The post-perspectival: screens and time in David Lynch’s Inland Empire

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Abstract

Taking Anne Friedberg’s notion of the post-perspectival as the point of departure for her analysis of David Lynch’s digitally shot and edited Inland Empire from 2006, Anne Jerslev argues that the film deconstructs continuous time and coherent space by constructing multiple planes of representation, multiple layerings of screens and, hence, multiple and fractured modes of perception. The article further suggests that the film’s enigmatic structure might best be understood with reference to a new media genre like the website with its hyperlink structure. Finally, the article discusses how a sense of ubiquitous surveillance coalesces with the screen logic.

Keywords: David Lynch; Inland Empire; digital cinema; screen; surveillance

**Inland Empire** (2006) is David Lynch’s first film shot and edited entirely using digital equipment. It is his longest to date—and his least coherent. Although Lynch claimed passionately in the late 1990s¹ that he hated digital equipment, he announced in interviews and in his vignette book *Catching the Big Fish* almost 10 years later that “working with film is so cumbersome”. He also

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said, “I’m through with film as a medium. For me, film is dead [...] I’m shooting in digital video and I love it”. Inland Empire is shot on Sony’s PD-150, which provides the image surface with a lower quality than HD video. To Lynch “DV is a miracle, a beautiful miracle [...] The quality is pretty terrible, but I like that. It reminds me of the early days of 35 mm, when there wasn’t so much information in the frame or emulsion [...] So I love working in digital video. High-def is a little bit too information to me.\(^2\)

In Catching the Big Fish, Lynch argues that the grainy quality of the PD images makes it possible for the mind to “go dreaming”: “Sometimes, in a frame, if there’s some question about what you’re seeing, some dark corner, the mind can go dreaming. If everything is crystal clear in that frame, that’s what it is, that’s all it is”. The lightweight digital camera and its particular image aesthetics can help accomplish the aesthetic idea that Lynch has turned into images and narratives and repeated again and again in interviews throughout the years—an invitation to be absorbed into other worlds of mystery and a surreal blurring of boundaries between different levels of reality, with neither more real than the other. It is thus interesting that Lynch favours the digital technique, which most closely approaches the textural aesthetics of analogue film.

J. Hoberman criticised the nearly 3-hour-long Inland Empire for a lack of concentration: “Cheap DV technology has opened Lynch’s mental floodgates”.\(^5\) Referring to the introductory close-up of a needle rotating in the groove of an analogue gramophone record, Hoberman suggests that Inland Empire might be regarded as a “meditation on the power of recording”. He furthermore proposes that “there is a sense here that film itself is evil”. Following Hoberman, one could say that the heavy 35 mm camera used on the film set within the film suggests a refined observation reminiscent of surveillance and that the film industry is—as in Mulholland Drive—the powerful agent responsible for producing a “dark danger”\(^6\) in Lynch’s images. On the other hand, in his short review occasioned by the DVD release, film critic Dennis Lim praises Inland Empire as a true work of art in the age of the Internet, suggesting that it “progresses with the darting, associative logic of hyperlinks”.\(^7\) Film scholar Zoran Samardzija later expanded on Lim’s digital metaphor, proposing that Inland Empire’s overall narrative pattern is encompassed by a “hyperlink temporal structure”, “more akin to a web where individual moments hyperlink to each other and other Lynch films”.\(^8\) And finally, Allister Mactaggart also compares it to the web: “Inland Empire is a film whose structure and style is in keeping with the technological interconnectedness that the world wide web and the internet provide”.\(^9\)

In light of Lynch’s ecstatic praise for digital technology’s technological and aesthetic possibilities and his equally passionate critique of analogue film equipment, Hoberman’s argument makes sense: The film meditates upon Hollywood film production and 35 mm recording practices. Although Inland Empire is loosely held together by a well-known cinematic plot (it is a film about film production), it seems to me that the film is as much occupied with projection and perception, with framing and screens, as it is with recording and production. In this article, I argue that the film may be regarded as an aesthetic reflection upon mediation, upon the way in which the world is represented to us and unfolds through the ubiquitous presence of a variety of screens.

