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Maria Poulaki

Diving in the Ocean of Consciousness: Altered States, Psychoanalysis and Trascendental Aesthetics in David Lynch

1. Introduction

The term "psychedelic" is often encountered when reading about the experience of David Lynch's (not just cinematic) work. For example, curator Klára Szarka writes on a collection of Lynch's photographs exhibited under the title *David Lynch: Small Stories*[1]:

> *Small Stories* takes visitors on a psychedelic journey through the world of emotions, humour, playfulness and restlessness, while unveiling past memories and scars. Similarly to his films, these images are dominated by dreams with the fundamental driving force of his poetic vision being the connection between the subconscious and reality.[2]

This quote contains some of the key notions around which the scholarship on Lynch has revolved, i.e., dreams and the subconscious. Here, I will attempt to focus on another term mentioned in this quote: the "psychedelic" quality of his work, not strictly defined as the condition resulting from the consumption of psychedelic substances, but in a wider sense of his work's affordances for altering and expanding consciousness.

[1] Small Stories was first exhibited in January 2014 in Paris at the Museum of European photography. It was also later exhibited in Budapest (March-June 2019 at the Budapest Photo Festival, Kunsthalle Chamber Hall), and in Luxembourg in 2023 (Cercle Cité's *Ratskeller*; see https://cerclecite.lu/en/event/small-stories-by-david-lynch).

[2] *David Lynch: Small Stories*. In *Műcsarnok* Kunsthalle Budhapest website. Retrieved from: https://mucsarnok.hu/exhibitions/exhibitions.php?mid=56fWnDFkWJd2JWjmJPVUUw (access May 5, 2024).

Both filmmakers and scholars[3] seem to agree that cinema and other cinematic media have the means not just to represent altered states of consciousness (often referred to as "ASCs"), but also to induce similar states in the minds of viewers, even though empirical research on this subject is still in its infancy[4]. As director Alejandro Jodorowsky, talking about his own "psychedelic" cinema, observed, "when one creates a psychedelic film, he need not create a film that shows the visions of a person who has taken a pill; rather, he needs to manufacture the pill"[5].

As Lynch has stated in interviews, he has never been a user of psychedelic substances[6]; however, his deep interest in altered states of consciousness – and indeed, in the unconscious more broadly – is expressed through his long-term commitment to the practice of transcendental meditation (TM), arguably made manifest in his work, which feels, as a commentator puts it, as if "you enter an 'altered state'"[7].

Even though Lynch's keen advocacy of TM, culminating in his "David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace" (a foundation for promoting meditation in schools), has been criticized by fans and scholars[8], his interest in meditation, and through it, in altered states of consciousness, could provide further insight into the interpretation of his work, and its link to the unconscious – which so far has been mainly discussed, in scholarly and also in lay publications, through a parallelism to dreaming. The connection between Lynch's artistic creation and meditation has not entirely escaped scholarly attention[9]. However, such approaches

[3] See, for example, P. Sharits, *Notes on Films/1966-68 by Paul Sharits*, in "Film Culture" Vol. 47, 1969, pp.13-16; A. P. Sitney, *Visionary Film: the American avant-garde, 1943-2000*. Oxford University Press, New York 2002; A. Powell, *Deleuze, Altered States and Film*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2007.

[4] For example, recent neurocinematic research explores the therapeutic potential of "clinical trance" and "movie-based auto-hypnosis". See W. Mastnak, *Neurocinematic Therapy: An interdisciplinary perspective*, in "Proceedings of the European Academy of Sciences & Arts", Vol. 3, No. 2, 2024.

[5] A. Jodorowsky, quoted in D. Church, *The Doors of Reception: Notes Toward a Psychedelic Film Investigation*, in "Senses of Cinema", Vol. 87, 2018. Retrieved from: http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2018/feature-articles/the-doors-of-reception-notes-toward-a-psychedelic-film-investigation/ (access May 11, 2024).

[6] D. Lynch, *Catching the big fish: Meditation, consciousness, and creativity*, Penguin, New York 2016, p. 176.

[7] C. Bliss, *Like Electric Gold: David Lynch, bliss and the dive within*. In CharlesBliss.com (Blog). *Retrieved from:* https://www.charlesbliss.com/newsletter/david-lynch-and-transcendental-meditation/ (access May 11, 2024).

[8] See for example D. Lim, *David Lynch: The Man From Another Place*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston and New York 2015, Chapter 12.

[9] See for example Z. Sheldon, *The Artistic Evangelism of David Lynch: Transcendental Meditation, World Peace, and Laura Palmer,* in "NANO: New American Notes Online", Issue 15, 2020, p. 10. Retrieved from: https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Ag-

have been very limited in comparison to other discussions focusing on the dream state as evoked by his films. According to Richard Barney, since Lynch first engaged in transcendental meditation in 1973, "his interest in altered, distended, and enhanced states of consciousness" remains intact, as well as his "unwavering commitment to exploring the radical transformation of ego-based identity, whether or not that venture may lead to profound serenity or harrowing distress"[10]. In the present article, I will examine both these outcomes of Lynch's quest to explore, represent and transmit a sense of "radical transformation of ego-based identity", deriving examples from two cases from his filmography, which indeed demonstrate different approaches and aesthetics of altering consciousness, either pointing at "profound serenity" or a "harrowing distress". But before getting to the specific cases, I will first explore Lynch's notion and experience of altering consciousness.

2. Lynch, oceanic consciousness, and the "unified field"

In the book *Catching the Big Fish*, where Lynch talks extensively about transcendental meditation and the influence it has had on his life and artistic creation, he uses the embodied metaphor[11] of "diving within" what he refers to as the "ocean of consciousness" to describe his meditative experience[12]. The path to oceanic consciousness comes for Lynch through meditation, and it is the guru of TM, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, whom he quotes using this phrase, as well as the ancient Sanskrit texts Upanishads as the inspiration behind Maharishi's metaphor: "One unbounded ocean of consciousness became light, water, and matter. And the three became many. In this way the whole universe was created as an unbounded ocean of consciousness ever unfolding within itself"[13]. Life's origin in water, and the idea of differentiation coming from primordial oneness is resonating in many areas of knowledge and inquiry, connecting theories of cosmogeny, ontogeny, as well as theories of psychic development.

