

Cultural Studies Review
volume 17 number 1 March 2011
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrij/index>
pp. 320–38
© Lynda Chapple 2011

In Threads and Tatters

Costume, Identification and Female Subjectivity in *Mulholland Dr.*

LYNDA CHAPPLE
MONASH UNIVERSITY

David Lynch's cinematic vision is always disturbing, exploring the darker sides of American life and the individual psyche. *Mulholland Dr.* is no exception. Although it has a contemporary setting, in style and reference the film recalls much from Hollywood's past, offering at times a homage, albeit rather a dark one, to this legacy. This is not only evident in the production design, including costumes, which reflects the contemporary world of Hollywood aspirations, but also in retro accents quoting previous eras. Central to the film's vision is an exploration of the nature of identification, examined through some complicated splitting and doubling of characters. The *doppelgänger* is not a new interest for Lynch. Throughout his career it has been explored in many ways, often through such strategies as character opposition, as in the Sandy (Laura Dern) and Dorothy (Isabella Rossellini) characters in *Blue Velvet* (1986), or through character merging, such as the conflation of the Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) and Andy (Michael Marsee) characters into (perhaps) one persona, or the casting of Patricia Arquette as two characters, Renee and Alice, in *Lost Highway* (1997). *Mulholland Dr.*, therefore, represents a development in

Lynch's exploration of the multi-faceted nature of the human psyche and the ontological instability of identity by evoking a complex web of disguise, performance and antithesis.

The film's plot is extremely complex, involving two narrative strands that turn and reflect upon each other. The first section offers a deliberately saccharine account of a young and talented *ingenue*, Betty (Naomi Watts), who arrives in Hollywood to pursue a career as an actress and finds herself involved with an amnesiac woman, Rita (Laura Elena Harring), and the noir-like mystery of her lost identity. The second part of the film reverses the optimism of the first section, examining a much darker version of a similar story, and complicating it by casting the actors from the first section in roles which, while similar enough to those in the opening half of the film to suggest tantalising narrative connections, are nonetheless distinguished in terms of characterisation and dramatic function. Watts now plays Diane, the cruelly tortured lover of successful actress, Camilla, now played by Harring; and many of the minor characters reappear in, often only slightly, altered guises. The confusion is compounded further by casting minor actors who look very similar to the leads. As a result, it is often difficult to say not only what is happening, but who exactly is involved. Spectators become enmeshed in solving the riddles posed by the plot and characterisation, and are thus positioned somewhat like the Betty and Rita characters from the first section. The slippages within and between characters and narrative therefore contribute to confounding the processes of spectatorial identification.

My purpose here is not to try to unravel or explain diegetic obscurities. Instead, I am interested in the instability and trauma implicit in the reflection that is signalled by the double plot, and more especially in the ways this links to the clothing and disguises worn by the two female protagonists to engage questions of identification and subjectivity. The link between costume and the performance of identity and the mechanisms of identification in cinema (and indeed theatre) is an enabling one, but is frequently overlooked in critical discussions of film. However, this film's costuming practices are central to the establishment and exploration of questions of ontology and subjectivity. Lynch deploys devices of dress, disguise (particularly as it is effected through Rita's blonde wig) and accoutrement in both subtle and highly dramatic ways to explore the complexities of female identification

with the cinematic image. Initially defined as sartorial opposites, the relationships of the two female protagonists—Betty and Rita in the first section of the film, Diane and Camilla in the later section—within self and between self and other, transmogrify along with the shifting subjectivities as the narrative progresses. What results is a doubling of subjectivities that plays with notions of the gaze and the mirror, and ultimately challenges any clear cut identification with the image. The purpose of this article, then, is to examine questions about memory, identification and subjectivity that are raised by the costuming practices within *Mulholland Dr.* By examining the role of mourning, nostalgia and memory, and the relationship of such to the complex pairing, doubling and splitting of the characters of the two female protagonists, I argue that the costuming practices in this film exemplify a crisis of identification within a specifically feminine cinematic image.

—NOSTALGIA AND MOURNING

A preoccupation with the past has emerged as one of the surprising trends of recent cinematic history. In a world that often appears cemented in the present tense, we have become obsessed with the past, both as a temporal and a spatial phenomenon. If modernity seems to have produced a longing for past time, and post-modernity a longing for vanished spaces, then, in its own attempt to make sense of the present, the millennium appears to be desperately negotiating the tensions between the two, producing an intensified form of mourning and nostalgia for something lost. Nostalgia is a desire for the past, a longing ‘not for the past the ways it was, but for the past the ways it could have been’,¹ and in this sense it involves both memory *and* forgetting. It is a reconstruction, infused with desire, and rests on a conflation of the past and the present. As Pam Cook points out, nostalgia is even more unreliable than memory, and is usually derided for being such.² Yet cinema has a particularly interesting relationship to nostalgia given that its representations exist simultaneously in the present and past tenses: present, in that each screening is an immediate experience of a given moment; past, in that the object represented by the image has long vanished. In a sense, cinema itself is memory recuperated in images; time and space cohere in a very present tense experience of the past. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that cinema often has a comfortable relationship with nostalgia.

