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THE GOTHIC IN DAVID LYNCH: PHANTASMAGORIA & ABJECTION

When you sleep, you don't control your dream. I like to dive into a dream world that I've made, a world I chose and that I have complete control over.¹

The more darkness you can gather up, the more light you can see too.²

Darkness and the nocturnal freedoms of the self in dream are recurrent Lynchian tropes, part of the thematic and visual chiaroscuro of "New American Gothic" literature and film. As Michel Chion has noted, Lynch's visual work may reflect his interest in romanticism but is better described as "Gothic" in its combination of "the grotesque and the terrifying, the supernatural and familiar."³ Lynch's films have frequently been identified as Gothic both in subject matter and aesthetics. The picket-fence idyll of a timeless American dream is menaced by violence and physical and sexual aberrancy. Not merely do Lynch's films flood white Middle America with anarchic and irrational brutality, but they portray it as "infested with psychic and social decay, and colored with the heightened hues of putrescence. Violence, rape and breakdown are the key motifs."⁴ Such extremist aesthetics can be seen from *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) to *Mulholland Drive* (2001). This amenability to the Gothic can be seen in the way in which *Twin Peaks* became a paradigm for late twentieth-century post-modern culture, heralding a burgeoning in "Television Gothic."⁵ Lynch's "Gothic" tendencies therefore seem clear: the dark, dramatic *mise en scene* of his cinematography; his interest in the violent and taboo forms of human behavior; the psychoanalytic structure of his narratives in which hidden and repressed desires are made horribly manifest.

Yet it is not merely Lynch's utilization of recognizable formulae that makes the Gothic crucial to an understanding of his work. Gothic is not solely a model but an artistic disposition; a set of aesthetic conceptions. Its status as a flexible and responsive mode, rather than a genre *per se*, provides a means of comprehending key concerns and cinematographic style in Lynch's corpus as a whole. Gothic's insistent rupture of system-

¹ David Lynch, *Lynch on Lynch* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 15.

² Lynch, *Lynch*, 23.

³ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 159.

⁴ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: The Gothic Tradition*, vol.1 (London: Longman, 1980) 3.

⁵ Lenora Ledwon, "'Twin Peaks' and the Television Gothic," *Literature-Film Quarterly* 21:4 (October 1993): 260.

atic knowledge by unreason, the repressed, and the abject provides a paradoxically coherent framework for Lynchian film. I will argue that the most compelling motivation for Gothic's importance in Lynch's work is its opposition to naturalist aesthetics and its refutation of realism. From *Blue Velvet* (1986) to *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* (2006), I will link Lynch's interest in Gothic tropes to his anti-realist aesthetics. Lynch's Gothic heroines crystallize his interest in the fictiveness or artificiality of cinema as a form. As an analytic tool and category the Gothic enables a reassessment of these films and their female characters in particular. Gothic's fascination with femininity and gender here illuminates Lynch's work, countering the persistent charges of misogyny made against his films. I show how Lynch's Gothic women are indicative not only of the self-conscious artificiality of his form, but are celebrated as such: these are not naturalistic "women" but celluloid phantasmagoria. Moving from the representation of Dorothy Vallens to his later heroines, I show how Lynch represents a specifically female abjection as salvaging and even redeeming damaged post-Reaganite society. The Gothic, therefore, is crucial as an ideological diagnostic as well as an identifiable schema of tropes, concerns and dispositions. As such it offers us a means of comprehending the willful perversion of quotidian meaning in Lynch's work, its stylized and stylish incomprehensibility. Gothic's repudiation of realism allows us to contextualize these films' unreason without neutralizing their affective power.

GOTHIC GENEALOGY, FROM RADCLIFFE TO *TWIN PEAKS*

As a genre, Gothic derives historically from the literature of late-eighteenth century Europe. The Gothic was a commercial "rage,"⁶ a cultural reaction to the political and social upheavals of the French Revolution, industrialization and the dominance of enlightenment reason. In contrast to the Augustan reason, order and decency that had set the standard for respectable literature, the gothic novel fuelled the reading public's insatiable appetite for scurrilous and extremist literature. Popular novels, poetry and plays concerned with dark, tempestuous romance and set in exotic locations or the imagined past saturated the market. Characterized by superstition, supernatural occurrences and the externalization of psychological or subjective states, these works aimed at the production of horror, terror and extreme emotion in their readers. Gothic literature rehearsed certain key themes such as the double or doppelganger; supernatural or ghostly visitations; villainous fathers or husbands; transgressive desires and actions. Its plots often featured the persecution or terrorization of innocents, frequently at the hands of corrupt paternal power, and the victimization of female characters. Metaphorizing the bloody turmoil of revolutionary France and the political instability of England and its colonies, the Gothic served as a talking cure for the taboo of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. Yet the tropes and subject matter of early Gothic are clearly recognizable in modern and postmodern manifestations and permutations, even as those originals have been transformed. The Gothic craze begun by Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764 has

⁶ Rictor Norton, *Gothic Readings: The First Wave, 1764-1840* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000) vii.

transformed from a disreputable genre to what is perhaps the pervasive mode of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The fascination of the ghostly, the unknown, the taboo, and the stimulation of extreme states of emotion or response are all marks of contemporary cinema and televisual culture. Once a derided literary and artistic mode is now a primary constituent of mainstream culture, as seen in the proliferation of series such as *True Blood*, *American Gothic*, *The X Files* and numerous feature length films. Contemporary American culture is in many ways fundamentally Gothic; dark, haunted by violence and transgression, self-reflexive, metaphorizing its discontents through popular media and the discourses of pop psychology. Modern Gothic represents otherness, in monstrous forms that require control or exclusion, and sympathy as an exception. For Jerrold Hogle modernity "thus constitutes and polices its boundaries on the basis of the exceptions, the others or monsters it excludes: workers, women, deviants, criminals... are produced as the antitheses fantasmatically and ideologically establishing modern norms of bourgeois rationality."

