

Notes on Psychogenic Fugue:
Graham Wiebe and
Boz Deseo Garden's *The Sphinx*

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This publication accompanies *The Sphinx*, an exhibition by
Graham Wiebe & Boz Deseo Garden at Petrine, Paris.

“The essential feature of the dissociative disorders is a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity and perception” – American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition ¹

“Salutations, it’s your Uncle...Sam. And this is the Great American Game.” – Samuel L. Jackson, Superbowl LIX halftime show ²

FUGUE

In David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*, Fred, a saxophonist played by Bill Pullman, murders his wife, Renee, a noir-ish brunette played by Patricia Arquette, following a conversation at a party with a “Mystery Man” played by Robert Blake (*fugue: years later, in a ‘split’ decision, Blake would be cleared in criminal court while being found liable in civil court for the murder of his wife Bonnie Lee Blakely.*) One night on Death Row, Fred, the upper-middle-class musician, transforms in his cell into Pete, a working-class mechanic, played by Balthazar Getty. (*Fugue: Getty, heir to his families’ oil fortune, suffered a descending arc of acting roles following Lost Highway before arcing back up with Lynch’s Twin Peaks: The Return; his great-grandfather J. Paul Getty, “the richest man in America”, left the U.S. in 1951 and never returned, becoming a devotee and collector of the remnants of the ancient European Cult of Priapus* ³ *and the priceless, looted artifacts collected by Sir Francis Dashwood’s 18th Century Society of Dilettanti and Hellfire Club; J. Paul Getty later came to the realization that he was the reincarnation of the Roman Emperor Hadrian.*)

Pete, freed from prison, returns to the auto shop and falls for the blonde gun moll Alice, also played by Patricia Arquette. (*Fugue: in a nod to Hitchcock’s Vertigo in which Kim Novak plays both Judy Barton and Madeleine Elster and a reversal of Buñuel’s strategy in That Obscure Object of Desire in which two actresses split the lead role.*)

¹American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*, Washington, DC. 2000.

²Kendrick Lamar, Apple Music halftime show, *Superbowl LIX*, 2025.

³Knight, Richard Payne. *A discourse on the worship of Priapus, and its connection with the mystic theology of the ancients*. London : Privately Printed, 1865.

Lynch: “At the time Barry Gifford and I were writing the script for *Lost Highway*, I was sort of obsessed with the O.J. Simpson trial... What struck me about O.J. Simpson was that he was able to smile and laugh. He was able to go golfing with seemingly very few problems about the whole thing. I wondered how, if a person did these deeds, he could go on living. And we found this great psychology term —‘psychogenic fugue’—describing an event where the mind tricks itself to escape some horror. So, in a way, *Lost Highway* is about that. And the fact that nothing can stay hidden forever.”⁴ (*Fugue: Lynch’s seeming obliviousness to the complex racial dynamics of the O.J. case mirrors his seeming obliviousness to questions of race in his films.*)

In *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, Geena Davis plays schoolteacher Samantha Caine, a woman suffering from retrograde amnesia whose head trauma following a car accident resurfaces her CIA-assassin alter Charlie. When former targets and colleagues start to come for her, Davis takes flight, fleeing her small town idyll with a P.I./shakedown artist played by Samuel L. Jackson. (*Fugue: Jackson’s introductory scene shaking down a john is a clear precursor to his character Jules’s introductory speech in Pulp Fiction; such “occult casting” (in which an actor is cast in order to refer us back to their previous roles) is an obsession of online conspiracy theorists.*) They hide out in a 1950s-style motor lodge. (*Fugue: Robert Altman’s The Long Goodbye with its endlessly reprising, stylistically splitting musical theme plays on the tv.*)

As Davis’s schoolteacher persona fades and her alter emerges, she expertly assembles a sniper rifle and reflexively shoots at Jackson when he startles her. (*Fugue: “From the fall of 1959 through the spring of 1962, Harvard psychologists conducted a disturbing and what would now be seen as ethically indefensible experiment on twenty-two undergraduates. One of these students, whom they dubbed “Lawful,” was Theodore John Kaczynski, who would one day be known as the Unabomber, and who would later mail or deliver sixteen package bombs to scientists, academicians, and others over seventeen years, killing three people and injuring twenty-three.”*⁵)

⁴ Lynch, David, *Catching the Big Fish*. New York : Tarcher Perigree, 2006.

