

Adrian  
Martin

*When I look at a living thing, what I see and what first occupies my attention is this mass, all of a piece, which moves, bends, runs, jumps, flies, or swims; which howls, speaks, sings, performs its many acts, takes on many appearances, assumes a multiplicity of selves, wreaks its havoc, does its work, in an environment which accepts it and from which it is inseparable.*

— Paul Valéry, 1943

I.

It was one of those strange coincidences of cinema and life that forever determines the way you experience, remember, and understand something: on the day I first saw David Lynch's **Lost Highway** at a movie theater in 1997, I had a migraine headache. A mundane, recurring condition for me at the time, these headaches had the power to literally warp, fracture, and discolor any film that, according to the winds of misfortune, happened to be swimming before my eyes. Lynch's film, however, wasn't just some ordinary movie receiving the inner-fish-eye-lens treatment. It seemed, rather, to be directly addressing, and even gleefully exaggerating, my situation: with someone's forehead sliced through by a glass table (ouch), and its wildly shaking skulls-with-skin en route to another violent metamorphosis of identity.

So Lynch will always be, for me, the migraine filmmaker. But this coincidence proved to be an open sesame for an entire, holistic way of approaching and analyzing his work. By the end of the 1990s I had become intensely interested in a mode of film criticism that calls itself *figural analysis*. Without getting into the whole theoretical and philosophical underpinning of it (which I have discussed in my punctum book **Last Day Every Day**), I can vouch for the type of crucial intuition that this kind of analysis confirmed for me: that the cinema, as form or material, is plastic and malleable and transformative, and that all the elements marshalled within it — people, landscapes, spaces, sounds, stories — are equally plastic, open to radical change.

There is another image from **Lost Highway**, highlighted in Cristina Álvarez López's audiovisual essay **Coming Attraction** accompanying this issue of **The Third Rail**, which perfectly condenses for me what Lynch's art of cinema is all about. We see a section of a male human body, abstracted in the darkness of a bedroom: muscles, sinews, bones at work. Then, as if from nowhere, and previously hidden in the frame, a female hand emerges, rising above this shoulder blade,



in slow motion. Actually, it's probably even going too far to ascribe the gendered labels of man and woman to these bodies, if the image can be taken — as surely Lynch invites us to take it — beyond the strict circumscriptions of its place in a narrative.

The sight is at once something monstrous and something marvellous — and it marks a reinvention, in and by cinema, of one of its essential components: the human body. It is, on the simple, scene-bound level, a hand moving to pat a lover's back, near the end of a spectacularly spooky attempt at sexual intimacy; but it also registers as much more — a true *apparition*, like so much of what we see figured, and transfigured, in Lynch's films.

In the writing (mostly not in English) about figural film analysis, a formulation by Nicole Brenez, from her 1992 introduction to a printed transcription of John Cassavetes's masterpiece **A Woman Under the Influence** (1974), struck me as a formidable insight, and the key to a new comprehension of the work of film. To paraphrase it: cinema (Brenez says) has the dual power both to concentrate the most complex of phenomena into a single, readable gesture or moment; and also to take what we have assumed to be transparent, straightforward, everyday things and make them seem suddenly, fantastically, strange and complex.

This dual process is what David Lynch achieves, miraculously, virtually all the time. When someone laughs, or cries, or even speaks their lines in a Lynch film, we wonder, instinctively, what it means for a body to produce such a sound or convulsion; when someone dances, or sways, or even walks, we are confronted with the quasi-mechanical strangeness of all human movement, figuring itself out (not always successfully) in the synaptic exchanges between body and brain. At the same time, a limpid gesture, so routine, so easy to produce — like that slow-motion hand of Patricia Arquette on Bill Pullman's exposed back — can encapsulate, in a moment, the waking nightmare of a completely dysfunctional and treacherous relationship.

## II.

Cinema continually figures and disfigures, makes and remakes, a body built from the combination and discombination of its parts. This screen-enhanced complex of a discontinuous self, of many-bodies-in-one, resonates with our daily experience within a thoroughly mediated world on so many levels: the feeling of being constantly decentered and hyperstimulated; of living through our virtual selves online; of being in unstable, chaotic relationships; of passing imperceptibly from trance or hallucination into waking reality and back again (the kind of daily brush with madness that Louis C.K. captures so well in his TV series); of hysterically acting out or somatising stressful, contradictory, impossible situations; or of undergoing memories and emotions that are somehow not "ours." Everywhere and at all times, the humanist ideal of the "sovereign self," the individual in command of his or her own identity, seems like a figment of a long-gone time.

Throughout the 20th century, various philosophers, mystics, and visionaries conjured fanciful schema to corral these amorphous



feelings of the splintered self — not always destined to be an unhappy state, but frequently a puzzling, challenging one, tough to grasp or think through sanely. Thus the musing of René Daumal, during his relatively brief life, on how the human being is comprised of head (intelligence), chest (emotion), and stomach (the body with its instinctual drives) — “I eat, I feel, I even (although rarely) think.” His model example was of a person spying a mirage in the desert: it is seen in an instant; the desire for this apparition forms some moments later; and the body reaches the illusory spot several days further on. Daumal called the human creature a jungle, forever at war with itself between these three levels; by the time the levels unite, he cheerily advised, we will be dead.

For his part, the celebrated French essayist Paul Valéry mused on what he called — creatively borrowing a term from celestial mechanics — the “problem of the Three Bodies.” The first body, he suggested is “My Body,” the one we take, in the everyday, to belong to us. We become aware of it only intermittently, partially, in moments of pleasure or pain — never as a totality or for a sustained period of time. The second body is the imaged body, “the one which others see, and an approximation of which confronts us in the mirror or in portraits.” In this sense, it is the represented body. The third body is subterranean: the unknowable world of organs, tissues, blood vessels beneath the skin — a dark universe that opens up only under the microscope, or on the operating table.

