

## Whose Story is This? The Non-existence of the External Gaze in David Lynch's Films

Asli Favaro  
Ege University, Turkey

### Abstract

The tendency to eschew a coherent narrative has been very common especially since the 1990s and a certain approach to narration has become observable within postmodern cinema: the viewer is denied access to the truth and realities concerning dramatic structure and characters, either during part of the narrative, or throughout the entire movie. For instance, Stuart Mitchell (1999) points out that in David Lynch's *Lost Highway*, as Lynch himself points out, the dream/dreaminess is neither a fantasy nor a delusion but something intrinsic to the character, thus what we watch is essentially the story of the main character and it is realistic according to his logic. Analysing the David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), this article will discuss how any attempt by the viewer to achieve the truth and to distinguish reality from fantasy may be fruitless and how the filmic or fictional reality may result undistinguishably from so-called material reality. I argue that the viewer moves and stumbles with the gaze of the camera which reveals that the reality is something constructed, and that the objective reality of an external gaze doesn't exist.

**Keywords:** external gaze, David Lynch, reality, fantasy, reconstructed reality, dream

## Introduction

The tendency to reject a coherent narrative has been very common especially since the 1990s within postmodern cinema, in which the director's cat-and-mouse game constitutes the core of a film. In these films, the truth and realities concerning dramatic structure and characters are hidden from the viewer. In addition to this obfuscation, some films, and especially in David Lynch's cinema, deny viewers access to truth and objective reality. In other words, the construction of narratives around shifts, from one level of reality or timeline to another, frees the director from the responsibility of coherence. In postmodern narratives, in which shifts in reality are presented through inhabiting the gazes of schizophrenic characters, the director deprives the viewers of the truth that they could have had in a traditional narrative. In Lynch's films, the viewer also faces the fact that there is no such thing as reality outside the film, as opposed to illusion or fantasy.

Many critics have attempted to define a plot or a linear structure in Lynch's films, by reorganizing seemingly arbitrarily arranged sequences. Many interpretations suggest, for example, that in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Lost Highway* (1997) everything perceived as real by the viewer is a dream. The narrative structure proceeds in a chaotic and fragmented way, paralleling the main character's journey of self-discovery. In *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), the events ensue within a circular structure, and the narrative returns to the beginning through specific motifs, acts or symbols. The camera, focusing on what goes through the main character's mind, often exhibits to the viewer the same event, motif, mise-en-scène or detail through different (re)constructions and representations. It tantalizingly suggests a puzzle to be solved in order to reveal the linear narrative beyond the schizophrenic gaze of the protagonist or the camera.

This article argues for a critical approach that is submerged in a dreamlike world where a story (even a simple one) could be built in various ways, thus creating various reality planes. In this alternative approach, the emphasis shifts from distinguishing between reality and non-reality (illusion/dream/delusion) to the possibility that the so-called objective reality or the reality we are living into could be structured in multiple ways, through various representations and forms. In Lynch's narratives, the characters try to maintain an ideal ego of themselves or to achieve an unworldly sublime universe and, while confronting this process, they strive to understand which plane of reality they are inhabiting. Therefore, different identities' overlap, and multiple versions of realities and forms of representation take place. The significations attributed to the concepts of reality, fantasy and dream and their contradictions are destroyed and cinematic conventions become ambiguous. As Stuart Mitchell (1999) points out about Lynch's *Lost Highway*, the dream in the film is neither a fantasy nor a delusion but something internal about the character. Thus, what we watch is essentially the story of the main character and it is realistic according to his/her logic.

Žižek (2008) refers to Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, when explaining that ideology is a dream-like illusion:

Here Lacan mentions the well-known paradox of Zhuang Zi, who dreamt of being a butterfly, and after he is awakening posed himself a question: how does he know that he is not *now* a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuang Zi? (pp. 45–6)

According to Žižek (2008) Lacan's explanation is that this question is justified for two reasons. First, it proves that Zhuang Zi was not a fool, since he does not believe in his immediate identity

with himself, and he is capable of a dialectically mediated distance from himself. Second, it proves that the subject could not be reduced to a void; the fantasy offers the possibility for the subject to obtain some content. When he was thinking that he was a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuang Zi, Zhuang Zi was in a way correct. In the symbolic reality he was Zhuang Zi but in the Real of his desire he was a butterfly and being a butterfly was the whole consistency of his positive being outside the symbolic network (Žižek, 2008, p.46).

This paradox reflects also the concept of reality/fantasy in Lynch's films. In the Zhuang Zi story there is no distinction between the absolute/material reality and fantasy; the dream is not seen as something fake or artificial. It's just another form of reality and, in fact, being a butterfly is considered the whole consistency of the being.

Lynch's films, as often stated, are constructed within a dream logic even though most of the time the dreamlike or illusionary state is indistinguishable from reality or entails different, superimposed planes of reality rather than a conflict between realities. Time, space and dimensionality are not comprehensible or coherent in terms of linearity; it's not a question of solving a puzzle to achieve a distinction between dream and reality and, in this way, to capture the material reality and an objective gaze on what is happening. The attempt to put together the events in a chronological and logical order within the causation, through an external gaze representing the objective reality, eventually fails because even the supposed awakening from the illusion or another plane of reality is revealed to be engulfed within the dream logic and the subjective constructions of reality.

