

A CINEMA OF CONFUSION

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Something is wrong. Videotapes appear on the doorstep of Fred (Bill Pullman) and Renée Madison (Patricia Arquette). They show, in floating, ominous frames, the exterior and then the interior of the couple's home. Even ignoring the tapes, Fred and Renée seem off, somnambulant. They speak in non-sequiturs and long pauses. Their house is always dark. We sense an intrusion taking place, but never that there might be one specific intruder. Something is looming, and it's impossible to tell what it might be. Things in this successful couple's upscale home seem like they should be normal, but they feel fundamentally wrong, and by the time Fred receives the final tape—chronicling his murder of Renée—the grainy footage seems itself like the act of violence. The police arrest Fred, but once within his jail cell, he physically transforms into another man, Pete (Balthazar Getty). The police can't figure out what to do with this man, so they release him. Pete returns home to his own family and work, which soon will lead him to Alice (also played by Patricia Arquette), who looks identical to Renée.

So, we have questions, but the answers we receive from David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) only confound us more. Fred murdered his wife. But when? Why? And even taking this account for the truth, Fred is no longer Fred, but Pete. Fred's arrest seems like a climax to *Lost Highway's* odd, oblique psychodrama, but with the transfiguration in the jail cell, we're delivered back into a status quo, albeit one that disrupts our understanding of the plot. And as Pete works his way into a classical noir narrative—one that mirrors Fred's story, especially jealousy and rage—his world begins to intersect at odd angles with Fred's. What seemed like a resolution—the reveal of Fred's violence—acts as an anti-revelation of sorts, one that returns *Lost Highway* to a state of unease rather than resettling and restoring it. Even as this new storyline plays out, its seeming straightforwardness pushes us further towards an edge that we cannot see but know is there.

Thus go the films of David Lynch, whose work veers from beauty to horror to hilarity and traffics in the deep confusion we see in *Lost Highway*. Frequently, his films dabble in familiar genre conventions, only to disrupt them and send storylines careening off into parallel realities. When analyzing his filmography, it can seem difficult even to find a solid inquiry; one takes it all in and doesn't know where to begin. Yet the deeper one looks, the more that quality of constant destabilization seems itself to be the point. Indeed, Lynch's work, taken as a cinema of confusion, perplexes and distorts, but it also elucidates fundamentally emotional and relatable ideas, albeit in uncanny ways. At his heart, Lynch is a deeply earnest filmmaker, but it would be wrong to think that his films' strangenesses and disorientations act as barriers to understanding his worldview. Rather, they're the key to it. In the cinema of David Lynch, confusion may be the truest way to understand the human heart.

If we look at Lynch's impact on the popular consciousness, we see that his ethos has translated even to a mass audience. He's become a strangely iconic figure, with his idiosyncrasies and tonal trademarks inspiring the widely-used moniker, 'Lynchian,' that describes a specific nightmarish, uncanny tone. His films have found recognition as midnight movie standards (*Eraserhead*, 1977), Palme d'Or winners (*Wild at Heart*, 1990), and even Oscar material (*The Elephant Man*, 1980, most extensively, with select nominations for others). Yet amidst this sporadic acclaim, many critics tend to dismiss serious examination of his work. Audiences can sometimes detach from him; some consider him a provocateur who seeks to simply make audiences uncomfortable, or a strawman creative who "ladles on the random weirdness" to hide dull, overdone thematic ideas ("Review"). In this regard, his public persona of nasal Midwestern oddness, with his weird stories and near-total caginess on the meanings of his films, can seem like a mask that hides a playful, creative emptiness. Yet despite cycles of critical dismissal and commercial underperformance, Lynch has endured, growing in reputation as the years go on. In the long run, it seems that people respond to his work, even if they also consider it strange. He must be doing something accessible, even if he does so in an unexpected way.

It might help if we set a baseline. Lynch's unique way of conveying emotion can be more explicable if we isolate it. How does it operate in his more straightforward material? His wilder abstractions? We might find his most basic principles of cinematic empathy most clearly articulated in *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), a popular TV whodunit in which FBI agent Dale Cooper investigates the murder of high school student Laura Palmer. In "Episode 14," Lynch resolves the series' central mystery and reveals the killer. Lynch infuses every moment with a queasy tonal balance, though most of what's here is more transparent than the strangeness of, say, *Lost Highway*. Still, the rationality of the plot is balanced by an abstraction of emotion that seems more of a precedent to Lynch's later work.