All these bodies taunt us, according to Valéry. “The first offers you nothing but moments; the second a few visions; and the third, at the cost of ruthless dissections and complicated preparations, a mass of figures more indecipherable than Etruscan texts.” But then he grasped for a fourth body which he enigmatically labelled “the Real Body or equally well the Imaginary Body,” living proof of “a certain Nonexistence.” This enchanting possibility of a fourth body has fired the imaginations of subsequent philosophers of aesthetics.

Jean Louis Schefer ignited the contemporary movement of figural reflection on the body in his groundbreaking 1980 book **The Ordinary Man of Cinema**. When we watch a body on screen, Schefer suggests, we do not merely recognize a mirroring figure, emotionally identify with a character, or follow a human story. What we see is inherently strange, a defamiliarizing reflection: bodies that (for instance) are reduced too small, or projected too large, just like the extreme close-up of Naomi Watts’ eye intercut with the miniaturized old couple crawling in under the door in **Mulholland Drive** (2001). Through such routine cinematic deformations, we encounter “the unexpressed that grows within the living being as he lives” — a formlessness that is full of possibility, but also sheer terror: a dual register we know well from Lynch’s cinema.

The contemporary philosopher Michel Serres offers yet another broad, multilayered schema. For him, the body is simultaneously plunged into at least five different types of space: it works in Euclidean, geometric space; sees in projective space; touches, caresses, and feels in topological (modulating, bending, stretching) space; suffers in emotional space; and hears and speaks in communicational space.



His provisional conclusion is extremely Lynchian: “This intersection, these junctions always need to be constructed. And, in general, whoever is unsuccessful is considered sick. Her body explodes from the disconnection of spaces.” This could be the plot summary of **Inland Empire** (2006).

### III.

David Lynch, like David Cronenberg, works in a corner of popular genre that is congenial and conducive to his figural exploration of the body: at an intersection of horror, fantasy, and surrealism. Sometimes the touch of the supernatural or other-worldly is heavy (as in the **Twin Peaks** saga, still unfolding), keyed to apparitions and presences in the external world; sometimes it is internal, springing from phantasms or disorders of identity (as in **The Elephant Man** [1980] or **Mulholland Drive**). In this generic realm, the philosophic questioning of the sovereign self, the making-strange of the relation of body to mind, the generalized experience of psychic dissociation, the difficult transaction between a Self and an Other, all come easily with the territory: tales of doppelgängers or body snatchers; people with spirits getting inside their skin or their voices suddenly issuing from somewhere or someone else; paradoxes of time lived as a Möbius strip, the end always meeting up, chillingly, with the beginning; the melding of the human with the technological; or the eternal mystery (that every child wonders about) of what’s going on inside the body, amidst all those veins and organs and fluids. The handy, even frankly clichéd tropes serve to condense and literalize, on screen, what are often complex metaphors or arguments — a profoundly figural process.

Lynch is especially drawn, from his earliest film school experiments in short animation, to the possibilities of the gothic, and particularly of the grotesque, with its familiar array of inversions: sex, birth, growth, all these “natural bodily functions” are stupendously fascinating to him, both ugly and splendid in their exaggerated distortions or malfunctions. Lynch and Cronenberg, different in so many ways, are alike in this: their work shares a beguilingly infantile perspective, as if every surreal scenario, including the most violent and extreme, issued from the imagination of a little boy or girl wondering about their place in the world — and how they would like to rearrange it.

But where Cronenberg, with his novelistic style, tends to favor, especially since **The Fly** (1986), a chamber drama approach that savors the macro-figurative level of plot, situation, and inherently unstable characterisation, Lynch works on the micro-figural. This takes place, in the images, literally frame by frame (and all his work, in this sense, bears the mark of animation processes), but with just as much attention paid to the artificial production and layering of sound. On this plane, Lynch occupies an experimental position in contemporary cinema more akin to Philippe Grandrieux (see **The Third Rail** issue 5) than to, say, Alejandro Jodorowsky. Photographic realism plays virtually no role in his aesthetic; artifice is all.

From Álvarez López’s ongoing work on Lynch, I draw her idea of four primal, figural operations upon the body in his cinema, revolving



around: birth and death; appearance and disappearance; transformations, mutations, doublings, and splittings; and the various kinds of conductors or transmitters that convey or misplace energies, affects, and information (this last category is the subject of “Short-Circuit,” our audiovisual essay on **Twin Peaks**, <<https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/short-circuit-a-twin-peaks-system>>). All these categories interlace in complex ways: for Lynch, the childlike questions of “where did I come from?” or “where does my body go when I die?” inform every entrance and exit of his characters from the cinematic frame, each occasion when they emerge from or are swallowed up by darkness (a motif we see handled with particular intensity in **Lost Highway**). The human being on the Lynchian screen keeps phasing in and out of “normal” existence, just as the image increasingly shifts in and out of focus (as in **Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me** [1992] and **Mulholland Drive**).

At the most extreme point of this figural, animated playfulness mingled with blank terror, a raving Dennis Hopper in **Blue Velvet** (1986) or a room full of dancing girls in **Inland Empire** simply pop out of the picture in the blink of a cut — while the room they were in just sits there for a few more moments, like an empty art gallery installation. The body is not the sovereign ruler of the world in Lynch’s cinema; but it still has the wild power to reinvent itself, and to wreak havoc among all the other living things.

*Cinema could have the almost anthropological function of reminding us of what is possible for the body, of sending us image constructions which make it impossible to limit the organism to its determining factors.*

— Nicole Brenez, 2008

