



# The Death of the Subject in David Lynch's Lost Highway and Mulholland Drive

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David ROCHE

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# The Death of the Subject in David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*

David Roche

David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1996) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) are films that deeply startle spectators, fascinating some, upsetting others, but always causing much debate on the subject of "what the movie was about." For most spectators and critics, this means figuring out the story and, ultimately, trying to distinguish between reality, or the real story, and the character's fantasies, sometimes using psychoanalytic tools. But *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* are films that seem to evade rational explanations, both at the level of diegesis and at the level of the character as comparable to a human subject with a conscious and an unconscious mind. It is this death of the character as subject that we wish to examine.

In a first part, I will try to show how mystery, that key ingredient of David Lynch's cinema, has been displaced from the diegesis to the film itself, in order to oppose rationalization, multiply subjectivity, and stimulate the interaction between the spectator and the film, thus killing diegesis in favor of narration. This death of diegesis heralds the death of the subject, which is why, in a second part, I will attempt to analyze the Lynchian character and see how, far from being a human subject, he uncovers his being an object in the composition of an artist. Like Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, one of Lynch's favorite films, *Mulholland Drive* is not just about the Hollywood movie industry, but even more about the magic of cinema as a form of art, and so, in a third part, I will take on a more metafictional approach in order to determine David Lynch's position in relation to these magical objects that are his characters and his films.

## I - A Taste for Mystery: the Death of Diegesis

### *The spectator-detective*

Bizarre as they may be, *Blue Velvet* (1986) and the TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1) are, on a structural level, held together by a linear detective plot. The series' subtitle, *Who killed Laura Palmer?*, is the question Special Agent Dale Cooper is trying to answer, while in *Blue Velvet*, the main character, Jeffrey Beaumont, finds a human ear in a field and, very much like in *The Hardy Boys* or other children's detective stories, decides to lead his own amateur investigation. In both cases, the detective is the main focalizer through which the spectator follows the plot, with the difference that, in *Twin Peaks*, the spectator knows a lot more than the detective, who is not present in all the scenes, and thus tries to solve the case on his own.

Although there is plenty of mystery in *Lost Highway*, there is no real detective plot; Fred Madison doesn't ever get around to really trying to find out whether his wife is cheating on him or not, nor does the police investigation of the case of the mysterious video tapes Fred and Renee keep receiving ever get underway. On a structural level, the film simply follows the main focalizer(s) in a narration that seems to be linear. Ironically enough, it is in part the detective plot that never gets underway that enforces this impression of linearity, since the police are always close on Pete's and then Fred's heels without ever catching up to them.

The first part of *Mulholland Drive* offers a semblance of a double detective plot: the Rita mystery and the Adam mystery. Yet with every new scene, many from which the main characters are absent, both mysteries seem only to spawn, or run parallel to, other mysteries, till the amateur detectives give up: Betty and Rita after running into a dead end, and Adam after giving in to the forces putting pressure on him to cast Camilla Rhodes. On a structural level, there is no single plot and no single focalizer the spectator can identify with, but rather, like in *Twin Peaks*, plots and focalizers (*Mulholland Drive* was first intended to be a TV series). The detective plots simply die out, leaving the many mysteries unanswered.

But this is the case only *on* the screen. On *our* side of the screen, the spectator is still trying to solve the mysteries. In other words, the detective has been *displaced* from the main focalizer to the spectator while the mystery has been displaced from the diegesis, the detective plot, to the film. There is a mystery or a puzzle, but it is the film itself, and the detective is none other than the spectator who can no longer rely on the character for focalization but must pick up clues as the movie goes along and try to work out its meaning(s), to the point that, in *Mulholland Drive*, only the spectator make associations between certain scenes, and in the end between the different parts of the film. So if *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* are held together by a genre, and more importantly by the character-detective's desire to solve the mystery, *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* are mysteries, not because of their genre, but *as films*, and are held together by the spectator-detective's desire to make sense of them.

#### *Narration vs. Diegesis: Film as Pure Mystery*

A detective picks up clues and organizes them in order to make the irrational rational; Sherlock Holmes sometimes solves the mystery and establishes a diegesis just by listening to a client's narration. The spectator-detective finds himself in a similar position as he watches *Lost Highway* or *Mulholland Drive*, only solving the mystery at a diegetic level, *i.e.* answering the questions "what happened and in what order?", turns out to be impossible.

