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The aesthetic potential of self-reflective film: artificiality and alienation in *Inland Empire*

-Jan Bert Rahder-

David Lynch's most recent feature film *Inland Empire* (2006) does not live up to the Hollywood norms of coherent plot development, consistent character identities, and consistency in regard to the film's world(s). This is attained, I propose, not only through the film's narrative structure, but through visual elements as well. The self-reflective nature of some of *Inland Empire*'s images can be seen in line with the tradition of films, initiated by Political Modernism in the 1960s, which seeks to criticize the status of the image as it is presented by Hollywood-produced films. A self-reflective image – making the methods that go into the production of the image visible – breaks with the illusion of reality, presented by the film. Such self-reflective images have an impact on how a film is experienced and how film is discussed as an art form. Compared to the techniques which are known to be part of this tradition – a visible camera; an actor looking directly at the camera; disjunctive editing; considerable gaps in the narrative – *Inland Empire*'s self-reflectivity is brought about through something else: Lynch's use of film sets. Lynch's contribution to film's self-reflective potential needs to be acknowledged, in order to fully comprehend the functionality of self-reflective elements. Self-reflective elements affect the viewing experience and (can) evoke an alienation effect in the viewer, by breaking the illusion of reality. In this thesis, I will therefore try to answer the following question: in David Lynch's film *Inland Empire*, how are film sets used to emphasize the artificiality of the medium, thus (potentially) evoking an alienation effect in the viewer?

In order to answer this question I will analyze several scenes, taken from *Inland Empire*. This visual analysis will primarily focus on the appearance of the film sets and on the ways in which they appear on screen. The visual analysis will be followed by an intertextual analysis. My hypothesis is that *Inland Empire*'s subtext partially consists of the mise-en-scene used in TV soap operas and sitcoms, and that this subtext is one of the causes for self-reflectivity and alienation. To support this argument I will interpret the stylistic elements of the analyzed scenes, by comparing them to the mise-en-scene from soap operas/sitcoms. The latter will be characterized with help from Jeremy G. Butler, professor in Television/Film studies, who wrote a book on the stylistic elements of soap operas, entitled *Television Style* (2010). His conceptualization of the sort of mise-en-scene inherent to soap operas will be used to analyze how some of *Inland Empire*'s film sets emphasize the artificiality of the medium.

For the interpretative parts of my analysis I turn to Daniel Yacavone's article on *film worlds*, in which he tries to capture the essence of film's expressive and immersive aspects, meaning the ways in which a film captures the viewer's attention through presenting a (fictive) film world. Yacavone approaches film in a philosophical manner that can be seen in line with philosophers and film theorists such as Stanley Cavell and André Bazin. I will follow Yacavone's line of thinking and through my visual analysis I will try to add relevant interpretations to his analysis of *Inland Empire*'s film world. As I will try to show, the

experience of *Inland Empire*'s fragmented film world(s) is supported by the alienating nature of the film sets, resulting in an aesthetic whole.

The first chapter features a historical/cultural description of the tradition of (stylistically seen) politically engaged films, followed by an introduction of Lynch's work and how it can be related to Political Modernism. By thus placing Lynch's film(s) in association with the genre of Political Modernism, it becomes apparent that the biggest part of *Inland Empire* fits the tradition. With these considerations in mind I will conduct a visual analysis of *Inland Empire* in chapter two. In the last part of my thesis I will relate the results from the visual analysis to the first chapter's contextualization of *Inland Empire*. As it will turn out, Lynch distinguishes himself from the tradition of self-reflective, politically engaged films, with *Inland Empire*. In the conclusion I will reflect upon my visual analysis and thus engage in answering my research question.

Chapter 1: Cultural-historical Context

In order to understand Inland Empire and its self-reflective elements, the film must first be placed into the cultural-historical context of self-reflective film. This first chapter will address the historical context of self-reflectivity in cinema and its similarities with Lynch's way of filmmaking. I will start by shortly explaining the historical advances that have been made since the 1920s, in light of self-reflectivity in theatre and film. Secondly I will introduce David Lynch by putting his work into the aforementioned cultural-historical context.

1.1: Brecht and Political Modernism

Self-reflectivity in art, be it in painting, photography, theatre or film, is an effect through which the artist or director can create distance between the work and the viewer. An image reflects upon itself by making its artificiality apparent to the viewer, which causes the viewer to take a critical stance, rather than being immersed in the illusion of reality. Each discipline has its own ways in which self-reflectivity can be achieved. Furthermore, self-reflectivity is often utilized as a means to criticize and go against the mimetic and immersive nature of art. An early theoretical approach to self-reflectivity in film can be found in Bertold Brecht's study *Epic Theatre*.

