

The Cinema of David Lynch: The Fleeting Mosaic Apparition of Selfhood

0. Abstract

In this paper I will explore the directorial work of David Lynch. First, in chapter one, I situate him in a film historical context, narrate the chronology of his works, divide his output into the “two Lynches” (commercial vs. avant-garde) and unveil the narratological and thematic continuity across what I call his “Mystery Film” series (1977-2006). In the second chapter I introduce a bit of theory, a *mélange* of ideas imported from the fields of film theory, psychology, sociology and semiotics. I argue for the unity of *psychological* and *narrative* continuity (temporality) in film. In the third chapter I show that Lynch, whose narrativity is always *internal* narrativity, is exemplary in this regard. Therein I undertake a psychological-structural-narratological-semiotic analysis of Lynch’s 1997 film “Lost Highway”, which I believe to be especially psycho-intensive (cf. “psychogenic fugue”) and immersed in semio-plenitude (cf. Eco’s *opera aperta*). I come to argue in favour of the spectator-theory of meaning-structuration. In the final chapter I summarize my findings, make a few further comparisons to other Lynch films and leave the field open for alternative interpretations.

1. Lynch as an Auteur - a Film Historical Perspective

Some American auteurs, as well as some non-American auteurs who like to keep one foot (or is that one sole, i.e. one *soul*) in Hollywood, spend their careers oscillating between independent (indie) productions, their *true* passion, and the everyday run-o’-the-mill studio productions, their “day job”. A typical example of this type may be taken to be Steven Spielberg, whose lengthy and veritable *oeuvre* includes crowd-pleasers like “*E.T.*” (1982) and “*Jurassic Park*” (1993), but which also includes deeply personal and controversial films like “*Duel*” (1971¹), “*Schindler’s List*” (1993), “*Amistad*” (1997) and “*Munich*” (2005). Of course, Spielberg is one of the few truly cross-over

¹ “*Duel*” was his first full-length commercial feature (although made-for-TV), after a number of art-school student productions and miscellaneous TV work. As a film it is close to the style of cinema refined by John Carpenter, John Romero, early George Lucas, David Cronenberg and others during the ‘70s and the ‘80s. Still one of his best, IMHO.

directors whose films are often both critically acclaimed *and* major box-office hits. In this category we have people like Martin Scorsese, George Lucas and James Cameron, all of whom have unfortunately relinquished much of their experimental side. A better, perhaps more authentically bipolar example of this type of an artist is Guillermo del Toro, the director of the masterful “*Pan’s Labyrinth*” (2006), whose highly uneven output in the 1990’s also includes the likes of “*Hellboy*” (sic), “*Blade II*” (sic!) and “*Mimic*” (sic!!). While hardly guilty of doing anything quite comparably scandalous as *that*, there sure are films in David Lynch’s catalogue which stick out like a sore thumb. While his very first and his very latest film – “*Eraserhead*” (1977) & “*Inland Empire*” (2006) – exhibit clear uniformity of stylistics and aesthetics, plus a remarkable continuity of form and ideology, there are occasional dips into the broad but dangerously shallow (so don’t jump in head first) waters of normalcy and into the realm of acceptability and unselfconsciousness, i.e. straight & clean, un-fiddled and un-muddled screenplay narrativity. There are two Lynchés.

Although his debut film, “*Eraserhead*”, was a tantalizing art house production with only the faintest semblance of linear narrativity, and although the short films he made during the ‘70s (such as “*Grandmother*” in 1970 and “*Amputee*” in 1974) were hardly any *less* baffling, he was chosen, based on the cult acclaim heaped upon him, to direct one of the most successful mainstream films of the decade, “*The Elephant Man*” (1980), a black-and-white rendition of a classic story. The only continuity between the two films is their use of B&W cinematography and the use of theatrical tricks such as smoke and transposed/translucent montages of images. *Elephant Man* was not written or conceived by Lynch (although he did slightly rewrite the adapted screenplay), so it was really his first “studio” film (one of only a few; three in fact²). It is not uncommon for an underground director to be “lifted up” from the low-budget art-school puddle by hirelings of the Hollywood élite, including talent-seekers, capital-pushers (financiers), executive producers, freelancer agents, media representatives and people situated in higher places. After all, everybody has to start *somewhere* (and “young artists are so rash and rebellious”). Talent-seekers and financiers are more than aware of the potential in an early low-budget student production, be it David Lynch’s “*Eraserhead*” or Peter Jackson’s “*Bad Taste*” (1987); the studios’ job, they assume, is to take the rough diamond and refine it to perfection (and mass audience palatability).

² One *could* count *Blue Velvet* as a studio film, since it was his second (and last) Dino De Laurentiis film, if it were not for the fact that Lynch demanded (and received) absolute artistic control over the process after the disappointment of *Dune*. In *Blue Velvet*, he conceived the idea, wrote the screenplay and directed it. In later films he would exert ever larger control over the process, until in *Inland Empire* (2006) he is credited as a writer, director, cinematographer, editor, sound designer and camera operator (the first four jobs being credited to him alone). It is clear that he has struggled to achieve independence from external pressure, in pursuit of the dream of artistic freedom.

So, confident and happy with the success of “*The Elephant Man*” (which received 8 Academy Award nominations), big money in Hollywood was certain to follow in Lynch’s footsteps, begging him to direct their Next Big Hit, with sweet promises of fame and stardom. How much Lynch enjoyed his new-found success is unclear, although he must have, momentarily at least, felt pretty good about the situation; he had, after all, been able to re-write the script for *The Elephant Man* and to have the process under directorial control. His next movie, his second mainstream movie, was “*Dune*” (1984), a Dino de Laurentiis production of a science fiction novel-turned-blockbuster, the only film that Lynch has repeatedly said and admitted turned out to be an *artistic* failure (he does not much worry about box office ratings or favouritism among critics), because he did not have the ultimate say in the final product. He did not have the right to make “the final cut”, the finances were strained and the sheer size of the production must have overwhelmed Lynch. Whatever the reasons for its failure (both artistic and commercial), Lynch turned away from the Big Studios and back to basics, back to UG cinema. Only in 1999 did he revisit mainstream cinema, in the Disney productions release “*The Straight Story*”. This was a family movie, based on a true story, about an old man’s quest to meet with his brother before death. With only a few quirks and twists, the film was his third (and so far the last) mainstream experiment. Before, and since, he has been best known for his uncompromising and increasingly “difficult” cult films. The unity of these films is in their emphasis (part Doylean, part Lovecraftian) on the narrative presence of signs, clues, apparitions and intimations of the Mysterious. This is what is meant by “Lynchian” cinema.

