'I'm there right now. Call me': Unstable identities and irregular distances from Raymond Chandler to David Lynch

Alex Pavey
University College London

Abstract

David Lynch's Lost Highway (1997) and Raymond Chandler's The High Window (1942) each contain scenes in which ambiguous distances and fluid identities disorientate the protagonists. The principle of incrimination that underpins modern criminal investigation demands a rationalisation of time, space and identity. But these three categories can be undermined, intentionally by individual action, or inherently by the technologies and systems of modernity itself. In both Chandler and Lynch, audio-visual media, particularly the telephone, demonstrate the fragility of any rigid, rationalised conception of distance and proximity, undermining the possibility of the stable knowledge by which the detective might solve the case, and the accused might defend himself against incrimination. The particularly disorientating dynamics of relation experienced by Lynch's protagonists are also analogous to his subversion of cinematic narrative structure – in which the possibility of narrative closure constantly seems to both approach and recede.

Keywords: Incrimination; Disorientation; Urban space; Crime narrative; Audio technology

David Lynch's films *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2007) constitute an informal trilogy linked by a common setting – Los Angeles at the turn of the twentieth century– and by certain common

tropes.[1] These include unstable identities, psychological disturbance, dreamlike narrative structures, and inconsistent temporalities and topologies. Space seems to take on unexpected, irregular structures; time loops back on itself; and the boundaries between different characters break down, defying expectations and complicating the narrative.

In their ambiguity, Lynch's films simultaneously invite and frustrate attempts to rationalise their plots; to establish what really happened, and separate fantasy from reality. As scholar Jennifer Hudson notes, this quality has polarised the critical response to Lynch, with commentators either attempting to establish a monolithic reading that explains the given narrative, or else affirming the films' fundamental openness and resistance to stable interpretation (2004: 18). One particularly forceful rejection of the latter tendency is provided by Slavoj Žižek, a philosopher and cultural critic who frequently draws on cinema to illustrate his own arguments. Discussing *Lost Highway,* Žižek argues, 'this impression that we are drawn into a schizophrenic nightmarish delirium with no logic or rules […] and that, consequently, we should abandon any attempt at a consistent interpretation […] is the film's ultimate lure to be resisted' (2000: 14-15).

This essay will not attempt to provide a comprehensive reading of any one of these films (let alone all three); in fact, it will primarily focus on a single scene from *Lost Highway*. Placing this particular scene in the context of Los Angeles narratives of detection, and relating it to criminological theory, a necessarily tentative and provisional attempt will be made to bring out something of the film's underlying logic – to propose a starting point from which to explicate the ambiguous distances and fluid identities that are so prevalent in all three films, and so threatening to Lynch's protagonists. This will, in turn, suggest a new perspective from which to consider the critical impulse to 'solve' Lynch's plots.

'You're *where* right now?'

Lynch's protagonists are frequently compelled to attempt to establish some kind of valid and stable *knowledge* about themselves and their environment. In *Mulholland Drive*, Betty (Naomi Watts) ingenuously attempts to help amnesiac 'Rita' (Laura Elena Harring) discover her true identity. In *Inland Empire*, Nikki Grace (Laura Dern) is an actor who becomes somehow unmoored in the process of performing her latest role, and has to negotiate her way out of a disorientating rabbit hole. And in *Lost Highway*, the initial paranoia of Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) about his wife's possible infidelity develops into the anguished question of whether he is responsible for her murder.

Fred is a jazz saxophonist, based in Los Angeles, living with his wife Renee (Patricia Arquette). Their home life is suffocating, tense and alienated. It is clear that Fred suspects, or is filled with anxiety about the idea, that Renee is unfaithful to him, although it is unclear whether any of these suspicions are justified. Fred and Renee begin to receive unmarked packages containing VHS tapes; tapes which show camcorder footage of the inside of their home, the point of view moving steadily and eerily further into the house, and eventually into their bedroom, showing the two of them asleep. This first section of the

film ends in a moment of crisis and confusion: Fred watches a tape, alone, that appears to show him with Renee's corpse; we then cut abruptly to a series of short scenes in which Fred is questioned about her murder, convicted and sentenced to death. A superficial reading of the second half of the film would be that Fred then undergoes some kind of dissociative psychotic episode in which he imagines he is actually a young mechanic called Pete (Balthazar Getty). The fantasy, if that is what it is, sustains itself for a while, but eventually breaks down – Pete turns back into Fred, and the film ends with him fleeing the police (whether in reality or in his mind) down a long, dark highway.[2]

