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The Mind Can Go Dreaming: the Narrative and Aesthetic Revolution of David Lynch's
INLAND EMPIRE

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An abstract of
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Film Studies
2012

Abstract

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INLAND EMPIRE
By Brian Richey

David Lynch has built his oeuvre around disrupting traditional relationships to the cinematic image, agitating the viewer with the disquieting notion that unseen horrors lurk beneath the surface. Shot on an already obsolete standard-definition camera, *INLAND EMPIRE*'s murky, often blurry, visual style both embodies and expands upon this approach by relying upon the viewer's imagination to an unprecedented degree. As Lynch notes, this ambiguous imagery has the potential to let the mind go dreaming. Further, with its fragmentary structure and lack of causation, Lynch pressures the viewer to interpret and make connections between disparate scenes and ideas. Yet, Lynch utilizes the spectator's personal involvement to envelope us in the protagonist's, Nikki Grace (Laura Dern), tortuous struggle to liberate herself from psychological demons. Throughout, I will interpret Nikki's journey to higher consciousness as a criticism of the constraints of classical cinema. In the end, Lynch not only mounts a dense, unconventional narrative with an unusual digital aesthetic, but also articulates a powerful critique of classical cinema's potential to transmit regressive ideology to passive viewers. In particular, the narrative is haunted by a "curse" of infidelity, betrayal, and murder, which is not only a familiar melodramatic narrative of little creative potential, but also propagates demeaning female images. Nikki will fracture into several identities that embody these female archetypes. She will ultimately need to confront and overcome the ideological threat of this narrative, embodied in the "Phantom" character, to reach a new spiritual strength and peace of mind. Her transcendence becomes synonymous with *INLAND EMPIRE*'s revolutionary insistence on the creative agency of the spectator to form a narrative and craft the characters themselves.

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INTRODUCTION

INLAND EMPIRE (2006) seems destined for obscurity. Shot on an already obsolete standard-definition camera and independently distributed by director David Lynch to only a few select cities, *EMPIRE* is further inhibited by its muddled narrative and ungainly three-hour duration. Every facet of its existence creates an impasse for viewers even accustomed to the elaborate psychological mystery of Lynch's previous film: the critically acclaimed *Mulholland Drive* (2001).

Indeed, many critics remarked upon the film's inscrutability upon its initial release. For instance, critic Ann Hornaday wondered whether "the familiar Lynchian symbolic lexicon" had "become a closed system of self-referential mannerisms." (Hornaday). David Edelstein, on the other hand, confessed that it was outside his comprehension, noting that it's "the higher math." (Edelstein) Even those who appreciated the film and claimed the value of it as "an experience", stopped short of interpretation. Both Michael Phillips and Dana Stevens defended their reluctance to offer an in-depth analysis or even a comprehensive synopsis with the excuse that it's more of a "video installation" than a traditional film. (Phillips) (Stevens) Writing for *Sight and Sound*, Michael Atkinson offered a more nuanced analysis, commenting that, "It's one of the rare films that teaches you – obliquely- how to watch it." (Atkinson) Yet, although he perceived that viewing the narrative "as the mental storms of a single character" would be "crashingly reductive", Atkinson never attempts to offer a thorough reading of the film's events (Atkinson). Instead, he, once again, praises "the torque of it as an experience." (Atkinson) So, even though the initial critical response to the film was largely positive,

most critics simply saw it as a physiological “experience” and, therefore, never delved into the specifics of its narrative, thematic, or aesthetic concerns.

Since its initial release in 2006, the few theoretical works on the film have been insightful, but limited. The most relevant to my own analysis is Allister Mactaggart’s *The Film Paintings of David Lynch*. Throughout, I will expand upon his observations that the ambiguity of Lynch’s digital aesthetic lends the visuals a painterly aesthetic. Yet, like many existing commentators, Mactaggart limits his analysis to the film’s cryptic opening and Nikki Grace (Laura Dern)’s first encounter with Visitor #1. Also, rather than dealing with the film on its own terms, he instead highlights motifs that are consistent with the rest of Lynch’s oeuvre. For instance, he notes that, during Nikki’s climatic shooting of the Phantom, we are presented “with a series of shots in which a shockingly distorted image” of Nikki transforms “into a swollen mass of dissolving facial features which are again reminiscent of the work of Lynch’s favourite artist, Francis Bacon” (Mactaggart 158). Although this proves his point about “the creative possibilities of digital film painting”, it fails to identify who the Phantom is (and what he represents) and why the encounter is meaningful to the narrative (Mactaggart 158). This is indicative of Mactaggart’s failure to offer a comprehensive interpretation of *INLAND EMPIRE*. Instead, he only points to moments out of context to support his general argument.

Anna Katharina Schaffner’s feminist reading “Fantasmatic Splittings and Destructive Desires: Lynch’s *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*”, was also influential on my analysis. Like Schaffner, I view the goal of Nikki’s journey to emancipate “herself from the status of male fantasy object” and embrace “her subjectivity” (Schaffner 271). Yet, Schaffner’s five-page analysis of the film relies on a

slim plot description that mostly bypasses the more fragmentary middle section of the film and offers no in-depth scene analysis. More troubling, after a brief introduction noting “the grainy, coarse and pixelated visual texture” of the digital cinematography, Schaffner never mentions the visual style and fails to link how the deficiencies of the medium frequently reflect Nikki’s subjectivity (Schaffner 282).

Although Robert Sinnerbrink offers a close analysis of the cryptic opening which I draw upon for my own analysis, the chapter he devotes to the film in *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* only deals with the first thirty minutes of the narrative. As a result, he ignores the vast ambiguities that Lynch unfolds. Further, Sinnerbrink joins Mactaggart and Schaffner in his attempt to root out and explain *INLAND EMPIRE*’s mysteries by drawing similarities to Lynch’s other work, most notably *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. Following this model, I compare a disjunctive moment in *INLAND EMPIRE* with similar scenes of identity rupture in those two films. Yet, through a close analysis, I find that *INLAND EMPIRE* operates drastically differently, both in its complex integration of form and content and in the nature of Nikki’s psychotic crack-up. Rather than creating a fantasy to evade a traumatic transgression, which motivates the character doubling in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, Nikki’s journey through the “inland empire” of her mind is motivated by societal, specifically cinematic, projections that aim to influence and shape her subjectivity.

For my own analysis, I have decided to replicate *Inland Empire*’s unconventional structure. So, rather than devoting an entire chapter to a theme, motif, or visual strategy, I have broken up my thesis into a series of sections. For the most part, each section analyzes one scene from the film, which are then organized in chronological order. This

structure allows me to develop my arguments in a more intuitive way and mirror the film's internal logic of weaving seemingly disparate elements into a final, coherent statement.

Throughout, I will analyze key scenes that convey different stages of Nikki/Susan's psychological journey towards transcendence. Further, whenever possible, I will illustrate how Lynch shrewdly utilizes the ambiguity of the digital image to reflect her interiority. A main focus of my analysis will be interpreting the curse that hangs over the film-within-the-film, *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, and how this curse links disparate elements of the narrative in its portrayal of a cycle of degradation, infidelity, and murder that aims to disenfranchise women. As I will discuss in the body of the thesis, this curse eventually becomes a complex critique of the creatively bankrupt nature of many commercial productions and the regressive ideology that is absorbed by passive viewers. Lynch's use of digital works both to envelope the viewer in the murky dimensions of Nikki's consciousness and to self-reflexively offer a commentary on classical cinema. Utilizing Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media*, I will showcase how digital media allows Lynch to meditate on the nature of the medium and how digital fundamentally changes the spectator's relationship to the screen.

In this way, *INLAND EMPIRE* destabilizes the conventions of classical cinema and insists upon a more active spectatorship. By "classical" cinema, I am referring to David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's exhaustive analysis of studio filmmaking in its prime, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. Early on, Bordwell notes that classical cinema is based upon principles of "causality, consequence, psychological motivations, [and] the drive toward

overcoming obstacles and achieving goals.” (Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger 13)

Further, Bordwell identifies the redundancy of classical style, where “a significant motif or informational bit should be shown or mentioned at three or four distinct moments” (Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger 31). By adhering to particular formulas and rules of repetition, classical cinema asks its spectators to “form hypotheses that are highly probable and sharply exclusive” and, therefore, “delimits the range of our expectations” (Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger 38). Throughout my analysis, I seek to illuminate Lynch’s critical attitude towards this controlled, more passive form of viewership and his systematic deconstruction of Classical style.

Before getting started on the close narrative and formal analysis that will form the body of this thesis though, it is first necessary to offer a few thoughts on the title followed by a detailed description of *INLAND EMPIRE*’s events for those who are unfamiliar with the film. Although I will leave my analysis for the body of the thesis, I will occasionally offer footnotes that give thematic analysis for the few scenes not handled in-depth in the text that follow.

What makes a synopsis of *INLAND EMPIRE* particularly difficult, even irrelevant, is its destabilization of a classical goal-oriented narrative and fragmentary structure. In this way, *INLAND EMPIRE* extends many of the disruptive narrative strategies of the European modernist cinema of the post-war era. In his text *Screening Modernism*, theorist András Bálint Kovács systematically identifies many of the principles of cinematic modernism, which often resonant with Lynch’s work. For instance, the “extensive representation of different mental states”, such as “dreams, memories, [and] fantasy” are clearly visible in Lynch’s explorations of character

psychology throughout his oeuvre (Kovács 61). Further though, the modernist film's tendency to have "symbolic rather than realist linkage of images", often resulting in a "radical manipulation of temporal order", can be found throughout *INLAND EMPIRE* in its freedom to edit between the various identities played by Laura Dern, scenes set in early twentieth-century Poland, and odd images involving humanoid rabbits in a three-wall sitcom set (Kovács 61). As Kovács notes, this ambiguous narrative construction allows "a considerable amount of freedom for the spectator to construct a consistent story", allowing the film to become a product of the "subjective imagination." (Kovács 245) *INLAND EMPIRE* pushes this ambiguity to an extreme, making any description an act of interpretation. As the film becomes more fragmentary, it becomes impossible to create any narrative coherency without considerable imaginative linkages on the part of the viewer.

INLAND EMPIRE's lack of causal relationships between images may explain why no prior critic has attempted such a lengthy account of the film's events. Indeed, it is a frustrating exercise, but helps to offer a more concrete roadmap to a film that obstinately denies such a reassuring luxury.

Following this, I will provide a production history. Although I confine myself to the text in my own analysis, the unconventional production method Lynch adopted was a direct influence on the unique structure and aesthetic of the finished film.

The Title

As many critics have argued, the title *INLAND EMPIRE* immediately hints at Nikki's voyage through her own subconscious. As Schaffner notes, the title invites a "psychotographical reading", since it refers to the "inland", or deeper recesses, of the

mind and foreshadows Lynch's plunging the viewer into Nikki's consciousness (Schaffner 283). Further, Lynch insists on the capitalization of the title, which seems appropriate for such an uncompromising and challenging film. Indeed, the title *INLAND EMPIRE*, with its elongated, gigantic letters filling the entire frame, is the first image that assaults the viewer. The title's towering presence foreshadows not only the overwhelming duration of the picture, but also the sprawling, infinite density of the film's narrative and its unconventional incorporation of digital visuals which often drape images in such murky darkness that they make the traditional act of viewership more interpretative and subjective than simple observation. From this point forward though, I will adopt the more traditional capitalization, *Inland Empire*, both for the ease of the reader and to differentiate my interpretation from the original text, which insists upon ambiguity and, therefore, seems stubbornly opposed to any one theoretical reading.

Plot Description

A gramophone needle runs over the grooves of an old record. An amplified voice announces that we are about to see "the oldest running radio show in history" and locates us in the "Baltic region". (Lynch *Inland Empire*)¹

We enter upon a man and woman somewhere in Poland. Their faces are blurred into abstraction. She seems to be a prostitute, but is confused, asking, "Where am I? I'm afraid."

What follows are several seemingly disconnected scene fragments:

A brunette woman (the Lost Girl, played by Karolina Gruszka) sits alone in her hotel room and watches Nikki's first encounter with the Visitor in fast motion.

¹ All future quotations from *Inland Empire* will be from the same source and will not be cited.

Humanoid rabbits in business suits and formal dresses reside in a domestic living room that resembles a three-wall sitcom set. After enigmatic phrases like, “I will find out one day”, canned laughter and applause erupts on the soundtrack.

A bald man (Jan Hencz) sits cross-legged on a couch in an ornate room. He addresses a bearded man, who will later be identified as “the Phantom” (Krzysztof Majchrzak), with vague questions such as, “You are looking for something?” The Phantom angrily screams that he is looking for an “opening”. Both speak in Polish.

After this cryptic opening, the majority of the first hour is dominated by Nikki Grace, a faded star hoping for a comeback role in *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. Yet, before she gets the part, she has a bizarre conversation with Visitor #1 (Grace Zabriskie) in her Los Angeles mansion. The Visitor predicts the role Nikki is up for deals with infidelity and a "brutal fucking murder" which is not in the script. She tells Nikki an "old tale" about a girl getting lost in the marketplace and how the alleyway behind the marketplace leads to the palace. She also mentions an “unpaid bill” and that “actions do have consequences”, two phrases which are repeated throughout the film.

Soon though, she is in the middle of production for *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, which is directed by the chipper Englishman Kingsley Stewart (Jeremy Irons). On a celebrity talk show hosted by Marilyn Levens (Diane Ladd), we learn that her co-star, Devon Banks (Justin Theroux), has a reputation as a notorious womanizer and Levens suggests that Devon and Nikki will have an affair.

During a table reading, Freddie Howard (Harry Dean Stanton) sees “someone” on the set. Devon runs after the intruder, but can’t find her. When he returns, Kingsley tells his cast that “information” has been withheld from them by the film’s producers: *On*

High in Blue Tomorrows is actually a remake of a never-finished Polish production, 4-7. 4-7 had a gypsy curse on it that resulted in the two leads being murdered.

At this point, Nikki's narrative is interrupted by a scene in an interrogation room, where Doris Side (Julia Ormond) is questioned for killing someone with a screwdriver, which is now lodged in her side.

After a dinner party, Nikki's husband, Piotrek Krol (Peter J. Lucas) warns Devon against having an affair with his wife. He tells her that she is not a "free agent" and echoes Visitor # 1's words that "actions have consequences."

Back on the set of *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, Susan Blue (Nikki's character) tells Billy Side (Devon's character) that her husband has found out about them. Suddenly, she laughs and exclaims, "This sounds like dialogue from our script!" Kingsley yells "Cut!" from offstage. Nikki looks into the camera with fear and confusion, signaling that she is losing the ability to differentiate herself from her fictional role, Susan Blue.

In a dark bedroom, Billy and Susan have sex. Piotrek watches from the doorway, further conflating Nikki's world with the fictional *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. Susan suddenly has a "memory" of a "scene" they shot the day before in an alleyway, where she saw "writing on metal." Suddenly, she screams, "Devon, it's me, Nikki!"

We transition into the alleyway scene Susan/ Nikki referred to. Susan walks to her car and notices "AXXON N" on a doorway. She enters and is witness to the table-reading scene from earlier. Devon sees her and runs after her. She retreats to Smithy's House, a set with a pink living room.

Inside Smithy's House, Susan/ Nikki wanders through a dark hallway where she meets a chorus of prostitutes who tell her that when she opens her eyes, "someone familiar will be there."

Nikki/ Susan opens her eyes onto the snowy streets of 20's Poland. Two prostitutes greet her and ask her, "Do you want to see?"

