

Oblivion: Theorizing The Abject-Sublime in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*

Lila Rush and Dr. Christina Parker-Flynn, mentor.
Florida State University Department of English

FSU



BACKGROUND

“The time is out of joint.” *Hamlet*, 1.5.34.

Mulholland Drive (2001) is a film out of joint-- a film that resists summation or sense-making. Georg Nöflke describes it as “a puzzle...that has self-consciously been smashed...nullifying all attempts at extracting a cohesive story,” a fact which he embraces for its ability to “[underscore] and [undermine]” hermeneutics, provoking reflection on how we come to know (2018). Other critics, however, find it useful to divide the film into “dream” and “reality” sequences (McGowan 2004, 2015). In this account, the film begins with the dream in which Betty, a Hollywood hopeful, discovers the beautiful amnesiac, Rita, who doesn’t know “who [she] is,” much less her name. The women then set out on a journey to recover Rita’s identity, falling in love along the way. Just before the dream sequence expires, the women visit Club Silencio, where they witness a strange and sublime performance that moves them to tears. In the audience, Rita opens her purse to discover a blue box-- and when she turns the key, the camera dives into this void, the “conduit between the two worlds” that ushers us into reality (Hughes-D’Aeth 2013). Betty awakens as Diane Selwyn, an unhappy, no-name actress suffering the end of an affair with Camilla Rhodes, the real-life version of Rita. Bitter, Diane places a hit on Camilla at Winkie’s restaurant, a setting that recurs in both dream and reality. When the job is done, Diane is driven to suicide. Such a summary is necessary but narrow; I find it most useful to describe the film as *shattered on both sides*: Diane’s reality is ruptured by fragments of dream, and Betty’s dream is ruptured by fragments of Diane’s reality. The spectator’s experience, too, is shattered: the screen is “self-consciously smashed,” littered with shards of what ought to be disparate temporalities. **This interpretive difficulty inspires my use of oblivion-- an atemporality that shatters subjectivity and symbolic constraints-- as an optic through which to view the film.**

The shattering experience of the abject-sublime is epitomized by the thunder and blue smoke that engulfs Diane’s bed upon her suicide, though examples abound in *Mulholland Drive* (Kristeva 9). The act of sending oneself into oblivion is at once abject (death) and sublime (superimposed with memories of love with Rita and stitched to a shot of Club Silencio) (Figure 5). Oblivion, therefore, describes this paradox.

Oubli:

- “Effacement, disparition des souvenirs” “disparition de la mémoire collective d’un groupe”
- “the erasure or disappearance of memory,” or “the collective disappearance of a memory from a group” (my trans, Larousse).

