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Lynchian Atmospheres and the Optical Unconscious

1. Introduction

Describing a childhood visit to his grandparents in Brooklyn, David Lynch[1] connects his experience of the horrific, uncanny, and unsettling to the sensory overstimulation he felt as a young boy visiting the modern city for the first time. As he recalls, "In a large city I realized there was a large amount of fear, because so many people were living close together. You could feel it in the air"[2]. Lynch's recounting of how entering the subway was like a descent into hell adequately describes his fascination with exploring the *terra incognito* of the affective and unconscious impacts of the physical environments we inhabit:

> As I went down the steps, going deeper into it, I realized it was almost as difficult to back up and get out of it as to go forward and go through with this ride. It was the total fear of the unknown – the wind from those trains, the sounds, the smells, the different light and mood – that was really special in a traumatic way.[3]

As Lynch continues, a frequent pattern in his films becomes recognizable in the childhood memory: "I learned that just beneath the surface there's another world, and still different worlds as you dig deeper. I knew it as a kid, but I couldn't find the proof. It was just a kind of feeling. There is goodness in blue skies and flowers, but another force – a wild pain and decay – also accompanies everything"[4].

Nowhere is this childhood experience as acutely expressed cinematically as in the opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* (1986) that transports its viewers between two radically opposed atmospheric constellations that recur in the cinema of Lynch. At first, we are welcomed to Lumberton,

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[1] D. Lynch, *David Lynch (1990)*, in Richard A. Barney (a cura di), *David Lynch: Interviews*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 2009, pp. 60–105.
[2] Ivi, p. 62.
[3] *Ibidem.*
[4] *Ibidem.*

a North American small-town where the white clouds are as perfectly arranged on the blue sky as the red roses matching the freshly painted white fence and the flawlessly mowed green lawn. Reminiscent of advertisements in the Golden Age of domestic consumerism, the scenery is populated by friendly firefighters waving towards the camera in slow motion and children safely crossing a quiet street as the soothing tones of Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" (1963), whose nostalgic mid-century mood the film was allegedly built upon[5], occupies the soundtrack. The placid atmosphere of this world, however, ends abruptly as a man, soon to be revealed as the protagonist's father, falls to the ground with a heart failure while watering his garden.

The scene's atmospheric transition from the polished, orderly, and constrained surface to the rotten state of decay upon which this world is erected is effectuated by an innovative use of a series of filmmaking techniques. First, Lynch again employs slow motion, yet this time to create an eerie and unnerving image of the gardener's dog drinking from the still spraying water hose. As the soft tones of "Blue Velvet" gradually recede into the background, the soundscape becomes noisier and the image grainier. What follows is the remarkable tracking shot in which the camera leaves the daylight scene to plunge into a microscopic sub-terrestrial world of mud, dirt, and insects hidden just beneath the brightly colored suburban landscaping. This dual atmospheric condition sets the tone of the film and expresses its thematic core as revolving around a dynamic of processes that mediate between disclosure and occlusion; the visible and the invisible; the surface and its depths; the socially, sexually, and legally permissible and the criminal, repressed, and perverse.

This continued intrusion of the repressed, uncanny, and perverse into the unspoiled world of small-town America has caused Lynch's films to be taken as textbook examples of how (often Lacanian) psychoanalysis can produce textual analyses revealing a deeper-lying meaning and logic in his cinema.[6] Here I propose another path for understanding the atmospheric effects of Lynch's cinema as related to the "uncanny", "weird", "dreamlike", "eerie", and "strange" by examining them through the lenses of Benjamin's concept of the *optical unconscious* and his media theory more generally.

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[5] D. Lynch, *Lynch on Lynch*, a cura di C. Rodley, Faber and Faber, London and Boston 2005, p. 134.

[6] Examples of such Lacanian readings of Lynch include B. Herzogenrath, *On the Lost Highway: Lynch and Lacan, Cinema and Cultural Pathology*, in "Other Voices", vol. 1, no. 3, 1999, http://www.othervoices.org/1.3/bh/highway.php; S. Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's* Lost Highway, University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA 2000; T. McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch*, Columbia University Press, New York 2007.

2. The Optical Unconscious and the New Instrument of Vision

Developed first in reference to photography in his 1933 essay *Small History of Photography* [*Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*] and later to cinema in the different versions of *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* [*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*] published between 1935-1939, the optical unconscious designates the ability of photography and film to facilitate forms of perceptual experience beyond the scope of natural human perception. As Eadweard Muybridge's chronophotographic motion studies of bodily postures in the act of walking had shown, the photographic camera makes it possible to isolate movement into discrete units and thereby to observe the constituent elements of walking that occur too fast for the human eye to capture. Similarly, the extreme close-up photographs of plants presented by Karl Bloßfeldt in *Urformen der Kunst* (*Originary Forms of Art*, 1928) had revealed "ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle"[7]. Through the magnification of scale new aesthetic principles inherent in nature become visible and in it a "geyser of new image-worlds hisses up at points in our existence where we would least have thought them possible"[8].

