POSTMODERN AMERICAN GOTHIC: THE POLITICS OF FEAR IN THE WORKS
OF THOMAS PYNCHON, DAVID LYNCH, AND STEVE ERICKSON

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Whereas the Gothic traditionally relied upon supernatural figures of evil (vampires, ghosts, monsters) to produce the sensation of fear or terror, contemporary manifestations of the Gothic repudiate such abstracted constructions, favoring, instead, metonymical and everyday representations of terror. In this project, I argue that the works of artists Thomas Pynchon, David Lynch, and Steve Erickson signify, what I term, the postmodern American Gothic, through their production of a symbolic economy of fear, paranoia, and dread. I contend that these artists’ works represent narrative critiques of the United States’ culture of consumption and history of imperialism dating back to the myth of Manifest Destiny. Moreover, these artists’ historiographic narratives rigorously complicate traditional conceptions of gender, sexuality, race, nationhood, and colonialism as aspects of American history.

Deconstructing the tropic elements of the gothic genre distinguishes these artists’ creation of a gothic aesthetic that privileges the lived horrors of historical record (slavery, the Holocaust, imperial modernity, oppression engendered through male-centered master
narratives) over the metaphorical monsters of the traditional Gothic narrative that represent actual cultural anxieties over lived social conditions. In its contemporary form, the Gothic challenges the very real institutions and social practices that systematize oppression, enable cultural alienation, and deny individual subjectivities. By revisiting actual horrifying events and their impact on human life, Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson establish the irreducibility of social and historical trauma.

In this examination, I comprehensively track Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson’s respective deployments of Gothic themes and tropes, illustrating the political significance of their creations. Moreover, my project broadens the understanding of these artists’ works, as well as those artists whose works employ similar techniques. The scholarly attention paid to manifestations of postmodern paranoia elicits a powerful connection to the horror invoked in the Gothic texts. Considering the profound urgency that differing conceptions of “terror” represent in a post-9/11 world, I believe that understanding representations of terror in contemporary artistic practice is vital to reassessing the Gothic genre, from its origins in the 18th century to the present, as defined by its politics of transgression.
For Mom and Dad
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By creating this document, I set out to establish a foothold in the academic research community. My lofty goals were to enrich the existing scholarship in the Gothic, the postmodern, and the artists whose work I would be examining. I hope, now that the work is complete (or relatively so), that I have accomplished these initial objectives. More importantly, however, this document has come to signify more than just an accumulation of my critical findings – it represents a process by which I have learned to depend upon others for their support, vision, criticism, kindness, and love. No project is ever undertaken entirely alone, and I owe much of this work’s completion to those who consistently offered me advice, praise, and, when necessary, distraction. Among those I feel compelled to list by way of acknowledgment, are the following:

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INTRODUCTION

Terror operates at the most primal level of consciousness. Julia Kristeva describes the disruptive capacity of fear where she writes: “phobia bears the marks of the frailty of the subject’s signifying system”(Powers of Horror 35). The Gothic, as an aesthetic and creative mode, has historically utilized terror as a method of expression, capitalizing on the visceral urgency of fear to communicate the breakdown of meaning, the limits of signification. Critics Judith Halberstam, Valdine Clemens, and Fred Botting hold that the Gothic, as a genre or historically specific literary culture, is defined as a narrative form designed to produce fear. I concur with their assessment, but interpret the Gothic as constituting a more specific political function. I base my reading on an observation made by Eve Sedgwick in her description of the Gothic. Sedgwick interprets the Gothic itself as a return of repressed cultural material, using the trope of live burial to establish the Gothic’s ideological subtext, “a carceral sublime of representation, of the body, and potentially of politics and history as well”(Coherence vi). I take Sedgwick’s suggestion of the Gothic’s potentially sublimated representation of political and historical material as my dissertation’s launching point.

Gothic, within my analysis, therefore may be defined as the rhetorical mode and narrative strategies created to produce fear derived from existing culturally-motivated anxieties. The Gothic feeds upon its audience’s ready reserve of dread and desire, compelling them to acknowledge that which has been forcibly cast out of consciousness. This drive to terrify, more than simply acting as an end, in and of itself, also engenders political discourse on race,
gender, sexual desire, and nation, transforming the tension attending these categories into fictional monsters and ghosts, distinguishing cultural aberrance, alienation, and perversity through a symbolic economy of fear. While I do not interpret the Gothic as fixed within a particular historical period, I do argue that the generation of terror in Gothic works is historically and geographically contingent, rather than relying on universal narrative strategies and tropes.

The central project of this dissertation will be to articulate how the Gothic operates within postmodern American works, specifically, as a mode of cultural critique. I will show how these three terms – postmodern, American, and Gothic – work in conjunction to form a distinct aesthetic. By channeling the overwhelming power of the monstrous, or rather the power to construct monstrosity, the artists examined here – novelists Thomas Pynchon and Steve Erickson and filmmaker David Lynch – employ the abject and the excessive to figuratively transmute their own political oppositions into dramatic forms of imagined horror. In this dissertation, I will show how these American artists’ works stand at the intersection of the postmodern and the Gothic – two separate, but not mutually exclusive theoretical paradigms. Specifically, I argue that the Gothic affords postmodern works another strategy for representing Otherness, a chief concern of postmodern art’s representation of marginalized and liminal voices. In turn, I will demonstrate how the Gothic, as it has been historically construed, changes through its representation in postmodern works, by showing how postmodern works interrogate the very process by which monstrosity is constructed within the works just as they question the process by which narrative is made possible. For Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson, the real world terrors of war, slavery, colonialism, corporate corruption, the Hollywood industry, and sexual violence ground the horror of their narratives. These artists employ Gothic themes and narrative strategies deliberately to
transform their political outrage into fictionalized terror, giving voice to passionate social
criticism by representing imagined worlds and lives plunged into depravity, perversion, and
violence.

Allan Lloyd-Smith argues that the postmodern shares several crucial concerns with
the Gothic where he cites the postmodern’s “populist tendency, its lurid, low-rent
sensationalism and exploitation of affect, its opening up of tabooed realms [. . .] its embrace
of the fragmentary” and its “use of paranoia” (“Postmodernism/Gothicism” 15). Smith
identifies several key shared narrative elements that this examination will explore within
these artists’ works, such as the use of degraded cultural forms and aesthetics, from
pornography to comic books, the fragmentation of language and narrative, and the
production of paranoia, dread, and horror. Glennis Byron and David Punter also note the
territories shared by the Gothic and postmodern:

What we find in the numerous conjunctions of Gothic and postmodern is a certain
sliding of location, a series of transfers and translocations from one place to another,
so that our sense of the stability of the map is – as indeed it has been since the first
fantasy of a Gothic castle (q.v.) – forever under siege, guaranteed to us only by
manuscripts whose own provenance and completeness are deeply uncertain. (The
Gothic 51)

Byron and Punter identify the preoccupations with textuality and fraught notions of
authority and authenticity that persist within both the Gothic and postmodern. My analysis
will expand those categories introduced by Lloyd-Smith, Byron, and Punter, identifying more
points of critical intersection between the postmodern and the Gothic to examine their
shared reliance on narrative abstraction and the limits of signification, their repudiation of
Enlightenment rationalism and grand ideological narratives, and their privileging of subaltern
counternarratives.
My interpretation of the postmodern American Gothic relies upon the Gothic’s history as a genre reliant upon the creative expression of dissidence. Since its origins in the eighteenth century, the Gothic’s representations of abject violence and corruption have signified political assaults on dominant ideological narratives, as during its challenge to Augustanism, a conservative set of principles that prevailed during the eighteenth century, which according to David Punter, coupled a reliance on absolute rationality and “a small cultural elite holding on to power and status” through their determination of that which was socially proper and culturally significant (28). The Gothic’s vilification of the nobility and the clergy, as in such classic Gothic works as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk*, signaled a rejection of order and hierarchical power systems, always privileging themes of sexual violence, abjection, and excess. Gothic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth century directly linked the monster – Dracula, Frankenstein’s monster, Mr. Hyde – to cultural anxieties about race, class, gender, and sexuality. The monsters of Gothic fiction are unnatural constructions of otherness that expose the monstrosity of cultural power systems designed to oppress, exclude, and marginalize.

With the postmodern Gothic, the terms of horror are flattened essentially, or made less fantastic as “normal monstrosities” supplant “monstrous monstrosities” (Derrida, *Points*, 380). In this dissertation, I will show how the horrors of the everyday are made monstrous in the works of Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson and, rather than simply transforming populist fears into supernatural monsters like those of classic Gothic fiction, these artists initiate far more quotidian forms of monstrosity that self-reflexively reveal the dark side of American identity. In *Against the Day*, Pynchon allegorizes the 9/11 attacks by creating a monster that decimates the New York skyline, but like terrorism itself, Pynchon’s monster is faceless and disembodied, evacuated of the dramatic visual qualities that define similar horrible creatures
like King Kong or Godzilla. For Lynch, the corporate businessmen that ruthlessly dictate the terms of Hollywood film production become the sinister and demonic forces that stalk his imagined worlds, exploiting women in a fashion reminiscent of common prostitution. Erickson transforms the menace of National Socialism into the conglomerate power systems that govern American commerce. In each case, these artists fashion their monsters from the ready-at-hand or the immediate rather than enacting an elaborate or supernatural transmigration.

Defining the postmodern has long been the subject of much scholarly debate. Paul Maltby describes the terms of the debate concisely, stating that the postmodern can signify “a mutation in artistic practice, an epistemic shift in western thought, and an epochal transition to a new cultural order. It is an enormously pretentious concept, and yet its very pretensions provoke thoughts about cultural change. [. . .] proving to be ideal ground for a multidisciplinary approach to cultural studies”(3). Maltby articulates the postmodern’s contested character, but identifies how this resistance to definition translates to the production of critical discourse on cultural phenomena. For the purposes of this dissertation, I assert the progressive potential inherent to postmodernism and rely most heavily upon Linda Hutcheon’s theorization of the postmodern. Hutcheon asserts: “Postmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning”(Poetics xii, xiii). For Hutcheon, postmodern culture, for all its inherent contradictions, signifies a questioning from within, constantly holding up to the light all of those notions that were once thought to be “natural” or “unproblematically common-sensical” like History, individual and communal identity, and the relation of language to its referents or texts to other texts (ibid). The postmodern artists examined here utilize Gothic themes and imagery,
implicating an ideological subtext founded upon cultural fears that disrupt the process of meaning-making within their narratives.

A crucial aspect of the postmodern that provides a salient link to the Gothic is its privileging of subaltern, disenfranchised, and marginalized voices, rather than reproducing or echoing the dominant ideology. Similarly, the Gothic derives many of its themes and narrative strategies from representations of the culturally abject or unassimilable. David Punter describes the contemporary Gothic in terms that apply to Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson: “the ghost is already in the machine, there would be no machine without a ghost, and the question of quite whose powers – or perhaps one should say powers of what – technology is extending remains central to our imaginings and our fears”(Spectral Readings 3).

Within postmodern Gothic texts, the subaltern voices are similarly privileged, but the dominant ideology is made monstrous, reversing the terms of the abject by attacking the process of alienation and disenfranchisement that subtends the ascendancy of a dominant group and their supporting ideology. Just as Matthew Lewis’ Monk, a representative of the dominant religious power structure of the day, represents the basest, criminal behavior, so do we see the origins of American democracy upended in Steve Erickson’s rendering of Thomas Jefferson as a sadistic rapist.

Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson initiate fictional worlds dominated by a continual staging of transgression and disruption of ontological boundaries. For each of these artists, narrative space represents a distinctly conceptual medium of representation, a staging ground where postmodern uncertainty and fragmentation are made abhorrent and terrifying. Moreover, Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson continually depict narratives journeys – spatially, psychically, and temporally – privileging the transitory and liminal over the static or defined. Steve Erickson’s nonfiction work, *American Nomad*, captures in its title the spirit of all three
of these artists’ works, as they continually traverse America – as a national space and concept – as a part of their project, always denaturalizing and distorting the image of America as a means for exposing its inherent paradoxes and contradictions. Their strategies of antirealism often generate an uncanny effect, announcing worlds whose initial appearance approach our own, but whose radical divergence destabilize the social and ideological moorings that structure everyday reality. Lee Spinks describes the theoretical reasoning behind Erickson’s notion of the “American Nomad,” a concept whose critical distancing via subaltern counternarratives of nation and history aligns it heavily with the postmodern: “Meanwhile the paradoxical structure of American identity is implicit in the title “American Nomad,” itself, which comes to suggest that to be an American nomad and stand outside the body politic is, in the age of mass disaffection with the political process, what it means to be American for the vast majority of Erickson’s compatriots” (223). Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson are American Nomads, critiquing the American nation by invoking its ghosts and monsters, occasionally, making America itself the monster. When David Lynch takes the tragedy of a small town American girl’s murder and refracts this narrative through the banal modes of the television melodrama and detective shows, he inserts a phantasmagoric space, the Black Lodge, where a dream-logic governs all action and libidinal energies dictate the rules of social interaction. Thomas Pynchon attacks American imperialism by way of an allegorical narrative of colonialism in Africa, initiating a temporal non-space like that of Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death”, a besieged estate, where orgiastic murders and abject displays of torture supplant common human interactions. Steve Erickson transmutes the urban sprawl of Los Angeles into an American limbo of the west, where the nightmares of history prevail. In each case, no reality is without its infernal doppelganger, like a postcard in negative.
The uncanny is a key concept that grounds an understanding of Gothic fiction. The uncanny moment in Gothic literature has historically relied upon a return of repressed material. This repression manifests itself within the world of the text in various ways. Valdine Clemens describes the uncanny succinctly in her *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien*, including a distinction between Freud’s conception of the *unheimlich* and Jung’s notion of repression:

This “return of the repressed,” or emergence of whatever has been previously rejected by consciousness, is a fundamental dynamism of Gothic narratives. Something — some entity, knowledge, emotion, or feeling — which has been submerged or held at bay because it threatens the established order of things, develops a cumulative energy that demands its release and forces it to the real of visibility where it must be acknowledged. This approach and the appearance of the repressed create an aura of menace and “uncanniness,” both in Freud’s sense of the “*unheimlich*” — something that becomes apparent although one feels it “ought” to remain hidden (17: 224, 241) — and in the Jungian sense of something possessing an awesome or transpersonal, numinous quality. (3-4)

The uncanny relies upon this overwhelming sense that something terrible has been released from its confines, like some monstrous and irruptive birth, leaving the narrative ineluctably altered. Often, the uncanny accompanies the presence of a *doppelganger* because the doubling signals differences that illustrate hidden qualities of the original. Homi Bhabha establishes a link between Freud’s original notion of the *unheimlich* (which Bhabha translates as “unhomely” rather than “uncanny”) and political critique:

If, for Freud, the unheimlich is ‘the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light,’ then Hannah Arendt’s description of the public and private realms is a profoundly unhomely one: ‘it is the distinction between things that should be hidden and things that should be shown,’ she writes, which through their inversion in the modern age ‘discovers how rich and manifold the hidden can be under conditions of intimacy.’ (Location of Culture 10)

Bhabha’s articulation of this connection between the Freud’s uncanny and Arendt’s public/private distinction illustrates how the Gothic’s iteration of the uncanny as a narrative
strategy generates the potential for political critique. By bringing to light that which has been purposely hidden, suppressed, marginalized, or silenced, the uncanny promises to reveal the secreted histories and lost memories that subtend systems of power, cultural and national.

