

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# MULLHOLLAND DRIVE 2001

David Lynch

## OVERVIEW

This film tells the story of Betty, a young woman who arrives in Hollywood with the dream of becoming a star. She meets Rita, a woman suffering from amnesia, and attempts to discover who she is. The two women begin a sexual relationship, and Betty makes a splash in her first audition, but thereafter Betty's dream is soured by loss and humiliation, which leads her to revenge and suicide. The foregoing description, however, bears as much resemblance to the film as a museum label does to a complex painting. In David Lynch's hands, the story is beautiful, baffling and surreal, full of bizarre thrills, erotic sex and mysterious parallels. Characters disappear and reappear with new names and identities. It's a brilliant mixture of fairy tale, crime thriller and satirical exposé of Hollywood.

## HISTORICAL NOTES

The idea for *Mulholland Drive* seems to have come from Lynch's earlier and highly successful TV series 'Twin Peaks.' Lynch won Best Director for the movie at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001, and the film won Best Picture at the New York Film Critics Circle in the same year. Often dubbed a 'poison-pen letter to Hollywood,' the film was named the best film of the century by a BBC critics poll in 2016.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

Betty	Betty is a young aspiring actress.
Diane	Diane is a version of Betty in the second part of the story.
Rita	Rita is a woman who suffers amnesia in a car accident.
Camila	There are two Camilas. One appears briefly in the first part of the story as a teenage singer. T The other Camila, in the second part, is a version of Rita.
Adam	Adam is a film director.

## STORY

*Setting* The film begins with scenes of young people doing the jitterbug, the quintessential American dance of the 1940s and 1950s. Superimposed on them is an image of a beatific woman's face, followed by a red blanket and the sound of someone breathing underneath it.

*Car crash* Next, we see a nightscape of Los Angeles and a black limousine crawling along the curves of Mulholland Drive. Inside, sit a beautiful young woman and a handsome man. The car is stopped by someone with a gun and then it is smashed by a drag-racing car coming from the opposite direction. The woman stumbles out of the car, climbs down a steep hill and finds refuge in an unoccupied apartment. A man, seen from the back and sitting in a church, takes a telephone call and is told that 'the girl is still missing.' He calls another man and tells him to 'do the same.' More phone calls and cryptic messages follow.

*Monster* Two men sit talking inside a diner on Sunset Blvd. The younger one, who is anxious-looking, tells the older one about his dreams, which are set in the same diner where they are now sitting. The speaker says he was scared because of a man, a monster, in the parking lot. Now, he has come back to the diner to exorcise his fear, but when he goes outside, he is confronted by a horrific-looking man and collapses.

*Betty* Young and attractive Betty arrives at LA airport, where she chats with an older couple, who wish her good luck in her desire to become an actress. Betty is chirping with confidence until she notices that her handbag is missing. Unperturbed, she takes a taxi to her aunt's apartment, which turns out to be the place where the woman from the car crash is hiding. Betty's aunt is on holiday and has allowed her to stay there. Inside the vacant flat, Betty finds the injured woman in the shower. Betty assumes that she must be a friend of her aunt's, but the woman has amnesia and can't explain who she is or why she is there. After seeing a movie poster of Rita Hayworth, she says her name is Rita.

*Adam* In a boardroom full of suited executives, young director Adam is being bullied into accepting an unknown actress, named Camilla, as the lead role in his new film. Angry and arrogant, he tries to refuse, which prompts the others to contact a strange man in a spooky room. They decide to close down production. Adam gets home and finds his wife in bed with another man, who beats him up.

*Investigation* Betty talks with her aunt and discovers that she has no friend named Rita. Unconcerned, Betty allows Rita to stay with her. Inside Rita's handbag, Betty finds \$50,000 and vows to help her solve the mystery of her identity. Through phone calls, Betty confirms the story about the car crash but little else. Rita sees 'Diane' on a waitress's name-tag and thinks that she might be Diane Selwyn. Betty calls the only number listed under that name in the phone book. A woman answers, but Rita says, 'That's not my voice.'

