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Unbeschreiblich Weiblich Looking awry to the home in Euripides' 'Medea' and David Lynch's '*Lost Highway*'

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Abstract (E): This article is based on an oral performance, in which the (un)concept of the uncanny is applied and elucidated to a tragedy of Euripides (431 B.C.) and to a film of David Lynch (1996). Simultaneously, a self-compiled score of *Lost Highway* influenced – interrupting, supporting, traversing – the performance. Starting from the ideas offered by Sigmund Freud in his text 'Das Unheimliche' (1919), the author turns to the related notions of 'objet petit a' and the 'Real', as elaborated by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, in order to consider the way in which David Lynch handles a specific sound score and a disturbing – subjective and objective – camera viewpoint. This is compared and contrasted to the way in which a Greek tragedy can be staged and looked at.

Abstract (F): Cet article se base sur une performance orale, où le (non-)concept de l' « unheimlich » rencontre à la fois une tragédie d'Euripide (431 avant J.C.) et un film de David Lynch (1996). Cette performance était accompagnée d'un montage personnel de la bande-son de *Lost Highway*, qui influençait à divers degrés (interruption, soulignement, opposition) la mise en scène de la parole. S'appuyant sur les idées développées par Freud dans son article sur l' « unheimlich » (1919), cet article recourt aussi à des notions élaborées par Jacques Lacan, puis par Slavoj Žižek (« objet petit a », « le réel »), dans le but d'analyser plus en détail la manière dont David Lynch se sert de la bande-son et des ambivalences d'une caméra à la fois objective et subjective. L'article se termine par une comparaison avec la manière dont il est possible de mettre en scène et de regarder une tragédie grecque.

Keywords: Lynch, Medea, tragedy, home

Article



1. What is happening in Euripides' *Medea*? A conflict, first of all between

a woman and her man. Medea, a barbaric woman, falls in love with the Greek adventurer Jason. With her magical crafts she helps him to win the Golden Fleece, that actually belongs to her father. For fear of his anger she follows Jason to Greece. The couple then, together with their two little sons, settles in the city of Corinth. Yet Jason, considering his social position as an immigrant not stable enough, chooses to marry the princess of Corinth, in order to get a royal offspring, and thereby a fortunate and honourable future. The story of the tragedy begins after Jason's removal to the palace of the king, Creon.

In the centre of the Athenian stage there is the *skènè*-building. In *Medea* this building represents Medea's home. In front of this house the nurse of Medea's children sets forth the story of the Golden Fleece and Jason's treachery. The nurse's monologue is regularly interrupted by laments and cries from the inside:

MEDEA. Aiai. Wronged. My wrongs call forth great cries
of woe!
Boys, your mother's hated. Cursed boys,
I wish you dead, your father too.
Curse his whole house!
(Euripides: 111-115)

In this tragedy Medea gradually executes her revenge. First, she kills Jason's new beloved. She makes her children hand over to the princess a poisoned bridal gown and a crown as wedding gifts. The princess - as we are told by the messenger - puts them on and while she is showing them off in front of the mirror, they catch fire, consume her skin and reduce the princess - together with her father, who tried to get her gown and crown off - to a heap of scorched flesh. Then, at home - in the *skènè*-building - Medea stabs her own children. By these violent acts Medea robs Jason of what is most precious to him, of what he desires the most: a stable future, provided by a royal offspring.

Slavoj Žižek considers Medea by these radical acts as the example of 'la vraie femme': a woman who deprives her husband of "the precious *agalma* around which his life turns" (Žižek 2000: 8-9). Jason cannot beget any children by his new bride, nor can he depend on the sons he has already fathered. This child murder is sometimes seen as a 'castration': it is probably not a coincidence that in Euripides' text two sons are murdered.¹ Žižek has derived the term 'agalma' from Jacques Lacan, who has dedicated a part of a seminar to this notion (Lacan 1991: 163-178). Literally, this Greek word means 'delight', 'pleasing gift', 'statue in honour of a god as an object of worship'. Lacan takes this term together with the 'objet petit a', the object-cause of desire.² I will come

back to this later.

