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Author(s): JENNIFER A. HUDSON

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“No Hay Banda, and yet We Hear a Band”: David Lynch’s Reversal of Coherence in *Mulholland Drive*

JENNIFER A. HUDSON

AS WESTERNERS, WE TEND TO INSCRIBE various stimuli within the discourse of traditional logic, favoring the idea that the endless series of events, persons, and images that abound in our experiences can be reduced to a singular and cohesive whole. In *Mulholland Drive* (2001), a film that has puzzled viewers since its world premiere, David Lynch successfully reverses coherence by making the traditional “sense” (logic) of the 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. Although critics remain divided on whether or not logical sense can be derived from *Mulholland Drive*, both sides, when examining or reviewing the film, have either ignored or glossed over Lynch’s aesthetic interest in the realm of the unexplained and his distrust of linguistic structure. This failure, one might argue, does Lynch and his film a great disservice. When looking at *Drive*, it is important to consider Lynch’s aesthetic principles regarding the discourse of sense, and provide a close reading of how he defers the discourse of traditional logic to the

discourse of nonlogic in the film. This essay examines the character of Rita (Laura Elena Harring) and the Club Silencio setting and scene as examples of this deferral. These examples enable us to see that, once Lynch’s aesthetics are kept in mind, we can then more fully appreciate the surrealistic world of *Mulholland Drive*, a world in which truths about “reality” are “sensed” (perceived and known) through the unexplained—the fluid and rhythmic pulsions of the “discourse” of intuitions and emotions. These can be perceived as contradictions or meaninglessness, and as absences in symbolic language—the blurring of conceptual borders.

Indeed, *Mulholland Drive* is a conundrum as curvy and convoluted as the road for which the film is named. Set in the mysterious and menacing dream world of Los Angeles, the film circles around a trance-like landscape where the actual amalgamates with the fantastic, defying semblances of cohesion. Lynch imbues *Drive* with the avant-garde deconstructivism prevalent in Angelino culture. Realities are juxtaposed, identities shift and merge, and unsettled viewers find themselves taking on the role of detective. Like the blackness inside the film’s enigmatic blue box, any logical nucleus for *Drive* remains elusive and indefinable. While audiences might try to perceive some trace of lucidity in the mirages of sound and vision that comprise the film, *Drive* remains a spiral, a circle, a series of unexplained pulsions that blur and destabilize traditional concepts of intellectual sense.

The first two-thirds of *Mulholland Drive* seem

JENNIFER A. HUDSON is a writer, editor, and independent scholar from Bridgeport, CT. Her critical essays, articles, short fiction, and poetry have appeared in *Sage Woman*, *Moondance*, *Medieval Forum*, and *The Delta Epsilon Sigma Journal*, among others. She is currently assistant editor of the *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* and an active member of the Charlotte Perkins Gilman Society, the Society for Utopian Studies, and the National Association of Women Writers.

to follow a sequence, though the last third will dismantle this linearity. One narrative involves a dark-haired, voluptuous, and self-assured woman sitting in the backseat of a limo traveling along Mulholland Drive—a long, curvy, and often treacherous road located high in the Hollywood Hills. As the limo stops, the driver points a gun at the woman, telling her to get out. Ironically, she is saved from assassination by a car full of joy riders, which crashes head-on into the limo. When the woman ambles out of the wreckage like a broken doll, her sensuality and poise seem to have vanished, replaced by innocence and uncertainty—and it is little wonder, for we learn she has amnesia. She remembers nothing about herself, including her name, and appropriates one, Rita, from a poster of the 1946 film *Gilda*, starring Rita Hayworth. The amnesiac hides in an apartment that will soon be occupied by Betty Elms (Naomi Watts), an aspiring actress from small-town Canada who is staying in her aunt's apartment while the aunt is off filming a movie (in Canada). Betty soon discovers Rita and takes it upon herself to help the amnesiac piece together the fragments of her identity—which, until now, are a considerable amount of cash and a mysterious blue key.

Another narrative involves a young and hot-headed director named Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux), who finds his life suddenly falling apart when studio executives force him to cast a particular actress in the lead role of his film. When Kesher refuses, the executives shut down his production. To make matters worse, he finds his wife in bed with another man. After a strange late-night meeting with a man who calls himself The Cowboy, Kesher must decide where to take his career.

