

**The Slipstream of Mixed Reality:  
Unstable Ontologies and Semiotic Markers in  
*The Thirteenth Floor, Dark City, and Mulholland Drive***

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A decade ago, a popular construction of virtual reality saw it as a realm separate from real life, a perception reinforced by cumbersome Polhemus helmets that entirely encased the user's head. That view has dramatically changed with recent technological developments such as enhanced reality glasses that overlay simulations onto real landscapes, embedded sensors, and wearable computers. Now the buzz is about "mixed reality," the promiscuous mingling of computationally-intensive simulations with input from the real world. As Simon Penny has remarked, "Our children will not call [this technology] virtual reality. They will call it reality." Similar trends have marked the development of certain strands of contemporary science fiction. Darko Suvin's famous characterization of science fiction as "cognitive estrangement" has traditionally been associated with fictions that use extraterrestrial settings, futuristic technologies, alien creatures, and other strategies to defamiliarize the fictional world and create works clearly different than mainstream fiction (3-15). By contrast, the last few years have seen the emergence of what Bruce Sterling calls

"slipstream fiction," works that occupy a borderland between mainstream and science fiction because they achieve a science fictional feeling without the usual defamiliarizing devices.<sup>1</sup> He writes, "the heart of slipstream is an attitude of peculiar aggression against 'reality.' These are fantasies of a kind, but not fantasies which are 'futuristic or 'beyond the fields we know.' These books tend to sarcastically tear at the structure of 'everyday life'" (n. p.). Remarking on this trend, Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger in *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation* observe that works set in the present are becoming increasingly important in contemporary science fiction; "the challenge for science fiction today is less to extrapolate a far future than to keep up with a permanently mutable present" (2). They hypothesize that as the pace of technological change accelerates, we perceive ourselves as already living in a science fiction world. As a result, conventional distinctions between science fiction and ordinary reality become increasingly difficult to articulate and maintain.<sup>2</sup>

These developments set the stage for narratives, including novels and

films, that have staked out a territory we call the slipstream of mixed reality. In mixed realities ontological and epistemological issues tend to be foregrounded, for the represented worlds often cannot be assigned unambiguously either to science fiction or ordinary reality. To investigate the dynamics of the slipstream of mixed reality we will explore three recent films that range along a spectrum of possibilities.<sup>3</sup> In *The Thirteenth Floor* the limits of present technology are stretched to imagine a computational simulated world in which “self-learning cyber beings” become virtually indistinguishable from real-life humans. The humans who create the technology can download their consciousness into the simulation, temporarily displacing the simulant’s consciousness and occupying his body. As the boundaries separating the simulated and real worlds become increasingly permeable, violent ruptures occur as borders are discovered, leading to assaults and murder.

That all three films initially present themselves as murder mysteries is not a coincidence. Plots tend deathward, as characters in Don DeLillo’s novels frequently assert, because death (the inevitable result of being alive) bestows consequentiality on events. Murders real and attempted occur in these three films but they prove to be misdirections, feints calculated to conceal more disturbing truths underneath. *The Thirteenth Floor* exemplifies the pattern, problematizing death’s ultimate finality and displacing its centrality with deeper ontological concerns. How seriously should one take bodily harm when the entity occupying the body is a temporary visitor? How serious is death when the entity in question is a computational

construction? The questions intensify when the markers separating simulation from reality are deconstructed as the film progresses. If mixed realities are difficult to disentangle, can any level claim ontological priority over another? At once unsettling normal reality and normalizing simulated reality, *The Thirteenth Floor* occupies a middle position in the slipstream of mixed reality.

By contrast, *Dark City* falls on the science fiction end of the spectrum. Its version of a simulated world emerges from a distinction between implanted artificial memories and staged environments on the one hand, and on the other an ineradicable core of personality that retains its identity independent of these manipulations. Again murder enters the narrative as the acid test opening the seams between realities. When John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) awakens and disrupts the implantation of the memories that will construct him as a killer, he embarks on a journey of discovery that will pit him against The Strangers, aliens who control the Dark City through “tuning,” their telepathic communication with machines that nightly alter the cityspace according to their experimental plans. The purpose, their minion Dr. Daniel Schreber (Kiefer Sutherland) explains to Murdoch, is to discover what makes human beings different from them, which Schreber identifies as “our capacity for individuality, our souls.” Unable to remember anything before his abduction into the Dark City, Schreber, like all the imprisoned humans, must take on faith that there remains a core identity within. When Murdoch discovers that he has undergone a mutation that bestows on him the alien capacity to “tune,” he

occupies a liminal status that restores the human and liberates the city but at the cost of becoming part alien himself. Like *The Thirteenth Floor*, this ambiguous ending is able to recuperate a stable ontology only by fundamentally changing the nature of that which has been recuperated.

At the “ordinary” reality end of the spectrum is *Mulholland Drive*, which unlike the other two films does not rely on science fiction tropes or technological interventions to unsettle ontological security. Rather, its mixed reality effect comes from narrative sequencing that renders problematic the distinctions between reality, dream, hallucination, and flashback. In contrast to other films that represent dream sequences after the viewer has been introduced to normative reality, thus allowing a clear distinction to be made between the real and unreal, *Mulholland Drive* gives only the briefest initial glimpses of quotidian reality in contexts that make understanding them as such almost impossible on a first viewing. Rather, *Mulholland Drive* situates the establishing scenes in a “reality” that is already a dream. This narrative strategy was sufficiently opaque to confuse reviewers when the film first opened so that it was widely misinterpreted as a dream throughout.<sup>4</sup> Careful study reveals, however, that the film is constructed according to an idiosyncratic but nevertheless coherent semiotic of reality markers that the viewer can learn only by watching the film. Mary Sweeney observes in the documentary *The Art of David Lynch* that Lynch does not create his films by watching other films but by projecting into exteriorized form his internal landscapes. This insightful comment illuminates the film’s signifying strategies; it should be

modified by the recognition that the film’s idiosyncrasies are themselves located in a broader cultural context that has been moving toward the slipstream of mixed reality. In the slipstream, simulation and real life, science fiction and everyday reality, merge to form an ontologically unstable amalgam that is, these films suggest, finally the only reality we can call our own.