For Benjamin both Muybridge and Bloßfeldt exploit the capacity of photography to promote a "new way of seeing". In this assessment Benjamin draws equally from the formal-aesthetic and socio-historical perspectives on photography advanced by László Moholy-Nagy and Siegfried Kracauer respectively[9]. In comparing photography to visual perception, Benjamin did not seek to express a mistrust towards human vision, at least no less than remarking upon how vision can be aided by instruments such as the telescope or the microscope would entail doing

[7] W. Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, in M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (a cura di), *Benjamin: Selected Writings (Volume 2, Part 2)*, tr. di R. Livingston, The Belknap of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2005, p. 512.
[8] W Benjamin, *News about Flowers*, in M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (a cura di), *Benjamin: Selected Writings (Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930)*, The Belknap of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2005, pp. 155–57.
[9] For examples of formative texts that have shaped Benjamin's theory of photography, see L. Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Photographie, Film,* Albert Langer Verlag, München 1925) and S. Kracauer, *Photography*, in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, tr. di T. Y. Levin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1995, pp. 47–63. For a recent anthology dedicated to the 'optical unconscious' in relation to photography, see S. M. Smith, S. Sliwinski (a cura di), *Photography and the Optical Unconscious,* Duke University Press, Durham and London 2017.

so[10]. Benjamin did not see photography or cinema as "prostheses" or "extensions" of vision but rather sought to understand the ways human perception is co-conditioned by technological *dispositif*s that evolve and change over time. By casting perception in a historical and material light, Benjamin examined the ways in which technologies reveal new aspects of reality previously hidden from the domain of the perceptible. With photography this includes a suspension of time (chronophotography); a magnification of objects (extreme close-ups); and the revelation of the internal structure of objects opaque to ordinary light (X-ray photography).

In terms of cinema, Benjamin takes the example of slow-motion, which he argues apart from retarding a natural movement can also create its own movements that express "gliding, floating, supernatural movements"[11, 12]. Benjamin[13] goes on to argue that the camera unveils a different nature than ordinary embodied experience, because the spatiotemporal coordinates are no longer aligned with ordinary perception. The camera then gives rise to an "other" nature or reality "above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious"[14]. Engrained in the cinematic techniques are then resources for "swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object."[15] From this Benjamin concludes that it is "through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis"[16].

By comparing how cinema alters the spatiotemporal coordinates of the worlds it not only depicts but also constructs to the Freudian discovery of the unconscious, Benjamin suggests that the cinematic world is no

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[10] For an elaboration of this argument, see M. Turvey, *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008). Here Turvey raises an argument against the 'revelationist' tradition of early film theory, whose main proponents he holds to be Kracauer, Balazs, Vertov, and Epstein. For a countercriticism of Turvey's critique from the perspective of Epstein's writings, see S. Keller, *Introduction*, in S. Keller and J. N. Paul (a cura di), *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2012, pp. 23–50.
[11] W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in H. Arendt (a cura di), *Illuminations*, tr. di H. Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 2007, pp. 236.
[12] The reference is to an essay first published in 1933-essay on 'Slow Motion', see R. Arnheim, *Film as Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1957, pp. 116–17.
[13] W. Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, in M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (a cura di), *Benjamin: Selected Writings (Volume 2, Part 2)*, tr. di R. Livingston, The Belknap of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2005.
[14] Ivi, p. 510.
[15] W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility [First Version]*, tr. di M. W. Jennings, in "Grey Room", vol. 39 (Spring), 2010, p. 39.
[16] *Ibidem.*

longer confined to the physical laws that govern conscious perception but modeled instead on the plastic material of its photographic imprint that through various techniques and devices such as camera movements ("swooping and rising"), editing ("disrupting and isolating"), slow motion, time-lapses, and freeze frames ("compressing a sequence"), and scaling ("enlarging or reducing an object") allow for the constructing of "another reality".

Although we are about to examine the reasons for Benjamin's somewhat counterintuitive decision to align cinema's ability to act as a 'new instrument of vision' to psychoanalysis and the unconscious, this alignment of cinema and psychoanalysis is, at least, supported by the countless of examples of films exploring the relation of cinema to processes of the unconscious: the uncanny, the repressed, dreams, psychoses, hallucinations, and the pathological. Yet, Lynch does more than representing the themes of psychoanalysis in cinematic form, he locates the uncanniness, the repressed, and the unconscious in the operations of the medium itself. By drawing connections between the uncanny, repressed, and unconscious with the disturbances, irregularities, and "noises" of modern communication media Lynch's cinema renders visible its atmosphere: the "nebulous primal matter that condenses into individual shapes" that is the "air and aroma" that Béla Balázs has identified as the "soul of every art"[17].

