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In Search for Hell Beyond the Fantastic:
The Untimely Remnants of Modern Progress in David Lynch's New
Mexico.

*Ojo con el ojo numeroso de la bomba
que se desata bajo el hongo vivo.
Con el fulgor del hombre no vidente, ojo y ojo.*

Oscar Hahn

I.

The following essay is an experimental encounter between French writer and theorist Jean Louis Schefer and American filmmaker David Lynch. One could argue that the former wrote 'theoretical poetry' while the latter filmed 'poetic cinema' thus becoming echoes of each other's oeuvres. Affected by similar images, their work is densely populated by figurative and literal monsters which, in an always untimely manner, put into crisis the notion of spectatorship, consciousness, and time – specially a time unbound, and therefore always operating outside chronometrical measures. Furthermore, it is through these notions that the question of the fantastic also arises, yet it arises as a new problem and under the guise of a new spectacle, perhaps beyond Todorov's structural universe. It is in this sense that both Lynch's *Twin Peaks* and Schefer's writings are part of a novel poetic vision¹ that – laden with the crises of history – remains open and structurally unclassifiable.

II.

In his book *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*, Jean Louis Schefer argues that when we go to the cinema, we enter a darkness in which we lose our

1 Vision: for they either write or present characters who watch over the viewer, as opposed to having a viewer that watches over the characters who appear onscreen.

center, for a kind of ghostly existence – or a transparent sleeper – leans in upon our dreams like a vampire who takes the place of our bodies. The vampire or the ghost is the moving image through which the spectator is “taken up in [a] new freedom to watch something of themselves that has never taken place: this paradoxically teaches them their memory”². And thus, by means of this cinematic machine, a “new world can live within me and, there, defy time”.³ Interestingly, Schefer’s pondering regarding the ontology of cinema seems to find its narrative and aesthetic counterpart in David Lynch’s uncanny figure of the Giant – or Fireman – from *Twin Peaks*’ dreamworld. This figure makes its first appearance in the eighth episode of the original series by materializing in Agent Cooper’s room as a kind of ghost or vision from an invisible beyond: i.e., as Cooper lies dying from a recent gunshot, it whispers to him the riddles – or clues – that will help him solve the mystery of Laura Palmer’s murder. In that crucial moment, the Giant seems to turn into Schefer’s transparent sleeper, looking back at a spectator who cannot react or talk, replacing its body with images, vision, and flashes of light. Here, both Cooper and us-the-viewers are only left with contemplation, spectatorship, and a mesmerized dribbling in the face of images that seem unfathomable yet oddly intimate – as Schefer writes: “I will die so far from images, so far from touching them, so far from their light: I am certainly all of their reality”.⁴

These images present to us an unrecognizable otherness, an otherness that will take the form of a master temporality who looks back at us, just like the Giant looks back at Cooper from a luminous above. Their luminosity is of course the ray of light that traverses the dust and darkness of a blind room, allowing the viewer to inhabit a kind of threshold where the unthinkable in thought suddenly appears as an image that refuses to be decoded in a rational or conscious manner. It is not a coincidence that in episode eight of *Twin Peaks* the Log Lady utters the following questions: a.) “Why are some things kept from our vision?” And b.) “Is life a puzzle?” Just like the Giant, she is giving Agent Cooper clues, yet these clues are always formulated as enigmas – Cooper understands this very well, letting that other master temporality to take hold of him, however,

2 Jean Louis Schefer: *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*, translated by Max Cavitch, Los Angeles 2016, p. 115.

3 Schefer: *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*, p. 115.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 129.



1st Image: TWIN PEAKS (1990–1991): Luminous Giant’s visit to agent Cooper.

the viewer is more of a skeptic – an offspring of modern science – and therefore often frustrated by the unruly mystery of the series. Perhaps here lies David Lynch’s humor as well as genius: i.e., in structuring the unsolvable mystery of time⁵ through the coordinates of a murder-mystery, and consequently making us think that it is possible to reach the center of the T.V. illusion that he himself had created.⁶ As Schefer states: “I will never reach the center of that illusion... because its world is composed by affects, not signification”.⁷ It is thus that we become the experimental – and not the thinking – being of a spectacle, a spectacle which is first and foremost “a private pact with an unexpressed part of ourselves”.⁸

We could argue that *Twin Peaks* is like an anti-detective story, in the sense that it is not the detectives who look *for* (as well as *at*) the clues, but it is the clues who look *for* – and consequently *at* – the detectives. Most importantly, in this reversal of the gaze, the series itself becomes a seer, a big open eye directed towards the audience: we are being looked at by these images and therefore our dread and desires – especially the desire of

5 I.e., the same mystery that drove Gilles Deleuze to write his books on cinema (*Cinema I: The Movement Image* and *Cinema II: The Time Image*) and to painstakingly study Friedrich Nietzsche, Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, Jorge Luis Borges, etc.

