NARRATION IN MAYA DEREN'S MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON AND DAVID LYNCH'S LOST HIGHWAY

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Abstract: Based on David Bordwell's theory of narration, which asserts that perception is a learned activity – the viewer constructs schemas to comprehend the development of stories –, this article proposes the hypothesis that it is the experience of watching films that enables viewers to make sense of a commercial but innovative film like *Lost Highway*, which, if produced in the forties, as Maya Deren's *Meshes in the Afternoon* was, would probably be seen as an experimental or avant-gardiste film, as long as commercial production values were not taken into consideration.

Key words: avant-garde, experimental cinema, filmic narration, post-modernism

Narration in *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *Lost Highway*

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In 1943, Maya Deren, the celebrated American[1] avant-garde filmmaker of the forties and fifties, made her first and best-known experimental film, *Meshes of*

[1] She was born in Kiev in 1917, but was soon brought to the United States, where she grew up mainly in Siracuse, New York.

the Afternoon. The point I want to make in this work is that it would probably have been difficult for Maya Deren to make her film as a regular Hollywood production in 1943. However, in 1996 David Lynch managed to make a film, *Lost Highway*, which can be seen as a Hollywood production that stands in the outer limits of commercial cinema – like the Cohen films – and not as an experimental artifact, although it seems to narrate its story in ways that do not differ substantially from the way Maya Deren constructed narration in the avant-gardiste *Meshes of the Afternoon*.

One begins to speculate then what it is that makes *Lost Highway*, a film that defies the widely accepted canon of classical film narration, interest a viewer that is not necessarily that of the art-house circuit, a viewer that is more familiar with current Hollywood production. My hypothesis is that audiences today are better trained in reading films that do not conform to a conventional classical narrative, and can thus more easily accept a cinematic work which deliberately confuses them with surrealistic elements in its narrative. That would perhaps also account for the fact that producers take the risk and invest money on films like *Lost Highway*[2] , which, after all, do not deviate completely from the norm of the Hollywood mainstream cinema: *Lost Highway* has Bill Pullman and Patricia Arquette as its leading actors, and although they do not have a "screen persona" in the sense that they are not a product of the Star System as actors of the past were, they are two very popular Hollywood stars. Furthermore, *Lost Highway* includes in its soundtrack rock music by Nine Inch Nails (*Videodrones* and *The Perfect Drug*), David Bowie and Brian Eno's song *I'm deranged*, which plays twice, in the opening credits and at the end of the film, Lou Reed's *This Magic Moment*, and the music of Rammstein, Tom Jobim, and Smashing Pumpkins. Besides, the film has supernatural characters – the man with a white make-up and a heart-shaped face; a mobster obsessed with cars – who provide a comic relief and extra moments of violence in the middle of the film; and it also has very stupid detectives. All of these are elements that can be found in current films. This might make *Lost Highway* more attractive to modern audiences, and insert it, in spite of its eccentricities, in the format of commercial cinema.

In order to support the ideas I intend to develop in this essay, I will use David Bordwell's theory of film narration as he develops it in *Narration in the Fiction Film*.[3] Based on a theory of general perception and cognition, Bordwell asserts that it

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[2] Deepak Nayar, Tom Sternberg, and Mary Sweeney are the producers of *Lost Highway.*
[3] BORDWELL, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

is the viewer that constructs the narrative on the basis of top-down processes[4] that involve making assumptions, making inferences, and hypothesizing. This can be done, Bordwell believes, because the spectator has organized clusters of knowledge, which he calls *schemata*, that have an important function in the comprehension of stories.

