Silencio

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Haunted by Seriality
The Formal Uncanny of *Mulholland Drive*

The most acclaimed American film of this century was a television program.

I am not referring to *The Wire* (2002-2008) or *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), or any of the other landmark television series that many critics hail as equal to, or surpassing, most of recent cinema. Rather, the twenty-first century American film ranked highest on the standard-bearing *Sight & Sound* critics' poll (at #28 in the 2012 poll) actually was a television show, at least before it became a film. *Mulholland Drive*, David Lynch's 2001 mind-bending film noir, literally was a television program, conceived and produced as a pilot for ABC in 1998, before they rejected it the following year for being too violent and strange. The French company Studio Canal Plus asked Lynch for permission to see the pilot a year later, then purchased its rights, and provided funding to shoot more footage to create a feature film version.

This unusual, and perhaps even unique production history is typically treated as a footnote for critical and scholarly analyses—often just as an aside marveling that such a remarkable film could emerge out of such initial commercial failure.[1] Some critics outright reject the significance of the film's origin story; as one writes in reference to its television beginnings, "People often talk about this fact like it was some kind of obstacle, but to [me] it is the least important thing in the world. Especially given [my] interpretation it shows just how in control Lynch is regarding every bit of what we see" (Film Crit Hulk n. pag.).[2] However,

I contend that a key part of what makes *Mulholland Drive* truly remarkable is precisely its televisual origination—not because it transcends the limits of televisual failure through a twist of cross-media fate, but because its initial design for television is essential to its cinematic achievements, and provides a crucial key to understanding the film's power and emotional resonance. But to get there, we first need to look at how the film has been typically talked about by viewers and critics.

Not surprisingly for a film that is so oblique and unconventional, the primary question that critics and viewers alike have focused on is "What does *Mulholland Drive* mean?" Although this question seems fairly straightforward—or at least simpler than its potential answers—there are two distinct ways to think about a film's meaning.[3] The first is a question of comprehension, trying to make coherent sense of the film's narrative events, especially involving the shift that occurs at the 110 minute mark, where the narrative reality transforms and nearly all of the characters take on new identities and relationships. The most common explanation for the film's narrative is that the first 80% of *Mulholland Drive* is Diane Selwyn's (Naomi Watts) dream imagining herself as Betty Elms while the final act portrays the reality she is trying to escape. Many other explications present theories of dreams, reality, deaths, and parallels, all catalogued online on websites like Mulholland-Drive.net. Such detailed analyses of narrative worlds, plots, and characters are part of a trend that I have called "forensic fandom," flourishing around contemporary complex television series, but also common to films, literature, and other media.[4] Lynch himself has seemingly contributed to such forensic criticism, as the film's DVD features no extra content except for an insert listing "David Lynch's 10 Clues to

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1. The only other examples of TV pilots repurposed into feature films I could find were the 1965 period horror B-movie *Dark Intruder*, which *NBC* deemed too scary for television, and *Cruel Intentions 2*, which originated from the unaired Fox television series *Manchester Prep*, and was refashioned into a direct-to-video prequel to the original *Cruel Intentions*.
2. This essay is by the pseudonymous Film Crit Hulk, who writes in all-caps and refers to himself in the third-person; I have converted the quotation to standard English for readability.

3. See Bordwell, *Making Meaning*.
4. See Mittell, *Complex TV*.

Unlocking This Thriller," highlighting stylistic and narrative features that seem to link the two parallel storyworlds—although fans have also postulated that Lynch might be using ironic misdirection in these clues to further confound viewers.

The other way to answer the question about *Mulholland Drive*'s meaning is to engage in interpretation; looking for the meanings beneath the surface, at the level of symbolism, thematics, or subtextual significance. Unsurprisingly, this has been the main purview of academic analyses, where we can find readings of the film as illustrating Lacan's theories of fantasy, desire, and reality;[5] evoking contemporary technologies of virtual reality;[6] dissolving boundaries between semiotic oppositions;[7] offering a lesbian tragedy as an indictment of homophobia;[8] and critiquing the dream-crushing logic of Hollywood cinema,[9] among many others. It is telling that in all of these interpretive essays, there is nary a mention of the film's televisual origins and unusual split production history. These scholars treat the completed film as a coherent, self-contained text to be exhumed, rather than the product of a unique creative process that might actually help us understand the film's meanings and aesthetic power.