#### Leakage and Liminality in *The Thirteenth Floor*

The slipstream of mixed reality is visually suggested by the simulator’s portal, portrayed as a laser-like layer of green light rays covering Douglas Hall (Craig Bierko) as he prepares for the transfer into the simulated 1937 world. Emerging from his first visit in which he dangerously pushes his immersion time to the limit, he jerks his head upward while his body is still under the rays, a vivid enactment of a borderland in which clear-cut distinctions between real and simulated worlds blur as the two realms begin to leak into one another. The cyberbeings in the simulated world are haunted by the experiences their users have while downloaded into the simulation. The simulant’s consciousness is put on hold while the user’s consciousness takes over the simulated body, and the user’s experiences manifest themselves to the stimulant as almost-memories they interpret as déjà vu. As the memories intensify, they function more like hauntings. Grierson (Armin Mueller-Stahl), the sedate sixtyish antique dealer in the simulated 1937 world who has been modeled on his creator Hannon Fuller, begins to recall with shame the amorous adventures in which Fuller indulged when he displaced Grierson’s consciousness and occupied his body to have sex with young women.

Retrospectively, these hauntings function as clues to the film's central mystery: the present-day "real" world is itself a simulation created by a reality above it. When the mysterious Jane Fuller (Gretchen Mol) appears on the scene, claiming she is Hannon Fuller's daughter, she actually has transported into the present from her world set in 2024. Her world has created thousands of simulated worlds, she tells Douglas, but only his world has created another simulation in turn. Jane is immediately attracted to Douglas because he is modeled on David, her husband in the 2024 world. As if dimly tapping into David's memories, Douglas comments that she looks familiar, calling it *déjà vu*. Jane reinterprets the experience by assigning it a romantic significance, claiming "they say that *déjà vu* is usually a sign of love at first sight." She has fallen in love with Douglas, she will later explain to him, because he embodies the goodness that her husband David lost when he began to indulge his sadistic inclinations by torturing and murdering people in the 1998 world. Jane's attraction cannot, however, put to rest the explosive implications of the revelation that the present-day world is as unreal (and real) as the 1937 world. The traffic between worlds opens a Pandora's Box of metaphysical and psychological complexities that cannot be stuffed back by a declaration of love.

One complicating factor is the leakage that occurs between simulant and user. Not only can Douglas be affected by the behaviors of the simulant whose body he occupies, as when he lights up after denying twice that he smokes (a habit Ferguson, his double in the 1937 world, practices); he can also be affected by the personality of David, his creator and the sadistic upper-level

user who occupies his body. When he is threatened by a low-life bartender who is attempting to blackmail him because the bartender has information about Hannon's murder, he surprises himself by pushing his opponent's head through a car window so violently that the thug is frightened and runs away. Other complications arise from leakages between worlds. Hannon's murder, which occurs at the film's beginning, was David's attempt to keep the true nature of the present-day world a secret from its inhabitants, for Hannon had stumbled across the fact that his world too was a simulation. The boundary between the worlds can be sealed, David thinks, by this act of ultimate violence, made all the more vicious by the pleasure he takes in carving up his victim.

Far from keeping the worlds separated, Hannon's murder initiates a series of events that ensures the worlds will increasingly become entangled with one another. Realizing how dangerous the knowledge is, Hannon leaves a message for Douglas "in the system" by entrusting a letter to Ashton (Vincent D'Onofrio) the suave and explosive bartender in the 1937 world modeled on Whitney, Douglas's mild-mannered programmer colleague. Instead of giving the letter to Douglas, as Hannon instructed, Ashton reads it himself. Following its instructions, he drives to "the end of the world" and discovers where the edges of the simulation drop off into nothingness. This forbidden knowledge goads Ashton into wanting to escape into the "real" world that created the 1937 simulation. Tortured by knowing his world is only a model, Ashton attacks Douglas when he returns, asking "What *is* real?" Demanding "Is this real?", he then shoots Douglas in the

leg. “How do you like having your life fucked with,” he shouts. The fight continues in a room with a heated pool, where the violent action contrasts with misty air that blurs boundaries and makes unambiguous delineation impossible. When the two plunge into the pool as Ashton tries to drown Douglas, the jump cut to Douglas being pulled by Whitney from the simulation, choking and gasping for breath, accentuates the similarity between being immersed in the green laser light and submerged in simulated water so real it was killing him.

We later discover that if someone is killed in the simulation while an upper-world user is occupying the body, the user’s consciousness dies with the simulant’s body. Since the user’s consciousness is no longer alive to re-occupy his own body, when the body emerges from the simulation, the computer places the simulant’s consciousness—now the only consciousness available—into it. In this way the simulant’s consciousness is able to leap out of the simulation to the (relatively) real world above. The boundaries are thus in fact permeable in both directions, allowing traffic to flow from lower to upper as well as upper to lower. This programming oversight is foreshadowed by Whitney’s early warning to Douglas, “You could die!”

The revelation that the 1998 world is a simulation intensifies the ambiguities that haunt the scenes with retrospective ironies. When Douglas barely escapes death by drowning in the simulated world, he is mobilized into furious action, insisting when he returns to his world that he intends to shut the simulation down. “These people are real,” he shouts to Whitney in an announcement that can be taken as an

answer to Ashton’s lingering demand to know what is real. “They’re as real as you and me,” he asserts, speaking truer than he knows. Here the film loses an opportunity to explore the ethical complexities of the situation, for if the simulants are in fact “real” people, shutting the simulation down can only amount to mass murder, since all the simulants would then be wiped from existence.

The omission is deliberate, for this realization drives the later plot of Daniel Galouye’s *Simulacron-3*, the novel that provided the starting point for the script. Like the film, the novel is set in a present-day world that has created a simulation so real it entrances the programmers who download into it. Unlike the film, however, the novel’s simulation serves as the focal point for political intrigue, for it can be used either for research into the secrets of “human nature,” as Douglas Hall puts it, or, in a more banal and ultimately sinister plot, as a data-mining replacement for the omnipresent public opinion pollsters, dubbed Certified Reaction Monitors, who constantly pester the citizens of the 1998 world for their views on commercial products. So pervasive has this practice become that it constitutes a sizable portion of the world’s economy, fortified by the powerful Association of Reaction Monitors that has successfully lobbied for laws compelling citizens to answer the CRM’s ubiquitous questions. When the novel’s Douglas Hall realizes his world is a simulation, he understands that it is being used for data mining by the world above, much as his company intends to use its simulated world. If his company’s simulation puts the CRMs out of business, Douglas’s world will cease to fulfill the purpose for which it

was created by the upper world and will consequently be wiped from existence by its creator, the sadistic David. In the novel these ambiguities are carried not so much by dialogue as by a complicated set of protocols that allows one character to probe and partially control the consciousness of another, enacted most fully when Douglas struggles to retain control of his consciousness against David. By reducing these complications and omitting altogether the political battle for how the simulation will be used, the film reorients the emphasis toward metaphysical complexities rather than political satire.<sup>5</sup>

