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“You’ll never have me”

Re-framing *Lost Highway* from a Renee/Alice’s Perspective

In David Lynch’s 1997 film, *Lost Highway*, the narrative bookends itself with the enigmatic phrase “Dick Laurent is dead”. This framing might initially suggest a circular plot, where unresolved premises introduced at the start are neatly resolved as the story unfolds, only to return to its starting point with newfound clarity. However, *Lost Highway* defies such expectations. Throughout the film, logical coherence eludes grasp, as the plot resists conventional interpretation at every turn. Attempts to dissect the storyline, even through psychological readings of the characters, disrupt any linear progression, as the characters themselves seem to reject traditional logic of “common sense”¹. Instead, they navigate through shifting identities and temporalities, challenging the very notion of a fixed narrative structure. The logical sequencing of life and death itself evades traditional chronology. To distil the essence of the film, one might turn to the director’s own description, wherein he frames it as “a 21st Century noir horror film. A graphic investigation into parallel identity crises. A world where time is dangerously out of control. A terrifying ride down the lost highway”². It serves as a potent visual exploration of parallel identity crises set in a world where time spirals perilously out of grasp, propelling characters into a harrowing journey along forgotten pathways. Except to later describe such statements as “rubbish”, stating instead that the film consists mainly of a mystery³.

Let’s proceed systematically. While many analyses of *Lost Highway* concentrate on its male protagonist(s), Fred/Peter, I propose a different perspective centred on the female character(s), Renee/Alice. Instead of categorizing her solely as archetypal “*femme fatales*”, I contend that she represents the true focal points of the narrative. In fact, by reinterpreting Renee/Alice’s statement, “You’ll never have me”, as a collective asser-

¹ Cfr. T. Jousse, *David Lynch. Masters of Cinema (Cahiers du Cinema)*, Phaidon Press, London 2010.

² D. Hughes, *The Complete Lynch*, Virgin Publishing Ltd., London 2001, p. 224.

³ Cfr. D. Lynch and C. Rodley, *Lynch on Lynch*, Faber and Faber, London 1997, pp. 214-243.

tion, the narrative shifts towards a broader exploration of desire, drawing inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*⁴. Within this framework, Renee/Alice embodies desire not merely as an object but as a dynamic force propelling the storyline. Examining the film through this lens unveils a deeper understanding of the nature of desire as an ongoing, fluid journey for connections. Renee/Alice emerges as a pivotal desiring character, reshaping our interpretation of Lynch's cinematic masterpiece.

These reshaping emerges because main interpreters focus their readings on psychoanalytical interpretations of Lynch's cinema, exploring the intricate layers of desire, fantasy, and the unconscious, utilizing theories mainly from Freud and Lacan, among others. For example, McGowan's analysis focuses on Lynch's use of dream logic and the disintegration of the symbolic order, emphasizing how his films portray the failure of desire and the persistence of lack⁵. I believe that these types of interpretations, while extremely valid, support the idea of desire as lack and reduce the film's interpretation to a hierarchical vision focused exclusively on man's hero. Žižek's reading can be closely aligned to the perspective that I'm proposing, especially in the way he explores *Lost Highway* as a cinematic exploration of the "Lacanian Real", where the film's non-linear narrative illustrates the breakdown of the symbolic order and the intrusion of the Real into the characters' lives. And I agree with him also in thinking at Renee/Alice as a character shifting the *cliché* of the *femme fatales*⁶. But, according to Žižek, the transformation of Fred into Pete represents a desperate attempt to escape the traumatic kernel of his existence, thus this metamorphosis is seen as an effort to reconstitute a coherent identity amidst the disintegration of symbolic structures. In this light, the key of the interpretation returns to Fred/Pete as the main character, driving the film's interpretation in strictly Freudian rails, in a binary alternative between "reality" and "phantasmatic fugue". Pisters' thought sets the stage for the "desiring" reading that I'm proposing. In fact, her theory incorporates Deleuzian concepts, suggesting Lynch's films create a "cinematic unconscious" that engages viewers on an affective, rather than purely

⁴ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983.

⁵ Cfr. T. McGowan, *The impossible David Lynch*, Columbia University Press, New York 2007; J. Ruers and S. Marianski, *Freud/Lynch. Behind the Curtain*, Phoenix Publishing House Ltd, Bicester 2023.

⁶ Cfr. S. Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime. On David Lynch's Lost Highway*, University of Washington, Seattle 2000. Regarding the possible proximity between Deleuzo-guattarian "desire" and Lacanian "real", cfr. B. Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1992; S. Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies. On Deleuze and consequences*, Routledge, New York, London 2003; F. Cimatti, *Il taglio. Linguaggio e pulsione di morte*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2015.

cognitive, level: “Lynch’s cinema functions as a ‘rhizomatic’ structure, creating a multitude of connections that challenge linear, logical narratives and open up spaces for a ‘cinematic unconscious’”⁷.

