
DAVID LYNCH – THE ART OF THE REAL

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

For citations and quotations, please cite as follows:

Thomas Elsaesser, »Actions Have Consequences – Logics of the Mind-Game Film in David Lynch's Los Angeles-Trilogy«, in: Thomas Becker, Wolfram Bergande, Alexandra v. Stosch, Valeska Schmidt-Thomsen (eds.), »David Lynch. The Art of the Real«, Braunschweig 2016.
<http://lynchconference.hbk-bs.de/actions-have-consequences-logics-of-the-mind-game-film-in-david-lynchs-los-angeles-trilogy>

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ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES — LOGICS OF THE MIND-GAME FILM IN DAVID LYNCH'S LOS ANGELES-TRILOGY¹

THE DIRECTOR AS AUTEUR TODAY: PERFORMATIVE SELF-CONTRADICTION

In a YouTube video, which over the years has had well over two million hits, we see David Lynch lashing out with a diatribe against all those who watch movies on a mobile phone: “You will never in a trillion years experience the film ... you'll be cheated. What a sadness that you think you've seen a film on your fucking telephone. Get real.” The clip ends with the iPhone logo and thus turns out to be a sponsored ad. A commercial, in other words, repackaged as a wild attack on the advertised product. What at first appears as a gag has symbolic value: it refers not only to the precarious financial situation of the filmmaker who has to carry his name to market. But it can also be regarded as an emblem of the dilemma of an independent director quite generally, whose outsider position only makes the major players of the studio system (or IT companies like Apple) stronger and more powerful. On the other hand, perhaps Lynch does have the last laugh on his side, because he is staging a performative contradiction. Thanks to a small reframing, the overt message is turned into its opposite, and by superimposing two possibilities, the spot creates a kind of “double bind”, which registers with the viewers as a cognitive dissonance that makes their minds vibrate. And it is this vibration that is Lynch's best and most typical “special effect”.

My proposition in what follows is that, David Lynch is one of those directors, along with other *auteurs*, notably Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier, whose authorial identity and creative authority – and the challenges these encounter in the 21st century – are negotiated by what I have called acts of “performative self-contradiction”. A performative self-contradiction is a term made popular by the philosophers Karl Otto Apel, in response to the speech act theories of Austin and Searle, but it also plays a role in Jürgen Habermas' critique of Derrida, where it highlights the fundamental difference between the two thinkers, since what Habermas regards as a flaw, has been seen as the core of Derrida's philosophical project of deconstruction. Briefly put, one commits performative self-contradiction when one makes a claim that contradicts the validity of the

¹ This essay is a chapter from my forthcoming book *Melodrama, Trauma, Mind-Games: Affect and Memory in Contemporary American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2016)

means that are used to make it, i.e. which contradicts your *performance* of the claim. In other words, in a performative self-contradiction, there is apparently a conflict between one's presuppositions and conclusions. The best-known example goes back to the logical or semantic paradoxes of the Greek philosopher Epimenides, who famously claimed "all Cretans are liars", while being himself a Cretan. Among deconstructivist philosophers of the second half of the 20th century, a performative self-contradiction is a way of achieving a degree of critical autonomy, while neither being caught inside a system nor presuming to occupy a position from without.

More specifically, I want to argue that David Lynch can stand contradictorily, but quite credibly, for the changing character and the current mutations of the cinema, perhaps more than any other filmmaker, precisely because he embodies many of its contemporary contradictions. Not only is he the perennial Hollywood *insider as outsider*, as well as one of the Cannes Film Festival's preferred *auteurs* because he still stands for 'the cinema as art'. But he is also a director of "the art of the real", and yet he does not hesitate to deploy for it the technologies of the virtual. Furthermore, in contrast to other cinephile directors, Lynch has been successful on television, arguably creating, with *Twin Peaks*, the very epitome of the cult HBO-type TV series. He has also struggled with television, and eventually despaired of television. Yet despite – or because – of all these credentials, Lynch is an auteur whose presence is least noticeable in the cinemas, if we go by box-office success, or even by how easy it is to catch his films on the big screen, as opposed to buying them as DVDs: Lynch, by design or by default, is these days most palpable on the Internet, where there is virtually no-one blogging seriously on the cinema who does not have strong views on Lynch either way, or who does not feel the urge to contribute to the debate on the ineffability of his personality, the peculiarity of his "religion" and the weirdness of his films.

