The Awakening – The Unconscious in *Mulholland Drive* and *The Matrix*

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**Introduction**

Few films have bewildered, or confounded spectators more than David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*, it creates a “Lynchian dreamscape”, proceeding with dream logic, to separate the dimensions of fantasy and reality, thereby revealing the unconscious on film. With surrealist expression coupled with philosophical models incorporated in film, *The Matrix* also produces a dreamlike world to viewers that may evoke their skepticism regarding senses, like the glitch evidence déjà vu. This essay will discuss the unconscious on both *Mulholland Drive* and *The Matrix* through examining psychoanalytical theory – Freudian dream-work as well as philosophical problems – Plato’s allegory of the cave and Descartes’ “I think therefore I am”.

**The Movie as a Dream**

*Mulholland Drive* can be best understood with the recognition that its diabolically labyrinthine plot is a dream in which the language and logic are unfolded in accordance to its own rules. From the first blurred scene with dim lights, *Mulholland Drive* brings viewers to a “Lynchian dreamscape”\(^1\), where the extended fantasy sequence comprises the first two hours of the film, with its manifest dream content contributing to reveal its hidden psychological meaning. Already

\(^1\) Blister Sleep: Latent Content and Cinematic Form in Mulholland Drive
in a century earlier, Sigmund Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* notes that dreams appear to be enigmatic and bizarre though, they link to the events and scenes of waking life – “the dream is the royal road to the unconscious.”\(^2\) Despite Lynch’s denials of familiarity with psychoanalytic theory in the film, the convergence between the Freud’s unconscious theory and *Mulholland Drive* is noticeable.

According to Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the mechanism of dream-work conceals dreamer’s latent thoughts through the expression of “primitive pictorial language”\(^3\). In *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch produces this visually arresting pictorial language through an association of his dreamscape with Hollywood art, as he says in an interview, “There are words and there are stories, but there are things that can be said with films that you can’t say with words. It’s just the beautiful language of cinema.”\(^4\) Diane Selwyn’s dream begins with her conflicted feelings towards both the wish to destroy her lover Camilla Rhodes who has abandoned her, and the deep guilt over Camilla’s death resulted from her murderous actions. The first two-thirds of the film depicts Diane’s fantasy as “Betty Elms”, Diane’s alter-ego, a bright-eyed young blonde, who also comes to Hollywood to pursue the fame and stardom. Freud considers a dream is not senseless and absurd, but “a psychic phenomenon” of full value – a wish fulfilment.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) *The Basic writings of Sigmund Freud*

\(^3\) *Interpretation of Dreams*

\(^4\) *Rodley 1999, 26-27, Lynch on Lynch*

\(^5\) *Interpretation of Dreams 190*
Diane’s dream reflects a complicated mental world of herself. Betty, not like Diane, is a high-spirited, self-sacrificing and idealized version of herself, who spends much time to assist Rita to search for her identity. The fantasy version of herself in the dream is Diane’s wish-fulfilling rationalization of events to exonerate her from the responsibility for Camilla’s death. Camilla in Diane’s dream is a mysterious lady, Rita, who suffers from amnesia and concussion, remembering nothing regarding herself, but the spectator and Diane’s latent conscious know that Rita/Camilla avoids death twice more by averting an assassination attempt from a hit man as well as surviving from a deadly high-speed car collision. Further, Diane’s dream serves to refuse and undo the reality of her attempt to lead to Camilla’s death: in the apartment of Betty’s aunt, Rita pulls out a large amount of money in her pouch, which is also shown in Diane’s waking life when she contracts with a hit man to murder Camilla. Rita’s possession of money indicates that the murderous action of Diane did not occur. In addition, the symbol, the blue key, with an implication of the death of Camilla as the hit man, holding up the blue key, tells her “When it’s finished, you will find this where I told you”, is also in Rita’s purse, meaning that Camilla is still alive. Instead, Diane produces various malicious and powerful figures such as espresso-drinking businessman and the wheelchair man in her dream to erase her terrible guilt over Camilla’s death through attributing this consequence to those malevolent men.

Rita’s name derived from Rita Hayworth in a movie poster; the adventure to unfold the mysterious identity of Rita is key to rationalize the fantasy plot that Diane made in her dream and finally lead her to find out her own identity in the club silencio, where Betty finds a blue box with Rita’s ornate blue key in it. This is a threshold space between Diane’s real and fantasy that
she starts to recognize that this is a dream, as the emcee in the club silencio repeatedly says, “No hay banda, there is no band, it is all an illusion.”

**Life Is a Dream**

“All human beings by nature desire to know.” – Aristotle

Truth always comes after skepticism; the awakening of Diane is owing to her awareness regarding the “illusion” she formed for her own and thus concerning the implication of the emblem of the blue key when Rita opens the blue box. Similarly, in *The Matrix*, Neo at the very beginning of the film asks his friends, “Have you ever had that feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?” That question may occasionally occur in our minds, but the point is that it seems to be, either obviously or trivially, true though, who would doubt our knowledge of external world? The entirety of *The Matrix* parallels a philosophical theory – Plato’s allegory of the cave in which Plato renders his skepticism towards reality. The prisoners in the cave are unable to move as they are chained by legs, hands, and the neck. In front of them, there is a wall where puppet-handlers cast shadows of artificial things before the light of a fire. Plato considers that these prisoners may mistake the appearance of reality as they do not know they are prisoners and do not suspect whether shadows on the wall they see is real. Until one

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6 No Hay Banda
7 The Matrix,
8 Republic, Plato
9 Republic, Plato
day, one of the prisoners, like Morpheus, is released from his chains and dragged to outside the cave, seeing the states of themselves and the actual world.