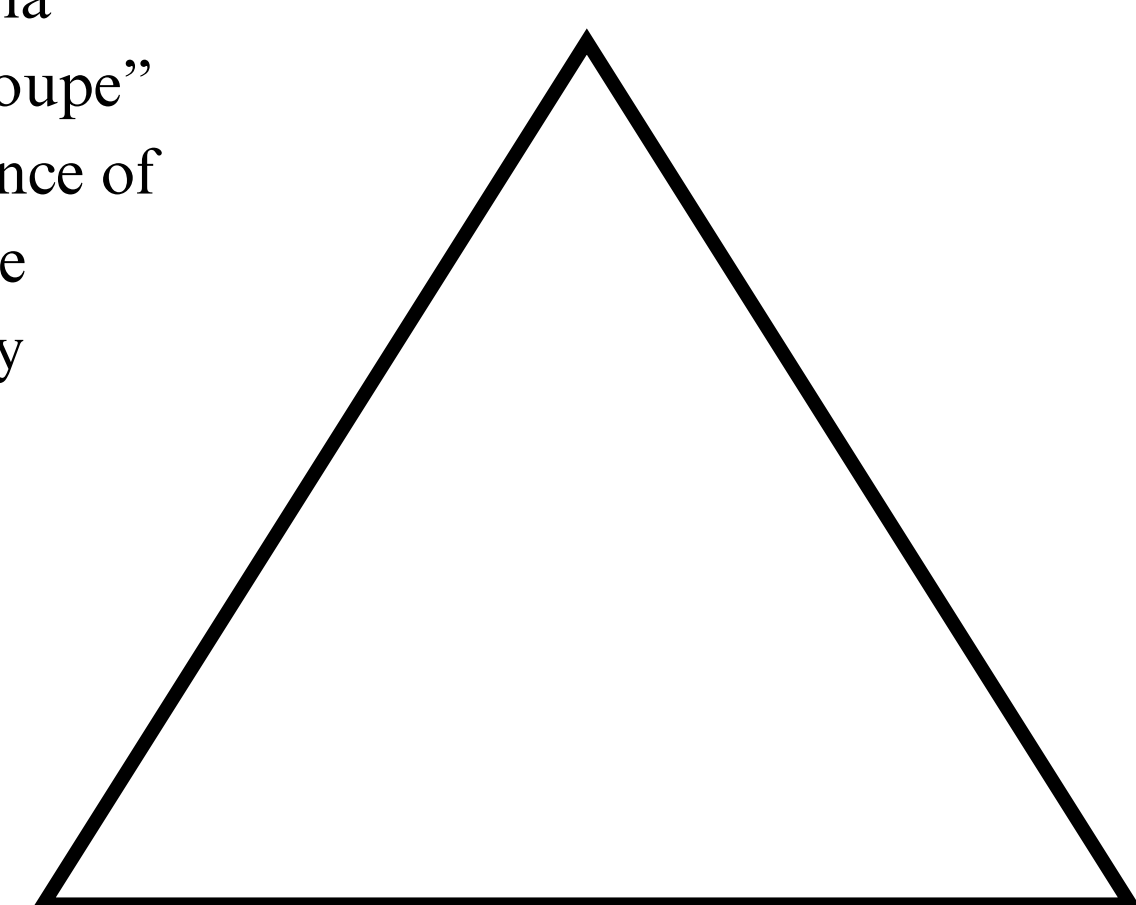
OBLIVION

Oblivion:

- “the state...of forgetting” or “condition of being forgotten” (*OED*).
- “obscurity, nothingness, void, death” (*OED*).

SUBLIMITY

The sublime is ineffable, beautiful, sometimes terrible-- in Kristeva, the sublime “expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy-- fascination” (12). This phenomenon is epitomized by the scenes at Club Silencio (Figure 2).



ABJECTION

The abject is the “jettisoned” thing which we define our subjectivities and build our cities against-- “bodily fluids...defilements...shit,” the abject is that which “life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (Kristeva 2). More abstractly, the abject is “above all ambiguity” that “draws [one] toward the place where meaning collapses” (ibid). Scholars see the abject as epitomized by the bum behind Winkie’s and in the sight of Diane’s corpse (Figures 3 and 6).



Figure 1: Plunged into oblivion, Rita realizes she can’t remember her own name.