THE LA TRILOGY

Lynch's loosely termed "sunshine noir" trilogy of films: *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Inland Empire* have often been called his LA films. Whether this is an appropriate common denominator, I shall leave to others, except perhaps to point out how important the concept of the 'trilogy' is for European filmmakers – Bergman's so-called "faith" trilogy, Satyajit Ray's Apu trilogy, Antonioni's "alienation" trilogy, Fassbinder's BRD trilogy, Lars von Trier's Golden Heart trilogy, Michael Haneke's "glaciation" trilogy, Abbas Kiarostami's Koker trilogy – so that the label "LA trilogy" in some ways dignifies Lynch with the attributes of a typically European art house or festival director, even if he is a US-American through and through, and even if his esoteric religious or spiritual beliefs make him a typical Southern Californian.

I shall – if only for the sake of argument – assume that the LA trilogy constitutes three highly reflexive pieces of filmmaking, or "meta-cinema", whose biographical, autobiographical, spiritual or even self-expressive dimensions concern me less than its reflexively self-contradictory aspects, which I have elsewhere discussed under the label of "mind-game film" – a label I shall come back to. Before doing so, I want to let Lynch speak on his own behalf, citing one of his frequently granted, but rarely revealing interviews, where he argues that his films – as far he is concerned – are about "ideas" (and not about images or stories) and – as far as the spectators are concerned – should be about "experiences" (and not about meaning). He is especially reluctant to explain either his characters or situations, so that "ideas" (which come to him liked winged creatures, and take him over) require the medium "film" in order to divest themselves of meaning and become "experiences".

Still, the question arises: what are these ideas? Let's start with the kind of reflexivity I noted and which can be explained or examined in several ways:

One can read Lynch's filmmaking as an ongoing cinematic experimentalism and a reflexivity about forms: *Eraserhead* was Lynch's first deliberate experiment (reflecting his interest in surrealism and European avant-garde), but even more conventional films, such as *The Straight Story* or commercial flops like *Dune*, were conceived as experiments, culminating in the LA trilogy and its final part, *Inland Empire*, once more a very experimental film. Or one can read his experimentalism within the framework of Hollywood (the insider as outsider), where Lynch belongs among the American directors who successfully blend or cross-pollinate

various genre conventions: horror, thriller, melodrama, as well as the various noir genres (sunshine noir, neo-noir, meta-noir, etc.) – a way of thinking *with and within* the cinema *about* the cinema, in the idioms that does not leave the fertile ground of the popular and the universally understood conventions that go with it. Lynch is a director who captures the attention of an audience because his incomprehensibility always stays so tantalizingly close to recognition, and his weirdness always has a brush with familiarity and even cultivates the cliché.

But there is also a case to be made that Lynch's LA films belong to the tradition of Hollywood's characteristically sarcastic take on itself (*Sunset Boulevard*, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *The Player*, *Los Angeles plays itself*), where the dream factory reflects on itself, showing its more lurid sides, and the horror that always lurks just beneath the glamorous surface. One also gets the sense that Lynch is all too familiar with the gossipy and secret histories of Hollywood, supplying a running commentary on both popular and scholarly works on the movie colony, such as Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*, David Thomson's *Beneath Mulholland*, Daniel Fuchs' *The Golden West*, not to mention the classics by Scott Fitzgerald (*The Last Tycoon*) or Nathanael West (*Day of the Locust*).

My own interest, however, is in another form of reflexivity – that of the mind-game film, which – among other aspects of style and narrative – also concerns the relation that exists between the production logic of Hollywood in the age of the Internet and the textual logics that can flow from this. Insofar as mind-game films are often, though not exclusively, signed by *auteurs*, I tend to read Lynch's type of meta-cinema as a form of self-allegory about authorship, one that manifests itself as the performance of a self-contradiction.

Again, before laying this out in more detail, I need to briefly indicate some other types of interpretation that the LA trilogy has solicited, and what common themes have generally been evoked to justify the label 'trilogy' in the first place. As already hinted at, the LA trilogy, both separately and as an identifiable corpus, have elicited a huge amount of comment on the Internet and as essay-topics for film students, mostly along four lines of argument: first, the recurring theme of psychogenic fugues and split characters; second, complex storytelling, twisted timelines and Moebius strips; third, intertextuality with reference to movies about movie-making in the post-noir neo-noir vein; intertextuality as Hollywood's homage to European filmmaking and vice versa; and intertextuality as critique of television, via sitcoms, while also celebrating its strange otherworldly charms (e.g. *The Rabbits* in *Inland Empire*); finally, there is the fourth aspect, the occult or spiritual dimension, where his movies are seen as coded messages about transcendental meditation, and where the LA trilogy is interpreted as a kind of Divine Comedy or a Book of Revelations (see blogs).

