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Article

## ***Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me (1992) and David Lynch's Aesthetics of Frustration***

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### **Résumé**

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Cet article s'intéresse à *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (David Lynch, 1992), la préquelle à la série produite par Mark Frost et David Lynch (1990-1991), qui représente un tournant dans la filmographie de Lynch. L'auteur soutient que l'esthétique du film vise à frustrer les attentes du spectateur, et notamment du fan de la série télé, en se penchant sur le rapport de filiation que le film entretient avec la série. L'esthétique du temps qui passe (Deleuze) ainsi que l'accumulation de signes insolites (Guiomar) dans la première partie du film amène le spectateur, qu'il soit fan ou néophyte, à s'attendre à une issue fantastique. L'article se penche ensuite sur la relation paradoxale et perverse qu'entretiennent le spectateur (ainsi que le cinéaste) avec Laura Palmer, personnage dont le sort est attendu mais qui n'engendre pas moins la frustration puisque sa présence tant désirée ne fait que souligner son absence en tant que sujet.

### **Abstract**

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This article focuses on *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (David Lynch, 1992), the prequel to the TV series produced by Mark Frost and David Lynch (1990-1991), which represents a turning point in Lynch's filmography. The author argues that the film's aesthetics frustrate viewer expectations, and especially the fan of the TV series, by addressing the issue of the film's relation to the TV series. Special attention is paid to the aesthetics of time passing and to the accumulation of unusual signs in the first part of the film, with reference to Deleuze and Michel Guiomar, and the way they lead the spectator, fan or neophyte, to expect something Fantastic to happen. The article then addresses the spectator's (as well as the director's) paradoxical and perverse relation to the film's main protagonist, Laura Palmer, whose fate is utterly expected but who further engenders frustration as her presence on-screen only underscores her elusiveness as a subject.

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### **Texte intégral**

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It came somewhat as a surprise when David Lynch released a film based on the TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) which he had more or less turned away from during the second season in order to make his fifth feature film, *Wild at Heart* (1990) (Rodley 1997 : 184). Fans were even more surprised—and maybe even disappointed—to discover the film was neither a condensed version of the series, nor a sequel, but a prequel which had little chance of providing answers to the final episode (Rodley 1997 : 182). Generally speaking, the film was neither a critical, nor a box office success (Chion 2001 : 177 ; Hughes 2001 : 178-82 ; Astic 2008 : 131-32). A brief overview of the first part of the film gives the impression that it is a mere replay of the series' pilot. Two FBI agents (Chet Desmond and Sam Stanley) are sent to a northwestern American town (Deer Meadow) in order to

investigate the murder of a young woman (Teresa Banks); the first shot directly following the opening credits, a body wrapped in plastic floating down a river [2:45], immediately recalls the opening shots of the pilot [2:00]. But the resemblance ends there, for at a diegetic level, the first part of the film is actually, as many critics have noted, the antithesis of the pilot (Chion 2001 : 173 ; Lauté 2002 : 111 ; Astic 2008 : 133). Both open with shots of a river, but the body only appears on the bank in the pilot [3:35]; there are two FBI agents, not one, and Dale Cooper and Chet Desmond do indeed share the same initial letters, only inverted; the town is uninviting, even hostile, *Twin Peaks*'s "shadow self" (Hughes 2001 : 166); if Lucy Moran, Sheriff Truman's secretary in the TV series, provided the officers with fresh coffee and donuts, the coffee Deputy Cliff invites Desmond to help himself to "was fresh about two days ago" [8:25]; Irene, who works at the local diner, is certainly not as amiable as RR-owner Norma Jennings, when she tells Sam Stanley who would like to order some food: "You wanna hear about our specials? We don't have any." [18:25]

*Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* was clearly not *Twin Peaks*, the fan of the series had, by then, presumably realized. I will argue that the film was, in effect, meant to be an experience of frustration for all viewers, but especially for *Twin Peaks* fans whose "horizon of expectations" the film attempted to anticipate, namely thanks to its status as a prequel. By "horizon of expectations," Jausse meant the system of references that can be expressed objectively for each work of art at the time of its release (1978 : 54). Although he coined the term in order to study the reception of works by real audiences in context, my study will focus on response rather than reception, that is to say on what Iser called "aesthetic experience" (1978 : 134) when he argued that "meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced." (1978 : 10) Frustration will be understood as both the act and state of preventing one's desires from being fulfilled, namely the fan's and the neophyte viewer's expectations regarding *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*. Lynch's approach would thus be in complete opposition to the way filmmakers and producers, according to many film genre critics, are believed to attempt to satisfy what they imagine to be viewer expectations in order to achieve financial success (Altman 1999 : 15-6, 122 ; Grant 1977 : 1).

I believe the film marks a turning point in Lynch's filmography because of the importance it gives the spectator. Lynch's experience with television ratings had, perhaps, made him increasingly aware of audiences. In any case, the film is clearly meant to be an emotional and mental experience. As such, it anticipates *Lost Highway* (1996), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2006), as critics have noted (Lauté 2002 : 115 ; Astic 2008 : 128), though, unlike Jérôme Lauté, I will argue that *Fire Walk With Me*'s structure is just as "deliberate" as those of the latter films (2002 : 115), and I agree with Guy Astic when he states that the film's lack of balance is actually a return to the TV series' orientation (2008 : 132-33). The subsequent analysis will focus on various elements of the film's aesthetics of frustration—its status as a prequel and the play on generic conventions, the passing of time and the multiplication of "unusual" signs, the enigmatic female protagonist—all the while underlining how they serve to articulate what I see as the film's four unequal parts: Chet Desmond and Sam Stanley's investigation of the murder of Teresa Banks, the return of Philip Jeffries and Dale Cooper's brief investigation, the seven last days of Laura Palmer, and Laura's resurrection in the Red Room. Many of these aspects (genre, time, "unusual" signs) can affect both the neophyte spectator and the *Twin Peaks* fan, while varying degrees of knowledge of the TV series obviously creates a gap; the main paradox may be that Laura and the Red Room remain enigmatic even for the *Twin Peaks* fan, making it paradoxically more frustrating for the fan than for the neophyte who can nurture the hope that *Twin Peaks* is the key to unravel *Fire Walk With Me*.

## 1. THE FILM'S FILIATIONS WITH THE TV SERIES AND FILM NOIR

Opening credits: the camera zooms out on a watery blue haze in order to reveal the static-filled screen of a TV set which implodes when someone off-camera hits it with an axe [00:15-2:45]. The film's program is announced quite literally: all hope of resurrecting the series, metonymically represented by the TV set, the sole object of the gaze in a room cast in darkness because of the light from the white-noise-filled screen, is crushed. The film's opening credits put a symbolic end to the series, just as the final episode, directed by Lynch, symbolically destroyed *Twin Peaks* the town. That the blue haze is not revealed for what it is until after the names of the two screenwriters (David Lynch and Robert Engels) have appeared [2:20], and not immediately following the names of the executive producers who created the series (Mark Frost and David Lynch) [2:15], suggests that Lynch takes full responsibility for re-writing *Twin Peaks* and endowing the series with a

posthumous origin. The character he plays, Gordon Cole, is, by the way, the first living character to appear [2:55], right after the shot reminiscent of the series' pilot. As for the music score, what could be more different from "Twin Peaks Theme," with its 1980s guitar synthesizer, than "Theme from *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*," a down-tempo "jazz composition in the style that Miles Davis pioneered in the 1960s" (Nochimson 1997 : 191), the whole drowned out in a spring reverb that dampens both high and low frequencies in order to convey a dark, liquid atmosphere?

