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Lost in Narration

Post-narrative Poetics and the Critique of *Auteurist* Subjectivity in David Lynch's *Inland Empire*

Abstract: This paper interprets David Lynch's *L.A. trilogy*—especially its final installment, *Inland Empire* (2006)—as a critique of narrative subjectification and *auteur* theory. While Lynch himself is often framed as an autonomous *auteur*, the trilogy stages the pitfalls of precisely this mode of authorship-subjectivity: in all three films, protagonists traumatically disintegrate when narrative identity becomes untenable. In *Inland Empire*, this traumatic experience becomes a formal structure undermining spatiotemporal continuity, causality, and self-identical characters. While some critics see the film's unreadability as a failure, this paper argues that it is its core poetic intervention: a post-narrative aesthetics, immersing the viewer into the trauma of 'losing one's plot,' while also hinting at alternative life forms beyond narrative identity and *auteurism*.

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1. Introduction

There is so much despair in the world, and the people are doing everything right, I mean, objectively, there is actually no reason for despair, so it must come from somewhere, yes, and maybe it comes from the fact that we are naturally used to telling ourselves comprehensible stories, but we are living something completely incomprehensible.

René Pollesch¹

I lost my memory in Hollywood / I've had a million visions, bad and good / There's something in the air in Hollywood / I tried to leave it, but I never could.

Madonna²

While the notion of film directors as *auteurs* is widely dismissed within theory, it is broadly used within both popular and critical discourse. This is particularly true for the work of recently deceased David Lynch. For example, in the obituary he wrote for the *New York Times*, J. Hoberman coined “Mr. Lynch [...] a visionary” due to his “florid” and “surreal” “style and unnerving perspective” —using terminology highly reminiscent of *auteur* theory.³ In Hoberman’s text, Lynch appears as an *auteur* because the films he directed have a recognizable, inimitable, original poetic.

This framing, however, is somewhat ironic considering that Lynch’s *œuvre* — as I will argue in this paper — contains a formally innovative critique of exactly the mode of subjectivity *auteur* theory imposes and implies. In the following, I will interpret the *L.A. trilogy*, and particularly its final installment *Inland Empire* (2006), as a critique of the notion of narrative or *auteurist* subjectification. I follow the methodology of interpretation inspired by film studies, aesthetic philosophy and critical theory. If it is true that, as aesthetical-critical theory argues,⁴ art re-evaluates and thereby critiques dominant social practices, then theory ought to analyze art and translate the non-conceptual⁵ critique it poses into conceptual arguments. In this sense, I will analyze form and content of Lynch’s work with the systematic goal of constructing the anti-*auteurist* critique it poses. I will argue that the formal unreadability of *Inland Empire* can be reconstructed as a post-narrative aesthetic that makes the spectator experience the traumatic aporia of *auteurist* subjectification. To achieve these goals, I will briefly revisit the premises of *auteur* theory (2.), analyze and interpret *Lost*

¹ “Abgeschminkt: René Pollesch” (my transcription and transl.).

² “Hollywood” (2003).

³ Hoberman 2025.

⁴ Cf. Bertram 2019.

⁵ “Art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, while at the same time it can be said only by art, in not saying it.”; Adorno 1997: 72 (transl. revised).

Highway (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) as critiques of *auteurist* subjectification (3.) and the post-narrative formal radicalization of this critique in *Inland Empire* (4.-6.). I will conclude by expressing what might be the takeaway thesis of the *L.A. trilogy*: A good life does not have to tell itself (7.).

2. *Auteurism revisited, or: who wrote Inland Empire?*

However often declared dead,⁶ *l'auteur*—and especially the “fragile and imaginary construct”⁷ of a filmic *auteur*—proves to be very much alive; the discourse around David Lynch is—as pointed out—not the worst example for this ghostly,⁸ undead presence.⁹ As a first approximation, I will briefly revisit the core premises of *auteurism* as posed by the *Cahiers du cinéma* debates of the 1950s. In the programmatic texts of this period, the idea of the director as an *auteur* of the filmic ‘text’ was spelled out explicitly for the first time.¹⁰

Before the labelling of directors as *auteurs* was appropriated by film marketing,¹¹ it was a polemical concept. As Jacques Doniol-Valcroze remembered some years later, the starting point (“le point de départ”¹²) of the *auteur*-debate was François Truffaut’s 1954 article “A certain tendency of the French cinema,” in which Truffaut sharply attacks the dominant French cinema of his time and, subsequently, hints at a concurrently developing alternative: the *auteur’s* cinema. He divides the two rigidly. While the driving forces of traditional cinema are labeled non-cinematic “literary men” or “scenarists,” the *auteurs* appear as ‘artists’ and ‘men of cinema.’¹³ Truffaut’s polemic is aimed against the role the director plays in the French film industry of his time. There, so his claim goes, “when the script is done, the film is done” and the director is merely a “*metteur-en-scène* [...] who adds the pictures to it”.¹⁴ Thus, even the talented “*metteurs-en-scène*” had not been able “to distinguish them[selves] from others”—they have no recognizable style, as they only execute what is already in the script. Truffaut’s counter model is the extreme opposite to this non-creative *metteur*: As an *auteur*, the director is an autonomous artist who manifests their “idea”—i.e., inimitable style—within the film’s “*mise-en-scène*.”¹⁵

⁶ For a reconstruction of the many deaths of *l'auteur* cf. Bennett 2005 and Arenas 2011.