6 Which seems to defy, for example, Christian Metz’s narrative structures, leaning on a non-chronological temporality instead of a linear one – similar, one might argue, to Jorge Luis Borges’ stories, e.g., *The Garden of Forking Paths*, or Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, for comparison.

7 Ibid., p. 19.

8 Ibid., p. 12.



2nd Image: TWIN PEAKS (1990–1991): Log Lady’s puzzle.

closure and the dread of incoherence – are being read through the screen, disregarded, and then replaced by the reality and temporality of a world that has both consumed and protracted our bodies. One could argue that we are no longer inhabiting the town of Twin Peaks but, on the contrary, that Twin Peaks is inhabiting us – us-the-viewers –. It is then, through this small town’s otherworldly creatures and its flashes of light, that this world begins to create its own Mnemosyne within us, that is, its own special time attached to a very peculiar world-memory. For us, the spectators, this feels as if something had crept inside of our bodies and played with our wires without our knowledge, like what happens in Kafka’s stories: first, we know something is out of place; second, we try to understand it and fix it; third, due to our own incapacity we fall into partial despair; and finally, when despair fades away because of habituation, we give in to the horror of ignorance.

Unsurprisingly, both Lynch and Schefer are – and were – avid readers of Kafka, in fact, the latter takes the following extract from Kafka’s diaries to expand on his idea about the always gazing cinematic image: “A segment had been cut out of the back of his head. The sun, and the whole world within it, peep in. It makes him nervous; it distracts him from his work, and moreover it irritates him that he should be the one to be disbarred from the spectacle”.⁹ One is left to wonder: am I not also this creature who is missing a segment of her head through which images creep in like vine? Furthermore, what is this unhinged temporality through which an invisible otherness seems to unfold within and in front of me, yet refusing classification?

9 Franz Kafka: *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1914–1923*, translated by Martin Greenberg, England 1949, p. 192–193.

III.

For Todorov, Kafka remains the mystery who surpasses the fantastic because it misses one of the essential aspects of its narrative structure: i.e., the feeling of hesitation. He finds in the Kafkaesque narrative a “contradictory movement” that obeys neither to the uncanny nor to the marvelous, but to an *adaptation* to the atmosphere of the supernatural. By quoting Sartre, he suggests that in Kafka’s world the only fantastic object is man-as-nature or man-as-society.¹⁰ It is within this discourse that we can ask the following question: is there anything more ordinary than the men and women who sit in front of a television or a computer screen to watch their favorite series? Here is where Lynch comes in, for he seizes this ordinary experience and turns it around or, moreover, turns it against the spectator by introducing elements that surpass the properly fantastic as well as the properly entertaining. We are left only with one guide, and that is Agent Cooper – he is the Virgil of our televised journey to hell, and he asks from us only one thing, that is, to follow him without hesitation into the unknown, for we – just like Dante – cannot be certain if there is a way out from these gruesome images. This is also how we learn to *adapt* to a world of strangeness that is also a world of suffering and unexpected elation. Again, and by turning around the experience of entertainment, what *Twin Peaks* seems to be doing is communicating with us at a different level, at a level that is above all a blind spot in our individual and social consciousness.¹¹

10 Tzvetan Todorov: *The Fantastic: A structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by Richard Howard, Ithaca 1975, p. 173.

11 The Lodge is perhaps the epitome of this imagistic communication, for it is a kind of heterotopia within the series – untraceable in terms of rational coordinates, it presents to both us and Agent Cooper a twisted movement in which everything seems to go backwards, including speech, and where thus a struggle between progression and regression gives rise to a heterogenous temporality, haunted by a multiplicity of past and future events. This is why it is only possible to access The Lodge in dreams, for through them we become less and more than subjects, always in excess with respect to our present selves and thus far-removed from our individual and historical center. When Agent Cooper enters this kind of heterotopia, he can only enter it as a kind of otherness, as a stranger that he himself has trouble recognizing in the morning while drinking his ‘damn fine coffee’. And so, this spot remains blind both to Cooper’s consciousness and to us-conscious-viewers, for a literal doubling or splitting takes place in The Lodge, making newer and older versions of the character appear, somehow mimicking the trope of the ‘evil twin’.



