-out Lynchian weirdness. The Cowboy is transformed into a cryptic enforcer with the aloof gravity of a fallen angel; the severe Italian is now a Mafioso mogul who demands an impossibly perfect cup of espresso; and even the redoubtable Michael J. Anderson makes an appearance as "Mr. Roque," a mastermind bound to a wheelchair and locked in a vault of glass and red velvet. (Oddly, only Anderson's head is used, inserted over the body of a realistic, man-sized dummy. If one did not recognize him as the famous backwards-talking "Man from Another Place" in *Twin Peaks*, one might not realize that the actor is a dwarf! Lynch

draws further attention to this by placing "Mr. Roque" in a room remarkably like the Black Lodge from *Twin Peaks*. Yet another example of *Mulholland Drive*'s nested illusions and Lynch's cinematic self-referentiality.) The appearances of these conspirators strike a jarring balance between the sinister and the comical, pushing the fantasy to the edge of surrealism as they exert their pressure on the director. The only "normal" event in Adam's day is taken from a comment Diane overheard him make about catching his wife sleeping with the pool-cleaner. But the fact that Mrs. Kesher's paramour is played by Billy Ray Cyrus adds another element of makeshift appropriation, as if Diane was inserting an image of blue-collar maleness plucked from the background noise of American pop culture.

Despite the fascinating characters surrounding Adam, the real story naturally revolves around the two women. Betty arrives at her "aunt's" bungalow, which is a glorified version Diane's real apartment at Sierra Bonita. (Of course, this *could be* the real Aunt Ruth's bungalow; we later know she lived in Hollywood when she was alive.) There she meets Coco, Adam's mother, now playing the role of a kind but nosy landlady. Upon entering the apartment, Betty is startled to discover the amnesiac brunette in the shower. When asked for her name, she blanks—she does not remember. Spying an old Rita Heyworth *Gilda* poster, she selects "Rita." The fact that the poster is Diane's fabrication, too, may indicate something about her movie-star fixations, as well as giving her an embedded hint that something is amiss. The poster's telling tag-line reads, "There never was a woman like Gilda!" The transformations are now complete—Camilla has become the mysterious and wonderfully dependent Rita, Diane has become the idealistic Betty, and Adam must cast some "other" Camilla Rhodes to please a shadowy cabal.

Needless to say, Rita and Betty hit it off spectacularly. But even this potential union contains the seeds of its own dissolution, and their decision to discover Rita's real identity can only lead in one direction. Almost immediately, elements of reality intrude upon the dream, transfigured into symbolic shapes. Opening Rita's *haute couture* purse, they discover $50,000 in stacks of crisp hundreds—the wad of grimy cash Diane handed to the hit man, now amplified and fetishized into another film noir trope, like finding a mysterious dame in one's apartment. But even more importantly, the blue key has also made the transition, emerging from the depths of the black purse and gleaming with a Sphinx-like aura of intrigue. No longer a cheap chrome blank, it's now a stylized, triangular rod from an art-deco vision of the future. Later in the film we'll discover what the key opens, when the blue box suddenly appears in Betty's black handbag. Like the blue box, I find the black purse to be another vaginal symbol, one resonating with film noir associations and rich with natal mysteries. In the movies, the interior of a woman's purse is co-located in some murky, chthonian world where various symbolic objects may suddenly materialize: mirrors, lipstick, stacks of cash, handguns, strange keys, puzzle-boxes....

Another significant irruption occurs at Winkie's Diner. In a mirrored reflection of cause and effect, the women are served breakfast by a waitress named "Diane." Like the poster, it's another pointed echo from the real world, as if Diane's mind is trying to break free from the delusion. In fact, the name is their first real clue to solving the mystery—Rita suddenly remembers the name "Diane Selwyn." Could it be Rita's true name?

Consulting the phone book, they make plans to investigate. This sets up one of the film's more obvious-in-retrospect hints. The girls call Diane Selwyn; but it's Betty, not Rita, who remarks "It's strange to be calling yourself." Rita replies, "Maybe it's not me." But all they get is a voice on the answering machine, a voice Rita "knows."