These perplexities provide the central focus for the latter half of the film, as characters in both the 1937 and 1998 worlds struggle with what their lives mean if their consciousness, and indeed their entire perceived universes, are merely electrical impulses running in a computer. When Ashton's body is struck by a car while occupied by Whitney, the death of Whitney's consciousness automatically ensures that the computer will upload Ashton's consciousness into Douglas's world, the first time Douglas (and we) realize this reverse transfer is possible. By now Douglas has discovered his world too is a simulation. When the usually-cynical Ashton, stunned by the superior technology of 1998, proclaims that people in this world are like gods, Douglas replies ironically that he is little more than a mechanical figure in the crude arcade game he keeps in his office, capable only of making preprogrammed moves. He repeats this denial of free will and ultimate meaning to Jane, calling himself a "puppet." Jane responds, "A puppet doesn't have a soul," insisting that Douglas, and implicitly everyone in the present-day

world, is as fully capable of a meaningful life as the citizens of her world. Echoing the concerns of Galouye's Douglas Hall, the filmic character insists, "None of this is real. You pull the plug, I disappear, and nothing I ever say, nothing I ever do, will ever matter."

Although the film swerves from the novel in downplaying the suggestion that the plug might be pulled, the film effectively settles the argument in Jane's favor when David, knowing she has betrayed him by falling in love with Douglas, downloads into Douglas's world to kill her while she is also downloaded in the 1998 world. Since her death in the simulation would mean the destruction of her consciousness in the 2024 world, the death threat must be seen as something more than a game, restoring its status as an ultimate concern. If her death is real, then it follows that her life in the simulated world must also be consequential and thus in some sense real. Through this plot twist consequences are knitted back together with actions, restoring the possibility for ethical action that was threatened when characters could apparently escape the consequences for their actions by uploading back into their own world, as Douglas did when he was being drowned by Ashton. From an ethical viewpoint it does not matter, the film suggests, whether the lives one plays with are simulated or real. Sacrificing someone else to gratify sadistic desires is always wrong and fraught with ethical implications. Jane tells Douglas that her husband "made himself a god, and it corrupted him." Douglas's conclusion concerning the simulants in the 1937 world, "they are as real as you and me," can now be understood in a positive rather than a

negative sense, as a recognition of the rights of simulants in both worlds to meaningful lives.

Throughout, the 1998 and 1937 worlds have been distinguished by strikingly different visual styles. Whereas the 1937 world has lightly-tinted sepia tones and is replete with rich lustrous fabrics and crowded cabaret scenes appropriate to the nostalgic function it serves for its creator Hannon Fuller, the present day world is rendered in saturated primaries, icy blues and reds reflected in cold glass and steel surfaces. When Detective McBain (Dennis Haysbert) cuts the plot's Gordian knot by shooting David just as he is about to kill Jane, the bullet shatters a large glass window, metaphorically penetrating the boundaries separating the worlds. As David's consciousness dies, Douglas is automatically uploaded into Jane's world, in effect allowing her to exchange the corrupted David for Douglas, who resembles the person David used to be before he played god. We know that McBain's conscious act of killing was initiated by a phone call from Jane. Although we do not hear their conversation, we can infer that she has clued him in to the situation. After killing David, McBain makes clear that he understands the true nature of his world when he asks, "Is somebody going to unplug me now?" This dark note is in sharp contrast to the final scenes showing Douglas awakening in the 2024 world, where the predominant rose colors and futuristic utopian style that suggest all the problems have been solved. Douglas, united with Jane, even recovers in surrogate form his relationship with his father figure Hannon Fuller, for in the 2024 world Jane's father, the model for Hannon, enjoys evident good health as he waves

to Jane and Douglas from the beach where he is walking his dog.

This trite ending is rendered more complex in the film's closing shot. As the screen goes black, the display contracts to a white dot in the middle, as if a television or computer screen was being shut down. The implication, of course, is that Jane's world is also a simulation, a suggestion slyly imported into Galouye's novel through its title, *Simulacron-3*. Although characters in the novel's present-day world explain the eponymous name of their simulation by saying that it took three tries to get the simulation to work, the title haunts the novel with the intimation that even the third uppermost world is a simulation.

Instead of turtles all the way down, reality may be simulations all the way up, a view that renders every level ontologically unstable but nonetheless also restores the possibility for meaning at every level. Detective McBain, who broods over the action in the 1998 world and functions as a kind of narrator for the film, sums up this view when, after he has killed David in Douglas's body, he tells Jane "Just leave us all the hell alone down here, OK?" If every available reality is a simulation, the reality markers that distinguish science fiction from mainstream fiction can no longer function effectively, for the differences that mark a world constructed through cognitive estrangement as distinct from the everyday world are deconstructed. In the worlds depicted in *The Thirteenth Floor*, all realities are mixed—at least all that we can know.

#### Memory and Authenticity in *Dark City*

Whereas in *The Thirteenth Floor* issues of ultimate concern are

problematized because quotidian reality is revealed to be a simulation, in *Dark City* the focus shifts to simulated memories and environments. Tampering with the minds of the simulants after they are created, a realized possibility in Galouye's novel where memories are frequently erased or reprogrammed, is omitted from the film version. Rather than introducing the additional complication of "real" versus "unreal" memories, past events remain consensually intact, allowing the focus to stay on the central ontological question of whether a simulated world can have meaning. By contrast, in *Dark City* the split between the real and unreal moves inward into the mind, creating a dichotomy between an artificial past constructed by implanting false memories, and an inaccessible yet still theoretically possible authentic core. This dichotomy is reflected and inverted in the city's architecture, split between an ordinary-appearing surface and an alien core. Although the Dark City appears normal to its inhabitants, underneath are The Strangers, aliens who control the machinery telepathically through the "tuning" that nightly rearranges the city surface according to their experiments. As with *The Thirteenth Floor*, anomalies function as crucial clues to the truth, here the facts that day never breaks over the Dark City and all roads circle back to their starting points.

