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## The Feminine Sublime in 21st Century Surrealist Cinema

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THE FEMININE SUBLIME IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
SURREALIST CINEMA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of  
Humanities

By

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B.A., Wright State University, 2013

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Abigail Sorensen ENTITLED The Feminine Sublime in 21st Century Surrealist Cinema BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF HUMANITIES.

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis will examine how the characters in three contemporary surrealist films, *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), *Under the Skin* (2013), and *Melancholia* (2011), experience the sublime. In each film, the female characters are marked by the “otherness” of femininity along with the consequential philosophical and social alienation due to their marginalized roles within the patriarchal structure. Their confrontations with the otherness of sublimity are disparate from their male counterparts, whose experiences are not complicated by patriarchal oppression. The sublimity the characters are faced with forces them to recognize their subjugated social positioning. All three films will be examined to analyze different methods used by the characters when interacting with sublime forces, and the extent to which those methods aid the characters when confronting oppression. By examining these films alongside each other, it will be argued that they represent a range of feminine subjectivities as they employ varying strategies of confronting sublimity.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

“...although I thought they [the surrealists] were wonderful, I had to give them up in the end. They were, with a few patronized exceptions, all men and they told me that I was the source of all mystery, beauty, and otherness, because I was a woman- and I knew that was not true. I knew I wanted my fair share of the imagination, too. Not an excessive amount, mind; I wasn't greedy. Just an equal share in the right to vision.” – Angela Carter (*Shaking a Leg* 512)

“...the feminine sublime is neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness- social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic- that is excessive and unrepresentable.” – Barbara Freeman (*The Feminine Sublime* 2)

In her essay, “The Alchemy of the Word,” Angela Carter describes her love for surrealism as well as her repulsion from it--her love, stemming from the movement's child-like wonder at the world, her exasperation from its near-categorical dismissal of feminine subjectivities. Surrealism has the potential to become a space for people on the margins of society to engage with otherness, but its troubled history with both the representation of women and women in the movement present challenges to this possible ideological value. Within surrealist groups of the 1920s and 30s women were largely discouraged from pursuing artistic activities because it was felt that their function was to inspire art, not create it. Women were relegated to an existence outside of accepted cultural realms and were not recognized as having the potential to contribute to the movement in a meaningful way. Therefore, the promise of surrealism as a theoretical space for an exploration of otherness and alterity was never realized. However, removed from its historic time and space, surrealism as an artistic strategy and ideological framework, not as a movement, can be reclaimed as a theoretical space in which feminine subjectivity and experiences with otherness can be explored.

This thesis will examine how the central female characters in three contemporary surrealist films, *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), *Under the Skin* (2013), and *Melancholia* (2011), experience the sublime, or, forces of unknowable vastness or greatness. In each film, the female characters are marked by the “otherness” of femininity along with its consequential philosophical and social alienation due to their marginalized roles within the patriarchal structure. Their confrontations with the otherness of sublimity is disparate from that of their male counterparts, whose experiences are not complicated by patriarchal oppression, and the sublimity the female characters are faced with forces them to recognize their subjugated social positioning. All three films will be examined to analyze how the various female characters interact with sublime forces, and the extent to which these different approaches aid or fail the female characters in their confrontations with sublimity. Specifically, my analysis utilizes Barbara Freeman’s philosophy of the “feminine sublime,” which calls for an embrace of sublimity and its inherent otherness. By examining these three films alongside each other, it will be argued that the films represent a range of feminine subjectivities as they employ varying strategies of confronting sublime forces.

Historically, the notion of the sublime stems from the philosophical examination of beauty and aesthetics, most famously theorized by Longinus in *On the Sublime* (1867), Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and Immanuel Kant. In Kant’s seminal work, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), he explores the meaning of the philosophical notion of the sublime, defining it as a force within nature that is completely great or completely powerful (the quantitative and qualitative sublime, respectively). Therefore, an artwork that results in a strong

feeling of overwhelming forces in the viewer can be termed “sublime.” In Kant’s view, the only way for an individual to overcome forces of the sublime is to depend on his or her higher faculties of reasoning and acknowledge that these faculties make him or her greater than any natural force. Kant suggests that the feeling of dread associated with the sublime stems from our displeasure in feeling inadequate in the face of natural forces. However, upon realizing that rational thought allows humankind to rise above natural forces, the subject may then find pleasure in the sublime: “... this respect is accorded an object of nature that, as it were, makes intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility” (*Critique of Judgment* 114). Kant’s assertions that rationality allows humans ultimate power over nature stems from rationalist, Enlightenment thinking. While the philosophical motivation behind conceptions of rationality and the superiority of humanity’s cognitive powers may not have always been to establish a social hierarchy, the cultural consequences of this privileges a specific kind of white, European masculinity as having rational and moral authority over not just “inferior” peoples, but over the natural world as well.

These Enlightenment principles are prevalent in Kant’s 1764 work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, in which he describes his sentiments on the nature of the relationship between femininity and the sublime. Kant argues that men are more inclined to the appreciation of sublimity because women are predisposed to things that are superficially beautiful; women cannot have a true appreciation of aesthetically beautiful objects or ideas due to their *natural* lack of intellectual capacity (*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* 81). His argument can be summarized in



this quotation: “The fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a *beautiful understanding*, whereas ours should be a *deep understanding*, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime” (78 [emphasis original]). Furthermore, he cites the tendency of the “fair” sex to be attracted to superficial things and to be driven by sense rather than rationality (77, 79). The conceptualization of women as fickle beings, existing outside the realm of rationality, coupled with the historic understanding of women as representations of the monstrous natural world, consequently aligns them with the uncontrollable, unpredictable natural forces that function as the impetus of Kant’s sublimity.<sup>1</sup>

In postmodern and poststructuralist feminist interpretations of Kant’s theory of the sublime, Kant’s vision of a traditional response to sublime forces (or, attempts to differentiate one’s self from sublimity through rational thought) highlights how his use of the sublime unintentionally further subjugates femaleness. Bonnie Mann, for instance, draws attention to the relationship between man’s rejection of nature and his subjugation of the feminine in Kant’s conception of the sublime: “One climactic moment of Kant’s drama of freedom is recounted in the ‘Analytic of the Sublime,’ where internal violence establishes the dominance of the masculine over the feminine at the same time it catapults the subject out of his dependence on nature and into a fantasy of his own freedom” (*Women’s Liberation and the Sublime* 38). Because of the cultural, philosophical, and

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<sup>1</sup> Many scholars, including Bonnie Mann in *Women’s Liberation and the Sublime*, as well as Robin M. Schott in “The Gender of Enlightenment,” support this interpretation of Kant’s philosophy. However, many authors, for example Mari Mikkola in “Kant on Moral Agency and Women’s Nature,” disagree and argue that Kant’s conceptualization of gender is not inherently misogynistic. A specific discussion of this argument is outside the scope of this thesis.

religious attitudes of the day, that which is feminine comes to be conflated with the natural world. The ideological consequences of Kant's theorization of the superiority of human cognition when faced with sublime threats is that women, who are conceptualized as having, at best, a diminished rational capacity, are aligned with the threat of nature, and thus become the very thing from which the masculine subject must differentiate himself.<sup>2</sup>

The problematic consequences of Kant's theorization of the sublime encounter does not disqualify sublimity from further conceptualization. The philosophy of the feminine sublime emerges from this ideologically restrictive space and is a subversive reaction to the destructive methods of confronting the sublime that Kant and others proposed. On the nature of the feminine sublime, Barbara Freeman argues, "Unlike the masculinist sublime that seeks to master, appropriate, or colonize the other, I propose that the politics of the feminine sublime involves taking up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness" (*The Feminine Sublime* 11). Utilizing the philosophy of the feminine sublime, an individual, particularly a woman, who is marked as other and threatening, can leverage her interaction with a sublime force to recognize and embrace the otherness that exists in the world outside of herself, which is made possible due to her positioning on the margins of the patriarchal structure. While Kant may admire the sublimity found in nature, he does not see himself in it. Therefore, a woman utilizing the philosophy of the feminine sublime can find freedom in embracing the otherness of the

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<sup>2</sup> The task of the rational, masculine subject to distance himself from the sublime object of otherness is not limited to an association with femininity, but can also be theorized as representing various forms of othered identities, such as sexual minorities, non-white peoples, and those with disabilities.

sublime, recognizing it as similar to her own othered nature, instead of the fear and violent differentiation often expressed in the Kantian, masculinist approach to the sublime. This patriarchal reaction to sublimity is manifest in the ultimate threat of the liminal, marginalized power of unsanctioned femininity.

In order to understand the othered positionality of women within masculinist society, we must examine Jacques Lacan's theorization of the Symbolic Order. In his 1953 essay "Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," he states: "Symbols in fact envelop the life of a man [sic] in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world..." (*Écrits* 74). Lacan argues that symbols, at the level of both culture and language, create the reality in which individuals exist. These symbols work together to form societal norms and expectations. Because we are all born into this preexisting Symbolic Order, we (usually) become acculturated to the individual roles in which we are placed. In addition, Lacan argues that this system creates the theoretical spaces of the Real and Imaginary. The Real, signifying the "truth" underneath the construction of the symbolic, is generally inaccessible to humans because of their naturalization into the Symbolic Order. The Imaginary originates from Lacan's theorization of the Mirror Stage in which the infant attempts to conceptualize their fragmented body and identity, symbolized in dreams (*Écrits* 5). The effects of the Symbolic Order on individuals who are positioned on the margins of society are of particular note. For them, the Symbolic Order works to create a hierarchy, on which they are placed at the bottom, while those who benefit from structural privilege enjoy a higher social position. This dynamic is found in the relative hierarchical positions of men and women with men being granted privileges at the expense of women and others inhabiting

the bottom of the power structure. One specific theoretical reason for this is the presence of abjection in the lives of othered people. A group of people who explicitly feel this symbolic tension are those who are marked as feminine.

Theories of abjection and liminal femininity stem largely from Julia Kristeva's 1982 work, *Powers of Horror*. Kristeva sought to establish a connection between the psychoanalytic theory of abjection and the subjugated position of women in the patriarchal symbolic order. Kristeva describes abjection as being manifested in matter that has been expelled from the body (i.e. blood and feces), culminating in the object of the corpse itself (*Powers of Horror* 3). However, abjection is not only present in bodily matter; abjection is brought about when one inhabits a space that exists on the margins of patriarchal culture, where one's identity is founded in radical otherness and opposition to the sanctioned version of one's own self (*Powers of Horror* 1). This psychological division creates a self that belongs to otherness and the symbolic order simultaneously. Kristeva argues that because of woman's unique relationship with abject bodily functions, including menstruation and birth, society sees her body as threatening the order of civilized society. Kristeva writes, "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity," highlighting the liminal position of the feminine body and identity (*Powers of Horror* 9).

The surrealist movement of the 20s and 30s had a unique relationship with the ambiguity of femininity and abjection. At the heart of the surrealist movement was a desire to engage with our deepest unconscious thoughts and our most basic human nature. As previously mentioned, this meant creating a specific artistic and theoretical relationship to the female body. Gwen Raaberg explains that, in the surrealist

imagination, women were often viewed as the source of a different kind of knowledge, one that was tied to the natural world and representative of their sexual desires – they were “man’s mediator with nature” (“The Problematics of Women and Surrealism” 2). This positions women as an important ideological and spiritual element within surrealist works, ultimately contributing to a masculinist framework that refuses to conceptualize women outside of the artistic role of the male artist’s muse.

Beginning in the 1970s, scholars began to reexamine surrealist works (specifically those belonging to Breton’s group of surrealist artists) and address their intrinsically violent power structure privileging men. Raaberg draws attention to the troubled relationship between male surrealists and the women in their own movement. She cites Andre Breton, a leader of the surrealist movement, critiquing the work of a female peer: “It seems so unlikely that the ship sweeping forward could be steered by a woman’s hand that some quite exceptional force must be assumed to be helping to drive it along” (“The Problematics of Women and Surrealism” 2). The idea that women were perceived as unable to adequately carry out surrealist practices without male guidance sheds light on the dominant, male attitude towards women and the feminine in their own work.

In spite of the well-documented violent attitudes that many male surrealists held toward the concept of femininity, the inherent nature of surrealism nevertheless creates a prime theoretical space in which to explore feminine otherness and sublime experience, despite how the movement of the 20s and 30s deployed surrealist methods in problematic ways. In the films selected for this thesis, their surreal visual and narrative nature allows the spectator to occupy an unfamiliar space and encounter women and femininity outside of the patriarchal discourse that promotes the domination of femininity and its otherness.

In the surreal cinematic space, the otherness of femininity can exist beyond the confines of a masculinist narrative and we can explore female sublime experiences because the surreal space is inherently other and threatening in a sublime manner. The sense of a feminine otherness that marks the three films I will be examining stems from their visual and narrative integration of a feminine surreal and sublime aesthetic, leading the viewer to a space in which they encounter a feminine sublimity.

In David Lynch's 2001 film *Mulholland Dr.* the four main characters, Betty, Diane, Rita, and Camilla, search for their lost and missing identities. Betty attempts to find her identity as a young ingénue pursuing Hollywood dreams and Rita tries to pick up the pieces of her identity after it has been erased in a deadly car accident. The two women embark on this journey together and encounter sublime forces that threaten their burgeoning identities and their very existence. When confronted with the sublime, Rita is able to positively engage with it because of her relationship to her own othered self while Betty cannot face the sublime because of her attempts to align herself with masculine society. However, before we are able to fully understand the consequence of either character's interaction with the sublime, the narrative shifts and we follow Camilla and Diane's struggle with sublimity. Because of the pressures put upon Diane and Camilla through their proximity to patriarchal forces, they are unable to reconcile their own otherness with the otherness of the sublime.

The main character in Jonathan Glazer's 2013 film, *Under the Skin*, is marked as other due to her gender and her inhumanity. An inhuman creature dispatched to seduce men and entrap them for unexplained reasons, she grows to recognize that her designated role is destructive and rejects it. She struggles with her own liminal, feminine nature and

tries to assimilate to human society. However, she cannot escape from the abjection and otherness of her body and becomes the target of the patriarchal structure. Even though she faces sublime forces with the curiosity and acceptance of the philosophy of the feminine sublime, she is destroyed by a man who burns her alive, acting as a vengeful actor on behalf of a society that is threatened by otherness in all its forms.

