

A Building of Rooks: Mulholland Drive

Donald Kunze

Mulholland Drive (2001) is David Lynch's neo-noir masterpiece. It is important to think of this film as a bridge between the Twentieth Century and Twenty-first Century versions of Surrealism, in the same way that Raymond Roussel, in his proto-Surrealist plays and novels, was a bridge between such main-line figures as Tzara, Breton, and Ernst and the putative "founders of Surrealism" — Poe, Hoffman, Mary Shelley, etc. — as well as a bridge between Surrealism's purest expressions and the genres that constitute its nearest neighbors: the mystery story, the police procedural, the fantastic, and the death narrative.

Proto-Surrealism. What constitutes a Surrealist bridge? One case could be made using the themes of the uncanny. In Ernst Jentsch's formula, we need only find some candidates to fill the positions of the "zombie" (AD), the living person who contains a kernel of death, either as fate or remote control; or the "vampire" (DA), the dead person who resists death and continues to feed on the living. To this can be added Freud's famous themes of optics and identity, and with these can be added the full "Borgesian" list of four strategies: travel through time, the double, the story within the story, and the contamination of reality by the dream. Not only does one single unbroken line connect Jentsch to Borges (and, hence, to any artists employing one or more of these themes); but all of these variations boil down to the single notion of the "extimate" — a blurring of the line that separates and protects the inside from the outside and *vice versa*. This kernel of the uncanny, which is also the kernel of Surrealism, forever fixes Lacan as the master-mechanic of Surrealism, since he is the only major thinker able to establish conclusively and in any detail how the "unconscious of" the external world is not a matter of things thinking but of subjects thinking *through* things — the *bricolage* celebrated by the Structuralists but also the point of Plato's metaphors, such as the Cave or the Dream of Er, or the jokes and ironies of the dialogs. All along, philosophers and artists alike have pointed to objects — manmade, natural, cosmic — as the animated content of the human mind. No less is the film, in particular *Mulholland Drive*, a case of mind put into *place*, put into *action*. That place is the unconscious; that action is unconscious thought. In this light, it is necessary to add the relationship between two metonymies: one that is "dropped out" at the very beginning, and other that is discovered as an "ungrammatical" false termination. The connection of these metonymies also connects issues of privation and prohibition: privation in the matter of a subject's subtraction through suicide; prohibition in terms of the themes of the "judgment in the underworld," put into the language of Hollywood film- and deal-making. In other words, the process of *naming* is uppermost, mixed with themes of mistaken identity and the "Real" of the name, which Lacan equated

with the value of $\sqrt{-1}$, the imaginary *i*. The "impossible-Real" mediates the exchange between privation and prohibition, between the first and last metonymies that serve as territorial markers of the "domain" of *Mulholland Drive*, a space we find itself metaphorically reproduced in the telling Club Silencio.

The plot(s). The film begins with dancers jitterbugging in overlapping silhouettes. Ectoplasmic images of characters we will meet later wobble translucently before we follow a white limousine up the dark gentle rise of Mulholland Drive, Los Angeles twinkling below. Angelo Badalamente's sinister bass tones provide a Lynchian signature ("this will be weird"). Car headlights provide the scene's ambient effects. The limousine pulls over, the passenger (Laura Elena Harring, playing both Rita and Camilla Rhodes, who is also "earlier" played by Melissa George) appears to be set up for assassination. Two teenager-filled daredevil cars careen around the road and smash into the limo just before this can happen, and the passenger staggers out and down the hillside, dazed, afraid, barely able to walk. She sleeps until morning under the shrubbery of an apartment building, where a resident on the way out of town provides her the opportunity to sneak into the vacated apartment for, hopefully, a few nights of refuge.