### ***Lost Highway* (1997)**

The plot of *Lost Highway* is quite difficult to summarize. Extending the interpretation given by Patricia Arquette (Rodley, 1997, pp. 231–2) who played Renee/Alice in the film, it could be said that it is the story of Fred Madison (Bill Pullman), who killed his wife, Renee, because he thinks she is cheating on him. Once he is convicted and sentenced to death, Fred cannot come to terms with his responsibility and creates a new reality for himself where he becomes Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty), a young and pleasant man who is in love with Alice, a woman looking exactly like Fred's wife. After transforming back into Fred, he is led by Mystery Man (Robert Blake) to kill Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent (Robert Loggia), who is Alice/Renee's lover. Fred then returns to his house to warn himself that "Dick Laurent is dead", a sentence he hears from his intercom at the beginning of the film.

*Lost Highway* begins with an apparently classic noir/thriller narrative using the classical stereotypes of Hollywood genres: the femme fatale, the Godfather-like rival, the overwhelmed, challenged male character and the relationship between a femme fatale and a worker who becomes an accomplice. The codes embody a narration that, in the end, drive the viewer to conclude that the film might be about Fred's dream or schizophrenic delusion. This schizophrenia interpretation is supported by the circularity of the plot when Pete transforms back to Fred, suggesting that Pete Dayton was created by Fred as an escape from the responsibility of the murder he committed. Žižek (2000), however, warns that such an interpretation is the "film's ultimate lure to be resisted" (p. 15). Indeed, as will be discussed, the narration invalidates any absolute explanation creating thereby a sense of loss.

The sense of loss is caused by the continuous overlapping and switching of realities, dreams and "constructed reality". While reality is to be construed as the main events happening through interactions among people in shared spaces and dreams, the "constructed reality" is an intertextual link between apparently unlinked realities within the filmic space. The continuous

change of perspective alters the perceived truth to the point of creating a new level of reality that absorbs every plane into a tangible yet inseparable part of itself. For example, the dream told by Fred to Renee after making love anticipates Renee's murder, and various narrative elements make it hard to tell whether it is a dream or not: the use of Fred's voice-off as narrator; the camera's gaze switching between subjective and objective points of view; the jump cuts and fades linking each scene; the use of the dream logic; and the scene where Fred wakes and sees the face of Mystery Man. These cues prompt the audience to question the boundaries between reality and fantasy. This sequence, furthermore, instills the doubt that even the act of making love could be a part of Fred's dream. For the act is shown in slow motion and Renee's voice is always off-screen, it sounds soft, muffled, giving it a dreamlike status. It's impossible for the viewer to recognize the beginning and ending points of the dream. The viewer becomes aware that Fred is awake only after he turns the light on, yet the beginning of the dream cannot be precisely discerned.

The alteration of reality is strongly marked when Fred meets Mystery Man at Andy's (Michael Masee) party. Mystery Man gets close to Fred crossing the room without interacting with the people around him, as if Fred were the only one to see him. All diegetic sounds are silenced. Only the conversation between Fred and Mystery Man is clearly heard. Mystery Man asks him whether they met before and tells him that they have met at Fred's house. Was Mystery Man referring to the dream or to something else? He then says he is in Fred's house "right now" and passes his mobile phone to Fred, asking the latter to call him at his house. The conversation with the "remote" and the "on-site" man, along with the silenced environmental sounds, gives the impression of being moved to another level of reality or to a dreamlike state. When Mystery Man moves away from Fred, the environmental sounds fade back in. The viewer is led to think that it was Fred's fantasy but, a few moments later, the presence of Mystery Man is confirmed by Andy who tells that the man is a friend of Dick Laurent. So, if Mystery Man really exists, was the conversation real too? Is Mystery Man a supernatural entity? We have no clear answer to the question. We know Fred saw Mystery Man before, although it was apparently in a dreamlike moment, but they cannot define the nature of both meetings beyond the certainty that Fred really experienced them.

Videotapes received by Fred and Renee add another level of complexity to the narration. The footage has an amateur quality and is often grainy suggesting tape damage. This makes the spaces and persons difficult to recognize, "unsettling any rational sense of safety and security" (Mactaggart, 2010, p.126). Handheld camera footage is usually considered highly reliable, as it evokes a sense of documenting reality. The footage in question in *Lost Highway* is from a high-angle as if there was an external observer. The shots do not provide any additional information beyond that already provided by Fred's point of view, they just confirm what audience already knows. The last videotape, for instance, does not question how or why the slaughter happened, it just shows that Renee is dead. As Mactaggart (2010) points out, it was Fred's dream that shows how it happened: "The use of different film stocks provides for subjective shifts in emphasis, to offer a grainy interpretation of Fred's mental state, as well as for temporal shifts in which the events depicted occur at different levels of the narration, so that any certainty about the sequence of events is constantly undermined" (p. 105). Thus, the viewer has no stable ground to define the boundaries of the reality of the main characters, contrary to classical narratives of American cinema where "the audience was given the optimum vantage point on what was occurring on screen" (Ray, 1985, p. 33).

In David Lynch's films a vantage point from which the puzzle could be solved is at times tantalizingly hinted. Sometimes the external gaze seems to be created through the detective characters or the camera's eye but as is seen in *Lost Highway* this vantage point is illusionary. The detectives, who give an impression of the existence of an external gaze, become a part of the reality/fantasy game. The detectives in *Lost Highway* ask absurd questions with deadpan expressions to Fred and Renee: "This is the bedroom? You sleep here in this room? Both of you?". They're inefficient and incapable of solving the mystery, and thus they differ from the detectives of classic narratives who solve the crime through an investigation based on a rational process. The detectives are thus offered as an external gaze to the mystery of the videotape story. Even when the film suggests the events to be Fred's fantasy, there is an inclination to seek out this external, rational gaze to indicate the boundaries between fantasy and reality, however illusionary that gaze may be.