The two women's and Nikki/ Susan's faces are superimposed over the gramophone needle creaking along a record. They instruct her to push a cigarette through silk and look through the hole.

At this point, the narrative splinters into a series of short, enigmatic scenes that only form a narrative in retrospect. This is seemingly motivated by Nikki/ Susan being elevated to a new, informed vision by looking through the silk.

Perhaps the most fragmentary sections are scenes that are assumedly from the unfinished Polish film, 4-7, but could be from the real-life tragedy that occurred during that production. In these scenes, an unnamed mustached man and a brunette seem to be having an affair. Both end up murdered with torso wounds on the snowy streets of Poland. Yet, the events are intentionally ambiguous as highlighted by a jarring moment when one of the Los Angeles prostitutes ducks into the frame over the image of a woman with her back to the camera and asks, "Who is she?" Therefore, these scenes of mysterious murder and one brutal beating (handed down by the Phantom) convey that the cycle of degradation, infidelity, and murder that occur in the Nikki/ Susan narrative have a far-reaching lineage.²

² Lynch freely splices these sequences into the narrative, suggesting that they are interchangeable with the contemporary curse affecting Nikki/ Susan. By refusing to name these characters or give them distinguishing personalities, they are rendered

One of the least developed identities Nikki/ Susan inhabits depicts her as a suburban housewife in a cramped, low-income residence. The first time we see her there she is cooking eggs at a stove and yells out, “Breakfast!” Later, we will see her and a bearded Piotrek sitting at a small, plastic table. They complain about money and then Nikki/ Susan reveals that she is barren. This statement though yields little reaction from the nonplussed Piotrek, who says he’s not surprised. Later, there are barbeque scenes populated by several Eastern European thugs and a few scantily- dressed women. With a smile, Nikki/ Susan asks them if they’ve known her before. Meanwhile, over the grill, Piotrek sullies his t-shirt with a large ketchup stain on his torso. Later, he will tell Nikki/ Susan that he is leaving her to join a travelling circus in the Baltic region to take care of animals.

Throughout, we return to the brutal monologues of the battered woman. Sitting across from a disinterested, bespectacled man, she tells tale after tale of male aggression and her own gruesome retaliation. For instance, in one story, she “gouged a man’s eye out” for attempting to rape her at fifteen. In another, she kicks a man in the nuts for hitting her with a crowbar. Yet, she also conveys elusive details about the towns she’s lived in. In one, the pollution from a chemical factory results in nearby town people “having weird dreams and seeing things that wasn’t there.” After Piotrek announces he’s leaving Susan/ Nikki at the barbeque, the battered woman relates that the circus

as faceless as the blurred man and woman that began the film. Lynch, therefore, might be suggesting that the repeated narrative of infidelity overrides individual personalities and only depicts characters as puppets “cursed” to act out the narrative again and again. For Lynch, these scenes from 4-7 may exhibit the same simplistic characterization, predictable narratives, and regressive ideology found in much of mainstream cinema.

employed a mysterious hypnotist, known as the Phantom, who performed mind control over audiences. He also had a one-legged sister who appears in the credits sequence of the film.

After Piotrek leaves to join the circus, there are several scenes that convey his trials. In the first, Piotrek travels in the backseat as two Polish men drive him out to a metal shed. There, they meet a man in black who tells him that the man he's looking for is gone and muttered something about "Inland Empire" before he left.

Frequently, we return to the Lost Girl, usually overcome with grief, who watches the film's events on her television in her hotel room.

Scenes with the humanoid rabbits are also interspersed throughout. In one, a cigarette burns into the corner of the set and a female rabbit emerges holding up two candles. This directly links the rabbits to the privileged vision Nikki/ Susan obtains by looking through the silk.

There are also several dancing sequences involving the chorus of prostitutes. After lounging around and consoling one woman after a break-up, they break into a high-powered dance set to Little Eva's "Locomotion." Later, there's a brief moment where they slow dance to Etta James' "At Last!"

Around the two-hour mark, these previously autonomous elements begin to coalesce into scenes of more obvious dramatic purpose, but which make the exact identity of characters more difficult to pin down. For instance, at one point, Susan/ Nikki races over to Billy's mansion to profess her love. Unfortunately, his wife, Doris Side, greets her and slaps her repeatedly for her blatant declaration. Yet, when Nikki/ Susan announces that there's "something more", Doris morphs into herself from the earlier

interrogation scene. Then we see a flash of the bloodied body of the woman from 4-7. All the while, the Phantom waves his finger and utters nonsense noises. In the body of my thesis, I will offer an in-depth formal analysis of this sequence and attempt to explain this complex intersecting of the 4-7, Susan/ Nikki, and the Phantom.

Later, a ratty-haired Doris Side visits Nikki/ Susan at Smithy's House and tells her she's come about an "unpaid bill that needs paying" and says she knows her neighbor, Crimp (who will later be revealed to be the Phantom).³

A subsequent scene also develops the role of the Phantom. Behind a ramshackle house, Nikki/ Susan runs into the Phantom, who walks towards her with several light bulbs in his mouth. Nikki/ Susan picks up a screwdriver and leaves.⁴

Another sequence that I will cover in-depth is a strange overlapping of the Lost Girl, Piotrek, the world of 4-7, and the rabbits that leads Nikki/ Susan to have another traumatic psychological splitting. The Lost Girl sits at the center of a long table under a red lamp. Piotrek is brought into the room and does not recognize the woman, who apparently summoned him. He is given a gun and told to rush since it is "after midnight." The woman dissolves in the center of the table. The two elderly men change their seating to match-dissolve to:

³ This short, enigmatic encounter foreshadows Doris's ragged, hysterical appearance later when she attacks Susan on the Walk of Fame. Further, her dialogue connects the idea of an "unpaid bill" with the Phantom. The "unpaid bill" becomes a verbal signpost that signals the weight of the curse that haunts Nikki/ Susan. Also, it suggests the curse's propagation of shame and deficiency on its female victims and the Phantom's integral role in its proliferation.

⁴ More than explicitly suggesting that the Phantom incites violence (by giving Nikki/ Susan the future murder weapon: the rusted screwdriver), it also links him with the film's ongoing discourse on light. The light bulbs lodged in his mouth literally link him to film projection and what's lurking inside cinematic images of light and shadow.

The Rabbits, who utter more cryptic sayings: "I'm going to find out one day."; "This isn't the way it was." As the suited Rabbit gets up, the room goes red and he gives us a seemingly important clue: "It was the man in the green coat."

A flash of lightning transitions us to Nikki/ Susan, who begins screaming as she's assaulted by colored rays of light in Smithy's House.

Suddenly, she opens her eyes and finds that she's a "whore" on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. A ratty Doris Side lurks in the background and eventually grabs the rusted screwdriver from her hand and stabs her in the torso.

Susan/ Nikki collapses next to a Vietnamese woman (Nae), her black lover (Terry Crews), and a black woman (Helena Chase), a trio of homeless vagrants on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. While Nikki/ Susan writhes in pain, the Asian woman talks about a two-week stay she had with her friend Niko. Niko has a blonde wig and has become addicted to "hard drugs and is turning tricks now." She tore "a hole in her intestines from her vagina wall" and now "she knows her time has run out." Nikko stays at home with her pet monkey "but there are those who are good with animals, who have a way with animals."⁵ Nikki/ Susan pukes blood onto the sidewalk. The black woman ignites a lighter in front of her face and says, "It burns bright now. No more blue tomorrows. You on high now, love." The fire goes out and she dies.

Yet, a zoom out reveals filming equipment and that this death was just another scene in *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. As I will offer an extensive analysis of the film's climatic moments, I will only offer a brief account here. Nikki wanders off to a cinema palace, where she sees one of the Battered Woman scenes from earlier projected onto the

⁵ Nikko appears in the credit sequence.

behemoth screen. Inside the theater, he spots the bespectacled man from the run-down office and follows him. She ends up back in the dark hallway and soon confronts the Phantom. She shoots him repeatedly and his face transforms into a grotesque, clown-like reflection of her own image.

After banishing the Phantom, Nikki appears in the Lost Girl's room and embraces her. When she evaporates, the Lost Girl is freed and is reunited with her family: Piotrek and a young boy.

The film ends by returning us to Nikki's encounter with Visitor #1, who smiles and directs her to look forward. She sees herself: serene and poised. She seems to have transcended to an enlightened position of strength unburdened by the curse.

Production History

Inland Empire's defiance of narrative convention culminates an equally unorthodox production history, where Lynch filmed ideas as they came to him, not knowing if or when they would form into a feature fit for exhibition.

The project was intended to be only a seventy-minute monologue for actress Laura Dern (Olson 669), but, upon completing the scene, he had an instinctive feeling that there was "something more" (Barney 247). He felt that the planned stand-alone scene was "holding something" (Barney 237). Lynch pursued his intuition and began an on-again, off-again filmmaking journey that lasted almost three years (Barney 253).

Lynch relied upon transcendental meditation to aid his creative process. According to Lynch, it allowed him to access what he called "the big, unbounded, infinite, immortal, eternal ocean of knowingness" ("Stories"). In his 2006 autobiographical text, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*,

Lynch gives a brief history of transcendental meditation (TM), which is a nondenominational form of meditation where someone repeats a mantra to access a higher consciousness. The mantra operates as a “sound-vibration-thought” rather than connoting any specific meaning (Lynch 4). Through TM, one is able to “transcend” to the “pure, vibrant consciousness” located “inside every human being” (Lynch 27). This “ocean of pure consciousness” is also identified as the unified field: a quantum physics term that theorizes a fundamental unity of existence where “every single thing that is a thing emerges from” (Lynch 48). Lynch’s belief in a unified field directly influenced his creative process while making *Inland Empire*. He believed that there was no such thing as “a fragment” and that, because of the unified field, there had to be a way that the seemingly unrelated scenes he was filming would fit together (Lynch 151). As a result, Lynch never dwelled on the idea of a finished product. Instead, he would wait until “another idea” came to him organically and never knew if any of the scenes “would relate to one another- if it was going to hold together, or be anything” (Barney 247). He pushed himself to have total faith in a vague sense that his “ideas” would merge into a final product.

Some critics have noted how the resultant narrative strongly resembles his perspective on transcendental meditation. For instance, in his 2008 interview with David Lynch, Richard Barney suggests that Nikki Grace’s journey of “going down into some other dimension” resembles Lynch’s description of the unified field that can be achieved through transcendental meditation (Barney 259). Further, Lynch believes that TM allows one to “become more and more *you*” and therefore achieve a more complete and autonomous identity (Lynch 57). Grace’s tormented journey then can be seen as her

struggle to obtain access to this unified field of enlightenment and, therefore, a unified identity, which mirrors Lynch's own process of creative discovery while making *Inland Empire*.

When he felt the project "was going to be a feature", he called StudioCanal director Frederic Sichler and told him, "I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm shooting in low-res DV. Are you in?" (Barney 254). In response, Sichler contributed some funds, which, along with Lynch's and actress Laura Dern's personal financing, helped to keep the project going. Sichler and StudioCanal's contributions showed an act of faith based on Lynch's past track record and the consistency of his output as an auteur. Therefore, StudioCanal could be sure that any product branded with David Lynch's name would achieve significant critical and at least moderate commercial attention, especially coming on the coattails of his Oscar-nominated *Mulholland Drive*.

Yet, although it is undeniable that Lynch's personal, day-by-day filmmaking process would not have been possible without his prior recognition and success within the industrial Hollywood complex, he used this established credibility to pursue a method largely at odds with his previous, more conventional, production methods. His reputation allowed Lynch the ability to obstinately refuse to define or compromise his intuitive approach to the project or to switch his commercially risky "low-res DV" aesthetic to the more conventional 35mm. By using the consumer-grade Sony PD150, Lynch was able to not only severely reduce the production costs, but also, thanks to its consumer-friendly design, have more productive days of filming. Laura Dern explains that the "ease with which David can shoot alone and move the camera around and get the scene" with digital would be "unheard of on a traditional 35mm movie set" (Barney 248). This method

eliminated the need of a large crew and gave Lynch, as one of the cameramen as well as the director,⁶ the ability to pursue his compositional ideas as they came to him, without having to first mediate them through a cinematographer and camera department. Digital therefore was a necessary precursor to his personal approach and allowed him to be amazingly productive, often shooting ten out of a possible twelve hours of a working day (Barney 248, from Dern).

Lynch's adoption of this intuitive, day-by-day approach was inspired by his experience shooting a scene in Łódź, Poland with the help of the Camerimage Film Festival. Although his initial interest in travelling to Poland for the Festival was to photograph "factories", he was struck with the inspiration to film a "scene" ("Stories"). He was amazed by the help he received from members of the Festival (who he refers to as "the Camerimage gang") ("Stories"). That night, he wrote the scene and, by 8 PM the next night, they were already filming and, by 10 PM, "it was tail lights and we had gotten the whole thing." ("Stories"). Lynch speaks with awe and gratitude at the speed and efficiency with which he was able to shoot. Further, he was able to begin pre-production on finding a location, determining set dressing, and auditioning before he had even written a script. This experience directly influenced his approach to filming *Inland Empire* and lent his production a speed and proficiency without always having prior knowledge of the specifics of a scene or its placement in the finished film. Further, his fascination with the architecture and unique atmosphere of Łódź also explains why he

⁶ Lynch didn't only disrupt the division of labor of studio filmmaking by acting as one of the film's cameramen, he also actively performed duties as the set designer, prop master, and casting director during the production. Further, he was the principal editor, sound designer, and helped write the music for the film.

chose to set the origin of the “curse” there. In this way, he also pays tribute to the origin of the liberating creative process he used throughout the film.

Lynch contrasts the ease of this production process with the artistic constraints of 35mm, studio filmmaking into his narrative, creating a unity of process and product. Not only is the film-within-the-film, *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, a remake, but it is riddled with melodramatic clichés and its discussion within the industry is dominated by tabloid-level gossip about the film’s stars. The trite quality of the studio production sharply contrasts Lynch’s intensive cultivation of every idea, rooting out the full potential of his creativity. Also, the star-centered media coverage of the production has its antithesis in the auteur-centric nature of *Inland Empire*. Perhaps the most telling disparity though is *On High in Blue Tomorrows*’ use of cumbersome lighting equipment and massive 35mm cameras. The inefficiency of working with film and heavy lights is commented on ironically in a scene where director Kingsley Stewart struggles to communicate with a grip over the placement of a 2K light. After numerous attempts to get the light raised by two feet, he eventually gives up. The comic exchange between Kingsley Stewart and grip Bucky Jay (voiced by David Lynch) riffs on the difficulty of communicating in large crews and highlights the frustrations of the long chains of command that Lynch avoided by occupying many key technical roles himself. Further, the extended delays between shooting caused by this advanced technology are, as noted earlier, eliminated by the use of digital. Frequently, Lynch gives the viewer the impression that the film-within-a-film wouldn’t have suffered from so many inconveniences if it had adopted his own intuitive and personal mode of production.

Yet, when Lynch remained faithful to the unruly three-hour time length he felt the film needed, he recognized its limited appeal and decided to distribute the film independently through his newly formed company, *Absurda*, to only 120 theaters (Barney 265). Lynch's uncompromising attitude towards commercial expectations shows a respect for the shape his project had formed but, predictably as a "three-hour picture that no one understands", *Inland Empire* earned very little money (Barney 265, Lynch quote). Yet, in interviews, Lynch is less concerned with monetary gains than with *Inland Empire* eventually finding a more sizeable audience.