Justine and Claire, the sisters at the heart of Lars von Trier's 2011 *Melancholia*, have distinctly different ways of engaging with sublime forces. Justine accepts the otherness and vastness of the sublime threat that faces human kind – the destruction of earth by another planet. Claire fights against this threat by utilizing the traditional strategies of the Kantian sublime, with reason and faith in the superiority of humanity. As they face the impending doom of the planet and their own existence, Claire refuses to acknowledge the greatness of the sublime threat and retreats in fear, whereas Justine has reconciled herself with this otherness and reaches a kind of peace with this violent end to all terrestrial life. Justine is able to free herself of the obligation to fight sublime forces by rejecting the patriarchal structure and embracing her own abject otherness. In the film's first chapter, we see her leave her husband on the night of their wedding and belittle her advertising executive boss while violently refusing to work for the capitalist system any longer. While Justine is still subject to the same fate as all people, dying along with the earth, she emancipates herself from the destructive patriarchal forces that dictate fear and panic in the face of the sublime. She utilizes the philosophy of the feminine sublime to establish an authentic subjectivity and discover her own existential freedom in the sublime.

While most, if not all of the female characters in these films die as a direct result of their experience of sublimity, they arrive at the destination by very different roads. The experiences of the characters and the value of their encounters with the sublime is of prime importance. While Betty does not gain anything from her sublime struggle, and in fact loses everything as a result, Rita is able to reconcile herself with the sublime otherness that surrounds her through her embrace of her own othered identity. Conversely, Diane and Camilla cannot explore their own marginalized identity or their relationship to sublimity because of their assigned roles within the patriarchal imagination. The creature in *Under the Skin* is stopped short of discovering herself within sublimity because of her threat to the dominant structure. Justine, while facing an emotionally painful death, is able to find some degree of peace by reconciling her female otherness with the otherness of the sublime force, the planet Melancholia, whereas Claire cannot because of her allegiance to patriarchal culture and rationality.

All of these films present the female struggle with sublimity, but they are also all marked by a male directorial presence. This manifests itself in different ways in each text. David Lynch often relies on his archetypal doomed woman/femme fatale character that could potentially lead his audience to revel in the pain and suffering of his female characters; *Mulholland Dr.* is no exception. However, astute viewers will recognize that Lynch creates a critical portrait of feminine struggles within the marketplace, not an exploitative one. Glazer's text is clearly marked by the influence of the male gaze, primarily in the exchanges between Scarlett Johansson's character and the men who were unwittingly being filmed as her victims. However, even as the creature is looked at by men, she looks back at them and they are affected by the power of her gaze. Von Trier's



film is perhaps the least violent toward his female protagonists from his repertoire in recent memory. While it is still built on the foundation of using the pain and suffering of women as exciting cinematic material, it is entirely dissimilar to the work of other directors who literally and figuratively torture their female characters solely for the pleasure of the audience. However, in the face of various problematic aspects of the films, which connect them to the troubled history of female representation within surrealist works, we can interpret elements of these texts both independently of the filmmakers and within their larger body of work. In fact, we can look to the performances of the women acting in these films as an alternative form of authorship; women who are writing the female experience with their own bodies on film. By examining the role of feminine sublime experiences in our contemporary surrealist cinema, we gain a greater knowledge and understanding of the functioning of female abjection and otherness in the face of ultimate sublimity.

## II. The Sublime and the Search for Identity in *Mulholland Dr.*

In his essay on postmodernism and the sublime, Jean-Francois Lyotard argues, “The postmodern would be that which, in the modern puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms... that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (“Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” 149). Lyotard argues that while the modernist movement chose to represent sublimity through absence (e.g., blank canvases), postmodernism strives to push beyond the void of the sublime to attempt to reflect something that is unrepresentable. The presentation of the unrepresentable is the natural area of surrealism and other art forms that subvert and move beyond the symbolism and language of the everyday. David Lynch, the most recognizable living American director to carry the torch of surrealism accomplishes something remarkable with his 2001 film *Mulholland Dr.* This film, which seems to defy any definitive interpretations, provides one of the greatest modern cinematic examples of what Lyotard calls the event-like quality of postmodern texts that deal with sublimity (“Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” 149). *Mulholland Dr.* is an experience, not necessarily a cinematic story or narrative.

This experience is shaped as a specifically feminine one. Through our interaction with the main characters and their challenges with the intersectional nature of their identities, we are placed within a space that encourages identification with characters marked by “excess” and feminine experiences of sublimity. The feminine positionality of

ourselves and the characters gives the audience the ability to approach the sublime with “respect in response to an incalculable otherness,” as Barbara Freeman advocates (*The Feminine Sublime* 11). This chapter will illustrate how the character of Rita is able to engage with the sublime from this perspective but is ultimately thwarted in her attempts to associate herself with otherness, as represented in the sublime forces of the patriarchal marketplace.

All of David Lynch’s work, both in the medium of film and in his other artistic pursuits (painting, music), adopts a surrealist style and engages surrealist concerns. Barbara Creed identifies Lynch’s interest in surrealism as belonging to a “darker” school of the movement, one following the philosophy of Georges Bataille (“The Untamed Eye and the Dark Side of Surrealism” 116). Creed observes that Lynch “...depicts Surrealist states of mind in direct and confronting ways, blurring the boundary between dream and reality, adopting non-linear and narrative forms, presenting the world as weird and incomprehensible and refusing to provide any ‘answers’ let alone closure to his narrative enigmas” (129). Lynch’s fascination with the bizarre and surreal world that lies just beneath the surface of normalcy allows him to create films that make people uncomfortable with and unsure about reality itself. This specific deployment of surrealism lends itself to an examination of the dark consequences of normative existence, specifically for women, who often function as the central characters in his films. Because of this, he is able to turn a rather standard love story into a frightening and uncomfortable experience for the audience. The surreal nature of *Mulholland Dr.* allows the tragedy of the characters to have repercussions beyond the narrative of the film. Rita and Camilla are not simply actors in Lynch’s bizarre world, but representations of

philosophical dilemmas and struggles within ours. Lynch is also able to closely interrogate the symbolic functions of our social reality and expose how they often restrict women from developing whole, autonomous identities, while still questioning if we can ever truly know ourselves and if that is even a productive goal.

Lynch's deployment of surrealist techniques and aesthetics could be seen as somewhat at odds with his emphasis on the development of "whole" or "complete" identities. While surrealism would most likely take the position that one can never access one's whole or "true" identity, and that this notion of the natural essence of an individual is an illusion, Lynch maintains his interest in the reclamation of identities that are broken by the demands that the Symbolic Order dictates to us while still preserving surrealist conceptions of the lack of "truth" or fact within reality. He does this by emphasizing identity reclamation and formation over a sense of true or static identity. He is interested in observing if his characters can find shards of themselves if they are removed from the illusions of Hollywood and culture, but does not take the position that there is one true self for these individuals. For Lynch, some forms of identity and reality are less false or manufactured than others, but none of them hold an absolute truth value.

The four main characters of *Mulholland Dr.* experience a crisis of competing conceptions of identity and reality. The film begins with one version of Laura Elena Harring's character, who later calls herself Rita, experiencing a fatal car accident. While her visible body is not significantly injured, aside from a bleeding wound covered by her hairline, she suffers from a concussion that suppresses her knowledge of herself. Conversely, Betty, played by Naomi Watts, appears to know exactly who she is and what she wants. She has traveled to Los Angeles from Deep River, Ontario to pursue her

dream of becoming “a great actress,” not necessarily a movie star. Even as she conducts herself with a presumed assurance of her identity and trajectory in life, viewers familiar with Lynch’s oeuvre will recognize the highly stylized deployment of her character, similar to the personalities that populate the rainy town of Twin Peaks in Lynch’s television show of the same name and his vision of American suburbia in *Blue Velvet*. These characters are formed as reflections of overly dramatized archetypes found in classic American soap operas and Hispanic *telenovelas*. Betty is not the fully-realized person that she appears, but rather a manifestation of the naïve young ingénue that exists in the popular imagination. As for Rita, she is the “dark mysterious woman,” due to her amnesia (a common narrative arc of soap operas) and her Hispanic ethnicity. Rita appears both as an aesthetically appealing person and someone desperately in need of validation; a perfect combination for the masculine imaginary, created out of the patriarchal Symbolic Order and its perpetual othering of women.

In the world of *Mulholland Dr.*, the reclamation of fractured selves is of the utmost importance, but is seemingly impossible to achieve. Betty and Rita both try to simultaneously locate themselves and conduct themselves free from the dominating forces of Hollywood, or as Martha Nochimson calls it, the forces of the marketplace. In the introduction to *David Lynch Swerves*, Nochimson explains: “Lynch’s term ‘marketplace’ refers to the problematic limits of ordinary domestic and public transactions. A word Lynch has borrowed from his mentor in things spiritual, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, ‘marketplace’ refers to a level of reality at which illusions of stability are promoted by culture” (4-5). Within the context of *Mulholland Dr.*, the

instability of culture and the danger of accepting the illusion of “reality” are especially significant.

In one of the first sequences of the film, we meet Dan, a nondescript character nervously describing a dream to his friend at Winkie’s diner. His dream involves a menacing “face” hidden behind the diner that makes him feel frightened before he even sees it. The mere fact that Dan knows it exists causes him to be afraid. His friend urges him to walk around back of the diner, to satisfy his feeling that something is lurking there. Of course, when Dan does go to confront his fear, the face is actually there, scaring him to death. This “face” belongs to a monstrous looking homeless person.

Dan’s dream of a frightening figure underneath the illusion of the classic, all-American diner represents the false construction of reality that the marketplace creates. Dan “knows” that this is just a dream, that the diner really is just the friendly diner, but when he goes to investigate this possibility, his worst fears (and his unconscious mind) were correct--there is something “other” underneath the cultural façade. That the menacing “other” figure is a homeless person is symbolically significant. In the capitalist economy of the marketplace, the illusions of pleasant reality that are created hinge upon the general economic welfare of the people; if the people’s need for sustenance and comfort are met, there are fewer reasons to suspect that our commonly-held cultural beliefs and ideologies are constructed. The monstrous homeless person is “proof” of these false realities. The marketplace does not work for everyone, and in fact functions at the expense of economically disadvantaged people.

The homeless person is also a representation of abjection. Kristeva’s theorization of abjection as being intimately linked to defilement and bodily waste is readily apparent in

the physical appearance of the “bum;” they have unkempt hair, weathered clothing, and are covered with thick black muck that we can assume is a mixture of human waste. In addition to this, the bum is often described as the “homeless man,” but the bum is, in fact, portrayed by a woman-- the actor Bonnie Aarons. Therefore, the combination of economic otherness, the abject nature of homelessness, and the feminine positionality of the bum create a figure that has several reasons to be violently cast out of the Symbolic Order and signaled as someone who should be feared. She is what is hidden underneath the illusions of the marketplace.

The degradation of abjection and the threatening nature of the Symbolic Order weigh heavily in the formation of the identities of Betty, Rita, Diane, and Camilla. However, at every turn, they are prevented from shaping their own identity or acting autonomously due to the overwhelming force of the marketplace. This economic structure does not consist simply of the business world of movie-making in Hollywood, but of the popular, predominantly male, imagination. Specifically, the marketplace’s vision of femininity traps all four characters within the confines of the masculine imagination, forcing them to reject the Symbolic Order and cultural marketplace if they wish to attain an autonomous existence.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the Hispanic identity of both Rita and Camilla is challenged by the hegemonic nature of the marketplace and forces them to choose between aligning themselves with the “ideal” vision of womanhood (“unraced”), or embrace an existence on the margins of society.

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<sup>3</sup>Here I am not conflating sex with gender, but simply reflecting the symbolic identification of women and femininity within the patriarchal structure.

As female actors, Betty and Rita, along with their corresponding manifestations/doppelgangers, Diane and Camilla, are constantly subjected to the objectification of the male gaze and must form themselves according to the values of patriarchal society. Whereas Betty arrives in Los Angeles as a comic exaggeration of the aspiring young female actor, Rita, a presumably accomplished movie star, is completely void of identity and is created in the image of the masculine imagination. When she is jettisoned from her privileged, constructed world, she finds herself at a complete loss because she, in fact, does not exist outside of the masculine context. For example, both Betty and Rita are aligned with archetypal Hollywood “types.” Betty is closely associated with the “icy blonde” Hitchcock actress. While she is young and naïve, her transformation in her audition illustrates her potential to transform herself into a formidable, sexualized lead. Rita, who literally aligns herself with Rita Hayworth, embodies the “dark mysterious woman,” an important aspect of the femme fatale, and a role that Hayworth often played. Frida Beckman posits that Rita’s characterization as the mysterious woman with no past grows into the complete femme fatale through the switch from Rita to Camilla (“From Irony to Narrative Crisis” 41).

Betty’s audition scene is the perfect representation of the ways in which the patriarchal marketplace molds women into objects for consumption. Betty’s previous attempt at acting, in which she practices her audition lines with Rita, reveals a woman too naïve and inexperienced to breathe any life into already dead dialogue. However, when she begins to audition with actor Woody Katz, she radically alters her approach toward the scene and toward acting itself. As she delivers a quiet, sexually charged performance in the place of an overly dramatic, soap-opera reading of the lines, both the film’s



audience and the audience in the audition room are transfixed. In his article, "Auditioning Betty in *Mulholland Drive*," George Toles notes that Betty's performance of complex sexuality is unexpected in the context of the narrative and jars the audience into a new consideration of who Betty is and how Naomi Watts portrays her. He says that we must consider "the possibility that Betty has sneakily, shadily kept something from us" (9). This new version of Betty is acutely aware of how she can use her sexuality to gain favor with men.

Luce Irigaray theorizes that women are a "commodity" bought and sold on the social marketplace in the service of the preservation of the patriarchal Symbolic Order: "The economy--in both the narrow and broad sense- that is in place in our societies thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate..." ("Women on the Market" 213). When Betty leaves the audition room, the remaining industry professionals, all men, congratulate themselves for finding an actor like Betty. They will buy her and then sell her to audiences. The purchase and sale of Betty's body and identity will be held by men and for men, without any real participation from her. She alters her demeanor and gender performance for the benefit of the men in the room and this constructed image that she has created will be edited, packaged, and sold. While Betty has certainly moved closer to becoming the "great actress" of her dreams, she is building a false construction of herself that will inevitably lead to the "alienation" that Irigaray cites. One can only perform a false image of themselves for so long before they lose their identity all together.

Throughout the course of *Mulholland Dr.*, Betty, Rita, Diane, and Camilla all gain and lose multiple identities. Forces of the sublime, specifically those that are patriarchally sublime, become even stronger in the face of intersecting identities such as the queer, female identity of Betty/Diane and the queer, Hispanic, female identity of Rita/Camilla. In an analysis of *Mulholland Dr.* through the conception of the feminine sublime, we must engage both with the sublime, othered existence of Betty and Rita, and later, Diane, and Camilla, and examine how each character engages with these forces.

In the first section of the film, Betty and Rita both inhabit identities that are cultivated to function within the patriarchal marketplace. Betty's naiveté and eagerness are quirky and harmless and Rita's vacancy of identity is ideal. Neither of these women pose a threat to the patriarchal structure and are largely allowed to exist without intervention. However, the film is complicated by the actions of both characters as Rita begins the journey to recover and rebuild her identity while Betty becomes a more confident and skilled actress. Both of these goals are intimately linked to each other and help form the romantic relationship between the two women.