*Adam* Hunted by some thugs, film-director Adam hides in a hotel, where he learns that his bank account has been cancelled and his credit withdrawn. He is told to meet a man in Beachwood Canyon, on the outskirts of Hollywood. That man turns out to be a mysterious cowboy, who warns Adam that he must cast Camilla in his movie 'or else.'

*Audition* Rita helps Betty prepare for her first audition by practising her lines. She is conventional and unconvincing, but at the actual event she is a sensation and wows the producers. The new star is taken to a movie set, which appears to be something from the 1950s. When Adam, in his director's chair, listens to Camilla sing the pop song 'I've Told Every Little Star,' he succumbs to the threats and gives her the part. After Betty and Adam lock eyes for a moment, she goes back to Rita.

*Diane* Betty takes Rita to the address of Diane Selwyn, where they speak to Diane's neighbour and then break into her apartment. Diane lies dead on her bed. Frightened for her safety, Betty gives Rita a blond wig as a disguise. That night, the two of them share a bed, make love and sleep in each other's arms.

*Blue box* After Rita dreams of a nightclub called Silencio, she forces Betty to visit a nightclub with that name. They sit and watch a show without music or song. It's all an illusion. Shaken, Betty cries and finds a mysterious blue box in her purse. Back in the apartment, Rita is facing the closet, when she turns around and sees that Betty has vanished. Using a key to open the blue box, Rita too disappears, apparently sucked into the box.

[Now the story shifts, with new names for the characters]

*Diane and Camilla* Diane sleeps in her apartment, fully alive, until awoken by her neighbour. Later, after noticing a blue key on a table, she sees Camilla, only this is not the pop singer girl. It's Rita. And, when we look closely, we realise that Diane is an older version of Betty. The two women make love on the couch, until Camilla suddenly freezes and shouts, 'We can't do this anymore.' Diane tries to force her, but Camilla prevents her. In the next scene, Camilla is on a movie set with Adam, the director, who is separated from his wife. When Adam and Camilla kiss, Diane suffers and tries, unsuccessfully, to masturbate.

*Humiliation* Diane is called on the phone by Camilla and told to get into a car that's waiting for her outside. The car is the same limo we saw at the beginning of the film. It takes Diane up Mulholland Drive to a party at Adam's house, where she is met by Camilla. We learn that Diane had been a teenage jitterbug champion in Canada and came to Hollywood as a young girl. She also explains that she met Camilla when they both auditioned for the same part, which was given to Camilla. Diane then

watches in humiliation as the teenage Camila (who sang 'I've Told Every Little Star') kisses the older Camila on the lips and that Camila announces her engagement to Adam.

*Hitman* The scene shifts abruptly to a haggard Diane sitting in the diner with a shaggy, blond-haired hitman. She pays him \$50,000 to kill Camila. When the deed is done, the man says, she'll find a blue key on her table.

*Monster* Outside the diner, we see the horrific man who was seen earlier in the same car park. He's filthy, his hair is matted and his face blackened; he is simply a homeless person. But he holds the blue box in his hand. Out of the box, crawl the old couple who wished Betty good luck at the airport. Now, though, they shriek like maniacs and chase Diane into her apartment, where she shoots herself.

*Silence* Again, the screen shows Los Angeles lit up at night. Strange, dream-like images float in the sky as in the beginning of the movie. We see the faces of Diane and Camila. Then we see an older actress from the nightclub they visited. She says, 'Silencio.'