As an example of how this nebulous, atmospheric primal matter is rendered visible in the cinema of Lynch consider the ending of *Mulholland Drive* (2001) where Diane's (Naomi Watts) bedroom suddenly fills up with smoke appearing in ever new constellations in the flickering blue light soon to be disrupted by the "visual noise" of a superimposed image merging two places into an indefinite, semitransparent space. Thereby not only is Diane's dissolving personality expressed visually but also the very disintegration of the medium itself. Justus Nieland[18] argues that Lynch understands filmmaking as "a way of shaping, plastically, a moving environment" one that further is as "affectively unstable, as riddled with temporal ambiguities, as filled with hybrids of nature-culture as the postwar world that haunts his filmic imagination. "In these atmospheres", Nieland continues with an allusion to the first lines of *Twin Peaks* and the discovery of Laura Palmer's body, "spectators are wrapped in plastic"[19].

[17] B. Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, E. Carter (a cura di), tr. di R. Livingstone, Berghahn Books, New York 2011, p. 22.
[18] J. Nieland, *David Lynch*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield 2012.
[19] *Ivi*, p. 4.

3. Photography, Film, and the Unconscious: Freud, Benjamin, Lynch

As French philosopher Sarah Kofman[20] has demonstrated, the medium of photography (particularly the photographic negative) acted as an important metaphor for Sigmund Freud in conceiving the unconscious. In the same way that the printed photograph originates in a negative, the concealed counterpart of conscious experience is the unconscious. As Kofman stresses, Freud's metaphor is not directed towards photography's supposed "objectivism" and "To pass from darkness to light is not, then, to rediscover a meaning already there, it is to construct a meaning which has never existed as such"[21]. Moreover, the passage from the negative to the positive print is "neither necessary nor dialectical. It is possible that the development will never take place"[22]. This in turn means that repression is originary and that "there is always an irretrievable residue, something which will never have access to consciousness"[23]. As it has been argued, the notion of the unconscious as quasi-photographic process accentuates its "machinic character", as a pre-personal set of automated functions: "the unconscious automatically produces dreams, fantasies, slip of the tongue, and the like, which is to say it produces symptoms"[24].

Recognizing the connection between the unconscious and the photographic process, Benjamin reverses it to emphasize the unconscious as a model for the operation of images. As Rosalind Krauss argues in *The Optical Unconscious*[25] – adopting the concept as title of her book "at an angle to Benjamin's"[26] – readers are likely struck by the "strangeness of this analogy" because "what in the visual field can we speak of that will be in analogue with the unconscious itself"[27]. In either case, the structural similarity that Benjamin proposes is founded in the shared ability of photography and psychoanalysis to reveal previously concealed aspects of reality. In *The Psychopathology of Modern Times* Freud[28] delineates the domain of the instinctual unconscious [*treibhafte Unbewusste*] in the

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[20] S. Kofman, *Camera Obscura: Of Ideology*, tr. di. W. Straw, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y 1998.
[21] Ivi, p. 28.
[22] Ivi, p. 26.
[23] Ivi, p. 27.
[24] J. Fardy, *Freud, Photography, and the Optical Unconscious*, in S. M. Smith, S. Sliwinski (a cura di), *Photography and the Optical Unconscious,* Duke University Press, Durham 2017, pp. 80–92.
[25] R. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious,* MIT Press, Cambridge 1999.
[26] Ivi, p. 179.
[27] Ivi, p. 178.
[28] S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, tr. di. James Strachey, The Hogarth Press, London 1903,1955.

domain of language by demonstrating that a "slip of the tongue" – a phenomenon that prior to this work would barely merit a remark – had become a symptom revealing deep-seated insights about our psyche.

Yet rather than being a proper philosophical term with a stable and fixed meaning, the optical unconscious is a productive metaphor whose main power lies exactly in a shifting of perspective that Freud would probably have disapproved of, namely the relocation and externalization of the unconscious (or, at least a part of it) from the psyche of the individual onto the material world and the sensorial environment[29]. This grafting of affect onto the environment is also exactly what makes the concept suitable for exploring the *atmospheric* dynamics of cinema; be it in the cinema of Lynch or more generally. It is also what allows a reconsideration of how moving image media influence psychological processes–on perception, affection, memory, cognition, and imagination – in ways that often operate beyond conscious registration. More precisely, it allows us to address the process in which we become aware of 'unconscious' image operations as being aligned with the psychoanalytical process in which the patient becomes aware of the workings of the instinctual unconscious.

Following Benjamin, the instinctual and optical unconscious are further linked by the fact that many "of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the world of optical perception [*Gesichtswahrnehmung*] in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams"[30]. Cinema projects outwards into its mediated sphere "the individual perceptions of the psychotic and the dreamer" and thereby "it can be appropriated by collective perception"[31]. For Benjamin, this is less achieved by actual depictions of "the dream world itself than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse"[32]. Although he recognizes the potential dangers of cinema in engendering in the masses "tensions that at critical stages take on a psychotic character"[33], Benjamin also claims that cinema can act as a "safety valve of the psyche", where the "forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses"[34]. Thus the "therapeutic release"

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[29] For a similar understanding of the 'optical unconscious' as a productive metaphor more than rigorous philosophical term, see M. B. Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno,* University of California Press, Berkeley 2012.