As Guy Astic demonstrates in his study of *Lost Highway*, the film has "at least three possible stories" that do not exclude one another but rather exist simultaneously: (1) Fred is schizophrenic and the movie is a "psychogenic fugue," where the Pete Dayton story represents Fred Madison's fantasy and the Mystery Man Fred's Hyde; (2) a story of the supernatural and parallel worlds in which the Mystery Man exists as an entity; or (3) the entire movie is the psychedelic trip of a man sentenced to death on the electric chair, which would explain why electricity, associated to dreams and the Red Room in *Fire Walk With Me*, contaminates not only the shots but the editing itself (Astic 37-42). These different stories coexist and render the solving of the mystery and the establishing of *one* diegesis impossible.

Likewise, when Pascal Couté attempts to establish a diegesis for *Mulholland Drive* in which the first part of the film would represent "Diane Selwyn's dream" and the second what really happened (Couté 38), he is forced to admit that there are "three impossibilities" (42), notably the fact that the dead girl in the dream is in the exact same position and filmed in the exact same manner as Diane at the end of the film. Pascal Couté thus demonstrates the process the spectator undergoes while watching *Mulholland Drive*: (1) the impression of being faced with a great mystery; (2) the solving of the mystery and the establishing of a diegesis; and (3) the realization that this diegesis is not absolute so that the "story is in appearance fully determined," but envelops "its points of indetermination which forbid all closure within its determination." (45)

So both films frustrate the spectator's need for a rational diegesis by playing on the spectator's mistake that narration is synonymous with diegesis. The spectator-detective attempting to solve the mystery at a diegetic level is always, like the police on a stake-out in *Lost Highway*, *one step behind narration*. According to Gilles Deleuze, cinematographic narration is "a consequence of the images themselves" and not "an underlying structure" (Deleuze 40), thus *within* each image as well as *in the succession* of images. In *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, narration prevails over diegesis, the order of events in chronological time; "no narrative can preexist or survive the succession of images which tell as they build their figurative *becoming*." (Astic 39) *Lost Highway* is, in a sense, more aggressive than *Mulholland Drive* because it immediately frustrates the spectator's need for rationalization, but *Mulholland Drive* is trickier and more perverse as it seems at first to fulfill that desire only to frustrate it in the end. The spectator has no other choice but to accept David Lynch's invitation and "enjoy the ride on" *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, letting narration carry him along. (Cannes Press Conference)

### *A greater subjectivity for a greater bliss*

It is obviously David Lynch's intention to make films that are pure mysteries as he dislikes giving any explanations as far as meaning is concerned. Much of the point in *Blue Velvet* is that the power of the initial desire awakened by mystery dies out as it is solved; Jeffrey Beaumont is not as enthusiastic about the case when he discovers most of the truth and, as David Lynch had predicted, TV audiences lost interest in *Twin Peaks* as soon as they found out who killed Laura Palmer. Lynch has thus abandoned the detective story as a genre in order to make films that, as unsolvable mysteries, keep the spectator's taste for mystery alive to the end and beyond. *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* tap directly into the spectator's desire, which then forces him, sometimes against his will, to become a detective who will watch and pick up clues without, as Jeffrey tells Sandy in *Blue Velvet*, ever getting "solid proof." The frustration induced by this impotence at investigating explains some of the negative reactions to both of these films. Yet it is also this frustration that contributes to making them films of "bliss."

Of course, it is not only because these films frustrate the spectator that I want to call them films of bliss, but also because, as mysteries, they rely on him to fill in the gaps with his own imagination:

That there is a mystery is a HUGE THRILL. That there's more going on than meets the eye is a thrilling thing. Let's say that you could see something and mistake it for something else — a man walking across a window at night with something in his hand. Maybe you saw exactly what you thought you saw, and all of your imaginings are exactly what is going on. But more often than not, if you were actually able to go in there and see what was really happening, it would be a let-down from your imagination trip. So I think fragments of things are pretty interesting. You can dream the rest. Then you're a participant. (Rodley 26)

David Lynch belongs to a long line of American artists<sup>1</sup> for whom making the reader or spectator interact with the work of art and develop his own subjective reading of it increases the power of the work. It is not the cynical standpoint that critics who have defined postmodernism sometimes attribute to authors. No heroics, please! It isn't tricking for the sake of tricking—Lynch wishes to trick himself with his own films ('Silence on tourne'<sup>2</sup>)—but a belief or *faith* in the imagination: *subjectivity prevails over objectivity as narration prevails over diegesis*. Of course, David Lynch is only reinforcing the very essence of his idea of what a film is: a subjective thing which, as he remarks, "won't tell the whole story" (Rodley 26); the end of *Blue Velvet* only offers "a partial portrait" of Jeffrey Beaumont while "in the real Jeffrey Beaumont there'd be a million other thoughts that are not shown in the film." (Rodley 22) Frustration, then, ensures not only that the spectator's desire doesn't die out, but also that he will return to the film again and again to try to make sense of the different clues by tackling them from different angles, as the random chapters on the *Mulholland Drive* DVD invite him to do.