During the first part of the film, a visibly uncomfortable and suspicious Fred attends a party thrown by one of Renee's friends. At which point, a sequence occurs that is perhaps the most enigmatic scene in a film that has no lack of enigmas. Standing at the bar, Fred is approached by a pale, eerie figure played by Robert Blake (unnamed during the film, in the credits he is simply called 'Mystery Man'), and all other diegetic sounds fade out before he begins to speak. 'We've met before, haven't we?' the Mystery Man insists, despite Fred's denial. Asked where he thinks they've met, he replies,

> At your house, don't you remember? […] As a matter of fact, I'm there right now.'
>
> 'What do you mean, you're *where* right now?'
>
> 'At your house.'

He offers Fred a portable phone, and with a kind of seething glee, instructs 'Call me. Dial your number'. Initially wry and sceptical, Fred – likely recalling the VHS tapes delivered to his home – becomes increasingly unnerved. He does as instructed, and when the receiver is picked up at the other end, the Mystery Man's voice can be heard: 'I told you I was here.' Laughing when Fred asks for an explanation how he is doing this, the Mystery Man takes back his phone, and walks away into the crowd. As he does so, the sounds of the surrounding party fade up again on the soundtrack, and Fred is left standing alone at the bar.

This is a scene in which a conventional sense of distance and proximity is eerily undermined, by an unsettling figure who appears to be in two places at once. And this uncanny situation is enabled by technology – specifically, by telephony. It is precisely the telephone line's ability to make a distant space – Fred's home – somehow proximate, that creates the very possibility of this uneasy encounter. There will be more say about this later, but for now, it is worth noting a broader point in relation to Lynch's work: the importance of the telephone here forms part of a preoccupation, across all three films, with various forms of audio-visual technology. This includes not just the movie cameras and projectors that might be expected in films that are often concerned with the movie industry, but also radios, recording studios, televisions, camcorders, record players and even intercoms.

'I still had it in my pocket'

The way the 'Mystery Man' scene is shot, and the tone of the film leading up to

that point, encourages the spectator to take the situation seriously, to accept it at unsettling, uncanny face value. There is little doubt, within the narrative logic of the film, that this man is in fact simultaneously standing in front of Fred at the party, and standing in Fred's home, speaking on his phone. Nor is there any attempt, beyond Fred's initial 'How'd you do that?', to seek an explanation for this event. This point is reinforced if we imagine the very different ways an equivalent situation could be presented, within other generic contexts – as some kind of con trick to be explained, perhaps, or as a 'locked room' mystery to be solved by a detective.[3] If we look back to an earlier period of Los Angeles *noir*, a similarly enigmatic scene can be found in a tonally very different work: *The High Window* (1943), Raymond Chandler's third novel featuring private eye Philip Marlowe. *The High Window* is not Chandler's most famous novel; indeed, it is 'a book not normally thought to be one of his best' (Jameson, 1993: 38). But the scene in question reveals something significant about the principles that structure Philip Marlowe's investigations.

Marlowe has been hired by rich widow Elizabeth Bright Murdock to locate a rare coin, a 'Brasher Doubloon', which is missing and presumed stolen. Halfway through the novel, and with the case having reached something of a dead end, Marlowe takes delivery of an anonymous package, which unexpectedly appears to contain precisely the coin he has been hired to locate. Uncharacteristically unsettled, he telephones his client from a drug store and intimates that he may have located the missing rare coin. He is only disorientated further when she interrupts him to tell him that his services are no longer required: 'This is all very unnecessary now, Mr Marlowe. I have decided to drop the matter. The coin has been returned to me' (Chandler, 2001: 73). Marlowe is left profoundly shaken because Elizabeth Murdock is telling him that she has already recovered the very coin that he appears to have in his own possession; this peculiar object, unique and yet repeatable, seemingly exists at both ends of the telephone line. Already unsure precisely why the coin has been anonymously put in his care, that mystery has been compounded by the question of 'how Mrs Elizabeth Bright Murdock had got her Brasher Doubloon back while I still had it in my pocket' (ibid.: 78).