Brecht, surrounded by the 1920s modernist climate, opposed himself to the established theatrical conventions of his time.[1] Brecht interpreted the traditional or 'Aristotelian' theatre as a political commodity, because the spectator's solely role is to identify with the fictional characters and to accept the premises of the fictional world without questioning.[2] With his *Epic Theatre* Brecht tried to break with these traditional norms of theatre being absorbing and hypnotizing, creating the illusion of reality. To achieve this, he developed certain techniques which would lead to what he labeled as *Verfremdungseffekten*: 'alienation', 'estranging', or 'distancing'.[3] Through this effect, the audience would develop a critical stance towards the actions on stage and therefore would be able to grasp the larger (political) forces at work behind it. This would enable the audience to understand the ways in which the play is a fictionally constructed apparatus. My goal is to point out similarities with techniques used in *Inland Empire*, in pursuance of exposing the foundations of *Inland Empire*'s self-reflective elements. Brecht's approach to break with the illusion of reality was enthusiastically received by a group of filmmakers in the 1960s, who brought Brecht's techniques into play in their quest for breaking that same illusion that also became a part of classical filmmaking.[4]

One of the most notable figures in this development is the French film director Jean-Luc Godard. In order to make the audience reflect in a similar manner as Brecht did, filmmakers such as Godard used techniques such as disjunctive editing: visible editing, interfering with

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[1] Christopher Innes. (2001) 'Theatre after Two World Wars', in: *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*. John Russel Brown (ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press: p. 403.

[2] David Bordwell; Kristin Thompson. (2010) *Film History: An Introduction*. 3rd edition. Singapore: McGraw-Hill: p. 521.

[3] Ibid: p. 521.

[4] Ibid: p. 521.

the film's narrative.[5] Godard was part of the counter-culture of the 1960s. 'Political Modernism' is the term that is most associated with the filmmaking movement that coincided with the counter-culture. The Political Modernists wanted to express their politically radical ideas and the radical forms of film that they employed served these goals.[6] The Brechtian techniques that they incorporated in their films allowed them to create a sense of ambiguity in regard to the film's images, to transform character subjectivity – preventing the viewer to identify with the film's character(s) – and therefore to force the audience to adopt a reflective outlook towards the cinema screen.

Another technique that filmmakers utilized for the sake of critique was 'collage construction'. The assemblage of incoherent bits of film would emphasize the disjunction between images—a critical stance towards the 'natural' linkage between images in classical Hollywood cinema. By applying this technique the spectator would be forced to make an "imaginative leap".[7] This imaginative leap can lead to all sorts of interpretations, as the spectator's own experience with film will determine the nature of the way in which the spectator will 'fill in' the gap. Regardless of whatever interpretation this Brechtian device might lead to, the spectator will always be forced to actively think about the film's plot and form. Although slightly differently executed, this technique and other Political Modernistic techniques, such as 'distancing', are well represented in David Lynch's movies – especially in *Inland Empire*, which I will introduce in relation to this historical/cultural framework.

1.2: Lynch in Perspective

I will start by relating *Inland Empire* to Lynch's previous two films, *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Lost Highway* (1997). *Inland Empire* shares many similar plot elements with *Mulholland Drive*. For instance, both films' main characters struggle with their career as actresses in Hollywood. An even more striking similarity is the way in which Lynch tells, or shows us their struggle for success- and with reality. The relatively straightforward first half of *Mulholland Drive* tells the story of novice actress Betty Elms (Naomi Watts) who moves to Los Angeles and gets offered a film role. Furthermore, she falls in love with a woman who tries to get her identity back after she lost her memory in a car crash.[8] The leading interpretation of the much less coherent second half concludes that the first half takes place in the fantasy of failed actress Diane Selwyn (also Naomi Watts). This distinction between fantasy and reality is also seen in Lynch's *Lost Highway*.[9] Notice the paradoxicality that the main characters' fantasy worlds make much more sense than their realities, in terms of visual coherency and logical plot development. The illusion of reality is hardly broken in these segments, until the key moment arrives where Lynch discards all logic and chooses to show us the 'real' reality in an often disturbingly confusing manner. Lynch's break with a logical

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[5] Ibid: p. 521.
[6] Ibid: p. 520.
[7] Ibid: p. 524.
[8] Todd McGowan. (2004) 'Lost on Mulholland Drive: Navigating David Lynch's Panegyric to Hollywood', in: *Cinema Journal*. Vol. 43, No. 2. University of Texas Press: p. 67.
[9] Ibid: p. 67.

plot, coherent editing and montage thus leads to a break with the illusion of reality and can therefore be seen well in line with the methods of Political Modernism in the 1960s.

Inland Empire takes the friction and discrepancy between reality and psychologically constructed fantasy a step further. Again we are introduced to two characters: actress Nikki Grace and her film role, Susan Blue (both played by Laura Dern). This time it is not only the viewer who is brought into confusion about the 'real' identity of Nikki. She herself struggles to get a hold of reality and tries to cope with her creative process as an actress.[10] This serves as an instrument for Lynch with which he challenges and criticizes the traditional narrative structure and character development that belongs to classic Hollywood cinema.[11] To elaborate on this I will make another comparison between the *Inland Empire* and *Mulholland Drive*. As Todd McGowan has argued,

> "This role of fantasy becomes apparent in the way that fragments of experience from the second part of Mulholland Drive are elaborated on in the first part. This process is crucial to the subject's ability to make sense of a situation: we understand and discover meaning because fantasy provides the background for fragmentary experience."[12]

The subject's ability to make sense of a situation is almost completely defied in Inland Empire, because there is an almost complete lack of coherency among the scenes and sequences throughout the film, with exception of the film's second half hour. The aforementioned 'imaginative leap' technique seems to be put into full effect in this case. This effect is not only reached through montage and the way of storytelling; Nikki's multiple 'roles' are left unexplained, as is the nature of the relation between them. As my analysis will show in the next chapter, *Inland Empire*'s visually stylistic elements contribute to this as well.

