

Making Sense of *Lost Highway*

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The operatic version of David Lynch's 1997 film *Lost Highway*, which premiered in the US in February 2007, is nothing more than a pared down, abbreviated version of the film. Rather than translating the film into operatic terms, the opera tried to imitate the film, and failed spectacularly. It attempted to offer condensed versions of the film's main scenes, stripping them down to their minimal signs, taking away from the film everything that makes it complex, intriguing, and engaging. At best, the opera was trying to prompt the audience to recognize the scenes in the film, and thereby hoping we would provide the action on stage with its content. The opera is, in other words, purely derivative; Olga Neuwirth's strange and innovative music, Elfriede Jelinek's libretto, and the liveness of the performance did not (with one exception) add anything to the story the film tells. (Lynch's film already has strange and innovative dialogue, sound, and music, which he partly mixed himself.) The simplistic set design was angled upward to look like a German Expressionist set, with a bed in the middle (doubling up as a car) and a screen to one side, on which video images and Fred Madison's hallucinations were shown. The front of the entire stage was completely covered with a translucent screen, upon which various images were projected (close-ups of characters or video noise), which basically said to the audience – this is where opera breaks down, so we're going to rely on film techniques. The projected images were filmed for this performance, except David Lynch's iconic image of the speeding roadway shot from a low angle at night, which appeared several times on the front screen. Only once was this screen used in an innovative manner. At the end of the story, Fred Madison kills Dick Laurent in the desert. The mystery man films the murder, and what he records is projected onto the front screen – creating a double point of view. But this innovation was far too little too late to save the opera. Only Raphael Sacks's performance as Mr Eddy/Dick Laurent

added something to the story – his acting brought out Laurent’s schizophrenic behavior, turning him into an even more scary and amusing character at the same time.

In the following analysis I will be using David Bordwell’s (1985) and then Edward Branigan’s (1992) cognitive theories of narration to examine what makes the film version of *Lost Highway* complex, intriguing, and engaging.

Lost Highway: Scene by Scene

The credit sequence of *Lost Highway* consists of a shot of a camera attached to the front of a car traveling very fast along a highway at night. The car’s headlights illuminate the road. The credits appear from the middle of the screen, travel rapidly toward the camera, and pause momentarily (the letters appear to stick to the film screen) before disappearing “behind” the camera and spectator.

In the opening scene we are introduced to Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) at home. Because of his frequent appearance in the opening scenes, we assume that Fred is the film’s main protagonist. The scene opens with Fred sitting in the dark on the edge of his bed. He is smoking a cigarette and looking at himself in the mirror. The front door intercom buzzes, and he hears the message “Dick Laurent is dead.” He goes over to the window in another part of the house to look out, but he sees no one. As he heads toward the window we hear the off-screen sound of tires screeching and a police siren.

Bordwell argues that a film’s beginning is crucial because the spectator’s hypotheses need to establish a foothold in the film early on. The intercom message leads the spectator to generate at least two hypotheses, focused around the questions: Who rang the bell? And, who is Dick Laurent? These two hypotheses are generated in response to the gaps in the narrative that the narration has constructed. Firstly, knowledge about the narrative is severely limited. But this limitation is motivated because the narration is linked to Fred’s level of awareness and experience of narrative events: the spectator sees and hears what Fred sees and hears. The knowledge is therefore deep and restricted, and the narration is being communicative, because it gives the spectator access to this knowledge. (We shall see later in this chapter that Edward Branigan discusses character awareness and experience in terms of the concept of focalization.) The gaps in the narrative are, firstly, spatial. The restricted narration does not show us the identity of the person outside and does not show us the source of the

off-screen sounds. This spatial gap in the narrative is evident to the spectator, and is therefore a flaunted (rather than a suppressed) gap. It is also a clearly delineated gap, and is therefore specific (rather than diffuse). Finally, it is temporary (rather than permanent) because it is eventually filled in at the end of the film. The hypotheses we generate about this spatial gap are a suspense, non-exclusive hypotheses operating at the film's macro level – suspense because we assume the gap will be resolved in the future (so we anticipate the filling in of this gap at a later time in the film's unfolding); it is non-exclusive because it could have been anyone (we cannot generate an hypothesis suspecting a particular person); and it operates on the macro level because it spans the entire film. The scale of probability–improbability usually refers to the hypotheses we generate. But in this case, the way the narration fills in this gap at the end of the film is highly improbable. Although our hypotheses were non-exclusive, it is highly unlikely that any spectator would generate the hypothesis that Fred is *also* outside the house pressing his own doorbell!

The lack of information on Dick Laurent's identity is a temporary, flaunted, focused gap that leads the spectator to generate an exclusive, curiosity hypothesis that operates on the macro level (for his identity is not immediately resolved). In a more conventional film (one that follows the conventions of the canonical story format), the spectator's narrative schema would condition her to expect the next scene to contain exposition explaining who Dick Laurent is.

