
DAVID LYNCH – THE ART OF THE REAL

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

For citations and quotations, please cite as follows:

SAMUEL WEBER, »THE DARKNESS OF FUTURE PAST: ON THE WORK OF DAVID LYNCH«, 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/the-darkness-of-future-past-on-the-work-of-david-lynch>

Table of contents of the complete publication:

<http://lynchconference.hbk-bs.de>

— SAMUEL WEBER —

» THE DARKNESS OF FUTURE PAST « ON THE WORK OF DAVID LYNCH

Before beginning I feel as though I need to state a few caveats. I am neither a specialist of cinema nor have I previously been particularly engaged with the films of David Lynch. My reaction many years ago when I first viewed *Blue Velvet* was that its undeniable moments of intensity were marred on the one hand by an illustrative treatment of all too familiar motifs – for instance, that of voyeurism in the often cited scene of Jeffrey hiding in the closet and peering through the slats of the closet door – and on the other by a fascination with violence that – most obviously personified in the character of Frank – that produced effective shock-effects but without contributing significantly to a larger context. Despite such reserves, however, I was happy to accept the invitation to speak at this conference as an occasion to confront more systematically the oeuvre of a filmmaker who occupies a unique place in contemporary cinema, and even more so within contemporary American cinema. Chris Rodley has identified, correctly I think, the (Freudian) “uncanny” – the *Unheimlich* -- as one of the essential traits of Lynch’s films. If that is true, then it also implies a very special relation to the “home” – in all senses of that word, including above all the culture and society in which – and out of which – those films emerge.

So let me therefore begin by asking, what is the “home” today in the United States? Since 2003 the word has entered the political lexicon under the term, “homeland security,” which defines both a governmental strategy and an institutional consolidation that groups 187 federal agencies and departments. The idea is to protect the “homeland” from both external and internal dangers, from “terrorist attacks” as well as from natural catastrophes. But the word “homeland” in American English at least continues to sound like an importation, like an awkward attempt to translate “Heimat” perhaps. And more sinisterly, the word recalls the “homelands” of the South African apartheid regime. The extension of home to “homeland” is thus anything but innocent or unconnnotated. It also marks the tendency to privatize the public sphere that is so characteristic of present-day neo-Liberalism, especially in the U.S. For prior to its recent politicization – and here I can speak only for American English– the word had traditionally a more private than public significance. Home was associated with family, with the place where one grew up, or the place where one resides, but always in relation to the subject as a private individual or group, rarely as a public citizen. Even today, the word “home” in this private sense has become a mainstay in the lexicon of real-estate agents, who always designate the houses they sell as “homes”. From this standpoint, a “home” is still very much a private property, a place to be possessed – renters for instance are never considered to be “at home” in this sense – they are clearly differentiated lexically from “home-owners.” Of course, since the bursting of the housing “bubble” in 2008, the status of these “owners” has turned out to be far more fragile than they thought. The home, and not just the homeland, is thus under duress – and although the “terror” involved is real, it is more difficult to personify and identify than in the case of terrorist organizations.

David Lynch's relation to his "home" – and to the home in general – appears to embody the extremes of this very American, highly ambivalent historical development – including up until the present-day. Not just perhaps because as a child he had no fixed home, at least not for very long; but because, for whatever reason or reasons, an experience of the "home" marks his work in an indelible if complex manner. "Home," he tells Chris Rodley (in the latter's remarkable set of interviews, *Lynch on Lynch*,¹ to which I will often refer in this talk) – "home is a place where things can go wrong. When I was a child, home seemed claustrophobic, but that wasn't because I had a bad family. A home is like a nest – it's only useful for so long." (10)

"Only useful for so long..." How long? And in what way "useful"? Lynch's attitude toward his own home seems paradigmatic for his attitude toward reality in general, and toward that of the United States in particular: My childhood was elegant homes, tree-lined streets, the milkman, ... blue skies, picket fences, green grass, cherry trees. Middle America as it's supposed to be. But on the cherry tree there's this pitch oozing out – some black, some yellow, and millions of red ants crawling all over it. I discovered that if one looks a little closer at this beautiful world, there are always red ants underneath. ... I saw life in extreme close-ups ... saliva mixed with blood. Or long shots of a peaceful environment. (10 – 11)

