

Beyond Narrative Subjectivity, Beyond Filmic Narration

David Lynch's *L.A. Trilogy* and the Limits of Narrative

David Lynch's *L.A. Trilogy* – *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Inland Empire* – has often been described as structurally 'unreadable.' This paper philosophically interprets the trilogy's 'poetics of unreadability,' and identifies its aesthetic structure and implications – emphasizing the trilogy's post-narrative aesthetic form, and the aporetic experience it immerses the spectator in. First (section 2), the paper applies a Gennettian film narratological framework to the trilogy to demonstrate how it both provokes *and* undermines narrative readings: on the one hand, the films of the trilogy invite spectators to reconstruct coherent *histoires* from the filmic *discours*; on the other, they simultaneously undermine every such reconstruction through irresolvable contradictions concerning diegetic organization, focalization, and temporal order – a radical and paradoxical aesthetic strategy the paper conceptualizes as 'post-narrative.' Moreover (section 3), the paper identifies two complementary yet mutually exclusive readings this post-narrative aesthetic provokes: a subject philosophical interpretation that reads the trilogy as a critique of narrative subjectification, and a media ontological interpretation that exposes the structural absence of a narrating instance within the filmic medium itself. As both readings are internally aporetic and lead the spectator into the other, the trilogy immerses the spectator in an endless oscillation between these two modes of reading.

1. Introduction

David Lynch's films are frequently described as resistant to interpretation, as works that evade coherent reconstruction and frustrate the spectator's desire for meaning. This diagnosis applies in particular to the so-called *L.A. Trilogy* – *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *Inland Empire* (2006) – which has often been characterized as violating the narrative "principle of readability" (Seeßlen 2006, 228; my translation; cf. Schmidt 2018; Anderson 2021).

In the following, I will examine this 'unreadability' from a philosophical perspective. My central claim is that Lynch's trilogy simultaneously solicits *and* undermines narrative understanding: On the one hand, the films provoke the spectator to organize what is shown into a coherent *histoire*; on the other hand, they frustrate this effort by systematically destabilizing diegetic organization, focalization, and temporal order. As I will argue in the following, the clou of this paradoxical poetic structure is to immerse the spectator in an *aporetic* aesthetic experience – a virtually endless oscillation between two opposing readings of the filmic text: (i) a *subject philosophical* reading that approaches the films as critiques of narrative self-constitution, and (ii) a *media ontological* reading that foregrounds the absence of a narrating instance within the filmic medium itself.

To argue these claims and unfold this interpretation, I will proceed in two steps. First, I analyze how the trilogy systematically disrupts narratological categories, thereby producing what I will call a post-narrative aesthetic (section 2). Second, I reconstruct the two competing readings of the trilogy's unreadability – subject philosophical vs. media ontological –, whose dialectical tension I

take to be central to the aesthetic experience it provokes (section 3). In the concluding section, I will then summarize my reading of the ‘unreadability’ of Lynch’s *L.A. Trilogy*.

2. Reading Unreadability: The Post-Narrative Aesthetics of the *L.A. Trilogy*

The *L.A. Trilogy* consists of three films that variate one trope – the breakdown of a protagonist’s subjectivity (Schaffner 2009). But there is an even more pressing reason to read the three films together than this accordance in content: the three installments of the trilogy formally decompose filmic narration, and they do so progressively – the films are increasingly harder to read in a narrative manner; they gradually approach what I will define as a post-narrative aesthetic.

In the following – rather than offering one more of the many existing interpretations of the *L.A. Trilogy*¹ (explaining, for instance, what signifier stands for what) – I will try to explore why it is so hard to interpret the trilogy; rather than explaining it, I at first want to explain its inexplicability. Therefore, I will engage with central narratological (more precisely: Genettian) categories – diegetic leveling, focalization, and time – to sketch out how Lynch’s films systematically *provoke* and, at the same time, *deny* a narrative reading. It will show that the trilogy stages an escalating implosion of narration: from the undecidability of focalization and diegetic structure in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* to a post-narrative poetics in *Inland Empire* for which the reconstruction of a *histoire* is no longer possible. However, before analyzing how Lynch’s films undermine narration, it is useful to briefly sketch out how filmic narration works in general – and how concepts of literature-based narratology can be appropriately transferred to the medium of film.