Critics consistently describe postmodern art as characterized by a radical superficiality, rather than the Modernist psychic depth (e.g. Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* or James Joyce’s *Ulysses*). Explaining Thomas Pynchon’s postmodern artifice in *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*, Joseph Tabbi describes the fictional spaces of postmodernity: “they turn out to be mere surface projections from the mind’s arbitrary center which the paranoid would mistake for reality”(77). Tabbi identifies two critical elements of postmodern narrative that demonstrate a crucial link to the Gothic: an aesthetic preoccupation with surfaces and a prevalence of works concerned with the paranoid or deranged mind. Edgar Allan Poe’s House of Usher represents, in its actual façade, Roderick Usher’s psychic turmoil, just as Pynchon’s Zone of *Gravity’s Rainbow* expresses the global uncertainty posed by the chaos unleashed in World War II as well as the social implosion initiated by the War, leaving only a non-space of displaced desire and criminality. In both cases, the surfaces of these fictional spaces suggest sensual experience and primal impulses, while maintaining a level of psychic unknowability that instigates a tenor of menace or doom. Lynch’s creation of paranoia via the use of technological invasion in *Lost Highway* as the main character is clandestinely filmed in his own home approaches the terrifying paranoia depicted in Jonathan Harker’s journals as he increasingly senses his impending demise at the hands of Dracula and his brides. In each instance, the use of representational technology – for Lynch a video camera, for Stoker Harker’s journal – lend greater authority and intimacy to the paranoia, effectively translating the characters’ paranoia into the reader’s/viewer’s experience of narrative suspense.
One of the distinguishing features of the postmodern is a certain degree of self-reflexivity. Linda Hutcheon describes the effect of this self-reflexivity: “[. . .] the formal and thematic contradictions of postmodern art and theory [. . .] call attention to both what is being contested and what is being offered as a critical response to that, and to do so in a self-aware way that admits its own provisionality. In Barthesian terms [. . .], it is criticism which would include in its own discourse an implicit (or explicit) reflection upon itself” (Poetics of Postmodernism 13). David Lynch’s works demonstrate elements of the self-awareness that Hutcheon notes, and he often uses moments of artistic self-reflection to create a peculiar sensation of surreality. For example, Mr Roque, the powerful and nefarious Hollywood mogul from Mulholland Drive whom we only see in his lowly-lit, sparsely-furnished and cavernous office, is played by Michael J. Anderson, the actor who played the infamous Little Man from Another Place in the Black Lodge sequences of Lynch’s series Twin Peaks. Anderson’s very appearance distinctly directs the knowledgeable Lynch viewer’s attention back to his iconic role and the strange dreamworld of the Black Lodge where he danced and spoke in an eerie backwards pattern. What makes Anderson’s reappearance so self-reflexive and alienating is Lynch’s decision to add prosthetic limbs to Anderson’s body, simulating the illusion that Anderson, a little person in actuality and in Twin Peaks, is a fully-grown man in a wheelchair. This inexplicable but noticeable strategy creates a sense of the artificiality and constructedness of Mr. Roque, very literally a man pieced together, a cinematic construction. Ultimately, this self-reflexive gesture proves unsettling, as his threatening and unexplained pronouncements within the film mirror his corporeal ambiguities.

In The Location of Culture, Homi Bhabha acknowledges the postmodern tendency towards hybridity, rather than favoring any notion of purity or absolute authority, as a source of critical legitimacy. Considering the ways in which postmodernism blends instances of
high and low culture, art and commercialism, and various media, Bhabha’s claim lends
greater political import to the aesthetic by esteeming hybridity as a social model, suggesting
the cultural hybridity needed for launching a historical counternarrative. Just as Bhabha
asserts postmodernism’s hybridity as a mode of political expression, so does the current
analysis posit the postmodern Gothic’s equivalent use of a hybrid aesthetic in its creation of
horror. Bhabha argues that postmodern hybridity signifies a generative and positive concept
through its proliferation of liminal identities. In *Gothic Pathologies*, David Punter makes
similar claims for the Gothic:

> Gothic is, on the whole, proliferative, it is not intrigued by the minimal: in its
trajectory away from right reason and from the rule of law it does not choose to
purify itself but rather to express itself with maximum – perhaps magnum – force,
even if on many occasions this also involves considerable ineptitude. It tells stories,
it tells stories within stories, it repeats itself, it forgets where it left off, it goes on and
on; it ‘loses the place.’(9)

Punter’s articulation of the Gothic’s privileging of the hybrid, fractal, and illegitimate
over the promise of continuity and purity displays a theoretical similarity to Bhabha’s claims
about the postmodern as a critical form that attempts “to fully realize, and take responsibility
for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present”(12). Both Punter
and Bhabha use similar language to describe their respective theoretical subjects, eliciting the
imbricated nature of the postmodern and Gothic in their mutual critical projects. I interpret
the hybridity that Bhabha locates within postmodern works and the postmodern’s inclusion
of both high and low forms of art as features that shape the postmodern Gothic.

**Blending Traditions**

Postmodern art implies a flattening of cultural hierarchies by deliberately combining
a range of aesthetic modes, from high art to low-brow culture. In this dissertation, I will
show how the postmodern Gothic synthesizes disparate aesthetics, from the high art categories of Expressionism and Surrealism for their manipulation of reality, to more popular modes such as horror cinema, science fiction, and television melodrama for their narrative emplotments of fear, paranoia, and anxiety. Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson merge these various aesthetic modes, effectively rejecting the cultural barriers that separate high art from low and the social divide that ostensibly separates the erudite intellectual from the mass public. In *Expressionism*, Shulamith Behr chronicles the history and reception of Expressionist art from its origins, noting it “connotations of the anti-intellectual, the emotional and the spiritual [. . .]”(8). It is precisely these characteristics of Expressionism that elicit a strong connection to the Gothic. Kasimir Edschmid argues that Expressionist writers seek not to “make a photograph,” but rather to posit “a vision” of the world that departs from the conventions of realism (Scheunemann 140). Certainly, the worlds imagined by Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson possess just such “a vision” whose relation to reality is deliberately problematized. The Gothic and Expressionism share thematic material, and the postmodern Gothic demonstrates how their mutual privileging of the mood-driven and emotional over the cognitive and intellectual can be utilized in the production of fear.

Beyond simply the visual arts, the cinema played a prominent role in articulating the link between the Gothic and Expressionism. David Punter, in description of the Gothic’s relationship to film, indicates that there is “a kind of melodramatic expressionism of style that is unmistakably Gothic in its cultural and structural force” (*The Gothic*, 65). In discussion of Robert Weine’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Dietrich Scheunemann describes the effect of the German expressionist film’s visual singularity:

> The means by which it introduced a heightened perception of reality and a truthful projection of the uncanny nature of characters and events is the expressionist design of the film. [. . .] It is through the curved walls, oblique windows, slanting doors and


strange radial patterns on the floor that the film establishes its nightmarish atmosphere. [...]. Different from straight lines and gentle gradients they create “states of anxiety and terror,” thus preparing the spectator for the perception of corresponding displacements and distortions in the main characters and events of the film. (Expressionist Film 136)

Scheunemann’s description succinctly describes the means by which expressionist techniques can be employed to produce terror. All aspects of the mise-en-scène contribute to the foreboding tenor of the film: set design, costuming, blocking and actors’ bizarre gestures, facial gesticulations, lighting. All of these elements produce a world where darkness dominates and the bizarre supplants the everyday. Just such a world materializes in the films of David Lynch.

As a painter and visual artist, trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, David Lynch has occasionally alluded to the expressionism of the 1920’s German cinema in his works, as depicted in the sharp wavy lines that adorn the floor of his infamous Black Lodge. Beyond these direct allusions, Lynch creates filmic worlds whose foreboding is translated equally through the mise-en-scène and his notable use of sound. Lynch suffuses his work with vague but palpable moods of evil, inertia, dreaminess, and hopefulness. David Foster Wallace explicitly situates Lynch’s films within the Expressionist tradition: “What [Lynch] is is a weird hybrid blend of classical Expressionist and contemporary postmodernist, an artist whose own ‘internal impressions and moods’ are (like ours) an olla podrida of neurogenic predisposition and phylogenetic myth and psychoanalytic schema and pop-cultural iconography [...](199). Foster Wallace identifies two significant points: 1) Lynch’s expressionistic style signifies an extension of the director himself, and 2) Lynch’s expressionism engages socio-psychological cues, further engaging his audience at an intimate level. While Foster Wallace suggests a mutual exclusivity between the
Expressionism of Lynch’s craft and its postmodern character, I would assert that Lynch’s postmodern art invokes and incorporates the Expressionist tradition of painting and cinema towards the production of what I have termed, the Postmodern Gothic. Whether presenting a horrific visual image or suffusing a scene with a droning, extra-diegetic noise, David Lynch constructs an imagined space that radically challenges America’s ideological conventions and social mores.

In addition to its incorporation of Expressionism, the Postmodern Gothic also integrates aspects of Surrealism in its creation of unsettling narrative realities. For the purposes of this examination, I will adopt the succinct definition of the surrealist aesthetic provided by David Bate in his article, “The Space of the Other”: “Surrealist practice is the production of representations that encodes a breach of normal ‘external’ realism with the inclusion of an ‘internal’ mental reality” (Lang, 186). Surrealism possesses profound connections to both Postmodern artistic practices and the Gothic, for its expression of divergence from reality, its disordering of both temporal and spatial coherence, and its historical privileging of popular art forms. Fredric Jameson describes the postmodern aesthetic and its attempt to render history politically disfigured: “the making up of unreal history [as] a substitute for the making of the real kind. It mimetically expresses the attempt to recover that power and praxis by the way of the past [. . .]” (369). Jameson demonstrates the artistic disintegration of realism within postmodern art, eliciting a similar approach to reality as that expressed by Bate in his description of Surrealism. Beyond its similarities with postmodernist works, Surrealism shares common creative ground with the Gothic. Dawn Ades and Matthew Gale directly address Surrealism’s historical debt to literatures of transgression, such as the works of French decadents and the Gothic: “Significantly, the definition [of Surrealism from Breton] in the manifesto occurred within an alternative literary
genealogy including Marquis de Sade, Jonathan Swift, romantic and ‘diabolist’ writers, such
Gothic novelists and poets as ‘Monk’ [Matthew] Lewis, Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, de
Nerval, Alfred Jarry and Isidore Ducasse, the Comte de Lautremont” (Turner 375). Postmodern Gothic works’ bizarre, often tormented disfigurations of the everyday emerge from their conceptual explorations of the unconscious, a mode of expression owing much to Surrealism’s concentration on the mind’s internal workings.

While the postmodern Gothic draws aesthetic material from Surrealism, it also borrows the Surrealists’ interest in popular culture, further illustrating Bhabha’s assertion of postmodern hybridity. Thomas Pynchon’s continual appropriations, citations, and imitations of various texts and artistic works of both elevated and degraded cultural modes (classic Hollywood film, art film, pulp fiction, comic books, classic literature, classical music, rock and punk music) have long been established as the intertextual hallmarks of his identity as a postmodern author. Similarly, both Steve Erickson and David Lynch reference a catalogue of films, from an array of global cinemas, genres, and eras, as cultural signifiers in their works. Bhabha’s notion of postmodern hybridity shares a critical link with Linda Hutcheon’s notion of postmodern intertextuality, as both rely upon synthesis as a dominant feature of postmodernist art, emphasizing the postmodern’s inclusivity. Hutcheon offers a crucial insight into the function of intertextuality, and its connection to historicity, within postmodern works:

Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader [viewer] and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context. It is not a modernist desire to order the present through the past or to make the present look spare in contrast to the richness of the past [. . .] . It is not an attempt to void or avoid history. Instead, it directly confronts the past of literature [and film] – and, of historiography, for it too derives from other texts (documents). It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. (A Poetics 118)
Pynchon’s works are sardonic and bitingly comedic, but, at their core, humanist. Just as Hutcheon suggests in her remarks on postmodernist expression, Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson navigate multiple cultural modes making their respective artistic projects innately democratic, leveling the social-political hierarchies that subtend all forms of cultural production. In his early story, “The Small Rain,” Pynchon features a protagonist who reads pulp fiction, and subsequently, Pynchon’s narrative parallels pulp serial fiction, eliciting his aesthetic connection to degraded forms of cultural production. In his short story, “Zeroville,” Erickson cites high art films, such as The Passion of Joan of Arc, alongside pornographic films, Nightdreams, exhibiting the postmodern rejection of cultural hierarchies. Lynch includes references to the art films (Lynch claims that a red pipe that he inserted into the background of Wild at Heart was an homage to French art director Jacques Tati), the film noir classics of the 1940s within the crime narratives of Blue Velvet, Twin Peaks, Lost Highway, and Mulholland Drive, and television melodrama in the soap opera aesthetic that he creates in Twin Peaks and Wild at Heart. These artists’ intertextual restructuring of their imagined realities revalue dominant cultural hierarchies, and ultimately, what we can consider to be historical facts. This is the context in which the Postmodern Gothic’s intertextuality situates itself: outside associations of Enlightenment progress or development, outside the safe parameters of reality, and outside the boundaries that distinguish the creative categories of genre, audience expectation, and social function.

And so, it is America where these artists come from, but more importantly, it is America where they focus their critical energies. It is through their evocation of terror that Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson achieve their critical ends of revealing those things in the cultural imaginary that have been previously rejected or unacknowledged, like America’s troubled racial past, Hollywood’s history of violence against women, or the American
public’s compliance in the practice of global imperialism. The Gothic, with its return of the repressed and insistence of the Other, implies a competing history that irrupts, shattering nostalgia and its subtending narrative of cultural coherence, and substituting a radical unreality for reality. Considering the current, post-9/11 age characterized by feelings of growing precariousness in the face of terror threats, this study represents a critical method for decoding the ideological implications of fear and its narrative (re)production in contemporary America. In *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, Brian Massumi describes the condition of present-day American society, in an age of limitless information and endless sources of fear and dread:

Society’s prospectivity has shifted modes. What society looks toward today is no longer a return to the promised land but a general disaster that is already upon us, woven into the fabric of day-to-day life. The content of the disaster is unimportant. Its particulars are annulled by its plurality of possible agents and times: here and to come. What registers is its magnitude. In its most compelling and characteristic incarnations, the now unspecified enemy is infinite. Infinitely small or infinitely large: viral or environmental. The communist as the quintessential enemy has been superseded by the double figure of AIDS and global warming. These faceless, unseen and unseeable enemies operate on an inhuman scale.(11)

Massumi articulates the everyday menace that consumes the American public, particularly through the perpetual stream of media, reporting on the ills and threats that lurk around every corner. Historically, Gothic tales have capitalized on the presence of actual, real world threats, but have also defused the sense of anxiety by “safely” containing the horror in some hyperbolic or metaphorical mode of narrative. Conversely, Postmodern Gothic works provide no such safety through the radical transformation of society’s monsters, rather they harness the terror generated by everyday sources of cultural anxiety and represent them directly. The artists studied here explore the ideological limits of their nation by creating narratives defined by transgression, excess, waste, subversion, and chaos.
Pynchon, Lynch, and Erickson interrogate American cultures by way of three
different temporal paths: Pynchon, by way of the American past and its genealogy of
oppression; Lynch, by way of the present and Hollywood’s depictions of American life; and
Erickson, by way of terrifying, futuristic iterations of Los Angeles, the physical and figurative
end of America. Pynchon’s, Lynch’s, and Erickson’s works are populated by the ghosts of
America’s forgotten or impossible histories whose presence illustrates the horrors that
subtend historical memory and challenge the legitimacy of conventional, realist narratives
that privilege a teleological understanding of American history. These artists hold up a dark
mirror to America, and their works offer no redemptive conclusions or discrete sense of
closure whatsoever. Rather, the worlds that they disarrange remain ruined and the monsters
that they spawn persist beyond all narrative retribution. To suggest that the narratives
examined here offer no hope would be incorrect, rather, they posit worlds where the
concept of hope itself, as redemption or fortification against the horror, is impossible.

I conclude with an extended account of America’s past from Steve Erickson. In true
Gothic fashion, the author invokes the image of a burial ground when describing America’s
ancient civilization of Cahokia, the famed site of ancient pyramids built by indigenous
communities (just outside St. Louis, Missouri). For Erickson, Cahokia signifies the
effacement of some authentic American past, deliberately supplanted by the myth of
American Exceptionalism. Erickson writes:

But if you are somewhere on the road just between a momentary stability and the
craziness that’s been waiting for you around the bend, you might almost see at dusk
twenty thousand American ghosts rise from the grave of this America that was secret
from the rest of the world, secret from history, the last American that presumed it
might cut itself off from memory once and for all, before it died. Its death remains
unfixed by science. There are no earthly shows of trauma by cataclysm, either natural
or manmade, no gashes of devastating war, there is no sign of rot from some
sweeping plague. There are only the geological and archeological hints of social
suicide, of an America that slipped away into a great catatonia of the soul, cavalierly
ravishing the land and water around it until the land and water could offer nothing in return, an America indulging itself into a fatal national lethargy until, as the desperation of the situation suddenly became clear, it was too late, when those who had less were repressed by those who had more, when resentment just answered resentment and meeker nihilism was answered by a nihilism more rapacious. And when you pull up to the curb of Cahokia and gaze across the grave of the secret country you may find yourself, not unlike a ghost, suddenly set free of history and memory after all, floating to some place that knows neither nation nor millennium – which is all we ever really wanted of America to begin with. (American Nomad 241).

In this lengthy and distinctly macabre account, Erickson conflates the doomed civilization of Cahokia with his contemporary United States, noting the insular logic of self-interest that contained and, ultimately, contaminated the ancient communities that habited there. Erickson’s interweaving of the two historical moments through their geographical and ostensible ideological verisimilitude prophecies a shared conclusion, namely, death and dissolution. Erickson pronounces the death of Cahokia, but his statement advances an equivalent apocalyptic vision for his own nation, for its own “catatonia” in the face of national/global crises (such as AIDS, global poverty, and social unrest; all topics Erickson takes up in his work). Erickson’s artistic perspective, like Thomas Pynchon’s and David Lynch’s, is ineluctably Gothic, relentlessly exposing the precariousness and anxiety that characterizes contemporary America via its history of human tragedy.
CHAPTER 1:
WITNESSING THE KINGDOM OF DEATH: VISIONS OF HORROR IN THE WORKS OF THOMAS PYNCHON

The Methodist movement and the American Great Awakening were only two sectors on a broad front of resistance to the Age of Reason, a front which included Radicalism and Freemasonry as well as Luddites and the Gothic novel. Each in its way expressed the same profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however "irrational," to an emerging technopolitical order that might or might not know what it was doing. "Gothic" became code for "medieval," and that has remained code for "miraculous," on through Pre-Raphaelites, turn-of-the-century tarot cards, space opera in the pulps and the comics, down to "Star Wars" and contemporary tales of swords and sorcery.