In Lynch's film, the repetitions of the past are often elliptical and frequently under-enunciated, yet nostalgia seeps through, particularly in the subtle details of dress.

While *Mulholland Dr.* may not seem obviously nostalgic, it is subtly informed by an awareness of the lingering power of the past in the present. The most prominent nostalgic influence in the film is the cinematic style and mood of 1940s and 1950s *film noir*. There are obvious citations, such as the reference to Charles Vidor's *Gilda* (1946), starring Rita Hayworth and the Haring character's appropriation of her (Rita Hayworth's) name, and allusions to *noir* classics, such as Billy Wilder's *Sunset Blvd* (1950). In terms of mood, style and thematic concerns *Mulholland Dr.* is firmly rooted in *noir* traditions. This is clear in the opening section with its focus on the search for the resolution of a mystery identity, but is particularly evident in the second half of the film. Here, the convoluted nature of the narrative structure with its use of flashbacks, the darker vision and relatively low-key lighting, the deepening puzzle of the initial investigation into Rita's (now Camilla's) identity all pay homage to the earlier cinematic style. The film also appropriates the *noir* era through the glamour of its female characters, particularly in the make-up and costumes. Rita/Camilla's vibrantly red and pouting lipsticked mouth, her dark hair and sultry looks, the dark dresses and the stiletto heels all contribute to her status as *femme fatale*.

But the *noir* style is not the only signifier of nostalgia; the film has a retro look and feel in many other elements of its *mise-en-scène*. The film for which Adam Keshner (Justin Theroux) is rehearsing actresses, the jitterbug contest, the limousine in which Rita and later Diane travel, Adam's thick-framed spectacles and his Hollywood mansion with its highly prominent pool, are all retrospective in their reference and reflect what has become a kind of retro-chic within contemporary design and fashion, a reflection of Hollywood's recent obsession with its own past and traditions. Yet the retro elements in this film are far from constituting a coherent style or vision; they emerge as residues from the past and exist only as traces, from fissures in the narrative. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines retro as something that imitates or harks back to a former style, especially a style or fashion that is nostalgically retrospective. It is a generalised term, often used to conflate, rather indiscriminately, several decades or periods of time. In this sense, only a highly abstracted notion of the past is referenced. The longing is general rather than

rooted in a specific historical moment. How, then, are we to understand the significance of the nostalgia implicit in this generalised kind of retro, particularly as it is invested in the costumes, in a film so interested in subjectivity and identification?

To fully account for the creeping nostalgia present in the vaguely anamorphic glimpses of retro clothing we need to consider what may have been lost to the present and how that absence can somehow be adumbrated, however tenuously, by reference to the past. The experience and trauma of loss and the subsequent mourning are central to the ways in which psychoanalytic theory understands the construction of the subject. As Phelan notes, 'loss is a central repetition of subjectivity', and the resulting sense of woundedness often leads to an excessive mourning that will not stay repressed.³ In some ways, the snippets of history that seep through in the retro features of Lynch's film suggest a hiatus in the conception of the modern self, a pointer to an earlier era—in both public and personal history—when there was (or at least appeared to be) a neatly unified sense of style and the world was perhaps less of a fragmented pastiche than our post-modern context has allowed.

Freud makes a useful distinction between mourning and melancholia in his explanation of nostalgia. Nostalgia, he claims, is imbued with a particular form of mourning for a lost object; melancholia, however, is a more excessive kind of mourning for something that is lost to the ego. 'In mourning it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself'.⁴ Melancholia is more narcissistic because it conflates the object of desire with an unconscious need within the self, and it is often inscribed in excessive terms. The melancholic often feels guilt, even self-disgust, because of a repressed feeling of ambivalence towards the lost object, and this can lead to introjection, the extreme identification with the lost object. The complex of melancholia behaves like 'an open wound', drawing cathetic energy from the ego until it is almost completely impoverished.⁵ Melancholia is, therefore, a projection rather than a reflection; it is about the subject, not the object, of nostalgia and the lack is within the self.

