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Auditioning Betty in *Mulholland Drive*

The ingénue arrives at the audition.

Anything that is not anonymous is all a dream.

—William Maxwell, *The Chateau*

Early on I learned to disguise myself in words, which were really clouds.

—Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*

Among the many riches beckoning to us, like a mirage, in the dream kingdom of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*—where we seem always poised between a bewitchingly full and an equally bewitching empty experience—is a master-key to the mystery of star acting in movies. I know of no film that provides a more comprehensive demonstration of how a star performance works, and how it achieves its boundary-shattering control over us.

Most of the revelations about star acting are concentrated in one astonishing segment: Betty's audition scene, which occurs in the course of the long day and night in which Betty dematerializes. On the one hand, Lynch slowly reveals to us a deluded, modestly talented, aspiring actress failing to achieve more than a stand-in status in her own life. Only in the private screening rooms of the actress's fantasy and dream life, we eventually determine, is there any hope of escape for her, but even there she can never escape the trap of performance. On the other hand, in the course of the pivotal audition scene Lynch manages to show us, just as our skepticism about "all things Hollywood" has reached fever pitch, what the power of performance can make happen: how it can swiftly confer a sense of identity and a groundedness that have sphinx-like credibility. A young woman who could barely be described as real becomes, through acting alchemy, a figure whose hold on life and on her turbulent inner forces seems stronger, more fraught with consequence than our own—at least for the length of a "try-out." We would be hard pressed to say exactly to what we are assenting, or what warrants our shift to a believer's vulnerable faith. We believe without knowing, or needing to ascertain, what it is that an irresistible performance is asking us to sanction. Moreover, we find ourselves capitulating (like moviegoers in childhood) to everything we see and hear immediately after receiving elaborate assurance, within the hideously false context of an ill-managed Hollywood audition, that there is no possible basis for belief of any kind.

Once Betty's audition ends, and she emerges from what might justly be termed a kind of possession, or performer's trance, we viewers may well experience a shrugging or shaking off of a kindred enchantment—our too deep immersion in the belief engendered by make-believe. We can rouse ourselves from a strange interlude of belief, or *awaken* from it, and in the slightly groggy aftermath wonder whether belief is really the right word to apply to an embarrassingly full involvement. This reflex renunciation of the credulous mood we were in a minute ago is similar to our disavowal of a curiously intense dream experience once we are restored to daylight, followed, more often than not, by a swift disintegration of the dream details in our memory. I reassure myself that an experience was "just a dream," as though that settled the question of my helpless enthrallment to its reality while the dream was still in progress. Such enthrallment is obviously sustained by a total, innocent acceptance of whatever happens as happening "for keeps," however absurd or overblown the events appear to us in retrospect.

Before Betty's audition scene, we are granted a full advance look at the script she must perform, and her confused amateur's approach to it in a dry run of the scene played with Rita, her non-actress roommate. The scene Betty must try to bring to life is manifestly hollow; every line of dialogue seems unworthy of a genuine actress's commitment. The dialogue is over-explicit, repetitive, and information-clogged, denying any recourse to an inner life. As for the actress who is earnestly laboring to make the scene play in rehearsal, she seems hardly more realized or humanly credible in her own right than the character she seeks to inhabit. At this point in the film, she seems at one with her improbable name, the flimsy comic-book moniker, "Betty." "Betty" is a character so entrenched in naïveté and the hokey paraphernalia of small-townness that her whole confected being is a hymn to unreality. The viewer is discouraged from imagining her life history as anything more than an amusing pastiche of stale movie conventions. She is a plastic newcomer to big-city ways (like Pamela Tiffin in the embalmed 1960s remake of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *State Fair*). From Betty's first appearance, she is armored in a niceness that keeps her virtually untouched by the confounding, fearsome events taking place around her. She leads a vacantly charmed life, floating into the movie as a beaming ghostly apparition at a jitterbug contest, and continuing to float in her subsequent more substantial appearances on escalators at the L.A. airport or in her tour of her "borrowed" apartment. One quickly learns to watch Betty's responses to situations with the confidence that cheerful puzzlement and pluck will invariably be the dominant notes. On a few occasions, something darker creeps almost imperceptibly into her expression for a moment, but the viewer is not expected to catch these tiny shifts. We are held by our first, forceful impression of her: intractable sunniness.

Naomi Watts, who plays Betty, is remarkably adept at finding fresh ways to rearrange the sugar packets of Betty's concerns. Watts is sincerely (as opposed to condescendingly) engaged with her character's buoyancy and shadow-free conviviality—without needing to hide the fact that Betty is disconnected from any world larger than her movie-defined "hopes." Naomi Watts was known to film audiences prior to *Mulholland Drive*, if at all, as a competent "background player" (one whose job was to blend in rather than stand out). For that reason, Betty cannot draw extra definition and weight from our familiarity with an already established

Betty (Naomi Watts) rehearses with bathrobe and butter knife.

Film Quarterly, Vol. 58, Issue 1, pages 2-13. ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.

Watts persona. Lynch makes it difficult, in other words, for us to see around Betty, and thus gauge the separate reality of the actress who endows her with an appearance and a voice.