2.1 Narratological Preliminaries: (How) Do Films Narrate?

Within film studies, it is relatively uncontested that film as a medium is capable of narration – and that, in fact, most fiction and many documentary films do narrate. However, the consensus ends quickly when it comes to the question *how* films do that.² In a foundational study, Markus Kuhn (2011) has convincingly applied Genette’s categories of narratology to film, making it possible to precisely analyze how films narrate. Following Genette’s (1980) distinction between *discours* and *histoire*, narrative works can be (minimally) defined as (re-)presentations (*discours*) of a sequence of events (*histoire*). Applied to film, this implies that cinematic narration consists in the audiovisual organization of events into a causally and temporally structured sequence.

Unlike literary narration, however, film lacks an anthropomorphic producer of the *discours* – the filmic text has no personal narrator. While voice-over or dialogue may additionally introduce linguistic narration, the primary mode of cinematic narration is non-linguistic: it emerges essentially

¹ Valuable interpretations can be found in Schaffner (2009), Seeßlen (2006), and Palmier (2012). Significantly, these texts not only diverge in their interpretations of the trilogy’s meaning, but even contradict one another in their descriptions of its *discours* and *histoire* – a point that will be central in the following.

² Within contemporary film studies, different approaches – from cognitivist and narratological to phenomenological and psychoanalytical – often remain in a state of unproductive opposition. In the following, I integrate models from different theoretical backgrounds.

from the interplay of camera, *mise-en-scène*, and montage (cf. Kuhn 2011; Chatman 1990). The ‘narrating instance’ of film is therefore, as Kuhn (2011, 86–94) convincingly argues, fundamentally non-anthropomorphic: It does not appear within the diegesis as a figure but remains structurally absent. (This point is not merely theoretical – it marks a genuine ontological feature of the filmic medium that will prove decisive for the present argument.)

Importantly, narrative is not simply given within the filmic text but emerges in the process of reception.³ As authors like David Bordwell (1985, 30f.) have repeatedly emphasized, spectators actively participate in the construction of narratives by forming and revising hypotheses about how the presented events are connected. The reconstruction of the *histoire* is thus a dynamic process between subject and object, spectator and filmic text, guided by conventions of cinematic storytelling and continually subject to revision.

It is precisely this process that Lynch’s films target. Rather than simply abandoning narration, they systematically provoke the spectator to form hypotheses about the narrative logic of the *discours*, while simultaneously undermining to uphold any hypothesis by systematically including elements of narrative undecidability within the filmic text.

2.2 Diegetic Paradoxa and Undecidable Focalization (*Lost Highway*/*Mulholland Drive*)

This can be explored in the diegetic structure of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. Both films present what at first appears to be a duplication of worlds: in *Lost Highway*, the *discours* suddenly shifts from Fred Madison, an unhappily married musician in Los Angeles who murders his wife Renee, to Pete Dayton, a young car mechanic who becomes entangled in a gangster intrigue involving a woman, Alice, who is paradoxically played by the same actress as Renee (Patricia Arquette); in *Mulholland Drive*, the narrative shifts from Betty, a bright-eyed aspiring actress who helps a mysterious amnesic woman called Rita discover her identity, to Diane, a failed actress consumed by jealousy over her ex-lover Camilla (again, as in *Lost Highway*, both Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla are portrayed by the same actresses, Naomi Watts and Laura Harring). In both cases, these two worlds are not simply juxtaposed but intertwined through metaleptic connections – most notably the casting of the same actors in different, ontologically separate roles (cf. Kuhn 2011, 360f.).