Viewed from the perspective of "the long shot" the world may seem at peace with itself, orderly yards, properly delimited by "picket fences" into distinct properties – into "homes". But viewed from close-up, this orderly unity reveals a more complex and more ambiguous multiplicity – "millions of red ants crawling all over". This multiplicity is both exhilarating and also menacing: "saliva mixed with blood." Places and bodies decay and putrefy, thereby revealing passageways to somewhere else, or disclosing frenetic activity taking place under the cover of a peaceful, unified and seemingly stable exterior.

Hence the defining importance for Lynch of two kinds of places: first, those that are more or less fixed and enclosed, the town of Twin Peaks for instance, with its Red Room, or Henry's room in *Eraserhead*; and second, places that are open, serving as ambiguous passageways into the unknown, as in *Lost Highway*, or *Mulholland Drive* – or even, the roads half hidden in the name of Camilla Rhodes, the double of Rita in that same film.

A place therefore is not something necessarily well defined: it can be on the move to somewhere else.

"I like the nowhere part of America," Lynch tells Rodley, underscoring that "nowhere" is just a "part", never the whole – and that the part in this sense is always "nowhere". Concerning the significance of Los Angeles in *Mulholland Drive*, he notes that the "ideas" in this film were about a slice of this town, and that's the best you can do. There's no way anyone can say everything. It's always a slice ... not the whole picture. And the picture always changes anyway. (273)

Even and especially where it seems most static, the picture turns out to be always changing. The same can and should be kept in mind about any attempt, including this one, to interpret or characterize Lynch's work: it can never be about more than the snapshot – *Momentaufnahme* – of a slice. The challenge therefore to any such interpretation is for that slice to touch on something essential, something that "drives" the rest. For a road is also always a "drive", and not just in *Mulholland Drive*. A trajectory is never just a static trace passing through a neutral space: it is dynamic, and with Lynch more perhaps than with any other filmmaker, it is conflict-driven. But it is driven as one drives a car, which is to say, always enclosed in a small, confined space, one that both seeks to protect and also to expose: the space of a close-up exploding the long-shot. The automobile is anything but autonomous: it depends on what is outside and beyond itself. Hence Lynch's fascination with the highway, especially at night, its illuminated dividing-line marking out a movement into the dark and unknown, unrolling before one's eyes like the film itself. To neglect the interdependence of either of these poles: the confined place and the moving space, is to risk disaster. And the temptation to reduce the one pole to the other, the world to the home or the home to the world, is an ever-present trait that marks Lynch's work shares with American culture.

Lynch's own attempts to resist this temptation without denying its seductive force takes the form of what he

¹ Rodley, Chris: *Lynch on Lynch*, revised edition, Faber and Faber, London: Future 2005. Future references to this work will be given by page number in the body of the text.

describes as an openness to “ideas”:

Ideas are the strangest things because they suddenly enter into your conscious mind and you don't know really where they come from. ... They could mean something or they could just be there for you to work with. I don't know. (48)

The ambivalence of Lynch's relation to America – to its cultural traditions – is perhaps most clearly manifest in the way he describes what others – not he – would call the “creative process”. As he describes his own mode of film-making, it is precisely not “creative” in the strong sense of the word, which is to say, in its theological sense. Lynch does not “create” the ideas with which he works: rather he receives them (or as he says, in his later writings, he “catches” them as one catches “deep fish”²: “It all comes from somewhere else, like a radio. But I'm a bad radio [...]”). Lynch's radio is bad insofar as it transforms and distorts what it receives. Lynch insists that what counts is being “faithful” to the “ideas” that impose themselves. But being faithful has nothing to do with reproducing ideas in a meaningful fashion. Indeed, meaning – a certain notion of meaning, based on a simple conception of self-identity – is precisely what he seeks to avoid: “It's so limiting to say what something is. It becomes nothing more than that..” (28) To say, to state, to predicate is to kill the process of signification and to reduce things to a dead present. The alternative is to translate: “To take an idea and translate it into something material is a beautiful process. It's thrilling to the soul. Who knows why?” (21)