It is fair to say then that nothing in either Betty or in Naomi Watts' unself-conscious (to the point of seeming un-self-aware) way of depicting her puts the character at odds with the two-dimensional audition scene apparatus she confronts when unctuous movie producer Wally leads her into his office. We see a nervous, smiling young woman, almost certainly out of her depth even in this emphatically shallow Hollywood setting, being introduced to an assemblage of mostly interchangeable personnel who have some connection to a low-budget movie that Betty has been invited (as a courtesy to her aunt) to read for. Though *Mulholland Drive* has challenged us with many bewildering, pathless, teasingly thorny episodes prior to the audition scene, we are encouraged to feel more securely placed and confident about what is going on at this narrative juncture than perhaps at any previous point in the film. We link the audition scene with the many previous glimpses of "insider" movie culture that Lynch has offered us, all of which share a quasi-satiric tone. The behavior of the people in the audition room as they are hastily presented to Betty increases our conviction that they have no serious claim on our attention. They are industry stereotypes, designed for service in a comedy sketch. We understand them at first glance: the Producer, dispensing dried-out blarney; the pretentious fool of a Director, sporting a dismally unflattering Errol Flynn mustache, who tries to sound knowledgable and fails at every turn; crisp, polite, but visibly skeptical and bored Casting Agents; and a sybaritic Leading Man, who has spent too much time in the sun and in throwaway TV movies, and whose face resembles a grinning catcher's mitt. The names attached to these nondescript professionals in the fatuous round of introductions refuse somehow to stick to their putative owners. The perky unreality of Betty's name is like a virus communicating a kindred improbability to the many names exchanged (or floated) in her presence: Woody, Bob, Wally, Jack, Lynnie James, Chuck.

Our already established suspicion that the script for the intended movie is nonsensical easily leads to the judgment that the material has found just the right group of people to ensure that its mediocrity will be respected—in fact, vigilantly protected on all sides. The atmosphere is thick with satiric signals that there is no place for art in this gathering, and that if art entered by accident, it would go unrecognized. The vocabulary of fraudulence that defines—and binds together—this club of seasoned hacks is an instant corrosive to any lively intuition or flash of inspiration. If we were asked to predict the outcome of Betty's audition early in the scene, my guess is that most viewers would envision (perhaps even wish for) a disastrous comic deflation of poor Betty's hopes. There is potential for ugliness in Betty's humiliation, since she has no experience with Hollywood guile, or its familiar sidekick, casual brutality. Though Betty is strictly a B-movie creation herself, both in her innocence and star-struck yearning, Lynch has alerted us (here and in his other films) that he is able to reduce even plastic ingénues to spasms of compelling woe. For Lynch, the fact of a character's conspicuous fabrication is no safeguard against real hurt. He often reserves his greatest torments for those most deeply enfolded in artifice, as though the artificial (in its nearness to dream) were the natural seedbed for trauma.

The possibility that no one viewing this film for the first time could foresee is that the audition would be electrifying in an unsatiric, unironic manner—in other words, a legitimate triumph. Even if Betty is able to persuade the unqualified observers sleepily spread about the studio office that she has an appealing freshness or the "right look," we assume that she cannot rise above her own cleverly molded limitations to escape the flatness of Betty's emotional life. She "wants the part," to be sure, with the foursquare eagerness of many a daydreaming neophyte, but she has no resources, no audacity to bring to the task of revealing herself to the camera. Further, the role itself seems built for the express purpose of thwarting truthful exploration.

The actors—Betty and her offhandedly lecherous assigned partner, Woody, who looms over her—are given almost no space in which to play the scene. They begin in the most awkward position imaginable, nearly backed against a wall. Woody holds her tight and seeks openings for permissible groping as he prepares to repeat, for the twentieth time, in a smooth, automatic fashion, the dull lines he has long since grown weary of. The director, Bob, intervenes just before the audition gets underway with some advice that is neither intelligible nor capable of being clarified. Bob cautions Betty that the audition (and the scene itself) should not be regarded as a contest. A contest, of course, is precisely what an audition is, and the only clear thing in the script pages Betty has worked on is that a power struggle (another contest) is taking place. Bob goes on to set up the characters as incommunicado monoliths: "the two of them . . . with themselves." He concludes with the injunction that they not "play it for real, until it gets real." This would imply that the roomful of listless spectators has all the time in the world for the performers to consult the temperature of their emotions "in private." Betty and Woody should hold off on interacting until they are fully convinced that reality, unvarnished and incontestable, underwrites their relationship. Woody, as confused as Betty, gallantly (as he sees it) takes up her cause, attempting to relieve her embarrassment with an old pro's directness and simplicity. He decides to "make it real" for her by playing it "nice and close," pressing her against him with the wall as backup. To compound Betty's worries, he declares his intention to duplicate the strategy he employed in an earlier, no doubt memorable audition with another actress ("the girl with black hair"). Betty, having not been present for the black-haired rival's reading, and having no clue about what made her approach intriguing, is promptly reduced to the status of body double for an absent (still vividly recalled) predecessor. Woody is dusting off a performance that once had a spark of life in the moment of playing, and enjoins Betty to revive the "ghost" of her unseen competitor so he can reenact his own good bits. Bob again intervenes, apparently delighted to be reminded of the audition in question. He urges Woody to remember "this time" not to rush the line "Before what?" as though Woody were the actor trying out and the one to whom Bob planned to pay attention. At the moment when all the hokum and degrading absurdity of the moviemaking process have been stripped bare and savagely mocked, Woody launches Betty into the scene with the courtly blandishment that they're going to play it "just like in the movies."