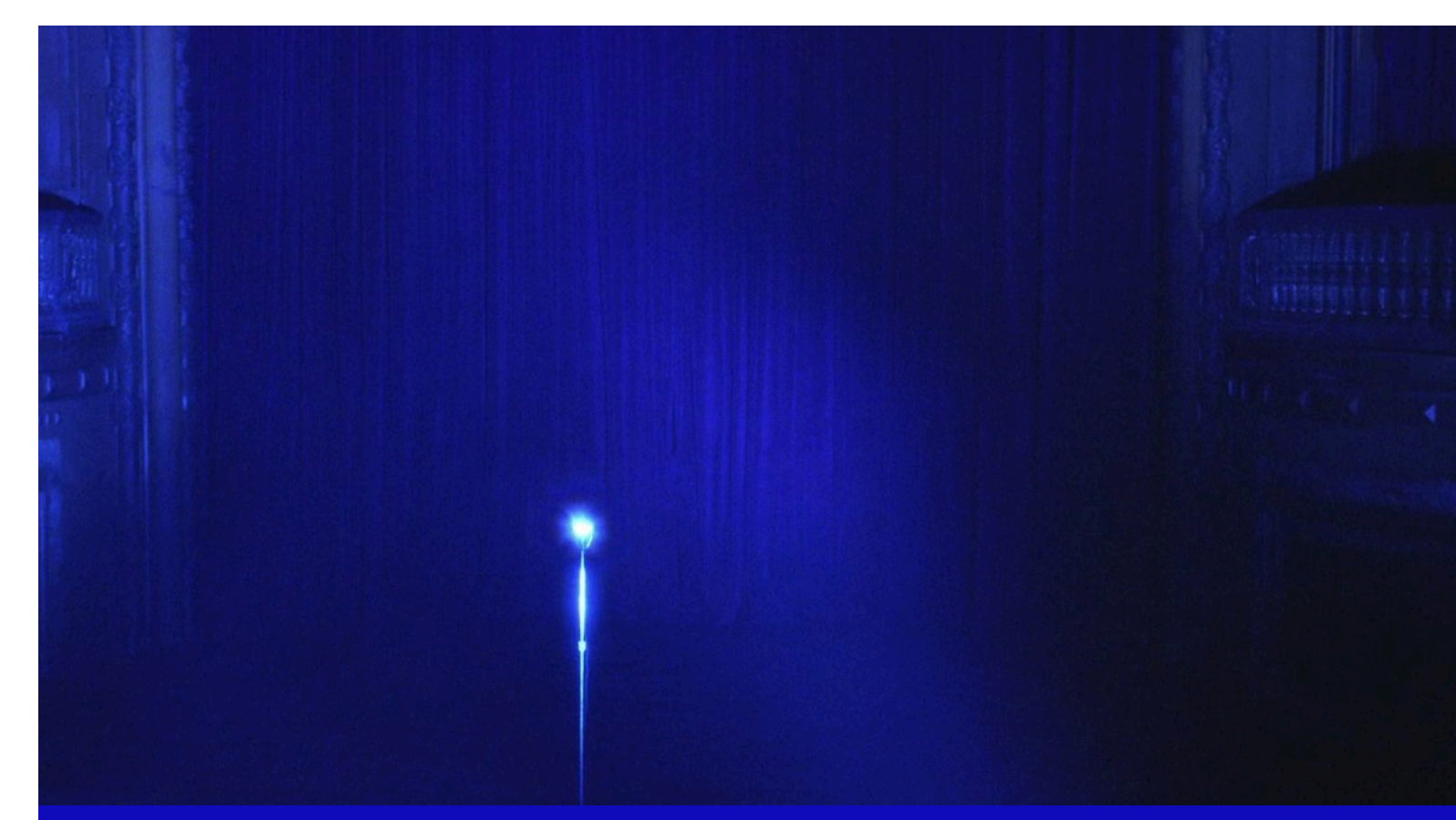


Figure 2: A scene of sublimity, Club Silencio glitters in the final seconds of the film