⁵ Chase, Alston. *Harvard and the Making of the Unabomber*. The Atlantic, June, 2000. Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/06/harvard-and-the-making-of-the-unabomber/378239/>

SPLITTING

In his role as “*Your Uncle...Sam*” in Kendrick Lamar’s *Super-bowl LIX* halftime show, Samuel L. Jackson delivers a biting pep-talk/critique to Kendrick, an audience of 127.7 million viewers, and, in attendance, the newly inaugurated President of the United States. Jackson’s hesitation after *Uncle* before spitting out *Sam*, his exhortations to Kendrick to “*humble*” himself and admonitions against being “*too loud, too reckless, too ghetto,*” finally asking “*Mr. Lamar, do you really know how to play the game?*” (*Fugue: the Superbowl stadium’s playing field is split into a hybrid Playstation controller/prison yard.*) all hint at another, mythic *Uncle* circa America 1852. (*Fugue: more “occult casting”*: in *Glass (2019)*, Jackson’s *Mr. Glass* confronts *The Horde*, a mass of dissociative identities inhabiting James McAvoy’s *Kevin*; in *Django Unchained (2012)*, Jackson plays *Stephen*, who, loyal to his master, exposes *Broomhilda’s* previous relationship with *Django*.)

Like David Hammons’ afro-diasporic twist on the negative afterimage of the American flag *African-American Flag (1990)*, Jackson’s *Uncle...Sam* reveals a “photonegative” afterimage of America 1852 resurgent as America 2025 slips into authoritarianism and white supremacy.

Splitting is apophatic: in *Lost Highway*, it is in Getty’s head injury, Blake’s bilocating “*Mystery Man*”, and the recurring POV speeding down the center divider of a highway locked into “*highway hypnosis*”; in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, it is in Davis’s schoolteacher slipping inexorably into her assassin alter, hunted by her Deep State makers, while Jackson’s street-smart shakedown artist comes into focus as the film’s moral center; in the Superbowl LIX halftime show, it is in *Uncle...Sam* and his afterimage shading into one another—becoming revelators, secret allies, and mutual enforcers.

Heteronomy: Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa coined the term to refer to the means by which he created a team of more than seventy characters, consisting of both heteronymic poets and semiheteronymic translators and publicists to promote them. A heteronym is a complex character vested with the power to create additional heteronyms and semiheteronyms; a semiheteronym is a character not dissimilar enough from its creator to achieve the status of heteronym. – Monica Steinberg, *Naming: Heteronymy and the Imaginary Artists of George Herms* ⁶

Heteronomous personae are the artistic equivalents of psychogenic or dissociative alters, creating work under different names with distinct styles: Bruce Conner with *Dennis Hopper One Man Show* created works that approximated Hopper's hippie-surrealist collages. (*Fugue: Conner later revealed that he felt that Hopper's collages resembled his own, re-appropriating his style as well as his friend's name.*) Lynn Hershman Leeson said of her invented persona Roberta Breitmore: "*she's more real than I am, because I couldn't get credit cards, and I couldn't get other artifacts of life and the records that she easily acquired.*"⁷ Senga Nengudi created three alters: the photographer Propicia Leigh, the painter Harriet Chin, and the writer Lily Bea Moor. White male artist Joe Scanlan's black female persona Donelle Woolford "*whose de facto endorsement by the Whitney Museum is both insulting and troubling*"⁸ informed the YAMS Collective's decision to withdraw from the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

⁶ Steinberg, Monica. *Naming: Heteronymy and the Imaginary Artists of George Herms*. American Art, Summer 2018, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer 2018), pp. 24-51 Published by The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26556942>

⁷ Myles, Eileen. *Why Lynn Hershman Leeson Is Always Ahead of Her Time*. Aperture, issue 235, 2019, originally under the title "The Double." Online: <https://aperture.org/editorial/why-lynn-hershman-leeson-is-always-ahead-of-her-time/>

⁸ YAMS Collective statement upon withdrawal from the Whitney Biennial, 2014, quoted in Lee, Felicia R. New