All these readings collectively illuminate how Lynch’s surreal and often disorienting storytelling techniques provide a cinematic space that foregrounds the deepest and most repressed aspects of the human psyche, thereby challenging conventional perceptions of identity, reality, and desire. My attempt in reading *Lost Highway* consists in trying to produce a desiring *enchaînement* between the film’s fragmented, fluid, identities and the Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas about desire, multiplicity, and sense. So, my aim, rather than interpreting the film in search of hidden meanings, is to show how it is a “producer of sense”, in a Deleuzian sense. In fact, a more effective approach to engaging with the film seems to be actively generate sense from it, rather than passively searching for pre-existing significance within the plot. To do this, I believe it is necessary to focus on the female character, because she *embodies* desire and, in doing so, shows us this dynamic that works both for desire and sense⁸.

In the initial section, I provide an annotated overview of the film, primarily highlighting the challenge of analysing the storyline and characters’ behaviour through a logic interpretative framework. Subsequently, I aim to demonstrate how the varied interpretation of the phrase “You’ll never have me” spoken by Alice suggests a fluidity in the dynamics of desire within the film, thereby rejecting the notion of the latter part of the film solely as Fred’s imaginative escape. In summary, by embracing this dynamic of desire, *Lost Highway* presents itself as a creator of sense rather than merely a subject for a “psychoanalytical” interpretation.

A surreal journey on the lost highway

As mentioned, the film begins with a sentence that sounds like a condemnation: “Dick Laurent is dead”. Listening to it, we find Fred (Bill Pullman) answering the intercom of his aseptic house in a metropolitan suburb. But he has no idea who is uttering these words, let alone who this Dick Laurent is. Drawing from sparse interactions between Fred and his wife Renee (Patricia Arquette), it emerges that their marital bond is

⁷ P. Pisters, *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, p. 218.

⁸ From this perspective, there might be a proximity between my idea and Lacan’s theory of feminine desire as expressed in *On Feminine Sexuality: the limits of love and knowledge. The Seminar, Book XX: Encore*, Norton & co., New York 2000. However, albeit nuanced, I believe that Lacanian theory contains implicitly a sexual binary which, conversely, Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of desire aims to dismantle.

fraught with tension, prompting Fred to question Renee's loyalty. Fred's conjecture implies that Renee's hesitance to accompany him to his jazz saxophone performance at the club may be due to her engagement with another man. This sense of doubt permeates the audience via Fred's hallucinatory visions, depicting Renee with another man at the club. Moreover, we are equally involved in Fred's spasmodic waiting for her answer on the phone, which punctually does not come. The prevailing motif in the initial segment is Fred's pervasive sense of doubt and suspicion, amplified by his saxophone solo performance at the club and further exacerbated by the subdued and seemingly inconsequential nature of the dialogue between him and Renee⁹. The love scene is perfectly in line with the atmosphere experienced so far: antiseptic and unresolved. One morning, Renee finds a videotape on the outside stairs of their house that shows the exterior of the mansion and does not contain any messages, as well as other scenes. The couple, especially Fred, does not seem to pay too much regard to it.

The next day, a new videotape: this time the recording includes scenes from inside the house and of the couple asleep in their bed. In a crescendo of anxiety, they call the police, who are unable to draw any conclusions. Interestingly, the couple has no security cameras and, in general, no filming equipment: in fact, Fred prefers to remember events "in his own way". This is an important aspect of the entire film. We are indeed surrounded by the vagueness and the lack of objectivity of what we see. Like our own memories, the scenes live in a pasture that is not only that of recorded images: Lynch attempts to show us something that cannot simply be shown, to tell us something that cannot simply be said. The scenes of the film, like the memories, are imperfect because they are shot through with sensations (both those of the moment in which the event happens and those in which the memory resurfaces)¹⁰. Similarly, the opening scenes of the film attempt to restore and immerse us in the suspicious, equivocal, and affectionless world in which Fred and Renee live.

The following evening, the couple goes to a party at Andy's house. Andy (Michael Masse) is an old friend of Renee, and the same man whom Fred suspects his wife of having an affair with. During the party, Fred meets a mysterious and unsettling character, who tells him that he is at his house at that exact moment. Incredulous and sceptical about this claim, Fred finds himself talking on his mobile phone to a man who

⁹ Žižek interprets this flat dialogues as reminiscent of Beckett's and Ionesco's theatre. Cfr., *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime. On David Lynch's Lost Highway*, cit., p. 29.