Expectations raised by the music regarding the film's generic identity, and namely its film noir heritage, are soon to be frustrated. Desmond is presented as a cool, competent agent, making an arrest [3:05]. The spectator is invited to identify, albeit briefly, with the latter through the POV shot inside the plane [4:05], but the instance of primary identification with Desmond is, in fact, a decoy, as the low-angle shot of Desmond getting out of the plane immediately establishes his superior position [4:25]. The spectator's stand-in, I would contend, is, in effect, Sam Stanley, whose first name is an obvious reference to Dashiell Hammett's famous private eye. If Sam has "cracked the Whitman case" [4:45], and the *Twin Peaks* fan has solved the Laura Palmer case by proxy, both must rely on Desmond's superior knowledge to decipher Gordon Cole's "surprise," i.e. the various meanings attached to Lil's clothing and dance [4:50], which Desmond explains to Stanley on the drive to Deer Meadow [5:30].

But the beginning of the film evokes "the failure of the detective machine," as Martha Nochimson has noted (1997 : 173). Desmond turns out to be a very disappointing detective, as the *Twin Peaks* fan finds himself more capable of decoding Cole/Lynch's "blue rose case" than Desmond. Indeed, it is Stanley, not Desmond, who extracts the letter "T" from under Teresa Banks' fingernail [13:55], and only the *Twin Peaks* fan knows it is a clue as to the killer's name. If Desmond symbolically castrates Stanley by tricking him into spilling coffee on his groin at Hap's diner [17:05], the gap between the detective and the spectator widens so that, not only does the second find himself playing the part of the first, but he finds himself ironically better qualified to lead the investigation. By the end of the first part, not only has Desmond been symbolically divested of his powers as he disappears, but later, even Dale Cooper, the ingenious detective from the TV series, is symbolically castrated by the camera when it focuses on the words "Let's Rock" written on the windshield of Desmond's car, visually cutting Cooper's head off [31:45]. Cooper's investigative impotence is ironically underlined when he quite dramatically raises the question of the killer striking again: "But like the song goes: who knows where or when?" [32:15] For even neophyte viewers were expected to know the answer from the film's tagline, "The Seven Last Days of Laura Palmer," which was added as a subtitle in countries like France (Astic 2008 : 130) and Japan (Hughes 2001 : 157). This statement, which quite simply summarizes the plot, mockingly echoes the series' catchy tagline—"Who Killed Laura Palmer?"<sup>1</sup>—thus denying the mystery it evoked.

The film further frustrates the spectator's expectations by raising a series of false alarms, often related to its avowed generic filiation with film noir. The photo of Sheriff Cable bending steel with his bare hands [10:50] hints that the verbal confrontation between Desmond and the sheriff may become physical.<sup>2</sup> At Hap's diner, the old man's inquiring if the two FBI agents are "talking about that little girl that got murdered" [16:40] calls for further information, an expectation his repeating the question renders nonsensical. Desmond and Stanley's hurriedly producing their FBI badges upon hearing someone angry yelling inside the Fat Trout Trailer Park office and noticing the warning on the door ("DO NOT EVER DISTURB BEFORE 9 A.M. . . . EVER") portends the worse [18:45], yet the proprietor turns out to be quite harmless and even agreeable, if odd. These visual and verbal signs, which the characters and the spectator can read as announcing a forthcoming fight, a revelation from a stranger or a dangerous madman, do not so much put them on the wrong track: they merely "le[ad] to dead ends," like "[t]he clues that were found by" the two agents, and that Cooper mentions at the end of the second part [33:20]. In other words, these signs do not signify, or rather, they signify the absence of signification, thus exacerbating the spectator's expectations that they will, at some point, signify.

## 2. THE PASSING OF TIME AND THE MULTIPLICATION OF "UNUSUAL" SIGNS

The atmosphere in the first part of the film can be described as one of expectation. At the beginning of the Deer Meadow Sheriff's headquarters scene, Desmond and Stanley are waiting to see the sheriff. The music stops the second it starts [7:20]: a guitar chord is strummed, followed by a couple of beats of hit-hat which quickly fades

out, leaving only the sound of the wind. The music both breaks and contrasts with the mid-tempo binary jazz tune and its time-keeping hit-hat, which has been playing ever since the first shot with Gordon Cole. The music thus emphasizes the passing of time, which is exactly what this scene portrays: the two agents were waiting before the scene even started and it looks like they might indeed wait “a while,” as Deputy Cliff says [8:05]. Expectation is thus the continuous form in contrast to present tense narration which would describe a succession of actions, e.g. when Desmond neutralizes Deputy Cliff, putting an end to the waiting period and causing the camera to follow his movements and give way to a series of close-ups [8:40].