Thus, I want to ask a related, but quite different question: how does *Mulholland Drive* work? By work, I am acknowledging that the film is an aesthetic object with its own unique design, and to understand its narrative and emotional impact, we need to unpack and analyze that design in the context of its production history. This approach stems from a subfield of film studies that David Bordwell has termed "historical poetics," analyzing the formal techniques employed by any text within the contexts of its production and circulation. To understand how *Mulholland Drive* works as a cinematic text, I cannot think of any bit of information more important than the knowledge that most of it was written, produced, and edited for a different medium altogether—and most vitally for my purposes, that it was designed as the first installment of an ongoing, serialized story.[10]

Taking *Mulholland Drive*'s production history into account seems like it should not be controversial, especially

since its story is in large part about producing a film, and thus the film calls attention to the mixture of inputs and goals that comprise the production process. Both comprehension and interpretation-based analyses mine the film for obscure details to support their theories, so the film's core setting and plot as a Hollywood behind-the-scenes drama

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seems like a clear invitation for greater contextual reflection. I think part of the resistance to considering its production history stems from how critics have a contradictory relationship to the concept of a film's intention. Many critics regard a film as surpassing the limits of intentionality, suggesting that the final textual product speaks for itself beyond the creative process that went into making it. At the same time, critics in general place so much faith in the overriding vision of Lynch as auteur that they imagine the film as the unobstructed realization of his creative goals, ignoring the very real obstructions that sidelined the project for over a year and then transformed its medium and form. Instead of focusing on intent, I want to highlight design as the contextualized process by which Lynch and his collaborative team's goals were realized. No matter what Lynch may or may not have intended, we know unambiguously that the story was initially designed as a serialized television program, and then redesigned as a self-contained film. This dramatic shift between media and narrative formats helps explain much of the text's striking emotional power.

Fan sites have documented this design process, including detailed comparisons between the television pilot and completed film versions.[11] The television version begins with the car accident that triggers Rita's (Laura Harring) amnesia, and ends with Betty outfitting Rita in a blond wig. This 90-minute sequence can be found mostly intact within the feature film version with few minor variations in editing, dialogue, pacing, and a couple of different scenes, but by and large they are highly similar. The bulk of the changes for the film version are found in a different opening sequence of a jitterbug contest and enigmatic shot of a bed, and the final forty-five minutes consisting of all-new footage.[12] Although ABC rejected the pilot, there is no

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5.   See McGowan
6.   See Gessler and Hayles
7.   See Hudson
8.   See Love
9.   See Andrews
10.   The only other formally centered analysis of the film I have found is in Laass, *Broken Taboos, Subjective Truths*, focusing on the film's technique of unreliable narration. However, Laass dismisses the impact of its television origins, suggesting that the cinematic reshoot and edit could have easily excised irrelevant bits from the pilot, and thus we should not look to its origins for answers.

11.   See *Mulholland-Drive.net*
12.   There are more subtle changes, including the shot of the bum that ends the pilot and was seemingly repurposed for the final scenes of the film, and a few shots of cars driving that were shot for television and
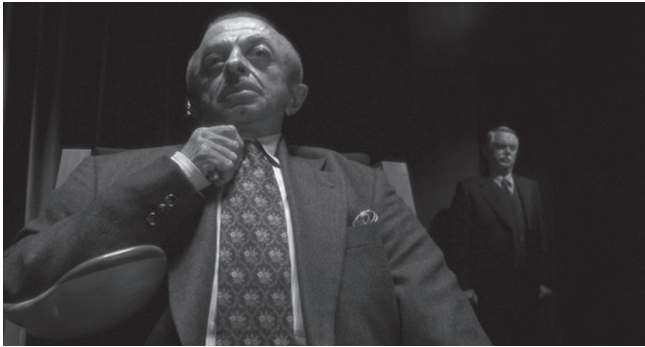
doubt that the story was designed to continue onward from the wig scene, and all evidence suggests that the ongoing story would proceed in a direction quite different from the film's final act. The mysteries of Rita's identity and her involvement in Diane's death would slowly be revealed, Betty would become more directly involved with Adam and his film, and the threads of mobsters, detectives, and a fright-inducing dumpster-dwelling bum would all become interwoven into the ongoing narrative. These original sequences function exactly as most dramatic television pilots do: setting up scenarios, character relationships, and dramatic conflicts that will continue to develop into sustained serial storytelling, and building up the expectation that the ongoing story will eventually come together and make coherent sense.