Thomas Pynchon, “Is It O.K. to Be A Luddite?”

As the Liberty lads o’er the sea
Bought their freedom, and cheaply, with blood,
So we, boys, we
Will die fighting, or live free,
And down with all kings but King Ludd!

Lord Byron, maiden speech to the House of Lords, 1812, as quoted in “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?”

In the broad accounting above, Thomas Pynchon succinctly draws a critical link between the political spirit that inhabits both postmodern artifice and the Gothic tradition; namely: a “profound unwillingness” to accept the rationalism of Enlightenment thinking. Pynchon’s article presents a genealogy of “The Badass,” a potent mythocultural figure borne of the British group called the Luddites who flourished from 1811 to 1816, “bands of men,
organized, masked, anonymous, whose object was to destroy machinery used mostly in the
textile industry.” The Luddites, the primordial “Badasses” embody the anti-Enlightenment
philosophy through their acts of industrial terrorism and “profound unwillingness” to accept
the terms of the king. It is a similar unwillingness that Pynchon employs in his works to
radically rethink the historical, the canonical, and the ethical through transgression and
transcendence. Later in the essay, Pynchon aligns his writing with the Gothic in a response
to those critics who have dubbed his work silly or unsubstantial: “The Gothic attitude in
general, because it used images of death and ghostly survival toward no more responsible
end than special effects and cheap thrills, was judged not Serious enough and confined to its
own part of town.” Similarly, Pynchon’s continued employment of non-literary and
unorthodox sources throughout his oeuvre, such as the aforementioned pulp novels, comics,
and tarot cards, illustrates the ways in which he is limning himself into the historical
continuum he constructs above. Pynchon’s article loosely defines an ancient conflict whose
repercussions continue in the present moment and whose sides are clearly defined: those for
the machine and those who rage against it. The nature and definition of the machine is what
changes throughout the various centuries and geographies.

Pynchon’s targeted “machines” are well-documented, as David Cowart states,
matter-of-factly while commenting on the 1960s origin of Pynchon’s ideological stance:
“[Pynchon] leaves his readers in no doubt about his attitude toward racism, oppressive
economic practices, genocidal violence, skullduggery in high places, and police-state
repression. He expresses, in numerous ways, a profound empathy with what he calls the
preterite, the left out, the passed over in every form of election (spiritual, economic, racial,
cultural)”(4). In a rare moment of self-reference in the “Introduction” to his collection of
early writings *Slow Learner*, Pynchon himself links fear, both a source of inspiration and lived experience, with the corrupt power-systems that he attacks in his prose:

Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it [the Bomb], most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. I think we all have tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it . . .(18-19).

Pynchon clearly identifies his fiction as ineluctably connected to the politically-motivated production of fear by those with power. Terror, as a source of profound emotion and primal intuition, represents a powerful tool for communication. Paranoia, a prominent touchstone throughout Pynchon’s works, functions similarly by substituting irrational fear for rational mindedness. A large body of critical work has chronicled Pynchon’s fostering of paranoia within his texts, but the current study proposes to view such moments of paranoia as manifestations of a broader economy of fear. Throughout the body of his work, Pynchon has explored the limits of rationality, and the terrifying result that comes by attempting its mastery. More than simply comparing Pynchon’s work to Gothic predecessors in an effort to establish ideological verisimilitude or further establishing Pynchon’s political leanings, in this chapter, I will show how Pynchon’s deployment of a specifically gothic aesthetic in crucial instances signals moments of social commentary.

Challenging the American power-structure and attacking global systems of oppression have often been claims made by scholars of Pynchon’s work. Jeffrey S. Baker notes this trend in Pynchon’s work: “In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon echoes an escalating countercultural critique of the Establishment’s repression at home and murderous imperialism abroad”(324). In terms that echo Pynchon’s Luddite repudiation of the machine, Baker continues, “*[Gravity’s Rainbow]* reveals the pragmatist’s idealist tradition as a
European ‘death-structure’ identified with Nazi imperialism and ‘planned society’ – a formulation that Pynchon clearly connects with America’s Cold War rhetoric and war economy in the Vietnam era”(ibid). Critic Christopher Ames reiterates Pynchon’s remonstration against corrupt forms of power: “But while Pynchon’s narrative style communicates respect and wonder regarding science, the novel [Gravity’s Rainbow] clearly locates technological discourse as a weapon of the oppressor class”(191-192). Few critics would argue against Pynchon’s politics being decidedly anti-Establishment, but the means by which he deploys his ideological vision remain fodder for an academic wheelhouse of scholarship.

While many have noted Pynchon’s debt to science-fiction and unreality, my project will examine the macabre themes of Pynchon’s works, as a specific form of unreality that he juxtaposes against actual historical events. Other critics, such as David Punter in his seminal work on the Gothic, The Literature of Terror, have identified Pynchon’s work as Gothic, though no critic has clearly defined Pynchon’s use of Gothic as a discursive means for political commentary. Punter goes so far as to suggest that Pynchon’s production of paranoia counters any effective social message: “The problems of paranoia [Gravity’s Rainbow] sets up are insoluble because the conspiracy is so diverse and enormous that it takes in the whole of recorded history . . . Pynchon’s plan is a Gothic one in that it has nothing to do with justice and complacency, everything to do with the power of strength over weakness and with the terrible might of a god who ‘passeth all understanding’”(Vol. II, 134-135). Conversely, the current analysis of Pynchon’s works will address views such as those espoused by Punter and focus on the ways in which Pynchon uses Gothic themes and images to render and concomitantly attack imperial practice most predominantly, but also traditional conceptions of gender, sexuality, and race. Pynchon’s interest in the systemic
manipulations of power is evident in a comment from his candid introduction to *Slow Learner*: “It may yet turn out that racial differences are not as basic as questions of money and power, but have served a useful purpose, often in the interest of those who deplore them most, in keeping us divided and so relatively poor and powerless”(12). I will show that at the heart of Pynchon’s work, the notions of America and Americanness as uniform, coherent enterprises are rigorously interrogated through his manipulation of the Gothic and its conventions. Rather, Pynchon’s works privilege pluralistic considerations of America and American identity, acknowledging a multiplicity of perspectives as challenges to the dominant History. Pynchon, by creating a Gothic history of occurrences that irrupt within the conventional understanding of history, employs the Gothic as a challenge to forms of historiography that perpetuate the prevailing ideology.

Stylistically, Pynchon creates narratives that perpetually alternate between harsh reality and expressionistic unreality. Pynchon’s work functions through the insinuation of overlapping systems of power and information, suggested through the privileging of fractal narrative threads and specialized language (technological, scientific, mathematical) over an aesthetic of narrative coherence and linearity. Allan Lloyd-Smith describes the Gothic aesthetic the Pynchon employs: “Thomas Pynchon, for example, often develops moments of almost-meaning, in which the merest suspicion of something going on is pursued into Jameson’s ‘expectant hush revealing an object world forever suspended on the brink of meaning, forever disposed to receive a revelation of evil or grace that never comes’”(123, and quoting Jameson from *The Political Unconscious*, 135). Pynchon’s inclusion of scientific and technological discourses ostensibly lends greater authority to the prose, but it’s a deceptive authority since all of the jargon adds up to nothing. Effectively, Pynchon recuperates alternate belief systems, like those of occultism, Tarot, or mysticism, by both
exaggerating and misusing theories of science and placing these alternate systems alongside scientific discourse without privileging one over the other. Just as Mary Shelley would assert the cultural authority of the scientific into her story of Dr. Victor Frankenstein as he created life from lifeless matter in a diabolical laboratory, so too does Pynchon advance this strategy, exploiting the technical language of science and technology to mystify the reader, and ultimately, disrupt the lines of rationality. In the absence of such signifiers, no longer is there a fundamental distinction between the scientific and the mystical. Despite the unreality of his narratives, however, the fears and paranoia created within Pynchon’s texts represent real worldly threats like genocide, terrorism, racism, imperial conquest, and capitalist exploitation.

This chapter will explore Pynchon’s novels – *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), *Vineland* (1990), *Mason & Dixon* (1997), and *Against the Day* (2006) – with particular emphasis on *Vineland, Mason & Dixon, and Against the Day,* since those texts have received far less critical attention than Pynchon’s earlier novels, and with occasional reference to Pynchon’s early short fiction – compiled in *Slow Learner* (1984) – and extraneous non-fiction works. The six novels will be examined in pairs that emphasize thematic and geographical similarities, illustrating elements of verisimilitude in Pynchon’s works that transcend the novels’ dates of publication. This chapter will concentrate on many shared themes and motifs employed by Pynchon, but, most significantly, his critical engagement with American imperialism. I will articulate how Pynchon situates American imperial practice in relation to historical forms of European colonialism and contemporary global capitalism. Moving from the German Sudwest Protectorate, to the Zone of WWII, to Reagan era, television-saturated America, and then back to the slavery, genocide, and Diaspora of early America, Pynchon’s assessment of America’s development into an imperial
power covers a broad historical and geographical range. Through his continued use of a Gothic aesthetic, Pynchon rigorously critiques the supporting historical narratives and ideologies that attend America’s emergence as an, oftentimes corrupt and malevolent, imperial entity. While Pynchon employs conventional Gothic tropes occasionally (ghosts, vampires, monsters), these representations are typically severed from their function as initiating horror. Pynchon favors more realistic sources of horror that impact human existence presently and historically. This gesture illustrates the postmodern Gothic's advancement of more metonymic forms of horror, rather than the more metaphorical representations that prevailed in earlier forms of the Gothic.

1.1. Adventurers and Scientists: Historical Hauntings in *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day*

*Against the Day*

Unreflectively entangled in crimes of demarcation, Mason and Dixon take us along a grand tour of the Enlightenment’s dark hemisphere, from their first journey together to the Cape of Good Hope, to pre-Revolutionary America and back to England, into the shadowy yet redemptive turns of their later lives. . . Mason as melancholy and Gothic as Dixon is cheerful and pre-Romantic – pursue a linear narrative of irregular lives. . .

Dust-jacket blurb, *Mason & Dixon*

*Spanning the period between the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 and the years just after World War I, Against the Day moves from the labor troubles in Colorado to turn-of-the-last-century New York to London and Gottingen, Venice and Vienna, the Balkans, Central Asia, Siberia at the time of the mysterious Tunguska Event, Mexico during the revolution, postwar Paris, silent-era Hollywood, and one or two places not strictly speaking on the map at all.*

Dust-jacket blurb, *Against the Day*

As their jack-blurbs testify, these texts present narratives of global proportion, but specifically American significance. Representing Pynchon’s last two novels, these tomes
interrogate the terms of Enlightenment rationality and its mantra of “progress” by critically examining the theme of scientific exploration and its role in furthering various nations’ imperial projects historically. Whether following history’s most celebrated cartographers or fictional, dirigible do-gooders, these novels intimate the centrality of scientific exploration through their narratives and their protagonists. Certainly, both novels target imperialist conquest, in general, as malevolent and dehumanizing, but it is their mutual narrative and theoretical return to American imperial praxis that illustrates the national specificity of Pynchon’s social critique.

In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon, via the principle narrator Rev. Wicks Cherrycoke, chronicles the exploits of Charles Mason (1728-1783) and Jeremiah Dixon (1733-1779) as they travel from Britain, to South Africa, and across America, charting the geography and the stars. Told in seventy-eight chapters, divided among three parts corresponding to scientific missions undertaken by Mason & Dixon, the novel has been called historical fiction and “postcolonial satire” (Garcia-Caro in Horvath and Malin, 107). Like *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* before it, *Mason & Dixon* signifies, as suggested above, a postcolonial instantiation of the Gothic, in that it “helps to isolate images of Self and Other in such a way that they identify how a particular brand of colonial politics works towards constructing difference, whilst at the same time indicating the presence of the inherently unstable versions of the subject on which such a politics rest” (Smith and Hughes, 4). The novel’s two protagonists encounter ghostly entities throughout their travels and the concept of haunting foregrounds much of the novel’s social commentary on empire-consolidation, slavery, and racial division by using the division between the living and the dead as an alternate, competing paradigm of difference and subjectivity.
Jean-Paul Sartre, in his *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, argues that we orient ourselves in the world by forming what he terms “hodological maps.” These maps construct our reality and are constituted in the course of our lived experiences. They permit us to personalize our path in the world and imagine the world itself as an extension or artifact of our own cognition. When the process of interpreting our own hodological map is disrupted – typically by some manifestation of fear, Sartre asserts – our minds compensate for the disruption by employing “magical means” rather than completing a realistic trajectory towards our assigned goals. Sartre describes this process: “all ways being barred, the consciousness leaps into the magical world of emotion, plunges wholly into it by debasing itself. It becomes a different world [. . .]”(78). Mason & Dixon, whose reality is governed by the actual mapping of a future Empire, also experience the process of mapping their own understanding of their experiences. The essence of the Gothic tale resides in the possibility that certain “magical means” – ghosts, ghouls, monsters – can exists outside the faculties of a single mind’s response to traumatic stimuli, more aptly representing a communal manifestation of fear or public anxiety. Within Pynchon’s text, the physical act of mapping reveals numerous belief systems – Judeo-Christian, Kabbala, Native American spirituality – whose simultaneous presence form a palimpsest whose intersections represent moments of fear and cognitive disruption. Pynchon’s ghosts are not malevolent, vindictive monsters, but telltales of those moments when human brutality transcends simple understanding, and requires “magical means” to assimilate the horrors of slavery and imperial conquest.

Daniel Punday’s article “Pynchon’s Ghosts” illuminates Pynchon’s strategy by showing how *Mason & Dixon* represents a departure from and transformation of spectral presence in Pynchon’s previous works. Punday suggests that the novel’s ghosts commit personal hauntings that work upon the individual to prompt ethical and social awareness,
rather than foregrounding the “Collective Ghost,” whose haunting more directly addresses the wrongs of perpetrated in the name of progress and American exceptionalism. Punday does acknowledge, however, that Mason’s late wife Rebekah haunts Mason throughout the text, subsequently marshalling Mason and Dixon towards encounters with the “collective ghost” represented succinctly in those “Wrongs committed Daily against the Slaves, petty and grave ones alike, going unrecorded, charm’d invisible to history, invisible yet possessing Mass, and Velocity, able not only to rattle Chains but to break them as well”(68). While Punday privileges Rebekah’s personal haunting for its narrative centrality, I would suggest that it is the relationship between Mason’s individual experience and the “Collective Ghost” of American history that constitutes Pynchon’s Gothic historiography in Mason & Dixon. This historiography gives “Mass” to those “invisible” cultural experiences effaced through the national narratives of progress, such as Manifest Destiny. David Seed asserts the historiographical project embedded in Pynchon’s narrative, hinting at its relationship to the Gothic: “[Mason & Dixon] gives the lie to this geometric fantasy of America as tabula rasa, which resulted historically in the commodification of the landscape into commercially disposable lots. Instead it is described as an ancient land where evil lies waiting”(Malin & Horvath 88). The “Collective Ghost” laying in wait reminds the characters and the reader of “The precariousness of Life here, the need to keep the Ghost propitiated, Day to Day, via the Company’s merciless Priesthoods and many-Volum’d Codes, brings all but the hardiest souls sooner or later to consider the Primary Questions more or less undiluted”(Mason & Dixon 68-69). Pynchon’s text proffers no answers to those “Primary Questions,” rather, it acknowledges the need for their positing. Pynchon’s creative reimagination of founding fathers Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson further illustrates the ideological commentary embedded within the text. In his Gothic figure of the “Collective Ghost,” Pynchon
repudiates nostalgic historical accounts that tacitly reduce the significance of slavery, genocide, and imperial conquest. Rather, *Mason & Dixon* locates these gruesome events as dominant aspects of contemporary American identification.

Mason & Dixon remain in United States history books as virtual footnotes, not explorers proper like Lewis and Clark or even adventurous personalities like Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid. Their capacity to be mythologized has been severely undercut by their more or less administrative function as cartographic technicians. As a self-confessed admirer of Oakley Hall’s *Warlock*, a book that challenges the legendary status of iconic historical figure Wyatt Earp, Pynchon no doubt sees the alternative challenge in mythologizing the exploits of a pair of historical figures whose most-celebrated exploit remains in name only (quite literally, The Mason-Dixon line) (as quoted in the Introduction to *Slow Learner*). Just as Hall’s text suggests broader philosophical and ethical questions that subtend the creation of a Old West myth rife with heroic deeds, so does Pynchon illustrate salient theoretical points on systems of power through the revaluation of two of history’s forgotten personages.