The screeching tires and the police siren are not coded as prominent cues, and many spectators may not perceive them as cues, but as part of the film's "reality effect" – that is, background noise that one may expect to hear, rather than a significant narrative event. In summary, the opening scene enables the narrative schema to gain a foothold in the film, since the spectator generates hypotheses in response to the gaps the narration has constructed, and is anticipating events in future scenes.

The first scene ends on an establishing shot, a very long shot of the front of Fred's house in the early morning light. After a fade, the second scene begins by repeating this exterior establishing shot, except this time it is night. Inside the house, we see Fred packing a saxophone into its case, and talking to Renee (Patricia Arquette), who wants to stay home and read rather than go to the club with him. This seemingly simple scene nonetheless keeps the spectator busy. It appears to follow the canonical story format by continuing to introduce the setting and characters, and by explaining a state of affairs. On the basis of the two exterior establishing shots (shown back

to back), we generate the hypothesis that the film has now progressed from morning to evening of the same day. In other words, using our narrative schema, we establish a linear temporal relation between the two scenes. Secondly, information about Fred is conveyed indirectly: we assume he is a musician, and we find out from his talk with Renee that the two of them are married (RENEE: "I like to laugh, Fred." FRED: "That's why I married you.") The deadpan way the two characters interact, plus the sparse dialogue, may suggest that the marriage is at a stalemate, to the point where Fred's sax playing bores Renee, and she invents improbable reasons for wanting to stay home (she does not appear to be the type of person who will spend her evenings at home reading).

In contrast to the end of scene 1, scene 2 ends abruptly, as we cut from the quiet interior of the Madisons' house to an image of the exterior of the Luna lounge and the very loud sound of sax music. This sudden break from scene 2 jolts the spectator, not only because of the contrast in sound and image, but also because there is no reference to the two gaps in scene 1. Fred does not mention the message he received on the intercom, and therefore we are no closer to finding out who the messenger was, or who Dick Laurent is. Reference to these cues would have strengthened the causal relationship between scenes 1 and 2. As it is, the two scenes are linked more tenuously – visually (the visual repetition of the establishing shot), and linearly (the progression from day to night), rather than causally. The narration is marked by a lack of redundancy between scenes.

In scene 3 Fred is shown playing his sax and phoning his wife during an intermission. But no one answers the phone at home; the house appears empty. In scene 4 Fred returns home to find his wife asleep in bed. These two scenes introduce a discrepancy between Renee's words and actions. In combination with the way Fred and Renee interact in scene 2, the discrepancy enables the spectator to group these actions together and call them a complicating action, the next stage of the canonical story format. The complicating action can be called "unhappy marriage," with the probability of infidelity on Renee's part. The spectator's hypothesis of infidelity is a near exclusive hypothesis – one with only a few alternatives, and is generated on the basis of Renee's absence from the house in scene 3 (a flaunted, focused gap in the film's narrative). The infidelity hypothesis is the most probable, but because the narration is restricted to Fred's perspective, the spectator does not gain any more information than Fred knows to confirm or disconfirm this hypothesis.

Scene 5, the next morning. Renee picks up the newspaper outside, and discovers a video tape on the steps, with no addresser, addressee, or message. After watching the tape, which shows the outside of their house plus a closer shot of the front door, the Madisons are understandably perplexed, and Renee generates the weak, improbable hypothesis that a realtor may have made the tape. This scene again presents another flaunted, focused gap in the narrative (which can be formulated into the following question: Who made the tape?), and its only link to the previous scenes is a continuity of characters and settings. There is no narrative continuity between this scene and the film's previous scenes. But the narration does seem to establish an internal norm, whereby it selects very specific portions of the narrative to show – namely, actions and events performed early in the morning or late at night.

Scene 6. Renee and Fred in bed at night (the film therefore continues to follow the internal norm of only showing actions performed in the morning or at night). We see several of Fred's memory images – of him at the Luna lounge playing his sax, and seeing Renee at the club leave with another man (we later find out that he is Andy). Fred and Renee then make love, and afterwards Fred recounts a dream he had the previous night. We then cut to several of the dream images: Fred looking around the house at night, hearing Renee call out to him, and a shot of Renee in bed being frightened by a rapidly approaching, off-screen agent. The spectator shares this agent's vision as he approaches Renee, but we do not see who it is. Renee looks into the camera and screams (her look into the camera makes the narration mildly self-conscious). Fred is then shown waking up, and looking at Renee. But another face is superimposed upon her (we later find out that it belongs to the "mystery man").

In this scene the narration continues to be restricted and deep, and seems communicative, as we gain access to Fred's memory and dream images. But the status of the memory images is ambiguous. To make sense of these images, we can generate the probable hypothesis that they refer to a narrative event that took place before the film begins, and that Fred is generating these images to fill in the gap in scene 3. We can paraphrase these images in the following way: "Last night Renee was probably with the guy who accompanied her to the Luna lounge on a previous occasion."