She sleeps; she takes a shower. Unexpectedly another young woman arrives; Betty (Naomi Watts) has come to take care of the apartment belonging to her aunt, Ruth Elms, who is taking a vacation from her job in the film industry. Aunt Ruth has made arrangements for Betty to get an audition with a producer-director friend, Wally Brown. Betty discovers the showering brunette and "Rita" confesses that she has forgotten her name — she has taken "Rita" from a poster on the wall from the 1946 film *Gilda*, starring Rita Hayworth. The fact that actors have multiple names is mocked by the film's use of multiple names and multiple actors with the same names. The two women form a bond and attempt to solve the mystery of who Rita really is. A wifty neighbor-cum-psychic senses a problem and alerts the concierge, Coco, that something's wrong. Indeed, the two have discovered strange clues in Rita's purse: a large wad of cash and a funny-shaped blue metal key.

The story shifts to two seemingly unrelated scenes. A psychiatrist meets a patient in a fast-food restaurant, Winkies, to hear him recount a horrifying nightmare about a man behind a wall in the parking lot. When they go to dispel this nightmare, the man appears suddenly and frightens the patient into cardiac arrest. The scene shifts to a meeting between a director, Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux) and the Mafiosi, the Castiglioni brothers, who want to mandate the casting of their *protégé*, Camilla Rhodes (Melissa George version) in Kesher's upcoming film about rock 'n' roll, *The Sylvia North Story*. The interview

goes sour and Keshner flees the scene after smashing the Castiglioni's limo with a golf club; he returns home to find his wife in bed with the pool maintenance man; he retreats to a flea-bag hotel, just missing a visit from (presumably) a "messenger" from the Castiglioni's who roughs up the unfaithful wife.

At the flea-bag hotel, Adam gets a call from his secretary to say that all of his accounts have been cleared out. He is told to go up to a remote corral in the canyon above Los Angeles to meet "the Cowboy," who seems to be the agent of the mysterious Mr. Roque, who is shown giving orders over a speaker phone in a glassed-in control room. The cowboy recommends hiring Camilla for his film if Adam wants his fortune restored. Adam agrees and the film casting proceeds as arranged.

Back downtown, we come on to a conversation between two shady characters, both apparently hit men. The man at his desk has botched a job, and has a black book with a list of names. The visitor shoots him but manages to escape only after also killing two of the cleaning staff who have "comically" stumbled into the scene.

Betty has gone to her audition and surprised both the casting directors and the actual movie audience with her unexpectedly masterful reading of a second-rate script. She plans to meet Rita later to investigate the apartment of "Diane Selwyn," a name Rita has managed to remember. She attends Adam's audition but has to leave in order to keep her appointment with Rita. The women find that the Diane has switched apartments with a neighbor, who has not seen her in some time. They break in and discover, to their horror, Selwyn's corpse, considerably decomposed, the victim of an apparent suicide. Frightened out of their wits, they return to Aunt Ruth's apartment. Rita finds a blond wig for a disguise; Betty finds a new attraction; the women make love. Waking up later, Rita feels compelled to take a cab to a mysterious isolated nightclub, "Club Silencio." The performers play and lip-synch to a sound track; *No hay banda!* ("There is no band!") the MC proclaims. After Dolores del Rio performs an *a capella* lip-synch of (her own actual recording of) a Spanish version of Roy Orbison's song, "Crying," and collapses, Betty and Rita themselves begin to cry uncontrollably. They discover that a blue box has strangely appeared in Betty's purse. They recognize the blue metal and rush home to try the triangular key that first baffled them. Betty turns around and finds Rita missing. She opens the box herself and vanishes, the box falls to the floor. Then, strangely, Aunt Ruth comes in, looks around, and sees nothing amiss. Were the two women grmlins all along, who scurried around while she was loading up the cab?

The Cowboy, who persuaded Adam Keshner to cast Camilla Rhodes, turns up in the bedroom of Diane Selwyn who we find alive but depressed about her deteriorating relationship with the "new" Camilla, the former Rita. Rita has been cast for the part and is falling in love with Adam as they rehearse scenes, Diane looks on with eyes green with jealousy. Diane is invited to a party at the now-divorced Adam. The

limousine sent to bring her to the party drops her off at the same spot the first limousine had stopped to shoot Rita. The pull-off is connected to Adam's house by a short-cut up the mountainside. Diane meets Adam's mother, whom we have before met as Coco, the concierge of Aunt Ruth's apartment building. Also at the party is the Cowboy. Diane manages a feeble explanation of her failed career in Hollywood; Adam and Camilla smooch and giggle.