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[10] Martha P. Nochimson. (2007) 'Inland Empire', in: *Film Quarterly*. Vol. 60, No. 4. University of California Press: p. 10.

[11] Russel Manning. (2011) 'The Thing about David Lynch: Enjoying the Lynchian World', in: *The Philosophy of David Lynch*. Devlin, William J.; Biderman, Shai. (eds.) University Press of Kentucky: p. 63.

[12] McGowan. (2004): pp. 73-74.

Chapter 2: Visual Analysis

"Now, you know some stories, but stories are stories, Hollywood is full of them. […] Stories which grew out of imagination. We're surrounded by these stories every day and they shouldn't be taken as truth."

-Cameron Daddo as Devon Berk's manager in *Inland Empire*.

In his book *Film, Form and Culture* (2006), Media Studies scholar Robert Kolker concludes his plea for the ambiguity of *the image* with the words: "An image of the thing is not the thing."[13] Building on Kolker's argumentation, I argue that an image is more than the sum of its parts: what an image depicts can contain many referents to other images. According to Kolker it is *mediation* that separates the image from actual reality.[14] My argument is that it is not only mediation that contributes to this separation, but it is also the (mediated) image itself. People make associations based on their personal experiences with visual culture and these experiences are inevitably connected to each other, on account of the world's extensive visual culture. In the words of Ryan Bishop:

"[…] the history of reproduction actually also provides the history of production (the two sides of mimesis are the same), and we judge the verity of the image by its relation to the memorio of visual history as much as, if not more than, to any external referent."[15]

Following this line of thinking, one can conclude that an image should not be taken as a valid representation of reality: it should not be taken as truth. An image of the thing is *more than* the thing, as is the case with *Inland Empire*'s imagery. The scenes, from which I will analyze the use of film sets, consist of images that represent anything but reality. Furthermore, they demand the viewer to reflect upon the image and on his/her history of experiencing visual culture. In this chapter I will continue to explain this argument more thoroughly in relation to *Inland Empire*. There are four different notions which I will connect to one another, in the following order: *the image*; *distancing*; *self-reflectivity*; and *film worlds*. The descriptions of these notions and their connection to *Inland Empire* will be illustrated with screenshots from a number of scenes from the film. Visual analyses of each of these scenes will support my arguments.

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[13] Robert Kolker. (2006) *Film, Form and Culture*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill: p. 13.

[14] Ibid: 13.

[15] Ryan Bishop. (2013) *Comedy and Cultural Critique in American Film*. Edinburgh University Press: p. 64

2.1: The Image

A great amount of articles and books have been written about the image, in terms of aesthetic properties, realness/reality and (re)presentation. Photography's ability to capture reality has been debated since its emergence and this applies to cinema as well. Film added movement and temporality to the image and this made the medium highly mimetic, because it made the image look even more real. Butler writes: "Film-as-art was thus established in terms of how film artists *transformed* reality through style, how film images *differed* from reality."[16] The emergence of television (TV) added a feeling of immediacy to the image. Since TV derived from radio, it was primarily seen as a transmission device. It's fundamental ability is that it can "transmit events that occur simultaneous to the time of viewing."[17] This understanding of television does not apply anymore to its current state, with quality TV-series and High Definition televisions (TVs). However, my point is that TV's immediacy still remains partially present – think of the news channels – and its stylistic elements remain to be a source of inspiration for filmmakers such as Lynch.

2.1.1[18]

2.1.2

The TVs that appear in *Inland Empire* not only function as transmitting objects, they also fulfill a role in the overall narrative as objects that defy and/or transform temporality and spatiality. *Inland Empire*'s second scene introduces a character credited only as The Lost Girl (Karolina Gruszka), sitting on a bed and silently crying in front of a TV set. Among the images that are shown on the TV there is a fast forward shot that reappears ten minutes later, this time in full screen (2.1.1; 2.1.2). The Lost Girl does not reappear after this scene until the last half hour of the film. Consequently, the shot-reverse-shots of The Lost Girl looking at the TV imply that the majority of the film takes place on a meta-level.[19] Yet, as the film nears its ending, the suggestion that *Inland Empire*'s action is consequently framed as being part of the imagery shown on The Lost Girl's TV gets rejected. Nikki, who has hitherto only been present in scenes that are suggested as part of the 'TV-world', enters The Lost Girl's room and this image is simultaneously played on the TV in the room, creating a loop of images

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[16] Jeremy G. Butler. (2010) *Television Style*. London/New York: Routledge: p. 1.

[17] Ibid: p. 1.

[18] Screenshots of *Inland Empire* by Jan Bert Rahder.

[19] Daniel Neofetou. (2012) *Good Day Today. David Lynch Destabilises the Spectator*. Winchester: Zero Books: p. 15.

