

**Trapped in the Triangular Orders:
A Lacanian Psycholinguistic
Reading of Mulholland
Drive and About Elly**

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**Studies in literature and Culture:
from Theory to Practice**

2026, Vol. 1(2) 164-177

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doi:10.22091/SLIC.2026.15462.1029
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Abstract:

Lacanian theories have been considered potential components in approaches meant to be employed in studying films. This comparative analysis investigates how characters in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* and Asghar Farhadi's *About Elly* collapse under psychological pressure when their perceived realities splinter. Exploring the complex interplay between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, the analysis demonstrates how the subjects' defence mechanisms fail to sustain their illusions. Despite significant cultural differences, both films can be read as demonstrating the ego's instability and the inevitability of its dissolution under the weight of reality. Diane's private fantasy represents the Ideal-Ego while Elly's collective social image offers Ego-Ideal imposed by collective expectations, which are subsequently disrupted by their respective Symbolic orders – namely Hollywood's laws and the Iranian social order. Each narrative arrives at a traumatic confrontation with the Real through suicide and disappearance, exposing the constitutive void at the heart of subjectivity. The subject in both films is repeatedly confronted with the Real in a traumatic way, whether through Lynch's individual fantasy or Farhadi's collective moral crisis. Ultimately, these narratives reveal how subjectivity exposes the void that shatters the illusion of a coherent self.

Keywords: Lacanian psychoanalysis; Subjectivity; the Real; David Lynch; Asghar Farhadi, Comparative film studies.

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How to cite this article:

Shirin Ghabimi. "Trapped in the Triangular Orders: A Lacanian Psycholinguistic Reading of *Mulholland Drive* and *About Elly*". *Studies in Literature and Culture*, vol.1, no.2, 2026, pp 164-177.

<https://doi.org/10.22091/slic.2026.15462.1029>.

*Received 18/01/2026; Received in revised form 15/03/2026; Accepted 20/07/2026; Published online 30/09/2026.

1. Introduction

The enigma of human subjectivity has been a central obsession of both philosophy and art, depicted as a fragile construct unsteadily balanced between internal desire and external recognition. As Virginia Woolf hauntingly observed, "For unless I am, I am nobody" (୧୦୫), illustrating how delicate human subjectivity is: a sense of self is always contingent upon how we are perceived or defined by other people. This existential dread of being nobody resonates deeply with the Lacanian notion of lack. For Lacan, the subject is born into a state of fragmentation and achieves only a sense of being somebody through the mirror stage—by identifying with an external image. The tragic dependency of the ego is that it must constantly seek confirmation in the Other to avoid falling back into the void of the Real that Woolf's quote captures. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the ego is described as unstable, built and formed through an image of oneself in relation to external recognition and always marked by a lack. Lacan's model of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real provides a useful framework for understanding how subjectivity is formed, maintained, and eventually shattered. The Imaginary order is where the ego—specifically the Ideal Ego—is formed during the mirror stage through identification with a specular image, creating a narcissistic illusion of wholeness and coherence. The Symbolic follows, introducing the Ego Ideal as the realm of language, law, and social structures. What Lacan calls the Other that speaks through the subject and positions it within a pre-existing network of meaning. The Real is described as what resists symbolization absolutely which means the traumatic core that cannot be integrated into either image or language and appears only as a break, absence, or rupture.

Both films examine the instability of subjectivity and the self. Lynch uses fantasy and a surrealist approach to depict the internal psychic landscape of his protagonist, while Farhadi uses a more realist approach to show the everyday lives and interactions of a group of ordinary people in Tehran. Despite the differences in cultural context, both films demonstrate how our perceptions of our identities are formed and quickly disappear before our eyes upon confronting the Real. In *Mulholland Drive*, Diane summons a fantasy figure of her beloved Betty, wishing to construct the perfect image of herself, presumably as a successful actress. Yet, that image begins to crumble with scenes featuring accounts of betrayal, guilt, and death. In *About Elly*, our main character is defined exclusively and exhaustively by others' judgments and expectations. Elly cannot express herself, nor can she express her voice in any clear way. Only in the kite-flying scene is the potential for her subjectivity revealed, as she is released from social expectations, a genuine one, experiences a genuine moment of pure joy (*jouissance*) briefly allowing her to exist outside the symbolic order's structural demands. Her disappearance serves to remind the viewer that the ego is fashioned as an image, and can quickly collapse in the face of reality. These two films were produced through different cinematic traditions, and yet the subsequent analysis suggests a shared structural logic that

the ego falls apart under the burden of reality. This paper will discuss both films' indications of the instability of the Lacanian ego, showing how facing reality can collapse the imaginary self and how subjectivity is always vulnerable to rupture.

