
DAVID LYNCH – THE ART OF THE REAL

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

For citations and quotations, please cite as follows:

MARTHA NOCHIMSON, »THE CERTAIN/UNCERTAINTY OF DAVID LYNCH: A PARADIGM SHIFT«, in:
Thomas Becker, Wolfram Bergande, Alexandra v. Stosch, Valeska Schmidt-Thomsen (eds.), »David Lynch. The Art of the Real«, Braunschweig 2016.
<http://lynchconference.hbk-bs.de/the-certainuncertainty-of-david-lynch-a-paradigm-shift>

Table of contents of the complete publication:
<http://lynchconference.hbk-bs.de>

— MARTHA NOCHIMSON —

THE CERTAIN/UNCERTAINTY OF DAVID LYNCH: A PARADIGM SHIFT

Some years ago, as we were approaching the millennium, I spoke with a distinguished colleague who had published a book almost twenty years earlier, in 1980, about about a very great film director in mid-career. Much time had passed since his book had come out, and I was curious to know if he had in any significant way changed his mind about his interpretation of the films. My colleague - I'll call him „Bob“ - looked at me with a stunned, angry expression, and asked „Change my mind? Why?“ I saw pride, I saw stubbornness, I saw energy, I saw status consciousness, but I didn't see what I had naively expected, a receptivity to the new evidence that, over time, inevitably presents itself on all subjects, especially film directors in mid-career.

A short time after my run-in with „Bob,“ I found myself in a position to test my ideals. When *Lost Highway* came out in 1997, the ink was barely dry on my book *The Passion of David Lynch*, and already I had the uncomfortable feeling that Lynch's new work didn't fit the theory I had proposed. This feeling only intensified when *The Straight Story*, and then *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* appeared. And what did I do? Well, I didn't re-evaluate my ideas, at first; I did what I could to protect them. After a while, though, my heart just wasn't it. The new films were so fascinating, I couldn't help trying to to understand what was going on. It wasn't that I saw Lynch changing his mind about the human condition. His new movies continued to breathe his original vision that life is unbounded; society is bounded and therein lies a painful conflict. But there was no question that, with *Lost Highway*, he had altered his cinematic approach to making meaning. And I want to talk with you today about the paradigm shift at the heart of my new thinking.

Those of you familiar with *The Passion of David Lynch* know that, on the basis of many conversations I had with Lynch, I evolved a modified Jungian interpretation of his work. I found Jung's archetypes of no use in considering Lynch's cinema, but Jung's sense that there was a collectivity to the human subconscious struck me as an excellent heuristic. Lynch had personally indicated to me that he did believe in such a collectivity, and following up on his statements, I traced a golden thread through Lynch's protagonists from *Eraserhead* to *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*. I explored the ways in which each is engaged in throwing off the constraints imposed by a repressive culture that bars them from the trans-cultural pleasures of human interconnectedness. And I celebrated the Lynchian seeker for his or her courage.

And then along came Fred Madison in *Lost Highway*; followed by Alvin Straight in *The Straight Story*; Betty, Rita, and Adam in *Mulholland Drive* and Nikki Grace in *Inland Empire*. Unlike Special Agent Dale Cooper, and the protagonists of the earlier films, they didn't push past cultural limits. They suffered, for the most part, caught firmly within the parameters of what Lynch likes to call The Marketplace, the cramped, measured and bounded space in which people transact business. Moreover, while the likes of Agent Cooper tended to experience

dreams and visions in which ordinary physical objects behaved strangely, they lived lives on well defined terrain that the movies have come to present as reality. But with the exception of Alvin Straight, and we can talk about him during the question period, the characters in Lynch's films from *Lost Highway* onward live on a terrain so full of indeterminate shifts that many have been confused about whether Lynch's characters are dreaming or not. Almost all the critics who have written about Lynch's four most recent films have tried to tell us that the unexpected material manifestations in them are dreams, but I have not been convinced. Even when confronted by such an event as Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) escaping from death row in *Lost Highway* by morphing into Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty), a young man Fred has never met before let alone been.