The illusion of an external gaze or of another eye can be distinguished also in the scene where the detectives leave Fred and Renee's house. The two detectives are shown with Renee and Fred in a high-angle shot, creating the sense that they are under observation. The identity of the observer is not immediately apparent: h/she might be the person who sends the anonymous video tapes to Fred's house. But soon after it turns out that it is Mystery Man who holds the camera. As he is a part of Fred's reality there is no external/objective gaze that defines the confines of this reality and its interactions with others and the outside world. The hidden camera which initially gives the impression of an external observer is revealed to be the gaze of Fred Madison, portrayed as if it was a gaze of someone/something external that witnesses Fred's world.

After being sentenced to death, Fred becomes Pete, a transformation likely caused by a mental breakdown. This transformation, along with the overlapping of Renee and Alice, is the reason why many interpretations of the film views Pete as a fantasy, or an alter ego created by Fred.

Fred and Pete's storylines express the fantasy in different ways. While Fred's part is based more on the dreamlike state as a prelude to his mental breakdown, in Pete's part the status is represented rather as a hallucination underlying the upcoming collapse of his fantasy. In Fred dreams the camera's gaze is quite steady and objective albeit one that blurs the boundaries between reality and dream/fantasy. In Pete's hallucination at Andy's house the gaze is subjective, the movement is unstable and the boundaries between fantasy and reality are strongly marked through visual and sound effects. Comparing Pete's hallucination to the events Fred experiences at the Lost Highway Hotel, the parallels (Figure 1) are evident and cast doubt on whether Pete's experience was a sort of premonition, an overlapping of realities or some kind of memory. Lynch attributes the same 'reality' status to both dimensions and, in doing so, precludes any clear answers. The reality is deconstructed and related to the protagonist's experience, regardless of whether or not it is a hallucination.



**Figure 1: Hallucination of Pete (left) vs "Reality" of Fred (right) at Lost Highway Hotel**

Pete's transformation into Fred presents the same problem. Fred reappears after Pete makes love with Alice. The lights illuminating the two lovers mark the scene as if it was a dream similar to the one Fred had the night before they received the second videotape. This is an example of the circularity suggested by Žižek (2001) where the two realities collapse. Indeed, after Fred turns back, seemingly confirming that Pete is a product of his mind, Mystery Man reinforces the interpretation of collapsed realities by saying that the woman isn't Alice, but Renee. The fact that Fred sees Dick Laurent making love with Renee at the Lost Highway Hotel opens up the possibilities that the fantasy is ongoing, even though Pete has disappeared, or that the homicide of Renee is another fantasy and the crime in question is the murder of Dick Laurent. The sequence takes place during a thunderstorm, recalling the hallucination Pete had in Andy's house. The parallels between the two sequences suggests that it is impossible to guess which is real, or if any fantasy actually existed.

The circle is closed when Fred says, "Dick Laurent is dead" (as heard by Fred himself at the beginning) to his own intercom at the end of the film. This development puts into question the linearity of time and causation, and the viewer's beliefs on what happened earlier. Even though the mystery on the first scene has been solved and the owner of the voice speaking to the intercom revealed, at the same time all the linearity and rational distinctions need to be discarded. Fred's identity shift in the last sequence suggests that each transformation generates new realities and, therefore, each storyline, has to be considered as "real". As Stuart Mitchell (1999) points out, David Lynch himself describes *Lost Highway* as the story of Fred Madison, suggesting that the narrative is not a dream and entirely realistic according to the logic of Fred (p. 291).

### ***Mulholland Drive* (2001)**

While in *Lost Highway* the boundaries between fantasy and reality are marked visually, and viewer led to think about a hallucination, the relative linearity of *Mulholland Drive* presents a more coherent reality during the first two-thirds of the film, that is completely deconstructed it in the last third. The intelligibility turns out to be just an illusion anyway, for, as Zina Giannopoulou (2013) suggests, *Mulholland Drive* presents all the tropes of Lynch's cinema:

non-linear patterns of exposition, intransitive narrative – in which the chain of causation that motivates the action and drives the plot is interrupted or confused through spatial

and temporal fragmentation – fluid character identities, a blurry borderland between dreaming and waking life or knowledge and illusion, and loss of memory (p. 2).

In a similar way to *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* initially has the typical structure of film noir: a woman with amnesia escapes from a murder attempt and finds support in a stranger; a love affair flourishes; an intrigue begins to emerge. This linearity is suddenly subverted after the two-thirds of the film and all the knowledge acquired by the audience is put into question. Identities, relationships and causality of events radically change. Unlike *Lost Highway*, where Fred and Pete are physically different, Betty/Diane (Naomi Watts) and Rita/Camilla (Laura Harring) have the same appearance and, as in *Lost Highway*, they switch identities: the sweet and naive Betty becomes the sour and angry Diane; the pliant and insecure Rita, becomes the self-confident and opportunist Camilla. This is a radical change that puts their true identities into question. Denham and Worrel (2013) suggest that Rita and Camilla may not be the same person because in Betty's storyline Camilla is portrayed by another actress, Melissa George (p. 8). Mactaggart (2010) suggests that the film "presents the initial depiction as if from Rita's fantasy while the spectator may or may not come to understand that is actually Diane's fantasy all along" (p. 109). These considerations point to the loss generated by the radical switch. Furthermore, the switch questions the nature of the first part of the film: was it all a dream, an hallucination or an alternate reality?