2. Review of Literature

Mulholland Drive and *About Elly* have independently attracted scholarly attention. David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, in particular, has been a case study for scholars in psychology to understand its complicated story and characters. In contrast, criticism on Asghar Farhadi's *About Elly* has mostly focused on its socio-political, ethical, and realist concerns especially the moral anxieties of the Iranian middle class after Elly's disappearance. Although these bodies of research adopt different problematizations and methodologies, they converge on similar notions of fantasy, social performance, and fragility of subjectivity. None of the existing studies, however, have juxtaposed within a single comparative framework that examines how both films stage subjectivity through the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

2.1. Studies Related to the Selected Films

Todd McGowan, in *"Lost on Mulholland Drive: Navigating David Lynch's Panegyric to Hollywood"*, addresses the problematic nature of narrative deception and desire in Lynch's cinema. He argues that the film critiques the Hollywood fantasy structure. Using a Lacanian framework, McGowan shows how the narrative is divided between Diane's Imaginary investment in an idealized Hollywood dream and the traumatic intrusion of the Real that shatters subjective coherence (67-89). He argues that the film shows the constitutive failure of the subject's sustaining fantasy rather than just presenting enigmatic puzzle plot. These findings are crucial for this study because they clearly map the relationship between the Imaginary and the Real, providing a precise template for analyzing how illusion's collapse leads to the breakdown of subjectivity.

In *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*, McGowan aims to develop a Lacanian film theory showing how viewers are confronted with the gaze of the Real in cinematic experience. He introduces Lynch as a filmmaker who confronts audiences with the gaze of the Real intentionally, exposing the constitutive lack at the center of desire (112). His work supports the idea that *Mulholland Drive* is a film that dramatizes the collapse of Imaginary coherence under the pressure of the Real, a model that can be extended to *About Elly* in a comparative framework.

Žižek's *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, explores how fantasy sustains reality and how ideological fantasies structure everyday experience by applying Lacanian concepts to films and cultural texts including David Lynch's work. He argues that fantasy is what supports reality and that surrealist approach reveals the ideological fantasies that structure ordinary life (156). His account of fantasy helps frame the analysis of

Diane's fantasy in *Mulholland Drive* and the social fantasy constructed around Elly in *About Elly*, allowing the present study to compare individual and collective forms of Imaginary construction.

In *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Hamid Naficy categorizes Farhadi's cinema as a milestone in Iranian modern realism, emphasizing how *About Elly* deconstructs the moral anxieties and defensive mechanisms of the Iranian middle class (214). Naficy focuses on collective deception and the invisible social boundaries that pressure the characters after Elly's disappearance. Most critics approach *About Elly* through an ethical lens, examining how language is used to maintain social facades. What these readings often overlook is the underlying psycholinguistic structure of these social constraints. The group's moral panic in *About Elly* can be understood not merely as a cultural response to loss, but also as a desperate attempt to preserve the Symbolic order when faced with a sudden and unexpected absence—an absence that embodies the Real.

Expanding upon this realist paradigm through an ethical lens, Khatereh Sheibani, in *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity and Film after the Revolution*, examines the linguistic and moral anxieties inherent in modern Iranian narratives. Sheibani aims to show how language and narrative gaps are used to indicate social façade. She examines how characters use language to protect group stability and hide domestic tensions by using a formalist and ethical approach. She finds that language in Farhadi's films functions as a fragile shield to protect the group from moral exposure. These findings are important here, because they highlight the role of collective pressure and social façade. By extending her work this research demonstrates that these defensive linguistic behaviours reflect a deep psychological attempt to preserve the Symbolic order when faced with the Real.

Further complicating this social framework, Akbar Hasanpour and Behjat Yazdbakhshi, in *"The Problematic of Femininity: Representation of Gender and Construction in Modern Iranian Cinema"*, investigates the construction of gender roles within contemporary cultural narratives (33-68). The authors' main objective is to analyze how Iranian modern cinema represents the traditional boundaries of femininity during moments of acute domestic crisis. Hasanpour and Yazdbakhshi, using a cultural-representative approach, demonstrate how language and social codes are weaponized by the community in *About Elly* to regulate female agency and maintain patriarchal stability. The study finds that the characters' collective defensive manoeuvres are structurally designed to safeguard traditional reputations from disruptive exposure. These findings help to show how the defence of patriarchal structures mirrors the subject's desperate defence of the Symbolic Law of the Father.