A common interpretative strategy seeks to resolve this paradoxically doubled structure by positing a hierarchy of diegetic levels. According to these sorts of readings (e.g. McGowan 2007; Schaffner 2009), one level is diegetic (‘reality’) while the other is meta-diegetic (dream, fantasy, delusion, etc.). Thus, Fred and Diane are taken to generate the worlds of Pete and Betty as wish-fulfilling narratives. This interpretation is supported by various formal markers: the worlds of Pete and Betty are filmed according to the conventions of classical Hollywood genre cinema – rich, colorfully saturated *mise-en-scène*, goal-directed plotting, familiar character types (first and foremost the ‘damsel in distress’: Alice in *Lost Highway*, Rita in *Mulholland Drive*) – while the worlds of Fred and Diane are shot in a more experimental, unsettling style, characterized by a sparse, either too bright or too dark *mise-en-scène*, an eerie audiovisual atmosphere, and a stuttering discontinuity in

³ For a precise reconstruction of the interrelation of subject and object within the process of art reception in general cf. Rebentisch (2012), concerning the cinematic spectator cf. also Voss (2013), Kappelhoff (2018).

editing. The meta-diegetic level (Pete/Betty) in this reading appears as the subject's wish-fantasy, stylistically presented in the very genre codes that Hollywood uses to render life meaningful.

However, this interpretative strategy ultimately fails – and this failure is not accidental but systematically produced by the filmic text. First, the supposed boundaries between diegetic levels are repeatedly transgressed by metaleptic figures – signifiers that cross the limits between supposedly distinct diegetic and meta-diegetic levels (Kuhn 2011, 357–366). In *Lost Highway*, the infamous character called the Mystery Man appears in both the Fred universe and the Pete universe, and his presence undermines any clean separation of the diegetic ('reality') from the meta-diegetic ('dream'). In *Mulholland Drive*, the Cowboy – a figure associated with the mysterious power structure controlling the Hollywood industry – serves a similar purpose. Second, and more fundamentally, both films include sequences that cannot be attributed to the perspective of the supposed fantasy-producing subject (Fred/Diane). In *Lost Highway*, metaleptic policemen investigate the crime-scene the supposedly phantasmatic Pete has left behind; and in *Mulholland Drive*, entire narrative strands – most notably the storyline around Adam Kesher, a film director fighting against a mysterious conspiracy within Hollywood – unfold entirely independently of Betty/Diane. If *Lost Highway*'s Pete is nothing but the psychotic fantasy of a murderer within a prison cell, why (and how) do his actions have consequences for other characters? And if the first two hours of *Mulholland Drive* were simply Diane's dream, why are there so many scenes without the supposed dreamer?

This second problem reveals a deeper inconsistency in the dream-hypothesis: it rests on an implicit claim about focalization.⁴ To read the Betty-world as Diane's fantasy is to read it as radically internally focalized – as a projection anchored in one subject's consciousness. Yet, paradoxically, the Diane sequences at the end of the film are the ones most clearly marked as internally focalized: they include moments where the spectator is surprised *with* Diane, flashback-structures that are visualized to be her memory, and scenes where the camera tracks her perspective. The Betty-world, by contrast, appears largely zero-focalized or, even more paradoxically, internally focalized on characters other than Betty (Rita, the two detectives investigating Rita's abandoned car, the clumsy hitman, Adam Kesher, etc.). The films' focalizations thus resist rather than support the dream-hypothesis.

What remains after these interpretative failures is a situation of undecidability. The spectator cannot determine which parts of the filmic *discours* are diegetic and which meta-diegetic, nor even whether the films are structured through a vertical hierarchy of diegetic levels at all, as opposed to a horizontal parallelism without ontological ranking (as in anthology films) – after all, Fred/Diane and Pete/Betty could also inhabit parallel universes. This undecidability extends to the question of attribution: if it is not Fred/Diane who 'produces' the images we see, who does? The films offer no answer. Like the mysterious videotapes that are delivered to Fred and Renee in the first act of *Lost Highway* – showing them sleeping in their own home, apparently filmed by a camera that was never there –, the images seem to come from nowhere, from an absent source.