An even stronger hint comes later that night, when Betty is visited by Louise Bonner, a spooky old psychic appearing at her door like a chattier version of the monster. Informed by her spiritual sources that something is "terribly wrong" at Ruth's bungalow, she tries to pry her way inside, where she senses that Rita is hidden. When Ruth's niece tells Louise that her name is "Betty," the crone shakes her head and moans, "No it's not...." Like the palm reader in *Jacob's Ladder* ("You're already dead!"), her message penetrates the fantasy with a stark reminder of the truth, but Coco leads this Cassandra away before her warnings can be deciphered.

Besides the quest for Rita's identity and the story of Adam, the fantasy narrative occasionally spins off into eddies. All these incorporate material from the "real" Diane narrative, and like a dream, identities change, events are conflated, and some clues lead nowhere. An early scene introduces a pair of TV detectives; but Diane imagines them to be after Rita, when in the real world it is Diane, not Camilla, who is under investigation. One dementedly violent sequence features Joe the hit man, who visits an associate named Ed in his shady office. We catch Ed in the tail end of telling a story about an "unbelievable" car crash, and though it's not explained, they both share a laugh as if something terribly clever had transpired. Could it be Ed was remarking on his own fantasy "assignment," which was figuring out a way stop the hit on Camilla? Or perhaps, as one commenter has suggested, a car crash really did botch the hit and kill Camilla? In any event, Joe guns him down and takes his black address book, an item Diane saw in the possession of the hit man.

We now return to the central theme. In one of the more remarkable scenes in the film, the ditzy Betty turns out to be a spectacular actress—which, I suppose, surprises us only because we are not Diane! A following scene allows Adam and Betty to trade a few highly charged glances, perhaps revealing that Diane's jealousy is more complicated that it will later seem. They never talk, however, as the sudden appearance of "Camilla Rhodes" causes Betty to unexpectedly run home. Perhaps even in her fantasy, seeing Adam meet and/or cast Camilla is too painful, so she retreats back to the security of Rita, her delusionary Camilla. Adam watches Camilla Rhodes' audition and obeys the dictates of the conspiracy: "This is the girl."

Continuing to play Nancy Drew, Rita and Betty decide to visit Diane Selwyn's residence, which turns out to be an apartment at—Sierra Bonita. A neighbor confirms their suspicion that Rita is not Diane, and she points them to the correct bungalow. It is, of course, the real Diane Selwyn's abode; and so the two girl detectives open the door from the dream world into a partial version/vision of reality. Inside, they find the corpse of an "unknown" blonde woman decomposing on the bed. Horrified, Rita runs outside screaming.

As the corpse is almost certainly that of Diane after she shoots herself, we may mark another point where dream reality slips away from waking logic: how could Diane be

hallucinating her own dead body, in exactly the same position as it will actually be? And how could her own death be such a critical a part of her fantasy narrative? And so on. Again, the Möbius strip twists out of our grasp; but we will only realize this at the very end of the movie, when the identity of the corpse is finally revealed. And yet, even this is thrown into doubt. Although we see Diane commit suicide on the bed, in the illusionary world, the corpse is dressed differently—it has Diane's hair, but Camilla's black dress! Still the Möbius strip slithers away, its two-in-one side(s) suggesting the unity of Betty/Rita, both creatures of Diane's hallucination. This would also explain why seeing the body filled Rita with panic: if the corpse is a conflation of both their real-world deaths, Diane's "Rita" senses both Camilla's past and Diane's future.

Realizing that she might be in mortal danger, Rita allows Betty to cut her hair and replaces it with a blonde wig. This blurs their identities even further, and reinforces Diane's jealousy of Camilla—her vampiric obsession demands that the two merge into one! Yet there is a more sinister reason than this inertial pull toward reunification—why does Rita now wish to resemble the corpse? And why does Betty help this along? Could this be Diane's mind trying to exorcize her own blondeness, trying to shift her death onto Rita/Camilla? Wouldn't it be just *lovely* if Camilla would give her life for Diane?