2.2. Synthesis of Studies on the Selected Films

These studies demonstrate that *Mulholland Drive* has been extensively read through Lacanian concepts such as desire, fantasy and the Real. While McGowan and Žižek work offers

an influential Lacanian reading of individual desire and psychic fragmentation, and show that the film stages the collapse of Imaginary coherence under the pressure Symbolic law and traumatic absence but their analysis remains focused on the Western cinematic tradition and the socio-cultural dynamics of Hollywood and the collective scholarship of Naficy, Sheibani, and Hasanpour exposes how collective anxieties and external structural constraints regulate non-Western subjects. They both converge on the human subject whether isolated individuals or bourgeois social groups that rely on structured illusions and linguistic facades to protect themselves from traumatic absence. The shared concept across these diverse studies is that stabilizing structures of human life are bound to shatter whenever an unpredictable crisis punctures their regulatory boundaries.

2.3. Reviews Related to the Theoretical Framework

Jacques Lacan addresses the fundamental problem of how human subjectivity is formed in his foundational paper *the Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*. His primary objective is to challenge the Cartesian notion of a unified, self-transparent consciousness by demonstrating that the ego is constituted through identification with an external image. Lacan's approach is psychoanalytic, drawing on infant development to explain the subject's originary alienation. His findings establish that the ego is born in misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), an "armour of an alienating identity" that forever marks the subject's development (1-7). Lacan's mirror stage is important for this study because it provides a theoretical basis for understanding how both Diane and Elly are defined by either images they create of themselves or images others create of them and how these images inevitably collapse when confronted with reality.

Bruce Fink addresses the problem of how the subject emerges within language and desire in *the Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. His objective is to systematically clarify Lacan's complex concepts of alienation, separation, and the constitution of the subject as lack. Fink's exegetical approach unpacks the complexities of Lacanian theory, demonstrating that the subject is "caused by the Other's desire" and sustained through fantasy (49-60). His findings clarify the function of object *a* as the cause of desire and the role of fantasy in structuring the subject's relation to the Other. Fink's works for the present study is significant because it clearly articulates of the Symbolic order operates providing the theoretical vocabulary to distinguish between the *Ideal-I* and the *Ego-Ideal*—a distinction crucial for analyzing the collapse of subjectivity in both films.

Dylan Evans in his work *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* addresses clear and accessible definitions of key Lacanian terms. He organizes the concepts alphabetically and explains each one in its proper context. His findings offer precise definitions of terms such as the Imaginary, the Symbolic, the Real, *objet a*, and *jouissance* (52-55). The significance of Evans's dictionary for the present study is its function as a reliable reference for

maintaining theoretical consistency throughout the analysis, ensuring that Lacanian terms are used accurately and rigorously.

2.4. Synthesis of Studies on Theoretical Framework

Together, Lacan's original formulation of the mirror stage, Fink's systematic exposition of the Lacanian subject, and Evans's terminological clarification provide a comprehensive theoretical toolkit for analyzing identity formation and collapse. Lacan establishes the foundational concept of the ego as a construct of misrecognition; Fink develops this framework by explaining how the subject is constituted in the Symbolic order and sustained by fantasy. Evans ensures terminological precision. All three theorists converge on the point that subjectivity is structurally unstable—defined by lack, dependent on the Other's desire, and vulnerable to rupture. This theoretical synthesis is essential for the comparative analysis of the two films, as it enables a rigorous reading that traces the movement from Imaginary coherence through Symbolic disturbance to the traumatic encounter with the Real.

The existing scholarship offers invaluable, multi-layered insights into the individual psychic fragmentation of Lynch's characters and the collective moral panics, gendered pressures, and structural frameworks within Farhadi's cinematic environment. However, a comprehensive synthesis of these distinct fields firmly affirms a critical GAP within contemporary film studies: the lack of a cross-cultural synthesis of psychoanalytic theories in non-Western cinema, particularly through a direct comparative dialogue between Lynch and Farhadi. Prior studies remain bound by a geographic, methodological, and ideological divide, leaving the deeper psycholinguistic and ontological underpinnings of non-Western social constraints largely unexplored. By juxtaposing *Mulholland Drive* and *About Elly* through Lacan's three orders, the present study directly bridges this gap, illustrating that the inevitable failure of the Imaginary ego when confronted with the law of the Father and the devastating arrival of the Real is a universal structural condition rather than a culturally isolated event.

