

WESTERN SIGHS: DAVID LYNCH'S LOST HIGHWAY

The west is the best – you come down we'll do the rest.

Jim Morrison – *The End*

The trend was up. The solution was in sight. The frontier had been reinvented, and its shape was the subdivision, that new free land on which all settlers could recast their lives 'tabula rasa'.

Joan Didion - *On the Mall* from *The White Album* Simon & Schuster 1979

Lost Highway, a film written by David Lynch and Barry Gifford and directed by Lynch, begins with a dark haired woman, Renee Madison (Patricia Arquette) announcing – in a state of unexplained dread – that she wants to stay home and read rather than go to a club with her husband Fred (Bill Pullman). Bill plays screaming acid jazz on a saxophone but seems to have caught the sense that something is very wrong. The dread that the characters feel seems imposed on them rather to come from some existential source endemic to the characters themselves. Lynch self-consciously creates a counterpoint between this dread and the surface details that become fetish objects: the saxophone, the lamps the television the clothes are all surfaces that are designed to seduce, to pull you in. The narrative dread and the seductive surfaces act as twin opposites creating an electric charge that is disturbing and hallucinatory. It is as if at any moment an abyss might open beneath the feet of the characters – and in fact that is exactly what happens. The relationship of this highly developed visual fetish and its resemblance to advertising, television commercials and to pornography is something to which Lynch will return later in the film. Fred begins to have headaches and has problems focusing his eyes,

rendered both comical and creepy by shifting the lens to create a psychedelic effect reminiscent of drug/horror films from the sixties.

Renee receives a video cassette in a brown paper envelope that ominously shows only a brief hand held black and white shot of the exterior of their house, followed by an elaborate overhead pan of their living room – then brief flashes of what looks like a dismembered body in their bedroom. The quality of the overhead pan is “professional” in the tradition of the studio system and the quality of the image is poor in the tradition of the home-made video. The incongruities begin to multiply as the narrative – as implied by the title – gets very lost. But Lynch knows where he is and where he is going. This is L.A. It’s the end of the millennium and the project known as the Enlightenment - also known as the Age of Reason – is about to crash and burn somewhere over the Mojave, one of deserts that surround LA. This is after all where they test experimental aircraft and rockets – the point being that if something goes wrong the casualties are minimal. The desert is also where people live who want to get as far from civilization as possible. The larger area that encompasses various deserts in California and Arizona is called Death Valley. This is where *Zabriskie Point* is located and where in 1969 Michelangelo Antonioni made his own version of the end of the road and what that might look like. Unlike Antonioni’s poetics in *Zabriskie Point* – which are high European – Lynch’s are self consciously closer to the Drive-In than to the Art Museum.

The couple call the police who arrive in the classic “unmarked car” whose brown color matches the walls of the house. The two policemen, Laurel and Hardy filtered through Crumb look the place over with a methodical suspiciousness. The bedroom becomes the focus of their attention as all of Lynch’s ingenuity as a director is used to point to that location as a scene of incipient terror. The video with the unclear images and the distorted music, the police with comically Pinteresque repetitions: “Is this your bedroom – is this where you sleep?” are all inauspiciously rendered. As a possible explanation for the videotape the couple explain that their house is “near the observatory”. Most conspicuous throughout is the dread that the wife seems to be experiencing in her own house. Taken together this is a beautiful evocation of the adult world from the point of view of a child. The terror of that bedroom and what could possibly happen there is the most tellingly frank visual representation of sexual fear since *Night of the Hunter*.

At night Renee takes off her nightgown in a manner that suggests that she is posing for the camera, making us uneasily and implicitly aware that we are participants in an act of voyeurism, while Fred at the opposite end of the frame looks on blankly. The couple make love in mechanical, brief unpleasantly paranoid bursts that convey through brilliant mis-matching close-ups the emotional separation between them. Fred’s emotional inertia leads to sexual impotence to which Renee responds by condescendingly patting Fred on back. Fred’s humiliation is seen in extreme close-up. The close-up, when a couple is in bed and starting to make love is almost always meant to involve an audience in identification and/or a sympathetic response. Lynch mis-matches his close-ups by coming in too close, by creating “eye-line”

matching shots that are just off, and by holding his shots for too long so we become uncomfortable. That Lynch is aware of what he is doing is obvious since he created one of the textbook examples of matching-close-ups in *Blue Velvet*. The closet scene from that film is often used in classrooms to explain matching cuts. The unnerving disconnect in *Lost Highway* results in a brilliant visual display of displacement and alienation in the act of love. Only Bergman in *The Silence* and *From the Life of the Marionettes* has come close to this kind of angst and terror in the midst of sexual passion.