Back to Winkies: Diane is hiring the bungling hit man, showing him a head shot of Camilla, paying for the same from him. He gives Diane a blue key, of a more ordinary type, but one we have seen before and will see again. "You'll get this key when it's done," he advises. Diane and the hitman are served by a waitress with the name tag "Betty," a reverse of the situation when she, as Betty, had been served by a waitress with the name tag, "Diane." Diane sees the psychiatrist's patient, alive, paying his bill at the counter, and this is one key to the time warp that makes the film, technically, a Möbius band. Behind Winkies the scary homeless bum releases a pair of small fidgety figures — the same old couple that Betty had met on the airplane to LAX from Deep River, Ontario. The couple make it Diane's apartment, squeeze under the door and materialize at full scale. They terrorize Diane who, screaming, retreats to her bed, retrieves a gun from the bedside table, and shoots herself.

There are two credible candidates for a subject imagining a "death narrative." Diane, whose suicide we witness in the final moments of the film, is the first. Her failed attempt to become a Hollywood star seems to be the wish-fulfillment motive of her fantasy under the name of Betty, an innocent who finds a beautiful girlfriend, has a great audition, and lives rent-free in her aunt's nice apartment. It also seems possible that Rita, who cannot remember who she really is, could be a soul lost in limbo who must seek the help of an imagined Betty. Whose "real life" was most real? The two real women, Camilla and Diane, seem to be actual lovers who meet in Diane's seedy apartment and break off before Camilla's engagement party. In true Freudian form, both women seem to have a fantasy life that features a love with the other, but in their own versions. Each has a "living" version of the other during the death dream, and each appears as a character in both death narratives as well as a "living" version in the digetic or "straight" parts of the story, if any.

So, there is a Diane (digetic character) who is Betty₁ in her own death narrative and Betty₂ in Camilla's death narrative. Similarly, there is the digetic Camilla, the Rita₁ of Camilla's death narrative and the Rita₂ of Diane's death narrative. There is also the digetic version of Camilla, played by Melissa George during the audition for the movie, *The Sylvia North Story*. These six (or seven) women are like points in a space about which vectors and forces whiz and whirl. While the digetic embodiments of both women stick together, their two ghosts versions are not clearly sorted. In Aunt Ruth's apartment, who is imagining whom? Does it matter?

Names and places. Betty/Diane, Rita/Camilla, the two assassins in the limo, the two assassins in the office, the two keys, two roles for characters such as Cookie and the MC at Club Silencio, Coco and Adam's mother, the half-part played by the other Camilla Rhodes, the two Castigliani brothers ... it's clear that the number two plays a big part in Lynch's thinking in this film. These mathematics were rehearsed in an earlier film, *Lost Highway* (1997). A musician, Fred, and his wife Renee, are baffled by a series of videos that show that someone has access to their house. At a party, Fred talks to a weird guest who claims to be at his house. Fred phones the house and the man answers. Fred is horrified to get a video showing him killing Renee; and when it seems that Renee in fact has been killed, the police arrest him. Inexplicably, Fred morphs into Pete, an auto mechanic who doesn't know any more than the police what he's doing in Fred's place in the jail cell. He's released, only to find himself enmeshed in a plot that involves a woman played by the same actress who played Renee, mistress of the same Dick Laurent who had been proclaimed dead by the mystery guest at the party.