With their depth of field, the two main long shots reinforce the scene’s atmosphere of expectation. Both use the wall to create a vanishing point, the first with Stanley sitting at the back of the room, the second with the hallway leading to the inaccessible sheriff’s office. When Deputy Cliff emerges from the hallway and tells Desmond: “Why don’t you have a seat over there with your partner? Go ahead make yourself at home, cause it’s gonna be a while.” [8:05], his remark evokes time by emphasizing space: waiting is symbolized by the unbridgeable distance which separates Stanley from the Sheriff’s office and that is emphasized by the shot/reverse-shot technique associated with the two long shots. I would argue that these two shots evoke time in the same manner as Deputy Cliff’s remark. They correspond to what Deleuze called a “direct time-image” and depict “a continuum of duration”: “a specific feature of depth of field is that it privileges time over movement and exhibits time for itself.” (1985 : 142, my translation) There are other such shots in the first part of the film, notably outside the morgue when time-obsessed Stanley worries about “where [they]’re going to sleep” at “three thirty in the morning” [14:25], and also inside Teresa Bank’s trailer where Stanley finds himself once again at the furthest point in a triangular composition where each character embodies one vertex [20:40]. It is my impression that, by emphasizing duration rather than action, these shots contribute to give less weight to narrative and more to narration, a shift in emphasis I have shown to be an essential part of the aesthetics of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* (2004 : 43).

The focus on the passing of time increases in the subsequent scenes. The morgue scene starts with a close-up of the clock with the second hand revolving [12:45]. The two agents, who “have [their] own clock” [11:55], lose all sense of time: at Hap’s diner, Desmond says “[i]t’s “late” and Stanley retorts “[i]t’s “early” [18:35], while at the Fat Trout Trailer Park, Stanley says “it’s really late, or really early” [20:15] when the two agents examine Teresa Banks’s trailer for clues. Time seems to rewind as Stanley comments on the coffee—“We sure do need a good waking-up, don’t we, Agent Desmond?”—then repeats his remark because his colleague did not react [20:50]. His rhetorical question recalls the man at Hap’s diner who also asked the same question twice for no apparent reason, thus linking the treatment of time to the multiplication of false alarms. The two strategies described above have thus come together. The time-image now frames a narrow space filled with enigmatic signs, both verbal and non-verbal, that seem to multiply: a photograph of Teresa Banks wearing a green ring [20:10], the very clue that will enable Laura Palmer to discover the identity of her abuser [89:00]; another false alarm occurs when, a moment later, a strange woman enters the caravan, preceded by the sort of forward-tracking shot often used to depict approaching danger [21:00], only to retire without answering Desmond’s question about Teresa Banks; then Carl Rodd, the proprietor of the trailer park, tells the two agents: “You see, I’ve really gone places. I just wanna stay where I am.” [22:15] Rodd offers no further explanation, so that his statement signifies nothing more than what he said, yet his forlorn expression and the meaningful tone with which he spoke conveyed a depth of meaning which ultimately remains inaccessible. Even the verbal fails to signify.