The mixed reality of *The Thirteenth Floor* is created in part by having two different consciousnesses occupy the same body, a time-sharing arrangement. Although leakages occur, each consciousness retains its individual identity. In *Dark City* the schism occurs not between one consciousness and another but within the same

consciousness as it struggles to construct a coherent self from artificial memories and a subjectivity that proves to be more than the sum of what it can remember. The drama is played out primarily through the character of John Murdoch, an inhabitant of the Dark City who successfully (and unconsciously) resists the latest memory imprinting and awakens in midstream, with his previous memories wiped out but his new ones not yet installed.

The implantation is carried out by Dr. Daniel Schreber, a human who has been forced to work for The Strangers but nevertheless harbors subversive ambitions. In sharp contrast to the ultra-modern simulation equipment of *The Thirteenth Floor*, the technology here is rendered anachronistically, the synthetic memories contained within an ornately antique syringe reminiscent of the kludgey technology of *The City of Lost Children*. Like that film, the lighting of *Dark City* is inspired by the noir tradition, as Roger Ebert has noted, using point light sources, dark shadows, and smoke-obscured rooms to create a sense of visual impairment that prevents us from ever seeing the whole picture at once. The absence of clear sight lines gestures metaphorically toward the condition of the human inhabitants, who are periodically injected with memories of completely different lives than they had led before. Dr. Schreber, mixing and matching memories "like so much paint," concocts from them synthetic lives that have no authentic roots in the past. When Schreber discovers that John Murdoch has attained the alien capacity to "tune," he hypothesizes it is an evolutionary mutation that has spontaneously emerged as a survival strategy. Realizing that John's abilities, unique among the human inhabitants of

the Dark City, have the potential to resist the aliens, Schreber confides to him what he knows about their history: that they were abducted and taken to the Dark City as laboratory stock on which to carry out the alien experiments. Possessing a group mind and communicating through telepathy, The Strangers are a dying race determined to discover the secret of what makes humans unique individuals. Although the rationale is only lightly sketched in the film, apparently they believe that if they can somehow discover the source of human individuality, they may be able to re-engineer themselves and reinvigorate their dying species. So they inject John Murdoch with the memories of a murderer to see if, given this false past, he will now act like a murderer. The irony, of course, is that by tampering with the human mind, they are eradicating the very individuality they hope to understand, a dynamic that makes their relations with the humans a zero-sum game.

Like *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Dark City* initially presents as a murder mystery. John Murdoch awakens to find a prostitute dead in his apartment, her body gruesomely mutilated and spiral-like labyrinths incised on her breasts. Also like *The Thirteenth Floor*, the murder is only a cover for deeper ontological issues. We never learn anything about the dead woman and come to understand that her body is intended merely as set dressing for Murdoch's identification as a murderer. Death thus ceases to be an ultimate concern and becomes instead an opening move in a game whose stakes are otherwise than they at first seem. The chief detective assigned to the case, Inspector Frank Bumstead (William Hurt), is there because Eddie Walenski

(Colin Fries), the previous detective investigating the serial murders, has apparently gone mad and had to be dismissed. When Bumstead visits Walenski at his home, he is holed up in an empty room, the walls and ceiling painted with spiral-like labyrinths. When Bumstead tells him he is frightening his wife, he insists, "She's not my wife. I don't know who she is. I don't know who any of us are." In retrospect it is clear that Walenski knows at least part of the real situation, including that his "wife" is associated with him only through a fictitious past and there is no way out from the Dark City. Bumstead guesses that Walenski is reacting to something he learned while investigating the case. Walenski explodes, "There is no case. There never was. This is all just a big joke. It's a joke," he goes on in a significant pronouncement revealing that murder is not primarily what is at stake here. A similar dynamic occurs when Emma Murdoch (Jennifer Connelly), John's memory-injected wife, tries to apologize to him for the extramarital affair her memories tell her she committed. At that point John knows that her memories have been implanted, and he brushes aside her apology like Walenski brushes aside Bumstead. Everything on the surface, from an illicit romance to murder, is trivialized because it operates in the service of what is concealed underneath the Dark City.

The plot evolves, then, as a struggle to escape from the labyrinth, penetrate the surface, break through to the outside—metaphors for going from illusion to truth, laboratory animal to authentic selfhood. The outside assumes mythic proportions in the billboards advertising Shell Beach, the promised outside where the sun pours down over

an ocean stretching to a vast horizon, signifying a geography diametrically opposed to claustrophobically encased Dark City. When John discovers a scrapbook he supposedly made as a child, it is blank when he first sees it. Confiscated by Bumstead, it later shows up in the detective's office filled with pictures. Even this apparently hard evidence, however, is revealed as an illusion. When John insists to Schreber that he can remember his childhood, Schreber tells him "You still don't understand, John. You were never a boy, not in this place. Your entire history is an illusion, a fabrication, as it is with all of us. You made those drawings happen with your gift." In an odd sense, the filled album does reveal who he is, not by pointing backward toward an origin that can connect him with an authentic past but by gesturing forward to the mutant being he is becoming.

The specter of a childhood severed from its rightful function as precursor to adulthood haunts the film throughout. The aliens have usurped the parental role, regarding the kidnapped humans as laboratory rats under their control, an image repeated in the spirals cut into the dead women's breasts, the obsessive drawings decorating Walenski's room, the rat running a spiral maze that Schreber is inspecting when Emma visits him, and the rat trap Bumstead finds in Walenski's cluttered office. With their vastly superior mental powers, The Strangers regard the humans "like lost children," perhaps an illusion to that other City of Lost Children where the sun seems never to shine. When The Strangers ominously visit Emma to inject her with the memories that will eradicate her past, they tell her condescendingly, "We will

give you some more pretty things soon, Anna." She objects, saying "I'm not Anna," but they override her protestation as an adult would that of a fractious child, responding "You will be soon. Yes."

At the center of John's quest for authentic selfhood is his attempt to recover his family and connection with his childhood, including Uncle Karl who runs an establishment called "Neptune's Kingdom." On display is not the vast ocean but only a few aquaria, allusions to the goldfish that John rescues when he awakens disoriented from the failed memory implantation and knocks over the goldfish bowl. When Uncle Karl entertains Johnny with that most banal of family activities, a slide show of shots from his childhood, John discovers not the authentication he seeks, however, but discrepancies that reveal the slides are artifacts concocted by The Strangers, "all lies." The creepiest sign of the disjunction between a childhood severed from natural adulthood are the aliens who occupy children's bodies, their diminutive forms in scary contradiction to their superhuman powers and bloodthirsty intentions. One of The Strangers tells John "We use your dead as vessels," so these unnatural children, in addition to their own monstrosity, signify the deaths of human children who will never grow to adulthood.