The dream images are also ambiguous. Above we noted that the narration in this scene is restricted and deep, and *appears* to be communicative. But a close analysis of later scenes in the film makes the film analyst realize that the narration in this scene is in fact being very uncommunicative,

but that its uncommunicative status is disguised. At this stage in the film, we are used to a communicative narration, with flaunted gaps. But in the dream sequence, we (or, at least, the film analyst) retrospectively realize that the narration contains suppressed gaps and is uncommunicative. This is why later scenes in the film jolt us.

Furthermore, Fred does not question Renee about her whereabouts the previous evening (although in the script he does¹). He only mentions the dream he had the previous night. Therefore, the link between this scene and previous scenes is only temporal, rather than causal (although the memory images of the club do at least refer us back to the location of scene 3). Owing to this lack of causal cues, the spectator tries to generate weak hypotheses to connect the mystery narrative (who is Dick Laurent?) to the romance narrative (perhaps the guy in the club is Dick Laurent, etc.).

Other events in this scene are even more vague. As Renee and Fred make love, the screen suddenly turns white for a moment (a white fade) and the action is slowed down. Although these make the narration self-conscious (both devices challenge the conventions of standard speed and black fades), it is unclear what these devices are meant to cue, other than the director's intervention (thereby defining the *mise en scène* as mannerist). Furthermore, the moment Fred wakes up and sees the mystery man's face superimposed upon Renee's face still constitutes part of Fred's dream he had the previous evening. In other words, *the scene ends inside Fred's dream*; the narration does not return to the image of Fred in bed narrating the dream. But one thing at least is clear from this scene: Renee and Fred make love dispassionately, which strengthens the hypothesis that their marriage is in crisis.

Scene 7: the following morning. Renee finds another video tape on the steps. But this one shows more than the previous tape by filming inside the house, and ending on Fred and Renee asleep in bed. Renee then calls the police. The second video tape adds to the "complicating action" chunk of the by now strained canonical story format.

In scene 8, two detectives watch the second video tape, and look around the house for possible signs of a break-in. Information is planted in the dialogue to facilitate the spectator's hypothesis-generating process. Fred tells the detectives he hates video cameras, because he likes to remember things his own way, not necessarily the way they happen. Many critics who reviewed *Lost Highway* saw this line as a nodal point on which to focus the previous scenes, as a key to the film's meaning – namely, many of the narration's twists can be motivated psychologically, as Fred's distorted

view of events. The spectator also has the opportunity to test out this reading of the film in the next scene.

Scene 9: party at Andy's house, late at night. (Andy was shown previously in Fred's memory images – in scene 6 – of Renee and Andy leaving the Luna lounge while Fred plays his sax.) The canonical story format is challenged, and begins to break down in this scene. In the previous scene, Fred and Renee did not talk about going to a party at Andy's house. If they had done so, it would have strengthened the causal relation between the scenes. More radically, Fred is shown drinking two whiskies and then talking to "the mystery man" (Robert Blake), whose face we have already seen superimposed over Renee's face in Fred's dream (recounted in scene 6). The mystery man says to Fred that they have met before (although Fred does not remember), and then defies Newtonian space-time physics by suggesting that he is in Fred's house at that very moment (that is, he is in two places at once). The mystery man "confirms" this by persuading Fred to phone his home, where indeed the mystery man also answers! In terms of them meeting before, we tend to side with the mystery man; firstly because of the comment Fred made in scene 8 (he likes to remember things his own way, not necessarily the way they happened); and secondly, because the mystery man appeared in Fred's recounted dream in scene 6 (his face is superimposed over Renee's face).

By challenging one of the fundamental background assumptions of the canonical story format (a character cannot be in two places at once), scene 9 begins to open up inferential possibilities, as we have to try to explain or motivate this fundamental discrepancy in the film's narrative. Is Fred simply delusional, and are we sharing his delusions? This assumes that the narration continues to be highly communicative by conveying Fred's deep experiences.

When Fred asks Andy who the mystery man is, he responds that he is a friend of Dick Laurent, to which Fred replies: "Dick Laurent is dead, isn't he?" Troubled by this news, Andy protests that Dick Laurent can't be dead. (He also says to Fred "I didn't think you knew Dick," which is an odd thing to say immediately after telling Fred that the mystery man is a friend of Dick Laurent.) The mention of Dick Laurent's name finally brings into sharper focus one of the gaps opened up in scene 1. Through its linear progression from scene to scene, the narration is now finally beginning to refer back to gaps in previous scenes.

Scene 10: Fred and Renee in the car on the way back from Andy's party. Renee describes how she met Andy (RENEE: "I met him at this place called

Moke's . . . We became friends . . . He told me about a job. . . .") This is one of the few fragments of exposition the spectator has received from the narration, which means that it is impossible to slot it into a context and make more sense of it. Instead, it remains a fragment of exposition. But from Fred's reaction, we understand that he dislikes Andy, possibly because he thinks Renee is having an affair with him.