*Mulholland Drive* does not give any clues regarding the status of different planes of reality. Compared to *Lost Highway*, the boundaries are more blurred and, until the last part of the film, the existence of different planes of reality is not evident. Hollywood provides the perfect backdrop for this particular story, considering that "dream machine" is a common metaphor for Hollywood. The audience is able to recognize the truth status of the narrative only retrospectively. Betty audition's scene, for instance, uses soap opera codes explicitly: the male character of the audition looks and acts like exaggerated and malicious soap opera characters; the passionate interaction between Betty and Chad is too melodramatic, the acting is too affected; the reactions of the crew as their audience are too enthusiastic. Toward the end of the film Betty's whole dream of becoming a Hollywood star seems increasingly naive and ingenuous. When Betty wakes up as Diane the previous setting is revealed as a constructed reality. As Mactaggart (2010) suggests, we as viewers can never be sure whether we are placed in Diane's fantasy projection as Betty, and he points out to her riveting performance at an audition for a daytime soap, preceded by a more prosaic rehearsal with Rita which also implicates a parody of their break up (p. 60).

In Lynch's films scenes that don't seem to contribute to the main plot immediately can, in retrospect, be recognized as signs indicating that what is presented is not as inconsistent as it might have appeared. For instance, when Joe (Mark Pellegrino), the hitman, is first introduced, he does not seem related to the main plot (Betty and Rita's storyline). He is presented in a sequence where he makes a mess, killing more people than he planned to. Afterwards it is revealed that Joe was hired by Diane/Betty to kill Camilla and in the reconstructed reality of Diane/Betty he should not have committed the murders. Here, as in other Lynch films, the director creates a kind of short circuit in the reconstructed reality, as if expecting the viewer to notice that all of the absurd, overly melodramatic, or overly movie-like moments could just be a part of a fantasy. Yet, these parts are just implications rather than clues since viewers never acquire the information based on an external gaze helping them distinguish between fantasy and material reality. Another example is the sequence at beginning of the film when Betty lands in Los Angeles. The camera shows Betty catching the taxi, and in another taxi her travel companions who are laughing in an uncanny way that recalls the laughs of Bob and Man From

Another Place in *Twin Peaks* (1992) and *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992). This scene is arguably an initial short circuit in the fantasy. The old couple is not shown from Betty's point of view, so it gives us an illusion of the external gaze, but they actually belong to Diane/Betty's reconstructed reality. Their uncanny laughing, indeed, implies that there is something "broken" in this version of the story.

The topic of dream/fantasy is suggested once again by Dan's (Patrick Fischler) story at Winkie's. At first, this seems to be one of the subplots not contributing to the main story, yet it contains some elements connecting the two storylines. The restaurant is the same where Rita and Betty go after calling the police and also where Diane hires the hitman (Joe) to kill Camilla; the vagabond-looking man met by Dan is the one carrying the blue box, that causes shifts in reality and ejects the old demoniac couple seen in the final scene. The latter Winkie's scene with Rita and Betty, moreover, is specular to the one with Herb and Dan. The first Winkie's sequence begins inside the restaurant and ends in the alley behind. The second one begins at the alley and ends inside the restaurant.

In the first part, Lynch presents contextual details to focus on Rita's story. An example is the meeting between Laney (Rena Riffel), a young woman and probably drug addict, and Joe, a man who seems to be connected to Rita's car accident. Joe, who will be revealed to be the killer of Camilla, asks Laney if a brunette woman was seen on the street. The scene, in light of the sequence of events and background information, suggests the conversation to be about Rita, and that the latter to be a prostitute or an escort. This presumption is the corollary of having seen Rita before in a limousine, threatened by an armed man and constantly refusing police assistance, as if she has something to hide. Thus, the detail about a "brunette on the street" revealed by a man who killed three people in the previous scene is enough to make the viewer think that she might be a prostitute.

Every certainty about the sequence of events suddenly collapses when it is revealed that Betty is Diane and Rita is Camilla. Therefore, all the knowledge the viewer acquired until that point must be reconsidered. The linearity of the story is inverted. While in Betty's timeline events are added as new revelations, in Diane's timeline they are presented as parts of a memory that is being restored. Every scene is like a flashback filling the void of memory and, at the same time, every new fragment undermines the viewer's position of the knowing subject, this undermining constituting one of the core elements of the postmodern narrative.

The constructed reality arises completely toward the end, through the climax in Diane's memory-restoring process that reveals the connections between the two storylines. So, Winkie's is the place where Dan tells Herbs about the dream, it is also where Rita begins to remember, and where Diane starts acting on her intention to get Camilla killed. The opening scene in which Rita has a car accident is a re-imagination of Diane's trip to Camilla's party. Almost all the characters in Betty's story reappear with different roles and personalities in Diane's one.