Gothic is not merely a formula. Resurrecting the irrationality that Enlightenment reason and empirical science had denigrated and excluded, the Gothic has its roots in the political and cultural reactions of romanticism. The Gothic is therefore inherently revisionist, oppositional in origin. It is part of a cultural dialectic, which raises the specters of uncontrollable passion in order to question and destabilize notions of the civilized, the orderly and coherent. Its representations of horror and fear act as simulacra of historical and social repression. From the outset, then, Gothic, is intimately concerned with power and the exercise of power on the individual subject. David Punter argues that Gothic writing and art revolves around the "dialectic of power and impotence."⁷ Its "concern with paranoia, with barbarism, and with taboo" provides the vital animus of Gothic fiction; it is "these are the aspects of the terrifying to which Gothic continually, and hauntedly, returns."⁸ Nor is the Gothic reducible to its components. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and David Punter, among several, have suggested, that the Gothic is a plurality of recognizable literary or formal codes. For Sedgwick Gothic provides a set of converging or associated set of themes negotiated by different verbal / non-verbal conventions. In a supplemental fashion Punter sees the radical discontinuities of Gothic literature as exposing and highlighting the fragmentation of the individual subject, opening up ruptures as *problems* rather than hermetically sealing them in an autonomous art form. But as Robert Miles has convincingly argued, the generic flexibility and thematic obsessions of Gothic works actively problematize the deployment of accurate critical tools: the focus on subjectivity threatening to dehistoricize a heterogeneous multiplicity of works. Miles' Foucauldian genealogy enables a historically embedded theory of influence, revision and intertextuality whilst allowing for the further complication of the shift from text-based Gothic to a film Gothic.

⁷ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: The Modern Gothic*, vol. 2 (London: Longman, 1996) 184.

⁸ Punter, *The Literature of Terror: The Modern Gothic*, 184.

Lynch's *Twin Peaks* series is undoubtedly responsible for the infiltration of mainstream culture by Gothic tendencies, effectively normalizing the abnormal. Writing on the cult of *Twin Peaks* and its overwhelming and unprecedented popularity, Lenora Ledwon identifies Lynch's "new Television Gothic" as one that produces "familiar Gothic themes and devices such as incest, the grotesque, repetition, interpolated narration, haunted settings, mirrors, doubles, and supernatural occurrences."⁹ The claustrophobic Palmer household is a quintessentially Gothic construct, with its overbearing, sexually abusive father and the dominated but vital young woman. Transposing the Gothic from its exotic, often Continental, old world locale, Lynch intensifies its effects by refusing the displacement found in pre-Victorian Gothic in which taboo or repressed subjects are negotiated through an apparent alterity. Andreas Blassman has called the series a "Gothic soap opera" and *Twin Peaks'* hybrid of domestic, relational drama and uncanny, malevolent archetypes re-charted the acceptable generic conventions for both TV and film. Yet whilst Hartman and Ledwon's identification of Gothic motifs is certainly utile and indeed valid, their insistence on thematic continuity obscures a fundamental aspect of the Gothic as a sophisticated *discourse*. If Gothic's energy derives from the "relentless exposure of the paucity and deception of traditional criteria of realism"¹⁰ its discourse is one that seeks to expose conventional visual form, to expose and de-authenticate moral, social, and formal archetypes that have been naturalized as accurate representations of reality. Lynch attempts this via a sophisticated and dizzying countermanding of the components of the Hollywood machine.

Therefore, his explicit Gothic themes and motifs are inextricable from controlled cinematic artifice, his dark materials of celluloid and fantasy. For Lynch, TV and films are stage-managed dreams; a haunted territory whose revenants are disturbingly self-conscious. Indeed, David Foster Wallace describes "Lynchian" as "particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter."¹¹ Though it is debatable whether the macabre is "contained" by the mundane, Lynch's films certainly posit a relationship between the two. The irony that structures Lynch's films is part of a very Gothic paradox in which self-reflexivity generates humor as much as darkness: it depends upon gathering darkness to make sense of the light. Yet the morbid comedy of Gothic co-exists with its channeling of the subconscious, though "much of its content streams forth from the unconscious, but is carefully channeled by the hyperconscious."¹² Here the Gothic can be seen to approach self-parody in its tendency toward excess. Both *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet* solicit the archetypes of wholesome 1950s America, creating a form of nostalgic atemporality populated by clichés exaggerated to grotesquery. Lynch excels at a form of Middle American kitsch – picket fences and manicured lawns, coffee and pie, good-girl, cheerleader chic of Sandy and Laura Palmer, the earnest decency of Jeffrey Beaumont and Agent Dale Cooper

⁹ Ledwon, "'Twin Peaks' and the Television Gothic," 260.