[30] W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility [First Version]*, cit., p. 31. ´

[31] *Ibidem.*

[32] *Ibidem.*

[33] *Ibidem.*

[34] *Ibidem.*

that Disney and Chaplin, and the collective laughter they incite can be taken as a "preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychoses"[35].

The "most important social function of film," Benjamin[36] argues, is the establishment of an "equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus"[37]. This is furthermore achieved "not only in terms of man's presentation of himself to the camera but also in terms of his representation of his environment by means of this apparatus"[38]. Thereby cinema advances insights into "the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera"[39]. According to this logic, it could be argued that Lynch's exploration of the "irrational underside of life heretofore unseen by normal human perception but now revealed through the mechanical prosthesis of the camera"[40], has educational value in terms of revealing the operative and manipulative mechanisms of the cinematic medium. In either case, the redeeming qualities Benjamin ascribes to the cinema via the optical unconscious remained a constant point of dispute between him and his contemporaries. In a letter from his friend Theodor W. Adorno[41], Benjamin is accused of exaggerating the progressive aspects of cinema while denying its reactionary aspects. The ethical and ideological implications of cinema's optical unconcious, however, are not to be determined beforehand but should be evaluated in relation to individual films as part of their larger historical, political, and work-internal contexts.

4. Medium as the Atmosphere

In line with the proposed aim to examine what could be understood as a particular kind of "Lynchian" atmospheres within the context of Benjamin's media theory, the concept of "atmosphere" will here be employed according to two interrelated, yet slightly divergent, meanings. First of all, atmosphere will be understood in accordance with recent interdisciplinary research on the subject as related to the affective character of an environ-

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[35] *Ibidem.*
[36] W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version*, in M. W. Jennings and H. Eiland (a cura di) *Benjamin: Selected Writings (Volume 3, 1935-1938)*, The Belknap of Harvard University Press Cambridge 2006.
[37] Ivi, p. 117.
[38] *Ibidem.*
[39] *Ibidem.*
[40] J. Nieland, *David Lynch*, cit, p. 112.
[41] T. Adorno, *Letters to Walter Benjamin*, in tr. di. R. Taylor, *Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, London 1980, pp. 110–33.

ment, situation, interpersonal relation, landscape, event, or work of art[42]. Secondly, the term will be considered in the post-Aristotelean tradition of *diaphanous media*, i.e. the atmosphere is the ambient medium, the surrounding environment *through which* perceptual experience is enabled in the first place. In this tradition of thinking about the environmental conditioning of perception, appearances are made possible on the basis of "media of perception" such as the diaphanous and translucent substances of air, smoke, vapor, crystal, and water that in turn shape and form the condition of perceptual appearance[43]. In Benjamin's extended application of this Aristotelean media theory, cinema acts as the 'medium of perception' *through which* the optical unconcious can be unveiled.

Antonio Somaini (2016b, 2016a) has demonstrated exactly the importance of Benjamin's media theory in bringing this elemental understanding of media to bear on modern media of mass communication. In conceptualizing the assemblage of techniques, technologies, and operations that enable historically situated and techno-mediated modalities of perception in environmental terms, Benjamin distinguishes between the apparatus (the material and technical artifact) and the medium (the field of potentialities upon the background of which individual forms of sensory experience is made possible). This led Benjamin[44] to propose the controversial and much-debated thesis of the "historicity of perception", according to which perception is not transcultural, innate, universal, or hardwired:

> Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their perception. The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history.[45]

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[42] For a recent overview of this growing body of literature, see T. Griffero, *Is There Such a Thing as an „Atmospheric Turn"? Instead of an Introduction*, in T. Griffero and M. Tedeschini (a cura di) *Atmosphere and Aesthetics: A Plural Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2019, pp. 11–62. For an exploration of the implications of atmosphere for the projective arts, see G. Bruno, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2022. For cinema more specifically, see S. Hven, *The Atmospheric Worlds of Cinema*, in a cura di S. Hven, *Enacting the Worlds of Cinema,* Oxford University Press, New York 2022, pp. 41–66.

[43] For a recent phenomenology of images operating in this tradition, see E. Alloa, *Looking through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media,* Columbia University Press, New York 2021. For examples of contemporary 'elemental' approaches to media theory, see J. D. Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2015, E. Horn *Air as Medium*, in "Grey Room" vol. 73, 2018, pp. 6–25, and Y. Furuhata, *Climatic Media: Transpacific Experiments in Atmospheric Control,* Duke University Press, Durham 2022.

[44] W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility [First Version]*, cit.

[45] Ivi, p. 15.