I would argue that these false alarms or enigmatic signs participate in an aesthetic of the “unusual.”<sup>3</sup> Michel Guiomar defines the “unusual [*l’insolite*]”<sup>4</sup> as an aesthetic category which, through various phases, appears to set the scene for the appearance of the *fantastique* (1957 : 128); it represents a sort of threshold to the *fantastique* which, for Guiomar, roughly corresponds to Todorov’s marvellous, though, for Guiomar, this “new Marvellous” represents the subject’s “haunted unconscious mind” (1967 : 275, my translation). In other words, for Guiomar, the “unusual” would lead one to expect the supernatural. Appropriately, Teresa Bank’s “unusual” caravan is located just a few steps away from a locus of the *fantastique*: the caravan where we will last see Agent Desmond and which belongs to those mysterious inhabitants of the Convenience Store, the Chalfonts. The eerie backward-played sounds associated with the Convenience Store and the Red Room, and thus with the *fantastique*, that have been increasing in quantity and volume since the beginning of the film—they first occur when Stanley finds the letter T under Teresa Banks’s fingernail [13:55]—are literally swarming in Teresa

Bank's caravan, as if the *fantastique* were just dying to break through—Chion even compares the screen to a “membrane” (2001 : 175-76).

This, in effect, is what occurs in the second part of the film. The spectator is immediately plunged into an atmosphere of expectation, as Agent Cooper strides into Cole's office to tell him the precise date and time, then adds that he's “worried about today because of the dream [he] told [him] about.” [26:10] This time, the agent is not cool like Desmond, but nervous. This time, the shots do not display the passing of time, but change rapidly in order to keep up with Cooper as he paces back and forth between the hallway and the monitor-surveillance room [26:20]. Cooper sees his own image frozen on the video monitor, although, oddly enough, he is no longer standing in the hallway, and watches Phillip Jeffries come back from wherever it was he had disappeared, step right through his image and into Cole's office. I would argue that it is at this moment, when Jeffries steps out of the elevator, that the “unusual,” which has built up to a “saturation” what with the accumulation of signs, “brings about the imminence of the event,” beyond which lie “the event, the hallucination, the prodigal, the *fantastique*, the eruption of the macabre.” (Guimar 1957 : 127-8, my translation) This “event” is not only Jeffries's return at a diegetic level, but the subsequent “eruption” of the Convenience Store and the Red Room onto the screen for the spectator to see.

Jeffries desperately tries to tell his colleagues what it was like in the Convenience Store—“I sure as hell wanna tell you after . . .” [27:55]—but his words are drowned out by the sounds associated with it. The few sentences we can make out fail to construct a narrative which would coherently explain the images on screen as a classic voice-over should. “. . . I found something!” shouts Jeffries [29:05], but he disappears, first as a “soundsign,” 5 then as an “opsign,” before we find out what [29:20]. Moreover, the two components of the “time-image,” “opsigns” and “soundsigns” (Deleuze 1985 : 13), are dissociated both in Cole's office and in the Convenience Store so that it is impossible to say one world is subordinate to the other. The enigmatic signs we are shown—the Man from Another Place saying: “Garmonbozia” 6 [29:15], a word that the subtitles will define at the end of the film [121:45], a grandmother who is a direct reference to one of Lynch's early short films [28:25], the Man in Red jumping backward [28:55], etc.—appear in succession, constituting, I would suggest, what Deleuze calls “points of deactualized present” (1985 : 132, my translation).

The Convenience Store sequence ends with the Chalfont/Tremond boy, who looks very much like a young David Lynch (Astic 2008 : 46), taking off his white mask with a Pinocchio-like nose twice in two successive shots [29:05]: first, a frontal close-up where he reveals his own face, then an extreme frontal close-up where another face is concealed in the shadows. The mysterious face will not be revealed until the end of the film when it turns out to be that of a monkey [123:05]. Again, this enigmatic image is meaningless at a diegetic level, but I see it as inviting, not to say imposing, a metafictional interpretation: the child in an adult's suit wearing the mask of a liar is a stand-in for the director jubilating in playing “monkey” games with the spectator. For the only thing that holds the scene together, giving it continuity and ultimately linking the various opsigs and soundsigns, is the “Theme from *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*” which recalls the film's promise in the opening credits. This second part thus marks the disappointing climax of an aesthetics of frustrated expectations I have attempted to analyze. What could have been a coherent narrative, Agent Jeffries solving the mysteries of this other world, gives way to a playful cinematographic experience where what the spectator is given to see probably does not correspond to what the character himself experienced, which not only marks the difference between narrative and narration, but more importantly, privileges narration over narrative, and aesthetic experience over consistent characterization. It is in this respect that I see *Fire Walk With Me* as the first in a series of invitations to play—I have in mind Lynch's remark that he hopes audiences will enjoy “the ride on *Mulholland Drive*” (Cannes Press Conference).

