

Mulholland Drive

How does the film render ambiguous the border between narrative “reality” and dreams? How do music and sound play a role in this?

Compare this film to *Vertigo*. How do the two films deal with questions of identity and fantasy?

Why do you think Lynch decided to make some aspects of the film so campy? What does this have to do with the role of the uncanny in Lynch’s films? (read about the Freudian notion of the uncanny here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncanny>)

Describe the soundtrack in the “Club Silencio” scene in terms of diegetic/non-diegetic and onscreen/offscreen sounds. How does the scene relate to the blurred dichotomy of dreams and reality and to the mutability of identity?

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MONSTROUS MATURITY ON MULHOLLAND DR.

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DAVID LYNCH CLAIMS that this film is easy to understand, but most of its viewers have disagreed. In an interview, he was asked to explain this disagreement, and responded by comparing film – not just this film, but all film – both to music and dreams.¹ Music, he says, is “just an experience,” “it is very far away from words,” and “there’s not an intellectual thing going on.” Film “has those same elements of just experience,” but whether because of the words spoken by the characters, or some other feature that distinguishes it from music, people falsely believe that their experience of a film can be translated into words. Similarly with dreams: “you tell your friend a dream,” Lynch says, “and you can see in the face they don’t understand.”

This is what happens to Dan who has asked someone to come to Winkie’s in order to tell him a recurring nightmare he has about it. We never learn this man’s identity – he could be merely a friend, but we may infer that he is a therapist. Even before Dan begins, the look of contempt on the therapist’s face anticipates this gap between dream and word. Dan tries to speak, but the failure of his words to communicate his inner feeling is most evident in his effort to describe the ambient time of the dream: “It’s not day or night. It’s kind of half-night, you know?” But the therapist does not know; nor do we, if we understand knowledge the way philosophers generally do.

Yet an alternate mode of knowledge is possible, according to Lynch: “use your intuition, and then an understanding comes inside you.”

Mulholland Drive is “not that difficult to understand,” he says, “if you trust your inner feeling.” This essay tries to be faithful to that recommendation – recognizing all the while that it is bound to fail, like every argument whose medium is words – by articulating the woolly notion of “intuition” and the vague injunction to “trust your inner feeling.” After all, this film evokes many different feelings, and it is by no means clear which we should trust. So although our ultimate goal is to understand it, or at least understand it better, an intermediate goal of this essay is to sketch an alternate mode of knowledge – an alternate epistemology, if you will – that will help us do so.

Important shading in this sketch will follow several lines through teratology, the theory of monsters, a field that has been neglected by most philosophers nowadays, but was earnestly investigated by their Greek predecessors. Aristotle considered monsters to be perversions of the natural order, whereas Plato thought of them as hybrids of conflicting parts.² Despite these differences, though, they share central criteria in the definition of a monster: it is a threat to philosophical categories, a disruption of rational thought and stable being, an eruption of the world’s irrational becoming. According to Jeffery Jerome Cohen’s *Monster Theory*, which is the seminal work of recent teratology, these Platonic–Aristotelian criteria are some of the principal characteristics of a monster more broadly conceived.³ Others of these characteristics are anticipated by Nietzsche. After developing these two approaches to monstrosity (Plato’s and Nietzsche’s), along with the rival epistemologies they presuppose, we shall find monstrous the main characters of *Mulholland Drive*. Its deepest lesson, in the end, is that we are monsters too.

Night, half-night, and day

Mulholland Drive is hybrid of a rejected television pilot and a cinematic coda.⁴ Lynch called the pilot a body without a head. It would have died, he says in an interview, if he had not found a head to bring it to life. Born from chance, as well as from an imagination worthy of Dr Frankenstein, it was nourished by both as it matured. The result is a film that the director – so usually reticent about the interpretation of his films, and so careful that their DVDs not be divided into chapters – nonetheless divides into three acts. He does not say when each begins or ends, however, so the following divisions are speculative.⁵

The first act emerged from the pilot, whose footage was re-edited once it was incorporated into the feature-length film.⁶ Accordingly, we need a name for it that avoids any reference to its genesis. We shall henceforth call it “the night act,” the time of dreams. It stretches from the beginning of the film to the scene where Betty and Rita stand before the bathroom mirror in Aunt Ruth’s apartment, after they have cut Rita’s hair and given her a blonde wig (1:38). The second act stretches from the next scene, when Betty and Rita make love, to the moment when the Cowboy summons Diane Selwyn to wake up (1:57). We shall call this “the half-night act,” the twilight of dawn or dusk, midway between dream and reality. The third and final act, “the day act,” stretches from her waking to the end of the film. To orient ourselves within the film’s bewildering narrative, this tripartite structure will help, but we should also recount the relevant details of each act. We begin, as the film does, with the night.

Of its many narrative threads, foremost is the search for the real identity of Rita. Victim of an attempted hit that was interrupted by a car accident, she flees both its horror and the shadowy syndicate of executives and hit men who pursue her. Descending from the Hollywood hills and crossing Sunset Blvd., she finds refuge in an unlocked Havenhurst apartment. It belongs to Ruth, an old actress who has just left for a shoot in Canada, but it is soon occupied by her niece, Betty. Giddy with excitement – “I just came here from Deep River, Ontario, and now I am in this dream place” – Betty surveys the apartment, beholds herself in a mirror, and then notices Rita showering.⁷ Suffering severe amnesia from the car accident, she cannot recall her own name, so when Betty asks nervously after it, Rita responds by looking to a movie poster hanging next to the shower (*Gilda*, starring Rita Hayworth). More precisely, she sees this poster reflected in one mirror, just as we see her reflected in another. Appearing as reflections of separate characters, then, Rita and Betty begin a film-noir search for her real identity. This search will fail, eventually dissolving the distinction between them, not to mention the distinction between reality and its reflected appearances.