The Line itself becomes a potent signifier of power, its positive and malevolent manifestations alike. Pynchon describes Dixon’s conflicted interest in charting the Meridian through America’s wilds:

> He has certainly, and more than once, too, dreamt himself upon a dark Mission whose details he can never quite remember, feeling in the grip of Forces no one will tell him of, serving Interests invisible. He wakes more indignant than afraid. Hasn’t he been doing what he contracted to do, nothing more? Yet, happen this is exactly what they wanted, and his Sin is not to’ve refus’d the Work from the outset. (394)

Kyle Smith, in “‘Serving Interests Invisible’: *Mason & Dixon*, British Spy Fiction, and the Specters of Imperialism,” aligns Dixon’s thoughts upon “serving Interests invisible” with
the British espionage genre that illustrates the clandestine circuits of power at play in preservation of the British Empire (Abbas, 191). While Smith’s account aptly notes the “dark Mission” of imperial conquest that Mason & Dixon undertake in the name of the Crown, my own reading proffers a less literal and more ambiguous reading of the phrase “serving Interests invisible” that signifies the Gothic figures and imagery that the protagonists continually encounter throughout their “dark Mission.” Dixon imagines himself to be in the “grip of Forces” prefiguring a subsequent episode where Mason and Dixon find themselves mired in a swamp populated by the dead and Dixon reflecting upon the evils of slavery and colonial rule.

Edward Said explains the relationship between imperialism and culture, a relationship that Pynchon implicates in Mason & Dixon: “Imperialism and the culture associated with it affirm both the primacy of geography and an ideology about control of territory. The geographical sense makes projections – imaginative, cartographical, military, economic, historical, or in a general sense cultural. It also makes possible the construction of various kinds of knowledge, all of them in one way or another dependent upon the perceived character and destiny of a particular geography” (*Culture and Imperialism* 78). Pynchon creates a text whose narrator speaks from the time of the imperial conquest (Cherrycoke), but whose “projections” and supporting epistemologies undermine any cohesive “character” or “destiny” for the land Mason and Dixon traverse. Beyond the perpetual questioning on the part of the two protagonists, the ghoulish imagery threatens any unified conception of America’s establishment and subsequent codification. Considering the numerous ghosts and spiritual entities that Mason and Dixon meet, the Forces that marshal their mission seem to be manifold despite their literal directive from the Crown.
Pynchon’s narrative signifies an anti-imperialist message, where he asserts the primacy of America’s indigenous culture and spiritualism. Mason and Dixon abandon their mission due to pressures from Native American hostilities initiated by the cartographers’ encroachment upon sacred ground, The Great Warrior Path where members of the warring Six Nations could move about the continent in peace, presenting another example of spiritual, invisible interests that marshal Mason & Dixon’s path through the wilderness. Through his explanation of William Butler Yeats poetics/politics, Edward Said identifies a “cartographic impulse” in establishing a sense of home space that Pynchon’s two protagonists’ encounter with The Great Warrior Path: “To the anti-imperialist imagination, our space at home in the peripheries has been usurped and put to use by outsiders for their purpose. It is therefore necessary to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover a third nature, not pristine and pre-historical (“Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,” says Yeats) but deriving from the deprivations of the present. The impulse is cartographic [. . .]”(225-226). This cartographic impulse mimics the actual cartographic activities of Mason and Dixon, for as they codify the imperial will, they question their own resolve in carrying out their mission, in the face of such overwhelming human atrocity. Effectively, Mason and Dixon embody the “third nature” that Said esteem in Yeats, as they signify the acknowledgment of imperialism’s monstrosity from a liminal position, precariously balanced between America’s prehistorical cultures and its immanent expropriation. While Smith’s account very astutely concentrates focus upon the “agents” of the line’s creation and their employ in service of Empire, by allowing the unseen and unknown Forces to signify the otherworldly, spectral voices of colonial victims and Native American spiritualism, the Gothic reading of Mason & Dixon privileges a more diabolical urgency underscoring the geographical practice of imperial usurpation.
More than simply charting a line between Pennsylvania and Maryland, Mason and Dixon navigate the conflict between secular conquest and its profound impact upon the spirit world of Native American belief. In “Pynchon’s Postcoloniality,” Michael Harris explains the relationship between the Great Warrior Path and the Visto by incorporating concepts drawn from Kwame Anthony Appiah¹, who makes the distinction between “the accommodative approach” of preliterate, precolonial belief systems and the “adversarial approach” of the Enlightenment-driven colonial powers. As Harris writes: “Preliterate societies’ dependence on oral communication allowed them to accept and integrate new, alien ideas, in part because their sense of cultural history was fluid and dynamic. By contrast, the emphasis on ‘proving’ or ‘disproving’ theories and on recording fixed results in writing gave Western science (of which Mason and Dixon are clearly harbingers) a more adversarial approach” (Abbas 207). The rage to order made Mason and Dixon’s project inherently adversarial, and Pynchon’s depiction of their perpetual questioning of their mission testifies to the dehumanizing process felt by both the colonizer and the colonized.

In a meditation upon America, the actual geographical entity, and its “discovery” in the world, a task historically and incorrectly accredited to Christopher Columbus, Pynchon again employs a Gothic construction. In conversation with a traveling delegation of Jewish dignitaries who are hunting a giant, invisible monster or golem, Dixon hears their theory that America, like their fabled monster, is invisible and, possibly, completely phantasmal, for they suggest: “Sometimes the Invisible will all at once appear, -- sometimes what you see may not be there at all” (486). This comparison sets up a Gothic paradigm that functions alternately

to suggest that the monster’s potential to rear up produces the standard horror and suspense endemic to the Gothic genre, and the simultaneous fear that America – its power and identity – is potentially an insubstantial chimera. Continuing with the comparison, the party discusses America’s emergence from the Invisible: “America, withal, for centuries had been kept hidden, as are certain Bodies of Knowledge. Only now and then were selected persons allow’d Glimpses of the New World, [. . .] Never Reporters that anyone else was likely to believe, - men who ate the Flesh and fornicated with the Ghosts of their Dead, murderers and Pirates on the run [. . .] any Runagate craz’d enough to sail West”(487). The Jewish delegation here presents America, the land and the concept, as both sleeping monster and exclusive body of knowledge, visible/accessible only to the depraved, decadent, and otherworldly. Notably, their rendering of America requires mention of “Ghosts” and the “Dead,” as they continue by comparing America to the mysterious knowledge of the Hebrew Kabbala. With this gesture, Pynchon condenses a number of significations within the term America: invisible monster, nation, land mass, alternative/secret history.

The story of America presented by the Jewish delegation represents just such an alternative/secret history. Moreover, through its collusion with the monstrous and ghostly, I would suggest, Pynchon is creating a Gothic historiography through their discourse with Dixon. From their initial suggestion of America’s discovery by mad “Runagates,” the delegation comments upon Dixon’s current task of charting the Meridian, depicting the cosmic relationship shared by such a mapping to the celestial Powers “above.” The Meridian that Mason and Dixon are charting is called, “An utterance. A Message of uncertain length, apt to be interrupted at any Moment, or Chain. A smaller Pantograph copy down here, of Occurrences in the Higher World”(487). This conception of the Meridian as “Message” simultaneously signifies the act of “writing” America into existence through the
act of inscribing the landscape with their physical labor and, figuratively, a proleptic glimpse at the rationale behind the murderous push West, succinctly called Manifest Destiny. Mason asks, in a moment of doubtful contemplation: “Shall wise Doctors one day write History’s assessment of the Good resulting from this Line, vis-à-vis the not-so-good? I wonder which List will be longer?”(666). Again historiography dominates the interpretation of the Meridian. Again, the Line is interpreted as a line of historical “writing.” Mason’s inclusion of “Doctors” in his questioning illustrates the connection between historiography and scientific advancement.

Pynchon returns to the Line’s comparison to Manifest Destiny and extrapolates upon its malignity as the delegation links the rise of Benjamin Franklin, historically considered a founding father, as a precursor to the greed and corruption that accompanies both the push West, and ultimately, America’s meteoric rise to eminence. One of the rabbinical figures states: “this Age sees a corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick. Projectors, Brokers of Capital, Insurancers, Peddlers upon the global Scale, Enterprisers and Quacks, - these are the last poor fallen and feckless inheritors of a Knowledge they can never use, but in the service of Greed. The coming Rebellion is theirs, - Franklin, and that Lot, - Heaven help the rest of us, if they prevail”(487-488). This ominous indictment suggests that just as the Meridian possesses a cosmic relationship to higher Powers, this relationship is severed through its transmogrification into an instrument of colonial conquest and expansion in the name of Progress.

Benedict Anderson explains the significance of the map as a crucial tool for the imperial powers: “They were on the march to put space under the same surveillance which the census-makers were trying to impose on persons. Triangulation by triangulation, war by war, treaty by treaty, the alignment of map and power proceeded”(173). David Seed
comments on the ways in which Pynchon transforms the charting of the Meridian to a codification of conquest: “Throughout his novel Pynchon [. . .] demonstrates how surveying and mapmaking are implicated in vested commercial and political interests as well as the process of colonization”(Horvath and Malin, 84). Pynchon recasts Franklin and the nation’s forefathers as progenitors of a malevolent American Empire, instead of their conventional narrativization as rebels throwing off their British oppressors. Just as Pynchon noted in Gravity’s Rainbow of America, “It has learned empire from its old metropolis,” we see again the mantle of imperial violence passing from the British Empire to the new American Empire, personified here by Franklin and codified by the very act of charting the Mason Dixon line (GR 722). Pynchon further attacks Franklin’s image as forefather where he writes: “Franklin is a Magician. A Figure of Power. We know what he is,— but to the Mobility, he is the Ancestor of Miracle,— or, of Wonders, which pass as well with them,— without which, indeed, they would soon grow inquisitive and troublesome. For, as long as it remains possible to keep us deluded that we are ‘free men,’ we back Inhabitants will feed the Metropolis, open new roads to it, fight in its behalf”(Mason & Dixon 488). Just as the Meridian shifts from the sublimity of celestial meaning to a measure of worldly greed, so is Benjamin Franklin transformed here from the statesman and ingenious founding father to a duplicitous confidence man. The “Wonders” and “Miracles” suggested above represent the standard textbook historical account that effaces, and tacitly pardons, America’s origins from its entrenched history of corruption and human debasement. Through the narration of this transformation, Pynchon disrupts the standard historical account, and substitutes this Gothic history, signifying a political act of historiography.

Pynchon in Mason & Dixon, as he had in both V. and Gravity’s Rainbow, examines the slavery and domination that underscore the development of Western Civilization, and most
significantly, America. Just as he had in “Mondaugen’s Story” in V., where an African is whipped brutally by a white colonial, Pynchon initiates a similar scene in Mason & Dixon but alters the result. Whereas in V. the violent episode is charged with morbid decadence and sexuality (see this chapter’s account in the portion concerning V.), the narrative of Mason & Dixon disrupts the violence, substituting Dixon’s forcible intervention in stopping the brutal act. Pynchon sets the scene where Dixon describes his indignation over the institution of slavery. As the explorers wade through a swamp, invoking macabre images of decay and death, Dixon announces his disgust:

As they stand in the muck of the Cypress Swamp, black and thinly crusted, each Step breaking through to release a Smell of Generations of Deaths, something in it, some principle of untaught Mechanicks, tugging at their ankles, voiceless, importunate,- a moment arrives, when one of them smacks his Pate for something other than a Mosquitoe.

“Ev’rywhere they’ve sent us,- the Cape, St. Helena, America,- what’s the Element common to all?”

“Long Voyages by Sea,” replies Mason, blinking Exhaustion by now chronick. “Was there anything else?”

“Slaves. [. . .] they’re murdering and dispossessing thousands untallied, the innocent of the World, passing daily into the Hands of Slave-owners and Torturers [. . .] Where does it end? No matter where in it we go, shall we find all the World Tyrants and Slaves? America was the one place we should not have found them.”(692-693)

I cite at length here to illustrate how Pynchon introduces Dixon’s epiphany, using gloomy and gruesome imagery to define the setting for an ethical discussion of Slavery. The “something in it” that lurks in the mire where Mason and Dixon stand suggests the standard Gothic trope of a monstrous entity that lurks beneath the surface. Here too, those “Generations of Deaths” suggests a wraith who, like Mason’s Rebekah and the “Collective Ghost”, signals an instance of ethical deliberation. Dixon’s pronouncement that America
should be the last bastion against slavery, rather than a complicit party to it, expresses the historiographical project at play in Pynchon’s text. Dixon’s indignation with the practice of slavery within a country whose ideals were said to be borne of democracy, liberty, and equality articulates the hypocrisy that undermines historical forgiveness of America’s past wrongs in the name of civilization’s development. Dixon’s realization, standing as it were among the legions of dead slaves in this primordial swamp, signifies Pynchon’s own repudiation of nostalgic or coherent narratives of America that elide the horrors and historical agency that truly constitute American history.

Before Mason and Dixon abandon their mission of charting the Meridian, they first encounter a host of otherworldly entities that discourage their cartographical project. Again, Pynchon imbues the scene with a calculated tenor of Gothicism to impart the social significance of the episode: “the great Ghost of the woods has been whispering to them,- tho’ Reason suggests the wind,- ‘No. . .no more. . .no further’”(634). The spectral presence that prohibits their progress directly defies the rational or scientific purpose for which the explorers toil. Following the pronouncement of the appariition of the forest, the two protagonists wander into a cave, whose link to the Gothic is made explicit: “Jointly and severally, they have continu’d to find regions of Panick fear all along the Line,- Dixon, in the great Cave whose Gothicity sends his partner into such Raptures, but wondering, in some Fretfulness, what might be living in it large enough, to need so much space [. . .]”(634-635). This setting illustrates the monstrous omen that stands between their act of mapping and the spiritual forces that inhabit the mysterious, frontier forests that continue to the West.

Thomas Pynchon’s latest and lengthiest novel tells the stories of dozens of characters, and like all of his works, defies simple summarization. As the blurb above
illustrates, *Against the Day* assimilates a massive catalogue of historical and cultural material. While Pynchon’s general scope is large, the text returns to themes rendered in Pynchon’s previous works - the global impact of Anarchism and, domestically, Trade Unionism as historical forms of political organization (*Vineland*), the perils and evils of imperialism (*V.*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and *Mason & Dixon*), and the conceptual limits of rational thought and scientific knowledge (all). Like their Luddite predecessors, Pynchon’s protagonists rage stridently against the proverbial Machine, here represented by venomous capitalists, murderous Pinkerton agents, and dubious European military personnel. Unlike, however, the clear distinction that Pynchon earlier made between those for and against the Machine, Pynchon initiates a third position, above and beyond the turmoil of worldly conflict, a Utopian ideal represented in the indomitable Chums of Chance. The Chums, a group of pulp fiction adventurers, travel the globe battling injustice and overseeing important events from the vantage of their dirigible, *The Inconvenience*. *Against the Day* notably represents Pynchon’s first public discourse following the events of September 11th, 2001, and significantly, situates acts of industrial and political terrorism within America’s historical record. Rather than present terrorist violence as an immoral or diabolical force, Pynchon elects to depict these acts of violence as revolutionary acts of political liberation. The dynamiters and Wobblies presented here exemplify the patriotic ideals of democracy, the overthrow of capitalism’s alienation of labor, and a radical repudiation of tyranny. For Pynchon, terrorist acts are woven into the very fabric of contemporary American identity, and *Against the Day* illustrates the rhetorical relativity bound to certain acts.

As he did in *V.* with the tension between the animate and the inanimate, in *Against the Day*, Pynchon perpetually returns to the dialectic of visibility versus invisibility, noting how these concepts affect a broad range of topics, from industrial sabotage to spectral
presence to government suppression of its citizens. Pynchon’s own invisibility as a literary figure within the public sphere charges invisibility with greater significance. Thomas Pynchon possesses a distinct and personalized form of literary iconicity founded upon the very concept of invisibility. Like the intrepid Chums of Chance or the vengeful spirits who float invisibly above and beyond the narrative, so does their author exist in a literary beyond: beyond the reach of would-be biographers; beyond the purview of his cultish fan base; beyond the scope of scholars and critics, whose questions and interviews remain unanswered. Moreover, invisibility and visibility impact Pynchon’s construction of Gothic scenes, since a great many horrors rise from their threat not yet made manifest. Consider those things in the darkness: the unseen, the unknown, the unutterable.