Rita's traumatic loss of memory at the beginning of the film positions her as the quintessential woman in the marketplace of *Mulholland Dr.* and enables her to be the ideal romantic and sexual partner for a man. Having no personality and no tangible past allows the masculine subject to project his fantasies onto her, regardless of reality. If Rita had not become involved in a relationship with Betty, both as friends and as lovers, she would remain the perfect actress, giving Hollywood players the ability to transform her into their own vision, as indicated in the second section of the film. However, when she stumbles into Betty's aunt's apartment, this perfect canvas for the male imagination is

compromised as she begins to build her own sense of self. From the moment Betty discovers her naked in the shower, Rita begins to search for her identity. Betty's inquiries prompt her to choose the name "Rita," inspired by a poster for *Gilda*, a film focused on how the male imaginary shapes women.<sup>4</sup> The paradox of Rita's memory loss is that it actually removes her ability to act. For example, when Betty and Rita rehearse the scene for Betty's upcoming audition, Rita can hardly deliver the lines to create a convincing performance.

Rita's relationship with Betty not only fosters the search for her lost identity, but it helps to rebuild her sense of self simultaneously. As the first section of the film progresses, Rita grows to have aspirations, fears, and desires. She becomes paranoid when she sees men in black suits outside the Sierra Bonita apartment complex where they have gone to pay a visit to the mysterious Diane Selywn. Betty scolds her for this paranoia, but it is a symptom of Rita's personality regeneration. Rita is afraid of the police and these men in suits not only because of the large sum of money found in her purse, but because she is growing to fear patriarchal authority.

The visit to Diane Selywn's apartment is also significant in terms of the film's narrative trajectory and thematic evolution. When Rita and Betty seek out Diane's home, in the hopes that she knows Rita and will be able to shed some light on her mysterious identity, they find only the corpse of Diane rotting on the bed. The sight of this makes Rita scream, prompting Betty to cover Rita's mouth and support her as her knees give

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<sup>4</sup> *Gilda*, the 1946 Charles Vidor film, features Rita Hayworth as the title character- a singer/performer who is used as a pawn in the illegal dealings of her casino-owning husband and gambling ex-boyfriend.

out. Rita then runs out of the apartment, hands covering her face, with Betty following behind her. This is followed by a shot of both women standing together, Betty concernedly gazing at Rita. However, instead of a standard medium shot, the images blur, overlap, and stack on top of each other, creating the illusion that Betty and Rita's faces are becoming confused and constantly shifting. Both Rita and Betty are profoundly disturbed by the presence of the abject, decomposing corpse. In addition, most of the audience will understand at this point in the film that there is quite a lot of identity exchange happening in the film. Of course, the Diane Selwyn rotting on the bed is conflated with the Diane Selwyn of the film's second section, also played by Naomi Watts. Therefore, the corpse disrupts the characters at both the ideological and narrative level.

The dead, abject body is purposefully related to the abject body of the bum behind Winkie's. Both women are immersed in excremental bodily waste. They also both disrupt the character's marketplace illusions about the "truthful" nature of proscribed reality. The bum reveals the ugliness of the capitalist marketplace and Diane Selwyn's corpse highlights the instability of identity. In their positioning as the ultimate examples of living and dead feminine abjection, the narrative and ideology of the film is laced with the presence of completely othered femininity. This is what is at stake for Rita and Betty. They can either conform to their assigned marketplace roles, or face the potentiality of total abjection.

This process of precarious identity reclamation reaches its peak during the sexual encounter that Rita and Betty share with one another. At Betty's insistence, Rita joins her in the bed, shedding both her blonde wig and the towel that covers her body. For Betty,

Rita removes all artifice and disguise, revealing her true, developing self.<sup>5</sup> This prompts Betty to initiate sex, asking Rita, “Have you done this before?” to which Rita replies, “I don’t know.” Engaging in a same-sex encounter is of key importance to Rita’s search for her lost identity. Because this is essentially her first sexual experience, Rita erases her presumed heteronormativity and replaces it with a queer identity. San Filippo notes, however, that this scene relies heavily on heteronormative perceptions of queer female sexuality: “Both of *Mulholland Drive*’s sex scenes seem to purposefully (and playfully) channel the representational history of female same-sex erotica” (“The ‘Other’ Dreamgirl” 42). The sexual encounter between Betty and Rita is situated within this heteronormative history of “lesbian porn” through the scene’s emphasis on both women’s “virginal” characterization, their breasts, and heavy kissing and petting. San Filippo sees this as Lynch deliberately queering the proscribed normative text and exposing its inherent absurdity. Lynch accomplishes this by creating a scene that is equally absurd and genuine simultaneously. This further emphasizes the difficulty of identity-reclamation within the hegemonic marketplace. Even Rita, who exists on the margins of society, envisions what queer female sex is “supposed” to be according to the heteronormative standard.

Rita’s adoption of queerness moves her even further from her assigned position as a canvas for the male imagination and is a flagrant rejection of her symbolic place in the patriarchal structure. Similarly, Betty’s adoption of a queer identity forces her to

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<sup>5</sup> In this scene, she also removes the short blonde wig she has adopted to disguise herself from the unseen forces she is afraid of. This wig makes her look similar to Betty. Therefore, in this sequence Rita removes her disguise, dismisses her own associations with Betty’s white femininity in favor of her ever-evolving, unconcealed self.

construct a version of herself that does not rely on marketplace stereotypes of femininity. Previously, Betty presented herself as a naïve, carefree young woman looking to make it big. However, when Rita comes into her life Betty is challenged to engage with life outside of the normative realm. Betty wants to call the police when Rita remembers her car accident, but Rita stops her. Betty forgoes her chance to meet Adam the director, an opportunity that would surely have benefited her pursuit of acting, in favor of helping Rita find her lost identity by breaking into an apartment. Rita pushes Betty outside of the marketplace and into the margins where she is able to become a more autonomous person and to engage in transgressive sexual acts. In the world of *Mulholland Dr.* that is ruled over by mysterious marketplace powers manifested in the forms of the puzzling Mr. Roque and the agent of the Castiglione brothers, the Cowboy, Rita and Betty's betrayal of their marketplace role must be punished. Immediately following Rita's sexual experience with Betty, she begins murmuring in Spanish as she sleeps. When Betty wakes her, Rita insists that they travel "somewhere." That place, whether recalled from a memory of her previous identity, or seen in a dream, is Club Silencio.

The Club Silencio sequence is not only significant because it marks the narrative turning point for the characters, but because of its importance for Betty and Rita's personal development. Club Silencio, tucked away in a dirty Los Angeles alley, is a location that seems to exist nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. Throughout the first section of the film, the blue and red colors of the club, both of which are significant colors in all of David Lynch's film and television work, can be found in the objects and locations populating *Mulholland Dr.* The blue key, which Rita finds in her purse full of money, the red curtains and blue desk lamp in Mr. Roque's office, all invoke Club

Silencio and insert its inherent mystery and threat throughout the entire film. Lynch's affinity for the color red can be traced to his heavy reliance on Hitchcockian narrative devices and visual motifs. In Hitchcock's work, red curtains, reminiscent of the curtains of the theatrical stage, brings the audience's attention to the integration of the theatrical, imagined world with our sense of reality or "real" life. This visual and narrative perspective is announced by the red curtains in Mr. Rouque's office and the red curtains of the Club Silencio stage.

The very act of arriving at Club Silencio hinges upon the resurgence of Spanish into Rita's dream life and waking life. The timing of this resurgence is particularly significant because it directly follows Rita's sexual encounter with Betty in which she fully rejects her role as an object of the masculine imagination. As she claims (or reclaims) her queer identity, she also rediscovers her Latina identity. Vernon Shetley observes how Hispanic identity and history function in both *Mulholland Dr.* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* ("The Presence of the Past"). In *Vertigo* (1958), Hitchcock both acknowledges the Hispanic history of California, San Francisco particularly, and obscures it at the same time. The story of Carlotta Valdez, the Hispanic burlesque performer who marries a rich, white man, only to be discarded and separated from her child, hinges upon the intersection of colonialism and patriarchal privilege. While this is the backdrop of Madeline's struggle, the narrative obscures the significance of colonial oppression in favor of emphasizing Hitchcock's icy blonde image of the alluring female character. Lynch, however, takes the opposite approach by first introducing Rita as a character lacking racial identity, then allowing her Latina existence to become visible at the moment when she has rejected the masculine imaginary. San Filippo also notes that

Rita's Hispanic identity remains unnoticeable until she wakes from a nightmare murmuring in Spanish ("The 'Other' Dreamgirl" 29). Through this introduction of racialized identity, Lynch draws a stark comparison between both the characters of Rita and Betty, one Hispanic and one white, and between representations of white femininity and racialized femininity.<sup>6</sup>

These themes are introduced along with Club Silencio because the aesthetic and philosophical presence of the club sequence and location rest on the destruction of trust in constructed certainties. Jennifer A. Hudson asserts that in the Club Silencio sequence, Lynch is engaging poststructural theory, specifically the work of Jaques Lacan. Hudson states, "David Lynch successfully reverses coherence by making the traditional 'sense' (logic) of temporal, spatial, psychological, and linguistic conditions of the film's characters and surrealistic world defer to the nonlogical 'sense' (intuitive and emotional perception) of those conditions" ("No Hay Banda and yet We Hear a Band" 17). In other words, for the majority of the film's narrative, we have felt relatively comfortable trusting our physical senses and relying on our linear conception of the world. However, Club Silencio illustrates that our trust in the normative conception of reality is misplaced. The famous line from the master of ceremonies, "No hay banda, and yet we hear a band," draws attention to our false confidence in the ability of our senses to interpret truth and the shortcomings of our cognition to fully realize the discrepancy between sensed reality and "actual" reality. Similarly, Nochimson relates the revelations of Club Silencio to

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<sup>6</sup> It is also worth noting that Rita Hayworth, from whom Rita takes her name, had a personal history of struggle with identity and ethnicity. Hayworth, born Margarita Carmen Cansino, was convinced to change her Spanish name to something more Anglo-American so she would not continue to be type-cast as the "exotic" woman. (McLean 31, 36)



Lynch's exposure of the lies of the Hollywood marketplace: "It [Club Silencio] is a place in which the illusions that fill Hollywood are revealed by a demonic master of ceremonies. 'It's all tape recorded,' he mockingly says" (*David Lynch Swerves* 109).

The emphasis on the lies of the marketplace and our consequential belief in proscribed conceptions of reality situate Club Silencio in a surreal space. Surrealism is a movement dedicated to the exploration of one's own unconscious self and its relation to other people and the outside world. Because the Club Silencio sequence dares both the characters and the audience to critically examine our notions of reality that we have taken for granted, the door for the expedition into our own minds to search for identities and realities that are less false (as Lynch would frame them) is made possible.

This expedition is complicated by the multi-cultural nature of the club. On the stage, the master of ceremonies, a man of Hispanic origin, speaks to the audience with authority through a mix of English, Spanish, and French. Unless the audience has a working understanding of all three languages, his use of multiple languages seems to blend together and form one cohesive whole. Even though not all, or even the majority, of the audience will be able to decipher every specific word spoken, we somehow understand him perfectly. This specific use of language paired with his demonstration of the sense trickery of sight and sound presents us with a view of the material world and social differences, such as language, as being wholly constructed. In this sequence, Lynch prompts us to try and break down artificial barriers to seek something deeper, not necessarily a one true "reality" free of constructed illusions, but perhaps a truth that has been less tampered with by marketplace forces.

The master of ceremonies walks the audience through a recording of various musical instruments. He prompts a musician to walk on stage playing a muted trumpet. The musician begins to mime playing the instrument, then moves it away from his lips to demonstrate that the source of the sound is not, in fact, his body, but something mechanical and synthetic--the tape recording. He continuously tells us that what we are hearing, the music of a symphony, is not “real,” that it is an “illusion.” However, in spite of this repeated information, it is still shocking to realize that what we sense as being “true,” the music that we hear, is actually not real in the way we perceive it through our senses. The music has no physical, material reality. Jennifer M. Barker approaches the Club Silencio sequence as an example of a cinematic experience in which viewers are able to take on the experience of synaesthesia “as a way of being in space and time” (“Out of Sync, Out of Sight: Synaesthesia and Film Spectacle” 236). Barker argues that Club Silencio “...carves out a tremulous space between past and present, plenitude and loss, vitality and decay, and illusion and reality. That passage, this tumultuous in-between state in which Betty and the viewer are caught, is articulated in sensual terms, as a perpetual movement between senses rather than a fixed perception in and of a single sense modality” (241). This liminal, in-between space that Barker describes is a reflection of sublimity. Club Silencio gives us a location in which we discover that knowledge and logic cannot serve as our sole method of interaction with the world.

The challenge of Club Silencio is not only that we are faced with the harsh truth that we cannot trust our own senses, but that we also cannot conceptualize this space and the deconstruction of perceived truths. Lyotard notes that, the sublime sentiment “takes place... when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle,

come to match a concept” (“Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” 146). The performance of the Club Silencio master of ceremonies reveals that neither Betty nor Rita have the ability to comprehend reality in its most raw, complex forms. If they cannot trust the reality that their senses interpret for them, what is to be trusted? This is a challenge of the imagination and the moment of the sublime feeling that Kant outlines in his critique. When Betty and Rita are confronted with the uncertainty of sense perception, they are forced to turn their imaginations toward interpreting and contextualizing this new information. However, because the imagination is itself dependent on experiences and senses, no logical conclusions can be reached. Kant states that the sublime feeling, “arises from the imagination’s inadequacy, in an aesthetic estimation of magnitude” (*Critique of Judgment* 114). The weight of the revelation of Club Silencio is overwhelming for both characters and they are left only with the sublime feeling of the unknowableness of the world.

Upon seeing this presentation that shatters confidence in our own senses and perception of reality, Betty experiences violent convulsions. As she shakes in her seat, having locked eyes with the master of ceremonies, Rita holds on to her, attempting to offer her physical stability. The realization of falsified reality is shocking to Betty, as over the course of the first section of the film, she has become more and more entrenched within the male imagination. Thus, when she claims a queer identity, she must be immediately reprimanded and made to understand the full consequences of her actions. However unknowingly, she has thrown away the security that patriarchal society was ready to extend to her. When Betty utterly transformed before the eyes of the Hollywood middlemen in her audition, she was proving her value to the masculine imagination in the

Hollywood marketplace. She was thus positioned to reap the benefits of opening herself up to this structure. Upon experiencing sexual and emotional intimacy with Rita, however, she forgoes these privileges. Conversely, Rita, who has already been living on the margins of the Hollywood marketplace since she began to seek out and build her own autonomous self, is better equipped to understand and cope with the events of Club Silencio because she has been actively embracing a marginalized identity.