3rd Image: TWIN PEAKS (1990–1991):Twin Peaks’ Lodge.

IV.

If we now move to *Twin Peaks: The Return*, we will find ourselves placed in the depths of a sometimes unbearable slowness. It is as if the series knew about our innermost desires and acted against them, dragging us through a deserted narrative that does nothing to clear the mysteries of the former *Twin Peaks*. Here the split or doubling of Agent Cooper is pushed to an extreme, transforming him into two odd anti-characters – one good and one evil – who, above all, fail to drive the plot forward. Certainly, in a world of readymade entertainment, Lynch seems to be swimming against this current through images that are powered by an engine of a different (and extremely strange) temporality. The result is that for all those who were expecting a nostalgic return in the vein of a remake or a sequel, they seem to encounter just the opposite: i.e., in Lynch’s world neither the characters nor the spectators can recognize themselves as who they were in the past, for *Twin Peaks* has indeed return, but – and as Friedrich Nietzsche would argue – it has returned as difference itself, or as an unfathomable spectacle disguised as the missing part of an unsolved mystery.

I believe that the heart of the third series lies in its eighth episode,¹² for in it we encounter once again the luminous power of the Giant and, along with it, the ultimate split or doubling of forms in a montage of color, light, and sound that recreate in the most striking manner the event of nuclear fission. This episode unfolds within different historical periods, yet the crux of it seems to be July 16, 1945, situated in the planes of the New Mexican desert. This is the day and place of the Trinity Test

12 It seems that the eighth episode from *Twin Peaks: The Return* was meant to mirror the eighth episode from the original *Twin Peaks*, using the figure of the Giant, or Firemen, as an axis for the doubling of reality/time.

carried out by North America as part of the Manhattan Project, in which a nuclear weapon was for the first time detonated. Perhaps one of the biggest industrial as well as scientific projects that North America had ever built, it consisted in a conglomerate of different technologies and trades – i.e., builders, engineers, physicists, photographers – that both knowingly and unknowingly traced the path of modern progress. It seems to be here that Lynch places the beginning of a cleavage or a caesura that gives rise to a modern hell populated by ill-intentioned creatures. By mimicking the long-lasting and invisible effects of nuclear decay, these creatures will refuse to die, becoming the ghosts (or specters) that keep returning as an insatiable darkness. If we borrow Georges Didi-Huberman’s terminology, we could argue that these are “survivals” or “residues” that persist in a return that “does not constitute knowledge” but, on the contrary, which presents itself as the unthought or as “an unconscious aspect of time”.¹³

Alas, is this not the reason why we fail to recognize ourselves as the viewers that we once were while, at the same time, we suffer from an anxiety that comes from those images that return in an untimely manner? These images, filled with characters who are also fissured, take the shape of *dybbuks*¹⁴ that keep coming back precisely because they cannot forget yet who, in that very haunting, become unrecognizable to both them and us-the-viewers. This is what Hamlet would have called ‘a time out of joint’, for once that disjointedness takes place, the unconscious time of phantoms begins to haunt our world as well as our history, making everything appear strange by surreptitiously introducing in us those images that lie behind the red curtains of our individual and social consciousness. A very specific spectacle takes place here: i.e., the spectacle of a struggle that encompasses a time that wants to move forward, always mounted on an idea of progress, but which is bound to a kind of eternal backwardness. Is this not also the peculiar temporality that unfolds in-between the velvet curtains of the famous and unplaceable Lodge from *Twin Peaks*? In other words, that strange heterotopia in which the characters not only talk and

13 Georges Didi-Huberman: *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s History of Art*, translated by Harvey L. Mendelsohn, University Park 2017, p. 12.

14 From Jewish Folklore: “...a disembodied human spirit that, because of former sins, wanders restlessly until it finds a haven in the body of a living person”. Definition taken from *The Encyclopedia Britannica*.

move backwards but in which, through that very movement, the center of their individuality finally cracks like the nucleus of an atom.