When Schreber confirms that John has acquired the ability to "tune," The Strangers are incredulous because, as their leader Mr. Book (Ian Richardson) says, "It requires several of your lifetimes to master our gifts. The idea that a simple man could develop the ability to tune" seems to them to defy the order that constitutes them as the adults in charge and humans as the "lost children" under their control. Through

his mutation, John has in effect been able to break through to adulthood as it is constituted within the regime of The Strangers. One of the first indications of his status comes when he resists The Strangers' command "Sleep," their usual way of dealing with humans who inconveniently interfere with their designs. He can no longer be treated as an overgrown child resisting going to bed but must be reckoned with as a fully commensurate adult. His quest to play this adult role leads him back in a circle to a wall poster advertising Shell Beach, the mythical outside he now realizes he can never reach. Furious, he rips through the poster and finds a brick wall underneath. Bumstead at his side, he begins tearing through the wall--only to expose the nothingness of outer space. The outside is thus revealed as an absolute disjunction, the Dark City as an immense artificial spaceship floating through the dark vastness of outer space. Trying to defend Murdoch, Bumstead breaks loose from the Dark City's gravitational shield and is lost in the blackness, giving us our first glimpse of the Dark City from the outside.

In a plot to find out what Murdoch is thinking, The Strangers have injected Mr. Hand (Richard O'Brien), one of their group, with his memories, creating a monstrous doppelganger that is half alien, half Murdoch.<sup>6</sup> Now they intend to inject Murdoch with their group memories, converting him into the mirror double of Mr. Hand, a human who possesses an alien core. In return they expect that they will finally learn the mystery of the human soul, for they will share his essence even as he shares their past. Forced by The Strangers to carry out this plan, Schreber subversively injects him instead with an especially prepared concoction that

replays the previously implanted memories of Murdoch's childhood. Interpolated into these synthetic memories are new elements, Schreber's admonishments urging Murdoch to action and assuring him he can succeed against The Strangers. In effect, Schreber is remixing Murdoch's false childhood, giving him instead the childhood he needs to reach maturation as a purposeful adult equal to the most powerful alien.

The price Murdoch pays to enter this god-like status is acceptance of his alien powers. The film intimates that by successfully resisting the aliens, he has preserved his individuality. The epic battle scene makes clear, however, that he now possesses in full The Strangers' powers of telekinesis. It remains an open question whether his mutant abilities have contaminated his "soul," his presumed human essence. Following the climactic battle, Murdoch again encounters his doppelganger, Mr. Hand, who tells him that his human imprint "is not compatible with my kind" and that he is dying. The scene's composition has been anticipated by an earlier scene in which Murdoch fights with Mr. Hand on the ridge of a peaked roof, a struggle resolved when Mr. Hand tumbles down one side, Murdoch down the other. This foreshadowing sets up the later death of Mr. Hand as a hygienic separation of the twins, with the alien contamination remaining with Mr. Hand and the human essence with Murdoch.

Later events testify, however, that Murdoch has become, if not an alien mutant, at least a superhuman entity. His status as a god is confirmed when he uses his newly realized power to overcome The Strangers and take over control of their machinery, using it to reinvent the Dark City as a place full of

light and water, the two elements they loath. As the sun rises over the Dark City in a shot that shows it from an exterior viewpoint as a huge metropolis floating in space, the parallel with Genesis is unmistakable. Moreover, the spirals that had earlier connoted an exitless maze are now converted into wispy clouds spiraling over the city. As Roger Ebert observes, this transformation plays off the spiral's alternative signification as an allusion to the Fibonacci series. Found throughout nature in everything from the chambered nautilus to spiral galaxies, the Fibonacci series (created by adding two previous elements in the series to create the next, as in 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, . . .) is associated with the ability of simple elements to self-organize, forming complex symmetries. The clouds, arising from the moisture that The Strangers abhorred, are not static like the walls of a labyrinth but self-organizing patterns, always changing, always new. It would be easy to see them as metaphors for the openness of free will and fecund creativity, were it not that the city is still ruled over by a superhuman deity who conceals from the inhabitants its true nature. The promise (or specter) of godhood haunts *Dark City* as it did *The Thirteenth Floor* because simulations necessarily imply a hierarchy in which the creator exists on a superior plane from the created.

The film attempts a naturalized ending by having John encounter Emma, now converted into Anna with no memory of her past life, at the pier overlooking the Shell Beach he has just created. As the two agree to go to Shell Beach together, the cozy reconciliation is tainted by the audience's knowledge that they enter into their presumed new relationship far from equal. Although

the city is no longer dark, it remains an artifact run by machinery hidden from the view of all its occupants except the omnipotent Murdoch (and Schreber, who has conveniently dropped out of the picture). In a sense, then, the city is still a simulation, a mixed reality that appears real to the inhabitants but is actually circumscribed by the limited boundaries and disjunctive relationship to the outside characteristic of all simulations. As with *The Thirteenth Floor*, this mixed reality is the only reality its inhabitants will ever know.

#### Time Sequencing and the Mixed Reality of *Mulholland Drive*

Whereas in *The Thirteenth Floor* the virtual reality simulation was created by a computer that can link to consciousness, and in *Dark City* by a mind linked to machinery, in *Mulholland Drive* the virtual reality engine is the mind alone. The sequencing makes the film virtually impossible to understand on a first viewing; only in retrospect can the viewer put together the pieces to construct a coherent story. Significantly, the detective characters that play prominent roles in *The Thirteen Floor* and *Dark City* are here relegated to bit parts that scarcely impact on the action at all. Their function is allocated instead to the viewer, who must actively re-think the story from the beginning once the ending has been reached, since the contextualizing information that enables this reconstruction to take place comes at the film's conclusion.<sup>7</sup>

The first coherent set of scenes depicts a plot to kill a beautiful woman (Laura Elena Harring) in the back of a limousine, foiled when joyriders crash into the car and kill everyone except her. Dazed, she makes her way down the hill into Hollywood from Mulholland Drive

and conceals herself in an apartment whose owner (later identified as Betty Elms' Aunt Ruth) is leaving on a trip. When Betty (Naomi Watts) arrives shortly afterward, she discovers the woman taking a shower and befriends her. The woman, who has lost her memory as a result of a head injury from the crash, takes the name "Rita" from a nearby movie poster advertising Rita Hayward. Thus the film opens with an apparent attempted murder, and much of the subsequent action focuses on the Betty and Rita's attempt to find out who

wants to kill Rita and why. But as with *The Thirteen Floor* and *Dark City*, the attempted murder covers a deeper and more disturbing reality. Only in the final scenes are we given the information that allows us to understand that the action takes place during the last two hours of Diane Selwyn's life. Figure 1, "Time Sequencing in *Mulholland Drive*," shows the temporal positioning of each section, indicates its ontological status (real life, flashback, or dream/hallucination) and the duration of each section.