As mentioned, the period between 1986 and 1997 entailed a return to the experimentalism and surrealism of his student productions, marked by the release of “*Blue Velvet*” (1986). Here we are initiated into Lynch’s “Mystery Film” series (whose ideological precursor was “*Eraserhead*”). Numerous recurring themes are here introduced; the score is by Angelo Badalamenti, who was to become Lynch’s court composer; it also featured Lynch regulars Laura Dern (who later starred in “*Wild at Heart*” and “*Inland Empire*”) and Kyle MacLachlan (first introduced in “*Dune*” and soon to become Agent Cooper in *Twin Peaks*). In addition to the formation of “Lynch regulars” in both cast and crew, the film featured many of the themes later explored in most of his films and TV productions; the innocence of love, dark mysteries at the heart of the night, supernatural and natural evil, brutal violence and insanity, instability of reality and of the ego. These themes, as they occur in *Lost Highway*, will be analyzed in depth from the point of view of the semantic-semiotic plane of narrative cohesion and meta-unity (see next chapter). His next work after “*Blue Velvet*” was in television (with Mark Frost): “*Twin Peaks*”, which spanned two seasons (1990-91). This series would be worthy of analysis in itself. Here it will suffice to say that the mixture of drama, horror

and black comedy (the “Lynchian” style) made for excellent television. In fact, the series is often listed as one of the greatest TV series of all time, with a large and ever-widening fan-base; it seems that each generation rediscovers Twin Peaks, which subsequently leads to resurgent interest on the part of TV-stations to broadcast the show, and on the part of the producers and financiers to put out a fresh DVD release. The film version, “*Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*” (1992), designed to tie the loose ends of the series, was a relative flop, but is today often considered an important final chapter (actually prequel) in the Twin Peaks saga. “*Lost Highway*” (1997), the one film I will analyze in detail, marked a deepening of the complexity of plot development and narrative fragmentation. These themes were ever deepened in “*Mulholland Drive*” (2001), originally shot as a pilot for a (cancelled) TV series but reworked into a feature film, which received wide critical acclaim (even Roger Ebert, who disliked “*Blue Velvet*” and “*Lost Highway*”, agreed it was a masterpiece). “*Mulholland Drive*” would require an essay the size of the Upanishads to do it justice, for which reason I chose to focus on its (slightly more straightforward) predecessor, “*Lost Highway*”. Lynch, today, enjoys the privilege of working on his own material, and he likes to be involved with the whole film process from early conceptual ideas to writing the screenplay³, financing, casting, scheduling, *mise-en-scène*, shooting, re-shooting, re-planning, improvising, organizing, wrapping up, calling it quits, post-production, scoring, editing and “having the final cut”.

So, what unites the bulk of Lynch’s catalogue is the presence of what I call “Mystery”. *Eraserhead*, *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks* (series and movie), *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* delineate a continuum of thematic isotopies and narrative strategies. The “Lynchian Universe” is not composed of islands (individual films) but of a single continent (the semiosphere of Lynch). “*Inland Empire*”, from what I have heard and read, will be the “next chapter” in this series. In fact, the official tagline to *Inland Empire*, found in posters, promo material and teasers, encapsulates much of the myths and mystery of the Lynchian universe; as a sign that his *oeuvre* evinces true thematic continuity, the following lines (as abstract pointers) could easily be applied, out of his films, to at least *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks*, *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*:

“*A Story of a Mystery...*”

A Mystery Inside Worlds within Worlds...

³ Lynch’s screenplays, when his *own*, are quite often re-written and re-thought in the actual process of filming it His latest movie, the 3-hour digital video production *Inland Empire* he claims to have shot entirely *without a script* – which is not the same as without any ready-made ideas, but rather from the premise of very general and suggestive ideas and concepts. Only someone with full confidence in his ability to control and maintain the integrity of the process would be able to do this in modern American cinema, even amongst the self-proclaimed “alternative” or “indie” film-makers.

*Unfolding Around a Woman...
A Woman in Love and in Trouble.”*

In this essay I analyze the structural and narrative style of “*Lost Highway*”, with the aim of shedding light on the dark and murky waters and the equally pernicious jungles and deserts which shock and mystify a visitor, or even a well-prepared traveller, in the Lynchian universe.

2. The Participatory Role of the Spectator in Cinema: “*De te fabula narratur...*”

My belief is that the mapping of a person’s psychological identity and the persistence of his I-hood through social events delineates a story, a narrative. My further claim is that this narrative most closely resembles the narrative of a motion picture. I hold David Lynch to be a paragon of cinematic narrative highly conscious of its indebtedness to the temporal trajectory of psyche’s intentional states. In a word, art imitates life, but life can only be understood through the imitative medium of art. The mediating screen acts as a psychological canvas or a diary; a proof of the reality of the particular (ego → protagonist / “hero” in Joseph Campbell’s sense) through the fictiveness of the general (actor → actant). Perhaps we could say that it is impossible for the ego to realize itself independently of identification with exterior role models (e.g. movie stars), because this achieves a clarification and crystallization of one’s sense of actoriality (e.g. the sense of morality, sexuality and social roles). Actoriality is defined in relation to socially sanctioned semantic-semiotic webs of reality-construction. In the terms defined by George Mead, the sense of “me” is always a result of social construction. But, beyond this sociological fact, even the sense of “I”, generally thought to be unbreakably firm and reliable, may be put in doubt when the very logic of *internal continuity* (both psycho-internal and plot-internal) of narrative “I-hood” is shaken up, extenuated and dishevelled.