Rita experiences the next event at Club Silencio, the performance of Rebekah Del Rio, much differently than Betty. Filippo notes that in this moment of the film, “Rita’s repressed Latina ethnicity emerges full force via the distinctly similar-looking Rebekah Del Rio’s lip-synched Spanish-language rendition of Roy Orbinsons’s ‘Crying’” (“The ‘Other’ Dreamgirl” 30). Del Rio, dressed in red and black with yellow and red makeup on and a single gemstone tear, sings acapella, and her performance is largely unintelligible for English-speaking audiences and the English-speaking Betty. However, for Rita, not only the aesthetic and emotion of the performance resonates, but also the lyrics of the song. In this version of Orbinson’s original (many of the lyrics have been slightly altered), the song describes a person who thought they were over their lost love, but encounters them and experiences a resurgence of loss and sadness. When del Rio sings the line, “You don’t love me anymore and I’ll always be crying for your love, crying for your love,” both Rita and Betty begin to cry; they lean toward each other and embrace as they tearfully watch del Rio perform. Rita, who understands the Spanish-language lyrics, has a very different relationship to this moment than Betty does. Betty is reacting to the emotion of the moment, the events directly preceding their journey to Club Silencio, and the overwhelming force of the atmosphere of the location. Rita is reacting

to these same things, but also comprehends the significance of the moment through the lyrics of the song. While it is tempting to see this performance as foreshadowing the conflict between the versions of their characters in the second section of the film, it is also important to examine the song's significance for the characters within the world of the first section.

The emotional resonance of this performance of "Crying" is certainly not lost on the audience. Without any knowledge of the lyrics to the original song, or what they mean in Spanish, the performance is mesmerizing and incredibly sad. When del Rio collapses on stage as her voice continues to fill the theatre, it is shocking to witness, even after the master of ceremonies demonstrated to us the fallibility of our senses and cognition, and the illusion of technologically recorded "reality." This is yet another example of abject femininity. Del Rio's voice seems to come from beyond the grave, a last message from a dead and decaying woman. Once del Rio collapses and is taken backstage, Betty reaches into her purse and discovers the blue box. While the song speaks of the sadness upon ending romantic relationships, the blue box is the object that will bring this about for Rita and Betty. The romantic connection between Betty and Rita is one that does not seem like it can be sustained. The tumult within Rita's life and identity paired with Betty's quest to belong in the patriarchal order and the Hollywood marketplace will eventually render this relationship impossible. The blue box is perhaps a direct manifestation of the song and an example of Lynch's vision of non-linear reality that plays an integral part in the second section of the film.

When they arrive back at Betty's apartment to retrieve the blue, triangular key they found in Rita's purse, Betty abruptly disappears. Rita searches for her in the apartment,

but Betty cannot be found. Rita opens the blue box and then also disappears when we travel through the open box's blackness. It is of particular note that Betty disappears before the box is to be opened. As previously mentioned, Rita's marginalized identity has better equipped her to confront the challenges of Club Silencio. Betty, who has not experienced life on the periphery of the Hollywood marketplace, is overwhelmed by what she has witnessed and is unable to face the danger of the mysterious blue box. Rita journeys on without Betty, unwilling to let the contents of the blue box go undiscovered.

At the end of the first section of the film, it seems that Rita is well on her way to utilizing the philosophy of the feminine sublime. She approaches the incalculable otherness that is herself and the overwhelming force of sublimity with respect; that is, attempting to acknowledge it for itself and to embrace her othered identity while pushing back against this threatening force. Because she opens the blue box and engages with the vast blackness that can be found inside, we see that she harbors a natural curiosity and desire to engage with the unknowable and the unrepresentable.

However, we cannot follow Rita and her development after *we* travel through the blue box. This could be because there is no further development for Rita after this point; perhaps her story abruptly ends. Perhaps Rita is present in Camilla and they are, indeed, one and the same person, as the popular interpretation advocates, insisting that Rita and Betty are simply dream versions of the "real" Diane and Camilla. However one chooses to conceptualize the end of the film's first narrative, we cannot follow Rita's journey any further and must focus our concentration on her double/doppelganger, Camilla.

The transition through the blue box marks the point of the film where Betty and Rita appear to transform into Diane and Camilla. In much of the scholarly writing on

*Mulholland Dr.*, this narrative shift is read as a change from dream to reality. However, upon reflecting on the filmography of Lynch, it is clear that he deals neither in dream worlds nor in “real” worlds, but in combinations of the two, or in places removed from this dichotomy all together. In the second section of the film, our female protagonists are radically different characters inhabiting the same bodies, performed by the same actors. Diane and Camilla are still engaged in a romantic affair with each other. Motifs and locations from the first section of the film also reappear in the second, such as Winkie’s diner, the blue key, Adam Kesher as the director, and several other small characters. These “crossover” elements emphasize that the story of the second section, while separate from the narrative of part one, is heavily informed and connected with the film’s first section.

The second section of the film is decidedly harder to interpret. The events of the narrative are, quite possibly, not shown in a linear progression, characters appear and disappear, our positioning in the world of the film is being called into question, and it is harder to align ourselves with either Camilla or Diane. The popular interpretation that the first section “was all a dream” and the second section is Diane’s waking world is complicated by the nature of the reality of the second section. Nochimson states that, “If anything, in the post-black-hole parallel world, time, and space are more chaotic and out of synch with ordinary norms of materiality than in the pre-black-hole action” (*David Lynch Swerves* 115). The second section is infinitely more complex and does not abide by linear logic, unlike most of the first section of the film. The argument could be made that the second section is much more dreamlike than the first.

When one examines *Mulholland Dr.* in the context of Lynch's body of work, it is clear that at no point in his films does Lynch strictly deal in worlds that are consisted solely of dream space or waking life; the worlds are always confused and they consistently bleed into each other. Even in what is perhaps his most delineated fictional world, *Twin Peaks*, the dream space of Agent Cooper works with and shapes his waking world, revealing to him more "truth" than his investigations in the physical world. In fact, the space of the Red Room is the ultimate symbiosis of dream world and waking world. It once existed in the dreams of Agent Cooper, but ultimately is positioned as a location that resides somewhere between dream and waking life, or even "beyond life and death" (the title of the last episode of the show's second season). In this sense, Club Silencio and the Red Room are similar; they both inhabit an in-between locality that cannot be placed in time, space, or even in one reality. Lynch's use of surreal visual and narrative techniques opens the door for us to view these narratives and spaces as metaphors for the sublime's "radical alterity that remains unassimilable to representation" (Freeman 11). Therefore, Club Silencio, Diane's apartment, and Winkie's function as physical spaces for the characters to encounter the alterity within themselves and for the audience to witness this struggle.

Another question that must be addressed is how we should interpret the behavior shift from the character of Rita to Camilla. If we read Rita as developing a sense of curiosity and reverence for the presence of the other, specifically as manifested through the presence of the blue box, in accordance with Freeman's conception of the feminine sublime, what is significant about Camilla's behavior toward Diane and the world at large? The change from Rita to Camilla is radical. We move from a character who is



growing to acknowledge her Hispanic, queer, female identity to one that performs the classic, sexually promiscuous femme fatale. The characterization of Camilla as a devious bisexual leads the audience to fundamentally distrust her not only based on her seeming betrayal of her relationship with Diane, but also based on biphobic, heteronormative conventions of bisexual people, specifically bisexual women as dangerous and treacherous. This trained reaction we have toward Camilla's behavior is further emphasized by her overtly sexual demeanor, both in her interactions with Diane and with almost everyone else she encounters. When both she and Diane are working on Adam's film set, she asks Diane to stay as Adam shows the lead actor how to properly kiss her on film. Camilla looks at Diane intently as Adam leans in for a kiss, leaving Diane visually shaken. Camilla also engages in a kiss in front of Diane at the dinner party at Adam's house. The blonde woman, who in the first half of the film was named Camilla (called "the girl" by the Castiglione brothers), whispers something in Camilla's ear and they kiss, both looking back at Diane as she watches their embrace. In this instance Camilla is essentially kissing herself in yet another instance of the fluid nature of identity in Lynch's vision of reality. Camilla's blatant sexual nature is seemingly exercised to unsettle Diane, but not because Camilla desires to exhibit her sexuality in this manner. Just as Betty performs male-oriented sexuality for the men at her audition, so does Camilla appear to act out the role of the femme fatale for the benefit of the men surrounding her. She has integrated the male perception of her identity into her interior self. This is significantly linked to the presence of identity politics surrounding Rita in the first section of the film. Furthermore, Filippo argues that this characterization of Camilla is a conscious choice on Lynch's part: "It would seem predictable then that in the ideology-reinforcing Hollywood

that Lynch's characters inhabit, Camilla would play her clichéd role as fickle, duplicitous bisexual as loyally as Diane adheres to the 'tragic lesbian' tradition..." ("The 'Other' Dreamgirl" 35). Here Filippo highlights that both characters may feel trapped by the marketplace forces that surround them and they conform to these pressures by eventually inhabiting the roles they have been assigned.

In the film's first section, Rita begins as a blank slate, cleansed of her racial and sexual identities. This forces Rita to reclaim her identity and rediscover her queer and Latina self. However, in the second section of the film, Camilla is firmly planted within a specific "queer" identity (as the devious bisexual woman) and within her Latina identity as a woman who is publicly hypersexual and the canvas for male erotic fantasies. Therefore, the shift from Rita to Camilla is the shift from someone who is exploring and defining their own identity to someone who only exists within the context of identities laid out for them by the white, heteronormative marketplace.

The positioning of Diane versus Betty is also important to explore. Whereas Betty is growing her identity as an actor on the cusp of being discovered and as a queer woman, Diane is a struggling actor cast in minor parts and behaves in a way that is conducive to being read as a lesbian. While Betty was engaging with queer identity, she also performed gender in a traditionally feminine way. Her femininity was framed around her childhood growing up in small town Canada and she presents herself as a "wholesome" young woman. When she engages in a same-sex relationship with Rita, she does not lose her naiveté or traditionally proper physical appearance. This is starkly contrasted with Diane's gender performance. She speaks in harsh tones and short sentences. She wears clothes that are much more androgynous and male-oriented. Her hair, although the same

length and color, is styled to be much more angular, almost spiky, whereas Betty's hair is smooth and lightly curled at the ends.

The juxtapositions between Rita and Betty and Camilla and Diane serve to highlight the very different realities in which they exist. For Rita and Betty, they allow themselves to explore identity outside of the sanctioned roles that are prescribed within the marketplace. They are able to allow themselves this exploration because they are not *yet* entirely dependent on the marketplace. However, in the second section of the film, Camilla is an established screen presence and Diane is also employed as an actor, both positions that are entirely dependent upon marketplace visions. In this comparison, Lynch seems to be showing us the difference between exploring sanctioned identity and exploring subversive identity and how this exploration radically changes depending on one's location in a larger ideological framework.

The harsh marketplace reality of the film's second section becomes abundantly clear when we return, once again, to Winkie's and find Diane hiring the hitman, Joe, from the first section of the film, to kill Camilla. Joe explains to Diane that once "it is done" she will find a blue key "where they talked about." In a reality where sexuality and queerness cannot be explored, Diane is trapped by heteronormative confines and cannot remove herself from the situation with Camilla in a positive manner. According to the marketplace, there cannot be a peaceful break in this same-sex relationship because one or both of the individuals participating in unsanctioned behavior must be punished.

In the final moments of the film, we are shown an image of Betty and Rita as doppelgangers, with Rita dressed in her blonde wig, smiling and embracing, overlaid with both images of the Los Angeles skyline and the face of the bum behind Winkie's.

This is a moment that occurs outside of either narrative reality we are given in the film. Perhaps this image is representative of a reality in which Rita and Betty shared this pleasurable moment with each other? However, we do know that this moment is impossible in either reality we witnessed. Happiness for this couple could not come about in these narratives because of the pressure of marketplace identity and behavioral regulations.

While happiness is impossible, or will become impossible, in both narrative realities of the film, the environment of the second reality is more harsh and confining than the explorative nature of the first reality. This is because of the characters' proximity to the marketplace. Nonetheless, the impending threat of abjection is found throughout the film's first section, signaling a kind of warning from the marketplace powers, a message showing the women what could become of them if they decide to forgo their assigned roles within the patriarchal realm. In the second reality, both women are deeply entrenched in marketplace values, both economically and morally, which makes exploration outside of these norms impossible. In the first reality, Rita is able to engage with otherness in a positive way; she fosters otherness inside of herself and sees it in others as well. She seeks it out when she asks Betty to accompany her to Club Silencio and directly faces it when she opens the blue box. However, Betty cannot face the blue box or the reality of Club Silencio because she has positioned herself within the masculine imaginary of the Symbolic Order and the marketplace. Neither Camilla nor Diane are afforded such opportunities in their reality. They are cut off from the otherness that surrounds them and they are alienated from the otherness inside themselves as well. Diane's queerness is relegated into a heteronormative stereotype of the vengeful butch,

Camilla is reduced to a treacherous bisexual and an excessively sexual Latina. In both characters, their inherent otherness is dictated and molded into a figure that the hegemonic marketplace deems appropriate. Rita seeks out and engages the sublime, recognizing it in herself and in her surroundings, which allows her to become a more “whole” person.

While we are not given the opportunity to see how or if Rita further develops her relationship with sublimity past her encounter with the blue box, we can recognize that she is a more fully developed person because of the manner in which she chooses to engage with the sublime. We do not know how her story ends, or if it ends at all, but there is certainly value in having this positive experience with sublimity. The main character in *Under the Skin* has a similar experience of identity exploration as Rita does. She also has access to sublime, unrepresentable spaces because of her own inherent otherness. However, unlike our journey with Rita, we know how the creature’s story ends.

### III. Discovering the Liminal Female Body in *Under the Skin*

Jonathan Glazer's 2014 film *Under the Skin* was clearly a breakthrough moment for the director. Having made two previous feature films, *Sexy Beast* (2000) and *Birth* (2004), and established himself as a prominent director of music videos, Glazer utilized his experience and skill to create a film that was unexpected and jarring. While critics seemed somewhat enamored by the film, the general public did not feel the same way; this is exhibited by the 85% fresh rating from critics on Rotten Tomatoes versus the 55% rating by audience members on the site. Even within the audience community on the rating site, those marked as "super reviewers" generally give the film a much higher rating than the average site reviewer. One can easily conceive that not only the film's challenging aesthetic, but its thematic material work together to alienate the "average" audience. It is easy to speculate that this divided reaction among critics and the audience is due to the film's heavily "stylized" aesthetic and dependence on filmic language that many audience members may not have encountered previously.