In Lynch's film there appears to be a slippage between nostalgic mourning and nostalgic melancholy; it is frequently unclear whether the nostalgia for a lost past resides in processes of mourning or melancholy—at times it seems to do

both—and this is often most fully evident in the retro traces invested in the costuming. There is a paradox implicit in styles defined by the prefixes ‘retro’ and ‘neo’. As a prefix, ‘neo’ is oxymoronic: it is a new version of an old thing, a new-oldness, an old reconceived as a new. ‘Retro’ functions similarly; it links the present to the past in ways that acknowledge both the inauthenticity and irrecoverability of previous eras, yet marks the desire for them anyway. There appears, that is, to be both a conflation and a bifurcation of Freud’s two modes of nostalgia, and in Lynch’s film the spectator is invested into the space between the two different positions. This gap, I would argue, is analogous to what Phelan argues is the wound at the heart of subjectivity, one made even more traumatic in this film by the impossibility of identification. To examine the ways *Mulholland Dr.* negotiates this complex terrain further, I want to consider the ways in which the film structures the relationship between costume, memory and identification in its representations of the female characters.

—THE AMNESIAC

Nostalgia is linked to memory and identification through the figure of the amnesiac, Rita. Like several other films from the period Like several other films made in the first decade of the twenty-first century, *Mulholland Dr.* concerns itself with memory and, more specifically, the loss of it. Amnesia and the consequent search for identity was also a popular theme in *film noir*, and reflected a more general uncertainty about the role and nature of male subjectivity in the postwar era. In Lynch’s film, questions of subjectivity are firmly located within the realm of the feminine, but the instability of that identity certainly recalls the earlier period and is explored as a crisis of representation, particularly at a sartorial level. Amnesia involves (usually short-term) loss of memory about details of one’s identity and immediate past: a loss, that is, of history and self. The amnesiac knows of a past, one that articulated identity in comprehensible ways, but has lost access to that particular narrative of self. What remains, and in the film this is symbolised by the vaguely defined, partly obscured and naked body of Rita in the shower, is evacuated of referents and therefore meaning, a simulacra of a more fully realised personhood. That Rita is behind the shower screen, both revealed yet obscured by the opacity of the design of the glass, hints at the complex manufacture of image and identity produced by the

cinematic apparatus. This is amplified by the multiplication of her image in the bathroom mirrors, and the juxtaposition of the image of Rita Hayworth as Gilda—another fictional character from the past—in the adjacent shaving mirror. These multiple reflections hint at an abyss of identification.

Diegetically, the clothing hints at, but ultimately offers few clues to, identity; it often only indicates the absence of it. To the detectives investigating the car crash—themselves a parody of the hardboiled detectives of B-grade *noir*—Rita is signified only by the pearl earring she has lost in the back seat of the car during the accident: ‘Maybe someone is missing’, says one to the other, as they puzzle incompetently over her absent presence. The earring, therefore, indicates both her existence and her absence. In this world of ontological uncertainty, it substitutes for the missing self. This pattern of intimated absence is repeated when Rita’s presence in Aunt Ruth’s apartment is announced to Betty by her empty and discarded shoes and clothing on the floor. Significantly, until she ventures out with Betty in search of Diane Selwyn, Rita is clothed only in a towel, a plain white shirt, grey trousers and a bathrobe, items which, in their highly generalisable nature and function—everyone can and does use them—are almost devoid of specificity. The accessories also fail to yield the promise of identity they contain. Rita’s handbag is the first place Betty searches for clues about Rita’s lost self. In a telling comment about the ways identity is circumscribed and documented by state practices, Betty innocently says, ‘your name must be in your purse’; the handbag, that is, should contain some form of identification. It does not, but instead discloses a large amount of unexplained cash and the blue triangular key that will later open the blue box and transport us, Alice-like, through the dark tunnel leading to the other side of the narrative. Ironically, her purse is embossed with the initials ‘DKNY’, the logo of the popular New York designer, Donna Karan. Part comment on the commodification of both celebrity and identity, and, indeed, the reduction of these things to the elision of the acronym—itsself suggesting a metaphorised absence—Rita’s handbag carries a reference to someone else’s identity, not her own. Something is definitely wrong.

This becomes even more problematic if we read the first part of the narrative against the second part and accept, as McGowan argues, the first section as some kind of phantasmatic projection of Diane’s desire, where Rita does not actually exist.⁶ ‘Rita’, as she herself recognises, is not her name at all. One of the factors that

makes such questions difficult to address is the slippage in the film between ontology, history and representations of identity. Lynch establishes a past, in this case the whole first part of the narrative—the Betty and Rita sequence—the reality of which he then throws into question. In many ways, therefore, the past that Lynch recalls and attempts to represent never existed. In this case, although the retro influences could be seen as a manifestation of grief for the loss of a real object, they could equally be seen as a melancholic form of identification with an imaginary past. The precise meaning of retro is constantly shifting, just as the narrative oscillates between the real and the illusionary. The relationship between clothing (retro or other), existence and subjectivity, therefore, becomes incredibly complex. What results, I contend, is an approximation of both historical referent and self, which mirrors the psychic oscillation between mourning and melancholy. Clothing, in this film, stands in for a self that is no longer there, and perhaps never was.