Lynch's complex relation to language is here apparent. To simply “say” what something is, to assign it a predicative meaning in propositional statements, is to “kill” its power to become something else. But this doesn't mean that language itself is superfluous or irrelevant. Language is indispensable, but as a medium of translation, of signification, not of fixed meanings. In signification, the signifier represents a signified for another signifier. The process is open-ended, even if it is inevitably always being closed off, situated, encapsulated, framed. But the frame is never definitive: for Lynch it is the potential threshold to further movement, to future surprises. “There is some kind of present, but the present is the most elusive, because it's going real fast.” (278) The present is always on the move, moving toward a future that however is difficult to separate from the past.

This potentiality of an open-ended form is what drew him from film to Television serials, to *Twin Peaks* and then to the proposed but rejected series, *Mulholland Drive*. But his experience with television also marked a new kind of confrontation with American society: not just that associated with the familiar scenes and persons of his youth, but with the impersonal but all the more powerful reality of the socio-economic system that rules the commercial media in the United States. This is how he describes his initial intention of *Twin Peaks*, developed with his collaborator on the project, Mark Frost:

The way we pitched this thing was as a murder mystery, but that murder mystery was to eventually become the background story. Then there would be a middle ground of all of the characters we stay with for the series. And the foreground would be the main characters that particular week: the ones we'd deal with in detail. We're not going to solve the murder for a long time.(180)

But it was precisely this back-rounding and suspended resolution of the murder mystery that the producers of the series feared and then rejected:

This they did not like. They did not like that. And they forced us to ... get to Laura's killer. It wasn't really their fault. People just got a bug in them that they wanted to know who killed Laura Palmer. The pressure was just so great that the murder mystery couldn't be just a background thing any more. The progress toward it, but never getting there, was what made us know all the people in *Twin Peaks* ... But ... the yearning to know was too intense. (180)

One of the most prevalent expressions today in American English – one that I fear is rapidly imposing itself on other languages and cultures as well – is the admonition to “move forward.” It is often used to fend off the demand for a critical reflection of the past that might suggest alternate possibilities for the future. The admonition to “move forward” goes together with the uniquely American expression, “that's history,” to designate something that is not just past, but over and done with. Nowhere is the generally concealed

2 Lynch, David: *Catching the Big Fish. Mediation, Consciousness and Creativity*, New York: Penguin 2005: 135.

genealogy of these two “twin peaks” of current American argot revealed more clearly than here. It is not just that the uncertainty of the future (of *Twin Peaks* the series) must be made transparent, must be “known”: it is that this uncertainty involves a death by killing. As we have seen from his remarks previously quoted concerning cherry trees, Lynch is fascinated by the inseparability of beauty and ugliness, life and death, of growth and decay, which he finds as prevalent in natural processes as in social life. But by deciding to explore such relations via the crutch of a “murder mystery,” the true mystery – the inexplicable, meaningless interdependence of life and death – was already subordinated to precisely the search for “meaning” that Lynch continually seeks to problematize. If there is a true mystery haunting American culture – and perhaps not only it – it is not about this or that murder, but rather about the tendency to portray murder as a privileged standpoint for experiencing death. Seen from this standpoint, death appears as the result of a specific, deliberate and planned action, whether individual or collective. It thereby loses much of the uncertainty it otherwise retains. For an audience incapable or unwilling to tolerate uncertainties, the “murder mystery” is therefore a tempting solution. But it is also what according to Lynch “killed” the series (as it has “killed” a good many other things as well). It is interesting, therefore, to recall that the series begins with a prologue, in which the “log-Lady” refers to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, another unsolved murder mystery: the killing of Laura Palmer thus has a rather specific, distinctly American genealogy – one which probably also involves the life and death of Marilyn Monroe.