In the episode's pivotal scene, Lynch demonstrates his knack for creating tone through tactility, imbuing the empty Palmer living room with a deep sense of dread through vacant compositions and the looping click of a needle on an ended record. Again, we have that sense that something is wrong. The sense of dread crystallizes, however, with the murder of Laura's identical cousin Maddy (Sheryl Lee). Lynch continues to create meaning through lyrical, visual associations that enhance a more direct plotting of the mystery. Leland Palmer (Ray Wise), Laura's father, looks in the mirror and sees the grinning face of BOB (Frank Silva), a supernatural presence signifying absolute evil. As Leland, possessed by BOB, beats Maddy to death, Lynch employs visual signifiers to create his feeling of unraveling tragedy. He intercuts the already drawn-out, brutal violence of the scene with slow-motion interludes that shine a literal spotlight on the two characters and replace Leland with BOB. Meanwhile, the denizens of Twin Peaks, gathered to celebrate and socialize in the town bar, begin to mourn and cry without knowing why. The reverberation of the episode's central murder spreads throughout the diegetic world of *Twin Peaks*, in a way dictated by the show's form and its underlying emotional climaxes, rather than literal causation. "Episode 14," like all of Lynch's work, operates on a deep sense of tragedy that defies logical structure, and while the way each scene feeds into the next can be disorienting, the emotional currents cut deep.

In *Twin Peaks*, however, such impressionistic stretches are backed by a largely straightforward procedural narrative. Several

episodes' literal plot frameworks allow us to shift into abstraction without losing our sense of context. It's a little harder to latch onto Lynch's films post-*Peaks*, which tend to emphasize illogic as their own appeal. So whereas Lynch's primetime murder mystery has an understandable appeal to its audiences—the desire to uncover “Who killed Laura Palmer?”—we have to wonder why his later films can still evoke such strong reactions. We must consider how their illogic can still provide clarity.

Without the ability to subvert an established context, as he could within *Twin Peaks*' ongoing story, Lynch constructs confusion in his later films by distorting traditional genre conventions. For example, Lynch steeps *Lost Highway* in the imagery of noir, with its covert phone calls, double-crossings, and identical femme fatales, whereas the “Pete” segment of the film plays more like a straightforward crime drama. Likewise, *Mulholland Drive* (2001) tracks a seemingly straightforward mystery: its central characters, Betty (Naomi Watts) and Rita (Laura Harring), attempt to track down Rita's lost memory and end up entangling themselves in a Hollywood conspiracy. Yet in both films, the concrete mysteries disintegrate as other realities collide with the ones we know. In *Lost Highway*, The Mystery Man (Robert Blake) that Fred encounters reenters Pete's story, and Pete becomes complicit in the violence inflicted on Alice, forcing him back into the role of Fred. In *Mulholland Drive*, Betty and Rita unlock what seems to be a major clue, but when we see them next on the screen they are in dramatically different roles, in an entirely different story. The mysteries hinge on the same thematic ideas, but they enter a metaphysical, rather than strictly literal, dimension.

Lynch unsettles us by breaking his own rules. As Martha P. Nochimson notes in *David Lynch Swerves: Uncertainty from Lost Highway to Inland Empire*, he likes to set up parallel realities that seem to reflect each other, only to collapse into each other and destabilize whatever straightforward dynamics we might have been able to parse. “By employing entanglement and superposition in conjunction with a ‘many worlds’ paradigm,” she says, “Lynch creates a complex of circumstances in which the world is both uncertain and also somehow unified” (13). It's not so simple as establishing a world and then a counter-world that illustrates certain points about the first, as some

straightforward science-fiction does; the worlds intrude on each other, and bleed into each other, becoming increasingly difficult to track. Everything feels broken up and wholly disorienting.

The effect of Lynch's parallel universes is more personal and disorienting than a more straightforward thought experiment about the concept of alternate realities. Whereas science-fiction must rely on cohesive internal logic when depicting alternate timelines, Lynch creates chaos in order to emphasize points of comparison, because that is how his characters perceive the world. In what might be one of his most candid interviews, he explains this empathetic approach to filmmaking: "What does the mind do . . . after . . . a horrific murder, and that experience? How does the mind protect itself from that knowledge, and go on? And that's interesting to me, and the mind is interesting for sure. Huge, huge stories in the mind" ("*Lost Highway*"). Taking this into account, *Lost Highway* stops seeming like a taunt to its audience and more like an exercise in a kind of radical empathy. The audience reacts with the same disorientation and horror that Fred does. They experience the same shocks and breaks in reality—the same sickening certainty, and the same feeling of persecution by the time Fred ends the film, screaming. One could read *Lost Highway* as a fantasy-horror movie about a Mystery Man manipulating Fred's realities in order to frame him or drive him insane. But that kind of reading can't encapsulate the erratic, nerve-shredding emotion we experience with Fred as the delineations between realities take place. Actually, we find ourselves thinking, where are the shifts?