⁴ I once more follow Kuhn's (2011) Genettian model of film narratology for this analysis of focalization. What I sketch out here for *Mulholland Drive* applies equally to *Lost Highway*, minor differences aside.

2.3 The Collapse of Causo-Temporal Order (*Inland Empire*)

If *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* destabilize diegetic levelling and focalization, *Inland Empire* radicalizes this aesthetic of undecidability by dissolving the causo-temporal order of the events it depicts. While the earlier films still allow for the tentative reconstruction of two (or more), albeit paradoxical, *histoires*, such reconstruction becomes unsustainable in the final installment of the trilogy.

Nevertheless, a brief orientation: the film follows Nikki Grace (Laura Dern), a middle-aged actress in Los Angeles who is cast in a mysterious film project called ‘On High in Blue Tomorrows’, a remake of an earlier, reportedly cursed film production, that is itself based on a Polish folk story titled ‘47’. As Nikki begins rehearsals and an affair with her co-star Devon, she increasingly dissolves into her role in the film – with the evocative name Sue Blue. After approximately one hour, however, the boundary between Nikki and Sue collapses entirely – at first seemingly only for Nikki but soon for the whole diegetic world –, and the film enters a sustained post-narrative mode that occupies its remaining two hours. What follows is a proliferation of narrative strands that intersect without forming a coherent temporal or causal sequence – Nikki-as-Sue moving through present-day Los Angeles and South California, 1930s Poland, and the contemporary Baltic region, sometimes accompanied by a group of prostitutes who function as something like a Greek chorus (cf. Anderson 2021, 58; Pranolo 2011, 486); a recurring sitcom-like sequence featuring humanoid rabbits; a mysterious female character (sometimes identified as the ‘Lost Girl’) who watches events on a television screen; and multiple additional versions of the Dern-character, whose exact number and ontological status commentators have variously estimated. Events appear disconnected, reordered, or repeated without explanation. The *discours* of *Inland Empire* appears like a complex labyrinth of several different incoherent, paradoxically and metaleptically intertwined *histoires* (cf. Seeßlen 2006, 247; Schaffner 2009, 284; Paraskeva 2012, 2; Kuhn 2011, 339–341) – and the spectator is thus confronted with a filmic text that resists integration into any stable timeline. While they will try to mark certain sequences as analeptic or proleptic (cf. Genette 1980; Kuhn 2011), this endeavor soon leads to similar cases of undecidability as discussed before – not least because the time jumps are often not narratively motivated or internally focalized.

This transgression of temporal order in *Inland Empire* exploits potentials that are specific to the medium of film. As Seeßlen (2006, 228) has observed, cinema is in principle the artistic medium that could most easily escape the Newtonian space-time continuum – every cut can lead to another historical epoch or a completely different location – but has suppressed this potential through the self-imposed demand for narrative readability. *Inland Empire* abandons this self-imposition: its cuts do not produce continuity but disjunction; spatial and temporal transitions occur without motivation; characters disappear through edits and reappear in different configurations (cf. Egenbauer 2026). The reconstruction of a coherent *histoire* becomes not merely difficult but meaningless: for almost any scene in the film’s last two hours, one could find reasons to position it before, during, or after almost any other scene.

Hence, *Inland Empire* marks the *post-narrative* end point of the narration-dissolving *L.A. Trilogy*. The category of the ‘post-narrative’ that I am using here does not denote the mere absence of narrative elements – on the contrary: Lynch’s films are not avant-garde non-films; they retain characters, locations, dialogue, and fragments of plot. Post-narrativity refers rather to a specific aesthetic in which narratological categories remain operative but become systematically undecidable –

the trilogy mobilizes the specific medial potentials of film to transgress filmic narration from within. The spectator is compelled to apply categories of narrative reading, yet every application leads to unresolvable contradictions.⁵