That stunning scene of transformation with its artful soundtrack and its mesmerizing images of an indeterminate physical plasticity has to be a dream, doesn't it? There are a dozen reasons why it has to be a dream. But I'm here to say that it isn't. It is Lynch pioneering a new way of representing physical reality. I contend that Fred really does transform into Pete, and a very long interview I had with Lynch on March 18, 2010, supports my belief. Because of that interview, I abandoned my use of Jung as the paradigm for his films, since he explicitly revealed to me on that day that his image of human collectivity comes from the Hindi Holy Vedas. Moreover, as we spoke, I realized that in his films, his faith in a universal unity is complicated by the simultaneous presence of a highly uncertain material plane of life. His most recent protagonists, in films that I will now refer to as his second stage cinema, live in an alternating current of certainty/uncertainty, struggling between intimations of a stable universe beyond the Marketplace and uncanny experiences within the Marketplace of infinitely uncertain particle behavior, as proposed by modern quantum mechanics. As quantum mechanics describes matter, what you just saw happen to Fred Madison is arguably a metaphor for modern human life in an uncertain universe, not a dream. But what connection does Lynch have to quantum mechanics?

In my latest book about him, *David Lynch Swerves: Uncertainty From Lost Highway to Inland Empire*, I not only document not only his long time fascination with physics, I also provide a broad brush but accurate account of the physics behind his interest, and I explore what it has meant to his latest films. Here I give an introduction to my new approach to Lynch. I do not want to misrepresent Lynch as a student of physics. He doesn't read it; and, when someone tries to explain to him, the nuts and bolts of scientific theory give him a headache. What I see in his four most recent films is that the ideas developed by quantum scientists have caused him to dream, as he might say, about new ways of representing the human condition. The intuitions behind cutting edge physics have filtered into Lynch's imagination and emerged as a very modern cinematic vocabulary.

For our purposes here, I will concentrate on the story of Fred Madison in *Lost Highway*. Before *Lost Highway*, Lynch's narratives to one extent or another, trace the great joy inherent in the education of the visionary hero by visions and dreams that alter normal perception of reality and enable him or her to enter into the large universal collectivity. In short, we can speak of Lynch's work from *Eraserhead* to *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* as more or less positive narratives of rebirth, though there are some complications that arise for Lynch's protagonists toward the end of that first stage of his work, particularly for Agent Cooper. But, in what I would like to call his second stage chronicles, Lynch inverts his strategy, tracing the great suffering experienced by those who refuse rebirth into vision.

If we consider Fred Madison from this perspective, the film easily makes itself visible as the story of a man who is continually invited by the universe to become a seeker, but who perversely turns his back on abundance in favor of pursuing what is patently impossible – his wife, Renee (Patricia Arquette), who does not and cannot love him. The film tells what could have been a standard melodrama about Fred being put on trial and sentenced to death for killing unfaithful Renee in a jealous rage. However, Lynch complicates the old formula to the point of demolishing it by raising doubts not only about whether Fred killed Renee, and whether she is in fact dead, but also about what we believe we know about the physical world. In the scene we just saw, which appears about forty-eight minutes into the film, when Fred escapes from a high security death row cell by turning into Pete, physicality is the central issue, a physicality that is neither completely solid nor bounded by absolute limits. This physicality contrasts radically with the over-controlled environment of the prison. Which do you think Lynch considers the dream? The unstinting malleability of particles inherent in nature? Or the phantom of limits on matter that the penal system represents?