—ORIGINALS AND COPIES

If in its structure, characterisation and nostalgic drive the costuming works to visualise a doubling of subjectivities, this is matched by an apparently contrary impulse to split the subject as well, and at times it is not easy to distinguish which—splitting or doubling—is the dominant force. Like *amœba*, subjectivities seem sometimes to split, even as they double. Given the film's Hollywood scenario, the rehearsals and auditions which the characters undertake provide a usefully credible context to foreground the role of performance in the creation and multiplication of subjectivity. The ability of performance to transform is most interestingly illustrated in the scene of Betty's audition for the film being produced by Wally Brown in the first section of the narrative. The audition is bracketed by two others—the rehearsal of the scene by Rita and Betty, and the audition for the 'Sylvia North Story' conducted by Adam Kesher—a tripartite structuring that navigates through alternative performance styles: the amateur, the actress and the Hollywood movie star.

The first rehearsal scene is not introduced as such but occurs, without any establishing orientation, after a cut from Adam's eerie meeting with the Cowboy (Monty Montgomery)—a cut-out type who is never clearly positioned or explained—and the Cowboy's subsequent de-materialisation, a scene that

foreshadows the ensuing disturbance of the film's existential equilibrium. As the camera focuses on Betty, enunciating a surprised, slightly worried, slightly threatening, 'you're still here', we assume she may have taken Coco's (Anne Miller) advice and asked Rita to leave. But it quickly becomes apparent in a cut to Rita's uncertain referral to a script that they are rehearsing the scene for which Betty is to audition the following day. The confusion between performance and diegetic reality is therefore established from the beginning. Both women are dressed in bathrobes, Betty's a fluffy pale pink, an over-determined signification of her naïveté, and Rita in the slightly masculine magenta and black robe that has been left by Aunt Ruth, colours consistent with those she was wearing when she walked in off the street. Playing opposite each other while wearing similar garments, the women appear somewhat as photographic negatives of the other: Betty blonde, lightly hued and confident; Rita dark and sultry, but diffident. The main purpose of the scene, however, is to set up a stark contrast with the way in which Betty eventually decides to perform the nameless character for which she is auditioning. The acting in the rehearsal is characterised by a fairly amateur form of melodrama on Betty's part and, as Toles notes, gives little clue to the potential actress we see in the audition.⁷ As the sequence leading up to and through the audition progresses, Betty transforms from an excited, idealistic *ingénue* determined to impress in her first Hollywood audition to a highly talented and sexually assured actress, and back again. The register shifts continually, reflecting the very persuasive way in which Betty ranges in and out of performance, personas and subjectivities.

The light grey suit Betty wears to the audition and her blonde hair both recall the similar costuming of the Madeline/Judy (Kim Novak) character, in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1959)—a character who, like Rita, also (ostensibly) suffers from bouts of amnesia.⁸ The suit itself is neatly tailored in a style that references the practical female business suit, inflected with 1950s panache—knee length skirt and slightly cropped sleeves—the greyness evoking a seriousness that is tempered by lightness of the hue. The suit therefore connotes a professional competence, but remains conventionally and identifiably feminine in its cut, which emphasises the curves of the woman's figure, and colour. Allusion itself is a doubling of reference that multiplies meanings through a range of associations. In this case, Lynch's film repeats Hitchcock's earlier investigation into a manic construction of woman, and

the characters refract their historical, but imaginary, doubles—Betty is sartorially matched to Madeline/Judy. The result is not only a doubling of subjectivity, in this case Betty's unforeseen ability as an actress to transform herself into an entirely different persona as the unnamed screen character, but also the creation of a duplicity associated with both the Madeline/Judy and the Betty/Diane pairing. The suit creates layers of replication which belie any notion of an original. The nature of this twinning is complicated further by a recollection of how in Hitchcock's film the murderous husband Gavin (Tom Helmore) uses Judy to act as a body double, an invented version of his wife based partly in history, partly in myth and partly in imaginative invention, and then Scotty (James Stewart) later reconstructs Judy as a replica of the earlier (entirely artificial) model. This artificial doubling is reinforced by Hitchcock's frequent use of mirrors to reflect the image of Madeline/Judy. The mirror image, as Cook argues, reflects a distorted view which is analogous to the cinematic process itself.⁹ In both scenarios the grey suit and blonde colouring are central to the existence of Madeline, the prototype of whom (Gavin's actual wife) is only ever seen as a representative copy of the fake, blonde and in grey, falling from the bell tower. Madeline, in other words, does not exist; her identity, if she can be said to have one, is reified only by the clothing she reputedly, but not actually, wears. In this case, the clothing clearly makes the woman and Betty's performance must be read against this.