No matter what subterranean reasons underlie the makeover, Betty and Rita now look more alike. Hardly surprisingly, their traumatic day drives the women closer together, and that night they have sex. It's quite a tender moment, and when Betty asks Rita if she's ever "done this" before, her lover replies, "I don't know." Betty confesses to being in love with Rita, and the two consummate their relationship.

This memorably erotic scene is actually the turning point of the fantasy narrative. Betty has exactly what she—or Diane—wants: a Camilla free of past experiences, receptive to her love, and ready to be sacrificed, absorbed, and devoured. And yet the fact that this narrative is an illusion calls even that into question, for *both* Betty and Rita are fantasies, complementary projections of Diane's dissociated self. Their consummation isn't even transgressive; it's masturbatory, delusional. It's quite possible that their orgasms (tastefully assumed, and certainly mutual) coexist with the masturbatory release reached by Diane back in the real world. After this climactic "little death," everything starts to come apart at the seams in both worlds, and the dream falls under the increasing power of reality's unravelling hand.

Shortly after making love, Rita slowly emerges from sleep, the word "silencio" emerging unbidden from her lips as if broadcast from a million miles away. More Spanish follows: "No hay banda," or "There is no band." (Rita speaks Spanish because Camilla spoke Spanish, a fact established later during the party scene.) Upon waking, Rita insists that Betty take her somewhere, a place she seems to have remembered in her sleep: Club Silencio.

Club Silencio is a surreal cabaret, located in the depths of an alley and advertised in blue neon. Seated in the theater, Betty and Rita watch a disquieting performance in which death and loneliness are principle themes, illusion is touted over reality, and the audience is constantly fooled into believing the fake is genuine. After a thunderclap causes Betty to

tremble uncontrollably, the stage is flooded with flickering blue light. The light fades, and a singer delivers a heart-rending version of Roy Orbison's "Crying" sung in Spanish ("Llorando"). But before the song ends, the singer slumps to the ground, and we realize she's been lip-syncing to a recording. Slowly but knowingly, Betty reaches into her purse. There, as if precipitated from the shimmering blue light, is a new object: a smooth blue box with a triangular keyhole.

The two women rush home, but as Rita retrieves her key from the bedroom closet, she turns around to find that Betty has disappeared. (Lynch is careful to have included Betty's footsteps upon entering the room; we hear none to mark a possible retreat.) Alone, Rita inserts her blue key into the lock, and the box opens, revealing only a dark and empty interior. The camera rushes inside and passes through, but Rita is gone. The box falls to the floor, tumbling through the void where she was just standing. The bedroom is empty.

Several odd things occur as the fantasy decays into the "real" narrative. First, we see Aunt Ruth, who is supposed to be dead in Diane's world, and visiting Canada in Betty's. She enters the bedroom and looks puzzled—and we see there is no box. We then watch as the room dissolves into the darkened walls of Diane's Sierra Bonita bungalow, then wavers back: the hallucination is fading. This happens again, and we see a healthy Diane sleeping on her bed, in the exact same position as her corpse. The Cowboy opens her door and says, "Hey pretty girl, time to wake up." We look again—her body is now in corpse form, and the Cowboy leaves. We observe Diane's corpse change into her sleeping body, and she reluctantly wakes up to answer the doorbell. It's her neighbor, come to claim an ashtray. We are now in the "reality" narrative, dropped into the morning that Diane commits suicide.

The Reality—The Diane/Camilla Narrative

The rest of the movie plays out in the real world, essentially following the plot as outlined above in the "Base Story" section. This isn't to say that the film tracks only Diane and remains entirely grounded in objective reality; at several points Lynch allows the dream world to intrude, reminding us that we're still connected to Diane's unstable universe. Even if Diane may not see the blue box and the monster, we observers are awarded a privileged view. Lynch tells this part of the tale using numerous flashbacks inserted within the basic linear sequence of Diane waking up, returning an ashtray to her neighbor, seeing a vision of Camilla, brewing coffee, staring at the key, and shooting herself. These intercuts are deliberately confusing, as Lynch makes sly use of repeated elements to suggest a false sense of continuity: ringing telephones, drinks in hand, and passages from one room to another all seem to "connect" non-contiguous scenes. The best way to keep track of this is by observing what Diane's wearing in each scene (in the "present," she's always in a grungy robe) and by keeping an eye on various objects in her room. (Or as Lynch himself suggests in the DVD's "10 Clues," "Notice the robe, the ashtray, and the coffee cup.")