After all, the reality of the unstinting malleability of matter does not make its first appearance in Fred's cell; his transformation appears as the climax of numerous challenges to any belief we might have in the rock solid physicality of the Marketplace. We have heard words spoken over Fred's intercom by someone of whom Fred can find no material trace. The words speak of the death of a man named Dick Laurent (Robert Loggia) whom neither Fred nor we have ever heard of, as if we are supposed to know who he is. There are three inexplicable videotapes. And we have seen Fred's home visualized not as a familiar, defined space, but as an indeterminate location in which he and Renee literally get lost. Then there is The Mystery Man (Robert Blake) whose face appears suddenly in Fred's bedroom where Renee's face should be and who seems to be in two places at once when he meets Fred at a party. Later the audience will have to contend with the double identity of Fred's wife; the double identity of Dick Laurent; and Fred's triple identity.

People want to say all this has happened in dreams because this kind of physical instability is beyond the imagination of the ordinarily acculturated person, even as a poetic fiction. And yet for almost one hundred years physics has been telling us that matter is uncertain, or, at least, that our perspective on it is necessarily uncertain. I am now ready to listen. I am ready to say that with *Lost Highway*, Lynch began to visualize the expanded universe he has always intuited through a new set of images.

Lynch discussed both Vedic certainty and quantum uncertainty with me when I met with him in 2010. In hindsight, he was so perplexed by how unguarded he had been that when I showed him the transcript of our interview, he asked me not to print it in my new book. I'm not going to quote him, because I told him I wouldn't, but I will tell you that he spoke at length of the way the materialist, consumerist Marketplace, as Lynch sees it, routinely misidentifies objects and bodies as the fulfillment of our desires and the essence of value and security. And thereby, the Marketplace creates a particularly dangerous illusion of certainty where there is none that results in a culture of non-being. Worse, that Marketplace culture of non-being demands of us the refusal of what can really sustain us.

We first see Fred in the dark, looking at the uncertain world through pained, unhappy eyes, but, perversely, he experiences only greater unhappiness when he is visited by numerous invitations to see that uncertainty only means that the world is full of freedom and possibility. Fred has first hand experience of particles that can be in two places at the same time, a phenomenon that physics has labelled superposition. When he astonishingly turns into Pete, he has first hand experience that particles can act as though they are one even though they are not connected to each other through normal chains of causality in time and space. This phenomenon has been scientifically labeled entanglement. For Lynch, the endless possibilities visible in the concepts of superposition and entanglement are cause for optimism. But in *Lost Highway*, Fred takes a negative view of the proof of the limitlessness that presents itself. If you are thinking, „Of course he does! These endless possibilities present themselves to Fred in fearsome shapes,“ you are correct. Or is it that, for reasons we must discuss, Fred is somehow influenced to misperceive boundlessness as terrifying? As I continue, I hope to show you that the latter is the case and that this tale is structured to encourage the audience to question that negativity. In fact, the fear generated by negativity in the face of abundant openness is the Lynchian idea of Hell. One of Lynch's favorite aphorisms is that the world is as we are, as in the parable of the coiled rope and the snake. If the world is a place of danger for you, then a simple, neutral coiled rope may well be, in your eyes, a snake – and much that is regrettable will follow from that kind of unbalanced vision.

Through Fred, Lynch deconstructs the destiny of a negative man, and the focus of Fred's negativity in this story is sex. Lynch chooses this focus not because he views sexuality in an unfavorable light, but because he sees it as the aspect of human life by means of which negative Marketplace illusions do the most damage. The hot spot of Fred's story is his terrible relationship to his wife, Renee, a two-step of uncomfortable silences; barely communicative words; and heavy sexual frustration. This is not a viable marriage, as we learn almost immediately, but Fred will not let go.

The consequences of Fred's obsession with Renee and his rejection of the bountiful universe are best understood in terms of the Vedic concept of Samsara, the unfortunate path of eternal transmigration into worse and worse forms of life, initiated by an inability to comprehend the larger nature of reality. The path Fred takes in this film is generated by just such a misunderstanding. He seeks security and satisfaction through a sexuality

of objectification and possession, the Marketplace version of erotic energy, which propels him into negative rebirth, the opposite of the positive rebirth stories of Lynch's first stage work. Trapped in Samsara, Fred descends into increasing sexual bondage, negativity, and violence.