⁷ Evans 2011: 401.

⁸ The filmic *auteurs* appear as ghosts, i.e. “anachronic forces which disrupt the ordered and datable sequence of future, present, and past. As forces specters are essentially operating in the present, and yet they do not belong to this time.”; Raimondi 2020: 184.

⁹ I thank the organizers of the FFK38 conference 2025 for assigning my presentation to the fantastic panel *Auteurism revisited*—which significantly influenced the ideas presented here.

¹⁰ Cf. Cook 1985: 386–418, Evans 2011: 401, Arenas 2011.

¹¹ Cf. Höwelkröger 2026 (in this volume), Hadas 2020, Evans 2011.

¹² Doniol-Valcroze 1959: 68.

¹³ Truffaut 1976: 229–231.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 233.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 229.

As Pam Cook points out, within *auteur* theory, the “artist is portrayed as an isolated, heroic figure struggling for creative autonomy against the interference of outside bodies.”¹⁶ The director here ought not to function as a technocratic employee within the entertainment industry, but rather as a sovereign subject. With the *auteur* controlling the full process of creating the film, the film itself becomes more than a mere cultural commodity: it becomes an artwork. Thus, the *auteurist* director claims authorship—and hence: responsibility—for all creative decisions made in the production of the film. This attitude is emphasized in the statement by Orson Wells, that

theatre is a collective experience, but cinema is the work of a single man, the director [...]; it’s a collective endeavour, but in essence a very personal outcome [...]. A film is what you write on the screen.¹⁷

Most *auteurist* approaches—including Truffaut’s—are re-installing a rather old model of artistry to defend cinema as an art form. According to Bennett, both Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault—the two most infamous eulogists of *l’auteur*—“identify the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the period in which the ‘modern’ conception of authorship is fully articulated.”¹⁸ Confirming this suspicion, Truffaut’s arguments highly resemble romantic aesthetic discourse¹⁹ about the genius and their intellectual progenitor: Immanuel Kant. The autonomous artist is defined by Kant as follows:

1) [The] genius is a talent for producing that for which no determinate rule can be given, [...] consequently [...] *originality* must be its primary characteristic. 2) [The genius’s] products must at the same time be models, i.e., *exemplary*, hence, [they are not] the result of imitation [...] 3) [The genius] gives the rule as *nature*, [...] [s]he [...] does not know [her]self how the ideas for it come to [her] [...].²⁰

This definition resembles Truffaut’s account of the *auteur*: Geniuses/*auteurs* produce *original* and *exemplary*—i.e. inimitable—works, and they do so *intuitively*; as Adorno puts it, they “make things [not knowing] what they are.”²¹ *Auteur* theory, probably more unconsciously than deliberately, reproduces this proto-romantic notion of artistry (which differs significantly from earlier ideals of artistry promoting rule-following as the path to *poetics*). Truffaut’s *auteur* is not a mere *metteur*, and Kant’s genius is not a dilettante, because their artworks are exemplary and original.

At first glance, *Inland Empire* seems to be an *auteur*-film *par excellence*—but only at first glance. Although Lynch’s style is, if anything, recognizable, and although he was responsible for directing, script, production, and even cinematography, on closer inspection, he appears to be anything but a Kantian genius who expressed his

¹⁶ Cook 1985: 387.

¹⁷ Welles in Wollen 1977: 26.

¹⁸ Bennett 2005: 55.

¹⁹ Cf. Arenas 2011.

²⁰ Kant 2000: 186–187 (§46).

²¹ Adorno 1997: 114.

individuality in an exemplary style. Even more than with other films, the production was highly collaborative. The film's script was not written before the production; rather, as Georg Seeßlen notes, the film developed

over years at different places and under different circumstances [...], fragments were pieced together without a full picture in the background leading the process of production: the dictatorship of script, storyboard and production planning was broken several times.²²

The production process started with Lynch filming monologues with Laura Dern without a bigger project in mind; other parts of the film stemmed from a visit to Poland and from an online series Lynch shot with Laura Harring and Naomi Watts. Such a process of step-by-step collective creation obviously is at odds with the notion of an autonomous *auteur* who creates the artwork alone and through a transfer from personal vision to final artwork. Film critic Melissa Anderson argues that especially Laura Dern, the film's protagonist, "might be thought of as just as much of a creator as Lynch."²³ To mark how this tackles classic notions of *auteurism*, Anderson coins the concept of 'acteurism:'

In a project as ungraspable as *Inland Empire*, Dern's corporeality functions as the movie's irreducible reality. [...] What Dern does with her ectomorphic body, her elastic face, her accented speech is indispensable to keeping the spectator tethered, if not held rapt, to the psychic entropy of Lynch's film.²⁴

3. The aporia of narrative subjectification, or: How Fred and Diane lost their plots

Inland Empire not only resists *auteurism* through its collaborative production, but also dismantles authorship ideology on a content level, as does the entire *L.A. trilogy*. Partly due to its setting, the trilogy is overpopulated with subjects who aim to be *auteurs*. The prime example for this is Justin Theroux's character in *Mulholland Drive*, who poses as a caricature of the director wanting to be autonomous and fights against the conspiratorial power bloc of Hollywood. However, this position is portrayed as rather pathetic in its effort to be heroic: Theroux stumbles from failure to failure, only to finally give in to Hollywood's imperatives. Lynch ironically mimics the self-conception of a director who poses himself as a Truffautian *auteur*—as an allegedly unappreciated genius who wants to be the decision-maker in every step of the production process.