Apart from the reference to Hinduism through the Upanishads, Lynch adopts another, scientific perspective to oneness, this time taken

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[10] R.A. Barney (a cura di), *David Lynch: Interviews,* University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS 2009, p. xii.

[11] A field of knowledge opened by G. Lakoff and M. Johnson through their seminal work *Metaphors We Live by*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980.

[12] D. Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish*, cit., p. 60, p. 90.

[13] Ivi, p. 92.

from physics, through the notion of the "unified field"[14]. Lynch's ideas on the unified field are not derived from Einstein's use of the term and the latter's suggestion of unified field theory, but from John Hagelin, a physicist who got affiliated with the Maharishi International University, and later became president of the David Lynch foundation. In the later 1980s and the 1990s, Hagelin became known for his work towards a unified field theory in quantum physics (particularly in superstring theory); most notably, he attempted to extend the idea of the unified field to the theory of consciousness, and thus provide support to Maharishi's beliefs. Even though this ideological appropriation of scientific research has not escaped criticism[15], Lynch endorses Hagelin's ideas and seems to believe that the notion of unified field gives scientific support to the connectivity and "oneness" of consciousness. He also notes the origins of this idea in ancient Vedic science, according to which "this ocean of pure consciousness is called Atma, the Self"[16]. In any case, bracketing out the science or pseudo-science involved in these claims, for Lynch "Transcendental Meditation is a simple, easy, effortless technique that allows any human being to dive within, to experience subtler levels of mind and intellect, and to enter this ocean of pure consciousness, the Unified Field – *the Self*"[17].

The same idea of an unbounded and limitless self, experiencing oneness with the world and the other is at the heart of psychoanalytical theories of subjectivity. Specifically, the metaphorical association of consciousness with the ocean, beyond its genealogy in Eastern religion and philosophy, has a separate (and of course much shorter) genealogy in psychoanalysis. In 1927, soon after the publication of his work *The Future of an Illusio*n, Freud sent a copy to Romain Rolland, an important intellectual (Nobel winner, dramatist, writer as well as mystic) at the time, to ask his opinion over the debated chapter where Freud lays out his thoughts on religion. Rolland responded with his theory that "true religion arose from the mystical experience of oneness with the world" which he called "the oceanic feeling" [*la sensation océanique*][18], a sensation of the eternal, of that

[14] See *Unified Field Theory*, in "Britannica". Retrieved from https://www.britannica.com/science/unified-field-theory. (access May 11, 2024).
[15] See J. S. Hagelin, *Is Consciousness the Unified Field?: A field theorist's perspective*, Maharishi International University, Fairfield, IA 1987, pp. 29-87. For criticism, see M. Shermer, *Quantum Quackery. A hit film justifies hogwash with quantum mechanics*, in "Scientific American", Vol. 292, No. 1, 2005, p. 22; V. J. Stenger, *Quantum Gods: Creation, chaos, and the search for cosmic consciousness*. Prometheus Books, New York 2009, pp. 60-62.
[16] D. Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish*, cit., p. 93.
[17] Ivi, p. 94.
[18] W. B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the psychoanalytic theory of mysticism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, pp. 3-4.

without perceptible limits. It is not a coincidence that Rolland's term was inspired by Hinduism[19]. At the beginning of his subsequent work, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud responds to Rolland's idea, linking oceanic feeling to the first stages of psychic development, when there is no concept of autonomous self, but a "primary narcissistic union between mother and infant"[20]; some people, Freud thought, preserve such feeling in their adulthood. According to Levine, "Freud will variously speak of the oceanic feeling or the Nirvana principle as the living embodiment of the hidden drive for self-dispersion and self-dissolution"[21]. Freud's views on the oceanic feeling as "a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded'"[22], are considered by scholars such as W. Parsons and A. Kokoszka to be his account of altered states of consciousness[23]. As Parsons summarizes, Freud's oceanic feeling is his "phenomenological account of mystical experience whose essence and keynote consists in the fact of 'unity'"[24].

3. Psychology of consciousness: from the ocean to the stream

Apart from Hinduism, Rolland had also been influenced by a seminal scientific-psychological work on transcendental or "mystical" experiences, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* by William James, one of the most important psychologists involved in "the earliest period" of the "debate over mysticism" (1880-1930), according to Parsons[25]. Rolland was "deeply impressed" by James's experiential approach to mystical experience, and by the emphasis James placed on its subconscious aspects[26].

[19] Among his many interests, Rolland was a researcher of Hinduism; he wrote the biography of Hindu religious leader Sri Ramakrishna introducing his thought to a Western audience (see A. Maharaya [S. Medhananda], *Debating Freud on the Oceanic Feeling: Romain Rolland's vedantic critique of psychoanalysis and his call for a new 'science of mind'*, in A. Maharaya [S. Medhananda] (Ed.), *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Vedānta*, Bloomsbury, London, pp. 197–223). According to Parsons, Rolland was "deeply immersed in the 'Oriental renaissance' sweeping Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries". (See Parsons, *The Enigma*, *cit*., p. 13)
[20] W. B. Parsons, *The Oceanic Feeling Revisited,* in "The Journal of Religion" Vol. 78, No. 4, 1998, pp. 501-523, p. 501.
[21] S. Z. Levine, *Seascapes of the Sublime: Vernet, Monet, and the Oceanic Feeling*, in "New Literary History", Vol. 16, No. 2, 1985, pp. 377-400, p. 398.
[22] S. Freud, quoted in A. Kokoszka *States of Consciousness: Models for psychology and psychotherapy*, Springer, New York 2007, p. 71.
[23] Kokoszka, *cit*., p. 72.
[24] W. B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the psychoanalytic theory of mysticism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, p. 10.
[25] Ivi, p. 8.
[26] Ivi, p. 65.