And into the movies we go, but as I've already noted, not at all in the manner that we could anticipate. Betty has come to the audition space dressed in a gray suit, which is clearly meant to evoke forceful memories of the famous gray suit worn by Kim Novak in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. In that film, Novak's initially hidden primary character, Judy Barton, wears the suit when she is impersonating the wandering, tragically innocent, lost-to-memory, and romantically possessed Madeline Elster.[1] Betty removes her gray jacket in order to perform more freely (gray gives way to her sky-blue blouse), divesting herself, it would seem, of a layer of formality. The *Vertigo* connection cues us to be on the lookout for a second Betty identity, one somehow at variance with the first—less assured, perhaps, or less shielded from whatever trouble the situation is clearly preparing for her.

When Lynch selects a medium-shot vantage point to frame Betty's audition (one that allows actors and space, finally in proper attunement, to blend properly), he is subtly displacing "Bob" as the directorial presence. Until this subtle transfer of directorial authority, the whole office space had felt disproportionate and off-kilter as a cinematic setting. The room is a long rectangle, whose furnishings seem wrongly situated for comfort (much less intimacy). One is mentally driven to rearrange things, to reduce the overall clutter and sense of unnatural distance and fish-eye elongation. Even the socially maladroit spectator could come up with a more sensible seating plan: everyone in the room looks slightly out of place, either poised for quick flight or resigned to entrapment. Nothing provides a center or gathering point. The room's color scheme is arduously brown, reminding me of the insanely overdetermined burnt sienna color coordination in Gene Tierney's desert hacienda in *Leave Her to Heaven*. In

Above: Betty is introduced to a cramped room of Hollywood professionals.

Right: Betty and Woody play it "nice and close."

the midst of so much chocolate decor, the possibly rich wood paneling acquires an air of basement rec-room flimsiness. Lynch does not place undue emphasis on these design "mistakes." Betty's nervousness and our willingness to share her mildly hallucinatory point of view, while scouting out portents unnoticed by her in this loaded milieu, seem to justify the disagreeable, tilting congestion.

Our sense of time leading into the audition is equally disjointed. The editing takes its rhythm, a bit aimlessly, from Wally's meandering, one-by-one introduction to Betty of his production team. Wally, who means no more to us than his associates, emotionally controls the time-flow in the room as he moves Betty, in a herky-jerky manner, through an incomprehensible tangle of alien points-of-view. There is another time shift (from torpor to urgency) once the introductions have been concluded. Wally makes it known, with hammy relish, that there's to be no more dawdling; Betty must instantly shift gears and "play the scene." Though Betty is dressed as a Hitchcock heroine, the progression of images thus far is the obvious antithesis of Hitchcock lucidity and fluent, "infallible" viewer placement within an event. We are naturally inclined to link ourselves with Betty, but we have a little difficulty maintaining contact with her. She is never hidden, but neither do we have a clear emotional channel to her. I would argue that though the time within the room unfolds subjectively, it is not necessarily her subjectivity that governs it. Not until Betty speaks her first "within the script" line ("You're still here") do film space and time, in Walter Benjamin's phrase, "come into their own [within the scene] and find each other."[2] The previously inhospitable audition room and its erratic "clock" are effortlessly adjusted to the performers' advantage.

When Betty had rehearsed her audition scene with Rita in her kitchen, her entire performing strategy depended on gradually reduced physical distance from her adversary. As her character's threats intensify and her homicidal intention crystallizes, she planned to close in on her victim. Woody destroys this possibility by insisting that Betty begin to speak while caught in his bear-hug embrace. The viewer is initially apprehensive that Betty is thrown off by this switch, and has lost her bearings. We have no reason to imagine that her talent or resourcefulness will enable her to deal with unforeseen developments. It seems less a question of *whether* she will be deprived of confidence and control than *when*. Since Betty has evinced barely a trace of sexual awareness in her previous scenes—even when she chances upon naked Rita in her aunt's shower stall—we no doubt feel that she is unequipped both as a person and as an actress to fend off (or take in stride) Woody's "automatic pilot" lasciviousness. However little credence we give to Betty as a fully developed character, we can't easily avoid feeling protective of her when she is so overmatched. Woody, with his massive bulk, appears to be intimidating a small, childlike woman, who is frightened but situationally constrained from saying so. We resent the actor's pushiness and his falsely paternal arrogance.

Betty appears to be forced by the unwelcome proximity of her partner to speak her first line before she is completely ready. We also imagine her consternation at the discovery that a scene she had construed as a climactic quarrel is being treated as a love scene. All her notions about her appropriate emotional relationship to her partner are abruptly taken away from her. The authentic notes that Betty is striking in the first exchange of the audition derive from our sense that Betty is not *yet* acting: she is merely unable to conceal her agitation at what her fellow-actor is doing. She "forgets" (so we imagine) how much the audition means to her, and—with an instinctive protest born of discomfort—she pushes Woody away after he kisses her without warning, then holds him off with a suddenly firm, even imposing, outstretched arm. We are surprised, and impressed, by a degree of physical determination that we have not before now encountered in her. On the instant, her seeming frailty is backed by a steel will.