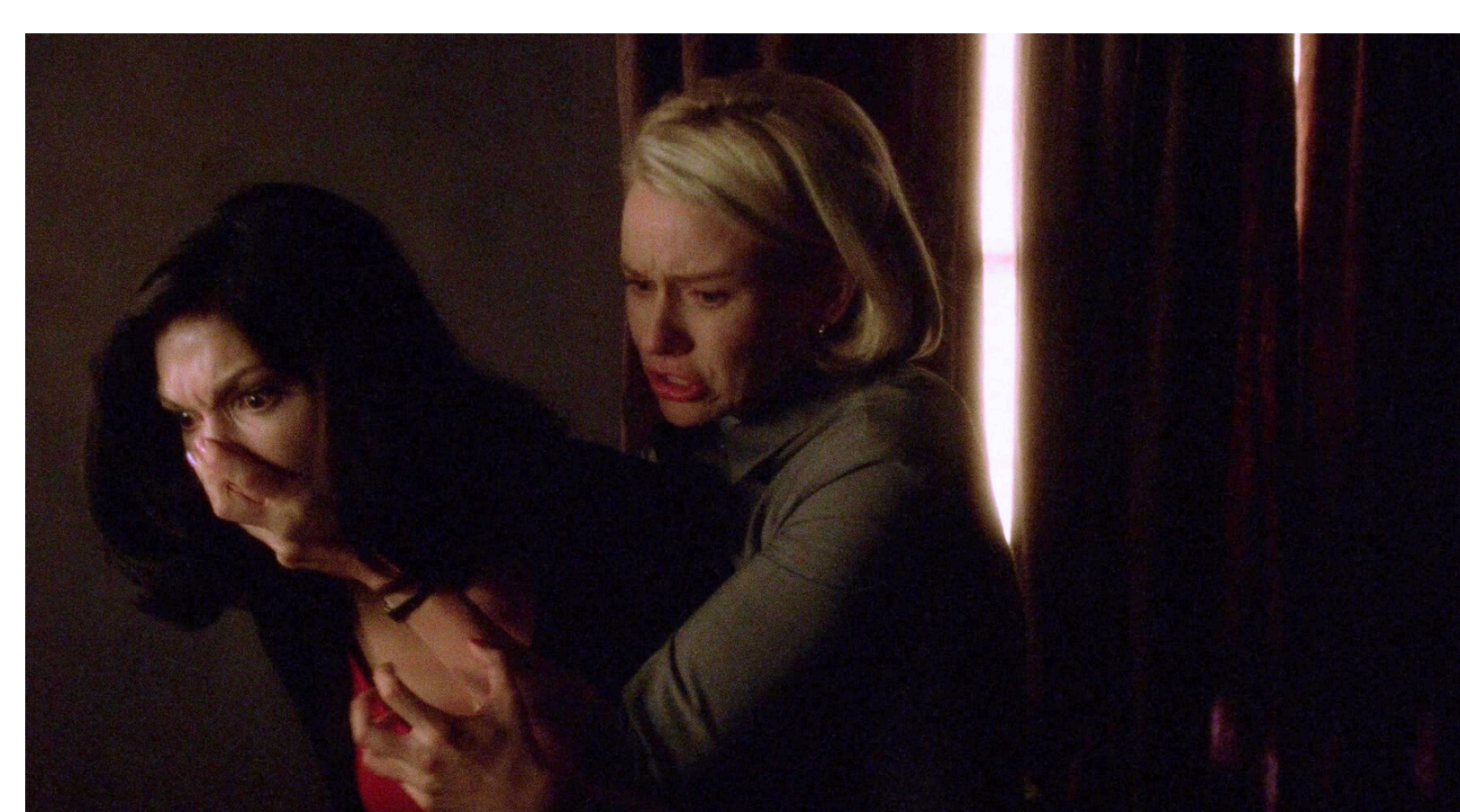


Figure 3: Rita and Betty encounter the corpse of Diane Selwyn-- the abject *par excellence* for Kristeva.



Figure 4: The interior of the blue box, the “void” of oblivion into which the camera falls.

FILM THEORY, FRENCH STYLE: METHOD

Watch, Read, Research: Execute several (re)viewings of *Mulholland Drive*, each for different themes: sublimity, abjection, oblivion and cross-reference scholarship on *Mulholland Drive* and the abject, as well as David Lynch’s interviews and press conferences.

Translate and Analyze: Read *Powers of Horror* in English; read key passages in the original French; translate French to English, drawing out polyvalent meanings.