Scene 11. At home, Fred checks around the house. He switches off the alarm, hears the telephone ring (but does not answer it), and he and Renee then prepare for bed. The events that follow refer back to Fred's recounted dream in scene 6. What is extraordinary is that parts of Fred's dream are now repeated and "played out" as non-dream events. As Fred wanders around the house, we hear Renee call out Fred's name in exactly the same way she did in the dream. In a few images we also see Fred moving around the house in the same way he did in his dream. In the bathroom, he looks intensely at himself in the mirror. He then walks toward the camera, blocking our view entirely (a self-conscious moment of narration). In the next shot, the camera is positioned outside a door.

This scene challenges the canonical story format further, since it distorts the notion of linear progression (unless we read the dream as a premonition). At the end of the scene, the narration is also uncommunicative, because it creates a gap in the narrative as the camera is positioned outside a closed door. But on the basis of a shot in Fred's dream – of an unseen agent attacking Renee in bed, together with the hypothesis that Renee is having an affair – we can generate a near exclusive, probable hypothesis that Fred is attacking Renee.

This hypothesis is confirmed in scene 12. Fred finds a third video tape on the doorstep, plays it, and sees, in addition to the initial footage on the second tape, a series of shots depicting him murdering and dismembering Renee. He acknowledges the video camera filming him, by looking directly into it (making the narration self-conscious). But for Fred watching the tape, the images are horrifying, and in desperation, he calls out to Renee. He is suddenly punched in the face by one of the detectives who visited the house in scene 8. There is a flaunted ellipsis in the narrative at this moment in the film, as Fred is now being questioned about Renee's murder (scene 13). The narration is both communicative and uncommunicative, since it shows us (via the video camera images) Fred murdering Renee, but it is uncommunicative in supplying information about who recorded the video tapes, who Dick Laurent is, the mystery man's ability to be in two places at once, and the identity between Fred's recounted

dream and Renee's murder the following evening. More generally, the film is marked by a lack of synchronization between its narrative and unfolding narration.

Retrospectively, we can now reevaluate the film so far as a detective film, which Bordwell (1985, p. 64) defines as having the following characteristics: a crime (cause of crime, commission of crime, concealment of crime, discovery of crime) and investigation (beginning of investigation, phases of investigation, elucidation of crime). We can characterize the film as enacting a crime, with emphasis on its concealment and discovery, with a very condensed investigation (at this stage consisting of identification of criminal and consequences of identification). We hypothesize that Fred is the causal agent, motivated by jealousy, who carried out the murder soon after Andy's party.

The policeman throws his punch directly at the camera, suggesting the narration's continued alignment with Fred. It also makes the narration self-conscious, not only because the action is directed at the camera, but also because it reminds a cine-literate spectator of similar moments in Hitchcock's films – most notably, *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and *North by Northwest* (1959), where punches are similarly directed at the camera. In another Hitchcockian moment, Fred's trial is not shown, but is reduced to the voiceover of the judge pronouncing sentence, as Fred is led to his cell. This goes beyond Hitchcock's rapid depiction of Margot Wendice's trial in *Dial M for Murder* (1954). (In *Lost Highway*, a scene taking place in the courtroom is in the script, but has been omitted from the final cut.)

There follows a quick series of scenes (sometimes consisting of three or four shots) as Fred is taken to his cell (scene 14), which is intercut with video images of Renee's murder (coded as Fred's memory images). Scene 15 continues with this theme, as Fred tries to figure out what is happening to him. In scene 16 he collapses in the prison courtyard, complaining of a headache. In scene 17 the prison doctor forces him to swallow some sleeping pills, and in scene 18, he has a vision of an exploding cabin in the desert, although the explosion is shown backward (making the narration self-conscious). The mystery man then comes out of and goes back into the cabin. The iconography reminds the cine-literate spectator of the exploding beach house at the end of *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich 1955) – a film that also begins with a shot from a camera attached to the front of a car traveling very fast along a highway at night. During these scenes in the prison, it becomes evident that Fred is not a rational, goal-driven agent who causally motivates narrative events, since he is unable to

remember or explain his actions. But his state of mind motivates the lack of synchronization between the narrative and narration.

The events in the second half of scene 18 and in the following scenes completely defy and undermine the canonical story format. Scene 18 ends on the following shots:

- Fred's cell; there is a sudden flash of bright light, and light bulb in his cell goes dim (perhaps representing the effects of an electrocution on the rest of the prison);
- the highway at night, repeating the image of the credit sequence; but this time, the car stops in front of a young man (whom we later find out is Pete Dayton);
- cut in closer to Pete, with a superimposed shot of his girlfriend Sheila, and Pete's parents; Sheila is screaming Pete's name;
- big close-up of Pete's eyes, superimposed over an image of the light in Fred's prison cell;
- Fred frantically rocking from side to side in his prison cell, screaming and covered in blood (this image seems to be strongly influenced by Francis Bacon's portraits, to the extent that it can be read as a filmic equivalent to Bacon's still images);
- shot of the prison ceiling; the camera tilts down to Fred;
- cut to an image of what looks like an open wound, and the camera moves toward it.

Working along the lines of a surreal logic, the narration presents a series of fragmented narrative events, which retrospectively we infer signifies Fred's transformation into Pete. (The version of this event in the script is more explicit about the transformation.)