The point I am making is that if Constructivist theory, which is the foundation of Bordwell's theory of narration, asserts that perception is a skilled, learned activity, and if, consequently, the viewer can construct and develop his schemata, the experience of watching movies enables viewers to sit through films like *Lost Highway*. The prevailing form of cinema as popular entertainment – what Stephen Connor refers to as "the 'classic-realist' text of the Hollywood cinema" – derived from the nineteenth-century novel and theater and I agree with Connor when he says that "alternative practices in the cinema need, therefore, to be defined against the dominating model of Hollywood and the narrative conventions it maintains."[5] So, as *Lost Highway* is an alternative cinematic practice, before discussing the main points of this work I find it helpful to make an account of the classical Hollywood narrative, according to the extensive study that Bordwell made of this type of narrative in *Narration in the Fiction Film*.

In the classical narrative, Bordwell says, style is subordinated to the interests of the syuzhet, which he defines as "the actual arrangement and the presentation of the fabula in the film."[6] When Bordwell studies the canonic narration in the classical Hollywood film, he highlights some characteristics of this mode, which the viewer learns to comprehend by interpreting the cues it presents. The canonic narration displays a state of affairs that has been disrupted and must thus have its order restored; the principal causal agency is the character; spatial configurations are motivated by realism and by compositional necessity; there is a strong sense of temporal causality; there are usually two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance and the other, another sphere – work, a mission, etc.; the syuzhet is usually broken into segments, sequences; the epilogue usually presents a happy ending and repeats motifs that run throughout the film; narration tends to be highly communicative and omniscient, and moderately self-conscious; the "invisibility" of the classical style is due to a strictly limited number of particular technical devices. Viewers will make sense of the narrative by making probable, exclusive, and aimed at suspense hypotheses, helped by the repetition of the data, by the usual placement of the exposition within the early scenes

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[4] These differ from bottom-up processes - like seeing a moving object - which are involuntary.
[5] Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary, p. 196.
[6] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 50.

of the film, by the "primacy effect"[7] – which is sometimes reaffirmed by the star system (the moment you see Marlene Dietrich you know there will be cabaret singing) – and by retardation devices – complications, subplots, or digressions.

In art-cinema narration, Bordwell argues, the temporal manipulations are based on three interlocking schemata: "objective" realism, "expressive" realism, and narrational commentary. For the classical cinema, reality is assumed to be "a tacit coherence among events, a consistency and clarity of individual identity."[8] But art-cinema narration, because it takes its cues from modernism, challenges this notion of the real – perhaps it is not so easy to know about the laws of the world – and argues that human psychology may not be so definite. As a result, narration can be dedramatized by the presentation not only of climaxes but also of unimportant ordinary events. It can also deal with the reality of the imagination, which is however treated as the reality of the objective world. Art-cinema narration also loosens the cause-effect principle by presenting permanent gaps, by including the element chance, and by removing deadlines. It favors an episodic construction of the syuzhet and may have a symbolic dimension. It is important to note that Bordwell asserts that art-cinema realism is not, because of these innovations – the inclusion of the reality of the imagination, chance, and permanent gaps – more "real" than classical cinema realism – which depicts the objective world – but only part of a different canon. This subjective or "expressionist" concept of realism presents characters who do not often have clear-cut traits, act inconsistently and are not sure about their aims, which makes the art-film construction more or less episodic and focused on the "boundary situation" – an episode of the character's life in which he/she becomes aware of a significant aspect of existence. As a consequence of all the aspects discussed above, the art film restricts its range of knowledge to the characters. We have then more psychological depth, but a narrower focus. The art film senses that life is more complex than art, and thus leaves many questions unanswered.

To the "objective" and "subjective" realism, Bordwell adds the schema of open narrational "commentary" – a very clearly self-conscious narration. An external authority then becomes more evident, and the very construction of the film becomes the object of the viewer's speculation, of his hypothesis-making. He/she then applies conventions of objective and expressive realism, and of authorial address in order to

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[7] Bordwell uses the term in *Narration in the Fiction Film* to refer to the fact that "initial hypothesis will be qualified but not demolished unless very strong evidence is brought forward." (p. 38).
[8] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 206.

make any sense of the film. Because the first two (the objective and the subjective realism) are incompatible, art-film presents ambiguity, unlike classical cinema, which is denotatively unequivocal. We can thus see that innovative intrinsic forms are created in films that arouse the viewer's curiosity about their own narrational processes.