In many ways, this was also my goal in writing about this particular film in such depth: to open up a discussion about such an unjustly ignored, incredibly rich and dense text.

A Meditation on Recording Technologies

Applause erupts on the soundtrack and a record needle crackles as it creeps over the grooves and crevices of a black disc. A reverberated voice, nostalgically reminiscent of radio announcers of a bygone era, tells us that “AXXON N, the longest running radio play in history” will now have another episode and locates us on “a gray winter day in an old hotel.” Already, Lynch has subtly prepared his audience for many of the structural and technological preoccupations of the proceeding film. The concentration on archaic technology (the allusions to records and radio plays; the canned laughter: a nod to a discarded sitcom device) seems appropriate for a work shot on consumer DV cameras. As theorist Robert Sinnerbrink notes, “the image’s circular motion, eternal repetition and ghostly recording of experience all point to the film’s fascination with the role of recording technology.” (Sinnerbrink 145) In particular, it is the mediation of these audio/visual technologies that Lynch dwells upon and their potential to transform experience and shape the viewer’s perception. The murky, pixilated images of the Sony PD150 are only the most recent incarnation of a lineage of recording technologies that create an audio and/or visual imprint. Yet, Lynch seems to focus on the aberrations of each recording device, how they warp and distort their impression of the world, and, therefore, offer their own mediated subjectivity.

So too, the film can be seen as revolving around and around, just as the record does, never achieving the satisfaction of comprehensible progression or resolution. Instead, it spirals down into murky realms of scenes from Nikki’s life as an actress hoping for a comeback with *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, her fictional character Susan’s

degradation due to her affair with a married man, and snippets from scenes set in 20's Poland where a similar narrative involving infidelity, betrayal, and murder unfolds.

“AXXON N”, seemingly a nonsense set of letters, operates a key signpost throughout the film. Robert Sinnerbrink theorizes that “AXXON N” could be interpreted as a reference to “a cinematic ‘axon’ or brain/nerve cell linking multiple layers of consciousness” (Sinnerbrink 151). Several times, Nikki/ Susan sees these letters written on metal doors or entranceways, beckoning her forth and propelling her to an important realization or confrontation. The repetition of “AXXON N” helps the viewer to recognize these scenes as shifts in both the cinematic narrative and in Nikki/ Susan’s consciousness. Throughout, I will note how the visual style departs from a simple representational recording of reality to a subjective depiction of Nikki/ Susan’s psychological state, creating a unity of form and content previously unseen in Lynch’s oeuvre.

These initial images are followed by what appears to be a Polish prostitute taking a client in a hotel room. Yet, this fairly straightforward premise is made abstract by the use of large gray blobs obscuring the actors’ features, making their identities a mystery. The use of black-and-white, hazy digital photography, and a static, straightforward camera angle initially give the scene an air of surveillance footage. The technique creates an unsettling voyeuristic effect as the audience intrudes on an intimate moment, spying on a particularly seedy sexual exchange. Lynch continues to destabilize the viewer with similar formal strategies throughout the film, especially in his use of noticeably out-of-focus shots and close-ups distorted by a fish eye lens. More than making the viewer feel uneasy for peering into these seedy dealings though, Sinnerbrink points out that the facial

blurring suggest a “dissolution of identity” that foreshadows Nikki’s own confused fracturing into multiple personas (Sinnerbrink 145).

So, although these initial images are cryptic and initially indecipherable, they succinctly foreshadow key themes that will preoccupy the rest of the film.

The Way to the Palace: A Narrative Roadmap

In one of the opening scenes of the film, Nikki welcomes a bizarre “new neighbor” (Grace Zabriske), who tells her with a thick Polish accent, a strange “old tale” that resonates throughout the film:

A little girl went out play. Lost in the marketplace, as if half born. Then, not through the marketplace, you see that, don’t you? But through the alley behind the marketplace: this is the way to the palace. But it isn’t something you remember. Forgetfulness, it happens to us all. And me! Why, I’m the worst one!

This cryptic tale directly foreshadows Nikki’s later retrieved memory of spotting herself in the alley. Further, although the low atmospheric music playing under the dialogue seems ominous, her tale of a forgotten origin myth actually foretells the surprisingly upbeat ending of the picture. By seeking out the repressed memory, one will find “the way to the palace.” This dialogue is likely influenced by Lynch’s much-treasured transcendental meditation. Asked to define the technique, Lynch commented that the process “opens the door to the transcendent, the deepest level of life, the unified field” (Barney 256). Simply put, Lynch notes that the “whole story” of transcendental meditation is really “the self knowing the self” (Barney 257). For Nikki though, the journey towards enlightenment will be a tortuous and often frightening one. The dialogue though generalizes this “palace” of self-knowledge, even giving the impression of a

hidden mental dimension that all women share and therefore unites them. There is the implication then that if Nikki weren't imprisoned by "forgetfulness", she would recognize her guest, not as a wacky foreigner, but truly as a "neighbor." Throughout, a close-knit group of prostitutes will also act as a supportive homosocial unit that stands as an alternative to Nikki's individual dread.

In many ways, this cryptic parable acts as a roadmap for the rest of the film, foreshadowing Nikki's voyage through the "alleyway" of her subconscious to a unified field that will free her of the various identities she must travel through. Yet, she will be plagued by "forgetfulness" and a bewilderment of where or who she is. It will not be until she accepts the fluid nature of time in the "alleyway" of her consciousness with the same carefree attitude as the Visitor and follows her intuition to confront her subliminal demons that she will reach the "palace."

Celebrity Culture and A Predestined Affair

"Tonight, Nikki Grace and Devon Berk", Marilyn Leven (Diane Ladd) sweetly whispers over the dream-like caressing of a harp.

"Mommas, lock up your daughters' doors! Nikki, really! This news! This shocking revelation by Devon must send a shiver down your spine!" Marilyn's eyebrows escalate in ecstasy at the tawdry gossip. Her permed blonde hair beams under the studio lights as the sparkle of her white pearls dance above her pinstriped blazer.

Ladd's exaggerated performance, her lips constantly curling to accent every word and her eyes overwhelmed with glee at the whiff of scandal, encapsulate the comic, parodic tone that infuses many moments in the first hour of the narrative. Seen out of context, this moment wouldn't seem out of place in a Christopher Guest mockumentary.

The campy Hollywood backdrop, the bright primary blues and yellows of the set, and the canned laughter that punctuate many of Marilyn's suggestive lines act as a natural extension of the dreamy, cartoonish Hollywood portrayed in the first-hour of the narrative. Indeed, a Hedda Hopper knock-off like Marilyn could only exist in a Hollywood where a director could proclaim his project to be a "star maker" with a childlike grin and elated laugh as Kingsley does only a moment prior. Kingsley's optimism at the prospects of the unabashedly old-fashioned Southern melodrama, *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, are indicative of Lynch's portrait of an irony-free Hollywood where "stars make dreams and dreams make stars."

Yet, even in these moments of exaggerated satire, Lynch subtly hints at the ominous undercurrents that will materialize later in the narrative. Marilyn's insistence of an affair developing between Devon and Nikki suggests the inevitability of their infidelity, which is destined despite both stars' bewilderment at even the suggestion. Further, although audience reactions throughout Marilyn's interview seem canned and artificial, they do accurately reflect the desire of her audience, to which the Starlight Celebrity Show caters. Therefore, Lynch identifies the pleasures spectators receive from stories of infidelity and celebrity defamation despite their familiarity and the ultimate predictability of the narrative. *Inland Empire* will progress from the quaintness of the affair in *On High in Blue Tomorrows* to the gruesome implications this infidelity inflicts on Susan's character.

Identity Rupture: Fracturing into Multiple Personas

We hover into a dark blue room. Thick pixelization clouds the setting and all we see are a lamp, a bed, and a huddled mass under the sheets that shifts erratically in the

darkness. Moans and heavy breathing pierce through the ominous low rumblings on the soundtrack and announce the event of the scene: sex. And, as Susan proclaims after repeated exclamations of “Oh God! Oh God Damn!”: “fucking good” sex. But Billy resists her blather, telling her in exasperation that she talks “too fucking much” and his loud shush invades the soundtrack. The prolonged *shhhhhhhhhhh* momentarily halts the dancing blue pixels of Susan’s face. Her image is caught in a freeze frame. The sketchy patches of a pixelated closed eye and cheek look like a botched portrait, more like a Francis Bacon painting than a stabilizing representation. Later in the same scene, Susan will again attempt to freeze herself into something concrete: commanding Billy to “look at” her. And the camera will attempt to obey: quivering and advancing in halting, handheld motions towards her visage. Yet again, it ultimately fails to preserve her in any sharp contours and, as if to mock Susan’s and our own hysteria, Billy erupts in sudden, menacing laughter. All the while, the pixels stubbornly continue to whirl chaotically, clouding our vision and making Susan appear like a hollow specter waiting to crack and shatter off the screen. Susan remains both visually and psychologically an indistinct, murky haze: precariously off-balance at the edge of oblivion.

More than just a showcase for Susan’s hysteria though, the sex scene marks the conflation of Nikki and her character in *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, Susan Blue. Previously separate entities, they now begin to overlap and become indistinct. Her identity becomes unhinged and the relative narrative coherence of the film up-to-this-point begins to splinter into opaque subplots that never seem to coalesce back into this early narrative coherence. The scene then operates as a signpost, signaling the rupture of

Nikki/ Susan's stable identity and the unraveling of the goal-oriented, actress-comeback narrative.

Moments where a character transforms into another self or realizes the artificiality of their imagined identity have become a reoccurring motif in Lynch's work. This is due to the shared structure of *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Inland Empire*, where the entire narrative is a fantastical projection of the protagonist. Anna Katharina Schaffner explains the shared thematic framework of this trilogy by noting each protagonist's "paranoid-schizoid splitting of the female other into virgin/whore, wholesome woman/femme fatale, ideal/ nightmare" binaries (Schaffner 271). These destructive dichotomies force "Fred Madison, the main character in *Lost Highway*, to lapse into psychosis" and Diane Selwyn in *Mulholland Drive* to re-imagine "her unobtainable love object" (Schaffner 271).

Further though, all three exhibit Lynch's attempts to portray the world of his films as the subjective innerworkings of his protagonists' deluded minds. Placed in the context of theorist Edward Branigan's levels of narration, narrative events are conveyed through the internal focalization of the protagonist, which portrays their memories, wishes, and fears in first-person (Branigan 86). What makes this narration particularly disconcerting in Lynch's work is that the viewer is often led to believe the story is being told by a non-diegetic narrator, who is reliably conveying information. The distancing, traumatic realization that this is a mistaken assumption not only places the viewer into the inner recesses of a disturbed mind, but foregrounds the artificial construction of storytelling as a whole. In particular, it forces the viewer to contemplate what ominous ideological

imperatives motivate the previously enjoyable, goal-oriented narrative and, perhaps by extension, the majority of mainstream cinema in general.

Inland Empire extends the disruptive strategies of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* by splitting Nikki into numerous, seemingly antithetical roles. Yet, whereas in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, the referent personality (Fred Madison/ Diane Selwyn) and their referent transgressive act (the direct or indirect murder of a lover out of jealousy) is discernible, in *Inland Empire*, discovering the pre-diegetic event that led Nikki to construct this fantastical reality is close to impossible. Perhaps more troubling, discovering the “true”/ original identity of Dern’s character is equally difficult.

The impenetrable ambiguity of the narrative is visually conveyed by the hazy, muddy digital imagery, which can never be brought into the detailed, visual clarity of 35mm film or high definition video. Lynch brings the murky and unstable constitution of his medium to the forefront in scenes of identity rupture. An analysis of similar sequences in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* will illuminate *Inland Empire*’s unique integration of form and content.

Identity Rupture in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Inland Empire*

In *Lost Highway*, Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) retreats from the knowledge that he’s killed his wife (Patricia Arquette) by creating a younger alterego, Andy (Michael Masse), that does not suffer this psychological burden. About halfway through the film, Lynch communicates this narrative and character rupture with a variety of cinematic devices: play with focus; brief, gory images of Madison’s head literally splitting open; reverse motion; and intense sound design.

The scene begins with a low angle between Madison's legs. The excessive headroom and the distortion added by the use of a wide angle lens accentuate his bodily shaking and visually approximate the nausea and physical pain coming from his head, preparing the viewer for the coming psychological split. Further, there is a small spotlight behind Madison's head, alone shining out from the blackness that surrounds him, cueing the viewer that the space is becoming psychologically subjective.

Madison's gaze leads us to the prison door, where a wipe resembling a curtain rising reveals a burning house. Much like the spotlight, the use of the curtain recalls a theatrical stage and signals a move inward into Madison's consciousness. This is further suggested by the low call of a siren-like pop song and a deep, whistling wind that fills the soundscape.

Through the use of reverse motion, the flames retreat back into a now pristine building and the Mystery Man (Robert Blake) walks out and stares out at Madison before returning inside the cabin. Throughout the entire film, the white-faced, near-vampiric Mystery Man has operated as a manifestation of Madison's guilty conscious, attempting to force Madison into a traumatic recognition of his repressed murder.

Whereas *Lost Highway* explicitly marks the film's movement into Fred's consciousness to formulate his fantasized alter-ego, *Mulholland Drive* forces its heroines to go through a surreal stage show to realize the artifice of their fantasy. Drawn to Club Silencio by an oneiric premonition, Betty (Naomi Watts) and Rita (Laura Harring) watch a disconcerting stage show, which seems bent on revealing the artifice of the supposedly live music ("No hay banda!"). Unlike the scene of identity rupture in *Lost Highway*, where Madison retreats from his heinous murder by creating a new identity, here the

opposite is occurring: Betty's constructed, idealized life (which has been the majority of the narrative up to this scene) is quickly unraveling. Betty's trepidation culminates when claps of thunder and lightning erupt in the theater. Just as a trumpet player can remove the instrument from his lips and reveal the music to be nothing but a pre-recording, we might assume the thunder and lightning to be a stage trick as well. Yet, Betty's (Naomi Watts) jerks and spasms in tune with the lightning suggest a more foreboding meaning, again cueing the audience that the cryptic scene has a severe psychological undercurrent for her. Just as Madison's head "hurt" and then literally split open, Betty's internal confrontation is dramatized by associating it with the break down of bodily order. Her violent convulsions are the result of her repressed act (putting a hit on her girlfriend) coming to the forefront of her consciousness.

Just as in *Lost Highway*, the moment of psychological recognition is staged with a rippling blue light erupting into interior space. In *Lost Highway*, the way the light opens up above the ceiling of Madison's prison cell almost suggests an alternate vortex or reality ready to suck him in. In this way, Lynch may be misleading the viewer towards a generically-motivated explanation for the bizarre bodily switch: almost like in a science fiction movie, an ethereal force from above transplants Madison's mind into a different body. The psychological subtext of the scene remains cryptic and the viewer may even be encouraged to turn to more conventional generic explanations for the horrific transformation.

Mulholland Drive, on the other hand, makes the lack of rationality behind the blue light and the obtuse theatrical demonstrations naggingly prominent. Betty's intense reactions and the ominous sound design all suggest the narrative importance of the scene.

In this way, Lynch makes the viewer feel as ungrounded and subtly unnerved as Betty herself as we struggle and fail to comprehend the events. Further, the white smoke, red curtain, and blue-haired woman prepare the viewer for an overtly surrealistic/ symbolic scene and encourage the viewer to read these details as symptoms of Diana's crumbling identity and constructed "reality". The blue light therefore escalates the claustrophobic feeling that the film's previously coherent mystery plot is dissolving right in front of us.