But the American inability or unwillingness to tolerate uncertainty also has a much older genealogy, one that is exposed most clearly in what is perhaps Lynch’s least Lynch-like film, “A Straight Story”. The film tells the “true” story of Alvin Straight, who at the age of 73 learns that his elder brother, from whom he has been estranged for many years, has suffered a serious stroke. Alvin thereupon decides to drive the 300 miles from Laurens, Iowa to Mount Zion, Wisconsin, to see his brother and to reconcile himself with him while there is still time. But since his poor vision excludes him from having a driver’s license, he chooses to make the trip on a lawn mower, which with a top-speed of 4 miles an hour, requires no such license. In this road movie, the only obviously characteristic Lynchian scene comes at the outset and recalls the beginning of *Blue Velvet*, when the tranquil if boring peace and quiet of rural middle American “homes” is suddenly punctuated by an acousmatic fall: an invisible thump coming from inside the house where Alvin lives. Lynch is fascinated with the acousmatic potentiality of sound, which, by pointing to what cannot be seen, underscores the relativity of the visible world. In this particular case however – and for Lynch cases are always particular – Alvin’s fall cannot be taken too literally – or rather, too theologically. For his journey to Mount Zion is triggered by his fall, as well as by the stroke of his brother. Alvin turns out to be motivated by a desire to expunge a guilt whose specific causes are never explicitly designated in the film, but whose force is all the more overpowering for being thus left unexplained. Alvin’s guilt cannot therefore be retraced to any particular action he has taken. And it is precisely this that reinforces its theological resonances. For what is distinctively Christian in this road-movie is not only the pilgrimage of Alvin to his brother in Mount Zion – but the linking of aging and impending death to a state of guilt rather than to any direct act of violence, as in “murder mysteries”. The mystery here thus pertains to guilt and its relation to mortality and it remains unexplained. It also contrasts with the generosity shown both by Alvin for others and by others for him. For throughout his trip, Alvin is befriended by almost everyone, just as he befriends everyone he meets, starting with a young girl who has run away from her family because she is pregnant. *A Straight Story* was Lynch’s only major film to receive a rating of G, i.e. as suitable for a “general public.” That the general public did not particularly flock to the film, however, despite its heartwarming story and excellent execution, may have something to do with what Chris Rodley calls “the age thing”:

CR: The age thing intrigues me, given that so much of what is made these days is geared to young kids.

DL: It’s all tied up with money and the fear of death that permeates this culture. Alvin is an old guy... (252)

It’s all tied up with the desire for money and the fear of death: in this throw-away David Lynch brings together what everything in American culture – and perhaps in Capitalism more generally – seeks desperately to keep apart: fear of finitude and the desire for an infinite accumulation of wealth.³ The TV producers who “forced

3 For an elaboration of the relation of these two tendencies, see: Weber, Samuel: *Zeit ist Geld: Gedanken zu Kredit und Krise*, Berlin & Zürich: diaphanes Verlag: 2009.

the solving of the murder mystery” – the outing of her killer, his identification – were pandering to the desire of the public to know, while at the same time seeking to secure a profitable return on their investment. To “resolve” the “mystery” in this context could only mean to identify the killer, and thereby by implication to identify death as the result of a deliberate, meaningful act: not as a rupture of identity but as its constituent. Thus imposed deliberately on someone else – Laura Palmer – death could thus be regarded as meaningful, and therefore as structurally transcendable. For if death can be seen as essentially the result of an act – for instance, of a Crucifixion – then one can also hope to undo it by an act. Even if this act has to be a deliberate act of self-sacrifice. In the case of aging, however, death appears as a meaningless but inevitable dimension of the life it both defines and interrupts: the life of singular living beings.

The Christian tradition, building on its biblical origins, represents death both as punishment and as possibility: as a punishment for transgression and guilt – and at the same time as the possibility of ultimate salvation, one that promises to restore life to something like its original prelapsarian state. As a motor of self-sacrifice, guilt can thus appear paradoxically as the possibility of liberating life from the bounds of a mortality that is otherwise endemic to any singular, living existence, and thus as a way of reuniting the mortal creature with the immortality of a Divine Creator. (This was of course the motivation behind the “fall” in the first place ... but that is another story.)

