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“I’m in This Dream Place:” Industry, Identity, and Illusion in *Mulholland Dr.* and  
*Sunset Blvd.*

*Hollywood, the dream factory, had created a dream girl. Could she awaken to reality? And what was the reality? Was there a life for her outside the dream?*

- Norman Rosten, *Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe*

Near the beginning of *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001), aspiring actress Betty Elms (Naomi Watts) gushes to an amnesiac she has just met, named Rita (Laura Elena Harring), about how excited she is as a newcomer to Hollywood, adding, “I just came here from Deep River, Ontario, and now I’m in this...dream place!” Though we as viewers don’t know this just yet, Betty’s moniker for Hollywood is incredibly fitting. As we will come to find by the film’s end, Betty and her world are fantastical figures in the dream of depressed, down-on-her-luck actress Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts). Similarly, by the end of *Sunset Blvd.* (Billy Wilder, 1950) we find that has-been heroine Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), has fully enveloped herself in fantasy, with her now-dead ex-lover, Joe Gillis (William Holden), commenting from beyond the grave that “the dream she had clung to so desperately had enfolded her.” This connection may seem rudimentary at first glance, but upon further inspection, the ties between *Mulholland Dr.* and *Sunset Blvd.* are extensive. *Mulholland Dr.*’s director, David Lynch, has professed his admiration of *Sunset Blvd.* for years. There are many explicit references to Wilder’s film in Lynch’s, from a shot of the famous Paramount gates, to the inclusion of Norma Desmond’s 1929 Isotta-Fraschini car in the movie, and both films are commonly lauded as two of the best pictures about Hollywood. Thematically, Lynch seems to be engaging with similar ideas to those tackled by

*Sunset Blvd.*, namely industry, identity, and illusion. By examining the approach both films use in portraying and commenting on these themes, mainly through their female protagonists, it becomes clear that *Mulholland Dr.* is deeply influenced by, and on many levels, an amplification of *Sunset Blvd.*

In order to identify *Sunset Blvd.*'s influence on *Mulholland Dr.*, it is critical to first analyze both films' portrayals of Hollywood as an industry. By most accounts, it seems that *Mulholland Dr.* and *Sunset Blvd.* are highly critical of the Hollywood institution. Ed Sikov refers to *Sunset Blvd.* in his piece, "Laughing Hysterically," as "the nastiest, most derisive film about Hollywood ever to have been made at that point" (Sikov 95). In a similar vein, Stephen Holden claims in his *New York Times* review of the film that *Mulholland Dr.* depicts the "nervy full-scale nightmare of Tinseltown" (Holden). In the case of Wilder's film, Hollywood is to blame for Norma's descent into madness. As Cecil B. DeMille, who portrays himself in the film, says of her, "A dozen press agents working overtime can do terrible things to the human spirit." Norma, who began acting at a young age, was put up on a pedestal by Hollywood, the same institution that would knock her off of it when she was no longer youthful and useful. Therefore, DeMille is implying that "Norma's delusions are the inevitable by-product of the system which they support" (Dean 95). Diane, on the other hand, never even feels the embrace of fame. Regardless of any talent or skill she may have, she is simply overlooked, a rejection that similarly influences her retreat into fantasy. Diane's failure may, at first, look more to be the product of fate than industrial factors. After all, Lynch claims in an interview with Chris Rodley that when it came to Diane's inability to get what she wants, "You could call it fate – if it doesn't smile on you, there's *nothing* you can do" (Rodley 17). And yet, Hollywood is at fault. This is because Hollywood, Diane's "dream place," crafted illusions for her, promising glory and good

fortune, but did not deliver on them. As Diane says, “I always wanted to come here.” Her ideals about Hollywood are reflected in her fantasy of Betty, who professes dreams of being a movie star, or even better, “a great actress.” Diane was sold on a naïve illusion of the industry, and thus Hollywood is vilified by both Wilder and Lynch for being the cause of Norma’s and Diane’s shattered ideals.