But the *L.A. trilogy* is concerned with authorship in yet another way: all three movies portray narrative or *auteurist* subjects. The narrative subject aims to narrate their life—just as Truffaut's *auteur* and Kant's genius aim to be sovereign authors of their

²² Seeßlen 2006: 245 (my transl.). Cf. also Anderson 2021: 39.

²³ Anderson 2021: 15.

²⁴ Ibid.: 19.

artwork, narrative subjects want to be sovereign authors of their lives.²⁵ That means, first and foremost, that they narrate their experiences in a coherent, chronological, and continuous way—they try to live a *fabula* (plot), i.e., a caudo-temporally connected series of events.²⁶ Narrating is synthesizing events into a coherent, continuously connected sequence that both follow each other in time and emerge from each other causally. The narrative subject is an *auteur de la vie*, aiming to live a meaningful, inimitable life. The fact that the individual chooses the plot they want to live autonomously grants them authorship-sovereignty. (This subjectification is, by the way, one of the dominant social forms within post-fordist capitalism and its imperative towards “singularistic” and “entrepreneurial selves:” Here, *l’auteur de la vie* becomes something of a role model for all members of society.²⁷ We all ought to be Kantian geniuses and Truffautian *auteurs*. “Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own,” says Michelle Obama.²⁸)

In *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, such *auteurist*-narrative subjects are in focus. Within both films, the protagonist attempts to become someone else through the means of narration: Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) imagines himself into a plot in which he is no impotent and jealous husband, but a young, hyper-potent and sexually desired man (Balthazar Getty); analogously, Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts) narrates herself as a desirable aspiring actress who is needed by the good-looking damsel in distress Rita (Laura Harring), rather than an unsuccessful, depressive and pathologically jealous outcast. Both protagonists thus give their lives a—clearly patriarchally tinged²⁹— *fabula*. And at first, everything seems to go fine: Through authorship-for-oneself, they reach sovereignty and happiness. Whenever Fred’s and Diane’s narrative-worlds are depicted, the screen glows in bright, rich colors, and everything is going wonderfully for each of them—perhaps a little too wonderfully.

²⁵ For a precise yet uncritical conceptualization of narrative subjectivity cf. Ricœur 1991.

²⁶ Cf. Tomaševskij 1971.

²⁷ Cf. Bröckling 2016, Reckwitz 2020, Kornbluh 2023, Boltanski/Chiapello 2005. Subjectification is subjection: By rendering themselves as subjects, individuals enact and embody social imperatives; subjectification is the individual realization of societal domination. The suffix -fication (Latin *-facere*: to make) hints to the insight of critical theory that we are not born subjects but are made such—or, more precisely: are made to make ourselves such. Subjectification is a particularly modern way of domination: When direct, personal relations of power are substituted through indirect and anonymous ones (like the market or the state), self-disciplination gets increasingly important for the functioning of society. For the theory of subjectification presupposed here cf. Menke 2022.

²⁸ Obama in Kornbluh 2023: 93–94.

²⁹ A point which Slavoj Žižek’s influential interpretation (2000) of *Lost Highway* unfortunately overlooks. Cf. Schaffner 2009: 279–281: “*Lost Highway* is not just a psychopathological case study of the particular psyche of an obsessive male protagonist entangled in his own web of false conceptions, but also a critique of the culturally determined binary fantasies he struggles with. [...] [Žižek’s] reading is thus at best gender-blind and at worst anti-feminist.”



Fig. 1: Fred and Diane as narrative subjects
 (Stills: *Lost Highway* [00:55:11, 01:40:43, 01:35:58] and *Mulholland Drive* [01:13:42, 00:18:00, 00:47:11])

The two films show, of course, extreme—as in: pathological—cases of narrative subjectification. Fred and Diane not only narrate their experiences, but rather narrate *against* them. However, it is exactly *because* of this artistic exaggeration that the films make vivid how narrative subjectification works in general. Narrative Subjectification is *performative* rather than textual. To narrate your life is to enact a *fabula*.³⁰ Acting—according to many authors, the central theme of the trilogy³¹—is the social technique in which an individual gives themselves a narrative. “Acting is an attempt to maintain the coherence of a unified self in the face of multiple possibilities.”³² While pre-narrated experience can seem chaotic, incoherent, and incomprehensible, a *fabula*-driven life seems foreseeable, comprehensible, and thus controllable. (Barely anything illustrates the sovereignty-through-performative-authorship as vividly as Naomi Watts’s portrayal of Betty in the first two hours of *Mulholland Drive*, especially in contrast to Diane’s life in the final scenes.) “The attractiveness of fantasy stems from this ability to deliver the goods—to provide the subject with a narrative in which she can access the inaccessible object-cause of desire.”³³ Narration—a *fabula*—gives Fred’s and Diane’s lives sense in the doubled

³⁰ For a performative theory of the social cf. von Redecker 2021.

³¹ Cf. Seeßlen 2006: 256, Palmier 2012: 249, Schaffner 2009: 284.

³² Naremore 1988: 71–72.

³³ McGowan 2007: 205.

meaning of that phrase: It renders the events they experience both understandable (in a descriptive way) and meaningful (in a normative way). Through narrative, they live in an understandable world which is temporally and causally organized and in which they are the protagonist: desired, needed, and in control.