¹⁰ To give a banal example, a fall from a bicycle and the resulting skinned knee at the age of six will be remembered painfully the following month, with affection and nostalgia seventy years later.

seems to be both in front of him and in his house, in what is undoubtedly the film's most famous and unsettling scene. Furthermore, Mystery Man (Robert Blake) claims in Kafkaesque fashion that he is present at Fred's house because he was invited by the latter. Distraught, Fred quickly returns home with Renee, finding no sign of any strangers in the house.

Third shot: in a brief frame, we see Renee's body horribly mutilated and Fred despairing. We do not directly see Fred killing her, but we "feel" it with some certainty. Likewise, both the police who arrest him and the court that sentences him to the electric chair seem to confirm this impression. But photography, settings, and sounds seem to communicate to us above all the senselessness into which Fred is thrown. As in a Greek tragedy, we do not see the violent act consummated on stage, but we experience it in the narrative: our messenger is a very brief frame that directly recalls videotape recordings. However, we cannot be absolutely sure about Fred's guilt, precisely in light of the previous considerations about memory and the lack of video-recording equipment in the house. What we are sure of is that, even in the cell and while awaiting the death sentence, Fred has not been able to unravel the riddle determined by Renee and remains in the same, apathetic and unnerving, doubtful disquiet.

Subsequent events within the narrative of the film exhibit an absurd and surreal quality. Instead of Fred, another individual named Peter (Balthazar Getty) occupies the cell. Peter finds himself devoid of any recollection regarding the circumstances leading to his confinement. Fred, conversely, has inexplicably vanished. Peter, younger than Fred, resumes his life after his release from prison, returning to familial surroundings, socializing with friends and a girlfriend, and pursuing employment as a mechanic in a garage. Yet, alongside the bizarre experience of awakening in a maximum-security cell without explanation, another enigmatic aspect pervades Peter's existence: a pivotal yet undisclosed event, alluded to throughout the film but only hinted at, which his parents and girlfriend avoid discussing, and of which Peter retains no memory. Lynch introduces yet another layer of ambiguity, this time without resorting to physical transformation but through subtle narrative cues, instilling in the protagonist (and the audience) an irresolvable uncertainty.

The primary client of Peter's garage is Mr. Eddy (Robert Loggia), a gangster who admires his mechanical prowess. In a subsequent scene, Mr. Eddy – referred to by the agents tailing Peter as Dick Laurent – returns to the garage and invites the guy for a drive in his car, purportedly to address an engine noise. In this absurdly comedic sequence, the gangster pursues and violently assaults a driver who had overtaken him, all while delivering diatribes on car safety statistics and imperiously commanding obedience to traffic regulations. The next day, Mr Eddy returns to the garage, this time accompanied by a stunning blonde identical in every

way to Renee, except for her hair colour (Renee was a brunette), whose name is Alice. It is love at first sight between Peter and Alice (highlighted by Lou Reed singing “This Magic Moment” by the Drifters), despite the risk posed by Mr Eddy.

The one pulling the strings of the relationship is evidently Alice. It is she who decides that the passionate clandestine affair can begin, and it is always she who manages how and when to see each other. The new elements in the couple’s dynamic are Peter’s passion and amateur skills, which are better than Fred’s. What remains is the enigma represented by Renee/Alice. If with Fred her enigmatic being is expressed through an icy apathy and an ill-concealed coldness towards her husband, in the case of Peter the enigma presents itself in the guise of a strong and passionate woman, who lets herself go with sexual desire but at the same time lucidly and rationally manages the relationship. It is in fact she who plans the escape with Peter, when Mr Eddy starts to become suspicious and threatens Peter by telephone (memorable is Mystery Man’s monologue).

Following Alice’s disclosure of her coerced involvement in a pornography enterprise controlled by Mr. Eddy, she proposes a scheme to rob Andy, the individual who initially introduced her to the gangster. Peter, deeply unsettled by the screening of a sexually explicit scene featuring Alice herself at Andy’s residence – coincidentally, the same individual who was acquainted with Renee – becomes emotionally perturbed. This disturbance ultimately leads to a botched robbery, wherein Peter inadvertently commits murder instead of merely incapacitating Andy. At this critical juncture, Alice’s manipulative nature becomes starkly apparent as she callously points out Peter’s responsibility for the death. Peter’s subsequent quest for solace in a restroom serves as a poignant reflection of his psychological turmoil: the overpowering resonance of Rammstein’s industrial metal anthem further disrupts any semblance of coherent thought, rendering the scene a cacophony of disorientation and distress: “*Ramm-Stein, ein Mensch brennt*”. The man who burns is indeed Peter: he burns with irrational passion towards Alice; he burns because he was involved in a murder and a robbery; he burns above all because during the unfolding of events the predominant feeling was jealousy towards Alice and that sex scene in which she was the protagonist. This is a strong parallel with Fred: the latter too, despite his death sentence, seemed to remain totally absorbed in the same state of mind of apathetic and jealous indecision that pervaded his relationship with Renee.

