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Hermeneutic Decoder: The Lure of Interpretation in Complex Cinema as Exemplified in David Lynch's *INLAND'S EMPIRE* (2006)

Abstract: Renowned narratologists, especially those focusing on film studies, have little interest in the prologue as a narrative device. I argue that this film segment is crucial in postmodern narratives, usually characterized by their nonlinearity. In films that feature it, this introductory scene/sequence is part of the work's complex embroidery and is formally produced in the same style of the overall film, alerting to its tone, nonlinearity, self-reflexive nature, theme, and metanarrative discourse. Like all prologues, it explains part of what is to follow and engages the viewer's curiosity. I call these segments hermeneutic decoders. However, in complex narratives they also deliberately hide the film's full story and/or real meaning in plain sight. They engage the viewer's cognitive abilities but manage to be as enigmatic as the rest of the film (despite containing most of the clues to its understanding). I will provide examples from several established categories of complex films and will deal with a specific case study in more detail: David Lynch's *INLAND EMPIRE* (2006), which belongs to an undecipherable category of narratives that Kiss and Willemsen call "impossible puzzle films." After a detailed analysis of the hermeneutic decoder, I will explain how it provides all the clues for an account of the film as an allegory of spectatorship from two theoretical standpoints: Gilles Deleuze's concept of the time-image and Jacques Lacan's notion of the gaze. The aporetical enunciation and the duplicated gaze, in tandem, form the key to the film's narrative enigma, open to an intense hermeneutic activity that is nevertheless, and necessarily, frustrated.

Keywords: Hermeneutic Decoder, Prologue, Complex Narratives, Enigma Films, *INLAND EMPIRE*.

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Introduction, or Written Prelude to the Prologue

Although practiced from very early days in literary and theatrical history, the prologue is not considered an interesting enough subject for a more in-depth approach by narratologists, especially in our current times of postmodernist narratives. Its absence from the theoretical writings of Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman, Mieke Bal, and David Lodge is quite telling. Likewise, it is missing from an important online research source, *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, a website sponsored by the University of Hamburg. It is featured in language dictionaries, such as *The New Oxford Shorter English Dictionary*, in two volumes,[1] but less so in specialized publications. For instance, in Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology*, rev. ed., it is cursorily defined as: "An initial section in some narratives, preceding and not including the exposition or (part of) the complication" (79). It is, interestingly, the philosopher Jacques Derrida who expands on it in *Dissemination*, but applying the concept to the philosophical prologue.

Originally from the Greek πρό, "before," and λόγος, "a word" (Gosse, n.p.), a narrative prologue, whether in prose or verse, is fundamentally a narration that precedes the story. Aristotle, in the section of his *Poetics* dedicated to the elements of the plot, defines it as "everything in a tragedy that precedes the opening chorus." It was used most notably on the Greek and Latin stage, in Elizabethan drama, and in Italian Renaissance plays, as well as in other literary works such as Dante's *Divina Commedia* (allegorical narrative poem in three parts, 1308–1321), Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (collection of 24 stories in verse, ca. 1400) and Cervantes's *Novelas Ejemplares* [*Exemplary Novels*] (collection of 12 stories, 1613). Someone, usually a narrator or a character (albeit not necessarily a protagonist), addresses the readers/spectators to introduce the ensuing narrative (i.e., story) and provide information on the characters, the action, the setting, and the mood. In doing so, the prologue (either in written form or personified onstage) clarifies the story world, emphasizes the theme and/or subject, explains the structure, and raises interest in what is to follow. As such it was an institutional tool of seduction as much as a required explanation for a good understanding of the artwork. Thus, it serves two purposes: interest and clarity.[2]

Ruth Evans calls the prologue, especially in Middle English works, "an hors d'oeuvre to the main course" (372), an interesting choice of words if one considers that—besides its gastronomical meaning as an appetizer—, in French, this means literally *out of the work.* Derrida, likewise, writes about the prologue in the section "Hors livre: Outwork" at the beginning of

1 The *NOSED* defines it as: (1) "The preface or introduction to a literary or musical work"; (2) "A preliminary act, event, etc." Specifically in the theater it is "an introductory speech or short poem addressed to the audience by one of the actors in a play" (all quotations on page 2374).

2 For more on this, see Bruster and Weimann (2004) and Fernando Cioni (2018).

Dissemination. Giraldi Cinthio, in his speech, "Intorno al comporre delle commedie e delle tragedie" (1543), observed: "The prologue cannot be considered part of the fabula, because it has no connections with the action treated in it; and it is not acted in the same manner as the other parts of the play" (quoted by Cioni 2). Although this is generally true insofar as a prologue is shorter that the work it anticipates, it nevertheless is closely integrated artistically with the work it prefaces, because, as mentioned by several commentators (Evans 371; Boyd 49; Derrida 7) they are/were written only after the main text, when everything else is/was already established and has been/had been created. They are an afterwork whose existence is dependent on the part they play in the overall design. Since it prepares the audience to the ensuing illusion, it can be said to be metatheatrical (Cioni 1) (and metaliterary as well).

In this light, the importance of prologues is undisputed, if also quite contradictory (Evans 372). On the one hand, "prologues offer frames for reading those works, frames that promise the reader a certain transparency of the ensuing text" (Evans 372) but some of them become so famous that they attain the status of artworks. On the other hand, Derrida claims that prologues are meant to be forgotten: "[they] have always been written, it seems, in view of their own self-effacement" (9). Once read/watched, they must be laid aside so that the rest of the work takes central stage, but they cannot be completely cancelled out: "[...] this subtraction leaves a mark of erasure, a *remainder* which is added to the subsequent text, and which cannot be completely summed up within it" (Derrida 9). In this, Derrida claims, resides their interest (9). In other words, a prologue occupies the entire duration and location of a work, remaining dormant in viewers' minds. In cinema, however, this is often forgotten. I consider it fundamental to address the nature and function of the prologue in the context of complex narratives, in which they play an extremely relevant part.