These innovations proposed by the art cinema in terms of narrative have been developed into a code that the educated viewer learned to decipher – a code that was then absorbed by the mainstream cinema, mainly the "New Hollywood" cinema of the late sixties and early seventies, which however continued to be classical in essence, although it incorporated "art-film" style to generic functions.

Encompassing many stylistic options, which vary from a more "objective" realism, like in Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*, and a quite definite authorial address, like in Rosi's *Three Brothers*, art cinema, Bordwell states, has its roots in the twenties as an opposition to Hollywood. He sees the influence of literary Modernism on the avant-garde cinema, and says that "at the same period (the twenties), Surrealist films like *Un chien andalou*, in their savage play with the conventions of mainstream storytelling, opened up new paths for the achievement of narrational ambiguity."[9]

At this point I find it necessary to refer to Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, often described as a classic avant-gardiste film and considered as a milestone in American independent filmmaking – part of a body of work completely outside the commercial film industry. It was produced in a period of two weeks in 1943, in collaboration with Deren's husband, Alexander Hammid, with funds from her own pocket, and a hand-wind Bolex camera. Because of all that has been discussed so far, I believe this film will necessarily be read differently today than when it was first released. It must have been quite a shock to be faced with a film which presented permanent gaps in its narrative, which treated time and space unconventionally (we do not have deadlines in the film and do not know exactly how long the narrative takes; space is fragmented and the viewer is often disoriented), a film which dealt with surrealistic situations, and unrealistic use of sound. Anyway, as "nothing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock"[10] , I think educated filmgoers today will more willingly take this film, because of the changes that films have undergone in the last fifty years.

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[9] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* , p. 230.

[10] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 81.

Moira Sullivan has called Maya Deren an "American avant-garde filmmaker"[11] , but one could speculate if Deren's work would not be more aptly called experimental, for the following reasons: first of all, there seems to be a certain organicity in its construction. Peter Bürger states in *Theory of the Avant Garde* that "the avant-gardiste work neither creates total impression that would permit an interpretation of its meaning nor can whatever impression may be created be accounted for by recourse to the individual parts, for they are no longer subordinated to a pervasive intent." [12] Confronted with this statement, *Meshes of the Afternoon* suggests some interesting questions. There is a recognizable, though weird, storyline; there are very accurate point-of-view shots; and, although the plot if far from conventional, I do not think we can suppress parts or change their positions without altering the overall impression of the film. On the other hand, *Meshes of the Afternoon* is clearly experimental in its assembling of poetic startling images which are beautiful in themselves, without an easily identifiable meaning. And a fantastic trance-like atmosphere pervades the film, which is justifiable, for it deals, after all, with dreams and nightmares, in the haunting story of a girl driven to suicide.

Up to the scene in which the girl falls asleep, the narrative is almost completely conformed to conventional storytelling, although some odd touches are added now and then. I will describe the whole sequence in detail, in order to see what cues the narration gives the viewer to infer the fantastic nature of this narrative, and parts of the other sequences, in order to see how the narration provides the viewer with schemata that enable him/her to make some sense of the film.

The first scene can be simply described like this: in a long shot of a paved sidewalk, in which trees can be seen in the background, a mysterious hand gently places a flower on the ground. But two things startle us in this very first shot – the hand enters the frame vertically, from above, as if belonging to no body, and the minute the flower is on the pavement, there is a cut, and the flower is shot as if the hand and arm had vanished in the air. A girl picks up the flower and we are shown only her shadow and her feet as she tracks the mysterious woman in black who dropped the flower and now disappears in a bend in the road.