This is, of course, not the full story. On the contrary, the films demonstrate how Fred's and Diane's ways of life are doomed to fail. At certain points in the films,³⁴ their narratives collapse, and their plots (*fabulae*) become untenable—*unlivable*. When Fred and Diane become aware that they, even in their idealized *fabulae*, cannot fully control and possess the loved individual—that they cannot live according to the plot they have given themselves—they painfully fall into a state of chaos. More specifically, they are consumed by what we might call *post-narrative chaos*. Here, everything they gained through narration—meaning, sovereignty, and even coherent time experience—is lost. Hence, Fred gets lost in a temporally impossible time loop—forever lost on an infinite highway; and Diane awakens in a dark, shadowy, and eerie world that “lacks even a sense of temporality.”³⁵ The post-narrative parts of both films are presented achronologically, framed within a dark, high-contrast, uncanny *mise-en-scène*, and are therefore very uncomfortable to watch. As Anna Katharina Schaffner summarizes,

There is no moment of catharsis, no hope; Fred, like Sisyphus, will endlessly re-enact his drama. Diane's death [...] is a lonely, sordid, tragic one. Her body is left to rot and disintegrate, undiscovered for weeks, in her apartment.³⁶



Fig. 2: Fred and Diane experience post-narrative trauma
(Stills: *Lost Highway* [02:10:13], *Mulholland Drive* [02:19:32])

The films unveil a contradiction. Fred's and Diane's fates demonstrate the *aporia of narrative subjectification*—precisely the technique that granted sovereignty to the subject is responsible for its brutal downfall into chaos. While narrating one's experiences at first grants autonomy and meaning, the *auteur de la vie* plunges into crisis whenever the experiences they make contradict their *fabula* too strongly.

³⁴ In *Lost Highway*, this point is marked by Patricia Arquette's words to the protagonist “You'll never have me” (01:56:12); in *Mulholland Drive* an ominous cowboy-character tells Diane to “wake up,” feeding into readings that interpret her narrative as a dream (01:56:25).

³⁵ McGowan 2007: 205.

³⁶ Schaffner 2009: 282.

Moreover, the subject experiences this chaos as its own fault, as an inability to live up to its idealized self-narration—as also shown impressively by the guilt-consumed individuals Fred and Diane at the end of both movies.

It is, of course, anything but random that the narrative subjectifications Lynch shows are located in Hollywood and that the filmic style plays with endless signifiers alluding to different epochs of Hollywood films.³⁷ It is the media-critical aspect of the trilogy that the narratives Fred and Diane give themselves are presented in the genre-typical styles of the *film noir*, the mystery thriller, and the detective film. The decline into post-narrative chaos is terrifying to watch, above all because, in both films, the style changes subsequently to it: The genre-codes are gone, and thus the spectator is lost within chaos, just like Fred and Diane. Hollywood—both the place and the collective unconscious it generates—is unmasked as the cultural production system that pushes individuals to give their life meaning through clichéd plots (the sovereign subject investigates, saves the damsel-in-distress, etc.): “Just as films take emotions from life, life models emotions based on filmic archetypes.”³⁸ Lynch shows how Hollywood—and the *auteurist* “forms of subjectification” it promotes—“can become a dystopia.”³⁹

4. The many worlds of *Inland Empire*, or: Nikki gets lost in Hollywood

Hollywood becoming a dystopia is, at last, the *sujet* of *Inland Empire*. The three-hour-long film depicts, amongst other strands, the odyssey of Nikki Grace (Laura Dern)—a forgotten, middle-aged actress in Hollywood who gets lost within the plot of a film. In the first hour or so, *Inland Empire* seems rather similar to the first two parts of the trilogy. Like Fred and Diane, Nikki seeks transformation-through-narrative because her life has become unlivable. Not only does Nikki, as an actress, steps into the role of Sue Blue in the film *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. That very film project is supposed to revive her “stagnating career, pulling her out of a failed marriage and a life that no longer satisfies her.”⁴⁰ Playing Sue means being someone else—an actress desired by a handsome co-star (Justin Theroux) rather than a woman trapped in an unhappy relationship. Again, what we see is narrative subjectification, and it again fails: As if fulfilling Nikki’s wish too literally, it is her fate to dissolve into Sue.

Yet unlike Fred and Diane, who remain in control of their *fabulae* until the final crisis at the end of their film, “Nikki loses the plot of her life” around one hour into the

³⁷ Cf. Elsaesser 2014: 53, Elsaesser 2021: 216, Paraskeva 2012: 7.

³⁸ Palmier 2012: 256 (my transl.).

³⁹ Danckwardt 2013: 404 (my transl.).