For James, the spiritual feeling (in all different forms, from Hinduism to Catholicism), which he too associates with a feeling of being "one" with the universe, stems mainly from the subconscious. In his study *Varieties of Religious Experience* he writes:

> The spiritual in man appears in the mind-cure philosophy as partly conscious, but chiefly subconscious; and through the subconscious part of it we are already one with the Divine without any miracle of grace, or abrupt creation of a new inner man. As this view is variously expressed by different writers, we find in it traces of Christian mysticism, of transcendental idealism, of vedantism, and of the modern psychology of the subliminal self.[27]

James referred to studies by George A. Coe that showed that spontaneous religious conversion was found more frequently in subjects with an "active subliminal self", prone to alterations of consciousness (for example, showing "hypnotic sensibility" or "such automatisms as hypnagogic hallucinations")[28]. Considered the first psychologist making a major contribution to the study of altered states, James studied many varieties of this "subliminal self" in the form of altered states of consciousness, including hypnotic trance, "vacancy" or lethargy[29], hypnagogic hallucinations, etc. Thus people susceptible to hypnotism and other such altered states in-between waking and sleeping are thus those in possession of an active subliminal self.

It would be easy to classify Lynch himself into this category. James's descriptions of subliminal experience resonate with Lynch's lucid account of transcending, alluding to a hypnagogic state:

> Many people have already experienced transcending, but they may not realize it. It's an experience that you can have just before you go to sleep. You're awake, but you experience a sort of fall, and you maybe see some white light and get a little jolt of bliss. And you say, "Holy jumping George!" When you go from one state of consciousness to another – for instance, from waking to sleeping – you pass through a gap. And in that gap, you can transcend.[30]

As a visual artist and filmmaker Lynch describes quite vividly (and in a manner that resonates with visual motifs prominent in his films) how

[27] W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A study in human nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902*, Longmans, Green, and co., New York 1917, p. 101.
[28] Ivi, p. 235.
[29] W. James, *The Principles of Psychology, Volume 1*, Chapter XI "Attention", p. 404, The Project Gutenberg Ebook. retrieved from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/57628/57628-h/57628-h.htm.
[30] D. Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish*, cit., p. 96.

this gap, and the oceanic (or, as he calls it, "pure bliss"[31]) consciousness experienced in it, feels like:

> I picture it like a round white room that has yellow, red, and blue curtains covering the white wall. The curtains are three states of consciousness: waking, sleeping, and dreaming. But in the gap between each curtain, you can see the white of the Absolute – the pure bliss consciousness. You can transcend in that little piece of white. Then you come to the next state of consciousness. The white room really is all around you all the time, even though the curtains cover most of it; […] With Transcendental Meditation, from the waking state of consciousness you can experience that white wall anytime when you sit and meditate. That's the beautiful thing about it.[32]

Even though, as already broached, the theme of dreaming is prominent in his films, Lynch seems to be interested in the transitions between the different states of consciousness more than he is in just the single state of dreaming – in "the gap between each curtain". "Bliss" lies, according to him, with the transition that allows to feel the connection of all different states, the undifferentiated "unified" field where all particular states of consciousness, with all sensations, thoughts and perceptions, emanate from.

Instead of looking for a scientific explanation for transcendence in physics (like Lynch does through the notion of the unified field), I find more productive linking his observations to the psychology of altered states of consciousness, of which James is a pioneer. He took interest in this transitory terrain between waking and sleeping, as already broached, that offers a glimpse of the "white room", to use Lynch's words. In James's view such experiences take place "in the twilight of general consciousness"[33]; the latter can be imagined as a constantly flowing stream (his famous notion of the "stream of consciousness"), which is attuned, through the "breathing and pulses of attention" that populates it, to a "changing process", a rhythm[34]. The rhythm of the stream contains "th*e resting-places"*, or "*substantive parts*", and the *"places of flight*", or the "*transitive parts*"[35]. The move from one substantive part to another is ini-

[31] Ivi, p. 97.
[32] Ivi, pp. 96-97.
[33] W. Wundt, quoted in J. James, *Principles of Psychology*, cit., p. 637.
[34] W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, cit., p. 620. James draws particularly on the phenomenon of "fluctuations of attention" observed by Wilhelm Wundt and his students in the school of experimental psychology in Leipzig (see D. Lehmann, *Brain Electric Microstates, and Cognitive and Perceptual Modes*, in P. Kruse, M. Stadler (a cura di.), *Ambiguity in Mind and Nature: Multistable cognitive phenomena*, Springer-Verlag, Berlin 1995, pp. 407-420, p. 411).
[35] W. James, *Principles of Psychology*, cit., p. 243.

tiated by some sort of change, a sensation internal or external or "a process of attention or volition"[36]. We only attend to the substantive parts, while the transitive parts are hidden in the "twilight" of consciousness.

In the writer's words:

> In either case [the substantive part] stands out from the other segments of the stream by reason of the peculiar interest attaching to it. This interest *arrests* it, makes a sort of crisis of it when it comes, induces attention upon it and makes us treat it in a substantive way. The parts of the stream that precede these substantive conclusions are but the means of the latter's attainment[37].[…] It then appears that the main end of our thinking is at all times the attainment of some other substantive part than the one from which we have just been dislodged. And we may say that the main use of the transitive parts is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another.[38]

We do not attend to the transitive parts of the stream, those gaps between the substantive parts described by James as "aching" for being filled[39]; and any thought and mental image or state we experience in-between "swims in a felt fringe of relations"[40] with the substantive part to which attention as well as fully conscious perception is attracted. Transitive parts are diffuse, and arguably unconscious. But they make this "glue" between substantive parts; creating the unity of consciousness that resonates with Lynch's idea of the "unified field" or "white room" which serves as the background and container of all distinct states of consciousness.