Inland Empire offers a view of the contemporary condition. It presents a world of screens that is characterised by the co-existence of real and virtual spaces, where boundaries between past and present are blurred and where we have no choice but to adjust to ever-new points of view, always changing with the changing of the screen. In this, I take inspiration from Anne Friedberg (2009), who argues that the screen is not just a material object but also a material practice, which at once frames reality and represents a view of reality. For Friedberg, the screen is a technology for representing space rather than a metaphor such as the window or the mirror. The screen may contain metaphorical windows and is embedded in different media (cinema, television, laptops and smartphones), each of which frame vision in a different manner and together constitute “the fractured multiplicity of the multiple ‘windowed’ screens”\(^10\)—for instance, a computer screen with its many folders and links. Friedberg hypothesises that, in a media culture saturated with projection screens and frames of all kinds, we:

as the beholders of multiscreen “windows” [...] now receive images—still and moving, large and small, artistic and commercial—in
spatially and temporally fractured frames. This new space of mediated vision is post-Cartesian, postperspectival, postcinematic, and posttelevisual, and yet remains within the delimited bounds of a frame and seen on a screen.\textsuperscript{11}

Accordingly, I propose that \textit{Inland Empire} may be understood as an aesthetic enactment of Anne Friedberg’s notion of the \textit{post-perspectival}. It constitutes multiple and fractured modes of perception in a world of digital screens.\textsuperscript{12}

In the following discussion of Lynch’s digitally shot film, I will attempt to unravel aspects of the film’s strange and complex structure and show how it deconstructs continuous time and coherent space by constructing multiple planes of representation and multiple layerings of screens. After a brief introduction to the film, I discuss \textit{Inland Empire} as a hyperlink narrative. This section includes a short discussion of a disturbing Lynch painting, my intention being to emphasise that the hyperlink narrative’s dissolution of continuous time is not a result of the affordances of digital media but is, rather, a Lynchian endeavour accomplished in many different media and materials. I then introduce David Rodowick’s notion of the “digital event”, arguing that it too may be used as a metaphor for the way \textit{Inland Empire} works digitally. Finally, I go further into the construction of the film’s screen aesthetics. I refer to Lev Manovich’s screen genealogy and discuss how a sense of ubiquitous surveillance coalesces with the screen logic.

\section*{THE FILM}

\textit{Inland Empire} is the story of the actress Nikki Grace, who lands the leading role of Sue in what turns out to be a remake of an unfinished Polish film concerning murder, jealousy and love. The leading stars of the original Polish film were murdered during shooting, and the new film seems to have inherited this curse. The set is haunted, and Nikki seems gradually to lose track of reality and lose the ability to distinguish between herself and her role in the film, between the new film and (her fantasy of) the original Polish film. She switches between different characters and \textit{worlds} (one of Lynch’s favourite terms): the original Polish film; the original Polish film featuring Nikki; the American film production (on and off screen); what may be a miniature stage on which rabbits perform scenes from what seems to be a sitcom (or so the presence of a laugh track suggests); and (perhaps) a story about Polish-American prostitutes, who at one point perform a dance act to Little Eva’s 1960s hit song \textit{Locomotion}—after which they disappear as if by magic, as in silent cinema trick film or as the result of some invisible \textit{webmaster’s} imaginary click on another link, which opens a new window to another world. And then there is Nikki’s Hollywood mansion, where she is visited by a strange woman who speaks obsessively to her about the nature of time:

I can’t seem to remember if it’s today, two days from now, or yesterday. I suppose if it was 9:45, I’d think it was after midnight! For instance, if today was tomorrow, you wouldn’t even remember that you owed an unpaid bill. Actions do have consequences. And yet, there is the magic. If it was tomorrow, you would be sitting over there.

Later in the film, Nikki’s character (in either the American or the original Polish film) repeats these words regarding owing an unpaid bill. This could suggest that the film—like \textit{Mulholland Drive}—takes place in a split second, in the twisted mind of the strange woman. This suggestion is heightened by the following of the woman’s line by a subjective shot of her finger pointing towards a sofa, then a cut to Nikki sitting “over there”, on the sofa together with two girlfriends.

By the end of the film, superimposed with images of a crying girl, who has been shown watching a television screen throughout the film, we return to Nikki’s mansion, where we see another wide-angle close-up of the strange woman and a repetition of the shot of Nikki turning her head and looking “over there”, in the direction of the pointing finger. However, what Nikki now seems to see is herself sitting alone in a formal pose, unlike in the earlier scene in which she was chatting with her girlfriends. It is thus also possible to understand the film as Nikki’s stream of consciousness. Perhaps, the film represents what she imagines in the split second in which she turns her head in the direction of the sofa.

Finally, none of this really matters. The point is not whether the film makes sense. \textit{Inland Empire} takes the form of a \textit{digital composite}, a layering of multiple disparate entities, held loosely together as
if by a wandering mind. The many real or imagined screens render a strong sense of visual enigma. Unlike Mulholland Drive, where a fairly coherent story emerges once the riddle of the temporal structure has been solved, Inland Empire follows its aesthetic principle of visual enigma to the very end. More radically than in both Mulholland Drive and Lost Highway, it refuses coherence. If closure is to be achieved, this closure must be on the part of the viewer.