Fred goes to a party given by a Mr. Eddie (Robert Loggia) who is a filmmaker, a gangster and a pornographer – in Los Angeles the distinctions between these categories is unclear. Self consciously cool well dressed Angelenos mingle as Fred meets Mystery Man (Robert Blake) who in white facial make-up resembles a demonic Imp, a stock character of Romantic fiction, the aging transgressive homosexual decadent in powder and lipstick. The hero – like Von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* - upon seeing him sees his own reflection that foretells his existential debasement and doom. Mystery Man insists that they have met before and that he has been to his house – that in fact he is there now. To prove this he hands Fred a cellular phone and asks him to call his own house. When he does Mystery Man answers and then orders him to return the phone. Unclear video images of Renee lying bloodied and dismembered in the bedroom lead to a long shot of Fred descending a staircase from the 1940's. As he descends – making literal his descent into the genre of the crime film from that period – we hear the highlights from the trial that sentenced him to death for the murder of his wife. He is locked

up in a prison whose façade resembles a jail at the turn of the century, and whose interior polished brick floor comes from modern public interiors such as we find in business lobbies and malls. The combination is beautiful and strangely congruent. A guard comes to look in on Fred and finds that he has disappeared to be replaced by a young man who has a head injury and no memory of how he came to be in prison. As we see later in flashbacks the young man, Peter Dayton (Balthazar Getty) was recently shot dead by police with a bullet to the head.

Peter leaves prison and is followed by two policemen as he returns to his job as a garage mechanic with the wound to the head healing from scene to scene. Like the policemen earlier the new group of cops are essentially comic characters, doomed to impotent, passive observation that will yield no answers. More to the point they are “the law”. Secular power embodied in men who must apply rational laws to the reality that they witness. Lynch also puts them in the position of voyeurs who have no understanding of their own complicity in the events as they unfold. Peter’s parents are two bikers who have settled in suburbia to watch television and raise their son. His girlfriend enjoys having sex in the back of his car, in the longstanding American tradition. These passionate exchanges are rendered in traditional matching close-ups. We are also introduced to Mr. Eddie – of the party earlier – who comes to Peter to service his car. In a scene that is brilliantly balanced between realistic violence and physical comedy – creating an uneasy sense of dislocation – Mr. Eddie assaults a tail-gating driver using his car as a weapon. A ubiquitous Los Angeles scene that finally finds it’s way to a feature film. Mr. Eddie, as his name implies, is both adult and child. This dichotomy is important as we further delve

into the mysterious world that he not only inhabits but rules. One is tempted to frame his childishness, arrogance and violence in terms of a Lacanian “mirror-stage” in action but the character is by no means an illustration of a type. Mr. Eddie is a full bodied character – tragic and comical – that plays out his histrionics within the genre that best suits him: Film Noir. Once we understand this we must assume that there is a blonde bombshell around the corner. The fascination and fear that the female sex must have for Mr. Eddie demands it. Alice Wakefield, also played by Patricia Arquette, wearing a platinum blonde wig, is the dame that helps bring Mr. Eddie to his doom. As her name implies she is both the Alice of the famous Wonderland, a field and a wake. The doubling of the female played by the same actress is in opposition to the splitting of the male into two separate identities played by two actors. Male and female are seen as antipodes that must come together and destroy each other. Alice seduces Peter and asks him to steal money from Mr. Eddie – the plot lifted verbatim from *Double Indemnity* – setting the stage for the creaking machinery of the narrative to move ahead to the betrayal the murder and the coda at the end. Let us go instead to where we may find the heart of the film: Mr. Eddie's house and what it is Mr. Eddie does there.

Alice tells Peter that she first met Mr. Eddie when she was hired to make pornographic films and was brought to his house – significantly a Victorian mansion – and forced to perform. In a brilliant flashback sequence we see a large black man lifting weights along with two white men in suits carrying guns. One of the gunmen points the gun at Alice's head as she strips. Mr. Eddie watches with a pained expression full of anxiety that tells us that he wants to be in control but is afraid

because he also wants to lose control – the voyeur in agony. Alice is shot from his line of sight effectively forcing us to see her from his point of view. It seems to take several armed men and one weight lifter to contain one woman wearing nothing. Of course – they fail. For Lynch all attempts at control with respect to human sexuality are absolutely necessary and absolutely hopeless. The futility is inevitably comic and horrifying. This is why the comedy in the film is so systematically double edged with uneasiness.

The “Carmina Burana” like music which accompanies the brief shots of pornographic videos projected on a large screen TV – S/M with strong elements of domination/submission – dissolve into close-ups of orifices that appear horrific. The fantasies and the horrors are two sides of the same landscape: they are about power and dominance, about using another body to masturbate, about fetish, in short it is all about control. Peter is horrified to learn that Alice enjoyed these sessions because they provided her with a sense of psychological power over men who have “ultimate” power – that is over life and death. After a “session” with Alice Mr. Eddie, naked in bed, looks like melancholic angst ridden teenager.