In a movie like *Lost Highway* the identity of the protagonist is not provided by linear narration or even by non-linear narration; the identity of the protagonist is an emergent property of the meta-temporal level of continuity (\neq mere “consistency”). This continuity implies the emergence of linkages (“worm holes” as it were) between nodes of spatio-temporally disparate worlds. These pathways are created, conjured and opened up by *highlighting* (lit. shining light on⁴) certain objects

⁴ Light; Indeed, Lynch likes to play around with light, shadows, reflections, darkness and lamps. In most of his films, the *highlighting* of a certain object in order to conjure up a specific mood or conceptual reference is often done by literally *lighting* it up, bringing it up to the perceptive foreground, and by playing around with its (dis)appearance.

in a certain manner (*narrativizing* scenic elements for the purposes of the plot), for a certain period of time, in order to, at a later date, *revisit* that previously established object-sign relationship, and thus to tie disparate occurrences and settings together via the interpretative power of the viewer. The “plot development” of a film and its “conclusion” (of which there might be many) can be understood as the bringing-together of narratively established “elements” and “themes” (in transposed semiotic terms: signs and isotopies) in a kind of thematic refrain whereby the full semantic-semiotic (what might be called “semic”) scope of the elementary relationships established in the course of the film is revealed and savoured. Of course, in a badly executed film, the finale might feel more like *coitus interruptus* than a joyful ejaculation of semiotic (semen) material on the screen. Nonetheless, it is expected that the structure of a script involves a kind of narrative-temporal **semio-plane**, the tracing of thing/object/event-relationships in order to synergize a meaningful coherent whole out of it all. Allan Rowe, in his article on “Film Form and Narrative”, writes:

“While film narrative can be viewed as a number of cause-and-effect links, it may also be perceived in terms of larger structures incorporating the entire film.” (p.117, in *Nelmes*, ed. 1999)

My point is exactly to question this distinction between the local and the global; the concept of the “semio-plane” is operable on *both* the narrative-diegetic (“*cause-and-effect links*”) and the meta-narrative/epi-diegetic level of analysis. A **semiosphere** contains both local events and global laws.

Complementary to the power of the script and its materialization on the screen, the film is shaped by the interpretative power of the viewer, always an active participant to the semiotic construction of cinematic meaning. To be sure, the viewer is *guided* by the “sign-posts” or “markers” set up as prominent *Gestalts* according to the writers’ and filmmakers’ communicative intents; these serve to *attract* the attention of the viewer (this is the full meaning of the “magic” of cinema) and, equally important, to *keep* their attention and to facilitate a smooth *transfer* from one thing to another, and from one scene to another. But this cannot be done 100%. Cinema is active spectatorship. In fact, it would mean nothing to say cinema is pure passive receptivity, not even in propagandist cinema like that of Leni Riefenstahl or Jerry Bruckheimer (although cinema may *aspire* to be pure persuasion). There is no such thing as passive receptivity in the arts. Phillips, in his article on “The Film Spectator”, goes through the Marxist, psychoanalytical and sociological theories which tend to emphasize the passiveness of the spectator. He divides approaches into “manipulative” and “pluralistic” models of spectatorship (p. 147, in *Nelmes*, ed. 1999). Although I think that many

films are blatantly manipulative, I have faith in the critical abilities of the viewer, which probably makes me a proponent of the “*pluralist*” concept of “*active spectatorship*” (ibid). It is not even that the spectator has “the power of choice” to either *accept* or *reject* an image or an idea; no, the spectator is the *creator* of the idea (Understanding) and the upholder of the universe (Will).

The active power of the interpreter is precisely the power to *construct* the “semio-plane” of a film (to “put all the pieces together”). This, again, does *not* mean simply reception or mental re-creation of the filmmakers’ *projected* and *intended* “meaning” that is written in the script and embodied in the conspicuous sign-relationships that are forcefully “pushed” upon the viewer, or “shoved down his throat”. No; the prospective combination of semiotic relationships between and across elements and themes (the cinematographic substance) in any given sequence of events is nearly unlimited, and *the emergence of a cohesive plot-internal semio-plane* is up to the integrative power of the perceiver. Certainly, the chances for any two viewers of developing the exactly same interpretation of “what a film means” is nearly impossible – only ideological prejudices or communal pressures may force an overlay of a simplistic explanation (such as “it’s about these two girls in love” or “it’s about the French Revolution”). Surely these explanations may be valid, but they do not explain *everything* about the film; they simply pick out a *highly visible pattern* which then becomes the catch-all explanation that overrides the richness of the filmic material. Most reviewers try to be general rather than specific, which (naturally) leads to over-generalization. **But the viewer is not the reviewer.** The viewer is an experiencer, and her experience is unique. Even amongst all the people involved in making a movie (including, by the way, the make-up artists, set decorators, gaffers, cameramen etc.) there is hardly a unified concept of what the filmmakers “have in mind” or what they “intend to achieve”. Even the director (Lynch, Cronenberg, Nolan) might have had a very abstract conception of how things fit together, and the director’s appreciation of the interpretative power of a film is subject to revision and to deepened understanding. In the passing of time one achieves perspective: “You know, only when I saw it again recently did I realize that...” Lynch not only acknowledges the viewer’s responsibility in interpreting his works, he *encourages* it. He refuses to talk about the “meaning” of his work (he is only willing to discuss the production process, the cast, the crew – the quotidian side of his job), and the following cryptic response to a too specific plot-related question exemplifies the typical Lynch attitude to his films:

“That’s thing about the film. It starts and then it ends, and nothing should be added and nothing should be taken away. So it’s wrong for me to say, but it’s beautiful for,

you know... anyone has the right to, you know, go where they want to go." (from Lynch interview #2)

In other words, the construction of meaning is "beautiful", and it is up to the viewer. In a trivial sense this might be a license to come up with *anything*, any arbitrary quasi-cohesive narrative. In practice, however, the construction of both the diegetic (linear) and the epi-diegetic (holistic) semio-planes is highly systematic and, in some sense, rational; freedom under aesthetics.