Betty holds her open hand against Woody as though she has every right to take command of the situation; she is flustered, but not apologetic. What is most remarkable here is the way that Lynch makes us uncertain of whether we are watching an actress or a character defending herself. Because we are more or less persuaded that Betty is an unimaginative, severely restricted performer, when we witness her expressing genuine turmoil in her struggle with Woody, we are likely to conclude, at first, that it is the actress who cannot manage her feelings, and who is compelled to resist him. We arrive at this conclusion before we have had time to process the thought that the behavior we assign to the actress bears virtually no relation to the "Betty construct" we have up to now been working with. The viewer is not sure if he is watching the audition scene unravel. Betty may well be making "mistakes" as her raided innocence awakens her survival instincts.

Though we aren't permitted to observe the reactions of those watching the audition, we may naturally wonder how they are interpreting what they are looking at. "Do they see what we see?" is a reasonable phrasing of our concern. Lynch encourages us to imagine that we are one or two jumps ahead of the Hollywood dullards who are carelessly assessing Betty's performance. It is quite possible that *they* imagine that Betty is, so far, reacting to Woody "in character." The judges of this audition don't know Betty as well as we do; they perhaps interpret her squeamishness, her upset and aversion as feigned for the sake of the written scene. How long will Betty be able to extend her involuntary, but fortunate, act of deception? When will they discern that her distress is interfering with the scene's development? And when she crashes, as she soon must, will they be impressed by the raw energy that has been goaded out of her? Lynch knows that we are eager to seize on the prospect that we are being let in on something that others aren't privy to—that we are being given, at last, a peek at *Mulholland Drive*'s inside story. For that reason, we find ourselves believing, almost unreservedly, the audition scene as it begins to unfold. The fact that Betty's "real" feelings are putting her into conflict with the demands of a trite scenario—and that we are catching those feelings as they erupt, ahead of other spectators who are more readily duped by movie conventions—makes it a "smart move" to surrender to Lynch's illusion. We do so because we imagine we are doing the opposite; we are entranced by our own wariness. The viewer is sold on the audition's truth, in its early stages, because we have a stake in the tension arising from an actual person's protest against being submerged in sterile make-believe.

While all of this is going on, Lynch has surreptitiously corrected, and beautifully enhanced, the scene's color scheme. Betty's sky-blue blouse mates appetizingly with the rich, patrician blues of Woody's suit. Behind this harmonized pair, the previously overstated brown on the walls and woodwork begins to soften, and acquire an elegant sheen. The wall no longer traps Betty but quietly supports the actors, lending its own burnished solidity to theirs.

The major transition in the audition scene occurs when Woody moves in to embrace Betty a second time and she registers with a different quality of awareness the fact that his hand is hovering near her ass. It is here that Betty, as actress (and character) evolves, in a matter of seconds, into a more advanced organism. We all understand, at some level that doesn't require much reflection, that good acting involves (minimally) a mixture of pretending and believing. Our initial skepticism about Betty's ability to take on the demands of another character is that she seems to have almost no faculty for living up to her *own* character (if that means diverging from type). She does not show any signs of having begun to consider that others may imagine her—or evaluate her actions—in a decidedly different manner than she does. The resistance of other minds to her fantasy of what she is is not a question she has reckoned with, or even formulated. We might grant her a willingness to enter into the scripted sentiments assigned to her (like a child playing with dolls), but her grasp of pretending is rudimentary. She does not see how pretending can be informed by detachment, calculation, and duplicity. Her approach to pretending is akin to a young girl's announcement after a visit to her mother's clothes closet: "Look. I'm wearing your hat and fur. Isn't that funny?" We have also seen Betty's amateur experiment with "little white lies" in her attempts to assist her new friend-in-a-jam, Rita. Nevertheless, a

Betty takes control.

split of a very different kind suddenly manifests itself in the playing out of the audition scene. We behold Betty crossing over, in so many ways at once that the effect is breathtaking, from guileless pretending to majestic double-dealing.

Lynch highlights the divide by deserting, as if in secret, the playing area framed for the actors and inserting a close-up of an action below the public performing space, where urgent "under the table" business is being conducted. We observe Woody's hand grazing the rear of Betty's skirt and Betty's answering hand —with an almost autonomous sentience—making a decision about how to take charge of it: either by warding it off or inviting it closer. The hesitation of the actress about how to contend with the encroaching hand endows Betty, for the first time in the film, with a visible calculating power. She elects to control her antagonist by taking control of his hand, pressing it against herself harder than Woody had dared to. Betty's hand, still in clandestine close-up, covers his, and thereby takes possession of it. By guiding his hand to make a strong sexual claim on her, Betty makes the aptly named Woody understand that if he takes her with sufficient boldness, she will respond fully. When the audition commenced, less than a minute ago, we were chiefly concerned that Betty would be degraded by an old-hand predator in front of a group of venal L.A. buffoons who would be likely to go along with any of Woody's lewd antics. (Our conception of her as a plastic innocent briefly gave way, in the course of her suddenly *real* physical struggle with her fellow actor, to the thought that a convincingly vulnerable woman was being threatened. The depiction of abuse is viscerally disturbing, and the victim seemed to be in no position to defend herself.) Betty's acting choice to make her own sexuality part of the "game" is a thunderbolt for the viewer because, right up to the moment of choosing, her sexual nature has lain utterly dormant, folded beneath her vulcanized naïveté, so that it seemed not even available for private acknowledgment. The release of sexual awareness is offered as a heightened form of a "let's pretend" moment. All we have time to absorb, as Betty's hand makes its move and the face of the actress seems to confer with her hand tactically (looking down at this furtive ally), is that an actress is making a spontaneous choice to give the character she is portraying a strong erotic connection to her partner.