“SOME NEWER MEDIA FORM”: TRANSgressING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN MEDIA

In his short piece about Inland Empire, Zoran Samardzić makes the interesting point that the film gives the impression of an unfinished work. Through interaction with dispersed audiences, it is in a perpetual state of becoming. The narrative could go in many different directions, depending upon the chosen route in the horizontally organised web of digital events, in the centre of which stands Laura Dern as the troubled actress/character(s). There is no obvious organising visual layer or superior level of reality to which to return. There is no inside or outside, and as in many of Lynch’s other films, there is no clear temporal order or linear succession.

Inland Empire is indisputably a 180-minute-long work of film art, complete with a title sequence and end credits and released in selected cinemas. Formally, however, it pays tribute to the post-cinematic digital era and echoes the contingency of its origin. The film began as an extended monologue presented by Laura Dern for www.davidlynch.com, and with the addition of other ideas along the way, it eventually became a film.

It makes sense when Steven Shaviro argues on his blog that, in Inland Empire, Lynch is “rethinking what film might mean” in “our post-cinematic, videocentric and thoroughly digitized age”.

Both digital video’s technological and aesthetic affordance—its facilitation of shooting very long takes and creating a sense of intimacy, immediacy and interiority—and the film’s fractured sequential flow contribute to Inland Empire being “constructed in such a way that it is no longer a movie any longer, but some newer media form”.

Shaviro does not go deeper into what he means by this rather loose yet perceptive remark. However, he and the critics to whom I refer above regard Inland Empire as formally resembling an intermedial hybrid. It is a digitally shot film, which takes on formal similarities with a website’s hyperlinked layering of screens/windows, constantly disclosing new worlds from new points of view. Nevertheless, Shaviro contends, Inland Empire is a film. Not only does it rely heavily on Lynch’s earlier works; it also builds on cinematic codes, even as it deconstructs them.

In Inland Empire, screens appear as transparent or invisible frames representing and demarcating worlds, monitors for displaying surveillance images (recorded and/or transmitted in real time), television screens, or the screen in a movie theatre, which is at once a silver screen and a surface displaying in real time what takes place in front of it. As the difference between planes of reality is blurred and the origins of both recording and screening space are continually rendered obscure, the film creates a strong sense of temporal presence. The many projections in the film point to the film as a digital surface. We have diegetic screens such as monitors, television screens and film screens as well as virtual screens in the sense that they are unframed and therefore disclose the blending of frames by other means (Nikki looks at herself within the same space-frame, for instance, and a change of screen is subtly marked by a change in image texture). These projections, however, are not merely surface and signal. They are also enigmatic signs, representations of a world and purveyors of a certain mood. The mirror logic in the mise-en-abyme figure seems in Inland Empire to be replaced by a fragmented digital aesthetics without the mise-en-abyme’s severe formal symmetry. In Inland Empire, time and space merge into a world of screens, mirroring the blending of the real and the virtual.

Like Lynch’s earlier film Mulholland Drive (2001), Inland Empire takes its point of departure in the Hollywood film industry. But the “hyperlink” structure makes opaque any precise recognition of the film production’s protagonist or time and place. For instance, by the end of the film, Nikki—or Nikki as Sue—is staggering through Hollywood, mortally wounded and lies down to die among a trio of homeless people. Framed in close-up, one of them, a young woman, speaks about her friend Nico, who is a prostitute addicted
to hard drugs. Her narrative takes some time, and as it ends, we return to Nikki, who spits blood and dies. A backward tracking shot then causes a diegetic analogue 35 mm camera to appear in the frame. This camera also slowly withdraws, like a slow, giant dinosaur, seemingly performing the same movement as the first camera behind it, which is presumably still filming. We hear the director’s voice order “cut” and then ask everybody on set to applaud Nikki’s performance.

There were, evidently, two cameras, presumably each focusing their close-up on a different part of the scene. The one appearing within the frame is obviously part of the film production narrative. The one framing the dying scene as we have just seen it, placing Nikki off screen, is most likely extra-diegetic. The dying scene we watched showed close-ups of the homeless woman and very little of Nikki’s performance, the performance that the people on set have been urged to applaud and that was perhaps shot with the revealed 35 mm camera. So, how are we to understand the presence of two cameras at the end of the scene? Obviously, we have not been watching what was framed by the diegetic director’s camera but instead what another camera chose to frame as more interesting. It is as if someone had chosen to click on one hyperlink instead of another.