So mystery speaks to the imagination. It also seems to awaken a childlike enthusiasm. Jeffrey (*BV*) and Betty (*MD*) react much in the same manner when they talk about the mysteries they are trying to solve; they have a sparkle in the eye and they're very lively. Moreover, many of these talks take place in diners (Arlene's in *BV* and Winkie's in *MD*), the diner being, for David Lynch, a *locus* of the imagination—he himself likes to go to diners to let his imagination wander in search of ideas. There is thus a direct relationship between mystery, childhood and the imagination. Mystery draws one near to childhood because it is linked to innocence as opposed to knowledge. As David Lynch points out,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* comes to mind, and notably his comments in his 'Preface to the volume XII of the New York edition (1906-1910)', as well as Raymond Carver for whom 'what creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things' (*Fires* 26).

<sup>2</sup> This documentary is a feature on the French Zone 2 DVD released by Studio Canal. It also contains the Cannes press conference.

When you're small, you're always looking up at things, and if you can get down, and look up, and study stuff, it's sort of the same again. Except you know so much. That wrecks a lot of it.

But there's so much mystery when you're a child. Something as simple as a tree doesn't make sense. You see it in the distance and it looks small, but as you get closer, it seems to grow—you haven't got a handle on the rules yet. We think we understand the rules when we become adults, but what we've really experienced is a narrowing of the imagination. (Rodley 14)

Like the ear Jeffrey finds in a field and that the camera plunges into, David Lynch uses mystery to open a doorway between the film and the spectator's imagination. Mystery thus enables the spectator to undergo a form of regression: from knowledge to innocence, from the objective and rational world of the adult to the subjective and irrational world of childhood. Here, regression is seen as a positive process, maybe linked to the artist's nostalgia for his own happy childhood.

## II - The Death of the Subject, or the Subject as Object

### *Looking for a (narrative) identity*

The temptation is great, as I have attempted to show using Pascal Couté's analysis of *Mulholland Drive* as an example, to mistake one's subjective reading of a movie for the diegesis and, in so doing, to see the character as a human subject who acts according to conscious motives (the second part of *Mulholland Drive* as Diane's crime) and unconscious desires (the first part as Diane's dream). Both diegesis and character seem to stem from the spectator's need for a character he can relate to as a human subject capable of *producing* a diegesis. So the death of diegesis calls into question that a character can be defined or treated as a human subject.

Indeed, some of Lynch's characters suffer from a state of not being defined, from an absence of identity, sometimes caused by amnesia. In *Lost Highway*, Fred doesn't remember having committed the crime he is apparently guilty of; it is as if someone else were responsible. As for Pete Dayton, he has a name, a family and a girlfriend, a job and a car, but he tells his father he doesn't "remember anything." This fills him with an anguish very much like that of Rita who, in *Mulholland Drive*, admits to Betty that she knows neither her name nor who she is. The affect is thus brought on by an absence of identity that is to be equated with the absence of a subjective past (memory) as opposed to an objective past (recorded history), a distinction made by Fred Madison when he explains why he doesn't like video cameras: "I like to remember things my own way. [...] How I remember them, not necessarily the way they happened." For these characters, the identity of the subject is not so much defined along the terms: "I think, therefore I am," or "I exist in the eye of the other, therefore I am." The other's identity is just as problematic: "Is that you? Are both of them you?" Pete asks Alice when he sees her and Renee, her double, on the same photograph. Instead, the identity of the subject seems to be defined along the terms: "I remember who I am, therefore I am."

It is this subjective past, the way the subject *likes* to remember things, that counts because, like dreams and slips, it reveals the *desire* of the subject constantly at work shaping himself, producing a diegesis of himself based on a memory that is fed by desire. In David Lynch's films, memory often seems to be triggered by desire. Indeed, the only time Pete Dayton says he remembers something is *after* the beautiful Alice tells him she was here earlier, and in *Fire Walk With Me*, Chet Desmond insists Sam Stanley must remember the clues in order to decode Lil's body language, his desire to solve the mystery, to read the female body, being prerequisite to his remembering the signs. The characters are thus looking for an identity that has been composed by a subject of desire who likes to remember things his own way, who is constantly writing his own diegesis. This subject seems to correspond to what Paul Ricœur calls "a narrative identity," the composition of a historical subject, *i.e.* a subject acting and developing in time, depending in part on his capacity to take on the roles of narrator and character and tell his own story (Gilbert 193). It should come as no surprise, then, that those who are driven by the desire to solve the mystery are not the characters suffering from amnesia

which, by making it impossible for them to tell their own story, destroys their "narrative identities," but characters like Betty who seem to have fixed identities.