There are intriguing similarities between these two scenes, as well as significant differences. Perhaps most importantly, and unlike *Lost Highway*, in *The High Window* we do eventually get an explanation for why the coin is apparently able to exist in two places at once: the theft of the missing coin was the start of a counterfeiting plot, and multiple 'Brasher Doubloons' are in circulation amongst the characters. But there is more to be said about Chandler's scene, and the troubling quality it possesses, prior to this eventual resolution.

'Somewhere else, when…'

In the nineteenth century, the burgeoning field of criminology began to utilise technologies like fingerprinting and photography to fix individual identities, in the face of the potential for anonymity afforded by urban modernity – 'to reestablish the traces of individual identity' against 'the obscurity of a new mobility' (Gunning, 1995: 20; see also Sekula, 1986). This imperative to fix

identity is one aspect of a fundamental, if under-analysed, criminological principle: *incrimination*. Once it is clear that a crime has indeed occurred, incrimination names the process whereby an individual moves from being one of many hypothetical suspects to being the one charged with a crime. The process relies upon establishing that a given *person* was in a certain *place* at a specific *time*; to take the most theoretically straightforward example, the scene of a murder. It is, in other words, what impels modern criminal investigation to rationalise identity, space and time.

In practice, establishing incrimination might involve observation – police surveillance, eyewitness statements or CCTV recordings – or the collection of physical traces, from lipstick-smeared cigarette butts or fingerprints on a glass to DNA evidence. It will almost certainly entail a rationalisation of time and space: establishing accurate chronologies of events, and maintaining detailed mental or physical maps of city streets, and the distances between locations.[4] Though the technological and institutional means available may vary, in this sense Philip Marlowe's investigations are not qualitatively different from the fictional criminal investigations of Dupin or Holmes, or those of the police in 1840s London or 1990s Los Angeles. All seek to establish incrimination by reconstructing the movements and fixing the identities of suspects. This, then, is a particular form of knowledge, in which fundamental epistemological categories – time, space, identity – are mobilised for a specific, juridical purpose.

Incrimination's mirror image, of course – the defence required of suspects whether they are guilty or innocent – is the alibi. The alibi is not, fundamentally, an assertion of moral innocence; it is rather an attempt to convincingly demonstrate that an individual was *somewhere else, when* a crime took place. The etymology of alibi emphasises this spatio-temporal aspect: it is derived from the classical Latin *alibī*, meaning 'elsewhere' or 'in another place'. Alibi is also linked by its Latin root (*alius* - other, or another) with another crucial term: alias, which derives from the Latin meaning 'at another time, otherwise, in another place, elsewhere' (*OED*).

This analysis can help us clarify why false identities are so prevalent in Chandler's novels, and why anonymity is often so threatening to Marlowe, since by their very nature they undermine the attempt to fix a stable identity in time and space.[5] As such, they frustrate the progress of the detective's investigations. His attempts to establish what has happened, what crime has been committed and by whom, require him to negotiate a network of aliases – gangster's pseudonyms, stage names, whole lives reinvented. In the pivotal scene with the coin in the drug store in *The High Window*, the unsettling implications of which are emphasised by Marlowe's behaviour and language, the missing coin operates in an analogous way to a missing person that has assumed an alias, uncannily frustrating attempts to rationalise its identity and location.

'Simultaneity across distances'

Philip Marlowe's Los Angeles is a city in the midst of a post-war 'boom', annexing surrounding cities and expanding across the Los Angeles Basin, the

Santa Monica Mountains and the San Fernando Valley. In fact, the growth of Los Angeles across the twentieth century as a whole has been characterised as a near-unbroken sequence of 'booms' (Soja and Scott, 1996). One vital characteristic of this geographic expansion is that it was accompanied by a contraction of distance, through technologies that allowed for faster motion and near-instantaneous long-distance communication. These movements, expansion and contraction, are bound up with each other: the dispersed city is only practical and functional because of the technologies that help overcome, or at least manage, its increased distances. The automobile is an obvious example of this tendency, and Marlowe himself can be considered 'the first motorized private eye in the most thoroughly motorized city in America' (Fine, 2000: 120). Developments in telecommunications, though, were similarly important. Audio culture historian John Durham Peters describes such technologies as 'space-binding media […which] knit distinct points in space together over great distances'; he goes on:

> Simultaneity across distances – first in writing, then in speech, sound, and image – was made possible by the telegraph, telephone, radio, and facsimile. For the first time in human history, acuity of vision and hearing were no longer the limit to instantaneous remote contact. (2013: 362)

In *The High Window*, if the Brasher Doubloon's identity is momentarily unstable, leaving Marlowe disorientated, then that instability is accentuated precisely by this capacity of the telephone to establish 'simultaneity across distance'.