There are other minor narratives: a troubled young man named Dan, who tells his friend (or perhaps psychiatrist; Lynch never establishes the man's identity) about his dreams of a horrifying, mysterious man who lives behind a restaurant; and a hitman whose task is beset with screw-ups. All of these separate but simultaneously occurring narratives follow a sequence, or they seem to until two-thirds into

Mulholland Drive. From then on, all bets are off as the film spirals into an increasingly absurd and confused jumble. In fact, the persons, events, and images in this last third feel more desultory than those of the previous two-thirds; as they appear to have been woven into each other, like a Möbius strip, with some details that overlap and some that do not. Moreover, the narrative framework in this last portion seems much more circular, fluid, and tousled than it does in the first—which might explain why words fail to pinpoint an exact destination (meaning) for *Drive*.

Approximately two and a half years have passed since the release of *Mulholland Drive* in the United States, and debates regarding the potential meaning(s) of the film continue to circulate. Generally, critics' responses tend to fall into one of two positions: 1) an argument for a monolithic reading, and 2) an argument for open interpretation. Those who argue for a monolithic reading hypothesize that the ultimate meaning of the film can be found in a singular endpoint once all the fragments have been fitted into linear categories.¹ Those who favor a more open interpretation hypothesize that applying traditional logic to a film that seems to resist, reverse, and dismantle such logic is problematic because things seem to be neither black nor white, either/or for Lynch; they just are.² While I agree with the second group, I believe these critics have not yet explored the relation of open interpretation to Lynch's aesthetics regarding the discourse of sense comprehensively. This essay will relate Lynch's aesthetics to poststructural theory and then apply these correlated aesthetics in a reading of the character of Rita and of the Club Silencio scene and setting.

Lynch and the Poststructural Approaches to the Discourse of Self

Generally speaking, poststructuralists argue that the rationalist conception of "reality" has been inscribed within an unstable symbolic order, a system of linguistic signs comprised of a signifier (sound-image) and a signified (men-

tal concept). Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, argues that the elements in the unconscious—desires, images, etc.—all form signifiers, and that a signifier has meaning only because it is not another signifier. For Lacan, there are no signifieds, and without the nucleus of signifieds, the chain of signifiers is constantly shifting and circulating. Thus, the process of becoming a “self” (entering into the symbolic order) is illusory. The presymbolic realm, what Lacan calls the Imaginary, is the only place where a sense of self is present, but it is present through another, the mother. In *Mulholland Drive*, as we shall see, Rita, who has no identifying markers because she is an amnesiac, undergoes the process of Imaginary identification with the character of Betty. Through this process, Rita arrives at the pre-symbolic realm that French psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva defines as the *chora*, the shared bodily space of mother and child where presignifying traces underlie and break through the order of signification (inscription).

The *chora*, in Kristeva's semiotic terms, is experienced as desire, the uncanny, or the mystical; it reverses coherence in that it is both dichotomous and heterogeneous, an endless flow of pulsions that are perceived as contradictions or meaninglessness, and as absences in the symbolic language. Thus the *chora* is a disruptive dimension that cannot be theorized through the discourse of logic. In addition, the *chora* threatens to destabilize the finite unity and homogeneity of the modern subject.

In *Desire in Language*, Kristeva argues against the *sujet unaire* (unary subject), where the self is seen as homogeneous. She claims that the *sujet en procès* (subject in process) resists the primal repression that institutes *sujets clivés* (split subjects) and disrupts the signifier/signified distinction because it is questionable and has varying nuances. Rita's status as a *sujet en procès*, and her Imaginary relationship with Betty, will propel her toward the realm of the semiotic *chora*, making Rita's own boundaries of self incoherent and blurred and disrupting the process of signification.

Jacques Derrida, a French linguist and

founder of deconstruction theory, views language as a part of a system (discourse) that defines and constructs subjects and concepts within a lexicon and binary logic that places these respective subjects and concepts in an either-or, oppositional relationship, thus establishing and perpetuating fixed, stable, and rigid conceptual borders and categories of difference. He proposes that *differance*, both linguistic “difference” and “deferral,” resists the either-or logic and refuses stability, sense, and the assertion of ultimate meaning. Both Rita and Club Silencio represent a return to the semiotic *chora*—the blurring of conceptual borders—through the fluid and rhythmic pulsions of intuitions and emotions; both exemplify Lynch's successful deployment of linguistic *differance* through the discourse of the unexplained in *Mulholland Drive*.