Yet, in the end, the identity of every character is an unsolvable mystery for the spectator-detective. Indeed, when Betty, whose identity seems from the start well-established (though she has never met her, Coco, her aunt's landlord, knows who she is and calls her by name the moment she sees her), the spectator is stunned by the appearance of Diane Selwyn, played by the same actress, and starts wondering, like Pete when he sees the photograph of Renee and Alice, if both of them are Betty and/or Diane. The diegesis that, in *Twin Peaks*, could already be equated to the question of the identity of the criminal subject (*Who Killed Laura Palmer?*) makes way, then, to an unsolvable mystery that is quite simply the identity of the characters as subjects (who are Pete Dayton, Fred Madison, Rita, Betty?), indeterminate in a world where all identities seem not fixed but shifting and subjective.

#### *The character as an image in decomposition and the "image-crystal"*

In both films, the character's failure to define his identity seems to cause him to break down. Indeed, when Rita's and Betty's investigation leads to a dead end—the dead body in Diane Selwyn's bed—Rita runs out of the apartment screaming hysterically with Betty close on her heels. The breakdown occurs not only at the level of the character but also at the level of the image; the shot is subjected to special effects that fragment their image and their voices are drowned out in reverb, the camera seemingly writing out the mental state of the characters. Fred Madison also goes through a sort of breakdown (he suffers from splinting headaches) when his identity is called into question, *i.e.* when he is put in jail for a crime he doesn't remember having committed. But the actual fragmentation or decomposition of his image thanks to special effects occurs during his painful transformation into Pete Dayton which, the narration suggests, may be triggered by something else.

In his prison cell, Fred has a vision of reality tearing like paper—or burning like photographic film?—and raising its curtains to reveal another reality beyond: the image of a cabin exploding subjected to a rewinding process, followed by a slow-motion shot of the Mystery Man at the top of the stairs. This cabin is the place where Pete will turn into Fred; as a *locus*, it is the reflection of Fred's cell which is the place where *Fred* will turn into *Pete*. This image is what Deleuze calls an "image-crystal," *i.e.* an image in which the movie reflects itself, an image that contains at once "the actual image," the real image existing at the present moment, and "its virtual image" which is *its* recent past and "corresponds to it like a replica or a reflection," so that it is impossible to tell the two images apart, to tell the explosion (what is filmed) from the implosion (the editing process) (Deleuze 92, 106). Like the different stories, the two images *coexist*. Moreover, the whole scene is made up of four shots that are identical to the ones at the end of the film, with the exception that the shot of the Mystery Man is not in slow-motion the second time around and the shots at the end of the film correspond to *two different scenes*. The scene Fred witnesses is thus *two scenes in one*. It contains two films: the song ('Song to the Siren') that accompanies Pete and Alice's love-making can be heard drowned out in reverb and stands for the Pete and Alice part of the movie, while the almost identical shot of the Mystery Man is used when Fred gets up after the second metamorphosis, thus the Fred part. Like the transformations, this image-crystal is a *bridge between two movies that reflect each other*, but it is impossible to tell the reflected from its reflection, just as it is impossible to tell the real story from its dream.

Likewise, in *Mulholland Drive*, the decomposition of Rita's and Betty's image occurs *after* they have been confronted with an image-crystal that functions as a bridge between the Betty/Rita part of the movie and the Diane/Camilla part, both parts reflecting each other without defining which is the reflected and which is the reflection. This image-crystal is one of the impossibilities picked up by Pascal Couté: the body of the dead girl in the same position and filmed *in the exact same manner* as the body of Diane Selwyn at the end of the film. Once again, the image-crystal contains two films, to the point that two different actresses play, on the one hand, the body of the dead girl (Lyssie Powell), and on the other, the body of Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts). Once again the second image is *almost* identical to the first, so that one can't tell Diane apart from her reflection.

So the decomposition of the subject's image, achieved through special effects, appears to be a consequence of the characters' seeing an image-crystal. The Doppelgänger theme, like mystery, is no longer applied just at the level of the diegesis and the characters, *it affects the film as a whole*: there are *at least* two versions of a movie, the reflected and its reflection(s), all of which cannot be differentiated. Indeed, at the end of *Lost Highway*, Fred's image is once again decomposed after an image-crystal: Fred has returned to the first scene of the film, only this time, instead of being the Fred Madison who at the beginning of the film hears a voice say "Dick Laurent is dead" on the intercom, he is another Fred Madison who says "Dick Laurent is dead" through the intercom. Once again, this scene reflects another but it is impossible to tell the reflected from its reflection. These films are thus *more* than double; the number of reflections is infinite, so that Deleuze's image-crystal, as applied to David Lynch, could be redefined as an image containing both "the actual image" and its virtual images.