An important underlying assumption of Benjamin's media theory is that sensorial experience is never immediate but configured, organized, and modulated by environmental, material, and technological instances of mediation that change throughout history[46]. Benjamin is particularly keen on understanding how photography and cinema as 'media of perception' can mobilize mass audiences. For him, a key function lies in the shielding and protective mechanisms of the overabundance of sensorial impressions the urban population were exposed to – much akin to Lynch's childhood experience of Brooklyn[47]. Benjamin cites Freud when stating that for the "living organism, protection against stimuli is almost more important than the reception of stimuli"[48] since the energies operating in the external world could cause disequilibrium in the internal preservation of energy within the singular organism. Benjamin extracts from this that the less the consciousness registers the external "shocks" of the environment, the less likely these are to have a traumatic effect on the psyche. As the artform of modernity per se, Benjamin's assigns an important task for the film in "training" the modern individual in coping with these shocks and thereby to prevent "mass psychoses".

When the writer David Foster Wallace towards the end of the century visited the set of *Lost Highway* (1997) and wrote a "gonzo" piece on his experiences, he coined the term "Lynchian" to describe "a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perceptual containment within the latter," adding that Lynch's "deconstruction of this weird irony of the banal has affected the way I see and organize the world"[49]. Wallace exemplifies this by a temporal operation: for a facial expression to become 'Lynchian' it does not suffice for it to be simply 'grotesque' it also has to be sustained "longer than the circumstances could even possibly warrant" until its readily apprehendable 'coded' meaning becomes defamiliarized and thus reopened to a multitude of interpretations. If for Benjamin the "shocks" of cinema held the potential to train the masses into coping with an increasingly rapid technological pace and flow of

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[46] On Benjamin's media philosophy, see A. Somaini, *Walter Benjamin's Media Theory and the Tradition of the Media Diaphana*, in „Zeitschrift Für Medien-Und Kulturforschung" no. 7, vol. 1 2016, pp. 9-25; A. Somaini, *Walter Benjamin's Media Theory: The Medium and the Apparat*, in "Grey Room" vol. 62 (Winter) 2016, pp. 6-41.

[47] For a rhizomatic genealogy on the protective functions of media informed partly by Benjamin's media theory, see F. Casetti, *Screening Fears. On Protective Media,* Zone Books, New York 2023.

[48] W. Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, in M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (a cura di) *Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2. Part 2*, p. 317.

[49] D. F. Wallace, *David Lynch Keeps His Head*, in „Premiere", Sep.1996, www.lynchnet.com/lh/lhpremiere.html, sec. 6.

information, Lynch appears to suggest that the cinematic operations have become so mundane and consequently invisible to us such as to themselves requiring defamiliarization.

A central component of the "global aesthetic expression" or "cine-aesthetic world feeling"[50] we associate with "Lynchian atmospheres" lies in how Lynch's stories always end up turning our love of film into a nightmare[51]. Despite its surface appearance, *Blue Velvet* is an example of Lynch's reintroduction of the repressed, uncanny, and perverse into the sheltered media-utopias of mid-century and post-modern US popular culture not only through a satirical take on formal, narrative, and genre conventions but also by accentuating the uncanny "noises" of the material basis of mediation. In this fashion, Lynch is able to address his audience "unguarded" leaving them in the defenseless position of the dreamer, or, put differently, Lynch's films enter us like a dream[52].

5. Haunted by the Optical Unconscious: The Videotape as Atmospheric Device in *Lost Highway*

Reflecting on the film actor, who performs no longer to an auditorium but a camera, Benjamin argues that this comes with a feeling of estrangement comparable to looking at one's mirror image, although in this case "the mirror image has become detachable from the person mirrored and has become transportable"[53]. An enactment of the transportable mirror is found in *Lost Highway* (1997) in which the couple Fred (Bill Pullmann) and Renee Madison (Patrica Arquette) receive a series of mysterious videotapes. Marked by the grainy image of surveillance- or home-video footage, the first videotape contains a short segment of shots taken from outside the couple's L.A.-mansion. As the video segments approach closer towards the entrance of the couple's home, the eeriness of these mysterious recordings is amplified by the soundtrack's ominous drone and stabs of static and strings before resolving back into the humming void of the tv-static from which it emerged.

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[50] On the ability of atmospheres to take on a more global character and become expressive of the "world" of a particular filmmaker, see D. Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema,* Columbia University Press, New York 2015.

[51] I am here referring to the title of a recent blog post on Lynch's intertextual references, see Z. Zanatta, *How David Lynch Turns Our Love For Movies Into a Nightmare*, in „Cinemasters", May 2, 2023, https://www.cinemasters.net/post/how-david-lynch-turns-our-love-for-movies-into-a-nightmare.

[52] D. F. Wallace, *David Lynch Keeps His Head,* cit.

[53] W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility [First Version]*, cit., p. 23.

