

Mulholland Drive

(David Lynch, 2001)

Component 2 – Section D: Film movements – experimental film (1960–2000)

Core study areas:

- **key elements of film form**
- **meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **contexts of film**

Specialist study areas:

- **Narrative**
- **Auteur**

Rationale for study: *Mulholland Drive* is a surrealist neo-noir that explores concepts of identity, sexuality, and memory. It's also a satire on Hollywood and the American lust for fame. David Lynch was named Best Director at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award. A BBC poll ranked *Mulholland Drive* as the 'Best Film of the 21st Century' in 2016.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

Winkies, and Betty's arrival 11:41 – 19:51

'Studio pressure' 27:29 – 33:37

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- The lighting and composition of many shots are reminiscent of the paintings of Edward Hopper. Despite having a contemporary setting, this gives the film a feeling that it is set in the 1950s.
- Cinematographer, Peter Deming, often lights characters using 'night' lighting even when the background is broad daylight. This adds to the dreamlike atmosphere of the film.

Mise-en-scène

- Adding to the 1950s feel to the movie many of the characters dress and wear hair and make-up more associated with that decade. This was also the period of 'Classic Hollywood' and is a nod to one of the film's main inspirations *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950).
- Lynch often uses repeated motifs, meaning of which can shift and change throughout the narrative.

Editing

- In many of Lynch's films, he creates a nightmarish atmosphere by filming and editing sequences. We feel there is something just out of shot that is lurking and there are repeated close-ups of the characters' confused or terrified faces, the sequence in the diner is a perfect example of this.

Sound

- Lynch consistently uses a deep throbbing bass sound to create a sense of unease and fear. Often this sound effect is used while the camera focuses on an unassuming object, imbuing the everyday with a malign energy.
- In *Mulholland Drive* this bass throb is combined with a sound like muffled wind that reminds us Los Angeles is a city in vast desert.

Performance

- In a film all about performance and identity, the two main female actors have a challenging task of portraying at which points in the narrative they are Betty/Diane (Naomi Watts) and Rita/Camilla (Lauren Elena Harring); especially as there is at least one other actor playing these roles! Watts particularly won praise for delineating between the bright, peppy Betty, and the devastated, bitter Diane.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS – Meaning and response

Representations

- The film centres around women, and the way the film industry manipulates them. Note the scene where Betty does a double audition, one playing the role shy and vulnerable, the next daringly coquettish. This could be a comment on the shallow roles written for women in Hollywood.
- Outside of this, the two protagonists form a strong bond from the beginning. Almost behaving like a vintage girl detective duo, until their bond tips over into becoming lovers. What these ‘dreamed’ roles say about the ‘real’ Camille and Diane is left ambiguous.

Aesthetics

- The style is typical of director David Lynch, with almost ‘twee’ vintage Americana (Fifties haircuts, jitterbug scenes, diners) mixed with scenes of cosmic horror. In films like *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Fire Walk with Me* (1992), Lynch’s aesthetic creates the impression that dark, unimaginable terrors lurk under the surface of ‘cosy’ suburban America.
- A particular ‘Lynchian’ trope is to take something pedestrian and everyday (e.g. the espresso cup in the ‘studio pressure’ scene) and make it seem sinister and threatening.



Image by United Archives /Alamy stock photo.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Social / Institutional / Political

- *Mulholland Drive* is, in parts, a satire on Hollywood. As an auteur with a unique and often bizarre vision, Lynch has often struggled to get financing and support from Hollywood studios. *Mulholland Drive* originally started as a pilot for a TV show. When it was abruptly axed only weeks into production, Lynch turned the existing footage and some extra scenes into a feature film. An obvious comment on this would be struggles of Adam, the director character in *Mulholland Drive* in the surreal and shadowy Hollywood system.
- Movements like #metoo (2006) and #timesup (2018) have drawn attention to sexism and misogyny in the film industry. Though predating these movements, *Mulholland Drive* is critical of the way the Hollywood system treats people, and young woman particularly. You should consider the portrayal of fame, celebrity, and the entertainment industry in the film – how does it seem to dehumanise people (or worse)?

Cultural

- *Mulholland Drive* is surrealist, inspired by the European surrealist movement of the 1920s–1950s with the aim to unite the conscious and unconscious mind.
- The film can be categorised as part of the American postmodern film movement of the 1990s/early 2000s. Diane's world is hyper-real; the narrative is disjointed, and the film contains intertextual references. The plot is somewhat inspired by *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950) another film noir about a desperate actress in Hollywood, set on an intersecting road to Mulholland. There are also references to *Gilda* (Vidor, 1946) and the paintings of Edward Hopper.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: Starting points

Narrative

- The plot of the film is deliberately ambiguous and mysterious, with no clear explanation of the plot, or closure at the end. This has added to *Mulholland's* 'cult status' – a film that can be watched repeatedly and discussed endlessly.
- One critic described it as a story "where everything has been studiously glued together, but where literally nothing fits."
- Critic Roger Ebert said such an experimental narrative works as a movie because every scene is *vignette* (a perfect and self-contained story); this makes it emotionally satisfying, even if the pieces don't all add up.
- Others have said the narrative is working on three different levels of reality: first, in a dream (Betty's); then the subconscious (what Rita/Betty is trying to suppress); then thirdly, in 'reality' (Rita and Camilla).
- Discussion point: consider all the narrative ingredients of *Mulholland Drive*. What would you say is the main plot? What happens to the characters? Are you satisfied by the end?
- Consider how *Mulholland Drive* frustrates conventional narrative structures.

Auteur

- Lynch is considered one of American cinema's greatest auteurs. Since *Eraserhead* (1977), he has made films with consistent aesthetic, narrative, and ideological approaches. Many explore a dark underbelly lurking beneath polite traditional US society; particularly in his TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990–2017). He often creates a dream-like atmosphere through sound design, surreal imagery, and experimental narrative.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

Winkies and Betty's arrival

11:41 – 19:51

In the first of three short scenes, a man recounts a nightmare in a diner; in an interim scene, a series of mysterious calls; in the third, a young woman arrives in LA.

- As the man recounts his nightmare, note how the camera seems to hover at an uncomfortable distance to his face. Why is this unsettling?
- Consider the location of the diner. Why might an audience, particularly an American one, find this location one of comfort rather than dread? Considering Lynch's *auteur* style, why do you think he has chosen this location?
- Examine the use of camera as the men go into the backlot. Many of Lynch's films are about using camera, editing and sound to create the impression there is something threatening just out of sight/sound. Consider how this sequence exemplifies this approach.
- There is then a montage of phone calls being made and received. How does the editing make it seem like these calls are a consequence of the scene at the diner? What makes us think these two sequences are unconnected?
- How does colour, lighting, music, and Naomi Watts' performance create a contrasting aesthetic in the next short scene?
- *Mulholland Drive*'s setting is contemporary. How are production design and music in this sequence to suggest it's actually the 1940s or 50s? This period was a Hollywood 'Golden Age' – why do you think Lynch has made these aesthetic references to the period?
- Despite jarring with the tone of what has come before it, this sequence is still quite sinister. Watch the sequence again and chart how you emotionally respond. What are your feelings when Betty first arrives? What is the connection to the 'jitterbug' shot beforehand? How does the scene of Betty's arrival become more ominous despite its happy tone?