Another cue that makes the viewer think this film will not make a realistic presentation of events is given in the scene in which the girl drops the key when she

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[11] Moira Sullivan is responsible for the Maya Deren Home Page (http://www.hks.se/~bertd/deren.html), sponsored by Film Studies, Humanities Department, University of Karlstad, Sweden.
[12] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant Garde*, p. 79.

takes it from her purse, and again a little later when the character enters her house. The falling key is photographed in slow motion, and as it trips down the steps, we do not hear any sound but the eerie and slightly onomatopoeic sounds of Teiji Ito's music. Inside the house, after the girl goes in, there is a panning which seems to be the girl's optical point of view. It ends in a close-up shot of a loaf of bread about to be cut by a knife held by no one – the knife suddenly falls down on the table, without anyone touching it.

The sequence goes on and is shot mainly with point-of-view shots which show the objects the way the girl sees them. One of these shots does not seem wholly consistent, though. First, there is an extreme close-up shot of one of the girl's eyes and then a long shot of the street as the girl looks through the window after she sits in the armchair; then we see an extreme close up of her eye again, closing as she falls asleep; and then an identical shot of the street through the window, as if she could still see it. The viewer can then either infer that this is not a point-of-view shot, but the film's narration, or that it is something the girl sees in her dreams or in her imagination, anyway, something more elusive than mere things that are displayed in front of her. I think the viewer will opt for the second choice, for the film has already hinted at an unrealistic depiction of things, and cues this by showing the closed eye, and, besides, the way the shot of the street develops seems to favor this second inference: the camera draws back and frames the scene through what seems to be a metal tube, and the surreal quality of the scene is enhanced by the sudden appearance of the mournful chords of Ito's music. And then the mysterious woman in black appears again.

I think the analysis of this sequence shows us two things: first, there is a certain plot to be followed, and here the viewer is helped by the combined use of objective and subjective shots, and the logical linking of the scenes – the camera shows the girl trying to open the door; as she cannot, there is a cut to her hand probing in her purse, until she finds the latchkey; she drops it and the camera shows it falling down the stairs; then there is a cut to the hand of the girl catching it. Second, the viewer perceives there are elements that make this film deviate from traditional narratives: the arm entering the frame from above in the first scene, the key in slow motion, the knife falling by itself, the weird tube that starts the second sequence. All these elements call attention to themselves for adding a surrealistic tone to the narrative and for evincing an authorial presence manipulating the medium.

The second sequence has a more evident semblance of a dream: the girl runs and runs and never seems to get closer to the veiled woman, who now reveals to have

a mirror covering her face. Everything happens in a way that reproduces the first sequence, with slight but meaningful differences: the knife is now on the stairs, the girl does not go up the staircase but seems to float upstairs, an effect probably obtained by having the actress run in slow motion. The camera tilts as she passes through gauze-like veils, space is treated unrealistically – as the camera spins and the girl dances her way on the walls and ceiling[13] , we are disoriented, but because of all the cues the film has given us so far, we do not get surprised when, from her place on the ceiling, the girl reaches out for the pick-up needle to stop the music (which we do not hear, by the way).

The third ascending of the stairs is even more distant from a conventional narrative: this time the camera sways and the girl has to hold on to the walls as if she were feeling dizzy. Jump cuts with a fixed camera show the girl occupying different positions in the scene and flaunt the narration's manipulation of space.

When the fourth sequence begins, the film narration has already prepared us to accept the image of the menacing face of the girl with the bulging spectacles (all the girls are the same girl who is sleeping in the armchair) striding "from beach to grass to mud to pavement to rug."[14] There is a cut from her feet on the rug to the girl sleeping in the armchair, and a traveling forward to the girl's face. The viewer reads this cue as a point-view-shot of the girl with the glasses who is shown in the next shot, in contre-plongée, ready to stab the sleeping girl (herself?). The girl wakes up and sees instead a young man, and we are asked to infer the girl has just waken up to see the murderer standing in front of her. But, contrary to our hypothesis, he outstretches his arms and helps her to get up.