They begin with two facts and two memories. The facts: Rita’s purse is stuffed with money as well as a shiny blue key. The memories: first the accident’s location (Mulholland Dr.), then the name of the waitress who happens to serve them at Winkie’s (Diane, which soon evokes “Diane Selwyn”). Equipped with this name and a phone book, their search brings them to the Sierra Bonita apartments. Diane Selwyn no

longer lives in the one listed, but the anonymous woman who answers its door has switched apartments with her. A ringing phone distracts her before she can take them to the other. Without a key but under the spell of movie fantasies, Betty cajoles Rita into helping her break in. The technicolor landscape of Hollywood now gives way to a fetid darkness that hides a female corpse. Fleeing in terror the sight of its gray, bloody, and bloated face, their beautiful faces freeze, stagger, and overlap as though the film projector were jammed. The dramatic illusion sustained tenuously throughout the night act thus begins to break down. Indeed, the sharp distinction between its two main characters – Betty the perky, blonde ingénue; Rita the sad, brunette femme fatale – begins rapidly to dissolve. Back safely at Havenhurst, Betty helps Rita cut her dark hair and cover what remains with a blonde wig.⁸ The night act ends here, with the two blondes standing side by side before the same bathroom mirror that first showed us Rita adopting her name.

The second act, shot in twilight, opens with their love scene. A tentative goodnight kiss turns passionate, melting the inhibitions that separate their bodies. The consummation is brief, and although we do not see it, we ride on the waves of a musical crescendo worthy of Wagner. The silence of their post-coital sleep is soon interrupted by Rita speaking from the depths of a dream. “Silencio,” she intones, adding two other Spanish phrases: “No hay banda” (“There is no band”) and “No hay orquesta” (“There is no orchestra”). Waking, and obviously afraid, she insists they go to Club Silencio, where these phrases will be repeated along with others that clarify the lesson: “This is all a tape recording,” says the magician who rattles Betty with thunder and flashes of lightning, “and yet we hear a band.” Before disappearing in a billow of smoke, he declares: “It is all an illusion.” This intellectual comment on the whole film – we the audience also hear a band, so to speak, because we see substantial people who are but flickering images projected through celluloid – is succeeded by its most emotional scene: La Llorona de Los Angeles. While singing “Crying” in Spanish and overwhelming Betty and Rita with grief, she collapses, apparently dead. The emcee carries her off-stage, but her song goes on; it was all a recording. Reaching into her purse for tissues, Betty finds a shiny blue box. She and Rita return in haste to Havenhurst to open it with the key hidden there. When Betty disappears, however, and Rita is left alone to ask “Donde estas?” (“Where are you?”), she opens the box by herself. Looking inside – the camera

now adopts her perspective – she descends into its darkness and likewise disappears. This dream is over.

The half-night act concludes with a summons to wake issued by the Cowboy. Although he appears in all three acts, and is the only character to do so, he features in the night's second-most-important narrative thread, which follows the travails of Adam Keshner, director of *The Sylvia North Story*. After Adam rejects the command of the shadowy syndicate to cast Camilla Rhodes as the lead in his movie, he finds himself bankrupt, ousted from his film, and in a corral beneath a flickering light to meet this Cowboy. "There's sometimes a buggy," he informs Adam, teaching him that his ride as a director requires someone else to be the real driver. "Now, you will see me one more time if you do good," he advises before leaving, but "two more times if you do bad." Similarly at the end of the half-night act, as though speaking again on behalf of some omnipotent reality, he addresses a Betty sleeping in the same fetal posture as the Sierra Bonita corpse. "Hey, pretty girl," he says with an uncharacteristic smile, "time to wake up." A second shot of her body shows it as the corpse, and the Cowboy leaves.

Someone then wakes up, thereby beginning the day act, but it is Diane rather than Betty. Both are played by Naomi Watts, a link that tempts us to interpret the first two acts as Diane's dream, the ensuing act as her reality. If any scene were to epitomize this reality, it would be her own account of herself at the posh dinner party off Mulholland Dr., where Adam will apparently announce his engagement to Camilla. After an ironic drum roll from the soundtrack, Diane tells her story to Adam's mother, who seems anxious and bored. "I always wanted to come here," she begins. Back home in Deep River, Ontario, she won a jitterbug contest. "That sort of led to acting," she says, although immediately she feels the need to clarify: "You know, wanting to act." Her aunt was a movie actress who died and left her some money, making it possible for her to come to Hollywood. On the set of *The Sylvia North Story*, she met Camilla, who beat her to the lead she wanted so badly. "Camilla was great in that," says an anonymous man sitting next to her. With a hint of resentment and an awkward pause, Diane replies "Yeah."

Looking fondly toward Camilla, who is seated at the head table next to Adam and speaking Spanish, she resumes. Camilla has since become a star but nonetheless secures small parts in her films for Diane. Hearing this detail, Adam's mother finally shows Diane some sympathy, patting

her hand and saying “I see.” This gesture seems to make Diane feel ashamed. Looking again toward the head table, this time seeing the host couple laughing together and leaning on one another, her vision blurs – the camera has now adopted her perspective – then refocuses as she stares into her coffee cup. If we credit other scenes in the day act, scenes of frustrated sex and an acrimonious break-up, Diane and Camilla have also been lovers. Toward the end of this dinner party, she sees Camilla flirt openly with another woman. Thus defeated, jilted, and tormented by her beloved, apparently, Diane becomes a monster of grief and jealous rage.

The sound of shattering dishes links the end of this dinner-party scene with the beginning of the next, in Winkie’s, where Diane meets a hit man, Joe. All three are shabby counterpoints to the glamour of the dinner party. Their anxious conversation is interrupted first by the dishes and then by the arrival of their perky waitress, Betty, who apologizes, pours coffee, and leaves them alone again. Diane offers Joe a purse with money and a photo-résumé of Camilla. “You sure you want this?” he asks. “More than anything in this world,” she replies with a sneer. He promises to signal success with the discreet placement of a blue key. Fixing her eyes with his own, he says “You’ll find this where I told you.” Distracted for a moment by the glance of a customer waiting to settle his bill at the register – he resembles exactly the night act’s Dan – she returns Joe’s gaze and asks him: “What’s it open?” He answers only with sinister laughter, fading into a dark vision of the vagrant in the alley behind the diner.

Smoke billows behind him as he turns over in his filthy hands a shiny blue box, places it in a crumpled paper bag, and drops it to the ground. All pretense of reality is abandoned when miniature figures dance out of the bag, laughing maniacally. They seem to be the same couple who accompanied Betty upon her dreamy arrival at the Los Angeles airport. As though briefly returning to reality, the next scene shows Diane back in her Sierra Bonita apartment, where she contemplates the blue key on her coffee table. Panning across it and another cup of coffee, we watch her descend into madness. Knocks on her front door herald the miniature couple, who crawl under it. Now grown to full size, as though psychopomps leading her out of the dream place into which they originally accompanied Betty, they pursue her with the same maniacal laughter and fingers outstretched like claws. Running into her bedroom, she collapses onto her bed, reaches for a revolver in the nightstand, and kills herself.