The first time the viewer is warned about a possible dream/fantasy or a reality reconstructed as a movie fantasy is in the scene at Club Silencio. This scene reveals to the viewer that they shouldn't take for granted what they have seen and what they will see. The Magician (Richard Green), in fact, issues a warning: "It is all recorded. It is all a tape. It is an illusion". This message is reinforced by the performance of Rebekah Del Rio (Rebekah Del Rio), when her song continues in playback after she collapses to the ground. The scene seems completely surreal: the theatre with the red curtains recalls the Red Room in *Twin Peaks*; the two girls

seated on the right side of the theatre look like Laura Palmer and Ronette Pulaski<sup>1</sup> from *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*; the blue lights, often used by Lynch to imply a sense of dreaminess, are present. As Mactaggart (2010) states, the scene best encapsulates the alienating yet absorbing quality of presenting the viewer with the “constructedness” of film (p. 61). Club Silencio represents the place where the characters meet the audience and both of them confront the inconsistency of reality. It is where, in the last scene of the film, the light of the microphone on the stage fades out, the dreamlike blue colour withdraws, the natural colours of the theater appear and the woman with blue hair in the lodge looks at the camera saying “Silencio” (the Spanish word for “silence”) as if a new show is to begin, or the show had come to an end due to the death of Diane in the moment when the screen fades to black.

The awareness acquired about the fantasy in *Mulholland Drive*, does not enable the viewer to experience a material reality despite being shown the points of view of side characters. McGowan (2004) points out that Rita and Betty do not recognize Diane’s body because they are inside the fantasy, and what the audience perceive is the reality of Rita and Betty (p. 80). That is why Diane’s neighbour does not recognize Betty as Diane and her point of view cannot be relied upon as an objective gaze, even though the audience sees her outside the house when she is not seen by Rita and Betty.

### ***Twin Peaks: The Return (2017)***

*Twin Peaks: The Return* (Lynch, 2017) takes place 25 years after the end of the Season Two of *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) as announced by Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) to Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) in Episode 30: “I’ll see you again in 25 years. Meanwhile...”. As stated by Showtime’s President David Nevins, “the core of it is Agent Cooper’s odyssey back to Twin Peaks” (Indiewire, 2017 para 7) and, as described by Lynch himself, it is a film broken in 18 parts, each one being one hour long, making *Twin Peaks: The Return* an 18 hour film (Deadline, 2017). The fact that the season should be considered as a film is reaffirmed in episode titles where the names are composed by “Part” followed by the episode number.

Despite being launched as a sequel to the 90s events, the new season only adopts the starting point and main characters from the earlier series, focusing rather on the deconstruction of reality that Lynch already attempted to do in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. In Lynch’s previous works, the viewers, even if unable to distinguish clearly the boundaries between reality and dream/fantasy, could attribute the experienced realities to one subject. *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* were about one subject experiencing different realities. In *Twin Peaks*, Cooper was the only figure holding the fragments together (Botting & Wilson, 2001, p. 149), while in *Twin Peaks: The Return* even this certainty is taken away from the viewer: it is about many characters experiencing different planes of reality within different timelines.

The main story is divided into different storylines: the journey of “the good Dale” who tries to escape the Black Lodge and return to Twin Peaks; Dale Cooper’s doppelgänger, Mr C. (Kyle MacLachlan), trying to avoid returning to the Black Lodge; the FBI investigation into Mr C., led by Major Garland Briggs; and the Twin Peaks Sheriff’s Department investigation of Dale Cooper’s disappearance 25 years before. Subplots are developed within these timelines: the relationship between ‘Dougie’ Jones (Kyle MacLachlan), his wife Janey-E (Naomi Watts) and his son Sonny Jim (Pierce Gagnon); the fantasy-like reality of Audrey Horne (Sherilyn Fenn);

---

<sup>1</sup> Phoebe Augustine, actress playing the role of Ronette Pulaski in *Twin Peaks*, is listed in IMDB as Woman in Club Silencio (uncredited). The correctness is disputed but it seems plausible that Lynch wanted some kind of reference to her and Laura Palmer, considering both the original project of *Mulholland Drive* as *Twin Peaks*’ spin-off and the Club Silencio’s similitude with the Red Room.

the love story between Big Ed (Everet McGill) and Norma Jennings (Peggy Lipton); the family issues of Shelly Briggs (Madchen Amick); and the story of Laura Palmer as Carrie Page.

The filmic space, originally based on the town of Twin Peaks, is now fragmented between Las Vegas, South Dakota, Washington, Twin Peaks and Odessa. Each of these places, in turn, are connected to a specific storyline: Dale Cooper/ Dougie Jones' story takes place in Las Vegas; Mr C. is in South Dakota; the FBI investigation in Washington; the investigation of Sheriff Truman's (Robert Foster)<sup>2</sup> office in Twin Peaks; and Carrie Page's timeline is in Odessa.

While the original series focused on Dale Cooper's gaze and *Fire Walk With Me* that of Laura Palmer, in *The Return* the gaze is completely fragmented among the storylines, and within each storyline among the characters, to the point of creating independent stories that the audience can follow separately. For instance, the storyline of Audrey and her husband Charlie (Clark Middleton), mostly confined to their house, as well as that of the isolated Twin Peaks community, never merges with the main plot except for on a few occasions. The resulting world is heterotopic, where there is a coexistence "of a 'large number of fragmentary possible worlds' or, more simply, incommensurable spaces that are juxtaposed or superimposed upon each other" (Harvey, 1992, p. 48).

Each storyline strongly depends on the points of view of the characters. The viewer learns what happens merely through the experience of each character and the intervention of an external gaze is almost absent. It is difficult to see an *intentio auctoris*, in the traditional meaning of transferring a unique point of view to spectator. On the contrary, it seems that Lynch tries to destroy any attempt by the viewer to create consistency and coherence due to an external eye, by excluding the concept of linear time and causality.