## THEMES

*Sexual awakening* While this film famously wrongfoots critical analysis, its main theme appears to be the awakening of Betty's sexuality. Pretty and pert, Betty is an all-American girl (except that she's from Canada). She's blonde, bright-eyed and pure, in contrast to dark-haired, dark-eyed and dangerous Rita. There are three key scenes that dramatise Betty's emerging awareness of her sexual desires. First, there is the shower scene (with a nod to Hitchcock), when Betty sees Rita's naked body through a translucent shower door. She registers the outline of the body, and the nudity, but doesn't react sexually. In the second scene, the audition in the movie studio, she acts opposite Woody, a lead actor at least twenty years past his prime. It is a seduction scene, in which the initially reluctant Betty slowly responds to his advances and ends up turning the sexual tables so that she is seducing him with her low sighs and provocative growls. Having aroused him and gained control over him, she nuzzles his neck and whispers, 'Get out...before I kill you.' Finally, she says through her tear, 'I hate you.' It is a supreme display of sexual power, an encounter that could end in orgasm or in murder. Later, the eroticised Betty goes back to Rita and shares a bed with her. 'I shouldn't have made you sleep on the couch,' she explains but we sense there is another motive, too. They lay side by side in the dark and speak in slow, languorous voices. 'Thank you,' Rita says, 'For everything.' When Rita gently moves herself toward Betty and kisses her, Betty responds with eager pleasure, cupping Rita's breasts and panting hard. 'Have you ever done this before?' Betty asks, and Rita says she 'doesn't know.' Betty fondles her and cries, 'I want to do it with you.' With a soaring music soundtrack, it is a sex scene of the highest sensuality. Betty has come to Hollywood to be an actress and has discovered her deeper identity as a lesbian.

*Thwarted dreams* Betty's dream of becoming a star is still unrealised, however, and its utter failure is the second major theme of the film. Her despair and revenge dominate the last sections of the long movie, which opens with Diane (Betty) and Camila (Rita) making love on the couch, again in a highly erotic scene. But Camila stops Diane, saying she 'doesn't want this any more.' The reason, we soon discover, is that Camila is in love with Adam, the director. In two later scenes, on a movie set and at a party, Camila flaunts her love for Adam in an attempt to humiliate Diane, who, we also learn, lost out to Camila when they competed for the same role in a film. Diane is now distraught and takes revenge by hiring a hitman, who is the person who pointed a pistol at Rita in the car in the opening scene of the film. Rita, we know, escaped unhurt from the hitman's attempted murder, except for her memory loss, but Diane ends up shooting herself in the head. Diane has watched her dream turn into a nightmare. Diane's (Betty's) image of what she wants to be is what we see in the first four-fifths of the film: her successful acting career and relationship with Rita. The reality of her life is shown in the last section. Of course, as many critics have pointed out, the whole film is a dream, with apparently incoherent elements, inexplicable images, non-sequiturs and mysterious symbols (such as the blue box). David Lynch has himself said that he works with the subconscious and with dreams, and that is what we see in *Mulholland Drive*.

*Unglamorous Hollywood* The movie industry depicted in the film has little sparkle and much rancour. Would-be starlet Betty has sudden success in an audition and gains a lover, but later she loses

everything when the director steals her partner. She ends up shooting herself. Nor does Adam, the smooth director, have the control we might imagine. He has casting decisions forced on him by the silent money men, who also orchestrate a campaign of terror against him by freezing his bank account, smashing up his car and threatening his wife. All this is carried out so that a teenage girl should get a part in his film. David Lynch lives on Mulholland Drive and knows that its twists and turns are a metaphor of the potentially deadly illusions of Hollywood.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**BETTY** Betty is 'fresh off the boat', a would-be starlet newly-arrived in Hollywood from Canada. She is sweet, bright-eyed, optimistic and talented. She is also a kind person, who helps Rita after she discovers her as a car-crash victim in her aunt's apartment. Her sunny smile matches the weather that greets her when she arrives in LA.

