

CRIME/SCENE: REANIMATING THE FEMME FATALE IN DAVID LYNCH'S HOLLYWOOD TRILOGY

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In 2009, the Bird's Eye Festival at the British Film Institute held a retrospective entitled "Screen Seductresses: Vamps, Vixens & Femmes Fatales," prompting the organizers to wonder, "Whatever happened to the femme fatale?" Noting a *dearth* of this iconic character in contemporary cinema, participants speculated on the likely cause: that women's increased social power was no longer perceived as threatening in the same way as in the post-WWII period when noir first flourished; that today's privileged moviegoer is the teen-aged boy, whose unsophisticated tastes could not stand up to the femme fatale's ferocious charms; and the proliferation of what they term the "new" chick flick, "different, dumber" films like *Sex and the City*, where a character like Carrie Bradshaw might call to mind Christine Gledhill's lament about women in 1970s neo-noir as "less dangerous, more neurotic" (Johnston 2009).¹ The festival organizers aimed to celebrate "transgressive women in film, strong and complex seductresses, with razor-sharp wit and unrestrained sexuality" (Bird's Eye View, n/d).

This description is one side of the familiar clichés of the femme fatale who emerged as a major character in U.S. film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, which reads its deadly women as subversive portrayals of sexuality and power. The other side of that argument sees the femme fatale as the misogynistic projection of male fear and longing. Iconic performances such as Barbara Stanwyk's Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* have been used to establish her defining characteristics: rarely directly criminal, she is instead an incitement to criminality via her sexual power, which she uses to manipulate a man to act on her behalf. In classic noir, the femme fatale is punished for her transgressions, if she is not murdered (*Double Indemnity*) or, more rarely, jailed (*The Maltese Falcon*), she is domesticated (*Laura*). In her 2009 study of the femme fatale, Julie Grossman convincingly argues that such a traditional conception is frequently at odds with the affective tones of the majority of noir film, where the femme fatale is a much more nuanced and sympathetically portrayed character whose extreme actions and dazzling attractive force can be understood as a desperate response to an unlivable set of conditions that limit and oppress her. Grossman suggests that the time has come to put the femme fatale in her place (2009).

¹ The quote refers to Christine Gledhill, "Klute 2: Feminism and Klute" (1998).

In the last decade, David Lynch's "Hollywood trilogy" (*Lost Highway*, 1997; *Mulholland Drive*, 2001; and *Inland Empire*, 2006) has provocatively re-imagined what the femme fatale is and what she might do. While Lynch has explicitly tackled the legacy of this iconic figure in his vivid reimagining of the noir tradition at least since 1987's *Blue Velvet*, a film which retained the classic noir distinction between the good girl, Sandy (Laura Dern) and the femme fatale, Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini in her first major role), already, the femme fatale had begun to show the outline of a Lynchian twist. Although Dorothy is the sexually alluring figure who leads amateur detective Jeffrey into his involvement with a surprisingly immanent criminal underworld, Dorothy's actions and her sexuality are those of a glitchy automaton. Her excessive "acting-out," particularly in her disturbing sexual encounters with Jeffrey where she begs him to hit her, does not signal the typical duplicity that incites criminality (Jeffrey's violence and self-disgust) via sexuality. Instead, her performance is precisely what makes her vulnerable. Like a human record, she is forced to replay not only her nightly performances of *Blue Velvet*, but also her grotesque sexual encounters with Hopper, an endless audition for a role she needs but that is killing her. Discussing her role in that film, Rossellini has remarked, "We don't know why we read the details of murder stories in newspapers with a certain gluttony," and her performance elicited both a ravenous craving and queasiness in equal measure (Rodriguez, 2009). Immediately following *Blue Velvet* and consistently ever since, the clear demarcation between good girl and femme fatale would become less and less distinct in Lynch's work; one need only think of Laura Palmer, probably one of Lynch's most tenderly beloved characters, simultaneously small town sweetheart and a dark and desperate figure. Increasingly, the femme fatale is the actress or performer for Lynch, endlessly auditioning at a crime scene. She has become the key figure through which he has developed an increasingly scathing critique of Hollywood's murderous criminality, but who also provokes a specifically cinematic reanimation of mystery and magical allure. This critique does not operate via a logic of exposure, in the way that some critics have read the Club Silencio scene in *Mulholland Drive* — "no hay banda!" — but rather intensifies the affective force of the femme fatale, often exceedingly literally, so that her duplicity is transformed into what Gilles Deleuze terms the "power of the false," a creative power that causes a metamorphosis, rather than revelation, of the true.²