To perform the audition, Betty first removes the suit's jacket and the small shoulder bag she is wearing when she enters the room; having thus established Betty's connection to Madeline in *Vertigo*, the film then attempts to strip it away. In getting down to the business of acting, Betty tries to shed her costume. But given the enabling relationship of costume to performance, especially if clothes really do make the woman, to strip away the associations established by the suit is simply not possible. This is especially so in the context of an audition, itself a rehearsal for another performance; the layering of history and replication allows no room for originality. Betty's performance is impressive; as for Judy in *Vertigo*, it results in an erasure of self. During her performance in the audition, the character of Betty disappears, replaced by a woman whose emotional complexity, sexual confidence and potential ruthlessness are more akin to Diane's character in the second half of the film. In a sense, once Betty removes her jacket, Diane erupts through the façade

of her rather shallow persona. Like Madeline, within the 'reality' of the film (however that may be defined) Betty's existence is, at best, ambivalent, and here would appear to be secured only by the clothing she wears, clothing that links her to another ontologically unstable, fictional character. The costume functions to contain a very tenuous sense of identity, one whose existence remains highly elusive.

The scene of Betty's audition is bracketed at the other end by another audition sequence, Adam's auditions for 'The Sylvia North Story', which offers a more extreme conflation of performance, costume and identification. The performance styles evoked here are associated much more clearly with the glamour of the movie star, and Lynch uses the scene to nail home his point that, particularly within Hollywood, nothing can ever be real or original. Again the establishing shot offers few clues to the context, framing only a performance of a 1960s' musical number; however, as the camera pulls back it reveals the set of a recording studio placed within the larger context of a film studio. This set-within-a-set construction, a *mise-en-abyme*, foregrounds the idea of Hollywood as the ultimate facsimile, not of life, but of its own endlessly reflexive construction. Unlike in the previous scenes, the costumes worn in this audition are clearly that: costumes. The artificiality is stressed and stretched to absurdity, particularly by the glittering sequins, diamante detail and the excess of feathers on the dresses of the choral singers.

But if this is meant to be 1960s retro, something is wrong. It is here that the historical vagueness of retro, its lack of specificity, assumes its full force. Compared to the costuming of the opening jitterbug sequence, which does have some verisimilitude about it, the costumes here are highly artificial and, very possibly, failed copies. While the songs can be precisely dated (1960 and 1961—undoubtedly a nostalgic period for Lynch personally), this is not the case for the dress styles. Not exactly parody, the costumes are a pastiche of kitsch glamour, excess, do-wop and Las Vegas showgirl. A specific period is apparently referenced, but the details do not cohere. This is paralleled by the confusing casting. The actresses auditioning, Carol and Camilla, are almost dead ringers for Rita and Betty respectively: Carol a sunnier version of Rita and Camilla, whom we know to be associated with the gangster Castigliane brothers, a darker version of Betty. They could, in other words, be copies of the protagonists, but we are not sure. Both actresses also lip-synch throughout the audition, performing a copy of the original recording. If retro works

to establish connections between past and present, the connection here breaks down in a shifting displacement of time, genre and style. There is a kind of desperation in the reach for the past here, which seeps through the (failed) attempt at manufacturing a coherent vision of the era. Like Betty's audition, the copies here displace a highly uncertain notion of the original.

—NARCISSISM AND THE LESBIAN SUBJECT

The most striking representation of this kind of doubling comes in the sequence when Betty helps Rita to disguise herself after the discovery of Diane's body. The disguise is effected solely by an ash blonde wig, itself a reference to all the blonde starlets, artificial and natural, of Hollywood history—Monroe and Novak to name just a couple. As Taubin suggests, the similarity in terms of looks and type of many of the actresses in the film (particularly the blondes) suggest their interchangeability within the Hollywood system: one is equivalent to another.¹⁰ After Betty and Rita make the horrific discovery of Diane's body, they are shown fleeing her house in a series of jump cuts and dissolves which, as Nicholson argues, suggests they are being shaken apart.¹¹ The shot segues to the bathroom of Aunt Ruth's apartment, where Rita, still in considerable distress, is trying to cut off her hair. Betty intervenes: 'I know what you're doing ... what you have to do ... let me do it.' There is a cut, followed by the camera panning left over a range of cosmetics and wigs—the fetishised accoutrements of decoration and prosthetic disguise. It then continues to pan up left, revealing the image of Betty, still dressed in the blue top and grey skirt from her audition, in the right side of the bathroom mirror, where it lingers momentarily, preparing the audience for the revelation to follow.