Seen from this retrospective position, the plot with Betty and Rita is encased entirely within Diane's dream.

A clue is given in the opening shots showing someone sleeping under red sheets, covered by an orange blanket. These colors reappear in Betty Elm's

spangle-studded sweater, visually connecting the sleeping Diane with the personae she creates in her dream. Betty is the innocent self, the better self, that Diane wishes she was, brilliantly played by Naomi Watts. Since the film has been widely misunderstood, it may be helpful to review the evidence that indicates most of the film happens within Diane's dream. At the engagement party shown in the final scenes, we learn that Diane had won a jitterbug contest whose prize was a trip to Hollywood (this contest is shown at the film's beginning as the credits roll). This, along with a small inheritance from her grandparents, enables her to come to the place often called the nation's dream factory to try to make it in the movies. She auditions for various parts, including *The Sylvia North Story*, she says in a conversation with Coco Keshner (Ann Miller), Adam Keshner's mother, but the director Bob Brooker "didn't think so much of me." Instead the part goes to Camilla Rhodes, the beautiful woman who appears in Diane's dream as the amnesiac Rita. Camilla befriends Diane and arranges for her to get small parts in exchange for a lesbian relationship. But when Camilla decides to marry her director, Adam Keshner (Justin Theroux), she tells Diane they must break off their relationship—a scene depicted at the end immediately before the engagement party scene. At Camilla's insistence, Diane agrees to go to the party, but clearly for her it is an exquisite torture. Not only do Adam and Camilla announce their engagement, but Camilla also kisses another woman in front of Diane while making sure she sees it, a hint that she may continue her lesbian affairs but not with Diane. In similar fashion, Camilla had earlier asked that Diane be allowed to stay on

the set that Adam Keshner orders cleared while he passionately kisses Camilla, another dig at Diane that suggests Camilla enjoys sadistically causing her pain. Devastated by these developments, Diane meets with a scruffy lowlife hit man and gives him Camilla's picture. He tells her that once events are set in motion they cannot be changed and asks her if she is sure this is what she wants. "More than anything in this world," she assures him, whereupon he tells her that when the deed is done, she will find in her apartment a blue key that he shows her. When she asks "What's it open?" he laughs, for from his point of view this is entirely irrelevant. The suggestion that the key can nevertheless open something important reappears in Diane's dream and provides a central metaphor for the dream's logic.

The dream recycles nearly all the characters that appear in the party but assigns them different roles, appropriate to Diane's agony at having ordered a murder whose consequences are literally unbearable for her. The casting is immediately apparent to us once we have seen the party, since the same actors play both their dream characters and real-life counterparts. The most important doublings, of course, are Betty and Rita standing in for Diane and Camilla, now cast so that Betty becomes the protective, nurturing friend altruistically trying to help a dazed and confused Rita. Betty is the rightful occupant of the apartment, transformed from the drab dump where Diane lives into a lushly decorated beauty, so her letting Rita stay with her is another example of her largesse. Coco Keshner, almost the only person to whom Diane talks at the party, is cast as Coco Lenoir, the well-intentioned busybody apartment

manager who disapproves of Rita staying with Betty (as Adam Kesher's mother, she could certainly be expected to disapprove of Diane's lesbian relationship with Camilla). Alone of the characters Adam Kesher remains who he is, a hip up-and-coming director with an attitude, but around him the dream builds an elaborate conspiracy plot meant to explain why he cannot have the real object of his desire, transformed from Camilla/Rita to Diane/Betty.

Within this general framework are many details that complicate the story, investing the transformations with delicate irony and dramatic tension. In the dream Betty pulls off a dynamite reading for a part in *The Sylvia North Story*, transforming a banal script into an explosive scene fraught with the ambivalence of sexual attraction twisted together with deep hatred—a vicarious enactment of what Diane feels toward Camilla. The director Bob Brooker, who “didn't think so much” of Diane in real life, is rendered as a near-idiot incapable of saying anything that makes sense, never mind insightful. The woman Camilla kisses at the party is cast in the role of the dream's “Camilla Rhodes,” recycled as the actress that the mysterious conspiracy foists upon Adam Kesher. When Adam initially rebels against their suggestion (actually their command) that he cast “Camilla Rhodes” as the lead, the conspiracy shuts down his production, bankrupts him with a phony credit rating, and threatens him with violence until he knuckles under, even though his longing looks toward Betty plainly indicate that he would much rather have her instead. Betty, for her part, runs out of this important audition despite Adam's encouraging stare because she has “promised a friend” (Rita) that she

would return, another re-writing that transforms Diane's murderous intentions into loyalty and altruism.

The conspiracy provides tantalizing clues to what the dream tries to conceal. One of its instruments is the mysterious Cowboy, a fleeting figure at the party whom Diane glimpses passing through a doorway. In the dream, he becomes the hokey but somehow still dangerous enforcer who warns Adam “You will see me once more if you do good. You will see me two more times if you do bad.” Since we see him twice more, at the party and when he appears in hallucinated form to waken Diane, the dream logic implies she has done “bad” rather than “good.” The real life conspiracy, of course, is between Diane and the hit man. In the dream the hit man appears as a vicious punk who for some reason needs the black address book of an acquaintance, presumably to track down Rita. Rather than simply ask his friend for the book, the hit man cold-bloodedly plugs him. When a stray bullet rips through the wall and hits an obese woman in the apartment next door, the hit man goes after her as well, comically struggling with her in a scene ripe with black humor. This struggle is witnessed in turn by a humble cleaning man. Lured into the room supposedly to lend aid to the screaming woman, the cleaning man is also killed by the hit man. The final victim is the vacuum cleaner, whose smoking demise sets off a fire alarm. With these ludicrous developments, the scene enacts a sense of consequences spiraling out of control.

In sharp contrast is the mysterious head honcho of the conspiracy, an impeccably dressed older man in a wheelchair who is encased in a hermetically sealed room, apparently to make sure nothing from the outside

world, from germs to rival gangsters, touches him. Despite his ailing health and nearly immobile condition, he is able to pull strings that jerk other characters into furious action. He communicates with his minions with a nearly imperceptible shake of the head, but this is enough to initiate a chain of telephone calls that move from one beefy hand to another. Since his motives and position are never explained, we may wonder if he represents Diane's unconscious, communicating through chains of intermediaries and pulling strings while remaining unmoved and unmoving.