Despite long-held theoretical disagreements and misunderstandings revolving around James' acknowledgement (or not) of unconscious processes, as Joel Weinberger points out, his notion of the stream of consciousness includes an account for the unconscious; particularly the notion of the fringe surrounding and accompanying all substantive parts is "clearly a model of unconscious processing": "The fringe is not directly represented in consciousness. It is the latent (unconscious) connotation of our thoughts"[41].

Bridging the gap between James's discussion of the stream of consciousness in his major work *Principles of Psychology* and his discussion

[36] Ivi, p. 620.
[37] Ivi, p. 260.
[38] Ivi, p. 243.
[39] "Whatever may be the images and phrases that pass before us, we feel their relation to this aching gap. To fill it up is our thoughts' destiny." Ivi, p. 260.
[40] *Ibidem*.
[41] J. Weinberger, *William James and the Unconscious: Redressing a Century-old misunderstanding*, in "Psychological Science", Vol. 11, No. 6, 2000, pp. 439-445.

of altered states in the same work as well as in others (like *The Varieties of Religious Experience* previously mentioned), we can consider altered states as modifications of the stream (instead of thinking of a separate, parallel stream altogether, as it has been suggested)[42]. In this vein, techniques such as meditation can be seen as methods of intentional modification of the experience of the stream, of letting oneself fall in its transitive "gaps" where attention is not resting on anything in particular, but stays diffused and lets itself swim in the fringes of experience, between its "substantive parts".

4. Meditation and altering consciousness

Meditative traditions differ both in their methods and their results (as well as the beliefs they reflect). A main difference is in the way they involve attention in their techniques to reach transcendence. One large category of meditative practice requires attentional concentration and is thus called "advanced concentration meditation" (or "concentrative (object) meditation", or "focused attention" mediation), while the other category is mentioned as "open monitoring meditation"[43]. In the former, attention gradually changes from "active and concentrated" to "still and absorbed"[44], as well as effortless, while in the latter, "the practitioner observes the occurrence of thoughts but does not engage with them"; object orientation is low as attention is not attached to any object in particular[45]. By "training" attention to let go, meditation loosens anchors to the "substantive parts" of consciousness; this could be imagined as a process of voiding attention and consciousness of its objects – phenomenologically experienced, as Lynch describes, as a feeling of diving into an ocean where no particular "wave" is different than another[46].

[42] See T. Natsoulas, *The Stream of Consciousness: VIII. James's ejective consciousness (First Part)*, in "Imagination, Cognition and Personality", Vol. 14, No. 4, 1994-5, pp. 333-352.
[43] Markovic and Thompson, *Hypnosis and Meditation*, cit. J. Markovic, E. Thompson, *Hypnosis and Meditation: A neurophenomenological comparison*, in A. Raz, M. Lifshitz (Eds.), *Hypnosis and Meditation: Towards an integrative science of conscious planes*. Oxford UP, Oxford 2017, pp. 79-106. See also M. Lifshitz, A. Raz, *Hypnosis and Meditation: Vehicles of attention and suggestion*, in "The Journal for Mind-body Regulation", Vol. 2, No.3, pp. 3-11. Different visual points of concentration can be employed, such as mandala patterns, steadily moving or changing objects – e.g. a swinging pendulum, a ticking clock, or candlelight, etc. But focalization practices could also involve rhythm (such as the repetitive act of breath, a repeated word or sound, like a mantra, etc.).
[44] Markovic, Thompson, *Hypnosis and Meditation*, cit., p. 86.
[45] Ivi, p. 89.
[46] A process often described as equivalent to meditation in Western science is the phenomenological practice of *epoch*é, a concept first defined by Husserl as "the com-

Engaging in a comparative meta-analysis of studies on different kinds of meditation, Travis and Shear classify the type of meditation practiced by Lynch, namely transcendental meditation (TM), under a third category, aside concentrative and open monitoring meditation: what they call "automatic self-transcending"[47]. They describe it as meditation that through automatism ("relaxed attention to special sounds (mantras) repeated silently within the mind") reaches a level where the technique itself effortlessly disappears – in the sense that it does not need to be actively sustained anymore. The result is an "experience of unusual global states of consciousness, including in particular states devoid of phenomenological objects", reportedly feeling "objectless" and "empty"; in other words, "a deep, apparently phenomenologically qualityless stratum of consciousness"[48].

So far I have briefly discussed both Western Psychology's early interest in altered states (through the work of James) and cultural traditions of reaching such states (meditation); associating Lynch's reports of his experience of transcending with both. Letting go of particular attentional objects, feeling the "transitive" nature of the stream of consciousness, falling in the "gaps" between "substantive" thoughts and objects, in an intermediary and transitory state not aligning with waking consciousness but with hypnagogic states[49], and thus reaching a feeling of bliss: it would be challenging to think of all these aspects of experiencing transcendence in relation to aesthetics in Lynch's work.

plete exclusion of every assumption, stipulation, and conviction with regard to objective time." See E. Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)* (Vol. 4)., Springer Science & Business Media, Dodrecht 1991. Like meditation, *epoché* as phenomenological practice aims at this exclusion of external influence, reaching a state of "letting go", of putting to rest the fluctuations of attention, in order to make felt the "ground" of consciousness out of which all particular perceptions and thoughts emerge.

[47] F. Travis, J. Shear, *Focused Attention, Open Monitoring and Automatic Self-transcending: Categories to organize meditations from Vedic, Buddhist and Chinese traditions*, in "Consciousness and Cognition", Vol. 19, No. 4, 2010, pp. 1110–1118, doi:10.1016/ j.concog.2010.01.007.