A neat reversal of movement is created by the mirror, so as the camera continues on its trajectory left, the image of Rita is revealed in an apparently right-moving pan as reflected in the mirror. Rita is revealed wearing the same red top and black cardigan as before, but is strikingly altered by the ash blonde wig she has assumed as a disguise.¹² A change of hairstyle and colour is more transformative than simple make-up or a change of outfit; it creates a 'new look', and often a new self to go with it. More than other forms of corporeal elaboration, the dramatic change wrought by altered hair colour and style shocks us out of formerly perceived notions of identity, and undermines the notion that these be fixed. Such is the

transformative effect for Rita here; she appears in the first moments of the revelation as a completely different person. Both women are framed together as a double image, each a reflection of the other, within the reflection of the oval mirror: Betty complacently smiling, Rita looking somewhat bemused. Although there remain clearly marked differences between the appearance of the two women—the colour and length of their hair is slightly different, the parting is on opposite sides (a reversal which creates a mirror within a mirror, another *mise-en-abyme*)—it is the way in which the wig draws similarity that is most striking and alarming. When Betty says, ‘You look like someone else’, what is unsaid, but visually enunciated nonetheless, is: ‘You look like me.’ The moment, therefore, appears to collapse the two identities of the women into one, even as the image of the characters is doubled.¹³

The wig is a complex device that can be used for both the enhancement and disguise of identity. Historically used to suggest the luxury associated with leisure and class (it takes a long time to style, powder and secure a wig), there is also a kind of grotesquery about it. When worn a wig is more synecdoche than metonym, but is divorced from the body as well. In the Hollywood context, the blonde wig especially has its own set of connotations; associated with the starlet, the manufactured screen goddess; it suggests sexiness, artificiality and the commodification of the female star. Wigs are detachable, portable, transferable, kind of free-floating signifiers that attach multiple meanings to the wearer. They provide a prosthetic and mobile identity, part disguise, part performance. Wigs can be styled before being put on (indeed, it is often necessary to do so) and so effect a kind sculpting of self, performed at a distance from one’s body. They exist as an object in relation to the self, yet form a prominent visual mark of subjectivity when worn. They work as part of a broader system of masquerade, signalling a disjunction between identity and representation, implying mutability, and encouraging a narcissistic marvelling at the self.

The mirror image, or *doppelgänger*, is a central trope in the cinematic representation of lesbianism, so it is significant that the scene of Rita’s transformation prefigures, both temporally and visually, Betty and Rita becoming lovers. As a category, the lesbian complicates any discussion of identity, as it rests on the premise of woman as both subject and object of desire and dissolves the binaries

so readily invoked to explain subjectivity. The lesbian, according to Diana Fuss, 'codifies the very real possibility and ever-present threat of a collapse of boundaries, an effacing of limits, and a radical confusion of identities.'¹⁴ Such confusion is apparent here where, if Rita's assumption of the blonde wig appears to suggest a possible collapse of identity, this is problematised by the recognition that it also doubles the image of Betty. To put it in the words of Teresa de Lauretis, 'it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian'.¹⁵ As Barbara Creed notes, in their repetition and duplication, representations of the lesbian double 'draw attention to the nature of the image itself',¹⁶ and the image here is certainly ambiguous. De Lauretis claims that the question, 'How do I look?', a question which sits at the axis of narcissism, voyeurism and subject/objecthood, is often central to an analysis of lesbian subjectivity.¹⁷ Here, it is the wig itself that ensures the boundary between the subject and object of narcissistic reflection and admiration remains blurred and shifting. But there is much more to the Rita/Betty reflection than simple narcissism; the doubling and simultaneous splitting of the image involves a more desperate attempt to secure subjectivity through the processes of identification.

In an attempt to establish a connection between female fetishism and narcissism that avoids seeing the fetish simply as a disavowal of castration anxiety, and therefore linked to the penis, as Freud would have it, de Lauretis cites Emily Apter's reinterpretation of Freud's comment that 'all women are clothes fetishists'.¹⁸ Apter sees such fetishism of clothing as a strategy for 'reinforc[ing] feminine narcissism by a kind of prosthesis', which effectively functions to establish an 'affirmation of female ontology'.¹⁹ Female fetishism is, by this account, still an expression of and compensation for loss, but not loss of the phallus, rather a more specific female loss which, Apter argues, can include loss of the female double. While de Lauretis disagrees with aspects of Apter's argument, such as her dismissal of disavowal, a concept which de Lauretis finds useful, she does appropriate and refine the connection between fetishism and narcissism, particularly as it relates to lesbian subjectivity. For the lesbian, she argues, the meaning of castration, which in female terms she sees as the wound, resides in the 'loss of the female body'.²⁰ The fetish becomes a metonymic memorial to the desired female body. I think we can also see the wig here as functioning in a similar way, particularly as it is connected to the lesbian double. The wig in these scenes is worn by Rita, but it is explicitly, and

