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Review Article

Lost in Lost Highway: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Lynch's *Lost Highway*

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Abstract

This review article provides a thorough psychoanalytic exploration of David Lynch's *Lost Highway*, a film celebrated for its intricate narrative and surreal imagery. Utilizing Freudian and Lacanian theories, the analysis investigates the film's themes of identity, trauma, and the unconscious. The protagonist's disjointed journey through fragmented realities serves as a case study in the manifestation of repressed desires and fears. By examining the interplay of memory, perception, and selfhood, this article reveals the deeper psychological currents that drive the narrative and influence character motivations. Furthermore, the discussion situates *Lost Highway* within Lynch's broader oeuvre, highlighting the director's fascination with the subconscious and the complexities of human experience. Ultimately, this psychoanalytic reading positions *Lost Highway* as not merely a cinematic puzzle but also a profound commentary on the nature of reality and the psyche, inviting viewers to confront their own unconscious landscapes.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, David Lynch, Lost Highway, Identity, *Lost Highway*, Unconscious.

INTRODUCTION

David Lynch's *Lost Highway* has always been regarded as an enigma known to baffle film critics and audiences alike. I confess that despite watching this iconoclastic film more than twice, I couldn't make heads or tails of it. To interpret the Lynchian cinematic universe, one needs to have a firm footing in disciplines like Lacanian psychoanalysis, which in many ways seems intimidating and, at times, cerebrally stimulating (in a good way). *Lost Highway* perhaps has the singular distinction of having remained indecipherable for reasons most acclaimed critics themselves aren't cognizant of. To make some sense, I read a few reviews, including one by the acclaimed Pulitzer-winning critic Roger Ebert. To my dismay, even he couldn't decipher Lost Highway despite calling it a tour de force. That's when I came across Zizek's take on the movie, which seemed at first interminably long and discombobulating. *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* is divided into 10 sections titled 'The Inherent Transgression', 'Canned Hatred', Fathers, Fathers Everywhere' and so on and so forth (apologies for imitating Zizek here; I couldn't resist). As someone lost in *Lost Highway*, the essay proved highly illuminating. The essay, so to speak, functioned like a headlight, which illuminated the lane lines. In India, where I come from, it's hard to find roads, let alone lanes.

The scene in which the mystery man introduces himself to Fred at the party is perhaps the most disturbing (and eldritch) scene. The mystery man represents Fred's unconscious, and most film critics have failed to grasp this notion. The mystery man carries an aura of the uncanny around him, and perhaps that's why audiences and critics alike failed to comprehend this. Remember, *Lost Highway* is not our typical horror/mystery film. The mind behind *Twin Peaks* is not to be underestimated. Fred and Pete are not two different characters. The mystery man who delivers the coup de grace (to Dick Laurent/Eddy, the Freudian father figure or the big Other) towards the end of the film is Fred himself. In fact, all three of them are one and the same. Likewise, Rene and Alice are not doppelgangers, as many ingenue critics have pointed out, but are the same. Alice, who becomes the objet petit a of Pete, is a figment of Fred's imagination. Zizek's observation is trenchant here. Fred is the real murderer, and the romance between Pete and Alice is a figment of his imagination, or shall we say 'fantasy'? Even in this phantasmatic world, Rene seems out of bounds for Fred, a middling saxophonist who fails to comprehend the feminine desire. "You will never have me," whispers Alice before walking out on Pete, who then instantly turns into Fred. There is no point in chasing this phantasm. Rene/Alice shall always remain an eluding signifier for Fred. After reading Zizek's *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, I watched the movie again. This time it made sense (partially). I also understood why

Lost Highway is underrated and ended up being a box office flop. This was not meant for philistine viewers and critics. Lynch was making a statement. No, this was his way of throwing the gauntlet at the cinematic world vitiated by mediocre/commercial films. As an Indian, it hit me with more vehement momentum. After all, India makes the greatest number of movies per year, and I stopped watching Bollywood movies long ago. It reeks of superficiality and are bromides/cliches masqueraded as cinema. Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and other Bengali/Malayali auteurs like Aravindan are an exception. But they were never part of the Bollywood culture industry. They 'had preferred not to' (I confess I am a big fan of Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*) be commercialized.

The Mystery Man as an Enigma/The Super-ego/The Big Other?