The two scene's shared theatricality is made overt by the inclusion of curtains in both. In *Lost Highway*, a wipe resembling curtains rising is used to reveal the burning house. In *Mulholland Drive*, Club Silencio's red curtains and opulent auditorium create a more pronounced theatrical space. The theater motif operates in both to suggest the flimsiness and overt artificiality of the respective characters' psychological realities as the seams in their constructed fantasy worlds begin to split and unravel. Also, the theater motif makes ideas of role-playing and performative identity frank and overt and helps the viewer to understand that Diana and Madison are both playing the part of the innocent to retreat from the traumatic implications of their murders.

Significantly though, the 35mm film is never exposed as a form of artifice in itself. Although these moments of identity rupture do bring cinema's unique powers of illusion and performance to the forefront, their bizarre warping of diegesis is attributed to Diane and Fred's schizophrenic breakdowns, not the limitations of the historical narrator or the extra-fictional narrator. The truth of their crimes and the two character's authentic selves seem to always be within the grasp of the film's representational powers. The reversion into theatrical space is meant to convey the unreliability of Diane and Fred's constructed narratives, but this interrogation never expands to Lynch's storytelling ability

or the limitations of the celluloid frame. In this way, Lynch never extends the ambiguity of the plot into the visual realm, allowing the materiality of the 35mm celluloid to remain stable and retain its referential value.

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Most overtly, *Inland Empire*'s scene of identity rupture shares the deep blue light that momentarily flashes through both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. Yet, instead of inexplicably rippling through the scene, it is consistent throughout and therefore can more easily be read diegetically than either of the previous scenes. Much like in a silent film, we read the blue tinting as connoting night and giving a visual equivalent to the low light levels of darkness. It is also indicative of Lynch's painterly attention to color and his ability to signal a departure from realism into the subjectivity of a character by bathing a scene in a signal shade of blue.

Further, the overt symbolic imagery of the earlier scenes is held at bay, making the break from the previous Nikki-as-actress narrative more subtle and less immediately noticeable. Instead of anachronistic figures and theatrical settings, Lynch uses the low-grade digital medium's own deficiencies to reflect the instability of the film's narrative integrity. For instance, the scene is shot in a series of handheld close-ups that quiver and shake as they capture Nikki/ Susan Blue struggling to stabilize the boundary between herself and the part she's been asked to play. Although this is most clearly presented through the dialogue (with Dern switching accents and speaking more and more abstractly- "Remember I told you about that thing that happened? It's a story that happened yesterday, but I know it's tomorrow."), Lynch's more subtle use of digital

technology and composition is instrumental in creating the scene's feeling of displacement.

The characters' isolation in separate shots, the different shot sizes, the fluctuating focus, and the heavy digital noise all heighten the viewer's awareness of each edit. In this way, the scene highlights its constructed-ness and makes us think of each shot as a separate and distinct unit, obstructing classical cinema's illusion of coherent and consistent time and space. Further though, the scene's disjointed construction adheres to one of Lev Manovich's Principles of New Media: modularity. Just as in Manovich's definition, shots are "assembled into larger-scale objects but continue to maintain their separate identities" (Manovich 30). Of course, any edited sequence will contain many discrete parts (shots) that create a constructed space, but Lynch seems intent on making the gulfs between these elements increasingly noticeable and disarming. He does so in part by placing fish eye lenses very close to the actors' faces, grotesquely distorting their features. Justin Theroux, for instance, is often reduced to a pair of looming eyes and shimmering, sweaty cheeks. Lynch takes advantage of the low resolution of his format to make his actors and the blue, whirling darkness around them a single entity, using the viewer's decreased visibility to support the confused and clouded mindset of Dern's character. This subverts the editing structure, which is, on the surface, a simple shot/reverse shot by removing the fundamental assumption this strategy is designed to suggest: a shared space. Instead, our faith in a continuous space and time begins to crumble as the advancing camera breaks the action up into blurred, extreme close-ups that taunts Nikki/ Susan's desire for a lucid, stable reality. This supports the dialogue,

which shows the characters failing to understand or effectively communicate with one another.

As the scene continues, there is an increased claustrophobia to the camerawork as their faces progressively overwhelm the frame. This visual strategy ironically comments on Nikki's pleas for Devon/ Billy to "look" at her, as the camera almost consumes her to obey her command. Yet, the dimness and lack of contrast of the monochromically deep blue and the noisy standard definition video make it frustratingly difficult to bring her visage into clear visibility. The muddled visuals therefore begin to carry an unexpectedly subjective meaning as it expressively conveys her confused state of mind. The dialogue's repeated mention of vision make this subtext overt and creates the same feeling of a crumbling and increasingly fragile reality as *Mulholland Drive* and *Lost Highway* without featuring any bizarre, inexplicable figures or theatrical settings. Instead, the scene creates a claustrophobic effect by plunging us into Nikki/ Sue's hysterical state of mind as the viewer is forced to continually strain their vision and make representational sense of the action onscreen.

Billy seems to cling to his persona for the majority of the sequence, repeatedly questioning Nikki's break from diegetic reality ("That doesn't make any sense. What is this, Sue?"). He therefore rejects the artificiality/ performance-nature of the "scene" (a term Dern uses repeatedly) and never concedes to his co-existence as both Billy and Devon the way Dern battles with the competing identities of Nikki and Susan. This isolates Dern in her confusion and coldly refuses the solidarity of exploring the mystery of her "found" memory and confused identity together (which forms the backbone of *Mulholland Drive*'s narrative). Instead, his sudden eruption into maniacal laughter

reveals him to be a ghoulish specter that taunts her frenzied mindset. He's only the first ominous male figure to mock Nikki's attempts at stable self-recognition and, as a climatic scene will make clear, these disconcerting specters are the devilish inhabitants of a psychological purgatory of negated higher consciousness.

The grainy, blurry digital images support the scene's conflation of Dern's Susan and Nikki personas. As her husband Piotrek peers around the corner of the bedroom, it becomes clear that the fictional Susan and Billy's affair has been directly superimposed onto Nikki's private life. Earlier in the narrative, Piotrek fulfills his duty as a jealous husband by warning the promiscuous Devon that the "bonds of marriage are real bonds" that, if necessary, are "enforced for us." Piotrek never clarifies what outside presence enforces marriage, but the tortuous psychological crack-up that Nikki is enduring could be viewed as punishment for her infidelity and, by extension, a reaffirmation of the "bond of marriage." At this point in the narrative, it is impossible to determine what force asserts these bonds. Interrogating this cryptic force will be a main focus of my reading of the 'Phantom' character.

The confusion between Nikki and Susan is matched by an increasingly abstract relationship to time, where "yesterday" and "tomorrow" are made just as modular and independent of each other as the visuals. Time is broken into fragments and no longer has the ingrained, linear succession of calendared time. Instead, as with much of the film, links between characters, scenes, and sometimes even shots will not obey standard notions of causality, but instead will continually branch out, re-combine, and evolve in search of some elusive, all-encompassing link that adds cohesion to the entire piece. Although this structure mirrors Lynch's improvisational journey of making the film, it

also resonates with Nikki's exploration of different states of mind on her way to the "palace" of mental enlightenment and transcendence. Further, Lynch's disregard for calendar time may be influenced by non-linear processing systems like the Avid Software that shaped the film. Avid and other modern, non-linear editing softwares, adhere to Manovich's principle of variability, where "time is spatialized", allowing Lynch "to study its different temporal structures" simultaneously (Manovich 40).

Dark Corridors

As we fade out from Susan's desperate pleas, an eerie hovering noise fills the soundscape. Halting, staccato camera movements retreat from the bedroom door. Shadows dance erratically on the night blue walls and we feel the fragile, unsustainable narrative coherence of the previous scene slip away and retreat into the intricate darkened narrative hallways that populate the film.

Much like the gramophone needle that began the film, the intermittent motion of this brief scene recalls a lineage of audio/ visual recording, specifically the stop-and-go quality of early film projection. Further, the dancing shadows of unseen figures may remind the viewer of cinematic projection's fundamental illusion: where light and shadow are interpreted as a referent the viewer is asked to identify with. Significantly, this moment marks Nikki's submergence into her fictional alter-ego, Susan, and, therefore, her inability to differentiate levels of reality.

Hallways though become a significant location throughout the film and operate as a space that offers entry into different portals for Nikki/ Susan. Much like in *Lost Highway*, where Fred Madison wandered through pitch-black hallways, Nikki's aimless travels through corridors visually convey stalled progress. In his analysis of *Lost*

Highway, Todd McGowan comments that “Lynch leaves the hallways completely dark”, which indicates “the void beneath the surface” (McGowan 157). For McGowan, the dark hallways are systematic of the underlying divide in both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*: desire and fantasy. Under his analysis, the drastically different aesthetic and narrative styles contained within both films is explained by this dichotomy. For instance, Fred’s world of frustrated desire is composed with minimal depth of field and “subdued lighting” whereas the world of his fantasized alter-ego, Pete, is characterized by “bright lighting [and] more colorful furniture and décor” (McGowan 157). McGowan explains that “fantasy acts a compensation for what the social reality doesn’t provide” (McGowan 155). It’s telling then that the fantasy worlds of Diane and Fred are shot more conventionally, mostly following the stylistic rules of Hollywood commercial cinema. Since “social reality doesn’t provide” a means to satisfy desire, Fred and Diane end up creating fantasies to create the illusion of plentitude. Yet, these fantasies ultimately prove to be inadequate “escapes” and both Fred and Diane end up returning to “the impossible object-cause of desire” (McGowan 155). The limitations of these characters’ fantasies can be seen as Lynch’s view of the drawbacks of commercial cinema as well, which relies on escapist principles and never allows viewers to sort through their own anxieties and frustrations.

Returning to the concept of the hallway, McGowan’s interpretation illustrates how hallway spaces operate differently in *Inland Empire*. The “void” of hallways in *Lost Highway* conveys Fred’s frustrated desire and resultant sense of emptiness (McGowan 156). Yet, in *Inland Empire*, hallways operate to connect fragments of the narrative that are not yet fully formed into narrative coherence. For instance, shortly after the narrative

fissure established by the sex scene, Nikki wanders through various rooms in a dark hallway. The first is a bedroom where a red lamp with a green, rectangular base freezes her gaze. She stares at the lamp with foreboding recognition. Suddenly, we see the edge of a green ruffled dress depart through an ornate doorway. The image fades into Piotrek, who eases himself into bed and shuts off his bedside lamp. The click of the lamp propels us back to the hallway where Nikki enters a room bathed in red by a crimson-shaded lamp. A reverberated heartbeat pulsates on the soundtrack so softly that it works more to accentuate the unsettling silence than register as adrenaline-pumped tension. Staring at the lamp, Nikki's red-saturated face weeps. A flashlight-like glow emerges from the lamp and illuminates Nikki's eye. When we return to the lamp, Billy's stern face, in the same white linen suit as he wore in *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, emerges in superimposition. The lamp flickers spastically and clipped digital glitch noises invade the eerily quiet soundtrack. A shaky pull out from a bare bulb mounted on the wall reveals a chorus of prostitutes. The glow of a flashlight floats through the room and caresses each woman's heavily made-up face as way of introduction.

In one sense, the hallway becomes a literal representation of the barriers blocking these image or scene fragments from coalescing with other areas of Nikki's consciousness. Although Nikki's furtive and often uneasy looks ascribe these images with some unnamed significance, they disarm the viewer with their distinct lack of referential value and narrative coherence. Yet, the prevailing darkness is not "emptiness" as in *Lost Highway* since it has the fertile ability to produce new terrors. Interpreted under McGowan's binary of desire and fantasy, these mysterious images of Piotrek, strange lamps, and a coterie of prostitutes could be reminders of Nikki's frustrated desire. As

such, they disrupt her fantasy of being an actress regaled with a critically and commercially promising comeback role. This interpretation could be supported by Nikki's distressed reactions, which seem to remind her of a repressed trauma. Still, McGowan's thematic framework of desire and fantasy proves to be frustratingly limited and, when applied to *Inland Empire*, leaves large sections of the film naggingly unexplained.

Light the Way: the Capacity of Light and Thwarted Visibility

Yet, perhaps the easiest place to start in approaching what I see as *Inland Empire*'s unique, scattered, and numerous thematic concerns is a simple, reoccurring motif that unifies the film: the quality of light. There's a diverse variation on Lynch's "light" motif: in this sequence, we are exposed to actual lamps, bare light bulbs, and the round, concentric circles of a flashlight beam. Each shapes figures that lurk in the darkness and momentarily bring them into visual clarity. So too, we are often introduced to different narrative settings through its distinct light source. Yellow street lamps under a sepia clouded sky announce the early twentieth century Poland of 47. Later, abstract colored lights reminiscent of L.A. traffic will help usher in the streets of the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The ultimate image of light though is the one that absorbs Nikki in its blinding, transcending embrace at the end of the film: the light emitted from a projection booth.

In many ways the digital medium has allowed Lynch to meditate on the cultural and historical significance of the cinematic image. Particularly, he is concerned with the arresting power of the image on the spectator and, superficially, the recurring lights that pierce the film at various moments can all be viewed as not only the light emitted by a

projector but, also, the light necessary to illuminate a scene and make image capture possible, rescuing it from the darkness that haunts much of the film. Lynch therefore expands upon his reflections of audio/visual recording technologies by showcasing how the cinematic camera perceives and records the world through gradations of light.

Literally, that final image turns us physically away from the silver screen and asks us to consider the technical apparatus. So too, the use of low light sources like lamps and street lamps and the low resolution of the digital footage make the action difficult to perceive. In a 2006 interview, David Lynch commented on the visual style created by the PD150:

The quality reminds me of the films of the 1930's. In the early days, the emulsion wasn't so good, so there was less information on the screen. The Sony PD result is a bit like that; it's nowhere near high-def. And sometimes, in a frame, if there's some question about what you're seeing, or some dark corner, the mind can go dreaming. If everything is crystal clear in that frame, that's what it is—that's *all* it is.

This quote not only indirectly corroborates the fecundity of the darkness in the hallways scenes, but suggests a reflective attitude on cinema as a whole. Lev Manovich's *Language of New Media* also uses digital as a catalyst for a discussion of the cinematic image and one can see many parallels in their renewed consideration of the medium. As with Lynch, digital forces Manovich to re-consider many of the formative properties that led to the cinematic image. Rather than foregrounding the communal experience of Classical movie-going, Manovich dwells on its origins, using the example of Kircher's *Ars magna Lucis et umbrae* (Rome, 1649), to create the image of a solitary viewer who

willingly “imprison[s]” herself in a “dark chamber” (camera obscura) to see the earliest proto-cinematic images (Manovich 106). Lynch mirrors this consideration when a chorus of prostitutes ask Nikki if she “want[s] to see?” and instruct her to burn a hole through silk and “look through the hole.” When she later does so, a beam of light projects onto her eye and she is transported to the snowy streets of Poland, where scratchy noises of an aged celluloid print once again recall a technological lineage in which digital is only the most recent incarnation. Further though, the scratching of a old celluloid print aurally rhymes with the digital glitch noises in its showcasing of the limitations of these two different mediums: both distort their representations of the world in different ways. The use of sepia tone in the Polish scenes approximates the warmth of 35mm filmmaking, specifically the emulsions of 1930’s filmmaking that Lynch finds so bewitching, while the blown out highlights and erratic digital noise convey the PD150’s own distinct visual textures. As Kristin Jones points out, Lynch’s “digital world approaches the paintings’ impossible spaces, exaggerated figures, murky tones.” (Jones) The unique, painterly textures of the digital medium avoid the “crystal clear” nature of 35mm or High Definition video, which allow the image to exist in the spectator’s mind as well as on the screen.