It is by amplifying this metamorphic power of the femme fatale, one constrained in her iconic incarnations as simple duplicity or manipulation, that Lynch's films re-animate the femme fatale. This re-animation occurs both in the sense of renewing her presence when she seems marginal to contemporary cinema, and in that again and again, the femme fatale is linked both to technological re-animations like lipsyncing and recording devices, and the re-animation of dead bodies. We see this in the rotting corpse of *Mulholland Drive*'s Diane Selwyn dreaming a different life as a bullet "makes a leisurely journey through her brain," Nikki Grace arising as

² See, for example, Elena del Rio's reading of the Club Silencio scene in *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (2009).

a zombie from the corpse of Susan Blue in *Inland Empire*, or the temporal dislocations that make our last image of Renee in *Lost Highway*, previously glimpsed as a grotesque restaging of the Black Dahlia's corpse at the hands of her husband, her escape by car driving off into the night (Toles, 2004: 13).

In this way, Lynch re-animates the murdered woman whose death initiates so many noirs and who is quickly forgotten and displaced by the femme fatale (*Laura*, *The Lady in the Lake*, *Vertigo*), by folding them into his femme fatales, but also by having this re-animation infect the film's temporality. Lynch's dream noirs become topological sites for expanding the affective power of the femme fatale, whose gift for duplicity mutates into a doubling that engulfs all elements of the film. Re-figured as performance, the duplicity of the femme fatale is no longer a threat, nor measured against the standard of a pre-existing truth, but as a truly creative act.

Critical to Lynch's re-animated femme fatale are several factors. The first is the explicit link between the femme fatales as a creation (and victim) of the Hollywood system—his main female characters are all actresses—highlighting the femme fatale not only as represented in the Hollywood system, but as a specifically cinematic mode of embodiment. Lynch re-imagines the moral and criminal place of performance and automatism in the femme fatale, turning the signs of her guilt into that which deflects death and guilt, to resituate her criminality against Hollywood. While this displaces questions of criminal actions at the level of narrative in a way that can be seen as glorifying violence against women and refusing the proper assignation of culpability, it opens up myriad possibilities at other levels that can lead to a renewed sense of what the power of the femme fatale might actually be, as well as to radically refocusing the question of crime in these films. As Elena del Rio notes of *Mulholland Drive*, "Lynch's implicit attacks on Hollywood's manufacturing of creatively exhausted, dead images is undoubtedly at the centre of the ideological ramifications spun by the film. The film embodies this extinction of vital creativity through the image of Diane's fetid, decomposing body, which like the monstrous, disintegrating body of Hollywood, lies beyond any capacity for action or transformation" (2009: 187). It is crucial to remember that this, however, is not the final scene of the film, which ends with the invitation to witness reanimation and the vital force of staged performance at Club Silencio. While there are those who would read such scenes and reenactments as only condemnations of Hollywood's dream factory, we should remember that tenderness and horror are two sides of the same topological coin in Lynch's universe. His deployment of the femme fatale is not a generic statement on unrealizable ideals of feminine icons and the impossibility of their attainment. Rather, he deploys the femme fatale as a specifically cinematic creative force that exceeds and can renew its institutionalized form.

Secondly, Lynch disrupts the femme fatale's iconicity through the violence and vulnerability of iconic bodies as signs; again, rather than emphasizing the singularity and uniqueness of the femmes fatales as individuals, he amplifies their reproducibility. In doing so, he attunes us to the difference that emerges in repetition, through his redoubled narratives, multiple characters played by the same actress (Renée/Alice in *Lost Highway*, Rita/Camilla in *Mulholland Drive*, Susan/Nikki in *Inland Empire*),

and undecidable indistinctions between roles. Michel Chion writes that Lynch's greatest gift to film is the tremendous violence that emerges in immobility (1995: 80). Part of the way that Lynch reroutes the criminality of the femme fatale into creativity is by making apparent the violence in the stillness and stasis of iconic signs. In this way, he takes up the frequency with which the femme fatale is posed and played "as image." Lastly, Lynch's Hollywood trilogy, while featuring graphic representations of violence and particularly murder, displaces questions of culpability and guilt at the level of representations and condemnation. Both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* can be read as the mad fantasy or dream of a murderer trying to escape responsibility for his/her actions, but the films themselves are less interested in moral condemnation than in asking what else the body of the femme fatale can do.