### Questioning Causality: Time and Space

As viewers, we constantly are asked to reconsider what has happened and to try to recreate a logic between the parts that we saw previously. Besides the fragmented narration through different characters and places, Lynch does not maintain the linear temporality of events.

Dale Cooper's journey to leave the Lodge in Part 2 and 3 provides a starting point to understand this process. The narrative is alternatively edited according to the points of view of Dale Cooper in Black Lodge, Mr. C., and Dougie Jones. The three storylines gradually converge to the final point when Dale Cooper exits the Lodge taking the place of Dougie Jones; Dougie Jones enters the Red Room and is revealed to be a Tulpa;<sup>3</sup> Mr C. has a car accident and vomits Garmonbozia<sup>4</sup>. The sequence of events is one of the most intelligible in the entire series, but it introduces some techniques used by Lynch throughout the season, to destroy the linearity of time and causality. First, the change of point of view shows the viewer what the three characters are experiencing at the same time. Second, the convergence of events through common elements such as Garmonbozia and the curtains of Red Room/Black Lodge seen by all of them. Finally, the expansion of the time, causing the events to happen in one minute in the diegetic time (from 2:52 – 2:53) but about 23 minutes in filmic time.

<sup>2</sup> Sheriff Truman is no more Harry (Michael Ontkian) but his brother Frank (Robert Forster).

<sup>3</sup> Tulpa is a concept of Eastern philosophy. It is an autonomous entity created with the power of mind. In *Twin Peaks: The Return*, Tulpas are created by Lodge inhabitants, combining the hair of a person and a small golden sphere through the use of electricity.

<sup>4</sup> Garmonbozia is creamed corn composed of "pain and sorrow" as referenced in *Fire Walk With Me*. It is created by the pain and suffering of the victims of the Black Lodge and is the food of its inhabitants.

While these sequences still maintain a continuity of events, albeit on different planes, others do not follow the same linearity. For instance, in Part 12, Diane receives a message (“Las Vegas?”) from Mr. C. but the viewer sees Mr C. sending this message in Part 15. Furthermore, the time on Diane’s mobile is 19.28 while Mr C.’s indicates 9:34pm. So, apparently, Diane receives the message before Mr. C. sends it. In addition to reversing the temporal sequence of events, different timelines lead the viewer to question whether these sequences are part of the same reality.

Time reference is one of the elements used by Lynch to deconstruct the linearity. 2:53, for example, occurs in different Parts, sequentially distant one from another. The time is announced by The Arm to Cooper before Cooper’s fall from the Black Lodge (“2:53 time and time again”), it is also one of the elements connecting different parts and storylines of the season. In addition to corresponding to the moment when Dale Cooper returns as Dougie Jones, this is the time shown in Part 14 when Sheriff’s officers find Naido (Nae), the woman without eyes seen falling in space while trying to help Dale Cooper in the Purple Room. Since the events of the Purple Room in Part 3 appear to take place between 2:52 and 2:53, we wonder whether Naido is found merely after her fall in Part 3. The same doubt arises when in Part 17, the time shown on the clock in Truman’s office loops between 2:52 and 2:53, although the events might have happened in different days.

The uncertainty of time and causality is directly suggested by One Armed Man/Mike (Al Strobel) in Part 2 and Part 18 when, in Black Lodge, he asks Cooper: “Is it future or is it past?”. Through this question Mike casts doubt on the linearity of events. In both Parts, a time loop is shown resetting all the sequences, emphasizing the fact that what happened might happen in the future or might have already happened in the past.

### **Questioning Reality: “Who is the Dreamer?”**

*Twin Peaks: The Return* develops the dream logic explored in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. Following the path taken with *Inland Empire* (Lynch, 2006), the third season reveals further the paradox of Zhuang-Zi through Gordon Cole (David Lynch) telling his ‘Monica Bellucci Dream’ in Part 14. In the dream, the Italian actress asks Director Cole: “We are like the dreamer who dreams, and then lives inside the dream. But who is the dreamer?”

The dream logic is what shapes the narrative of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, through elements such as Teapot-looking Philip Jeffries, the Purple Room, and the experimental Part 8. Part 17 and 18, moreover, blur the boundaries between dream and reality, making it impossible to identify the truth, and leading the viewer to question all certainties.

An overlaid image of Cooper appears in Part 17, while Cooper in the scene talks to his friends gathered in Truman’s office in *Twin Peaks*. ‘Overlaid Cooper’, with a deeply distorted voice, says: “We live inside a dream”, evoking what Phillip Jeffries (David Bowie) said in *Fire Walk With Me* and Gordon Cole’s Monica Bellucci dream. The origin of the overlaid image is debated among critics and there is no consensus, but the image suggests an external gaze suspended between different realities as an observing third eye.

This hypothesis may be supported since the superimposition is maintained through different scenes, as if another Dale Cooper was observing the events from a distance, leading the viewer to assume that Cooper is the dreamer. At the same time, the continuous switch between places and planes of reality questions this assumption. Indeed, superimposed Cooper is seen even after

the blackout when Cooper, Diane and Gordon Cole walk into the Great Northern Hotel towards the door of room 315, but he disappears when Cooper meets Mike and enters the Convenience Store. Lynch does not explain, how and why Dale Cooper, Gordon Cole and Diane arrive in the dark corridor after the blackout in Sheriff Truman's office but in this transition, he maintains the image of 'Overlaid Cooper'. The narrative merely suggests the possibility of a dream through the loop of the clock between 2:52 and 2:53 in the Sheriff's office, the superimposed image of Cooper, and the transformation of Naido into Diane. At the same time, Lynch does not give any clue to distinguish the reality and the dream state, recalling the paradox of Zhuang Zi.

