



DAVID LYNCH – THE ART OF THE REAL

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— MICHEL CHION —

CINEMATIC AND DIEGETIC REAL IN DAVID LYNCH'S INLAND EMPIRE

The first appearance of Laura Dern that one gets in *Inland Empire* is a woman who has just sit down on a sofa in order to welcome a visitor. 2 hours and 50 minutes later, she can be found just there, right after the film has been showed her running away, getting lost, beaten, murdered, in hell when the film put her there again, as serene and lonely but finally happy and surrounded by a group of celebration.

Let me remember a paper I wrote in 1987 about *Blue Velvet* in *Les Cahiers du cinéma*: "Static groups, women sitting on timeless sofas, dying even upright so that they need to be killed again in order to collapse – these are the vegetable-men of David Lynch. Beyond the visible oddities and his cabinet of teratology, the intensity of this director is able to film like no other the obvious opposite of the cinema: the stillness."

At that time, I had not seen the short films of Lynch, nor the permanently sitting grandmother who never moves.

For the first edition of my work about Lynch in 1992, I chose as a motto the statement of Françoise Dolto in respective of depressive mothers of unbearable children: "If you start to care for an unbearable child you can be sure that his mother run the risk of a depressive suicide.

Indeed, an unbearable child is the permanent and enactive everybody's electroshock for the poor. He prevents his mother all day long from having depressive fantasies. Being aggressive, he gives her the opportunity to be aggressive in return and to keep her on the surface. [...] We know that the infant is the first psychotherapist of the mother."¹

It would be difficult for me not to feel a certain self-satisfaction about the catchword of *Inland Empire* chosen by Lynch for the distribution in the USA: *Woman in trouble*. I did say, but principally I did see indeed that the woman in trouble is in the centre of Lynch's cinema and the 'attacks' which the woman are subjects of look like

1 Dolto, Françoise, *Séminaire de psychanalyse d'enfants*, Paris: Editions Seuil 1982.

the managing of the unbearable child.

Yet, fifteen years ago, this was anything but evident; many people would not see the cinema of Lynch as anything but a shifted and postmodern play with codes and a series of misogynist pictures.

At the same time, it is not a question to equate his films to psychological studies. The 'woman sitting on a sofa' could be a pictorial pattern, and indeed it is true for this film director coming from painting so that it occurs very quickly even if the sofa in *The Grandmother* is a chair. The woman going down is seen in *Industrial Symphony No. 1* as well: Women, intubated by all kinds of streams such as physical, emotional and electrical.

But careful: it is no question to say that the depressive woman is the meaning of Lynch's cinema even she is just the centre of it; it structures itself around her. Like in *Inland Empire* it happens around her, and on the whole because of her.

The first scene situated between the visitor (Grace Zabriskie, the ex-mother of Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks*) and Nikki during the beginning of *Inland Empire* is a great moment of the film. This visitor is a woman of affected gesticulations and strange intonations who suggests to be at home in the house next door, "it's difficult to see it [the house of Grace Zabriskie, Th. B.] from the road" and that one asks not only unusual questions (is the film that Nikki will make about marriage?), but multiplies menacing warnings as well ("actions do have consequences"), annoying questions (has been there a murder in the film?), and the displeasing insinuations (Nikki could have an unpaid bill), and distributes a dark tale (the story of a little boy ("who went out to play") where the evil was born, and finally of a little girl). The woman has difficulty knowing whether it is today or tomorrow – this "tomorrow" which stands for the head of the film project *On High in Blue Tomorrows* – and designates a divan of the living room. The shot of the swinging index finger is followed by the shot where Nikki is among friends. We will never know the end of the conversation between the actress and the visitor and therefore whether this chain has "propelled" Nikki towards an already tomorrow or whether Nikki is believed to have accompanied again the tactless lady or even made her expel, and whether she has wait until the next day.

This is a good example among many others in *Inland Empire* for the impossibility by getting us to draw a clear line between the cinematic real and the diegetic real.

The diegetic real, a term that imposes oneself, is in the film what the figures are living, what happens to them or even happens to an object, a landscape, an animal, etc. The cinematic real is this other real on the screen, within the frame, the chain of shots, the links, etc. The two real usually coexist in the cinema without being contradictory or confound with each other, always remaining complementary and distinct.

A good example to show the difference between the diegetic real and the cinematic real is the conversation on the phone, filmed usually as angle-reverse angle. In other words: we see everybody of the interlocutors bit by bit at the place they are speaking. In the diegetic real, the figures are not considered to see one another although their glances are exchanging in the cinematic real because of the cutting's play. In the diegetic real, they are far away from one another, in the cinematic real, they are nearby one another, etc. In *A Woman of Paris*, a silent film by Chaplin, a woman is calling with a public telephone her lover who is located in a house far away. In the diegetic real, never mind their mutual positions, but in the cinematic real, Chaplin made turn their backs on each other because both are showed as oriented toward the right of the screen. They are soon breaking up with each other because of a misunderstanding.