These identities criss-cross as a demonstration of the film's title, *Lost Highway*. Is it significant that *Mulholland Drive* also identifies a highway? Is this the highway connecting the $-x$ and $1/x$ forms of the name, privation and prohibition?¹ There may be some point in looking at some of *Mulholland Drive*'s specific uses in the film. First, we see it as a night-time path, lit only by the ambient illuminations of car headlights. The street sign, for example, is made visible only when the car lights catch it for a brief moment. The next notable feature is the pull-off which is to be used as the place of assassination of the passenger, Rita/Camilla. The joy-riders come into view; we quickly anticipate the deathly convergence. The pull-off has not protected the limo, but the passenger has been allowed to escape *two deaths*. She finds refuge by staggering down the hillside. Later in the film we see that the pull-off has another pathway connection, one that goes in the other direction, uphill to Adam Kesher's house overlooking the city. Both pedestrian paths could be considered short-cuts, "short-circuits" that link one narrative line to another.

The narrative lines are multiple. There is the story of Betty's arrival and encounter with Rita. Is this Diane's death dream or Camilla's? There is the quest to discover Rita's real name, which leads to Diane's decaying corpse. There is the narrative of the end of Diane and Camilla's affair, ending in the engagement party at Adam's house. There is Adam's confrontation with the Castigliani brothers, ending with the audition of the blond Camilla. There is Adam and the brunette Camilla's romance on the set, ending also at the engagement party. While there is no reason to try to relate, untangle, or analyze these narratives, their overlaps, or their intended uses or meanings, there is the overall theme of the command-role played by Mr. Roque, the midget fitted out with a "body prosthesis" seated in the glass-enclosed control room. Like other appearances of this same figure, played by Michael J. Anderson, Mr.

Roque comes close to being a stand-in for the director Lynch himself. Like Lynch, Roque pulls the strings behind the production of *The Sylvia North Story*. His agent, the Cowboy (Monty Montgomery), "negotiates" with Adam to restore his bank accounts. The two assassins in the downtown office seem to be part-time employees.

Prophetic speech. One peculiarity of Anderson as a real person is that, while attending a school for exceptional children, he learned how to talk backwards. This skill became a central feature of Anderson's portrayal of the dwarf in *Twin Peaks*. In *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch emphasizes Mr. Roque as a commanding voice, an *acousmatic* divinatory voice that determines the fate of strangers who have never met him or know his name. The psychiatrist's patient seems to inadvertently refer to Mr. Roque when he describes his fantasy about a man behind Winkies: "He's behind the wall but I can see him clearly, he's the one controlling it. He's the one causing it." Mr. Roque is the real monster behind the glass wall (he's in clear view though behind a wall; he *is* the one controlling things). *Roque* in French refers to the chess move of "castling" — the exchange of the king for the rook, or castle. The castle moves vertically or horizontally. In the film, *Mulholland Drive* moves *horizontally*, and is connected *vertically* to Adam's house and the Havenhurst Apartments where Ruth Elms lives. (In Diane's narrative, Ruth has died and left her the money to come to Hollywood.) The king can move one space at a time; the castle can move any distance parallel the square of the sides of the board, although we should note that the sides are no longer "square" but twisted.

Offstage voices play a central role in the story. Although we see both Adam and his secretary during their phone conversation, most are one-sided; we hear half of what is said. In French, *mi-dire* is the name given to the half-speech which is used especially by psychotics such as the Pepin sisters, a famous murder case in the 1950s that attracted Lacan because of the sisters' use of a private language. Lacan related this to the anthropological examples of specialized speech used by African and other tribal leaders, whose mumblings require the use of special interpreters. Mumbled, prophetic speech was popularized in a film about the Dali Lama, *Kundun* (1997), where an oracle is consulted on important matters of state. Like the prophetic riddles of the ancient oracles at Delphi and elsewhere, what is said is "half-true" in the sense that the remainder of the meaning must be supplied by the auditor. This meets the technical definition of the "enthymeme," the syllogism describing the rhetorical condition of the speaker and audience, bound together by a "middle term" whose circularity is the key to effective communication.