3. Theoretical Framework

To analyze the subjective dissolution in both films, Jacques Lacan's tripartite ontology of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real is employed here. These three orders constitute an intertwined network that shapes human reality and subjectivity.

The Imaginary order is anchored in the foundational concept of the Mirror stage. Between the ages of six and eighteen months, when the baby still feels physically uncoordinated, sees its reflection in a mirror. This image gives the false sense of being whole and in control. Lacan calls this Ideal-I. However, the baby identifies with an outside image, not with its real, fragmented body. So, the ego is formed by this image. In cinema, this shows up when characters hold onto idealized versions of themselves, trying to rely on the visual identification, narcissistic fantasies, and the desperate maintenance of a coherent self-image. But because

this unity is built on a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), it remains fragile and is threatened by the intrusion of reality that exposes the self's lack.

As the subject matures Imaginary relationship is disrupted by the Symbolic order, the realm of language, law, and social structures. This entry is mediated by the Name-of-the-Father, a metaphorical function that functions as the bedrock of social law, and provides the subject a stable place within the discourse of the Other (Seminar III 149) and separates the child from the mother and forces the child to enter society. When the subject enters society and gains the access to language and must separate itself from its phallic position of being everything to the mother and submit to the law of the signifier. As a result, the subject split and alienated by the language that it uses to express itself. In this linguistic network, desire is never unmediated but it is always the desire of the Other. Because language can never fully capture human experience, this entry creates a permanent residue or lack. This structural void gives rise to the *objet petit a*—the unattainable object-cause of desire. The *objet a* function as a psychic placeholder for the lost fullness of the pre-symbolic state, driving the subject's perpetual chase for satisfaction through various substitutes, none of which can truly fill the lack (Fink 59-60).

When the Symbolic network fails to domesticate or signify the subject's experience, the Real erupts. The Real must not be confused with objective reality; rather, it is the traumatic, unrepresentable void that resists absolute linguistic capture. It is that which remains outside the symbolic law and the imaginary fantasy. The Real and jouissance are tied – this excessive enjoyment, "whether correlated with a conscious feeling of pleasure or pain, is what the French call jouissance" (Fink 60). Jouissance is the unconscious enjoyment the subject gains through symptoms, a way of compensating for the loss of imaginary unity. The Real in cinematic narratives usually appears as a breakdown in the story or structure, where the safe illusions of the Imaginary and the rules of the Symbolic fall apart, forcing characters to face the trauma and void that was always there beneath the surface.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Imaginary: Ego as Image and Fantasy

In both movies, the imaginary emerges through idealized self-image process of ego formation is indicated through the perfect images that their characters construct or inhabit. In *Mulholland Drive*, Diane's perfect image is made by herself as she imagines herself as Betty, the successful actress, to hide her guilt and jealousy towards her lover Camila in real life. Lynch masterfully externalizes this imaginary misrecognition through his explicit cinematographic techniques during the first half of the movie. The camera functions as unnerving, a bright, saturated Hollywood palette whose lenses visually mimic the seamless coherence of an Ideal-ego. Even in her fantasy, she pictures Diane dead to reduce her guilt and forget her identity,

presenting Betty as a pure and reliable self-image in the first half of the film. Lynch often shows us Betty's point of view, drawing audience into Diane's imaginary world. But this visual coherence is unstable and he interrupts the fantasy with slow tracking shots that feel unsettling, and sudden shifts into deep-focused shots that hint at repressed elements into the frame. Yet, as a narrator, she is incapable of facing reality, and the whole cheerful fantasy turns into a nightmare of loss, representing how the ego's illusion is sustained only by repression (Žižek 156).