### 3. KNOWING WHAT TO EXPECT: AN ENIGMATIC WOMAN

With all hope of a coherent narrative seemingly lost, the nostalgic theme from the TV series that opens the third part comes as a welcome relief for the series' fans [32:25] (Astic 2008 : 134). The film will now carry out the promise in its tagline or subtitle of delivering the narrative of “the seven last days of Laura Palmer.” The third part is thus also an experience of expectation, only this time, the spectator knows what to expect: the film's subtitle leaves no doubt as to what is to come and the killer's identity is no mystery to the series' fans, only to

Laura Palmer and, for a short while, to the neophyte spectator—the mystery of Teresa Banks’s murder is resolved three-quarters of the way into the film [92:00].

The third part is quite literally the experience of being the fire that walks with Laura Palmer (Chion 2001 : 178). Laura speaks these words to Harold [43:15], whom I see as a stand-in for the neophyte spectator: Harold is a recluse who lives outside of Twin Peaks and with whom Laura shares her inner life, entrusting him with her diary which contains information concerning her rapist’s identity [43:40]. I want to underline that, if the stand-in for the spectator in the first part of the film was a detective playing an active part in the ongoing investigation, the stand-in is now a passive spectator looking in from the outside. This suggests that the spectator is no longer a private eye, but a Peeping Tom. The shots often underline the fact that the camera is spying on Laura, e.g. from behind a fence when her car arrives at her secret friend Harold’s house [41:45], or when she is framed between two posts outside the Bang Bang Bar where she lives her secret night life [66:15]. Unlike Jeffrey Beaumont in *Blue Velvet* when Sandy wonders whether he is “a detective or a pervert” [30:00], the spectator cannot claim curiosity as an excuse for morbid voyeuristic desires, while for the *Twin Peaks* fan, the initial pleasure of finally seeing the subject missing from the TV series, and thus generously making up for the frustration caused by the TV series (Chion 2001 : 169), seems to have perversely made way for the “visual pleasure” Laura Mulvey identified in classic Hollywood narrative cinema.

That the focus on Laura is equivalent to a desiring gaze is also represented at a diegetic level. Laura is constantly the object of the gaze of those who love and/or desire her (principally Donna, James and Bobby). They, too, function, at least in part, as stand-ins for the spectator. However, unlike Donna who is shut out from many aspects of Laura’s life—she tries to undergo the same experience as her friend by imitating the latter’s behavior at the Bang Bang Bar [70:45], only to admit Laura’s behavior eludes her understanding: “Why do you do it?” [84:10]—the spectator is given to see Laura’s inner life on the same level as her outer life. For instance, when Laura realizes Bob has read her diary, the distorted and amplified sound of paper being torn [41:15], which has no link with the diegetic reality presented by the image, represents not so much an audio flashback as it takes on a psychological dimension—it is an instance of what François Jost calls “primary internal auricularization” (Gaudreault and Jost 1990 : 136)—as well as a metaphorical one: Laura’s inner life has been raped. Likewise, on Laura’s last day, the fingers on the clock at school spin [103:45], appearing as a symptom of Laura’s dazed state, but also signaling that the end is quickly drawing near. If the film does not let us hear the character’s thoughts as in *Dune* (1984), it makes Laura’s thought processes visible, most notably when she realizes her father may very well be Bob and a series of close-ups and zoom-ins focus on the signs—the One-Armed Man, the Man from Another Place and Teresa Banks either holding or wearing the green ring [89:00]—that lead her to solve the mystery. This scene, with its close-ups that single out specific signs, recalls the scene where Desmond explained “the dancing girl’s” mimics to Stanley, and thus suggests that Laura is also a detective trying to figure out her rapist’s identity.<sup>7</sup>