In cinema, prologues spoken by characters akin to the ones practiced on stage in earlier periods are extremely rare, as that entails breaking the fourth wall and acknowledging the medium's self-reflexivity, considered an anathema by classical Hollywood film standards.[3] I am not considering here the cinematic adaptations of theatrical plays in which the device exists—such as Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944), which transposes Shakespeare's theatrical prologue to the screen as part of the diegetic story of a theatrical troupe contemporary to the Bard's existence. My interest lies in the prologues that Ruth Evans has described, in the context of medieval literature, as standing "outside the works they introduce" and that "offer frames for reading those works [...]. A frame demarcates the boundaries between inside and

3 That is, for example, the case of Steven Soderbergh's *Schizopolis,* a self-reflexive satire on religion with meta-cinematic nuances, released in 1996. A presenter on a theater stage, played by Soderbergh himself, addresses an empty house, saying "Ladies and gentlemen, young and old, this may seem an unusual procedure, speaking to you before the picture begins, but we have an unusual subject [...]."

outside, showcasing a visual image as well as confining it." (quoted by Richard Burt 225). In the online approaches to the subject—usually in film blogs (e.g., Mariani)—the prologue tends to be confused with the opening credits or the opening scene. Yet not all opening scenes are prologues, because many are not descriptive/preparatory and jump right into the main action of the film. A prologue needs to set what is to come, but without entering the main action outright.[4]

For example, in the film *Lady in the Lake* (1946, directed by Robert Montgomery), the main character, the private investigator Philip Marlowe (played by Montgomery himself), faces the camera head-on and raises curiosity about a story that happened to him in his professional capacity three days before Christmas, and which forms the bulk of the film. However, his appearance in person and the direct address to the audience at this point are justified by his forthcoming absence from the rest of the work, as the film, from that point onwards, adopts his focalization in an assumed exercise on the nature of the gaze. The character points out: "You'll see it just as I saw it"; and proceeds: "You'll meet the people, you'll find the clues, and maybe you'll solve [the case], maybe you won't." Thus, the viewers are also lured into the story and the murder mystery it contains. This approach champions audience engagement, but in a less enigmatic way than the one produced in current complex narratives, inasmuch as the actor is here already "in character" (therefore operating at a diegetic level) but not yet inside the story that follows. This corresponds to the implied narrator, Edward Branigan's fourth level of narration, explained in *Narrative Comprehension and Film*.

In American indie or crossover cinema what is often considered to be a prologue may be just an opening scene with a voice-over, usually used as an alternative means to enter the story world in a less classical fashion. For example, in *The Big Lebowski* (1998, The Coen Brothers) the voice is totally inconsequential to the parade of offbeat characters that ensues, especially the most eccentric of them all: the protagonist, known as the Dude (played by Jeff Bridges). The quirkiness of the text sets the tone for the whole film and establishes the Dude's laziness and singularity, but it does not provide much background information. In fact, it takes the viewers off guard for the surprise attack that awaits the Dude in his house when he opens the door in the next scene. The importance of the prelude is thus more stylistic (illustrating the nature of the story world) than narrative (the story itself).[5]

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4 One of the best film openings in classical Hollywood cinema, George Cukor's adaptation of the namesake play *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) presents, in less than a minute, the dissolution of the main couple (Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant) in a scene without dialog. Nothing is known about their prior relationship, except that this is the end of it, setting the woman free to marry another man.

5 The same may happen in mainstream cinema. In the action films featuring the British secret agent James Bond, an entire action sequence unrelated to the case that will occupy 007 in each film takes place right at the beginning, at once grabbing the audience.

In arthouse cinema, however, especially in Europe, a cinematic prologue can be used differently, as is the case in *Dogville* (2003, Lars von Trier), a film "told in nine chapters and a prologue," as indicated by an intertitle at the outset of the work. The prologue lasts for about eight minutes, during which time the voice-over (spoken by John Hurt) guides the film viewers through the town of Dogville by following Tom Edison Junior (Paul Bettany) in his interactions with other local inhabitants. The narrator first establishes the general setting —the town, its location, and social configuration—then moves on to inform of both Tom's and his fellow citizen's occupations, interrelations, and human nature, also revealing their aspirations, fears, and cognitive abilities. The narrator portrays Tom as a sort of spiritual yet nonreligious leader, committed to the idea of morally rearming the townspeople and "mining into their soul." The narrator's portrait, however, is ambiguous, as he also represents Tom as a wannabe writer living at his father's expenses, opinionated, lustful, and self-centered enough to inflict a daily humiliating defeat at checkers upon his none-too-bright best friend.

Tom says the people of Dogville have a problem with acceptance and wishes he had something tangible for them to accept. The voice-over's cynical tone and observations intimate that perhaps what they are rejecting (although mildly) is Tom's influence itself. *Dogville*'s prologue is, in fact, a preliminary act, taking place before the arrival of the protagonist, a female fugitive (played by Nicole Kidman), and is separated from the rest of the film by a fade to black. It quite literally sets the stage for the story, in its presentation of the "town" as a bare stage in which the contours of the houses and other facilities are marked on the floor—leaving nothing to the viewer's imagination. Yet, the set dressing, lighting, mise-en-scène and actor's *verité* acting style are unchanging throughout; only the characters perform a narrative arc. The film symbolizes the inescapability of one's destiny and reveals the atrocities inflicted upon the outsider in the name of the misguided notion of "acceptance," something at which the voice-over hints.

Despite their considerable formal differences, from semitransparency to blatant self-reflexivity, the classical film *Lady in the Lake* (1946) and the European arthouse *Dogville* (2003), respectively, have three main aspects in common: first, they are rather unfragmented; second, they unfold at a slow pace; third, they convey their information clearly enough. Montgomery's prologue consists of one single shot with the camera tracking in on the actor almost imperceptibly, whereas in von Trier's prologue the open space of the set decoration conveys the (false) impression of homogeneity, the editing cuts becoming secondary by comparison. Although they contain, respectively, a modicum of mystery and ambiguity, they are not felt as being cognitively challenging or confusing. The challenge is aesthetic more than anything else; narratively speaking they are quite linear.

The same cannot be said for many opening sequences in the nonlinear, complex, and puzzling postmodern cinema, which forms a different narrative paradigm, regardless of their commercial category: mainstream, indie, or arthouse cinema. Many of these films use their

nonlinearity to increase the enigma and the cognitive activity they entail. Working as real "brain-teasers" (Elsaesser "The Mind-Game Film" 13) or cinematic brainteasers (Kiss and Willemsen 6), they stage bizarre events, times, spaces and characters, sometimes without any hold in our physical reality.[6] Thus, their openings tend to be as enigmatic as the rest of them, adding an extra module to an intrinsically modular structure "in which the narrative is divided into discrete segments and subjected to complex articulations" (Cameron 1).

In this context, I claim this module may be taken to work as a prologue to the film, sometimes being even more fragmented than the rest of it. The more complex the film, the likelier it is that the prologue portrays condensed events in a sort of montage sequence, thus establishing from the outset the "structural-constructional complexity in the storytelling logic" that Kiss and Willemsen allude to in *Impossible Puzzle Films* (10).

The Hermeneutic Decoder

Whether their meaning is closed shut at the end or remains open, they are enigmas that cause viewers to engage cognitively with them and actively pursue an interpretation. This enigmatic nature usually implies a thematized self-consciousness, typical of metanarratives. Despite their complexity, these films often contain their own explanation, regardless of the so-called structural or phenomenological categories to which theorists refer them. The "explanation" they provide is often part of their complex makeup and one that further induces in viewers a compulsion for repeat viewing, which is often (but not always) frustrated. As Steven Soderbergh claims in the film prologue to *Schizopolis:* "In the event that you find certain sequences or ideas confusing, please bear in mind that this is your fault, not ours. You need to see the picture again and again until you understand everything." Some aspects of the film, are nevertheless, left to personal assessment, the myriad existing taxonomies on the subject attesting to the commentators' hermeneutic individuality.