The final third of the film begins with Diane waking up to greet her neighbor. We see the hit man's blue key on her coffee table—Camilla is dead. Weary and distraught, Diane sees a sudden vision of Rita/Camilla standing in her apartment. Bursting into tears she cries, "Camilla, you've come back." She spaces out momentarily, "coming to" in the spot where she's just hallucinated her lover.

This is all *very* baffling to first-time viewers. Not only are we unaware that Diane and Betty are the same person, we've been lead to believe that Rita and Camilla Rhodes are two completely different women! So why is this "Diane" woman calling our Rita by the name of that blonde floozy who stole Betty's role? And is "Diane" really the same actress who played Betty? And what's with that "normal" blue key? Uh-oh, Lynch is up to something....

Recovering her senses, Diane begins brewing a pot of coffee; but a sudden flashback catches the viewer off-guard, and we are now in the past, the coffee cup transposed to a whiskey glass. Camilla is sprawled naked on Diane's couch, and setting the glass down next to her neighbor's ashtray, Diane playfully begins foreplay. Although Camilla seems to enjoy it, after a few seconds she pushes her lover away. Much to Diane's resentment, Camilla insists that they "shouldn't do this anymore."

We are about to learn why Camilla has had a change of heart. After the couch scene, we move ahead to the set of Adam's movie, which stars Camilla and features Diane in a minor role. Clearing the set of all extras, Diane is practically invited to watch Adam and Camilla "practice" a make-out scene. Needless to say, she is mortified. Soon afterwards, Camilla comes over to Diane's to try to explain, but she is thrown out, and a miserable Diane returns to the couch to masturbate joylessly. She stops when the phone rings.

This is followed by another flashback, fluidly spliced to the previous scene by a ringing phone. (We again note that Diane is dressed differently.) It is now after the confrontation/masturbation scene; perhaps that same day, but possibly weeks later. This is the critical flashback, the biggie, the key to the whole movie: Diane's limo journey up Mulholland Drive and her subsequent humiliation at Adam's party. In this crucial sequence, we learn Diane's real history, meet most of the people she casts into her fantasy, and witness the emotional destruction that results in her decision to have Camilla murdered.

After watching Diane break down at the party, we quickly move to Winkie's Diner, where Diane hires the hit man, meets a waitress named Betty, and trades glances with the psychic man. It is here that Diane crosses the line, making decisions that will force her to repress overwhelming feelings of guilt and loss. It is here that Diane creates the monster, the blue box, and her own tormenting agents of conscience. To underscore this, Lynch breaks from the realistic narrative at this point to take us outside Winkie's Diner. We see the filthy monster, now shorn of dream-glamor and looking more like a homeless outcast. It packs the blue box into a bag and sets it down. We then see Diane's grandparents, shrunken and maniacal, issue from the bag and set off on their mission.

Finally, we are back in the present. Wrapped in her robe, Diane sits staring at the blue key, trembling slightly, as she trembled in Club Silencio during the thunderclap. Startled by a fierce pounding on the door (The detectives? The Cowboy? Fate, à la Beethoven's Fifth? Perhaps even Camilla?) Diane watches in horror as her grandparents slip under the door and expand in size, a pair of terrorizing harpies hounding her to the bedroom. Flinging herself on the bed, she opens her drawer, where she pulls out a gun and shoots herself in the mouth. However, we also see a glimpse of something in the drawer—the blue box?

By now, we are familiar with the position of her dead body, and we watch as smoke fills the room and it's flooded with blue light. We briefly see the cryptic face of the monster, then an image of a happy Diane and Camilla swirling in a dreamlike vision of LA. The scene fades into the flickering stage at Club Silencio, where a matronly woman with nightmarishly blue hair whispers, "Silencio."