Lynch, whose great mistrust of words and linguistic structure first became evident in his short 16mm film *The Alphabet* (1968),³ insists that the demand of intellectual discourse for rationalization and structure “kind of restricts thinking, because there are many things going on” (qtd. in “Naked” 28). The filmmaker, like poststructuralists, sees reality as fluid, expansive, and in constant motion, and he resists inscribing reality within a system of linguistic signs that he views as hollow and unstable. Unlike poststructuralists, however, Lynch shows us directly the instability of linguistic structure through the sounds and images of his films, rather than philosophize about this instability. Lynch's sounds and images are meant to evoke moods or feelings in lieu of intellectual thoughts. The filmmaker believes that through these moods, feelings, and sensual perceptions, what he describes as “a kind of subconscious intuition kind of thing [;] it's fluid,” one can “sense” (intuit truths about) experience, a process that occurs when luxuriating in the unexplained (qtd. in Rodley 27).

Like most surrealists, Lynch's language of the unexplained is the fluid language of dreams. Generally, dreams are comprised of images that are perceived by, and stimulate some sort of emotional response within, the

dreamer. We do not know exactly how the dreamer perceives the images, or how he or she experiences emotional responses in dreams. What we deduce is that the language of dreams is a product of the dreamer's unconscious and that it usually does not make sense.

Dreams, like the semiotic *chora*, reverse coherence in that the blurred images, concepts, and emotional responses that materialize in dreams are fluid and rhythmic pulsions. These are perceived as contradictions and meaninglessness by the waking, rational self, who stumbles when trying to explicate his or her dream. This stumbling occurs because the language of dreams is the language of nonlogic, which resists the order of signification. In trying to make logical sense out of his or her dream, the dreamer realizes he or she can only sense the dream through emotional responses and intuitive knowing.

Because Lynch is interested primarily in the sensory aspects of film—sounds and images—he refrains from inscribing these signifiers within the discourse of traditional logic. He does not provide us with signifieds, so his chain of signifiers, in the words of Lacan, ends up constantly shifting and circulating, thus propelling his characters (and audiences) toward a state of being “lost in darkness and confusion,” awash in intellectual uncertainty, left instead with intuitive and emotional perceptions and responses.

Moreover, as Lynch blurs conceptual borders through his surreal juxtapositions, experimental forms, and forays into the unexplained, he defers either-or logic. Lynch, who recognizes that “there is goodness in blue skies and flowers, but another force—a wild pain and decay—also accompanies everything,” sees much value not only in deferring either-or logic, but also in mediating oppositions because, as he explains, “our trip through life is to gain divine mind through knowledge and experience of combined opposites. . . . [T]o reconcile those two opposing things is the trick” (qtd. in Rodley 23). For Lynch, there is no negative Other and opposites are not hostile or irreconcilable; they

just are. Both Rita and the Club Silencio scene and setting are paragons of an aesthetic that values the merging of opposites.

“Lost in Confusion”

Rita, an amnesiac, epitomizes the vagueness of conceptual borders, confusion of place, and incoherence that have become staples of Lynch’s aesthetics, as she exudes the fluidity and promise that comes from not having a fixed self. I would argue that, without conceptual borders surrounding her identity, Rita disrupts traditional either-or logic. Moreover, the incoherence and questionability of her character disrupt the signifier-signified distinction—achieved not by primal repression, but through Rita’s deferral to and rapport with the indefinable, the fluid and rhythmic pulsions of her intuitions and emotional responses.

Rita suffers from retrograde amnesia, which means that she is unable to remember anything prior to her incidence of trauma, the car accident. As an amnesiac, she is truly “lost in darkness and confusion” in terms of identity; she is “a woman in search of herself,” as the trailer for *Mulholland Drive* indicates. *Amnesia*, from the Greek *amnēsia*, is defined in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* as “a loss of memory due to brain injury, shock, fatigue, repression, or illness,” and as “a gap in one’s memory.” Memory is both temporal and spatial. Through time and space, we endow our experiences with a sense of meaning; memory gives us a sense of place (identity) within the realm of temporality and spatiality. If memory is lost, or if a gap occurs in recall, then identity and meaning within time and space become lost, falling into a place without form. But rather than view this so-called place without form as nothingness, one might as easily view it as everythingness, a return to the expansiveness of the semiotic *chora*, thus enabling Rita’s identity to exist beyond time and space, beyond form and fixed meaning, and beyond conceptual borders.