The key for generalized sense-making is placed right at the beginning of the film. This sequence is for all purposes a prologue, but a more complex one than usual. First, it is a fundamental part of the film's narrative embroidery and serves to deploy its fragmentariness. Second, it announces what is to come, in a way that arouses the viewers' curiosity or draws them in with the promise of a mystery to solve, a pact which is not necessarily fulfilled (either throughout or by the film's end). Third, it hints at the type of assessment and experience the film requires of its own viewership, given the cognitive challenge it presents. Thus, the opening sequence reveals as much as it conceals, at once disclosing the type of film and the

6 Cf. Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson (eds.) for the concept and ramifications of "unnatural narratives."

(main) characters or (pivotal) actions, while obfuscating their real import. This sequence is what I call a "hermeneutic decoder." Not all cognitively or structurally complex films (brainteasers) have hermeneutic decoders, but they are quite prominent in this narrative paradigm.

The meaning of the film is all there waiting to be analyzed and decrypted, in one of two main ways. The simpler one consists of the narrative assemblage of clues put together in the right order and in the adequate mood, often resulting in full comprehension by the viewers, as happens in the multi-draft category proposed by David Bordwell ("Film Futures"). The second one entails a greater effort, as many of the clues provided are deliberately misleading and the overall film is impressed with psychological, allegorical, or paradoxical overtones, as is the case with David Lynch's later films, whose Freudian condensation and displacement processes never amount to full comprehension (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 383–419).

A hermeneutic decoder is often (but not necessarily) related to the film's final sequence, yet not in the same manner of a narrative frame. Whereas a frame story begins and ends in the same spatiotemporal context and the last scene is conveyed as the resumption of the action started at the film's outset, in complex nonlinear films no such continuance exists. What is at stake here is not the action, but the staging of an idea which may be completed in a different setting. Take for example, a classical film like *Madame Bovary* (1949, Vincente Minnelli), based on the eponymous protagonist of Gustave Flaubert's infamous novel about a beautiful young woman who abandons both her infant and humble country doctor husband to indulge in a life of adultery and luxurious consumerism. Minnelli's film begins with a courtroom scene in which Flaubert, the writer (played by James Mason), is accused by the state of crimes against morality. He takes the stand to defend himself and the film flashes back to a description of his heroine's actions from his more forgiving and exculpatory point of view. When resuming this scene, at the film's end, he makes an indictment of censorship and argues in favor of truth. Many other cinematic versions of this novel exist devoid of such a narrative device. However, in the Hollywood film industry of the 1940s, subjected to the Hays Code of censorship, this was necessary to be able to show what was otherwise prohibited then. It speaks volumes to the ingenuity of the filmmakers that they managed to transform a diegetic defense into an ideological accusation without infringing the strict precepts of the Code by managing to keep the arguments within the boundaries of narrative.

The eventual relationship between first (prologue) and last sequence (epilogue) is possible in pretty much all types of complex narratives, notwithstanding many existent variations.[7] For example, in *Stay* (2005, Marc Forster) and *Trance* (2013, Danny Boyle), two unreliable

7 These two parts of work were intrinsically interconnected in Shakespeare's Elizabethan theater (Bruster and Weissmann 2).

narratives, the hermeneutic decoders are respectively quite short and rather long. *Stay* opens with a car wheel spinning out of control until the unstable image rolls over and then settles, upside down, in a simulation of a car accident on a bridge at night. A young man, Henry, is seen sitting on the pavement in front of the burning wreckage, his back turned to it. He gets up and walks toward the camera, facing it head-on, in close-up. The film cuts to another man, Sam, waking from a dream, also in close-up. Henry, the protagonist (Ryan Gosling), is portrayed throughout the film as a schizophrenic patient with a death wish, undergoing therapy with Sam (Ewan McGregor), who is married to a female artist (Naomi Watts). When, at the end, the film resumes the scene on the bridge, we realize that Henry is the victim of an accidental car crash and that "Sam" and his "wife", who have never met until that moment, are a doctor and a nurse trying to save him from dying as a result of the accident. Despite the final twist, there are numerous clues throughout the film as to its unreliable narration, of which the straight look at the camera in the beginning is the most incisive. In *Trance*, Simon (James McAvoy) is an auctioneer who explains, in voice-over, the history of security proceedings adopted by auction houses to counteract art robbers, such as the ones who then burst into Simon's auction hall during a high-profile sale. The protagonist's silent and insistent look at the camera during this entire sequence, which crosscuts between different reenacted robberies, his own training for emergency situations, and "live" shots of the robbery in progress, seems to be making the statement that something is severely wrong, eventually hinting at his possible involvement in the theft. When, at the end, the convoluted plot of the film is explained, in voice-over, by another character, looking straight at the camera from an iPad, intercut with scenes from the rest of the film, the protagonist's straight look at viewers in the beginning acquires an even more sinister feeling in retrospect.

In *Magnolia* (1999, Paul Thomas Anderson), a multistrand narrative with ten protagonists whose lives intersect in a moment of personal crisis, the theme of chance is set from the beginning, conveyed in a montage sequence of coincidences and freak accidents recounted in voice-over. Additionally, the nonsensical playfulness and unrealistic tone of this account contrasts with the dramatic interrelation of the main characters in the rest of the film and anticipates an allegorical event: a shower of frogs that redeems all the protagonists of their shortcomings and past mistakes. In *Unknown Code*—whose original and complete title is *Code inconnu: Récit incomplet de divers voyages* (2000, Michael Haneke)—the title gives away the film's undecidability. Four people are geopolitically interconnected, and the overall theme is social insecurity and determinacy. The hermeneutic decoder presents the viewers with a metafictional activity in progress: a little girl acts out a situation (on a stage) for a group of mute children to guess its meaning. Several hypotheses are put forward, unsuccessfully, just as the cinematic viewer herself will try to grasp the overall signifying content of a very elliptical film narrated in segments separated by black frames, thus conveying the characters' helplessness and isolation in metropolitan Paris.

In *21 Grams* (2003, Alejandro González Iñárritu), the temporally manipulated account of the intersection of three unrelated people's lives is approached head-on in the hermeneutic decoder. The film begins with the shot of a couple in bed after having sex, the man (Sean Penn) watching the woman (Naomi Watts) fast asleep. The film's title, briefly shown in red, is followed by three scenes with dialog: (1) a man with two little girls eat at a diner; (2) the woman from the first shot, now at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, talks about how crucial her husband and the birth of her eldest daughter were for her recovery; (3) a preacher with a violent past (Benicio Del Toro) explains to a rebellious youth how the guilt of wrongdoing can "suck one down to the marrow." Cut to a flock of birds flying away at dusk, followed by a shot of Sean Penn intubated on a hospital bed wondering about his decaying physical condition. He observes, in voice-over: "I don't know when anything began anymore, or when it's gonna end." The opening sequence presents the protagonists without explaining the relationship between them and introduces two enigmas: one is temporal (why is Sean Penn seen first healthy and then near death?), the other has to do with agency (who is "the husband" mentioned by Watts?). The jumbled temporality is announced in the voice-over, and the subjects of guilt, redemption, recovery and death are all verbalized. The ingredients have been explained, but it is up to the viewers to make sense of them.

