

'Inland Empire' (2006): A Temporal Experiment with Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

David Lynch, who is largely considered the finest surrealist filmmaker of all time, goes the distance with his bizarre cinematic creation 'Inland Empire'. A riot on the senses, 'Inland Empire' is a movie that talks about the glitzy world of Hollywood, albeit in a strange and twisted fashion. A movie with a strong feminist undertone, 'Inland Empire' makes viewers crave for some sort of a meaning. This thesis makes a conscious effort at deconstructing the movie using the Auteur and the Psychoanalytical Film theories. While dissecting the movie, this thesis also looks at each of the themes used to convey the intended meaning, if there is any.

Introduction

How does one describe a movie like 'Inland Empire' (2006) (Lynch, 2006)? Is it just a stream of consciousness or does it at all have a meaning? If it does have a meaning, it takes some doing to uncover it and put it on a plate. It might help us to remember that 'Inland Empire' is the last feature film from the stables of David Lynch (Weston, 2018), the master filmmaker. The fact that he never made another feature film might give a clue or two about the movie. Additionally, the movie did not have a prepared script when the principal photography began (Fuchs, 2016). The result only added to the confusion. In fact 'Inland Empire' is a snapshot at understanding the entire Lynchian universe – starting from 'Eraserhead' (Lynch, 1977) and ending in 'Mulholland Drive' (Lynch, 2001).

To start with, let us understand the meaning of the term 'Inland Empire'. Inland Empire is a metropolitan area located in Southern California. How did the movie get its name? The answer is not very clear. 'Inland Empire' is also the third instalment in Lynch's Hollywood trilogy. This movie also talks about the maze that is Hollywood. While trying to deconstruct one of the most profound surrealist works of David Lynch, it needs to be understood that categorizing it as Lynch's representation of Hollywood is not enough. We need to dig deeper, much deeper than what we think is required on the surface.

Roger Ebert hits it on the right spot when he writes, "It is, after all, overtly about the relationship between the movie and the observer, the actor and the performance, the watcher and the watched (and the watch)" (Ebert, 2007). Beyond this, it is difficult to say anything that can help us understand the movie. However, even though the movie has been likened to a spider's web, it is essential we make a dedicated attempt at deconstructing its cryptic narrative structure. In fact, we might argue that the movie is bereft of any narrative structure at all. Again, just as any other Lynch movie, the narrative and the diegesis are not the same.

The obvious question again raises its head. Where exactly do we start? How do we unweave the movie in its elemental

form. Lynch does the usual and refuses to help us. Knowing the person that Lynch is, it is essential that we try to make our own way through the diegesis.

A Lynchian film is a Lynchian film. It does not go by the set grammar of filmmaking. Therefore, any effort to deconstruct the movie using the existing film theories only adds to the omnipresent confusion. On multiple occasions, we try and look at movies from a definite perspective based on the context on which the movie is made. However, does 'Inland Empire' indeed have a context? The answer is rather difficult to find. Given the way Lynch makes his movies, it is indeed very difficult to find social or any other contexts for his movies. The fact that 'Inland Empire' probably does not have a context makes it even more confusing.

Making Sense out of the Movie: Does the Movie Constitute Hyperlinked Realities or Is the Movie a Reality in Hyperlinks?:

Let us start with the tagline for the movie. It is "A Woman in Trouble" (Lynch, 2006). While audiences do tend to realize that the movie is indeed about a woman in trouble, they cannot proceed any further. It helps to sum up the movie but does not at all explain as to what the movie actually represents. Therefore, we understand that the protagonist Nikki Grace, who adopts her screen persona Susan Blue for a forthcoming movie, is in some sort of a trouble. However, what sort of a trouble are we talking about? Is it physical or psychological or something else? As could be made out from the movie itself, the trouble is a mixture of everything.