(2.1.3). The viewer knows now that the two worlds are in fact part of the same world. The implication that The Lost Girl is witnessing the majority of *Inland Empire* on her TV remains valid in this scene, but the TV as mediating object seems to interrupt this illusion. The TV's narrative function stays unclear and this leaves the viewer in uncertainty about the true nature of the TV's mediating abilities.

The viewer's uncertainty in regard to the instable (fictional) identity of the film's characters seems to be brought about through narrative *and* visual means. The Lost Girl's TV set and its imagery are fundamental to the cause of this uncertainty. An apprehension of the film in absolute terms remains absent when the credits start rolling. Daniel Neofetou, filmmaker and author of the book *Good Day Today, David Lynch Destabilises the Spectator* (2012), argues for an additional understanding of that same uncertainty: "Despite their form implying the comfort of omniscience, then, the (Lynch's) films force the audience out of such a position."[20] The viewer is forced to take distance from the film's action and this leads the viewer to reflect upon what is shown, and how. The status of the image in *Inland Empire* is therefore one of instability. Self-reflectivity and the means through which this effect is reached are the main reasons for- and results of this instability. I will continue this argument in the following paragraphs.

2.1.3

2.2: Distancing and Self-reflectivity

As explained in the first chapter, *distancing* is one of those Brechtian techniques that enable the director to create distance between the viewer and what is shown on screen. When the viewer feels alienated from an image and therefore reflects upon it, it means that the desired effect of distancing is reached. Godard used similar principles to keep the audience from

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[20] Neofetou. (2012): pp. 16-17. Parenthesization by Jan Bert Rahder.

being wholly absorbed in the immersive aspects of his films.[21] Self-reflectivity is then a more specific technique, which can be employed to create a similar kind of distance. Distancing and self-reflectivity seem to be intertwined closely, but they bring on slightly different results. Whereas distancing often implies a political attitude, self-reflectivity tends to have a larger aesthetic potential, particularly its quality to make the audience feel alienated. Here the effect of 'alienation' is meant different as to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. For Brecht it functioned as an effect through which he could present the audience an insight in social *reality*.[22] Again it is an effect infused with political means. My understanding of the term is similar to Sigmund Freud's concept of *Das Unheimliche*, translated as the uncanny.

An uncanny feeling can explain the reason(s) for alienation. It is the kind of alienation which creates distance between subject and object, but this separation is preceded by something that unconsciously appears to be familiar; something hidden away which does not immediately make itself present. One of the most commonly used examples is "the double".[23] When seeing two persons that look alike, one might say "the resemblance is uncanny", meaning that it is an inexplicable, incomprehensible feeling to experience. We can speak of an uncanny experience when something that appears to be strange, or unfamiliar, simultaneously appeals to an underlying sense of recognition. It is comparable to a déjà-vu, but the process which causes the feeling is different and the result is a feeling of alienation. One might find something in a film that is strange, because it is new, or unfamiliar – and often horrifying – but at the same time it appears to be strangely familiar without any given explanation. In order to explain how an uncanny feeling is reached in *Inland Empire*, I will strip down the following image and determine the nature of the (un)familiar visual aspects.

2.2.1: The *Rabbits* set in *Inland Empire*.

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[21] John Mullarkey. (2009) *Refractions of Reality. Philosophy and the Moving Image.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan: p. 33.

[22] W. A. J. Steer. (1968) 'Brecht's Epic Theatre: Theory and Practice', in: *The Modern Language Review*. Vol. 63, nr. 3. Modern Humanities Research Association: p. 639.

[23] Sigmund Freud. (1919) *Das Unheimliche*. Translated by Alix Strachey. P. 10.

Lynch's self-described "9-episode sitcom" *Rabbits* (2002) features a family of rabbits who live and behave in a fairly human manner.[24] Lynch re-used scenes of *Rabbits* – some identical, some altered – and placed them in *Inland Empire*. Four minutes into the film we see The Lost Girl watching TV. The TV's static interference fades out until there's a room visible with two rabbits in it. The frame is now completely filled with the shot of the rabbits. A couple of seconds later the door opens and a third rabbit enters the room, guided by applause coming from the audience that is suggested to be present at the shooting of this 'sitcom'. The shape and size of the room and the presence of a couch suggest that it is a living room the rabbits are in (2.2.1). The onscreen lightening comes from two lamps; there is no light coming from the window on the right. It is not the most revealing abnormality, but the room lacks a ceiling. This accentuates the artificiality of the living room: we are not looking at a living room, but at a construct. The same could be noticed when watching a sitcom like *Friends*, where, as is the case in many sitcoms, the ceiling's solely function is to support the lightening and it is therefore not visible inside the frame (2.2.2). It is a representation of the stereotypical living room, designed in such a way that it offers a lot of practicalities for filming. The same goes for the absence of the other side of the room. This sort of 180 degree room limits the physical movement of the characters. It is a technique that is often used in the production of soap operas, because it minimizes the possibility of action and this causes the audience to focus on the dialogue.[25] This then resulted in the so-called 'talking heads' television; most of the shots are close-ups of the character's heads. This is not the case in the *Rabbits* scenes. How does all this relate to the self-reflectivity of the image?