In a scene of Wes Craven's *Scream*, a young girl finds herself terrorised by a call at home: In the diegetic real she has the space to escape, but in the cinematic real she is framed and filmed so that she seems to be cornered and without direction to escape. The play of the film is to make us forget the diegetic real, and finally to remember it.

The narrative form of the cinema is to play with the both arrays by making us consider sometimes as the diegetic real what only belongs to the cinematic real; but as a rule, this narrative form consists to permit the audience to well discern both by resetting the reference of the diegetic real.

The same cannot be said of *Inland Empire* where we are not sure about the tangible reality we get to see and

where everything happening in the cinematic real seems to affect us little by little, and to contaminate the diegetic real; yet, if the last one is basically stable because of the law of nature and the physics, the cinematic real in turn is characterised by precariousness. The relation of time, space and causality created by the cutting, the different angles, the montage, are subjected to unsteady constants and steady redefinitions.

When Grace Zabriskie in this film of Lynch hint at a point of the living room by saying “if it was tomorrow it would be there” and we see then just for a moment Nikki with two friends sitting on a sofa, we have in terms of a diegetic real what I call a simple ellipse of time, and what the spectator firstly concludes. In the space-time of the cinematic real, there was a jump towards a new scene, a new pattern of figures: the visitor is no longer there (we will never see her leave), there are two friends (we did not see them come). On the whole, if the visitor says “if today was tomorrow” (she could say “if tomorrow was today”, but this takes a different meaning), she points out what happens on and on in the cinematic real where the next day can be today (ellipse of the time), the elsewhere can become here (ellipse of the space, combined or not with an ellipse of time).

While the cinematic real in the world of *Inland Empire* let instantly appear and disappear locations and figures and immediately brings night and day together, it becomes for certain figures their diegetic real. Everything happens as if the madness of Nikki consisted of being driven in the cinematic real, which she has to go through and of which she does not know the laws.

In addition, *Inland Empire* is a film where the cinema is pushed to its limits.

In one of the very unsettling scenes that implies this work, Laura Dern is in a room, dressed with a striped tank top, leant against a wall, silent, even some girls are joking and speaking about sex, and are smiling sometimes. At a time of a different shot we see the same smile looming into the face of Dern. There is nothing sure or evident in this scene. What is certain is this smile, a mysterious reaction.

The conversation with Grace Zabriskie at the beginning of the film and the “dialogue of agony” at the end are two moments, cut as shot-reverse shot. In the first of these scenes Laura Dern is filmed in a slight low angle shot (from button up) by a camera on a pedestal which dares sometimes a discreet panoramic of reframing. Grace Zabriskie is filmed a little more closely by a visible video camera so that the frame is always flickering a bit. Thus, host and visitor are filmed in a different style. At any given time the host fixates on a word “it’s not”, and it is impossible to know whether it is a [staged] mistake of the figure or [a real mistake] of the actress Grace Zabriskie, Lynch therefore mounts just afterwards a “reaction shot” of Laura Dern... without reaction.

This scene is fascinating because the cinematic dispositive action/reaction has a running idle, however it is running.

In this paper about Lynch, we had the opportunity to notice the director’s practice of very marked and hyperbolised reaction shots.

In this case, there is a very strange billiards effect: The shots of Grace Zabriskie seem to send the words like projectiles, and those of Laura Dern who speaks much less in this scene show us a face that seems “to rake in”, but sometimes to offer a surface of rebound towards the spectator.

The cinema is a machine to postpone this game of action/reaction towards the auditorium.

In return, the cutting of *Inland Empire* with many close-up views is not very different from *Mulholland Drive*, but maybe more radical. Here, Lynch often makes recourse to a very simple process and very intensive for him: the figures are shown in the totality of a décor that is either enormous or obscure; finally, the cutting isolates the faces of the protagonists who speaks to each other, or of which the one listen to the other, and therefore this is as if in this exchange of words the global frame was forgotten, negated, repressed, lost to sight, and only the figure lost his grip, and the reality failed. In the same way, in *Mulholland Drive*, when Betty played her scene with an old actor in front of a whole film team, one was attached to her and to him without image or sound referring to the context. Once again, for Lynch, it seems that this famous context is sensitive to disappear completely because of a simple change of shot as if the steady diegetic reality was subverted, absorbed by a cinematic reality being precarious by definition.

In the same way, at the end of the third act, the revelation that there was nothing but a shooting does not suffer for Nikki to escape from her world.

The return to the décor's totality is therefore often striking: it is for example the alarm bell in a world where one did just play that there was nothing but a shooting, where a world out of the screen exists.

The cinema catapults us in a different space and time, from day to night. Well, it is the same what happens to the heroine of *Inland Empire*: she finds herself instantly catapulted. But there are moments where the return to the reality does not suffer any longer, and where the décor is like contaminated with the impressions of the figure.

However, we do not believe that *Inland Empire* is talking about the cinema. Instead, we are saying that Lynch "talks cinema" in this film. What is he talking about? About the insanity, maybe, but about the life as well and about the strange fact that everything, the evil, even the insanity seems to be convertible into life.

(Translation: Thomas Becker)

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