Criticism of Hollywood is also achieved in both films through satire. In Sikov’s words, “The joke of *Sunset Blvd.* is Hollywood itself” (Sikov 98). By relaying how absurd it is that, for example, Gillis’s script about “Okies in the dust bowl” ended up “played on a torpedo boat” by the time the Hollywood machine was through with it, Wilder is communicating the creative restriction and lack of vision that plague the industry. Even Norma’s character, though tragic, contains elements of absurdity in her “personality of such irrational, mythical proportion” (Sikov 96). She is a victim of Hollywood, but in another sense, her ludicrous displays of wealth and massive ego signal her as an emblem of the industry itself, which is “immured narcissistically in its past glories” and are thus thoroughly mocked in the course of the film (Dickstein 178). Lynch seems to have picked up on this absurdism, and in his traditional surrealist fashion, amplifies it in his own movie. In the Hollywood of *Mulholland Dr.*, creative restriction comes via a shadowy organization that overtakes the production of a film and imposes their own will in the casting process, led by a dwarf who relays orders from a sealed-off room through speakerphone (Nochimson 38). The characters that drive this imposition, from Mr. Roque (Michael J. Anderson) to The Cowboy (Monty Montgomery), are undeniably influential and villainous, but their strangeness of demeanor, of speech, and of behavior, lends them a comedic role within the film as well. They are so laughably peculiar that it becomes amply clear that Lynch does not believe Hollywood is in the right hands, echoing Wilder’s original sentiment.

Despite Lynch's film amplifying the ideas of Wilder—Hollywood is a flawed institution—he has an admiration for the place that permeates *Mulholland Dr.*, an admiration that, strangely enough, seems to stem from *Sunset Blvd.* One of the first things Lynch apparently did upon his arrival to Los Angeles was seek out the driveway Joe Gillis pulls into at the beginning of *Sunset Blvd.* (Lim 155-156). In interviews for *Mulholland Dr.*, he frequently tells the story of the “full-tilt love affair” that began between him and L.A. when he first saw its light, commenting on its “freedom” and “feeling of possibilities” (Lim 142). Lynch finds the Hollywood of Wilder's world, which has been deemed “grotesque” and “decaying” by most, to be “just too *beautiful* – every part of it” (Rodley 19). Lynch's novel, romantic vision of *Sunset Blvd.* is reflected in his movie's often anachronistic depiction of an idealized Los Angeles, where doo-wop and the jitterbug are part of the cultural mainstream and 50s-style fashions, diners, and nostalgia prevails. The golden age of cinema that *Sunset Blvd.* eulogizes still exists, according to Lynch, if only in fantasy.

Hollywood's betrayal of Norma and Betty has an indelible impact on their identities. Both women, enamored by illusions of stardom and success in Hollywood, are ultimately unable to attain it, and this destroys their perceptions of themselves. In Gerd Gemunden's terms, for Norma, “her isolation from the film industry has split her personality in two” (Gemunden 90). This split is illustrated in Lynch's film as well. In Clint Stivers's account of *Mulholland Dr.* for *Senses of Cinema*, he notes Diane's self-image as a star after winning a jitterbug contest in Deep River, Ontario. Despite this early success, however, she is unable to break into Hollywood, and “Consequently, Diane cannot integrate her image of herself as a star into her actual world” (Stivers). This leads to a complete fracturing of Diane's identity, just as in the case of Norma. Both films' depictions of these broken mental states reach for the surreal. The grotesqueries of

her dilapidated mansion, complete with rats scurrying in an empty pool, are surreal images that externalize Norma's deteriorating mental state. Her rooms are stuffed with clutter and various images of herself, conveying the fragmented, scattered nature of her self-image at this point. Additionally, the actions her character undertakes, whether it be holding a funeral for a pet monkey or hosting a thoroughly uncomfortable New Year's party for two, provide a great deal of insight into the mental disturbance her broken identity has caused her. Lynch seems to identify this element of the surreal in Wilder and heightens it in his own depiction of Diane's broken identity. Even in Diane's dreams, her damaged mental state makes itself known, through terrifying and absurd characters like a monster behind the dumpster who is only identified as "the one who's doing it" and a crying woman who gives a moving performance in a theater before inexplicably collapsing. Diane's broken view of herself is also clear in Betty's discovery of her own grotesque decaying dead body on a torn mattress. After this discovery, Betty flees from the house where she has found the body and her image blurs, so we see multiple of her on screen, suggesting, once again, a fractured identity. The use of surrealism in both films to illustrate the psyches of their protagonists imbues them with an air of horror, complicating the already nuanced tones of the films. As it is, these depicted identities demand repair, and both Lynch and Wilder suggest that the method through which this can be achieved is illusion.