2.2.2: The set of Monica and Rachel's apartment in *Friends*. Source: http://whatculture.com/tv/5-reasons-why-a-friends-movie-sadly-wouldnt-work 25-05-2016.

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[24] http://www.lynchnet.com/rabbits/ 26-4-2016.
[25] Butler. (2010): p. 40.

First of all, the camera does not take in another position, nor does it zoom in- or out. In combination with a lack of details, especially when compared to the *Friends* set, it reinforces the artificial appearance of the room. The set of *Friends* (2.2.2) is a detailed representation of a living room, thus creating a 'reality effect', whereas the *Rabbits* set is anything but detailed, thus making the artificiality of the image apparent.[26] The first scene in which the rabbits appear is approximately five minutes in length and this is offers the viewer enough time to take in all that is to see. Additionally, Lynch does not give enough clues for a straightforward interpretation of the *Rabbits* scenes in relation to the film's narrative. Therefore, and because of the immobility of the camera, the scene's images are potentially self-reflective. An image is, according to Kolker, always a "representation of a mediated transmission […], appearing to be the thing itself, though, in reality only its image."[27] Mediated images are culturally accepted as 'real', but in fact they always appear to us indirectly. Self-reflectivity is then the effect through which this invisible mediation becomes visible. Self-reflectivity in this case is attained through the aforementioned elements that expose the artificial nature of the *Rabbits* scene.

Secondly, the *Rabbits* scenes share both visual and auditory similarities with sitcoms. The characters rarely move and the shot does not change in angle or depth, which draws the viewer's focus to whoever is speaking, notably to the laugh track – a common attribute to sitcoms. The 180 degree set and an absent ceiling are additional supporting elements that assist the argument that the cause of alienation in this scene can be looked for in its subtext: the sitcom. In combination with the visual similarities to sitcoms, as described in the previous paragraph, the laugh track is the deciding component of an uncanny feeling. The viewer perceives the image as a collection of disintegrated fragments from visual experiences, supported even more by the typical laugh track. Because of the fast manner in which this process occurs, it is the viewer's lack of time in which he/she tries to place the 'familiar' elements which results in an uncanny feeling. Parts of the scene are familiar, because they lay claim to the viewer's background in visual culture, but they are overshadowed by an overwhelming feeling of alienation, caused by human-looking rabbits having an absurd conversation that gets randomly interrupted by the laugh track. When combined, this results in an uncanny feeling. Throughout the rest of the film the appearance of the room does not change much. It is rather the placement of the *Rabbits* scenes within the whole of the film and its plot which changes and leads to new observations. As the film's ending approaches the uncanniness of the *Rabbits* set takes a different shape.

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[26] Roland Barthes. (1968) 'The Reality Effect', in: *The Novel. An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000.* (2005). Richard Howard (tr.); Dorothy J. Hale (ed.). Wiley-Blackwell: pp. 230-231.
[27] Kolker. (2006): p. 13.

2.2.3

2.2.4

After the scene in which Nikki shoots and kills The Phantom (Krzysztof Majchrzak), a character that has been haunting her throughout the film, the *Rabbits* set reappears (2.2.3). The rabbits slowly turn their heads towards the opening door, from which, seconds later, a bright light starts flickering. The next shot shows Nikki entering the *Rabbits* living room (2.2.4). Both the hall from which she enters and the living room are now lit up. It is unclear what causes Nikki to look so horrified. There is a short moment between this scene and the next, in which a bright light is visible. The shot of Nikki looking at 'something' and the light shining on her face imply that she is looking at the light. The light reappears several minutes later, but this time the camera zooms in on the light and just before the shot changes there is a round outline visible. Its function and its origin remain uncertain in the narrative, but my suggestion is that it is a camera light. There are a couple of elements that support this argument.

We know that The Lost Girl is watching the *Rabbits* scene on her TV and the sitcom-esque look of the rabbits' living room suggests that it is a 180 degree room. This would correspond with my interpretation of the 'thing' Nikki is looking at: a filming camera. Following this line of thinking, it would make sense that the images that are shown on The Lost Girl's TV are suggested to be shot with the camera that Nikki is looking at. The two times the camera is visible in between the scenes it interrupts the illusion of a coherent whole. The term for such an event in narrative theory is *metalepsis*: "a breakdown of the boundary between levels of narration."[28] The camera's ontological status – it films, but it never reveals itself – changes. It is an unusual image to see in a movie, in the sense that it, especially in this case, reveals methods of production that are inherent to the shooting of the scenes. The camera as narrator suddenly appears to the viewer and Lynch offers no guidelines as how to interpret this emergence. This evokes an alienation effect in the viewer. Firstly because of the camera's unexplainable appearance, and secondly because its relation to film's production process causes self-reflectivity. Self-reflectivity will continue to be an important angle from which I approach *Inland Empire* throughout the rest of this paper. I will continue, however, with a description of the concept of *film worlds*, followed by an application of that concept on *Inland Empire*.