Nikki’s male co-star at one point follows the sound of what seems like someone eavesdropping on his and Nikki’s rehearsal. He returns unsuccessfully and concludes, “She disappeared where it is real hard to disappear”. The remark adds to the mood of mystery within the film, yet it could also be understood as a self-conscious reference to the hyperlink logic, in which a click on a link closes access to one screen and makes a new screen appear. From this perspective, the film might be understood as unfolding with the logic of a newer media form, resembling a (filmic) interface, which Anna Munster perceptively defines as a “space of both representation and action”. Inland Empire is a narrative yet is utterly incoherent, and it is a formal interplay between different digital screens or surfaces. Regarded together, they constitute the fragmented filmic space in which the “virtual” and the “real” combine in the simultaneous formation of a grid of multiple screens. Inland Empire thus aesthetically enacts in filmic form that which Anne Friedberg reminds us in the opening lines of her book: “How the world is framed may be as important as what is contained within that frame”.20

Below, I discuss further the meaning of screens and Inland Empire’s status as a “newer media form”. I wish to show how the film’s layering of screens constitute, in the words of Thomas Y. Levin, “regimes of surveillant narration”21 and in so doing also produce the sense that the film is continuously coming into being and is confusingly dissolving continuous time. I would, however, like to conclude this section by stressing that the obscuring of differences between medias is not a new element in Lynch’s work. Lynch has challenged the medium specificity of all the media with which he has worked ever since his one-minute film school experiment Six Men Getting Sick (1967), an animated film loop projected onto a three-dimensional, sculptural screen. His entire career has focused on the dissolution of continuous time and hence on the elimination of closure. The transgressive gestures in Inland Empire are therefore not specific to the affordances of digital technologies, even if they seem to have multiplied in this film.

In Toby Keeler’s 1997 documentary, Pretty as a Picture: The Art of David Lynch, Lynch’s ex-wife Peggy Reeves argues that Lynch turned from painting to film because “he wanted his paintings to move. He wanted them to do more. He wanted them to make sounds”. I have elsewhere22 argued that, in Lost Highway, Lynch seems at times to arrest the flow of moving images in an effort to turn each frame into a painting. During a conversation about time in Lynch’s films,23 philosopher Boris Groys and filmmaker Andrei Ujica touch on the same point that Lynch’s film images may be regarded as paintings set in motion.24 Perhaps, Lynch’s enthusiasm for working with digital equipment has intensified the film’s screen logic. However, even without the digital affordances, he seems to have experimented over the years with collapsing boundaries between art forms and developing a cinematic discourse of his own. Andrei Ujica formulates this endeavour eloquently in the catalogue to the large Lynch exhibition curated by Fondation Cartier and first exhibited in Paris in 2007:

Instead, he has developed his own cinematic discourse by transposing the static time of visual arts onto film and thereby inevitably setting it in motion. To set in motion a
painting, a drawing, or a photograph is the only way of achieving the absolute congruence of all three times – past, present and future. This substantive interweaving of the divisions of time, which cannot be explained by conventional analytical tools, is what imbues Lynch’s films with their mystical aura.25

Time has always been tricky in Lynch’s films. In Lost Highway, the final scenes turn the whole narrative into a loop that ultimately destroys continuous time. Mulholland Drive’s story possibly takes place in a split second, in the failed actress’ dying moments. The same could be the case in Inland Empire, but more significantly, this digital work allows time to implode within the diegesis, simultaneous with the constitution of space as a web of overlapping screens. In some of his paintings, most notably 2004’s This Man Was Shot 0.9502 Seconds Ago, Lynch produces a vibrant, paradoxical sense of movement and time by freezing time as if turning the canvas into a filmic freeze frame.

This Man Was Shot 0.9502 Seconds Ago exemplifies how a sense of movement (a moving painting), of real-time immersion, and the dissolution of continuous time can be performed outside of the encounter with the computer screen and the digital signal, even outside of film. The painting (measuring 152.4 × 296 cm and made using different techniques and materials, including cloth) shows a man whose entrails are splattering outwards and whose spirit is leaving his body (as indicated by a written caption). The man looks in bewilderment towards the viewer, his eyes consisting of black holes and his mouth wide open—an almost ghost-like, roughly sketched face that contrasts starkly with the realist use of materials (real trousers and a real jacket), thereby providing the painting with a three-dimensional, relief-like surface. Blood and intestines burst from his chest towards and beyond his face. The man stands with his arms outstretched, as if he is being crucified. His short, thick fingers point violently in all directions, and his lilac shadow casts the figure of a man with severed arms. The written caption in the upper-right of the painting reads: “This man was shot 0.9502 seconds ago”.