### *The subject as an object in a composition*

The character does not so much discover his identity as *uncover*, for the benefit of the spectator, that he belongs to a film that is a *part* of the film, that is, one subjective version among others. When this occurs, it is the *image* of the character that is decomposed because, as there are other versions of the film, there are other versions of the image of the character. The character is thus not a human subject but a *subjective image that is part of a composition* (the image of the character as part of a shot, the shot as part of a film), so that it may be more appropriate to compare the character to an object than to a subject.

Indeed, amnesiacs like Pete and Rita are, from the start, identified to objects subjected to events and other characters' desires. Pete is taken home by his parents, taken out by his friends, manipulated by Alice, while Rita is first seen in a limousine not driving but *being driven* somewhere, and is then dragged along on an investigation by Betty. Even when Rita decides they must go to the Silencio, it is not a conscious decision; she is possessed by an idea which comes to her out of the blue. Rita is a "broken doll"—this is the word used by David Lynch when he directed Laura Elena Harding for the aftermath of the car accident scene—, an object subjected first to Betty's desires, then to a mysterious force.

But even characters who seem to have an identity are subjected to events orchestrated by mysterious forces. These sometimes take shape, as in *Lost Highway* where they are embodied by the Mystery Man who helps Mr. Eddie terrify Pete then helps Fred kill Mr. Eddie, and tells Fred that Renee and Alice are the same person. In other words, like a director, he doesn't take sides as far as characters are concerned, knows the same actress is playing two different parts, and is, as opposed to Fred, associated with the video camera and recorded history (the "objective" past). There are many such forces in Lynch's other films. In *Twin Peaks*, the inhabitants of the Red Room, like the Greek Gods, either harm or try to help the characters. In *Wild at Heart*, the Evil Witch of the East seems to cause discord in Sailor and Lula's lives whereas the Good Witch of the North's intervention reestablishes the harmony of true love. And in *Mulholland Drive*, the cowboy explains to Adam that he is the only driver of the buggy and that Adam has no choice but to ride along, just as Lynch invites the spectator to enjoy the ride on *Mulholland Drive*; there is also the sick-looking hobo at the back of Winkie's who is the keeper of the blue box which serves, first, as a passage between the two parts of the film (the cowboy also fulfills this function), and secondly, as the source from which emerge the demons who lead Diane to commit suicide.

I'd like to call these mysterious forces "figures" of the director after Barthes, a director who seems to manipulate characters like objects, who dabs them onto his composition then erases them suddenly, like Betty whose disappearance goes unexplained. The character is thus an *object in the work of an artist*. Before the transformation, Fred Madison looks up in his cell and sees a spotlight shining down on him, similar to the one used in *The Elephant Man* to signal the beginning and end of Dr. Treves's presentation when he presents John Merrick to his colleagues. Fred is an object in a movie just as John Merrick is the object of Treve's show. As such, he can be replaced by another character just as John Merrick can, as one of the characters suggests, be replaced any other "freak." Moreover, Fred Madison's metamorphosis into Pete Dayton is, like the birth of Victor Frankenstein's

creature, accompanied by lightning and electricity. The Lynch character is thus, like the Frankenstein monster, a composition made up of bits and pieces of matter and texture.

So if David Lynch's characters cannot be compared to human subjects, it may simply be because they are images in an artistic composition. The character is thus not a human subject that produces a diegesis or develops in one, but an object that moves along a narration and that is subjected to the mysterious hand of the artist. Unlike the subject of desire who, in Lacanian theory, is made to realize during analysis that he is a "myth," the character as a would-be subject *cannot* come to any realization concerning "the truth" of his existence as "fiction," or anything else for that matter, *because* he is an object in a composition (Borch-Jacobsen 187). The process at work, the death of the subject, which is also *the death of psycho-realism*, takes place, like the mystery, not within but *outside* the film, as *the narration uncovers for the spectator to see that the character is not a subject but is and always has been an object in an artist's composition*. Of course this does not keep psychoanalytical theory from being a useful semiological tool in order to analyze the images *per se*.

### III - The Magical Object

*The actor-character = an "image-crystal"*

Yet, calling the character an object seems discordant to David Lynch's vision of cinema. Indeed, how can one conciliate the cynical, *tyrannical* position of a mad God-like director handling characters like objects and his taste for mystery which encourages subjectivity and *freedom* of interpretation? There is obviously more to the character as object than meets the eye, something that may have to do with the magic of cinema.