3. Two Intertwined *Aporiae*: Subject Philosophy and Media Ontology of the *L.A. Trilogy*

After having approached the ‘unreadability’ of the *L.A. Trilogy* and its consequentially post-narrative end-point in *Inland Empire*, I will now make explicit two readings this post-narrative unreadability provokes. Implicitly they were already present in my so-far description: the first reading, the *subject* (or *social*) *philosophical interpretation*, takes the three films as depictions of a failed self-narration; whereas the second reading, the *media ontological interpretation*, discovers an aporetic structure of the filmic text itself. My claim is that the *L.A. Trilogy* triggers both these interpretations as hypotheses the spectators are provoked to formulate when confronted with it and hence immerses them within a viscous circle, endlessly oscillating between the two internally aporetic and mutually exclusive yet interconnected readings.⁶

3.1 The Subject Philosophical Interpretation: The Limits of Self-Narration

The first reading strategy interprets the trilogy as a filmic depiction of a certain form of life and its failure: narrative subjectification (Ricœur 1991; Menke 2022).⁷ Narrative subjects are – broadly speaking – individuals who aim to live according to a *histoire* they gave themselves; the narrative subject constructs itself performatively as sovereign by means of authorship (cf. Evans 2011). The *L.A. Trilogy*, according to this reading, stages extreme cases of such subjectivity – Fred in *Lost Highway* tells himself a *histoire* in which he is a desired, potent young man necessary to rescue a ‘damsel in distress,’ Diane in *Mulholland Drive* conversely narrates herself into a successful actress with a submissive love object, Nikki in *Inland Empire*, finally, dissolves into a film role, escaping her life as an unsuccessful actress. The films show what the subject gains through self-narration: their lives as their fantasy-selves (meta-diegetic) are bright and understandable, especially in comparison to their ‘real’ (diegetic) lives: through the means of narrative subjectification, they are desired protagonists in a (narratively) structured and thus meaningful world.

Within this reading, it is no coincidence that the narratives through which Fred and Diane subjectify themselves are presented in the aesthetic styles of classical and post-classical Hollywood genre films. The Pete-world in *Lost Highway* is filmed as *neo-noir*; the Betty-world in *Mulholland Drive* as a melodrama crossed with a detective thriller. These formal figurations carry a specific media and ideology critical charge. As Jean-Pierre Palmier (2012, 256) has argued, just as films mimic

⁵ My concept of post-narrativity is inspired by Hans-Thies Lehmann’s (2006) notion of post-dramatic theatre, cf. also Egenbauer 2026.

⁶ For a precise and original reconstruction of the concept of ‘aporia’ presupposed here cf. Boon 2025.

⁷ A more detailed version of the subject or social philosophical interpretation of *Inland Empire* (and, briefly, of its two predecessors) can be found in Egenbauer (2026).

emotions from real life, life mimics the emotions of filmic models: Hollywood essentially functions as a cultural production system that supplies individuals with ready-made *histoires* – clichéd plots that promise to render life meaningful. The wish-fantasies Fred and Diane construct for themselves are drawn from an available generic repertoire (cf. Danckwardt 2013, 404): the potent young lover, the successful ingénue, the damsel saved from dark forces. This correspondence between the content of the fantasy and the style of its cinematic presentation is the media-critical clou of the first two films: the meta-diegetic (the protagonists’ fantasies) and the aesthetically conventional (classical Hollywood genre codes) coincide. The result is a double critique: of narrative subjectification as a form of life that binds the subject to an unattainable demand for coherence and self-authorship, and of Hollywood as the cultural apparatus that supplies and sustains this demand. As Todd McGowan (2007, 205) elaborates: “The attractiveness of fantasy stems from this ability to deliver the goods – to provide the subject with a narrative in which she can access the inaccessible object-cause of desire.” Self-narration grants the subject not only a stable identity but also a structured world in which it inhabits a secured role.