Also though, the hole in the silk self-reflexively recalls early cinematic inventions like Thomas Edison’s Kinetograph, which required spectators to look through a small hole to be visually transported to a new visual dimension. The darkness of the hallways also resonates with the low light levels of the Cineplex, which allow viewers to forget their immediate surroundings and be transported to an alternate, imaginative realm. Yet, the dark corridors directly recall cinema’s primitive, early history, which was ruled by

avant-garde experimentation and not tied to Classical narrative and stylistic rules. New media's affinity with the avant-garde is one of Manovich's founding principles, noting that the "cinema becomes a particular branch of painting....Computer media return to us the repressed of the cinema." (Manovich 308). For Manovich, as theorist Allister Mactaggart illuminates, this means that "once marginalized and specialized technical devices, as well as aesthetic and political oppositional approaches, have now come (unconsciously for most users) into the mainstream" (Mactaggart 144). *Inland Empire* cannot be considered a "mainstream" production, but it does bring the "unconscious" incorporation of "oppositional" aesthetics to the forefront by utilizing low-grade digital footage. Further though, this gives the viewer the opportunity to break away from traditional passive viewership and concentrate on the aesthetic and material aspect of the digital image, making the spectator's identification with the screen a conscious and sometimes distancing factor when watching the film.

Appropriately then, this early hallway scene represents a state of dreamlike gestation, where ideas and images exist as fragments, half-formed and unrestrained by the logic of classical narration. This seems appropriate for a film that is constantly reflecting back on a time of poor, blurry emulsions and primitive spectatorial practices. By freeing himself from the ingrained aesthetic and narrative assumptions of modern filmmaking, Lynch is also able to defamiliarize his viewer from the ideological assumptions of the cinematic apparatus. Once again though, although this distances the viewer from a conventional identification with the image, it also reflects Nikki/ Susan's confused mindset as images of Piotrek, foreboding lamps, and a Greek chorus of prostitutes appear without any narrative context or stabilizing referential value.

Screens and the Lost Girl

Lynch seems fascinated by the variety of screens through which viewers can access entertainment. Periodically, we see a lone brunette woman (identified as the Lost Girl) watching the film on a television set. Perched on the edge of her bed, she is often overwhelmed with emotion and transfixed by the image. Once again, this resonates with Manovich's discussion of the body and screen. He notes that with the "classical screen" (which includes both cinema and television), the "actual physical reality is disregarded, dismissed, abandoned" as the viewer forgets their physical body and is absorbed by the action onscreen (Manovich 113). Throughout, Lynch views this classical relationship of body to screen as a threat. Much as his protagonists in previous films turned to self-created fantasies that repressed psychological trauma, the Lost Girl is a "prisoner" (to use Manovich's terminology) of the screen, forgetting her true physical and psychological state. Nikki suffers from a similar dilemma: losing herself in a mise-en-abyme of fictional personas where she is unable to discern what's performance and what's reality. Taken literally, Lynch almost seems to suggest that there's a risk of losing a grounded sense of self and emerging from the Cineplex with a collection of ideological values and behavioral notions that will forever influence one's inborn personality.

Narratively, Allister Mactaggart has suggested that the Lost Girl is the character whose consciousness the main body of the film (and the character of Nikki/ Susan) derives from (Mactaggart). Since we see her as a prostitute early in the film, Nikki's quest is seen as the Lost Girl's fantasy to deal with her depression and family troubles. We repeatedly return to her in the hotel room, overwhelmed with tears, as she watches Nikki/ Susan's voyage to higher consciousness. Perhaps, by identifying with Nikki's

character, she is able to cathartically reflect on her personal dilemmas. This is certainly supported by an ending sequence when, finally liberated from Nikki's transcendence, she returns to the embrace of her husband and child. Yet, I ultimately think this theory simplifies Lynch's reflection on the spectator's relationship to the screen too much. Throughout, I will offer a more nuanced interpretation that allows Nikki to maintain an identity independent of the Lost Girl. Rather than locating the Lost Girl as the origin consciousness of the entire narrative (the way Diane and Fred operate), I think her role is a more abstract reflection on how viewers interact with the cinematic image and what ideology is communicated to them in this passive state.

The Phantom and the Ideological Residue of Film-going

The idea that the cinema is a type of dreamlike sleep where the viewer is made vulnerable to the tampering of foreign ideology is hinted at by the Phantom, who reoccurs throughout the narrative. Before we are introduced to Nikki, there is a mysterious conversation between the Phantom and a bald Polish gentleman. The Phantom is nervously perched at the edge of his seat as the calm, cross-legged man on the couch states the Phantom's needs: he is "looking to go in" through an "opening." The Phantom anxiously rises and stands over the aloof gentlemen, exclaiming that these indeed are his desires.

The elusive scene of negotiation is rendered nearly indecipherable by the abstract dialogue and larger questions about why the lines are spoken in Polish or where the ornate, gold-decorated room is. Yet, in keeping with the film's thematic discourse on the ideological ramifications of cinema on the viewer and what cultural forces process and disseminate this information, I will interpret this scene as a variation on a Hollywood

pitch scene, rendered strange and foreign by the use of Polish, abstract dialogue, and the ostentatious setting. What makes the scene so cryptic is that Lynch avoids explicitly showing a filmmaker persuading financial backers to bank his creative idea. Instead, he presents the subtext: the true desire/ intention of the cinematic artist. What he's truly looking for is an "opening" into the mind of the spectator, to powerfully transport them to a fantastical narrative. The scene therefore might exhibit a fear of film's power to ideologically contaminate or influence the viewer as the Phantom seems to search for the spectator's vulnerable point of entry. The suggestion of forced entry into a spectator's consciousness foreshadows the Phantom's role as an uninvited guest directing and influencing Nikki's thoughts. Although the Phantom's exact allegorical significance is somewhat ambiguous, he seems to represent the ideological residue of a film viewing: the ideas and influence a film can potentially implant in a viewer's subconscious. This outside influence is here viewed as a threat, a psychological violation that compromises how a viewer will comprehend and interpret her physical world.

Yet, the scene qualifies the Phantom's seeming all-encompassing power, which will haunt the rest of the film, by portraying him as in desperate need of the man's (a producer figure) approval. Tellingly, the producer is twice reduced to an abstract blur as the camera goes out of focus. His lack of visual representation may allude to the power of the producer to choose what stories will reach a public audience by providing financial backing yet remain behind the scenes as a production coordinator and financier who does not traditionally play a role in the diegesis. As the Marilyn Levens Starlight Celebrity Show will later testify to, the popular media is often centered on star gossip rather than deeper reflections on the cultural forces determining what narratives are sold to viewers.

Further, the baroque decoration of the room, which is suggested to be the producer's environment both by his comfort level and his centered placement in the frame, creates the impression that he is of an elite class of long-held customs.

Although this interpretation of the scene may initially seem unfounded, it is supported by a key later development in the narrative. At an early table reading, director Ben Kingsley communicates a startling revelation to Nikki and Devon:

Ben Kingsley: Information is indispensable. You probably know this from your own lives. We all have people that gather: agents, friends, producers. And sometimes they share, sometimes not. Politics, ego, fear. Sometimes one just isn't told the whole story. *On High in Blue Tomorrows* is in fact a remake....The original was of a different name, started but was never finished. Now, Freddie has found out that our producers know the history of this film and have taken it upon themselves not to pass on that information to us, purposefully. Anyway, the film was never finished. Something happened before the film was finished....Well, after the characters had been filming for some time, they discovered something inside the story....The two leads were murdered. It was based on a Polish, gypsy folk tale. The title in German was *Vier-Sieben, 4-7*. And it was said to be cursed. And so it turned out to be.

This short speech from Kingsley indirectly speaks to Lynch's commentary on the ideological forces "inside" popular narratives. Yet, upon first glance, Kingsley's speech about a "gypsy folk tale" may have a distancing effect upon the first-time viewer, The blend of cultural heritages (Polish, gypsy, and German) somewhat negates any historical

specificity and the use of the word “cursed” gives the legend a mystical, other-worldly vibe that underplays its contemporary resonance.

Yet, although coated in predictable, generically motivated language, Kingsley’s spooky speech gives many hints at Lynch’s larger agenda. Rather than being dogged by a specific infidelity and murder, Nikki is “cursed” by an ancient narrative that threatens to entrap her. Further, her fate is kept certain because the film’s producers withhold key “information” from her “purposefully”. As Anna Katharina Schaffer points out in her article “Fantasmatic Splittings and Destructive Desires”, “*Inland Empire* is essentially about a woman’s struggle to liberate herself from cultural roles and fantasmatic projections imposed on her” (Schaffner 284). The societal mechanisms that impose these “cultural roles” on Nikki are never made as explicit as they are here: where producers, stand-ins for any cultural disseminator of gender myths and behavioral expectations, consciously deceive Nikki into repeating an age-old cultural archetype. Further, Lynch may be making a criticism of mainstream cinema in general: suggesting that, consciously or not, most films are “remakes” that repeat tired social narratives that propagate the same subjugated roles for female viewers. As Mactaggart notes, “Lynch’s films feed back to the Hollywood mainstream the (unpalatable) lesson of its own history as a plaintiff eulogy from the perspective of troubled and damaged female characters” (Mactaggart 144). Here, Lynch seems to be criticizing the tired predictability of Hollywood mainstream cinema, which, consciously or not, remakes the same film over and over again without bothering to look “inside” to consider its regressive ideology.

In this context, producers are the elite force that limits narrative to simply reaffirming the status quo. Women then are prevented from seeking agency or

empowerment because they are not allowed to see “inside” the narratives that cultural mythmakers provide for them.

Kingsley struggles to find motivation behind the producers’ deception: “politics, ego, fear.” These sketchy explanations cryptically point towards larger socio-political imperatives that led to the slanting of entertainment towards familiar submissive representations. Yet, Lynch never didactically (and some would argue, coherently) attempts to explain these more abstract ideological inter-workings, instead opting to portray Nikki’s many attempts to “free herself from a man-centered narrative” (Schaffner 285). Still, the early pitch scene persuasively argues that producers are motivated by their desire to maintain their empowered, distinctly patriarchal, ruling order.

The Phantom’s Controlling Gaze

Although he occupies several distinct personas throughout the film, a revealing moment for the Phantom’s allegorical significance is found in one of Susan’s brutal confessions. Throughout the film, we return to a bruised and battered Susan sitting in a dark, drab office space across from a disinterested, bespectacled man. In coarse, expletive-soaked language, she tells story-after-story of misogynistic violence and her own brutal retaliation. While speaking about how her lover (Piotrek again) left her to join the circus in “some Eastern Europe shithole”, she gives an account of the bizarre, hypnotic powers of a man called the ‘Phantom’:

Susan: He’d start talking, you know, real regular. Talking up the crowd. They’d start listening, pushing in closer. He did some sort of thing on people. They all called him the ‘Phantom’.

Her dialogue is punctuated with a superimposition of the Phantom, a sly smile on his face as he stares screen left. Assumedly the object of his gaze, we see a group of men emerge from the darkness around a red-stripped circus tent. An anxious Piotrek rubs the muzzle of his horse as he looks at the same, foreboding sight.

The brief tableau portrays the Phantom's uncanny ability to manipulate people as he materializes a group of men that seem to threaten Piotrek's safety. The persistence of her superimposed face makes the viewpoint of the entire sequence ambiguous. It is unclear whether these images emanate from Susan's own memories or if they are presented by a narrator outside the diegesis. This destabilizes the viewer's assumptions about whose subjectivity we are viewing the events through. Since this three-shot sequence is not narratively explained by Susan, we might assume it to be outside her character's knowledge. Even so, it substantiates Susan's words by visually corroborating her vague explanation of the Phantom's effect on crowds by showing us an instance of his menacing power. Yet, it also hints that the Phantom had a specific threatening influence on Piotrek and, by extension, suggests a darker force dictating Piotrek's actions.

His hypnotic command over Piotrek here, who seems wide-eyed and stunned, may superficially explain Piotrek's bizarre vacant stare and fixed smile in a previous scene where he announced his intentions to join "a travelling circus" due to his "way with animals." Susan's bewildered response to Piotrek's statement ("What's that got to do with you?") forefronts his bizarre, out-of-character behavior. Further, his stilted dialogue and fixed, unnatural stare seem to be the behavior of a hypnotized man, under the mental command of forces beyond his control. Since Piotrek's abandonment of Susan seems to

have been a direct catalyst to her hardened, battered persona in the office scenes, this brief superimposition further suggest the Phantom's role as an unseen presence manipulating and guiding the action. Further, the superimposition literally reveals his visage as lurking beneath her image, invading her thoughts without her knowledge. The ambiguity of the superimposition problematizes character agency as well as point-of-view, raising the question of what outside forces are motivating Nikki/ Susan's actions.

The Phantom's threat to Piotrek is implied in the previous barbeque sequence by a large ketchup stain that sullies his shirt. In both shape and splatter formation, the ketchup distinctly resembles a bloody wound. Further, a group of Polish men lingering in the background foreshadow the threatening hoodlums that emerge from the darkness in the proceeding flashback. Much like the loud cawing of crows on the soundtrack, these men are a predatory force waiting to swoop down and prey upon Piotrek. Significantly, this sequence suggests that Piotrek is also endangered by the curse of infidelity and murder that circulates throughout the narrative. The bloody wound resembles the torso injuries inflicted upon Nikki/ Susan and the woman in the Polish narrative, suggesting that although women are often forefronted as the victims of the curse, the tale of infidelity that absorbs all levels of narration reconfigures and fragments the identity of unsuspecting male characters as well.

The Curse Lurking Unseen

The bleached white glow of a Los Angeles city lamppost lingers over Susan's windshield as she races into town. She pulls up to a Los Angeles mansion and her high heels creak as she heads towards a backdoor. As the slam of the door echoes on the soundtrack, there is a brief cut to a switchboard where red and green lights blink in alarm.

A jerky, handheld camera ascends the steps. Susan's stilettos stomp loud on the soundtrack. She pants hysterically.

The disembodied camera is typical of the film's erratic freedom of camera perspective. Hovering just a few inches above the steps, the placement is much too low to be confused with Susan's POV. Instead, the jerks and erratic handheld motion mirror Susan's panicked hysteria and frantic single-minded determination to reach the top of the stairs, but without explicitly adopting her viewpoint. In this way, Lynch makes the physical presence of the camera conspicuous instead of diegetically motivating its aberrant perspective and motion as the POV of Susan. Yet, by contrast, a subsequent handheld shot seconds later travelling through the opulent entrance way of Billy's home is at the right height to be interpreted as Susan's POV. The close proximity of the two handheld shots subtly makes the viewer question the integrity of the POV though and continues Lynch's strategy of distancing the viewer from a classical identification with the camera.

Billy's wife, Doris Side, and her child lounge in their parlor. We hear brief snippets of their conversation about 'school', cementing the domestic nature of the scene. Susan enters, looking lost as she stands in the doorway. The camera swoops in until her baffled face, her mouth hanging agape helplessly, fills the frame. The handheld quality of the push-in continues to give the camera an embodied presence, rejecting the transparency of a smooth dolly-in. Yet, although baring the device, the anxious move in echoes Susan's paralyzed sense of shock at seeing Doris. This illuminates the film's paradoxical strategy of distancing the viewer by self-reflexively forefronting aesthetics while simultaneously immersing the viewer in Nikki/ Susan's subjectivity. McGowan

believes that the preoccupation that unifies all of Lynch's films is their ability to "break down the distance between spectator and screen" and thereby "implicate the spectator in their very structure" (McGowan 2). Although McGowan was chiefly addressing Lynch's narrative strategies, this sequence exhibits how *Inland Empire* continues this strategies in its camerawork: forcing the spectator into an active role by problematizing assumed POVs and erratically shifting the tone of the scene.