It is this theological attitude toward guilt that informs the story of Laura Palmer in the film epilogue to *Twin Peaks – Fire Walk With Me*. It suggests why the idea of the “murder mystery” could never be relegated to a “background” status, as Lynch and Frost desired, even if their producers had been less insistent on solving the mystery. For guilt and murder always presuppose an original and prior violation as their cause. And since in the Biblical and Christian tradition this cause also defines the shape and fate of the self, as its effect, it is only through self-sacrifice that the self can hope to liberate itself from its ultimately mortal effects. Laura acts in this tradition when she takes it upon herself to assume and affirm her corruption and ultimately to collaborate in her destruction. Thus, throughout her life of increasingly self-imposed degradation, Laura never entirely loses touch with a childlike innocence that harks back to the state of Creation before the Fall. In Lynch’s films, however, the Garden of Eden has become the lawns and yards of middle-America. However ironically it is portrayed, it is clear that this phantasy of arrested development is what “homeland security” is ultimately designed to “protect” (represented *avant la lettre* by FBA special agent, Dale Cooper). In the film, Laura never loses sight of the Norman Rockwell, Hallmark-card like picture hanging on the wall of her bedroom, showing children gathered around the kitchen table with an angel beaming down upon them. And when the angel then suddenly disappears from that picture, Laura knows that her doom is imminent. But at the end of the film, just before she is murdered by her father, Leland, who in turn is possessed by the supposedly devilish and demonic Killer Bob, the angel reappears and rises slowly into the sky, filling the screen and ushering in the end of the film, and the end of *Twin Peaks*. This end however marks the survival of the spectators and viewers, a survival that is underscored by the very brutality that the marks that end. No matter how horrific the carnage shown, its viewers will outlive that end – at least for a while.

The possession of Leland, Laura’s father, by the devilish and murderous Bob, confirms both Lynch’s proximity to and distance from the Christian theological tradition that continues to inform much of mainstream American culture and society. “I want to make films that occur in America but that take people into worlds where they may never go, into the very depths of their being.” (114) Going into the depths of “their being” means first of all unsettling the notion that those depths are simply individual and that their being is consequently indivisible. It means questioning that the Self, like the Creator-God, is one and the same. If, as Lynch notes of the characters in *Mulholland Drive*, all are “dealing somewhat with a question of identity – like everyone,” then the doubling or splitting of the “individual” is the first step toward exposing the differential heterogeneity that underlies all beings, animate as well as inanimate, and not just in the worlds of David Lynch.

The problem – and here my initial reserve returns – is that in many of his films this doubling, or splitting, is portrayed all too individualistically, even while claiming to be “abstract”. Lynch is unusual among American filmmakers at least – not among painters, which he is also – in defending the value of “abstraction” over that of “concreteness.” Especially representational concreteness. This is most apparent in “*Fire Walk with Me*”. The

depiction of Killer Bob is anything but “abstract”, notwithstanding the claims of Lynch, who sees in Bob “an abstraction in a human form.” (178) But despite his grimaces, Bob’s human form is anything but abstract: contrasted with Leland, whose possession by Bob is indicated first by Leland’s grimaces and then by a crude switching back and forth of images of each figure, superimposes on the other, – contrasted with Leland Bob remains all too recognizably realistic: a figure of rural “white trash,” geographically and socially situated in contrast to the middle-class bourgeois Leland. None of his grimaces as he attacks and rapes Laura makes him any less socially “concrete” and “individuated,” or any more the embodiment of an abstract, diabolical force.