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[28] Elaine Freedgood. (2010) 'Fictional Settlements: Footnotes, Metalepsis, the Colonial Effect', in: *New Literary History*. Vol. 41, No. 2. New Sociologies of Literature: p. 398.

2.3: Film Worlds

My understanding of the term 'film world' comes from Yacavone's article *Towards a Theory of Film Worlds* (2008). He suggests that film worlds are "complex object-experiences with both symbolic/cognitive and affective dimensions."[29] Building on Yacavone's ideas, I will now point out the most important aspects of film worlds and how they must be understood in the context of this paper.

Film's objective being and its subjective experience are both connected to self-reflectivity, says Yacavone.[30] This puts the viewer in the center of the process of creating and experiencing a film world's reflective elements. This view upon self-reflectivity is thus perceived through context: a viewer's experience with a wide net of film worlds contributes to the viewer's ability to understand film worlds such as that/those of *Inland Empire* as an aesthetic whole, rather than seeing it as an isolated object.[31] The viewer's knowledge of various film worlds and of the real world shapes the viewer's experience of a specific film world. However immersive a film world might be, the viewer is always entrusted with his/her own values and ability to reflect upon the experience with that world. Even regarding fantastic film worlds, such as those of *Avatar* or the *Lord of the Rings* series, one inevitably judges the verity of the images and of the actions that take place in those worlds. The unspoken 'rule' is that everything that is not articulated or made clearly visible in a film world, is assumed to be similar to the real world. For example, Harry Potter can make an object fly with his wand, but in the film's world he himself cannot fly without a broom. *Inland Empire* defies this 'rule' many times, because there are rarely explanations given for the sudden changes between sets, characters and plotlines. The scenes that I will introduce next are examples of the fragmented film world of *Inland Empire* and they will demonstrate the relation between film worlds and self-reflectivity.

2.4: *Inland Empire*'s mise-en-scene: an expressive world

When Nikki and Devin Burke (Justin Theroux) are rehearsing a scene from the film-within-film 'On High in Blue Tomorrows' in a Hollywood studio, the director's assistant Freddie hears a noise. Devin follows the sound of footsteps and ends up walking towards the front of a set house, with nothing but empty space and a wall behind it. "Disappeared where it's real hard to disappear", says Devin as he walks back to Nikki and the film crew. Half an hour later in the film we see Nikki walking into the same studio and she sees herself and Devin rehearsing. The noise that they previously heard and the sound of footsteps appear to be coming from Nikki herself. The 'second' Nikki flees and runs through the door of the set house. This time it is not just a front; she ends up in a parallel universe: Smithee's House. Nikki opens the curtains and sees Devin on the other side of the window looking in. She screams 'Billy' at him – Devon's film-within-film character – but he does not respond. The

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[29] Daniel Yacavone. (2008) 'Towards a Theory of Film Worlds', in: *Film-Philosophy*. Vol. 12, No. 2. University of Edinburgh: p. 83.
[30] Ibid: 103.
[31] Ibid: 103.

door through which Nikki enters Smithee's House leads directly to the living room (2.4.1). The onscreen lightening comes from a small lamp near the window, and from an unknown light source outside the window. The anonymity of that light source is a point of discussion.

2.4.1: The set of Smithee's House in *Inland Empire*.

Prior to the interior-shot we see the reflection of a light on the outside of the window (2.4.2; 2.4.3). When Nikki opens the door again—this time from the inside—there is light coming through the door (2.4.4). The camera stays inside and films Nikki through the window as she walks out of the house. The studio from which she entered the house seems to have disappeared and has been 'replaced' by a gated front yard (2.4.5). Is the light shining through the open door coming from the same artificial light that was clearly visible before Nikki entered the house, or are we actually looking at a different location and is it natural light, which falls on the outside on the house? We might even be looking at three different locations: the Hollywood studio, the interior of Smithee's House and a front yard. The yellow curtain is the only reoccurring element in all three shots. Either way it is an openly visible error in continuity and this does not allow a homogeneous film world. This scene therefore evokes the question of what is real, and what is unreal?

2.4.2

2.4.3

2.4.4

2.4.5

The second scene at Smithee's House adds tension. Prior to this scene we see Nikki in casual clothing cooking breakfast and speaking with a different accent. There are no identifiable signs of this scene as being part of the film-within-film, such as Devin, a visible camera or the director yelling "cut". This uncertainty allows the next Smithee's House scene to be increasingly alienating. Nikki enters the living room again, this time with a bag full of groceries. The living room is no longer a strange place for Nikki; rather, she seems to be coming home. Same as with the previous scene, Lynch does not provide the viewer with enough clues to be certain of which world is shown, that of Nikki's character Sue, or that of Nikki's fragmented subjective view. Rather, the viewer is granted an encounter with the artificial nature of the image. We as viewers are left alone in our judgment of the verity of the image. Everything that is shown in relation to Smithee's House therefore opens itself up for questioning. Errors in continuity, different characters played by the same actress, and a focus on the artificiality of the shot—these factors invite a critical stance towards what is shown on screen. I will continue with focusing on visual indicators of artificiality in the next paragraph.