I have introduced the concept of the "semio-plane" as the *teleological* "goal" of the screenplay but also as something constructed by the viewer. Now we can better approach the psychologically loaded world of "Lost Highway", which demands, unquestionably, the viewer's full attention and, preferably, multiple viewings. To overcome confusion, one needs to look *within* for answers.

3. Lost in Lost Highway

Lost Highway shall serve as an example of Lynch's work. It is probably not his best film, but it is clearly uncompromisingly intact and true to his vision. It stands as a continuation of the themes of Twin Peaks (his last project) and the earlier Blue Velvet. Also, there is a continuation from the cold and lonely white urbanism of "Lost Highway" to the dreamy Hollywood **semio-scapes** of "Mulholland Drive". Both films are, in some limited sense, "road movies" (as the titles suggest!), although the former is a Californian highway hostel movie (and then some) while the latter is only tangentially related to the Hollywood street in its title: "Mulholland Drive", in fact, is more about the *pedestrian's* (outsider's) perspective on L.A. suburban sprawl. At any rate, "Lost Highway" explores the themes of loneliness, darkness (*noir*) and mystery and is thus quintessential Lynch.

Highly controversial and oft criticized, "Lost Highway" can both enlighten and infuriate. America's foremost film critic (although not necessary the best), Roger Ebert, gave it a scathing review (**):

*"David Lynch's "Lost Highway" is like **kissing a mirror**: You like what you see, but it's not much fun, and kind of cold. It's a shaggy ghost story, an exercise in style, a film made with a certain breezy contempt for audiences. I've seen it twice, hoping to make sense of it. There is no sense to be made of it. To try is to miss the point. What you see is all you get."* – Roger Ebert's review (link [here](#))

I like the metaphor of “*kissing a mirror*” - it is more apt than Ebert realized. You indeed may not “*like what you see*”, and that is the beauty and horror of Lynchian cinema. Unravelling the story requires looking into the mirror (the mirror is also an important object and symbol in the story, see below) for answers (“*mirror, mirror, on the wall...*”), or at least for better questions. I said earlier that one needs to look “within” for answers. Within where? *Within the self*. This internal life of the self is contained in the film’s *epi-diegetic* textural patchwork (wherein one finds hidden/occluded clues of underlying unity), and within the protagonist’s *diegetically* narrated inner world (which mirrors the inner world of the spectator). The *connectives* and the *associations* that link events, objects and actants together are rarely explicit in Lynch. It requires a bit of “detective work” which often leads to dead ends and red herrings, but, unlike Ebert, I do not think “*there is no sense to be made*”; I believe a lot of it makes sense. *Sense*, after all, is the *sensing* (etymologically). So, to sense the sense of the film (i.e. to perceive what is perceivable) requires the courage to take risks, and a bit of tolerance for the occasional frustrating realization that one had been following a false lead. In other words, the interpretative work here is demanding, but it is not fantastic, arbitrary or external to the film. *Au contraire*, the semiotic detective work required implies looking in the filmic material itself, as the physical substratum that *grounds interpretation to the level of objects*. Of course external factors, like conventions and social beliefs, factor in as well. For the viewer, it is an *ethical* imperative to heed the material content of the film, both static and diegetic. But this material is always subject to re-interpretation on the level of the nodes and linkages of the semio-plane.

Even if I may sound like a relativist or a subjectivist, I hold a kind of realist (or “documentarian”) theory of cinema: Every film picks, selects and re-arranges (as a kind of collage or museum-exhibit) *a set of objects and events* from the real life world (the world captured on the film through cameras). This process establishes *sign-relationships*. This is the primary level of the construction of the semio-plane. For example, associating “*this house*” (a building in the film) with “*home*” (an abstract concept) can be done by creating *associative situations* which establish or enforce that link: For example, the director might show us a family eating breakfast, or a shot of the family name engraved on their door, in order to establish (or at least *suggest*) this semiotic relationship “*house—home*”. Association, whether iconic, indexical, symbolic or seemingly arbitrary is done for the purposes of the larger story, wherein, for example, this “*house—home*” relation might be tied in, diegetically, with other concepts. The following is a *simplistic* representation of a semio-plane:

House: home—family—dog—missing—problem—search—adventure—discovery—celebration—homecoming—the rooftop of the house—“oh, finally home”—family dinner—dog eating a bone...

Actually that sounds like a pretty marketable movie! At any rate, this example shows the semiotic connections made between things, events and actants by suggestive *mise-en-scène* and such cinematic techniques of persuasion. This *scripted* level of the semio-plane is fairly straightforward. Patrick Phillips is undoubtedly correct when he states that “[N]arrative realist film is the dominant form in cinema” (p.143, in *Nelmes*, ed. 1999). The telltale sign of such cinema is the linear, diegetic unfolding of a fairly uncomplicated semio-plane. Of course, anybody can undertake a lengthy analysis of, say, “the role of the sofa” in *Friends*, but that show’s *suggested* and *scripted* level of meaning lies in the dialogue, the human relationships, the pre-recorded laughter track and so on.

In theory, a good director may suggest a connection between any two or more completely *random* things. A neat example of an (apparently) arbitrary association is the question-answer relationship where “42” stands for “The Answer to Life, the Universe and Everything” in Douglas Adams’s “*Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*”. Another example: For someone unversed and inexperienced in surrealist cinema, the works of Bunuel or Cocteau might be full of “arbitrary” associations, but with a bit of hermeneutic and semiotic competence it is easy to break through the primary level of bafflement, confusion and dismay. Lynch, too, is a master of subtle, ambivalent suggestibility. The point, again, is not to find out what the *director*, but rather what the *film itself* suggests.