Identity and the Hollywood industry are innately connected with illusion in both these films. Illusion is what traps both these women, but it also functions as their escape. Hollywood, commonly referred to as "the dream factory," produced fantasies that Norma and Diane desired and were unable to obtain, fracturing their identities. In order to repair these identities, then, they are forced to create fantasies of their own. Norma's fantasy is sustained through celluloid, as she seeks "a way to reassimilate herself with the star image" by surrounding herself with

photographs from her heyday and watching her own films (Gemunden 90). Her illusion is supported by her butler, Max von Mayerling, who writes her fan letters which convince her she is still remembered, is still a star. As suggested by Roger F. Cook in his piece, "Hollywood Narrative and the Play of Fantasy: David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*," Diane's fantasy exists in a dream, where she crafts an entire world with narratives and ideas drawn from Hollywood conventions. The Castiglione brothers pressuring director Adam Keshner (Justin Theroux) to cast an actress of their choosing lends the feeling of a gangster film. Doo-wop singing numbers add a dash of the musical, and the central love affair of Betty and Rita is, of course, the romance (Cook 373). Even the character of Betty, as written by George Toles in "Auditioning Betty in *Mulholland Drive*," "is strictly a B-movie creation herself, both in her innocence and star-struck yearning" (Toles 4). By restructuring her reality to attain her desires, Diane is reconciling her self-image with her real self, and this is achieved only through the crafting of a film-like narrative. This entanglement of self-perception and illusions with Hollywood is also brought up in Neil Sinyard & Adrian Turner's piece on *Sunset Blvd.* As they say, "Characters in *Sunset Blvd.* are constantly defining their actions and experience in relation to cinematic models" (Sinyard & Turner 272). It is clear that Lynch must have noted this, whether in Gillis's dialogue, where he refers to personal relationships as "contracts" or in the scene where Norma shows Gillis one of her movies. This could have been an influencing factor in his choice to create a film whose narrative is dominated by the faux-film narrative an actress has applied to her own life. Just as Norma's and Diane's identities are wrapped up in Hollywood convention, their identities are also enmeshed with their role as performers. At the end of *Sunset Blvd.*, when Norma's illusion has reached its peak, she believes she is acting for the camera, putting on her production of *Salome*. She also performs for Joe, donning costumes and playing different characters,

indicating that her fantasy is tied to her ability to act. She is “truest to her self image” in these everyday performances (Dean 95). Diane’s alter-ego, Betty, likewise, does not truly come alive until her audition scene, where she can prove her chops as an actress (Toles 2). It is clear that Hollywood and the power of performance play key roles in the dreams of both these women.

It is important to note what role exactly illusion plays in repairing the identities of Norma and Diane. Primarily, they allow them to occupy positions that would be impossible for them to occupy in reality. Norma’s illusion allows her to occupy the position of a star even though her celebrity is long faded. By surrounding herself with images of her past self and her old movies, she is also able to convince herself of her eternal youth, despite her advancing age. Therefore, her self-perception as someone who is “big” and “ageless,” which developed in response to the promises of stardom, can be reconciled with her reality. In a similar vein, Diane’s illusion allows for her to occupy the position of a great actress whose failure is not attributed to any fault of her own, but a system that is rigged against her. Interestingly, Betty’s fantasy also allows her to inhabit multiple contradictory positions. As Todd McGowan suggests in his book, *The Impossible David Lynch*, in Betty’s dream world, “she is innocent, yet sexual; she is naïve, yet aware of how the world works; she is hopeful, yet not easily duped” (McGowan 207). All these characteristics which Diane must have felt existed within her would be impossible to embody simultaneously anywhere outside of fantasy, but the structure of the dream allows her to do so. Thus, both Norma and Diane are enabled by illusion to become that which Hollywood dreams had promised them and failed to give them, repairing their shattered senses of self in the process. Additionally, both women, whose low position in the Hollywood hierarchy has stripped them of their agency (a fact that suggests *film noir* tendencies are present in both movies), are granted control of their fates by illusion. The power Norma’s fantasy lends her allows her to believe she

can stage a successful return and can get Cecil B. DeMille to direct her film when she so desires. Diane's dream gives her the agency to pursue an acting career and a romance.