As already is said, the *skènè*-building in the theatrical space represents Medea's house, her *oikos*. This term not only refers to the material space where a family lives, but also to the family itself.³ Ever since the beginning of the performance this *oikos* is negatively connoted. The prologue of the nurse tells of the flourishing and the decay of Medea's family. When during this story pained cryings are heard from the inside of the house, it is the *oikos* itself that seems to be crying. After Jason's departure, Medea is the only one left to represent the house. When the king of Corinth, fearing that Medea will destroy the marriage of his daughter by her magical crafts, has banished her, she tells the public:

For by Queen Hecate, whom above all
I worship and have chosen as my partner,
Lodged in the inmost corner of my home,
I swear that non of them shall cause me grief
And not regret it.
(Euripides: 395-398)

Normally it is Hestia, the hearth goddess, who represents the Greek house. In the heart of Medea's *oikos* lives Hecate, goddess of the moon, goddess of magical power, and of the underworld as well. The Athenian public then sees the outside of a house, in which they may suspect the most obscure and darkest forces. This will soon be confirmed by Medea's murdering of her children inside her own house. The public can only hear the children's cries for help. It feels an unnameable tension inside the *oikos*-building: the home has become an 'un-home', a black hole inside a Greek town.

This dark connotation of the inside of the *skènè*-building not only holds for Euripides' *Medea*. When in a tragedy a murder or suicide is committed, it will never be shown on stage, but either in a hypothetical space - for instance behind an *eisodos* - or in the darkness of the *skènè*-building. Some tragedies connect this building with Hades' home.⁴ This connection of the invisible inner part of the *skènè*-building with the underworld, is revealed by the word 'Hades' itself. The Greeks wrote Hades also as 'Aïdes', that can be derived from the verb 'a-idein': 'not to see'. Hades then is the non-visible. Once passed through the gate of the *skènè*, one ends up in the darkness of the underworld.

As the woman had no importance in political - and social - life and had to stay at home to guard the '*oiko-nomia*', it became probable to the readers and thinkers of Greek tragedy to draw a parallel between the dark inner world of the house and the woman, even between the inside of the house and her body. Ruth Padel refers to the polysemy of the

Greek word for the woman's room: '*muchos*'. Alongside the inner part of a house - which is traditionally associated with women (Zeitlin: 354-356) - *muchos* also refers to a body cavity as well as to the underworld (Padel: 100). The connecting element for this polysemy is probably the '*a-ides*' - the invisible. Some critics not surprisingly state that from the viewpoint of men the dark house - for *Medea*: the *oikos* where Hecate is living - must be a lugubrious place, yes, an unhomey home. This 'Unheimliche' is not in the first place linked to the child murder, but rather to the associations which are aroused by the dark inside of the house. To certain associations triggered by events in the performance, which provoke certain feelings - fears -, the quality 'unheimlich' can be ascribed.

2. Yet, we can imagine a man in the Athenian public, who does not consider the house as uncanny at all. He does not think of the horror of the underworld, he does not feel anything threatening in this lurking female obscurity, although day by day he obliges his wife to stay at home - *inside* the house -, while he himself is strolling over the sunny *agora* on his way to a lovely *hetaere*...

Freud himself already pointed out that a sort of sensitivity is necessary to experience the uncanny. (Freud: 219-220) In our consideration of the (un)concept of the uncanny, it can be understood as a certain affect felt in the body, in this case via the gaze, that gets in touch with the spectacle of a theatre play. If a spectator does not approach the *skènè*-building as part of a scenery, but from the viewpoint of imagination, the uncanny can appear. The *oikos* then becomes part of a story that gets in touch with his imagination and is parasitic on his semiotic body. The spectator in his turn is not looking straight to the house, but, as Slavoj Žižek calls it, he is looking 'awry'. He does not see a walled piece of scenery that has to represent a house in a tragedy of Euripides, but a threatening darkness in the house of *Medea*, a woman who is left behind, hurt, full of rage and has it in for her *man*.⁵

3. The way Žižek fills in this notion of 'looking awry' needs a little digression. First of all, it is important to know that Žižek makes use of a Lacanian vocabulary, although he interprets it in his own way. Here, the notion of 'objet petit *a*'⁶ is very important. The '*a*' is a sign that can be found in some of the so-called 'algebraic formulas' of Lacan, like the following:

" \exists & \forall ". This formula attempts to give expression to the desire and fantasy. One may call the rhomb - composed out of two arrows which point in the opposite direction and therefore articulate a certain dynamic - the 'finite form'. It means 'to desire for'. The rhomb then establishes a

relation between a subject and that so-called 'objet petit *a*'. The subject (\exists) is 'barred', cleft on two levels. On the one hand there is the level of the imaginary: a human being discovers his complete 'I', he perceives himself as a whole, when he sees his own image or someone else's in the mirror. This discovery depends on an image that is outside the human being, which causes an alienation. On the other hand, the subject is split on the level of the symbolic order: when a subject says 'I' and by this means appears as a subject, it is representing itself by means of a signifier that lies outside itself, in the symbolic order of language, an uncontrollable system of ways of expressing, discourses, stories which were all already present before the subject came to life. Lacan calls this 'l'Autre' (A). So on the level of the symbolic order the subject is alienated, because one can only speak of a subject in the field of the Other by means of a signifier. The place of the subject itself is an emptiness. Therefore one cannot consider the subject as a unity. By entering the symbolic order 'l'objet petit *a*' arises as something that irrevocably has been lost, but what the subject will continue to desire.⁷ So '*a*' is both object as well as cause of the desire.

In a phantasm the desire is staged. This does not mean that in a phantasm a desire is satisfied, but it is literally realised. This desire has an object, namely the so-called 'objet petit *a*' around which the subject continues to circle, but which it will never be able to reach. Although reaching this '*a*' is the aim of the subject, it will never get to its destination. This '*a*' is immediately connected to the void that is experienced by the subject in the symbolic order, so in its existence as a barred subject. The bar that splits the subject and takes away his sense of unity, is linked to the 'Real'. The 'Real' is what by no means can be represented. The forever lost sense of unity would belong to the order of the Real, and desire thus springs forth from the separation between the 'self' and the 'Real'. That is why not only the subject is barred but also the symbolic order (%): by entering the symbolic order the '*a*' is lost, so it cannot be represented.

To survive in reality one needs representations: one needs the imaginary and the symbolic to be able to recognise the world as a reality. By means of image and language, based on the principle of differentiation, the world appears to the subject. Since it is possible to differentiate, one is able to occupy a certain position in the world and to have more or less control of this world. Since the 'Real' cannot be represented in the symbolic order, it is traumatic: it is a gap in the symbolic order, it cannot be mediated, it is pre-eminently something to be feared. Within the Lacanian topography this 'Real' is a sort of 'sub-stratum', which the symbolic order attempts to signify, but will never succeed in

representing. The 'Real' is a blind spot.

The 'Real' however exists in the human being, in his phantasms and dreams. One may distinguish 'reality' from the 'Real' by the fact that reality is formed by subjective representations, by means of the imaginary and the symbolic, while the 'Real' is what slips out of this, what cannot be known, but what is always present. Žižek connects the 'Real' with the unmediated: what cannot be mediated by means of imaginary imitation nor by means of symbolically codified representation (Žižek 1991: 40). In Žižek's opinion the 'Real' can be 'represented' in a psychic reality - not the subjective representation of reality, but in phantasm and dreams. Žižek's statement can be explained starting from the isotopy between the 'objet petit *a*' and the 'Real': they are both beyond the grasp of the subject and cannot be represented. So they are both a blind spot. In the phantasm the subject unconsciously tries to display the object-cause of his desire.

3. Not only in phantasm but also in certain art forms the 'Real' can come close to representation, for instance in the soundscape of a film. It may be interesting to take David Lynch's *Lost Highway* as a case study and to listen to the sounds in the house of Fred and Renee Madison. At a certain moment Fred is roaming through the corridors, where the walls have disappeared in the darkness. The soundscape consists of pulsating, distorted bass sounds - the so-called 'drones' - and subdued yells, as if there is an underworld resonating.

A scene from *Lost Highway* gives an excellent illustration of the 'looking awry'. The spectator sees Fred, lying on his bed and turning his eyes to the right, where we may suppose Renee in the room. In the next shot Fred sees himself playing on the saxophone in a jazz club, without hearing any sound. His eyes are looking into the public, where we see Renee and a man, leaving the club.⁸ The next shot shows the 'exit' sign, while Fred's eyes - represented by the camera view point - move upwards. Next, the spectator sees Fred's face again, lying in bed, with his eyes looking awry to Renee. She undresses and leaves the room, naked, by a little stepladder. So, resumed schematically, the two sequences have - from the viewpoint of Fred - the following parallel structure:

#1: Fred

- * Renee and a man moving to the right of the club
- * the exit sign and Fred's eyes going upwards

#2: Fred

- * Renee in the right part of the room, undressing
- * Renee, naked, leaves the room by a stepladder

What is suggested here, seems to be adultery. The violence of this thought is made clear by the next scene: Fred and Renee are trying to make love, but Fred seems not to be able to get the thing going. Something is playing tricks on him and suddenly he starts to utter it: it is about a dream. He is walking through the dark, he hears Renee crying his name, but he can't find her. Suddenly he arrives in their bedroom and stands next to the bed, where Renee is lying down. The camera - Fred's eyes - suddenly jumps forward to Renee, who is yelling without any sound and is covering her face with her arms. Subsequently, Fred wakes up with a start...