Of course, the *Mulholland Drive* pilot is an example of failed seriality as the story never did get a chance to continue, at least as it was originally designed. Television produces many failed serials each year in the form of completed pilots that never air and thus are perpetually halted in a state of the unresolved openness of a single installment, but most failed serials never are viewed outside the industry. *Mulholland Drive*'s failed pilot was seen by many, lodged within a closed film; however, its open-ended design that remains intact at the core of the self-contained film, creates a spirit of seriality that haunts the completed film. Many critics

included in the film's final act. Despite these few exceptions, it is fair to say the television pilot is sandwiched between new footage in the film version.

note that the first part of the film is fairly conventional in tone and style, at least for Lynch's typical brand of Hollywood experimentation. As Todd McGowan writes:

> Almost everyone who sees *Mulholland Drive* notes that the first part of the film makes a good deal of sense—at least for a David Lynch movie. . . . While the first part of *Mulholland Drive* is not without strange characters and events . . . 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. (67-68)

McGowan uses such stylistic analysis to highlight that the film works to construct fantasy as more realistic than the unconventional reality found in the second part, a reading that certainly seems justified. However, he never mentions that this contrast is traceable directly to the film's design as its more conventionally narrated and styled section originated for television, a much less experimental form (especially in 1998) that demanded more narrative coherence than allowable on film. Given its business model requiring millions of viewers to tune in regularly, commercial television has always embraced convention and imitation over experimentation, often mandating narrative redundancies and explicit exposition to welcome new viewers.[13] Thus, the conventional portion of the film seems to make sense precisely because it was designed to, but not to signify *fantasy* as much as *television*.

Mulholland Drive's power and pleasures as a film derive less from a compelling narrative structure or even its symbolic meaning, but from its piercing moments of emotional affect and its ability to create a deeply unsettling feeling in its viewers. Some of these moments would stand out in either medium—the first Winkies Diner scene (which was shot for television, but edited out in the version submitted to ABC); Betty's remarkable audition; the Club Silencio sequence—but others acquire a strange uncanny impact in the repurposed context of the film. I contend that the contrasting style and tone between the film's two parts works much more on an emotional level than a symbolic or narrative one, and that this affective dimension is created in large part from the lingering sense of thwarted seriality in the made-for-television section. Much of the film's affective power is achieved by keeping viewers off-balance via obstructed expectations, as in Betty's surprisingly sultry audition. Thus, the film as a whole relies on our expecta-

13. See Chapter 1 of Mittell, *Television and American Culture* for an overview of television's conventional development process.

tions that a serial narrative will continue and come together coherently, creating a productive dissonance between what the first part was designed to do and what the second part actually delivers.

One strategy Lynch uses to sustain the project's failed seriality is the inclusion of unresolved loose story threads from the pilot in the film. Characters and plotlines are introduced in the first hour of the film that were clearly designed to continue onward if the television series had been produced, but then are transformed and redefined in the film's conclusion (or ignored altogether) in ways that are counterintuitive to how the pilot had been scripted and shot. For instance, one memorable scene shows Joe (Mark Pellegrino) murdering Ed (Vincent Castellanos) to retrieve his black book, presumably in search of Rita to kill her for the crime syndicate that is involved in producing Adam's (Justin Theroux) film. The scene functions as a dark comedic sequence of an escalating botched murder in the vein of the Coen Brothers or Quentin Tarantino, but also sets Joe up as an ongoing character with a story arc to be continued in subsequent episodes. One popular press article mulls the significance of this dream sequence in establishing ineffectual Joe as a latent desire for the hit man hired by Diane to kill Camilla in the reality sequence, but also as,

> [P]art of the confusing background noise Lynch likes to put into his movies. It is a deeply felt contention of his that not everything makes sense. Less charitably, you can say it's a loose end from the TV series that never got made. (Garrone, Klein and Wyman n. pag.)

However, to dismiss the possibility of the loose end as a less charitable reading misses the power of the film's failed seriality—the reason Joe's (Mark Pellegrino) scene works within the film is because it was not intended to be confusing background noise, but precisely because it was designed to actually make sense. Lynch certainly does include moments of random oddity in most of his films, but *Mulholland Drive*'s unique feature amongst his filmography is that many of its least explicable moments were conceived as part of an ongoing sense-making narrative design. A scene like Joe's botched murder is conventional enough to encourage us to expect a narrative payoff that would connect to the main plotlines, or establish Joe as a three-dimensional character. The film's refusal to weave together such threads in conventional ways helps create its sense of unsettling disorientation.

The casting choices also play against convention and expectation in productive ways. Dan Hedaya is the fifth listed actor in the opening credits, suggesting a significant supporting role in keeping with his recognizable face as a character actor. By 2001, Hedaya had been in over seventy films and television programs, including a prominent recurring part on *Cheers* (1982-1993) and major roles in films like *Blood Simple* (1984), *Clueless* (1995), and *Dick* (1999), playing the titular character of Richard Nixon. Yet, his character of mobster Vincenzo Castigliane appears in only one scene in the film, with just three brief lines. Similarly, Robert Forster plays detective Harry McKnight (although unnamed within the film), a minor character appearing in one scene with three lines totaling less than twenty words. Yet, he is one of only eight actors listed in the opening credits, with his name placed in the final spot as "and Robert Forster," a signal of a major supporting character typically played by a well-known veteran actor. Forster fits that bill, with dozens of film and television roles since the late-1960s, and a Supporting Actor Oscar Nomination for *Jackie Brown*