Scenes 19 to 25 depict a prison guard discovering Pete in Fred's cell, Pete's identification, his release, and his home and work life. It is as if the film has "started again" or, more accurately, we seem to be watching the second half of another film, because the narration has identified Pete as the film's main protagonist, and has introduced a new setting and additional characters. This sudden jolt in the film's narrative is caused by the fact that the previous protagonist, whom we were given privileged access to, and from whom the camera rarely departed, has suddenly and inextricably disappeared from the narrative.

This jolt is far more radical than superficially similar scenes in other films – such as the murder in *Psycho* (1960) of Marion Crane, the film's primary

protagonist up to that point. In *Psycho*, the transfer from Marion to Norman takes place within a stable narrative. In *Lost Highway*, the narrative has been severely disrupted, creating a flaunted, but diffuse permanent gap that is never filled in. But to attempt to fill in this gap, the spectator needs to generate the two mutually exclusive hypotheses: Is Pete the same person as Fred? That is, are two actors playing the same character? Or are the two actors playing two different characters? However, the narration does not contain sufficient cues to enable us to choose one hypothesis over the other.

After the spectacular transfer of agency from Fred to Pete, we start to question the communicative status of the narration. It seems to hide more than it shows. As we continue to watch the film unfold, the unresolved issues remain, because the film does not address or even acknowledge them – that is, until scene 24, when Pete’s girlfriend Sheila mentions to Pete that he has been acting strangely since “the events” of the previous evening. Also, the narration continues to follow the internal norm established at the beginning of the film – to depict events taking place early in the morning or late at night. In scene 25 Pete returns to work (as a mechanic), and in scene 26 repairs the car of a gangster, Mr Eddy. The scene ends with Mr Eddy driving away from the garage where Pete works, and two cops who are following Pete identify Mr Eddy as Dick Laurent. One of the gaps presented in the narrative at the beginning of the film (who is Dick Laurent?) is now brought into clearer focus, although it raises another question: why is Mr Eddy also called Dick Laurent? From this moment onward, the narration makes additional and more frequent references to the first part of the film, enabling the spectator to focus other gaps and refine hypotheses.

At the beginning of scene 27, Pete looks at himself in the mirror in the same way as Fred looked at himself just before he murdered Renee. But in this part of the film, Pete takes Sheila out on a date.

Scene 28. At work the following morning, Pete hears sax music on the radio – identical to the music Fred played at the Luna lounge. The music distresses Pete, and he switches it off. A few moments later, he meets Mr Eddy’s girlfriend, Alice, played by Patricia Arquette, who also played Fred’s wife Renee. But, as Renee, Arquette looked vampish; as Alice, she conforms to the stereotype of the blonde femme fatale. Hypotheses we generated when Fred transformed into Pete recur here, but inverted. Now we need to ask: Are Renee and Alice the same character in disguise (because they are played by the same actress)? Or is Patricia Arquette playing two characters?

Scenes 29 to 32 depict the affair that Pete develops with Alice. In scene 33, after Alice had to break off a date with Pete, we see Pete in his room, experiencing hallucinations and hearing strange sounds. The narration is restricted, deep, and communicative because the spectator directly shares these experiences (the camera goes out of focus, we see Pete's hallucinations of Alice, and so on). In scene 34 Pete decides to go and see Sheila, and in scene 35, Pete's parents talk to him. They know what happened to him, but refuse to tell him everything. They tell him that he came home with Sheila and "a man," but say no more. This scene is interrupted by a montage sequence repeating the shot, in scene 18, of Pete's parents and Sheila screaming, although this time it is not superimposed over an image of Pete. This is followed by a shot of the open wound, and a video image of Renee's mutilated body. These shots are coded as Pete's memory images, whereas previously, they were coded as Fred's.

In following scenes, Mr Eddy threatens Pete, and Alice devises a plan whereby she and Pete will rob Andy and run away together. In scene 39 Alice tells Pete how she met Mr Eddy. She uses the same line that Renee used to describe to Fred (scene 10) how she met Andy (ALICE: "I met him at this place called Moke's . . . We became friends . . . He told me about a job. . .")

Scene 40. Pete breaks up with Sheila, and then takes a phone call from Mr Eddy-Dick Laurent and the mystery man (confirming Andy's comment in scene 9 that the mystery man is a friend of Dick Laurent). When the mystery man talks to Pete, he uses the same phrases as he did in scene 9, when speaking to Fred at Andy's party ("We've met before, haven't we?" etc.). He then indirectly threatens Pete.

In scene 41, Pete carries out Alice's plan to rob Andy, but in the process Andy is killed. Pete finds at Andy's house a photo of Mr Eddy, Renee, Alice, and Andy standing together. Pete asks Alice "Are both of them you?," echoing an hypothesis the spectator generates when first seeing Alice in scene 29. Pete then goes upstairs to clean up, but the corridor in Andy's house looks like a hotel corridor. Furthermore, we see flashes of light in the corridor, as we did in Fred's prison cell.