There is a broad consensus that *Inland Empire* is the most puzzling but also the most promising film to speculate with, not least about Lynch's mind-game mentality. Laying my cards on the table, as it were, I shall give a version of what I understand to be the "plot" of the film, while bearing in mind that Lynch is not a plot-driven filmmaker, and considers films as pods that pop open and disseminate like pollen or seeds, rather than stories that develop sequentially. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that in his films, there are agents and actions, and these actions concatenate, have consequences and combine into storylines and recurring patterns.

Hence my justification to point out a number of these narrative strands, and to indicate how I think they are braided or superimposed. Mostly, they are fractured and layered in such a way that they duplicate and mirror each other in both theme and trajectory, while also doubling back and foreshadowing along causal chains. The strands are all organized around central motifs such as love relations and sexual relations, marital infidelity and prostitution, which are in a sense also inverse mirrors of each other in terms of gendered dependency, power and exploitation.

First, there is the would-be (or come-back) actress Nikki Grace (Laura Dern), married to a rich and pathologically jealous Polish husband (Peter J. Lucas, who also plays Smithy, Susan Blue's husband), while living in the gilded cage of a lavish LA mansion. Nikki is to play Susan Blue in a film called *On High in Blue Tomorrows* partnered by Devon Berk (Justin Theroux), an actor notorious for serially seducing his female co-stars. *On High in Blue Tomorrows* is based on a gypsy tale and carries a curse: it compels the protagonists to enact in real life the situations they are playing for the camera, thereby providing the guiding motif, namely the constant wandering in and out of "character" in the film, as we lose our sense of what is the film-film-within-the film and what is the reality-within-the film.

Predictably, Nikki as Susan Blue (her film-within-the-film character), allows herself to be sucked into an extra-marital affair with Billy Side (played by Devon Berk/Justin Theroux), who also lives in a palatial home and is married to Doris (Julia Ormond), at one point claiming to have been hypnotized into killing someone with a screwdriver. The affair seems to bring out the worst also in Susan Blue: she turns into a bruised and abused, foul-mouthed and street-wise harridan, who confesses sordid episodes of sex, violence and drugs to a private eye, shrink or hired killer, living on top of a steep flight of stairs in a seedy office above a cinema. Why Susan is talking to him, and what connection if any this unsavory character has to the other men remains unexplained, but because played like a figure out of movies like *The Maltese Falcon*, *Chinatown* or *LA Confidential*, his presence requires little further motivation.

These narrative threads have similarly structured prequels and sequels, or maybe even a framing narrative: one set in a wintry Polish city in the present, and involving the Lost Girl (Karolina Gruszka) and the Phantom Man (Krzysztof Majchrzak), another set in a Polish city in the past, and involving another couple, played by the same actors. In Los Angeles, much of the action revolves around the re-make of a German film, originally left uncompleted, because of the curse and its consequences. The larger structural symmetries thus dictate that in each of the strands, a lover is murdered by the jealous partner of the other, across a switch of gender. These internal narratives are framed by the Lost Girl, who watches, tears streaming down her eyes, on a faulty television set, scenes from the film we are in the process of watching ourselves, while her pimp, lover, agent or people trafficker, who keeps her locked in the room with the tv set, turns up in Nikki's life as the Phantom Man. He holds the reins or pulls the strings in several of the sub-plots: a clownish-cruel version of male authority who turns up in many of Lynch's film, either as a mystery man (*Lost Highway*) and Cowboy (*Mulholland Drive*) or as a sort of Über-father.

MELANCHOLY FEMALE/ FEMALE DEPRESSION (SLAVOJ ZIZEK, MICHEL CHION)

Much is being made in the literature on Lynch about his misogyny, and the ordeals he usually has in store for his female protagonists – a projected accusation that Lynch shares with Lars von Trier. But while critic Amy Tobin has harsh words to say about what she calls Lynch's "exceptionally crude and brutal (in form and content) wife-beating" fantasies, and Jonathan Rosenbaum speaks of "designer porn" but concedes that "*Inland Empire* is full of good and bad girls", a Lynch obsession given an "interesting spin by having most of them played by the same actress", there are also a number of feminists who have come to Lynch's defense, arguing that especially *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* are not in fact sorry tales of female degradation, schizophrenia or bi-polar disorders, but can and should be read as parables of female empowerment. I quote:

"Obsessive-destructive desire, fantasmatic projections and paranoid-schizoid splittings of the female love-object into virgin/whore, ideal/nightmare pairs are central thematic concerns in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*. However, Lynch not only orchestrates but in fact deconstructs these clichéd representations of women on the levels of content, form and narrative. While both Fred Madison in *Lost Highway* and Diane Selwyn in *Mulholland Drive* fail to obliterate their obsessions because they remain caught in a network of false fantasmatic conceptions, Nikki Grace in *Inland Empire* is able to liberate herself from the dark male forces who exercise power over her. Nikki thus also frees herself from the curse of binary male projections: in the beginning she is the embodiment of the ideal, the glorious movie star, while Sue Blue (her film-within-the-film character) is the ultimate incarnation of the male nightmare – the castrating, violent and abused white trash female. Nikki transcends both categories, she undoes the false split; in the end she is neither one nor the other but simply herself. *Inland Empire* is thus Lynch's most explicitly feminist movie in this trilogy on the fatal dynamics of binary thinking." (Anna Katharina Schaffner)

However, we owe the most thoroughgoing analysis of the role or status of women in Lynch's films to Slavoj Zizek, who – building on some remarks by Michel Chion – has developed a wide-ranging hypothesis of causal inversion, around female melancholia: "at the centre of *Blue Velvet* (and of Lynch's entire oeuvre) lies the enigma of woman's depression" Zizek avers, a state to which he attributes profound consequences in the way it structures and re-organizes male impotence masked as desire; reaction masked as action; castration anxiety

masked as macho violence. Zizek's master trope is, of course, Jacques Lacan's formulation about woman being a function of man and vice versa, each futilely relying on the other for identity and self-consistency, to which Zizek gives a further twist, by positing depression as the centre of gravity that radicalizes male female relations, and tipping the balance of power in the woman's favour, and thus to some extent supporting the feminist emancipatory argument about Lynch's film.

Inland Empire can indeed be understood as having yet another deeply disturbed female character at the center of the narrative, underlined by the film's tagline "A Woman In Trouble". But while many of the Lynchian motifs of sadistic male power are evident, they play out differently; there are hints of the usual violent males of the enjoying superego in the mould of Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet* (1986), Bobby Peru in *Wild at Heart* (1990), or Mr. Eddy in *Lost Highway* also in *Inland Empire*: both Smithy and the Phantom fit the role, as does Nikki's husband (Smithy by another name). Their violence is intimated rather than performed, allowing it to appear as reactive as well as manipulative. But what distinguishes Nikki/Sue from the troubled women at the center of the earlier films, such as Dorothy Vallens (*Blue Velvet*), Laura Palmer (*Twin Peaks*) and Renee Madison/Alice Wakefield (*Lost Highway*) is that she is not stirred from depression by the pathological male, and rather works through her troubles in her own mysterious ways, by 'traversing' her various roles or fantasies. Yet one of the key points in Zizek's argument is not only the changing male-female dynamics, or even the therapeutic working-through of fantasy-roles, but also the different articulation of time and causality – the famous deferred action or *Nachträglichkeit* – that centers on female depression, or rather: for which female depression and its creation of voids act as attractors, and therefore can provide the convenient and telling trope.

COMPLEX STORYTELLING

"A Woman in Trouble", in other words, also touches on the matter that gives my paper its title, namely "actions do have consequences – causality, implication and anticipation". Before discussing one of the two sequences, where this phrase occurs, a reminder of what's at stake here. *Inland Empire*, like *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, belongs to a species or genre of film, which breaks with the rule that a story should have a beginning, middle, and an ending, preferably in that order. In Lynch's films, the narratives are fragmented, people can be in two places at once, a story begins halfway through, characters split or double, scenes are taken out of any conceivable chronological sequence and presented to the viewer often in non-linear fashion. This can even include parts of the dialogue. In the by now notorious Rabbit sitcom segment of *Inland Empire*, the exchanges between the three humanoid rabbits are back to front, and some parts can indeed be re-arranged so as to make at least some sort of causal sense, insofar as they do appear as question and answer, rather than – as now – as answer and question. Lynch himself, when challenged, attributes this change in story-telling method and narration, to "the flow of life" itself, and at the same time, insists that, however fragmented his films may appear, "the pieces are all there".

Yet this narrative mode has become very common in recent years in films: some of them mainstream, some from the independent sector, some from European art cinema and from Asian world cinema: the titles range from *Memento* to *Donnie Darko*, from *Run Lola Run* to *Sliding Doors*, from *Being John Malkovich* to *Adaptation*, from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* to *Amores Perros*, from *Old Boy* to *Infernal Affairs*, from *Tropical Malady* to *Inception*. Film scholars have seized upon the phenomenon, and come up with all manner of names for them: puzzle films, forking path films, modular narratives, twist films, optional films, smart cinema, multiple draft narratives, or complex storytelling. I have myself entered the fray with a term and explanation of my own: I call them "mind-game films", by which I mean to point to a particular set of narrative properties that together form a new networked textual and para-textual logic, as well as comprising a set of themes or tropes concerning states of mind and body we usually call pathological, yet which in these films are often not only deemed normal but become peculiarly adaptive and productive. But mind-game films are also symptomatic, I want to maintain, of a changing production logic and reception context – one to which I will turn in the last part of this essay.

“ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES”

One particular paradox of *Inland Empire* as a mind-game film is that at first glance, much of what happens in the film is disjointed, disconnected and random. And yet, early in the film, the one character, among the many mysterious ones, who may have special powers of foresight and insight, ominously pronounces “actions do have consequences.” The phrase, as is probably known, comes from the Old Testament, the Book of Solomon. In verses 8-19 of *Proverbs* chapter one, Solomon impresses upon his listeners that our actions always have consequences, and that we need to be mindful, that is: try and anticipate, what the – intended and unintended – consequences are of what we do. Children, in Bible class, are usually taught these words of wisdom, thereby not only learning the physical laws of causality, but also the moral laws that are said to mirror them. Indeed, it is often asserted that if you exempt individuals from the consequences of their actions, you are not only depriving them of free will, you are also denying their personhood.

Interestingly enough, in an on-line commentary, a Pastor has contrasted this important Biblical proverb to the current situation in our media-saturated world: “Unfortunately”, he says, “Solomon’s lesson is not conveyed today. In the movies and television shows that we watch, the exact opposite message is promoted. What we need to remember is that [...] the sit-coms, dramas and movies are not reality. The problem is that many in our society and culture want their lives to imitate what they see. [But] in real life, people get hurt, unplanned pregnancies occur, and problems don’t get fixed during a 30-minute time slot. The truth of Solomon’s words need to be heard anew and shared with conviction – actions have consequences. In speaking to both youth and adults alike, I have heard them voice disappointment that their lives are not more like their favorite television show. ‘After all, no one on television ever suffers the lingering effects of their choices. So why do I have to?’ Solomon’s instruction is to think not short-term, but long-term and consider the consequences. Consider the laws of motion that say with every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. In other words, no action is void of a consequence.” (http://www.chickashanews.com/community/lesson-no-actions-have-consequences/article_28161335-628c-5e11-b4e0-ec7dbc98f3b5.html)

Even if the good Pastor wasn’t thinking of Lynch’s Rabbit sit-com, and even if his point is a more general one, the mind-game film as genre, and Lynch’s LA trilogy in particular, can be seen to demonstrate this lesson in the most effective way possible, namely as a performative self-contradiction: *using the apparent inconsequentiality of his film fantasies, to argue against the ‘real’ inconsequentiality of media fantasies*. We see actions in *Inland Empire* that seem to make no sense to us, but the film’s jagged trajectories, its parallel narrative strands, its schizo-characters and uncanny doubles, and especially its multiple diegetic worlds bleeding into each other, are actually lessons in ‘consequences’, for which *we may not yet know, or no longer know, or don’t want to know* the actions or causes of which the characters now experience the consequences. Or, as the Polish neighbor puts it, whom Lynch makes the spokeswoman for this particular Sunday sermon or Solomonian oracle: “if today was tomorrow you wouldn’t even remember that you owed on an unpaid bill”. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fNwN2r2gvs>)

TRANSGRESSING PARAMETERS OF FILMIC NARRATION

Put differently, what Lynch is demonstrating is that in a world where multiple identities, sit-com lives and self-empowering fantasies are part of the flow of the everyday (into which, not least thanks to movies, music and other media, we are individually and collectively immersed), the laws and logics of consequence still obtain, albeit not necessarily in ways that the Pastor might recognize.

How then, does Lynch conceive of these different forms of causality and how does he persuade us of the consequentiality of his apparent inconsequentiality? I would argue that Lynch does so, by modifying three of the central parameters in narrative films: he transgresses the autonomy of character-consistency, he transgresses spatial contiguity, and he transgresses temporal coherence and sequentiality, by not respecting time’s arrow. This could provide the premise for arguing that *Inland Empire* is all taking place inside the head of “Nikki Grace”, that it is a subjective film but –given the lack of character consistency – without a unified or centered subjectivity. Hence inside and outside, before and after, perceived and imagined, actual and virtual