(1997). While there is a tradition of named actors appearing in brief cameos, the contractual dictates behind actor credits suggests that both Hedaya and Forster were cast to become regulars in the television series despite their brief presence in the pilot.[14] For viewers, the paratextual indicators of recognizable actors and prominent credit placement help establish the expectation that they will recur later in the film with some dramatic significance—Murray Smith

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has discussed the importance of such character recognition in guiding cinematic comprehension. Nonetheless, contrary to these established expectations, both actors' single appearances remain as unresolved dissonances throughout the rest of the film, with the original design casting an unsettled shadow on the final version, and the specter of failed seriality confounding our normal strategies of narrative expectation and comprehension.

Although watching the final film of *Mulholland Drive* is not a serial experience, I would argue that seriality is crucial to our understanding in two major ways. First is the pilot's original serialized design that remains present yet unfulfilled throughout the film, second is the serial nature of the production process itself. As both Sean O'Sullivan and I, among others, have argued, the essential element of seriality is the temporal gap between installments, both for viewers and creators. Even though viewers never experienced *Mulholland Drive* as a multi-installment serial, I would argue that David Lynch himself did. After finishing the pilot in 1999, Lynch had a gap of over a year before he returned to transform it into a film; he recounts the process after Studio Canal Plus optioned the project:

> It came time for me to really commit to making it into a feature. I had zero idea how I was going to do that, so it was a time of high anxiety. One night, I sat down, the ideas came in, and it was a most beautiful experience. Everything was seen from a different angle. Everything was then restructured, and we did additional shooting. Now, looking back, I see that

> [the film] always wanted to be this way. It just took this strange beginning to cause it to be what it is. (qtd. in Macaulay n. pag.)

Serial authorship is defined by an ongoing creative engagement with an unfolding text, typically in dialogue with its cultural reception. From Dickens to contemporary television producers, serial creators release works that are unfinished by design, and allow feedback and the passage of time to help shape future installments. Although *Mulholland Drive*'s original pilot was not broadly seen and consumed outside the industry, Lynch's own gap between producing the pilot and redesigning the film enabled his ability to see it from a different angle, thus facilitating this remarkable narrative shift that evidently was not part of the pilot's initial design. It is not hard to imagine that after a year away from the text, Lynch viewed the pilot footage as a distant dream, redesigning the film around that revised perspective. Even though Lynch restructured the story and re-imagined its framework, he left the bulk of the pilot's structure and footage untouched. This follows the norm of serial authorship that future installments add to, rather than remake, previous episodes. Thus we are left with the first installment intact and embedded within its revised conclusion, suggesting an implicit seriality in the narrative construction. The scene where Rita opens the blue box with the blue key may symbolize the shift from Diane's dream to reality, but also represents the shift from serial television to stand-alone cinema. However, at both levels, the shift does not leave behind where it came from, with the new form only explicable in reference to its earlier framework.

Most critics have focused their attention on the finished film as a stand-alone textual object that reveals its own cultural meanings and aesthetic techniques, but just as its story is, in large part, about the making of a film, I contend that the film is also *about* the extra-textual level of its unique production contexts. I feel that the key to unlocking the blue box of *Mulholland Drive* is to attend to how the film became what it is through the key of serial television. The television pilot opened itself up to serial expansion and continuation, and thus much of the film's celebrated uncanniness stems from its lack of continuity and dangling narrative threads—plotlines and characters who were clearly designed to grow more significant in future episodes are left frustratingly unresolved and oddly marginalized in the film version. It is striking that the critical consensus suggests that Lynch's most accomplished achievement in experimental narrative structure was not designed to offer such experiments; counterfactual speculation is a fool's game, but I believe *Mulholland Drive* would not have worked had it been initially designed as a stand-alone film. So much of the film's haunting, dreamlike narrative sensibility stems from

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14. I could find no production documentation to suggest precisely what Hedaya or Forster's roles in the ABC series would have been, nor whether the film's cast credits were mandated by the original ABC contracts or revised by Studio Canal Plus. However, their credit prominence contrasts with actors who have larger roles in the finished film, suggesting that their top billing is a remnant from the television production.

its failure to follow conventional closed cinematic storytelling norms in lieu of the differently-conventional markers of serial television, which it then undermines through an ending that both offers and subverts closure. Just as these haunted remnants of seriality that persist help explain the power of its final closed narrative form, *Mulholland Drive*'s cross-media history provides an unusual window into the affective powers and pleasures central to all serial storytelling.

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