In Lynch's film, the performer is more and more the figure of creation, increasingly the double of Lynch himself, who might, in a Flaubertian gesture, make the pronouncement that, in *Inland Empire*, "Nikki Grace, c'est moi." Lynch's emphasis on the femme fatale parallels an increasing, though still timid, critical claim that his recent films are in fact, deeply feminist, in a way that speaks to the insufficiency of the divided reception of the femme fatale herself as either misogynist creation or subversive liberation. For critics like Martha Nochimson, Laura Dern in *Inland Empire* represents the liberation of a feminist creative energy, a figure in full control of her creative powers who takes up arms to defeat the forces that would keep her down (2007). Julie Grossman suggests that Lynch is the future of the femme fatale, arguing that the femme fatale in *Mulholland Drive* is a force of feminine vitality that is a "a deeply feminist reworking of gender typography in order to endorse an imaginative openness with regard to experience." Part of her argument here involves the way that the assignation of femme fatale remains a mobile signifier in the film fluctuating between Rita and Betty (2009: 133). Lynch reroutes questions of affective engagement into uncertainty and hesitation specifically around the recognition of the actresses' bodies, highlighting themes of death and challenging identification to disrupt understandings of criminality.

Grossman also suggests that if we re-imagine the femme fatale, "the woman labeled as dissembler has a story of her own to tell" (2009: 54). But I would argue that in Lynch, she has precisely an-other's story to tell, that the force, and indeed, the crime of the femme fatale is simply what Deleuze calls "the crime of time," violence in the films as the felt force of becoming other than what we have been. If in classic noir this has meant specific dreams of becoming another (changing class position, escaping a dead end marriage, etc.), in Lynch's films the reanimated femme fatale must always be read alongside her corpse, her double, her becoming-other-than-what-she-was, auto-auditioning herself to make uncertain space for someone else to emerge, provoking the crisis of recognition and learning to produce new subjectivities from frozen clichés.

I want to focus on the figure of the femme fatale as suggesting another way of reading crime and criminality. In classic noir, the femme fatale is instantly legible as the incitement to criminality. She is the figure who uses her sexuality (or whose sexuality is passively provocative, like in *In a Lonely Place*) to essentially turn a man

into a puppet, to act out her transgressive desires. Classically, the body that incites crime is also the victimized body in the end. The excessive place of the femme fatale, characterized by her affective potency, is inevitably dimmed. Her duplicity or “performance” is both her power and her weakness, what justifies her violent end. To briefly illustrate how Lynch reworks these characteristics, I want to take a look at scenes of performance and audition in the Hollywood trilogy to read them as privileged moments that reanimate the femme fatale, both announcing her presence and generating an affective uncertainty over identification. In this pause is the potential for the femme fatale to become something other than what she was, for a certain automatism of performance and response to become the sign of the emergence of the new. In these scenes, the femme fatale becomes a topological figure, amplifying the traditional femme fatale’s “surface effect” to a literal dimension written on the body, generating a hesitation of recognition around these bodies and codes that are not about reversing expectation but instead developing the sense of a critique. In the valorization of the performance of the femme fatale, Lynch re-imagines criminality along Deleuzian lines as the powers of the false. Thus, what might seem to be the central questions of these films go unanswered: Who are these women, really? and Are they really dead? We need to understand this question of rerouted criminality in Lynch’s film not in ethical terms, to be assessed via their representational status, but in “ethico-aesthetical terms,” to account for the affective force of the femme fatale.

In *Lost Highway*, Patricia Arquette’s character embodies the femme fatale in two performances: as Renée in the first half of the film, and as Alice in the second half. This dual performance sparks a multiplicity of doublings throughout the film as a whole. Here, the femme fatale initiates a contagion of duplicity that repeatedly twists and folds characters, narrative progressions, and repetitions against each other. Deleuze’s reassessment of the powers of the false as perhaps not *crime* can also be understood in relation to the confused criminality and culpability of *Lost Highway*. There, criminal acts of murder and violence are rampant, and yet culpability and the crimes themselves are undecidable, ambiguous in their reality, even to the point of asking, “Did this really happen?” This confusion stems from the uncertainty over whether an act of violence has been committed externally —Did Fred kill Renée?— or whether the real “crime” is the violence that entails when “I is an other.” Crime becomes suspended precisely *in time* in this film.