A “Platonic” interpretation

With this articulation of the film into three acts, and the relevant details of its narrative and characters before us, we may indulge for a while a popular interpretation of it that relies on a sharp distinction between appearance and reality, not to mention its cognate distinctions between the images of reflection, dreaming, fantasy, and hallucination, on one hand, and the world outside our imagination, on the other. This popular interpretation, which we shall call “Platonic,” will motivate our exploration of the epistemological assumptions we bring to the film, so that once we have distilled the lessons of that philosophical exploration we may return to the film and offer a better interpretation of it, one based on an epistemology closer to the one Lynch expresses in his interviews. Briefly, according to this Platonic interpretation, the day act recounts Diane’s failure and fury, and this is the dark, banal, and unifying reality beneath the colorful, adventurous, and disjointed appearances of her dream, which the other two acts project. Although easily stated in brief, this tempting interpretation is much harder to develop in detail. Ultimately, in fact, it proves impossible.

In its crudest form, this interpretation assumes a one-to-one correspondence between characters in the two segments of the film. While the day act gives us real life, according to it, the other acts reflect this reality with dreamy enhancements. The day act shows us Diane in a dingy white bathrobe, for example, whereas the night act’s Betty wears a similar one enhanced with bright pink. Although this transposition works to some extent between the Naomi Watts characters – which makes it so tempting a hermeneutic key to unlock the whole film’s blue box – it fails to explain the complex associations between others. Both Rita and Camilla, for instance, are played by Laura Elena Harring, but the correspondence between them is looser. In the night act, Rita rides alone in the limousine that makes a surprise stop on Mulholland Dr., but in the day act it is Diane, not Camilla, who does this. If there has been any transposition from reality to dream in this case, then, the real Diane has reflected herself as Rita as well as Betty. Were this not problematic enough, moreover, far more complex associations hold between the minor characters, not to mention between inanimate objects and other aspects of the drama.⁹

If it is to be at all plausible, therefore, this “Platonic” interpretation must permit a fluid relationship between elements of reality and dreams.

Such fluidity can be granted faithfully by recalling Lynch's own comparison between films and dreams, as well as this film's particular discussion of dreams, the one with which we began. Dan dreams of a terrifying monster behind Winkie's. Unfortunately for him, his therapist's contempt for dreams is matched by the naivety of his technique for dealing with them. He tries to pierce Dan's fear by confronting him with its object, with predictably disastrous results. For if Freud is right, dreaming is a compromise between the forbidden "latent content" of our minds and an unconscious agency that protects us from its threat by converting it into the tolerable "manifest content" we experience as the dream. The manifest content thus appears on the surface of the dreamer's mind, while the latent content is a psychic reality below that includes short-term memories from the day before ("day-residue"), long-term memories from as distant as one's earliest childhood, and all the emotions associated with both. The conversion of this latent reality into manifest appearance is far from random, however, because it must satisfy two opposed demands: on one hand, the demand to fulfill the forbidden wishes embedded in the latent content; on the other, the demand to avoid the fear and anxiety that would attend the satisfaction of these wishes in their raw form.

This process of conversion, which Freud calls the "dream-work," uses specific techniques, each analogous to a poetic device. "Displacement" is just metonymy, transposing one element from the latent content into another in the manifest. "Fragmentation" and "condensation" are merely two modes of ambiguity, the first dissolving one element into many, the second fusing multiple elements into one. Substitution of an element's part for its whole is but synecdoche, while exaggeration or diminution of an element are hyperbole and irony respectively. The possibilities are nearly endless, restricted by the urgent need to compromise between the mind's opposed demands of unconscious wish and fear, but in no way restricted by its conscious principles of reason. "Ideas which are contraries," for instance, "are by preference expressed in dreams by one and the same element," thereby flouting the principle of non-contradiction.¹⁰ The principle of sufficient reason fares no better. "A causal relation between two thoughts," Freud writes, "is either left unrepresented or is replaced by a sequence of two pieces of dream of different lengths," although "the representation is often reversed" (OD 6). Dream logic, if it may be called that, is the illogic of poetry.

This is not to say it is random, notice, but only that each association will require its own analysis if we are to understand it, sometimes using one poetic technique, other times using another, but always seeking the same compromise that the mind itself already sought, between wish and fear. Were the final act of *Mulholland Drive* Diane's reality, and the earlier acts her dream, it would come as no surprise that the association between the elements in the two segments is illogical. Were the life of Diane in the day act to supply the latent content manifest in the earlier acts, furthermore, it should come as no surprise to find there a colorful appearance in which she is displaced onto another character, fragmented into several characters, or fused with someone else into one. And so likewise for the people she meets, especially those about whom she feels strongly, and above all those whom she loves. The transposition from reality to dream does not follow philosophical logic (where contradiction is impossible, and effect must follow cause, future the past) but it does heed the illogic of fantasy (where time and causality are suspended and something can both be and not be itself as well as something else).

Dream characters are thus hybrids, or as Freud calls them, "'composite structures,' which are creations not unlike the composite animals invented by the folk-imagination" (OD 4). These folk monsters "have already assumed stereotyped shapes in our thought, whereas in dreams fresh composite forms are being perpetually constructed in an inexhaustible variety" (OD 4). That said, dream monsters are of two basic types: good and bad. When the dream-work succeeds, its monstrous creations satisfy the dreamer's wishes without provoking her fears. These are the good ones, and she sleeps on. When the dream-work fails, however, its creations become too scary. These are the bad ones, and she awakes. Freud compares this difference to the two options available to a nightwatchman, "who first carries out his duty by suppressing disturbances so that the townsmen may not be woken up, but afterwards continues to do his duty by himself waking the townsmen up, if the causes of the disturbance seem to him serious and of a kind that he cannot cope with alone" (OD 11).

If Diane is the dreamer, her dream-work successfully suppresses disturbances that manifest as variously as car accidents and murder; she orchestrates all of these monsters into a vibrant and occasionally comic production. But it finally fails when it projects a corpse that shocks by both its rot and its resemblance to herself. With the interruption of her

dream-work, her projector jams, and the multifarious characters of its creation begin to resolve themselves into one groggy consciousness. It is only a matter of time – the duration of the half-night act, as it turns out – before her nightwatchman, the Cowboy, arrives to issue the inevitable order: “Time to wake up.”