The most elusive and enigmatic character from the movie is in fact a manifestation of the superego in an eldritch sempiternal way (I use the word 'sempiternal' here for a reason). The mystery man is not restricted by time or space, and the scene where he is introduced attests to this fact. "It is not my custom to go where I'm uninvited," says the garishly pale character when Fred appears disturbed and perplexed at the same time when he comes to terms with the fact that he (the mystery man) is indeed at his home right now. The scene is perhaps the most eldritch scene in Hollywood's history. World cinema, however, is a whole different ball game. Kurosawa's movie *Dream* and the oeuvre of Tarkovsky attest to this fact. I have a penchant for digression, and therefore I'll stop with a reference to Tarkovsky's celebrated movies, *Solaris* and *Mirror*. But what critics and audiences alike fail to grasp is the fact that the Mystery Man is the personification of the regulating superego. His purpose is to keep Fred Madison in check, to castigate him when he is overwhelmed by inappropriate thoughts, to remind him time and again of his sense of right and wrong, and to force him to remember who he really is. When Fred describes a dream in which he couldn't find Renee in the house, the Mystery Man makes his appearance for the first time. When he does locate her, she is not quite the same. Just someone who resembles her will do. After telling Renee this tale, he turns to face her and spots the Mystery Man. Later, at the gathering, they cross paths. When the Mystery Man inquires if they had met, Fred is unsure because he cannot recollect it. The mystery man then reveals that they did meet at his home. Could this be a reference to Fred's dream in which he saw the Mystery Man in his bed?

The Mystery Man makes numerous appearances to remind Fred who he really is. Fred, of course, is confused and, without his superego, would be lost. The Mystery Man turns out to be his only ally/superego. The Mystery Man holds up a video camera in front of Fred and forces him to identify himself. We don't see Pete anymore. Now it becomes unequivocally clear that Fred had been imagining/dreaming things. Pete had been a figment of his imagination. Pete was his foiled attempt to grasp an elusive *objet petit a.* The mystery man turns aggressive for the first time in the movie. He lacks the initial playfulness (uncanny playfulness) and shouts at Fred. The superego works in mysterious ways. We also see the death drive at work here. Mr. Eddy is also a figment of his imagination. It is not Fred but the Mystery Man who delivers the coup de grace to Mr. Eddy. The agony within Fred's mind culminates with the death of Mr. Eddy, perhaps the most intimidating character from the Los Angeles trilogy. The transition from the 'pleasure principle' to 'death drive' is what is at work here. The movie relies too much on Freud and Lacan. Now, we know that it was Fred who killed Renee to liberate his demented mind. I am reminded of the Victorian poet Robert Browning's poems *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover.* Both are dramatic monologues dealing with dark and macabre themes. Suspicion and insecurity drive the narrators of these poems to 'silence' their significant other. One can't help but think of Shakespeare's *Othello* as well. Fred is the modern-day Othello, and he is not alone. Men are insecure, jealous, and paranoid now. I confess I am no feminist. But we must acknowledge the truth. Even when it hurts. Now, we know why Fred hates video cameras. Here is an exchange from the movie:

Cop: Do you own a video camera?
Renee: No. Fred hates them.
Fred: I like to remember things my own way.
Cop: What do you mean by that?
Fred: How I remembered them. Not necessarily the way they happened.

Lynch is an intrepid filmmaker, and I believe he often gets the wrong credit for all the wrong reasons. Critics, especially the uninitiated ones who suffer from a dearth of reading and are unaccustomed to the cerebral aspect of cinema and psychoanalysis, have made a habit of calling him a charlatan, among many other names. Some learned critics prefer the words arcane and convoluted to describe his signature style of incorporating surrealistic elements in his works. I am not talking about his feature films alone. Recently, during a seminar, I bumped into an old friend who, time and again, reminds me of Edgar Allan Poe's Fortunato from *The Cask of Amontillado.* However, he is no cognoscente of wine and champagne, nor is he dressed like a jester from a carnivalesque scene like the hapless Fortunato (if you remember the story, you know how it ends for poor Fortunato). Joking apart, this friend of mine is an expert in international relations and nuclear disarmament. Even an erudite scholar like him couldn't grasp the idiosyncratic style of David Lynch, an auteur extraordinaire! "I understand why you watch Lynch and Lars Von Trier. You feel duty bound to watch and

encourage auteurs who would never produce a box-office hit like Spielberg or Tarantino. Do you even understand Lynch? I confess I don't. Not even when I am caffeinated on the strongest espresso available in Italy. It's a moral obligation for an aficionado, right? Or, am I wrong?" came the question as we found ourselves veering towards a topic (informal for him) not germane to the ongoing wars in Ukraine, South Sudan, and Gaza.