*Optimistic* In her first scene, Betty steps off the plane in LA. Her blond hair and her pink sweater, matched by her pink lipstick, seem to glow in the bright sunshine. She has arrived determined to become a successful star. 'I was so nervous and excited,' she says to her older travelling companions, who wish her success in Hollywood. 'I hope to see you soon on the big screen,' the older woman says, to which Betty replies, 'Yes. Won't that be the day!' She doesn't doubt that she will be a star (we later learn that she won a jitterbug competition as a young girl). She keeps on smiling, her eyes sparkle and her face glows. Brimming with confidence, she surveys her new world. It's perfect, not a flaw in sight, just like her. Even when she realises that she's lost her handbag, her frown lasts for only half a second. When the taxi driver asks 'Where to?', she beams that powerful smile once more and gives him the address. Stepping inside the taxi, she glances at the famous 'Hollywood' sign on the hills above her. She definitely knows where she is going.

*Helpful* Hopeful Betty is also quick to help others. This is apparent when she encounters Rita in her aunt's apartment. Betty is in the bathroom, admiring her good looks in the mirror when she senses another's presence. She looks through the translucent shower door and sees Rita, standing naked. Betty's first reaction is not 'Who the hell are you?' Rather, she apologises, saying that she didn't know her aunt had a friend staying in the apartment. When Rita mentions the accident, Betty's voice cracks with concern. 'What happened?' she asks. 'Are you all right?' Rita says she is, and Betty again apologises for her intrusion. 'I'm sorry,' Betty says, 'so sorry.' Then, when she realises that Rita is unknown to her aunt, and has lost her memory, Betty lets the complete stranger stay in the apartment and offers to help her. Her immediate and unqualified offer of help defines Betty. She does not think of herself; she is only concerned with Rita's comfort. She is a good person.

*Sexuality* Betty's sexuality appears to be that of an inexperienced teenager, similar to the character of Sandy in Lynch's other erotic film, *Blue Velvet*. She represents a bubbly, blonde-haired innocence, a radiant female purity. She's probably in her early- to mid-twenties and presumably has had some sexual experience, but there's no hint of carnal desire on her sweet-as-sugar face. She is the girl next door. Except that she's moved, to Los Angeles, and wants to be a movie star. When she begins to perform, she discovers hidden layers of herself.

*Modest* Betty's sexual innocence is illustrated in an early scene, when she has just arrived at her aunt's apartment. She is thrilled by the sophisticated décor, the expensive furnishings and the greenery seen through the window. When she notices woman's clothes thrown on the floor, a tiny frown appears, but it vanishes when she wanders into the well-appointed bathroom. She hears a noise in the shower—must be a dripping tap—and opens the door. Seeing Rita naked, she quickly closes the door. 'Oh, my dear,' Betty exclaims. 'I'm sorry.' As Rita tries to explain what happened, Betty looks at the translucent door, through which she can see Rita's statuesque body. Betty keeps apologising for opening the door on the naked Rita. She is embarrassed by the nudity, and wants to help Rita. She shows no hint of sexual desire. Nor would we expect any, for this is Betty, the good girl.

*Seductive* The desire lurking within pretty Betty emerges during her first audition for a role in a film. In a room full of producers, she is asked to perform a scene with an older male actor. Betty is dressed in her best outfit, a modest grey skirt, blue top with a high neckline and a string of pearls. She stands very close to the man, who begins to kiss her neck, but she pushes him away, saying that

her parents might see. 'I can call my dad,' she says. 'But you won't,' he says and grabs her. Betty hesitates but then encourages him, speaking softly and nibbling his face with her lips. She is panting with pleasure, arousing his desire, and then says, 'Get out of here before...' Her breathless sentence is left unfinished, and the man says, 'Before what?' We expect her to say something like 'before we do something we'll regret (i.e., have sex). She doesn't answer for a while, and instead kisses him more urgently. A full minute later, she says, 'Before I kill you.' He says that they'll put her in jail, and she says, 'I don't care. I hate you.' She backs away, her eyes blazing with anger, tears streaming down her cheeks. The audience is stunned and then begin to applaud her mesmerising performance. Betty has played the *femme fatale* to perfection, seducing her victim before threatening him with death. She demonstrates how physical intimacy, even when fully clothed, as in this scene, can be both erotic and dangerous. Her words of warning are uttered slowly, between pauses when she kisses him. It's the drip-drip technique to sexual arousal, which masks her real desire, until the very end. Betty is irresistible.