⁴⁰ Seeßlen 2006: 256 (my transl.).

film.⁴¹ Thus, *Inland Empire* shows the post-narrative chaos resulting from narrative subjectification in much more depth—and *length*—than its two predecessors. Hence—as virtually every text about the film points out—has a highly experimental poetic structure.⁴² After Nikki has dissolved into Sue, she seems to undergo even more identity changes: She is not just, as Fred and Diane, doubled, but “quadrupled” within post-narrativity.⁴³ Thus, the viewer is increasingly unsure, which character Dern is embodying within a respective scene, “where and when the scenes are set, what level of reality they represent, and by what spatiotemporal laws their events and actions are governed.”⁴⁴ The mysterious Dern-character drifts through time and space—from present-time L.A. to what seems to be South California, the Baltic and even 1930s Poland. Constantly, new characters and plotlines are introduced just to disappear again—and these “multiple diegetic worlds” increasingly bleed “into each other.”⁴⁵ The spectator is soon as lost as ‘Nikki,’ navigating through these labyrinthically⁴⁶ intertwined narrative worlds that appear as

an endless play, a labyrinth of labyrinths, each exit is also the entrance to a new one [...], each scene is an autonomous mirror of the former, not a continuation [...].⁴⁷

A striking example of this “non-readable”⁴⁸ aesthetics is the infamous ‘choir’⁴⁹ of prostitutes that at some point during the film suddenly appears and follows ‘Nikki’ (or rather: the non-self-identical character embodied by Dern—hence the quotation marks here and below). The diegetic status of these figures—whether the women are real or hallucinated—remains unresolved. Their sudden appearance does not make any sense. This weird inexplicability culminates in a sequence⁵⁰ where the women suddenly start dancing a perfectly synchronous choreography to *The Locomotion* by Little Eva. The short interlude in which *Inland Empire* appropriates the logic of a musical—non-diegetic music becomes diegetic—ends as abruptly as it started when the dance group suddenly disappears through a jump-cut. The spectator will likely receive the scene with a similar response as ‘Nikki,’ whose confused face is shown in reverse shots.

⁴¹ Anderson 2021: 77. The transition is marked by the sequence in which the rules of Newtonian space-time are blatantly broken for the first time, cf. 01:01:45.

⁴² They, for example, point out that *Inland Empire* “does not correspond to ordinary narrative conventions” but rather appears as “the most free-associative, nonlinear movie in the director’s singular corpus” as it, “after an hour or so, [...] leaves the terrain of classical narrative cinema altogether [and] dissolv[es] into a performative mélange of places, scenes, roles and motifs,” a “series of loosely-connected episodes and vignettes”—to recapitulate the film’s plot thus “would be to replicate the tedium and pointlessness of narrating a dream.”; Nochimson 2007: 11, Anderson 2021: 13, 31, Schmidt 2018: 209, Pranolo 2011: 482.

⁴³ Anderson 2021: 31.

⁴⁴ Schmidt 2018: 210.

⁴⁵ Elsaesser 2021: 216.

⁴⁶ Cf. Seeßlen 2006: 247, Paraskeva 2012: 2, Schaffner 2009: 284.

⁴⁷ Seeßlen 2006: 247, 258 (my transl.).

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 33 (my transl.).

⁴⁹ Cf. Anderson 2021: 58, Pranolo 2011: 486.

⁵⁰ 01:38–23–01:29:13.



Fig. 3: Nikki and the post-narrative choir
(Stills: *Inland Empire* 1:38:25-1:29:10)

It is likely due to this complex and confusing poetic structure that *Inland Empire* was not well acclaimed. While it has been widely discussed within academic discourse, it was, in large part, critically and popularly dismissed for its seemingly eclectic style. According to widespread opinion—recently resurfaced, for instance, by Todd McGowan⁵¹—*Inland Empire* is too Lynchian, as it misses the last remnant of narrative coherence and understandability that Lynch’s earlier films still maintain. And even those critics and theorists who assess the film favorably often struggle to defend it against accusations that it fails to be readable.

But this supposed weakness can also be understood as the film’s formal radicality—and thus, its strength. To understand the film’s aesthetic structure, it is crucial not to read its plotlessness—*negatively*—as a deficiency but rather—*positively*—as a deliberate and productive poetic strategy: a *post-narrative aesthetics*. The aesthetic category ‘post-narrative’ aims to describe a certain strand of contemporary art: artworks within the field of narrating arts (film, literature, theatre, etc.) that cease to narrate. Generally speaking, within contemporary arts, a trend away from narration is observable. (Other examples for this trend would be theatre writers/directors like Sarah Kane and René Pollesch, or writers like Kathy Acker and Elfriede Jelinek). Within post-narrative works, the fictional events we witness unfold in a way that resists synthesis—they appear free-floating, no longer embedded in a coherent continuity (*fabula*) with self-identical protagonists. ‘Post-narrative’ signifies narrative art “‘after’ the authority of the [narrative] paradigm [...]. What it does not mean is an abstract negation and mere looking away from the tradition”; rather, post-narrative art makes narration apparent—and thus: *questionable*—“as a quasi automatically working norm” within art and life.⁵² The fragments of plots post-narrative works often still contain seem to be only a background to aesthetic experimentation, liberating the aesthetic means of production from the functional purpose to tell a *fabula*. And not only the means of production—the process of reception is also liberated: When narrative synthesis ceases, the recipient must receive in a different way than the hermeneutic strategy of reconstructing a *fabula*.

⁵¹ “David Lynch,” *Why Theory* (2025).

⁵² Lehmann 2006: 27. Lehmann’s seminal work on post-dramatic aesthetics is—although limited to theater—still the most profound analysis of this strand of contemporary art.