[48] *Ibidem*.

[49] Meditation has often been compared in its technical, phenomenological and neuropsychological aspects to another intermediary state between waking and sleeping, namely hypnosis (a Western medical practice popular in the 19th century but later devalued). The two have been found similar "in the attentional and concentration practices employed that result in altered states of consciousness" (see De Benedittis, G., *Neural Mechanisms of Hypnosis and Meditation*, in "Journal of Physiology – Paris", Vol. 109, 2015, pp. 152-164, p. 161; also see U. Ott, *States of Absorption: In search of neurobiological foundations*, in G. A. Jamieson (Eds.) *Hypnosis and Conscious States: The cognitive neuroscience perspective,* Oxford UP, New York 2007, pp. 257-270), as well as in "altered boundaries of the self and an altered perception of reality" (R. J. Pekala and E. J. Forbes, quoted in Markovic and Thompson, *cit*.)

5. Aesthetic manifestations of "diving in" the ocean of consciousness

In a sense, cinematic transcendence has been a main object of film theory for decades; Apparatus Theory[50] has addressed it as a dream-like state where spectators enter, aided by the conditions of projection as well as by the unconscious processes of identification at play. (Dreaming is here again, the main point of reference for the state of consciousness that cinema induces). The association of cinema with trancing has been a steady preoccupation in scholarship – from Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception*[51], a study positioning cinema as a crucial 20th century cultural practice of modifying and altering attention and consciousness, to Utte Holl's *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* – where the use of the term "cinema-trance" defines the medium as "a cultural technique of trance and transformation"[52], a system "that expresses and alters perception and the corresponding nerve-psychological relations in bodies as it transmits its impulses"[53]. In the context of such wider association of the medium of cinema with transcendence, however, it is less easy to highlight specific aesthetic moving image configurations as affording trance-like responses. Paul Schrader's book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, & Dreyer* offered perhaps the first comprehensive study of specific aesthetic attributes of films that can express "transcendental style" – which he approached as different ways filmmakers used to express "the Holy", or "spiritual emotions"[54]. Here I would like to suggest a different way to approach transcendental aesthetics through juxtaposing film techniques with techniques of specific trancing practices such as meditation.

Of course, film, and especially narrative film, is not a medium that is often associated with the type of transcendence that meditation achieves. After all, film's affordances for transcendence are mostly attributed to the effect of narrative transportation, which does not require attention to deepen, widen and become still and objectless, as in most types of meditative practice, but to flow from one narrative event to the other. Film constantly directs and manipulates attention, for some "attuning" to its

[50] Among other contributions to this branch of theoretical approaches to cinema (such as those by Raymond Bellour, Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Pierre Oudart, and others), see Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the cinema,* Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1981.
[51] J. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, spectacle, and modern culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1999.
[52] U. Holl, *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2007, p. 13.
[53] Ivi, p. 23.
[54] See P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1972, p. 3.

natural fluctuations[55]. However, in films diverging from the established mainstream modes of storytelling, such as Lynch's, the treatment of attention can be more complex, with structures of emptying and voiding attention coexisting with, and at times prevailing over, conventional cinematic structures for guiding attention.

The transcendental aesthetics of Lynch's work in connection to his meditative practice have not escaped scholarly attention; for example, Nowocień and Szejko have focused on such aesthetics manifesting in the film *Blue Velvet*, noting its "combination of meditation music, slow sequences as well as contemplation of human mind and emotional reactions" characteristic of what they call "transcendental cinema", which, according to the authors, "teaches paying attention to single stimulus and staying in one thought"[56]. They describe it as a type of

> slow cinema featuring long shots, austere camerawork and acting devoid of self-consciousness. […] All these features [they argue,] bring transcendental style closer to philosophy of mindfulness characterized by the practice of purposely bringing one's attention to experiences occurring in the present moment without judgment.[57]

Taking into account such views on "meditative" cinematic practices, but also trying a different way to approach aesthetics of altering consciousness in film, I will attempt to trace instances in Lynch's work that afford voiding of consciousness and attentional diffusion, and can be considered to have a meditative effect in this sense. Aesthetics that can be thought as trance-inducing may be found in scenes that audiovisually embody a sense of "diving within", feeling unbounded and losing the sense of a separate self.

6. A straight path to transcendence

Out of Lynch's filmography, perhaps the most explicitly "meditative" film, adhering to the perspective on transcendental aesthetics adopted by authors such as Nowocień and Szejko, is *Straight Story* (1999). It is one of the later titles in Lynch's filmography and makes a stand-alone case, being perhaps his most straight-forward narrative film. It tells the

[55] See J. Cutting, A. Candan, *Movies, Evolution and Mind: From Fragmentation to Continuity*, In "*The Evolutionary Review*", Vol. 4, No. 1, 2013, pp. 25-36.
[56] J. Nowocień, N. Szejko, *Transcendental Cinema and Psychiatry. The case of Blue Velvet by David Lynch*. In "European Psychiatry", Vol. 64, No. 1, 2021, doi: 10.1192/j.eurpsy.2021.1993
[57] *Ibidem*.

linear, literally and figuratively, (true) story of Alvin Straight, the elderly man who decides to visit his estranged brother at the other side of the country using the only means of transportation he can have under control and drive, that is his old lawn mower. The script was not written by Lynch himself but by John Roach and Mary Sweeney, making this certainly less personal than other titles in his filmography. Transcendental aesthetics is embedded in *Straight Story*'s narrative structure and at the same time foregrounded by means of style, especially, as I am going to argue, through an abundance of shots having "fractal" properties.