**RITA** Sultry, mysterious and brunette Rita is in stark contrast to bright-eyed, transparent and blonde Betty. While riding in the car before the accident, she wears expensive clothes and holds a designer handbag. After the accident, she becomes a victim, vulnerable and secretive. But she still oozes sensuality.

**Helpless** Rita is a blank, to herself and to Betty. Her confusion is made explicit in the first scene, when Betty finds her in the apartment. As Betty attempts to understand who she is, Rita can only manage a single word ('accident') and then two words ('car accident'). When asked her name, she casts her eyes around in fear—she'll appear to be insane if she can't remember her own name—and sees a poster of Rita Hayworth. 'Rita' she says. Throughout this scene, the camera is close up, showing the fear in Rita's eyes. She has no one to turn to, no friend or family or colleague who might help her. She is the helpless victim, a vacuum which Betty (and the audience) can fill with their own desires.

**Mysterious** Rita's amnesia cloaks her in secrecy, from herself as well as from Betty. She remains an almost silent sidekick, tagging along as Betty takes on the task of finding out who Rita is and what happened to her. Her deep mystery permeates every scene in the first four-fifths of the film, none more so than when she seems to remember her name. She and Betty are served coffee in a diner by a woman whose name-tag reads 'Diane.' Rita thinks her real name might be Diane Selwyn. Betty finds the telephone number of the only person by that name in the phone book and calls. They both listen when a woman on the other end picks up and asks who is calling. 'That's not my voice,' Rita says firmly. 'But I know her.' Rita's recall is mysterious. In the last, short section of the film, we learn that the Diane she knew is actually Betty in another guise. Confusing, yes, but everything about Rita is mysterious.

**Sexuality** Rita is a woman of strong sexual desires. Dark, tall and full-breasted, she makes a sharp contrast with the light and pert Betty, whom she seduces. Her sexual appeal is not entirely physical, though, and is enhanced by the mystery surrounding her identity. This is what increases her attraction for Betty, whose curiosity to understand Rita crosses over into a desire to possess her.

**Seductive** When she says her name is 'Rita,' it appears to be an arbitrary choice, but, this being a Lynch film, it is not. The poster she sees is Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, the 1946 noir in which Hayworth plays a smouldering *femme fatale*. Those same dark powers of seduction are displayed by this Rita in a scene when Betty and she first sleep in the same bed. Betty says it's more comfortable than sleeping on the couch, and Rita says, 'Yes.' The two of them giggle, a sign of nervousness, and fall silent, leaving us to imagine their thoughts. Rita turns onto to her side, stares at Betty and says softly, 'Thank you, Betty. Thank you for everything.' Rita's large dark eyes do not move from Betty's face. 'Good night, sweet Betty,' she says. She continues to stare and as she slides toward Betty and kisses her goodnight. But she does not move away and continues to look down at Betty, who soon responds and they make love. This scene displays Rita's irresistible and almost accidental sexual attraction. She has been touched by Betty's efforts to help her, and they have shared drama and danger after embarking on an investigation into Rita's past. Naturally, Rita wants to thank Betty. She knows only one way of showing her gratitude.

**DIANE** Diane is a version of Betty (indeed, the same actress plays both parts). One could see her as the 'real' Betty, the one hiding behind Betty's idealised image of herself. Alternatively, she might be

the Betty who emerges after living in Hollywood for some time. In either case, she appears dejected, rejected and angry. Unlike the prim Betty with her neat, sensible clothes, Diane has shaggy hair and wears ripped jean shorts and a grubby, sleeveless top. She looks like she hasn't slept for a week.