Take, in “*Lost Highway*”, the **mirror** at the end of a dark tunnel where Bill Pullman’s character recedes only to face his own reflection (in reality his doppelganger, his second identity, his suppressed unconscious, his feared *alter ego*). The mirror, as a sign, is related to hundreds of other scenes, objects, themes and people in the movie. The mirror is the connective fibre, the looking glass and the rabbit hole between him and the character played by Balthazar Getty. Lynch has mentioned the idea of “psychogenic fugue” (a dissociate state of acute amnesia and/or psychosis) as a term that may describe the protagonist’s condition in his search for sanity (see “*Lynch on Lynch*”). The “fugue” (lit. escape) is psychogenic, i.e. a mental state. This, again, corroborates my idea of *the unity of the narrative and the psychological* in this film and also, I believe, in cinema generally.

Underneath all the phenomenological apparitions of ideas and objects, an inter-referential structure, a semiotic web, can be ascertained. In the protagonist’s “psychogenic fugue”, his *Lebenswelt* (or *Umwelt*) is revealed to be a world of signs, a world of implicit connections. Such connections, or

associations, I now try to list down in a meaningful pattern. The pattern is *not* temporal, linear or narrative, but rather on the level of established *structures* of semantic-semiotic associations. The following lists are **empirical charts** of the connectives (represented by dashes) that tie events, objects, scenes, people, concepts and ideas together in *swirling loops* of associated meanings:

I) mirror: self-reflection—mirror image—double protagonist—twins—multiple personality—**evil**...

II) lamps: blindness—epilepsy—seizure—headaches—**evil**—police—headlights—street lights...

III) mystery man: ominous—**evil**—pale—reflection—mirror—self—fears—psychogenic fugue...

IV) cars: highway—street lights—joyride—mafia boss—**evil**—escape—escapade—police—chase—speed—crash—Mulholland Drive—beating of a car in MD—beating of a man by a car in LH—violence—threat (of violence)—transgression—property—boss's girlfriend (Arquette)—cheating—**evil**—escape—escapade—runaway—drive-away—highway—driveway—hostel—sex—cheating—Arquette—escape—escapade—runaway—away—lost (highway)—lost-in-psychosis—psychogenic fugue—psychogenic escape—escapade—runaway—away—lost (highway)...

The recurrence and re-appearance of the same, or similar, associative pathways implies the *strength* of some of these connections. “*Escape*”, for example, is constantly suggested, which gives us a clue on what this movie, to some extent, is about. The semio-plane forms its own alphabet of recurring sets of ideas, signs and themes. Like music: GCEEFDCE... “E” is repeated, *but not without reason*.

The next example introduces additional vertical hierarchization (sub-divisions and sub-branching). The point is just to show that the picture can be further complicated (and made more accurate) by allowing for more kinds of relationships than simple connectives. The semiotic web thickens...

V) Patricia Arquette's character: blond/brunette—victim/cheater— good/**evil**—object-of-desire/seductress—wife/lover—dead/alive—property/free—sex-as-duty/sex-as-passion—sexuality [→ home/hotel—bed/table—intercourse/porn { → private/public—eyes/videocam }—married/free—old/young { → protagonist₁/protagonist₂—good/evil }—lethargic/sensual]—sensuality—sensibility—self-perception—self-image—mirror—self-reflection—mirror-image—double protagonist—twins—multiple personality—psychogenic fugue—loss of control—**evil**...

I could go on and on. I have highlighted the word “evil” in order to shed light on the multiplicity of positions each term can take in the chain of semantic interpretations. Evil can *be suggested by* “mafia boss”, “cheating”, “cheater”, “multiple personality”, “headaches”, “ominous” etc. In its turn, evil can *suggest* (bring to consciousness and act as a sign for) “seductress”, “escape”, “pale”, “police” and so on. And if we look at the terms that the word “evil” is *two steps away from*, we find that they include an even wider range of associations, from “lover” and “twins” to “reflection” and “headlights”. **“Evil”, as a concept and a filmic theme, can cause and be caused by various signs.** And that is just an example, based on my particular construction of the possible relationships existing on the film’s semio-plane. I have hopefully proved my point about the interconnectedness of all the elements. The “meaning” of a film is in the mapping and weaving of its semio-plane. If, again, one were to take a random keyword, say “jazz”, one could form the following sequence:

Jazz: bar—saxophone—radio [→ headache—the introduction of Arquette₂]
—passion—sex—
Arquette—cheating—**evil**...

We have again come full circle; all the roads (highways) lead to Rome – and to “evil”.

In a semiotic sequence (which may or may not be diegetic, yet *always* psycho-semiotic) the recurrence of thematic material opens up pathways of connectivity, almost always completely *incomprehensible* to someone who has not seen the movie. So far I have used single one-on-one associations, but of course, as the distribution of the sign “evil” shows, each node has multiple branches or connections attached to it: The word “evil”, as we have seen, can stand in various different kinds of relationships (metonymic, symbolic, indexical, proximal, iconic, hierarchical, logical, implicatory, transitory...) to various different elements in the universe of the film. Elements are connected in a kind of web or plane of semiosis, what I have called semio-plane. This web is 1) a narrative web (film-internal and plot-internal) of **diegetic** elements, but also 2) a psychological web (a literal “mind map”) of **semantic** associations. Each of these elements can be taken out of context and trajectories drawn across the plane of signs to the point of dizziness and confusion. The mind has the task of making *relevant sense* out of this “semio-web” or “semio-plane”. If ambiguity and ambivalence is desired, a scene will leave out interpretative steps and only present, say, “jazz” and “radio”, and with a bit of ingenuity one is supposed to infer the implied concepts of “headache”, “passion”, “cheating” and “evil” – in case there are other contexts in the film where such connectives are *established* and *suggested*.

A mundane example might be when a Hero carries a talisman given to him by his father (at some point in the film). When (later in the film), in a moment of grief, he holds the talisman in his grasp and sheds a tear, we are supposed to infer all the emotions of “family”, “kinship”, “tribal loyalty”, “homesickness” and so on. Semiotic associations operate through memory, rationality and convention. This is also why the unity of the *psyche* and the *story* is so important and blatant.

Let me, then, now turn to a more in-depth *psychological-semiotic* analysis of the movie...

