Fade to Black: The Destruction of Identity in *Vertigo*, *The Tenant*, & *Mulholland Drive*

Eric M. Lachs

ENG4133: The Accident

Dr. Richard Burt

The rudimentary form of narrative storytelling lends itself towards application to an individual subject's life story due to the correspondence of a narrative's finite bounds and the subject's mortality. *Vertigo* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), *The Tenant* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1976), and *Mulholland Drive* (dir. David Lynch, 2001) are consistent with this idea because their narratives follow an individual human subject from an anecdotally significant beginning to their death. I will argue that the anthropomorphized narrative compels the subject's suicide through the misrecognition of personal identity. This occurrence brings about the themes of narrative significance, subject motivation, identity, recognition, and mortality.

The specificities of basic narrative method include the Aristotelian triumvirate form—consisting of beginning, middle, and end—and a fundamental progression in time. These requisites belie the potentially infinite scope of narrative and set a primitive restriction to the most fundamental linguistic practice. Once the boundaries of narrative have been recognized, a formal equation and basic concepts can be established in its name. The semiotic codification of these concepts is so great, in fact, that many narrative structures and concepts translate into multiple mediums. James Brooks elaborates on this in *Reading for the Plot*.

> Narrative in fact seems to hold a special place among literary forms—as something more than a conventional "genre"—because of its potential for summary and retransmission: the fact that we can still recognize the "story" even when its medium has been considerably changed. (Brooks 4)

This recognition is predicated by the distribution of narrative occurrences within certain categories. The most important narrative incidences are functions of progression, which

Roland Barthes established as the proairetic code (the code of action, instantiating narrative progress). Action motivates the story and conveys it temporally. (Barthes 18-20)

The proairetic code is the only one without which a narrative cannot subsist. The motivation in sequence establishes a dynamic plot, ceaselessly decreasing the distance from its conclusion. Aristotle clarifies the concept of narrative motion in *The Art of Poetry*.

> Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the characters; they include the characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its fable or plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing. (Aristotle 37)

The symbiotic relationship of characters—these are created with what Barthes terms the connotative code—and action seems menacingly inseparable, however Aristotle resigns the confusion to the narrative's impetus. He argues that the character's connotations are subordinate to and dependent on their actions, because the actions are the exclusive stimulation toward the end. The narrative's end affects the experience both directly, in its explication, and indirectly through the knowledge of the subject's approach to it. (Barthes 11-20)

Through these realizations, the form of narrative becomes directly controllable for the subject; its actions necessitate the story, and therefore the end. In this way, the viewer (or the reader of a literary narrative) comes to identify with the story's subject--whose intentionality motivates progression and brings about the end—as it mirrors their actions in reality. What, then, accounts for the narrative's urgency for the end? Brooks ameliorates this problem with an analysis of Sartre's autobiography.

> Sartre pursues further his reflection on end-determination in his autobiography, *Le Mots*, describing how in order to escape his sense of himself as unnecessary, utterly contingent, he had recourse to a book discovered in his grandfather's library entitled *L'Enfance des hommes illustres*, which told of children named Johann Sebastian or Jean-Jacques and, without ever mentioning the names Bach and Rousseau, in recounting their childhood constantly inserted casual references to their future greatness, contriving the account so artfully that it was impossible to read of the most trivial incident without relating it to its subsequently revealed significance. These children, Sartre comments, "thought they were acting and talking at random, whereas the real purpose of their slightest remarks was to announce their destiny.... I read the lives of those falsely mediocre children as God had conceived them: starting at the end. Sartre in emulation began to see himself as in a book, being read by posterity "from death to birth"; he undertook to live his life retrospectively, in terms of the death that alone would confer meaning and

> necessity on existence. As he most succinctly puts it, “I became my own obituary.” (Brooks 95)

Narrative envelops life in the sense that Sartre believes in it. The end of a story attributes a final signified to the product that can be analyzed at any point, and to know how it is signified gives interpretative control over the history that approaches an end. Sartre’s acknowledgement that he lives within the journey to his death absolves him from its consequences.

Vertigo, *The Tenant*, and *Mulholland Drive* are suitable for the analysis of the relationship between narrative and life on the basis that their respective stories follow a subject’s actions until death. In coming to terms with life, one must realize that the two basic considerations of existence are personal identity and expiration (or death), which will henceforth be understood as the absence of identity. Similarly, the consequentialist narrative format operates within certain bounds, namely the certainty and finality of ending, as Brooks discusses. The main characters in these movies assuage their own expiration, but always return to it through the transformation of their identity. Barthes mentions the assignation of personal identity within a narrative in *S/Z*.