The last segment, which seems to be the most "realistic" one, shows the young man getting into the house, after picking up a flower from the ground (the same flower seen before) to find the girl sitting in the armchair, with her throat slashed from side to side. Perhaps this segment is framing a dream – the girl goes to sleep and then, as it often happens in life, her arrival home is reenacted some times in her dream, every time with the addition of more bizarre elements. This simplistic account of the film is not satisfactory, however, for it does not fill all the gaps in the narrative. The flower the young man picks up at the end of the film is exactly like the flower the girl finds on the street, in the first scene of the film, left there by the mysterious hand.

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[13] The girl is played by Maya Deren herself, who was involved in modern dance and made some ciné-dance films.
[14] Louise Heck-Rabi. *The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*, vol. 2, p. 215.

Could the dream she dreams in the armchair be part of a larger dream that includes the first sequence too? Perhaps the whole film is the enactment of a dream. Anyway, these questions become irrelevant when the viewer has developed a set of schemas to comprehend narratives that have unfilled gaps, narratives that call attention to the way they have been constructed, films that evince the figure of the filmmaker. The patterns that repeat themselves (the shots of the feet climbing the stairs, for instance, growing more and more unconventional each time), the atmosphere created by the music, the beauty of the shots of the girl in the penultimate sequence: she is now a potency, armed with a knife, bulging black eyes like a giant fly's, a force of nature resolutely coming from the sea, the source of life, to stop by the girl's chair – these are the elements that the viewer now takes into account. A logical, classical narrative would perhaps detract the film from its poetic force and the haunting beauty of its images.

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Meshes of the Afternoon, Maya Deren's film-poem, is a classic example of the American avant-garde in films. *Lost Highway*, David Lynch's latest film, is a product of modern American film industry. What can the interest in comparing them be? And in what way can that be done? Although there is a time span of fifty-three years separating both productions, they seem to be related in some ways. Apart from their titles, which imply a state of confusion, of disorientation, most striking of all is, it seems to me, the dreamlike atmosphere that pervades both films. But what first calls our attention is perhaps the fact that there are points of intersection in the development of their storylines. In *Meshes of the Afternoon* we have the girl recurrently entering her house; in *Lost Highway*, there is a recurrent event too: every morning, Renée – or her husband Fred – finds an envelope containing a video tape, lying on the steps of the staircase leading to the front door of their house. The first tape shows only the façade of the house, whereas the other tapes show, each time, a little more of the inside area, even the bedroom with the couple asleep in bed. Like in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, there is also a violent death inside the house in *Lost Highway* – Renée is brutally murdered. Some setting elements remind us of Deren's film, too. The menacing house – dark corners, sparse furniture, and non-diegetic sounds of the wind blowing, distant voices that reverberate, electronic noises; the stairs where the tapes are found; the winding road in front of the house.

In terms of style, *Lost Highway* is also indebted to art-cinema narration.

There are permanent gaps in the narrative: in the middle of the film Fred Madison is imprisoned for the murder of his wife – we do not know whether he is guilty or not – but it is the young mechanic Pete Dayton who is found in the prison cell the first morning after the imprisonment, and the film never explains why this happens; we never find out what really took place the night Pete disappeared to appear again in the prison cell; there is a hint Renée is unfaithful to Fred, but that point is never made clear; we do not know who really murdered Renée; Renée and Alice (both played by Patricia Arquette), although belonging to different "stories", can be seen in the same photograph with Dick Laurent; the white-faced man appears in the middle of the deserted place where Alice and Pete have a rendez-vous with Dick Laurent as if he came out of nowhere.