Lost Highway explores the theme of psychological insecurity. The hero, the protagonist, is played by two actors, Bill Pullman and Balthazar Getty. The protagonist lives a double life, or rather the two lives of the two men co-habit the same psychological realm (like twin brothers separated at birth) and converge in critical instances of the plot; the hero is presented in a 2-in-1 (or rather 1-in-2) package. What, then, do I mean by the distinction between 2-in-1 & 1-in-2? The best illustration of this difference that comes to mind, oddly enough, is that of the Christian Trinity. Is God 3-in-1, or 1-in-3? If the former, his indivisible unity is seriously damaged by this act of sub-division; after all, in the case of Government the tripartite division into the legislative, judiciary and executive branches serves the purpose of *limiting* and *checking* the overall distribution of powers – but in the case of God, what would it mean to say his power needs to be checked?⁵ If, on the other hand, *Deus* is 1-in-3, then his unity is that of a schizoid poly-vocal trio, a synergetic troupe. The two-faced protagonist in Lost Highway is more of the latter type (*E pluribus unum*), in need of a synthesis of disparate elements, and completely *lost* (as the title of the movie implies) in the multiple personalities and mood swings he experiences. The protagonist is stretched across two human beings, but does not find peace in *either*. He is out of place and out of character.

There are, of course, previous examples - often quite detailed and convincing - of switched identity, delusional self-reconstituting soul-searching, multiple actor character instantiation and looped, Moebius strip structured narrative. The very trick of having two actors occupy the same character space, as it were, was utilized by Louis Bunuel in his last film, “*That Obscure Object of Desire*” (1977), where two actresses alternate playing the same woman (although nobody in the film seems to notice or care!). Likewise, in David Fincher’s “*Fight Club*” (1999) we have a split personality and an externalized apparition of an internal demon (Brad Pitt is Edward Norton’s bad *alter ego*). In a vein similar to “*Fight Club*”, but even more in line with the Lynchian theme of reconstructing the

⁵ This, incidentally, is the common Islamic critique of Christian monotheism, which it accuses of pandering polytheism.

shattered and lost Self, we have Christopher Nolan's "*Memento*" (2000), David Cronenberg's "*Spider*" (2002) and Richard Kelly's "*Donnie Darko*" (2001), all of which explore the unravelling and putting back together again (Humpty Dumpty?) of the peace of mind of the protagonist, through hardships, insanity, delusions, false memories, dreams (nightmares), unconnected random encounters, barely conscious patterns of action, weaving of webs of lies and deceit, hallucinations, conflict, loneliness and lack of love. In this context one shouldn't forget Lynch's own later "*Mulholland Drive*" (2001), which Slavoj Žižek⁶ actually claims to be a sequel of, or a continuation to, *Lost Highway*. They, to him, are two parts of *the same movie*. This I hold to be an exaggeration, because the female characters in the two movies share nothing in common psychologically. That said, it is uncanny that both films, *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, employ the plot tool of having a woman's hair colour signify her identity: a brunette becomes a blonde with a wig (both MD & LH), and consequently a different person. (More MD/LH comparisons in the last chapter!)

The protagonist, in his first reincarnation, lives a life of possessive jealousy over his wife. Like so many self-conscious and domesticated husbands, Pullman's character fails to externalize his emotions in action, and instead harbours doubts, nightmares, fantasies and delusions underneath a calm exterior. In depicting the violent fantasies of the jealous husband Lynch is depicting the preference for inaction and self-imprisonment in average bourgeois existence. The fear of infidelity (in part 1 & in hero 1), i.e. fear of change, is symmetrically mirrored in, and easily transformed into, a lust for adventure (in part 2 & in hero 2); an idealization of the anomie of the cheater-killer-runaway. Ultimately – in act 3 of the movie, towards the (inconclusive) conclusion – the "reality" of the first protagonist forces itself through and blows away the illusionary escapade of the middle section of the film. It is a three-act film, but the third act is in fact the prologue (or the prequel), so that the viewer's mind reels back down the memory lane in search of a temporal explanation for what has now being revealed to be a non-temporal (or meta-temporal) unity of disjunctively introduced places, characters and motifs. It is like the synchronicity-rich finale of "*Magnolia*" (1999) or its pale imitation in that overrated piece of kitsch, "*Crash*" (2004), except that in *Lost Highway* people do not come together, serendipitously, as individuals, but as *a higher order identity* (*e pluribus unum*). In Lynch, the detective path is always away from the particular to the general; from the fleeting and accidental to the holistic and law-like. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Or, in a better example, it is like a melody line adding a single note to which changes the whole colour and tone of the sequence (think of EG turned into Ef#G staccato); or like the word

⁶ In the 2006 documentary, "*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*".

“hit”, adding an initial sibilant to which creates a word worthy of censorship! In Lynch, when the final clues to the puzzle are unveiled, it feels like trying to fit one too many potatoes on a plate or one too many pairs of socks in a suitcase – one faces the danger of excess, overflow and disintegration. In my opinion Ebert’s criticism is wrong, but only partially. He is wrong to say that there is no greater semio-plane (“meaning”) to be discovered; but, he *is* right in saying that it is not always easy, comfortable or enjoyable to try to fit all the pieces together. This is a real criticism of “*Lost Highway*”. In his other films, like “*Mulholland Drive*”, the process feels a lot more *pleasant*.

Back to “*Lost Highway*”. If, in the end, the story of the protagonist and his doppelgänger (his “mirror” image) has any discernible logical conclusion, it is the realization that even after the circle (of self-understanding and self-construction) has been completed, the tale does not end there, but it follows the shape of a spiral, where *each turn of the coil unveils a new layer, a new dimension, to the saga of self-realization*. In Eco’s (and Peirce’s) terms, there is a potential for almost unlimited semiosis. One has to qualify that by saying that *anything* has the potential for unlimited (including excessive and obsessive) semiosis. My point about Lynch films though (especially the “mystery films” of 1977, 1986, 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2006) is that *only* by taking advantage of this potential do we, as viewers, come to form any coherent and stable interpretation about the “meaning” of the film and the underlying humanity of the protagonist. “*Lost Highway*”, especially, is a “**one** man’s journey”, a nearly solipsistic tale of one man’s “mental escape” (psychogenic fugue) into fantasy.