From these invisible depths, Pynchon generates a scene of horror that commences by appropriating scenes and settings established in Gothic fiction and film. Pynchon begins the episode by framing the narrative under the heading: “From the journals of Mr. Fleetwood Vibe - ” (138). Calling to mind the Robert Walton’s Arctic expedition letters at the beginning of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, Vibe tells his tale of a colonial/scientific expedition in the Arctic that finds a large mass that the Eskimo people call a *Nunatak* or “land connected,” containing, unbeknownst to the crew, a mysterious, malevolent creature. Ignoring both the warnings of the colonial Eskimo people and the Chums of Chance, who flew to the Arctic specifically to warn the crew, the expedition proceeds to remove the large mass and transports it back to the metropole in the ships hold. Once they return the object to the mother country, it dramatically escapes from the hold, a trope borrowed from *King Kong*, and rains death and devastation upon the city. Pynchon includes these Gothic conventions and supernatural monsters to illustrate the contrast initiated between older, metaphorical forms of Gothic representation (monsters and ghouls)
and contemporary, metonymical Gothic tropes (unseen power-systems and human exploitation). Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan explain the political significance of this stylistic approach:

The metaphoric replacement of the actual object with a higher meaning parallels the way in which, in ideology, certain ideal meanings come to stand in for an accurate perception of actuality. Someone who adopts such ideological representations of the world as ‘freedom’ will think, feel, and act as if the ideal of class mobility were real, and will not see the structural reality of class inequality. [ . . . ] Rather than promote an idealized understanding of the world which overlooks material connections, metonymy is the mode of representation that foregrounds the contiguous, material, contextual interconnections between different dimensions of that actual social system. It is an anti-ideological representational form in that it acts to deconstruct the pretensions of ideological meanings like ‘freedom’ by anchoring them in their material contexts.(15)

Pynchon’s use of the Gothic typically favors the preternatural over the supernatural. Pynchon creates the scene of a monster’s attack, but the monster itself is never visible or represented. This scene emphasizes the turmoil and chaos that resulted from the monster’s attack, evacuating the horror of the monster itself, and grounding the horror of the scene in the transformation of the once-proud city into a figurative victim.

This scene succinctly blends a number of narrative motifs borrowed from Gothic texts and popular film while linking an act of colonial domination and opportunism with violent retribution. Pynchon constructs the discovery and examination of the nunatak in the fashion of a science-fiction or horror fiction/film such as Bram Stoker’s and Tod Browning’s Dracula and Ridley Scott’s Alien, first depicting the confusion resultant from the monster’s discovery, to its subsequent confounding of the scientists, and finally to its emergence as a malevolent force. Once the Chums have used their scientific implements to examine the ice-covered mass, they suggest that the creature within has been deliberately entombed, calling to mind monster-movie classic The Mummy as they mention the similarity
with discoveries made by Egyptologists. More than simply alluding to prior conventions of
Gothic fiction and film, Pynchon creates an atmosphere of mystery and horror surrounding
the expectant monster as Vibe describes its consciousness:

Though details were difficult to make out, the Figure, appeared to recline on its side,
an odalisque of the snows – though to what pleasures given posed a question far too
dangerous – with as little agreement among us as to its “facial” features, some
describing them as “Mongoloid,” others as “serpent-like.” Its eyes, for the most part,
if eyes be what they were, remained open, its gaze as yet undirected – though we
were bound in a common terror of that moment at which it might become aware of our
interest and smoothly pivot its awful head to stare us full in the face.(141)

The expedition immediately begins extracting the Figure, despite the ominous
disquiet circulating amongst their sled-dogs and the shamanistic Siberian who wanders in
from the north, recounting the terrible outcome that will come to pass once the monster is
unearthed.

Once exhumed, the Figure is placed in the ship with great difficulty due to its
shifting dimensions. The failures of the expeditionary scientists to account for the Figure’s
capacity is described as “original sin – the repeated failure, back there up north, to determine
the distribution of its weight in ordinary space . . . and that thus we had, in our cloud of self-
deluding and dream, brought it home already at large”(145). It is here that Pynchon begins his
political revaluation of a standard cliché of foreboding established throughout the horror
fiction and films, the motif of the Westerner/scientist transgressing the ancient rites of an
endemic population with violent and horrifying results. Pynchon does not construct a
simple cautionary tale like that of Pandora’s Box, whereby it is the quest for knowledge that
dooms Pandora; rather, Pynchon offers a prolepsis of future events. Instead of repackaging
this well-worn trope, Pynchon imbues the episode with allegorical implications that auger the
very real tragedy that will befall those Western powers who seek global control through
imperialism, whether cloaked in the interests of scientific discovery, cultural progress, civilized democracy, or freedom.

The racial bigotry that accompanied the imperial agenda is underscored during a moment in which Fleetwood Vibe recounts a conversation in an explorer’s Club populated by former white colonial administrators. The location of the club, while never called Washington, is referred to as “the district” south of the city under attack and Vibe has fled there in the panic following the Figure’s rampage. Vibe is quickly accosted by a character referred to only as “the General” who immediately asks: “But I say, old ‘Wood! Haven’t the wogs killed you yet?”(146). The General’s racist language illustrates the association of mortal threat that the colonial authorities made with the colonized black population of South Africa. Later, in “a funny sort of confab about civilized evil in far-off lands” among a number of speakers rarely identified, the General casually sizes up the colonial situation by discussing an explorer whose plan it was to feed his sled dogs, one-by-one, to the other dogs as his expeditionary load was lightened. The General then casually posits a grotesque analogy: “Suppose it were to happen to us, in the civilized world. If ‘another form of life’ decided to use humans for similar purposes, and being out on a mission of comparable desperation, as its own resources dwindled, we human beasts would likewise simply be slaughtered one by one, and those still alive obliged to, in some sense, eat their flesh”(147). The General’s imagined concept sounds like the stuff of horror tales, but he quickly suggests that this is similar to actual practices, translated from their origin in colonization to current practices under capitalism. When suggested by another unnamed speaker: “You refer to present world conditions under capitalism and the Trusts,” the General completes his broad vision by naming the “American Corporation” as that other “form of life” aforementioned. Vibe concludes his account of the explorer’s club by suggesting that the company’s
conversation was underscored throughout by the knowledge of the terrorizing Figure to the north. Pynchon employs this dialogue in order to create a genealogy of “civilized evil” borne of a Gothic Figure that represents a similar violence and historical trauma.

Pynchon’s nunatak transforms from clichéd horror tale, to a scene that approximates the lived horrors of New York City during the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Though he never references New York specifically, Pynchon’s inclusion of the coordinating descriptors “upstate” and “Jersey” nearby calls to mind the northeastern American metropolis. The most striking feature of what follows the Figure’s escape is its disappearance. The creature’s path of destruction and victims dominate the description, not the creature itself. The attack proceed thus:

The city more and more vertical, the population growing in density, all hostages to just such an incursion . . . Who outside the city would have imagined them as victims taken by surprise – who, for that matter, inside it? though many in the aftermath did profit briefly by assuming just that affecting pose. . . Fire and blood were about to roll like fate upon the complacent multitudes. . . So the city became the material expression of a particular loss of innocence – not sexual or political innocence but somehow a shared dream of what a city might at its best prove to be – its inhabitants became, and have remained, an embittered and amnesiac race, wounded but unable to connect through memory to the moment of the injury, unable to summon the face of their violator.(151-153)

The devastated city of Against the Day metonymically parallels New York and the United States, more generally. Pynchon mimetically reproduces the trauma of 9/11 by discursively reproducing the citizens’ amnesia and concomitant problems of representation in Vibe’s account. Throughout the traumatic scene of the Figure’s attack, never is the creature described satisfactorily, only its destruction and the congeries of confusion that left the city’s inhabitants in disarray. Eric Savoy notes this narrative strategy as a function of the gothic: “[. . .] the gothic registers a trauma in the strategies of representation as it brings forward a traumatic history toward which it gestures but can never fully refer”(Savoy and
Savoy continues on, offering another understanding of the Gothic: “[…] the gothic might be broadly conceptualized as a […] negation of national imaginary” (ibid). Vibe’s account renders the fragmentation of reality, as he chronicles the anguish that envelops the city. Pynchon’s allegory initiates this fragmentation, illustrating with discursive ellipses the actual incapacities that accompany both the traumatic event and its subsequent narrativization.

Pynchon later allegorizes the ruined city/nation in gendered terms:

Out of that night and day of unconditional wrath, folks would’ve expected to see any city, if it survived, all newly reborn, purified by flame, taken clear beyond greed, real-estate speculating, local politics – instead of which, here was this weeping widow, some one-woman grievance committee in black, who would go on to save up and lovingly record and mercilessly begrudge every goddamn single tear she ever had to cry, and over the years to come would make up for them all by developing into the meanest, cruelest bitch of a city, even among cities not notable for their kindness.

To all appearance resolute, adventurous, manly, the city could not shake that terrible all-night rape, when “he” was forced to submit, surrendering, inadmissibly, blindly feminine, into the Hellfire embrace of “her” beloved. He spent the years afterward forgetting and fabulating and trying to get back some self-respect. But inwardly, deep inside, “he” remained the catamite of Hell, the punk at the disposal of all the denizens thereof, the bitch in men’s clothing. (153-154)

Vibe’s telling represents a Gothic testimonial: a fragmentary attempt to describe moments of terror that extends Pynchon’s social commentary upon these historical circumstances. Elaine Scarry explains the impulse that I locate embedded in Vibe’s narrative: “[. . .] though there is no language for pain, under the pressure of the desire to eliminate pain, an at least fragmentary means of verbalization is available both to those who are themselves in pain and to those who wish to speak on behalf of others” (13). The image of the city as violated woman signals Vibe’s masculine will to protect the city through his narrative. Despite the lack of agency expressed throughout the episode, Vibe assumes an
indirect form of agency through the narrativization of the event. Pynchon’s deliberate omission of the violator, the horror’s architect, mimetically reproduces the trauma of rape, but also, the real conditions of terrorism, where the faces of the terrorist preemptively concealed and subsequently ancillary to the terrorist act.

The city’s demolition initiates what Benedict Anderson has termed “an imagined community” established by a shared violation and subsequent rage and humiliation, mirroring the United States’ violent swing towards extreme nationalism and its accompanying surges in xenophobia, cultural bigotry, and hate crimes following 9/11. The “embittered and amnesiac race” borne of the city’s devastation signals the birth of a group defined by their suffering, effacing whatever prior differences existed among them. Benedict Anderson writes of such an “imagined community”: “All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives. [. . .] Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, identity [. . .] which, because it can not be ‘remembered’, must be narrated”(204). Pynchon’s traumatized city parallels the nation, both conceptual and actual, as it manifests a solidarity founded upon the sense of violation incurred by the Figure’s attack, and subsequently asserts that solidarity through a shared bitterness and backlash. Pynchon’s vision of the United States post-9/11 as an infernal catamite graphically conveys, through Vibe’s chronicle, the emotional gravity of the circumstance. Vibe’s accounting as a narrative of historical events also suggests Pynchon’s attention to historiography.

By framing a first-person narrative account within his larger narrative and relying upon previous Gothic texts for tropic points of reference, Pynchon provides a greater degree of familiarity with the text, offering the reader more comfort and access to the
allegory. The comfort and familiarity generated through this strategy is deceptive, however, and actually functions more at the level of nostalgia, where “nostalgia is understood as a will to [sustain] cultural coherence” through a cognitive act of historiographical recombination (Savoy in Savoy and Martin, 7). Pynchon’s allegory offers no closure, as Eric Savoy notes of Gothic historiography: “[. . .] it irrupts by fits and starts in a semiotic that is fragmentary, one that is more suggestive than conclusive”(ibid, 8). Pynchon’s institution of a first-person account here suggests a personalized vision of an historical event, rather than an omniscient recording. This strategy privileges the private over the public, the marginal over the institutional. Furthermore, Vibe’s account relies upon themes and impressionistic glimpses of victimization, rather than the pyrotechnics of the destructive act, reproducing the ineffable nature of horror.

Thomas Pynchon, literary specter and strident dissident, haunts the power-structures that perpetuate human degradation in the service of realpolitik. Accordingly, in his indirect address of global terrorism, his concern is with the victim, appropriately, but not without an accounting of those levels of complicity that mitigate the claims to victimhood. The horror and destruction leveled by the mysterious creature bear the urgency of felt human experience, through the first-person testimony of Fleetwood Vibe, but Pynchon never fails to remind us that the monster itself is defined by retribution; its attack the result of the nation’s provocation through acts in the service of Empire. The desecration of indigenous culture and practice of colonial rule invite the monster’s wrath, a fact conveniently effaced by the “amnesiac race” left to rebuild their ruined city. The image of the ruined city becomes iconic here, as Pynchon writes in a historical moment very nearly defined by the fall of cities to violence, whether New York, Kabul, or Baghdad. In the end, the vengeful city becomes as much a creature of retribution as its aggressor. Effectively, the conclusion of the
episode tacitly posits the rhetorical question: who makes our monsters, but monsters themselves.

Later in the text, horror, death, and violation again factor largely into the narrative, as the intrepid Chums of Chance travel to Brussels “to pay their respects at a memorial service for General Boulanger, held each September 30 on the anniversary of his suicide,” effectively, a mission begun upon the premise of death (548). Miles Blundell, a crew’s resident cook and clairvoyant, senses ominous circumstances, described in a Gothic style similar to Jonathan Harker’s approach to Castle Dracula in Stoker’s text. The Chums are transported to Belgium “as if by some evil agency [. . .] down into seaside shadows stretching into the growing dark, shadows that could not always be correlated with actual standing architecture”(551). Describing the geographical setting where the crew has landed, Miles tries in vain to make out locations and features but is impeded by “the hesitant darkness in which little could be read across the lowland fixed anciently under a destiny, of not quite a curse, contemplated the pallid vastness of twilight, in its suspense, its cryptic insinuation”(Ibid). The “suspense” and immanent sense of danger increases as Miles wonders: “What was about to emerge from the night just behind the curve of Earth?”(Ibid). After this dramatic introduction to the Belgian countryside, Miles descends to meet with a former colleague, Ryder Thorn, who foretells the future of the ground upon which they stand: “You have no idea where you’re heading into. This world you take to be ‘the’ world will die, and descend into Hell, and all history after that will belong properly to the history of Hell [. . .] Flanders will be the mass grave of History”(554). The Gothic setting imagined by Blundell, though described within the paradigm of a Gothic tale, becomes the site for mass deaths brought about by the rigors of World War I. The conventional, metaphorical Gothic
tROME OF THE SUPERNATURAL MONSTER THAT THREATENS THE PROTAGONISTS IS SIGNIFICANTLY REPLACED BY THE PREFIGURING OF MODERN WARFARE.

AGAIN, PYNCHON PRIVILEGES THE METONYMICAL OVER THE METAPHORICAL; THE PRETERNATURAL OVER THE SUPERNATURAL. HERE, THE METONYMICAL SOURCE OF HORROR IS MAN HIMSELF, RATHER THAN SOME ABSTRACTED CREATURE OR SPECTRAL PRESENCE. THEREFORE, WHEN THORN PROPHESIES THE DESTRUCTION OF WAR, HE CAUTIONS AGAINST ITS ABSTRACTION THROUGH ANY AESTHETIC TRANSFORMATION:

THE WORLD. ONE A SCALE THAT HAS NEVER YET BEEN IMAGINED. NOT SOME RELIGIOUS PAINTING IN A CATHEDRAL, NOT BOSCH, OR BRUEGHEL, BUT THIS, WHAT YOU SEE, THE GREAT PLAIN, TURNED OVER AND HARRewed, ALL THAT LIES BELOW Brought TO THE SURFACE – DELIBERATELY Flooded, NOT THE SEA COME TO CLAIM ITS DUE, BUT THE HUMAN COUNTERPART TO THE SAME UTTER ABSENCE OF MERCY – FOR NOT A VILLAGE WALL WILL BE LEFT STANDING. LEAGUE UPON LEAGUE OF FILTH, CORPSES BY THE UNCOUNTED THOUSANDS, THE BREATH YOU TOOK FOR GRANTED Becom[ING] CORROSIVE AND DEATH-GIVING. (554)


PYNCHON INITIATES A UNIQUE FORM OF HAUNTING HERE – A PROLEPTIC HAUNTING, WHEREBY THERE IS NO SPECTRAL PRESENCE PER SE, ONLY THE INELUCTABLE TERROR OF WAR TO COME. LIKE EBENEZER SCROOGE’S GHOST OF CHRISTMAS FUTURE, PYNCHON’S IS A HAUNTING OF HISTORY, WHOSE CONSTRUCTION IS PREMISED UPON HUMANITY’S PERPETUAL RECOURSE TO VIOLENCE. THORN, AS A MEMBER OF A MYSTERIOUS GROUP OF SOOTHSAYERS, DISTANCES HIMSELF FROM “GHOSTLY” FORMS OF HAUNTING: “NO MORE THAN GHOSTS MAY CHOOSE WHAT PLACES THEY MUST HAUNT . . . YOU CHILDREN DRIFT IN A DREAM, ALL IS SMOOTH, NO INTERRUPTIONS, NO DISCONTINUITIES, BUT IMAGINE THE FABRIC OF TIME TORN OPEN, AND YOURSELVES SWEPT THROUGH, WITH NO WAY BACK, ORPHANS AND EXILES WHO

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find you will do what you must, however shameful, to get from end to end of each corroded day”(555). Here, Thorn conflates his position as oracle and witness to non-linear Time with the situation of refugees displaced by the devastation of war. Just as he associates his ominous vision of the future with a ghostly haunting, so do those dislocated and unhomed in war wander the landscape like living ghosts. Thorn reinforces his own position as a figurative ghost where he cries: “I wish I had never seen these Halls of Night, that I were not cursed to return, and return”(555). Thorn’s perpetual return alters the concept of a future war (WWI) to just another in a cycle, effectively imagining time as folding back upon itself instead of strictly linear. Pynchon’s construction of this scene again underscores the metonymical manifestation of horror, humanity’s repeated reliance upon escalating scales of violence to resolve global conflict. By invoking conventional Gothic iconography, Pynchon’s replacement of the metaphorical monsters (ghosts) with a host of human horrors to come, he emphasizes the primacy of the one over the other within the context of the contemporary moment. While the political salience of the Gothic remains, its terms must necessarily be modified in order to maintain urgency and impact in the face of current political trends.