If we return to Gunning's analysis of late nineteenth century criminology, he makes a similar point to Peters, but draws out further implications; implications that are no less relevant to twentieth, and indeed twenty-first, century crime. Modernity involves a transformation of experience based on new systems of circulation, such as railways, currency markets or portable photography: 'modern networks of exchange and transportation' (18). These new networks are susceptible to exploitation:

> While circulation relies on an evolving process of rationalization of time and space, the very intricacy and speed of these routes of transfer and exchange create a counterthrust in which stability and predictability can be threatened. [...] The criminal [...] preys on the very complexity of the system of circulation. (20)

This gets to the heart of Marlowe's dilemma in *The High Window*: the means by which he attempts to solve his cases are ambiguous, and open to manipulation, and the knowledge he establishes is fragile – not just because of the false identities that can be assumed in modern urban space, but also through the ability of media such as the telephone to facilitate anonymity and bind together distant, disparate spaces in the same instant.

'Playing detective'

The moment of disorientation experienced by Philip Marlowe in *The High Window* is brief but revealing, because it helps us identify some of the principles that govern Marlowe's method. If there is a crime, there is an imperative to establish incrimination by rationalising time, space and identity. But these categories are made unstable by the conditions of modernity – the very tools that can also assist the detective's investigation. The equivalent scene in *Lost Highway* can be interpreted as a signal that the same dilemma is at stake, but at a much greater degree of intensity. To understand this particularly intense disorientation is to begin to explicate the uncanny force of Lynch's Los Angeles films.

The hard-boiled detective novel is a broadly realist genre; Chandler himself, in his own reflection on the form, talked of 'the realist in murder', as distinct from the artificial logic and deduction novels of 'Golden Age' detective fiction (1988: 17). Similarly, whilst 'film noir' is a near-infinitely contested term, a certain gritty realism is undoubtedly a constituent part of the genre. French film critic Nino Frank, one of the first to use the phrase, suggested in 1946 that such films are distinguished in being 'what one might call "true to life"' (1999: 16). Lynch's cinema moves beyond such constraints, incorporating elements of art-house surrealism, fantasy, horror and pastiche. The complex layers of fantasy and reality throughout *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, the apparently inexplicable shifts in identity, the telephone calls from obscure places and eerie lip-synced performances; all serve to drastically expand the psychological implications of unstable knowledge and incrimination for Lynch's protagonists.

These protagonists, we should remember, are not detectives in the sense that professional private eye Philip Marlowe is. Fred Madison/Pete Dayton, Betty Elms/Diane Sawyer and Nikki Grace all have a deeply ambivalent attitude towards the knowledge they seek to establish: both compelled to investigate their mysteries, and fundamentally threatened by the implications that are uncovered.[6] Lynch presents us with vulnerable individuals who are at risk of incrimination as much as they are seeking to establish it. And if distances are irregular, and people are not who we expect them to be, then we are in a world in which we can neither orientate ourselves effectively, nor defend ourselves from accusation. An object or person that appears to be in two places at once, that is at the same time distant and close by, is unsettling, because it demonstrates that the mental image we use to orientate ourselves in our environment may be unstable. But more than this, it is *threatening*, because it suggests that the grounds on which we might provide a convincing alibi to defend ourselves against accusation are similarly fragile. Returning to *Lost Highway* specifically, we see precisely this in the scenes in which Fred views the footage of himself with Renee's corpse, and is then interrogated by the police: he is confronted with seemingly irrefutable incriminating images that he is unable to defend himself against.

Conclusion: 'The gap that seemed to be closing opens again'

The logic of incrimination and disorientation considered above certainly does not amount to a single key that might unlock the mysteries of David Lynch's cinema (any attentive viewer of *Mulholland Drive* will be wary of the symbolism of the key). But it does, I would suggest, offer a valuable tool with which to analyse this compelling and ambiguous series of films, drawing our attention to certain common tropes and the suggesting a relationship between them. Moreover, it emphasises the extent by which Lynch's engagement with earlier forms – the detective novel, film noir – is more than cosmetic.