Post-narrative art aims toward a “liberation from all endeavors to understand and the revelation of the ‘intrinsic meaning’ of man and things.”⁵³ This ‘liberation’ from understanding is inherently ambivalent, as it can either be “experienced as fundamentally frustrating”⁵⁴ or contrarily as “fascinating:” The devotion to the incomprehensibility of such an aesthetic phenomenon can be pleasurable when the recipients “allow [them]selves to be overpowered by it.”⁵⁵

Inland Empire appears as a prime example of a post-narrative poetic. In a way, it seems very climactic that Lynch—whose former work always danced at the “margins of narration”⁵⁶ yet never crossed them—took this radical step with his last film. But even more importantly, when read as a sequel to the other two parts of the *L.A. trilogy*, *Inland Empire*’s post-narrative “politics of form”⁵⁷ also follows a specific end in terms of content.

5. Post-narrativity’s poetics of affects, or: Nikki’s *angst*

According to Adorno, “aesthetic form” is nothing but “sedimented content.”⁵⁸ Hans-Thies Lehmann sketches out this thought more concretely when he writes that aesthetic forms always reflect “social norms of perception and behaviour.”⁵⁹ (Conversely, of course, aesthetic products—especially in the realm of popular culture—also install such norms in the first place.) Following this premise, we can assume that the weird, confusing, and overwhelming form of *Inland Empire* reflects a dominant societal norm (or form) of perception—the weird disintegration that occurs when narrative subjectivity collapses. As shown, narrative subjectification is aporetic insofar as it reproduces exactly the problems it promises to solve—“fantasy leads the subject down the path that [s]he tried to escape.”⁶⁰ While life authorship, at first, seems to guarantee the individual sovereignty, they regress into an even more chaotic, contingent and helpless state of being as soon as their experiences are incompatible with their narrative (*fabula*). As it is exactly this fate that, just like Fred and Diane, haunts ‘Nikki’—*she loses her plot*—, it is only consequential that *Inland Empire*, after one hour *loses its plot*. Through this formal decision for a post-narrative,

⁵³ Fischer-Lichte 2008: 186.

⁵⁴ Ibid.: 157.

⁵⁵ Seel 2005: 145.

⁵⁶ Seeßlen 2006: 111 (my transl.).

⁵⁷ Kappelhoff 2015: 101. If—as Walter Benjamin argues—the radical author is the one who never “merely work[s] on products but always, at the same time, work[s] on the means of production” and therefore refuses to “supply the apparatus of production without, to the utmost extent possible, changing it”, then Lynch’s *Inland Empire* can be called radical: By suspending the narrative paradigm—*fabula*, continuity, stable character-identity—the film changes the cinematic apparatus itself, making perceptible what that apparatus, within a narrative paradigm, could not show; Benjamin 1999: 777, 774.

⁵⁸ Adorno 1997: 5.

⁵⁹ Lehmann 2006: 19.

⁶⁰ McGowan 2007: 171.

plotless poetic, the audience, together with the 'Nikki'/Dern's body, experiences the trauma of post-narrative chaos, of losing sovereignty-through-authorship. *Inland Empire* radically breaks the rules of classical cinema, where continuity of time and space ensures coherence,⁶¹ to make tangible the traumatic loss of narrative sovereignty. The trauma is not just represented thematically – it is enacted formally.

This implies that *Inland Empire* cannot be 'understood' in any traditional sense. If the hermeneutics of film-reception conventionally rely on discovering a narrative structure, then post-narrative poetics like *Inland Empire* refuse understanding. The audience will find itself in exactly the same position as the Dern-character(s) – spectating weird, incoherent, spatio-temporally impossible situations:

Nikki resembles in her situation [...] the cinemagoer confronted with a work that largely defies the conventions of filmic narration. For during the almost three hours of this film there are repeated moments when the viewer feels lost and alone.⁶²

Lost, alone – and frightened. The trauma of a lost life narrative is sensed in a very practical way by the viewer watching *Inland Empire* when they are unable to find their way around the convoluted structure of the film. It is experienced in the flesh through the particularly intense "physical entanglement in the cinematic events" that is, as Gertrud Koch pointed out, specific to the media.⁶³ *Inland Empire* makes the spectator – *affectively* – experience the loss of narration and its coherence. To describe the "spectator feelings" of films, Hermann Kappelhoff has coined the concept of "poetic of affects:" An analysis of these poetics tries to reconstruct the "spectators' embodied process of perception" by analyzing which 'affective parcours' the film's montage and *mise-en-scène* creates.⁶⁴

The poetic of affects of *Inland Empire* is clearly rather uncomfortable. After the first hour of relatively coherent storytelling, the spectator will likely be, first and foremost, frustrated by the impossibility of understanding what is happening. Moreover, they will be confused – and even scared – by the film's many location and identity switches, uncanny situations, and jump scares⁶⁵. Post-narrativity's poetic of affects is unsettling – and the Lynchian style (slow tracking shots through dark hallways, weird, unidentifiable sounds, and so on) reinforces this affects of confusion, dread and *angst*. A central leitmotif of the film mirrors (yet not produces) these emotions: extreme close-ups of Laura Dern's panicking face, taken in wide angle, which makes her facial features – eyes wide open in fear and confusion – look grotesquely exaggerated. Dern's body – and particularly her frightened face – serves as the only common thread of the film, and even though it constantly seems to portray different characters, its corporality and its *angst* remain stable.⁶⁶ Together

⁶¹ Cf. Lie 2012.

⁶² Schmidt 2018: 210.

⁶³ Koch 2016: 26 (my transl.).