Starting from the multitude of actors, who take up multiple roles in the movie, to the anthropomorphic rabbits – the movie is replete with cryptic references without plausible explanations. It is essential to understand that any effort to understand the movie in terms of just a narrative structure will eventually fail and the viewers will feel cheated. Images appear and disappear, memories and dreams intertwine and characters are lost in a struggle for recovering their identities – the whole form is indeed a mess. To add to the confusion, there are other ancillary characters, who end up engaging with the primary characters. In fact, Lynch is primarily concerned about the form and not the subject.

The beginning and the ending of the movie disrupt the traditional focus on establishing coherence through a narrative structure. Linear or non-linear, crossed or circular – other traditional movies do have some sort of a narrative structure. In 'Inland Empire', it takes a bit of time understanding as to where the plot is going. The first person shown on screen happens to be a prostitute at a hotel room looking at a surreal comedy show involving anthropomorphic rabbits. She is known as the Lost Girl. Towards the end of the movie, we seem to be looking at another prostitute dying, subject to her getting stabbed on a Hollywood sidewalk. Therefore, there is a thematic similarity between the beginning and the ending. Consequently, any attempt to make sense out of the movie has to necessarily be about finding the linkage. However, the prostitutes shown at the beginning and the ending represent two different characters, speak two different languages and are separated by time and space constraints. Consequently, we cannot possibly draw up a cinematic code to unearth the mystery. The absence of a cinematic code in 'Inland Empire' provides the very first cue.

The movie offers numerous clues that suggest that the multiple audiovisual vignettes that make up 'Inland Empire' form the parts of a single story, at least a story that the auteur seems to be telling. It is important to understand that the movie explores the various facets of the character played by Nikki. However, Nikki is not one individual that we are dealing with. Nikki, in fact, is an assortment of characters drawn from multiple perspectives. She goes through multiple churnings at various points in the movie. Therefore, the thematic diversity that the movie covers is enormous. This is exactly where it succeeds.

Throughout the movie, Lynch does not allow viewers to identify who Nikki is and settle down with some sort of an expectation. She is an amalgamation of the different stages that a woman goes through in her life. In fact, to categorize Nikki as just a woman would also be an understatement. We can look at Nikki as representing the quintessential female archetype with all the associated elements – both Lynchian and otherwise.

We can continue to argue that the movie is plotless and is an assortment of multiple themes. One of the primary traits that comes out of the movie is its emphasis on adultery. Adultery and deformed sex form a very important part of the movie. Probably, adultery is the primary theme on which Lynch bases his premise of the movie. The social evil of human trafficking also finds a subtle mention in the movie. It is essential to understand that the movie was partly shot in Poland, one of the primary sources of women for prostitution in the United States of America. Therefore, trafficking of economically backward women from Eastern Europe is also a distinct constituent of the story. Lynch has not really been known for being a social reformer. However, during his long and illustrious career, at multiple points, he has touched upon very important subjects. Probably, a similar urge made him deal with human trafficking in this movie.

There is another thematic element that needs a closer introspection in this case – the strangeness about Hollywood.

Lynch has made multiple subtle remarks through his movies vis-à-vis the culture in Hollywood. Through 'Inland Empire', he sheds a little more light on the painful process that accompanies the making of a movie. Movies often paint the picture of a different reality. The movie might also be a conscious attempt at trying to find a connect between reality, myth and cinematic myth. Method acting is an aspect that Lynch might have emphasized on. The fact that a person can become the character in a movie is one of the thematic points in this movie.

The movie can also be categorized as a live relay of of our subconscious existence. The movie shows us snippets from multiple places having multiple characters. However, the primacy of the protagonist is something that remains constant. While perspectives and places change, the protagonist does not.

In this movie as well, Lynch draws a picture of deranged sex albeit in a different way. Lynch has repeatedly talked about sexuality from multiple perspectives.