¹⁰ Punter, *Literature of Terror* 2, 143.

¹¹ David Foster Wallace, "David Lynch Keeps his Head," *A Supposedly Fun Thing I Will Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 2009) 161.

¹² Norton, *Gothic Readings*, xii.

all recognizable tropes. Yet, as in the Gothic Novel of the eighteenth-century, nostalgia is a means of negotiating generic and existential crisis. Lynch's films are not set in the present but they nonetheless conjure archaism. This nostalgia is a variation on what Susan Stewart calls "distressed genres,"¹³ works that invent their own "temporal grounds" in order "to conceive of its own context as being encapsulated within the form of representation."¹⁴ Lynch's retro-land is an eternal present whose terms are not temporal but imagistic, imaginary, and purely artificial. Its context is cinema, artificiality: a phantasmagoria corresponding to subjective desires and fears rather than a correspondent objective reality. The Gothic obsessively reworks older forms, layering interpretation and metatextual narrative into a dizzying fabrication. In this way Lynch's films are part of a Gothic discourse that presents the instability of contemporaneity through the formal appropriation and détournement of golden age Hollywood.

Viewing Gothic as a primarily self-reflexive and artificial form allows us to reconsider Lynch's cinematic style and content. In her discussion of the uncanny in *Blue Velvet* Laura Mulvey notes the film's clear binary oppositions, topographical as well as psychoanalytic, commenting that "the specific formal properties of cinema"¹⁵ play a central role in structuring connections, resonances and the plot itself. Mulvey's reading locates the cinema itself as a locus for the symbolic rendering of the unconscious. In this way, the dark, undulating material of the opening credits conjures not only sensual pleasures and linking to its use as a sexual prop within the film, but it also recalls the veil that covers both the theatrical stage and that of the cinema screen. The veil itself has a Gothic genealogy. Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* contains a "black veil" appearing to conceal a painting. Presumed by the heroine to cover a representation, a picture – a mimetic likeness – it inspires fascinated curiosity and horror. Momentarily brave, Emily lifts it to see beneath and perceiving that what concealed "was no picture,"¹⁶ falls away in a faint. In Radcliffe's novel terror stems from the idea that if what is hidden is *not* a representation, then it must be a "real" body. Terror stems from the possibility that what lies beneath the veil of representation is the horror of the "real." Jeffrey Beaumont's love of mysteries in *Blue Velvet* and his desire to "see something that was always hidden" may seem to recall Radcliffe's dispelling of supernaturalism through empirical reason, but what Jeffrey sees is fundamentally staged, artificial. Dorothy Vallens is woman as masquerade: a consistent spectacle, a self-conscious role within the visual economy. The much-analyzed close of *Blue Velvet* is most convincing as a Gothic parody. The anti-naturalistic appearance of Sandy's dream robins at the close of the film signals the form's inherent artificiality, its status as contrivance and entertainment. It is the re-statement of its context as aesthetic. The robins are as un-nerving a corrective to the happy ending as a dark or Gothic resolution. As Steven Dillon has noted, Lynch's directorial habits repeatedly display ideological

¹³ Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 66.

¹⁴ Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, 73.

¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London: British Film Institute, 1996) 152.

¹⁶ Ann Radcliffe, *Udolpho* (London: J. Limbird, 1826) 197.

and stylistic affectation: "Lynchian weirdness appears theatrically, not naturalistically."¹⁷ Again, Dillon echoes Lynch's own description of the film as a "dream world" controlled by the director. This is not a simple subconscious mode used to represent inchoate emotions, but "the staged quality of the dream."¹⁸ The film concludes by refusing realism and reinstating fantasy. Whilst Radcliffe seeks to dispel her heroine's horror by revealing what lies behind the black veil to be no more than a wax model, Lynch opens *and* closes *Blue Velvet* with the soft ripples of the curtain. The veil remains, the robins sing.

Twin Peaks excavates the constructed nature of reality through a hyper-artificial and stylized exploration of images. Like *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks* refutes the constraints of realism, transforming what is ostensibly an investigation into something approaching paranormal transcendentalism. *Twin Peaks* displays a Gothic mistrust of objective sensory data as a reliable source of knowledge about the world, as seen in Cooper's intuitive readings and Log Lady's spiritualist messages. In its privileging of subjective, often prophetic or intuitive forms of knowledge, *Twin Peaks* implies that realist cinematography is not merely inadequate but misleading. Instead, Lynch at every turn reminds the audience that his work is phantasmagoria, illusion and artifice. If one is to perceive the truth the screen must foster a radical mistrust in its audience; a dark misgiving over the images presented to them. Critical disappointment and anger at *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* was in part a response to its Gothic rewriting of *Twin Peaks* rather than a conventional prequel. The characters of *Twin Peaks* are themselves "incoherent, fissured, interrupted, multiple and self-critical,"¹⁹ unfamiliar even to themselves. The scene at the Bang Bang Bar is an instance of Lynch substituting images for objective knowledge. The disorienting aural onslaught overpowers verbal audibility. As the music plays, Laura Palmer discusses Theresa Banks' death, her words impossible to hear under the pulsations of the music; the scene shot in blood red, the corpuscles of the screen itself seeming to throb with lurid desire. Lynch makes the film a process to be undergone rather than analyzed. This is not our dream, and we have no power to request clarification. Lynch risks our alienation in order to achieve our awareness, the striving of the viewer who attempts to piece together background noise, music, the voice beneath the image. Though understanding is refused, the harsh discordance of this scene is intensified by a radical lack of anything to hold it together other than the screen and the viewing subject. The horror here is in the breaking apart of the traditional unity of image and what Chion calls "visualized sound."²⁰ Here the Gothic affect is directly reliant on the fragmentation of our senses: it is our subjective look that remains as traditional screen co-ordinates de-cohere. This elevation of subjective agency seems like a version of the sublime – the reactivation of mental energy in the face of aesthetic power. Indeed Martha Nochimson's romantic description of the gaze in Lynch is couched in the self-same discourse:

¹⁷ Steven Dillon, *The Solaris Effect: Art and Artifice in Contemporary American Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006) 88.

¹⁸ Dillon, *The Solaris Effect*, 88.

¹⁹ Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 122.

²⁰ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 101.

"Longing to see... ceases to depend on human control and moves toward involuntary transportation beyond ordinary limits into a Lynchian contact between logic and the subconscious."²¹

Yet the sublime, of any form, is not unambiguously positive: in essence it is a transaction of power that involves subjection to the screen image, and a relinquishing of agency that is in itself problematic and liable to resistance. This can be seen in the representation of Laura Palmer at the close of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, where the broken and abused schoolgirl is subjected to pursuit and battery by the predator now revealed as her Father. At the moment of death, Laura's companion receives exculpation by an angelic figure from the picture on Laura's wall. Laura herself is transformed into a heavenly creature: purged of material grossness she achieves a form of religious apotheosis, shining, other-dimensional. This foreshadows her iconic representation throughout the *Twin Peaks* series where her silent corpse garners the allure of a frozen Madonna. Such anti-realism oscillates between morally queasy specular pleasures and the offer of pure escapism, the spectator of Lynchian film is radically compromised and profoundly self-conscious. There is no supremely powerful point of view; whilst certain characters are given preeminence, this is often undermined and problematized by a radically non-individuated camera gaze – mobile, yet non-editorial, non-narrative, almost detached. Emma Clery has argued that the Gothic mobilized the sublime as a "solution to the defects of a commercial society" (104), its re-affirmation of the individual subject proving a bulwark against the alienating effects of capitalism. In contrast, the Lynchian Gothic sublime leaves us bewildered, impotent – aware of its status as *ex machina*. The viewing subject is left with a sense of the inadequacy of comprehension: the dramatic residue of pessimism.

FEMALE GOTHIC AND THE OBJECT

From its very origins Gothic has been associated with problems and explorations of gender and power. This raises questions as to whether Gothic is "possessed by or possessive of women...[whether there is an] intrinsic link between femininity and the Gothic imagination...because Gothic imagination is peopled by women."²² The centrality of women in eighteenth-century Gothic literature can be seen in how its focus is often on "corruption in, or resistance to, the patriarchal structures that shaped the country's political life or its family life."²³ As is clear, Lynch's cinematic fascination with women places them at the heart of his Gothic aesthetic: as objects whose performative qualities exemplify the tension between depth and surface, nature and artificiality, and as subjects whose emotions, fears and perceptions generate the atmosphere and structure of his dreamlike films.

Lynch's experimentation with the subject-object relationship is undertaken primarily through the prism of female characters. Moers argues that

²¹ Martha P. Nochimson, *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997) 78.

²² David Punter, "Death, Femininity and Identification: A Recourse to Ligeia," *Gothic: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. F. Botting and D. Townshend (London: Routledge, 2004) 156.

²³ Donna Heiland, *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 5.

historically “female Gothic” views women from a woman’s perspective, but more importantly gives “visual form to the fear of self.”²⁴ The terror evinced by the veil in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is paradigmatic of this type of Gothic: focused in the scopic drive, the fear produced in female Gothic is founded on the indescribable, a fear which terrifies and compels. Unlike the “Terror-Gothic” found in Lewis’s *The Monk*, or contemporary horror films, “the female Gothic depends as much on longing and desire as on fear and antagonism.”²⁵ The strangely seductive menace of his films relies on the creation of “female Gothic,” one in which erotic obsession is produced in tandem with a profoundly disquieting fear. In *Blue Velvet* Dorothy Vallens’ role is as sexual fetish: male desire triangulated around her person. Yet Lynch includes the polar opposite to Jeffrey’s voyeuristic complicity in her sexual perversion by including Sandy’s revulsion. When Dorothy appears toward the film’s end, battered, naked and desperately declaring her love to Jeffrey, Sandy’s disgust is clear – “I love you, but I can’t watch that.” The simultaneous disgust and desire that Vallens provokes in characters is mirrored in the viewer’s discomfort: we are both voyeuristic *and* moralistic. The inclusion of Sandy’s perspective complicates what would otherwise be a simple construction of the male gaze. Lynch therefore innovates the gender allegiances that would typically be associated with “female Gothic,” enabling a profound ambivalence on the part of the audience.