Curiously it is indeed *only* the (twice-embodied) protagonist in “*Lost Highway*” that we can ascertain to be a real human being at the core. It sometimes seems as if all the side-characters, even Arquette’s character, are simply pieces in the puzzle, parts of the conspiracy, “another bricks in the Wall” in Pink Floyd’s terms – and, in fact, not real human beings at all. The criticisms against Lynch’s “coldness” and “superficiality” of character portrayal have been harsh, but one could take the issue at least three ways, listed here from the most sympathetic to the most unsympathetic:

- 1) My favourite theory is that Lynch forces the viewer to emotionally bond with the protagonist only to play with the perceptions of consistency and continuity by breaking all social bonds (all signs of life- and ego-affirmative human interaction) and exploring the cold wetlands of ego-death (not quite the Buddhist type) and deep, deep loneliness. In this view, all the other human beings are severed from the world of the protagonist, who is lost in a time loop of his own solipsistic creation. Psychogenic fugue is always a solitary affair.

- 2) Another theory rests on the belief that all of Lynch's characters have a *raison d'être* beyond their role as *encounters* and *objects* in the path of the protagonist. In this theory, the apparent unpredictability and underdeveloped representation of Lynch's characters in *Lost Highway* belies an underlying unity of each and every character's "nature", so that each of the fleeting and contradictory appearances of the various characters, if correctly interpreted, *will* eventually yield an understanding of what the side-characters are *thinking*, "*where* they are coming from", and what their *place* is in the story. We just have to try hard enough. But I frankly do not think the film is about anybody else than the protagonist(s). Most of the side-characters *are* mere encounters – friends or foes, but always external to the ego's *Innenwelt*.

- 3) The least likely option I take to be the idea that the apparent loose ends of character development indeed constitute a real weakness in *Lost Highway*'s internal structure and its believability, which ultimately corrodes the potential for the expansion and extrapolation of the filmic-fictive world (in our imagination) into a full-blown parallel universe. Such an ability to extrapolate beyond the event horizon (beyond the visible traces of cause-and-effect; beyond the 16:9 screen composition of the screen) is essential to the success of the cinematographic power of persuasion, but Lynch provides us, or so some people claim, with a mere backbone of a story and forbids (through trickery and perversely prevalent self-de(con)structiveness) the fuller development of its active, part-time constituents.

This last point raises the issue of criticisms of Lynch. The following three criticisms are interesting, and partially valid, analyses of the imperfect side of Lynch, and of "*Lost Highway*" particularly:

- a) The inability to develop believable characters reveals, possibly, underlying misanthropy, misogyny (esp. in "*Blue Velvet*", see Roger Ebert's review), existential pessimism, tunnel vision (and myopia), limited psychological insight (writerly autism), anthropo-observant uncreativity (stereotypical character models), distrust of and hate for the audience ("You didn't expect this, did you, ha-ha!"), lack of faith in the script or the characters therein, etc... In this view, Lynch is either naïve or simply unable to muster a good storyline. His "weirdness" is just de-humanizing coldness.

- b) Perhaps it all just evinces Lynch's boredom with his own freshly-branched detours – maybe he does not nurture all his babies, all his small ideas, beyond infancy and tentative playing-around; he abandons ideas underdeveloped, aborted. In other words, the signifier-signified relationship is not brought into full maturation. In this view, Lynch is difficult because incomplete and disorganized.

c) Or, lastly, perhaps he considers many of these side-tracks (including side-characters) to be inconsequential in relation to the One Big Idea of his storyline (whatever *that* may be). This might be both a blessing and a curse, for many writers choose to focus on embellishing the small details at the cost of losing track of the “vision”. There should ideally be some unifying principle behind all the individual, spatio-temporally separated events, scenes, objects, elements, characters and signs.

Whether Lynch’s highly demanding, epi-diegetic, holistic, fragmentary, enigmatic, ludic, silly and suggestive-rather-than-conclusive style is to everybody’s taste is another matter all together...

4. Conclusions: The Heart of Darkness & “Bob” Revisited

I believe I have said all I need to say about “Lost Highway”. Its psychogenic-semiotic structure of narrative relies on *active spectator participation* for the construction of its “meaning” on the level of the open-ended semio-plane. More careful analyses of the narrative structure of “Lost Highway” – and, god forbid, exegeses of “what it all means” – could be undertaken, but my point has precisely not been to *explain*, or even understand, “*Lost Highway*”, but rather to show that there is no direct implication relation from cinema’s physical substratum (its filmic elements) to its simplistic parsing in terms of genres, preconceptions and “theories”. Every film can be analysed in terms of *all the suggested sign-relationships* (the “possible readings”) that can be unveiled by a careful studying of the structures of *the chains of association* that exist in the diegetic and epi-diegetic levels of narrativity. These structures can be written out in graphs, diagrams, lists, mind maps etc... What I want to establish is an *empirical* semiotics of film, one that does not simply rely on some defunct ideology (like Marxism or psychoanalysis) but rather takes and studies the material of the film *as it is*, as a series of interconnected semantic-semiotic (“semic”) relationships between elements of film.

Although this essay has been about “*Lost Highway*”, I think two examples from his other movies will help to show that what I have said applies to *all* of his movies and not just one:

I) In *Twin Peaks*, the evil character, evil spirit, is called “Bob” (reminiscent of Dennis Hopper’s “Frank” in “*Blue Velvet*”). The tale told by Lynch, in the book “*Lynch on Lynch*”, on the birth of that character is revealing: He says that the character was not in the original script. In fact, Frank

Silva was originally a set decorator who, after truly portentous circumstances and coincidences⁷, was chosen by Lynch to play a character made especially for him. Here is a tentative **semio-chart** (purposefully short, for the list could easily extend several pages long) of the Lynchian associations, coincidences and connections involved with the character “Bob” played by Frank Silva:

Bob: Frank (Silva)—Frank (D. Hopper) – **evil**—death—Black Lodge—White Lodge—Cooper...