"Susan? What are you doing here?" Doris asks with the concern of an old friend. The camera lingers, instilling a sense of stilted silence as both women struggle to overcome the abruptness of the encounter.

"What? I thought you were gone." Dern reads these lines as if she's just woken up, with a slow utterance that gropes at each word searching for meaning. As the camera advances in to an extreme close up, her image betrays a softness and lack of focus, reflecting her psychic instability and her vain attempts to make sense of her surroundings.

Billy barges into the parlor with urgency, his white linen suit perfectly pressed. In contrast to the way the camera lingers and slowly approaches both Susan and Doris, Billy walks into his tight framing. He therefore immediately takes commands over the frame and harnesses the erratic handheld motion into near submission. After Billy's entrance, Doris' framing is also much more stable, signaling the shift from the two women's allied empathy and confusion toward the couple's united confrontation against Susan, whose hysteria is signaled by a persistent softness of focus and increasingly erratic handheld camerawork.

Susan breathes heavily and warns him, “Something’s wrong. Bad wrong. You feel it?” There’s a moment of strained silence as Doris looks to her husband to reconcile the situation.

“Sue”, he admonishes.

“Billy, do you love me?” Susan timidly asks him breathlessly. A slight glint in Susan’s eye suggests barely suppressed tears.

“What?” Doris exclaims in outrage, turning to Billy for an explanation.

Billy gives his wife a stern look, tacitly warning her against directing her vexation towards him. His authority within the scene is reaffirmed by the slight high angle of his shots. Doris and Susan, by comparison, are captured in low angles, giving their emotional volatility a monstrous quality as their images loom over the viewer.

“Billy, don’t you remember anything? How it was?” In a conciliatory, slightly condescending voice, Billy tells her to “go along now.” Outraged, Billy’s wife barges towards Susan and slaps her violently. The blocking further illuminates the power dynamics of the scene. Throughout, only Billy and Doris are permitted to move in the space and both of these actions work to assault Susan, either verbally or physically.

At each loud wallop, Susan once again professes her love for Billy. Tellingly, Susan begins jutting out her chin to the side, distorting her features into the same grotesque facial mannerisms that will later distinguish her battered woman persona. Her hair becomes a disarrayed nest of tangles that partially cover her eyes. She breathes heavily and her image softens, furthering distorting her features into a warped and misshapen visage that seems savage and vehement. Her chin quivers and her Southern accent weakens as she breathily states, “I don’t care. It’s something more.” A stunned

look of fright overwhelms Doris as her image dissolves into her visage from an earlier interrogation scene, where she claimed to be hypnotized into murder.

A ragged-looking Phantom appears: glassy-eyed and manic. His teeth glisten in his grubby, mischievous smile. He waves his finger in front of the camera and directs our gaze screen left.

We transition once more to the murdered woman from the Polish narrative, blood dripping from her mouth and a wound in her side. The camera looms over her, caressing her gored corpse. There's a superimposition back to Doris' worried stare as the blood of the murdered woman gleams underneath her image. The superimposed image creates a striking composite: the blood seems to flow from Doris' mouth. The illusion of a wounded Doris visually reminds the viewer of her actual injury that closes the earlier interrogation scene: a screwdriver lodged in her side. Therefore, the three women's shared fatal injuries (Doris, the Polish woman, and soon Nikki/ Susan herself) link them as mutual victims of the 'curse'.

The Phantom's grubby finger sways across the screen as a nonsense gibberish incantation escapes his lips, as if he were putting both these women and the audience under a spell.

With his hoarse, glottal noises still prominent on the soundtrack, we return to a now soft image of Billy, who stares at Susan in shock. This moment of traumatic, but cryptic, epiphany ends with a disorienting dolly zoom on Susan, creating a perspective distortion that tears Susan from her surrounding. The camera movement succinctly sums up the unsettling effect of the sequence, creating a rupture in the unity of the characters' identity and their sense of agency over their actions.

Susan's repeated warning that something's "wrong" and there's "more" to this plot of melodramatic infidelity than meets the eye once again recalls Kingsley's notion of looking "inside" a narrative for its painful secrets. Her frantic pleas and unstable shifting between her Nikki and Susan personas unleashes a disquieting moment of recognition in Billy's wife, Doris Side, who recalls being interrogated for killing a woman. Less than twenty minutes later, Doris fulfills this prophecy by stabbing Susan on the streets of Inland Empire with a screwdriver. Superficially then, the curse of *On High in Blue Tomorrows* has come to fruition: the tale of infidelity and murder that wreaked havoc on its original Polish stars has also claimed the lives of the film's new stars, Devon and Nikki, who have similarly become entangled in the gypsy curse and lost their agency as their identities became overtaken by their characters.

Billy, much like in the earlier sex scene, is secure and unified in his persona, never allowing the fictional 'Billy Side' to bleed into or influence his real self, Devon Banks. The scene clarifies that the curse of infidelity and murder only offers its female victims the possibility to understand their predestined fate. Devon and Kingsley may have information withheld from them, but, at best, they remain oblivious hosts.

Instead, the 'curse' operates to turn Susan and Doris violently against each other, a riff that contrasts the close-knit female community of the prostitutes that is weaved throughout the narrative. Although their vulgar language and skimpy outfits characterize these women, they continually offer emotional support to one another. Their unity is epitomized by a scene where they join in a song-and-dance rendition of "Locomotion". Throughout as well, they offer advice and guidance to Nikki/ Susan, helping her to reach the 'palace' of transcendence and enlightenment. As prostitutes, they are outside the

societal expectations and confines of marriage that form the backbone of the “curse.” Therefore, they operate as a positive alternative to the endless circular narrative of betrayal, infidelity, and murder.

Although Doris is motivated by jealousy, Susan transforms into the grotesque battered woman out of “love.” Throughout the scene she pleads with Billy, begging for him to profess his ‘love’ and abandon the societal constraints of marriage that confine them. As exhibited by the earlier sex scene though, her desire for ‘love’ is more a need for self-definition and security, something she foolishly looks to Billy to supply. Lynch therefore hints at the ugly ideological underbelly of tales of infidelity and murder for women: behind the lure of sexual liaisons, the woman tacitly develops an emotional and psychic dependency on the man. Susan’s belief that Billy will defend and support her destroys the possibility of an empowering, homosocial bond with Doris.

Even though Doris and Susan are offered a glimpse of the legacy of destructive behavior through the brief image of the gored body of the Polish woman, they seem powerless to alter the predestined chain of events. Further, Doris is given a premonition of her anguished self after she has attacked Susan. Yet, despite this insight, both Doris and Susan’s fate remains certain and they are trapped under the influence of the Phantom. Once again, the subjugation of these characters can be related to Lynch’s condemnation of the passivity of traditional viewership, which leaves the spectator vulnerable to socially regressive ideology.

Still, by being absorbed in investigating and solving the mystery of the “gypsy curse”, which Lynch encourages by constantly parading cryptic clues, the viewer neglects peering “inside” the narrative and reflecting on what ideological motivations the

“producers” had in concealing “information” from Nikki and Devon, thereby ensuring that they would repeat this destructive behavior. Yet, even while he teases the viewer with a familiar investigative mode of viewership, the mystery of the Curse and the foreboding presence of the Phantom will ultimately have more far-reaching implications than simple elements of a mystery. Indeed, by encouraging this familiar model of genre viewership, Lynch draws the viewer into a potentially distancing, unconventional narrative and guarantees the thematic resonance of Nikki’s final confrontation with the Phantom. This prevents the film from simply turning into a didactic message on the ideological implications of film viewership.

The Artifice of Narrative and the Breakdown of the Digital Apparatus

At a long dining room table, two elderly men and a frazzled, grieving Lost Girl sit in strained silence. A red lamp glows above her. Piotrek, Nikki’s husband, is backed into the room and is immediately interrogated about whether he recognizes the Lost Girl. He quickly glances down at the table, but she is invisible to him. He is told she summoned him, but the grieved woman mutters that she doesn’t even know where she is. He is vaguely asked if he works for “someone” and, when he confirms that he does, he is handed a pistol and told to rush, as it is already "after midnight." After leaving, the Lost Girl dissolves in the center of the table. The two elderly men change their seating and there is a match-dissolve to the Rabbits in the same blocking.

This cryptic sequence illustrates *Inland Empire*’s dreamlike fluidity, where the different planes continually overlap and dissolve into one another, problematizing any attempt to dissect the film into distinct, bisecting narratives. For instance, the crackling of an old celluloid print pervades this scene. As Dominic Power points out in his review in

The Soundtrack, this “faint celluloid hiss” usually operates within the film as a “clue that we may be watching fragments of the original film that survived the gypsy curse” (Power 53). Indeed, at first, the cryptic Polish sections of the film, set in the 20’s or 30’s, seem to be re-telling the story of unfaithful spouses that had cursed the original Polish production, 47, yet here the Lost Girl and Piotrek illogically invade this dimension. Much like the sex scene, this creates the disorienting feeling of fragility and overt construction that defies narrative logic. The obvious vagueness of character motivations is forefronted: Piotrek simply works for “someone”, the unexplained urgency of it being “after midnight”, and the unspecified errand with the pistol all tear away expectations of a goal-oriented scene with unified time and space. A phrase like “after midnight” may carry a dreamlike déjà vu for the viewer due to its repetition throughout the film, but is never prescribed any clear narrative meaning. Instead, much like the sex scene, this brief moment bares its incoherence so blatantly that it signals another failure at narrative compartmentalization (or psychological compartmentalization for Nikki).

This scene, therefore, may seem ripe for applying McGowan’s desire/ fantasy dichotomy. As with the Club Silencio sequence in *Mulholland Drive*, the prevailing narratives up to this point can be viewed as the subjective renderings of a repressed mind, trying frantically to build up a fantasy world where recognition of the character’s traumatic transgression can be avoided. *Inland Empire* differs from the narrative framework of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* though in that the act of transgression is never made clear. There is the curse of infidelity and subsequent murder that ripples through all levels of the narrative. Yet, these actions seem predestined and outside the individual agency of any of Nikki’s fragmented personas. This is most blatant when the

curse of the original production of *On High in Blue Tomorrows* is revealed: not only is *Tomorrows* a tale of infidelity and murder, but anyone who stars in it are doomed to repeat this tragic pattern of behavior. Nikki is trapped in a narrative tradition and any hope of liberation and empowerment is robbed from her by deceptive producers, who control information and forbid her from seeing “inside” narratives designed to preserve a history of ignorance and disenfranchisement.

Still, this scene exhibits Nikki’s successful journey to reclaim her agency and see the constructed nature of the narrative. At first glance, the scene is an incoherent collage of borrowed narrative motifs and subjects: Piotrek has morphed into some kind of Polish assassin (assumedly) and the mysterious Polish elder men are brought together inorganically. The Lost Girl who “summoned” him but struggles to be seen is another puzzler. Yet, this can easily be placed in poetic conversation with Nikki’s desire to be seen and, therefore defined, by the male gaze in the earlier sex scene. Just as Nikki pleaded for Billy to “look” at her, desiring for him to identify who she is and therefore alleviate her frantic mind, Piotrek is asked if he recognizes the grieving woman at the head of the table. Her agency is robbed from her as the Polish elder men transcribe her desires. Seen in continuum with Nikki in the earlier scene then, the Lost Girl has been deprived of even the ability to request to be “looked” at and her lack of depth has become transparent. Her hologram-like transparency resembles the projected image and, therefore, once again reminds the viewer of the illusion inherent in the cinematic image. Since the Lost Girl is usually confined to her role as a “viewer”, this scene may convey the viewer’s unsuccessful attempt to engage and interact with the diegesis of a classical

narrative. The flickering could imply that her identification with the screen is feigning and that she is being dragged back to her physical body inside the hotel room.

Further, Nikki and the Lost Girl's shared desire to be defined by the "look" exhibits their mutual dependency on male authority figures. The scene therefore may suggest the interchangeability of Nikki and the Lost Girl or, at the very least, signal their joint quest for transcendence from the curse.

The elder men's stiff repositioning to match the blocking of the rabbits forces the viewer to draw comparisons between two drastically different scenes. Typical of Lynch, the rabbits' enigmatic sayings can be interpreted as clues. By resonating with the cryptic passages seen so far in the film, these clues engage the viewer by placing them in the role of the investigator of a mystery: "It was red", "Where was I?", "This isn't the way it was". These statements also echo the confusion of both the Lost Girl in the previous scene and Nikki/ Susan throughout. Halfway through the scene, the rabbits' living room falls dark, emanating an eerie red glow. The suited rabbit stands and, in a heavily digitally altered voice, announces: "It was the man in the green coat". We also hear, "It had something to do with the telling of time" over the drab, red-tinted image of a window. The theatrical shift in lighting echoes Lynch's use of lightning flashes and non-diegetic, rippling blue light in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* to convey a shift inward into a character's psyche. The rabbits' dialogue encourages this as we move away from apprehensive confusion ("This isn't the way it was") to a concrete clue to the traumatic act ("It was the man in the green coat"). Significantly though, it is the male, suited rabbit that supplies this hint, making the veracity of the evidence somewhat suspect. As most male characters within the film have used stories of infidelity and

murder as a smokescreen to mask the disenfranchisement of women, the “man in the green coat”, which is just tangible enough to pique the viewer’s interest and revert them to the mindset of an Agatha Christie mystery, could be no more than a red herring that distracts the viewer from seeing “inside” the ideological agenda of the text. The other statements simply echo the general surmises the viewer would have come to on their own by this point in the film: the “passage of time” is significant (as shown by the frequent mention of “after midnight”), there’s a reoccurring “red” lamp, and a general feel of displacement and unreality.

A flash of lightning brings Nikki center-stage, rain pouring down voraciously behind her. Sitting on a porch, she has a quizzical look of stunned trepidation frozen on her face. She stares ahead and, as if to meet her gaze, a sudden cut takes us to a darkened living room. Quick flashes of lightning uncover the baby pink walls, which match the bathrobe and slippers of Nikki, who sits petrified in an auburn chair that juts out from the flat, boxy set. Her arms are laden helplessly at her sides. Suddenly, abstract, out-of-focus colored lights begin flashing across Nikki’s face. Harsh, atonal screeching assaults the soundtrack as the camera becomes more frenetic, moving around Nikki in the pink room in pulsating, erratic movements. Nikki’s face is motionless: shocked and overwhelmed. Her visage bursts in and out of the frame in overpowering white flashes. Sharp, digital glitches invade the soundtrack as a red laser beam repeatedly attacks the robed Dern, who puts the pink fabric over her face for protection. The image jumps hysterically in staccato rhythms as every fiber of the film’s construction degrades: from the stability of Nikki’s mind to the already grainy, muddy digital image. All the while, we see the bleached white legs of the prostitutes dancing energetically in the background.