> In principle, the character who says “I” has no name (Proust’s narrator is an outstanding example); in fact, however, *I* immediately becomes a name, his name. In the story (and in many conversations), *I* is no longer a pronoun, but a name, the best of names: to say *I* is inevitably to attribute signifieds to oneself; further, it gives one a biographical duration, it enables one to undergo, in one’s imagination, an intelligible “evolution,” to signify oneself as an object with a destiny, to give a meaning to time. On

> this level, *I* (and notably the narrator of *Sarrasine*) is therefore a character. The figure is altogether different: it is not a combination of semes concentrated on a legal name, nor can biography, psychology, or time encompass it: it is an illegal, impersonal, anachronistic configuration of symbolic relationships. As figure, the character can oscillate between two roles, without this oscillation having any meaning, for it occurs outside biographical time (outside chronology): the symbolic structure is completely reversible: it can be read in any direction … As a symbolic ideality, the character has no Name; he is nothing but a site for the passage (and return) of the figure. (Barthes 68)

When the assumptive character becomes a bundle of signification first, and an identity second, their actual personality is easily transgressed. Trelkovsky in *The Tenant*, for instance, occupies this type of category. It is more important to be a character than to be a certain character with certain accompanying traits or motivations. Because of this distinction, he occupies the apartment just as identity occupies him. Trelkovsky is a "site of passage for Simone. Similarly in *Vertigo*, Judy becomes Madeleine by way of narrative imposition (she holds a position that must be filled spatially). Even in *Mulholland Drive*, in which identity is clearly malleable, Diane creates Betty in herself when faced with emptiness. The signification that accompanies identity through naming and description are altered through transformation and reversal. These characters entrench themselves in the narrative, not because they have purpose, but because they can adapt to the will of the subject, whose only purpose is to see the story reach its end (to ensure their deaths). (Brooks 3-5)

These dynamic identities satisfy the instinctual movement of the story. In many ways, the story is fundamentally about the changes that characters undergo, but only in relation to the necessity of those changes in guaranteeing an end. Brooks summarizes the subject's instinctual change, quoting Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

> Freud now moves toward a closer inquiry concerning the relation between the compulsion to repeat and the instinctual. The answer lies in "a universal attribute of instincts and perhaps of organic life in general" that "an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things." Instincts, which we tend to think of as a drive toward change, may rather be an expression of "the conservative nature of living things." The organism has no wish to change; if its condition remained the same, it would constantly repeat the very same course of life. Modifications are the effect of further repetition, so that, while the instincts may give the appearance of tending toward change, they "are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new." Hence Freud is able to proffer, with a certain bravado, the formulation: "the aim of all life is death." We are given an evolutionary image of the organism in which the tension created by external influences has forced living substance to "diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated detours before reaching its aim of death." In this view, the self-preservative instincts function to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, to ward off any ways of returning to the inorganic which are not immanent to the organism itself. In other words, "the

> organism wishes to die only in its own fashion." It must struggle against events (dangers) that would help it to achieve its goal too rapidly—by a kind of short-circuit. (Brooks 102)

Causally, the aim of all life is certainly death, but objectively the route is much more indirect. Madeleine stages her own death to live unburdened; to reconcentrate the narrative focus, to begin again. This attempt to thrust the motivation back to the start does not change her destiny; it only delays the inevitable. In her case, restoring "the earlier state of things" becomes a return to the state of her narrative death, not a return to her narrative insignificance as she intended. Trelkovsky, too, rebels against his neighbors' supposed attempts to destroy him, although his conscious acceptance of this fact effectively speeds up his divergence. In *Mulholland Drive*, Diane's fantasies project Betty into herself, where she can enigmatically defer her identity into the mysterious blue box that can only be opened by the signification of Camilla's death (the matching key), her suicidal motivator. (Brooks 103-105)

The characters' deaths integrally motivate the narratives, whereas the characters themselves represent the futility of their own lives. Madeleine, Trelkovsky, and Betty all see their deaths before they experience them. Madeleine orchestrates a faked suicide, Trelkovsky learns Simone's suicide story, and Betty sees her own suicide, but none of them can effectively avoid their fates even with that foresight. They are condemned to repeat their own deaths, compulsively reliving the narrative as the viewer watches in horror. Brooks gives an example of how discovering death can motivate a narrative in *Reading for the Plot*.