Although the character cannot be compared to a human subject, he nevertheless acts in the sense that he plays parts. In *Fire Walk With Me*, Laura Palmer, an identitiless character who tells her boyfriend James she is "Gone," is also an actress whose parts range from local prostitute to the home-coming queen so that, though the whole town knows her, no one knows who she really is; they only know her parts which sometimes get mixed up. Likewise, in *Lost Highway*, Pete Dayton plays the part of Pete Dayton since it is all written out for him, and in *Mulholland Drive*, Rita names herself after Rita Hayworth while Betty is a talented actress who can play the same part in either a melodramatic tone when she rehearses with Rita or in a very sexy fashion at the audition.

All these identitiless characters are actors. As David Lynch says, "amnesia ties in to acting. Actors give up themselves to become somebody else." ('Silence on tourne') The identitiless character is thus fundamentally an object which attempts to *act* like a subject. He then becomes a mock-subject for whom acting *like* a human subject appears as the only solution to escape being an object. In *Fire Walk With Me*, it is Laura Palmer's inescapable destiny to become an icon, the photograph of a dead girl which frames each episode of *Twin Peaks*—the movie came out after the series and describes what happened prior to the events in the series. In the film, before entering the Bang Bang Club, Laura meets the Log Lady who touches her forehead to take her temperature and says: "When this kind of fire starts, it is very hard to put out. The tender bows of innocence burn first." Laura then looks at her reflection, goes inside, breaks down and cries, and stops only when she takes on the part of the local prostitute. What the divine inhabitant of the Red Room has revealed to Laura Palmer is that, like the cabin in *Lost Highway*, she is literally an image-crystal (Laura and her reflections) on fire. Or more exactly, as an actor-character, she is an object trying to escape being an object by being a mock-subject who is, ironically, the object of desire of the men who pay her. In the same manner, Rita (*MD*) breaks down and cries when the investigation for her identity fails, then takes on the part of Betty by cutting her hair and wearing a blond wig, ironically becoming the object of Betty's desire.

The character-object thus mistakes another character-object for a subject. Believing he is a (mock-)subject when he takes on a part, the identitiless character is actually an object (a character) that acts like another object (another character); he then becomes a mock-object, and the experience of otherness (or sameness depending on which way you look at it) is, in fact, not becoming another subject but becoming another object. Indeed, before Rita appears as a mock-Betty, the shot first

shows Betty looking at her own reflection in the mirror; Betty then draws the mock-Betty to her side and the two virtual Betties stand side by side in the mirror: Betty's reflection and the mock-Betty, both are reflections Betty who, as a character, is an image. That Betty offers to help Rita cut her hair puts her in Orson Welles's shoes when he transformed Rita Hayworth into a short-haired blond for her part in *The Lady From Shanghai*; Betty is thus herself the reflection of an actor-director.

Like the bridges between the different parts of the film, *the character as actor is thus an "image-crystal," "the actual image," and its mock-objects, its virtual images (the different parts), all of which cannot be differentiated*. Looking in the mirror at this face without an identity, the as-yet-unnamed Rita lays eyes on a poster of *Gilda* and names herself after Rita Hayworth. In other words, she names herself after the actress who was a human subject and not after the character as icon because the actor and the character cannot be told apart.<sup>3</sup> The actor and his characters thus tend to crystallize: *the actor is an image-crystal in which the actor and his parts cannot be differentiated*.

#### *The "power of the fake" and the magical object*

According to Deleuze, the image-crystal engenders a "puissance du faux," a power of the false and the fake, the French word implying both meanings. Indeed, as we have seen, it is impossible to tell the real image from its virtual images, the true from the false, the genuine from the fake (Deleuze 172). Diegesis is replaced by a "falsifying narration" which "exposes the forgers, the sliding from the one to the other, the transformations of the ones inside the others" (175); it is a narration the characters have no choice but to ride along with, either playing parts (becoming mock-objects) or, like Pete and Fred, transforming into other characters (objects).

This idea that the image-crystal produces a "power of the fake" is illustrated in *Mulholland Drive* by the singer Rebecca Del Rio's appearing as herself at the Silencio. Although an illusion of a complete human subject is momentarily maintained, the singer as human subject seeming at first to be equated to her part (thus no virtual images), she turns out to be a character who lip-synchs, thus who *acts like* she's singing. The actress then splits apart into what Deleuze distinguishes as the two components of the "image-movement," the "opsign" (her body collapses) and the "soundsign" (her recorded voice goes on singing), revealing that she is an "image-crystal" whose part reflects the real human subject (herself). As such, she is, like the different actresses who sing the same song in playback at the casting for the lead role in Adam's film, an object which can be replaced, for although Rebecca Del Rio the human subject is a real singer, her character performs a part that is just as fake as another, and as fake as the magician's tricks which are all produced by visual and sound illusions.