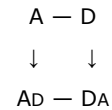
Keys also play a large role in *Mulholland Drive*, and the "key" of the enthymeme should not be taken as simply a characterization. The condition of $B>B$, whose logical status is equivalent to Lacan's sign of authenticity and scale inversion ($<>$), the *extimate*, the *pointon* (\diamond), is the central device of the enthymeme, which as "half-speech" is the conjunction

of the material speech of the speaker and the "silent speech" of the audience. The key, $B > B$ or $< >$, can be compared to the middle term of the standard syllogism, Socrates is a man, all men are mortal, Socrates is mortal. The middle term, man/men, is the deployment of one term as, on one side, a universal and, on the other side, as a particular. This Janusian quality of being both universal (enclosing) and particular (enclosed) at the same time allows the middle term to "glue" Socrates to mortality. In the enthymeme, speech is glued to silence, and the connector is the "master signifier" that is held in common by the speaker and his/her audience.

If the terms of the syllogism could be compared to the levels of the story, Adam's (represented by his house on the hill), Betty's (the Havenhurst Apartments), and Rita/Camilla's (Mulholland Drive), the middle term takes up the topographical role of the connecting footpaths, the $< >$ or key. Like Lacan's *point*, the key guarantees authenticity. When literal keys are used in the film, they "seal the deal" (the assassin's token to Diane) or terminate a line of credit (the blue box, opened by the key, suck in Betty and Rita after their return from the Club Silencio). As acousmatic voice, Mr. Roque's barely audible whisper "seals the deals" relating to Adam's fate and the arrangements for *The Sylvia North Story*.

This film-within-a-film engages more use of doubles, twins, and halves. The director at Betty's audition, Bob Brooker (whose name "contains" a "rook," "BobB rooker"), is a classic mumbler whose comments are intended to sound enigmatic but come off as idiotic. Explaining the scene to Betty, he describes the characters as being "the two of them with themselves," later echoed by the "real" director, Adam, who explains to Camilla that "the two of them are alone." Betty has lost the part to one Camilla Rhodes (roads?) when she attends the audition Adam holds, where the fix is already in to chose the blond Camilla. Later, we find that she is additionally double-crossed (double-double crossed?) because it is really her lover Camilla Rhodes, the brunette, who is playing the lead role. The fact that the rook is also a black bird fond of carrion (*Corvus frugilegus*) and a fold of the outer ear may also be a part of Lynch's complex unconscious.² Perhaps the director read Wallace Stevens' poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." There must be at least thirteen independent involvements of rook (bird), roque (chess move), Roque (acoustic villain), and rook (castle). The fact that these specify halves rather than wholes is all the more intriguing.

The Jentschian uncanny specifies two endpoints: the vampire and the zombie. Where the vampire is mainly dead but hangs on to life (the POV of the death narrative, who "does not know he/she is dead"), the zombie must shoulder on, alive but with a kernel of death or fate pulling the strings, arranging things to "look like accidents." Put in terms of a diagram, the "horizontal" relationship between life, A, and death, D, is "dropped" down through metonymic devices to a criss-cross relationship between zombies, AD, and vampires, DA:



While the vampire is created, typically, through a metonymic "drop out" (we don't notice or are not told about the event of death, which is the generating feature of the death narrative), the zombie is constructed "from above," when a seemingly ordinary character finds that he/she is being controlled by a concealed but superior position — i.e. Mr. Roque's control room, "behind a wall but visible." The prophetic "half speech" (*mi-dire*) of the dwarf, who can in real life talk forward and backward with equal ease, works the verticals. The "horizontals" of life *versus* death that provide the diagetic sense of reality are drilled through with holes that drop out characters and events through metonymies such as blue keys and lampshades to a *Hades* ("invisible") of doubled identities (Betty/Diane etc.) and inconclusively terminated scenes (the disappearance of Betty and Rita into the blue box). Likewise, the life-death horizontal is "rooked" from above by Mr. Roque, Adam's castle, and the half-conversations that come over phones, black and otherwise.