During the attempted hold-up of Mr. Eddie’s house Peter trips one of the bodyguards and he is sent flying into the corner of a glass table, in the style of Mies Van der Rohe. The table’s right angle slices into his forehead impaling his head and killing him instantly. In a sense this anonymous gangster in a suit becomes an amorphous decorative element in a piece of modernist sculpture/furniture. With his eyes open in close-up from underneath the table he appears imbedded in a piece

of absurd assemblage. Technology in the form of a transparent table and a human being come together to create a new thing that as yet has no name – but is obviously ridiculous. Popular art has long dealt with a fantasy of the perfect blending of man and technology: *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *The Terminator* and Hajime Sorayama's books such as *Sexy Robot* in which animals and young women have flesh made of polished metal speak eloquently about that fantasy. The fetish for transparency and un-porous materials – matter not weighed down by gravity or worn down by decay is in effect a flattening out, an emptying out of mortal human beings and their re-constitution as Mythic creatures – Gods - who have left uncertainty, pain and death behind. Lynch brilliantly ridicules this confluence of man and machine in a hilarious re-constitution that is not only pointless – but is in fact a reminder of our mortality – the modernist table becomes a sepulcher and the fantasy evaporates. Like other great artists before him Lynch has doubts about objects while at the same time being seduced by them. One thinks particularly of Stanley Kubrick in *2001: A Space Odyssey* in which man – master of the universe – can calmly have a conversation in a clean well lighted space station with colleagues. The problematic element comes in the form of a friendly computer who thanks humans after beating them at chess and apologizes after trying to kill them. As we see in the work of other filmmakers who have handled similar themes the denatured world that humans have created haunts Antonioni's characters who never seem to know what to make of the world they have made, to say nothing of Bresson's religious saints, wandering urban landscapes in which they can never hope to be at home.

Alice tells Peter that they must now go to the “deserted cabin the desert”. He drives there without asking what cabin or which desert. Such details are now outside the realm of allegory and genre in which the film is operating. The narrative threads of the film start to come together in the traditional sense and also start to come apart at the seams. One feels that now the film might break with narrative altogether and head into another kind of territory. Alice and Peter have sex in the desert outdoors seen by the light of their car. After they finish a nude Alice walks toward the cabin and tells him with contempt that “you will never have me.” This line is expressed in utter contempt leaving Peter naked – literally and figuratively – exposed and alone. As she enters the cabin, an inversion of the earlier modernist mansion, Peter gets up from the desert floor and he is Fred again. The change in identity has happened just at that moment of sexual vulnerability. Naked, he appears to have just been born in the desert, the place of the widest possible open spaces – the prison inverted. The cabin, that looks to be from the beginning of film history, perhaps the cabin in Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush*, has sixties inflatable furniture and the Imp from the party earlier holding a video camera. He is associated with high technology and death from the beginning when he hands Fred a cellular phone and orders him to call his own house. Now he gives him a gun to shoot Mr. Eddie which he accepts. The Imp in essence challenges Fred/Peter to go head on – full speed – into his own fears as a way to escape them. As Mr. Eddie lies dying the Imp approaches him and shows him some video on the camera monitor. Mr. Eddie, realizing that he is dying, nevertheless looks at the monitor. Like the characters at the end of Wender’s *The End of the World*, hypnotized into watching their own dreams on video, Mr. Eddie

does what he has always done: he watches as the cabin bursts into flames. The ending pays tribute to Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* and the theme of *Pandora's Box*: the inevitability of the death instinct coming into play during a period of decadence. The film winds in on itself – having reached a moment where the narrative might break down or go in another direction Lynch chooses a circular ending – like *The Tenant* by Polanski which also ends in a scream - in which the characters repeat their actions unconsciously forever. Fred returns to his house at the beginning of the film.

Lost Highway seems to want to break free of the genre conventions that the film has brilliantly adopted while at the same time utilizing those conventions to speak about contemporary life in the United States. The scream at the end of the film longs to break loose, to shatter the narrative bonds that hold the film together, and that will take the film beyond genre into abstraction, or into something that doesn't have a name. But of course the film can't do this – like Mr. Eddie the voyeur trapped between the need for control and the need to lose control – the film is unable to go beyond this dichotomy. Lynch can't find it. *Lost Highway* brilliantly articulates the frustration of the absence of this new cinema. At most it can only repeat, in every sense, the Oedipal cycles of conventional cinematic tropes. There is no escape from genre once you made a pact with it Lynch seems to be saying. At most you can, as other filmmakers such as Oliver Stone have done: mix and match genres with as much intensity as is humanly possible to create a simulation of the anxieties and contradictions of contemporary urban life. The virtuosity of styles, the quotations from other films, the self-conscious effects and ironic asides seem evasive,

portentous and ultimately self defeating. Unlike Stone who wallows in the effects Lynch seems to understand and to convey to us a sense of melancholy that there is nowhere to go despite the open road. Godard at the end of the sixties said that he wished to “return to zero” to the time before narrative conventions took root. The characters in *Lost Highway* – and by extension Lynch speaking through them – express the opposite desire because they are stuck at zero; or more precisely they are going at unimaginable speed – hurtling away from their own past - without going anywhere - without moving one millimeter. Fred/Peter – like the character Jeff Bailey played by Robert Mitchum in *Out of the Past* cannot escape the past – even in the deserts of California. This is the tragedy of the American West articulated so well by foreign directors such as Wenders, Antonioni or Jacques Tourneur – that because it is here that one is meant to experience that freedom with the greatest intensity and pleasure – it is here that one should be able to start anew – that’s the meaning of *tabula rasa*: a clean slate – that’s the promise of the West.

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