constantly overlap and interpenetrate each other, either out of a sense of stressful anticipation (“Am I going to get the role and make a come-back or not?” – which links it to parts of *Mulholland Drive*) or guilt feelings (“I’ve cheated on my husband and I dread the consequences”), which recalls the jealous rage at the core of *Lost Highway*. The various diegetic worlds would then be the ‘playing through’ or ‘acting out’ of the different anxiety-and-guilt scenarios, which these states of mind entail, thus instantiating the phrase “actions have consequences”. After all, at the end we return to Nikki Grace’s mansion: she is now sitting where the Polish neighbor predicted she would be sitting, and she is surrounded by a chorus of female performers, some of whom played bit parts in the film itself. - Such a reading would fit with the psychological aspect of what I have called “mind-game” films, indicative of the productive, or ‘liberating’ effect of certain pathologies: in this case, the power of paranoia to navigate a world where everyone seems to be inside someone else’s game (and mind), at once manipulator and manipulated, at once pulling the strings and puppet on a string, at once sinner and sinned against.

MIND-GAME FILM AS PRODUCTION LOGIC

In keeping with what I suggested earlier, however, it is not the psychological aspects of the mind-game film that concern me here. The type of reflexivity I wanted to examine is more focused on the relation that exists between the production logics of Hollywood in the age of the internet and the textual logics that flow from this. I therefore want to read Lynch’s metaleptic rhetoric and mise-en-abyme diegeses primarily in light of another hypothesis associated with the mind-game film, which concerns the different media deployed, and the reception contexts they entail.

Inland Empire, even more than the preceding two films, plays endless variations on the cinematic apparatus and its different mutations, as it migrates and mingles with video and the digital modes of recording, playback and storage. In fact, as Andrew Lison has pointed out, *Inland Empire* is something of a commentary on Friedrich Kittler’s media philosophy: Note that the ‘subjective mode without subjectivity’ that Lynch puts on display (while allowing for the kind of psychologizing interpretation I have hinted at) is framed within what can easily be recognized as a form of Kittlerian technological determinism. The best example is opening of the film, which is like an homage to Kittler’s gramophone needle struck in the brain, with the phonograph the acknowledged media format best suited to the Lacanian register of the Real: “only the phonograph can record all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning.” Thus, the film suggests, the recurrent themes that Lynch explores again here—adultery, sexuality, prostitution, fantasy, desire—are constitutive of contemporary subjectivity but this subjectivity now requires a specific material-technological support through which it is mediated. Indeed, the opening sequence includes allusions to all three analog technologies Kittler links to the Lacanian model: not only the gramophone/Real but the cinematic apparatus, which he aligns with the imaginary, and the typewriter, which he identifies with the symbolic. As Robert Sinnerbrink argues, when interpreting the film as memory-work of nostalgia and loss: “Gramophone needles, movie cameras, DV cameras, even the strange camera obscura using cigarette and silk screen that we see later in the film; all of these devices make possible this haunting capture of an absent presence, this ghostly presence of the past.” For Kittler, on the other hand, analog media become a specific focal point of interest precisely because of the rise of the digital, and not for reasons of regret: “Increasingly, data flows once confined to books and later to records and films are disappearing into black holes and boxes that, as artificial intelligences, are bidding us farewell on their way to nameless high commands. In this situation we are left only with reminiscences, that is to say, with stories.” The film’s explicit foregrounding of analog formats is thus aligned with a media archaeological perspective on the material supports of earlier forms of subjectivity in an age where, as cognitivists often claim, the brain now tends to be modeled after the computer rather than the film projector. By viewing *Inland Empire*’s treatment of analog media as distinct from that of prior forms such as the *camera obscura* and later ones such as hand-held video, as well as by foregrounding these (instant) recording and (permanent) inscription technologies from the vantage point of the digital (which simulates both and is neither), we can see the film quoting – but also straining to overcome – the Lacanian model of subjectivity (with its emphasis on optics and the geometry of vision/miscognition), without however altogether abandoning it.