Despite the dream's attempt to rewrite Diane's character and transform the consequences of her actions, real life keeps breaking through more and more insistently. The unbearable truth of the murder Diane has purchased interrupts the sanitized construction of her dream repeatedly through the voices of her dream characters. At first the leakages are subtle, as when Rita tells Betty "It will be OK if I sleep," a hope dispelled when she awakens and still cannot remember who she is. Rita's expectation that sleep will cure her parallels Diane's hope that sleep will restore her sanity. The interruptions become more insistent when Louise Bonner, cast in the dream as a loony tenant in Betty's apartment complex, knocks at the door muttering "Someone's in trouble." Here the dream logic is at its most self-referential, for Louise has no counterpart at the party; rather, her double is within the dream itself. The shape of her unkempt hair and profile connects her to the dream's most mysterious character, a figure invested with a fear so intense he is rendered almost monstrous.

This figure is introduced when an unnamed young man sits at a booth in Winkie's restaurant and confides to his companion (perhaps his psychoanalyst) that "I've had a dream about this place. It's the second one I've had." He tells his companion that in his dream he sees his companion standing by the cash register in this very spot. In the dream, the young man then goes outside to the back—and out pops a figure so dreadful, so monstrous that the young man declares, "I hope that I never see that person outside my dream." At his companion's urging, he decides to confront his fear. With his companion trailing behind, he goes outside and walks behind the restaurant. Just as he is nearing the dumpster, around the corner appears a derelict that we glimpse only for a second, scarcely human with unkempt hair, a filthy face and obscured features. The young man collapses. In the dream logic the derelict represents that which is so dreadful it cannot be faced, the devastating truth that Diane attempts to evade through her dream. It is no accident that the derelict's double is within the dream itself, for he is positioned at the crux where the convolutions in the dream's logic become most intense. Nor is it an accident that when he appears again, it is a signal that the truth cannot be kept at bay any longer.

The dream's climax comes when the dream's script breaks down, revealing that it is powerless to change what has already happened in real life. The tension begins to build when Betty and Rita visit the same Winkie's restaurant in which the young man recounted his dream, a setting nearly identical to the one in which Diane had met with the hit man. In that scene, Diane glanced at the waitress's nametag

and saw “Betty,” the name she will appropriate for her alter ego in her dream. In the dream sequence set in the same restaurant, Rita glances at the waitress’s nametag and sees “Diane,” a name that rings a bell with her (as well it might!). Following this clue, Rita produces the name “Diane Selwyn” and she and Betty visit Diane’s apartment. Breaking in through the window, they penetrate to the bedroom to make a ghastly discovery, a decaying corpse on the bed. The corpse is an unmistakable recognition within the dream of the deep trouble in which Diane finds herself, as well as an indication that the dream cannot sustain its illusions for much longer. The discovery frightens Rita and Betty so badly that, retreating back to Betty’s apartment, they cut Rita’s hair and hide it with a blond wig, making her into a double for Betty. Snuggling in bed, Betty confesses her erotic attraction to Rita and they begin making love. When Betty asks Rita if she has done this before, Rita says she does not know, and when Betty confesses that she loves Rita, Rita significantly does not answer, another indication that Camilla’s rejection of Diane in real life is beginning to affect Rita’s behavior in the dream. The dream’s illusions are further emphasized by a camera shot positioned to superimpose half of Rita’s face onto half of Betty’s, creating a composite portrait in which the two characters merge. In retrospect we realize that all of the dream characters are being generated by Diane’s mind, speaking the thoughts she wants them to have.

The dream’s climax comes when Rita awakens at 2 am and tells Diane that they must go to the Club Silencio. Arriving at this eerily empty establishment, they find an ominously costumed impresario telling them “It’s

all recorded” and “It is all an illusion,” despite the appearance he creates of having live musicians create the music on the spot. His colleague then introduces “La Llorona de Los Angeles, Rebecca del Rio.” Literally “the crying one,” La Llorona is the protagonist in a Hispanic folk tale about a woman who is jilted by her husband. In despair she drowns their two children in the river. After nights of weeping in remorse she drowns herself, and her ghostly sobs are often heard in the night.<sup>8</sup> The film’s version of “La Llorona” sings Rob Orbison’s “Crying” in a faithfully rendered Spanish translation. Although the vocalist’s hair is disheveled and her makeup overdone, she sings so expressively and powerfully that Rita and Betty begin weeping. Betty in particular is so affected that she begins violently trembling. The lyrics to “Crying,” mourning a lost love that will never return, combine with the allusion to La Llorona to constitute the dream’s most transparent recognition so far that by ordering Camilla’s murder, Diane has not only lost her lover beyond hope but also condemned herself beyond redemption. It is at this point that the singer collapses, although the richly sorrowful voice continues as she is unceremoniously dragged off stage. We realize that she must have been lip-syncing and that the voice is, as the impresario warned, “all recorded,” just as the events that the dream attempts to rescript and replay have already been irreversibly acted out in real life.

With this recognition, the dream can no longer maintain its illusions. When Rita returns to the apartment, Betty has disappeared, as if to signal that this idealized double for Diane cannot be sustained. As Rita opens the mysterious blue box with a blue anodized triangular

key, the camera zooms into the black interior and the Cowboy appears in the doorway, saying “Hey pretty girl, time to wake up.” Perhaps alluding to Pandora’s Box, the blue box functions symbolically as the knowledge that Diane has ordered Camilla’s murder, opened with a blue key that alludes to the blue key she found in her apartment indicating that the murder has been committed. Diane then awakens from sleeping on the bed, the dream having failed to solve her problems, which now confront her with renewed terror. As she goes into the living room, we see the hit man’s blue key on the coffee table, establishing that the murder has already taken place and that the dream was an attempt to evade this reality. The next sequences are a real visit from her estranged roommate, as well as hallucinations where Diane imagines that Camilla has come back to her. The most revealing scenes are flashbacks to the breakup scene, the engagement party, and the scene where Diane meets the hit man to arrange Camilla’s murder, thus finally giving us the information we need to put together a coherent chronology of events.