The aptitude to unleash her libido comes from out of nowhere, but once Betty consciously seizes on the impulse, her expression conveys to us that she knows exactly what to do with it. She expertly refocuses the scene so that her excitement at Woody's proximity (or conversely, her excitement over successfully manipulating him into thinking so) is the new center of interest. The actress is becoming attuned to dimensions of her role that were hitherto undreamed of—not only by her, but by the viewer. The viewer understands the well-worn convention of an anxious performer receiving sudden inspiration when "up against the wall" and then ceasing to flounder. That is the most convenient explanation to latch onto as we try to subdue our bewilderment and convert the alarming infusion of strangeness into something familiar. We may well entertain the question: "Who is using whom, at this point?" but in part we are merely relieved that Betty the actress is, against all odds, up to the demands of what is taking place. "She is more talented than I had supposed" is another convention-dictated impression that gains fleet entry into the viewer attempting to sort things out—and to find the least taxing route to restored clarity.

The delayed recognition of what is really transpiring has to do with the abruptly transformed character of the actress herself. A talented performer is indeed rising to the challenge under the most adverse circumstances, and she is making a series of magically right split-second decisions. Nevertheless, we need more time than we are given to register the fact that the woman who intuits under pressure what her role might include to enrich itself (moving well beyond the cramping straightforwardness of the script writer) is not—cannot be—Betty, as we have known her. To become the cagey, experienced professional who now confronts us, she must part company completely with the "dewdrop" Nancy Drew type that she has relied on for her entire onscreen definition. Someone new is at the controls, someone whom—we dimly sense—we know nothing about. To find out who she is, or might be, we are obliged to turn our attention to the fictional character being enacted—a figure that graduates, for the balance of the scene, to the status of primary source of meaning.

Notice how the deep soundlessness of the offscreen group of witnesses, and of the room itself, creates a "just like at the movies" effect at this interval. We are following Betty into her newfound trance of involvement, with no sense of the world's competing presence, or ability to distract her from her make-believe goal. She is alone with her partner, with the camera, and with us. As Betty leaves her ingénue persona behind, who does she become for the truth-seeking camera? What is the nature of this metamorphosis? Who is auditioning for us now? The viewer is virtually commandeered into thinking about "Naomi Watts" herself—especially if we have no experience of her beyond her presentation in this film. The character that Betty is reading for, after all, has no special dramatic significance at first viewing. Prior to the audition, Watts' potential range as an actress has not been an issue that we have been given much cause to dwell on. If anything, she appears to match up almost too flawlessly with Betty's resolute blandness. Nowhere have her eyes signaled an alertness, a sensitivity, a degree of achieved inwardness greater than Betty's own. So we receive a salutary shock when we are reminded, past the halfway mark in *Mulholland Drive*, that the aspiring actress Watts has capacities for expressiveness and allure that she has been expertly holding in reserve. One is inclined to congratulate Watts for *her* handling of the audition, as we gradually catch on to the fact that "Betty" has been slipped off like the gray jacket and another, far more formidable presence stands in her place. We compare "Betty's" acting with Watts' more intense, exposed impersonation of an aroused lover and conclude, however irrationally, that Watts is a better, more accomplished artist than Betty. For a short, unhinged interval we have the impression of watching Betty expand emotionally to incorporate the larger persona of the mysterious "Watts," while simultaneously considering the possibility that Betty has sneakily, shadily kept something from us.

We speedily reverse that judgment in favor of the more sensible idea of Watts emerging in triumph from a "Betty" cocoon of her own making, and applaud her for carrying off such a brazen, instantaneous transformation. We are pleasurably struck by how thoroughly the skill of this new actress has deceived us. Yet we may lingeringly also feel, albeit hazily, that Watts is betraying Betty—both by exceeding her scant powers as an insecure amateur and by cunningly violating her innocence, shredding it beyond repair. She is somehow competing against her former self, and grabbing every available advantage in order to trounce her. She is free to mock, because the audition scene allows it, every last outcropping of timorousness in her personality, including that schoolgirl variety exemplified by her bewildered rival, Betty. Lynch treats us to a sexual version of one of those speeded-up nature films in which a plant grows to full maturity and luxurious blossoming in the space of a single breath. We watch, with a prurient, volatile blend of queasiness and excitement as an unseasoned girl, lacking every protection sophistication offers, advances by means of a solitary squeeze of the hand to the farthest reaches of sexual knowing. Watts reveals a figure who is not merely practiced and utterly confident in her ability to excite and subdue a male quarry, but one who calculates (always) from a bruised position.

Sex is no sooner established as a shared language for the acting couple than it shifts from a spur for provocative teasing to a recognition of authentic hazard. Every maneuver Betty initiates upholds the motto: break or be broken. She significantly reverses the order of one line from her previous rehearsal scene with Rita. "You're playing a dangerous game here" now begins, rather than concludes, the speech that mentions a blackmail threat (from the male) that is "not going to work." Rearranging the sentences places Watts/Betty on top of the danger. She glows with it and gains strength from it, while serving notice that the danger is real—however much sexual play intervenes. As the actress takes convincing ownership of the menace that underlies the film as a whole, in the guise of acting it out, Naomi Watts secures our allegiance to herself as the rightful star of *Mulholland Drive*. Until this scene, Laura Elena Harring's Rita has been the dominant, glamorous female presence in the narrative, in spite, or because of, her amnesiac discombobulation. She is firmly wedded to the film's principal mystery from her initial drive up the street of the film's title during the credit sequence, after which she is instantly set up for murder and saved by a gruesomely providential car crash. We assume that either she or the objects associated with her hold the key (a blue key, as it turns out—Betty's color in the audition) to the past.

