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Spring 2025
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David Lynch's *Inland Empire*: Abjection, Flesh, and Cinematic Metamorphosis



The Painter's vision is a continued birth.¹

What can David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006) teach us about cinema's relationship to mutation and mediation? How does the film evoke questions of inscription and mimesis, horror and abjection, structural surface and the simulacra? Broadly, I situate Lynch's final cinematic project within a discursive field of digital *deformation*, intuitive dream logic, and post-surrealist imagery. *Inland Empire* is an open-ended *mise-en-abyme* of digital new media and disjunctive memory events; a cyclically redemptive narrative unfolding across a porous landscape of hyperlinked screens.

In this way, I read Lynch's project through a phenomenological lens wherein *the fantastic*, virtual perception, and *the abject* triangulate. To accomplish this task, I import the theoretical work of Tzvetan Todorov, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Julia Kristeva. With Todorov, the *fantastic* as genre is organized through indeterminacy, a hesitation between spheres of the supernatural and natural world. For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenological interfacing reconfigures the spatial politics of *being*, spectrality of the eye, and receptivity of embodiment. Kristeva's psychoanalytic discussion of abjection—bodily excess, 'exorbitant outside-ness,' and gendered ego dissolution—reach apotheosis in the wounding figure of the corpse.

I argue *Inland Empire* discloses a mordant cinematic worldscape operating across transmedia discourse: a liminal aesthetics of glitchy discorrelation nominally called the technological-fantastic (Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images*, Duke University Press 2020). Through careful analysis of virtually animate *mise-en-scene*, shifting diegetic characters and script, and uncanny audience participation, I suggest Lynch's penultimate work (third installation in the Los Angeles trilogy) is a kaleidoscopic encounter that disintegrates any stasis of fact and fiction, reality and illusion. Ultimately, the film aspires to transcend both the medium and frame alike. Lynch's project is a poetical conflagration of form and content in tandem. The auteur's uncanny, axiomatic statement: "You can even rehearse while you are shooting," further informs my intervention.

¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. *The Primacy of Perception*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 168.