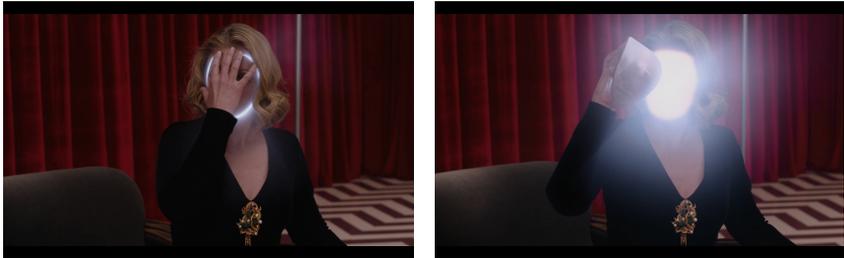
4th Image: TWIN PEAKS. THE RETURN (2017): The birth of evil after nuclear testing in New Mexico's Desert.

And thus, in the new series, New Mexico becomes a new kind of Lodge as well as a new kind of spectrality, yet, as Fredric Jameson points out, a spectrality that not only talks of a past that is “very much alive and at work” in our present, but one which reminds us that “the living present is scarcely as sufficient as it claims to be” and “that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us”.¹⁵ This is perhaps what Lynch’s New Mexico stands for, that is, as a kind of anachronic heterotopia¹⁶ that, in its striking history of nuclear destruction, reminds us that there is always a darkness willing to betray our best and most rational intentions. It is also for this exceptional reason that *Twin Peaks* and its images can only communicate with that part of ourselves that we fail to access consciously, for it hides in the creases of

15 Fredric Jameson: “Marx’s Purloined Letter”, in: Michael Spinker (ed.): *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, New York 2008, p. 26–67, here p. 39.

16 The concept comes from Michel Foucault’s work and can be found in a transcription of one of his lectures: *Des Espace Autres*, published by the French journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in 1984.

our quotidian brain as a kind of “impossible self-knowledge”.¹⁷ As Didi-Huberman argues, when we are confronted with images we cannot trace their exact boundaries, for they are the result of provisional movements – historical, anthropological, and psychological – that stare at us from a distance and continue to stare far beyond.¹⁸ Just like Lynch’s rendering of the nuclear bomb, images seem to always be an energy-bearing and dynamic *moment* that liberates a time unthought and which, in this very *moment*, swallows the spectator’s ground and blurs the boundaries of its social and individual memory. What replaces these memories is that other master temporality, always oozing from a boundless and ghostly force, which has the power to awake in us an unrecognizable double.

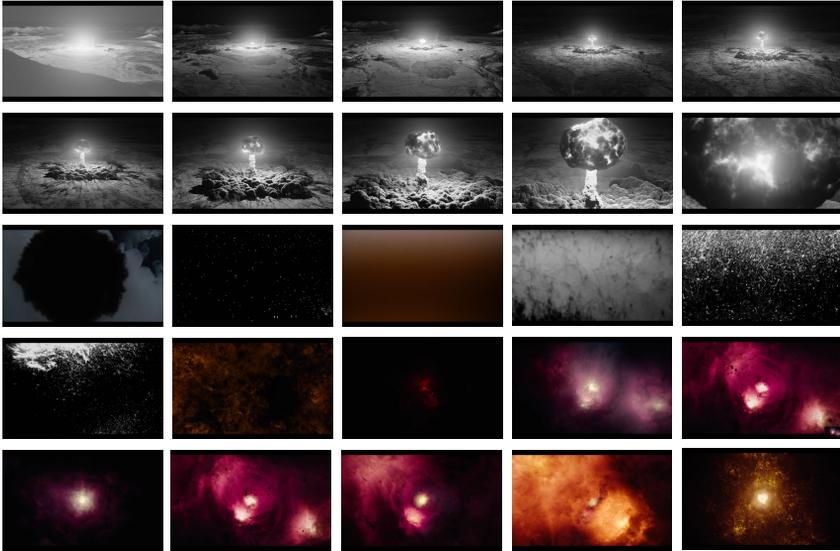


5th Image: TWIN PEAKS. THE RETURN (2017): Older Laura Palmer in Twin Peaks’ Lodge.