Like some art-cinema films, *Lost Highway* also presents flashforwards, although with a variation: we see the explosion that is going to take place later in the narrative in reverse motion. The manipulation of the sights and sounds by an author is foregrounded all the time: the setting is stylized, most of the time we do not know exactly where the characters are – close shots decontextualize them, or, as it occurs in the bedroom scenes, a dark background mixes with the black satin sheets and black pajamas of the characters; in the first part of the film (the one involving Renée and Fred), lines are spoken with improbable intervals between the words, in a trembling tone of voice, which renders ordinary utterances rather threatening – like the scene in which Renée tells Fred she is not going to the club with him, but will stay home and read, instead. When Fred meets the mysterious white-faced man at the party, all the surrounding sounds are erased, and we hear only their exchange of lines. When Fred is talking to his wife in their bedroom, he suddenly disappears in a dark corner, we hear muffled screams, and he comes back a few moments later in a state of trance, as if returning from another dimension. Angelo Badalamenti's music enhances this bizarre atmosphere.

Like in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, there is a slender storyline to be followed in *Lost Highway*. But the gaps occur so frequently, and the fantastic atmosphere is so mesmerizing, that the viewer stops trying to make logical connections between the episodes and lets him/herself be carried away by the salient style. Let us examine the first part of the film, up to Fred's arrest, to see what sort of inferences, assumptions and hypotheses the viewer can make.

First of all, as it is a David Lynch film, the spectator who is familiar with his work, especially if he/she has seen *Eraserhead*, *Wild at Heart*, *Blue Velvet* and the television serial *Twin Peaks*, will be expecting a film in which the extraordinary lurks

beneath the surface of ordinary events. In fact, mainly after Fred is arrested, the film plunges into a bizarre night world of betrayals, porno films, nightmarish events, and unexplained coincidences. The very opening credit sequence, which is a driver's point of view of a deserted highway, sets the tone of the film: you cannot see very far, darkness is all around, there are no other cars on the road, and – most significant of all – on the soundtrack you can hear David Bowie singing *I'm deranged*. There is a fade to black after the credits and, after some time, a very slow fade-in to a close-up shot of Fred's face, followed by other close ups, until we hear the doorbell. It is not easy to contextualize Fred, for the background is either too dark or too light, contrasting with his face. After he gets the news of Dick Laurent's death and tries to see who spoke in the front door intercom, there is a fade-out followed by a fade-in to Fred preparing to go play the sax in the club he works for. His wife glides into the frame; he seems to come out of the dark in the next shot. The way their lines are spoken in this scene, as was mentioned before, cues the spectator to the strange behavior of the characters, and Renée will display the same catatonic appearance throughout this first part of the film. As Fred makes a telephone call to his wife from the club, his face in close up is bathed in a red light that slowly fades to the yellow wall of his living-room as he arrives home. As she did not answer the phone, and as the camera lingers on Fred's suspicious face at the end of this sequence, the viewer makes the hypothesis that Renée might be betraying her husband, a hypothesis which is not confirmed later.

Then Renée finds the first tape. She is questioned by her husband and, because she starts when Fred asks her what that is, and answers as if defending herself, we tend to go along the betrayal line of plot. But the tape only shows the façade of the house.

In the love-making sequence, Fred's incapacity to complete his sexual intercourse with Renée is preceded by shots of his anguished face, slow-motion photography, sounds of distant singing voices and wind, and a fixed shot of Renée's expressionless face reinforces our hypothesis she is betraying him, a hypothesis that is not confirmed, as was mentioned before. The way the narration presents his dream does not differ from the way "reality" is presented – perhaps that is why Fred announces he is going to recount a dream; and after the dream is over, Fred looks at his wife and sees the greenish face of an old woman. He turns on the light and Renée is her normal self, again. What is dream, what is real? The film does not give precise cues, so the viewer by this time must be ready to accept illogical events as part of this narrative, as part of this dream world, which has its own laws.