This phantasmatic self-narration, however, ‘delivers the goods’ only for a while – as the trilogy proceeds to show by drastically staging the pitfalls of narrative subjectification. In both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, an implosion of narrative is triggered at the precise moment when the beloved object reveals itself to be an autonomous subject rather than an element of the protagonist’s *histoire*. In *Lost Highway*, Alice refuses to be the passive damsel Fred/Pete has cast her as; in *Mulholland Drive*, Camilla’s agency – her independent desire, her choice of another partner – exceeds what Diane’s narrative can accommodate.⁸ It is this excess – the irreducibility of the Other to the protagonist’s *histoire* – that precipitates the collapse into post-narrative chaos. The narrative self disintegrates not from external catastrophe but from the internal impossibility of sustaining its own coherence in the face of an uncooperative reality.

This is the *aporia of narrative subjectification* Lynch’s trilogy stages: the very mechanism that promises the subject sovereignty and self-coherence – the capacity to author one’s life as a narrative – simultaneously generates the conditions of its own collapse. Narrative subjectification is structurally vulnerable to the autonomy of others, to the non-identity of experience, to the gap between *histoire* and life. The more rigorously the subject seeks to master its existence through narration, the more violently it is confronted with the impossibility of doing so. Both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* stage this collapse as an experience of agony: bar the narrative structures that had granted them meaning, Fred ends in a state of infinite psychosis, Diane in suicide. Post-narrative chaos appears here as the traumatic reverse of narrative sovereignty, as what the subject had always already been suppressing.

Inland Empire radicalizes this structure by displacing the collapse from a terminal event to a governing principle. Here, the narrative disintegration occurs after approximately one hour – far earlier than in the two preceding films – and does not culminate in a single moment of breakdown but expands into the film’s dominant mode, as Nikki dissolves into an apparently endless proliferation of identities and spaces. The *aporia* of narrative subjectification is no longer depicted but formally enacted: the film ceases to narrate at precisely the moment its protagonist ceases to be a

⁸ It is this essentially feminist subtext of the trilogy – its *critical* unveiling of patriarchal self-narratives – Slavoj Žižek’s (2000) influential reading of *Lost Highway* unfortunately overlooks (cf. Schaffner 2009; Nochimson 2007).

narrative subject. Hereby, as Oliver Schmidt (2018, 210) observes, the audience and the Dern-character(s) are placed in an analogous situation:

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

Together with Nikki (or one of her doubles portrayed by Dern), the spectator gets lost inside the infinite and paradox web of *histoires* that constitutes the *discours* of *Inland Empire*. Hence, here the spectator not only – as in the two predecessors of *Inland Empire* – observes a subject losing their plot but to a certain extent experiences this uncanny loss herself, when they watch a film that, after an hour, loses its plot.

It is *Inland Empire* too, however – and this is the last step the subject philosophical interpretation involves –, that also lets us briefly glimpse at an alternative to the horrific and traumatizing breakdown of narrative. At the end of that film, the protagonist portrayed by Dern – again unlike Fred and Diane – is depicted in a “state of grace” (Anderson 2021, 95). Seemingly not shocked anymore but on the contrary fascinated by the chaos around her, Nikki encounters a surreal musical performance – and again, the spectator might as well be no longer terrified but excited by the weird, Lynchian chaos unfolding on the screen. This might be what the trilogy portrays as the utopian alternative to the dystopic pitfalls of failing narrative subjectivity: fascinated bliss in face of that which cannot be narrated (cf. Menke 2022).

3.2 The Media Ontological Reading: The Abyss Within the Filmic Text

The subject philosophical reading reconstructed in the previous section provides a compelling interpretation of the trilogy that helps understanding its confusing *discours*. Yet – as shown above (cf. section 2.2–3) – it ultimately encounters a limit: the focalizations and temporalizations this reading presupposes is not only suggested but – *also* – systematically prevented by the filmic text. Hence, the attempt to interpret the films of the *L.A. Trilogy* as depictions of the breakdown of subjective narratives fails as the structure of their *discours* exceeds and ultimately undermines it.