The same grainy, 90s television aesthetics recur in the second video-tape, which contains the same shot of the mansion from the outside but then moves inside the house and down the murky hallway. Occasionally disturbed by pierces of both audio and visual electromagnetic noise, this segment includes an "impossible" floating camera movement hovering above the bed with the sleeping couple ("a singularly gliding, floating, su-pernatural motion"). Because it could not have been technically achieved without professional equipment such as a crane, this shot breaks with the notion of being a home-video recording, prompting the epistemological and ontological uncertainties of its origin. Do these sender-less images materialize out of the electronic disturbances, the noises and the tv stat-ic, of our communication devices? These recordings indeed appear to invoke "a different nature than meets the naked eye", where conscious experience is replaced "by one penetrated by the unconscious".

This suspicion of the videos being somehow connected to the uncon-scious is further established as Fred receives the third videotape while Renee is away. The recording begins with the usual flickering followed by the exterior shot of the house. This is followed by the floating crane shot, again intermittently distorted by bursts of noise and extreme close-ups of the cathode-ray tube's pulsating raster, which now enters the couple's bedroom to reveal Fred naked, in a psychotic state, kneeling over Re-nee's mutilated corpse. For an instant, the grainy black and white imag-es cut, without breaking continuity, to high-contrast color images of the blood-smothered Fred looking directly into the camera[54].

In a fashion typical of Lynch these segments are atmospherically bathed in the uncanny in all the nonspecificity and ambiguity that this concept entails[55]. By intruding first into the private space of the home and later into the intimate sphere of the bedroom, the videotapes involve a gradual process of turning the homely (*heimlich*) into something unfa-miliar, haunted, and strange (*unheimlich*). The sudden flash of a bright color palette in the final videotape foreshadows Fred's metamorphosis into the mechanic Pete Dayton and can be viewed as a cinematic articula-tion of the "psychogenic fugue". Lynch[56] himself has alluded to this rare clinical condition (now referred to as "dissociative fugue") defined by a loss of personal memories (psychogenic amnesia) and identity as well as "physical relocation" as a possible way of understanding Fred's condition

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[54] This could potentially be one of several references Lynch makes to *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939) that uses a similar color-scheme of black-and-white for the "real world" of Kansas and its revolutionary technicolor for the fantasy world of Oz.

[55] For an introduction to Lynch's cinema as structured around the uncanny, see C. Rodley, *Introduction*, in a cura di C. Rodley *Lynch on Lynch*, cit.

[56] See D. Lynch, *Lost Highway Article – Filmmaker Winter 97*, in „Filmmaker Magazine", Winter 1997, http://www.lynchnet.com/lh/lhfm.html.

(rather than being *the* key to solving all the film's mysteries)[57]. This idea of Fred taking flight away from conscious awareness finds an acute cinematic expression in the images of him in the hallway, dressed in black and almost completely devoured in darkness[58].

Bearing in mind Freud's definition of the uncanny as the return of the repressed, the interpretative framework provided by Lynch could imply that the videotapes materialize from Fred's unconscious as a return of the repressed memory of him murdering his wife before "relocating" himself into a surrogate, fantasy world. One could further note that Freud has argued that memory and the conscious are two interdependent but separate systems[59]. Whereas it is the main task of consciousness to register the impressions, affects, and stimuli of the environment, it is the task of memory to store these in the form of "permanent traces" (*Dauerspuren*). These permanent traces remain a latent part of the system, even if they are never actualized or enter conscious awareness. This is because it is one of the basic functions of consciousness to form a protective shield (*Reitzschutz*) for the psyche and to ensure it is blocked from experiencing overstimulation.

Such a reading of the videotapes being a visualization of how Fred, suffering from a dissociative disorder while sitting on death row, is haunted by repressed memories of murdering his wife, however, fails to recognize the intersubjective nature of the videotapes, as watched by Renee, the policemen, and as serving as evidentiary material in the sentencing of Fred. The videotapes do appear to have a particular connection to Fred's unconscious and memory, yet in accordance with an interpersonal flow of communication that folds inside and outside onto a singular continuous plane. Being both mental and environmental, the videotapes could be taken as instances of what Proust termed *mémoire involontaire* (involuntary memory), that is as a passive, unintentional, and contingent type of memory triggered by external factors such as the famous madeleine. In his writings on Proust, Benjamin argues that photography can be aligned with the willful recollection of the past (*mémoire involontaire*)[60]. "The

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[57] Lynch further explains it as a condition, "where a person gives up himself, his world, his family – everything about himself – and takes on another identity" and continues: "That's Fred Madison completely. I love the term *psychogenic fugue*. In a way, the musical term fugue fits perfectly, because the film has one theme, and then another theme takes over. To me, jazz is the closest thing to insanity that there is in music", see D. Lynch, *Lost Highway Article,* cit.

[58] On the cinematography of *Lost Highway*, see S. Pizzello *Lost Highway – Highway to Hell*, in „American Cinematographer", March 1997, https://theasc.com/articles/lost-highway-highway-to-hell.

[59] On the separate functions of memory and consciousness, see S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* tr. di. J. Strachey, the Hogarth Press, London 1955.