*Under the Skin*, based on Michel Faber's 2000 novel of the same name, presents us with the story of a non-human creature (Scarlett Johansson) masquerading as a human woman in order to trick men into coming home with her. Once the creature captures them, their body is harvested for an unknown reason, leaving only their skin remaining. While the film vaguely inherits the origin of the main character and her mission from the novel, little else of the source material remains intact, with the exception of the Scottish

landscape. Throughout the film we see the creature “becoming” human and, more specifically, a woman. This process of acculturation allows us to examine how the creature navigates a gendered world and how that impacts her ability to engage with radical otherness. She begins to engage with the sublime from her own position of liminality, specifically through the abjection of her feminine body, but is prevented from this because of the threat her monstrous body poses to the Symbolic Order.

The process of becoming a woman is troubling, not only for the creature who we follow, but for the audience as well. The narrative of the film recounts the physical creation of a woman and the power associated with femininity. However, we also see how femininity and womanhood make the creature a target of violence and social subordination. Ultimately the threat of violence and physical oppression against the feminine body of the creature causes her death. Yet, it is essential to note that she not only dies because of her woman-ness, but because of her inherent otherness. This is, perhaps, one important reason why the film is alienating to a mainstream audience--the focus on the complex balance between the power of the othered individual and the violence that ensues because of that otherness is not often shown so explicitly in contemporary cinema.

The otherness of the creature is twofold: she inhabits a female body othered by the patriarchal structure, and she inhabits a non-human body that is perceived as inherently dangerous by a homogenous society. Therefore, the liminality of her body, both human and non-human, both female and not female, forces the creature to exist outside of structured society altogether. While she can enter briefly to trap a human man, she can

never belong to or understand the human world. Outside of human society and symbology, she encounters patriarchal forces as a threat to her existence.

The marginalized, liminal body is often associated with either femininity or some kind of physical “defect.” In either case, the presence of abjection creates the theoretical space for these othered bodies to be considered threatening to society. Kristeva theorizes that the experience of abjection is “being opposed to *P*” (*Powers of Horror* 1). She signals the corpse as being the ultimate abject symbol (3). That which is abject is both alive and dead, here and there, inside the body and outside the body. Abjection occurs in the theoretical space that is unknowable and unrepresentable. This unrepresentability, similar to Lyotard’s assertion that the sublime exists in modern art through un-representation, functions to further limit the social spaces that abject bodies are allowed to inhabit (“Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” 149). For example, in Kristeva’s theorization, menstrual blood comes to signify the “danger issuing from within the identity” of femininity (*Powers of Horror* 71). Menstrual blood is dangerous because it holds the power to disrupt our conceptions of the border between life and death; blood that flows from no wound. This situates the biologically feminine body ambiguously between social ideas of proper bodily function and the internal body and external reality.

This ambiguous space is where the creature’s body exists. She is liminal; a walking example of abjection. This is why she is both attractive and frightening to the men she encounters. There is something that lures one to see the abject, the sublime, but fear and self-preservation regulate behavior as well. The lumberjack who seeks to satisfy his sexual cravings with the attractive body of the creature is repulsed when her abject,



sublime nature is revealed. Because the abject is neither living nor dead, he must destroy her body, lest he become infected by abjection itself.

The threat of the abject, feminine body is explored in Barbara Creed's 1993 book, *The Monstrous Feminine*. Creed examines monstrous femininity through Kristeva's theory of abjection, asserting that "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (*The Monstrous-Feminine* 1). *Under the Skin* engages with the dialogue of femininity and monstrosity by giving us a character that lives on the border of multiple identities. Because she is both human and not human she is frightening. She is a woman yet is not a woman simultaneously and that is monstrous. According to the logic of the patriarchal order, you must be all one thing or another, never something that is liminal, that confuses rigid boundaries. Because the creature's body is powerful yet feminine, she is positioned on that very boundary that should not exist. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray theorizes that the female body, in its positioning within a patriarchal social economy, is inherently conflicted: "She is *both one and the other*. She is at once decay and growth... She is equally *neither one nor the other*. Or is she rather between the one and the other--that elusive gap between two discrete bodies? between two realizations of one body?" (165 [emphasis original]) The female body cannot be reconciled with the demands that patriarchal society has placed upon it. Thus, women must attempt to function as liminal beings in a strictly binary society.

Because of the creature's embodied liminality, she is endangered by male humans and males of her own species. While she is a target for human men because of her body and the specific symbolic messages performed by her body, including "slutty" clothing

and suggestive body language, she is also a target of the “motorcycle man” who acts as her boss or overseer. The audience interprets this “man” as a creature of the same species as the main character whose role is differentiated by his performance of masculinity. We have no evidence of a gendered system within the culture and societal norms of the creatures, but we see human systems of gendered labor at work in their tasks on Earth. Because the main character performs traditional, heteronormative femininity through her physical appearance and body language, her work is that of the “peasants” or “serfs.” Conversely, the Motorcycle Man performs masculinity and is therefore assigned the role of a feudal lord. While we can speculate on the structure of the social system of these non-human individuals, it is clear that our specific system of gendered labor divisions and historic European class society is adopted by the creatures. The ratification of gendered labor seems especially apparent in light of the androgynous “natural” figure that the body of the main character takes at the end of the film.

The first aspect of the creature’s body that we see is the creation of her eye. In the very beginning of the film, vague shapes and colors fill the screen. It is only after the eye has been assembled that we realize what we have been gazing at. As the eye begins to take a recognizable form, we hear her begin to practice English words, and notably the word “film” is repeated several times. Because she is created in a black, void space, we are left with the impression that she was created from nothingness. This nothingness takes the form of synthetic flesh when her “true” body is revealed at the end of the film, but before that moment, we do not understand who or what she is; she seems to have sprung up from a black hole. These visual representations of birth or creation align with Kristeva’s theorization of the “archaic mother” and the patriarchal fear of the mother’s

“generative powers” (*Powers of Horror* 77). Just as the space from which the creature emerges is mysterious and vast, so is the patriarchal conception of the mother’s womb as a place of dark unknowableness. Of course, the void black spaces in the film are representations of sublimity itself--spaces that contain the unknowable vastness of otherness. That something material, specifically something resembling a human, would emerge from this sublime nothingness is frightening and threatens our teleological ideology of cause and effect.

This creation scene positions the film from its very beginning within a surrealist context. The eye is, of course, an important motif within surreal art, specifically painting and film. Dali and Bunel’s famous 1929 film, *Un Chien Andalou*, begins with the cutting of an eye with a razor, insinuating the violent destruction of the audience’s spectatorship. Conversely in *Under the Skin*, we begin with the creation of a new eye, a new position of spectatorship that is both literally and figuratively alien. If the primary goal of the surrealist project is to subvert our “normal” understandings of reality, then *Under the Skin* works toward this goal from its very first moments.

This initial sequence also sheds light on the specific deployment of surrealism that Glazer utilizes in this film. Lynch uses surrealism to highlight the false separation of our conscious and subconscious realities and our false trust in the illusions of the marketplace in *Mulholland Dr.* Similarly, *Under the Skin* deals directly with the violent consequences of the constructed nature of the Symbolic Order. Both Diane and the creature die as a result of their interaction with sublimity. However, Diane’s death is caused by her decision to situate herself within the masculine economy, whereas the creature’s death is prompted by the advance of the masculine economy into the physical and theoretical

space allocated for the “others” of society. Diane could have taken steps to remove herself from her ideologically harmful situation, but the creature could not escape because the harmful forces actively sought her out.

The maintained presence of the sublime throughout the film, specifically its emphasis on negative spaces, further emphasize the surreal visual and narrative nature of the film. The absence of a recognizable origin of the creature, her “birth” from completely black spaces, is reminiscent of the transitory space of the blue box in *Mulholland Dr.* Just as Camilla and Diane emerge from this transition through the blue box as changed individuals, so does the creature emerge from each encounter with vast black spaces changed in either subtle or fundamental ways. Each experience with complete blackness, or whiteness, forces the creature to engage with the otherness of sublimity, and through each experience she gains more understanding of her place in the human world and within her own liminal identity. The sublime spaces of Scotland’s landscape force the creature to not only consider her positionality within the theoretical human world, but within the material human world as well. The film’s relationship with these liminal spaces not only challenges the identity of the creature, but the audience’s willingness to engage with these reflections of radical negative spaces, which are uncomfortable to view. Kant’s conception of sublimity engages with this idea of a simultaneous pleasure and displeasure at the sight of ultimate otherness. Likewise, the philosophy of surrealism encourages these uncomfortable exchanges with representations of sublimity and fragments of the Real. Thus the experience of the film and the narrative is challenging for both the creature and the audience alike.

Once we have witnessed the formation and birth of the creature, we first see her in human form when she is standing over the body of a dead or dying woman who looks very similar to her. The woman's body is lying on the floor as the creature takes off her clothes and puts them on her own body. This takes place in an entirely bright white space, the opposite of the blackness we inhabited during the first scene of the film. This bright white space is also the first instance where the power and dangerous potential of the creature is highlighted. When she is taking the clothes off the woman, the camera looks up at her from below, an angle that emphasizes her power and strength. She also appears to be an entity that lacks the ability to empathize with others, exhibited by her emotionless treatment of the woman as she removes her clothes. However, once the creature has fully dressed herself, she examines an ant on the tip of her fingernail. She gazes at it intently, watching as it moves on her finger. The film cuts to an extreme close-up of the ant, which fills the screen, overstating its size and making it look far more threatening than we would normally think.<sup>7</sup> In her consideration of the ant, a pivotal moment of the film is foreshadowed. While she appears to lack empathy, interactions with beings that do not benefit from structural privilege play an important role in her emotional and ideological growth.

Through the alien's exploits she continues the process of acculturation by examining how the men respond to specific things she says and does. How the men react to her sexual advances is not only a reflection of the state of her humanness, but of men's reaction to the presence of the female body. When the filmmakers were filming the

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<sup>7</sup> Here, once again, the film references *Un Chien Andalou* and the famous scene in which ants crawl out of the center of a man's hand.

scenes depicting the alien attempting to seduce men, they utilized hidden cameras to film people without their knowledge and without a script, capturing the most genuine reactions possible (Romney “Unearthly Stranger”). Therefore, the source of these sequences is our own “reality” and not one belonging only to the film. This serves to frame the entirety of the film as an allegorical meditation on the otherness of the female body that is cultivated around us every day. This also enables Glazer and Johansson to transform the relationship of the camera with both the female body and the audience. In Ara Osterweil’s essay, “The Perils of Becoming Female,” she observes: “Seen through the figure of a woman who both looks with a piercing gaze and is constructed deliberately ‘to-be-looked-at,’ conventional gender balance is implicitly challenged” (47). The radically altered perspective of the camera forces the audience to associate themselves with an othered, feminine subjectivity and thus engage with sublime spaces from this, perhaps foreign, perspective.

Similarly, the “otherworldly” score of the film helps to position the audience outside of themselves and into the creature’s profoundly abject subjectivity. Mica Levi, whom Glazer chose to score the film, uses untraditional instruments and musical arrangements to emphasize the alterity of both the narrative techniques of the film and the character herself. In addition, the presence of a female composer, a rarity in both commercial and independent cinema, embeds another layer of feminine positionality into the narrative and the overall aesthetic of the film. By utilizing alternative methods to score the film, Levi performs the liminal femininity of the creature through the music of the film. Because the score is so integral to the experience of this film and its world-building, Levi’s work

amplifies the uncomfortable experience of existing in an abject, feminine body and encountering “untamed” vast spaces and conceptions simultaneously.

Each time the creature successfully lures a man into her house, we return to vast, negative spaces. The room she takes them into is completely black, lacking any visual markers as to its size. As the men follow her into the room and take their clothes off, they unknowingly sink into the floor and are suspended in a thick liquid as their flesh is harvested, leaving only their skin behind. When they are suspended in this liquid, they are able to look up and see the creature walking on the hard surface of the floor, leaving to catch another specimen. In these instances when she lures a man to his impending death, her body again seems strange and other. While she is traditionally beautiful, her body is noticeably fuller than in many other roles that Johansson has played. It is both beautiful but tempting in a transgressive way. She is not wholesomely beautiful in this film as most American movie stars are crafted to be. Here she is seductive and inhabits the body of a woman who would be labeled a whore or slut. The relative fullness of her body emphasizes this; she is lush and ripe, transgressively so. Her hair is short and black, not conventionally beautiful. Her accent is not that of a common person in Scotland or England, but it does not belong to a person of the higher classes either. She appears to be rather poor, “slutty,” forthright, and unafraid. The alien’s performance of this specific kind of femininity exposes our own conceptions of women’s worth in relation to their class status. Because she looks “cheap,” she must be easy to bed. This assumption is most likely why the alien portrays herself this way, in order to more believably lure men into her van. She is not beautiful nor is she ugly; just as she is neither alien nor human, her body and identity lie somewhere in-between.

The European, specifically Scottish, locality of the film and characters is important to our understanding of the both the creature's body and the landscape she inhabits. Scotland's history with Britain and its current situation with the U.K. positions the film's narrative within a context of the struggle for sovereignty and autonomy (McGarvey 36). The importance of this is highlighted in the film when the creature is sitting in her van, waiting to drive through Glasgow traffic, and she hears a news bulletin on the radio referring to the referendum on Scotland's independence. When we reach this moment in the film, we've followed the main character for quite some time and we know that she is in the charge of the anonymous Motorcycle Man. We have also observed that she is beginning to critically examine her role on the planet and whether or not she truly wants to be a part of the system in which she finds herself trapped. By placing this internal struggle against the external political strife of Scotland's ongoing struggle with national independence, Glazer, an English man born in London, interweaves the body of the creature and the space of Scotland together, highlighting the symbolic occupation of both.

The creature's liminal body aligns with the ambiguous state of Scotland's relationship with independence. It seems that currently, a large portion of the Scottish population desires autonomy outside the political structure of the U.K. However, the country as a whole voted against the independence referendum mentioned in the bulletin we hear on the radio in the creature's van. Thus Scotland inhabits a theoretical and political location that is neither autonomous nor completely occupied, much like the creature. In this sense, it is logical that the creature is visually and narratively associated with the physical space of Scotland because of its own political liminality.



