

Cristina
Álvarez López

In an already classic fragment of **The Pervert's Guide to Cinema** (Sophie Fiennes, 2006) devoted to **Blue Velvet** (David Lynch, 1986), Slavoj Žižek comments: “My relationship with tulips is inherently Lynchian. I think they are disgusting. Just imagine: aren't these some kind of vagina dentata threatening to swallow you up?” This wonderfully misogynistic statement finds its perfect mirror in one of the answers given by David Lynch in the interview that precedes the published screenplay of **Lost Highway** (1997); when his interlocutor confronts him with Patricia Arquette's idiosyncratic explanation of the plot, the director responds categorically: “But why though? Because of this person: the woman.”

In **Lost Highway**, the woman is Renee (Arquette). With her black gown and her red lips, she is the figure of sinister femininity that haunts and paralyzes Fred (Bill Pullman). But why though? Because he can't possess her, he can't access her secrets, he's unable to please her sexually. Arquette's performance of this sphinx is superb: all monotonal voice, blank expression, and inaccessible nakedness. Lynch's depiction of the character relies both on pure excess — her body fragmented, different sections shown in extreme close-ups as autonomous, partial objects — and on total lack: a hole, an abyss, a cipher.

So, the first thing one needs to understand about **Lost Highway** is that it's all about the man's tortured subjectivity: this is the core from which the entire film is built up. But, as always in Lynch, what matters is, precisely, the act or process of this building. Lynch is often described as a great creator of atmosphere, but what is most amazing in his cinema is the work on the transformation and shifting of these atmospheres from moment to moment — usually in the course of a single scene, through a minute control of the tiniest details of image and sound design. Lynch understands the scene as a dynamic, heterogeneous mass that he molds and modulates in a series of sometimes small but always decisive *moves*.

The sexual intercourse between Fred and Renee that takes place early in the film is a prodigious, synthetic example of Lynch's work in this regard. Four major transformations occur in less than four minutes. First, through a volley of shot/reverse shots that contrast Fred's physical effort with Renee's disturbing detachment, we are immersed in the uncomfortable tension of their two bodies at odds. Second, the blurry close-up of her face fading to white functions as a switch, signalling Fred's plunge into fantasy. Angelo Badalamenti's disquieting score makes way for the theme “Song to the Siren” performed by



This Mortal Coil: an ode to a mythical figure who is, by definition, the ultimate masculine fantasy, perpetually holding back the physical encounter (“touch me not, come back tomorrow”), and driving the man insane. This moment of unexpected and yet ambiguous bliss, soaked in slow motion and in the dreamy reverberation of Elizabeth Fraser’s voice, will be suddenly interrupted, in a third move, by Fred’s premature ejaculation: an exhalation that ignites the whole sonic atmosphere, vanquishing the fantasy, cancelling the song and the slow motion. And, fourth and finally, with Badalamenti’s score plunged into chaos and distortion, a slow build-up to a *coup de grâce*: Renee’s stroking of Fred’s shoulder, her monstrous hand appearing from the most horrific zone of the frame — the off-screen space.

What Lynch does here is risky, because the overall structure of **Lost Highway** relies on our *understanding* this scene, which is rendered with virtually no dialogue and in the most unconventional manner. What happens here, in a strictly narrative sense, can be easily summarized in one sentence; but the imprint it leaves on Fred’s psyche must be cinematically *experienced*. If we look and listen closer, we will be thrown into a roller coaster of emotions brought about by the rhythms and punctuations of the montage, the metamorphoses of the aural textures, and the inventive, dancing steps of the *mise en scène*. We feel the piercing of the wound, faced with the otherness of the Other; we shiver, as the diffuse magnitude of this monster makes us recoil and shrink.

Only this scene can explain what comes next: a “fucking brutal murder” followed by a death sentence. Amnesiac Fred propelled into a **Vertigo**-trip through second-chance-land. A trip that concludes with another sex scene, this time between Pete (Balthazar Getty) and Alice (Arquette again). Pete (i.e., *stone*): an idealized version of Fred with his masculinity restored. Alice: Renee *reborn* (*re-né*), a fantasy in *truth*’s disguise. “Alice who? Her name is Renee. If she’s told you her name is Alice, she’s lying,” shouts the Man With the Camera to the Man Who Likes to Remember Things His Own Way.

While Lynch does not show Alice in the earlier sequence, he prefigures her, “as if half-born,” through a series of details (the blinding white, “Song to the Siren,” the slow motion) that reappear here. This intimate moment between Alice and Pete presents itself as the long deserved fulfilment of Fred’s fantasy, already announced in that first scene. This moment is then imbued with the promise of a *reversal*, but it turns out instead to be a *reprise*, constructed almost

David Lynch, *Lost Highway*, 1997





mimetically. Pete is now left at the gates of heaven, in a gesture of frustration that rhymes with his earlier premature release. “You’ll never have me,” murmurs Alice in his ear, and she turns her back to Pete: a gesture that has the same paralyzing effect as Renee’s stroking of Fred’s shoulder. Alice’s words are the ultimate, beyond-the-grave act of revenge on Renee’s part. But they also resonate in a complementary way as the fantasy’s self-conscious revelation of the very condition of its own nature.

Every fan of David Lynch knows that his **Lost Highway** is, actually, like the road in John Carpenter’s **In the Mouth of Madness** (1994). Every attempt to escape throws the protagonist back within the same perimeter surrounding the same abyss. “I’m deranged,” sings David Bowie in the theme that opens and closes Lynch’s film. And we know that, no matter how many mutations, splits, and substitutions this hero faces, Fred can’t be freed of himself. My audiovisual essay **Coming Attraction** is a play on scenes and a play on words, inhabiting the vicious circle that is **Lost Highway**.