While both *Mulholland Dr.* and *Sunset Blvd.* posit that fantasy is a possible way to cope with Hollywood's rejection, the former seems to believe more in its positive potential than the latter. Fantasy lends coherence to the lives of the protagonists in both films. Despite Wilder's insistence that *Sunset Blvd.* did not have a happy ending, there is a sense in which Norma's total descent into illusion is merciful (Phillips 124). Joe Gillis uses this term at the film's close, noting that the cameras were turning for Norma just as she had been aching for them to do all this time. "Life," he muses, "which can be strangely merciful, had taken pity on Norma Desmond." Even though the turning of these cameras coincides with Norma's complete loss of reality, she is still, in a certain sense, getting what she wants. Sinyard & Turner suggest this scene as being imbued with a certain "compassion and sensitivity" (Sinyard & Turner 287). As Sikov sees it, "Norma succeeds in orchestrating her greatest cinematic triumph" (Sikov 112-113). Perhaps Lynch, like these authors, sees Norma's descent down the staircase as something of a victory, and resultantly, his sense of fantasy is quite positive. In Lynch's vision, fantasy oftentimes makes more sense than reality. It is striking that the film's extended dream is more narratively and visually coherent than the reality it draws on, which jumps around in time and is edited erratically. This choice perhaps indicates the useful role of fantasy in making sense of reality, in "rendering our experience coherent and meaningful" (McGowan 195). Norma and Diane are both able to confront their trauma in dreams and process their emotions, their guilt and anger, under the protective veil of illusion. Also, just as Norma can attain her desire, that of being an eternal star, through her dream, Diane is able to attain proof of her acting ability and a romantic relationship with the woman she loves.



Still, both Wilder and Lynch are careful to portray the damaging aspects of the stories these women spin for themselves. Norma is commonly referred to in literature on *Sunset Blvd.* as a vampire who “sustains her fantasy by draining the lives of those who surround her” (Gemunden 79). Joe Gillis’s and Max von Mayerling’s lives are put to service keeping Norma’s illusions alive, playing “parts in the scenarios [Norma has] scripted” (Dean 92). Both of them are the collateral damage of this illusion. Max is subservient to her hysteria and spends all his time ensuring that the truth of Norma’s state is not revealed to her. When her fantasy is threatened, infringed upon by reality in the form of Joe’s attempt to leave her, she shoots him. Though we are not given closure on where Norma’s delusion will take her after the end of *Sunset Blvd.*, Diane’s leads her definitively to suicide. Dreams are bound to end, and fantasy is structured to dissolve when the real is inevitably encountered within it. Considering how Diane’s real world intrudes on her dream, most prominently in her discovery of her own dead body, it becomes clear that she will not be able to escape reality forever (Andrews 28). When she finally wakes, she is confronted with the absence of everything she desired, and having completely invested herself in her dream, is inconsolable, leading to her committing suicide. In this sense, both Lynch and Wilder illustrate the negative sides of over-investment in fantasy. But both filmmakers go one step further, by opening their films up to the audience. As Norma puts on her final performance, she speaks to the audience, to us, proclaiming, “You see, this is my life! It always will be! Nothing else! Just us, the cameras, and those wonderful people out there in the dark!” This line reminds viewers of their own relationship with illusions, as our role as an audience sustains Hollywood, as well as our need for illusions, such as those provided by film. This is achieved by Lynch’s film as well, which returns to the Club Silencio of an earlier scene in *Mulholland Dr.*, a scene which lays out the artifice of synchronized sound and image that, in the words of Dennis

Lim, “lies at the very heart of cinematic illusion” (Lim 151). By ending in Club Silencio, Lynch, like Wilder, is reminding audiences that we too, are partaking in illusions that give our lives meaning, namely those provided by cinema.

Overall, Lynch’s depiction of industry, identity, and illusion in *Mulholland Dr.* is not much different than that of Wilder’s film, which preceded it by half a century. At times, Lynch seems to elevate elements of *Sunset Blvd.*, but for the most part, the two films tell the same story of women who are trapped in a system whose production of dreams force them to create their own. Depictions of Hollywood as villainous, identities as fractured, and illusions as necessary but dangerous are consistent across both films. This suggests that, despite the significant gap of time between the making of these movies, Hollywood hasn’t changed all that much. It is still “this dream place” that is in the business of selling stories that can give meaning to our lives, or destroy them.

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