

Structures of Guilt across *Lost Highway*

When the credits rolled on *Lost Highway*, I felt as if I had just watched a crime mystery in which I knew neither what exactly the crime was nor who had committed it. As with many other Lynch films, I could not easily summarize what had happened, but I could recount the strong emotions that ran throughout it, namely that of Fred Madison's hysterical guilt. Over the semester, our conversations with Professors Duwayne Dunham and Mary Sweeney have aided in delineating a Lynch-verse with unique narrative habits: films that move with unusual, shifting rhythms and that leave their stories open rather than resolved. *Lost Highway* (1997), which Sweeney both edited and co-wrote, exemplifies these characteristics. During the lecture, she emphasized that it was not cut to make conventional sense, but assembled around intuition, mood, and emotional tempo. Motivated by that approach, the film breaks Madison's story into discontinuous pieces, depicts the unstable fracture of his identity, and relies on repetition in its narrative. These structural choices place Madison's guilt at the center of the film's narrative, giving the viewer a continuous sense of his emotional state.

After Madison is sentenced for his wife's murder and locked in solitary, the scenes in prison show how the collapse of his identity is a consequence of his own guilt. The sequence is edited around repeated returns to the cell, cutting away to other spaces before bringing us back. Each return cut to the cell brings us back to a medium close-up of Madison on the narrow bed with his arm across his face or his eyes fixed upward, and the repetition makes his expression look more disoriented each time (*Lost Highway* 00:44:19–00:48:42). The monotony of the gray walls and floor, broken only by a small barred skylight, turns the room into a mental cage, implicitly signifying that his guilt is tightening around him (Woods). Instead of marking the

passage of clock time, these returns feel like they were put in as checkpoints into a mind that is quickly wearing down. When that pattern finally breaks, it does so through a hallucinatory montage of flickering light, distorted close-ups, and frantic cutting around his body (*Lost Highway* 00:49:56–00:51:00). In lecture, Sweeney described this metamorphosis as “cutting-room trickery,” built from in-camera effects and a fake Fred head packed with artificial brain matter. The identity transition is thus literally constructed out of fragments in the edit, rendering his shift into Pete more as something to be viscerally felt than understood. Combined with the lack of any stable intermediary shots, this sequence leaves audiences with a striking feeling that something within Madison has broken.

After the cut in the cell, the Pete Dayton section of *Lost Highway* brings in the concept of what Sweeney introduced in lecture as “psychogenic fugue.” Psychogenic fugue can be understood as a state in which a subject under extreme pressure adopts a new identity that refuses its connection to an earlier self and to an unbearable act (Woods). The edit behaves accordingly. It drops viewers into Pete’s life without explanation, smoothing over transitions and letting scenes play with more conventional continuity, as if the film were offering a reality untouched by the murder (*Lost Highway* 00:56:40–01:11:46). Sweeney also mentioned in lecture that the O.J. Simpson trial was a big inspiration for Lynch during filming, and that the director was bewitched by the idea of how someone can commit an act of such intimate brutality and then go on behaving as if nothing happened. In the same vein, we are made to experience a version of Madison who imagines himself as someone desirable and innocent. This segment of *Lost Highway* invites us to feel how alluring that sense of escape could be. Yet, returning images, repeated actors, and Pete’s eventual migraines tear at the seams of this new world, hinting to the

viewer that the new identity cannot fully detach itself from the old one, that Madison's guilt is too overpowering. Rather than declare that Pete is definitely Fred, the film lets viewers inhabit a secondary narrative only to then gradually expose its cracks. In that sense, this switch into Pete's world is one of the clearest ways the editing makes Madison's overwhelming anguish felt, as his new life keeps circling back toward what it seems designed to avoid.

In the final movement, Madison's hysterical guilt is accentuated through the use of repetition in the edit that turns the film's narrative into a full cycle. The most obvious instance is the film's ending, where the return to the same highway shot offers the clearest indicator of its cyclical story (*Lost Highway* 02:09:49–02:10:09). Within this framework, the consistent use of This Mortal Coil's cover song of "Song to the Siren" provides a sonic analogue to these visual returns. The track's three appearances each mark key moments when Madison's sexual failure, desire, and ultimately guilt resurface. Thus, Sweeney's recurrent placement of it on the soundtrack mirrors the film's reliance on repetition to organize the story (Miley). In terms of narrative, the melody supplies a line of continuity that crosses the fracture between Fred and Pete, and lets viewers perceive Madison's guilt as an ongoing pattern. In that way, the use of the song depicts how Sweeney's emotions-first editing style translates into structural choices that highlight Madison's psychosis. Film critic Roger Ebert characterized the film as a sequence of "isolated scenes and notions", yet the patterns of both image and sound reveal an underlying structure that gathers those fragments into a coherent depiction of unresolved guilt. As expressed by Professor Dunham, where other directors "build the box," Lynch instead "takes the lid off." *Lost Highway's* circular narrative aligns directly with Sweeney's account of an edit guided by

intuition, with such a design allowing Madison's guilt to emerge as the most coherent element in an otherwise volatile narrative.

After the backlash to the second season of *Twin Peaks* and the—at the time—critical rejection of *Fire Walk with Me*, it would have been easy for Lynch to return with a film made to win back critics and audiences; instead, he gave the world *Lost Highway*. Rather than guiding the viewer toward a single answer about what precisely happened, the film builds a world in which central events never solidify into definitive stories. Across the violent prison metamorphosis, the fugue-like turn into Pete's imagined life, and the cyclical structure of the final movement with its visual and musical returns, the film depicts Madison's state of extreme distress and guilt through the editing and narrative structure. Sweeney has described *Lost Highway* as the point where Lynch “cut loose” after *Twin Peaks* (Fagerholm). Releasing a film that critics such as Ebert dismissed as “design, not cinema” amounts to a crucial decision in the director's already storied career, that of putting complete trust into his own intuition (Ebert). Seen this way, *Lost Highway* holds a special place in Lynch's oeuvre, not only as a powerful story about guilt and sin, but as the film where he decides to go all in on the distinctive patterns that now define what we have come to call the Lynch-verse.

Works Cited

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