In contrast, *About Elly*, the Imaginary is manifested not within the individual but within a collective. The vacation to the north is also like a dream, where Elly is trapped within their judgments, not narrated by herself. She often participates in imaginary misrecognition; instead of being granted a subjective voice, the cinematography frames her through a detached observational lens, Elly is never allowed to speak her own desire; she is constantly evaluated and trapped within a network of several expectations that limits her freedom. Because human subjects are inherently bound to a deceptive ego characterized by misrecognition, this Imaginary integrity remains structurally precarious. Elly's sudden disappearance immediately following this peak of imaginary unity signals the violent transition from Imaginary stabilization to Symbolic rupture—the unavoidable incursion of social law, language, and the patriarchal order that fractures the illusion of a coherent self. Farhadi's camera participates in this imaginary misrecognition, the camera captures Elly through brief scenes where she is outside of the group's circle, separated and alone which mirrors the group's refusal to perceive her as fully articulated subject. Sepideh, in particular, attempts to consolidate herself and her position within the group's moral framework by projecting her desire for a coherent social narrative onto Elly, using her as an imaginary object to fill a lack in her own social identity. Elly is largely framed through the group's fantasy, which limits the possibility of her appearing as a fully articulated subject (Naficy 218), as Lacan (*Écrits*) attributes to the Imaginary.

The peak of the Imaginary order in Farhadi's film occurs in the kite-flying scene. As Elly runs along the shore with the kite, she briefly escapes the demands of the Symbolic order. Farhadi captures this brief moment of liberation and *jouissance* through a dynamic panning shot as she runs along the shore. The pure joy she experiences is a moment of *jouissance*—a rare moment of freedom that contrasts with the social mask imposed on her. Yet this cinematic liberation is ironic meaning that she is framed from a distance, suggesting that her identity remains out of reach, always already captured by the group's fantasy.

Immediately following this imaginary unity, Elly's sudden disappearance releases a violent structural rupture. The camera that was smooth and steady in kite-flying scene, suddenly changes into a frantic, unstable handheld camera with quick and chaotic editing rhythms. Moreover, the bright open space of the beach is replaced by the claustrophobic *mise-en-scène* of the old decaying villa. Through this visual shift, accurately captures how the characters'

fragile self-images and defensive facades quickly fall apart when they are faced by an unpredictable crisis.

4.2 The Symbolic and the Name-of-the-Father

Lacan's Symbolic order is a system of language, laws, traditions, and social norms—like an invisible rulebook of society that shows what we are born into and how we see the world. It is how the subject is divided from the Imaginary and becomes defined by the discourse of the Other, including law, language, and social order. In both movies, this transition happens, and fantasy connects to reality, showing that the ego is inscribed within structures of power, morality, and communication.

Mulholland Drive's symbolic dimension emerges where Hollywood appears as a metaphor for Lacan's Name-of-the-Father—the law that limits fantasy and structures desire, separating the subject from the Imaginary. Diane seeks recognition through an Ego-Ideal represented within Hollywood's standards of success and desirability. The casting scene, the mysterious authority figures (the cowboy, Mr. Roque), and the phrase "This is the girl" all signal the law of the Other that dictates the world Diane wishes to enter. Todd McGowan in *The Real Gaze* argues that Lynch exposes the psychic logic of capitalism by revealing its fundamental misunderstanding of enjoyment (101). Diane fails as an actress and lover by Hollywood's laws, so her fantasy of success and romantic fulfillment with Camilla represents how Hollywood is an obstacle to her fame, wealth, and love life, defining her as a subject of the Symbolic.

In *About Elly*, Farhadi structures this Symbolic constraint through cinematic form not just cultural codes. The group's moral expectations regarding honor, reputation, marriage function as an Ego-Ideal. When Elly disappears, the group language becomes a mechanism of protection instead of a tool for honest communication. It becomes a purely symbolic instrument for representing the traumatic Real of the group's collective guilt and Elly's potential death.

Farhadi auditorily establishes this symbolic pressure through continuous and overwhelming diegetic sound of the crashing waves is not just a natural backdrop. Instead, the roaring sea acts as a scary auditory of the Real. This non-stop noise of the waves visually and acoustically exposes the failure of their symbolic communication. In this chaotic environment, Elly is reduced to a silent signifier, trapped between the group's judgments, where her actual voice is completely excluded from the social order.

4.3. The Function of the Name-of-the-Father: Women as Lack and *Objet a*

A dimension of the Symbolic in both films concerns the position of women within the Symbolic network. In *Mulholland Drive*, Rita is passive and amnesiac, dependent on Diane, Adam Kesher, and the mysterious industry powers that insist "this is the girl." The dinner party scene also indicates Camilla as an object that is exchanged within a symbolic economy that

excludes Diane entirely. She is what Lacan calls *objet a*—the cause of desire that circulates within the Symbolic order but can never be possessed.