He is helped along on his path by the tragi-comic disaster of the Marketplace culture of non-being which is often represented in this story by the agents of the law. At first, they appear in a humorous, useless form, as ineffective emissaries from Fred's culture when he needs help. The police who respond to Fred and Renee's complaints about the anonymous videotapes reduce the cultural affinity for illusory certainty to a burlesque obsession with nonsensical minutia, as they absurdly ask questions like „Is this the bedroom? You sleep here? In this room? Both of yuz?“ But comedy turns to something much darker once Fred stands accused of murdering Renee. We see that Fred lives in a society willing to extinguish a man's life on the basis of nothing more substantial than a powerful desire for certainty.

The fact that there is no corpse does not prevent the system from pronouncing a death sentence on the basis of a videotape that provokes more questions than it answers. The lack of substance in the court's decision is conveyed by the invisibility of the trial. We don't see it; in fact there is no way for the audience to know how the Marketplace has gone from the highly uncertain video to the death sentence it imposes on Fred. Indeed, this strange transition from videotape to death row is as spectacularly mysterious as Fred's transformation into Pete. Once Lynch establishes social institutions as phantasmic, he places the point of view of his film squarely within the territory of a different concept of reality, one that quantum mechanics calls non-locality. Non-locality means that particles of matter, and therefore objects and bodies, can be connected with each other in ways that depart from the essence of Newtonian physics, which sees the world in local terms, as a continuous chain of cause and effect stretching from here to there in linear space and time. Modern physics understands the world as essentially non-local, filled with the potential for superposition, entanglement, and other contradictions of Newton's theorization of the locality of matter. The non-locality at the heart of Lynch's second stage cinematic metaphors channels Werner Heisenberg's seminal formulation of the uncertainty principle in his 1927 paper: „the more precisely the position [of a particle] is determined, the less precisely the momentum [of that particle] is known in this instant, and vice versa.“ In other words, the upshot of non-locality is that it leaves us with infinite probabilities that make it impossible for a human observer to know the totality of a physical situation.

The Lynchian lesson to be learned by watching Fred and his culture is that, unable to know, they construct a bogus logic of locality, spurred on by fear and anger at the indeterminacy around them. This is evident in the legal system's prosecution of Fred; it is also evident in Fred's private process of inventing certainties, by means of which Lynch poetically depicts how negativity alters perception and behavior for the worse. There is an interplay between Fred's burgeoning annoyance with the videotapes that arrive anonymously and the images that appear on them. As Fred's response to the mysterious tapes becomes increasingly negative because he doesn't understand how they came to be there, the images on the tapes become more threatening, until the image of murder appears, triggering the Marketplace version of justice that leads to Fred's incarceration. The world is as you are.

But the universe remains larger than the shackles created by cultural fear. It invites Fred to freedom when it demonstrates limitlessness through his transformation into Fred/Pete. And does Fred marvel at the gift he has been given? Or even show curiosity about it? He does not. Instead, he takes another step in the cycle of Samsara down the lost highway when he picks Alice over Sheila (Natasha Gregson Wagner), Pete's girlfriend, and a life of crime over Pete's ordinary working life at the garage. As Fred/Pete makes these choices, Lynch demonstrates how hard his protagonist has to work to return to the lost highway of Samsara after the metamorphosis, which has put everything in place for our hero's liberation, an ordinary life of potential. At the same time, the new life also necessarily includes the omnipresent aspects of the Marketplace that replace open-endedness with the lures of glamorized delusions of non-being, the violence offered by gangster boss Mr. Eddy and objectified sexuality offered by his seductive moll, Alice. Fred/Pete is trapped by their seductions. Why? Something, which we shall soon explore, encourages Fred, no matter what form he takes, to persist in his preference for the delusional certainty that turns sexuality into a narcotic, hallucinatory object.