In the acting out of her nameless character in the audition, Watts/Betty effectively steals the sense of danger and darkness that her friend Rita had previously embodied. These were the two known ingredients (or reference points) of Rita's otherwise vaporous identity. Watts not only appropriates Rita's "danger and darkness" (and *theft* is exactly the right word for it, calling to mind the old acting phrases, "scene stealing" and "stealing the show"), she enhances their interest by making fully conscious use of them, as far as the audition circumstances permit. She appears to know everything that is at issue, at least for the time being, and by turning up the sexual heat while announcing her involvement in masquerade and her intention to murder, she trumps Harring's more passive possession of mystery. Watts is like a shimmering, ravenous bird bearing the truth of bloodlust out to us on its beak. (Think of the end of *Blue Velvet*, where just such a bird poses for us like a mechanical toy, proudly displaying the insect-kill in its beak.) Betty's incarnation of the bird flies near to us in close-up, where the ragged, excited breath of the lovers is as audible as beating wings.

The vulnerable heart of the once faltering actress turns to animal indifference as she metamorphoses for us and then rises to her full acting height.

Woody is bound tight to this fledgling creature, and he gains a surprising amount of fresh interest as the overshadowed half of a couple. His assigned role is that of the young woman's father's best friend. We learn that he is accustomed to taking advantage of this family attachment as soon as dad leaves for work. Almost all of his lines focus attention on the absent father, either by speculating on his present whereabouts or considering the consequences of his getting wind of the friend's betrayal. The repeatedly invoked father streaks the love scene with shadows of incest. "Dad" seems to be peering over the lovers' shoulders and serving as a troubling stimulus for Betty's arousal. When Betty tells Woody twice to "stop"—unconvincingly, because her continued kissing coaxes him forward—it would appear that she is replying to his query, "What will your dad think of you?" She is lodging a faint verbal protest against Woody's repeated reminders of dad, yet at the same time "fanning her own flames" with the reminders, and using them to push herself out of control.

Near the end of the audition, when Betty brings the dialogue to a halt, places an arm with a closed fist around Woody's shoulder and initiates a lengthy, open-mouth kiss, we may remember that the director had instructed Woody—as his last piece of muddled advice to the players—not to rush the line "Before—what?" this time. Betty's forceful intervention to create a "motivated" pause makes Bob's acting note to her partner something else that she has taken over. The kiss masterfully prevents Woody from rushing, and fills the resulting silence to the brim with suggestiveness and anticipation. Betty's clenched fist is a pantomime carryover from her rehearsal with Rita where she brandished a harmless-looking dinner knife to make clear the extent of her vengeful rage. Now she merely pretends to hold a knife, it would seem, though there is no longer need for one. Perhaps Betty's closed palm holds a "blue key," which will later be the object designated to seal "Rita's" death warrant. Lynch ventures a second Hitchcock allusion here—to the famous Ingrid Bergman embrace of Claude Rains in *Notorious,* which is used to conceal a key hidden in the deceiving partner's hand. In that scene as well, the hidden key marked a major act of betrayal.

Woody's most noteworthy moment in the audition follows Betty's announcement, once the kiss is concluded, that she means to kill him. He takes several beats to assess the seriousness of the threat she has made, letting us see his deliberations about whether to place his trust in her convincing passion or her whispered warning. For the first time in the scene Woody actually establishes prolonged, searching eye contact with Betty. What he discovers in her look not only causes his character to draw back in fear, but the actor himself to do so. (Lynch brilliantly extends the pattern of role confusion at every possible opportunity.) Here we have a parallel to Betty responding at the outset of the audition to the actor's brusque sexual forwardness with a discomfort that appeared to issue from *her.* Woody's upset resembles Betty's earlier scare; if we watch him carefully we see that it is the *performer's* deadly resolve that panics him slightly, and obliges him to draw back. He uses his final line ("Then they'll put you in jail") as a means of recovering his acting composure.

The main purpose of Woody's momentary perturbed dislocation is to establish the idea that Betty is resorting to what actors describe as the trick or technique of "substitution." In order to play an emotionally difficult action with the requisite truthfulness, an actor may supplement the scene's fictional circumstances with an emotional memory (or substitution from another relationship) that increases the size and strength of her commitment to the fictional givens. We cannot be certain who or what Betty is envisioning, but we do have time to consider that she is looking through Woody—rather than directly at him. It is possible that we flip through our own memories of Betty to find a feasible answer to the double question: "who is she staring at, who is the missing person?" Since nearly all of Betty's life in the film, such as it is, has been spent in Rita's company, and since we have witnessed her practice this same climax (comically) with Rita's faltering assistance only minutes ago, we may well return mentally to that rehearsal to see how Rita fits the present picture. When Betty arrived at the big emotional moment in rehearsal, she told Rita how silly it seemed to shed plausible tears for such a "lame" melodramatic confrontation, and summarized for her benefit the action she was not yet in the mood to "play for real." After the two women share a laugh, and Betty loses concentration, she explains: "Then I cry, cry, cry, and then I say, with big emotion, 'I hate you. I hate us both.'" Rita responds to Betty's embarrassment by reassuring her that whatever the limitations of the scene, Betty has enough talent to make it work. She compliments her with the unstudied admiration of the non-performer, and with the fine-tuned judgment of an amnesiac.