Questions in a World of Blue: The Box, the Monster, the Old Couple, and Club Silencio

Of course, the blue box is one of the biggest mysteries of the film, and there are numerous theories concerning its nature. First of all, I think the box has many interconnected meanings, and it's unnecessarily limiting to settle on just one. I also think that the box, the monster, Diane's shrunken grandparents, and Club Silencio are all related, and form a system not unlike the id, the ego, the superego, and the collective unconscious respectively.

One its most basic level, the blue box represents the repressed memories and awareness of reality that Diane must seal away in order to construct her fantasy world. Inscribed with Camilla's death, it's called into being when Diane orders the hit, a self-generated answer to her own question, "What does the key open?" Also incarnated at this moment are the monster and her grandparents. The monster represents her disfigured self (her ruined ego?), and seems to change appearance each time it's seen. Like the picture of Dorian Gray, when Diane becomes more pure and beautiful as Betty, the monster grows from a homeless wretch into a terrible hag. (Although the pilot-script labels the monster as male, it is played by a female actress. Roger Ebert also suggests that it may be a projection of Diane's decomposing body.) But the monster is not an exclusively evil figure. It also functions as a force of entropy (or justice?) within Diane herself, working to dissolve her fantasy and bring about self-realization. It is the monster that packs the blue box (the buried desires of the id, acted upon and then repressed again?) into a brown paper bag, the sleek black purse now in a fallen state. From this bag also emerge her grandparent-tormentors (the judgmental superego?), transformed from benevolent protectors of innocence into furies armed with talons of guilt. Tiny and nagging at first, they will grow in stature like the voice of conscience, eventually overwhelming Diane and driving her to suicide.

On a mythopoetic level, the blue box naturally calls to mind Pandora's Box, with the dangers of opening restricted to the destruction of Diane's personal universe. And of course, a sexual involution is folded into the box as well—after all, two of the main sources of Diane's anger are erotic emptiness and romantic unfulfillment, and part of her fantasy may be unleashed while masturbating.

So why does the box appear in her purse at Club Silencio? To answer this question, one has to first understand the nature of Club Silencio, and like the box, it also contains several metaphorical dimensions. To start with, its very existence as a nocturnal cabaret evokes a host of mundane associations: it is a theater, a place where performance and voyeurism exchange energy, a somewhat seamy nexus of desire and illusion. No one attending the performance seems particularly happy; Silencio is a home for broken hearts, insomniac castaways, and 3-a.m. refugees from sleep's tranquility. Club Silencio does not need to advertise—its patrons wake up in the middle of the night and know

where to go. (Pynchon readers might easily imagine its regulars to be familiar with the underground postal system from *The Crying of Lot 49*. I'm sure Sliencio's bathroom contains W.A.S.T.E. graffiti!) But where an ordinary cabaret thrives on bankable illusion, Club Silencio highlights the confusion between reality and perception, and strives to expose theatrical pretense. At one point, its Magician-emcee pronounces, "It is . . . an illusion. Listen!" and calls forth a rolling thunderclap. Diane trembles uncontrollably, as if all her illusions were toppled by the 100-letter thunderword of the demiurge. Could this thunderclap be the knock on the door back in her pre-suicide real world? Or, as one commenter has suggested, the gunshots that ended the lives of Camilla and Diane?

The Magician vanishes and the stage glows with a watery blue light, its square shape offering a more-than-passing resemblance to a shimmering blue box. Indeed, it is at this point that the box most likely manifests in Diane's purse, but she has yet to realize it: she has been exposed, the gig is up, and from this point she can no longer find refuge in illusion. Rebekah Del Rio takes the stage, and transfixed, Betty holds onto Rita for one last time as they open themselves to the heartbreak of "Crying," it's painful but appropriate lyrics masked in Spanish. But of course, even that's a sham. When the singer collapses and the recording runs out, Betty knows just what to do, and reaches into her purse. In its dark, uterine depths, she finds the blue box that will be her undoing. Now that she has achieved her desired union with Rita/Camilla, her fantasy can no longer sustain itself, and its essential hollowness is exposed: *no hay banda*. Taking it home, Diane allows "Rita" to insert the key, and she is negated from existence—after all, the box has always contained Camilla's death. The fantasy is over, and all that's left is the realization of horror and the mocking pursuit of the furies.