> A nice example for me has always been the scene in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up* in which the photographer-protagonist attempts to reconstruct what has occurred earlier in the day in a London park through the enlargement of the photographs he took in the park—and then enlargements of parts of his enlargements—and the arrangement of his photographs in an intentional sequence. What starts him on the reconstruction is the gaze of the girl on the photographs, the direction in which her eyes look: the gaze appears to seek an object, and by following its direction—and its intention—he discovers, shaded and barely visible, a face in the shrubbery and the glinting barrel of a pistol. Then by following the direction of the pistol barrel—its aim or intention—he locates the zone of shadow under a tree which may represent a corpse, that of a man whom the girl was leading towards the shrubbery, perhaps toward a trap. In this scene of reconstruction, finding the right sequence of events, putting together the revelatory plot, depends on uncovering that "line of sight," that aim and intention, that will show how incidents link together. And finding, or inventing, the plot that seems to lie hidden in the shadows of the park and in the grainy darkness of the photographs could alone give meaning to the events, which, while recorded through the veracious and revealing "objective" lens of the camera, remain unavailable to interpretation so long as they are not plotted. (Brooks 35)

For *Blow-Up*, even if the character was glimpsing at his own death, the greater picture eludes analysis. In this movie, the character famously enlarges the photographs into

obscurity, and even the most magnified shots prove nothing more than a haze when he revisits the park scene to find the corpse missing. His line of sight extends only so far as to see what has already been seen. So, too, for Madeleine, Trelkovsky, and Diane the bodies are only there for as long as they look. The narrative moves along unaffected, whereas the repetitive death drive has found a new "site of passage" in them. (Barthes 68)

The narrative pace corresponds to the death drive of these characters because they resemble the previous deaths in the narrative, or, more specifically, because they neglect the importance of the previous deaths. For instance, Trelkovsky's inability to predict the circumstances that led to Simone's death also takes his life. Barthes encounters a similar narrative trope in *S/*Z, his explanation of Balzac's *Sarrasine*.

> Sarrasine, who has persisted in proving to himself La Zambinella's false femininity by these enthymemes, will die because of an inaccurate and inconclusive reasoning: it is from the discourse of others, from its superfluity of reasons that he dies. But it is also, inversely and complementarily, a defect in this discourse which kills him: all the cultural codes, taken up from citation to citation, together form an oddly joined miniature version of encyclopedic knowledge, a farrago: this farrago forms the everyday "reality" in relation to which the subject adapts himself, lives. One defect in this encyclopedia, one hole in this cultural fabric, and death can result. Ignorant of the code of papal customs, Sarrasine dies from a gap in knowledge ("Don't you know..."), from a blank in the discourse of others. (Barthes 184)

According to Barthes, Sarrasine dies because he neglects to recognize that La Zambinella is a man. This misrecognition literally causes him to die of ignorance. Furthermore, the same thing could be said about Madeleine, who mirrors the portrait of a suicidal woman without the knowledge of doing so, Trelkovsky, who lives in the apartment of a suicidal woman and ignores the hole in the wall and the bathroom occupants, and Diane, who ignores Camilla's affair with the director until it overcomes her. The strange hallucinations in all three films (Scottie's fragmented dream sequence, Trelkovsky's nightmare about Madame Gaderian, and Diane's trip to Club Silencio) contain referential codes, which foreshadow their deaths. Barthes (184-187)

The anthropomorphized narrative accounts for a subject, while essentially mirroring his or her actions. The exclusive dilemma therein involves the subject's identity. Brooks arrives at a similar conclusion upon examining the narrative model in relation to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

> We emerge from reading *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with a dynamic model that structures ends (death quiescence, non-narratability) against beginnings (Eros, stimulation into tension, the desire of narrative) in a manner that necessitates the middle as detour, as struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque in the dilatory space of the text. The model proposes that we live in order to die, hence that the intentionality of plot lies in its orientation toward the end even while the end must be achieved only through detour. (Brooks 108)

The subject that exists solely for expiration, and the loss of identity, must remain within their own scope. If, due to some misrecognition or assumption of a new identity, the

subject is altered, the narrative integrity is marginalized. The misrecognition of their own identities constitutes a narrative detour, and necessitates the subjects' suicides in the three films.

Sources Cited

Barthes, Roland. S/Z: An Essay. New York: Hill & Wang, 1974.

Blow-Up. Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni. Perf. David Hemmings, Vanessa Redgrave. 1966. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2004.

Brooks, Peter. Freud's Master Plot. New York: Harvard University Press, 1984. pp 90-112.

Brooks, Peter. Reading for the Plot. New York: Harvard University Press, 1984. pp 3-36.

Freud, Sigmund. Beyond the Pleasure Principle. New York: W. W. Norton Company, Inc., 1961. pp 1-78.

Mulholland Drive. Dir. David Lynch. Perf. Naomi Watts, Laura Harring. 2001. DVD. Universal, 2002.

The Tenant. Dir. Roman Polanski. Perf. Roman Polanski, Isabelle Adjani. 1976. DVD. Paramount, 2002.

Vertigo. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. James Stewart, Kim Novak. 1958. DVD. Universal, 1999.