If we now add to this the changing reception context since the emergence of DVDs and the Internet, of which, as indicated, Lynch is both victim and beneficiary, it becomes clear to what extent Lynch participates in the strategies of the mind-game film. This genre or tendency in contemporary filmmaking, I would argue, is only possible because of an active willingness on the part of the audience to enter into these indecipherable worlds and play these undecidable games. Spectators on the whole do not mind being “played with”: on the contrary, they rise to the challenge. The fact that audiences are set conundrums, or are sprung “traps for mind and eye”, that they are confronted with odd objects or puzzling details that do not “add up” – even though the overall experience “makes sense” – would indicate that mind-games are a phenomenon that spectators recognize as relevant to their own lives: they identify with worlds that are predicated on contingency, but where actions do have consequences, nonetheless. Yet mind-game films are also film forms and practices that suit the producers and respond to changing production conditions in the film business. For instance, on the side of the recipients, it is noticeable that the responses to mind-game films found on fan-sites either ignore the fictional contract and treat the film as an extension of real life, to which factual information is relevant, or they tend to use the film as the start of a database, to which all sorts of other data - trivia, fine detail, esoteric knowledge - can be added, collected and shared. Given that these commentators are likely very savvy media-consumers, their disengagement with traditional strategies of interpretation, indicates the existence of an informal, yet common set of rules, which permit participation. Consequently, such films become part-text, part-archive, part-point of departure, part node in a rhizomatic, expandable network of inter-tribal communication, but also indicating that this type of spectatorial investment sees the ‘Mind-Game’ film become the ideal product for DVD commodification, where multiple viewings and para-textual information are specifically supported. This is evidenced also on YouTube, where Lynch is a favourite for mash-ups, pastiches and parodies [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaJUDYwrGdY>].

Mind-game films, we could say, break one set of rules (realism, transparency, linearity) in order to make room for a new set, and their formal features – whether we examine them from a narratological angle, a psychopathological, a spiritual or therapeutic perspective (for all of which the mind-game films of Lynch provide credible “entry-points”) – represent a compromise formation, which is itself flexible, adaptable, differential, and versatile. In addition, they highlight the material conditions of multiple entries, as well as of multiple platforms. To take just one example: for a feature film to be not only recordable, storable, and playable as a DVD, but in some sense, particularly “DVD-enabled,” it would have to be a film that requires and repays multiple viewings; that rewards the attentive viewer with esoteric or hidden clues; that is constructed as a spiral or loop; that benefits from back-stories (bonuses) or para-textual information; that can sustain a-chronological perusal or even thrives on it. All these conditions chart the type of textual organization which responds to the conditions of distribution, reception, consumption, cinephilia, connoisseurship, and spectatorship appropriate for the multi-platform film in the digital age, which can seduce a theater-going public with its special effects and spectacle values, engage the volatile fan-communities on the internet by becoming a sort of “node” for the exchange of information and the trade in trivia and esoterica in social networking situations, as well as “work” possibly even as a game. With this, I have described several salient features of the mind-game film, but now looked at from the point of production. *Inland Empire* is in many ways a pastiche, i.e. an exaggerated instantiation of this logic and its formal consequences, taken to extremes.

To finally come back to my initial point: how does this alignment of Lynch’s films with the mind-game genre help us understand Lynch’s authorship as paradigmatic, in relation to the changes and transitional states that the cinema is undergoing, of which I claimed the mind-game to be both pathogenic symptom and provisional solution?

My tentative answer is that the question of who or what is at the origin of the events and the actions, of who organizes experiences, encounters, appearances and disappearances, i.e. the question of authority and authorship, is posed throughout Lynch’s LA trilogy, but it finds different answers. Or at any rate, Lynch comes up with different strategies and configurations that attempt to clarify it, by performing the possibilities. If Hollywood in general and mind-game films in particular experiment with new ways of opening access to global audiences and thus engage highly diverse groups and constituencies, across different outlets, platforms and screens – including those mobile devices with which I started – the producers (which includes the studio,

the directors, the writers, the financiers) are just as intent on maintaining control: whether we call it control over the brand and the franchise, control over the intellectual property rights and their commercial exploitation, or in a more old-fashioned language, we call it “creative control”. This means that between “access for all” and “keeping control”, there is either a constitutive contradiction, or something has to give. I see Lynch’s particular – and indeed radical – manner of conducting his mind-game films as his way of “opening up” the film (to endless speculation on the internet, and to the most diverse interpretations among critics and academics, present company, myself – and this conference - included), while at the same time “keeping control” (over the apparatus that is Hollywood picture-making, over the suits and the money-men, but also over the way that agency – “actions have consequences” – manifests itself in the films themselves).

Or to put it in my terms, I see Lynch’s films tending towards “performative self-contradiction” at one level – let’s call it the promotional level, where he markets his weird personality as a brand – and towards “distributive agency” at another level (that of the film as text, as narrative or as aural, visual and affective experience), where authorship and agency are thematized across the different diegetic registers of action and settings, and the nested as well as fractured identities of person, actor, character. But “distributed agency” also applies to the scenarios of manipulators manipulated, of premonitions and anticipations, of curses and consequences. A curse is a curse only if there is someone who retroactively ‘recognizes’ and ‘assumes’ it as such, i.e. feels him/herself the target and “victim”. In *Inland Empire*, the ‘curse’ of the original German film version of the Polish-Gypsy folk-tale, abandoned because both leads were murdered, functions much the way that Louis Althusser’s ‘interpellation’ was said to work: as a powerful vector of subjectification, which reorganizing past and present, making the effect or consequence seek its cause or origin, thereby inscribing the present into the past, or indeed altering the past, to the extent of inscribing one’s own responsibility/culpability into it.