Fractals are structures in nature and culture that have mathematically been proven to be self-similar in different scales. Ruth Herbert notes the fractal properties of many invariant and self-similar structures in nature and the living environment, among which stars and fire, as well as landscapes, both man-made (e.g. cityscapes), and natural[58]. Sounds "such as wind, rain, and running water" are also "fractally invariant"[59]. According to Herbert, the regularity and iterative nature of fractals allow their classification with other "repetitive figurations"[60] such as mandalas, i.e. graphical symbols representing the universe is Hindu and Buddhist traditions, which are used as visual aids for meditation, because their shape's regularity restricts attention and affords "absorption"[61] (a kind of deep and still attention associated with meditation) and trancing.

As already broached, fractal motifs flourish in *Straight Story*. Prominent ones are the aerial shots of corn fields not "contained" in a single frame but revealed through multiple self-similar shots of different width and length, combined through editing to offer different views of the landscape from various distances. Also, close ups of fire (that the protagonist lights when he camps on the side of the road overnight) are frequently inserted into dialogue scenes. The sight of stars is another recurring fractal visual motif, serving a narrative purpose (as they are associated with a childhood memory of the protagonist with his brother) as well as contributing to viewer's absorption. At the end of the film the fractal structure of stars is explored through camera movement, with the last shot being a continuous, slow and hypnotic zoom into the night sky, with the end credits superimposed on the shot without cutting.

The slow pace of camera movement is characteristic throughout *Straight Story*, especially following the equally slow-paced but steadily moving forward trajectory of the hero on his lawn mower towards his

[58] Ivi, p. 181.
[59] Tooby and Cosmides, quoted in Herbert, *cit.*, p. 181.
[60] R. Herbert, *Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, dissociation and trancing*, Ashgate, Farnham 2011, p. p. 153.
[61] Ivi, p. 162.

destination. The frequent shots of the road resonate with the narrative's linear structure, also conveying the sense of a "straight line" – literally giving shape to the stubborn and persisting goal of the protagonist to reach his brother. However the sheer act of moving forward down this never-ending road, which is always changing and always seeming the same, shares some of the meditative affordances of the fractal images.

Through the frequent insertion of fractal shots such as those described, as well as by connecting different layers of cinematography, editing, and sound (the lyrical synth-based soundtrack composed by Lynch's steady collaborator Angelo Bandalamenti) through self-similar patterns, Lynch prepares for the viewer transitions between the "waking" conventional narrative parts and the non-narrative inserts (i.e. the fractal shots as transitive parts) that afford shifts in attentional concentration, causing attentional diffusion and affording an experience akin to trancing. In the end this proves to be a not-so-straight story, cinematically creating an embodied metaphor of the transitive nature of consciousness[62], allowing the mind to wander and get lost in the gaps between the film's beginning and ending – which feel like eternity. A sense of bliss or "profound serenity" is thus transferred not just through the narrative resolution (the hero's apparent reunion with his brother) but through the overall experience of the film.

7. A different case of transcendental aesthetics in *Eraserhead*

Even though a definition of transcendental cinema such as that given by Nowocień and Szejko highlights cinematic aesthetics with "meditative" properties, such as attentional focusing and "letting go" of intentional objects, aesthetics of altering consciousness (a term I prefer over transcendental[63]) can also be thought, as already broached, in terms of various stylistic techniques constituting embodied metaphors of mental transportation.

In his own discussion of meditation, Lynch keeps using embodied spatial metaphors to refer to his experience of trancing; i.e. "you go to the Unified Field beneath the building – pure consciousness"[64]. Thus, scenes of falling into or entering openings, tunnels and corridors, holes

[62] As well as an excellent example of the "source-path-goal" conceptual metaphor in its cinematic embodiment (see G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge in Western thought*, Basic Books, New York 1999).
[63] The term "transcendental" has been used in this context in the sense of transcending / trancing, and not in the sense the term has in philosophy – as in transcendental idealism.
[64] D. Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish*, cit., p. 172.

and chasms can be considered as embodied metaphors of trancing which allude to alterations of consciousness. Lynch's early film *Eraserhead* abounds in such images – which I will attempt to describe in more detail.

In its opening sequence, the superimposed head of the protagonist of the film, Henry, appears floating against a black background of night sky full of stars. A very slow zoom into the sky bypasses Henry and approaches a dark, round and rough-surfaced object, which gives the impression of a planet. The camera flies close above the object exploring its texture. A few shots later, the moving viewpoint descends and "enters" a black hole in what seems like a building on the ground of the planet. While an alien creature in the shape of an umbilical cord or sperm emerges out of Henry's open mouth, a mysterious man shown sitting by a window inside the building pulls some levers which seem to cause the creature's ejection towards an unknown direction.

The film being black and white accentuates textures and at the same time makes it hard to discern light from darkness, as well as forms from their contours. An illuminated circular form on the surface of the planet is recognized as a pond only when the creature is thrown into it causing a splash of water. A few frames later a white circular object moving horizontally in black background turns out to be the opening of the same pond now seen from within its dark depth, probably from the perspective of the creature that dived in it, which we now share. The sense of orientation is at first ambiguous, as it is uncertain whether the moving POV we share is still "diving in" or ascending towards this white hole. Finally passing through its gap to the light and transferred out we can hardly discern the shadow of what seems like hair in the contours of the hole; this impression is enforced by the subsequent shot: an image of Henry's head, first time seen upright rather than horizontally, with its characteristically tall and bushy hair. The match between the two shots creates an association suggesting that the mysterious creature is being brought out into the world through Henry's head (something actually depicted later in the film). This "world" is also new to us viewers; it seems like we're out of a surreal dream or nightmare of the opening abstract sequence into what feels like a more "real" diegetic world, in a sense being "born" with the creature, with whose perspective we have aligned.