The paradox is reinforced in Part 18. Crossing the 430-miles threshold, Cooper and Diane enter a new dimension where Cooper becomes Richard and Diane becomes Linda. When Cooper reads the letter left by Diane, signed as Linda, he seems surprised to see different names and he seems to question his own identity, as Zhuang Zi does.

In the new plane of reality all the clues given throughout the season assume other meanings: the malevolent being Judy<sup>5</sup> becomes the name of a restaurant, Laura Palmer is now Carrie Page and the Palmer's house in Twin Peaks is inhabited by the Tremonds/Chalfonts. These new meanings seem to support the theory that all the events in Twin Peaks were a dream/fantasy of Richard/Cooper. However, Lynch, prevents the viewer from considering it as the ultimate conclusion. Indeed, Richard/Cooper continues to qualify himself as FBI Agent Dale Cooper; Carrie Page seems to recall her past when Richard/Cooper mentions Laura's mother Sarah Palmer (Grace Zabriskie) and she hears her voice coming from the Tremonds/Chalfonts' house. The final scream of Carrie Page, the blackout and Cooper's question "What year is this?" connect this plane of reality to specific moments of the season: Carrie's scream recalls Laura's when she is taken from the Red Room and from the forest after being saved by Cooper; the blackout recalls the one that happened in Truman's office (Part 17); and Dale's time dilemma reinforces the question "Is it Future or is it past?"

*Twin Peaks: The Return* can be defined as the highest level of Lynch's filmography that deconstructs reality. Not only does it blend different dimensions, but it also drives viewers to continuously recreate realities due to the impossibility of identifying a consistent and coherent plot. Furthermore, it encourages viewers to create a custom film experience. It is a narrative where everyone can combine elements and create their own interpretation that will be unique and valid at the same time. Not being oriented and limited by an external gaze, there is no more a single interpretation that invalidates others.

## Conclusion

In David Lynch's films, the aim is not to perceive an objective reality represented through an external gaze third-party's point of view, in the form of other characters or the camera's gaze. Viewers follow the point of view and mental representations of the main characters. So even though the films put forward a reality that the main characters must confront, this confrontation with a harsher reality is portrayed through a dreamy narrative, a fragmented dramatic structure and a superimposition of different worlds. When the reality built by the character collapses, the viewers do not have the objective gaze of the camera or the narrator to guide them through a distinction between reality and fantasy.

---

<sup>5</sup> Judy is mentioned for the first time by Phillip Jeffries in *Fire Walk With Me* and then by Gordon Cole in Part 14. Judy is seen in Part 8 as the "mother" of Bob, the evil spirit who possesses Leland Palmer (Ray Wise) in the first two seasons and gets defeated in Part 17.

In *Mulholland Drive* or *Lost Highway* some scenes, with their parody-like feel, are hinted to be just a fantasy or to belong to the fictitious universe of cinema and then to our collective imaginary. In *Lost Highway* Alice, who is the transformation of Renee, seems to be a pastiche of film noir femme fatales. The love story between Alice, the lover of the “Godfather” Mr. Eddy, and Pete, a mechanic recalls melodramas. Alice, as a femme fatale, and Mr. Eddy, as a godfather, are cliché representations rooted in classical Hollywood genres. The closeup of the red lips of Alice speaking into the phone punctuates the sense of mystery characterizing the femme fatale. The use of slow-motion, when Alice gets out of the car accompanied by the music and Pete’s contemplative gaze, indicates love at first sight. Those images indicate cinematographic versions of reality based on collective imaginary. As underlined previously, in *Mulholland Drive* Betty’s audition scene presents a similar overconstructed of the same constructed universe. The awakened Cooper in *Twin Peaks: The Return* seems almost a parody of Dale Cooper from the original series with his overenthusiastic attitude.

There is no such thing as the objective gaze of the camera either; camera’s gaze is constructed through the reality of the character although we are sometimes given illusionary high-angle shots and shots from points of view of the side characters. *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Twin Peaks: The Return* offer us elements that give the illusion of an external gaze. The detectives, guardians, and federal agents who are supposed to represent an objective and external point of view, as in the modern and classical detective and noir narrative, might be considered parts of fantasies or reconstructed realities.

In David Lynch’s films even when we are shown an awakening of the character, this awakening does not signify the collapse of an artificial world and the encounter with material reality in a strict sense. Even the awakening is told in dream logic or makes part of reconstructed reality that looks like a fantasy. This recalls the paradox of Zhuang Zi: Zhuang Zi is living a paradox since he does not have an external gaze that defines the distinction between reality and fantasy, hence his true identity. In other words, both the butterfly that dreams of being Zhuang Zi or Zhuang Zi who dreams of being a butterfly are valid planes of reality.