That hallucination is principally embodied, of course, through the metaphor of superposition that is Renee/

Alice. Using the same actress that he used to play Renee, Lynch presents Alice as existing in superposition with her, that strange circumstance in which one particle can be more than one but not quite two. When particles are in superposition, there are barely words to describe their relationship to each other in that it is impossible to say that they are both there at the same time or both not there at the same time. This just about sums up the relationship between Renee and Alice, two yet one, there yet not quite there, a quantum truth. In reality possession is impossible under these circumstances, although the Marketplace encourages the delusional behavior of desiring to grasp the ungraspable. In pursuing Alice as he once pursued Renee, Fred is both repeating a previously disastrous mistake and exacerbating the problem because Alice is the more obviously insubstantial and corrupt of the Renee/Alice superposition. She, as we shall soon see, puts into words her taunting elusiveness while Renee wordlessly slips from Fred's grasp. Alice is explicitly a part of a pornographic industry, while Renee only stimulates Fred's worst fears about her possible promiscuity.

Fred's furious attempt to possess Renee leads to what might be murder. Fred/Pete's acceptance of Alice's invitation to bondage leads to the clear, albeit accidental, murder of Andy (Michael Masee), Alice's pimp and drug dealer friend, when Fred/Pete lets Alice convince him to rob Andy so they can afford to run away together from Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent. The road Fred/Pete and Renee/Alice follow leads relentlessly to a desert cabin where they are supposed to meet up with a fence who will bankroll their escape. However, once there, Alice cuts the ground out from under Fred/Pete's hopes by revealing the impossibility of the possession with which she has tantalized him. The fence, actually the Mystery Man, is not there, and as they start to pass the time waiting for him by having sex, Alice makes sure it never reaches a climax by tauntingly whispering, „You'll never have me.“ This promotes another transformation into a third, more debased identity for Fred, which I will call Post Fred/Pete. Indeed the film tells us that „having“ any material thing in the way Fred and then Fred/Pete lust for it is not only impossible, but a pursuit that is inherently obscene and degenerative. Fred's negativity leads from a sick, passive desire to possess Renee, to an accidental murder in an attempt to possess Alice, to Post Fred/Pete's intentional collaboration with the Mystery Man in killing Dick Laurent/Mr. Eddy, making him the new porno king in town.

And now the moment I promised you earlier when we address why Fred, Fred/Pete, and Post Fred/Pete have been so persistently negative. The answer? Their choices have not been made freely. There is yet another form of non-locality at work in Fred's life that has been present all along. By this I refer to Fred's entanglement with The Mystery Man, a relationship that fuses both quantum mechanics and Vedic poetry. The Mystery Man grows out of the metaphors Lynch has gleaned from the literature of Vedic mysticism, which tells Lynch that the greater universe beyond the delusional Marketplace is filled with both beneficial and malign messengers that affect what we do when we begin to see what exists outside of ordinary Marketplace limits. Typically, from *Eraserhead* on, Lynch's characters are visited by these messengers in some form. The good messengers are angels who counsel decisions that will lead to love and affirmation. The bad messengers who instigate fear and thus hatred and death, Lynch thinks of, as he told me, in terms of the scourges of humanity in the Vedas, called Rakshasas. In his films, Lynch never explains why one character is visited by an affirmative influence and another by a negative influence. These images are simply ways of cinematically showing the thing that opens people to different energies. Fred's messenger is a Rakshasa: The Mystery Man.