With the passage from the opening sequence to the main body of the film, a world of round objects and floating movement is substituted by one that is more rectangular and upright. Yet another passage, this time through a tall imposing gate in an industrial landscape, takes us with the protagonist to one more layer of this "real world" where his story will unfold. In this part of the plot he will again encounter the creature, mysteriously having been born by a woman (Mary) who seems to be Henry's girlfriend and claims it to be their child, even though all seems incom-

prehensible to him. Henry himself seems to be just born too, with his terrified and full of questions facial expression, while the absence of any backstory or exposition on who his character is reinforces this impression to the viewer.

Images of chasms and holes recur in this part of the film, reminiscing some of the opening shots. For example, the image of the pond on the "planet" in the opening sequence resonates with later scenes featuring holes filled with water – like the puddle full of muddy water in which Henry accidentally steps as soon as he exits into the "world" – or the pond where later, in what gives the feeling of a dream sequence, he and his mysterious neighbor find themselves making love, eventually being swallowed into its murky waters.

A more complex recurring motif in the film is that of the (spatial-graphic as well as conceptual) juxtaposition of positive and negative. Round forms and objects seem to act as the "positive" doubles of holes and gaps. The prominent solid form in the film is of course the "head", in all its different variations, oversized and deformed (like the head of the "radiator lady" starring in the protagonist's phantasies), or even decapitated, like Henry's head lying on the floor in a nightmarish scene[65]. Moreover, the frequent juxtaposition of close-ups of heads, especially the protagonist's and his "child's", suggests an exchange and connection between him and the creature, as if one's lack is filled by the other, through some sort of transformation of one into the other. The latter could not be made more explicit than in the scene of (another) nightmare where the sperm-like creature "pops out" of the protagonist's head, knocking it off.

A variation of the pattern of positive-negative is also found in the binary opposition between sharpener and eraser; in the characteristic surreal scene at the pencil factory, the protagonist's head serves as the sharpener triggering the assembly line-style "reproduction" of numerous pencils, in a mechanical and at the same time uncontrollable fashion. This opposition and juxtaposition of positive-negative (including the variations of sharpener-eraser) makes a recurring conceptual and symbolic pattern in the film, accentuating its existential concerns – in my reading having to do with reproduction, and its uncontrollable nature, meaning the impossibility to control one's own birth and existence. The notion of the eraser alludes to the desire to "erase" and

[65] The function of the head as passage in *Eraserhead* is reminiscent of another organ functioning as such, in his later film, *Blue Velvet*; the ear. "It had to be an opening through the body" Lynch remarked in an interview about *Blue Velvet*, (Barney, *David Lynch: Interviews, cit*., p. 38). Indeed in that film, the ear serves as the portal for the transportation through its labyrinth back and forth the "underworld" and the surface world, the conscious and the unconscious, making *Blue Velvet* another transcendental – both conceptually and aesthetically – film by Lynch.

undo, perhaps by returning to a phase of primordial existence before birth (alluded to in the opening sequence).

This "desire" is perhaps fulfilled by the film's closure. The final sequence completes a circle returning to the theme and the visual motifs of the opening sequence: the inflated head of the child/creature turns into the dark planet we saw at the beginning, with editing making the graphic match between the two prominent. The "planet" then cracks like an egg under the terrified gaze of Henry whose head is shown in reverse shot against a background of stardust and stars. The crack reveals a black hole inside the planet toward which we are attracted, entering it with a zooming camera movement. We are then found again in the same place where the creature was initially spewed out from, and the last shot of the film finds Henry embracing the radiator lady, now more evidently a mother-like figure, until everything gets washed in white light and dissolves.

8. Psychoanalytical and other interpretations

Adopting a psychoanalytical perspective, it would be rather easy to link *Eraserhead*'s images of holes and cavities to Oedipal concerns, like phantasies of penetration and fears of castration. Todd McGowan's Lacanian reading of *Eraserhead* is intriguing, as it aligns the mysterious creature of the film with Lacan's reference to an amoeba-like creature he called "lamella" and used as a metaphor for "what the sexed being loses in sexuality"[66], "the life substance itself"[67], on the lack of which (and the resulting dissatisfaction) every desire for the Other is grounded in later life. Indeed, the very notion of "life", and beyond it, as already mentioned, existence itself, seems to be the central concern in the film – this becoming manifest through the use of image schemas that act as material embodied metaphors of the passage into existence.

Even though the application of the theory of embodied metaphors to cinema adopts a primarily cognitive perspective[68], traditionally contrasted to the psychoanalytical one, the two can be combined. Embodied metaphors in cinema can be thought to operate through what Christian

[66] J. Lacan, *Seminar XI*, quoted in T. McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch*, Columbia University Press, New York 2007, p. 31.
[67] McGowan, *Ibidem*.
[68] See M. Coëgnarts, *Cinema and the Embodied Mind: Metaphor and simulation in understanding meaning in films*, in "Palgrave Communications", 2017; M. Coëgnarts, P. Kravanja, *Embodied Visual Meaning: image schemas in film*, in "Projections", Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 84-101. Also J. Littlemore, *Metaphors in the Mind: Sources of Variation in Embodied Metaphor,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019.

Metz called "primary identification", the type of identification promoted through sharing the perspective, movement and "subjectivity" of the camera, before (and rather than) that of the characters on screen – which he associated with the "secondary identification" process at play. In Metz's own words, "every cinematic identification, primary or secondary or beyond, insofar as I confuse myself with an other – human, animal, or technical – stages a return to the 'primitive undifferentiation of the ego and the non-ego'"[69].

Reich and Richmond adhere that Metz's concept of primary (rather than secondary) identification in particular, opens up possibilities for re-thinking cinematic identification beyond (or before) the Lacanian mirror stage, as an identification with the camera and the screen that can provide a sense of unboundedness and Ego dissolution, and allow "for a mobile, labile, polymorphically perverse experience of the film world"[70]: "The primary cinematic process is one in which my ordinary boundedness and self-possession are dissolved, captured and organized for a while by the cinema itself"[71]. This type of identification, according to the authors, psychoanalytically corresponds to a stage of psychic development before differentiation, and thus highlights an aspect left aside by traditional Lacanian psychoanalytical film theory, which has approached cinematic spectatorship and subjectivity through the concept of "phallic lack" associated with the later Oedipal stage.