The creature is aligned with the Scottish landscape both visually and metaphorically when she forgoes her role as the bait for lustful human men. She flees the surveillance of the Motorcycle Man by escaping into uncanny, sublime nature. She drives her van outside of the city, stops in the middle of an isolated country road, and walks into thick fog, abandoning her human mode of transportation. Through this act of escape, she finds temporary refuge in the all-encompassing white fog. She is hidden from the eyes of the human men that she preys on, but is threatened by the Motorcycle Man who rules over her through surveillance and visual inspections. By disappearing into the sublime landscape, she engages with Freeman's feminine sublime philosophy. At this point in the film, the creature has recognized that she is completely other in respect to both the Symbolic Order of humanity and to the goal of her species on Earth. Through her recognition of this proscribed otherness that she inhabits, she is likewise able to respect the otherness that she finds outside of herself. The sublime, liminal Scottish landscape can provide shelter for her because she occupies the theoretical space where she respects the otherness and liminality of the landscape, as she too contains a similar othered nature.<sup>8</sup>

The creature's body and its symbolic significance change over the course of the film according to the decisions she makes and how her identity transforms. In the beginning of the film, the men do not see her as monstrous because they are unable to see her abject nature. They only view her as a sexually pleasing body. However, we the audience see her as monstrous throughout the whole film because we witnessed her "unnatural"

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<sup>8</sup> The film's portrayal of the sublime qualities of the Scottish landscape, of course, draws from the country's long history of being portrayed as a place of transcendent, majestic nature.

creation--her ascent from void blackness. We also understand her motives before the victims become aware of these and are therefore able to understand how she transforms into the object of their desire in order to capture them. She becomes a wolf in sheep's clothing, symbolized in the film through the heavy fur jacket she selects for herself at the shopping mall.

The creature abandons this predatory role when she seduces a man with facial disfigurement. When she realizes that he is quiet and reserved, she capitalizes on his loneliness to persuade him to follow her to the trap. He is the only man that exhibits any real sense of caution upon seeing the desolate state of the dark house. However, he is willing to risk his safety to attain some form of human connection, which he has been deprived of due to his physical appearance. After she has trapped her prey in the liquid pool, the creature gazes at herself in the mirror for a long period of time. She is finally distracted by the sound of a fly trapped against a window, trying to move through the glass, unaware of what is restraining it. This scene harkens back to our first experience of the creature in her human form after she takes the clothes off the woman and examines an ant that had been climbing on her body. However, when she studies the fly, she feels empathy for the trapped man and sets him free. The creature experiences this change of behavior due to both her experiences with humans and her own identity formation. It is clear that she feels trapped by the structure of the Symbolic Order that allows the Motorcycle Man to surveil her. It is also apparent that she finds a relationship between herself and the helpless fly, between herself and the man trapped in the liquid pool. Both the creature and the man share experiences of otherness and of existing in abject bodies. She is just as much an outcast as he is. The act of gazing at herself in the mirror and

examining the fly remind her of their shared otherness; this is why she sets him free. Even though this act marks her as a threat to the system she is a part of, she takes on the risk because she no longer seeks to “colonize” otherness as the masculinist sublime does; she seeks to respect it.

After freeing the man, she flees the dark house and the white van for the refuge of the countryside and is housed by the Scottish man, and we witness a formative moment in her identity development and in her relationship with abjection. As she is about to engage with the man in a sexual experience, it becomes clear that she does not understand the situation or what sex is. When he takes her underwear off, she becomes aware that she lacks genitals. Startled, she pushes him away and grabs a lamp to look between her legs. With this new knowledge of her liminal body, she leaves the suburb and enters into the damp forest, the last location of the film. This moment is important because previously, she conducted herself as though she possessed the organs necessarily for sexual intercourse; being an important component of her seductive performance. However, when she discovers that she does not have a vagina, her identity necessarily changes. It would seem that the creature is aware, to some extent, that she is neither wholly human nor wholly other, but some blend of the two disparate physical forms. Upon discovering that her human form lacks the essential organs that the Symbolic Order demands women must possess, she becomes even more lost in this world where she has no physical or symbolic role. This is also a moment when her relation to abjection shifts. While she has inhabited an abject body throughout the film, menstrual blood is of specific significance to both abjection and the creation of the monstrous-feminine character. However, her own lack of

a menstrual cycle also positions her within a monstrous framework because she is both a woman yet not a woman at once (within the patriarchal conception).

The revelation of her lack of female-sexed anatomy forces the creature to a greater understanding of her position within the masculinist framework. This newfound, amplified liminality allows her to engage with the sublime with curiosity and not through fear because of her own othered positionality. Therefore, when she leaves the Scottish suburbs, it is with the knowledge of her place within the patriarchal construction of essentialist femininity, and this is precisely what she sets out to escape. For the creature, the process of “becoming” a woman, or adopting femininity is the gradual reconciliation of her own othered inhuman body and identity with this new, othered human female body and identity. Therefore, becoming female does not hold any inherent positive or negative valuation for the creature, it is only when this process of becoming doubly othered marks her as the subject of violence that femininity gains a negative connotation. This functions in contrast to the themes of identity reclamation present in *Mulholland Dr.* In that film, the Symbolic Order has disassembled both Rita and Betty’s identities so they can better function within the masculinist marketplace. Their challenge is to negotiate their proximity to the marketplace with their own desire to rebuild or rediscover the fragments of themselves outside of the patriarchal framework. For the creature in *Under the Skin*, she does not have any human identity to reclaim, therefore, she is creating an entirely new identity for herself. For her, the problem lies in her forced association with femininity, being an othered identity subject to intense cultural surveillance, which prevents her from creating an entirely positive position for herself, either outside or inside the masculinist society.

Throughout the film, we have seen how the creature inhabits a liminal body that does not belong in either her native world or the world of humans. Her otherness makes her a material manifestation of the sublime. She threatens men who benefit from patriarchal privilege through her monstrous female body, but she is simultaneously threatened by these same men because of her liminal, abject nature. She is subjected to two attacks in the film. First, she is waiting at a red light in her van as a man leans out the window of another car, distracting her as several men surround her van and try to break in to rape her. Not understanding her female positioning within the system of patriarchal power, she does not grasp the gravity of the situation. Confused, she gazes at the men as they try to enter her vehicle, but ultimately drives away. Her second attack occurs at the end of the film. She has left the suburban man who temporarily housed her and has taken refuge in the forest. She encounters a lumberjack who evaluates her situation in the same way that she evaluates the men who she seeks to lure into her van. He asks her if she's alone, what she's doing in the forest, and gives her brief advice about navigating the muddy trails. Once she has fallen asleep in a shelter for backpackers, he attempts to rape her. After a long struggle, he tears off her clothes, but he also tears her synthetic skin, revealing her "true" form underneath her human disguise. Upon seeing her inhuman form, he douses her in gasoline and burns her to death.

The two attacks that she experiences highlight the otherness and abjection of her body. The first attack is a symptom of her performance of femininity. Although she is not completely a "biological" woman, her performance makes her a target within the human, patriarchal structure. She is threatened by masculine power as manifested in the threat of rape. The second attack begins as a consequence of her performance, just as the first

attack does. However, when her “true” form is revealed, the nature of the attack changes into one motivated out of fear. The lumberjack first sees her as a target, a body that he can manipulate and conquer. The power dynamic shifts when her performance is penetrated and an attack that was born out of the exercise of patriarchal power changes to an attack born out of a fear of sublime otherness. The lumberjack acts in accordance with Freeman’s conception of the masculinist sublime. Whereas before, the lumberjack thought that the otherness of the creature’s body made it a platform for his own performance of masculine power, her threatening sublime otherness changes his reaction to one that seeks to completely conquer the sublime threat, so that he is not threatened by this otherness.

Freeman’s assertion that “the masculinist sublime seeks to master, appropriate, or colonize the other” highlights how not only the lumberjack’s reaction to the creature’s body reflects this philosophy, but also that his profession illustrates this reaction to sublime nature as well (*The Feminine Sublime* 11). When we first encounter the lumberjack, he is working alone in the woods with several large trucks, harvesting lumber. Because the audience understands that the landscape of Scotland is represented as being sublime itself, the very act of deforestation portrays the attempt of the masculinist sublime to master and colonize the other, as Freeman outlines.<sup>9</sup> When we encounter this person, we see that he is already attempting to tame sublime nature and neutralize its threat to civilization. Therefore, the attempted rape and successful murder

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<sup>9</sup> The lumberjack and his destructive acts harken back to Scotland’s long history of colonization, specifically the Highland Clearances of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century wherein many groups of people, particularly Gaelic peoples, were forced out of their homes to make space for the new economic ventures of the ruling classes. (Bamerry 108, 115)

of the creature is an extension of this already practiced and accepted way of engaging with otherness within patriarchal society. Through her death, we see that the creature's body is a source of power as well as weakness, depending on her ability to perform femininity within the Symbolic Order. Irigaray argues that women are only defined within the symbolic as "lack" compared to men; "Thus, this 'lack of qualities' that makes the female truly female ensures that the male can achieve his qualifications" (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 165). According to this, the woman is only valuable when the man can place himself within the symbolic through her body. The man knows his own positioning through his interactions with a woman who is positioned outside of society. Therefore, when she is no longer able to provide this point of reference, this blank canvas onto which the man can project his wants and desires, she must be disposed of. When the creature's performative power is stripped away, she holds no place within the masculine imaginary and must therefore be eliminated so that she poses no threat to masculine power.

The creature's death through fire is significant in its recalling of a witch burning at the stake. Just as a witch does not fit into the conception of the masculine imaginary and exists on the margins of society, so does the creature's sublime body rock the ideological foundation of this same imaginary structure. On the role of the witch in culture, Catherine Clement remarks: "This feminine role, the role of sorceress, of hysteric, is ambiguous, antiestablishment, and conservative at the same time. Antiestablishment because the symptoms--the attacks--revolt and shake up the public, the group, the men, the others to whom they are exhibited" (*The Newly Born Woman* 5). The witch, perhaps the ultimate example of abject femininity in culture, is threatening just as the creature's sublime body

is because of her relationship to liminality and the otherness of nature that frightens those around her, making her the target of ideological attacks. The elimination of the body of the witch and the body of the creature serve the same purpose--to maintain the existence of masculine power and colonize the bodies of those that represent sublime nature.

The natural spaces into which the creature escapes throughout the film are both metaphorically and visually examples of classic Kantian sublimity. The dense white fog that covers the isolated country road and the thick, dark forest both represent forces of the sublime in nature. The white fog is frightening because it is all-encompassing; you cannot see through it or past it--it will consume you if you enter it. Yet, the creature walks into it without hesitation. According to Kristeva, "The abject is edged with the sublime" (*Powers of Horror* 11). In other words, abjection is primarily a tumultuous relationship with the aspects of one's self that are other and symbolically threatening, while the sublime is one step further from that, ultimate otherness that can potentially threaten to destroy human structures and concepts altogether. For the creature, abjection comes from within her human self, while sublimity is the otherness that she recognizes outside of herself. The creature is able to walk into this sublime natural force because she is already associated with abjection. Abjection, like sublimity, takes place outside of the Symbolic Order. They are both manifestations of ideas and forces that are linguistically unrepresentable. The Symbolic Order disallows the description of that state of being "in-between," of being a liminal individual stuck between life and death, inside and outside. It is also impossible to represent a force that is either physically or theoretically all-powerful or all-great. Because abjection and liminality take place outside the symbolic,



those who occupy a space outside of structured society are better positioned to understand and experience them.

In Kristeva's influential essay, "From One Identity to Another," from her 1984 book *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she explores the tension between what she terms "poetic language" and the language of the "paternal symbolic." She says, "It is probably necessary to be a woman (ultimate guarantee of sociality beyond the wreckage of the paternal symbolic function, as well as the inexhaustible generator of its renewal, of its expansion) not to renounce theoretical reason but to compel it to increase its power by giving it an object beyond its limits" (*French Feminism Reader* 165). Here Kristeva argues that in order to stretch language and ideology beyond the boundaries set by masculinist society, this effort must originate from those individuals who already exist outside of the Symbolic Order. She signals that women can fulfill this extra-symbolic function because of their "natural" alienation from the patriarchal symbolic. Just as Kristeva argues that a woman can push language beyond the sanctions of the Symbolic Order, so can we theorize that a being who resides on the margins of society might be better equipped to encounter sublimity. The creature, who is liminal and abject, can engage with the sublime in a way that others cannot because she herself comes from a position of ultimate otherness. This is why she walks into the fog, whereas others would not be able to. She is not afraid of the vastness of the fog because she too was created out of vastness. Similarly, she can walk through the forest alone and unafraid because the forest itself cannot harm her, she is more like the forest than she is like humans.

While the sublime cannot harm her, the masculinist reaction to the sublime can. She dies at the hands of the man who burns her alive out of fear and self-preservation. If the

lumberjack were able to change his association with the sublime, as Freeman advocates, to refrain from attempting to control it, the creature would have been able to continue existing. However, as Osterweil remarks: “Regardless of the epic transformations that self-discovery brings, to be female is to be voided” (“The Perils of Becoming Female” 50). No matter one’s relationship with ideological frameworks, if you inhabit a female body, your subjectivity and very life are not deemed worthwhile within patriarchal society.

Can someone with no real association with otherness, with no understanding of that which takes place on the margins of society, ever hold a position of respect in the face of sublime forces? Based on her theorization of woman’s place within the paternal symbolic, Kristeva would most likely argue that this is not possible. For someone who has no experience of alterity, an encounter with abjection or with sublimity could lead to a jarring breakdown of their imaginary conceptions of the symbolic order. This disruption of imagined structures, coupled with a potential encounter with the Lacanian conception of the Real behind the Imaginary, could drive someone insane. Perhaps one must already reside outside the realm of language and the representable in order to grasp the nature of otherness and abject liminality. Thus, when the language of the prevailing symbolic structure is not enough, one must find ways to either subvert this language, or to create an entirely new one in which we can more accurately express experiences with excess and the sublime. The character of Justine in *Melancholia* achieves something reminiscent of this alternative expressive structure through her categorical rejection of masculinist society and frameworks, finding companionship with a manifestation of sublimity itself.



#### IV. *Melancholia* and the Sublime Apocalypse

In 2011, Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier released the second entry of his Depression Trilogy: *Melancholia*. In stark contrast to his previous films, *Melancholia*, and the first entry into the Depression Trilogy, *Antichrist* (2009), exhibit a visual strangeness that von Trier does not display in the rest of his filmography. In fact, even the third and final chapter of the Depression Trilogy, *Nymphomaniac* (2013), corresponds much closer to the narrative and visual style that the director has historically preferred. The *Antichrist--Melancholia* blip is characterized by the extreme slow motion prologues, obvious special effects, and their anti-realism or hyper-realism. *Nymphomaniac* does exhibit anti-realism in its narrative, but to a much lesser extent.

These narrative and stylistic deviations of *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* are of particular note due to von Trier's historical self-proclaimed position as a champion of a "pure" cinema, free from the commercial excess of contemporary corporate filmmaking. He and fellow Danish filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg created the Dogme-95 manifesto in 1995, signing a "vow of chastity" to remain pure and free of commercial interests, special effects, and what they deemed to be a movement toward the total dilution of cinematic narratives. Reading through the various "vows" both filmmakers signed, it is clear that von Trier has only produced one film specifically in conjunction with the movement (*The Idiots*, 1998). However, even though the Dogme-95 period was more of an artistic test than a proclamation of directorial intentions over the entirety of his career, *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* can be seen as particularly deviating from these idealistic values due to their previously cited characteristics. While Dogme-95 is not inherently surrealist, it does offer

a different view of what a film can look like outside of commercial cinema. Dogme-95's tendency toward a specific brand of hyper-realism could certainly push itself into the realm of surrealism under the right director. Von Trier's preference for practicing "unusual" aesthetic sensibilities makes his foray into surrealist techniques no surprise. The peculiarities of the two films, perhaps stemming from his history with Dogme-95, position them very comfortably within the category of 21<sup>st</sup> century surrealist cinema.