As a scene of identity rupture, this jarring moment is certainly more formally overt than the subtle wavering focus and pronounced digital gain of the earlier sex scene. Still, Lynch uses properties unique to his digital medium to portray this traumatic shattering of narrative boundaries. The flashes of light, already a motif utilized in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, are extremely effective due to the limited visual dynamic range of the Sony PD150, allowing large sections of the frame to be erased into bleached whites and depthless shadows. The lack of visual detail helps to make the frantic sequence more abstract and offers a visual equivalent for the gaping holes and inconsistencies building up in Nikki's consciousness. The motivation behind the rupture remains the same as Lynch's previous work though: as the various narrative threads grow strained, their artifice is revealed and glimpses of the traumatic revelation this narrative "fantasy" was designed to conceal begin to break through. This break has been foreshadowed by the ghostly grieved woman in the Polish scene and, more overtly, by the strained match-on-action of the Polish and rabbit sequence. As the various narrative realms *Inland Empire* has been juggling begin to overlap, superimpose, and bleed into one another, their integrity (the believability of their artifice) quickly dissolves.

What's striking though is Lynch's use of a combination of frenzied, piercing lights, spasmodic handheld camerawork, and multiple layers of superimposition. Whereas previously Lynch has maintained a relatively strict boundary between form and content, relying on the reversion of the filmic *mise-en-scene* to theatrical subjectivity, here the effect is created through turbulent montage and superimposition that drive the representative space of the image into abstraction. The fragility of the digital medium has been latent throughout as noticeable levels of gain, shifting focus, and murky images

have often made comprehending an image more an act of guesswork than simple observation. Lynch once again exploits this quality here by making almost no image stable and traditionally readable, transforming the scene into an abstract expression of Nikki's mental collapse that threatens to obliterate the brittle digital images as well as Nikki's shaky identity.

Nikki screams over the dense digital cacophony. Suddenly, the layers of superimposition dissolve away over a line of prostitutes on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. "Heeeellooooo", they yell playfully in unison and burst into mass laughter. A ratty Nikki stares back at the women. Her features are dark and worn and her hair is caught in lusterless tangles. The business suit she wears looks slept in. She could have been walking these streets for days. Matter-of-factly, she mutters, "I'm a whore" to herself. Then, embracing the prostitutes' carefree attitude, she exclaims, "Where am I? I'm a freak!" She whines these lines in an exaggerated style that derisively mocks both her previous sense of helpless displacement and the societal prejudice towards prostitutes. Her parodic reading seems to signal her acceptance of the fluid, non-lineal treatment of time and space. She seems to no longer view a question like "Where am I?" as a serious or meaningful inquiry. Further, rather than questioning her new identity, she seems resigned to her role as a "whore" and cheerfully acknowledges the large-scale revulsion towards her new status without feeling threatened by it. Nikki's attitude here shows a marked difference from the anguished hysteria and bewilderment that have arrested her thus far in the narrative.

This switch may initially be difficult to explain given that a mere few seconds previous Nikki was screaming in fright and splintering into multiple, equally tormented

identities. Yet, the film's self-reflexive breakdown and move towards increasingly artificial, narratively strained scenes provides important foreshadowing and context. Dern plays the scene with an arched sense of self-parody, as if her character both recognizes and relishes the challenge of the part she's been given. Yet, Nikki's sense of performativity should not be taken as a literal return to the 'Nikki-as-actress' identity that began the picture. Whereas the scenes of identity rupture outlined in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* saw protagonists traumatically creating or shedding imaginative alter-egos that did not share their guilt, this passage of formal and narrative disruption, by sharp contrast, ends with an ironic sense of distance. This can be attributed to Nikki's burgeoning self-awareness that these troubling personas are not a punishment for infidelity and murder, but instead the manifestations of socially-ingrained subjugation and prejudice that she must overcome.

Overcoming the Curse and Transcendence

Nikki finally confronts the Phantom in a climatic scene. Yet, there are a series of realizations that allow her to overcome this foreboding power.

Suffering from a fatal wound from Doris, Susan is left vomiting mouthfuls of blood on the glittering stars of Hollywood boulevard. Eventually, she hunches over on the pavement next to a few homeless people, ignominiously ignored as they have a seemingly inconsequential conversation about catching a bus to Pomona. Yet, as her face becomes overwhelmed with physical pain and fear of her oncoming death, a black homeless woman leans over her and ignites a lighter in front of her face. Susan stares down at it, her eyes sparkling in mourning at how quickly her own life will be extinguished.

“I show you light now,” the vagrant tells her, holding her head lovingly. “It burns bright forever. No more blue tomorrows. You on high now, love.” As the homeless woman removes her finger to stifle the flame, Susan’s expression eases, the tension in her mouth escapes, and her head falls to the pavement.

A slight smile rests on her deathly visage as the camera zooms out to a Panavision camera on a technocrane. Kingsley’s amplified voice yells, “Cut it! And print it!” A work light brightens the dark set and the vagrants rise and walk out of frame. Nikki remains still, sprawled out on the bloody sidewalk until, finally, she rises slowly in stiff movements, as if out of a deep slumber.

Kingsley and the crew applaud, but she ignores this and walks off set in trance-like movements. Silent, she barely seems aware of her surroundings. As Anna Schaffner insightfully points out, her indifference to Kingsley’s praise “indicates that her film-star desires have now been transcended” (Schaffner 285). She no longer seeks of the validation of a male authority, here Kingsley, and instead privileges the progression of her voyage to enlightenment and transcendence. Her dazed, seemingly oblivious behavior suggests an urgency to leave the film set and fall back into her murky subconscious.

Nikki’s desire to re-enter her deeper psyche, which was opened up to her through her Susan persona, exhibits her new informed sense of vision. Her voyage has allowed her to see beyond the superficial concerns of fame that motivated her at the start of the film as she saw “inside” to the roots and causes of public acclaim. She can look past the myth of stars and celebrities expounded by Marilyn Levens, the chatty talk show host who savored the same scandal and public debasement that forms the backbone of narratives like *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. Lynch envisions a consuming cycle of

narrative and reality where audiences feast on the downfalls of heroines whose beginning virtuosity quickly transforms into threatening callousness and debauchery that can only be resolved by an equally quick and inexplicable death. By forcing Nikki to re-live and embody this narrative in gruesome detail, Lynch may hope to distance the viewer from the narrative pleasure they typically enjoy from such tawdry, melodramatic fare. Further, by continually showcasing Nikki's bewilderment, Lynch successfully reveals the absurdity and lack of logic lurking beneath these narratives, exposing the stories about the 'fall' as socially regressive tales aimed at subjugating female audiences. With the literal death of her 'Susan' persona, Nikki is able to throw off the debased, hardened roles she has mistakenly felt personally guilty for.

Stunned by her bizarre behavior, Kingsley catches up to her, stares into her eyes unblinkingly, and informs her that she was "wonderful." He embraces her and her fisted arms dangle at his sides for an instant until she pries herself away and walks off without a word. Kingsley stares after her, his mouth agape in concern.

Nikki stands outside the behemoth studio doors. Her eyes wander searchingly over the studio lot. Her face still has the beaten and bruised molding of her Susan persona, but this battered visage has been revealed to be movie artifice: just a skillful make-up job. Still though, this rough appearance becomes the physical manifestation of the psychological bruises and beating she has undergone, much as the spasms and head trauma of Fred and Diane conveyed their damaged psyches.

She jerks her head to the side, staring just past camera. There's a sudden cut to the Lost Girl, who, teary-eyed, stares back at Nikki, whose image now resides inside her television screen. Since the two women are divided by a different space and time, the

eye-line match implies a more abstract identification between the two women. Although Lynch will literalize this eye-line match by allowing Nikki and the Lost Girl's space to dynamically interact, here the moment communicates Nikki's burgeoning awareness of the dynamic relationship of production and reception. Further, it prevents Nikki's anguished fusion with 'Susan' from simply being passed off as a narrative of an unstable actress getting lost inside her character. The Lost Girl, as a viewer overcome with emotion and transfixed to her television, allows Lynch to comment explicitly on film's ideological impact on viewers.

Nikki squints to see the Lost Girl clearly as if past the dense, opaque boundary of the screen. A faint light ignites in front of her and invites her to continue forward. Nikki wanders into an empty, cavernous auditorium and stares up at her own battered image in wide-eyed perplexity. When she looks back, her mirrored image has been replaced with one of her confessionals in the run-down office from earlier in the film. Her dialogue echoes through the theater: "I guess after my son died, I went into a bad time. I was watching everything go around me while I was standing in the middle. Watching it, like in a dark theater before they bring the lights up."

Her metaphor for paralyzing malaise suddenly adopts a literal meaning as a description of the inert position of the viewer while watching a film. Further though, the scene displays an emotional as well as a literal *mise-en-abyme*. Susan's description of helplessness and disengagement with everyday life can be seen as a hyperbolic metaphor for the temporary bodily and psychic amnesia that occurs when a viewer is transfixed by a classical narrative. The constant switching of the screen to either conveying Nikki's present, Susan's past, and even a brief moment in the future may convey Nikki's growing

awareness of the 'scripted' nature of her life and, therefore, the delusion of agency at any individual moment. Although she has escaped Susan's downward narrative trajectory, Nikki has begun to see that her own life is just as predetermined and qualified by ideological dictates and male authority figures. Her disregard for Kingsley's praise **was** a sign that she has transcended needing his approval and a positive indication that the male authorities in her life will no longer determine her actions. Yet, it also hints at her growing cognizance that she has internalized both his demands and the submissive willingness to comply deep within her subconscious.

Suddenly, the image cuts to a silhouetted man walking through the theater to a blue staircase. Nikki turns her head and sees the same sight: it is the bespectacled man who she spoke with in the beaten down office. He looks back at Nikki before ascending the stairs. She glances back at the screen and, once again, the image is mirrored. Lynch freely cuts between the projected image and the diegetic present within the theater, suggesting their interchangeability. His use of the screen to actively reflect Nikki's present tense resembles Manovich's notion of the "dynamic screen", where the "image can change in real time, reflecting changes in the referent" (Manovich 99). By reflecting one's immediate surroundings and "visible reality", the dynamic screen creates the potential for interaction between the viewer and the screen, altering the passivity of classical spectatorship. It does so by obstructing the "complete illusion" of the "classical screen", where "the viewer is expected to concentrate completely on what she sees in the window, focusing her attention on the representation and disregarding the physical space outside." (Manovich 96) By reflecting Nikki's "physical space", her surroundings and the representation conveyed by the screen merge. Although this has the potential to return

Nikki to her physical body, Lynch highlights the screen's continued goal of identification and therefore its potential to shape her perception of the world. As Manovich notes, the screen is "aggressive" in its capacity "to filter, to screen out, to take over, rendering nonexistent whatever is outside its frame." (Manovich 96) This is made clear when the screen briefly fast-forwards to Nikki approaching the rectangular lamp that was shown in the bedroom earlier in the film. Only a few minutes later, this glimpse into the future will be fulfilled. The dynamic screen, therefore, reveals its ability to condition a viewer into a fixed response and shape their future behavior. Although the nature of the screen has fundamentally changed, it continues to influence and predetermine Nikki's actions by controlling her vision.

She climbs the stairs and finds herself back in the rundown office. Her eyes wander past a ticking clock that reads twelve minutes past midnight towards a door, where "AXXON N." is scrawled prominently. She enters the dark hallway. The bedroom with the green, rectangular lamp reemerges. Nikki approaches the lamp and opens the top drawer of the cabinet. A look of wonder breaks upon her face as she sees a gun resting on top of green fabric. As her hand reaches for it, we see the letters "L.B." tattooed onto her hand with a red diagonal lined slashed through it.

Armed with the gun, Nikki returns to the hallway. Unlike her previous travels through these dark corridors, there's an initial image that spatially links several disparate locations. Shot through the open door of the rundown office, Nikki emerges in silhouette against the pink room. The composition therefore literalizes her journey through her subconscious as exploring different linked rooms. Unlike previously, where these rooms seemed to loom in the darkness, disconnected and without spatial linkage, they now lead

into each other in one cohesive structure. These previously compartmentalized psychic regions being more explicitly linked signal her progress through the ‘alleyway’ towards the ‘palace’ of enlightenment. Although Nikki’s movements are still measured and unsure, she comes prepared with a weapon, suggesting her awareness of a coming confrontation. The camera pans away from the illuminated pink room and dank office towards the pitch-black further recesses of the hallway where a dim blue glow alone silhouettes Nikki’s figure.

The crackling of an old celluloid print pervades the soundtrack as Nikki walks out of the darkness, her murky sepia tone image shifting in focus, signaling that we are once again in the world of *47*, the unfinished Polish production. Yet, Nikki’s entry into this cinematic space suggests a more ambiguous landscape than simple lost dailies of a never-completed production. Instead, Nikki enters into the origin of the ideology of degradation that she has previously suffered for. The celluloid hiss demarcates this place as distinctly analogue, suggesting that digital, by contrast, has the revolutionary potential to change the oppressive and regressive nature of film. As Sinnerbrink notes, “the creative bankruptcy of Hollywood, its sterile repetition of ‘cursed’ stories, its unacknowledged debt to the past, needs to be overcome...for a new way of telling stories to be possible.” (Sinnerbrink 150) Yet, while Sinnerbrink eloquently captures Lynch’s critical attitude to commercial cinema, he ignores the dense specificity of Nikki’s journey, which envelopes the viewer in her unique consciousness. Nikki’s triumph then is the revelation of her as a startlingly complex heroine that defies the one-dimensional archetypes of creatively bankrupt mainstream cinema (the same archetypes Nikki temporarily occupied throughout the film): the actress hoping for a comeback, the depraved prostitute, the low-

income housewife, etc. The stakes, therefore, are higher for Lynch than a diatribe against stale Hollywood formulas. Through Nikki/ Susan's plight, he reveals how debilitating and hateful these female portraits actually are. Nikki's transcendence not only signals Lynch's plea for a more original and aesthetically engaging cinema, but one of complex characterizations that allow contradictory character traits to co-exist and does not fall back upon simplistic stereotypes.

The manic Phantom, his eyes shrouded in darkness, wanders out into the hallway, glancing past the pink room in search of Nikki.

Nikki emerges out of the brief Polish street image into an emerald green hallway, which she steps cautiously through. The camera lingers on the candle bulbs of the wall-mounted lights as Nikki passes through, briefly throwing one out of focus until it becomes an abstract pool of light stretching its rays into darkness. Both the Polish street lamps, reduced to specks of light, and the impressionistic, out-of-focus shots of the wall lamps continue Lynch's motif of light. Most explicitly, removed from any image clarity, they explicitly foreshadow the light of the projector that will later bathe Nikki. Further though, Lynch takes advantage of the limited dynamic range of his Sony PD150 camera, explicitly allowing these highlights to blow out. In this way, he forefronts the empty space by showcasing its complete lack of visual information. These gaps of represented space self-reflexively distance the viewer from the image by exposing the limitations of the camera eye and, therefore, force the spectator to once again reflect on the mediation and subjectivity of the cinematic image.

Nikki stares forward at an empty corridor. The eerie significance of the location is suggested by the unnaturally long shot duration and other disjunctive stylistic choices.

For instance, the wobbling, handheld quality of the camerawork suggests we are seeing the hallway through Nikki's POV, but this assumption is debunked by the subsequent stationary shot of Nikki, which fails to motivate the mobile camerawork. Yet, although this shot does not operate as a traditional POV shot, it does give an impression of Nikki's tactile and sensory exploration of the space. Further, after a few moments of the handheld shot of the hallway, there is sudden, but nearly imperceptible, jump cut followed by a cut to Nikki's over-the-shoulder onto the hallway. Yet, because the hallway is nearly the same size, it appears as though Nikki simply pops into the frame. These edits therefore break the 180 degree rule by not altering each shot by a minimum of 30 degrees and a substantial re-sizing of the image. This subtle breaking of the 180 degree rule both signals the subjective nature of the space, which seems to shift and reform in Nikki's consciousness, and foreshadows the disquieting confrontation with the Phantom. Further though, it shows Lynch dismantling aesthetic norms at the same time he dissects the narrative laziness and diminished female characters of classical cinema. Lynch insists upon a formal as well as narrative revolution.