Shortly thereafter, Peter and Alice’s bodies are still burning, this time in the open Californian desert, under the headlights of the stolen car. At this juncture, a polished depiction of romantic affection unfolds, suggesting an eventual progression towards a serene and gratifying future. This feeling is short-lived: to Peter’s words of love, Alice replies: “You’ll

never have me”, abandoning him and walking towards the house where they was waiting for the fence who will supply them with counterfeit passports. At this point, Peter turns back to Fred. It is also here that Alice disappears and Mystery Man re-emerges shouting that there is no Alice, only Renee. In the following scenes, we witness Fred’s revenge on Mr Eddy. The latter is in a room at the Lost Highway motel with Renee/Alice (this time a brunette) and is surprised by Fred, who kidnaps him and cuts his throat in the middle of the desert with the help of Mystery Man, who will give Mr Eddy/Dick Laurent the *coup de grace*. After the deed is done, Mystery Man whispers something (which the audience cannot hear) in Fred’s ear, who immediately takes the car and runs to intercom to his own house (talking to himself?) the phrase: “Dick Laurent is dead”. The film closes with Fred – whose expressiveness remembers us the first metamorphosis into Pete – being chased by police cars on the *Lost Highway*¹¹.

Trying to understand *Lost Highway*

The film therefore does not present a linear narrative, it is imbued with surreal and unspoken elements. Think, for instance, of the metamorphoses of the characters, the double names, the frequent references that Peter receives to “that night” of which he remembers nothing and of which Lynch shows us nothing, or the phrase that Mystery Man whispers to Fred after the murder of Dick Laurent. The two narrative planes, which we could summarily describe as consisting of the Fred-Renee and Peter-Alice series respectively, are continuously mixed and intertwined, especially by the presence of Mystery Man acting in both planes. At the same time, the presence of the police – mostly in comic form – who witness the metamorphosis in the cell and subsequently tail Peter, gives a sense of attachment to the first part of the film, to the Fred-Renee plan. Again, Andy himself is active in both plans: indeed, his proxy activity seems to make explicit Fred’s doubts about his wife Renee.

One might think that the narrative is circular; after all, the first and last sentences are the same. But it is a circle whose contours tend to be opaque, porous, certainly not well delineated. At the end of the film, we have absolutely no feeling of a “closing the loop”, quite the contrary. Instead, we feel that the narrative thread itself is as surreal and logically impossible as the scenes we have seen. The non-sense is mixed with the sense of the plot at multiple points and, at the same time, hints at multiple meanings. A more effective approach to engaging with the film is

¹¹ About vehicles and roads in Lynch’s films, cfr. A. Mactaggart, *The Film Paintings of David Lynch: Challenging Film Theory*, Intellect Books, Bristol 2010.

to actively generate meaning from it, rather than passively searching for pre-existing significance within the plot: the figure of the Möbius tape – suggested by Lynch himself and co-writer Gifford – seems much more apt to exemplify this infinite possibility of cross-references, especially if we consider such cross-references as production of meaning and not as mere referents of something deeper. And, therefore, something that goes far beyond a simple closing of the circle or a “reassuring” return to the starting point, but “rather a ‘coming back to oneself’ that leaves the field open to transformations and new spatio-temporal dimensions”¹².

A potential and insightful line of interpretation can be termed as “phantasmatic dialectics”, because interprets the film as a psychological dialectic concerning Fred¹³: the initial segment representing reality, wherein Fred commits the act of killing Renee; the subsequent metamorphosis depicting his hallucinatory reverie, wherein he assumes a younger persona and is pursued by the woman; however, the tragic culmination constitutes a synthesis in which the torments of the former inexorably encroach upon the aspirations of the latter, escalating into a crescendo of violence and despair. Žižek accurately notes this aspect, emphasising that neither plane is actually idyllic. Indeed, both show tragic and despairing characters, in which the hallucinatory fantasy is nonetheless absorbed by the crudeness and senselessness of reality: “It is as if the unity of our experience of reality sustained by fantasy disintegrates and decomposes into its two components: on the one side, the ‘desublimated’ aseptic drabness of daily reality; on the other side, its phantasmatic support, not in its sublime version, but staged directly and brutally, in all its obscene cruelty”¹⁴.