[60] W. Benjamin, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, in M. W. Jennings and H. Eiland (a cura di), *Benjamin: Selected Writings (Volume 4, 1938-1940)*, The Belknap of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2006, pp. 313-55.

techniques inspired by the camera and subsequent analogous types of apparatus," Benjamin argues, "extend the range of the memoire *volontaire*; these techniques make it possible at any time to retain an event – as image and sound – through the apparatus"[61]. In *Lost Highway* the videotapes assail Fred in the same way as involuntary memories do. Bursting out of the tv-static, these images seem to transpire from some reservoir of "non-perceived", unconscious images that operate beneath the surface of perception in a repressed sphere of noises, disturbances, and deformations.

6. Lost in the Medium

In an interview, screenwriter of *Lost Highway* Barry Gifford[62] explains that him and Lynch used the topological figure of the "Möbius strip" – a strip of paper twisted 180° and then looped such that it has one continuous side that if you followed it will variously be on the inside or the outside – as a guiding metaphor for how the "story folds back underneath itself and continues"[63]. This inside-outside logic can be illustrated by the film's ending where Fred is revealed to be the sender of the mysterious message ("Dick Laurent is dead") he receives over his intercom in the film's beginning. As this example illustrates, the Möbius strip not only elucidate how Pete's and Fred's respective narratives fold in on each other as Fred morphs into Pete and back into himself again, it equally works as a metaphor of the many feedback loops, disturbances, and noises that disturb the linear flow of our communication technologies; a key atmospheric strategy in the film.

In Shannon and Weaver's influential theory of information, communication is understood on a 5-step linear model of sender (or information source) producing the message; transmitter encoding the message into signals (i.e., the intercom); a channel connecting the transmitter and receiver; a receiver reconstructing the message from the signal; and a destination, where the message arrives. The sixth element of this model is the disturbing side effects of the system in the form of "noises" interfering with and endangering successful transmission of communication. A central issue of this model lies in the optimization of the signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) in the transmission of the message. The less noise, the better the chances are for successful communication. In *The Parasite* (1982), philosopher Michel Serres challenges this

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[61] Ivi, p. 337.
[62B.] Gifford, *Interview: "Lost Highway Screenwriter Barry Gifford"* in "Film Threat" (blog), 1997, http://www.lynchnet.com/lh/lhgifford.html.
[63] Ivi, para. 3.

model and posits that it is not the transmission between sender and receiver that should be of interest but the relation between communication and noise.

In *Lost Highway* some of the most noticeable and eerie atmospheres are created by disturbing the linear, information model and by accentuating the instabilities in communication instantiated by "noises" in the system. At a party Fred is approached by the Mystery Man (Robert Blake), who informs him of his current presence in his home. To prove the veracity of this illogical proclamation the Mystery Man hands Fred an oversized portable phone with the prompt: "call me". Baffled Fred calls his house, where the Mystery Man answers the phone on the other end of the line: "I told you I was here." As both sender and receiver, the Mystery Man appears to defy time and space and stand above or beyond the "laws of communication" thereby embodying of the interpersonal communicational flow of the (optical) unconscious.

Remarking on the overabundance of communication technologies in *Lost Highway* (electricity, videotapes, telephones, intercom, cameras, etc.) Bernd Herzogenrath[64] argues that the film is penetrated by a "communicational electro-smog". Depicted in the film is a world in which technological forms of mediation have merged with reality to the extent that these communication devices have become part of our physical and sensorial existence. This parallels a shift in communication technologies observed by contemporary media philosophers, where media are no longer tools to be used but environments to be inhabited. The data we collect and the technology we use are no longer tools used for particular purposes rather the sentient human being has itself become the operating function within a communicational feedback loop is, as the Benjamin-inspired philosopher of 'new media' Norbert Bolz[65] has posited.

The idea that the human has become inscribed into the flow of communication informs Lynch's connection of the uncanny to the undesirable energies of the medium: its noises, grains, tv static, and glitches. Whether the medium in question is that of television (as in the two first seasons of *Twin Peaks*, 1990-91*)* or digital media and streaming platforms (as in *Twin Peaks: The Return*, 2017), it is a trademark of Lynch to accentuate the dysfunctionality of the 'media of perception' that informs the backdrop to his works. In *Lost Highway* the Möbius structure informs a transgression of the sender-receiver model and its replacement with the feeling of being stuck in an endless recursive feedback loop, which lends

[64] B. Herzogenrath, *On the Lost Highway: Lynch and Lacan, Cinema and Cultural Pathology*, in "Other Voices" vol. 1 no. 3, 1999. http://www.othervoices.org/1.3/bh/highway.php.
[65] N. Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien* Raben Verlag, München 1990.

the film with an atmosphere of "being lost in the medium"[66]. Whereas for Benjamin cinema could reveal the 'optical unconscious' and thereby a new domain of perceptual experience and hence of reality, Lynch far more envisions this domain of the optical conscious as an uncanny black hole threatening to devour us completely.