But what this scene also demonstrates is that this "power of the fake" also *produces an emotion in the spectator bordering on the sublime*. Even though Rebecca Del Rio's singing is shown to be fake and the magician keeps telling the audience that there is no orchestra, only a tape recording, thus revealing that the two components of the image-crystal are separate, Betty and Rita are moved to tears by the singer's performance and frightened by the thunder the magician seemingly conjures. Showing the image-crystal to be false or fake somehow reinforces its nature. The multiplication of reflections increases subjectivity which, according to Bergson, "is never ours, it belongs to time, that is to say to the soul or to the spirit, to the virtual. The 'real' is always objective, but the virtual is the subjective." (Deleuze, 110) By destroying all illusion of a subject and revealing the mock-objects, subjectivity is paradoxically multiplied to infinity. The image-crystal or the actor-character is thus a sort of magical object ; the "power of the fake," the image-crystal's essence, may very well represent the magic of cinema which, by multiplying subjectivity, opens onto the infinite.

I have argued that, for David Lynch, subjectivity is the key to making the spectator interact with the film. Appropriately, the image-crystal, containing the infinite of subjectivity, can only unleash its magic *when it interacts with the spectator*. There is thus more to the image-crystal than meets the

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<sup>3</sup> Actors, even real actors, are icons; people often get the name of the character and that of the actor mixed up, and TV shows like *The X-Files* or *E.R.* have shown that the character often eclipses the actor while actors like Bruce Willis or Arnold Schwarzenegger are practically the characters of the action-packed features they star in.

eye; the scene at the Silencio insists heavily on Rita's and Betty's gazes. Moreover, the image-crystal and the actor are metonymical representations of the film—both acting and cinema are fake. The film is thus also a magical object and, as David Lynch says, "a chance to get lost completely in a world." ('Silence on Tourne') But in order to enter that wonderland, the spectator must interact with the magical object thanks to his senses. Like the Rubik's-Cube-like blue box which opens onto another movie once Rita inserts the key into it, the camera forcing the spectator's gaze to fall through the box as when Alice fell through the rabbit hole, the image-crystal is a magical object that can only be opened by a key: the spectator.

### *The real at work in the art of David Lynch*

It seems appropriate that, since it is the "power of the fake" of the "image-crystal" that opens a door onto the infinite, the strange forces at work in the films of David Lynch are often represented as being very fake: the robin on Jeffrey's windowsill at the end of *Blue Velvet*, the Wicked Witch of the East and the Good Witch of the North (*WAH*) who look just as phony as in the 1939 movie starring Judy Garland, the Mystery Man (*LH*) who is heavily done in make-up and, as Guy Astic points out (Astic 94-5), is very reminiscent of the clownish Grim Reaper in Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*. Moreover, not only do these strange forces look fake, but intertextual references to other films also produce a "power of the fake" as they are the reflections of films within the film. Because of this, they link the infinite of subjectivity to the infinite of the strange forces they represent. Yet they are also, as we have seen, figures of the director. So the question remains: is David Lynch a God-like artist imposing his will on his characters and even on his actors, as this statement from actress Naomi Watts seems to suggest: "We're a vessel, a canvas, that [David Lynch] puts his ideas on?" (Cannes press conference)

In fact, David Lynch sees *himself* as subjected to forces that intervene in his life much in the same way as they intervene in his characters'. Indeed, outside forces—producers, like those associated to demi-gods<sup>4</sup> in the film—killed the *Mulholland Drive* TV series project; that Lynch made it into a film is seen by him as a product of fate, as if mysterious forces momentarily possessed the producers so that the film would happen. These forces also speak through these magical objects that are actors. When Betty does the audition (*MD*), Woody, the experienced actor, first directs her, positioning her like an object before starting the scene. But as they play the scene, it is Betty who takes over and starts directing it, as she places his hand on her buttocks. What makes her do this? Is acting in fact being possessed, like Leland Palmer who *acts* differently when he is possessed by the demon Bob in *Twin Peaks*?

Whether these forces be producers, characters speaking through actors, or nature at work in a painting like *Clay Head with Turkey, Cheese and Ants* where ants eat away at a piece of meat, they represent a form of divine. But as Alain Chareyre-Méjan points out, there is "nothing religious about the divine, which is not what links together but rather *what keeps happening*. It is in a way Nature itself in the sense that it rains ceaselessly down on us without even having a direction." (Chareyre-Méjan 85) David Lynch's divine may very well be the real which shows itself "where what happens happens." (84) If the divine is often represented as fake, it is because, like E.T.A. Hoffmann's automaton in *The Sandman*, an imitation "questions the mystery of 'the identity' of the real:" it is "a device which imitates the real imitating the device," and proves that, as Clément Rosset explains, "the world is the world and nothing other than the world exists." (Chareyre-Méjan 71-2) That David Lynch's films are mysteries may then be seen as a consequence of his vision of art as subjected to the divine. Indeed, for Chareyre-Méjan, the detective story focalizes on details and does not try to organize the real: "the thing happens when it wants to, the story can't do anything about it. It follows. Hence its charm." (55) David Lynch's taste for mystery thus indicates a *faith that the real will suddenly appear*.