The experience of frustration would, then, come, in part, from the film’s putting the spectator in the satisfying yet uncomfortable position of . . . a spectator. It seems to me that, in this case, the ungraspable nature of the object of the desiring gaze makes the spectator’s position especially frustrating. Indeed, if Laura Palmer is shown as a body walking to school in her schoolgirl’s attire [32:30], one of the first lines she speaks, wearing nothing but a towel, is: “I’m gone, long gone.” [34:55] In other words, Laura may be present as a body, as a sexual object, but, as a subject, she remains absent, enigmatic<sup>8</sup> to her friends and ultimately to the spectator, which was the opposite in the TV series where she was an absent body powerfully alive in the minds of the other characters (Astic 2008 : 119). When James asks her “[w]hat’s wrong with [them],” her answer echoes the line quoted above: “You don’t know me. There are things about me—Even Donna doesn’t know me . . . Your Laura disappeared . . . It’s just me now.” [108:55] Earlier on in the film, when Donna asks her why she sells her body, Laura merely replies: “Life is full of mysteries, Donna.” [81:55] Donna’s taking part in Laura’s experience has not enabled her to understand it. The same goes for the spectator who may have seen more, but in the end knows little more than Donna. The mystery at the heart of *Fire Walk With Me* is, then, not the killer’s identity as the first part of the film seemed to suggest, but the victim’s, that is to say the identity of the “Me” in the film’s title, of this woman who is “all-women-in-one” (Chion 2001 : 182).

In the end, Laura’s identity gets confused with that of her rapist when she looks at her reflection and sees Bob gazing back at her [117:50], while one shot shows her father wearing the same grotesque make-up as Laura when she says “[f]ire walk with me” to Harold [120:45]. I have argued elsewhere (2008 : 230-5) that, like

Dorothy Vallens in *Blue Velvet*, Laura's behavior recalls at once the hysteric and D.W. Winnicott's "false self," a social role that is "a defensive formation in which the individual is alienated from his emotional center, i.e. the internal center of the self that Winnicott called the true self" (Feher-Gurewich / Tort 1996 : 204, my translation). It is significant that Laura appears as a parody of a witch or a demon when she speaks the title of the film as if possessed. Not only does this suggest, as Jérôme Lauté points out that Laura is the "scapegoat," the Thanksgiving "turkey" [36:15], sacrificed to purify the community (2002 : 113), but it also reinforces the filiation between the "sorceress" and the "hysteric" that feminists have pointed out time and again (Meaney 1993 : 7). Laura is not only symbolically burning up; she is constantly breaking into tears or laughter. That the enigmatic hysteric/witch/actress participates in producing the experience of frustration that, for Lynch, is essential to the spectator's experience of cinema, has been confirmed in his more recent films with Renee/Alice in *Lost Highway*, Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla in *Mulholland Drive*, Nikki Grace/Susan Blue in *Inland Empire*, but it was already at the heart of *Blue Velvet* (1986) with Dorothy Vallens.

#### 4. BRINGING AN ICON BACK TO LIFE

*Fire Walk With Me* is presented, then, as the experience of seeing the subject to her death—Laura Palmer, the empty vessel destined to become "[t]he absent center" (Rodley 1997 : 172), the photograph that haunts the TV series. The personified "fire" addressed in the title is none other than the spectator with his desiring gaze, who is not completely passive but, as the title suggests, is also capable of movement. At a metafictional level, the title can be read as Lynch's invocation of the spectator in the creative process: the fire of creation requires the spectator to produce the aesthetic object; frustrating the spectator is merely a means of fanning the fire. In the end, the film does not reveal the TV series' icon as a human subject, but as the object sacrificed to the fire of the spectator's desire. Like the protagonists of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* (Roche 2004 : 47-8), Laura Palmer ultimately uncovers, for the benefit of the spectator, her being an object in a composition, a celluloid image in combustion.