importantly, linked to Betty, as it is her appearance that is doubled, and in some ways both ensured and erased, by it. The wig foreshadows Betty's disappearance from the narrative, and her manufacture of Rita in her own image could, therefore, be read as a narcissistic attempt to secure her own ontological existence. In a sense, the wig could be read as a form of existential retro, providing a lingering materiality for what is an immaterial existence: a prosthetic, indeed a metonymic, substitution of self.

—CLUB SILENCIO AND ILLUSION

The narrative and central premise of the film turns on the Club Silencio sequence, which marks an epiphany for characters and audience alike. As they hail a taxi in the early hours of the morning to take them to the club, Rita is dressed in a long black sleeveless gown, which attaches halter-style around her neck, revealing starkly her pale and well-defined clavicle bones and shoulders. She is wearing the blonde wig and dark red lipstick. Combined with the dress these give her a dramatic and somewhat overdressed look, especially in comparison to the more modestly attired Betty, who wears a straight black skirt and red short sleeved top, embossed with a fairly discreet motif on the chest. Betty's fringe is clipped back on one side giving her a school-girl look, especially in comparison to Rita, whose wig is elaborately coiffed and emphasised by the whiteness of its colour. The women remain coupled by the wig, but a visual gap has emerged between them, Rita's more striking appearance perhaps signalling her ascendancy over the relationship. Throughout the scene, it is Rita's highly artificial appearance, almost a form of female drag or masquerade, that marks her out as the object of the gaze.

A wig is, of course, a device of performance as well as disguise, and it is here linked to the performances and the illusions we witness on the stage. The club itself exists in a dark hinterland characterised by empty and vaguely threatening alleyways and a strong blue light, a colour linked to the mysterious blue key in Rita's handbag and which produces a negative-like chiaroscuro effect throughout the scene; at times both the women, therefore, look more wraith-like than substantial. The theatre itself is rather opulent: a large stage boldly framed by a proscenium arch, prominent balconies, elaborately stuccoed walls and a heavy rich red velvet curtain. The set, therefore, has a solidity and substantiality that is belied by what

actually happens in it. Everything, we are told, is unreal; there is no band, no orchestra, only tape recordings and actors that simulate the existence of these things. As the Mephistophelean magician insists, everything in the theatre is an illusion, a representation of an imaginary reality. This is played out ontologically when he appears to physically dissolve in a haze of blue smoke. Contradictions and reversals abound during what follows, yet the performance appears so authentic that it produces very real responses to the deception. When Rebekah del Rio (playing herself) performs *a cappella* a cover version of Roy Orbison's 1961 song 'Crying' in Spanish, although she is marked as unreal and artificial—she is unstable on her feet because of her heels, and made up highly artificially with a fake tear on her cheek—her performance produces real tears for Betty and Rita. Illusions, it would seem, can produce real effects. But the illusion itself breaks down when the song continues without the performer after she collapses on stage. What we are then left crying for is the possibility not just of reality, but also of the appearance of reality at all: a double void at the centre of the illusion.

The wig distorts as it doubles, an idea most fully encapsulated by the image of the blue-haired woman (Cori Glazer) who sits in the balcony observing the events of Club Silencio. She too wears a wig, but it is blue, a distorted reflection of Rita's disguise. Its strikingly unnatural colour radically foregrounds the highly artificial and constructed nature of its wearer, and establishes several questions about the character: Who is this person? What is she doing there? Is she real, or another of the theatre's illusions? Is she in drag or costume? What is she watching? If the wig is as much an accoutrement to performance as it is to disguise, what exactly is being performed here, and what, if anything, disguised? She is certainly a bizarre and unsettling figure. Her size and positioning (she is small, positioned slightly right in the lower part of the frame) would normally suggest an insignificance, but her elaborate costume, and particularly the blue wig, mark her out as requiring attention. This is reinforced by it being she who pronounces the film's one word epilogue, 'silencio', which confers a significant status upon her.