The through line of *Lost Highway* is Fred's perverse progress toward an embrace of The Mystery Man in which they become entangled so that two are connected as one--almost. Remember the murder of Dick Laurent/Mr. Eddy is depicted in a way in which it is difficult to separate the two as the knife slices the victim's throat. At first, Fred and The Mystery Man are separate, but as the Rakshasa figure grooms Fred to create a world of negativity around himself, they move toward a state of entanglement. The Mystery Man begins fanning the flame of Fred's rage after the scene of bad sex with Renee, when he appears within her body, an image that tells us he already is and has yet to be revealed as the true object of Fred's desire. The Mystery Man's function is to transform desire itself into something pernicious. At Andy's party, he steers Fred toward a negative perspective on his ability to be in two places at the same time, by punctuating his demonstration with sinister laughter and intimidation. Similarly, he depletes Fred of hope during a phone call to Fred/Pete from Mr. Eddy who is obliquely expressing his anger at Fred/Pete's sexual relationship with Alice. Taking his turn on the telephone at Mr. Eddy's request, the Mystery Man offers a parable to Fred/Pete that reduces him to trembling paralysis,

when he turns Fred's situation into a snake by telling him pointedly about a mythical place in the Far East where condemned men are sent to a place from which they cannot escape, never knowing the exact moment when they'll be executed. Nice talking to you.

As the narrative unfolds, we see that the Mystery Man has prepared the deteriorating Fred to take the place of Mr. Eddy. But first the Mystery Man must make Fred fully a part of the non-being of the Marketplace. This campaign reaches its climax in the desert cabin, when the Mystery Man uses Fred's increasing fear to deprive him of any identity. Screaming at post-Fred/Pete that there is no Alice, the Mystery Man makes that attack on our hero's sense of reality a bridge to something worse. „And your name. What the Fuck is your Name?“ the Mystery Man growls. Post Fred/Pete clearly doesn't know anymore. Instead of being more connected as the narrative comes to a close, as is Lynch's first stage protagonist, this character reaches a nadir of disconnection.

The disconnection takes the form of pornography and murder, when the Mystery Man entangles with his new friend once known as Fred to cut the throat of his old friend, Mr. Eddy/ Dick Laurent, and then abandons his new friend to his role as a fugitive from the police. Amazingly, as Fred takes flight, he is once again visited by a potential liberation--if Post-Fred/Pete doesn't reject it again. But he does. Before the Mystery Man disappears, Post Fred/Pete listens carefully as he whispers in his ear. Filled with those words, unheard by us, he again embraces negativity, screaming „No“ under the pressure of a new transformation in progress. Post-Fred/Pete is still on the lost Samsara highway. In 1997, Lynch told me that Fred could have had a happy ending if the movie were longer. He laughed when I reminded him of that on March 18, but again did not explain. But it does suggest that the universe will persistently disclose its bounty to Fred. Possibility is always an option at whatever point on the lost highway.

To conclude, this interpretation of *Lost Highway* is a part of the larger exploration of the new developments in Lynch's cinematic artistry that I undertake in *David Lynch Swerves*. In his first stage cinema, Lynch gave us heroes who achieved a kind of blissful knowledge of a unified cosmos through their courageous crossing of boundaries set by culture. As it turns out, we now see that they only partially encountered the absurdity of social claims that there is a hard and fast materialist definition of reality. Lynch's second stage protagonists, more stuck in the Marketplace, are more confused, more stringently tested. Lynch confronts them with a quantum mechanics poetics of boundless materiality that radically challenges everything their Marketplace conditioning has presumed. It is blindness to the importance of this vision of matter in Lynch's work that previously stood in the way of my understanding of Lynch's two stage career, and, as I think, has blocked the entire body of literature about Lynch from acknowledging the full extent of his artistry as a filmmaker of unique and unparalleled modern vision.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Nochimson, Martha, P.: *The Passion of David Lynch. Wild at Heart in Hollywood*, University of Texas Press 1997.
Nochimson, Martha, P.: *David Lynch Swerves: Uncertainty From Lost Highway to Inland Empire*, University of Texas Press 2014.

FILMOGRAPHY

Lynch, David: *Eraserhead*, USA 1977.
Lynch, David: *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, USA 1992.
Lynch, David: *Lost Highway*, USA 1997.
Lynch, David: *The Straight Story*, USA 1999.
Lynch, David: *Mulholland Drive*, USA 2001.
Lynch, David: *Inland Empire*, USA 2006.