The power of this ambivalence is the lure of the abject. Vallens’ open, desirous, yet victimized body is the axis for Lynch’s Gothic abjection. Canonically, the abject is that which we must expel from ourselves in order to *be* an individual subject. The abject is that which must be rejected and defined as other to establish a proper self, expelling the phantasmatic and imaginary contents of non-individuality found at the pre-oedipal stage. The re-appearance of the abject exposes the artificiality of the boundary between self and other; provoking the revelation that what we exclude from our self-definition is “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself... Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.”²⁶ In “Approaching Abjection,” Julia Kristeva calls the abject a horror that is “as tempting as it is condemned ... a vortex of summons and repulsion.”²⁷ The prospect of “engulfing” of the self threatens self-loss, dissolution and debasement. The abject – that which is cast off – thus proffers an ambivalent means of both defining the self, and of debasing it to the point of un-selfing. To abject is to separate, reject – to *be abject* is to be “repulsive, stuck, subject enough only to feel this subjecthood at risk.”²⁸ Lynch’s work revels in abjection – the suspension of temporal, spatial and subject-object relations – with the intention of provoking a particular engagement from his audience. In essence, Lynch attempts to engender abjection in his viewer.

²⁴ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York, Doubleday, 1986) 106, 109.

²⁵ Clare Kahane, “The Gothic Mirror,” *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 342.

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 4.

²⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.

²⁸ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1996) 156.

If the abject is experienced as a cognitive disturbance in which the coordinates of reality and identity are thrown into doubt, the subject becomes aware of a gap, or lacuna in the real. The incoherence of sense opens up anxiety as the rational epistemic system is thrown into doubt. The components of traditional narrative cinema (sound, plot, image etc) are deployed by Lynch in an antagonistic fashion. The Lynchian "look" is a scopical relation in which the viewer "hangs in an essential vacillation on a fantasy."²⁹ Lynchian cinema is designed to abject its spectator.

However, unlike many avant-garde artists, Lynch does not repeatedly deploy "shocking" or obscene images, but he does prioritize the imagistic over the narrative. Lynch's Gothic focus on the signified above the thing itself approaches what Hal Foster calls the "artifice of abjection":³⁰ an aesthetic signaling the collapse of the system of representation. In all of Lynch's films we are faced with the dissolution of perceptual codes and the end of signification as a stable set of sign and signified, emptying out. Yet Lynch eschews the shock-value of obscenity: his films invoking glamour as frequently as grotesquery. Here Kristevan abjection helps elucidate Lynch's Gothicism, and his depiction of women in particular. Martha Nochimson reads Lynch's depiction of feminized, often vatic characters (such as Log Lady and Agent Dale Cooper) as a refutation of the Cartesian self, and a demonstration of the energies of a non-coherent subjectivity. The female Gothic's stress on the visual as locus of experiential horror is complicated by the way Lynch portrays his female characters as celluloid constructs, as objects of desire which invite abject responses in his audience – both male and female. Lynch's films create a viewing dynamic, which though "pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is the woman as representation/image that crystallizes this paradox."³¹ This paradox is supremely Gothic and mobilizes the abject as the means of its horror.

So whilst female characters most frequently produce this look, male characters are subject to its disorienting effects. In this way *Lost Highway* is a narrative of Gothic abjection that subjects the audience, via its male character, to the dizzying effects of abjection through his relationship with a Gothic female. Renee Madison, as played by Patricia Arquette, is a 1940s femme fatale whose brooding sexual attraction and emotional hauteur elicits a dialectical emotional reaction in which the viewer and Madison "oscillate between both attraction and repulsion, worship and condemnation."³² *Lost Highway* doubles Arquette as Gothic woman: both wife and whore, brunette and blond, each an artificial creation – a cinematic fantasy. Madison/Wakefield is an ambivalent character, one which inspires fascination which propels the narrative toward the dissolution of erotic thanatos. Object of uncanny desire, Wakefield is a cipher whose attraction deconstructs male subjectivity in its compact of sexual availability and psychic absence, whispering to Pete Dayton at the climax of lovemaking "You'll never have me." The pivotal importance of these female archetypes seem to bear out Laura Mulvey's critique that in cinema

²⁹ Lacan, qtd in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 212.

³⁰ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 153.

³¹ Mulvey, qtd in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 202.

³² Punter, *Literature of Terror*, 190.

women are commonly “the bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning.”³³ Yet Lynch’s heroines are the bearers of non-meaning, icons whose allure triggers crisis in the viewer.

In true Gothic fashion, *Lost Highway* substitutes “transformation, condensation and projection for clearly defined patterns of cause and effect,” prioritizing “subjective experience and the dynamics of inner life”³⁴ for definable causal relationship. As the Gothic aesthetic is one of violent contrasts, Lynch continually emphasizes the relationship between those contrasts. *Lost Highway*’s multiplication and subsequent fusion of personae, its dereliction of chronology and the embrace of the uncanny are part of a systematic disruption of the normal and normative boundaries of the self. The voice from the empty street on the intercom that initiates the film’s spiral into murder confuses and disorients because it is already known. Knowledge is *a priori* in the film, whilst understanding is not. Chronologically the film works backwards toward the primal horror, the founding violence, which is repressed at the beginning by the surface of bourgeois life. At root, *Lost Highway*’s horror is entirely abject. The gap between power and powerlessness narrows, as the rebirth as Pete Dayton suggests that the secure demarcation between self and other, husband and murderer, is ultimately imaginary. Dayton’s eruption as self and narrative from Madison’s incarceration is “some spooky shit” – inexplicable and haunting. The lack of explicable continuity between the film’s two sections reveals the arbitrariness of cinematic narrative as well as the vulnerability of subjectivity, the way in which our coherent construction of the world is based around our imaginative actions. The narrative expresses subjective suture, a metaphor “for the relation of a subject to a signifying chain... the impulse to coherent identity which...must maintain itself through the gaps of difference.”³⁵ Lynch makes suture visible – showing the breaks in that chain, the stitchmarks of identity and culture so often hidden in the seamless selves of Hollywood. *Lost Highway* de-authenticates not only the idea of self, but space, sound and vision are similarly deracinated. The disembodied voice on the intercom from the empty street is the initial sign of the inadequacy of objective rational data. This moment is the dizzying “emptying out of the object...a horrifying moment of the birth of a new space which ruins habitual space.”³⁶ Lynch uses technological dislocation to summon up the effects of the supernatural:

Mystery Man: Call Me. Dial your number. Go ahead.

[Fred dials the number and the Mystery Man answers]

Mystery Man: [over the phone] I told you I was here.

Fred Madison: [amused] How’d you do that?

Mystery Man: Ask me.

[Fred remembers the anonymous video tapes]

Fred Madison: [angrily into the phone] How did you get inside my house?

³³ Qtd in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 198.

³⁴ Steven Jay Schneider, *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud’s Worst Nightmare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 4.

³⁵ Lindemann, qtd in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 170.

³⁶ Parveen Adams, *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1996) 154.

Mystery Man: You invited me. It is not my custom to go where I am not wanted.

Fred Madison: [*into the phone*] Who are you?

[*Both Mystery Men laugh mechanically*]

Mystery Man: Give me back my phone.

[*Fred gives the phone back*]

Mystery Man: It's been a pleasure talking to you.

Bemusement turns to anger following the recognition of Madison's powerlessness – the gothic joke is on him. The Mystery Man's ghastly appearance recalls the ghoulish villains of Hammer Horror, his sinister demeanor and cryptic omniscience at once compelling Madison to question him and to flee him. The Mystery Man's doubling enables him to speak from within the home, communicating with his other: "Call me. Dial your number." Madison's question, "Who are you?" is redundant and met with "mechanic" laughter. Like Freud's uncanny automata, the Mystery Man mimics vitality whilst spreading a deathly contagion. Madison's visceral disgust at the Mystery Man is an attempt to separate the self from what already infests it – psychic decay, violence and sexual jealousy. The surplus that the abject creates distorts the object of his desire, Renee Madison becomes the degenerate Alice Wakefield, a violent and sexually exploitative woman. Madison's complicity with the Mystery Man is his subsumption by the abject. Fleeing from the desert where Dick Laurent has been murdered, the camera films from the interior of the vehicle, the white road markings flashing up in an infinity of movement through fluid darkness. No defining landscape is visible: instead Badalamenti's music wells up mournfully over a prolonged shot and credits. Space, time and self have been undone. The close of the film ends in psychic limbo, a total "dislocation of spatial, physical, and fantasmatic coordinates."³⁷ This is dénouement as anti-resolution: knowledge is circular, obsessive, abject. Eschewing closure, Lynchian Gothic opens up abjection's temporal and existential abyss.

GHOSTS AND THE MACHINE: LYNCH'S GOTHIC PHANTASMAGORIA

Neighbor: A little boy went out to play. When he opened his door, he saw the world. As he passed through the doorway, he caused a reflection. Evil was born. Evil was born, and followed the boy.

Nikki: I'm sorry, what is that?

Neighbor: An old tale, and a variation. A little girl went out to 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.³⁸

Dialogue as aporia and imagist nightmare is another of Lynch's characteristic traits as a filmmaker. Lynch's films stage a confrontation in which both audience and protagonist are presented with systems of signification (whether musical, visual or linguistic) that seemingly refuse comprehension, transparency and reciprocity. Yet these systems' obduracy, opacity

³⁷ Fred Botting, *Limits of Horror: Technology, Bodies, Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008) 10.

³⁸ *Inland Empire* 2006.

and multiplicity also compel and seduce. Nikki's neighbor's narrative comes from nowhere in the conversation they are having within a setting of starched neighbourly politeness. The eruption of dark narrative is symptomatic of Lynch's production of Gothic menace and atmosphere in the saccharine technicolor of the Hollywood dream. The fairy-tale archaism of the old woman's story carries with it the freight of archetypes and symbols, acting as a foundation myth for something as vague and as concrete as "Evil." Her explanation, that it is "an old tale, *and* a variation" implies an incipient doubleness: Gothic tales are always familiar, repetitive, identifiable as such, and open to appropriation. *INLAND EMPIRE* and *Mulholland Drive* is late Lynch's Gothic diptych. Both films explore cinema as a realm of Gothic opposition to realist aesthetics – focusing on the confusion and absorption of fictiveness, artifice, symbols. By rendering Hollywood and the film industry the site of postmodern Gothic horror Lynch transposes traditional, old world Gothic onto the new. As in *Mulholland Drive*, the film demonstrates a "poetic reliance on intensity of imagery, the violence, supernaturalism, and vivid coloring of legend and folklore."³⁹ From this perspective, *Mulholland Drive* is a fairy tale of Hollywood: the story of the self negotiating and destroying itself through the Gothic misprism of cinema. Steven Dillon's outstanding analysis of *Mulholland Drive* as a deconstruction of the cinephilic fantasy reads the film as reflection of the director's love of the screen, its ability to permeate our conscious and subconscious life, to mould and distort through its seductive images, its immaculate imaginary. For Dillon, *Mulholland Drive* explores our ability to feel intensely about that which we know is unreal, despite or because of its unreality: the film is not only "a nightmare of love, but a nightmare of artifice."⁴⁰ Filmed in his signature palette of technicolour clarity, and Hollywood style, Lynch also steeps *Mulholland Drive* in the pooling darkness of his earlier films. If *Mulholland Drive* is indeed a film about artificiality, its exposure of the solitary pleasures and sadness of film is double-edged; implying at once that what we watch is fantasy and illusion, it poses the Gothic possibility that there is no alternative to this artifice.