But is Diane the dreamer? To answer this question, and thereby underwrite the “Platonic” interpretation we have now buttressed with Freudian dream theory, we would have first to determine who she really is. That determination proves impossible, however, because it requires us to credit the day act as reality. Hallucination of the miniature old couple makes it incredible, so too does the kiss of the two Camillas at the dinner party that enrages Diane. In this modern setting, the blonde Camilla wears her fifties period costume from the set of *The Sylvia North Story*. Moreover, when she exits the room, she passes the Cowboy, who exits the party. What is a cowboy doing at a gathering of Hollywood glitterati? These are not the only inconsistencies in the narrative of the day act. In the scene on the set of Adam’s movie, for example, Diane seethes with jealousy as she watches Camilla being kissed by him. But in the dinner-party scene, when she recounts how she met Camilla on the set of this movie, the anonymous man beside her asks whether its director was Bob Brooker, and she agrees. Or, while Diane stands alone in her drab kitchen, unwashed in her dirty bathrobe, Camilla appears perfectly made-up in her signature red. With tears of desperate joy, Diane exclaims “You’ve come back!” Immediately, though, her tears turn to sobs that rattle her as she contemplates nothing; nothing, that is, but herself. For the next shot shows her standing where Camilla appeared to be, only contempt now detectable on her face. So which part of this scene was memory, which part fantasy, and which part hallucination?

Once we lose this faith in the reality of this act – and really, this faith cannot be reasonably maintained in the face of so many inconsistencies – it becomes impossible finally to assess the reality of any of its particular scenes. Does Diane have sex with Camilla? Did they ever? Do they break up? Were they ever together? Is there anyone really named Camilla? Most radically, does Diane even exist? This is a peculiar question, whose significance may not even be clear. To answer it, therefore, we now begin a philosophical excursus that aims to provide the background necessary to make its significance clearer. This excursus begins with Plato, then juxtaposes his views – on knowledge, reality, the soul, monsters,

maturity, and tragedy – with the rival views of Nietzsche. Only after the contours of this background have been painted in broad strokes can we highlight the precise features of our own interpretation of Lynch’s film: Diane does not exist. Properly understood, however, neither do we.

Plato

At the center of *Republic*, Plato’s Socrates distinguishes sharply between knowledge and other cognitive powers. Although many have since rejected details of his distinction, especially the rich ontology he associates with it, most presume its basic tenet: that knowledge requires consistency. Separate powers must deal with separate things, Socrates says, and so for each cognitive power he identifies a different object. Knowledge is infallible, dealing only with what is. Ignorance – deep, deep ignorance – is always wrong, dealing only with what is not. In between these two opposed powers is a third, the fallible power of belief, sometimes right and sometimes wrong. The object with which it deals must likewise lie between the other two. By shortening “what is” to “being” and “what is not” to “not-being,” he identifies the object of belief as “what partakes in both being and not being.”¹¹ This contradictory hybrid he elsewhere calls “becoming,” the world of change we are all born crediting through our senses (7.519a7–b5). Children do not exhibit the critical reason necessary to eliminate contradiction and think consistently of pure being. Nor do many grow out of this sensual gullibility. Becoming thus remains the basis of “the majority of people’s conventional views” (5.479d3–4). But a proper education – culminating in philosophy, which alone pierces hybrid appearances with pure reason – can free us from its seductive power.¹²

The image that illustrates this pedagogy is Plato’s most famous, the Cave. “Compare the effect of education and that of the lack of it on our nature,” he begins, “to an experience like this” (7.514a1). The Cave is so famous an image that we rarely consider how scary it is. Hearing it from Socrates for the first time, Plato’s brother reminds us that “it is a strange image you are describing, and strange prisoners” (7.515a3). As much for us as for the Greeks, who knew caves as the mythical homes of Cyclopes, they were the locus of monsters. Plato makes monstrosity more explicit at the summit of his argument, when he illustrates his psychology by comparing the soul to “Chimaera, Scylla, Cerberus, and

the numerous other cases where many different kinds are said to have grown together into one” (9.588c2–5). The bodily appetites are collectively like a “many-headed beast, with a ring of tame and savage animal heads that it can grow and change at will” (9.588c7–9).

Already, therefore, this first part of the soul is a monster: it fuses many heads, of many different types, which change or become through time according to the becoming world reported to them by the senses. Next are the emotions, or at least the emotion of anger, which Socrates compares to a lion as well as a snake. This second part is thus also a hybrid on its own, beholden to the senses and becoming, though corrected by a third part that does not change because it heeds eternal being. Reason, this third part, Plato symbolizes with a homunculus. “Join the three into one so that they somehow grow together naturally,” and we have an image of our monstrous humanity (9.588d7–8). The uniform appearance of our skin hides from view the reality of our multiform soul.

Jean-Joseph Goux has shown how Plato built this model of the soul from the materials of Greek mythology.¹³ Ancient heroes typically had to earn their status by a journey consummated with the violent killing of a monster: Bellerophon stabbed Chimaera with a lance, Perseus decapitated Medusa with a dagger, and Jason slew from within the Dragon that had swallowed him whole. This “monomyth,” Goux argues, depicts an initiation into maturity through which a youth must leave his home and its jealous king, survive fearsome adversity that culminates in the slaying of a monster, and thereby earn a bride of his own elsewhere.¹⁴ The notable exception to this pattern was Sophocles’ Oedipus.¹⁵ He defeated his monster, the Sphinx, not with a violent deed but with a clever word (“Human”). For this innovation, he won not another man’s daughter but his own father’s wife – in other words, his mother. In Goux’s persuasive interpretation of this perversion of the heroic monomyth, Sophocles dramatizes the cost of the Greek enlightenment he witnessed across the span of his life. By trading violent deeds for clever words, the youth never really matures. To marry, this immature man must kill his father, because he has never really left home. So-called oedipal desires are therefore the price to be paid for enlightenment, Greek or otherwise.