Slipstream (2007, written, directed, and starred by Anthony Hopkins), and the Danish film *Reconstruction* (2003, Christoffer Boe) feature diegetic writers at odds with their own created characters, mixing reality and illusion in a way that it is hard for film viewers to disentangle. *Slipstream* opens with 55 seconds of completely cryptic snippets taken from the entire film. The loud sounds of car horns, tires screeching and something splashing onto a windshield hint at a car accident, possibly involving the protagonist, who is seen with his arms wide open, as if before an impact. However, the sheer velocity of it all, the apparent disconnection of the images (to one another and to a context), and the intriguing sound of what may be a computer keyboard being typed on have a physical impact on the viewers, numbing them into absolute confusion, on par with the protagonist's stream of consciousness-like perception of the world throughout the film.[8]

In *Reconstruction*, right after the credits, a street performer seemingly juggles a cigarette in the air in an undefined environment made more mysterious by the grainy cinematography, while a male voice-over states: "This is how it always ends. A little magic, a little smoke, something floating." The voice belongs to the film's "narrator," who assumes he is pulling the strings, and continues: "Let's start at the beginning." He stages an empty city street

8 In narrative a stream of consciousness is a technique "intended to render the flow of myriad impressions—visual, auditory, physical, associative, and subliminal—that impinge on the consciousness of an individual and form part of his awareness along with the trend of his rational thoughts" (in *Britannica* online).

where a young man (Nikolaj Lie Kaas) is first seen walking alone, but decides to change the setting and add passers-by to the scene. The narrator addresses the viewers directly, telling them to pay attention: "We begin like this. It's not the beginning, so take it easy." As the young man enters a bar where a beautiful young woman (Maria Bonnevie) is sitting at the counter alone, the narrator raises doubts as to whether they already know each other. "Is this a beginning or an end? That's what we're about to see," in what he insists "is all film. It is a construction." The film is a love story played amidst infidelity, because the man and the woman have other partners, but it is also an account of loneliness in the big city where aspirations for more intimate connection become illusory, like a film script where reality and fiction are undiscernible.

In Raúl Ruiz's *Love Torn in a Dream* (*Combat d'amour en songe*, 2000) the hermeneutic decoder explains, more straightforwardly than usual, the rather complex narrative structure of the film. After a speech on the importance of art, made by a local dignitary.[9] The crew's first assistant director explains to the whole cast how the narrative works. He says it consists of nine stories combined according to the logical system of the *ars combinatoria* attributed to Raimond Lull, "which may result in a total of 2,000 stories." The first speech announces the film as an arthouse opus, whereas the following transvisualization of the actors into their characters (with the image significantly distorted) as the AD explains each of the stories, proves that even in their simplest form they are already intrinsically hybrid and indistinct from one another. To this contributes the fact that several of the actors play different roles in distinct film stories. The last sequence of the film is unsurprisingly titled "*mélanges*," meaning "intermixture." In it a character orders another to "search for the riddle," while all the characters recognize they have no fixed identity.

For all its variety and applicability, the hermeneutic decoder is especially used in two narrative scenarios: the bifurcated films and the extremely ambiguous ones, the opposite poles of a continuum that contemplates many other possibilities in between.

In the less ambiguous although multifarious narratives, such as the ones usually placed by commentators in the forking path or multi-draft categories, the opening of the film is often a montage sequence of shots taken from different parts of the narrative, which make little sense in this condensed version devoid of context. For example, in *Blind Chance* (*Przypadek*, 1987, written and directed by Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski), the protagonist, Witek (played by Boguslaw Linda), is seen during indiscriminate moments of his several "lives," in the company of different girlfriends and in a distinct relationship with medical school. The hermeneutic decoder may also be a condensed version of the characters about to appear in the story, as happens in *Run Lola Run* (*Lola rennt*, 1998, written and

9 A fictional representative of the Portuguese Ministry of Culture, as the film is a coproduction with Portugal and the film's story, at this point, assumes the film will next be shot there.

directed by the German film director Tom Tykwer). In this case, it is fair to say that most commentators have signaled the ludic overture and the diegetic policeman's announcement that "the ball is round, the game lasts 90 minutes. [...] Here we go!" However, many of them have missed the point made by a nondiegetic male voice-over about the mysterious designs of the human beings and the driving force of affections ("Where are we going? How do we know what we think we know?"). Most importantly, influenced by Lola's running and the musical techno beat, most commentators disregarded or downplayed the other characters present in the film's opening and their role in affecting Lola's destiny as much as she affects their own. Certainly, the film carries a narrative interconnectedness having to do with the butterfly effect, but it also conveys a more transcendental one, pertaining to human feelings. By trying to enforce a classical reading upon the film, David Bordwell ignores shots of Lola and Manni in bed during moments of chronologically undefined closeness and real affection. These scenes are placed in between the drafts of Lola running and are not part of the main repeated action. Lola is much more than the video game character that she is usually represented as being. She is a person endowed with real feelings and very high stakes to preserve the man she loves.

In David Lynch's so-called LA Trilogy, also made up of triptychs (here considered as narratives that contain three distinct parts, but which are not divided in different stories), the hermeneutic decoder seems to contribute even more to the general mystification. In this case it is impossible to obtain a mathematical sum of the type 1+1+1 = threesome totality. In Lynch's case, therefore, the hermeneutic decoder is not a key to the film's narrative, but rather a key to what is at stake semantically. It opens the secret meaning of the film, to which Lynch never alludes in his numerous interviews. Expecting direct allusions or objective clues to straightforward actions, Lynch fans are often defrauded and puzzled even further than they were to begin with. The decoding takes place at an allegorical level, which cannot be naturalized, contrary to what Kiss and Willemsen preconize in *Impossible Puzzle Films*. In this case, the opening of a film is mostly thematic but conveyed through strategies (and characters) that recur as leitmotifs.

The Case of *INLAND EMPIRE*

The first eight minutes of *INLAND EMPIRE* (2006, David Lynch) may possibly be among the most complex and baffling beginnings in film history. Although the topic of sex is prominent—due to the presence of a presumed prostitute with a client in a hotel room, shot in black and white, and a half-naked young woman crying in front of a television set, seen in color—this sequence contains many other, and more important, elements. The subsequent presence of three giant anthropomorphic rabbits seated in what seems to be a living room

built on a theater stage and the enigmatic dialog in Polish between two men in a large and richly adorned palatial house are hardly explained in a sexual context. The said eight minutes convey the feeling that this is a rather abstract film, unlike Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Dr.* (2011), which were more life-like, although no less cryptic. This entrance into *INLAND EMPIRE*'s story world(s) highlights from the outset the idea that the film is imbued with a strong figurative meaning (or meanings).