Central to Betty and Rita's story is the Hollywood film industry, the economic, imagistic and technological apparatus that creates and sustains the artifice of beauty that Betty so desires, and whose projections structure her dream-like story. Arriving in Los Angeles, Betty represents herself as a sweet ingénue whose aspirations to stardom will be rewarded by the traditional format of Hollywood filmed narratives. Yet benign coincidence is swiftly belied by the rage, impotence and confusion of Betty as she meets and falls in love with Rita, whose dark beauty and amnesia are emblematic of the two-dimensional erotic fantasies of cinema – she is what Betty wants, not a subject. Named after the femme fatale flick *Gilda* (1946), Rita is a commercial product torn from the screen. The intensity of Betty's feelings are incommensurate with Rita as a person, but reflect the voracious, illogic of obsessive desire, of the loss of self in the abyss of idealized love. The uncanny, convoluted love affair detours into a degrading obsession and murder is highlighted, as in *Lost Highway*, by the Gothic effects of technology. Lynch's interest in the technological un-

³⁹ Punter, *Literature of Terror*, 182.

⁴⁰ Dillon, *The Solaris Effect*, 91.

canny is clear from Rita's murmured "it's strange to be calling your self" as she makes the call to an answering machine, while the violent shifts between conventional Hollywood film style and hand-held camera foreground the technical contrasts of the film. Lynch's emphasis on the texture of technology, its ability to produce effects beyond the real stresses the power of artificiality – its sinister allure most powerfully rendered in the *No hay banda* section of *Mulholland Drive*. Set in a film noir theatre full of the deep hues of cabaret decadence, Betty and Rita watch a performance that is entirely artificial – whose simulated music is merely lip-sync and acting, and which proclaims its fabrication as a condition of the audience's enjoyment and absorption. Directing the audience with the gravitas of a priest or a TV host, the MC declares "*No hay banda*...it's all recorded; it is all a tape: it is an illusion." Sung in Spanish by Rebecka del Rio, "Llorando" is a version of Roy Orbison's "Crying" – "an old tale, and a variation." The intensity of del Rio's performance, which almost consumes her in a melodramatic faint, brings both women to an ecstasy of tears. Two beautiful women weeping at a simulacrum causes a profound surplus of emotion, as Lynchian Gothic approaches the sublime even as it undercuts the stability of the transcendental with the mundane. The aural artifice recalls Man Ray's "Tears," its aestheticized glass drops on a woman's face more beautiful and evocative than the real tears of human sentiment. The imagery and symbolism of the *No hay banda* section underscores the illogical but overwhelming emotions of the Gothic – its ability to inspire emotion due to its artificiality, problematizing the emotion felt by the audience aware of its formal aesthetics.

Film-critic Stephen Holden calls *Mulholland Drive* an "ever-deepening reflection on the allure of Hollywood and on the multiple role-playing and self-invention that the movie-going experience promises... What greater power is there than the power to enter and to program the dream life of the culture?"⁴¹ The uncanny ability of the artificial to penetrate not merely into our subconscious, but to structure our desires and emotions, is a Gothic trait. Cinema is the post-modern phantasmagoria – the early nineteenth century technology used to entertain and terrify, to allow audiences to see their fears and to produce responses through visual and aural machinery. Art historian Henri Focillon described the representational power of objects as a spatial and imaginary eruption into the real. "Form prolongs and diffuses itself through our dreams, we regard it, as 'twere, as a kind of fissure through which crowds of images aspiring to birth may be introduced into some indefinite realm."⁴² The "fissures" caused in the somatic imaginary of the viewers of early phantasmagoria and contemporary cinema alike can be seen as generative, creating a populace of phantoms seeking habitation in the real. Robert Miles' recent work on the link between Gothic and romantic phantasmagoria suggests a rich connection between the increased visuality of culture and the rise of the Gothic as a pervasive commercial form. Focillon's use of fissure to describe the aesthetic's ability to open up in the subconscious mind

⁴¹ Stephen Holden, "Hollywood Seen as a Funhouse of Fantasy," *New York Times*, 6 Oct. 2001: 13.

⁴² Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. C.B. Hogan and G. Kubler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942) 3.

associates it further with the abject. One literal meaning of phantasmagoria is an assembly of ghosts: early magic lantern shows often represented death masks of animated simulacra of the dead. In this way, Lynch's creation of dream worlds structured by sight and experience directly relate him to Gothic's infancy, its fascination with the spectral and its imbrication in commercial activity.