*Vindictive* Rejected and later cruelly humiliated by Camila (a version of Rita; see below), Diane plans her revenge. We see her sitting in a diner, haggard and distraught. Opposite her sits a large, scruffy-looking man in a torn leather jacket. Diane wears a cheap tank-top, no make-up and no smile. She passes a photo to the man and says, 'This is the girl.' The man asks if she has the money. 'Sure do,' she says, with her face rigid and her voice flat. The man nods and asks if this is really what she wants. Diane leans in, places her elbows on the table and announces, 'More than anything else in the world.' Diane has just hired a hitman to kill Camila.

*Sexuality* In contrast to Betty's emerging sexuality in the first part of the story, when she has morphed into Diane in the second part, she has a voracious sexual appetite. That insatiable desire exposes her to humiliation and despair when Camila ends their lesbian affair in favour of a liaison with the very masculine and heterosexual Adam.

*Desperate* Diane's only sexual scene in this brief second section of the story is with Camilla (alias Rita). Diane wakes up wearing a crumpled face and slips on a tatty robe. She looks out the kitchen window of the apartment and turns when she senses someone's presence. Her grumpy face leaps into a smile and she gasps, 'Camilla.' Camila stands not far away, smiling, with bright lipstick and low-cut blouse. Diane makes coffee and returns to the living room, where she sees Camila lying fully naked on the couch. Diane puts aside the coffee mug and slowly climbs on top of her. She fondles Camila's breasts and lowers herself to kiss her lips. Diane becomes more and more sexually aroused, but suddenly Camila tells her to stop. Diane is delirious with desire and doesn't understand, until Camila says, 'We shouldn't 'do this anymore.' Diane is shocked. 'Don't say that,' she says and tries to masturbate Camila, but her one-time lover pushes her hand away. 'Stop!' Camila says. 'I've tried to tell you this before.' Diane's face crumbles in despair and she makes a sneering remark. Innocent Betty has been left far behind. This is desperate Diane. The scene is significant not only in its emotional impact on Diane but also in its choreography, which is almost an exact replica of their first sexual scene, in which Betty senses someone in the shower and finds Rita.

**CAMILIA** There are two Camilas. The first is the teenage singer, whom the director Adam is forced to cast in a film. The second Camila, who appears in the second part of the story, is a version of Rita, who is now haughty and cruel. Neither character appears long enough to display any character traits other than their sexuality.

*Cruel* The hidden, dark side of Camila is displayed in the second part of the story, where she appears as a version of Rita. Now, Camila turns against Diane and rejects her in favour of director Adam. Her *volte face* is displayed most cruelly in a scene, which is itself a scene shot in the studio. Camila is an actress doing a love scene in a car with another actor. Director Adam takes the place of the actor in order to show him how he wants him to perform. 'Nice and comfortable,' he says as he slides into the car and puts his arm around Camila, who is his lover off the set, too. He orders everyone off the set, and Diane, who has been watching, turns to go. But Camila gets Adam to allow Diane to stay. With Diane as her audience, Camila plays her love-making with special passion in order to humiliate her erstwhile lesbian lover. It works splendidly. Diane is devastated and breaks down in tears, while Camila continues to snuggle up to Adam. Camila has chosen to reject Diane in the most public and cruel way possible—on the movie set. It is vindictive.

*Seductive* The first Camila is a pretty teenager who appears only once. She is on a movie set, overseen by director Adam, where she sings 'I've Told Every Little Star,' a pop song from 1961. Her head bobs from side to side, and her lips glisten with lipstick as she sings the lines of this sweet song, which is a young girl's confession of love. Nothing could be more innocent. And yet, the way she swings her hips and runs her hands down her short dress suggest that she is not completely unaware of her sexual attraction.



(Betty and Rita)



(Rita and Betty)



(Diane and Camila)