Plato takes the next step, according to Goux, putting these new monsters in the soul. Its irrational parts, hydra and lion–snake, shrink from nothing, neither incest nor parricide. By contrast, the rational part,

our inner homunculus, seeks only eternal truth, and above all the Good. With this image of the soul, Plato is not thereby condemning us to monstrosity, any more than his cave allegory condemns us to imprisonment. In both cases he admonishes with hope. Perhaps we will be frightened by these images, if not persuaded by the arguments they illustrate, and will then try to resist the temptations presented by the inferior parts of our soul, purge from ourselves the results of their attraction to the appearances of hybrid becoming, and identify finally with pure reason, which is our true nature. This is the promise of his philosophy, an education to help us become who we really are. Maturity, as Plato understands it, defeats monstrosity.

Although most philosophers nowadays reject Platonism, and nearly all would blanch at its invocation of monsters, many nonetheless agree with two of its basic tenets: not only that knowledge requires consistency, but also that maturity requires knowledge. *Mulholland Drive* challenges this consensus – not with consistent arguments, which would weaken its challenge by hypocrisy, but instead with the sensual images of tragedy, which Plato feared as monstrous.¹⁶ Like all the arts, according to him, tragedy is imitative. Like painting, in particular, it imitates appearances rather than reality, and not just any appearances. The ways of “a wise and selfsame character,” someone whose soul is ruled by reason, or the homunculus within, are “neither easy to imitate nor easy to understand when imitated” (10.604e1–3). To most people, the tale of such a character would be boring. With its passionate tales of violence and perversion, by contrast, tragedy imitates the ways of people whose souls are ruled by irrationality, “the part that leads us to recollections of our suffering and to lamentations, and is insatiable for these things” (10.604d8–9). Such tales appeal to most people, whose souls are likewise irrational. Tragedy thus excites “the childish passions that the masses have,” by appealing to the monsters that rule their souls (10.608a5). In short, tragedy presents monstrous characters on stage to please the monstrous parts in its audience.

But furthermore, tragedy itself is a monster because it represents the scariest monster of all: becoming. By recalling his chief epistemological distinction – between knowledge, ignorance, and belief – Plato diagnoses the imaginative artist’s error as its neglect. Whatever the subject matter, be it shoes, military strategy, or the best way of life, only a fool fails to distinguish between knowledge, ignorance, and imitation. The imitator

of human life and character, the tragedian, errs in his making of images because “whatever appears good to the masses, who know nothing – that, it seems, is what he will imitate” (10.602b2–3). Relying in this way on appearances, and especially the unreliable appearances of the ignorant masses, “the maker of an image, the imitator, knows nothing, we say, about what is” (10.601b9–c1). The power of the artist’s imagination is not set over what is, then, but instead over what-is-and-what-is-not, being-and-not-being. In other words, his art represents the contradictory hybrid of becoming. Whether or not Plato was right to fear it as such, tragedy – and its modern offspring, cinema – is indeed a hybrid, for this was acknowledged, and even celebrated, by its foremost advocate: Nietzsche.

Nietzsche

Like Plato, Nietzsche understands tragedy by using the distinction between appearance and reality.¹⁷ According to Plato, tragedy presents an appearance of an appearance because it draws its material from the senses, which already report appearances of true reality.¹⁸ With this much Nietzsche, in *Birth of Tragedy*, agrees. But because his conception of reality inverts Plato’s, so too does his valuation of tragedy’s doubled appearance. Platonic reality is pure being, free of contradiction, redeeming whoever identifies with reason and thinks of it alone. Nietzschean reality is impure becoming, an eternal contradiction, annihilating whoever is so unfortunate as to behold it naked of all adornment. There are several Greek myths about poor humans who behold a god without adequate preparation. Semele wishes to see her lover, Zeus, in the light of day and is destroyed by the overwhelming sight. Actaeon stumbles upon the chaste huntress-god, Diana, while she is bathing in the company of her nymphs; he is then devoured by his own hounds. In this mythic tradition, Nietzsche describes “the tremendous horror which grips man when he suddenly loses his way among the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world, as the principle of reason in any of its forms appears to break down” (BT 1). The pure being of Plato’s cognition, his path to maturity, is in fact a fantasy, one way to cope with an otherwise overwhelming chaos. Reason is reality’s clothing, in other words, without which we would all look upon it naked and suffer the punishment of Diana.

One form of the principle of reason is that every effect must have a cause (sufficient reason). Another is that being precludes not-being (non-contradiction). Both receive their first articulation in the poem of Parmenides, whose goddess uses them to lead her initiate onto the sure path of reason and reality, away from the contradictory path of belief.¹⁹ Those who travel the latter are “two-headed,” like monsters, “for whom both to be and not to be are judged the same and not the same, and the path of all is backward-turning.” These mortals wander through a twilight where “all is full of light and obscure night together.” By contrast, should her initiate think only of what is, he will mature into the recognition of his own undying being.

Seeking precedents for his apostasy from her cult of consistency, Nietzsche invokes Heraclitus – here, as elsewhere – by calling contradiction “the father of things.”²⁰ The truth of the world, he believes, is found not through consistent thought but in the transports of Dionysian revelry; not through order, that is, but disorder. “Excess revealed itself as the truth,” he writes, “and the contradiction, the bliss born of pain spoke out from the heart of nature” (BT 4). Were we somehow able to survive such pain, which in its rawest form destroys the individual, we would be compelled to accept the so-called wisdom of Silenus: that it is best of all never to have been born, and next best to die as soon as possible. But the Greeks who knew this pain nonetheless enjoyed life, so that even their greatest hero preferred to serve a landless man rather than become king over all the breathless dead.²¹ The reason they were able to remain aware of the horror of existence without being destroyed by this awareness is that tragedy interposed between it and them a screen of beauty, rendering their life not just tolerable but pleasurable. They were redeemed, in other words, by dreaming, by an aesthetic phenomenon, by the appearance of an appearance.

“Although musical tragedy itself admittedly includes the word,” writes Nietzsche, anticipating Lynch in his interview, “it can still at the same time juxtapose the underworld and the birth-place of the word and clarify its development for us from the inside” (BT 21). Neither one without the other would work: words without music would remain lifeless abstractions, disconnected from the reality of becoming; music without words would immerse us in its flow, but deny us the illusion of being that is afforded by our cognition. “Thought and word,” he

adds, “rescue us from the unbridled outpouring of the unconscious will” (BT 21). Fused together into the hybrid of tragedy, they offer modern Europeans as much as ancient Greeks the redemption of artistic beauty. “Only as an aesthetic phenomenon,” Nietzsche famously writes, “are existence and the world justified” (BT 5).