Pynchon introduces another monstrous creature, the Tatzelwurm, as he initiates another critical volley against capitalist intrusion. The Tatzelwurm represents Pynchon’s use of the Gothic to initiate ecocritical discourse through his narrative. The Tatzelwurm manifests an outcry against nature’s violation, for as a company of men drill into the mountain in the name of establishing infrastructure, the Tatzelwurms react. The tunnels allowed for troop movements in times of war and, subsequently, shipping routes during peacetime. The characteristics of the Tatzelwurm are as follows: “It’s a snake with paws [. . .] Four legs and three toes on each paw, and a big mouth full of very sharp teeth. Hibernates
here, inside the mountain. [. . .] Tries to. But anybody who wakes it up, God help them”(655). One of the old-timers on the tunneling crew, Gerhardt describes the Tatzelwurm as a manifestation of confrontational energies: “It is also a good argument for Hell [. . .] for some primordial plasm of hate and punishment at the center of the Earth which takes on different forms, the closer it can be projected to the surface. Here under the Alps, it happens to become visible as the Tatzelwurm”(ibid). According to Gerhardt, the creatures, giant burrowing worms like those from David Lynch’s *Dune*, are simply manifestations of human sentiments. Instruments of “hate and punishment,” the Tatzelwurm signifies an explicit check upon humanity’s destruction of the natural world in the name of advancing civilization. Their identity as essential to the Earth makes their terrible attacks, quite literally, the retaliation of the Earth against the abuses of humanity.

Humanity’s intrusion upon the environment becomes mortally dangerous as Pynchon describes the terrifying Tatzelwurm’s appearance: “The really disturbing thing [. . .] is when you see one and it looks up and sees that you are watching it. Sometimes it will run, but if it doesn’t, then prepare to be attacked. It helps if you don’t look at its face too long. Even in the dark, you will know where it is, because it will be screaming – a high whistling scream that like the winter cold will creep in to occupy your bones”(ibid). This description utilizes the classic Gothic trope of the creature that defies proper visual enunciation because of its capacity to violently protect its image. Just as many horror films maintain suspense by deferring the presentation of the monster, so does the Tatzelwurm signify a similar narrative strategy. Gerhardt explains the reason for the monster’s appearance: “To tell us that we shouldn’t be doing this,” meaning, as another character suggests, continuing the work of extending the network of railroads, and in turn, the capitalist network of control. When asked about whether the capitalist railroad owners see the Tatzelwurm, the response: “It
visits them in their dreams [. . .] And it looks like us [the tunnel workers]” (656). Here, Pynchon directly connects the Tatzelwurm as a force beset against the owners, who acts in place of the workers, much like the dynamiters who protect the miners’ interests, elsewhere in Pynchon’s text. The uncanny image of the Tatzelwurm haunting the mind of the industrialists in nightmare visions of workers succinctly renders Pynchon’s movement from metaphorical monsters to metonymical manifestations of fear. Here, instead of evil creatures that promote fear among the masses, the Tatzelwurm, like the sand worms of Lynch’s *Dune*, are ultimately benign creatures that simply react against human disturbance. The creatures’ only threaten those who trespass upon their ecosystem, promoting capital venture through destructive means. The miners fear them in pragmatic terms, as an immanent risk at their work site. The Tatzelwurm only becomes a genuinely Gothic figure through its psychic irruption in the dreams of the owners. Whereas dynamiters commit acts of industrial terrorism in the name of worker rights, these attacks function similarly under the auspices of environmental preservation.

1.2. V. and Gravity’s Rainbow

Pynchon’s debut novel, *V.*, and his third and most celebrated novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, commence assaults on imperialist practices and corporate greed through an exploration of Gothic fetishism and decadence. *V.* presents a mystery that spans history and geography as Herbert Stencil attempts to deduce the events that led to his father’s disappearance decades earlier. Armed only with a cryptic passage from the elder Stencil’s notes concerning an appointment with “V.,” Stencil sets out to reconstruct the infinite number of possible narratives that could illuminate the nature of “V.,” not knowing if it
referred to a place or a person. Naturally, Pynchon complicates the text by inserting multiple possibilities, involving the reader in the impossible mystery. Moreover, the text oscillates between narrators, without resolving whether or not those narrators are simply figments of Stencil’s unique imagination. Within the novel, framed narratives and multiple protagonists further muddy the resolution of Stencil’s quandary, and simultaneously, the text itself. Linda Hutcheon describes Pynchon’s novel: “In Pynchon’s *V.*, [. . .] the writing of history is seen as an ultimately futile attempt to form experience into meaning. The multiple and peripheral perspectives offered in the fiction’s eye-witness accounts resist any final meaningful closure. And despite the recognizable historical context (of the Cold War years and their paranoia or of German policies in southwest Africa), the past still resists complete human understanding” (*Politics of Postmodernism* 68). While I would agree with Hutcheon that Pynchon’s text resists narrative closure, *V.*’s resistance hardly comes at the sacrifice of meaning. While Hutcheon quickly brushes Pynchon’s text off as paranoid or conspiracy theory, the current examination suggests, rather, that Pynchon employs actual historical moments and events in order to create an alternate, often Gothic, history to challenge the power-systems that subtend dominant History. Moreover, Pynchon’s narratives are not conspiracy theories, but present the process by which conspiracy can be born.

Throughout the text, Pynchon continually troubles the distinction between animate and inanimate, altering the typically fraught Gothic paradigm of life and death, in order to foreground the concept of technology as an apparatus that can simulate life or, just as easily, snuff it out. *V.* is populated by cyborgic women, artificially intelligent dummies, and wraiths that aptly illustrate Pynchon’s blurring of the animate.

“Mondaugen’s Story,” an episode within the novel, relates the story of Kurt Mondaugen, a radio wave researcher studying the atmospheric activity within southwest
Africa many years removed from the time of General Luthar von Trotha’s genocidal Extermination Order that sanctioned the unprovoked killing of all African’s with the Sudwest Protectorate. Mondaugen, forced by the threat of political unrest, seeks refuge in a local farmer, Foppl’s walled estate, where a siege party is undertaken, and a Gothic carnival of decadence and violence commences. Pynchon utilizes the conventional Gothic trope of the Westerner/scientist, whose presence is founded upon colonial interests and who comes face-to-face with the madness and inhumanity that inheres in imperial conquest. The Mondaugen episode of V. represents Pynchon’s first narrative exploration of the conditions of colonialism. Pynchon situates this tale of colonial aggression and malevolence as text within the text, literally rendering a proto-postcolonial awareness of the profound impact of alternative historiographical narratives that irrupt from within the dominant historical narrative.

Andrew Teverson elicits the nature and function of a postcolonial Gothic: “The Gothic, because it originates as a literary discourse that challenges Enlightenment ideals of the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘unitary’ (whether in terms of self, body or book), is already poised to threaten the ‘unitary’ vision of nationhood . . .” (Empire and the Gothic, 211). The concerted rejection of Enlightenment ideals represented within both the Gothic and postmodern makes the imperial project a natural target for critique. Andrew Smith and William Hughes describe the relationship between Enlightenment humanism and imperialism, stating that the Enlightenment humanism with its stress on the Cartesian subject “helps to construct the racial hierarchies which would come to underpin colonialism” (1). They continue by noting: “The claim that such a position relies upon the exclusion of ‘otherness’ finds its corollary in the Gothic’s fascination with raising often difficult questions about what it means to be human. The Gothic’s use of non-human and ab-human figures such as vampires, ghosts
and monsters of various kinds is calculated to challenge the dominant humanist discourse. Pynchon’s perpetual return to the question of the animate illustrates this point, and continues as he depicts the treatment of humans as something less than human based on the color of their skin or their cultural affiliation. Moreover, the colonial aggressor enters the equation for their in-human actions. Considering Pynchon’s construction of Mondaugen’s tale, which indicts the all-too-often-effaced history of genocide that has plagued the development of African nations and cultures, the coherence of a metropolitan center is effectively repudiated. It is through this attack upon the concept of national unity that allows for Pynchon’s message to alternately address current, specifically American, forms of imperial conquest. Furthermore, Pynchon’s disruption of the concept of national consensus privileges both a pluralistic vision of nation and the profound importance of dissenting voices from within the prevailing imperial regime.

Pynchon constructs the Mondaugen chapter palimpsestically, intercutting at least four temporal moments and several subjective narrative voices without clear indication of the shifts in narrator or time period. The multiple subjectivities tacitly undermine any notion of historical authority, instead privileging the personal over the universal. This alienating effect emphasizes the confusion and horror that Mondaugen experiences within the walls of Foppl’s farmhouse, which takes on the persona and dimensions of a Gothic castle. Pynchon’s strong critique of imperial practice grows more intense in relation to his use of Gothic imagery and constructions. John Dugdale, in his study of Pynchon’s copious allusions, notes that during the Mondaugen episode Pynchon refers to such texts as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat,” “The Imp of the Perverse,” and “The Masque of the Red Death,” commenting that the last text “itself arguably related to racial fears, informs the basic conception of the siege party of a reckless elite doomed to eventual Nemesis.”
Dugdale’s analysis continues to illustrate Pynchon’s echoing of Poe: “Here numerous details are taken from Poe (phantasmagoria, Dance of Death, blood, velvet, arabesques, corridors) and there is a direct verbal allusion – ‘To hell with them out there . . . so affluent was the farmer Foppl’ (234-5) – the last phrase following Poe’s ‘the Prince Prospero’ and playing on ‘prosperous’” (Dugdale 91). Foppl’s farmhouse and siege party resemble the decadent castle of Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death” in a number of ways that bear noting. First, the castle represents a space of opulence and security, as well as a spatial motif that returns perpetually throughout the history of Gothic fiction, from Walpole, to Radcliffe, to Stoker, to Poe, and beyond. Second, the siege party seeks to elude the inevitable descent of the indigenous people’s rejection of colonial oppression, just as Poe’s revelers attempt to avoid the perils of the Red Death. In both cases, the efforts are futile and assume an air of passivity in the face of certain doom. Finally, the choice of decadence in the face of certain ruin governs the action of both Poe’s tale and Pynchon’s Mondaugen episode. Both narratives move in the direction of an ineluctable fate. Pynchon’s tale attests to the ephemeral nature of colonial rule, albeit a damaging and parasitic transience.

In addition to Poe, Dugdale notes Pynchon’s allusion to Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, yet another text premised upon the instability of a white elite due to cultural anxieties over racial difference and slavery. In both of Dugdale’s allusive instances, Pynchon relies upon the Gothic (Poe’s American Gothic and Faulkner’s Southern Gothic) to invest his narrative with the macabre dread associated with the discourse of racial anxiety. Pynchon’s use of American Gothic authors as the locus for his examination of the distant

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2 It should be noted that Dugdale’s citations of Pynchon follow the Lippincott text, whose pagination diverges from the current examination’s text. For the purposes of this examination, the passage Dugdale cites comes from page 248.
locale of Southwest Africa in 1922 suggests Pynchon’s broad meditation upon racial conditions in the United States. The fluidity of temporality expressed throughout the episode also renders Pynchon’s liberation of time’s fixity, allowing for meaning to be gathered from disparate times and geographies. Though the reader experiences Mondaugen’s nightmarish confrontations in Foppl’s home, it is only through the lens of American Gothic narrative that the scene’s ghoulish impact is achieved.

During Mondaugen’s stay in Foppl’s lair, he experiences all manner of disturbing phenomena, including witnessing a slave being whipped brutally and watching various fetishistic sexual encounters. The action reaches a crucial moment as Mondaugen clandestinely spies the sadistic colonel Weissmann as he searches for the hidden Mondaugen, dressed in a long, white dress cut in the fashion of 1904 (the year of Von Trotha). The Gothic character of the scene becomes evident as Weissmann’s actions and language become more cryptic and ominous. Pynchon describes the scene:

All at once a dawn chorus burst from the loudspeaker, chaotic at first but resolving eventually into a deep-space madrigal for three or four voices. To which the intruder Weissmann, out of sight, added still another, in falsetto, to a minor-keyed Charleston: Now that the twilight’s just beginning/World, stop/Spinning;/Cuckoo’s in his clock with laryngitis,/So he can’t tell us what night tonight is./ No one among the other dancers has/ Any/Answers, just/You, I, the night/And a little black sjambok3 . . . (V. 276-277)

The minor key signifies an eeriness equivalent to Weissmann’s song, amplifying the sense of danger felt by Mondaugen, and lending even greater unreality to the decadent atmosphere of Foppl’s estate. The song describes a macabre scene, as measurable time is rendered ineffectual, and only night prevails. The scene concludes with Mondaugen hiding

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3 A type of whip used here to signify the sado-masochism of the siege party, and concomitantly, the brutality of slavery and colonialism.
beneath his bed as Weissmann passes out of the room. Pynchon likens Mondaugen’s position to that of an ill, frightened child, entertaining wild, monstrous fantasies: “[. . .] Under-the-bed us even stranger country than neurasthenic children have dreamt it to be”(277). Mondaugen’s experience has become the stuff of standard horror narratives.

Following this passage, and without any orienting transition, the time and setting of the action moves to a desert trek being made, during the time of Von Trotha, by an unnamed rider atop his horse Firelily and a troop of marching slaves. Judith Chambers suggests that the Firelily episode of this chapter represents Mondaugen’s “fever dream,” based on Pynchon’s prior mention of neurasthenia (quoted above). Whether the surreal imagery of Mondaugen’s nightmare, or simply a nightmarish and unconnected moment issuing from some other realm of the text (for example from some Stencilized account), the Firelily episode represents a Gothic blending of the erotic and the morbid. Moreover, in disrupting the temporality of Mondaugen’s narrative, the historical present itself is teleologically endowed with meaning. As Hayden White notes: “Considered as a transition between a past and a future, every present is at once a realization of projects performed by past human agents and a determination of a field of possible projects to be realized by living human agents in their future”(The Content and the Form 149). Accordingly, the past, as ostensibly channeled by Mondaugen in his delirium, determines the agency of Foppl’s decadent guests, and the agency withheld from the oppressed indigenous peoples through their physical subjugation and lack of voice within Mondaugen’s account. Pynchon inflects the Firelily scene with a chilling sense of danger by removing any direct link to the narrative of Mondaugen or his besieged associates. The scene commences with a rationalization for the extermination order pronounced by Von Trotha: “The voluptuous feeling of safety, the delicious lassitude you went into the extermination with was sooner or later replaced by a
very curious – not emotion because part of it was obviously a lack of what we commonly call ‘feeling’ – ‘functional agreement’ would come closer to it; operational sympathy”(277). This “operational sympathy” signifies the shift from human empathy to inhuman acts of sadism. Quickly, this ostensible pathos will be replaced by sexual arousal.