Betty pushes the erotics of the audition far beyond expectations.

If Betty is, indeed, picturing Rita when she replays the scene with Woody, she is also disregarding all of her earlier stated notions about how the end of the scene should be handled. She speaks the "hatred" lines softly, and once more she appears to be disengaged from Woody—physically as well as emotionally—when she sounds them out. Her tears, which surface with no cue for active weeping, follow rather than precede the lines, and are visible very briefly. Betty is not *attempting* to weep. She hardly conveys the impression of even noticing her tears. She is rather caught on the hook of an unbidden painful thought, and she closes the audition in the same trancelike condition that she assumed when entering it. She is "alone with herself," yet again ironically taking one of the director's inept preliminary notes and transmuting it into a thing of beauty.

In the logic of the scene itself, the female character may be addressing her hatred to her absent father, with whom she may have a dreadful score to settle. However, in the logic of *Mulholland Drive* as a whole, the playacting of a projected death intersects with the already executed hired slaying of "Betty's" one-time friend and female lover. While Naomi Watts is still busy delineating, on one level, Betty's potentially life-altering audition, her acting speaks to and encloses another woman's tragedy (a woman we haven't, at this point in the narrative, officially met). Given a first-time viewer's state of partial knowing during the audition, the buried tragedy and the guilt flowing from it are pretty much a blank to us, but we can feel them nonetheless taking shape in Betty's face here, long before the sordid "true history" comes to light.

As we return to an awareness of Betty's audition-evaluators in the Hollywood office, we are at the very least mindful of how far we have traveled from the episode's misleadingly crude satiric setup. When Betty demurely descends to earth with her sheepish "Well, there it is" (accompanied by a dancer's hand gestures), our most honest questions for ourselves are likely to be: "How did I believe so thoroughly what that actress was doing, and *what* precisely did I believe?" For belief, of the most impressively various sort, was hauntingly at stake throughout. All the cynical advance preparation we were given did not give us any of the expected detachment from, or intellectual jurisdiction over, the Big Movie Scene's life. The skeptic in us came into the room laden with a will to expose (once again) the Hollywood charade, thereby disavowing our once-upon-a-time enthrallment to such things. What happens instead is that the skeptic is unwelcomely relieved of his superior, scoffing pose. Perhaps the skeptic is secretly pleased to have it taken away, and to be suddenly at the mercy of a sincerity hatched at the very core of artifice.

I began by describing the audition scene as a master-key to star acting. Lynch sets before us, with a thoroughness that is not compromised by extreme compression, all the major barriers to identification with performers and their contrived roles that movie viewers enamored of their own reality sense commonly complain about. He also illuminates how rife with contradictions our engagement with any star performance is, yet shows how an awareness of contradictions, far from rescuing us from naïve involvement, can increase the likelihood of wholesale surrender to the acting hoax. The "argument" of the scene is that both our resistance and assent to what stars reveal to the camera has little to do with what we *know* about the lines dividing imaginary situations from life as it is actually lived. We watch with a feeling approaching awe as a star emerges from the husk of a mildly appealing non-entity, in circumstances which are peppered with warnings against taking fakery of precisely this sort to heart. The full throttle romantic acting of the old Hollywood school penetrates our defenses just as we

are most confident that we understand the limitations—the unembarrassed obviousness—of this kind of acting. Moreover, we find ourselves attending to Betty as someone involved with matters of genuine consequence as she makes her way through a script we have already judged empty, and after she expressly announces her intention to act a part for our critical evaluation.

As viewers, we are struck by the seeming disclosure of a mesmerizing Watts star persona at exactly the point where we have logical grounds for objecting that this "confusing" actress has entirely lost touch with her assigned character. Perhaps our involvement with all star personae works in a similar fashion. The persona is never quite accounted for by the attributes of a specific character, however beguiling that character may be, and in spite of our conviction that a persona and a certain type of role naturally fuse. I would argue that the persona depends on a divided but not grating experience of someone as both emotionally accessible (thus known to us in a persuasively intimate way) and continually eluding our grasp. In the supposedly simple case of John Wayne, for example, the more intensely he appears to be known, the more he manages to preserve (or even increase) his margin of unknownness. The unknown in its seductive relation to the known is always the split that makes a star persona compelling. Betty takes us "through" the screen of appearances, while acting, to suggest a depth of misery-fuelled chicanery in herself. This is a wrenching turn for the viewer because we have been so thoroughly convinced that she dwells entirely, and contentedly, on a flat surface: an ideal inhabitant of a movie screen. Betty's face suddenly opening up to us to demand an emotional response is an exemplary instance of the still inexplicable primitive rite that is cinema. A moving-picture image somehow acquires enough living dimension to swallow the credulous viewer whole. How is it we invest these dubious framed reflections with so much embracing power? How many "real" sights and sounds get through to us with such potent immediacy? Lynch provides us with a quilt of densely interwoven recognitions to take away from his audition scene, leaving us struggling for a glimpse of terra firma within its capacious folds.