To Žižek the 'looking awry' stands for the gaze, interested in something, and filled and sometimes transformed by a desire, in other words: a gaze determined by phantasm and consequently by desire. In the case of *Lost Highway* it remains very vague which scene is phantasm, dream or reality. When Fred wakes up of the dream he was telling - a strange blur of the story and the dream - he looks aside and discerns the silhouette of Renee next to him in the dark. At any rate, he thinks it is Renee and therefore he relaxes a bit. Yet, when he looks closer, out of the silhouette the face of Mystery Man is looming up.⁹



Fred gets a shock - and the spectator with him -, yet it turns out that it is Renee who is sitting there. So the appearance of the face of Mystery Man seemed to be an hallucination. Yet, it is clear that Fred's nasty feelings about Renee's behaviour and her supposed adultery influence his relation to the world around him. So reality is transformed by his 'looking'.

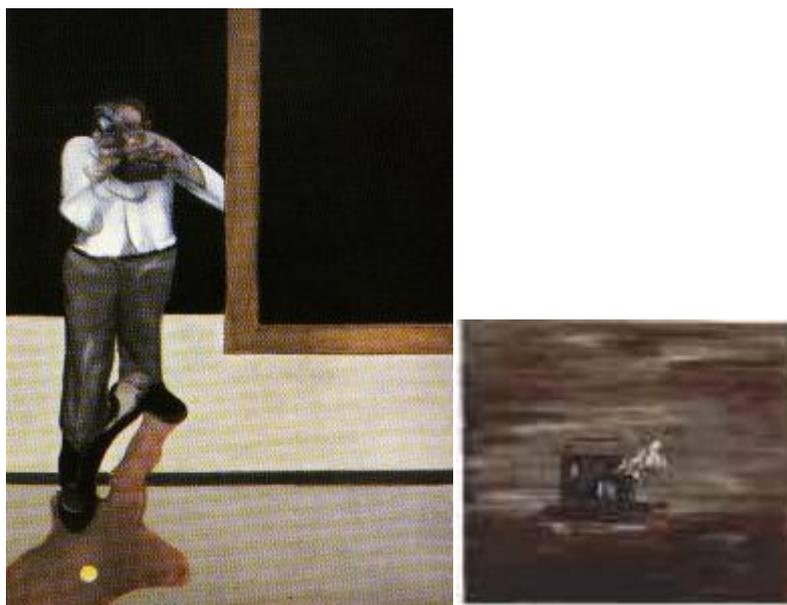
4. Exploring David Lynch' *Lost Highway* seems to be similar to circling around the notion of the Unheimliche. It is remarkable that Žižek himself has written a rather disappointing essay about this film. There are some strange inaccuracies on the level of the plot and the characters, and the 'looking awry' does not appear in his exposé.

Therefore, we will take recourse to some of the concepts introduced above,



which we will confront with scenes from the film and with statements by the director himself. It is striking that Lynch describes 'the intellectual uncertainty', prevailing about his films, in terms of "being lost in darkness and confusion" (Rodley: 20). In an interview he considers film as a representation of a dream experience by means of sound and situations. To the latter he adds: "The essential ingredient is completely unable to be communicated." (Rodley: 15)

Yet, since there is not any communication possible on this matter, some light can be thrown on two levels that may be important for the uncanny atmosphere of the first part of the movie, which almost entirely takes place in the house of the Madisons. This house is not presented as a neatly (vertically) structured unity, but as a kind of labyrinth in a shapeless darkness. So the first level focuses on the visual. Therefore, we first digress to a painter, who has undoubtedly been important for Lynch's own painting: Francis Bacon. Lynch himself made the following statement on Bacons work: "When you see those works, you dream." (Rodley: 17) In some untitled triptychs, with mutilated figures in rooms - like the ones from August 1972, May-June 1973 and March 1974 - black, amorphous spaces are overtly present. Up to a certain level they resemble the spaces in *Lost Highway*, in which Fred sometimes disappears or gets lost. Besides, one of the paintings from the March 1974-triptych shows a figure that is filming the spectator. At the end of the movie, Mystery Man does the same to Fred. Moreover, it reminds one of the videotapes found by the Madisons at their front door in the first part of the film. On these tapes, they could see someone - the cameraman, supposedly Mystery Man - walking through their own dark house...