“Distributed agency” applies with equal importance to the different media technologies and media forms: Polish folk tale, incomplete German film, women’s picture, sit-com, porn-film, thriller, horror movie, as well as radio serial, gramophone recording, television screen, canned laughter, movie house, Hollywood sign, Hollywood set (Paramount Studio), Hollywood location (Hollywood & Vine), digital camera, big studio camera, lights, lenses, megaphone.

In *Inland Empire*, in other words, authority, authorship and agency are distributed and dispersed across different fields of human relations, but also object-relations and media-relations. At one level, they are concentrically organized around a love affair that is itself nested inside a love relation, i.e. a marriage, each of which are disfigured or decentered across prostitution and infidelity on one side, and doubled by another set of affective relations in which love and money also play a role, namely those that are necessary for filmmaking: the affective contacts and economic contracts that pass between director and his leading players, that exist among the actors, and must be sustained between the director and his producers, his agents, assistants, crew and so on. At another level, they are dispersed across the different media, their distinctive materialities, properties and effects, alternating between television and cinema, episode and series, sound and image, analogue and digital, recording and reproduction.

Yet cinematically, this distribution and dispersal is also realized and represented: this time through a contradictory rhetoric or style, which presents its narrative blocks or diegetic segments in terms of closed Chinese boxes and mise-en-abyme repetitions, but then traverses, intersects and opens them up thanks to pointedly directional compositions, to movement and editing, characterized by long tracking shots, hand-held camera work, mobile points of view, and an obsessive attention, both visually and verbally, to doors, portals, passages, alleys, corridors, gates, stairs and other vectors of transition and transgression, along with deictic-indexical markers, such as the Polish neighbor’s outstretched index finger leading the gaze but also leading the camera. In a similar, but more paradoxical way, the hand-gun with which Nikki as Susan kills the Phantom, is what one might call a directional object, which here doesn’t so much kill the Phantom as it obliterates him with light (though only after several mutations and reverse transformations), by shooting a light beam at him, much like a flash-light, a spot-light, or the lights on the set, which the director of the film within the film has so much trouble having adjusted, despite wielding himself a directional object par excellence, the megaphone. It would certainly be instructive to go through the film and identify and itemize those instances, where such vectors of linear movement and moments of transit occur and how they are thematized.

Thus, a special role in this renegotiation of agency and directionality is assigned to objects, in particular to objects that are both acted upon and capable of action or endowed with agency: notably sources of light (lamps), sources of sounds (stylus, megaphones, telephones), as well as a proliferation of nested locations, both three-dimensional and as mere sets, along with props, tools and totemic objects (e.g. the screw-driver, the hand-gun, the monkey), some of whom, like the characters, are doubles and substitutes for another in a chain or relay, where they take on mysterious, uncanny or magic properties.

It is worth remembering that the Polish neighbor, after asserting that actions do have consequences, completes the sentence, after a short pause, with “and of course, there is the magic”, meaning that there may be consequences without actions, since magic is usually defined as effects without apparent or natural causes. But in another sense, magic is performative action: saying so makes it so, and magicians are deictic agents – they point to and demonstrate the power of imagined and inanimate objects (think *Silencio Club* in *Mulholland Drive*). They highlight how things can not only have causes but be causes, just as human beings can be active agents when they seem to be most acted upon, which is the grace/case of Nikki Grace, who by “letting go” might appear to be losing control, but by accepting her loss of control, she also regains it, across the flow of movement through the different spaces, sites and situations. Nikki – active-passive agent par excellence of *Inland Empire* – is both the bearer and conduit of authorship, as she leads the camera and is led by it. It is as if the curse can and has become the cure, in the act of transfer: Something that has happened in the past and cannot be undone, is retroactively declared to be the express intention of the one no longer in charge – thereby regaining the initiative and retaining control. This is what happens in the scene with the Polish neighbor at the beginning of the film.

The ‘magic’ of Lynch’s mind-games would then be how the director always finds new ways to shake up, play off against each other and asymmetrically distribute both causes and consequences, actions and intentions, memories and anticipations: he makes it look as if no-one is in charge and all the possibilities are open, while directing our gaze and attention to detail and instant, and thus keeping control over mood and moment – even as the world, the people and places are allowed to arrange themselves in ever different configurations. For as he so rightly says: “the pieces are all there, the pieces are all there”.

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