If *Mulholland Drive* rewrites Los Angeles as the City of Nightmares, its concern with phantasmagoria is part of a desire to make the audience more conscious of the corruption of dreams. The film's dizzying plot shifts, and alternate realities jostling against one another, culminate in pessimism about the gloss of the cinema. Betty's suicide is the climax of a solitary fantasist. *INLAND EMPIRE* continues Lynch's investigation into cinematic Gothic. The choice of Laura Dern to play Nikki highlights the director's self-reflexivity, his referencing of his earlier work in what seems like an auto-cento of the Gothic sections of *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway* and *Wild at Heart*. In many ways *INLAND EMPIRE* is Lynch's most Gothic film since *Lost Highway*. Moving away from his trademark camera style, *INLAND EMPIRE* uses digital camera to draw attention to film's visual surface, its artificiality as a form. Instead of the technicolor hyper-reality of earlier works, Lynch's film is grainy, muted in palette and production value. Beginning with European footage resembling a snuff movie opens the film, the film replaying in its obscure menace. Initially without context, it becomes clear that the film Nikki is acting in is a re-make of an original German film, itself based on a Polish folk-tale, in which someone has died. Nikki's dreams or rememberings of a previous European existence resonate in the film's present through the figures of her sinister husband, and the ancient Neighbor who tells her "there is a murder in your film...brutal fucking murder!" Nikki's peculiar existence becomes more and more somatic, her affair being undertaken as if through a haze of dream, the repetitions and surreal transmissions of the "Rabbit Ears" sequence creating an atmosphere of almost unsustainable horror in which time and experience are repeatable, obscure and fantastical. The camera and film itself become gothic agents which actively obscure and distort the subject and her relationship to the world, even as they grant that subject centrality and meaning.

INLAND EMPIRE pushes Nikki to the limits of characterization: victimizing and abusing her through marital intimidation, through the resurgence of a buried alternate identity and the threatened supernatural curse of the original film, 47. Her status in the film is almost impossibly refracted: "I'm a whore. Where am I? I'm afraid," and yet Dern retains the level of performative artifice – what we might call "star quality" to justify and retain the camera's gaze. It is arguably due to this noumenal quality that Lynch returned to Dern for this role, since the film travesties the delights of Hollywood still further. Broken, dying on a street that is also a screen-set, Nikki is not resuscitated or revived: as extras around her discuss their performance, her death appears "real," a token either of the power of narrative or of the fatal toll such cinematic fantasies can take.

The final frames of the film constitute an idiosyncratically Lynchian moment. In an incredible sequence, which travesties the glamour and choreographed ecstasy of a Busby Berkley special, twenty cheaply dressed and provocatively made up women dance to "The Locomotion," as Laura

Dern gazes beatifically at the camera. The spectator is literally elevated as the camera POV rises above the surreal scene, and the accompanying aural candyfloss. This is a phenomenal close to a seemingly dark and complex film in what is arguably Lynch's most abrupt and wonderful shifts in tone. The intensely stage managed feel of this final scene refuses to allow the viewer a continued absorption, or the option of clean catharsis. Instead we are returned to the artifice of the screen, and the fact that the Gothic heroine we have been watching for over two hours is an uncanny double – an actress, rather than a character. The Gothic horror of the film is transmuted in its final sequence, which at once intensifies our confusion and disgust and yet also proffers us a state of bliss and joy, even if that spectacle is debased. The discordance of this moment is a quintessentially Gothic celebration of the inextricability of contrasts – Dern as whore and as glossy film-star, as proper middle-class wife and adulteress – and one based on a kitsch celebration of Gothic irony. Whether this makes the fantasy-element of the resolution a problem, or allows the viewer to accommodate its status as wish-fulfillment or illusion is questionable. What it unarguably does is to highlight cinema as visual phantasmagoria – a media which produces pleasure through artifice and the content of which should not be confused with “the real” but confronts the viewer with his/her emotional and cognitive confusion as a prime result of the spectacle. We are not provided with any clear position for comfort or indeed of identification. Both Nikki's death, and that of Laura Palmer are staged, symbolic acts rather than realist or even plot-driven deaths. *INLAND EMPIRE*'s finalé confronts us with the cheapened extras of transcendental epiphany in a fantasy world where “stars make dreams, and dreams make stars” is a statement of profound anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Lynch's shift toward feminocentric narrative is synonymous with his exploration and exposure of the technology of artifice in cinema as a form. The economy of excess, repetition and abjection developed in his films since *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* is inherently Gothic in its militant anti-realism. Portraying film as the ultimate in phantasmatic projection, Lynch extrapolates the cultural and personal abjection resultant from our misrecognition of the dream-screen for the real. That two of his female characters, and one of his male, suffer forms of amnesia suggests that the supersaturation of images has destroyed the solid, coherent self of traditional cinema. His representations of phantasmatic women imply the darkest truth of all, that artifice might be the dominant means of negotiating identity and abjection. Countermanding ideal images in service of cinema of ambivalence, confusion and symbolism, his films creates a phantasmagoric confusion of cinematic representations and subjective hallucinations: mental phantasms as entertainment, and vice versa – and both are capable of being sold. These cinematic fantasies fuse the two contraries of Lynchian aesthetics – the mawkishness of sentimentality and the terror of the Gothic –in the erotic phantasmagoria of liminal and vulnerable women.