Really, there are none—and as Lynch makes more films, he only delves deeper and deeper into this chaos, embedding his confusions in the aesthetic qualities of the films themselves. With *Inland Empire* (2006), famously shot on a consumer-grade camcorder, he moves into full-on assault, with its visual ugliness and dizzying leaps between various storylines with borders that aren't even clear. There isn't room for reality to contort in this film, because there is no reality; the grainy images announce their falseness instantly, ripping open into each other with an odd, aggressive seamlessness. *Inland Empire's* plotlines carve out labyrinths across its three-hour runtime, with reverberations and potential overlaps ultimately buried within the pure density of the thing. Only the gorgeous confusion of Laura Dern's performance,

which spans characters, emotions, and possibly planes of existence, offers itself as an anchor. Yet that feint towards continuity only destabilizes the audience more, as her character continues to expand and shift into something impossible to track. There are no separations or delineations between the doppelgängers and the strange recurrent images; there seem to be many worlds, but really there is only one.

The one true reality might be the conflicted human mind, so it is only natural that Lynch would rely on splits and doubles to evoke the mind's messiness. Much of this fractal division within the mind, particularly when taking the form of a doppelgänger, can be traced back to Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, with its doubled heroines and spiralling visuals and plotlines. In *Twin Peaks*, Lynch even borrows the names of Hitchcock's tormented lovers—Scottie Ferguson and Madeleine Elster—for Maddy Ferguson, the identical cousin to murder victim Laura Palmer and a prime Lynchian doppelgänger. Lynch also acknowledges film noir as a major influence in his use of doppelgängers. Noir, itself a movement that sought to reflect post-war destabilization, featured many doppelgängers and mirrored images. In "The Film Noir Doppelgänger: Alienation, Separation, Anxiety," Ed Cameron asserts that noir doppelgängers "allow classical films noir to implicitly reveal how the noir protagonist is often haunted by his own doubled desire, duplicitous nature, and monstrous id" (39). Through these doubles, "[w]hat is not, or could not, be shown directly within the diegetic content of the cinema because of the overriding need for narrative coherence, because of generic constraints, or because of the Production Code is forced onto the screen mostly through the formal elements of the film's mise en scene" (39). Reading the doppelgänger through a psychoanalytic lens, Cameron argues that the double represents the repressed urges and desires of the protagonist, which can only pass the restrictions of the Production Code in disguised form. The doppelgänger represents what could not be presented directly, for fear of losing the stamp of approval.

Lynch, working in the late twentieth century, had few such content restrictions (by the 1990s, one could argue that he owed his edginess to his financiers—see *Wild at Heart*, a Palme d'Or winner and edgy to the point it falls off a cliff). But Lynch exhibits a similar interest in how narrative form can reflect internal character psychology.

Through this lens, *Lost Highway*'s detour into noir begins to seem like a form of discretion, placing us with Fred as he tries to evade his murderous actions. Lynch's major innovation is in muddling devices that are already meant to disorient. By the time we reach *Inland Empire*, we aren't dealing with a single doppelgänger, but a seemingly infinite variety of Laura Dorns.

Lynch's entire career seems to work towards a destabilization of the dichotomies he established in *Twin Peaks*, which featured his most narratively straightforward noir doppelgänger. "Episode 14"'s juxtaposition of BOB and Leland remains one of Lynch's simplest doubles, so concise and clear that it can function as a plot-based reveal: a family man looks into the mirror and sees a monster. The sight and the implications it carries are unbelievably upsetting, but they posit a contrast and accepts the results. Post-*Peaks*, we can never be so sure. Did Fred Madison kill his wife? Is he the Mystery Man, or is someone else? And by *Inland Empire*, the questions become even more abstract: who is Nikki Grace? *Is Nikki Grace?*

Lynch does not allow us comfortable clarities. It seems in all of these films that the truth will be painful, and where we won't accept it directly, the confusion illuminates the truth more than reality does. What we can't find step-by-step in an ordinary narrative, we can only find buried in the chaos, by searching for ripples and resonances. This principle may find its apotheosis in the unusual filming of *Inland Empire*, during which Lynch says he would "get an idea, write it down, and then go shoot it," continuing this process "until one time it kinda started unfolding how they all related" ("David Lynch"). Lynch himself seems to find meaning in that confusion, not by planting recurrent ideas but allowing them to emerge as he forges along with the creative process. The spontaneity of creating art through *Inland Empire* was an experiment for Lynch, but it also serves as a therapeutic mechanism. By expressing the chaos in all its messiness, Lynch attempts to reckon with an insane world.

Indeed, as terrifying as change can be in the works of David Lynch, nothing seems quite so alien to him as stasis, as denial. Lynch is here to remind us what denial looks like, to remind us that it looks like Fred Madison's house—long corridors and dark rooms. We can look at the nice décor, listen for the low hum of electricity, and wait

for whatever's coming. It is a liminal space, where we will never know what is wrong. We know nothing; we are static; we don't know what horror might be sitting in the other room. We haven't watched the tapes yet; we aren't aware of the violence. But that doesn't mean it hasn't occurred. Once the tapes do arrive, we may be confused, disoriented, horrified. But we'll know.

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