The colour black is clearly present in Lynch's own painting as well. Black

is considered as the colour of dreams, because black has a depth without showing concrete shapes. Lynch: "You can go into it, and because it keeps on continuing to be dark, the mind kicks in, and a lot of things that are going on there become manifest. And you start seeing what you're afraid of. You start seeing what you love, and it becomes like a dream." (Rodley: 20) In *Lost Highway*, after the last trip through the dark corridors of his house - which is very similar to the dream in which Renee was calling Fred's name -, Fred comes out of the darkness with a videotape. On this tape he sees how the camera is walking through their house, right to their bedroom, where Fred sees himself gesticulating on the floor, covered with blood, and next to him the dismembered - 'Baconian' - corpse of Renee. Is it a dream? Is it 'real'? Is it a phantasm? In any case, it indicates the bad tensions present in the house as well as the transformations occurring under the influence of these tensions.

In an interview about *Lost Highway* David Lynch puts the house on a par with the relationship of Fred and Renee, in a way comparable to our approach of the screaming *oikos* in the beginning of Euripides' *Medea*. Gaston Bachelard writes about this topos in the poetical imagery:

Avec l'image de la maison, nous tenons un véritable principe d'intégration psychologique. Psychologie descriptive, psychologie des profondeurs, psychanalyse et phénoménologie pourraient, avec la maison, constituer ce corps de doctrines que nous désignons sous le nom de topo-analyse. Examinée dans les horizons théoriques les plus divers, il semble que l'image de la maison devienne la topographie de notre être intime. (Bachelard: 18)¹⁰

For example: when a house lacks verticality, this may be an indication of the uprooted and disintegrated character of the house. (Bachelard: 42) The structure of the house of the Madisons seems to fit in this idea. It is even possible to consider their house as one giant cellar, which is traditionally seen as "l'être obscur de la maison, l'être qui participe aux puissances souterraines." (Bachelard: 35) Within the poetical imagery the cellar refers to the fears that live in a house. Even without the interpretation of the Madisons' house as a cellar, the general idea of Bachelard remains interesting: the house as an "état de l'âme" (Bachelard: 77), as a topography of our 'intimate being'.

In the case of *Lost Highway* the state of the house represents the relation between the two residents. Their relationship is clearly unstable, they feel that somewhere at the border of the conscious - or beyond it -

there are "bad, bad problems" which they cannot articulate. Hence, a bad feeling is hanging around and is starting to live a life of its own. This life may be felt in the darkness of the house, but also in the gaze of the spectator, who looks into the dark. Contrary to the tragedy of *Medea*, where the threat of the inner darkness of the house is determined by the extent of the male spectator's 'looking awry', it seems to be Lynch's aim to make this sort of 'looking' present in the film itself. The dark, wall-less corridors can be seen as a way to influence the looking awry.

Another level is the music. In the creation of his films music usually precedes the montage, for Lynch - together with his composer Angelo Badalamenti - elaborates a scene first on the level of the soundscape. "And BOOM! I'll tell you: that piece of music is what adds 80 per cent of the horror of that scene. It's the emotion of the scene." (Rodley: 16) When in *Lost Highway* one hears the drones and the subdued screams, the following statement of Lynch may be very significant: "I like to go deeper into a house and find things underneath things." (Rodley: 18) And it is precisely what is growing rampant and swarming there, that Lynch wants to give a chance in his film language.¹¹