At the end of the film, all the spectator's expectations concerning Laura Palmer have been fulfilled. Or almost. For, if Laura is indeed murdered by her father, she is then brought back to life in the Red Room. I identify her resurrection as the fourth part of the film. No longer dressed and made-up like a schoolgirl or a prostitute, Laura recalls, rather, the femme fatale evoked by her first name in reference to Otto Preminger's film (1944). At her side, another archetypal figure of film noir: the TV series' detective, Agent Dale Cooper [123:45]. Both are endowed with iconic value (Astic 2008 : 104). Oddly enough, the third central figure of the genre, the criminal (Leland/BOB) is absent, even though he was shown in the Red Room a moment before [122:00]. An angel appears instead, and seeing it makes Laura laugh and cry, her face lit with a white light reminiscent of that which illuminates Henry at the end of *Eraserhead* (1977) [82:15] or Betty and Rita at the end of *Mulholland Drive* [135:35]. It seems to me that these resurrections subvert classical Hollywood narrative codes that have erected verisimilitude into an essential quality of cinema. As the third part of the film opened with the main theme from the series, the spectator had every right to expect the film to end, like each episode, with the framed photograph of Laura Palmer. At the end of the film, however, the mystery—and the "m'hysteric" to use Irigaray's term (1974 : 250)—does not die, but lives on in the Red Room. With its red theater curtains and its black-and-white-zebraed floor (another reference to *Eraserhead*), this artificial space represents a *mise an abyme*<sup>9</sup> of the artificiality of a film desired by the film-maker who "wanted to see [Laura] love, move and talk." (Rodley 1997 : 184) If the monkey behind the mask can be interpreted as Lynch's mocking the spectator whose expectations have once again been thwarted, Laura's laughter may be directed not only at the spectator, but also at the director who has brought her back from the dead only to imprison her. The ending might also recall Bazin's theory that visual arts are rooted in a "mummy complex," i.e. "artificially fixing the carnal appearance of the being" in order to "pull him out of the flow of time" and "secure him to life" (2002 : 9, my translation). But rather than attempting to "save the being through appearance" (Bazin 2002 : 9), Lynch is trying to preserve what was already a copy to start with: a fictional character named after a famous film noir heroine. However, this excess of artifice, which I see as one of the main elements of Lynch's approach to art, goes against Bazin's idea that the need to preserve the dead is "essentially" linked to the psychology "of resemblance, or even, realism." (2002 : 10) For in the end, far from destroying the TV series, the film invites the frustrated spectator to pursue the aesthetic experience from the prequel to the series back to the prequel, and playfully ride



along this spiral composed of enigmatic and sometimes even inconsistent signs which fail to signify.

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### Notes de bas de page

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- 1 Cooper's next appearance will be just as disappointing, as he vaguely describes the next victim to his colleague Albert Rosenfield, demonstrating once again that he knows much less than the spectator [45:10].
- 2 A fight scene was filmed but edited out (Hughes 2001 : 168).
- 3 Astic uses the word "*insolite*" in his book but without referring to Guimar (2008 : 110).
- 4 Rosemary Jackson translates "*l'insolite*" by "the unusual, the unprecedented" (1981 : 25).
- 5 "Opsign" and "soundsign" refer to visual and sound situations, with sound no longer relying on the image.
- 6 The characters in the Red Room were taped speaking backward, then played forward (Rodley 1997 : 165).
- 7 She asks Bob, the man who rapes her: "Who are you?" [101:25], the same question she put to the mysterious blue light that appeared in her room [89:30].
- 8 Laura responds to Jacques' enigma ("I am not Jacques. I am the Great Went") with an enigma of her own: "I am the Muffin." Interestingly enough, the first is a reference to *Twin Peaks* episode 2 (M.T. Wentz is a restaurant critic and mother of diner owner Nora), the second to a conversation between Laura and Donna that was edited out of the film (Hughes 2001 : 171), suggesting an enigmatic ping-pong between the series, the film and the material edited out of the film [73:30].
- 9 The relation of similitude a part of a work has with the work it belongs to.

### Pour citer cet article

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