There is, indeed, a further sense in which Lynch develops or subverts the narrative conventions of these genres. The manner in which he does so returns us, like Fred Madison, to where we began: to the drive to establish what 'really' happened that is so often at play in responses to Lynch's work. His films, in all their ambiguity, seem to frustrate the desire for total narrative closure, and yet compel us to attempt a solution. If we consider the attempt to close the narrative with a rational plot summary as analogous to the attempt to 'solve the case', the drive to establish some stable knowledge, then the films' ambiguity is entirely consistent with the logic sketched out above. It is the fraught implications of precisely this ambivalent drive for knowledge that Lynch's films dramatise, and with which his protagonists are confronted.

Writing about the structural conventions of detective fiction in what is one of the most significant sustained scholarly analyses of the genre, Dennis Porter borrows a dramatic trope first established by Aristotle in the *Poetics* – the moment of *peripeteia* (Porter, 1981: 32). Usually translated as 'reversal', in Aristotle peripety marks a turning point, during which the true nature of things is revealed to be very different from what it was believed to be (1996: 18). Porter argues that this trope is central to the structure and pleasure of detective fiction, with its repeatedly deferred solutions: it is the moment, exemplified by the drug-store scene from *The High Window*, in which a potentially approaching resolution recedes once again, for both the detective and the reader. Porter uses a tellingly spatial image: at the moment of peripeteia, 'the gap that seemed to be closing opens again' (32). In the detective novel, we know that a resolution will, eventually, be presented to us. Lynch's cinema serves precisely to open gaps in our knowledge, teasing our desire for certainty with solutions that remain stubbornly, unsettlingly, distant.

Endnotes

1 Lynch co-wrote (with Barry Gifford) and directed *Lost Highway*, wrote and directed *Mulholland Drive*, and wrote, directed, edited and co-produced *Inland Empire.* Particularly given this comprehensive (and escalating) involvement in different aspects of the films' production, in this essay I follow the auteurist convention of describing the three works as 'Lynch's films'. This should not be seen to diminish the importance of other members of the films' crew and cast, particularly frequent Lynch collaborators such as Mary Sweeney (editor, producer) or Angelo Badalamenti (composer).

2 This reading corresponds to the rationale settled on by Patricia Arquette while preparing for her role(s) in the film, according to interviewer Chris Rodley; it is an interpretation Lynch neither wholly rejects nor straightforwardly endorses (Lynch, 2005: 231-2).

3 If the mystery was to be addressed by Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin, for example, he might begin and end with the suggestion that a third party, imitating the Mystery Man's rather distinctive intonation, had broken into Fred's house and was waiting for the call. It says much about the forceful illusions created by Lynch's cinema that such a deflationary hypothesis is not immediately prompted by the scene – and in this, it foreshadows the 'Club Silencio' scene in *Mulholland Drive*, where despite being repeatedly told 'There is no band. It is all a tape. It is an illusion', the spectator is still shocked when the on-stage 'singer' collapses mid-performance, and the song continues.

4 For some examples of this impulsion to rationalise time, space and identity in practical criminal investigation handbooks of Chandler's time, see Vollmer and Parker (1937: 13-16) and Söderman and O'Connell (1952: 53-57).

5 Some of the most significant ambiguous identities amongst the many in Chandler's novels include: Velma Valento's reinvention of herself as 'Mrs. Lewin Lockridge Grayle' in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940); Muriel Chess, previously known as Mildred Haviland, who goes on to murder and assume the identity of Crystal Kingsley in *The Lady in the Lake* (1943); the many identities (and several faked deaths) of the man initially known to Marlowe as 'Terry Lennox', in *The Long Good-bye* (1953).

6 It should be noted that the danger inherent in 'playing detective' in Lynch's films predates *Lost Highway*, going back as far as *Blue Velvet* (1986) and the initially enthusiastic sleuthing of naïve Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan), who is shocked and endangered by the depths of corruption he discovers.

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Biography

Alex Pavey is a doctoral student in the Department of English, University College London, and holds an MA in Philosophy and Literature from the University of Warwick. His research interests include narratives of crime and the city, the representation of audio-visual technology, and the cultural construction of time, space and identity in twentieth-century fiction and cinema. This work converges in his PhD thesis, *‘A maze with no centre’: Disorientation in Los Angeles Fiction and Cinema*.