Consider in this context the double notion of atmosphere as equally pertaining to the affective feeling tone of a film, artwork, or situation, but also to the ambient space of the medium itself as that through which something is perceived. The atmosphere thus pertains to the in-between within "the structure of perception" that is "not 'I see something' but rather 'in the medium, the presence of things is perceivable'"[67] 99). By exposing their "medium of perception", the noises and glitches of electronic and digital information technologies, both an affective component and a historical rootedness of these *dispositifs* become apparent. Although it is certainly possible to experience such "noises" as disturbances, it is equally possible, especially when a historical distance is installed, that they evoke pleasant atmospheres such as when the crackling of a vinyl player conveys a homey "nostalgic feel" or when an old filmstock provides "authenticity" to the historical portrayal of a film. However, with Lynch this media nostalgia is invoked only as part of an atmospheric strategy that eventually turns our familiarity and intimacy with communication technologies uncanny such that the disturbances of the media, whether the ear-pitching drones or the tv static, threaten to swallow us up into a *mise en abîme* of electronic feed-back loops.

7. Conclusion

The most condensed cinematic display of the central atmospheric strategy of connecting the uncanny, repressed, and unconscious to the "noises" of modern communication media is found in Lynch's short-film *Premonitions Following an Evil Deed* (1995). The film was produced as part of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the first cinematic screenings featuring the short films of Auguste and Louis Lumière. Along with 40 other prominent filmmakers and artists (e.g., Sarah Moon, Spike Lee, and Wim Wenders), Lynch was invited to shoot a short film simulating the conditions of the earliest moving pictures. For the occa-

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[66] On "being lost in the medium" in *Lost Highway*, see Alanna Thain, *Funny How Secrets Travel: David Lynch's Lost Highway*, in „Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture", vol. 8, 2004, pp 1–17.

[67] G. Böhme, *An Aesthetic Theory of Nature: An Interim Report*, in tr. di. John Farrell, „Thesis Eleven", vol. 32, 1992, pp. 90–102.

sion, Philippe Poulet, a researcher at the Museum of Lyon and one of the initiators of the project, had restored the *Cinématographe* of the Lumière brothers: a hand cranked camera that also functioned as a projector built with brass, glass, and mainly wood resembling a small box. Poulet also recreated the film stock by using the original formula (although nitrate was replaced with acetate for safety reasons). In addition, each film had to obey certain restrictions: no synchronous sound (then unavailable) could be used although a soundtrack could be added; only natural lighting was permitted; the film had to be accomplished in a maximum of three takes (once the camera was rolling you weren't allowed to stop it); and the film could not exceed 52 seconds.

Apart from its duration of 55 seconds, *Premonitions* conforms to these restrictions, yet it creatively introduces montage and scene shifts using black screens and the burning of a veil thereby making his film closer in spirit to the cinema of Méliès than that of the Lumière brothers. Through an accentuating of film materiality (the grains on the film stock, its gradient overexposures of the images, the jolted movements resulting from the hand-cranked camera) combined with its more "modern" soundtrack (consisting of acoustic noises in the style of *musique concrète* and the eerie, ambient score of Angelo Badalamenti), Lynch finds a way to express his own childhood "premonition" of a repressed subterrain of reality lurking beneath the surface that he "could feel in the air". *Premonitions* connects this to the "primal scene" of the birth of the cinema by displaying the medium's capacities to uncover the macabre hidden in the mundane. In its short duration the film blends two storylines, one more "realistic" in tone (three police officers find the body of a young boy in the forests and inform the family) and the other more grotesque and phantasmagoric seemingly taking place in some monstrous parallel reality (in a torture chamber three deformed figures give electro shocks to a naked woman floating inside a translucent tube).

In the cinema of Lynch, story or narrative is not *opposed* to the parameters of the affective, atmospheric, the medium-specific, or the informational noises disturbing the flow of information; it is dependent on it. When defending narrative against the rigid, binary logic of information theory in *S/Z*, Roland Barthes[68] makes a plead for its "cacographic" nature: "One might call *idyllic* the communication which unites two partners sheltered from any 'noise' […] linked by a simple destination, a single thread. Narrative communication is not idyllic; its lines of destination are multiple, so that any message in it can be properly defined only if it is specified whence it comes and where it is

[68] R. Barthes, *S/Z*, tr. di. R. Miller, Paperback, Blackwell-Wiley, Berlin 1990.

going"[69]. This could qualify as an acute description of how Lynch envisions cinema as an artform intimately connected to an otherworldly dimension dominated by the murky, the deformed, the repressed, and the noisy. Only here, as Barthes emphasizes, this "noise is not confused, massive, unnamable; it is a clear noise made up of connections, not superpositions: it is of a distinct 'cacography'"[70]. In a manner characteristic of Lynch[71], he opts for a joke to express a similar critical viewpoint about conforming stories to a communication model: "If you want to send a message, go to Western Union"[72].

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[69] Ivi, p. 131, author's emphasis.
[70] Ivi, p. 132.
[71] D. Lynch, *David Lynch (1990)*, in *David Lynch: Interviews,* cit.
[72] Ivi, p. 63.

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