Morpheus is the one who is set free to see the real world and explains to Neo, the “Matrix”, the illusory world, is omnipresent:

It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes, to blind you from the truth…that you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.10

The matrix is a dystopian world in which the reality that humans perceive is actually a simulacrum; in this world humans are deceived into thinking that they are eating palatable steaks, reading books, and engaging in other such activities. However, the truth is that their entire lives appear to be a dream in which both their physical and psychological activities are manipulated by the matrix. For example, the attractive lady in a red dress smiling to Neo in Morpheus’s matrix training system is a simulated character, designed by one of the crew, Mouse, who talks to Neo that he can arrange “a more personalized milieu”11 if he wants to meet her. As regards their real lives, their actual bodies are confined to small containers filled with magenta gelatin and the crew, who have been unplugged, eat the unappetizing yet nutritious food that

10 The Matrix
11 The Matrix,
Neo’s crewmate Apoc describes it as “a bowl of snot”. This substance sparks Mouse’s distant memory of Tasty Wheat during the meal and he wonders: “How did the machines know what Tasty Wheat tasted like? Maybe they got it wrong. Maybe what I think Tasty Wheat tasted like actually tasted like oatmeal or tuna fish.” Jean Baudrillard in The Precession of Simulacra presents that simulation is not a substance, or a referential being but a hyperreal generated from models of a real, as he quotes Ecclesiastes, “The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” He uses Disneyland as a model of simulacra, which attracts the crowds most is that they can act like a child to convince themselves that the childishness is ubiquitous. He contends that it is not a question of a false representation of reality but of hiding truth that the real is no longer real, and therefore of preserving the reality principle. Such point can also link to the choice of Cypher, who betrays his crewmate and choose to return to his previous artificial life in the Matrix. He declares, “Nine years, I realize that ignorance is bliss.” While the notion that the real is invaluable and worthwhile to be pursued relentlessly dominates the whole film, does the perceptual experience that matter to judge not only real but also the value of a person’s life (Cypher’s choice is supposed to be wrong in this film)?

Objective Reality and Subjective Fantasy

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12 The Matrix
13 The Matrix,
14 The Precession of Simulacra
15 ibid
16 The Matrix
Such question allows us to separate the dimensions of objective reality and subjective fantasy both in *Mulholland Drive* and *The Matrix*.

1) **Diane’s reality vs fantasy**

Only during the final twenty minutes of *Mulholland Drive*, can the spectator start to link the manifest dream scenes to Diane’s reality. In her dream fantasy, her alter ego, aspiring and exuberant Betty, shortly after her discovery of Rita, conveys a clear expression for her ambitions:

> I could never afford a place like this in a million years. Unless, of course, I’m discovered and become a movie star. Of course I’d rather be known as a great actress than a movie star, but sometimes people end up being both, and that is, I guess you’d say, sort of why I came here. I’m just so excited to be here. I mean I just came here from Deep River, Ontario. And now I’m in this dream place. You can imagine how I feel.  

Betty’s kind of narcissistic confession reveals Diane’s latent content and also become evident for her frustrating experience as we learn about in her waking life. In reality, her actual acting career is a flop, relying on small roles that successful Camilla manages to her. But in her dream fantasy, as a representation of her wish-fulfilment, her idealized version Betty turns a small audition into a tour de force performance and then she arrives at the director Adam Kesher’s sound stage set to audition for a starring role on the big screen. Even though this seems to be a big chance for Betty to be discovered – Hollywood momentary glances exchange between Adam and Betty, she leaves for the reason that she needs to assist Rita to find her identity. Apparently, she is reluctant to be discovered as she may try to rationalize the lack of success of her career in the dream as

17 *Mulholland Drive*
well as her murderous actions for Camilla – Adam is forced to select the blonde “Camilla” as the leading actress in his film.

Diane, as numerous aspiring and glamorous young girls, comes to Hollywood pursuing the promised land, but by the end of the dream she finds herself eclipsed by more incomparable and talented figures, transforming her dream into a nightmare.

\[ ii) \quad \textit{Is ignorance bliss?} \]

Unable to endure the harsh condition in the real world, Cypher declares that “ignorance is bliss” and betrays his crewmates in exchange for a pleasant world, even it is an illusory fantasy. Cypher’s mistake is not only owing to his immoral and selfish deal with Agent Smith, but also that he gives up his mind. Such choice may provoke a question that when it comes to the Matrix, the simulacrum, as Baudrillard contends, as a hyperreal, is it necessary to distinguish reality and fantasy? Can we just regard the delicious steak, the woman in a red dress, and the Tasty Wheat as real? René Descartes in \textit{The Second Meditation} presents, “I think therefore I am.”\[18\] This is because, he considers that our senses can deceive us, and like the Matrix, we possibly live in a illusory world created by a malicious devil as we cannot know whether the external world exists.

The essay does not intend to discuss whether there is a powerful deceiver but to convey a point that “mind is more than matter.” It seems that the only thing can prove our existence is that we are a thinking being. As regards Cypher’s choice, if he gives up his mind and returns to dream in the false reality, how can he know whether he still exists?

\[18\] Descartes
Conclusion

In *Mulholland Drive*, Diane Selwyn’s dream illustrates many of the fundamental principles of Freud’s dream-work in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, especially exemplifying the Freud’s notion that dream as the fulfillment of a wish, thereby revealing its hidden psychological content. This film is also a piece of exalted tragic art, which leads viewers’ emotions from delighted aspiration and desire to utterly dissolution and desperation. In terms of the resonance in *The Matrix*, profound philosophical themes may encourage viewers to think about the relationship between simulacrum and reality, to perhaps wonder “how deep the rabbit hole goes” – skepticism with regards to their senses, and to even discuss Descartes’s conjectures on the possibility of existence of a malicious deceiver.
References