While the second part of the film marks a clear break with the first half, switching focalization from Fred to Pete, as an audience we cannot help but refer the events, actions, and characters of the second act back to the first. We look constantly for the play of doubles in order to try to reorient our sense of what has happened. When we are finally given our first “concrete” evidence of some sort of significant continuity between the two worlds, in the person of Patricia Arquette reappearing onscreen, now as Alice, things begin to come together; however, the “concrete” evidence of the body is made hazy by the virtuality of the actor’s part. What is normally closely coupled (the present and past, the actor and role) becomes enlarged by a suspended perception.



Alice picks herself out from a photo with Renee in *Lost Highway*.

Alice's first appearance at the garage creates a "ripple" effect in the film. The clichéd use of slow motion to highlight Pete's first glimpse of her also references the slowness and weightiness of her actions, creating a link to the first half of the film, where time could be seen developing in the characters. As she steps out of the car, the soundtrack resonates with a sense of familiarity and disquiet. Lou Reed performs a tight, minimalist cover of the Drifters' hit "This Magic Moment." The song is recognizable at once, but also strangely unfamiliar and newly inflected. In the film, it is literally a magic moment, "so different and so new," but "like any other." In the same way, the body of Patricia Arquette serves to ground the second part of the film; her body becomes the center around which all other elements revolve. The mystery of her identity, though, will play second fiddle to the generative effects of her "masked difference." What is the relation between Alice and Renée?

Even their names complicate the question. Renée, the original, is named "reborn"; although she belongs to the section of the film with narrative primacy, she is always affiliated with repetition and cliché. Likewise, Alice inverts the rabbit hole of the second half: rather than traveling to a world of nonsense, she becomes the figure of sense (in that she focalizes questions of understanding) in a world turned upside down or inside out. As a figure of surfaces, though, she also resists notions of sense and of identity. Her identity is refracted by fantasy, photos, films, and Arquette's sly performance. Her duplicity is evident; she always slips away. The fetishization of her body and her affiliation with clichés of womanhood might lead one to analyze Alice/Renée as yet another "immaterial" male fantasy: not "woman as woman," without depth but trapped by the body. However, this character's very slipperiness and the film's entire structure belie this. Renée/Alice have no "genuine" depth, but that is because identity itself is an effect as a whole throughout the film, one that already is created and recreated.

This is evident again during a later scene between Alice and Pete, the classic incitement to criminality. This scene cuts back and forth between the present and Alice's narration of a past event, doubling the story of her audition for Mr. Eddy

(though what she is auditioning for is still ambiguous) with a “performance” for Pete, who needs to know if she can successfully perform the role of his fantasy woman as helpless victim. The lovers meet in a motel room; Alice is upset and tells Pete she thinks Mr. Eddy knows about them. Like Fred, Pete becomes increasingly obsessed with uncovering Alice’s secrets; unlike Fred’s obsessive jealousy, however, Pete’s position as lover, not husband, means that his intentions toward Alice involve rescuing her from the brutal and imperious Mr. Eddy. Although Mr. Eddy never directly mistreats Alice, it is clear that she is under his thumb and a sort of possession. Pete longs to escape with Alice and equally longs to hear that she is Mr. Eddy’s victim. Alice tells Pete that they can leave together, change their identities and begin anew. In order for this to happen, though, Pete needs to uncover Alice’s secret, the story of how she met Mr. Eddy, to make space for a new identity via a grounding in truth. As Alice tells her story, there are clear parallels with Renée’s story of how she met Andy. Both begin at a place called Moke’s, both involve meeting Andy, who tells them about a job. Alice’s job offer leads to her meeting Mr. Eddy. The scene cuts to Mr. Eddy’s house, where Alice waits nervously in a hallway, guarded by a man. Her voiceover describes the scene, doubling its temporal location; it is unclear whether these are her memories, Pete’s imagination filling in the images, or if the images are the visual manifestation of Alice’s fabulation, which may or may not be true. And, ultimately, there is no way to know. There is a curious, motivating literality to the voiceover. “It got dark,” Alice says, and the screen turns black, but it was only a close-up of the back of Alice’s black dress, and sound and image constantly come together only to expose the void between them in this scene. Description is never what it seems; the images motivated by the words fail to line up. When she finally meets Mr. Eddy, he is seated in a chair, accompanied by his thugs. He looks at her and gestures, and when she hesitates, one of his henchmen holds a gun to her head. As in her earlier introduction to Pete, the soundtrack once again plays a new copy of an old song, this time Jay Hawkins’s “I Put a Spell on You,” as performed by Marilyn Manson. Again, the lyrics suggest a distorted temporality — “I put a spell on you because you’re mine” — and the circular nature of desire — “You’re mine,” “I don’t care if you want me, ‘cause I’m yours, yours, yours . . .” As she strips in this audition, Alice fluctuates between being a victim of Mr. Eddy’s command and a seductress taking control of the scene; in the same way, the images that unroll tell a familiar story both appealing and appalling to Pete. He is simultaneously disgusted and turned on by what he sees/imagines/is told. When Alice is left only in her panties, she walks over to Mr. Eddy, and kneels in front of him. She reaches out her hand to caress his cheek, and the scene cuts to her hand touching Pete’s face. At the cut, the music, which had been building hypnotically in the scene, cuts abruptly with the picture (the shock of contact will later reappear when Alice points to herself in the picture at Andy’s). This containment of the non-diegetic music is often repeated throughout the film. The cut of the sound juxtaposed with the continuity of the gesture between scenes inverts the usual sound/image relationship, both highlighting the transition and not bridging the cut, but making the overlap shocking and powerful. Non-diegetic music is used to undermine the “ref-