Tragic justification and redemption are available to whole peoples in public spectacles, but also to the individual in the private theater of his dreaming mind. Nietzsche thus reverses Plato’s directions to maturity as well as to reality. Rather than waking from our dreams, emerging from darkness into light, and piercing contradictory appearances with pure reasoning about consistent being, we should instead absorb the beauty of these appearances, remain in the twilight between oblivion and consciousness, and exclaim to ourselves joyously: “This is a dream! I want to dream on!” For dreams, like art, “make life possible, worth living” (BT 1). With his attacks on art, dream, and the appearances of becoming, then, Plato’s Socrates undermines the foundations of life. Motivated by a “metaphysical madness,” he inaugurated “the unshakeable belief that, by following the guiding thread of causality, thought reaches into the deepest abysses of being and is capable not only of knowing but also even of correcting being” (BT 15).

Nietzsche sees this madness corrupting Attic tragedy from within, replacing the unconscious forces at work in Aeschylus with the conscious dialectics of Euripides. The result he contemptuously called “aesthetic Socratism,” the doctrine that “in order to be beautiful everything must be conscious” (BT 12). In Nietzschean psychology, humans are naturally driven to act and create by unconscious forces, inhibiting themselves from time to time by conscious prohibitions. Socrates, by contrast, acted and created with conscious reason, but was inhibited occasionally by an unconscious voice – his *daemonium*. He thus inverted the natural order in himself. “Instinct becomes the critic and consciousness the creator,” Nietzsche concludes, so that Socrates represents, in his estimation, “a true monstrosity *per defectum*.”²²

If we allow that there are multiple notions of monstrosity – some applicable in some contexts, others in others, but fundamentally divided into the bad and the good, the fearsome and the wholesome – we may agree with Nietzsche that Socrates is a bad monster and tragedy a good one. We may agree, that is, unless we agree with Plato that tragedy is

the most fearsome monster of all and Socrates the philosopher its heroic slayer. Beneath this disagreement, however, is a deeper and more important agreement. Whether in Plato's attack or Nietzsche's defense, tragedy presents contradictory becoming, being-and-not-being, appearance and reality mixed together. But whereas Nietzsche sees in this indeterminacy a beauty that could redeem us, Plato sees a seductive monster. Lacking fangs and claws, it appeals to our native desires, and especially our sympathies. That is how it destroys us. "Fear of the monster," observes Cohen, "is really a kind of desire."²³ Rather than resisting this desire as a seduction, according to Nietzsche, we should indulge it as our salvation. From his rival accounts of tragedy and monstrosity, not to mention knowledge and reality, we can now construct our own interpretation of Lynch's film.

A Nietzschean interpretation

Now if any character in *Mulholland Drive* really exists, it is Diane: who else could be the real victim of its illusions, the real dreamer of its dreams? This was the assumption of the "Platonic" interpretation expressed before we elicited the philosophical assumptions that underwrote it. But confidence about real identity and selfhood dissolves in this film as readily as it dissolves within Nietzschean philosophy and its Freudian successor. Nietzsche began with a Platonic distinction between appearance and reality, but eventually subverted it: "The real world – we have done away with it: what world was left? the apparent one, perhaps? . . . But no! with the real world we have also done away with the apparent one!"²⁴ For his part, Freud analyzed the soul into parts, the closest one to a self being *das Ich* – "the ego," or, more accurately, "the I."²⁵ But whereas the rational self of Platonic psychology was stable, indeed necessary and eternal, every part of the Freudian soul is the product of time and contingency. The Freudian self is produced by ever-changing bodily drives shifting alliances in confrontation with each other and a frustrating world.²⁶

Although Freud's systematic tendencies reduced these drives to two (eros and death), he was thereby extending a psychology adopted by Nietzsche from Schopenhauer.²⁷ While proudly stressing that he read neither, Freud acknowledges "the large extent to which psychoanalysis coincides with the philosophy of Schopenhauer," before describing Nietzsche as "another philosopher whose guesses and intuitions

often agree in the most astonishing way with the laborious findings of psycho-analysis.”²⁸ With one short and very intuitive chapter, in fact, Nietzsche anticipates the main notions of Freudian dream theory, not to mention psychoanalytic psychology more generally.²⁹ “Every moment of our lives sees some of the polyp-arms of our being grow and others of them wither,” he writes, evoking Plato’s image of the hydra’s many heads, “all according to the nutriment which the moment does or does not bear with it.” The polyp-arms of our being are our drives, wishes, or appetites; the nutriment they seek is occasionally available in our encounters with reality, but more often supplied by our souls themselves through imagination.

This is especially true of dreams, according to Nietzsche, because “the meaning and value of dreams is precisely to compensate to some extent for the chance absence of ‘nourishment’ during the day.” But it is no less true of waking life, when our desires are just as urgent. “Waking life does not have this freedom of interpretation possessed by the life of dreams,” he argues, because the screen on which it projects our daytime fantasies is never so blank as it becomes in the night-time theater of sleep; nevertheless, Nietzsche adds, “there is no essential difference between waking and dreaming.” And this is precisely what we should expect from the philosopher who celebrated tragedy, alongside dreams, as the justification of existence. The incoherent and terrifying reality of Dionysus (our latent content) must be transmuted for us by Apollo (into manifest content) if we are to tolerate it. For an individual, the technique of transmutation is dream-work; for the public, tragic art. In every case its projections are merely appearances of an appearance, but our survival requires them, or at least some of them. “I must go on dreaming,” Nietzsche writes elsewhere, “lest I perish.”³⁰

Above all, we need the projection without which we literally lose our minds: the dream of a self (or ego). “We are none of us that which we appear to be in accordance with the states for which we have consciousness and words,” Nietzsche writes, because words and consciousness present mere appearances of ineffable unconscious depths where the rational self dissolves into the infinite drives of a mute and irrational body.³¹ “The so-called ‘ego,’” he concludes, “is thenceforth a fellow worker in the construction of our character and destiny”; just as it comes to be, however, so too can it pass away.³² Once we experience the dissolution of Diane into incoherent drives – projected as fantasies,

always attended by passions, never fully stitched together as a coherent story – then and only then do we understand *Mulholland Drive* with the intuition recommended by Lynch himself. If this intuition could be put into words, the magician at Club Silencio has already done so: “it is all an illusion.”