In one way, Club Silencio may be seen as the blue box writ large. Where the box represents Diane's fragile illusions and suppressed awareness, Club Silencio encompasses the whole world—or at the very least, the film itself. Lynch the artist is playing with his audience, reminding us that what we are watching, too, is a mirage of sound and vision. Even though the Magician has informed us that the band does not exist and everything we hear is recorded, like Betty and Rita, we are mesmerized by the singer's passion and intensity, easily forgetting that she's only lip-syncing. When she falls to the stage (all part of the act, ladies and gentlemen!), we are as startled as her audience—startled, and quite foolishly so, because we have *allowed* ourselves to be duped, we were willing participants in our own self-deception. It also drives home the deeper illusion of film itself: *no hay banda*. And so Lynch takes this epiphany, this rupture in our suspension of disbelief, and bends it to his art: we watch Betty take possession of the box with our consciousness altered and chills tingling our flesh.

Club Silencio has another riddle to pose—the Blue Haired Lady. Aloof in her "box" above the stage, she sits quietly but imperiously, garishly made-up and crowned with a bizarre head of electric blue hair. While neither her presence nor purpose are ever explained, her single line of dialogue brings the film to a close. She may be the mistress of Club Silencio, she may be a favored patron, or she may be an idealized form of the monster—especially if we see the monster as a minister of secrets, functioning as a merciless agent of self-realization. If Club Silencio is the universal image of Diane's personal blue box, its Blue Haired Lady could be the Queen of Monsters. After all, both Lady and monster reappear in the last few minutes of the film. First we see the monster,

its face hovering over Diane's fuming bed. The upright bedpost visible in the glowing blue fog gives the whole scene a resemblance to the stage of Club Silencio, where the vertical microphone was seen gleaming in the shimmering blue light. When this similarity is reinforced by the appearance of the actual stage, we again see the Blue Haired Lady, positioned above the tableau to whisper her parting incantation: "Silencio."

A provocative word to end with, as the audience of *Mulholland Drive* will be inclined to anything *but* silence as they leave the theater! Perhaps, as some viewers have suggested, it is not a closure, but a beginning, a command: Silence—the curtain is about to lift on the *real* play. But even so, it is still the last word we, as the audience, hear; and is therefore inextricably linked to what has gone before. Like many "difficult" artists, Lynch is reluctant to discuss his own work. Perhaps "Silencio" is both an artistic statement and a Zen-like instruction, echoing the many mystical beliefs relating silence with wisdom and understanding. Lynch could be suggesting that *Mulholland Drive* should be first allowed to settle in the subconscious world of dreams, where much of the film seems to operate, and where it finds a sublime kind of harmony. After all, even if the core of the film resists logical understanding, it can still have meaning. Its very enigma holds a truth elusive to the rational mind, and yet still meaningful within the realm of emotional and spiritual experience. To return to earlier examples, think of the *frisson* experienced when making a Möbius strip, the wonder of being absorbed in an Escher print, or the playful joy felt when reading aloud from *Finnegans Wake*. While repeated viewing and careful analysis reveal a surprising amount of structure and cohesiveness to *Mulholland Drive*, parts of it remain paradoxical, and I'm content to let it remain so. As another many-layered and famously elusive work once concluded, "The rest is silence."

Postscript: Dangling Threads

"The rest is silence," eh? OK, so that was a tidy and clever way to end my essay, but let's face it, *silencio* only takes you so far. There are some things about *Mulholland Drive* that I admit I just can't figure out, and I don't mean the paradoxes. There are a few elements that I think *should* make sense, but don't. This is complicated by the fact that the first two-thirds of *Mulholland Drive* was intended to be the pilot for an ABC TV series; so it's possible that the film contains a few vestigial threads, meant to be woven into the whole later, but left behind as inexplicable loose ends.