About Elly takes on this dynamic within a specifically Iranian cultural dimension. Elly's position is defined by the group's symbolic universe, by what Naficy (220) terms the moral economy of Iranian middle-class society. Her actual desires, her history, her interiority—none of these matters to the group's fantasy. Following her disappearance, the group starts redefining her in order to ease their guilt and reserve symbolic stability. Her subjectivity is reduced to a set of competing signifiers that reveals how symbolic order functions through classification rather than actual recognition.

The Name-of-the-Father, by initiating the child into language, kinship structures, and a network of social meaning, acts as a paternal metaphor that substitutes for the mother's desire. In *Mulholland Drive*, this function is indicated through the authority of Hollywood, a rigid patriarchal system of "naming" that fails Diane as an actress. Diane's inability to find a stable place within the industry's symbolic network—she is rejected by the "name"—causes her ego to fracture, leading her to retreat into an Imaginary fantasy where she can "name" herself as a successful Betty. The most evident example of this displacement is the name "Camilla Rhodes," which is assigned to two different women by the shadowy forces of the industry. This detachment of the name from a specific person portrays the Lacanian premise that the signifier does not guarantee a stable identity; rather, it is a placeholder within a system of desire (*Écrits* 150). In Diane's fantasy reconstruction, she splits the original Camilla into two figures—the vulnerable Rita and the system-imposed actress—to manage her jealousy. Her inability to control this naming process confirms her exclusion from the Symbolic law, leading to her psychic fragmentation. This split reflects how this dream protects the subject from confronting the painful truth that the beloved Other has an independent desire.

Similarly, in *About Elly*, the group attempts to control the narrative through lies and significantly they cannot even provide Elly's full name to the authorities, revealing that how little they know about her as a subject beyond the Symbolic role assigned to her. She is a signifier without a fixed referent, passed between their judgments. Her silence and eventual disappearance mark her exclusion from a Symbolic order that never truly identifies her as a subject. This is where language shifts from a communication tool to a purely symbolic instrument for managing the traumatic Real of the group's collective guilt and Elly's potential death.

5.3. The Real: Trauma, Loss, and Breakdown

The Real is about impossibilities—the impossibilities of language and life. According to Lacan, the Real is the emptiness about which both the Imaginary and the Symbolic are organized. The Real cannot be represented in language. It only appears as rupture, trauma, or what has been repressed (*Écrits* 4). The trauma returns in disguise, in dreams or in slips of the

tongue. In both movies, *Mulholland Drive* and *About Elly*, the Real appears as a dream or death when fantasy and social order fail to contain the subject's encounter.

In *Mulholland Drive*, the Real appears in the second half of the film when Diane wakes up from the dream of Betty's life. The Club Silencio scene, where the performer insists "No hay banda" ("there is no band") as the music continues, serves as the revelation of the Real. Lynch breaks the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the same way; "what seemed coherent is revealed as simulation, and the subject's belief in representation disintegrates" (Žižek 156). The suicide of Diane symbolizes the Real she was unable to endure; she cannot sustain the fantasy that structured her ego, and she confronts the void in her life that lies beyond the limits of signification. The Real, here, is both truth and death—the traumatic point at which desire is stripped of illusion.

In *About Elly*, the Real appears with Elly's vanishing into the sea. This incident fractures the social order of the group and exposes the moral contradictions underlying their collective façade. The group members' desperation to explain or justify what happened only deepens the void, showing that the Symbolic cannot contain the Real of loss. Elly's haunting absence, mirrored by the emptiness of the sea, becomes a cinematic embodiment of the unspeakable—the Real that destabilizes both identity and narrative. Farhadi changes the visual landscape to reflect this trauma. He changes the bright smooth cinematography of the early scenes into a bleak, desaturated color palette and a chaotic handheld camera style during the rescue attempts.

As Hamid Naficy points out, Elly's haunting absence and the absolute ambiguity of her fate become the ultimate representation of the Real, exposing the moral contradictions of the characters (220). The climax of this confrontation is when a body is finally found Farhadi refuses to provide a clear confrontation but he frames the characters' collective breakdown through long shots to emphasize their isolation. Like Diane, Sepideh and the group fail to traverse their social fantasy. Instead of integrating the truth of Elly's death and their own complicity, they choose to retreat deeper into the Symbolic lie, forcing Sepideh to deny Elly's identity to Alireza. The Real is not resolved; it is violently repressed once again to save their middle-class reputation, leaving the subject permanently fractured.