The failure of the subject-focalized reading of the trilogy points to a more fundamental feature of the filmic medium, and this is the second *aporia* the trilogy immerses the spectator in: the structural absence of a narrating subject within *any* filmic text. As argued with Kuhn (2011) in section 1.1, the narrating instance of film is essentially non-anthropomorphic: it does not – and *cannot* – appear within the diegesis as a figure but operates as an invisible structural condition of the visible. To understand the uncanniness of this media ontological condition – which is normally suppressed by the conventions of narrative cinema – it is necessary to briefly consult another theoretical framework than narratology.

Sulgi Lie (2020), in his re-actualization of suture theory, has argued that the central political potential of film lies precisely in its a-personal enunciation. Within the poetics of moving images, the entity that gives rise to the visible world necessarily remains external to it:

The plenitude of the visible is thus based on the existence of an invisible site, the Inside on an Outside, the on-screen world on the off-screen world, the effect on an absent cause [...]. [The] internal outside is [...] none other than the (non-)place of the camera viewpoint. [...] The off-screen necessarily evokes an imaginary space that is essentially filled by the active imagination of the spectator. (14–17)

The producer of the images we see in films remains essentially within the off, and the spectator necessarily imagines an indefinite entity who produces what they see (cf. also Deleuze 1986, 15–18). In classical narrative cinema, this uncanny absence is typically managed – one might say: suppressed – by attributing the images to characters or narrators within the diegesis: through internal focalization, zero focalization, or alike. But also more post-classical “mind game films” (Elsaesser 2021) – a category Lynch’s films are also sometimes subsumed under – tend to close the gap through the ‘unreliable narrator’ structure, the dream-sequence convention, etc. These devices fill the structural gap left by the absent enunciator with a personal, representable presence. Lynch’s films, by contrast, expose this gap by systematically refusing to fill it (which marks their radicality in comparison to other famous mind game films like *Fight Club* [1999] or *The Usual Suspects* [1995]). When the narrative readings of *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Inland Empire* fail – when the spectator can no longer attribute the seen images to Fred’s fantasy, Diane’s dream, or Nikki’s dissolution –, she is confronted with the simple but uncanny fact that the images cannot be attributed to anyone within the frame. They appear to come from nowhere.

This uncanny experience – of images without a source, of a *discours* without a narrator – is the media ontological (and media-reflective) core of the trilogy. It is important to note that even when *Inland Empire* metaleptically includes the production of a film within its own diegesis (showing film sets, a director, a crew), this does not resolve the problem but deepens it: an intra-diegetic film crew cannot substitute for the absent extra-diegetic enunciator, whose constitutive invisibility – whose location in the off – cannot be represented within the filmic text. (After all, sequences like these do not show the actual camera and the actual film team that filmed the diegetic camera and the diegetic film team.)⁹

For Lie (2020), the a-personal origin of the filmic image is not merely an ontological curiosity but carries political significance. The absent enunciator – the uncanny, non-personal origin of the visible world that is normally suppressed through the installation of narration – serves as a structural stand-in for what has been repressed: the uncontrollable and invisible forces, both within and outside the subject, that resist integration into its narrativized world. Filmic narration, on this account, is inherently ideological in the specific sense that it domesticates the radical alterity of the cinematic image by anchoring it in recognizable human perspectives – incorporating, and thereby concealing, precisely the abyss of absent enunciation that underlies it. By letting this domestication systematically collapse, Lynch’s films liberate the filmic medium from its narrative containment and let the repressed return: the spectator is confronted, as Fred and Renee were confronted by those videotapes in the first act of *Lost Highway*, with moving pictures that seem to come from nowhere, to show something no identifiable subject witnessed, to mean something no identifiable subject intended.

Yet like Fred, the spectator will sooner or later arrive at the uncanny suspicion that these sourceless images are somehow produced by herself. This is the precise point at which the media ontological reading is drawn back toward the interpretation from whose failure it emerged: the subject philosophical one. Unable to locate the origin of the filmic text elsewhere, the spectator typically places herself in the gap of enunciation – and, identifying with the character on screen who seems to occupy the same position, tilts back into the reading strategy that seeks to internally focalize the

⁹ Also the strategy of *auteur* theory to substitute the absent cause of the filmic text with the director – a strategy especially popular with the eccentric persona of David Lynch – cannot succeed and thus inevitably becomes entangled in contradictions (cf. Kuhn 2011; Lie 2020; Egenbauer 2026).

seen sequences. The two readings thus not only alternate but implicate each other – they are intertwined within a vicious circle.