In scene 42 Pete and Alice drive to the desert to sell Andy's valuables to the mystery man at his cabin. Shots of the highway at night, and the shot of the burning cabin are repeated. In scene 43, Alice and Pete make love in the desert. Alice then goes inside the cabin, and Pete gets up. However, he has now inexplicably transformed back into Fred. But before we have time to adjust to Fred's sudden return to the narrative, the narration

presents a series of unusual shots and scenes. Fred looks into his car and sees the mystery man inside, staring back. We then hear the mystery man's voice off-screen, and he suddenly appears in the entrance of his cabin. He then goes inside the cabin in the same way he did in Fred's memory image in scene 18. Fred enters the cabin where he sees the mystery man, but no Alice. Fred asks him where Alice is, and he replies that her name is Renee. Despite the photograph in Andy's apartment, Renee and Alice may be the same person (although this still does not explain her disappearance after entering the cabin). The mystery man then confronts Fred about his name, and begins to film him using a video camera. As Fred runs out of the cabin into his car, several of the shots are from the mystery man's perspective filmed through the video camera, and the resulting images are the same as the three tapes sent to the Madisons' home. We can now fill in one of the gaps generated in the first part of the film, for we have conclusive evidence that the mystery man made the video tapes. Moreover, the hypotheses about the relation between Alice and Renee, and Fred and Pete, are brought into focus, but they are not resolved, for the "solutions" the narration presents are highly improbable.

Scene 44. Fred drives along the highway, and shots of the highway at night are repeated. Scene 45 takes place at the Lost Highway motel. Fred wanders along the corridors in the same way Pete did in Andy's house. Fred enters an empty room, while Renee and Dick Laurent make love in another room. Another gap in the narrative is filled in, as we realize that Renee is having an affair with Dick Laurent, not Andy. (Andy therefore presents the spectator with a false lead.) In scene 46, Renee leaves the hotel and Fred knocks out Dick Laurent, watched by the mystery man. In scene 47 Fred takes Laurent to the desert where he kills him, with the help of the mystery man. In fact, the mystery man suddenly appears just at the right moment, to hand Fred a knife. The mystery man then shoots Laurent, but a few moments later he suddenly disappears, leaving Fred with the gun in his hand.

In an attempt to make sense of what is happening in these scenes, we can return to the opening scenes, when we generated the hypothesis that Renee may be having an affair. We now see that Fred has followed her to the Lost Highway motel, and discovers that she is having an affair with Dick Laurent, whom Fred subsequently kills. The mystery man and Alice now seem to be figments of Fred's imagination. However, if we accept this, then it generates more questions and additional gaps in the narration, such as: Who made the three video tapes?

Scene 48. The police are at Andy's house. The two detectives who questioned Fred look at the photo – but Alice is missing, strengthening the hypothesis that Alice is a figment of Fred's imagination. The two detectives realize that Pete Dayton's prints are all over the place, so they head toward Fred's house. For this scene, then, the film has "flipped back" to the Pete Dayton side of the narrative, but has erased Alice from it. The police have generated the hypothesis that Pete/Fred has murdered Andy, possibly because Fred thought that Andy was having an affair with Renee. In terms of the film's narrative, perhaps Fred followed Renee to Andy's place first, killed Andy, and then followed her to the Lost Highway motel, where he subsequently kills Dick Laurent. At some point in the narrative, he also kills Renee. (Obviously, in this reconstruction of narrative events, he does not kill her after going to Andy's party, because Andy is already dead.)

Scene 49. Outside Fred's house. Fred has just returned from the desert, and presses the intercom and leaves the message "Dick Laurent is dead." The two cops then turn up, and give chase. Scene 50: the film ends with the police chasing Fred as he continues to drive along the highway at night. He appears to undergo another transformation, but we are left with an image of the highway at night.

The gap opened up in scene 1 is now filled – it is Fred who rings his own door bell and who leaves the message that Laurent is dead! The off-screen sounds of screeching tires and the police siren are similarly repeated, but now as on-screen sounds. The final scenes fill in most of the gaps the narration has generated, but they do not lead to a resolution, because the "answers" they present pose additional questions since they are improbable answers.

Irresolvable Ambiguities and Inconsistencies

From this cognitive reading of *Lost Highway*, we can discern several irresolvable ambiguities and inconsistencies. Firstly, concerning character stability: in scene 9, at Andy's party, the mystery man is in two places at once. Fred is also in two places at once: in scene 1, he is inside his own house receiving the message on the intercom that "Dick Laurent is dead" and in scene 49, which returns to scene 1, Fred is outside his house delivering the message. Other instabilities of character include Fred's transformation into Pete at the end of scene 18, and his transformation back again in scene 43; in scene 12 it appears that Renee is murdered, but in scene 28