⁶⁴ Kappelhoff/Lehmann 2019: 214–215.

⁶⁵ For example: 01:56:20, or 02:45:04.

⁶⁶ Cf. Danckward 2013: 399, Anderson 2021: 16–19.

with the body of Laura Dern, the viewer makes the *angst*- and dreadful experience of losing narrative structure.



Fig. 4: Nikki's *angst*
(Stills: *Inland Empire* 01:03:46, 01:04:28, 01:56:58, 02:44:25)

6. Power without sovereignty, or: Nikki's bliss

Lynch's trilogy constructs an unexpected genealogy of the *auteurist* subject's post-narrative crisis—of how one loses one's plot. People give their lives a plot and then are traumatized when their experiences do not accord with it. This crisis is not, as one might intuitively assume, rooted in a lack but rather in an excess of narration. Who gets lost within post-narrative chaos really gets lost in narration: Only someone who chose a *fabula*—who wanted to be the *auteur* of their life—can lose it; post-narrative trauma stems from narrative subjectification. 'Nikki,' like Fred and Diane, loses the coherence and the meaning that the narrative had conveyed to her life. She is no longer a successful, beloved actress; she is not even trapped within an unsatisfactory marriage anymore—she is neither Sue Blue nor Nikki Grace, she is less than nobody. Hence, the Dern-character (and with it the spectator) experiences herself and the (filmic) world as incoherent and meaningless. The fate of the narrative subject, in Lynch's perspective, appears as somewhat dystopian. Kant's genius and Truffaut's *auteur* are no good role models.

But this is—again—not the full story. Because, unlike *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, where the protagonists end in agony, "*Inland Empire* surprisingly ends ecstatically [...] it blinks itself awake into a state of grace."⁶⁷ In the last half hour of

⁶⁷ Anderson 2021: 95.

the film,⁶⁸ ‘Nikki’ undergoes a radical transformation. Rather than remaining trapped in post-narrative horror, she finds a new way of existing—as Schaffner puts it: “in the end Nikki sheds of these projections like an old skin” and “free[s] herself from a man-centered narrative.”⁶⁹ And, we might add, from *all* attempts to narrate her life.

The film portrays ‘Nikki’s’ transformation as follows. After gaining awareness about the performativity—and thus contingency—of narrative subjectification (in a scene inside a movie theatre where she watches herself *performing* on the screen⁷⁰); and after killing the film’s pseudo-villain, realizing that problem was never some external force but her own belief in the necessity of authorship (portrayed in a terrifying jump scare where the villain’s face briefly transforms into a grotesquely distorted version of her own⁷¹)—‘Nikki’ abandons the drive to narrate herself. From there on, she seems to have a radically different stance towards the world: She does not aim to be the *auteur* of her life anymore—quite strikingly, she does not even speak anymore in this part of the film.

This new attitude is beautifully expressed in the extraordinary end-credit sequence⁷² of *Inland Empire*. In it, once again, a flood of post-narrative chaos washes over the screen: A one-legged woman enters Nikki’s villa and says, “Sweeeeeet,”⁷³ a blonde woman with a monkey, the actresses Laura Harring and Natassja Kinski, a woodcutter sawing a piece of wood, and a pianist appear almost out of nowhere and populate the opulent room. Moreover, the chorus of prostitutes re-appears, now dancing joyfully, lip-syncing to Nina Simone’s *Sinnerman*—“frantic bodies twitch ecstatically in fluorescent stroboscopic disco lights.”⁷⁴ As Anderson puts it, “their movements are exultant, propulsive, embodying the word that Simone sings repeatedly near the end of the song: *power*.”⁷⁵ In the middle of this scenery sits the transformed, graceful body of Laura Dern—no longer ‘Nikki’, ‘Sue’ or any other narrative subject who tries to understand the paradoxical occurrences around, but rather someone who enjoys them.

⁶⁸ From 02:33:16.

⁶⁹ Schaffner 2009: 285–287.

⁷⁰ Cf. 02:36:44. Cf. Anderson 2021: 95.

⁷¹ Cf. 02:44:23.

⁷² From 02:52:45.

⁷³ Schaffner 2009: 286.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* Schaffner also emphasizes the feminist nature of this choir: “The chanting, chatting and dancing community of life-loving prostitutes seems to suggest an alternative model for female companionship, undisturbed by male intrusions.”; *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Anderson 2021: 98.