Crime scene image 1 from *Mulholland Drive*.

erentiality” of the images, their primacy in the film, also associated with the play between imagination and reality throughout. In this audition scene, the femme fatale is revealed, and she’s revealed in her power to create images, to produce a magical effect that literally reaches out to touch the spectator. This audition in *Lost Highway* not only performs the powers of the false in the femme fatale’s ability to manipulate her male prey, but more importantly illustrates the effect that this mutability has on the logic of narration, cause and effect, and normative temporality.³

In *Mulholland Drive*, an audition scene condenses these two impulses, both replaying that uncertain identification of actress/part beyond the narrative boundaries of the film, and testifying to the way that cinema’s magic works not through an illusion, a glossy surface hiding a dirty truth, but in an affective transmutation right before our eyes, disrupting the revelatory logic the classical duplicity of the femme fatale seems to promise. Betty’s audition is the first moment where the clear distinction between the femme fatale (as Rita) and the good girl (as perky Betty), starts to take a topological twist, and Betty is revealed as a femme fatale whose control emerges via an automatism of performance. George Toles has offered a brilliant reading of this scene, in which he claims that the effect of seeing Betty —up to this point a rather shallow and clichéd character— suddenly transmute into a brilliant performer leaves the audience scrambling to recognize the woman in front of them, and forces us to conclude that we can only be seeing Naomi Watts. Betty becomes “possessed” as it were, by this actress. He writes: “We behold Betty crossing over, in so many ways at once that the effect is breathtaking, from guileless pretending to majestic double-dealing,” concluding that “the viewer is virtually commandeered (ie., we are made automatons) into thinking about ‘Naomi Watts’ herself”

³ A small section of this article (from paragraph starting with the sentence “In *Lost Highway*, Patricia...” in page 89, to this point) was previously published in the author’s article, “Funny How Secrets Travel: David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*,” *Invisible Culture* vol. 8 (2004).

(Toles, 2004: 9). He concludes that Betty is Lynch's Eurydice, the woman coming back though death via performance as a kind of resurrection (13). If this scene throws the audience into a crisis of identification —Are we seeing Betty or Naomi Watts, and why is this a problem?— the uncertainty resonates and is echoed by the very next scene, in which Betty is taken to a film set where actresses audition for a part via lipsyncing. The hesitation of Betty as femme fatale set against this backdrop of the uncertain possession of lipsyncing, of making a space for an other's performance within the body. As the performances unfold, the director of the film does a second take of Betty in slow motion, again suggesting an uncertain recognition that asks us to look again. Toles makes the link between femme fatale and performance explicit when he argues that the audition scene is where "Watts/Betty effectively steals the sense of danger and darkness that her friend Rita had previously embodied...and *theft* is exactly the right word for it, calling to mind the old acting phrases, 'scene stealing' and 'stealing the show'" (9). Betty's fatal indistinction as dreaming corpse and vengeful lover who causes Rita's death are condensed in the double effect of the femme fatale's power of re-animation.

In *Inland Empire*, auditions and performance shift yet again, and increasingly become the sites of auto-audition, where Laura Dern's characters feel themselves becoming other. Nikki Grace's first reading for the film *On High in Blue Tomorrows* is interrupted by a mysterious figure, who turns out to be herself stumbling onto the film set from another time and place. In that film, criminality is incited by the mysterious cursed film itself, and it is never certain whether the murders and violence we continually witness are contained by the fiction of the script, or topologically folding studio and set into lived realities. The entire finale of the film is a drawn out experience of resurrection, in which Nikki Grace reemerges as a kind of zombie or automaton from the corpse of Susan Blue on the floor when the camera pulls back to reveal the set.