One of the recurring themes in all of Lynchian movies is the presence of a demonic character, a declared villain. For 'Inland Empire', the decided villain is the Phantom. We can draw parallels with 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' (Lynch, 1992) and 'Lost Highway' (Lynch, 1997). Bob was the declared demonic character in the former while the Mystery Man was the one for the latter. Some people also peg Dick Laurent as the demonic character in 'Lost Highway'. However, we shall reserve that discussion for somewhere else. The Phantom makes use of his powers for his own selfish gains. The Phantom has the uncanny ability to put anyone under a hypnotic spell. This is seen repeatedly in the movie. This is done so that the person under the hypnotic spell can follow all the instructions given by the Phantom. The Phantom can also take the human form of anyone he wishes to. Interesting that Lynch chooses to ascribe superhuman powers to the demon. In one of his human avatars, he makes a wife murder her husband and subsequently kill herself. At the same time, the Phantom also murders his own wife. Gory and terrifying, the Phantom represents human fear in its most primal form.

This discourse proves one thing though. The best way to understand the movie is to watch it. A single watch does not help in understanding the movie. 'Inland Empire' is one audiovisual text that needs to be seen multiple times in order to get a grasp over it. Any number of descriptions and people will not still be clear as to what the film theorizes. There are multiple stories in the movie – all the stories strangely interconnected like the lines in a spider web. An interesting analogy indeed. However, who is the spider here?

However, what is the fundamental conjecture of the movie? It is a movie about an actress by the name of Nikki Grace. She has been selected to play the lead role in a movie called 'On High in Blue Tomorrows'. Although it is not revealed in the beginning, we eventually get to know that the movie is a remake of another movie, which is rumoured to be cursed. This is again a representation of the typical Hollywood culture. This was probably Lynch's way of saying what is essentially wrong

with the culture. From hereon, the story takes multiple twists and turns until the movie ends abruptly. There are reasons to believe though that the ending is not abrupt.

The next thing that we see is the story going everywhere. From Hollywood to Poland and from gangsters and prostitutes to Gypsies – we see blood, violence and gore. We can take any of the moments from this deluge of themes and we shall find that the same is repeated at some other point in the movie in some way or the other. Like any other Lynch movie, 'Inland Empire' is also like a painting. The painting needs to be understood with all its details.

After one is done watching the movie, one would feel that he/ she has just woken up from a deep slumber. As talked about repeatedly, 'Inland Empire' has not been made with the intention to make any sense. It could also be considered a figment of Lynch's ripe imagination. Whatever it is, 'Inland Empire' makes us cringe for defeating our senses repeatedly. Lynch plays with our sensibility and succeeds and we enjoy it.

As we logically proceed in the movie, the usual Lynchian traits start making their appearances – the dark staircase, the shady hallway, a gun that can be seen in the drawer, a sex scene in the bedroom, a scene that involves seduction, small episodes that hardly make any sense and many others. All these cinematic devices are used in the movie such that viewers are shocked and often titillated. In addition, the suspense factor is built in the movie with much precision. It has to be remembered here that 'Inland Empire' uses some of the noir elements that Lynch has used in his earlier ventures. In this context, reference needs to be made of the low-resolution Sony camcorder that was used for shooting the movie. When we look in retrospect, we understand as to why Lynch used its services. The entire movie creates an intentional cinematic haze that Lynch does not clear up so that the mystery element is kept intact.

The camerawork in the movie is also done in a specific way to create intrigue and shock. At times, the scenes are blurry and viewers are not sure as to what is happening on screen. Many out-of-focus shots are used to add to that cinematic haze. A number of close-up shots are used to add to the paranoia, already existing in the movie. Tension is built up gradually so that there is always a question mark that looms large over the frame. Lynch also uses many colour contrasts in order to enhance the effects. The movement of the camera, at times, is jerky to create that element of tension and suspense.

There is also an effort to create a dystopian world bereft of normalcy. Therefore, shadows are also used intermittently at various points in the movie. Lynch is aware of the fact that viewers build the stories inside their heads. In fact, audiences prepare the stories and stay in those. Therefore, there are expectations that people build up. Lynch plays with those expectations masterfully. While the units remain in their places, the grammar and syntax stand changed. We are talking about this Lynchian universe. In fact, it can be compared to poetry. Just as a poet takes poetic liberties, Lynch does not leave any stone unturned to take cinematic liberties.