3.3 Between Social Philosophy and Media Ontology: The Vicious Circle of the *L.A. Trilogy*

The two readings developed each expose an *aporia* in their own right. The subject philosophical reading stages the self-destruction of narrative subjectification: the very mechanism through which the subject seeks coherence generates the conditions of its collapse into incoherence. The media ontological reading exposes that the filmic *discours* itself lacks a representable origin and thus uncannily seems to stem from nowhere. Two *aporiae*, then – one internal to the subject, one internal to the medium – that are not simply parallel but dialectically intertwined.

Intertwined and interlocked – because each reading, each *aporia* both provokes and undermines, implies and destroys the other, in a movement that has no starting point. The subject philosophical reading requires a stable diegetic hierarchy – without it, there is no fantasy to attribute to Fred, Diane, or Nikki. But the narratological analysis has shown that precisely this hierarchy is what the films systematically refuse, driving the spectator toward the media ontological reading. Yet this reading, once arrived at, cannot rest in itself: confronted with the a-personal origin of the image, the spectator – like Fred before those videotapes – begins to suspect that the sourceless images are produced by herself, and tilts back into subjective attribution, back into the attempt to anchor the *discours* in a character's perspective. Which in turn collapses again, for the same reasons as before. Neither reading is primary; neither is final. Each is the other's condition of possibility and impossibility at once – the subject philosophical reading calls forth the media ontological, which calls forth the subject philosophical, and so forth.

Hence, mutual implication does not produce a synthesis but a *vicious circle*: the spectator moves from narrative investment to its collapse, and back again, without arriving at a stable position from which both movements could be surveyed. Following Sonderegger (2000), one might describe this poetics as an *aesthetic of play*, and one might add: *aporetic play* – not a game with a solution, but one whose structure is the perpetual deferral of resolution. The two readings function as the alternating positions of this play: the move toward subjective attribution and the counter-move of withdrawal are both compelled, both frustrated, and both renewed. Crucially, the spectator is immersed within this aporetic play, she participates in it: The doubled *aporia* is enacted in the act of spectating, trying to make sense of, and being confused by the diegetic paradoxes of the trilogy itself.

4. Conclusion: The Limits of Narrative

David Lynch's *L.A. Trilogy* confronts the spectator with the limits of narration in a double sense. It shows that narrative is an indispensable means of making sense of both films and lives; and, at the same time, it demonstrates that this means is inherently unstable and ultimately self-undermining. The attempt to impose coherence through narration – whether the spectator's attempt to

reconstruct a coherent *histoire* from the filmic *discours*, or the subject's attempt to live according to a self-given *histoire* – is always already threatened by its own failure.

This paper has traced the two readings of the trilogy that correspond to this double failure. The subject philosophical reading interprets the trilogy's post-narrative aesthetics as a critique of narrative subjectification: the films show that the subject's attempt to master their life through narrative coherence generates the conditions of its own breakdown. The media ontological reading interprets the same aesthetics as an exposure of the a-personal origin of the filmic image: the films show that narrative cinema suppresses a structural uncanniness that belongs to the medium as such. These two readings are not alternatives but form a vicious circle within the act of spectating the *L.A. Trilogy*: the subject philosophical reading collapses into the media ontological, which in turn folds back into the subject philosophical – each arising from the failure of the other, each generating the necessity of the other. In both *aporiae*, however, the spectator is analogously confronted with that which is suppressed through narrative coherence and sense-making – the traumatic and fascinating chaos of life here, the uncanny and politically explosive potentials of the filmic medium there. In both readings, the *L.A. Trilogy* lets us intensely experience both the terror and the beauty that lie beyond the limits of narrative.

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