Joe the Hit Man

I have no idea why the hit man had to kill his friend Ed, and can only offer the brief conjecture I outlined above regarding the "car crash" conversation. But still, why was Ed's black book of phone numbers so important? Just because Diane saw it in the diner? Could it just be Diane's fantasy supplying a backstory for the hit man? If so, why go to such lengths? Also, why the scene where the hit man and his older associate question a prostitute regarding the missing girl, Rita? I can see that Diane's fantasy had to conjure up a reason for Rita to be assassinated, but there still seems to be a missing link or two—who was the "guy" the hit man was working for, and why would anyone want to kill Rita in the first place? Could it just be a film noir trope, or were these plot lines intended to be developed in the TV series?

Aunt Ruth's Final Appearance
In the real world, Diane's Aunt Ruth, who lived in Hollywood, is dead. Yet, she is the last person we see in the "fantasy" narrative, where she is supposed to be filming in Canada. Surely Diane wouldn't hallucinate her aunt returning from Canada? (Though one commenter notes that "acting in Canada" is an old Hollywood metaphor for being dead.) The fact she was dressed the same as when she left adds to the confusion. Did the whole Betty fantasy happen within the space of time needed for Ruth head back into the house before taking her taxi? If so, why add this extra mind-bender—the fantasy was over, no? Who cares about Ruth at this point? And where did Aunt Ruth live, exactly? Did she really have that delicious apartment? Was she a ghost, somehow interacting with Diane's fantasy in the same way that Louise Bonner and the psychic man at Winkie's could? Or was that final scene a flashback, with a flesh-and-blood Aunt Ruth hearing a ghostly disturbance of her own? In the "10 Clues" provided by Lynch in the DVD packaging, Clue #10 is "Where is Aunt Ruth?" Well, let's see . . . dead? In Canada? In the bedroom? With the Log Lady?

The Cowboy's Final Appearance
Why does the Cowboy visit Diane to wake her up? Was that a genuine flashback, in which Adam's friend stops by before the party but is unable to rouse Diane from her depressed sleep? If so, why is she in her "death" position, and why does he suddenly then see her dead and depart? Perhaps the knock on the door that precipitates Diane's suicide is actually the Cowboy, who was sent to bring her somewhere—to Adam, to the film set, or even to Camilla's funeral? Remember, we really don't know how long Camilla's been dead, nor do we know who else realizes she's dead. Come to think of it, for all we know, the hit man botched the job and left the key anyway, and the final knock on the door was a pissed-off Camilla! Anyway, if the Cowboy walks in on Diane's suicide, this might explain why she transforms from living to dead—but still, if she just shot herself, she wouldn't be already decomposed. Hm...

The Final Appearance of the Blue Box
As Diane opens her drawer to get her gun, we see a very brief glimpse of what *could be* the blue box. If so, why is it present in "reality," and clearly within her point-of-view? Is Diane's suicide a dream within a dream? Or does the box track her down into the real world? Or—most likely—does Diane Selwyn have some kind of mundane blue box of her own, perhaps a jewelry box, music box, or a stash box; something that she just incorporated into her fantasy like the address book and blue key? (Perhaps it contains mementos of her affair with Camilla?) And finally, does anyone wonder just what the hell this crazy woman is doing with a gun in the first place? Eek.

Postscript II—More on *Mulholland Drive:* Visitor's Comments
Since this review/essay went online, a few visitors have emailed in some ideas of their own, including alternative interpretations, additional allusions, and intriguing artistic precursors. I have used some of these ideas in my revision of *No hay banda*. In such cases, I have noted, "As a commenter has suggested...." Repeat readers may also notice that I have revised my opinion of the old couple, now assigning them the role of Diane's grandparents. I did this after reading the script for the pilot, and I do not believe that it alters their symbolic value as expressed in my essay.

Credits

Thanks to Andrew Duncan and Judie Ryer for discussing this movie at length with me, for pointing out a few clues I missed, and for offering some very insightful suggestions. Thanks also to Bun Zopf, whom I first used as a sounding board for my theory. And a big thank you to Roger Ebert, another fan of this film who pointed out a few of Lynch's more subtle tricks.

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