she seems to return to the film's narrative. The spectator needs to ask if Fred and Pete are the same character played by two different actors, or are they different characters? And are Renee and Alice two different characters played by the same actress, or the same character in disguise? And why is Mr Eddy also called Dick Laurent? Other irresolvable ambiguities include: in scene 6, in Fred's dream images, he sees the mystery man's face superimposed over Renee's face; but in scene 9, when the mystery man introduces himself, Fred cannot remember meeting him before. Scene 35 repeats the video images of Renee's murder, and a shot of the open wound; when they first appeared in scenes 15 and 18 (respectively), they were coded as Fred's memories, but now they are coded as Pete's memories. Furthermore, the photo in Andy's apartment is shown in scene 41 and repeated in scene 48, but Alice is missing when the photo is shown again. Finally, there are ambiguities concerning the linear, temporal ordering of events: the events in scene 6 (Fred's recounted dream) are repeated (as non-dream events) in scene 11; and Fred's visions in scene 18, of an the exploding cabin from which the mystery man appears and disappears, are repeated in scenes 42 and 43, although they are not coded as Fred's visions. But how can Fred's dreams and visions so accurately predict forthcoming events – unless those events have already happened? This suggests that the narrative of *Lost Highway* is organized like a loop – or better, a Möbius strip – rather than linearly. If this is the case, then scene 18, in Fred's prison cell, represents the twist in the Möbius strip, the twist where the topside is transferred to the underside. Scenes 1 and 49 are the moments where the two edges of the Möbius strip are connected together, with Fred represented outside his house on one side, and inside the house on the other side. Moreover, to travel around the entire length of the Möbius strip, one needs to go around it twice – first on one side (from the intercom message to Fred's transformation in his cell), then on the other side (from Pete being released from prison to his transformation back into Fred), before we are returned to the moment where the two sides are joined (Fred conveying the intercom message to himself). The metaphor of the Möbius strip appears to accurately represent the structure of *Lost Highway*.

It is important to remember when discussing such ambiguous moments that our aim is not to disambiguate them, for this is a reductionist move that attempts to explain them away. Instead, we should attempt to explain how the ambiguities are produced, and what effects they achieve. Either these scenes contain too few cues, or too many cues that contradict one another; or there are too many flaunted and suppressed gaps;

or maybe the cue is a permanent gap. All these cues may lead the spectator to generate non-exclusive, diffuse hypotheses that are not brought into focus, or are “resolved” in an improbable manner. Lynch’s films are open to analysis as long as we do not try to reduce these ambiguous moments to a rational logic, but recognize that a non-rational but meaningful energy governs them. *Lost Highway* also prevents spectators from automatically applying schemata to it, since it goes beyond the commonsense, rational logic embedded in these schemata; instead, spectators become aware of the schemata’s conventions, and work hard to apply them in new and unforeseen ways (spectators unwilling to do this stop watching the film).

Point of View and Focalization

I shall now reanalyze key scenes from the perspective of Edward Branigan’s (1992) cognitive theory of narration – especially the various agents and levels of narration he outlines. The focus of the following analysis is therefore: What narrative agent (if any) motivates the selected images? And: What level of narration can they best be described as operating upon?

After the Madisons view the first video that has been sent to them (scene 5), the film cuts to the hallway leading up to the Madisons’ bedroom. This hallway is draped by a distinctive red curtain (a characteristic feature of Lynch’s films). What is the status of this shot? Is it simply a transitional shot between scenes? It seems to be a nonfocalized shot – that is, a shot not controlled by any narrative agent in the film’s diegesis, but controlled by an agent outside the diegesis – the narrator.

In scene 6, Fred’s recounted dream consists of the following shots, which also raise intriguing questions in terms of agency and levels:

- We see Fred walking around the house and hear Renee calling out to him; we also hear Fred’s voiceover recounting the dream. All of the recounted dream shots are therefore internally focalized (depth) shots.
- Image of fire (with exaggerated sound, rendering the fire uncanny). (This shot is part of the dream – that is, internal focalization [depth]; but *within* the dream, it is non-focalized.)
- Fred and voice of Renee.
- A puff of smoke rises from the stairway (as with the red curtain, smoke is another characteristic symbol in Lynch’s films). This shot is coded as

Fred's optical point-of-view (pov) shot. In other words, within his recounted dream we have a pov shot.

- Fred in hallway (there is an ellipsis, since he have moved location between cuts).
- Hallway. Again, this is a pov shot.
- Fred.
- Hallway and red curtain, and bedroom (coded as Fred's pov).

Here we have a repetition of the red curtain, but this time it is coded as Fred's pov. Whereas previously the shot could be read as a transitional shot, which means that it is non-focalized (objective, or belonging to the narrator), here Fred has now appropriated this image, as it is focalized around his vision *and* is part of his recounted dream.