The connotations of the colour blue within a cinematic context, especially in the world of David Lynch, are multiple—pornography, velvet, sado-masochism—but it is rarely associated with hair colour. The blueness of the wig links to the lighting design in the club sequence and to the mysterious blue box and key, which provide

entrance to the other (nether) side of the narrative; it is, therefore, a reflection of the diegetic and ontological volatility framed by the film. While it would be an oversimplification in a film as complex as this one to suggest a definitive reading of this figure, more than any other item of costume, the blue wig signals the collision between reality and the illusion, between a lost notion of subjectivity and the futile attempts at securing it, between mourning and melancholy for a past, the existence of which is highly contestable. The blue wig enacts a failed attempt at corporeal representation, an approximation of self caught up in the flux of the female cinematic image.

—CONCLUSION

The final image of the blue-haired woman pronouncing 'silencio' comes immediately after Diane's suicide, and thus seems to be a kind of epitaph for her. The film is concerned with the vacuum left behind in the wake of the deconstruction of stable identity. It is littered with holes and gaps: nameless characters, cover versions of old songs, *a cappella* performances, bifurcated characters, illusions and shifting subjectivities. It also stages a failure of identification with the female image, and in a cinematic context this represents the breakdown of a central and defining paradigm. The film is peopled with hackneyed tropes—the Cowboy, the *femme fatale*, the gangster-producer—cut-out types that reference the past as mutations of the idea of an original. Identification of these types is possible—they are recognisable by their costumes—but for the most part they are strangely devoid of substance. The costuming in this film is informed by a vague sense of retro: a past that is longed for, but ill-defined; a past that seeps through the cracks of the narrative, but ultimately cannot be recuperated; a past, the original of which may not even have existed and, if it did, can only be accessed through the wavering reminiscence of memory. More than the past, though, what is lost in *Mulholland Dr.* is the possibility of feminine identification and, therefore, subjectivity itself. This is the wound at the heart of this film and, as the Hollywood backdrop to the film attests, all forms of cinematic representation. Like the sleeves of Rita's black cardigan, the female subject is in threads and tatters, a remnant only of a dubious existential reality. The costumes represent an approximation of self; they work as devices that desperately attempt to

secure some form of identity, doubling and mirroring the self in a vain, ultimately failed, attempt to fix the female subject and resolve her ontological ambiguity.

—

Lynda Chapple teaches at Monash University in Melbourne. Her doctorate involved an examination of the relationship of costume to the feminine in contemporary cinema.

—NOTES

¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, New York, 2001, p. 351.

² Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 3.

³ Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p. 5.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 254.

⁵ Freud, p. 262.

⁶ Todd McGowan, 'Lost on Mulholland Drive: Navigating David Lynch's Panegyric to Hollywood', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2004, pp. 67-89.

⁷ George Toles, 'Auditioning Betty in Mulholland Drive', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2004, pp. 2-13.

⁸ Toles, makes a similar observation.

⁹ Cook, p. 12.

¹⁰ Amy Taubin, 'In Dreams', *Film Comment*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2001, pp. 51-4.

¹¹ Martha P. Nicholson, 'All I Need Is the Girl: The Life and Death of Creativity in *Mulholland Drive*', in Erica Sheen and Annette Davison (eds), *The Cinema of David Lynch*, Wallflower Press, London and New York, 2004, p. 174.

¹² At an affective level, Rita's transformation also replicates the shock audiences reportedly felt with the change of the red headed Hayworth of *Gilda* into an ash blonde for Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947).

¹³ In the film this comment is perhaps most dramatically enacted by the shot that merges Betty and Rita's faces when they are sleeping. A clear reference to the visual and thematic conflation of the identities of the two female protagonists in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), the shot occurs immediately after the two women have become lovers. The scene commences with a dissolve from the previous sex scene to a shot of the two women's clasped hands, the nails varnished in what have

become the signature colours of the two women: Betty's are pink; Rita's are dark red. The camera pans up Rita's left side to focus on her sleeping face in profile, foregrounded against Betty's face, which is turned on her left side, so she faces the camera. The focus is shallow, so while Rita is clearly demarcated, Betty appears in a much fuzzier, blurred outline. Rita's profile is aligned symmetrically with the right side of Betty's face and the features of each woman are matched to the other. The effect is to produce an illusion of one face folded in upon itself. As Rita starts to chant 'silencio' unconsciously, the camera adjusts its focal length to privilege Betty's face, now clearly in focus. In the effacement of corporeal boundaries, the framing and the shifting focus therefore imply a permeability and enact a movement within and between subject positions.

¹⁴ Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Routledge, New York, 1991, p. 6.

¹⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, p. 92.

¹⁶ Barbara Creed, 'Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts' in Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (eds), *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p. 107.

¹⁷ de Lauretis, p. 85.

¹⁸ de Lauretis, p. 273.

¹⁹ de Lauretis, p. 274.

²⁰ de Lauretis, p. 275.