What is the best part of 'Inland Empire'? Well, the answer is very simple. It plays in our imagination even when we are watching the movie. It stays in our imagination even after we have left the hall. Interestingly, the movie is roughly three-hour-long. However, there is not a single dull moment in the movie when someone wants to switch it off. Even though we are unable to understand the story that is forwarded by the movie, we do not want to get away from it. This is where Lynch succeeds and succeeds with masterful clarity. 'Inland Empire' can be likened to an interesting yet dark dream from which one does not want to wake up.

The Strange World of the Rabbits in 'Inland Empire':

In the overall plotline, the anthropomorphic rabbits are of immense importance. These rabbits stay together and converse in non-sequiturs. These rabbits make their appearance in the movie multiple times and they add to the theme of the movie. These creatures first make their appearance when Lost Girl watches them on television. It is seen that Jack enters the scene and says that he bears a secret. When Jack says so, Jane says that she will eventually find it out. Subsequently, Jack hears a noise and goes out. Does this scene have any impact on the original plotline? Yes, it does. The mention about a secret somehow connects to the central theme of the movie. When we see 'Inland Empire', it is all about finding that secret that manifests itself through snippets and vignettes.

The next scene involving the rabbits involve a dark room. As we see lights, Jack starts speaking to the Phantom. The Phantom continues speaking as Jack is no longer there in the room. Then we see the room go dark again. Does it mean that the Phantom has a tacit understanding with Jack? Perhaps he does.

The next scene is again representative of the usual Lynchian brilliance. We see Jane sitting inside the room alone. We suddenly see that the room has turned red with a peculiar noise heard in the background. This features the appearance of Suzie, who enters the room with a couple of candles. While Suzie is no longer there in the room, Jack makes his entry. This scene again creates a dichotomy. Lynch makes a case for the impermanence of the entire humankind. Therefore, the message is as much philosophical and spiritual as it is diegetic.

The next scene involving the rabbits feature all of them sharing the same room. Subsequently, Sue, the character that the protagonist plays on screen, calls up over telephone and asks for Billy, the character that the protagonist's co-star plays. Jack is speechless over the telephone as we hear the laugh from the studio audience. How do we deconstruct this scene? The only possible explanation could be the futility of human relationships. At times, Lynch has emphasized on ingrained human nihilism. This could point towards that.

The next scene involving the rabbits is one of the strangest scenes in the movie. When the Polish man call up the Lost Girl and provides Smithy the gun to kill the Phantom, all of them turn into rabbits. In the meanwhile, Derek becomes Jack, Marek becomes Jane and Franciszek transform into Suzie. In the given context, the rabbits start conversing in non-

sequitur again. Lynch uses his phantasmatic cinematic device here. The scene here can be interpreted in a number of ways. Lynch could have used the scene to end the film.

The rabbits involve in a number of very important scenes in the movie. When Nikki murders the Phantom near the rabbits' house, it is seen that the number is 47. When Nikki goes inside the house, she finds the house empty. After Nikki liberates the Lost Girl, she is seen inside the rabbits' house.

Insights into 'Inland Empire':

While dissecting the movie, we have to keep in consideration that 'Inland Empire' was not made for everyone. The movie was not driven by a necessity to keep up to the popular culture. In fact, we can say the movie was made for those filmgoers, who are in awe with an entire bunch of people getting uncomfortable with the depicted audio-visual imageries. It was also made for people, who do not mind a three-hour-long stream of consciousness in the form of an audiovisual text. 'Inland Empire' can fascinate those people, who are enamoured by the grandeur of filmmaking as an art form and who look for performances in a movie in addition to entertainment. Having said that, it is also important to understand that the definition of entertainment is different for different people. Therefore, there is a dedicated bunch of Lynch lovers, who swear by the uncanny creativity in the movie.

It might be worthwhile to note that the principal photography for the movie lasted for more than two years, a data that is enough to prove the perfectionist tendencies in Lynch. Interestingly, though, the script was continually written as and when the different scenes were shot. Indeed, the movie is a perfect example of automatism in audiovisual creations. As odd as it sounds, this rather intricate process of filmmaking did perfect justice to the movie as it captured the psyche of Lynch like no other movie. Viewers, who are more used to the narrative structure of filmmaking, would find the movie devoid of a definite narrative. However, it is this lack of a narrative that lets the movie explore the characters in finer details. We get to understand the protagonist in all her vulnerabilities. This is exactly where the film beats all our expectations.