AD and DA twist the square into a Möbius band that comes close, topographically, to the landscape around Mulholland Drive, with its pull-off and paths going up and down. But, now that we have the diagonal connecting AD and DA identified with the *i*, the $\sqrt{-1}$, the Real, we can begin to articulate the central, "key" role of the name in both Lacanian and Lynchian terms. The name in primitive cultures had life-and-death implications. It called forth the soul. Memory of ancestors' names were not just a sentimental custom — it was required to keep the *manes*, the ancestral souls, alive (DA), to serve the family through the rituals of the hearth. Hestia, one of the original pantheon of twelve gods and goddesses in the Greek and Roman religions, was "wed to the flame" of the hearth, that is, when cooking and worshiping were united in the concept of sacrifice, the fire and its hearth (L. *focus*) constituted the basis of the first "family" religions, the basis of all later collectivizations into civic and national religions.³ The security of the city, established through foundation rites that purposefully blurred the distinction between interior and exterior space (*extimité*) and combined this uncanny blurring with the drama of the death of one of a pair of twins (Romulus and Remus, Castor and Pollux, etc.), we have the formula of *Mulholland Drive* in one ancient nutshell.

Is this an example of what Colin McCabe would call a "swerve to the right" in an application of Freudian-Lacanian clinical motifs to a search of unified primitive terms ultimately based in biology?⁴ This would be the case if there were any unity to be found in any "primitive" terms. Instead, there are more cases of what Lacan would call the death drive's central function of repetition (recurrent motifs), whose compulsive, circular returns keep open the very space that allows desire to maintain itself, openings that are concealed/revealed by fantasies

that, taking the form of discourses that position agents, others, sites of production, and places of truth (think of the corral where Adam meets the Cowboy) in relation to a ring of performative terms (knowledge, master keys, partial objects, subjects with split identities). *Mulholland Drive* has also been accused of the opposite "deviation" from clinical objectivity — a swerve towards a "political critique" of Hollywood corruption, personified by the Castigliani brothers, Mr. Roque, and the multiple hired killers that populate the film. Both swerves, it seems, belong to the natural situation of *Mulholland Drive* both

as a fantasy and a road above Los Angeles. Neither can pull it off route; the road is *deviation itself*, just as Einstein's space became, in the end, not an ordinary space with curvature as an exception but *curvature itself*, embodied in its very nature. This is the *i*, the $\sqrt{-1}$, the Real, of the film: its unsymbolizable merger of distantiation and immediacy, spatial separation and spatial collapse.

1. The terms $-x$ and $1/x$ are abbreviations for two aspects of the proper name, which, Lacan explains, occurs as a noun for which there is "no place" in the inherited system of signifiers. The place of the proper name is "no place," a theme that is taken up in myth and folklore by countless heroes with name dysfunctions ("Nohbody" in *The Odyssey's* Cyclops story; *Il Mio Nome E Nessuno* in the more contemporary (1973) spaghetti western of Sergio Leone. Where the $-x$ designates the "privational" aspect of the proper name, the $1/x$ form has to do with the "prohibition" associated by every culture with the power of the name, the "reversed antinomasia" by which the name carries actual power over the named. One only need be reminded of Puccini's opera, *Turandot*, to be convinced of this abiding function.
2. The collective word for a group of rooks is a "building" and the chess-piece is a little building. Like a "flight" of doves, a "gaggle" of geese, or a "murmuration" of starlings, collective nouns range widely across a semantic landscape that seems only loosely to have any bearing on the qualities of the species named. Strangely, a group of crows, another kind of black bird, is called a "murder." See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_collective_nouns_for_birds, last accessed February 26, 2010.
3. "The Missing Guest: The Twisted Topology of Hospitality," in *Eating Architecture*, ed. P. Singley and J. Horwitz (Cambridge: MIT, 2004), pp. 169-190.
4. Colin McCabe, "Introduction," in Sigmund Freud, *The Schreber Case*, trans. Andrew Webber (London and New York: Penguin, 2003), p. xi.