As a tabula rasa, Rita has no identifying markers. When Betty and Rita first meet, Betty

finds her in the shower, completely nude. Rita's disrobed body, submerged under running water, suggests her own rebirth and "gene cleaning"⁴ as an amnesiac. Moreover, when Betty asks Rita her name, the amnesiac's eyes are vacant. Through this vagueness, Lynch establishes Rita's openness in terms of identity. The amnesiac might be considered a *sujet en procès*, as her preexisting identifying markers have been erased and thus left questionable, open to the flexibility and potential of being without a self.

Rita attempts to invent her self by responding to her stimuli, a process she begins when she appropriates her name from the poster she sees in the bathroom. Rita, to use Philip Lopate's words, "truly doesn't know who she is, so she has to be reactive, sweet, and self-inventive" (47). However, as she will find, the road to self is indefinable, and she ironically attempts to find her self in Betty.

While Rita helps Betty prepare for her audition, and Betty performs the part of a betrayed young woman with amateurishly overdone anger, Rita seizes the opportunity to dazzle her companion. Her eyes sparkle, her lips curve into an alluring smile, and she suavely offers Betty the encouraging "but you are *good*." Does Rita really believe Betty is good, or is she simply being sweet and smooth? If acting is a playful reinventing of the self that is "reacting,"

as Woody Katz states at Betty's studio audition (where, incidentally, Betty plays the scene very differently from how she played it for Rita), then is Rita reacting to her growing desire for Betty and/or perhaps a narcissistic desire to realize her identity through Betty?

When Coco, the landlady, drops by unexpectedly to see Betty, she sees Rita sitting on the couch, and asks the brunette "Who are you?" Rita responds in fear, cannot think of a spontaneous answer, and stumbles "Uh, Betty?" As Craig Miller and John Thorne note in their analysis of *Drive*, this seemingly casual answer not only establishes that Rita does not know who she is, but also suggests that she may be dependent upon Betty to supply her with an identity. The irony is that Betty turns Rita into a spitting image of herself (13). I would add that Rita also becomes a "splitting" image, in the sense that, by making love with Betty, her "mother," Rita returns to a place of incoherence where conceptual borders of self become indefinable, and where opposition and signification is disrupted.

Before retiring to bed, Rita (wearing nothing but the blonde wig and a red towel, which might suggest the redness of the womb, the pre-Oedipal space where self is not yet formed), wishes Betty a good night. When Betty says, "You don't have to wear that in the house," Rita, looking down at her towel, asks,

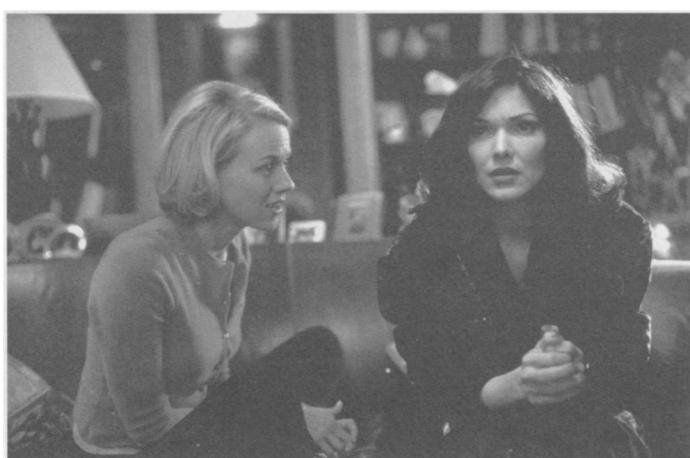


Photo 1: In *Mulholland Drive*, Betty (Naomi Watts, left) helps a confused Rita (Laura Elena Harring). ©2001 Universal Studios (Universal Focus). Photographer: Melissa Mosely.