With Fred still recounting or narrating the dream in voiceover, the camera quickly moves toward Renee, and she screams. Fred then "wakes up" – but this seems to be part of the dream. (This is the conclusion we reached in the "Bordwellian" analysis of this scene.) In Branigan's terms, is this image of Fred waking up an internally focalized (depth) image (that is, part of the recounted dream), or has Fred stopped recounting the dream? There are insufficient (or conflicting) data in the image to enable us to decide one way or the other. The voiceover has ended, and the film has returned to Fred and Renee in bed, the place where Fred began narrating the dream. This suggests that Fred has stopped narrating the dream. However, there is no continuity between this shot of Renee and Fred in bed and the shot of Fred beginning to narrate the dream. This is discontinuous because both of them are now asleep, and Fred is waking up from the dream. He then sees the mystery man's face imposed over Renee's face. This means that he is not only narrating the dream to Renee, but is also telling her that he woke up and did not recognize her. The film is inherently ambiguous about which description is correct. Furthermore, there are no other cues in the film indicating that Fred stops narrating the dream. If the second description is correct, it means that the dream remains open-ended – we don't know when and where it ends.

The second video (first shown in scene 7) also deserves closer scrutiny. As Renee and Fred watch the second video, Renee turns to Fred and calls his name. Fred looks at the TV screen. Cut to a shot of the hallway. This is a complex shot to describe. Firstly, it is Fred's pov shot as represented in his dream. But another narrative agent has also appropriated it – this time the agent who has made the video (the mystery man). But as Fred

watches this shot on screen, it becomes his pov shot again! He is therefore watching his pov shot within his dream now being manifest in reality via the video. There are multiple layers of agency attached to this shot (as there are with many shots; however, here the presence of the various agents becomes apparent). Perhaps part of Fred's fear is that he feels someone has got inside his head and is now reproducing his dream on video. Cut to a close-up of Fred's eyes, and then cut back to the video image, now showing the red curtain, a shot used twice before, but this time it is attributable to the mystery man (or the mystery man appropriates it from Fred, who appropriated it from the narrator). The video then shows Renee and Fred in bed.

When Fred comments in the next scene that he does not own a video camera because he prefers to remember events his own way, not necessarily the way they happened, this comment seems (as we saw in the "Bordwellian" analysis of this scene) to be a nodal point on which to focus the previous scenes. Yet by looking at the previous scenes more closely, through the lens of Branigan's theory, we come to realize that *the video images appropriate Fred's pov shots*. In other words, there is no conflict between what Fred sees and remembers, and what we see on video; yet Fred's comment serves to distinguish video images from his experience.

Later we can attribute the video images to the mystery man. The fluctuating attribution of agency to these shots gives us textual evidence to link the mystery man to Fred. Furthermore, we argued that the shot of the red curtain, when it is first seen, is a non-focalized shot (that is, is attributable to the narrator); on its second appearance, Fred has appropriated it; and on the third occasion, the mystery man appropriates it. We can use this description to link the narrator to Fred and the mystery man, and perhaps go even further and link the narrator with the historical director, Lynch. It is easy to make wild assertions (or hypotheses) about the relation between Fred, the mystery man, the narrator, and Lynch; what we need is textual evidence to support these hypotheses, so that we can attach or ground these assertions in the film itself.

In scene 11, of Fred in the house after Andy's party, the shot of the red curtain is repeated for the fourth time, which could be the pov shot of an unseen agent, who then seems to confront Fred. Could it be the mystery man with his video camera recording what's going to happen in the house? (If so, then do we identify the narrator's-Lynch's camera with the mystery man's video camera?) Otherwise, it could be a non-focalized shot. When preparing for bed, Fred looks at himself in the mirror in the same way he looked at the camera a moment ago. Renee then calls out, in the

same way she did in Fred's dream. We then have a shot of the living room with two shadows (are they replacing the image of the blazing fire in Fred's dream?). Is this the mystery man following Fred with his video camera, ready to record what's going to happen next? Instead of finding out what happens next, the spectator is positioned outside a door. We then cut to the next morning, where Fred picks up the third video tape, which fills in the ellipsis of the previous scene. The dream can also be added to fill in this ellipsis, since we see Fred approaching Renee as she sleeps in bed.

Conclusions

My reanalysis of key scenes and shots from the first half of *Lost Highway* only begins to demonstrate Branigan's theory of agents and levels of film narration. But from this short analysis, its ability to make more and finer distinctions than Bordwell's theory makes it a powerful tool, particularly in analyzing moments of ambiguity, in more detail and with more subtlety. The spectator's hypotheses can be formulated more clearly, and exclusive hypotheses can be related to one another more precisely (by linking each to a particular agent and level of narration). Whereas Bordwell's theory offers a methodology that reads a film as a linear or horizontal string of cues that spectators try to identify, Branigan develops a methodology that reads a film both horizontally *and* vertically, which enables the analyst to recognize the complexity of an individual shot or scene. A notable example from *Lost Highway* is the shot of the hallway in the second video, which Fred is watching. Branigan's method of analysis not only revealed the complexity of this shot, but also supplied the tools to analyze it in detail.

Adapted from Warren Buckland's chapter "Cognitive Theories of Narration (*Lost Highway*)," in Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland (2002), *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis*, pp. 168–94.

Note

- 1 See Lynch and Gifford (1997, pp. 11–12). At breakfast, Fred questions Renee (who is reading a book), after they have looked at the first video tape. This scene has been deleted and replaced with the single shot of the red curtain.

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