In fact, in these eight minutes, the form of the film is revealed as being dualistic, therein laying out the real secret of the film. The male rabbit's sentence "I have a secret" is a narrative red herring, albeit important as a verbal leitmotif. Indeed, the opening segment is divided in two apparently unrelated parts, each subdivided in two others. The spaces where the action is set are different, as, seemingly, are the characters present in each. Furthermore, there is no causality between the actions and the figures that act them out. There are, nevertheless, coincidences between these two parts and subdivisions, that need to be considered, such as the use of a foreign language (Polish) and a giant male rabbit dressed in a blue suit, able to move from one scenery to another. Although the rabbit acts as the narrative divider, he also establishes a physical connection between spaces. A straight parallelism may therefore be deduced from this segmentation. A diagram helps to clarify the dualism.

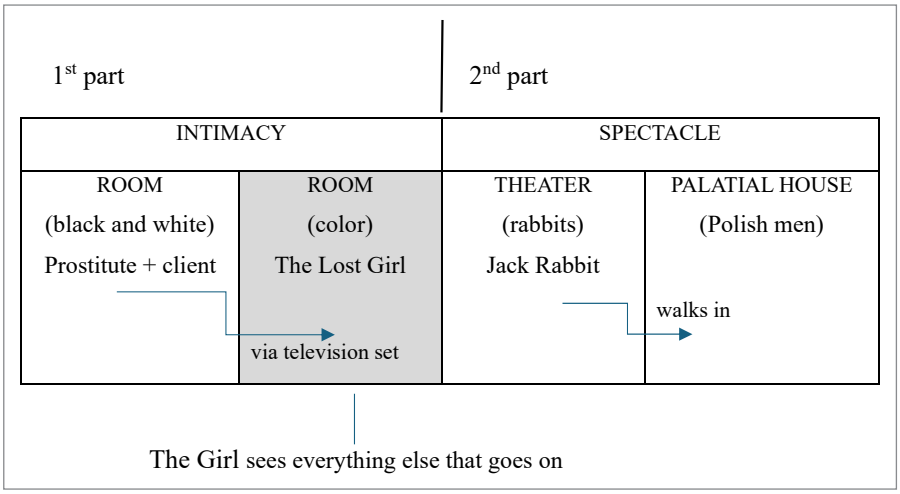

Figure 1. Dualistic configuration of the hermeneutic decoder

Both parts of the prelude are, therefore, complementary rather than independent, as also proved by the employment in them of two cinematic techniques: the visual blur and the superimposition of three images in a single shot. Equally, they use an inverted relation to color and darkness: the first part of the segment in the room begins in black and white, transitioning to color; whereas the second part, taking place in the palatial house, opens with

the salon immersed in darkness and only then becomes bathed in a resplendent light. This reveals a true "territorial" transposition, whose nature only later becomes comprehensible to the film viewers.

Likewise, in the first half of the first segment (let us call it A), the supposed prostitute of the first part optically vanishes from the couch she occupies and is substituted, through a cut, for the half-naked girl of the second part, seated on her bed (segment B of the first part). As the prostitute's face is always blurred, this could be the same person. Echoing a later comment by another character (Visitor 1)—"And then, there is the magic!"—this change is mediated by a reflexive surface: the camera lens is hit by a powerful light source, which produces a flare. The continuance of some set decoration items—such as the carpet, the couch, and the lamp (reflected in the television set)—may prompt viewers to consider the possibility of them being the exact same ones, albeit placed in a diametrically opposed position. Thus, the space could the same as well. I posit that, due to the flare and the television set, the viewers may feel they have crossed some invisible barrier, being transported to "the other side" of the set.

The same occurs in the second part of the sequence. The image fades in from black, revealing the humanoid rabbit positioned in front of a large door that provides access to a salon kept in the shadows. Suddenly, a strong projector shines on him, prompting viewers to look in that direction, toward a spatial *over there.* Inversely, when all the lights come up at once, the strategic placement of several chairs turned toward the film viewers shifts their attention to an *over here*—i.e., to what is taking place on this side of the large room. The wide shot, the frontal camera placement, and the static position of the two Polish-speaking actors turn the situation into a theatrical setting, very much like the giant rabbit's abode. The men, too, blur in and out of space, in a magical act of appearing and disappearing, like the prostitute.

In both parts of this eight-minute sequence a *before* and an *after* can be discerned, as much as an *inside* and an *outside.* This dualistic structure, which, as already pointed out, is entirely symmetrical, seems to have been conceived to unfold both a visual and a narrative mirroring. In both parts of the hermeneutic decoder there is a character who is left out, obsessively wanting to "get in," as one of the Poles, later to become known as the Phantom, declares. This is ample material to interpret the film's meaning and its thematic vectors.

Yet, as in a magician's trick—a sleight of hand, for example—the film viewers look on but do not understand what happens. Lynch shows them the elements but carefully conceals their rightful meaning. This is not only a problem of context; it is also a question of agency. In a film in which Laura Dern plays three parts—the actress Nikki Grace, the character Sue Blue, and The Battered Woman (Sue fallen into prostitution)—her absence from these eight minutes is quite puzzling. The absence of the protagonist here prevents the viewers from perceiving this film excerpt as a coded summary of the overall thematic concerns, because everyone is mainly looking for the story. Additionally, the protagonist's absence here produces a much stronger final twist in the epilogue, when she appears in the room of the

half-naked girl (fully dressed by then) and interacts with her in a metaleptic situation meant to produce an uncommon happy ending in Lynch's films.

As pointed out by Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen, who consider *INLAND EMPIRE* to be an "impossible puzzle film," there is no real narrative resolution waiting for the audience at the end of the three-hour long viewing (*Impossible*). In my own interpretation of the film, developed in depth elsewhere (Chinita 2013), a strictly factual analysis is fruitless because some aspects are deliberately made "incompossible" (Deleuze 1985)[10], as the viewers who tried to make sense of the ten clues provided by Lynch himself on his *Mulholland Dr.* DVD edition realized, much to their chagrin[11]. Indeed, the "riddle plot," a subcategory of the former genre, as posited by Kiss in 2013 ("Navigation"), remains an enigma for the film viewers, despite its cathartic value for the female principals. In truth, the film has two female protagonists, equally important as intradiegetic enunciators: Laura Dern's triple role, coinciding with different stages of a single person's life, and Karolina Gruszka's (The Lost Girl).