"What?" When Betty replies "The wig," Rita, caught in the act so to speak, smiles and responds, "I was just looking at myself again. I'll take it off before I go to sleep." Then, per Betty's invitation into bed, Rita takes off her wig and then her towel, completely exposing and opening her physically and psychically bare self to Betty. As Betty and Rita playfully kiss and caress, each gesture a reaction to the previous one, the women connect, opening themselves to and blurring conceptual borders between each other.

This blurring is perhaps best exemplified in their postcoital scene. After the women have slept for a short while, their hands intertwined, Rita begins chanting. As she chants, she is in the foreground, lying on her back; Betty is behind, sleeping on her left side. The positioning of the figures is such that the silhouette of Rita's face bisects Betty's, so that the two seem to merge. Betty's face is out of focus while Rita's remains distinct. However, once the amnesiac begins chanting "*no hay banda*," (there is no band), Betty's face comes into focus and Rita's blurs. This camera technique, in addition to the physical positioning of the two characters, suggests that while Betty and Rita have merged, or their boundaries have blurred, they also remain distinct; they are both dichotomous and heterogeneous, a contradiction at which they arrive through the flowing pulsions of their emotional responses to each other. Betty and Rita, to use Kristeva's semiotic terms, are *sujets clivés*, arriving at the semiotic *chora*, a place where identity is present in each other and incoherence supersedes distinction.

Miller and Thorne see the visual merging of Betty and Rita as a suggestion that the two characters are actually two halves of Diane. They also use the following dialogue, from the scene where Betty and Rita call Diane's phone number, to further their argument:

BETTY: It's strange to be calling yourself.

RITA: Maybe it's not me.

MACHINE: Hello, it's me. Leave a message.

RITA: That's not my voice, but I know her.

Although Miller and Thorne feel that the pun in this dialogue—"it's not me," followed by "it's me"—suggests that Rita might be Diane, I would argue that it might also suggest a breakdown of Rita's self. In this moment, Rita is paradoxically dichotomous and heterogeneous; she is both not Diane and Diane. But she is also Rita, the self she constantly reinvents.

However illusory Rita's attempt at becoming a self may appear, she seems to be the most real character in the film, in the sense that, as an amnesiac, she must be reactive. In other words, Rita's genuineness comes from her trust in her own emotions and intuitions, to which she remains true. Even if she doesn't understand intellectually why she might react a certain way toward a given situation, she understands and makes sense of her stimuli through her connection with and trust in the unexplained. For instance, as Betty and Rita plan their visit to Diane Selwyn's apartment, Rita exclaims with alarm, "I'm not sure about this!" There is something uncanny and unexplainable in her fear. Later, when she sees the rotting corpse in Diane's apartment, Rita experiences an overwhelming sensation of terror. While we cannot determine exactly how Rita knew that something was not right, or exactly what her connection to the corpse is, Rita's intuitive and emotional responses to her stimuli leads her to deduce that she is in some kind of grave, albeit unknown, danger. We attribute Rita's terror to an intuitive knowledge and to feelings that are inexorably linked to the uncanny.

Another example of Rita's sensing occurs after she and Betty make love. As Rita begins chanting "*silencio*," her eyes remain shut. However, by the second time she chants the mantra "*no hay banda*," her eyes open, although she stays in a trance. As the camera focuses on her eyes, we detect an almost paralyzing fear or dread in them. Has Rita perhaps intuited or sensed a truth—that there is no thread, no cohesive reality, no stable sense of self, and no traditional logic? When Betty attempts to jerk Rita's consciousness awake and tells her to "wake up," Rita replies, "No." We do not know why Rita feels things are not all right or what

has such a strong hold over her waking self, but her sudden demand to Betty, “Go with me somewhere,” evidences desperation and urgency, perhaps even madness. As Betty and Rita enter their cab, light flashes before the screen as the camera blurs; we are then taken to Club Silencio. What might this mean? Has Rita pulled Betty into a postcoital dream (or nightmare), or might Club Silencio be both fantasy and reality?