Lynch himself decided the soundtrack of the movie. Given the cryptic nature of the finished product, any cinephile would be able to guess that Lynch did the editing for the movie too. As mentioned earlier, the entire movie was shot using a low-resolution camera. This helped in imparting a raw authenticity to the depiction. The movie features some very unusual cinematic devices. On multiple occasions, we see that the characters in the movie indulge in long and unwinding dialogues with the camera being very close to the characters' faces. In addition, the relative distances between the characters are also deliberately kept less in order to impart an eerie factor. The fact that the lights were kept low during the shooting of the movie helped to enhance the frightening factor in the movie. There is a deliberate attempt on the part of the auteur to make the viewers identify with the inner psyche of the protagonist. It needs to be mentioned here that the task of keeping up with the protagonist is indeed a difficult one as she oscillates between normalcy and madness. She also

encounters a series of rather strange episodes during the course of her performance in the movie.

It might be noted that a lot of the meaning in the movie is created through the facial expressions of the characters. At times, it indeed becomes a difficult task to continue looking at the screen purely because of the avatars that the characters adopt.

Before we go any further, it is essential that we objectively analyze vis-à-vis the primary plotline. A careful look and we understand that the fundamental plotline is about the protagonist landing up a role in a movie. A ghastly old woman predicting this to happen precedes this. During the shooting of the movie, the protagonist goes through many strange experiences in addition to inner churning. During the shooting of the movie, the protagonist's co-star hears a peculiar noise at the sets. He tries to investigate it but finds nothing. It is now that the director decides to reveal the story behind the movie.

Devon, who is the protagonist's co-star, does not like the fact that the movie is not based on an original script. Additionally, the script had been borrowed from another movie that was never really made. The script owes its origin to a planned German production, which was based on an old Gypsy folktale from Poland. It was also rumoured that the original movie was cursed as both the lead actors were brutally murdered. The scene then abruptly changes and the protagonist is seen conversing with some Polish people, who are both rich and old. When the Polish inmates ask the protagonist a question in their mother language, the protagonist admits that she does not understand the language. To this, the Polish people seem peeved. From here on, the complete narrative takes a bizarre turn and nobody really understands as to what is going on. What we see is a conflict between the two characters – Nikki, the protagonist and Sue, the character that she plays on screen. We do not really understand as to who is who! Lynch plays with our anticipation and weaves a movie that is far divorced from hard reality.

It is essential to understand that there are other parallel plotlines in the movie as well. All the storylines seem disjointed at the beginning. However, at multiple points in the movie, we see the primary plot is intertwined with the other parallel storylines. This creates the confusion and viewers start interpreting the movie pretty much the way they want to. The movie was not made to enamour the audience. It was made to make the viewers constantly question what they think is the reality in the movie.

Let us face it. 'Inland Empire' is an ugly film by all stretches of imagination. It has the ingrained objective of causing discomfort to its audiences. A careful look at the movie and we realize that the focus of the camera used in many of the scenes are rather awkward. There is an intention to make even beautiful things ugly. The dialogues used in the movie at multiple points do not make any sense at all. We see people conversing in non-sequiturs for a long period. However, with all the confusing cinematic devices, the movie does not fail to stray true to its tagline – "A Woman in Trouble." However, the

definition of this trouble can be different for different individuals.