The kind of reading that we might call “phantasmatic dialectic” seems to lean towards the idea that, in order to satisfy his desire for Renee, or even better, to attract Renee’s desire, Fred is forced to flee from the harsh and desolate reality into the realm of imagination, the phantasmatic horizon of the Peter-Alice plan. It is precisely here that is produced the short circuit, or rather the continuous deadlock of his desire, its definitive and irresolvable condemnation: “The subject turns to fantasy to escape the deadlock of desire but inevitably encounters the deadlock in a new

¹² R. Caccia, *David Lynch*, Il Castoro, Milano 2000, p.118 (my translation). About Möbius tape, cfr., M. Henry, *Le Ruban de Moebius. Entretien avec David Lynch*, in “Positif”, 431, 1997, pp. 8-13.

¹³ A similar viewpoint has been expressed by Arquette in various interviews. Cfr., P. Hoad, “I visited a dominatrix club where customers were used as tables”. *Patricia Arquette on making Lost Highway*, The Guardian, 24 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/oct/24/david-lynch-bill-pullman-patricia-arquette-dominatrix-lost-highway> (accessed 1 March 2024).

¹⁴ S. Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime. On David Lynch’s Lost Highway*, cit., p. 22.

form"¹⁵. This is evident if the film is read from the perspective of Fred/Peter: the unattainable object of desire is Renee/Alice, invariably elusive and evasive. Trying to grasp her desire is what continually frustrates Fred/Peter's desire, in very different but equally tragic ways. It is thus the eluding of the object that produces the desperation of the male protagonists. This could be an interesting point: it is not the so-called law of the father and the consequent sublimation (Mr Eddy, who serves as the ideal character of the Father is easily evaded and eventually killed; moreover, his killing does not take on any totemic significance¹⁶ but seems to be restored to the meaninglessness that envelops Fred's actions) that clips Fred/Peter's wings, but it is the object of desire itself that escapes from all sides, that is unattainable in its paradoxical proximity. Therefore, in my opinion, the character who could help us most in producing meaning is none other than the elusive and equivocal Renee/Alice, because she is the embodiment not of the object, but of desire itself. Let us thus reverse the perspective: instead of the loop closing proposed by the phrase "Dick Laurent is dead", let us disarticulate the circle by referring to a production of meaning starting from Alice's statement "You'll never have me". If we decline it in the plural, it becomes a sort of mantra with regard to the male figures in the film: none among you will ever have me, you will not be able to channel my desire into your lacks. So, it is not the object that flows, but the desire itself.

A "schizo's stroll" with Renee/Alice

To substantiate the last statement, which form the cornerstone of my overarching interpretation, it becomes imperative to introduce certain tenets of the concept of desire that I aim to employ, particularly as elucidated by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*. In this seminal work, the authors articulate a conception of desire that diverges markedly from conventional wisdom and contemporary theoretical paradigms. Rather than construing desire as a deficiency seeking fulfilment, or as an impulse directed toward perpetually elusive objects, Deleuze and Guattari conceive it as a generative force, an ongoing impulse towards production. They posit it as inherently productive, continually engendering realities, thereby eschewing fixed objectives and emphasizing its fundamentally social dimension. In my interpretation, such a formulation does not celebrate disorganization or unrestrained revelry, but rather represents a forward impetus towards novelty, facilitating an elucidation of the in-

¹⁵ T. McGowan, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

¹⁶ Cfr. S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Routledge & Sons Ltd., London 1919.

trinsic relationship between power dynamics and the nature of desire and its repression within societal organization¹⁷. This is because the lack of an object towards which to strive is not what gives rise to desire, but rather what represses it but at the same time organizes it in the plane of immanence of societal organization: “Production is never organized on the basis of a pre-existing need or lack (*manque*). It is lack that infiltrates itself, creates empty spaces or vacuoles, and propagates itself in accordance with the organization of an already existing organization of production”¹⁸.

We might use the analogy of a river encountering a dam to illustrate how social structures organize and regulate the flow of desire. Just as a dam controls the movement of a river and its resources, the social organization of desire establishes objects or “territories” of desire. This analogy helps us understand two main points: firstly, the primacy of desiring production over lack, similar to the relationship between the river’s origin and the dam; secondly, the river’s natural resistance to imposed organization. Just as a river continues to flow according to its natural course, shaped by its surroundings, desire thrives on its fluid and ever-changing nature, resisting societal attempts to impose limitations and restrictions.

