
Mulholland Drive

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It's a Puzzlement
By Brent Shepherd

Universal Pictures

Mulholland Drive

A dozen or so years ago, a couple of my friends saw David Lynch's Blue Velvet. Completely baffled, they asked me to rent the movie and explain it to them after I saw it. Here's what I came up with:
Boy meets Girl. Boy and Girl fall in love. Boy finds severed ear in field. Hijinx ensue.

I watched part of Blue Velvet again recently, and it didn't make even that much sense to me. But maybe I need to view it again, because I just saw Lynch's latest effort as writer and director, Mulholland Drive, and I think I'm starting to get the hang of it.

What I've learned over the years is that a David Lynch film can be an enjoyable diversion, but he's gonna make you work for it. Mulholland Drive is no exception. It contains characters and scenes whose presence makes no earthly sense whatsoever on first viewing, but the broad strokes of what passes for the film's plot follow:

The film opens at night, with a young woman (Laura Harring) being driven along Mulholland Drive when the car stops and she's told, at gunpoint, to get out. Before she can comply, a car full of joyriding kids collides head-on with the car she is in. She staggers from the wreckage, disoriented, and makes her way on foot into Hollywood, where she eventually lets herself into the apartment of a woman who is departing on vacation.

Meanwhile, young, starry-eyed Betty Elms (Naomi Watts) of Deep River, Ontario, arrives in Los Angeles. Naturally, she's come to seek fame and fortune as an actress. She moves into her Aunt Ruth's Hollywood apartment, in a courtyard complex managed by a sweet, daffy lady with the priceless name Coco Lenoix (Ann Miller).

Once inside, Betty discovers the disoriented young woman in the shower and mistakes her for a friend of Aunt Ruth's. Lifting a name from a movie poster in the bathroom, the woman introduces herself as Rita, but soon confesses that she doesn't remember who she is.

Betty, obviously naive, offers to help Rita find out more about the accident she walked away from. A chance encounter with a waitress named Diane sparks in Rita a vague memory of the name "Diane Selwyn," and on the strength of this clue, our pair of unlikely sleuths sets out to unravel the mystery of Rita's identity.

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At first, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Betty — although she is, in fact, cute as a button — is just painful to watch. She speaks almost entirely in expository dialogue, and Watts is one bad little actress. Not just bad. Porno bad.

Then Betty auditions for a film role. (On her first day in L.A., no less. She's a real go-getter, that Betty.) And she nails it. Not just nails it because the film wants us to believe she does. She really nails it.

And then it hit me: That's the point. Watts is supposed to be awful, because Lynch wants Betty to be more convincing as an actress than she is as a human being. What this particular revelation means in the grand scheme of the film, I haven't decided yet. Check back with me later. But this much I know: it isn't accidental.

The movie is what screenwriting guru Robert McKee would most likely classify as antiplot — meaning it's a non-linear story that rejects conventional storytelling structure and is filled with inconsistent realities. More simply put, it's what H.I. McDonough's boss Glen would call a "way-homer" — you only get it on the way home.

As it happens, this is the twisted genius of both Lynch and his movie.

Mulholland Drive is not a single story headed toward a single conclusion, but rather two stories (or possibly more) that are hazily reflected mirror images of each other, coming from opposite directions to meet in the middle of the film instead of at the end. (Please don't ask me to repeat that.)

I identified three or four scenes near the midpoint of the movie that may or may not be the looking-glass (or -glasses) through which the story passes to become its own reflection in the second half. I won't tell you what they are because you should enjoy identifying them on your own. And feel free to pinpoint more than four, because while I'm satisfied with the few that I caught, the film's probably full of them.

Suffice it to say, however, that there is lesbian sex, murder-for-hire, adultery, suicide, coercion, vandalism, late-night existentialist cabaret, and the most colorful assortment of characters you've seen this side of a blunt-force head injury. As Butt-Head would say, "This movie has something for everybody."

Furthermore, the film is replete with enough detours and red herrings (although, in this case, Lynch's red herrings are blue) to keep the audience flummoxed for hours after they've exited the theater. Even now, I'm compelled to admit a begrudging admiration for moments and elements that made me wince in the darkened theater.

Lynch puts the weight of his film on the shoulders of actors you've probably never heard of, including Justin Theroux as an embattled film director who bears more than a passing resemblance to Steven Soderbergh. On the flipside, Lynch casts some fairly notable stars in roles that don't amount to much, including Chad Everett as a lecherous has-been matinee idol, Oscar nominee Robert Forster as a police detective, and the invaluable Dan Hedaya as an enigmatic money man with definite opinions about film casting. These credited cameos seemingly have little or no bearing on the plot, so either a) Lynch just wanted an excuse to work with those actors; b) the actors are in on the joke; or c) I'm missing the point entirely. Any combination of these explanations seems plausible and agreeable to me.

Other amusements include cameos by country singer Billy Ray Cyrus, who appears as an adulterous handyman, and the film's composer, longtime Lynch collaborator Angelo Badalamenti, who in his own unique way, does for espresso what Agent Dale Cooper did for black coffee in *Twin Peaks*.

Earlier this year, film audiences were fascinated by the twists, turns and enduring mysteries of writer-director Christopher Nolan's *Memento*. In its own quietly loopy way, *Mulholland Drive* is like a response to that film. It's the master telling the disciple, "Nice try, kid."

For my own part, I feel a dubious sense of achievement, like a sudden realization that I have within me a capacity for weirdness that I've denied all these years, kept hidden away under lock and key. Not that I'm passing myself off as some kind of authority now — I still have Lynch's entire oeuvre to reevaluate before I can adequately explain this film or any of his others.

However, I can highly recommend the experience. With one caveat: Don't worry if the film seems like a complete waste of time and resources while you're sitting there in the dark amid the blank gazes and nervous laughter of your fellow audience members. Just pay attention.

Trust me. You'll get it on the way home.

About This Author:

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