6.3. Comparative Discussion: Fragmented Selves beyond Cultures

Examining both films through a Lacanian perspective, *Mulholland Drive* and *About Elly* represent a vision of the ego as an unstable structure, always in danger of collapse. However, while the films follow the same psychoanalytic trajectory—starting from the Imaginary through the Symbolic and finally into the Real—they present that trajectory through very different cultural and aesthetic landscapes. The two films, when compared to one another, illustrate how Lacan's theories are universally thought of initially in an empirical way, then through their social, linguistic, and moral systems produce different configurations on the

screen, which will ultimately leave us with a clear indication of how culturally distinct these two films are while at the same time containing specific parallels.

In *Mulholland Drive*, the fragmentation of the self is interior and psychological. Diane's ego collapses due to the burden of her own fantasy and guilt, which unfolds in the hallucinatory logic of the dream. The Real appears as an individual and personal trauma—an internal collapse of desire that cannot be held steady by language or narrative. In Lynch's narrative, chaotic surrealism wedded to inexplicable episodic naturalism becomes the means of exteriorizing psychic disintegration: Los Angeles is both dreamscape and nightmare, reflecting Diane's repressed unconscious. The folly of the ego is located in the psyche and becomes dramatized by the futility of individual identity against the weight of unattainable desires and symbolic exclusion (Žižek).

In contrast, *About Elly* situates the same structural crisis within a social field rather than an individual mind. Elly's identity is never told by her character but is produced through the social discourses of others—friends, fiancé, and societal expectations. In her disappearance, she embodies not only personal trauma but also collective trauma that illustrates the instability of the moral and linguistic framework constituting the group. While critics might argue that applying a Western theory like Lacan to Iranian cinema is euro-centric, Farhadi's film proves that the theoretical framework proves productive when adapted to cultural specificities. Here, the Symbolic order operates through the unique Iranian middle-class anxieties regarding Ta'arof, honor, and reputation (Aroo). Therefore, where Lynch works through the Real as psychic unravelling, Farhadi works through the Real as ethical collapse. The Real, here, is social and communal: a vacuum at the center of a culture that requires coherence and cannot bear uncertainty (Naficy 221). The comparison between these two films suggests that while the psychic experience of lack is shared across cultures, the social systems through which this lack is managed create completely different cinematic configurations.

4. Conclusion

Through a comparative reading of *Mulholland Drive* and *About Elly*, this paper has demonstrated how both David Lynch and Asghar Farhadi utilize the medium of cinema to dramatize the fragile and fictional nature of the human ego. By applying a Lacanian framework adapted to their respective cultural landscapes, we can see that whether the psychic defense structures are undone by a highly personalized, surrealist guilt in Los Angeles or a collective, socially repressive crisis on the Caspian coast, both films stage a comparable encounter with the Real.

Crucially, neither Diane nor Sepideh does manage to successfully "traverse the fantasy." Diane's journey ends in absolute physical self-destruction, while Sepideh and her social circle choose to retreat deeper into the security of the Symbolic lie, permanently fracturing their ethical subjectivity. These cinematic narratives ultimately reveal that the ego is not a solid

foundation of identity, but a defensive screen that shatters the moment the repressed Real breaks through the surface of daily reality.

This psychic dissolution and the terrifying pull of the unrepresentable recall Virginia Woolf's profound literary insight into the human consciousness—specifically her description of the self as something capable of dissolving into the surrounding environment, shifting from a rigid ego into a fluid, porous existence. The ultimate fates of these female protagonists in these films including Diane's fading into the phantoms of her bedroom and Elly's drowning into the indifferent, overwhelming sea dramatize this very erasure of the self.

When the structures of the Imaginary and the Symbolic collapse, they are forced to confront the absolute void. In these moments of collapse, cinema ceases to be a mere comforting mirror but instead becomes a radical space that exposes the fundamental lack at the heart of both the individual psyche and the social order, and leaves us with nothing but the haunting echoes of what has been violently erased.

Acknowledgments

AI tools were used for language editing during preparation of this manuscript.

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