When Fred and Renée decide to call the police, the viewer is given a feeble hope that there will be a logical explanation for all that is going on, but the film soon frustrates these expectations, when the detectives start asking stupid questions. Later, the hope of having a logical narrative is completely lost in the party sequence, in which the white-faced man tells Fred that he is in Fred's house that very moment, and confirms it by answering the telephone when Fred calls his own number. This is the most evident cue the film gives that it is not committed to a realistic sort of narration.

So it is not surprising to see Fred, in the third tape, on his knees by his bed just after he killed Renée. The black-and-white video image suddenly turns to color film stock, for brief moments, as if suggesting the fiction of the video tape and the "reality" of the film are one and the same thing. And as Fred is spanked at the police station, the viewer is left with a series of hypotheses to be confirmed or not – probably not – until the end of the film: Fred has really murdered Renée and does not remember a thing; Fred did murder Renée, and is now lying, saying it was not him – a weak hypothesis, if we take into account the fact that this narrative is distant from classical detective story conventions; there is no logical explanation for what happened and we are in the realm of the fantastic – a very strong hypothesis authorized by the development of the film so far. As Fred is sentenced to death, the viewer is again given a storyline to rely on and his/her curiosity is stirred, for only forty minutes of projection time have gone by, and the film will not probably do away with its hero so soon.

The analysis of this first part of the film might help us to comprehend how its narration encourages the viewer to pay attention to its construction, its narrational procedures, and its style. If we now compare the reading of *Meshes of the Afternoon* to the reading of *Lost Highway*, we will see that they both deviate from classical filmic narration, that both of them leave permanent gaps in their narratives, and that they call attention to their stylistic features. However, whereas Maya Deren is practically the sole responsible for *Meshes of the Afternoon* – she played the main part, edited and directed it, and wrote the screenplay in collaboration with her husband Alexander Hammid, who also co-starred and photographed the film, David Lynch depended on the collaboration of a large staff, on a more commercial basis. He co-wrote the film with Barry Gifford, the music score was composed by Angelo Badalamenti, Peter Deming was the director of photography, Mary Sweeney was responsible for the editing, and Lynch did not invest his own money in the production, as Maya Deren did. *Lost Highway* took fifty-four days to shoot, in a striking contrast to the fifteen days Maya Deren needed to shoot *Meshes of the Afternoon,* using her own house as the main setting. In this respect, *Meshes of the Afternoon* is much more

an authorial film than *Lost Highway*.

Besides these differences in terms of production, there are other things about *Lost Highway* that are worth mentioning, things that are characteristic of a postmodern cinema, and that would further distinguish it from *Meshes of the Afternoon*. The very fact that the film incorporates elements of experimental cinema into a commercial Hollywood production would perhaps follow the tendency of a time when juxtaposition of apparently irreconcilable items are welcomed as a way of discussing these elements by having them dialogize. Besides, the film also combines elements of film noir, such as a convoluted plot and the notion of woman as danger, to elements of the horror film – a supernatural character – with a touch of dark humor in a sort of gangster film parody, as in the scene in which a driver tailgates Mr. Eddy's car. Lynch is here playing with the conventions of these traditional film genres. Close to the end, narration becomes so self-conscious, the touch of the director is so evident – the overexposed love scene lighted by the headlights of the car, the scenes in the Lost Highway Hotel, the appearance of the man with the powdered face videotaping Fred, the murder of Mr. Eddy – that the film becomes self-parodic, for these last scenes seem to be a parody of what was seen before.

Songs of different origins are combined, from the German hard rock group Rammstein to the Brazilian composer and pianist Tom Jobim playing *Insensatez*, a 'bossa-nova' song, which, in its slow tempo, unlike the other songs in the soundtrack, underscores a scene which apparently has nothing to do with the film. Pete, the young man who takes Fred's place in the prison cell, is released, and is now resting in the back yard of his home, when, attracted by the music, he rises and looks over the wall at his neighbor's yard. He sees a ball and a little boat floating in a plastic pool, a little dog nearby and a white picket fence in the background (a white picket fence can also be seen in the remarkable opening sequence of Lynch's *Blue Velvet*). These elements, which allude to the quietness and normality of suburban life, are in a striking dialogic contrast with the vicious underworld life the second part of the film will present.