This, of course, has interesting theoretical and philosophical implications surrounding the use of surrealism in *Melancholia*. Because of his history with Dogme-95 and his well-documented repulsion toward both commercial cinema and its aesthetics, it would seem that he would be at-odds with the philosophical emphasis of surrealism; blurring the lines between the conscious and unconscious world, breaking down reality and its "false" nature, etc. The purpose of Dogme-95 was to create a more "pure" cinematic experience, whereas the goal of surrealism is to confuse boundaries and make reality far less delineated. However, *Melancholia* is a complete mixture of these two differing cinematic and theoretical positions. This results in a film that is at once dream-like and hyper-real. The consequence of this dualistic nature is that the film creates a hybrid space where, like *Mulholland Dr.*, the narrative exists in-between "reality" and the subconscious. Therefore, we are left with a film that endorses surrealism as a means to explore sublime encounters, but prefers to explore the consequences of those encounters in the hyper-real world.

In *Melancholia*, von Trier presents the narrative through chapters, according to his tradition. However, whereas most of his other films have many chapters, *Melancholia* has only three sections: "Prologue," "Justine," and "Claire." In the prologue, von Trier

presents us with a slow-motion portrait of the main characters as they prepare for the impact of a planet named Melancholia. As we observe their preparations, we are given several landscape sequences, shots of the interior of Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and her husband John's (Keifer Sutherland) castle-like home, and the cosmic perspectives of the "dance of death" between the two planets, culminating in the destruction of earth upon the planetary collision.

*Melancholia*'s prologue functions not only to showcase the end of its narrative arc at the beginning of the film, but to foreshadow themes and visual images that will be found throughout its runtime. Included in these images is the fall of Justine's (Kristen Dunst) favorite horse Abraham, whose actual fall within the narrative occurs as Justine whips him for refusing to cross a bridge.<sup>10</sup> Justine's nightmare, which she recounts in the "Justine" section, of being weighed down by grey wooly matter while struggling to walk, is portrayed as though she is walking through a swamp. This image is mirrored by a shot of Claire holding her son, Leo, in her arms as she struggles to walk across the 19<sup>th</sup> hole of her golf course (a hole that should not exist according to the rules of the sport and to the narrative itself), her boots sinking into the earth. We also see Leo preparing sticks to make the "magic cave" in which the family will take refuge as Melancholia collides with Earth.

Using the prologue of *Melancholia* to detail the climax of the film would seem to be counterintuitive. However, partially in keeping with Dogme-95 principals, von Trier does

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<sup>10</sup> A similar scene occurs in *Antichrist* when He and She walk toward their cabin in Eden and She cannot bring herself to calmly walk over a bridge.

not want the viewers to become distracted by the visual grandeur and strong emotions of the climax of the film; instead, he wants them to be actively aware of the narrative and of the visual strategies that he uses to portray Claire and Justine's struggles. The prologue removes any suspense and calls the spectator to bear witness to the destruction of Earth with detached coolness.

The prologue's disjointed nature and uncanny visual style, which could be considered a short film within the larger film, recalls the narrative and visual strategies of the surrealist movement of the 1920s. The landscape paintings of prominent surrealists Salvador Dali and Max Ernst can be compared to the highly stylized nature of *Melancholia's* prologue. A central tenant of 1920s surrealism was to complicate the "real" world with our interior unconscious thoughts and desires that, for the surrealists, functioned as their source of "truth." On the nature of the surrealist project, Graeme Harper and Rob Stone write:

The Surrealists favored an orientation that was defined by dream-logic, chance, superstition, coincidence, absurdity and challenge. They aimed to recreate links with primal thoughts and emotions in order to recast human needs away from materialism, mass culture and social order towards immersion in the revolutionary hagiography of mankind's [sic] dark side (*The Unsilvered Screen 2*).

Von Trier's aforementioned tendency to distance the viewer from the narrative's emotional center in favor of a more self-reflexive experience for the viewer, coupled with his non-linear framing techniques provide fertile ground for surrealism to take hold. Within surrealism's historical context, the very nature of the cinema was considered an

ideal space for surrealism. The darkened room full of people sitting together, viewing the same shadows reflected on the screen was interpreted as a place of shared dreaming (Harper and Stone 3).

Reflecting the surreal nature of the cinematic apparatus, *Melancholia*'s slow-motion images, dream-like in their unreality, give us insight into the unconscious of the characters, and perhaps the director himself. Von Trier's films appear to be quite autobiographical. Many of the characters he writes, specifically the two sisters, Claire and Justine, in *Melancholia*, are partially based upon himself (Wigon "Collision Course"). Therefore, we can interpret the subconscious thoughts and desires of the sisters to be reflective, to an extent, of the director's impression of his own unconscious mind. This is both highly reflexive and surreal in nature.

Historically, von Trier's style has been intimately linked to experimental and avant-garde filmmaking. From his earliest features to his recent work, he has employed experimental techniques in the telling of his narratives. His Europe Trilogy, consisting of *The Element of Crime* (1984), *Epidemic* (1987), and *Europa* (1991) all integrate hypnosis into the story telling. Most famously, *Europa* is framed as a hypnotic journey of the viewer into post World War II Germany. In *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), von Trier inserts musical numbers into the otherwise somber text as a reflection of the main character's fantasies and desires. His uncharacteristic foray into the genre of comedy, *The Boss of it All* (2006), is interrupted at several intervals by von Trier's commentary on the regulations of the genre. These are among many examples of the ways von Trier subverts traditional narrative filmmaking in order to create an unfamiliar, and perhaps more enriching, cinematic experience. In these examples we also find elements of surrealist



philosophy and aesthetic values at play: the change of everyday realism to the uncanny; hypnosis and accessing the subconscious self, and the interruption of traditional narratives in favor of the absurd.

In the films of the Depression Trilogy, von Trier's favorite disruptive techniques and visual elements are present, yet the nature of the stories themselves and the framing techniques that are chosen also contribute to his surreal aesthetic. In the case of *Melancholia*, the division of the film into two large chapters with radically different narrative material is illustrative of surrealist strategies. The juxtaposition of Justine's wedding with *Melancholia*'s approach toward earth have led some scholars to view the film through a darkly comic lens, insisting that von Trier has structured the film and its characters to be viewed as a tragic farce (Figlerowicz "Comedy of Abandon"). However, the dramatic narrative shift can be viewed as a reflection of the film's surrealist philosophy. Striking juxtapositions were important to surrealist artists who sought to complicate our perception of reality. Likewise, von Trier uses the film's disparate sections to complicate the contexts of both the wedding and the apocalypse. Unlike most wedding sequences in traditional films, von Trier's iteration is drawn out for over an hour (half the run-time of the film), does not contain the marriage vows, and jump-cuts between multiple different perspectives and events.<sup>11</sup> All these attributes serve to disorient viewers and force them to approach the marital event anew, and outside of their personal and filmic experiences.

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<sup>11</sup> Here it should be noted that Justine and Michael's wedding is very similar to the wedding of Bess and Jan in *Breaking the Waves*.

Within the three-film arc of the Depression Trilogy, there are clear narrative parallels between the first and third chapters (*Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*): the death, or near death, of the main character's child while she is engaged in sexual acts, as well as an examination of both systematic patriarchy and constructed female gender roles. However, *Melancholia* and its cosmic tale of the apocalypse seem to be out of place. It has much more in common with the narrative of *Under the Skin*, which emphasizes the wonder of the cosmic perspective within the microcosm of the Scotland's majestic nature; something that *Melancholia* also does with its European landscapes. Whereas in *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac* the driving themes are female sexual shame and familial struggle, *Melancholia* appears to be primarily concerned with examining various coping mechanisms in the face of tragedy. Von Trier's familiar themes of sexuality and tumultuous family life are encountered, but only in the service of his larger quest to explore individual philosophy when one encounters sublime finitude.

Through von Trier's meditation on states of existence situated on the precipice of extinction, Kantian sublimity is brought forth. In *Melancholia*, Kant's notion of the sublime is explicitly on display, specifically in relation to forces of nature that call into question the resilience of the human species. The audience is bestowed with knowledge that *Melancholia* will ultimately cause the destruction of the Earth; however, the characters situated in the narrative, with the exception of Justine, do not have such knowledge and must face the quite literal existential crisis facing them. This crisis of monumental proportions brings out the innermost philosophies and ideologies that the characters hold most dear. It is in this dynamic experience that we see strategies of sublime confrontation surface.

The sublime force of Melancholia (invoking both the quantitative sublime in its relationship to the infinite cosmos, and the qualitative sublime in its all-encompassing power over Earth), is a perfect example of the dynamics of sublimity that Kant outlines in *Critique of Judgment*. In Kant's estimation of sublimity, the appreciation of the sublime as observed in nature is distinguished from mere aesthetic appreciation through Nature's theoretical and physical threat to humanity's rational command over the natural world. Kant argues: "Hence nature is sublime in those of its appearances whose intuition carries with it the idea of their infinity" (*Critique of Judgment* 256). This "idea of infinity" is essential to both the understanding of Kant's philosophy of sublimity and of *Melancholia* itself. What causes the planet Melancholia to be sublime is not only its quantitative size and qualitative power, but its threat of a finite end to life. In a frequently cited sequence of the film, Justine and Claire discuss the possibility of life on other planets. Claire maintains that there could be life elsewhere in the cosmos, but Justine emphatically maintains that the collision of Earth and Melancholia will render life extinct, that there is no life outside of Earth, and she is able to determine this because she "knows things," citing her knowledge of the final count of the bean lottery at her wedding from the previous section of the film as proof. The idea of a final end to all life frightens Claire, leading her to ponder, "But where would Leo grow up?" In an essay examining the relationship between procreation and a queer sublime reading of *Melancholia*, Eric Robertson observes that, "Reason tells her [Claire] that the event at hand is grave but also inconceivable. She is a subject made by the desire for the continuance of her procreative object without which, there is no life at all" ("Volcanoes, Guts and Cosmic Collisions" 71). What frightens Claire and her rational ideology the most is not that Melancholia will

destroy Earth, but that it will be the *final* destruction of all life, that there is nothing anyone can do to take shelter or to survive the apocalypse; this is the final end. It is here that Claire's rationality fails her and her imagination is stretched to the breaking point. Similar to the Club Silencio sequence of *Mulholland Dr.*, Claire experiences the sublime in the inability of her imagination to conceive of the end of life. This experience pushes Claire, and the characters of *Mulholland Dr.*, to their intellectual breaking point, forcing them to emphatically pursue a philosophical solution to this challenge of the imagination's failure.

Kant advocates a method of confrontation with the sublime that philosophically distances the human subject from the sublime object. In this act of distancing, the human subject develops an ontological understanding of humanity's relationship with the sublime natural world and theorizes that through rational thought, the sublime object can be conquered. This argument is founded in Enlightenment rationality and the conceptualization of humanity's relationship with the divine power of a Christian deity (*Critique of Judgment* 122-123). In section 28: "On Nature as a Might," Kant outlines the affiliation between the sublime as found in nature and the power of God, citing that sublimity is often seen as God revealing himself to humanity. However, Kant argues against an attitude of fear and reverence toward the sublime and instead proposes that when one truly understands humanity as divinely conceived, sublimity occurs within cognition and not singularly in nature: "Hence sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to nature outside us (as far as it influences us)" (123).

Here is the place where rationality can overcome sublime forces, but, for Kant, can only be accessed through assimilation to a divine conception of humanity.

Claire appears to accept this divine vision of humanity, a view that is manifested in her familial relationships. In the “Justine” section of the film, Claire concerns herself with attending to Justine, attempting to provide her with the best possible wedding in hopes that this will lighten Justine’s spirits. Despite her sister’s best efforts, Justine begins to slip back into her depression; physically appearing as though she is gradually fading away until she looks like an empty vessel. This, of course, leaves Claire to care for Justine in the film’s third section, in the midst of the impending destruction of the earth. While Claire is a caring and loyal family member, she is plagued by her dependence on Kantian rationality that renders her ineffective in the crises she faces. She is unable to prepare herself and Leo for the collision of *Melancholia*, leaving Justine to attempt to provide solace for the family.

Claire’s husband, John, is characterized by a similar philosophy. Throughout both the “Justine” and “Claire” sections of the film, John’s classist, chauvinistic attitude toward his own family helps to illustrate the inherent flaws in Kant’s strategy of sublime confrontation. John, who claims to be an “amateur astronomer,” consistently lords his pseudo-intellectualism over every other individual who crosses his path. When Claire repeatedly expresses legitimate concerns about the approach of *Melancholia*, he tells her to simply “trust the scientists” and forbids her from searching the Internet for information about the planet. Author Christopher Sharrett cites this exchange as an example of “the control of knowledge by the enlightened male...” (“Woman Run Amok” 32). John’s treatment of Claire’s fear and uncertainty exposes the fundamental problem with Kant’s

theory of sublime confrontation: its marginalization of feminine knowledge and experience. Freeman emphasizes this in her critique of the traditional conception of sublimity: "...the canonical theories that seem merely to explain the sublime also evaluate, domesticate, and ultimately exclude an otherness that, almost without exception, is gendered as feminine" (*The Feminine Sublime* 3).

The positionality of the feminine sublime facilitates Justine's apparent peace with the approach of the planet in contrast to Claire's intrinsic fear of its unknowable vastness and power. Here, Justine's resolve mirrors Rita's ability to engage with the sublime because of their shared rejection of patriarchal roles. As previously cited, Claire's dependence on rationality, and specifically on her husband's false knowledge, fail her when confronted with the inescapable nature of the planet's sublimity. Her inability to even comprehend the end of life betrays rationality's failure of sublime estimation. Conversely, Justine's resigned calm exhibits the viability of the feminine sublime to negotiate emotion and "reality."

Justine's relationship with extinction emanates from her experience of not only Kant's vision of sublimity in nature, but also the forces of the sublime in her life as a female. At the beginning of chapter one Justine notices Melancholia, and is reassured by John (the "amateur" astronomer) that it is the star Antares. The impending doom of Earth is not only on the mind of the spectator, having just watched Earth's destruction in the prologue, but also on the horizon of Justine's cognition. Von Trier positions Justine's wedding celebration as a kind of apocalypse; a sublime force in Justine's life that cannot be confronted with rationality. Sharrett observes: "...von Trier uses the wedding ceremony, perhaps the key bourgeois ritual, as the ultimate site of disaster, and in so

doing enacts a condemnation of western patriarchal bourgeois civilization that is amazingly comprehensive and uncompromised” (“Woman Run Amok” 26). Justine’s dilemma is to decide whether or not to complete her assimilation into this patriarchal, bourgeois world through both her marriage and her corporate marketplace position in an advertising agency.