So, we are literally eyewitnesses to a man being shot. The painting’s violence, its carnal spectacularity and the written caption produce an impossible sense of the here and now, placing the painting closer to photography or the filmic freeze frame. It is an incident captured in a fraction of a second by a measuring tool obviously capable of measuring time down to one to ten thousandth. The painting, however, is devoid of photography’s indexical “having-been-there”-ness. The caption ensures that there is no past to the motif, which is forever frozen in a moment so close to now as to still be ongoing or forever becoming. The painting could thus be understood as the creation of an encounter with the shooting of a man. We witness the event that took place less than a second ago and is in a sense still unfinished. The frozen moment in the violent act of destroying a body captures the viewer in this very instant. The man’s frontal position and the time warp in which the painting immerses the viewer not only position us as eyewitnesses but also make us accessories to a crime. Indeed, the fact that this man was shot 0.9502 seconds ago makes it more than likely that the person who is standing in front of him is the one who has shot him. The viewer.

Inland Empire constructs the viewer as less violent. However, despite the very different media involved, the viewing situation is similar. In the same virtual manner, the audience is (inter)actively immersed in a time without extension and a space with no clear demarcation. As in the painting, there is no clear boundary between audience space and diegetic space.

THE DIGITAL EVENT

Instead of forwarding an argument about inter-textuality, it would be fair to say that the rabbit sitcom scenes are copied from Lynch’s website and inserted into the film (or cut-and-pasted from www.davidlynch.com to Inland Empire). The film’s overall hyperlinked structure of disparate and contingently connected scenes may be further illuminated with reference to David Rodowick’s notion of the digital event.26 In Rodowick’s discussion of understanding (the disappearance of) filmic specificity in the age of digital media, the digital event is his term for the particular characteristics and affordances of digital film as a collection of independently manipulable data. The digital event is any computer operation, any manipulation or transformation of digital information on any layer or level of film production,
from the shot—or what he, following Holly Willis\(^{27}\), prefers to call the capture—to the filmic montage or compositing. The digital event is “any discrete alteration of image or sound data at whatever scale internal to the image”.\(^{28}\) For Rodowick, digital film is basically composite or montage in nature. There is no whole on any level in digital cinema.\(^{29}\) The shot is not a single unit; any part of an image can be broken down into pixels and manipulated independently from all of the others.

The digital event is Rodowick’s term for the affordances and hence the aesthetic possibilities of digital film as a technology. As such, “the digital event corresponds less to the duration and movement of the world than to the control and variation of discrete numerical elements internal to the computer’s memory and logical processes”.\(^{30}\) As a metaphor, the concept addresses what Rodowick regards as one of the characteristics of digital cinema as a medium, its lack of temporality. Digital film confers upon him a sense of “time lost”, caused by the lack of analogue film’s indexical inscription of time. Digital film lacks analogue film’s contingency and its trace of the past.\(^{31}\) Rodowick therefore proposes that we speak of a different ontology in digital film, a “digital ontology” characterised by “an increased attention to the present and to the control of information”.\(^{32}\)

It seems to me that the digital event is also useful as a metaphor for the structure of Lynch’s film. *Inland Empire* takes the form of a composite. It is an assemblage of multiple screens, which frame scenes put together in accordance with a hyperlink structure. The screens are not immediately connected spatially or temporally. In the same way, they are divided by their seeming to have been shot in different media and projected onto different screen materialities.

**SCREENS AND SURVEILLANCE**

We repeatedly get the impression that we are not only looking into a world through the eyes of Nikki, her film character, or an omniscient disembodied film narrator. We are looking at screenings of past events or transmissions of real-time events projected onto a surface or displayed on a monitor. The film’s layering of points of view and the repeated use of wide-angle long shots of rooms and wide-angle close-ups of faces create a strong sense of surveillance, as if the images were procured by some sort of digital image technology intended for automated capture. Shifting image textures emphasise the feeling that the film shifts constantly between diegetic on-screen and off-screen spaces, between prerecorded screenings and “real time” projections, between the virtual and the real. And precisely because past, present and future are mixed into a confusing simultaneity, the difference between projections of stored data and real-time transmission is also blurred. The film seems like an apt example of Lev Manovich’s suggestion that the image, at least in the way we usually understand the term, has disappeared: “It is only by habit that we still refer to what we see on the real-time screen as ‘images’ […] Yet such an image is no longer the norm, but the exception of a more general, new kind of representation for which we do not yet have a term”.\(^{33}\)