Betty, for her part, leaves the audition encumbered with an imperious sex drive that came into being for the actress at the moment she pretended to have one. Succeeding with her audition also results in her acquiring an initiate's sense of darkness, an eagerness to manipulate others' wills, and a troubled awareness of the transformative potential lurking in previously "stable" persons and objects. She must somehow hide all these newfound discoveries from her freshly intrigued (now wary) spectators as well as from herself if she is to keep "Betty" credible. This necessary retreat inward—with its demand that she now *act* Betty as one of many possible roles instead of simply "being" her—serves notice that the person bearing that "see-through" name and temperament is rapidly decomposing. Her time to occupy this cohesive identity, as though it were a permanent safe refuge, has run out.

The emotional structure of this episode, which depends on an unlikely performance taking hold of spectators, onscreen and off, and generating perilous consequences for the performer who risks belief, is a repeating pattern throughout the film's narrative. Also repeated is the alternation between scenes that present riveting, disquietingly exposed performers and scenes that debunk and ridicule the tricks of performance. The latter suggest that all performance boils down to a deceiving stunt when we are let in on the secret. After Betty's audition, recall, we are briefly deceived by a doo-wop quintet of retro-1950s singers lip-synching their way through another audition piece on a briefly hidden sound stage. Once we are apprised of this simple simulation technique, we promptly appraise the next auditioner with a practiced, skeptical air ("How wooden she seems!"), as though our freshly gained knowledge of the precise strings being pulled had always been in our possession. Distance can so easily seem preferable to closeness.

Armed with an awareness refined by repeated demonstrations of the method of artificially linking voice to mimed vocals, we are nevertheless undone by belief once again as we accompany Betty and Rita to the Silencio theater. A Fellini-esque master of ceremonies clearly (and one would think, needlessly) explains to us how sound and image lead separate lives in this illusion-saturated setting. No sooner has he completed a prolonged demonstration of the fact that everything we hear is taped (using musical instruments to demonstrate) than a performer reminiscent of Betty at her audition takes the stage, and causes us to forget instantly the elaborate counsel about sight and sound splitting. In a ravishing Spanish rendition of Roy Orbison's "Crying," the female vocalist, with a single painted tear on her face and dark hair and lipstick suggestive of Rita's recently discarded "vamp" look, carries us so far into the unsuspected depths of this overfamiliar pop song that she becomes the tragic embodiment of *all* lovers' weeping: scalding tears personified. At the height of her aria, she stops moving her lips and collapses on stage; while unconscious she is summarily dragged off by two stagehands. The

"There it is": Betty returns to form in front of her stunned audience.

sound of someone's voice continues singing in her absence—powerfully, mockingly. Betty, who is on the verge of her own final disappearance from the narrative, is a spellbound witness of the singer's ardor, entering unreservedly into the spirit of the performer's sorrowful self-division, and weeping (persuasively) along with Rita who sits beside her.

Just before the Spanish song commences, the sound of an impending storm onstage, connected—like a traumatic memory—to Betty's nervous system, causes her to convulse in her seat. She attains the maximum pitch of visceral identification with a staged event, and has no capacity to separate any part of herself from what she absorbs in this charged atmosphere. On subsequent viewings, it becomes clear that the storm sounds are fused with Betty's (a.k.a. Diane Selwyn) earlier/later act of suicide by pistol shot. The death overtakes her briefly during a performance, as one of the consequences of her belief, and then grants her permission to mourn herself and the woman she herself has caused to die for a few moments before fading from view.[3]

The narrative will soon allow us to conclude that sweetly affirmative "Betty" never existed outside of another actress's fantasy and dream life. (Diane Selwyn, Betty's author, is depressive, morbidly jealous, unsuccessful in her career, a killer, and teetering toward death-by-suicide. Her so-called real life is a melodrama as improbable as the one that Betty tries out for in Wally's office.) Strangely, Betty becomes most "real" to us when we are certain that she had no chance of living at all, and that there are no means, once she is gone, to revive her. As we consider Betty in retrospect, we may well find something terribly truthful about this girl who never imagines herself lost: a purely synthetic, but still striving image of hope, outfitted in the pathetic remnants of everyone's failed innocence. And because Naomi Watts does such a stunning job of expanding and expunging Betty in their joint audition scene, for the duration of *Mulholland Drive* she gets to fulfill Betty's animating dream. She turns into a movie star, one (it is worth noting) whose mimicry of total failure becomes a recipe for success.

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Notes

1. Madeline is Hitchcock's Eurydice, half-returned from the underworld and fated to turn back there irretrievably when her lover insists at the end on taking her literally (thus, making her literal). He demands that she not merely show herself (as a re-created vision), but declare once and for all who she is. Scottie Ferguson is given more chances to look back than Orpheus, but he sees no better and fails more tests—just as decisively. Betty is just as certainly David Lynch's Eurydice. She attempts to revoke her alter ego's death (presumably, while a bullet makes a leisurely journey through Diane Selwyn's brain). The only earthly identity that might be strong enough to undo death is that of an actress on the verge of stardom.
2. Walter Benjamin, "Berlin Childhood around 1900," in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-38* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 346.
3. This image of a woman convulsing in the act of witnessing her own likely death scene may have its source in Agnès Varda's *Vagabond*. The corresponding moment in that film depicts a woman staring at herself in a mirror after she accidentally electrocutes herself.

Abstract This essay argues that Betty's audition scene in *Mulholland Drive* is the Rosetta Stone for the mysteries of star acting in Hollywood film. By means of an almost moment-by-moment reconstruction of the audition segment, Toles demonstrates how our presumed ironic superiority to artifice and role playing is cunningly exchanged for a believer's faith in movie acting truth.