INLAND EMPIRE's hermeneutic decoder points to the spatial duality of the entire film in which the setting is recurrently divided into two adjacent areas, separated by a door, a window, or a screen, operating as a portal to another ontological dimension (not to be confused with a literal multiverse of parallel narrative[s]). These dimensions are as much intertwined in time as they are frontally linked in space. They replicate the cinematic apparatus of a film theater but also that of the cathodic tube, which is summoned in the opening of *Twin Peaks – Fire Walk with Me* (1992) when an axe comes crashing down on it. In short, *INLAND EMPIRE* can be interpreted as an allegory of spectatorship because film viewers are creators and coproducers of meaning, especially in complex narratives such as this one. That is why the first image of the hermeneutic decoder, and by extension of the whole film, is that of a projector beam. Enunciation, both visual and narrative, is paramount here. In fact, they cannot be separated, as the verbal radio play *Axxon N.* lets on. The ensuing record player's needle evokes both a text that is already inscribed and the very act of inscribing it. Thus, it represents storytelling in general and acknowledges the importance of the viewer's role in it.

They Key That Unlocks the Whole, or Does It?

To realize in full the importance of the hermeneutic decoder and its function and impact upon the film viewers, it is necessary to approach the film's meaning, or one of its possible meanings, since the film is a convoluted network of allegorical sense-making. I wish to focus here on two of its aspects, from an intradiegetic perspective: the duplicated gaze and the

10 According to Gilles Deleuze's theory in *Cinema 2: Time-Image*, this refers to incompatible things/events which are possible but not at the same time.

11 The clues are available online at https://screenrant.com/mulholland-drive-movie-david-lynch-clues/.

aporetical enunciation. Together, they explain the existence of a spatial dichotomy (an over here vs. and an over there) which is also an ontological one (true vs. imagined/fictional reality). The case may—and has been—made for an allegory of cinema from an industrial position (Elsaesser, "Actions Have Consequences"), but I feel the architecture of the films' segments is better explained from within the work itself—that is, from the position of its own narrative devices, conveyed through the characters that enact and/or experience them. Following Lynch's impetus to go inside, I will do so.

I should start with a brief synopsis of the story, but that is a fruitless task, because the film makes and unmakes *stories*, plural, as it goes along, both generating and destroying characters' paths while merging different ontologies. It is precisely at this most basic instance of what *goes on* that divergences between commentators begin. For now, suffice it to point out the narrative core. Lynch's film (*INLAND EMPIRE*) is about an actress who gets a role in a Hollywood film (*On High in Blue Tomorrows*), which turns out to be a remake of a previous unfinished foreign film based on a Gypsy tale (*Vier Sieben*), and which could not be completed because the leading actors were murdered during the original shooting. As perceived in the diagram bellow, Lynch's film form was wrought through extreme spatiotemporal fragmentation combined with the device of *mise en abyme.*

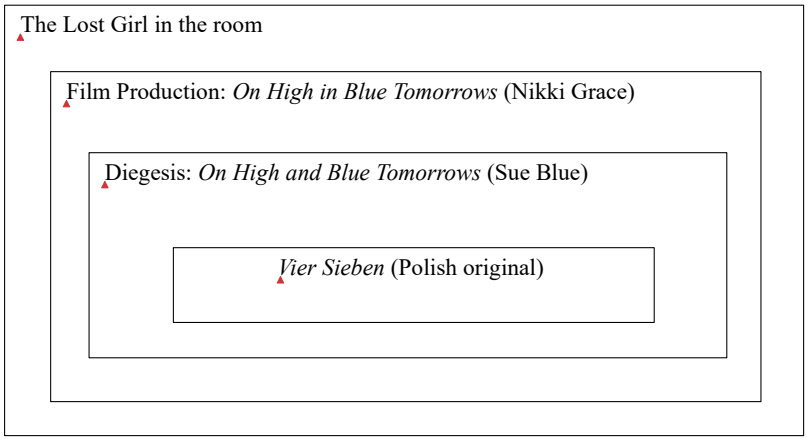

Figure 2. *Mise en abyme* and narrative levels in *INLAND EMPIRE*

This concept immediately entails what the narratologist Lucien Dällenbach, in *Le récit spéculaire* [*The Mirror Image*] (first published in 1977), considers to be two different varieties of narrative mirror images. First, Lynch's film is an enunciative *mise en abyme* in that it presents, in the diegesis proper, a duplication of the acts of production and reception which occur in all films about filmmaking, and especially in this self-reflexive one (Dällenbach 100). In this context, mental enunciation may be considered a creative act. Second, Lynch's film

also contains ample examples of fictional *mise en abyme*, which is a duplication of the act of fictionalization. These duplicated stories may be embedded either once or multiple times (in the latter case called *ad infinitum*), or else they may exist as two stories which reflect each other as two sides of the same whole taking place in two different fictional universes at once. Hence the importance of the duplicated gaze for these narrative concerns.

"Do you want to see?" is the mantra the film keeps repeating. The characters do, and so do we, the cinematic viewers. But this is a variation of another fundamental question: "Do you see?" The two questions work together in tandem: the latter is a physical act, the former a cognitive impetus to perform that act. Seeing becomes a verb with double meaning, something you accomplish with your eyes but also with your cognition. *INLAND EMPIRE* is evidence of Gilles Deleuze's twofold modern image—i.e., one which has two permanently interchangeable sides to the same phenomenon, manifested both optically and structurally, to the point of being a real "mirror-image," "symmetrical, consecutive or even simultaneous" (*Time-Image* 92, my translation). There is a reversibility between real and imaginary throughout the film which corresponds to the essence of the Deleuzian crystal-image as a circuit derived from this interchangeability of sides. "Smithy's house," for example, is seen both as a movie set (corresponding to its real dimension in the world of the film crew) and as the home of the female protagonist (a *décor*, a made-up space in a fiction). The film viewers are presented with both versions of the house enacted from the two different optical and narrative points of view, as first Nikki Grace and then Sue Blue inhabit it. Like in Lewis Caroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the mirrors (and reflexive surfaces) in *INLAND EMPIRE* not only duplicate the space, inverting it, but also function as portals to other, more imaginary, dimensions.

The song theme "Polish Poem," which Lynch purposely wrote for this film, is the best example of this deployment: "I sing this bond to you, on the other side I see." The image is composed of two sides and there is a symmetrical reality. Yet, narratively, they are not only symmetrical but also consecutive and simultaneous. Actions may have consequences, as we keep hearing characters say, but as the films proves, consequences may also beget actions. In other words, the replaying of events from a different optical and ontological perspective seems to change their chronology, were it not for the fact that they coexist. Indeed, when the character Sue looks out the window of Smithy's house and sees the sound stage with the actress Nikki on it, rehearsing her role, she hears her sentence, "Oh shit! Look in the other room," which in the economy of the script is addressed to Bill, her costar in the intradiegetic film production This indiscernibility is denounced in the hermeneutic decoder. The young crying woman, whom the viewers by now have come to perceive as the Polish female protagonist of an earlier unfinished film, *Vier Sieben*, literally disappears from the hotel room to reappear in another room (which is the same), this time in color. She materializes in a presumable "this side" as a flesh-and-bone woman. She watches television and what she sees

in it is the film *INLAND EMPIRE* itself, with the interference of static. This is therefore a sort of nonimage, nevertheless observed, and the glitch transforms a physical space into a technical medium.