My suggestion is that the artificiality of Smithee's House is not only attained through montage or through gaps in the narrative, but through pure visual elements as well. For one, the other side of the room is never visible, which adds credibility to the suggestion that this living room is a made set. Secondly, there is the bland look of the living room: its walls and door are pink, the floor is fully covered with carpet; the curtains are closed in both scenes; there are hardly any decorations; and the furniture is in an outspokenly seventies style.[32] Such an appearance is comparable to the look of living rooms in sitcoms. Furthermore, the space is shallow and confined—two characteristics that belong to the mise-en-scene of soap operas.[33] The bland, 'homey' look of the living room adds probability to this relation. Smithee's House is the most basic, stripped down representation of a living room. Generally it is not just the materialistic properties of the set design that shape the viewer's interpretation of the image. The filmmaker's stylistic choices result in a sense of authenticity as well.[34] Lynch, however, seems to play with this distinction: he made the set look like a set. The subtext of soap operas

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[32]

https://www.google.nl/search?q=seventies+furniture&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiUha2v_b3MAhUHORoKHQHtA6cQ_AUIBygB&biw=1366&bih=643 3-5-2016.

[33] Butler. (2010): 38.

[34] Miriam Bratu Hansen. (2012) 'Theory of Film', in: *Cinema and Experience*. University of California Press. P. 262.

and sitcoms plays a considerable part in this, because it reduces the verity of the film set, through the increase of artificial elements. I will continue with explaining how this can be understood in light of self-reflectivity.

When Nikki enters the house in the second Smithee's House scene, differently dressed, with groceries and without the anxious expression on her face she had before, the ambiguity of the image cannot longer be ignored by the viewer. This cannot be the same character we are looking at. The leading assumption would be that Nikki is in fact playing the role of Sue, her film-within-film character, because she dresses and speaks differently. As I mentioned before, Lynch does not grant us with enough information to be certain of this assumption. This uncertainty forces the viewer to actively think about what happens on the screen. This is one of the effects of self-reflectivity. The self-reflective aspect is attained through the physical properties of the set, in the manner that I mentioned before, and through the transformation of character subjectivity. The following quote, taken from Yacavone's article on film worlds, explains how Lynch transforms character subjectivity through the use of multi-faceted architectural spaces in his films and it further explains the alienating processes at work in the Smithee's House scenes.

> "[…] within this series of shifting represented world-spaces or scenes that Nikki moves through, a number of architectural spaces literally or metaphorically double as cinematic spaces, wherein the temporal experience of film viewing in general, and the viewing of Inland Empire itself, is externally projected."[35]

Laura Dern's character's identity fragments together with the world as she (and we as viewers) know it. Yacavone makes a valid point by adding the "temporal experience of film viewing in general" to his argumentation. Because of this external projection, the viewer gets compelled to view *Inland Empire* from the inside looking out, while simultaneously reflecting upon the film's action.[36] Moreover, it enables the viewer to see the film's multiple worlds as a, more or less, coherent whole. Not in the sense that the properties of each world are similarly understood by the viewer, but rather in the sense that each world contributes something to the film as aesthetic whole. Yacavone describes this sort of film world as a film's "expressed world, as something emphatically more than the sum of its representational parts."[37] Building on Yacavone's argumentation, I propose that the film's subtext of soap operas/sitcoms contributes to the emergence of this expressed world. The world-feeling that is unique to *Inland Empire* forms the film's expressive world, which is its own collection of expressive qualities, such as the tone that is set by the interior of Smithee's House.

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[35] Yacavone. (2008): p. 99.

[36] Ibid: 100.

[37] Ibid: 100.

Chapter 3: The function of self-reflectivity in *Inland Empire*

In some ways it may seem as if *Inland Empire* is a film about watching (a) film. The film features multiple narrative layers, on both spatial and temporal levels. The viewer's alienation is the result of the self-reflectivity that those various, semi-communicating film worlds bring about. As I explained in the first chapter, such films are characteristically inherent to Political Modernism's 1960s cinema, for which the directors appropriated Brechtian devices in favor of their political statements. In these last paragraphs I will contemplate *Inland Empire* in light of politically engaged cinema and the previous chapter's results. Self-reflectivity of the medium will remain to be the conceptual framework through which I approach the film and its context. To start I will compare Political Modernism's utilization of self-reflectivity with *Inland Empire*'s self-reflective attributes, as described in the previous chapter. John Mullarkey gives a useful description of the effect of self-reflectivity, as it was intended by the Political Modernists.

> "Seeing that the reality depicted in a movie is an effect allows us also to imagine alternative realities. It awakens in us the possibility of thinking about ourselves historically, the contingency of the status quo (the 'everything's fine' that is just a surface effect), and so the possibility of change."[38]

Inland Empire does fit this description in the sense that it allows the viewer to see the film's reality as an effect and to therefore imagine alternative (and in this case psychologically constructed) realities. Here I refer to Lynch's use of multiple layers of film worlds, presented as Nikki's fragmented subject. The second part of Mullarkey's description is in the case of *Inland Empire* not entirely applicable, because it calls for political insinuations that are not explicitly present in the film. *Inland Empire*'s self-reflective elements grant the viewer an insight into the film's main character's psychological and creative process, in regard to making a film—the film-within-film 'On High in Blue Tomorrows'.[39] The result is that *Inland Empire*'s self-reflective elements work aesthetically, rather than politically. I will now elucidate this statement.