I remember reading an essay (originally a lecture) by the inimitable writer Lafcadio Hearn on reading (On Reading in Relation to Literature), wherein he proposed/maintained that reading becomes fruitful only when the text is read over and over again. Hearn, having come from an eclectic literary and cultural background, has a penchant for a peculiar kind of martinetism when it comes to literary standards. One must assume that he has never picked up a copy of something philistine as popular fiction. He has nothing but absolute contempt for the masses (like my favourite Spanish writer/philosopher, Ortega y Gasset). Hearn's draconian standards could be applied to films as well. If one were to go by that logic, we must watch auteur movies only. Stanley Kubrick, Andrei Tarkovsky, Satyajit Ray, David Lynch, Akira Kurosawa, Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson, Jane Campion, and the list is quite interminable to mention here. I also found Hearn's notion of re-reading fascinating. A great classic is easily recognizable (according to Hearn) by the virtue of having been read multiple times during multiple stages of one's life (adolescence and adulthood, for instance). I feel compelled to add something I recall hearing from a lecture delivered by the virtuoso Argentine filmmaker and auteur Pablo Cesar. During a post-lecture discussion, I sneaked into his cabin, where he was enjoying his filter coffee (filter coffee is, among others, an inevitable part of South Indian gastronomic culture). Cesar was of the view that the politics of "selection" was a big problem. "Kevin, while I appreciate your love for auteur cinema, I must also point out the myopia that has afflicted the cognoscenti. You might have seen Lynch, Scorsese, Del Toro, or your own auteur, Satyajit Ray, but how many independent auteurs have crossed your mind when you evoke Bazin's term?". I was speechless for a moment. What he said made perfect sense. As with apparel, we go with the brand logic. I have no right to comment or be sanctimonious here. I have a collection of Lacoste and Gant polos and a couple of Ralph Lauren linen shirts and Armani jackets. Cesar's ratiocination was accurate to some extent. Applying this logic on a different level, the abominable "tyranny of public opinion," if discarded, makes way for a better appreciation of Lynch's least acclaimed movies. Whenever Lynch's name is evoked, it's a rite to mention *Blue Velvet* and *Eraserhead.* I have often wondered where my favourite Lynch movie had disappeared. What explains this invidious neglect of a brilliant auteur film from the Los Angeles trilogy?

Last night, as I was commuting a long stretch from Mamalakandam (Ernakulam district, Kerala) to Muvattupuzha (Ernakulam, Kerala), also known as the State Highway 43, which is more than 100 miles, something that merits mention transpired. It was thirty minutes past one, and the highway was empty. My friend who came for a brief stay from Frankfurt, Germany, started shuffling some good old *Rammstein* songs, and to my surprise, the song from *Lost Highway* started playing. The song, interestingly, is banned in seven countries, including Albania and other ultra-conservative countries. Deutsche New Metal is not everyone's cup of tea, I admit. But what happened to the sacrosanct freedom of expression? Censoring, at least according to Salman Rushdie, is tantamount to homicide. Apologies for the digression. The skies were clear for a while, and then it started to rain cats and dogs. Gradually, it acquired an amaranthine hue with flashes of lightning occurring sporadically. There was something surreal about the stretch that, at the moment, evades symbolic (Lacan's second order). The street lamps and billboards started melting (like Dali's famous painting) and diffusing in a Lynchian way, and the mist from the Western Ghats accentuated the eldritch vibes in an ineffable way. I have seen a thousand movies in my lifetime, and yet, in spite of its complexity or impenetrability, David Lynch's tour de force (at least, according to me) has stood the test of time. The soundtracks and songs by Lou Reed, Marilyn Manson, the Italian composer Angelo Badalamenti, Trent Reznor, and the German *Rammstein* are always there on my playlist. I might even make watching the movie an annual ceremony. And I know why. *Lost Highway,* for movie aficionados, is the light at the end of the tunnel, or the golden bug from Edgar Allan Poe's story waiting to be deciphered. It is a movie worth revisiting (Fredric Jameson repeatedly mentions Lynch's *Lost Highway* in his magnum opus *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* extolling the director's virtuoso filmmaking). It is also a testament to Lynch's brilliance. We need to talk less about *Blue Velvet* or *Mulholland Drive* and more about *Lost Highway.*

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