Crime scene image 2 from *Inland Empire*.

The final sequence, which unfolds when Nikki enters the Rabbits set, is book-ended by two double encounters with the self. The first is when Nikki shoots the Phantom (*The figure of deathly terror in the film*), only to be confronted with her own distorted and maniacally grinning visage. The second encounter revisits Nikki's first scene in the film, with Visitor #1, where once again Nikki looks over to where she will be and sees herself on the couch opposite, this time alone and looking back at where she would have been. This final face-to-face encounter of Dern's personas is not about a simple recognition, or stabilization of a copy/model distinction. These encounters are consistently asymmetrical; here, the first Nikki is shot in extreme, fish-eye close-up, while the second is in an undistorted long shot. This asymmetry is critical to the way that Lynch re-imagines the femme fatale as a figure of becoming other, which is why although I do agree with Grossman that Lynch's films might be the future of the femme fatale, I cannot agree with her that dissemblance is about simply telling her own story (2009). As Deleuze argues in *Difference and Repetition*, "lack of symmetry" is "positivity itself"; something is happening (the refrain of the song that accompanies these images) between these two shots that escapes a closed-circuit of mirror reflection (1994: 22). Between these instants, Nikki/Laura Dern enters the Rabbit set; like them she, too, is living herself as a medium, what Deleuze might term an "actor-medium" (1989: 19).

In the final sequence, when Nikki shoots the Phantom, he undergoes several transformations. The bullets that pierce him are simply beams of light; lighting changes throughout have signaled phase shifts or moments of collective becoming. Nikki sees her own face, a reminder of an earlier scene in which Dern approaches the camera slowly up a forest path, only to speed up dramatically as she reaches the camera. The second composite image as the Phantom dies is a distorted and soggy head, like a face decomposing underwater, suggestive of the fluid immersion of the environment previously signaled through the use of lighting. Here, the composite image renders the surface of the image an entire world, mutable and connected, a body in de-and re-composition. While it is horrifying, it also sparks movement on Dern's part; she stumbles backwards into the *Rabbits* room, and from there, we see her encounter with the Lost Girl, now dressed and ready to leave, as the live and the recorded enter into the vibratory image of figural anamorphosis—the doubling of the two girls racing by in the hallway, Dern's appearance on the television screen and in the room simultaneously, and the persistence of the composite image as a means of legitimate contact—the reality of connection via the medium in the tender kiss and exchange of tears.

The Lost Girl's story ends in a conventional "happily ever after," one which in some ways rewrites the ending of *Blue Velvet*. Dern's performance, the dark haired and European Lost Girl who reunites with her husband and small son, call to mind another way to end *Blue Velvet* in which the femme fatale is not the figure of horror who intrudes on suburban domesticity, and who can only be a mother when adult males no longer have any claim to her. From Dorothy's horrible automatism and Sandy's imperiled purity, Dern's performance in *Inland Empire*, her presence on stage is precisely what releases the Lost Girl, who leaves the room after hearing the

breathless laughter of the two women who race down the hallway, the doubled spirit guides for Dern's character throughout. Nikki's end, however, is more ambiguous. Nikki looks out into an empty theatre space, the single eye of a spotlight her only witness. As she cries, the image of a slow motion ballerina bleeds through in a final composite image. It can be read as melancholic, in that the live performer will know a contact and approbation from their audience that Nikki, performing as femme fatale, will never know. Constantly, Nikki is her only audience, and her perception is of her "othered" self. But it is crucial to recall that the ballerina moves in slow motion: she performs a dance that can only exist on the screen. This final composite image of Nikki and the ballerina not only signals a cliché of grace, beauty, and bodily control, but immediately places the dancing body and Nikki's sense of the self's intimate otherness as a response to the challenge of living the deformations of iconicity. This performance made possible through the "illusion" of cinema takes us back to the very end of *Mulholland Drive*, where a spectator waits in the balcony for the show to begin again. The affective potential of the ending of *Inland Empire* is Lynch's final gesture of the double movement of creative recomposition. That this is immediately followed by the lipsyncing credit sequence, featuring, among others, Laura Harring from *Mulholland Drive*, in a joyful indistinction between characters and actresses, is strong evidence for Lynch's project of reanimating the femme fatale to a different end.

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