Justine’s interactions with Michael reveal the sublimity of their relationship, not only in the bizarre nature of the wedding event, but in his attempts to patronizingly “cheer her up.” Michael takes Justine aside and shows her a picture of an apple grove he bought for her, explaining that the trees will grow tall, giving her shade to relax in when she feels sad. This attempt at soothing Justine’s anxieties is communicated to her as though she were a child. Michael clearly does not see Justine as an intellectual equal, despite the many declarations of her genius by her boss, Jack, who is also Michael’s best man, over the course of the evening. Justine, full of melancholy, glides around Claire’s mansion, which serves as the site of the wedding reception, like a specter with an empty look in her eyes. Fueled by her disappointment in her interactions with Michael and other familial disputes, she confronts Jack, who has been demanding the whole evening that she supply him with a tagline for a pending advertising campaign. Expressing her distaste for the advertising industry and for his tactics, she says, “Nothing is too much for you, Jack. You are a despicable, power-hungry little man.”

After a half-hearted cutting of the cake and a dispirited bouquet toss, Michael carries Justine over the threshold of their bridal suite. Prepared to engage in the marriage christening, Michael is greatly disappointed when Justine asks for a “minute” and abruptly leaves the room. With this action, it is clear that she has abandoned the

relationship. She leaves to seek out her father, who remains oblivious and does not try to comfort her, only to discover the next morning that he has left the wedding celebration by dawn with no notice. Her mother also dismisses her pleas for help, telling her that she does not belong in this world, and to “wobble on out.” As Michael prepares to leave Claire’s home and his marriage with Justine, he says: “You know, it could have been different,” to which Justine replies, “Yes Michael, but what did you expect?”, conveying her inability to conform to patriarchal demands.

By morning, Justine is left completely alone. She has rejected a traditional marriage with her husband Michael, prompting him to leave altogether. She has publicly humiliated her boss and harshly criticized the entire philosophy of the capitalist project. In Justine’s exchanges with Michael and Jack, we see her in a new light--as a potential source of great power. In these flashes of rhetorical strength, both men see Justine as a formidable threat to their masculinity and patriarchal power. Irigaray ruminates on the ramifications of female desire and power within traditional patriarchal positioning: “Admittedly, because she is deprived of everything, ‘she’ also wants to take possession of everything. And that has to be prevented, since anything she might thus attract to herself will be reduced to a mere reflection, shadow, fantasy, absence, of what it had been in its natural wholeness” (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 167). Justine is recognized as a threat to the individual men (and women) in her life, as well as the patriarchal, Symbolic Order at large. Her clear drive and desire is wholly incompatible with the project of sustaining the masculinist status quo, and therefore must be driven out. Justine realizes this, and chooses to preserve herself by voluntarily “opting out;” she exiles herself from the patriarchal system and the corresponding masculinist, capitalist marketplace. Justine’s



voluntary exclusion from patriarchal society mirrors the creature's societal isolation in *Under the Skin*. Once the creature discovers her vagina and understands the burdens and consequences of human femininity, she attempts to remove herself from these constructs altogether, just as Justine does. While she is now free of these burdens, she must face life on the extreme margins of society, existing without any material or theoretical life raft.

This place of total disenfranchisement from traditional, patriarchal civilization is the place where profound abjection is located. Justine begins to embrace her female, abject nature when she rejects those things that attempt to cover up or mask abjection, such as traditional marriage and the western capitalist economy. Her reclamation of her own abjection takes the form of both actual and theoretical actions. During one of her many escapes from Claire's mansion on the night of the wedding, she walks onto John's oft-bragged about golf course and urinates on it. Bodily fluids being one of the prime physical manifestations of abjection, she defiles John's capitalist pride by sullyng it with the very reality that his wealth and power attempt to hide, the reality of death and decay that alludes to the sublime threat of Melancholia; just as the Bum behind Winkie's represents the "truth" underneath the illusion of the marketplace.

The intersection of Justine's singularly female experiences of sublimity and her own abject nature creates a narrative reflection on the philosophical complexity of feminine existence under the dictatorship of patriarchy. For Justine, the choice is between having material wealth and comfort while compromising her own identity and morality, or having no material wealth and preserving herself. On those who choose to separate themselves from abjection, Kristeva observes: "The object from which he [sic] does not cease separating is for him, in short, a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered"

(*Powers of Horror* 8 [emphasis original]). Justine accepts her position in this “land of oblivion,” a space situated outside of the realm of sanctioned existence. For Claire however, this fear of being separated from society permeates into her every thought and action; everything she does is an attempt to fight off this abjection in the hope of maintaining her esteemed position in society. It is clear that Claire has chosen material wealth over personal authenticity, gaining economic security and social status while compromising her mental and emotional well-being and subjecting herself to John’s whims and desires. Justine’s choice of rejecting the material in the name of self-preservation initially results in formidable depression, but then develops into something profound and significant.

The melancholy that begins to plague Justine and grows to control her whole body is a symptom of her traumatic denial of the traditional female role within the patriarchal structure. When she arrives at Claire and John’s house once again after the failure of her wedding, Claire acts as her caretaker, feeding and bathing her sister. However, as Melancholia approaches Earth, Justine gains physical and mental strength. It has been noted by many scholars that Justine has a kind of intimate relationship with the planet. Author Andrew Gordon speculates that Justine is in love with Melancholia and sees herself as its bride, citing the seemingly romantic nature of her interactions with the planet, specifically the scene where she lays on the bank of a stream, naked in Melancholia’s light, gazing up at it as her sister quietly observes from the brush (“The Bride of Melancholia”). However, this intense connection with Melancholia can also be attributed to Justine’s specific relationship to abjection. If Justine serves as a threat to the patriarchal structure and must be cast out in order to maintain its existence, then

Melancholia is an even bigger threat to the fabric of masculinist civilization; the ultimate threat of abjection is obliteration. Justine sees herself in Melancholia, and its approach acts as a reassurance that she is not alone at the margins of society.

This abject affiliation between Justine and the planet creates a prime space for Freeman's philosophy of the feminine sublime to emerge. Justine, in stark contrast with her sister Claire, acknowledges the planet as an analogous being and treats it accordingly, without fear. Freeman explains that "...the feminine sublime does not attempt to master its objects of rapture" (*The Feminine Sublime* 3). Justine's identification with the planet illustrates the ultimate value of the feminine sublime philosophy, an acceptance and embrace of forces of otherness. Justine is able to look within herself, establish a relationship with the radical destructive unknown, and create a positive connection with this force, which develops to assist her in life's final moments.

The similarity between Justine and the planet becomes even more apparent when reflecting upon her abandonment of marriage. Leaving her husband Michael, Justine not only exits the patriarchal institution altogether, but also eliminates the possibility of bearing a child, not because she can only procreate within marriage, but because she has abandoned the system entirely. Robertson's previously mentioned essay, "Volcanoes, Guts and Cosmic Collisions," examines Justine's role as a representative of queerness in the world of the film. For the purposes of his essay, Robertson defines queer as any "non-procreative body," positioning Justine as not only queer in this sense, but queer by choice. Her refusal of her feminine role of procreation marks her as monstrous, as welcoming, and indeed, inviting the end of the world. While the maternal body is also considered to be abject and monstrous, the non-procreative queer woman does not

provide society with any material gain in the form of offspring, whereas the monstrous mother can at least offer her children to the patriarchal system. Robertson expounds: “The abject female body interrupts, figuratively, the procreative process of all humanity” (72). Furthermore, the author argues that queer, non-procreative individuals can find eroticism in the notion of an end to life, stemming from Georges Bataille’s theories of mutilation and bodily rupture, which add crucial depth to the analysis of Justine’s romantic/erotic relationship with Melancholia. She not only identifies with the planet, seeing its relationship to her own abjection, but welcomes it as the fulfillment of her own consuming desire for extinction, a desire so clearly reflected when she explains to Claire that, “The earth is evil. We don’t need to grieve for it.”

Even as Justine recognizes a complimentary force in Melancholia, she knows that she is ideologically alone within her sister’s grand mansion. The reliance on John’s supposed “knowledge” of astronomy leaves the family totally incapable of preparing themselves for the collision event. When John realizes that he has, in fact, placed his trust in a network of fallible people, he immediately resorts to suicide, unable to face the consequences of his own unwillingness to accept the sublimity of Melancholia. Claire, now alone in her rational resolve, finds it increasingly harder to cope with the apparent reality of the threat of the planet and begins to panic, seeking comfort in her melancholic sister. In another frequently referenced scene, Claire asks Justine to join her on the terrace to drink wine when the time comes, to which Justine replies that the plan sounds like “shit” and suggests they might as well meet on the toilet, once again reflecting her intimate relationship with abjection. Claire is profoundly dismayed by her sister’s

reaction, repeating her condemnation of Justine's actions from the "Justine" section of the film: "I really hate you sometimes."

Justine, of course, cannot agree to this plan; she does not need to make the end of the world "nice" as her sister does. Justine is wholly prepared for the apocalyptic event and indeed has already faced it in her own individual life. She views the destruction of Earth as the destruction of the patriarchal, symbolic order, including those that have already cast her aside upon her refusal to assimilate to their corrupt values. Justine has absolutely nothing to lose in this extinction. Here it is tempting to interpret Justine's resolve as utterly pessimistic and fatalistic. However, the reality of Justine's resigned attitude toward the end of life is completely linked with her embrace of alterity and otherness at the end of the film's "Justine" section.

When Justine leaves her marriage and her job, she frees herself from powerful forms of systematic oppression. She was faced with the choice of embracing her sanctioned position as a feminine object within masculinist ideology and violently rejected these assigned roles, associating herself with the abject. Upon *Melancholia*'s arrival, Justine does not actually have any new choices to make; the planet is an extension of the abjection she has already embraced. Furthermore, *Melancholia* is a perfect representation of Kant's notion of the sublime in nature, indicating her embrace of the planet's collision with Earth is an embrace of the uncontrollable sublime, in accordance with Freeman's conception of the feminine sublime. Whereas Justine has made peace with the Earth's destruction, Claire fights and tries to escape *Melancholia* until the very last moments of her life. Her unwillingness to reject the systematic oppression that prevents her from embracing otherness results in a frightening and miserable end.

Thus, in a dramatic role-reversal, Justine becomes the caregiver as Claire is increasingly incapacitated by her fear. Claire tries to “run away” to the village with her son Leo and hide from the planet’s impact until the effects of *Melancholia*’s approach render her motor vehicles inoperable. Justine takes over the care of Leo, telling him that they would make the magic caves Leo often mentioned. At the end, all three gather in a cave made of sticks, reminiscent of Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, in which Socrates explains that people who cannot bring themselves to view the true nature of the world are like those chained to a wall in a cave, looking at shadows cast on the wall made by a fire burning behind them. These people will never know what truth is (*Republic* 225). Justine constructs this cave both to shelter her young nephew, who is too young to grasp what is happening, and her sister Claire, who has let oppression dictate how she interacts with the world. She cannot face the sublimity of *Melancholia* and must be sheltered in the cave.

Philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek asserts that *Melancholia* is a primarily optimistic film. In an interview, he argues that Justine is in a position to act more ethically because she lives with the knowledge that the world will end and accepts this fate (Big Think “The Optimism of *Melancholia*”). This idea that adopting a philosophy of acceptance is actually a more ethical way of interacting with threats from the exterior world mirrors the philosophy of the feminine sublime. Because Justine, and Rita by comparison, are both able to form positive relationships with forces of otherness, they do not need to violently engage with this force, as one feels inclined to do under Kant’s vision of sublimity. By embracing this constructive strategy, Justine acts as a primary example of why Freeman’s theory of sublime confrontation is preferable to Kant’s, specifically when examined from a feminine, or feminist, perspective.

## V. Conclusion

*Mulholland Dr.*, *Under the Skin*, and *Melancholia* all present us with female characters encountering sublime forces. In every film, engaging with sublimity threatens one's ability to exist within patriarchal society. Betty and Rita, while both discovering their respective identities together, diverge when Rita embraces her othered identity and Betty forgoes hers in favor of aligning herself with the patriarchal marketplace. Similarly, the creature seeks to discover her own liminal nature while existing in the world of humans, but cannot achieve this because of the threat that her monstrous body poses to the symbolic structure. Both Justine and Claire must face the impact of *Melancholia*, but choose to do so in vastly different ways; Claire aligns herself with patriarchal rationality while Justine forgoes it in favor of fostering her own othered identity, which forces her to remove herself from masculine cultural structures.

Rita, the creature, and Justine all turn inward and find otherness and sublimity within their own constructed natures and choose to interact with sublimity through this othered subjectivity. For Rita, this allows her to foster her sense of wonder and curiosity surrounding excess and the unrepresentable. The creature's alignment with the unrepresentable in both the material and theoretical world positions her to view and interact with the construction of the symbolic in a completely unique way. Justine also allows herself to relate to sublime forces through her own sense of abjection and otherness. Her embrace of sublimity allows for a sense of peace and acceptance in the face of imminent death. All three of these characters not only positively engage with the sublime and develop their own identities through those encounters, but they pave avenues

for themselves and others to disassociate themselves from paternal structure and create new spaces where abjection, liminality, otherness, and sublimity are celebrated and deemed necessary for a full existence.

In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray reflects on how female desire and language are jettisoned to the borders of patriarchal culture: “The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) ‘subject’ to reflect himself, to copy himself” (30). The difference between the women in these films that choose to engage with otherness and sublimity and those who stay aligned with the patriarchal economy is that embracing otherness allows them to reclaim the fragmented, fractured aspects of their identity and reform themselves into a cohesive whole once again, no longer at war with themselves and others. The surreal place of otherness, of sublimity, when experienced from a feminine positionality, has the potential to reform the “female imaginary,” as Irigaray terms it, and to provide the theoretical space where those relegated to the margins of society can experience wholeness outside of and against masculine constructs.

The three films examined in this thesis all lay important groundwork for this essential reconceptualization of feminine positionality and experiences. While many criticize the films and their directors for being essentialist, sexist, and male-centric, we can look deeper at the thematic and visual material at play and realize that these are, in fact, important feminist works. Despite whatever the intentions of the filmmakers, the experiences of the female characters speak volumes and allow for a deep exploration into



feminine otherness and sublimity that is sorely lacking in much of contemporary culture. In addition, the creative work and authorship of the actors in these films must be acknowledged in expressing the complete otherness of women who exist on the margins of the patriarchal Symbolic Order. Furthermore, if the films work for the spectator, they will allow the audience to glimpse into the experiences of someone on the margins who engages sublimity in a manner that only “othered” individuals can. This sets these films apart not only as great artistic works, but works of great symbolic importance as well.

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