Manovich’s discussion of real-time transmission is part of his outline of what he calls a screen genealogy. He defines the screen in the most general sense as the existence of another world or another virtual space. The screen, or what he calls the classical screen, “separates two absolutely different spaces that somehow coexist”: A represented space and “our normal space, the space of our body”.\(^{34}\) As such, the screen (whether a canvas or a computer screen) is the mediating “interface” between different spaces and different levels of reality. The classical screen is the window screen, which places us in front of a world different in scale to the real world, large or small depending upon medium. The dynamic screen places the viewer in the same fixed position as the classical screen, but it is the screen of moving images. First came cinema, and then came television and video. These technologies are now disappearing, and the dynamic screen is being replaced by the computer screen’s disparate multimedia text formats, says Manovich, complete with the possibility for manipulating separate clusters of data. Or the screen disappears entirely as a material frame and is replaced by Virtual Reality’s merging of screen and sight.

The third type, the screen of real time, replaces dynamic screens (digital as well as analogue) in Manovich’s screen genealogy. Examples include the interface/screen of real-time transmissions,
such as Skype, the smartphone, live video, or the screening of real-time surveillance on a reality show or in a control room. Focusing in particular on fiction films about surveillance, Thomas Y. Levin has discussed in depth this screen of real time. He argues that a change took place in surveillance narratives, beginning with the famous finale of Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974). First, there was a shift in representation from “a thematic to a structural engagement of surveillance”, from surveillance as plot to surveillance enacted at the level of enunciation. This shift is unfolded in *The Conversation* but gains special prominence in films of the 1990s, where the ambiguous exchange between surveillance as a thematic concern and as the point of origin of narration comes into play. Second, the discussion about the surveillance image’s claim to truth was scrutinised by shifting the thematic focus from “surveillance as a recorded observation to surveillance as real-time transmission” (e.g. in *The Conversation* and Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show* (1998), respectively). Cinema thus invoked what Levin terms a new “rhetoric of temporal indexicality” in which indexicality is connected not to photography’s having-been-there-ness but to live now-ness. There was a movement from the indexical trace to the indexical live-ness: Fiction films like *The Truman Show* rhetorically enacted one of the specificities of early reality television programmes, i.e. a truth claim based on the impossibility of manipulating real-time transmitted images.

*Inland Empire* is in one regard a suitable example of Levin’s concept of surveillance narration and filmic “diegeticized surveillant omniscience”. However, the construction of time in Lynch’s film is much more ambitious and more complicated than is the mere spectacle of simulating real-time tracking. The hyperlink temporal structure incorporates the clashes and blurring of boundaries between different visual regimes of surveillance and observation and hence between different screened times: The screen of real-time transmission, the dynamic screen of projected film and the screen of surreptitious observation. The visual field is both expanded and fragmented by the ubiquity of screens. The perspectival framing in photographic media multiplies and disintegrates, making questions concerning the what, when and where harder and harder to answer. The framing is at times invisible, yet at other times, camera angles, short passages of slow motion or stop motion, a shift from black-and-white to colour, a shift in the sharpness of the image surface, or the sudden appearance of the digital image’s pixels call attention to the images as recorded projections that were captured by someone and projected from somewhere—for instance, a control booth—for one purpose or another.

Time and space cease to be narratively connected. Nikki may move forward from one screen to another or one world to another. But temporally, she can move from the present to the past or move without time moving along at all. As she tells her confused male co-star at one point, when her “on-screen” and “off-screen” characters start blending, “It’s a story that happened yesterday, but I know it’s tomorrow”. There is no distinguishable yesterday and tomorrow, no precisely localised here and now, just a sense of being directed, almost at random, to new links on the digital surface and entering yet another world. More than just film, *Inland Empire* is a moving image digital composite, which makes sense when compared with a website with an elaborate hyperlink structure.

By going through the first few minutes of the film, *I* offer one last example of how the screen structure works. After the aforementioned black-and-white close-up of the gramophone needle, there is a complicated layering of superimpositions of black-and-white close-ups of a couple going from a corridor to a room. The woman takes off her clothes while the man watches, and they presumably make love. The first shot from the room is a wide and slightly high-angle long shot, thus creating a strong sense of surveillance. However, the two people’s faces are blurred, as if the “original” footage has been manipulated in order to erase some of the information that surveillance images are meant to provide in the first place. The blurring creates a confusing sense of screen doubling, as if the surveillance images were recordings projected from a control room somewhere rather than displayed in “real time”.