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<sup>4</sup> It is the power of money which confers omniscience to Mr. Roque who, like the divine creatures of *Twin Peaks*, resides in a Red Room.

Il y a comme une extrême *sincérité* du style Policier. Une sincérité de nature directement esthétique, et non pas épistémologique ou morale: une certaine passivité dans laquelle s'engouffre le monde au fur et à mesure qu'il apparaît. Une foi perceptive, en somme, attachée à la conviction que l'instant qui arrive et le fond de tout ne font qu'un. Il y a dans le Policier cette intuition fondatrice de la modernité esthétique que l'instant de conviction et le surgissement du réel constituent la butée ultime des discours.<sup>5</sup> (Chareyre-Méjan 58)

This may explain in part why David Lynch distrusts words and why his art is so figurative. As Alain Chareyre-Méjan remarks, "a word asserts something about a thing; a shape, if it's possible, makes it be." (66) After the final word of *Mulholland Drive*—"Silencio"—is spoken by a very fake Fellinian countess, the lady with blue hair, silence opens onto the sublime which "physically crushes our words" and makes the presence of the real be felt (Chareyre-Méjan 96).

David Lynch's relationship to his art is quasi-mystical. Like the post-romantic English poet Ted Hughes who, though an atheist, saw the creative act as being possessed by an idea (the Thought-Fox comes in through a hole in his head and is then captured on paper), Lynch at the Cannes press conference compared inspiration to fishing; ideas swim around out there and from time to time you catch one: they are the real when it is "saillant," which in French includes both the idea of something outstanding as well as something which stands out or *protrudes* from the real (Chareyre-Méjan 85). Moreover, David Lynch's faith in the real implies for him that he has a moral duty to be true to it, as Moses had to be true to the word of God, when he puts ideas into form.

You can lose your way very easily. And die the death. Every film is its own film. The idea passes through Suzy's machine as it goes from one medium to another. It's this machine that colors the idea to some degree. But still the idea dictates everything. [...] It's not about manipulation, for me, it's about being true to the ideas. (Cannes press conference)

David Lynch is a romantic, and it is this mystical vision of art, which he depicts in his films, that enables him to escape the cynicism of the tyrannical artist by turning the artist into a *worker* of the divine, as the ant is a worker of Nature, so that the film can simply happen.

### The "Religion" of David Lynch

I have tried to show that the death of diegesis and the death of the character as human subject go hand in hand. The first is a consequence of the displacement of the detective plot from the diegesis to the film, which ensures that the spectator's desire for it will not die out. The second occurs when the character uncovers, for the benefit of the spectator, that he is not a human subject but an image in a composition. These two deaths endow the film with an infinite power capable of filling the spectator with emotion and awe. Indeed, David Lynch's films, like his characters, are magical objects, image-crystals that, because of their many reflections and their many unsolvable mysteries, multiply subjectivity to infinite. The rational makes way to the irrational as narration prevails over diegesis, subjectivity over the subject, and figuration over psycho-realism. I have defended a portrait of David Lynch as a romantic filled with childhood nostalgia and not the cynical postmodernist tyrant he is sometimes thought to be.

It is nevertheless interesting that, although he seems to share many of the obsessions of the American artist, notably a desire to return to a lost Eden, God and religion are almost completely absent from his films. Lynch says he believes in an afterlife, but he does not appear to be interested in religion as such. It may be because he feels religions force a unique representation and interpretation of the divine onto the masses while David Lynch's art—his religion—multiplies fake

<sup>5</sup> Detective fiction is, in a sense, extremely sincere. This sincerity is purely aesthetic in nature, and not epistemological or moral: it is a sort of passivity which swallows the world even as it appears. A perceptive faith associated to the conviction that the instant drawing near and the depth of the world are one. Detective fiction has this founding intuition of the aesthetics of modernity: that the instant of conviction and the sudden appearance of the real represent the ultimate end of discourses. (*My translation*).

representations of the divine—the fake faking the real faking the fake—in order to give each spectator the freedom to feel the divine for himself, to catch his own ideas, his own fleeting glimpses of the real.

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