By contrast, the corruption and destruction of Laura Palmer remains true to the “idea” articulated by Lynch in the lines that give the film its title: “Through the darkness of future past, the magician longs to see. One chants out between two worlds, ‘Fire – Walk with me.’” (165) Lynch’s “two worlds” here recall the famous phrase of St Paul: “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.” (Cor I.13) The future that will become the past – future anterior in English (zweite Zukunft in German) – is one in which the consequences of the fall – i.e. of an original act – namely death and suffering, can be redeemed through another act, one of self-sacrifice. The fire – and Lynch, like Walter Benjamin and many others, is fascinated by fire -- both destroys, and purifies. Between the two worlds there is the hope therefore of walking with fire ... or riding a lawn mower – into a future that will fulfill the promise of the past. But that hope can also become also indistinguishable from a fear: fear of a future that will be nothing more than a return of and to the past: a “history” in which it is we who are over and done with.

Faced with this situation, the institutions and representatives of “homeland security” reveal themselves to be utterly ineffective. The impotence of the official representatives of Government – FBI agent Dale Cooper in Twin Peaks – to resist the forces of evil and corruption recalls the fate of the Berlin Police in Fritz Lang’s Mabuse films, especially the Testament of Doctor Mabuse, where the diabolical doctor, although physically imprisoned, is able to operate effectively by tele-commanding a proxy, Dr. Baum, who is thus able to implement his plans of terrorizing and disorganizing Berlin. But whereas in the Fritz Lang film it is the desire for power per se that drives the disruptive forces, in Twin Peaks: Fire walk with me, the desire involved is of a different kind: it aims at the sexual possession and ultimate destruction of other individuals. From Lang’s Berlin of 1932 to Lynch’s Twin Peaks of 1992, the horizon has shifted from society to the individual.

(This difference between the German and the American Uncanny is reinforced by another predecessor in the ongoing history of possession, in which the good but weak father is possessed by a lethal and demonic force, namely E. Th. A. Hoffmann’s story, “The Sandman.” There the diabolical agent is the lawyer, Coppelius, who then splits and returns as the Oculist Coppola – a distant relative no doubt of Francis Ford. In “The Sandman” as in Twin Peaks: Fire walk with me, an ostensibly tranquil small family is disrupted by someone from outside the family, who however exercises total power over the head of the household, who in turn grows to resemble his possessor before being destroyed by him. But as a representative of the Legal process, or subsequently of the technology of visual observation, Coppola-Coppelius is not just an “abstraction in human form,” i.e. the devil in human guise, but rather a dimension of an impersonal social system – the Law -- that intrudes upon the home, which in turn depends upon it for its being. No home without law, but no law leaves the home unscathed.

But in “The Sandman,” once again, the cause of the trouble has to do with a relation to the law, and is never simply tied to individuals or persons. Unlike “Twin Peaks,” whose subtitle -- distinguishing the film from the TV series – names the main reference: “Fire walk with me.” Twin Peaks is ultimately about “me,” even if it is a series of me’s, of very unequal stature and importance. For the film marks the return of Laura Palmer, who in the series is present only briefly and then only as a corpse.)

But this shift does not happen without a struggle. For Lynch’s films are driven by the constant effort to reveal just how divisible so-called “individuals” actually are. This also carries over into the way he describes his own work-process, which he repeatedly insists consists above all in by remaining open and receptive to what he calls “ideas.” These ideas do not originate in any individual, including above all Lynch himself: they always arrive from elsewhere and often unpredictably. The task of the filmmaker, Lynch emphasizes, is to be receptive to such ideas but also to be capable of “translating” them into the material of cinema. But this task of translation

presupposes a certain degree of “control”. This is one of the principle reasons why Lynch acknowledges having reservations about working for television: given the ongoing demands of TV series, no one director can do all the episodes by himself. But the need to work with other directors also means that the series can easily get out of “control”, which Lynch suggests was the case with the second year of *Twin Peaks*. (182)

This tension, between the desire to explore if not escape from the confines of the individual – whether place, person, story – and yet to keep control over the work-process, also informs Lynch’s relation to one of the categories that constantly imposes itself on his discourse: the dream: On the one hand, Lynch often emphasizes how much he regards his films as a kind of dream: “I love dream logic; I just like the way dreams go. But I have hardly ever gotten ideas from dreams...”⁴ But if Lynch loves dream logic, it is the logic that is found in a particular kind of dream:

Waking dreams are the ones that are important, the ones that come when I’m quietly sitting in a chair, gently letting my mind wander. When you sleep, you don’t control your dream. I like to dive into a dream world that I’ve made or discovered; a world I choose. (15)

The dream logic of “waking dreams” however is not the same as the logic of dreams that occur while one sleeps. In the former, you can still sit “quietly ... in a chair” and “gently” let one’s “mind wander.” The latter, on the other hand, are marked by a lack of conscious control. In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud explores this distinction between “daydreams” and night-dreams, especially in connection with what he calls “secondary revision.” Secondary revision – sekundäre Bearbeitung – is the fourth and last of the mechanisms that constitute what Freud calls the “dream-work”, the process by which the dream is constituted. In order for the dream to be remembered, the conflicts that it articulates – and we should never forget that for Freud at least, the dream is not just a “wish-fulfillment” but the articulation of a conflict – the dream must conceal its true nature, which if it appeared would probably result in the dream being repressed and forgotten. This work of concealment is generally accomplished by what Freud calls “secondary elaboration (or processing: sekundäre Bearbeitung). The work consists in distorting the “dream-thoughts” – which are often not just “wishes” but conflictual desires – so that they can then be “remembered” by the conscious subject subsequent to the dream itself. If the conflicts are too obvious, the dream will be repressed, which is to say, excluded from memory. Just how secondary elaboration accomplishes this task emerges most clearly by considering those dreams in which it has not worked successfully. In those cases, as Freud writes, we often find ourselves “helpless and confronted by a senseless heap of fragmentary elements (wir stehen wie hilflos einem sinnlosen Haufen von Inhaltsbrocken gegenüber).”⁵ In short, the task of secondary elaboration is to take the disparate elements of the dream and give them the form of a rational and meaningful series of events. This generally means presenting those elements as though they were elements in a causal chain, in a coherent, consistent and above all meaningful story.

Whenever that “meaningful story” does not appear, Freud reminds us, we “stand as though helpless”. But who is this “we” that requires such a narrative in order not to feel helpless in the world?

In stressing the importance of a continuous storyline in the constitution of a false but apparently meaningful dream, Freud thereby touches on the question of the point of view of the spectator and the author as those who are in some way outside as well as inside the dream.

Although at the time he wrote his *Interpretation of Dreams* Freud was still many years removed from discovering and elaborating a specifically psychoanalytical notion of the “ego,” namely as that instance that seeks to consolidate the conflictual processes of the psyche in something like a unified self, his analysis of secondary revision is already implicitly at least informed by this notion. For it is that part of the psyche that he will analyze later on as the ego, which requires a unified story in order to recognize itself as a unity and therefore have the feeling that it is in control, as Lynch might say. This is probably why he prefers daydream phantasies to those of the night, while being drawn irresistibly toward its darkness and discontinuities.

And this is also why, in film after film, Lynch remains attached to the very linear narrative form that he also

4 Lynch: *Catching the Big Fish*, 63.

5 Freud, Sigmund: *Die Traumdeutung/ Über den Traum*, in: *Gesammelte Werke II/III*, Frankfurt a. Main: Fischer 81988: 495.

continually seeks to subvert and interrupt. But every subversion and interruption presupposes a certain continuum as its point of departure.

And this is also why Lynch oscillates, in reflecting on his own filmmaking, between the expression of a desire to lose himself in ever new and unknown “worlds”, and the desire to keep control of his trajectory in order to successfully “translate” his “idea” into cinema.