Her brows knit in apprehension. A door marked "47" confronts her, the title of the original Polish production, foreshadowing that the origin of the curse is approaching. When Nikki turns back towards the hall, the Phantom appears. Gritting her teeth, Nikki fires at him. The Phantom smiles, a look of awe upon his face, as his image is washed out by an overpowering white light. Nikki shoots again and a burst of light erases the Phantom's visage, reducing him to a trace of a grimace and squinting eyes. Suddenly, his mouth and sagging eyes transform into a grotesquely manic Nikki, her huge mouth gaping in a cartoonish, clownlike grin, revealing sparkling gums and teeth manically

protruding out. Her eyes bulge out hysterically in a desperate mix of anguish and feigned elation. Nikki shoots again. The optically magnified image of her gun is made abstract by its overt pixilation and a staccato slow motion effect. Blood pours forth from the grotesque face, air bubbles erupting from the mouth as if the figure were underwater.

Much like the Mystery Man in *Lost Highway*, the Phantom ultimately reveals himself to be a subjective projection of the protagonist's inner psyche. Yet, whereas the Mystery Man operated to remind Fred of his homicidal transgression, the Phantom is unmasked as Nikki's malformed self-image, distorted and misshapen by the shameful stories of infidelity and debasement she has internalized. The grotesquely caricatured quality of the image may reflect the perfunctory and gravely distorted nature of these personas. By shooting down the Phantom, she not only overcomes the fictional curse, but also the distorted image of herself insisted upon both by the tawdry expectations of the Hollywood celebrity culture, represented by Marilyn Levens' show, and especially through her embodiment of Susan, which conveys the implicit ideology present in commercial cinema's entertainment.

His extinction is appropriately marked by a white light, which operates to distance the viewer by revealing the limitations of the digital medium. In many ways, this moment has the same disruptive effect Manovich describes when "the projected image does not precisely coincide with the screen's boundaries" (Manovich 96). Manovich explains that the classical screen "strives for complete illusion and visual plenitude, while the viewer is asked to suspend disbelief and to identify with the image." (Manovich 96) Yet, when this illusion is disrupted, it makes the viewer "conscious of what exists outside the representation." (Manovich 96) By killing the Phantom and creating a gaping white hole

in the movie screen, Nikki breaks her identification with the image and liberates herself from the destructive ideology that ‘hypnotized’ her while only a passive viewer. Further, the abstractness of the pixelated image of the gun firing marks the move away from representational wholeness of the indexical image to what Manovich refers to as the “kino-brush”, cinematic “painting” that strives for ambiguity and overt subjectivity instead of the illusion of visual plentitude of classical cinema (Manovich 306). By choosing to pair Nikki’s confrontation with these overt stylistic touches, Lynch once again reasserts the necessity of radically changing form in order to re-examine and reformulate cursed stories.

Nikki’s transcendence is made explicit as her image is overwhelmed by rays of light that stretch out over the screen. Superimposed over this heavenly light are two women’s smiling faces, equally blown out. The Lost Girl watches with wide-eyed wonder, her face also dissolving within the emanating light. On her television set, she sees the two women holding hands, smilingly elatedly, while running down a hallway. These scantily dressed women recall the prostitutes seen throughout the film. As they excitedly run through the hallway, their clasped hands remind the viewer of the supportive, homosocial bonds these women represented. Further, the Lost Girl’s awareness of their presence signals her break from her solitary grief inside the hotel room. She turns her head to hear the women pass by her own door. When she looks back, she sees herself on the bed watching the television set. At that instant, Nikki emerges from the hallway and approaches the Lost Girl. Nikki clasps her hands around the Lost Girl’s face lovingly and embraces her. As she does so, Nikki evaporates. The Lost Girl

hears her hotel room door unclasp and runs in elation out of the room, liberated from her imprisoned role watching the television.

The heavenly light is soon revealed to be the beams of a projector. As discussed earlier, this self-reflexive barring of the device signals that these women's liberation from the confines of stereotypical roles is predicated on a new relationship to the cinematic image. The women's blown out images, bereft of detail and visual clarity, reject the sharp clarity of 35mm and high definition video for ambiguity and elusive imagery. These mysterious portraits are the visual equivalent of Lynch's narrative ideal of challenging new structures and fractured characters. Further, Nikki and the Lost Girl's tender embrace signals the promising potential of this new, dynamic relationship to the screen. The spectator's identification with the character is no longer a traumatic, agonizing experience but a bond of mutual exploration and enrichment.

In many ways then, *Inland Empire* resonates with Laura Mulvey's famous polemical essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey criticized classical Hollywood narratives for their adherence to the dominant ideology of its patriarchal society (Mulvey 834). For Mulvey, this split the pleasure of looking into "active/ male and passive/ female" roles (Mulvey 837). Lynch extends this criticism by forcing Nikki to fulfill the *femme fatale* role of the dangerous seducer who threatens the institution of marriage but ultimately meets a fatal end at the hands of the virtuous wife. Her consistent bewilderment about how she came to occupy this role reiterates the fatalistically predestined nature of this narrative. Further, her battered woman persona helps to convey that the deceptions of men have demoralized her and driven her to brutal, gruesome behavior.

Inland Empire fulfills Mulvey's ideal of a more self-aware cinema that systematically destroys "the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the 'invisible guest', and highlights the way film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms." (Mulvey 844) Further, by allowing his image to often waver in focus, Lynch forefronts the problematic visibility of his images and forces the viewer to contemplate the mediation of the camera.

Yet, although *Inland Empire* is an elaborate deconstruction of the founding principles of classical spectatorship, he simultaneously exploits the engaging strategies of mystery and detective genres. For instance, the repeated image of writing on metal (AXXON N) and the seeming importance of "after midnight" operate as signposts that urge the viewer to make far-reaching connections between seemingly disparate events. By allowing the viewer to mull over these clues and consistently identify with Nikki's attempts to make sense of bewildering events, Lynch prevents the viewer from only being a distanced, critical observer. Instead, the narrative signposts give the viewer the promise of a satisfying resolution that will bring both closure and relevance to the proceeding action. Ultimately though, Lynch places the spectator in an investigative mode to examine the hidden ideology implicit in these viewing practices. In this way, Lynch forces the viewer to confront themselves and what lies beneath their own involvement in the narrative rather than just losing themselves in cinematic fantasy.

CONCLUSION

The beams of the projector dance on the lens: reaching out past the limits of the frame. Within its embracing rays, the Lost Girl is reunited with her husband. Her teary eyes glisten for a moment until the arched eyebrows of the Visitor float into the frame and the Lost Girl's face, wet with tears of reconciliation, dissolves away. The Visitor's bewitching features break into an unexpected smile. Nikki turns slowly, her brows furrowed in apprehension. Yet, instead of another malevolent doppelganger, Nikki is greeted by her serene self sitting across from her: her arms calmly placed in her lap, her eyes meeting her own gaze with pose and assurance. With this final transcendence and peace, the screen can go black: no longer burdened by ideological phantoms or distorted self-images.

Yet, the screen only stays dark for a few seconds before the squeak of a single tennis shoe brings us back. A one-legged woman on crutches, alluded to before as the Phantom's sister, limps through the parlor of Nikki Grace's house. Her eyes scan the ceiling in awe until she lets out a single word: "Sweeeeeet!" The camera wanders throughout the room to introduce us to some familiar characters from the Lynchian universe. Nikki, the Asian woman with a blonde wig mentioned earlier by the vagrant on the Walk of Fame, sits cross-legged with a monkey perched above her. Rita (Laura Harring), a visitor from *Mulholland Dr.*, smiles seductively and blows us a kiss. Nikki blows it back, her shy face overcome with an indulgent smile. A lumberjack too seems to be a relic of the logging town Twin Peaks. Discerning viewers will notice that Nikki is also wearing a baby blue dress that Dern wore originally as Sandy Williams in *Blue*

Velvet. The chorus of prostitutes comes out for one last dance as they lip-sync the lyrics to Nina Simon's "Sinner Man."

Appropriately, the sequence ends with Dern's joyful face. Flickering lights flash across her gracious smile as she stares up at the spectacle. Long imprisoned in a disorienting cinematic nightmare, she now seems to enjoy the pleasure of being a spectator, the flickering light reminiscent of those soft rays that bathe viewers in a Cineplex.

Yet, although this closing sequence brings us back to the problematic role of the spectator, it's important to differentiate her position from the lonely, imprisoned Lost Girl who sat transfixed in front of her television. The most overt difference is the collective atmosphere, where we see Rita and Nikki blowing kisses at one another, creating a tender, homosocial atmosphere between women that was consistently blocked by the curse throughout the film. This is further supported by the prostitutes, throughout a communal alternative to Nikki's isolation, and the choice of "Sinnerman" as a closing song. Taken outside of its religious context, the African American spiritual "Sinnerman" features lyrics of struggle, moral transgression, and eventual heavenly transcendence, very similar to Nikki's quest throughout the film. The initial lyrics find the speaker being rebuffed by her harsh, oppressive environment, enduring a "bleedin'" river and a "boilin'" sea. Further, the Lord refuses to offer any comfort or defense against the oppressive elements. He even tells her to "run to the Devil", which she does. Yet, in the next stanza, the Lord admonishes her for this transgression, telling her that she "oughta been prayin'." The oppressive and caustic nature of the world portrayed in "Sinnerman" and the cold indifference of a higher power seems like, when removed from its gospel-

like chants and clear resonance with the African American community's struggle for Civil Rights, an appropriate reflection of the psychologically tortuous ordeals Nikki had to overcome to finally reach transcendence. Nina Simone's robust repetition of the closing lyric, "Power" (Chorus: "Power to the Lord"), transcend its origin as a gospel prayer and operate to convey a raw, commanding female authority. Seen alongside the jubilant and lively lip-synced performance, the scene portrays a joyful strength of spirit that adds stability to the peace of mind Nikki has finally achieved.

Further though, along with the rays of the projector beams that marked the end of Nikki's struggle, it lends the sequence the air of a cinematic heaven. Allister Mactaggart suggests that this "redemptive scene" resembles the "Lady-in-the-Radiator" sequence that ends Lynch's first feature, *Eraserhead* (Mactaggart 154). In *Eraserhead*, Henry Spencer (Jack Nance) endures a demonic home life in an alienated industrial wasteland. His relationship with his live-in girlfriend, Mary X (Charlotte Stewart), is shaken when their deformed, alien-like newborn won't stop shrieking. After killing his monstrous baby, he is greeted by the Lady in the Radiator in a heavenly coda scene, who sings a sweet tune to him. As Todd McGowan points out, Henry's embrace of the Lady in the Radiator signals that he has finally escaped "the dissatisfaction that has haunted him throughout the film" (McGowan 47). Yet, this peaceful retreat to fantasy is predicated upon the "destruction" of his baby and therefore requires complete abandonment of "social reality" (McGowan 47). The unrealistic aspects of Henry's transcendence are marked by the simplistic nature of the lyrics she sings:

In Heaven

Everything is fine

In Heaven

Everything is fine

In Heaven

Everything is fine

You got your good thing

And I've got mine

The inane, and ultimately unconvincing, quality of the lyrics highlights the scene's disconnection from reality. As a result, this happy ending is very problematic and dissatisfying. Aspects like the Lady's grotesque extended cheeks, which look like two gigantic macaroons, further distance the viewer from embracing this supposedly "redemptive" conclusion and makes the existence of an alternative or escape from Henry's trials doubtful.

Yet, these troubling qualifying elements seem to be absent in *Inland Empire's* final scene. The rendition of "Sinnerman" and the reunion of a coterie of Lynch's cinematic creations does not mark Nikki's retreat from "social reality" into fantasy, but her elevation and transcendence. As a result, this ending bookmarks and resolves the troubling anxieties that have haunted Lynch's work since his first feature. Interviewer Richard Barney nicely sums up this feeling of resolution by noting "a kind of unification" between "the cast, the actors, the people making the movie, and in terms of the kinds of movies [Lynch has] made" before (Barney 260). To which Lynch evasively admitted, "Well, let's just say that's a good way to think." (Barney 260) Although neither Barney nor Lynch elaborates, one can assume Barney intended his term "unification" to resonant with Lynch's concept of the unified field achieved through transcendental mediation. In

this way, his ending collection of characters is not simply a self-reflexive nod to his previous work, but suggests the unified field he himself was able to tap into while making the film: that he discovered within the “ocean” of his imagination unseen linkages and consistencies among his work. So, through the act of private meditation, Lynch was able to gain, and then publicly portray, a new perspective on his entire oeuvre.

Perhaps the mutual catharsis of Lynch and Nikki is best summed up by a brief, most likely unintentional, moment. As the camera retreats back to a long shot of the room for the final image, we briefly see its huge, behemoth shadow lurking in the background. Despite its questionable intentionality, this moment conveys a fusion of spectator and the cinematic apparatus, Lynch and his creations. This fleeting image removes the insistence on viewer’s identification with the screen’s “illusion” of the reality. Instead, a utopian alternative to the passive, imprisoned viewership of the *Lost Girl* is put forth, where spectator and the recording apparatus are allowed to mingle and interact in the same space. The recording apparatus is no longer negated or repressed by the viewer, but accepted, without, in the process, disrupting the pleasure of the cinematic image.

Perhaps, in retrospect, this answers why Lynch seems to have retired from feature films. Since *Inland Empire*, Lynch’s longest filmed creation was the sixteen-minute promotional film for Dior, *Lady Blue Shanghai*. With over six years since the film’s release, this is the longest amount of time Lynch has spent between projects and he currently has no features in development. Considering that Lynch is now sixty-six years old, it is not unreasonable to consider that *Inland Empire* may be Lynch’s final cinematic contribution.

As an epilogue to Lynch's filmography, this last, joyous "unification" of Lynch's past characters not only resolves the anxieties that have dominated his work since *Eraserhead*, but also appropriately celebrates the universe he has created. He reminds us of the grotesque, disturbing, funny, unique characters he has given us and presents us with a final scene that can be interpreted as a celebration of the creative potential of the mind.

David Lynch has built his oeuvre around disrupting traditional relationships to the cinematic image, agitating the viewer with the disquieting notion that unseen horrors lurk beneath the image. *Inland Empire*'s murky, often blurry, visual style both embodies and expands upon this approach by relying upon the viewer's imagination to an unprecedented degree. As Lynch noted, this ambiguous imagery has the potential to let the mind go "dreaming". Further, with its fragmentary structure and lack of causation, Lynch pressures the viewer to interpret and make connections between disparate scenes and ideas. Yet, since Lynch utilizes the spectator's personal involvement to envelope us in Nikki/ Susan and the Lost Girl's tortuous struggle to free themselves of the constraints of classical spectatorship, it seems curious that he would end with such a reaffirming view of movie-going. Still, this viewership is the product of an utopian ideal that *Inland Empire* has sought to employ: where the viewer is not the compliant recipient of foreign ideas, but an active participant who has a role in shaping the story and forming the characters. As a result, Lynch achieves something truly revolutionary with *Inland Empire*: he liberates the viewer by transforming the act of watching a movie into a personal act of creative expression.

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