The next scene is in colour. A young girl (listed in the credits as *The Lost Girl*) sits on a bed in a room, superimposed in the very first second of the shot with the circular reflection of light in what could be an analogue camera lens, again creating a sense of recording and surveillance. Apart from
the first long shot and a medium close-up from the back, we only see her in ultra close-ups, crying, while she appears to watch the flat-screen TV on the wall. The first cut to the television screen shows flickering static. Then the rabbit sitcom appears on the screen, shown speeded up—even though the girl has no remote control device in her hand. The enigmatic fast-forwarded images again transmit an impression of some powerful concealed-off-screen monitoring agency selecting and projecting footage. Or they could address the digital surface as materiality and be regarded as a particularly conspicuous digital event.

The rabbit “program” is replaced by a slightly distorted fast-forward wide-angle shot of the strange woman moving towards Nikki’s front door—as we see it in “real life” a few minutes later. In the last second of the very brief surveillance shots of the strange woman, the fast-forwarded projection on the diegetic television screen fills the entire image frame, and we see the digital pixels superimposed with the room reflected on the screen’s surface. There are a few more crosscuts between the crying girl and the now-empty flickering screen. The scene is immediately followed by the rabbit sitcom, complete with dialogue and laugh track, possibly displayed on the television screen we have just seen or perhaps projected from somewhere else. Finally, the story about Nikki and the haunted movie begins when the strange woman knocks on her door.

After Nikki has stepped out of character by the end of the film, risen from the death scene and left the set, she walks through a movie theatre, where she encounters herself displayed in real time on a large screen. She then seemingly reenters the world inhabited by the Lost Girl and her television screen. The TV screen seems, in the end, to have changed into a monitor displaying real-time surveillance images. A close-up of the screen shows a long shot of the room. The girl is sitting on the bed in the right foreground, and the screen in the left background shows the exact same image that we are seeing. Nikki enters through an open door in the right background and approaches the girl. Again, the exact movement is mirrored on the screen in the screen (the only *mise-en-abyme* in the film). There is a cut from the close-up of the monitor to a long shot of the room, as if an operator in a control room somewhere had shifted from one camera to another. The two women embrace, then Nikki fades away, leaving the Lost Girl with empty hands.

What seemed at first to be a television screen turns out to be a monitor transmitting images from the film’s many different scenes/screens. Some of them, for example, the recordings of the strange woman and the shots of the room, are obviously surveillance footage, yet they are surveillance footage of two different kinds—recorded images and real-time tracking. The fast-forwarded images seem to be projected by some anonymous operator, who controls the screen from somewhere else and adds to the film’s sense of omniscient surveillance. The screen also displays real-time images seemingly originating from a surveillance camera in the room, but we will never know who controls the screen and the concealed recording technology. The close-up of the screen shows Nikki entering the room. In the following long shot of the room, she is “real”, but then she vanishes like a ghost, leaving the young woman with her arms still embracing someone who is no longer there. What has happened? Is Nikki’s sudden disappearance an obvious example of a digital event, the manipulation of just a selection of the image’s discrete elements? Or is Nikki’s and the girl’s embrace to be understood as a sign of redemption and the end of the narrative?

**CONCLUSION**

What the three segments to which I have referred in this article have in common is the layering of screens, the fluid and constant shift of point of view and enunciation. *Inland Empire* is a work of digital film art, which in the form of a fiction film meditates on the same problems theorised by Friedberg: The screening of the world, the substitution of single for multiple perspectives in the post-perspectival age and the corresponding need for new tools of cultural navigation and other perceptual capabilities.

*Inland Empire* supports Levin’s thesis about a “shift in the cinematic exploitation of surveillance from videotape to ‘real’ time”. 40 Yet, real-time transmission is but one way of screening the world in the film, which seems more concerned with the confusion of time and questions of agency in a world of screens. *Inland Empire* is a thrillingly enigmatic and frightening vision of a multilayered...
world where perspective changes constantly. As in many other Lynch films, the construction of worlds to enter and suspension of hierarchy and perspective are accompanied by uneasiness and an uncanny sense of lost control. Inland Empire’s screen aesthetics emphasise surface and image as digital events at the same time as they communicate a fragmented story about the confusion of Borrough’s aesthetics to “adjacent data” and states that “we can’t think of a better description of Inland Empire”: “I can’t think of a better description of Inland Empire”.

Throughout this article, I have used words like hyperlink, web(site), computer, interactivity and immediacy as metaphors for conceptualising a complex construction of time and space and an enigmatic enunciation. Inland Empire is not, of course, a website. The digital surfaces are loosely connected as if by virtual links. Nor does it offer its viewers interactivity; there is no possibility of the viewer altering the order of scenes. It mimics the logic of a hyperlinked website. It provides a sense of the possibility of interactivity. For lack of better words, it might be understood as “some kind of newer media form”. However, Inland Empire is also a film, recorded and edited into a finished work of 180 minutes before being released in cinemas and transferred to DVD.