But for whom? Not for Diane, because it persists after her suicide. It is not her dream, then, but ours. As the film flickers to an end, just before we must wake from this public dream and return to the harsh light of an indifferent world, smoke billows around her deathbed. Behind it looms one last time the face of the monstrous vagrant whose appearance always marks a death.³³ His blackened face is now lit by flashes that recall earlier illuminations: the magician’s lightning in Silencio, the lamp of the Cowboy’s corral, and the headlights on the street sign for Mulholland Dr. itself. Behind the flickering images of this film, then, is a horrible reality to which we all must wake: the ultimate annihilation of self in death.³⁴

This is not the reality of Plato: pure being, free of contradiction, redeeming eternally whoever identifies with reason and thinks of it alone. It is the reality of Nietzsche: impure becoming, an eternal contradiction, destroying whoever is so unfortunate as to behold it naked. If this is indeed the nature of things, Plato’s injunction to maturity – that we think consistently, strip reality of all its clothing, and grab it for ourselves – is sinister. The consummation of philosophy, which Plato imagines as making love with supreme reality after a long courtship, is in fact a rape.³⁵ Although his injunction presents itself as a campaign against monsters, Nietzsche unmasks it as the worst sort of monster: the murderous seducer. “Of all errors thus far,” he writes later, “the most grievous, protracted, and dangerous has been a dogmatist’s error: Plato’s invention of pure spirit and of transcendental goodness.”³⁶ Throughout his career he personifies this most dangerous error as Socrates – monstrous always, but especially before death.³⁷ “Rationality at all costs,” he writes near the end of his own career, “life bright, cold, cautious, conscious, instinct-free, instinct-resistant: this itself was just an illness.”³⁸ Lynch seems to agree – not exclusively with words, in the manner of a philosopher, but by superimposing words upon images and music. In the tradition of Aeschylus and Wagner, and against the tradition of Plato and Parmenides, he unmasks the worst sort of monster with the best: tragic drama.

Monsters bad and good

Dan is persuaded to confront the reality behind his fear. He collapses and we feel that within. Betty persuades Rita to seek her real identity. They find only a rotting corpse and we feel that within. The shiny blue key promises to open the shiny blue box, and does. But it terminates a beautiful dream of love and we feel that within. The sum of these and other such “inner feelings” evoked by *Mulholland Drive* is the intuitive understanding Lynch recommends. This is the ineffable answer to Diane’s question to Joe in Winkie’s as he holds the blue key before her: “What’s it open?” In necessarily hypocritical words: it opens our eyes to naked reality, it wakes us to a world indifferent to our existence, confronting us with the rotting corpse we must all eventually become. Joe answers her more authentically, with wordless, sinister laughter that fades into the mortal vision behind Winkie’s. The tempting hermeneutic key to this film – that it presents consistent reality behind the contradictory appearances of a dream – likewise dooms our desire to understand it. For the pernicious monster depicted in these visions is the fantasy of real and pure identity.

We cannot find any such identity because there is none such to be found.³⁹ There is no being beneath our contradictory appearances. There is only the being-and-not-being of becoming. If we wish to mature in the midst of it, to become who we are, we must try to direct it. But how? This essay has considered two opposed answers to that question. The first was Plato’s (enhancing Parmenides’). It enjoined us to look beneath impure appearances to pure reality and understood maturity as moving from the one to the other, as waking from a dream. The second was Nietzsche’s (to some extent enhanced by Freud). It rejected as pernicious the fantasy of pure reality beneath impure appearances. Instead it credited only appearances, distinguishing between those that are beautiful, creative, and vital on the one hand, and others that are ugly, destructive, and morbid on the other. This second answer understands maturity not as waking from a dream, but as beautiful dreaming, making good monsters rather than bad. By subverting the distinction between appearance and reality, and by scaring us with a monster at the terminus of the search for real identity, *Mulholland Drive* assumes something like the second model of maturity.

If Lynch is right, in other words, we should fear the initiation of Parmenides’ goddess and avoid her straight path of pure being.

We should instead go two-headed down her proscribed path of being-and-not-being, where “it’s kind of half night, you know?” This twilight between dreaming and waking, appearance and reality, illusion and knowledge, is where all of the characters of this film live. It is also where we moviegoers go whenever we knowingly suspend our knowledge that films are illusion. Each one is a waking dream, but few project so well as this one does a harsh reality through the screen of a beautiful appearance, seeming just real enough for us to suspend our disbelief, but not so real that it elicits from us real horror. *Mulholland Drive* manages not only to enact this contradiction, but to present it to us as a distinctive lesson about our own selves. We are each a dramaturge, it would seem, our selves but characters, and we mature not when we cancel the show to escape the cinema into the noonday sun, but when we dwell in its half-night long enough to project a show that sublimates our longings for beauty and love. Can our creative powers survive the real traumas of an indifferent world while still representing them as beautiful and it as lovable? To do so, we must recognize the necessity of our dreams, our inescapable role as their artists, and our contradictory identity as monsters.⁴⁰

Notes

- 1 This interview and several others like it are easily available on YouTube. A similar interview can be found in Lynch 2005: 266–94. The comments on intuition and “inner knowing” are on pp. 277–78.
- 2 Aristotle’s teratology can be found in *On the Generation of Animals* (4.3–6). Plato uses monsters at, among other places, *Republic* 9.588c.
- 3 Cohen 1996. For a wider and more recent survey, see Mittman and Dendle 2012.
- 4 Lynch describes its complex genesis in Lynch 2005: 279–87.
- 5 Although he does supply clues to the meaning of each in a note on the video sleeve: act 1, “She found herself the perfect mystery”; act 2, “A sad illusion”; act 3, “Love.” The first is significantly ambiguous: “she found for herself the perfect mystery” (the identity of Rita), and “she found herself to be the perfect mystery” (as we shall see below).
- 6 The following website catalogues these many edits: *Lost on Mulholland Dr.*, <www.mulholland-drive.net> (accessed 1 June 2012). Generally, for students of *Mulholland Drive*, this site is an indispensable mine of facts and theories.