This is a tension that I believe marks not just his work-process but also his films themselves. Since however Lynch is a uniquely self-reflective filmmaker, he invokes two words that suggest how he seeks to negotiate this tension. One of these words is “mood” and the other, closely associated with it, is “feeling.” Often the two are difficult to distinguish: this is the case with what is probably the dominant “mood” and-or “feeling” in many of Lynch’s films, namely anxiety. As Lynch says, concerning *Eraserhead* – but it could apply to most of his other films as well – “anxiety doesn’t let up. It doesn’t really let up for anybody.” (57) As mood and as feeling, such anxiety is can no longer be attributed to an individual subject exclusively. For instance, when he is asked to decide whether Henry – the main protagonist of this film – “is dreaming of being dreamt?” Lynch responds: “I wouldn’t even know what to say about that. Maybe if I wrote, I’d do it in the first person, third person ... I don’t know. It is what it is.” (72) Somewhere between first and third person, between identification and involvement, between feeling and mood, the standpoint of the author and the viewer of the film has to be situated. A mood obtains of a world, or a scene – a feeling of individuals. But in a very special way, particularly if one takes the word literally. For “to feel” can be either transitive or intransitive; an attribute of a subject or something that befalls it. All that is certain about feeling is that it marks a point of contact. It is not, as is generally supposed, something “internal” to a person. And the same holds true for “mood”. Mood meets feeling a bit like a needle on a record – like that needle playing an old 78 record that occurs at the beginning of *Inland Empire*. Or like the experience of learning something that does not pass through one’s consciousness but rather directly into one’s body. Lynch describes such an experience in art school:

If you draw while you listen to the teacher, the drawing may not have anything to do with what you’re hearing, but ... all you have to do is to run your finger over the drawing and the words – what was said – are recorded in there. It’s like you’re a needle on a record and its weird. (15)

The notion of “feeling” is decisive for Lynch, for it dislocates and supplants the usual notions of “knowing” and “thinking”: this is how Lynch justifies his own reluctance to explicate the “meaning” of his films:

Telling them (his audience) robs them of the joy of thinking it through and feeling it through ... because even if you get the whole thing, there would still be some abstract elements in it that you’d have to kind of feel-think. The frames are always the same on the film ... but the experience in the room changes depending on the audience. ... ‘knowing’ putrefies that experience. (288)

If I had time, I would try to argue that “feeling” here, especially as a certain “feel-think,” involves not a strictly internal state of the psyche, but a singular encounter that is always dependent on its spatial-temporal situation: “The frames are always the same .. but the experience in the room changes...” Lynch is aware that one is always in some sort of “room,” and maybe more than one at a time. And the rooms can change all the time, depending on how its singularity is apprehended, remembered and anticipated: in short, experienced. Perhaps it is the fascination with these ever-changing, ever-returning rooms that is behind Lynch’s love for “curtains” – red curtains, as in a theater, but also blue curtains, as in *Mulholland Drive*. Such curtains materialize the mystery of every situation, and often as a stage. It is interesting that theater is the one medium that Lynch has not worked in, despite or perhaps because of the theatricality of his films. Prior to *Inland Empire*, this theatricality was implicit. But in this last film – filmed in video – the stage emerges as such, no longer simply a “red” or “blue” room. Perhaps to mark the fact that in the shift from analogical to digital medium, from film to video, anything, as Lynch observes, now seems possible – anything that is, except the elimination of the stage.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Freud, Sigmund: *Die Traumdeutung/ Über den Traum*, in: *Gesammelte Werke II/III*, Frankfurt a. Main: Fischer 1988.
 Lynch, David: *Catching the Big Fish. Mediation, Consciousness and Creativity*, New York: Penguin 2005.
 Rodley, Chris: *Lynch on Lynch*, revised edition, Faber and Faber, London: Future 2005.
 Weber, Samuel: *Zeit ist Geld. Gedanken zu Kredit und Krise*, Berlin & Zürich: diaphanes Verlag 2009.

FILMOGRAPHY

Lang, Fritz, Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse, Germany 1933.
Lynch, David: Eraserhead, USA 1977.
Lynch, David; Frost, Mark: Twin Peaks, USA 1990 – 1991.
Lynch, David: Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me, USA 1992.
Lynch, David: Lost Highway, USA 1997.
Lynch, David: A Straight Story, USA 1999.
Lynch, David: Mulholland Drive, USA 2001.
Lynch, David: Inland Empire, France, Poland, USA 2006.