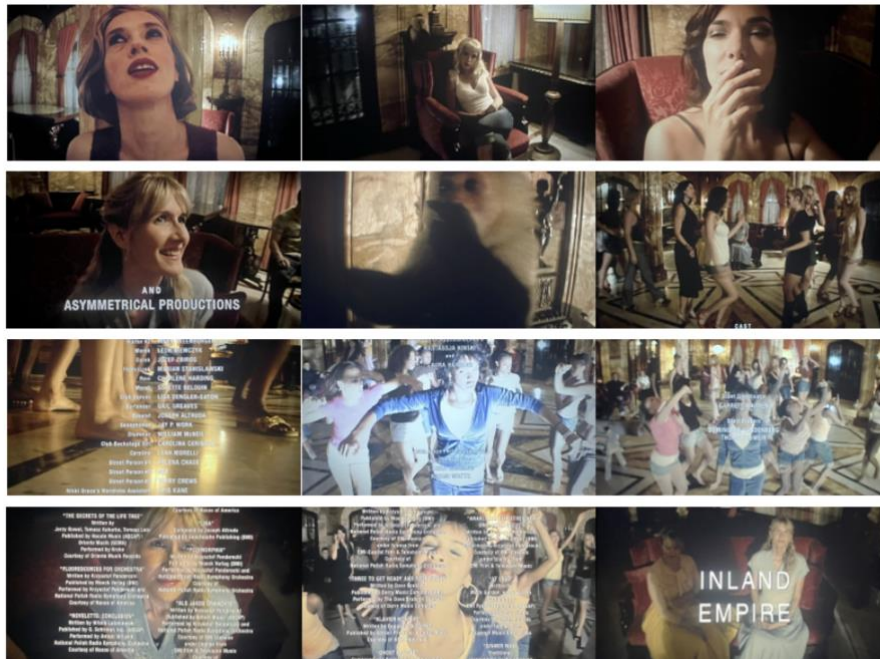


Fig. 5: Nikki's bliss (Stills: *Inland Empire* 02:52:50–02:59:05)

Another dialectical reversal has occurred: Just as the sovereignty of narrative subjectivation turned into insovereignty in face of post-narrative chaos, that which must appear as radically insovereign for narrative subjects—passive, fascinated, non-understanding receptivity—reveals itself as true sovereignty: as power. This power is superior to its patriarchal counterpart that constantly needs to control its environment—be it through understanding, be it through domination.⁷⁶ By “accepting her loss of control, [Nikki] also regains it, across the flow of movement through the different spaces, sites and situations.”⁷⁷ If, as Kant notes, “all hope aims toward bliss,” ‘Nikki’ has found what she hoped for.⁷⁸

Inland Empire shows a journey from narrative subjectification via post-narrative trauma to post-narrative happiness. To find grace, Nikki had to go through a state of (Sue) blue. This dramaturgy mimics the classical Hollywood narrative of the ‘heroine’s journey’—yet it simultaneously decomposes it: The journey here leads out of heroism, self-identity and narrative altogether. In the end sits a body—neither Nikki nor Laura Dern, but something in-between, something *unsignifiable*. It depicts a counter-model to heroism and *auteurist* subjectivity: an attitude which neither needs to signify anything nor to decode signifiers, but rather enjoys its own incomprehensibility as much as the meaninglessness around. The fact that the events in the scene cannot be understood in a temporal-causal way is no longer a problem—neither for ‘Nikki’ nor for the viewer. Again, her position mirrors the spectator’s:

⁷⁶ Cf. Seel 2005, Fischer-Lichte 2008.

⁷⁷ Elsaesser 2021: 222.

⁷⁸ Kant 1998: B833 (transl. revised [“Denn alles *Hoffen* geht auf Glückseligkeit”]).

Both are fascinated by the chaotic and beautiful—or *chaotically beautiful*—spectacle unfolding. This is the radical alternative, both to narrative subjectification and post-narrative trauma, the film's ending hints towards. What appears as the ultimate loss—of narrative, of understanding, of meaning, of self—can also be the moment of greatest enjoyment: as non-identical selfhood, as post-narrative receptivity, as bliss.

7. Conclusion, or: A good life does not have to tell itself

The *L.A. trilogy* at its core challenges the notion that authorship grants sovereignty. I have offered a reading of the trilogy as a critique of narrative subjectification—the ideology and social imperative that demands individuals to narrate themselves. *Auteurism*—an important strand of 20th-century film theory and a late descendant of romantic philosophy—was built on the idea that the director ought to be a sovereign and autonomous creative force. The currently dominant regime of narrative subjectification expands this model to the individual's life. Lynch's critical depiction of this *auteurist* subject can be summarized in four steps.

(i) The *L.A. trilogy* critiques narrative subjectification—the idea that we must structure our lives into coherent plots in order to assert control over our identity. Fred, Diane, and Nikki all attempt to rewrite themselves through narrative—and fail: When they cannot live up to their plot, they radically lose any sense of time, meaning, selfhood and sovereignty to an all-consuming, frightening chaos.

(ii) Within *Inland Empire*, this post-narrative chaos—resulting from the aporia of narrative subjectification—is not only reflected thematically but formally. By taking the content of losing one's plot to a formal level by installing a post-narrative poetic, the film makes the point even more tangible than in its two predecessors. Its labyrinthine structure disorients both its protagonist and its audience, making the breakdown of narration something that is not just observed but experienced.

(iii) *Inland Empire* differs from its two predecessors in yet another way: It hints towards an alternative to the constraints of narrative subjectivity. Unlike Fred and Diane, who end trapped in despair, 'Nikki' ultimately embraces post-narrative existence. She relinquishes the compulsion to make sense of the world and herself, lets go of *auteurism*, and finds bliss: non-sovereign power, post-narrative joy.

(iv) Perhaps, then, the lesson of *Inland Empire* is this: *A good life does not have to tell itself*. True sovereignty lies not in compulsive autonomy and *auteurism* but in a receptive stance toward the world—one that does not seek to structure and master experience, but to embrace and enjoy it. Take cinema, for instance: In a dark space, light creates incomprehensible yet beautiful weirdness. Enjoy it while it lasts.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ I wholeheartedly thank Mary Lawrence, Jorge Marrero, Christina Schmitz, Anna Stocker, and Oski Villar-Cornell for their thoughtful comments and corrections on earlier versions of this paper.

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