The narration also insists on a certain indefiniteness in terms of time and place. As was mentioned before, characters are usually framed against neutral colored – grayish lilac – or dark backgrounds, and outdoor scenes often occur in deserted places, mostly at night. The action seems to be set in modern days because of the way characters look and dress, and because of some icons of high tech civilization – cellular telephones, television sets with huge screens – but cars seem to belong to the seventies, a glossy reference to the past, and the prison Fred is sent to is not the modern sort of prison we see in most films today. The film would therefore present a complex reality,

in which different times, places and genres coexist, in a postmodern fashion, as part of a stale, urban setting, in which men's only possibilities of adventure would lie in sex and crime.

Meshes of the Afternoon, on the other hand, can be seen as a poetic construct which heavily relies on surrealistic elements, although it does not reach the full surrealistic status of, say, *Un chien andalou*, in which we have the appearance of a narrative in cinematic terms, with characters, optical points of view, notions of causality, but no plot at all to follow. It is as if what really matters in *Un chien andalou* is to show the mechanism of storytelling, the devices which are normally at the service of a story. *Meshes of the Afternoon*'s distance from Dada films is even greater, for, as Kuenzli points out, "the incoherent, non-narrative, illogical nature of Dada films, which constantly defamiliarize the familiar world through cinematic manipulations, never let the viewer enter the world of the film".[15] Deren's film also defamiliarizes the familiar world, but within an organic construction, in which there is an investment on the psychology of the main character – her hallucinatory feeling of estrangement and her being in a situation that seems to have gone beyond acceptable limits are mainly conveyed by the consistent use of point-of-view shots. In the case of this film, therefore, we are apparently closer to an avant-gardiste experiment that incorporates surreal elements – as in the sequences in which the girl takes the latchkey that is lying on her tongue, or the one in which the key is changed into a knife – without becoming an absolute surrealistic experience throughout.

Lost Highway's preoccupation with stylization, with artifice, and the superficiality of its characterization – we never learn what Renée, for example, is really like, or in what ways Fred and Pete are distinct characters – would evince a camp aspect in the film, as would also the exaggeration in the characterization of Alice. She is the prototype of a vamp: golden hair, scarlet lipstick – extreme close ups of her lips are lighted as if a thin ray of light fell upon them – sexy miniskirts, a femme fatale look. To use a term employed by Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*[16], she serves as a 'connotator' of dangerous vamp characters of the past, in a nostalgic fashion, like the deadly character played by Barbara Stanwick in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*. This adds to the shallowness that pervades the film – we are seduced by its visual style and use of sound, but do not

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[15] Rudolf E. Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film*, p. 10.
[16] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 76.

really get deeply involved with the characters. Atmosphere seems to be more important than characterization.

It is these aspects that mostly distinguish *Lost Highway* from *Meshes of the Afternoon*, because they are characteristic of a certain type of contemporary cinema that sometimes baffles an ordinary viewer by presenting schemas that have not yet been completely assimilated. After all, films involving juxtaposition of different times, parody of well-defined genres, camp elements, and, most of all, the resistance to explaining the irrational, are a more or less recent tendency. Nevertheless, I believe the study of such works will enable us not only to have a better understanding of postmodernist films but also to see the challenging works of the past from a different perspective. That is why I chose to study *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *Lost Highway*: by pondering on the way narration is dealt with in these two apparently very different films which, however, do share so many interesting features, I intended to place them in a dialogic relation, so that *Meshes of the Afternoon*, as an experimental construct, and *Lost Highway*, as an industrial postmodern product, could illuminate each other and help us have a better understanding of some of their meanings.

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