When we watch 'Inland Empire', a very interesting interpretation crops up. We can safely assume that the entire movie actually happens in the mind of the Lost Girl. In the beginning of the movie, we see that she has just been ill-treated by one of her clients. Therefore, there is an attempt at redemption; there is an attempt at restoring her lost human glory. Therefore, she cooks this all up, so that she can be freed from people who have abused her repeatedly. It might be important to note that Lynch tried giving 'Inland Empire' the most hopeful ending amongst all his surrealist movies. We see that the protagonist of the movie makes the Lost Girl revisit her life sans all the tragedies. In both 'Mulholland Drive' and 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me', nothing of the sort actually happens thereby giving the two movies pessimistic endings. We see that the Lost Girl and the protagonist self-liberate themselves. They are seen successful. Even irony that marked 'Blue Velvet' is not there in 'Inland Empire'. However, the auteur makes the movie strenuously lengthy so that the viewers scamper for this positive ending and value it.

It should not come as a major surprise that a significant part of the movie is shot in Eastern Europe. Foggy, hazy, gloomy and very sparsely populated – the place actually seems like the typical dystopian Lynchian world. Lynch has always been fascinated by the industrial culture and its implications on the human civilization. The industrial setting eventually used for the movie perfectly fits his expectations and he goes about creating a tale that is not a tale at the first place.

A question looms large though. Where exactly is the house of the anthropomorphic rabbits? Well, the question does not have any answer. Whether or not the rabbits constitute a part of the actual storyline is something to have a debate on. However, their geographical positioning is not important in the overall context of the movie. These rabbits are instrumental in imparting a surreal humorous touch to an otherwise grim text that runs for more than three hours.

Another rather interesting interpretation that comes out is that the movie is representative of the strains in creating something. It tells the tale of creativity. The protagonist of the movie goes the distance in ensuring that she truly brings out the character that she is playing. In the process, she loses her composure and her peace of mind. Lynch has maintained that creativity heals. This is precisely the reason why the protagonist eventually brings out the Lost Girl from her ordeals. In very simple terms, the movie talks about the sweat, grit and determination that is required to bring an art to life.

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One of the most interesting aspects of the movie is its subtle play with light and darkness. Often intertwined and mostly confused, Lynch creates a world where the meaning of light and shadow go for a complete toss. At times, dark events are represented by light and at other times, bright and desirable episodes are shown with the help of darkness. Lynch inhabits an area where everything is a shade of grey and nothing is very clear. The fact that the camerawork is intentionally hazy adds to the interplay of light and shadow.

One of the things that deserve a strong mention is the fact that Lynch made this movie as an experimental project. He was never too sure about the outcome. While typical surrealist elements inhabit the movie, it would be injustice done if it were to be bracketed as just a surrealist venture. Just as automatic writing, the movie was made to represent the dark interiors of the human subconscious. Lynch has always shown us mirrors to assess our own faces. In 'Inland Empire' as well, the same effort continues. There is an attempt to show human beings the way they exactly are.

Conclusion:

As it is, 'Inland Empire' could also be construed as the expression of human guilt and remorse. It is a paradox; a paradox that demands deciphering. From the constricted world of a film set to the gloomy alleys of Eastern Europe, 'Inland Empire' makes a considerably long journey. In the process, it touches many points, some obvious and relevant and some not so. However, one thing remains constant throughout. The honesty with which all the visuals come on screen. Lynch never cheats his viewers. He shows exactly what is there on his mind. If someone does not like it, he has the leeway not to watch the movie. However, the narrative and the diegesis remains exactly the way Lynch conceived those to be. Like all other Lynchian movies, 'Inland Empire' also deals with sexuality. Most of the times, the sexuality is not heathy sexuality. Lynch makes it a point to deal with sexuality in all his movies. However, the approach that he adopts often creates a stereotype, a stereotype that might be intentional.

In addition, if we look at it carefully, we shall be able to appreciate that there is an uncanny uniformity and congruity in all of the surrealist works of Lynch. There is a continuity as well. Consequently, the story that Lynch started with 'Eraserhead' logically ends with 'Inland Empire'. The primary themes, the subject matter, the manner of presentation, the perspective and the flow of narration – there is a chord that binds all his surrealist movies. This resemblance might be intentional or it can be incidental as well. However, what we do understand and with certainty is that 'Inland Empire' bears the same Lynchian elements that make all his works so distinctly distinguishable. Paradoxical yet enigmatic might be the most apt description for the movie.

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