Again, the list could be extended indefinitely. It seems that the semio-chart may serve as a way of mapping both *film-specific* and *auteur-specific* semio-planes. Coincidences, too, matter (signify).

II) The DVD release of “*Mulholland Drive*” (whose similarities and thematic connections to “*Lost Highway*” are numerous) comes with a list of items called “*David Lynch’s 10 clues to unlocking this thriller*”. For example, Clue#1 says: “*Pay particular attention in the beginning of the film: at least two clues are revealed before the opening credits*”, and Clue#7 asks: “*What is felt, realized and gathered at the Club Silencio?*” It seems clear that Lynch wants us to ask questions rather than to have simple answers. Similar “clues” are not explicitly given elsewhere, but every one of Lynch’s “Mystery Films” involves semiotic detective work: the “whodunit” murder plot in *Lost Highway*, the detective work of Agent Cooper in search of the evil of “Bob” in *Twin Peaks*, the chasing and discovering of the mystery woman Dorothy in *Blue Velvet*, the amnesiac search for lost identity in *Mulholland Drive*... Each and every Lynch movie operates like a carnival of allusions, but the majority of these allusions are *weak* or *internal* allusions; allusions that never *leave* the film, never jump out of the film to some larger context. We have seen examples of this in *Lost Highway*, which is *self-referential to the point of self-obsessive*, all for the purpose of discovering the lost self

⁷ In an interview (#2) he retells the story (my emphasis): “Mark Cousins: “Is it true that during the making of the *Twin Peaks* series BOB wasn't in the original idea?” / David Lynch: “Right. I was on set in Laura Palmer's house. We were going to shoot a panning shot in Laura's room to start with. And Frank Silva was a set decorator, and he was in arranging some furniture. And at a certain point he moved a chest of drawers in front of the door and someone said “Don't block yourself in there, Frank.” And my mind pictured Frank blocked in the room. And then I rushed into him and said “Frank, are you an actor?” And he said “Why, I happen to be an actor.” So I said “You're going to be in this. And so we did a couple of pans without Frank and then I had him kneel down behind the bed and freeze. And it panned around and there he was; kind of hard to see right away, but if you held for a while suddenly you sort of see him. And I didn't have a clue what I was going to do with that. And then later we were shooting the last set up in the house and it was pretty late at night and it was Mrs Palmer at the end of that day where she lost her daughter, smoking a cigarette, distraught on the couch and playing some scenes in her mind. And she sees something mentally and lurches up and the operator has to crank very fast to catch it. Nailed it. Perfect. She screams at the top of this thing in this big close up. And I said “Beautiful” and I congratulated Grace on her job, & Sean said “No, it's not good, not good, not good.” And I said “What's wrong?” and he said “Someone was reflected in the mirror.” And I said “Who was reflected in the mirror?” And he said “Frank was.” And then I knew I was onto something.” **Mark Cousins: “That was a sign?” David Lynch: “A very big sign.** And it led to many things that those two events kept unraveling. Mark Cousins: That's a lesson on, a real reason for keeping your mind as open as possible, isn't it? David Lynch: “Absolutely. A lot of things that happen are maybe food for thought, but it ends up being useless. But some of those things are such great gifts... you can't imagine.”

shattered across a thousand shards of broken mirror. Mulholland Drive, while heavily self-referential like a Heidegger treatise, does however also contain numerous *external* allusions to “the world of Hollywood” as a Greimassian *isotopie*, a *topos* of mutually re-enforcing elements, all of which together imbue the canvas with borrowed (stolen) life, the life of (the mythical) Golden Age of Hollywood. The movie is coloured with the afterglow of ‘50s Hollywood shine and glamour, and the L.A. of the movie (Mulholland Dr. is located in Hollywood) is that of show-business and glitter. Examples of cultural allusions are numerous: 1) One of the characters assumes the identity and name of Rita Hayworth. 2) The film studio is (re)making ‘50s girl group productions. 3) The street, Mulholland Drive, is itself famously home to ‘50s-‘60s Hollywood notables like Marlon Brando, Jack Nicholson and Warren Beatty. Mulholland Drive, the street name, is, of course, an index for the borderlines of show business (the physical boundaries of Hollywood) and a symbol of the limits of dreams. Another Lynch-internal connection/continuity can be found: maybe Mulholland Drive *is* “the lost highway”? Zizek’s thesis on the unity of the two films seems more and more plausible. After all, a part of Mulholland Drive is known as “Mulholland Highway” -- get it, *lost* highway...

On that note, I will end this paper. After all, we have come full circle. The chain of interpretations is long and arduous... I will hopefully have presented some evidence in support of the “open work” in cinema. Various empirical methods for delineating and mapping possible semio-planes can and should be devised. Ultimately, though, the theory must yield to the facts, not the other way around. But here we have a new twist – facts can now be seen as *liberating*, not constricting or limiting.

...

Sources:

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Mead
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psycho-genic_fugue
- http://www.forteanimes.com/articles/216_lynch_2.shtml (Lynch interview #1)
- <http://members.fortunecity.com/vanessa77/index2005.html> (Lynch interview #2)
- <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19860919/REVIEWS/609190301/1023>
(Roger Ebert’s “*Blue Velvet*” review)
- <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19970227/REVIEWS/702270304/1023>
(Roger Ebert’s “*Lost Highway*” review)
- Jill Nelmes (ed.): “*An Introduction to Film Studies*” (2nd edition), Routledge 1999, London

- Rodley, Chris: *"Lynch on Lynch"* (1998, 2002), Like, Helsinki
- Slavoj Zizek's *"The Perverts Guide to Cinema"* (3-part documentary, dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2006)

David Lynch Filmography (minor works omitted)

1977: Eraserhead

1980: The Elephant Man

1984: Dune

1987: Blue Velvet

1990: Industrial Symphony No.1 – Dream of the Brokenhearted

1990: Wild at Heart

1990-91: Twin Peaks (22 episodes)

1992: Twin Peaks - Fire Walk With Me

1997: Lost Highway

1999: The Straight Story

2001: Mulholland Drive

2002: Rabbits (6 episodes)

2006: Inland Empire