The conclusion comes when we cut to the derelict playing with the blue aluminum box, now open to signify that the cat is out of the bag. Indeed, out of the paper bag at his feet crawl miniature versions of Diane’s grandparents, rescripted in the dream as a well-meaning couple Betty meets on the plane but here transformed into demonic creatures hysterically laughing, as if in recognition that Diane’s dream of making it in Hollywood has turned into a horrible mockery of success. We cut to her apartment, where she hears a knock on the door. When the truth enters in the form of her hysterically laughing

grandparents crawling under the door in miniatures and then growing to normal size, she flees into her bedroom, puts a gun into her mouth, and pulls the trigger. Camera shots of the derelict’s face and ghostly images of Betty and Rita replay the crucial realizations that led to this moment. The final shot is of a blue-haired woman reminiscent of La Llorona sitting in the balcony at Club Silencio. She pronounces “Silencio” as if echoing the conclusion of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, “The rest is silence.”

A recuperative reading such as we have given here must recognize that even if the film can be rendered as a coherent sequence, it nevertheless is *presented* as if it were ontologically unstable. Thinking about why this kind of fragmented narrative has become so widespread on the contemporary scene, including films such as *Memento* and *Run Lola Run* and contemporary fiction ranging from *Gravity’s Rainbow* to *House of Leaves*, we speculate that as the flow of information and the technologies of interconnectivity have increased exponentially across the globe with the advent of the microcomputer, distributed processing, the Internet and the World Wide Web, the art of storytelling has dramatically changed. As theorists Janet Murray, George Landow, Marie-Laure Ryan and Michael Joyce among others have argued, nonlinear modes of storytelling, especially fragmented non-chronological narratives, are becoming increasingly visible and important. The highly nonlinear narrative of *Mulholland Drive* further suggests that the technologies of virtual reality feed back into the culture to change perceptions of how stories are conceived and created, even when the technology is not literally present. Thinking of the mind as a virtual reality

machine (as Richard Dawkins among others has argued it is) implies that the notion of mixed reality has so permeated our contemporary context that it no longer needs to be linked with an actual technology to be capable of shaking the ontological and epistemological ground on which consensus reality is built.

The conjunction of *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Dark City* and *Mulholland Drive* suggests that in the slipstream of mixed reality, we are no longer so confident that the technologies of virtual reality—including dreams, hallucinations, and fantasies-- will be able to be controlled by their creators. Leakages, mutations, and consequences spiraling out of control tear the fabric of ordinary reality, letting loose results that fundamentally alter our relation to our perceived worlds. Along with this unsettling conclusion emerges another implication less scary and more encouraging. All three films suggest in complex ways that an ontologically unstable world can nevertheless be ethically coherent, in the sense that consequences are knit back together with actions. Living in the slipstream of mixed reality may not be especially comfortable, but it need not be devoid of ethical responsibility. We could do worse than accept this vision.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Sterling's "Slipstream" essay originally appeared in *SF Eye* #5 (1998), but this magazine is now defunct and available at only five libraries in the United States. Fortunately, Sterling has put his essay on-line. In the web version it appears without page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Marlene Barr's contribution to the ongoing challenge to clarify the boundary between mainstream and science fiction has been to define a genre of "feminist fabulation" that draws on Robert Scholes' notion of "structural fabulation" as constituting a realm separate from ordinary reality yet related to it. Feminist fabulation differs both from mainstream fiction and male-oriented science fiction in its focus on re-envisioning patriarchal societies and writing from a feminist perspective. These ideas are developed in Barr's *Feminist Fabulation (passim)* and revisited in her introduction to *Lost in Space* (10-15).

<sup>3</sup> Additional information on these films and further analysis can be found at Nicholas Gessler's website.

<sup>4</sup> In "A Festival of Flops," Rex Reed reveals that he did not understand *Mulholland Drive* at all and makes a number of embarrassing mistakes,

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including thinking that the Spanish version of Roy Orbison's "Crying" sung by La Llorona is "an Italian aria" (26). In contrast is the excellent analysis "Everything you were afraid to ask about 'Mulholland Drive'" by Bill Wyman, Max Garrone and Andy Klein, as well as the review by Stephanie Zacharek, "David Lynch's Latest tour de force."

<sup>5</sup>The film's interest in ontological and epistemological issues is clear from "The Basement: Philosopher's Library" on their website, where they have quotations from over fifty philosophers on the nature of reality.

<sup>6</sup>Alex Proyas's original script for *Dark City* is much darker than the version that finally was made. In the original script, Mr. Hand was named Mr. Black, and Murdoch's character, taken over by the aliens instead of successfully resisting them, is named John White, making clear the doppelganger relation between them. Apparently Proyas brought in Lem Dobbs and David S. Goyer to help him re-write the script. Comparison of the original script with a transcript of the film suggests that Dobbs and Goyer had a salutary influence, for they transformed an unwieldy script that often bordered on grotesquerie into a tightly structured screenplay.

<sup>7</sup>Apparently concerned that viewers would not understand the film, David Lynch included in the *Mulholland Drive* DVD "David Lynch's 10 clues to Unlocking This Thriller." Since there is no commentary on the DVD, this list remains Lynch's only commentary on what he intended the film to signify. As evidence for the cogency of our reading, we can respond to all 10 clues successfully as follows. 1. The two clues revealed before the credits are the

jitterbug contest and Betty's winning it. 2. The red lampshade is significant because it stands on Diane's bedside table and therefore orients the scenes in which it appears as occurring in real time. 3. The title of the film for which Adam Kesher is auditioning is *The Sylvia North Story*, which Diane mentions later at the party. 4. The accident of course occurs on Mulholland Drive. 5. The hit man gives Diane a blue key to signify Camilla's murder has been completed. 6. The robe, the ashtray, and the coffee cup are significant because they identify the real time scenes from the flashbacks that occur in the last section of the film. 7. Felt, realized, and gathered at the Club *Silencio* is Diane's regret over the loss of Camilla and her murder. 8. Camilla was helped, of course, by sleeping around, including with her director Adam Kesher. 9. The young man at Winkie's encounters his worst fear, with the derelict symbolically connecting to Diane's recognition that she has ordered Camilla's murder. 10. Aunt Ruth remains in her apartment the entire time. Her departure on a trip is encased within Diane's dream and does not occur in real life. This is indicated when, as Diane is about to awaken, Aunt Ruth comes into her bedroom and looks around; the blue box that Rita has just dropped on the floor in the dream is nowhere to be seen, because that action occurred in the dream and not in real life.

<sup>8</sup>We are indebted to Stanley Allen for drawing our attention to the La Llorona folk tale, email communication Nov. 7, 2002.