There is always a duplication involved in the spatial disposition of cinematic apparatuses, notwithstanding the change in habits of consumption. All screens, from the movie theater to the smartphone, presuppose a separation between an "over here" and "over there." The fusion is only possible in an intradiegetic narrative logic, being allegorically conveyed by the film itself. The multiple looks directed at the camera throughout the film are not Brechtian distancing effects, because they do not break the fictional contract; they attain the film's viewers metonymically *through* the characters. For example, at a certain moment a female voice asks, "Who is that woman?"—a question that works as a little mystery inside the film because it is uttered more than once on different occasions. On this one, a woman is seen with her back to the camera; she is a brunette and has long hair, yet her identity is uncertain. Then, unexpectedly, a female face in close-up erupts laterally in the foreground. She looks straight at the lens and asks, "Who is she?" The film viewers realize that this specific image has several layers, both pictorial and narrative, which immediately changes its meaning for them. This is why the immersion is not precluded: we are not witnessing the author addressing us but rather a character's comment on another one. This second woman in the foreground of the image is part of a group of girls seen dancing "The Locomotion" in Smithy's house at some point, and one of the few characters allowed to look straight at the camera on several occasions. She belongs to the plot of *On High In Blue Tomorrows* whereas the brunette with her back turned to us exists in the plot of *Vier Sieben*. Here the film viewers are not confronted with an instant of diegetic suspension, but instead with a Deleuzian nonchronological temporality, with two characters inhabiting different temporal and ontological strata at the same time.[12] In fact, this second woman in close-up crouches to get a better view of the television set, implying that she is literally approaching it as a tangible, portal-like object. The frame and the apparatus are reinforced inside the film by the story itself.

Right from the start, in the hermeneutic decoder, *INLAND EMPIRE* seems to illustrate Jacques Lacan's theory of the duplicated gaze, explained in *The Four Key Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (originally published in 1964). The theory establishes that a gaze is never exerted on its own but is rather the result of an interchange of looks. Without a responding

12 Because of the combination of two different ontologies, this a more radical proposition than Deleuze himself ventured to make. This chronosign, impacting upon the order of time, is a mixture of Deleuze's points of permanent present ("*points de présent*") and the layers of past temporalities ("*nappes de passé*"). Since the original film, *Vier Sieben*—of which *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, starred by Nikki Grace, is an intradiegetic remake—remained unfinished, everything pertaining to it is always in a past temporal relation to Dern's situations in her triple role.

gaze, the initial gaze remains unacknowledged (therefore nonexistent). In this hermeneutic decoder the Lost Girl looks at the television set as much as the television set looks at her, and both perceive each other. The Girl casts her gaze—she is Lacan's "gazing point" ("*le point de regard*"), but initially there is only static emanating from the screen, a propagation of light representing the several luminous points directed at the viewer, as if the medium is looking at her. It is in those dots, operating together as a "spot" ("*tache*"), that the girl's gaze is fixed, traversing the opaque "screen" ("*écran*"), a space in between, and enabling her to see the "frame" ("*tableau*")—i.e., the content of the image as such. The intradiegetic films may then begin. In other words, the television set no longer reproduces an opaque image but begins to deploy a real representation. This provides the Girl with a correspondence as she, too, becomes seen by what emanates from the television set (in French, "*image*"). Because of the spectatorial *mise en abyme* here, the lamp reflected in the cinematic screen operates as our "spot," denouncing the *other side* as a twofold virtual world (i.e., inside the film as an artwork and inside the diegetic second room mirroring the first one). The cinematic viewers, too, watch and are wathed back.

One narrative level beneath, into the film's story of Sue, the Polish girl incites her American counterpart to see the "other side"—that is, to project her own gaze in space: "You have to be wearing the watch. You light a cigarette. You push and turn, right through the silk. You fold the silk over, and then you look through the whole." The cigarette butt is a luminescence which is a nonhuman eye turned toward this side, a spot that draws the attention of the (extradiegetic) viewer and her gaze and denounces the translucency of the medium (be it analogical celluloid or digital code). The cigarette butt traverses the field of the representation, the "image" ("*image*") attaining the viewer. This extreme reversibility corresponds to a more complex structural duplication of the Lacanian gaze. Not only does the gaze duplicate at each of the ontological levels, but it also does so between levels.

Yet, this optical dimension cannot be separated from its scopic counterpart. In Lacan's theory, the so-called appetite of the eye cannot be disconnected from the desire of the Other. The viewer wishes to go inside, which in this case equals transitioning to the "other side" mentioned in the theme song. This proves more difficult to do than to say. Except in the final intradiegetic sequence, the Lost Girl and Sue/Nikki do not physically connect, entering into contact only through mental enunciations. Were it not for time, together with the spatial crossing over and the labyrinthine route, they would not meet at all. This is where Deleuze proves essential for this equation, for Lacan does not contemplate time in his theory. The watch is necessary because the film is made of several intertwined stories, spread across several different times (as well as spaces). The Lost Girl and Sue communicate among themselves from noncontemporary universes. The watch allows for a jump in time and is an allegorical representation of the nonchronological time. The fact that the silk must be "folded over," as per the instructions provided by the Lost Girl, creates not only a fold in the image but also a spatial and temporal one, where both instances are redoubled.

The duplicated gaze has other narrative consequences in the film. As indicated by the marketing slogan "A Woman in Trouble," *INLAND EMPIRE* deals with issues of womanhood. The question to be asked here, then, is "Which woman?" The film's fan community as well as most film critics and commentators presumed it would be Nikki/ Sue/ The Battered Woman, all being played by Laura Dern, whose fourteen-page monologue originated the film, by Lynch's own admission. However, in *INLAND EMPIRE* Laura Dern is only half of the duplicated gaze intradiegetically orchestrated by Lynch, and the Polish woman is in more "trouble" than Dern's *personae.* She is the one trapped in a limbo at once spatial, temporal, and ontological. In short, "Lost," as the final credits put it. She is also, apparently, the film's diegetic enunciator. It is her mental *projection* of the film (seen first in fast motion) on the television set that seems to launch the action to which she remains a spectator. Indeed, we see Visitor 1 on the television set before she materializes in Nikki Grace's palatial home, the same being true for the Rabbits' Theater/Sitcom. This is not *stricto sensu* a reversal of cause and effect, but rather an anticipation of those actions, seen as representations *before* they take place as events. Due to the difference in the images' speed, what she sees is a physical impossibility. Hence, the images are mentally enunciated by her. However, she is trapped inside another diegetic level, as the German correlate of Sue Blue in the film *Vier Sieben*. This is a twofold paradox: (1) she is a fictional character narrating a nonfictional one (Nikki Grace); (2) the film from which she narrates remains unfinished as the real-life actors playing the leads have been, reportedly, murdered. Hardly does it get more impossible than this.