Notes

1. Chris Rodley, *Lynch on Lynch* (London/Boston, MA: Faber & Faber, 1997).
2. David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 149, 150. For a discussion of Lynch and digitality, see Anna Munster, ‘Beyond Boundaries: David Lynch’s Inland Empire’, *Moving Image* no. 16 (February, 2010), 139–157.
3. Scott Thill, ‘David Lynch Interviews – Uncut’, *Wired* 1 (2007), http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2007/01/72391 (accessed 1 February 2012).
4. Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish*, 153.
5. J. Hoberman, ‘Wild at Heart’, *The Village Voice* (November, 2006), http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-11-28/film/wild-at-heart/ (accessed March 10).
6. Boris Groys and Andrei Ujica, ‘On the Art of David Lynch’, in Exhibition Catalogue, *Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain*, Paris (2007), 109.
7. Dennis Lim, ‘David Lynch Goes Digital’, *Slate* (2007), http://www.slate.com/id/2172678 (accessed 1 February 2012).
8. Zoran Samardzija, *Davidlynch.com: Authorship in the Age of the Internet and Digital Cinema*, *Scope*, no. 16 (February, 2010), http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=16&id=1171 (accessed 1 February 2012). cf. also Kristin M. Jones who compares the film to “Wormholes, rabbit holes or web portals” in ‘Light and Dark’, *Frieze*, no. 107 (May 2007), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/light_and_dark/ (accessed March 10). Likewise Amy Taubin refers to Gibson’s comparison of Borrough’s aesthetics to “adjacent data” and states that “we can’t think of a better description of Inland Empire”: “I can’t think of a better description of Inland Empire”.
9. Allister MacTaggart, *The Film Paintings of David Lynch* (Bristol: Intellect Press, 2010), 153.
10. Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009 [2006]), 19.
11. Ibid., 7.
12. Ibid., 194.
13. David N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2007).
14. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the characters played by Laura Dern as Nikki throughout this article—even though this is the name of the diegetic actress and not her part, who is called Sue. Differences between the two roles are often blurred, and my point is not to unravel exactly who is who at what points.
15. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*. The term is also used in Steven Shaviro, ‘Southland Tales’, *The Pinochio Theory* (December 2007), http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?m=200712 (accessed 1 February 2012) and in Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*.
16. Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish*, 139–41. Cf. also Linda Nochimson, ‘Inland Empire’, *Film Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (Summer 2007), 10–14.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Anna Munster, *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics* (Hanover/London: University Press of New England, 2006), 124.
20. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 1.
21. Levin, ‘Rhetoric of the Temporal Index: Surveillant Narration and the Cinema of “Real Time”’, in *CTRL Space. Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, eds. Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne and Peter Weibel (Karlruhe and Cambridge, Massachusets: ZKM & MIT Press, 2002).
22. Anne Jerslev, ‘Beyond Boundaries: David Lynch’s Lost Highway’, in *The Cinema of David Lynch: American Dreams, Nightmare Visions*, ed. Erica Sheen and Annette Davison (London: Wallflower Press, 2004).
23. Groys and Ujica, ‘On the Art of David Lynch’.
24. cf. also MacTaggart, *The Film Paintings of David Lynch*.
25. Ibid., 379.
26. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*.
27. Holly Willis, *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005).
28. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 167.
29. cf. also Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, for similar points of view (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).
30. Ibid., 166.
31. This article is not about the complicated and intriguing relationship between the digital and the indexical. So, I will leave it here. For an interesting discussion of the digital index, see Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). For a discussion of indexicality and contingency, see Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2002). For a discussion of indexicality and the trace, see Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

32. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 166.
33. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 100.
34. Ibid., 95.
35. Levin, ‘Rhetoric of the Temporal Index’, 582, 583.
36. Ibid., 585 (my italics). It should be noted, however, that *The Truman Show* is also an example of the thematic engagement with surveillance, even though it is about surveillance as real-time transmission. *The Conversation* is actually much more refined than *The Truman Show*.
37. Ibid., 592.
38. Levin, ‘Rhetoric of the Temporal Index’, 589.
39. I refer only—and rather briefly, without going into all takes and details in this rich and complicated sequence—to the image track. I do not consider Lynch’s typical elaborate and refined use of sound and music.
40. Levin, ‘Rhetoric of the Temporal Index’, 592.