5. A connection can be found between the lack of images that can be looked at in a straight way, and the aversion of the protagonist, Fred Madison, to cameras: "I like to remember things on my own way", he says, "not necessarily the way they happened." Therefore it seems to be a rather risky business to attempt to pinpoint a moment in the movie, as Žižek does, at which the film suddenly starts to show Fred's phantasmatic world. The phantasmatic is permanently intruding: both in the shapeless black which influences Fred's gaze and that of the spectator, and in the sound. This phantasmatic is circling around a woman, who at the end of the film interrupts a sex scene by reacting to the repeated 'I want you' of the man with: "But you will never have me."¹² Lynch here seems to represent the trauma of the male protagonist. Probably it is not a coincidence that in the Freudian and Lacanian topography the woman is called the blind spot: "On 25th May, 1897, Freud wrote: "It is to be suspected that what is essentially repressed is always what is feminine." (...) [E]very neurosis starts as a passive traumatic scene which is experienced as unpleasant; passivity means femininity; hence, the core of the repressed is femininity. There does not seem to be a place for the woman in the psychological economy. At this point we have to make an important link with Freud's previous discoveries during his 'trauma' period. At that time he had discovered that there was something, a nucleus, navel or mycelium, which could not be psychically elaborated and which gave rise to anxiety as the only possible reaction. We have already described this as the Lacanian Real,

situated beyond the signifier. Freud now discovered that this something was always of a passive, unpleasant and traumatic nature. Passive and therefore feminine. To be more accurate: passivity became a substitute signifier for femininity because even Freud could not find the right words for it. In other words, the traumatic Real, for which there is no signifier in the Symbolic, is femininity. *Freud had discovered the lack in the Symbolic system: there is no signifier for The Woman.* Half a century later, Lacan wrote this down as %, meaning that the totality of signifiers is never complete, that the Other has a lack." (Verhaeghe: 39). And it might be this lack - which coincides with the 'objet petit a' (Verhaeghe: 64) - that is presented in the phantasm, for the phantasm can be seen as an interpretation of the 'Real', meant as a defence against the traumatic essence of it.

In the house of *Lost Highway* sound and blackness refer to the intruding traumatic, that breaks out in moments and circumstances which we may call 'unheimlich'. Somehow, we recognise it, but we are not able to represent it, nor to recuperate it. It is an immediate sensation we can scarcely grasp in terms of the symbolic order, as if the 'Real' is suddenly there. Lynch, almost paraphrasing Lacan, once said: "The 'real' is hiding all through life, but we don't see it." (Rodley: 44) And: "That there is a mystery is a HUGE THRILL. That there's more going on than meets the eye is a thrilling thing." (Rodley: 26)



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Footnotes

1. There is no consensus about the number of Medea's children in the mythological tradition. Hesiodus, for instance, mentions only one child. Cf. Hesiodus, *Theogony*: 992-1002.

2. Cf. Lacan 1991: 177: "(...) cet objet, *agalma*, petit *a*, objet du désir (...)".

3. In tragic language the word *domos* is used instead of *oikos*. Yet, in criticism the term *oikos* is preferred, for this word is set as a concept against the *polis*. The *oikos* is traditionally considered as the space of the woman, while the *polis* is seen as a male space. However, this may not be interpreted in a radical way: the *oikos* is not *possessed* by the woman. Women take care of the house *from the inside*, while men protect it from the outside.

4. Cf. Wiles 1997: 165-166; e.g., Sophocles, *Electra*: 109-110.

5. In a famous speech Medea lodges a complaint against the weak

position of women in the patriarchal society. (Euripides: 228 ff)

6. A brief survey of the meaning and use of this term in Lacan's oeuvre can be found in Evans: 124-126.

7. The little 'a' refers to the French word 'autre' (with little a), rather than to the first letter of 'agalma': "and a, the other which isn't an other at all, since it is essentially coupled with the ego". (Lacan 1978: 321)

8. In the following this man, Andy, is presented as a pimp.

9. The character of Mystery Man is hereby introduced in the film. The name 'Mystery Man' does not appear in the movie, but is used by David Lynch himself.

10. It is important to keep in mind the aim of Bachelard's work: a phenomenology of the poetical image. This poetical image is primarily situated in the poem. Therefore it is an image to be seen by the inner eye, emerging from a (written) text. Bachelard is not really interested in the gaze of the reader. In his work two chapters are dedicated to the house. This house is primarily seen as "la maison natale". Nevertheless, because of the phenomenological character of his theory and the connection to the inner life - "la rêverie" - some aspects of his work may be transferred to our discourse.

11. Trent Reznor - front man of *Nine Inch Nails* and collaborator at the score of *Lost Highway* - illuminated Lynch's working process in an interview. Lynch had asked him to create some sound for a scene. He had to keep in mind that in the corner of the room there would be a bag full of snakes. In the film itself there was no bag, only darkness.

12. During this scene a song of This Mortal Coil, appropriately called 'Song to the Siren', is heard.

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