Even if we consider some storylines as parts of dream/fantasy or having dream logic in terms of space and time relations, these dreamlike or illusionary realities seem to continue overlapping the daily life and are perceived more real than fiction or fantasy by the main characters. From this perspective the vagabond-like creature who lives behind the wall at Winkie’s in *Mulholland Drive*, and Mystery Man who records Fred’s house and helps him to kill Dick Laurent/Mr. Eddy have an existence and signification beyond the fictitious creations of a schizophrenic character, since the worlds that appear to be fantasy commingle with the other realities. At this stage it is void to ask whether the suicide of Diane/Betty in *Mulholland Drive* or the murder of Renee in *Lost Highway* took place or not. None of the elements in these films are relevant to the distinction between reality and fantasy; the reality of the film is the fragmented one in which the main character lives. This could also be said about *Twin Peaks: The Return*. The main point is not to distinguish clearly whether Laura Palmer’s murder has been deleted from the past since Phillip Jeffries himself mentions to Cooper an unofficial version. The distinction is not between fantasy and reality, but between the official and unofficial version. We see different timelines or different planes of reality related to Dale Cooper: Cooper as Dougie, Richard, Cooper as an overlaid entity, the possibility of the awakened Cooper being another manufactured double.

Even if we consider some parts of the films to be dream or fantasy in the strict sense, it is clear that they are represented as dreams and fantasies of cinematic narration. The fantasy is not

narrated through a strict distinction from reality and without an external gaze. Here, the question is rather: How would a certain reality seem if it was narrated as if it was a filmic dreaminess? Here we deal with storylines constructed as if they were some states of filmic fantasy. To put it another way, Lynch shows us how it would be if a story (or a part of a story) was narrated as if it was a different plane of reality. That's why it may be too restrictive to see Lynch's films as a director's self-indulgent product of postmodern times. His films show that there is more than one way to construct and re-construct reality. In *Lost Highway* Fred Madison explains to the detectives why he doesn't own a camera; he tells them he likes to remember things in his own way, not necessarily the way they happened. This explanation could also frame Lynch's narratives. As viewers we are shown the stories "the way the main characters remember them" and we don't have an external gaze to show us "necessarily the way things happened". Throughout each of the films the camera also 'remembers' and shows things the way they are reconstructed. That is why in Lynch's films the colliding worlds could not be described simply through deliriums of some clinically schizophrenic characters, since schizophrenia assumes an external, material reality in which the fantasy or alternate reality is well distinguished and contained.

In *Twin Peaks: The Return* Audrey who seems to be stuck in a reality, asks her husband: "What story is that, Charlie? Is it the story of the little girl who lived down the lane? Is it?", which is the same question asked by The Arm to Cooper. Here it makes sense to recall Gordon Cole's dream where Monica Bellucci says: "We are like the dreamer who dreams and then lives inside the dream. But who is the dreamer?". We never know whose story this is exactly or who the dreamer is, since there is no external gaze or point of view that reveals the dreamer or the storyteller. Cooper says "We live inside a dream" but as in the paradox of Zhuang, the dream is neither something artificial, nor something that would be cancelled with the revelation of a certain reality. The dream or fantasy is just another way of constructing the reality. We live inside a dream, but we never perceive the awakening since both the reality of the butterfly and the one of Zhuang Zi are experienced as real. And "the story of the little girl who lived down by the lane" could be told the way the characters remember them.

## References

- Twin Peaks: Showtime boss on the revival's launch plans and how it's 'pure heroin' David Lynch. (2017). *Indiewire*. Available at: <http://www.indiewire.com/2017/01/twin-peaks-showtime-premiere-david-lynch-homeland-1201766858/> [Accessed 13 June 2018].
- Botting, F. & Wilson, S. (2001). *Battaille*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- David Lynch travels back to Twin Peaks: "The story was not over". (May 2017). *Deadline*. Available at: <http://deadline.com/2017/05/twin-peaks-david-lynch-cannes-showtime-disruptors-news-1202090469/> [Accessed 13 June 2018].
- Denham, A. E., & Worrel, F. D. (2013). Identity and agency In Mulholland Drive. In Z. Giannopoulou (Ed.). *Mulholland Drive* (pp. 8–37). New York, NY: Routledge
- Giannopoulou, Z. (Ed.). (2013). *Mulholland Drive*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Harvey, D. (1992). *The condition of postmodernity*. Cambridge, USA: Blackwell
- Lynch, D. (Director). (1990-91). *Twin Peaks* [television series]. USA: Lynch/Frost Productions
- Lynch, D. (Director). (1992). *Twin Peaks: Fire walk with me* [film]. USA: CIBY Pictures
- Lynch, D. (Director). (1997). *Lost highway* [film]. USA: Ciby 2000.
- Lynch, D. (Director). (2001). *Mulholland Drive* [film]. USA: Les Films Alain Sarde
- Lynch, D. (Director). (2006). *Inland empire* [film]. USA: Absurda
- Lynch, D. (Director). (2017). *Twin Peaks: The return* [television series]. USA: Lynch/Frost Productions
- Mactaggart, A. (2010). *The film paintings of David Lynch: Challenging film theory*. Bristol: Intellect.
- McGowan, T. (2004). Lost on Mulholland Drive: Navigating David Lynch's panegyric to Hollywood. *Cinema Journal*, 43(2), 67–89. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2004.0008>
- Mitchell, S. (1999). How secrets travel. David Lynch and the road. In J. Sargeant, & S. Watson (Eds.). *Lost highways: An illustrated history of the road movies* (pp. 241–256). London: Creation
- Ray, Robert B. (1985). *A Certain tendency of Hollywood cinema, 1930–1980*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Rodley, C. (1997). *Lynch on Lynch*. London: Faber and Faber
- Žižek, S. (2000). *The Art of the ridiculous sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*. University of Washington: Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities
- Žižek, S. (2008). *The sublime object of ideology*. London: Verso

**Corresponding Author:** Asli Favaro

**Email:** [asli.favaro@ege.edu.tr](mailto:asli.favaro@ege.edu.tr)