This aspect of the societal organization of desire, while it may initially appear somewhat incongruous with the context of *Lost Highway*, is indeed of significant import. When viewed through the lens of Fred/Peter, the film aligns with a paradigm of objectlessness (Renee/Alice) and the paternal law (Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent), encapsulating the castration of desire through societal norms and the consequent frustration stemming from the unattainability and elusive nature of desired objects, as epitomized by mechanisms of sublimation. However, when analysed from the perspective of Renee/Alice, this interpretative framework appears notably diminished. The female character escapes this dynamic because she shuns the territorialization that the male characters attempt to impose on her: Renee/Alice is the embodiment of desire for this very reason. And not simply because she could cheat on her husband, or because she is an extremely free woman, but because she does not direct herself towards a missing object. She constitutes her own precarious and changing organisation, her precarious and fluid micro-territories, because, unlike all the other characters but like desire, “she lacks nothing”: “Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object”¹⁹. All the men

¹⁷ Naturally, my interpretation is anything but serene. For contrasting viewpoints, cfr. S. Žižek, *Organs without bodies. On Deleuze and consequences*, cit., or M. Recalcati, *L'uomo senza inconscio*, Cortina, Milano 2010.

¹⁸ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, cit., p. 28.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 26.

seek to assert control over her, to establish territorial dominion: but the jealous spouse, the aggressive mobster, the youthful paramour, and the procurer of pornographic actresses merely constitute marginal annotations within her stream, transient instances of intersecting desiring flows (*enchaînement*, to borrow the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari). In this light, all the men in the film look like grotesque manifestations of the “Body-without-Organs”²⁰: non-production stasis that tries to attract the desiring-machine Renee/Alice, but at the same time repulse her. Within this framework, *Lost Highway* is the exemplification of the desiring flow: Renee/Alice runs through all these non-production stations, but none of them stops her, because her path is, definitely, a “line of escape”. While Renee/Alice acknowledges the inherent precariousness of the trajectory of escape and its ensuing organization, the male characters become ensnared within it, succumbing to their paranoia, neuroses, and illusions of control. Consequently, she embodies a “schizo” character wherein the apprehension of novelty and the threat of dissolution coexist – a character who offers a glimpse into an alternative horizon yet simultaneously risks, due to repression, plummeting into the abyss of despair and psychic affliction:

Van Gogh, Nerval – and how many others could be cited! – have broken through the wall of the signifier, the wall of “mum-dad”, they are far beyond it, and speak to us with a voice that is that of our future. But the second element still remains in this process, and that is the danger of collapse. That the “*percée*”, the rift, may coincide or slip into a kind of collapse is something that no one has the right to treat lightly. One must consider this danger as fundamental. The two things are linked.²¹

Exemplifying this notion is the scene wherein Alice, confronted with a firearm, is compelled to disrobe in the presence of Mr. Eddy. Arquette’s facial expressions vividly convey a composed demeanour, save for a subtle

²⁰ Due to spatial constraints, further elaboration on the concept of the Body-without-Organs (BwO) is not feasible. For the current discourse, it suffices to note that within the BwO, it manifests as an instance of anti-production essential to the dynamics of desire – an entity that resists any form of organization yet simultaneously posits itself as a surface enabling the dynamics of desire. It represents a necessary yet unattainable limit: “The BwO is desire; it is that which one desires and by which one desires”. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987, p. 165. Cfr., the entire chapter VI, titled *November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?* (pp. 149-166). Reference is deferred also to *Anti-Oedipus*, cit., especially pp. 9-16.

²¹ U. Fadini (a cura di), *Gilles Deleuze e Félix Guattari. Macchine desideranti. Su capitalismo e schizofrenia*, Ombre corte, Verona 2004, p. 56. My translation.

shift indicative of an acknowledgement of this coerced interaction, albeit with an underlying intent to subvert it. This momentary acquiescence to territorial imposition is swiftly followed by a subsequent deterritorialization – a movement seldom enacted by the male characters. While they may exhibit traits of paranoia, perversion, mania, obsession, and repression, none embody the “schizo” disposition as Renee/Alice does. They all remain attached to their dualistic patterns, their sclerotized territories, their shortcomings: “People trapped in a dualistic world are ‘lost’ because they believe unity can only be attained through the pursuit and acquisition of a fundamental yet missing element”²².

If we reverse the perspective focusing on the desiring flow embodied by Renee/Alice, it seems possible to go even further in reading the film. Indeed, it becomes apparent how fluid and mutable identities and subjectivities are within a universe where boundaries and spatio-temporal norms, akin to those of the unconscious, are fractured. She epitomizes this dynamic of desire, transcending the constraints imposed by her impotent, paranoid husband, the young car mechanic, the deceitful Andy, or the Oedipal figure of Mr. Eddy. She navigates deftly beyond the confines of identity, temporality, and the dichotomy of life and death. In embodying the film’s temporality, Renee/Alice subverts linear narrative conventions, offering instead an intricate interplay of desire and the unconscious – a rupture in the fabric of time, albeit symbolized by an unconventional circularity. She appears to traverse a temporal realm distinct from conventional experience, reminiscent of Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*²³: in this book, linear time becomes just a human convention and, just like Billy, she only dies for a while, just “to go out for a walk”. From this perspective, the disjointed, non-linear structure of the film reflects the fractured nature of the unconscious, making it a canvas for exploring the paradox of temporality and, in backlight, of identities:

The paradox of [...] pure becoming, with its capacity to elude the present, is the paradox of infinite identity (the infinite identity of both directions or senses at the same time – of future and past, of the day before and the day after, of more and less, of two much and not enough, of active and passive, and of cause and effect).²⁴

²² M. Walling, *All Roads Lead to the Self. Zen Buddhism and David Lynch’s Lost Highway*, in W. Devlin and S. Biderman, *The Philosophy of David Lynch*, Kentucky UP, Lexington 2011, p. 96.

²³ K. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*, Dial Press, New York 1999.

²⁴ G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, Continuum, New York 2004, p. 4.

Renee/Alice's journey is literally a "schizo's stroll" as her identity shifts and fragments the conventional chains of symbolisation. Her statement, "You'll never have me", is a rebellious assertion of autonomy and a rejection of the conventional structure of desire, placing her in stark contrast to the archetypal female roles often represented in cinema, in a very counter-intuitive way. She moves as the productive and connective synthesis of desire: she is not Renee "or" Alice, but she is Renee "and" Alice, "and", in my misguided interpretation, Mystery Man as well. After the glossy sex scene in the desert sand, in fact, who remains is neither Alice nor Renee, but only Mystery Man. The same face exactly that, projected onto Renee's body, terrorizes Fred during a nightmare in the first part of the film. However, it would be better to say that there is Mystery Man, "and" Alice, "and" Renee. He/she, Mystery Man, shoots Mr Eddy and conveys a mysterious message to Fred, moving like a "demiurge". Just like Alice with Pete.

If we assume the second half of the film as a mere imaginative and desperate escape of Fred, we lose the fluid identity of all the other characters²⁵ and, consequently, of desire itself: "Fluidity is one of the most important features of [Lynch's] cinematic world"²⁶. Above all, we lose the desiring nature of the film, its being a producer of deterritorialized meanings, which elude symbolization and conventional sense-making, yet they are not thereby absence of sense:

Nonsense does not have any particular sense, but is opposed to the absence of sense rather than to the sense that it produces in excess – without ever maintaining with its product the simple relation of exclusion to which some people would like to reduce them. Nonsense is that which has no sense, and that which, as such and as it enacts the donation of sense, is opposed to the absence of sense. This is what we must understand by "nonsense".²⁷

All characters must be regarded as genuinely real, existing within the same realm of desire, epitomized by Renee/Alice. There is no hierarchy or depth, just interlocking planes where Renee and Alice, Fred and Pete, coexist without fully merging: "The existence of all the characters in the Lynchian sphere is beyond doubt: ontologically, they are all on the same level"²⁸. By embracing the radical reality of all characters, we further affirm the Deleuzoguattarian dynamics of desire embodied primarily by

²⁵ It is in this sense that Brenna defines *Lost Highway* as a "Bonfire of the identities". Cfr., S. Brenna, *A letto con David. Sogni e incubi nel cinema di Lynch*, BookTime: Milano 2012.

²⁶ R. Parciak, *The World as Illusion. Rediscovering Mulholland Dr. and Lost Highway through Indian philosophy*, in W. Devlin and S. Biderman, cit., p. 78.

²⁷ G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, cit., p. 83.

²⁸ R. Parciak, *op.cit.*, p. 82.

Renee/Alice. She is the character who accepts to operate within a plane of immanence, where desire generates nothing but the real, while all male characters instead appear to exemplify mechanisms of transcending desire that produce frustration, both in their attempts to confine Renee/Alice and in their various neuroses: “Every time desire is betrayed, cursed, uprooted from its field of immanence, a priest is behind it. The priest cast the triple curse on desire: the negative law, the extrinsic rule, and the transcendent ideal”²⁹.