Through identification with the camera and the image schemas it materializes as embodied-conceptual metaphors (being beneath, rising to surface, exiting or entering the abyss), as well as the positive-negative visual and conceptual juxtapositions, which points at the lack, desire and possibility of oneness, *Eraserhead* makes a whole film-conceptual metaphor of transcendence (between existence and non-existence). And watching the film as a whole, one could argue, makes for a transcendental experience.

But at the same time the film also alludes, through its weird and incomprehensible feel (also a trademark of Lynch's style), to a transitive state of constant uncertainty that blurs the borders between conscious and unconscious, a state of consciousness perhaps akin to

[69] E. Reich, S. C. Richmond, *Introduction: Cinematic identifications*, in "Film Criticism", Vol. 39, No. 2, 2014-15, pp. 3-24, p. 14; quoting C. Metz, from *The Imaginary Signifier*.
[70] E. Reich, S. C. Richmond, Ivi, p. 10; the phrase "polymorphously perverse" comes from S. Freud's work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). See *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VII (1901-1905): A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works*, pp. 123-246, p. 234) and refers to the first phase of infantile sexuality (between two and five years of age.
[71] E. Reich, S. C. Richmond, Ivi, p. 14.

a hypnagogic state. It employs various stylistic means, especially in its more abstract opening and closing sequences, some of which I have described, in order not just to represent trancing but to induce the feeling of it to the viewer. And this of course is a quality retained throughout Lynch's subsequent filmography and work overall; the quality that makes it "Lynchian".

9. Bliss

Even though as already said, *Eraserhead* abounds in images representing a passage, primarily the passage to existence itself, no sense of bliss seems to be transmitted through it (apart perhaps from the very last scene of the film). On the contrary, gaps, holes and passages acquire a terrifying quality, in the prospect of attracting into the abyss like whirlwinds, or ejecting the abyss – in the form of disgusting liquids (like the blood bursting out of a cooked baby chicken at the dinner table), or monstrous creatures (like the sperm-like child itself). The soundtrack, a mix of industrial and distorted natural sounds often giving the sense of wind blowing through a vacuum, reinforces the feel of the whole film as an expressionistic nightmare. *Eraserhead* expresses a great existential terror and indeed a deep sense of "harrowing distress"[72]; the torment of existence and of being a Self; and the desire to abandon the Self.

It might not be a coincidence that *Eraserhead* was made during a very troubled phase in Lynch's life[73], as he struggled both financially and psychologically; but this was also the time when he discovered meditation, which helped him pull through. He confesses *Eraserhead* was a movie that came as a revelation as a whole:

> *Eraserhead* is my most spiritual movie. No one understands when I say that, but it is. *Eraserhead* was growing in a certain way, and I didn't know what it meant. I was looking for a key to unlock what these sequences were saying. Of course, I understood some of it; but I didn't know the thing that just pulled it all together. And it was a struggle. So I got out my Bible and I started reading. And one day, I read a sentence. And I closed the Bible, because that was it; that was it. And then I saw the thing as a whole. And it fulfilled this vision for me, 100 percent. I don't think I'll ever say what that sentence was.[74]

[72] R. Barney, (a cura di), *David Lynch: Interviews*, cit.
[73] D. Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish*, cit., pp. 73-74.
[74] Ivi, pp. 69-70.

If *Eraserhead* is seen as a film about the passage to existence, transcendence here takes a more spiritual quality, like Lynch himself confesses. We will probably never get to know the "meaning" that Lynch himself found in the film. But interpretations have been countless. Beyond common psychoanalytical readings, the attempt to associate these images with a psychic stage before differentiation might be more enlightening, and closer to Lynch's own spiritual concerns – as would be the connection of this particular state of non-differentiation with what James called "a religious experience", the same sort of experience that intellectuals of the turn of the last century such as Rolland and Freud tried to understand, the latter through the first pre-Oedipal stages of psychic development.

Thinking in terms of primary identification, mediated by a combination of stylistic elements of cinematography, editing, mise en scene and sound, images such as those I described in *Straight Story* and *Eraserhead*, in their ambiguity and iteration, and the sense of bodily illusions[75] they introduce, can be said to have an effect of Ego dissolution. The sense of unboundedness is what the fractal images present in Lynch's work induce, through their never-ending self-similarity and self-replicating on different scales. Also, the bodily engagement and identification with Lynch's images of diving in, trespassing, falling, entering, etc. through holes and chasms, also challenges the borders between spectator and screen forming embodied metaphors of consciousness alteration and (terrifying or not) Ego dissolution.

Unboundedness and Ego dissolution are, as already noted, the characteristics of oceanic consciousness that Lynch refers to as the goal of meditative practice. The sense of undifferentiation alludes to the idea of the "unified field" of consciousness that he subscribes to through his belief in – and devoted practice of – TM. And perhaps this pre-Oedipal and "polymorphically perverse" experience can account for instances of bliss he describes; a feeling of "diving in" this white, rather than blue, ocean of consciousness; perhaps a place such as that Henry finds himself at at the end of *Eraserhead*. It is described as absolute and unbounded happiness.

Bliss is the opposite of fear; in meditation Lynch found a way to be in nothingness, beyond the binary opposition and dialectic of existence – non-existence. The terror of void gave way to its embrace, and to finding plenitude and connection in abandoning the boundaries of the Self. Lynch's trajectory as a filmmaker, balancing between "harrowing distress" and the "profound serenity" of what he would call "bliss", can be seen as a path to give cinematic expression to this struggle.

[75] Another term suggested by Richmond – See S. C. Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions: Flying, floating, and hallucinating*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2016.

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