We awake as that unconscious otherness that is also being looked at by the remnants of past images that do not move progressively or chronologically but, on the contrary, which go back and forth like waves of an unbeknownst interiority. Time is thus out of joint, yet not only for the characters that we watch onscreen, but for us-the-spectators who sit in front of the television as ordinary men and women and who – by chance – are taken through a Kafkaesque hell that seems to exceed the boundaries of the properly fantastic or, for that matter, of any narrative structure. Lynch, of course, does this masterfully through the figure of the Giant, constructing through and around him a world of historically fissured images. These images will be pregnant with a time unbound and

17 The expression comes from Serge Daney, and it is taken from an essay he wrote for the *Trafic Magazine*: Serge Daney: “Le Travelling de Kapo”, in: *Trafic* (1992), 4, p. 5–19, p. 8.

18 Didi-Huberman: *The Surviving Image*, p. 19.



6th Image: TWIN PEAKS. THE RETURN (2017): Lynch's rendering of New Mexico's atomic bomb testing.

a difference that conceals itself under the guise of sameness, just like the doppelgangers who appear onscreen: i.e., they seem to be whole individuals, yet they are split vectors with split drives, laden with either dark or luminous energy, which manage to crack the ground on which we base and construct our certainties. These are the atomic and aesthetic embodiments of the word *heimlich* – with all its semantic range and complexity – who come to tell us a story/history that has no center, no beginning, and no end point. We could argue that it is in this sense that the Giant has the power to traverse the metaphysical screen of history, for he is also a maker of doubles, watching us-spectators from a place unknown, feeding us the 'good images', such as the undead Laura Palmer, who we so desperately want to re-encounter. He sees us in our despair and in our joy, as well as in our hubris and humility, perhaps reminding us that there is no such thing as a solidity or a density of the present – just like there is no solidity in the return of Laura Palmer, for even if she were to come back, the world around her has already been ruined, i.e., it would still be the world in which she was murdered as a teenager.



7th Image: TWIN PEAKS. THE RETURN (2017): Luminous Giant's projection of images.

V.

On July 16th, 1945, there was an ‘Optics group’ in charge of observing and analyzing the space-time relationships as well as the light emitted by The Trinity explosion. In a file of The Energy Research Administration, there is a long account of the spectacle that took place in the New Mexican desert and which – precisely with the help of the ‘Optics group’ – reads as a narrative very similar to Lynch’s cinematic rendering of the event. To have had spectators was essential to the development of the experiment yet, in an interesting doubling of such an account, *Twin Peaks: The Return* becomes the metaphysical reoccurrence of that archived and long-buried gaze. If the fantastic as such is a way to breach an otherness, or a kind of license for transgression,¹⁹ then *Twin Peaks* seems to take that license to look back at us through the transgression of a past that could only see progression or, in other words, that believed hardheartedly in rational, in-

19 Bliss Cua Lim: *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, Durham 2009, p. 112.

dustrial, and scientific invention²⁰. However, Lynch also twists the genre by leaving the remnants of that broken nuclei to haunt the spectators and, in that bold move of non-closure, it becomes a weapon in its own right: the weaponized image of a world unseen yet very much felt, alive, and ready to betray us once more.



8th Image: Real footage of atomic bomb testing in New Mexico's Dessert.

As Schefer states, cinema – and in this case, television – can always open itself to a temporality unthought and show the mechanic and oneiric phantasms that have both been written and forgotten in history. This is also how the image has the power to become “the public repetition of an intimate dream, or a mirror that deforms time”²¹ for the spectators, or for the Optic-creatures that watch eagerly from a place of relative comfort. Yet, that place of comfort can always turn into a kind of vulnerable and impossible self-knowledge, or a state in which an uncommunicable experience of time can make its entrance into the dark and unconscious

20 This reminds us of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964): A kind of Frankenstein's experiment, Dr. Strangelove is a hybrid – half-human and half-machine, he seems to be haunted by the remnants of a love-affair gone awry. He is the material child of a past that believed in technology as pure progress, and thus a creature that lives with the certainty that the future is the only way out of an already ruined present. His comedic appearance in Kubrick's film also reminds us that it is never good to fall into despair when the world is about to end, and that our last resort still stands as a type of futurity where a few men and women can reproduce in a bunker underneath the earth while they wait for radiation to clean itself up. I would argue that Dr. Strangelove is not an evil man or machine but, on the contrary, a man that professes a strange kind of love: i.e., a love for destruction and, perhaps most importantly, for spectatorship.

21 Jean Louis Schefer: *Du Monde et du Mouvement des Images*, Paris 1997, p. 5, translation is mine.

room of the viewer. These, finally, seem to be the images that watch over and beyond us.

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