Yet, at an allegorical level, the film provides a half-satisfactory explanation in its structural combination of the embedded *mise en abyme* and the aporetic variety according to Lucien Dällenbach. On the one hand, the film seems to develop centrifugally—inward and downward—toward the most intradiegetic core of the film; on the other hand, there is a rejection of this penetrability, with doors and windows, and mostly screens, acting as conduits but also as barriers that need to be overcome to attain the "other side" of the theme song. This combination engenders an interdependence of the female protagonists, which is why the intradiegetic Lost Girl can only be freed by Laura Dern's Sue. It also generates a more complex and entirely, accomplishment: if the Lost Girl narrates Nikki, the latter also narrates the Lost Girl. Simply put, this means the film's intradiegetical narration is totally decentered: part of it is conveyed through the Lost Girl's mental enunciation and the other part from the Battered Woman/Sue/Nikki's point of view, in this exact order, corresponding to several plot twists in the film in which the viewers find themselves in another 'reality' than the one they surmised they were in. However, they only realize this at the end. Besides the authorial manipulations at an extradiegetical level—which includes the addition of a hermeneutic decoder and a final sequence set outside the scope of the story, but inside the film—the diegetic proper is thus a redoubled storytelling in which actions always have consequences

but may be presented as either the cause or the effect, depending on the narrative focus of the film and its intradiegetic narrator. Multiple embeddedness combines with multiple aporia in a process reminiscent of Christopher Nolan's curved narration in *Memento*, where the two narratives follow different directions, one of them progressing forward, in black and white, and the other backward, in color.

Hence, *INLAND EMPIRE* is a reflexive labyrinth, and the implied author is directly responsible for this complexity, which the viewers naturally want to decode. I choose to interpret the parable told by the foreign neighbor who comes for a visit at the beginning of the film (Visitor 1, played by Grace Zabriskie) as a representation of Lynch's role in this specific film production and narrative arrangement: "A little boy went out to play," she says. "He opened the door, he saw the world. As he passed through the door, he caused a reflection. Evil was born, Evil was born and followed the boy." In this allegorical authorial sense, the abuse falls on the cinematic materials themselves, and hence the allusion by the intradiegetic director, Kingsley (played by Jeremy Irons), to a haunted film that never got completed. At the time of its release, *INLAND EMPIRE* itself was deemed incomprehensible and open-ended. The aporia it sets in place is possibly one of the most complex ever seen on films: the main actors of *Vier Sieben* were killed by their own characters! Indeed, the film conveys the impression that the Lost Girl attacked the wife of her lover with a screwdriver, as she is seen going up one flight of stairs with it. Similarly, it appears that The Phantom, husband of the Lost Girl, has likewise killed the lover, as he tells his (ex-)wife the news of his rival's death. Yet the characters' existence—The Lost Girl and the Phantom—is not abolished; instead, they remain in a limbo unable to reincarnate and keep the story going, as they have destroyed their human mediums. One is turned into a voyeuristic recluse while the other is transformed into a malefic ghost. The former is ultimately set free, and the latter is shot dead, on both occasions by Dern. The metalepsis is here combined with *mise en abyme* and intercut with other layers of time, which further disrupt the order of the events and their meaning.

INLAND EMPIRE contains gaps, incongruities, downright paradoxes, and symbolical leitmotifs which simply do not conform to a logical explanation. This is exactly how Lynch wants it, which is why, in his myriad interviews, he never talks about the films' meaning(s).[13] Notwithstanding some degree of naturalization—taking place when one attributes some rather obscure occurrences to characters' dreams or memories—the fact remains that, in my opinion, this film requires an allegorical reading. This much can be implied from Davide Morello's (2009), Robert Sinnerbrink's (2011), Anne Jerslev's (2012), Brian Rourke's

13 For example, when asked directly about what *Mulholland Dr.* meant to *him*, Lynch replied (in an abridged quotation): "[...] I think they really know for themselves what it's about. I think that intuition – the detective in us – puts things together in a way that makes sense for us" (Lynch 287). "[...] 'knowing' putrefies that experience" (Lynch 288). In *Lynch on Lynch*, edited by Chris Rodley.

(2016), and Thomas Elsaesser's (2021, "Actions Have Consequences") interpretations of the film, which go beyond the literal meaning of the story into symbolical and ideological content more attuned to ideas and concepts than characters' actions.

Morello focuses on enunciation, self-reflexivity and metacinema; Sinnerbrink on a social-philosophical account of Hollywood as a consumerist locus in crisis and the film itself as "an experience conducive to thought" (141), generating an "expanded consciousness" (148); Jerslev on the new technology of digital cinema, taking the story to be "a web of overlapping screens" (6)—that is, images produced by several means, including psychological ones, where real and virtual spaces coexist (2); Rourke on a socio-symbolical background abounding in collective experiences, fantasies, dreams, old stories and folklore to the point of The Woman in Trouble resembling "more a habitus than a character" (n.p.), and Elsaesser on the institutional conditions that turn the film into a critique of Hollywood's own survival strategy in a post-truth condition.

None of these commentators looks for a literal meaning in *INLAND EMPIRE*: "The point is not whether the film makes sense" (Jerslev 3); "Such films communicate an experience of thinking that resists a philosophical translation or paraphrase [...]" (Sinnerbrink 142).[14] Following Lynch's own rejection of political ideology, I have restricted myself to narrative as an enigma, but away from a literal meaning.

To Conclude

In postmodern narratives, the hermeneutic decoder contributes to a film's narrative fragmentation and nonlinearity. It is another segment, or module, although one that does not completely correspond to the four neat categories preconized by Allan Cameron in his monography *Modular Narrative in Contemporary Cinema*: anachronic narratives, which undermine the order of events; forking-path narratives, providing concomitant versions of the same event; episodic narratives, that present causally unrelated events; and split-screen narratives in which the fragmentation occurs inside the film screen. This is not to say that these categories cannot have hermeneutic decoders, as the examples provided here have demonstrated. Yet, there are other categories, beyond Cameron's four ones, which also contain them, most notably those films in which the mixture of reality and illusion is so strong that it cannot be attributed to the change of causal order alone. In Cameron's anachronic category, a correct order of events is still discernible at the film's end, depending on the viewer's cognitive investment. Not so in films of the impossible puzzle film variety (according to Kiss and Willemsen's concept).

14 In fact, Elsaesser goes as far as reading the film as an allegory "of its complex institutional and creative feedback loops" ("Actions Have Consequences" 44).

In this category the hermeneutic decoder does not disclose the film's secret (whether it is alluded to in the work or not). For example, as already mentioned, *INLAND EMPIRE* possesses lacunae and narrative problems which simply do not conform to a logical explanation. In this case, and in many others in which reality and illusion cannot be told apart, the hermeneutic decoder acts rather as a teaser presenting the viewers with many clues that, if followed and decoded, do not amount to the film's complete story. For these cases, I argue, the hermeneutic decoder is, in fact, a major contributor to the film's complexity and cognitive inaccessibility, operating on a meaning-making level that transcends the story proper.

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