Write: Use translation precisions and to theorize the valences of oblivion and *l’oubli*, asking, how does oblivion, nuanced through the French *l’oubli*, help us think through the film? How does it help us think through the abject and the sublime not only in *Mulholland Drive*, but in Kristeva’s *Pouvoirs de L’Horreur*?



Figure 5: Diane’s death-vision. In this mirage of joyous memories, Diane appears once more as “Betty,” accompanied by her lover, “Rita.”



Figure 6: After Diane places the hit on Camilla, the camera cross-fades into a scene of abjection, where the filthy, horrible bum holds the blue box.

OUBLI, OBLIVION: CONCLUSION

What is oblivion? Oblivion is a word Kristeva never explicitly defines. Interestingly, the original French “oubli” has a slightly different valence than the English “oblivion” (1980 ; Seuil, 1983). From the verb *oublier*, to forget, *oubli* refers first of all to the “disparition des souvenirs,” or the vanishing of all memories, “amnésie” or “effacement” (“oubli”). Rita signifies this kind of oblivion. *Oubli* can also refer to the disappearance of a memory from the collective, as in the sentence, “un écrivain tombé dans l’oubli,” a writer who has fallen into oblivion, what we in English might call falling into obscurity (ibid). This is the variation of oblivion Diane faces as a forgotten actress, and worse still, a forgotten lover. But what about the English oblivion? Like the French, it can signify “the state...of forgetting” as well as the “condition of being forgotten” (“oblivion”). But it also has a darker edge: “obscurity, nothingness, void, death” (ibid). Each word adumbrates a different shade of oblivion: the “void” of the blue box; the “nothingness” behind the performance at Silencio (“Il n’y a pas d’orchestra! It is all an illusion”), and, of course, the penultimate scene of Diane’s suicide (Lynch 2001). **Oblivion-- the beyond that we reach in forgetting, falling, facing absence and death-- describes the experience at the edge, where the abject winks with flashes of the sublime.**

Why oblivion? I extrapolate oblivion as a kind of third from Kristeva’s equation of the abject and the sublime as a possible solution to the “interspace between abjection and fascination” (204). Kristeva is clear that “the abject is edged with the sublime,” and that the “time of the abject” is one of “oblivion and thunder” (Kristeva 11, 9). The apex of *Mulholland Drive*-- the sequence of Diane’s suicide, death-vision, and final cross-fade into Club Silencio-- is visually and aurally overcome with Kristeva’s thunder and thematically underlined by her oblivion. Equally, this sequence entangles the abject (suicide) with the sublime (the visions of love, the ghostly glimmer of Silencio). As Kristeva writes, the abject is a paradoxical “vortex of summons *and* repulsion” that both “beseeches *and* pulverizes the subject” (Kristeva 5, 2; emphasis mine). *Mulholland Drive* is similarly bound by paradox; suffused with the abject and the sublime, the film evokes what one critic calls a “luxurious dread” (Rodley 2005). As Todd McGowan says of Silencio, it is “dangerous, yet alluring” (2004). Drawing on the storied meaning from the French, oblivion seems to index not only the diegesis (Rita-Camilla and Betty-Diane’s oblivions), but the *spectatorial experience* of *Mulholland Drive*. The film requires a suspension of knowing, a *forgetting* of the logic of the Symbolic; a surrender to the shadows of the abject and the flashes of the sublime that “expand us, overstrain us” (Kristeva 12). In a word, viewing *Mulholland Drive* induces oblivion. **The spectatorial-diegetic doubleness of oblivion, its linguistic polyvalence, traverses the interspace of horror and sublimity. This brings us to the crux of Kristeva’s paradox: and through this very shattering-- the experience of oblivion-- we, along with a rapt Rita and Betty, glimpse the interspace of the abject-sublime.**

“Le temps de l’abjection est double : temps de l’oubli et du tonnerre, de l’infini voilé et du moment où éclate la révélation.”

“The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.”

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*
translated by Leon S. Roudiez



WORKS
CITED