- 7 In this film, *Deep River* seems to represent Betty's commonplace innocence, whereas in *Blue Velvet* (1986) the *Deep River* apartment-building hides that film's most perverse, violent, and gruesome scenes.
- 8 Lynch uses the motif of a blonde wig—and the alternate identity it creates—in both *Lost Highway* (1996) and *Inland Empire* (2006).
- 9 Two are especially important. First, Harring's day-act Camilla differs from the Camilla of the night act ("This is the girl"), played by Melissa George, who also plays the anonymous woman of the day act whom Harring's Camilla kisses at the dinner party. How can we understand these nettled associations? Similarly complex is this second set of associations: in the night act, Rita remembers "Diane Selwyn" after seeing the name tag of a Winkie's waitress, played by Melissa Crider, who also plays a nearly identical waitress in the day act, there named Betty, who now serves Diane Selwyn.
- 10 On *Dreams* 6 (Gay 1995: 159). "Dream-interpretation has laid down the following rule" as it traces the dream's manifest content back to the latent thoughts of the unconscious mind: "if an uncertainty can be resolved into an 'either-or,' we must replace it for purposes of interpretation by an 'and'" (On *Dreams* 4 [Gay 1995: 152]). All subsequent quotations of this treatise will be from the same translation and will be abbreviated in the main text as OD, supplemented with a section number.
- 11 Republic 5.478e1–2. Unless otherwise noted, quotations of Plato in this essay are from *Republic*, and particularly the translation of Reeve 2004. Henceforward they will be noted in the main text according to book and line number.
- 12 Miller 2011 elaborates this story and recounts its contested history in pre-Platonic philosophy.
- 13 Goux 1993: 140–81 (chs 8 and 9)
- 14 *Ibid.*: 5–24 (ch. 1; see also chs 2–4).
- 15 *Ibid.*: 82–93 (ch. 5; see also chs 6–7).
- 16 Plato's critique of tragedy occupies Book 3 of *Republic*, initially, but recurs in a more sophisticated form in Book 10 (595a1–608b3).
- 17 *Birth of Tragedy* 1. Nietzsche later subverts this distinction, as we shall discuss below (citing *Twilight of the Idols*, "How the Real World Finally Became a Fable"), but he begins his career with a book that depends on it. This shift creates confusion whenever the "Nietzschean" position on the distinction between appearance and reality is mentioned without qualification. Significantly, though, the same confusion should arise with the "Lynchean" position on the same distinction, which is similarly complex, and equally contradictory. Rather than trying to resolve these contradictions, which may not be possible in an even longer treatment, this brief essay aims simply to acknowledge them whenever they affect its argument.
- 18 For this, the most famous Platonic argument against tragedy, see *Republic* 10.595a1–597e8. For Nietzsche's direct discussion of it, see *Birth of Tragedy* 14. Unless otherwise mentioned, all quotations of Nietzsche are from *Birth*

of *Tragedy*, and particularly the translation of Pearson and Large 2006; references will appear in the main text, abbreviated as BT and supplemented with a section number.

- 19 See especially B2, B6, B8.9–10 (Curd 1996: 45–47). The next two quotations, from the same translation, are B6.5–9 and B9.3.
- 20 *Birth of Tragedy* 4 (Pearson and Large 2006: 52), evoking Heraclitus’s aphorism B53. His most glowing invocation of Heraclitus comes at the end of his chapter on the Ephesian: “The world forever needs the truth, hence the world forever needs Heraclitus” (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 8 [Cowan 1962: 68]).
- 21 Nietzsche alludes to Homer, *Odyssey* 11.556–58.
- 22 *Birth of Tragedy* 13 (Pearson and Large 2006: 66). The theme of Socrates as monster recurs later in Nietzsche’s career, in *Twilight of the Idols*, specifically “The Problem of Socrates” (3 and 9). He there recounts the following story from Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* (4.80): “When a foreigner who was an expert on faces came through Athens, he told Socrates to his face that he was a monstrum – that he was harbouring all the bad vices and desires. To which Socrates answered simply: ‘You know me sir!’” (Pearson and Large 2006: 459).
- 23 Cohen 1996: 16–20.
- 24 *Twilight of the Idols* (Pearson and Large 2006: 465).
- 25 Freudian analysts warn against conflating the notion of selfhood (*das Selbst*), which occurs very rarely in Freud’s writing, with *das Ich*. For a sense of their complex relationship (theoretical and textual), see McIntosh 1986.
- 26 *The Ego and the Id* 2 (Gay 1995: 635–37) and 3 (643–45).
- 27 On Freud’s drives, see *The Ego and the Id* 4 (especially Gay 1995: 645–50); a short note acknowledges the antecedence of Nietzsche on this point (*The Ego and the Id* 2 n. 2 [Gay 1995: 635]), tracing the term “Id” to Nietzsche’s use of it for the impersonal forces of the body.
- 28 *An Autobiographical Study* 5 (Gay 1995: 38).
- 29 *Daybreak* 119 (Pearson and Large 2006: 198–200). Although Freud’s dream theory was less original than he believed, it nevertheless made at least two important contributions to the theory of Schopenhauer–Nietzsche: by (i) articulating the constructive technique of the dreamer’s dream-work (that is, its movement from latent to manifest content), he made it possible to reverse directions and practice (ii) the analytic technique of the clinical therapist (that is, the movement from manifest to latent content).
 - 30 *Gay Science* 1.54 (Pearson and Large 2006: 212).
- 31 *Daybreak* 115 (Pearson and Large 2006: 197).
- 32 *Daybreak* 115 (Pearson and Large 2006: 198).
- 33 The other two appearances are: before Diane’s hit on Camilla, and before Dan’s collapse (presuming, therefore, that he dies).
- 34 Lights flicker, often because of electrical shorts, in Lynch films as early as *Eraserhead* (1977).

- 35 Symposium 211d2–212b1.
- 36 *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface (Pearson and Large 2006: 311–12).
- 37 Nietzsche’s critique of Socrates, especially the dying Socrates, emphasizes both his obsessive rationality and his morbid pessimism. See e.g. *The Gay Science* 4.340, but above all *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates.”
- 38 *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 11 (Pearson and Large 2006: 461).
- 39 “All the characters are dealing somewhat with a question of identity,” Lynch says in an interview (Lynch 2005: 293). “Like everyone.”
- 40 I would like to thank C. D. C. Reeve, who not only provoked me to think philosophically about this film, but read and helped me revise various versions of this essay. Its thesis was conceived in conversation with Sarah Alison Miller, and was nourished by her work on monstrosity (e.g. Miller 2010).

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