The possibilities of making sense are therefore all there in immanence plain sight, all on the surface, whether they are images, dialogues, unspoken words, or the music of a splendid and heterogeneous soundtrack. This is because, in Deleuze, the dynamic of making sense is strictly related to the dynamics of desire, both expressing an immanent, horizontal, rhizomatic becoming rather than a transcendental, hierarchical, binary form³⁰. In this light, sense “is produced. It is not something to discover, to restore, and to re-employ; it is something to produce by a new machinery. It belongs to no height or depth, but rather to a surface effect, being inseparable from the surface which is its proper dimension”³¹. On the basis of these considerations, the film is a production of sense in the immanence plain, rather than an object concealing a mysterious, transcendent, meaning that produces frustration and neurosis. It is a *producing-machine* rather than a *object-of-analysis*, because it presupposes a generative idea of sense, rather than a definite one, in a perspective that conceives of sense as the element of the *genesis* of propositions and no longer simply the *effect* of propositions³². If, as I assume, the film acts “in order to liberate a living and expressive material that speaks for itself and has no need of being put into a form”³³, it means that the Lynchian language – through the surreal and the non-sense – does not work in revealing something, but works in producing connection between “elements which are not themselves signifying”³⁴. So, we have to explore this paradoxical movement in which the sense is generated: sense is production because it is a pure becoming rather than a static being, and it moves within the interstices, within the empty spaces of the signifying chain. It

²⁹ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, cit., p. 154.

³⁰ And this is also the reason why I chose this kind of theory rather than other hermeneutical theories (such as Gadamer’s, Ricœur’s or Eco’s theories) that conceive interpretation as a productive and dynamic movement.

³¹ G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, cit., p. 83.

³² Cfr., D. W. Smith, *The Concept of Sense in Gilles Deleuze’s Logic of Sense*, in “Deleuze and Guattari Studies”, 16, 1, 2022, pp. 3-23.

³³ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986, p. 21.

³⁴ G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, cit., p. 175.

is within these spaces that the unconscious finds its place, as a paradoxical force that disrupts linear logic: "There is nothing astonishing in the fact that the paradox is the force of unconscious: it occurs always in the space between (*l'entre-deux*) consciousnesses, contrary to good sense or, behind the back of consciousness, contrary to common sense"³⁵.

In accordance with Deleuze and Guattari's framework, desire engenders the immanence of reality through incisions, connections, and conjunctions that constitute the *agencement* of desiring flux. In its surreal essence, *Lost Highway* exemplifies a deterritorialisation in every sense. However, a crucial aspect, integral for a comprehensive understanding of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of desire, is that this deterritorialization engenders new, albeit inherently precarious, territoriality. This new territoriality is nothing but the productive assertion of new horizons of sense, especially when it succeeds in generating a sense of unfamiliarity while employing the familiar language of cinematic narrative. In order to understand this strictly intertwining between desire and sense, I think that the clearest approach in reading the film involves leaving behind the jealous neuroses of Fred/Peter and focusing on the "schizo's stroll" of Renee/Alice, who embodies desire and shows the fluid, precarious, becoming in which consists the sense.

Conclusion

The decision to uniquely analyse *Lost Highway* should not be misconstrued as implying that the film is an isolated work within Lynch's career. In fact, similar dynamics can be observed in various other works. Especially if we look at films as machines that produce sense, one can consider, for instance, *Blue Velvet*, *Inland Empire*, *Mulholland Drive*, or the *Twin Peaks* series. In all these narratives the production of sense literally explodes, frustrating any attempt to reduce them to a single clear interpretation. Moreover, in these works, the narrative – and also the characters' identities³⁶ – seems to develop primarily through emotional intensities, akin to the unconscious, challenging linear temporality. All this works express sense as a dynamic and fluid becoming, rather than a stable form. Additionally, referring to the phantasmatic and paranoid traps into which desire can fall, Betty's fall in *Mulholland Drive* appears as valid an example as Fred's fall in *Lost Highway*. The choice fell on the latter film because, in my opinion, the character of Renée/Alice is

³⁵ Ivi, pp. 91-92.

³⁶ Cfr. M. Nochimson, *David Lynch swerves: uncertainty from Lost Highway to Inland Empire*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2013.

the keystone for demonstrating the productive desiring dynamics that permeate Lynch's poetics. This is the reason why the "desiring perspective" emerges from *Lost Highway* when examining the role of the female character(s), Renee/Alice, within the narrative framework.

In summary, through a reinterpretation of her assertion, "You'll never have me", as addressed to the plural, it is possible to represent the broader dynamics of desire and sense-becoming. In fact, this approach unveils the film as a multifaceted exploration of desire as a generative force. Lynch's cinematic craftsmanship manifests in the film's surreal and disjointed narrative, which operates as a canvas for exploring the fractured nature of the unconscious and the fluidity of desire and identities. Renee/Alice's journey, a pure "schizo's stroll", serves as a focal point for this exploration, embodying a rebellious assertion of autonomy and challenging conventional structures of desire and identity. Moreover, *Lost Highway* transcends mere storytelling to function as a producer of sense, inviting viewers to engage with a process of sense-making that extends beyond (*deterritorializes*) the confines (*territories*) of traditional narrative analysis. In a sentence, a peculiar manner of attempting to articulate the ineffable, of "telling the untold".

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