First, as I explained before, it is the film's unique expressive world that enables the viewer to see the film as an aesthetic whole. Self-reflective elements and their result in regard to the viewer's experience can therefore be read as aesthetically improving, rather than a tool through which political engagement is provoked. The set of Smithee's House, for example, demands to be viewed in context of its subtext: the mise-en-scene of sitcoms/soap operas. The melodrama, captured in domestic settings such as those of *Friends*, appears only partially familiar to the viewer, which makes the viewer feel alienated from the image, which then enables the image to reflect upon itself.

Lynch's interest in melodramatic settings showed itself prior to *Inland Empire*; especially in the TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) and the film *Wild at Heart* (1990). In *Twin Peaks*, it is the considerable amount of scenes that take place in domestic interiors, such as The Great

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[38] Mullarkey. (2009): p. 34.
[39] Nochimsom. (2007): p. 11.

Northern hotel. In *Wild at Heart*, it is de over-the-top romance between the two main characters, Sailor (Nicolas Cage) and Lula (Laura Dern), which, in a way, seems to sometimes ridicule Hollywood's notion of romance and happy endings. A Political Modernist would want to break with all that these Hollywood illusions encompass. Lynch, however, uses Hollywood norms not to engage the viewer with political means. Rather, he deploys certain elements of these norms to increase the aesthetic potential of his film.

Furthermore, it is not the melodramatic acting or narrative of soap operas/sitcoms that Lynch integrates in *Inland Empire*, but it is the domestic interior, appearing similarly to interior sets in soap operas/sitcoms: the living room, the artificial lightening. It is with the stripped down, alienating representation of real interior settings and with the narrative context of those sets that Lynch causes the film's images to be self-reflective and, at moments, uncanny to the viewer.

Conclusion

In this thesis I investigate how the film sets in David Lynch's Inland Empire are used to emphasize the artificiality of the medium, thus (potentially) evoking an alienation effect in the viewer. The self-reflective elements in the scenes that I analyzed expose the artificial nature of the film sets. The similarity with the mise-en-scene of soap operas/sitcoms seems to be crucial to this process. Furthermore, this intertextual relation causes the film to fall outside of the tradition of self-reflective films.In this thesis I investigated how the film sets in David Lynch's *Inland Empire* are used to emphasize the artificiality of the medium, thus (potentially) evoking an alienation effect in the viewer. The self-reflective elements in the scenes that I analyzed expose the artificial nature of the film sets. The similarity with the mise-en-scene of soap operas/sitcoms seems to be crucial to this process. Furthermore, this intertextual relation causes the film to fall outside of the tradition of self-reflective films. The tradition of self-reflective techniques and images in film is characterized by the viewer being distanced from the image and thereby taking a critical stance towards what is shown on screen. At first it seemed as if *Inland Empire* can be seen as part of this tradition. However, the ways in which *Inland Empire*'s film sets emphasize the artificial nature of the medium do not imply a political standpoint. Rather, they contribute to the film's aesthetic value, by causing the viewer to experience the incoherent film as an aesthetic whole. Such an effect of self-reflectivity is unique to *Inland Empire*, and therefore it had to be analyzed and interpreted, in order to fully comprehend the functionality of self-reflective elements in film.

I started by placing Lynch and his *Inland Empire* in the context of Political Modernism, the genre that utilized Brechtian techniques to attain self-reflectivity, thereby breaking with the illusion of reality presented by Hollywood cinema. This enabled me to relate the results of chapter two's visual analysis to a larger context. I analyzed several scenes from *Inland Empire*, relating them to the film's subtext of soap operas/sitcoms and to the theory of film worlds. This intertextual analysis showed that the artificiality of the medium is at least partially caused by the fragmented representation of domestic interiors, as they appear in soap operas/sitcoms. This causes the viewer to be alienated from the image, because something

familiar – the living room – is made to look unfamiliar. It is this uncertainty that leads to an uncanny experience: the viewer is reminded of the mise-en-scene of soap operas/sitcoms, but he/she cannot place this association, because it is a fragmentary representation. Furthermore I used Yacavone's theory on *film worlds* to investigate the function of the film sets. This resulted in an understanding of *Inland Empire*'s film world(s) as an expressive world: the multiple worlds make the viewer reflect upon the film's world(s). This leads the viewer to experience the film as an aesthetic whole, rather than experience it in a politically engaged way.

Inland Empire is unique in the way in which its film sets affect the viewing experience. The film sets demand to be viewed in context of its subtext. This subtext appears only partially familiar to the viewer, thus evoking an effect of alienation in the viewer. Moreover, the film sets transcend spatiality and temporality, as they transform the film's main character's world, causing the viewer to question the verity of the image. The visual elements through which *Inland Empire*'s film sets emphasize the artificiality of the medium, thus causing alienation, are analyzed, opening the way for further research in regard to film's self-reflective and aesthetic potential.

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