Club Silencio is perhaps the best example of Lynch’s reversal of coherence. Lined with uterine red walls and velvety curtains, Club Silencio acts as a liaison between the worlds presented in *Mulholland Drive*, not only because Lynch places it in the middle of the Betty and Rita–Diane and Camilla sequences, the middle being a position he describes as “the power of both” (qtd. in Rodley 23), but also because Club Silencio is that “no place” filled with contradictions, where things both are and are not, where *il n'y a pas de orchestre* and yet we hear an orchestra. Further, as a place of contradictions, Club Silencio evokes the semiotic *chora*, and also acts as a site of linguistic deferral and difference since it is a place where emotional pulsions flow rhythmically along with the music, becoming a discourse that exists beyond intellectual sense.

At Club Silencio, language fails to define and construct reality and being within a symbolic order, as Spanish, French, and English are intermingled somewhat arbitrarily. One might argue that, through Club Silencio, Lynch takes his mistrust of intellectual discourse, defers it by showing its illusiveness, and then uses emotional responses as a fluid and sensual language that expresses what words cannot. Lynch’s *dif-férence*, to use Derrida’s term, of the traditional discourse of sense is particularly evident during Rebekah Del Rio’s Spanish performance of the Roy Orbison ballad “Crying.” With each sorrowful note, tears stream down Betty and Rita’s cheeks. In this sense, deep sorrow and its physical manifestation, crying, become a language; it communicates that which is intensely felt but cannot be articulated with words. Thus, it matters little that there is no ostensible reason for

Betty and Rita’s tears, other than that both are deeply moved on an emotional, primal level. Words lose their power to inscribe and fix meaning; intellectual discourse loses its power as emotions and their physical manifestations become a new mode of making sense.

Overall, in the words of the synopsis from the Universal Focus official press kit, *Mulholland Drive* is “an uneasy blend of innocence and corruption, love and loneliness, beauty and depravity. Lynch skillfully constructs a mesmerizing puzzle, propelling us through a mysterious labyrinth of sensual experiences until we arrive at the intersection where dreams and nightmares meet.” Like a roll of film—something both linear and spiraling—coherence in *Drive* is reversed because Lynch has made the discourse of traditional sense defer to the discourse of nonlogical sense, to the presignifying traces that can be perceived through the unexplained as the blurring of conceptual borders. The film openly ends with a return to Club Silencio and a blue-haired woman who whispers a reminder, “*silencio . . .*” However, Lynch prompts viewers to be anything but silent about the film’s surrealistic world. Once *Mulholland Drive* becomes your universe, you will find yourself lost in confusion, driving in circles as you revise or spin new interpretations again and again, making sense through your senses, responding to *Drive*’s fluid and rhythmic pulsions of sights and sounds.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Ruch. He concludes that the film is comprised of two separate narratives—the “fantasy” narrative involving Betty and Rita, and the “reality” narrative involving Diane and Camilla. Diane, he argues, is a split identity who attempts to replace her reality with a fantasy—one that ultimately crumbles when bits and pieces of her reality begin to surface. As Ruch reduces the film to a fantasy that opposes a reality, he places the fantasy narrative in a secondary position, suggesting that the reality narrative is the superior and, thus, the true narrative. See also Ostherr and Abizadeh, who read the film, particularly Betty and Diane, as “two temporally distant poles of a single identity.” Both of these readings, I would argue, limit the possibilities of Lynch’s vision because they perpetuate rigid conceptual borders.

2. See Ebert, who insists that the film “resists, defies, and finally defeats logical explanation. Like a dream, it does not have to make sense. The best way to appreciate ‘Mulholland Drive’ is simply to experience it as a series of scenes, each one with a power and consistency of its own, that do not ‘add up’ to a logical plot summary, or cannot be reduced to an explanation.” See also Nochimson, who argues that *Mulholland Drive* is Lynch’s retort to the mass-marketed mechanism of reason that stunts the experimentalism of the creative process (37). I would take Nochimson’s argument a step further and suggest that what Lynch rejects in the film is the discourse of traditional logic itself.

3. The plot of *The Alphabet*, suggesting the violence of language, involves a young girl surrounded by darkness as she listens to children chanting the letters of the alphabet. After learning the letters of the alphabet in a space that incorporates aspects of form and formlessness, the girl vomits blood overpoweringly.

4. “Gene Clean” are the words painted on the old, dilapidated truck of the man with whom Adam Kasher’s wife has an affair.

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