Firelily’s rider and the horse initiate the sexual conditions that will inflect their acts of cruelty with fetishistic sadism. Fetish represents a standard Gothic trope. Firelily appears “sexually aroused” as she and her rider assess the march of the slaves. Pynchon describes the slaves’ conditions, indirectly through the subjective view of the anonymous rider:

In his village church in the Palatinate was a mural of the Dance of Death, led by a rather sinuous, effeminate Death in his black cloak, carrying his scythe and followed by all ranks of society from prince to peasant. Their own progress was hardly so elegant: they could only boast a homogenous string of suffering Negroes and a drunken sergeant in a wideawake hat who carried a Mauser. Yet that association, which most of them shared, was enough to give the unpopular chore an atmosphere of ceremony.(278)

The aestheticization of human suffering infuses the scene with added horror, evacuating the visceral quality of the trauma and supplanting it with artifice. The mention of Death and his relationship to old religious iconography lends an ironic note, as Firelily’s rider effectively positions himself within the scene as Death, acknowledging the “business” of slavery to be production of death. This comparison effaces the culpability of the slave-driver, since Death historically serves a necessary purpose, whereas Lucifer elects to defy the Lord’s ways. The rider’s assessment of the slave’s amplifies the religiosity of the scene as he esteems their “atmosphere of ceremony.” The narrative distance apparent within this subjective depiction of suffering denies the subjectivities of the slaves: their misery made painterly; their individuality obliterated, as they are rendered mass ornament.
As the march progresses, Firelily’s rider narrates the whipping death of a slave in distinctly Gothic terminology. The whipping proceeds as follows: “Together the troopers sjamboked the Hottentot on the buttocks and thighs, forcing him into a queer little dance. It took a talent to make a prisoner dance that way without slowing down the rest of the trek because of the way they were all chained together”(279). The reference to the prisoner’s “dance” connects the current image to the aforementioned Dance of Death that the rider recalls from the church mural. Moreover, the suffering described casually as dance creates a radical discrepancy between the scene’s graphic brutality and the nonchalance of the narration. This off-hand language continues as the rider esteems the efficiency of the troopers’ sadism. Later, the violence escalates as the prisoners attack their oppressors, and the narration becomes abstract and philosophical, further distancing the act from its horror. Speaking of one of the troopers in particular, the narrator describes the aftermath of the murder:

Fleische said later that he’d felt something like it too – there came over him for the first time an off sort of peace, perhaps like what the black was feeling as he gave up the ghost. [ . . . ] Things seemed all at once to fall into a pattern: a great cosmic fluttering in the blank, bright sky and each grain of sand, each cactus spine, each feather of the circling vulture above them and invisible molecule of heated air seemed to shift imperceptibly so that this black and he, and he and every other black would henceforth have to kill slid into alignment, assumed a set symmetry, a dancelike poise.(279-280)

This “great cosmic fluttering” suggests the dangerous and terrible sublimity that must consequently be imagined by the violent oppressor in order to undertake such merciless destruction. The rationalization of the act by investing it with some celestial significance illustrates the helplessness of the prisoner, as not only are the conditions of his degradation of human design, but also the will of some higher power. Furthermore, making
the violence the consecration of some fatalistic covenant justifies it by implying the prisoners’ tacit consent.

In the conclusion to this analepsis, all of the troopers experience the sense that the prisoners acquiesce to their destruction, illustrating the corruption of reality in Pynchon’s construction of the Land of Death. Unlike the playful or ironic divergence from reality so prevalent to Pynchon’s work, the destruction of the Bondels represents several framed narratives of colonist subjectivity. First, the entire episode occurs in what is called “Mondaugen’s Story” and may, or may not, be one of Mondaugen’s fever dreams. Next, the specific events of the troopers’ march are narrated by an unnamed trooper, only identified by the name of his sadistic mare. Finally, the narrator relates events and sentiments as described by the murderous troopers following their slaughter of the imprisoned slaves. This level of subjective translation mitigates the plausibility of the account, creating a terrifying alternate history to the official record that resulted in Von Trotha’s actions being formally deplored, even in his home country of Germany. Pynchon’s use of the Gothic imagery here signifies the profound social impact leveled by such a will to power. Considering Germany’s return to genocide during World War II as a justified act, sanctioned by Hitler as an act of “cosmic” proportions, Pynchon’s message illustrates the perpetual return of the repressed – von Trotha to Hitler – so central to Gothic fiction.

Following a meeting with von Trotha, the troopers take to the countryside, killing any and all in their path. The narrator describes the scene, noting that the once implicit consent offered by the Bondel population is now explicitly given: “Returning from Waterberg with von Trotha and his staff, they came upon an old woman digging wild onions at the side of the road. A trooper named Konig jumped down off his horse and shot her dead: but before he pulled the trigger he put the muzzle against her forehead and said, ‘I am
going to kill you.’ She looked up and said, ‘I thank you’”(280). While the events of this scene could be interpreted as the woman’s willing participation in her own demise (as is conjectured by the German troopers), there is also the possibility that her assent represents the exhaustion and resignation of a woman faced with her own impending doom. Told from her perspective, Pynchon tacitly suggests, this scene could be understood rather differently. The rampage continues: “Later, toward dusk, there was one Herero girl, sixteen or seventeen years old, for the platoon; and Firelily’s rider was last. After he’d had her he must have hesitated a moment between sidearm and bayonet. She actually smiled then; pointed to both, and began to shift her hips lazily in the dust. He used both”(280-281). The rape and murder of a teenage girl ends the unnamed rider’s account, again suggesting the willingness and, here, erotic participation in one’s own annihilation. Considered on a grander scale, the episode asserts the will of the oppressed in hegemonic acquiescence. Moreover, in relating the terms of the massacre to “a great cosmic fluttering,” Pynchon connects this horrifying scene to other genocide’s sanctioned by heavenly powers, namely, American Manifest Destiny. Ultimately, von Trotha’s Extermination Order and Hitler’s final solution function similarly to the premise of Manifest Destiny, seizing power over the land, and the dictate of the heavens all at once. Pynchon’s rendering of the scene’s graphic brutality and sexual insinuations further transform the terms of the historical acts into elements of Gothic iconography.

Just as the Firelily sequence began, so does it conclude: with a transitionless shift back into Mondaugen’s present. As though woken from a dream, Mondaugen becomes aware of the dominatrix, Hedwig Vogelsang “entering the room astride a male Bondel who crawled on all fours”(281). What could be termed a fetishistic act of seduction is, rather, no act at all. Hedwig’s treatment of the enslaved Bondel links too neatly to the nightmarish
episode featuring Firelily and her rider. Hedwig makes the connection explicit where she claims: “I call it Firelily [. . .] because of its sorrel skin”(281). Her utterance of the name “Firelily” signifies the pervasiveness of human atrocity, from the potentially interior space of Mondaugen’s dreamscape, to the present moment. Moreover, the identification of the debased slave as “it” further conveys the dehumanization of indigenous populations through colonialism’s cruel displays of power. That Hedwig’s display of power is ostensibly theatrical (as an act of sexual seduction, since she proceeds to have sex with the weakened Mondaugen), but in fact, conducted in earnest sadism, makes her malevolence metonymically, rather than metaphorically, linked to von Trotha’s genocidal exploits. By identifying the skin as a visual signifier of the slave, Hedwig’s display further intimates the play of power represented in their colonial experience. The Bondel signifies Otherness both through visible blackness and cultural difference. The episode commenced with the apocryphal reports of a native rebellion, signifying the anxieties of the colonizing whites that would ultimately take up residence in Foppl’s phantasmagoric dwelling. Despite their attempts to treat the natives as monsters (as succinctly shown in the case of Hedwig), the colonizers own abject Otherness dominates Mondaugen’s story; their inhuman acts of sexual depravity; their sadism; their monstrousness. Andrew Smith and William Hughes describe this operation of the Gothic, where one form of otherness undermines another:

This model of collapse also underpins the process in which the colonizing subject is displaced in its confrontation with racial otherness, an otherness that is both strange, distanced and exotic, and yet the site upon which racial, psychological, and sexual anxieties are projected. In effect, difference and distance become erased. [. . .] This is perhaps the central complexity of the [Gothic] because it debates the existence of otherness and alterity, often in order to demonize such otherness.(3)

Monstrosity becomes the nullifying term, as behavioral difference reverses the hierarchy instituted to assess visible difference. As with Victor Frankenstein, the attempt to
master another, and in doing so, create a monster, signifies his becoming a monster. The historical conflation of Victor and his monster under his surname, Frankenstein, succinctly illustrates the ways in which monstrosity is innately linked to the creation of monsters, from within and externally.

Homi Bhabha identifies atrocity as that which undermines colonial authority and claims to civilized progress. He suggests that the colonizer’s position as both paternal authority and concomitant oppressor becomes an ambivalent point in much colonial discourse, compounding the violence already initiated through the colonizer writing the history of the colonized. Continuing, Bhabha states that such a historiographical intervention, on the part of the colonizer, “reveals an agonistic uncertainty contained in the incompatibility of empire and nation; it puts on trial the very discourse of civility within which representative government claims its liberty and empire its ethics. Those substitutive objects of colonialist governmentality [. . .] are strategies of surveillance that cannot maintain their civil authority once the colonial supplementary, or excess of their address is revealed”(96). Mondaugen’s text dramatically performs these “excesses” by transforming them into the fetishistic and brutal acts performed by a group defined by their abject insularity. Moreover, as an ancillary participant in colonial authority, Mondaugen’s role as scientist and, finally, historiographer represents the colonialist discourse whose very presence represents a form of violence done to the history of the oppressed. This violence is mimetically translated in the Firelily episode, as Mondaugen, the passive arm of colonial power, loses control of the narrative, psychically and literally, and the narration continues outside of Mondaugen’s temporal moment and plausible knowledge. From where this grotesque narrative of colonial cruelty springs remains a part of critical debate, but its irruption within Mondaugen’s Gothic narrative represents one alternative colonialist
discourse framed within another, closing a circuit of silence that denies the voice of the colonized. This silence represents a more insidious source of terror, for just as countless horror films and fictions have included the protagonists’ inability to scream in their moment of terror, so is utterance denied for the colonized. Linda Hutcheon notes the significance of utterance as a historiographical function linked to trauma: “History is not ‘what hurts’ so much as ‘what we say once hurt’” (Politics of Postmodernism 82). “Mondaugen’s Story” suggests that the colonized, indigenous people’s subjective effacement from historical representation, and within the narrative itself, represents their voice being hijacked and made commensurate with the terms of their subjugation.

Pynchon’s artistic choice to write about genocide and imperial practice via the conflict in southwest Africa simultaneously recalls the despotism and sadism of Hitler and the Nazis, while also making the violence and brutality more historically universal among western powers. Mondaugen’s tale signifies a metonymical representation of the imperial past that Pynchon clearly opposes. Homi Bhabha stresses the importance of interpreting textual tropes and themes as metonymy, symptomatizing the text, intimating the social and political forces that govern its constitution. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin identify a similar gesture towards metonymy in American postmodern aesthetic and critical practices: “Thus the long-term importance of the postmodernist and poststructuralist impacts in America may well be in allowing the Americans to recapture and appropriate their own writing from a false history of explication. [. . .] It is significant, then, that more recently American critics have seen the possibility of rereading American literature as metonymic of a continual process of subversion and appropriation which predates the concerns of modernism and postmodernism and which may well be centred in their post-coloniality” (163). Effectively, Pynchon’s text elicits the metonymical structures that ground
his critique of Empire, while issuing an acknowledgment of the methods by which historical horrors were subverted through their subsequent historicization. “Mondaugen’s Story,” as a fictive historiography, illuminates the process by which identities were destroyed and effaced, both by human acts of brutality and artful composition.

Moving from the actual colony, Pynchon moves Stencil’s quest for V. to another setting, where he deploys a figurative construction of imperial rule inflected with eroticism and fetish. Using a cyborgic woman, V., as the focal center of Stencil’s imagined narrative, Pynchon creates a scene of fetish that incorporates Gothic imagery and sexual transgression. Pynchon introduces the concept of fetishism directly where V. addresses her lover, Melanie: “Do you know what a fetish is? Something of a woman which gives pleasure but is not a woman. A shoe, a locket . . . une jarretiere. You are the same, not real but an object of pleasure”(436). This description of fetish emphasizes the ways in which the fetishistic gaze dissects the coherent whole, in this case a woman, and substitutes a fragmented, objectified part of the whole in the pursuit of pleasure. The cyborg V., with her clockwork eye, looks upon Melanie as simply a “chaos of flesh” whose identity as an exoticized dancer evacuates the “reality” of Melanie as a female and person. Ultimately, V.’s fetish is a deadly one: “V. needed her fetish, Melanie a mirror, temporary peace, another to watch her have pleasure. [. . .

As for V., she recognized – perhaps aware of her own progression towards inanimateness – the fetish of Melanie and the fetish of herself to be one. As all inanimate objects, to one victimized by them, are alike”(442). Pynchon’s construction of this scene emphasizes its visuality, as the dominant sense medium through which V.’s fetish is transmitted. Moreover, Pynchon infuses the scene with a macabre aura of death and decadence, befitting the macabre setting of a Gothic novel.
Pynchon illuminates the connection between V.’s fetish and a more insidious world defined by Death itself. Again, Pynchon returns to the dialectic of the animate and inanimate. Identifying a central narrative theme “of all Romanticism” (the literary period that gave birth to the Gothic) – “the act of love and the act of death are one” – V. concludes: “Love-play until then this becomes an impersonation of the inanimate, a transvestism not between sexes but between quick and dead; human and fetish”(442). Subsequently, V.’s sexual relationship with Melanie must necessary step beyond the performative limits of fetish, and transcend the barrier between inanimate and animate. V. describes the social import of their relationship in an analogy: “their love was in its way only another version of tourism; for as tourists bring into the world as it has evolved part of another, and eventually create a parallel society of their own in every city, so the Kingdom of Death is served by fetish-constructions like V.’s, which represent a kind of infiltration”(443). Pynchon juxtaposition of V.’s fetishism and the phrase “Kingdom of Death,” which he uses throughout his oeuvre to describe the practice of Empire, inflects the scene with a power dynamic, privileging V.’s power over Melanie by virtue of V.’s inanimate status. Melanie is gruesomely killed during their act of sexual congress, and V., who exists beyond the scope of life and death as a “clockwork” woman, persists to confound Stencil’s quest. Just like the colonizing country exploits the resources of the colony, granting it “transvestite” status as a subject of the motherland by aping the customs and cultural practices of the motherland, so does V. exploit Melanie by luring her into a virtual suicide pact, guaranteeing her destruction in the service of V.’s cruel demands. While this analogy seems like a metaphor, the end result is entirely metonymical, for Melanie’s death and her corpse intimate the death and decay inherent to the imperial Kingdom of Death. Homi Bhabha explores the relationship between fetish and its representation in colonial discourse: “Within discourse, the fetish
represents the simultaneous play between metaphor as substitution (masking absence and difference) and metonymy (which contiguously registers the perceived lack). The fetish or stereotype gives access to ‘identity’ which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it’ (Location of Culture 74-75). In his conception of fetish in connection to the Kingdom of Death, Pynchon evinces the “mastery” innate to colonial domination, where satellite colonial communities are forced to assimilate and comply with the perpetually repeated cultural modes of the metropole. Furthermore, the ghastly scene of Melanie’s demise demonstrates the “anxiety” that Bhabha notes in Pynchon’s metonymical construction of the fatal relationship premised upon an unequal distribution of power.

The gruesome epilogue to the scene depicts the “kind of infiltration” that V.’s love implies, as Melanie remains impaled through the vagina on a giant spike, lifeless before a crowd of lascivious onlookers: “shirt torn, one eye blackened, the doctor knelt over the girl and pronounced her dead” (447). Melanie’s graphic death illustrates the trajectory towards destruction that Pynchon identifies in the production of Empire. Bhabha articulates the link between power and desire: “This conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, master/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence, has a fundamental significance for colonial discourse. For the scene of fetishism is also the scene of the reactivation and repetition of primal fantasy – the subject’s desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division, for the subject must be gendered to be engendered, to be spoken” (75). Bhabha’s description of the dissembling function of fetish here gestures towards Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, whereby impurity is cast out in an effort to establish subjective coherence. V., whose origin is as mysterious as her subjectivity (considering her potential existence simply
as a manifestation of Herbert Stencil’s fetishism), seeks in Melanie a “reactivation” of animation. That Melanie cannot withstand the fetish and is gruesomely killed, rendering her inanimate, testifies to the impossibility of actualizing the fetish and showing the ineluctable course plotted towards death that Pynchon identifies in the imperial process. Like a vampire or a colonizing entity, V. leaves Melanie’s blood-drained corpse to run off with a new conquest, to begin her creation of the Kingdom of Death anew.

*Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon’s most critically celebrated text, sardonically presents imagined events of the Second World War and the global devastation and mass confusion that accompanied the war’s aftermath. Throughout the text, Pynchon’s critique of governments’ fostering of war is evident, as the quotient of insanity increases in relation to the power exercised by individuals. Molly Hite succinctly describes one of the novel’s narrative strategies for producing a sense of diffusion: “In *Gravity’s Rainbow* characters on every level of the social and political hierarchy intuit a larger pattern that renders them impotent. Paranoia becomes a configuration like a Chinese puzzle, where every system of control turns into evidence for a more encompassing system”(123). Written during the chaos of America’s violent presence in Vietnam, *Gravity’s Rainbow* has often been considered a strident antiwar text responding to America’s imperial presence in Southeast Asia. Christina Jarvis’ “The Vietnamization of World War II in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*” cites numerous instances where Pynchon’s language gestures towards his contemporary moment within *Gravity’s Rainbow*. More directly, Jarvis’ cites a letter that Pynchon famously sent to Thomas Hirsch, a graduate student whom Pynchon contacted concerning source material on colonial Sudwest Africa for his first novel, where Pynchon writes “I think what went on back in Sudwest is archtypical of every clash between the west
and non-west, clashes that are still going on right now in South East Asia” (Pynchon qtd. in Seed 241-2; Jarvis 106). Susan Jeffords describes the aesthetic that such responses to Vietnam employed by suggesting that they “must be read, not as increasingly refined attempts to arrive at an explanation of the war, but as increasingly deferred logics that produce a (con)fusio

dn from which explanation cannot occur” (22). Part of the confusion that Pynchon renders, in addition to other strategies that disrupt the text’s narrative coherence, results from his constitution of a Gothic iconography of fear. The insertion of Gothic and ghostly imagery underscores the unworldly terror that inheres in the experience of war. Pynchon is able to metonymically respond to the conditions of Vietnam via the phantasmagorical landscape he depicts in 1940s Europe.

The V-2 Rocket, less potent successor to the V-1, or buzz bomb, was a weapon of terror and very much the central icon of Gravity’s Rainbow. The buzz bomb was named for its audible approach, ostensibly giving some time to avoid the impact, but the V-2 was silent, and therefore, capable of generating more terror through its soundless assault. Pynchon’s reliance on paranoia pervades the text, owing much to the terror historically implicit in the V-2. The Rocket hovers over the action of the novel, literally and figuratively, as immanent threat of death and military/technological usurpation. It is the rocket that enables Blicero, arguably Pynchon’s most Gothic character, to devise his fiendish plot to propagate a “Kingdom of Death.”

Blicero, aka Weissmann, embodies decadence, perversion, and a histrionic display of Evil. He is a caricatured personification of differing conceptions of the insanity of war. Blicero represents what Julia Kristeva terms “the abject.” She writes: “It [abjection] is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance” (15). Blicero places his bound, cherubic lover Gottfried inside the 00001 rocket that promises certain
annihilation for Gottfried and countless others. The rocket serves as a sexual symbol for ejaculation, as Blicero blasts Gottfried off in an “alchemical” gesture of rebirth. He speaks to Gottfried as he loads him into the rocket: “I want to break out – to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want to be taken in love: so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered, inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become. . . .” (GR 724).

Blicero’s speech bespeaks the transformative gesture that Kristeva locates in abjection. Blicero’s pedophilic relationship with Gottfried further illustrates Kristeva’s description of the abject: “The abject is related to perversion. [. . .] The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life – a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death – an operator in genetic experimentations [. . .].” (Powers of Horror 15). Blicero, the “progressive despot” who “lives at the behest of death” succinctly conveys the atrocity bound up in the Nazi programs of genocide, but within the terms of the Gothic, he accesses the sentiments of those who were and continue to be horror-struck at such conscienceless violence. Blicero, like his “Kingdom of Death,” stretches beyond his role in Nazi aggression; he represents the frightening persistence of such aggression as it takes new forms.

Just prior to his sentimental speech on achieving transcendence with Gottfried, Blicero sodomizes the boy while narrating the evils of humanity. Blicero describes the imperial process that signifies the creation of the “Kingdom of Death”:

America was the edge of the World. A message for Europe, continent-sized, inescapable. Europe had found a site for its Kingdom of Death, that special Death the West had invented. [. . .] In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceana, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered. In time the death-colonies grew strong enough to break away. But the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death, the structure of it, kept on. Now
we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis. (GR 722)

In broad strokes, Pynchon indicts the West for the genealogy of death that it has constituted through the violation of developing countries in the name of progress. The “Kingdom of Death” signifies the ultimate achievement of the Enlightenment, its avid phenomenological “Analysis” and “impulse to empire” beyond the consideration of humanity. In this passage, Pynchon relocates the horror of his Gothic predecessors from the metaphorical, alienated monster to the metonymical citizen whose role in perpetrating human degradation and murder is made accountable. The West and its prevailing historical Kingdom serve as stark symbols of oppression, and it is the complicity of all those within the court/metropole of the Kingdom that generates the horror.

The Zone of Gravity’s Rainbow, occupied Germany following WWII, represents within its narrative geography the chaos and confusion that accompanied the violence and mass displacement of people. Moreover, the Zone signifies the erasure of Old World value systems that grounded European social hierarchies within national borders. Relying on Gothic imagery, Pynchon describes “The Zone” where he writes:

it is always easy, in open and lonely places, to be visited by Panic wilderness fear, but these are the urban fantods here, that come to get you when you are lost or isolate inside the way time is passing, when there is no more History...barn-swallow souls, fashioned of brown twilight, rise toward white ceilings...they are unique to the Zone, they answer the new Uncertainty. Ghosts used to be either likenesses of the dead or wraiths of the living. But here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly...Down here are only wrappings left in the light, in the dark: images of the Uncertainty. (303)

The Zone is aptly depicted as a place where history is conflated with the present, life with death, dark with light. Pynchon immediately renders the Zone a space of “Panic wilderness fear” where one is likely to be visited by figures whose ghostliness, like the
landscape itself, remains uncertain. Ontological certainty is premised upon maintenance of borders, national or otherwise; the Zone offers no such certainty.

Pynchon’s illustration of the Zone perpetually returns to Gothic imagery as visual descriptors. Here, Pynchon relates Slothrop’s chance meeting with a mysterious little girl, somewhere within the Zone:

The fire died presently, leaving starlight and a faint glow over some town to the east, through windows whose panes were all gone. The music box still played, beyond the running time, it seemed, of an ordinary spring. Their feet moved over clouded, crumbled old glass, torn silks, bones of dead rabbits and kittens. The geometrical path took them among ballooning, ripped arrases, smelling of dust and an older bestiary than the one by the fire...unicorns, chimaeras...and what had he seen festooning the child-sized entranceway? Garlic bulbs? Wait – weren’t they to keep away vampires? A faint garlic smell reached him exactly then, an inbreaking of Balkan blood on the air of his north, as he turned back to her to ask if she was really Katje, the lovely little Queen of Transylvania. But the music had run down. She had vaporized from his arms.(282-283)

Pynchon’s insertion of spooky and conventionally Gothic imagery (vampires, chimaeras) to describe the scene of a war-ravaged barnyard, effectively dislocates realistic representation from the very act of description. The Zone, at once invoking the hypnagogic and the phantasmagoric, privileges a cosmology of the fictive over the Real. Pynchon’s fusing of the Gothic and the war-torn setting of World War II suggests the supernatural horror that accompanies any attempts to imagine the reality of Europe during that historical period. Any effort to realistically recapture the atmosphere of pain and death that blanketed the continent during WWII would necessarily fail, so Pynchon opts to illustrate the fear through the conventions of Gothic literary tropes. This strategy evinces the intertextuality and attention to surface that characterizes the postmodern, while asserting the trauma and terror of war as a real, live analogue to the horror generated by the supernatural creatures of Gothic fiction.
1.3. The Crying of Lot 49 and Vineland

The perennial buzzword in scholarly studies of Pynchon, paranoia, grounds his two California novels, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*. Examining the two together, we experience a shared cultural space and a narrative leap between the nascent suspicions of technocratic systems that epitomized the pre-Vietnam era in America and the jaded, almost banal paranoia that characterized antiwar radicalism in the decades following the Vietnam conflict. Patrick O'Donnell introduces *The Crying of Lot 49*:

[The novel] speculates upon the whole idea of “connection,” or the activity of connecting, as the characteristic human endeavor, whether it be in writing and reading literary works, or in articulating ourselves – our identities – as historical beings. We need to narrate, Pynchon’s novel argues; we feel the necessity to create and perceive significant patterns in all that we read and do; we are driven to see the connections between the events of our own lives and the larger, external events of that unfolding story we call “history.”(1)

*The Crying of Lot 49* represents a postmodern detective novel, placing the activity of detecting/connecting in question. In “‘Hushing Sick Transmissions’: Disrupting Story in *The Crying of Lot 49*,” Bernard Duyfhuizen asserts the central question that the novel posits: “We must ask whether the systems of cultural formation that operate within a given society paradoxically represent both something to be maintained and a process of positive motion toward an ‘improved’ cultural formation [. . .] or whether these systems become the sawdust that masks the decay of society . . .”(O’Donnell 79-80). Pynchon’s second major work presents the narrative of an alternate system of mail delivery, Tristero, that threatens to undermine governmental control. Moreover, the benignity of Tristero remains ambiguous throughout the text, as does its existence ultimately. *Lot 49* incorporates the least conventionally Gothic imagery, while maintaining a simmering paranoia that fuels
protagonist (postmodern detective) Oedipa Maas’ attempts to resolve the mysterious quandary of Tristero.

Oedipa wrestles with the concept of such a cohesive and clandestine system, questioning its validity, but also the inherent potential menace that could lie behind Tristero’s necessity:

For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublishized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world. (92)

Tristero, as a counterforce, is later signified by the acronyms WASTE (We Await Silent Tristero’s Empire) and DEATH (Don’t Ever Antagonize The Horn), a cryptic symbol of a muted horn, and black bedecked figures that keep to the shadows. Here, we see Pynchon gesturing towards the portent of a diabolical underworld, through Oedipa’s psychic conjecture and the amassing of narrative ambiguities.

Based in the actual historical events surrounding the advent of Thurn and Taxis families’ currier system spanning Europe during the 1600s, Pynchon’s Tristero signifies a figurative means for transcending mortality, as the system survives beyond the fates of nations. Effectively, like a spectral entity, Tristero hovers just beyond Oedipa’s ability to coherently understand it, illustrating as Molly Hite explains, “that the final revelation cannot occur. The conclusion is necessarily deferred”(69). Oedipa weighs the significance and meaning of Tristero and concludes:

Ones and zeros. So did the couples arrange themselves. At Vesperhaven House either an accommodation reached, in some kind of dignity, with the Angel of Death, or only death and the daily, tedious preparations for it. Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia,
or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unforrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.(136-137)

Pynchon locates the central paranoiac fear that drives Tristero, its psychic or actual capacity to undermine “the legacy America,” the unassailable integrity of America and its systems of public participation and citizenship. In the end, Tristero’s actuality is irrelevant because even its theoretical existence posits enough of a threat to America, as to shake it to its foundations, simply by questioning the narratives that support its past and present eminence.

Pynchon develops the link between Tristero and the concepts of death and waste. Rather than relying upon the conventions of Gothic imagery, such as ghoulish backdrops and eerie castles, Pynchon populates Oedipa’s journey with discarded people whose appearance is made apparitional through Oedipa’s paranoia and exhaustion. Indeed, Oedipa herself becomes a specter, whose physical substance she questions: “Down at the city beach, long after the pizza stands and rides had closed, she walked unmolested through a drifting, dreamy cloud of delinquents in summer-weight gang jackets with the post horn stitched on in thread that looked pure silver in what moonlight there was. They had all been smoking, snuffing or injecting something, and perhaps did not see her at all”(89). Pynchon suffuses the scene with an ethereality that conveys Oedipa’s liminal position, caught between the oblivious world she previously inhabited and a new, paranoid reality characterized by societal specters whose lives signify marginality. Carolyn Brown describes Oedipa’s liminal situation, as she navigates the city night: “Oedipa (as phantom) inhabits the space between death and waste. Her travels throughout the text are as if in Hades, through a topography of phantasms, masks and hallucinations, towards an uncertain destination. Oedipa’s
wanderings among the dead, the margins, the phantoms, of the landscape of San Francisco, becomes an encounter not merely with WASTE, but with death (DEATH)”(Abbas 155). Brown’s description, with Eliot and Dante firmly in mind, captures all of the Gothic themes that subtend Lot 49’s narrative. The setting of the beach in the scarce moonlight mimetically parallels Oedipa’s sense of being at the edge, lost in a dark waste(land). Pynchon continues Oedipa’s journey through the night: “Riding among an exhausted busful of Negros going on to graveyard shifts all over the city, she saw scratched on the back of a seat, shining for her in the brilliant smoky interior, the post horn with the legend DEATH”(89-90). Again, Oedipa finds herself amidst those pushed to the margins of society. The Negros are forced into nocturnal perambulation by the nature of a “legacy America” that has historically debased African-Americans. Pynchon’s employment of the term “graveyard shifts” revitalizes the dead metaphor, returning the Gothic import of the term, as the emphasizes the Negros’ ghostly presence in American history/identity/society.

The perpetual return of WASTE and DEATH again suggest what Kristeva’s concept of “the abject.” Of the abject, Kristeva writes: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-betweens, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. . . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of law, is abject [. . . ]”(4). I qualify the use of Kristeva’s term with regards to Pynchon by acknowledging that the paranoia Pynchon generates is always necessarily premised upon the socially perpetuated

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4 The WASTE method of mail delivery, the trash recepticle, returns as a mode of subversive message delivery in Alan Moore’s Watchmen (1986), a graphic novel chronicling the exploits of a vigilante who casts aside codified law for his own determination of social justice; effectively, an embodiment of Kristeva’s abject “criminal with a good conscience” and “killer who claims he is a savior.”
anxiety over the abject. Moreover, that which “disturbs identity, system, order” in Pynchon’s novels, typically substitutes the insinuation of an infernal order of its own for the moral system it threatens. Pynchon’s privileging of the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” expresses the aesthetic means by which he deploys his unique manipulation of the Gothic. The horror created by Pynchon’s texts often occurs within the elisions and gaps, created most visibly by Pynchon’s use of grammatical ellipses, dashes, and radical narrative leaps. The signifying elements that Pynchon condenses within the acronyms WASTE and DEATH illustrate more examples of such “composite” practices, where the surplus of meaning threatens meaning itself through ambiguity. The evacuation of meaning through its exponential proliferation lies at the heart of Lot 49’s Gothic sense of dread.

If we are to read Gravity’s Rainbow as a discursive response to the Vietnam conflict, then Vineland represents an elegiac meditation on the fall of 1960’s radicalism that was concomitant with the rise of the conservative right under the Reagan administration. Frank Kermode reduces Vineland to Pynchon’s indulgence in “hippie nostalgia”(3). However, Pynchon hardly waxes nostalgic upon the sixties, rather, he clearly depicts the drug-induced “sloth” (a term he uses in “Nearer, My Couch, to Thee”) and complacency that doomed much of the activism of the time to, more or less, empty rhetorical gasps in the decades to follow. In broad strokes, Madeline Ostrander describes the novel: “Vineland depicts both historical and individual attempts to construct alternative ideologies, reveals their inherent instabilities, and renders their collapse”(Abbas 122). As N. Katherine Hayles notes in her reading of Vineland: “Obvious to everyone is the failure of the sixties to solve the problems the radical movement shouted to the nation – poverty, racism, American economic and military imperialism”(78). Despite the failure of these ideals, Pynchon’s task is not to
critique their idealism as faulty, but rather, to reject the complacency that allowed former idealists to abandon those humanist goals, and in doing so, become complicit in the dismantling of all forms of resistance to the systemic oppression fostered by the conservative right's rise. Again, we should be reminded of Pynchon’s 1984 indictment of those in power since 1945 as “criminally insane.”

*Vineland* intertwines many narratives: romances, tales of resistance, espionage plots, film history, labor conflicts. Two main protagonists emerge, Zoyd Wheeler and Frenesi Gates, two young people brought together by happenstance during the social tumult of the 1960s; Frenesi, an activist in a political film collective, Zoyd, a pot-addicted and carefree musician. The novel recounts the story of Frenesi’s complicity in government infiltration of student activist networks, her estrangement from Zoyd following the birth of their daughter, Prairie, and Zoyd’s subsequent harassment at the hands of Frenesi’s domineering FBI-agent lover, Brock Vond. Frenesi’s government-assisted disappearance, due to her role in the sabotage of an activist group, gives her an almost spectral presence in both Zoyd and Prairie’s consciousness. Moreover, Pynchon juxtaposes Frenesi’s apparitional status against the paranoia fostered by the Reagan administration’s build-up of military power and domestic spying. Appropriately, Frenesi appears most ghostly through her filmic image, since film’s cultural significance figures prominently in *Vineland*.

In “Reel to Real: Film History in Pynchon’s *Vineland*,” Ernest Mathijs describes the shift in aesthetic focus represented in *Vineland*, for whereas *Gravity’s Rainbow* alluded to art cinema and culturally significant films (Bergman’s *Seventh Seal*, Cocteau’s *Orphee*, Lang’s *Metropolis*), Pynchon’s *Vineland* incorporates degraded forms of visual media (made-for-television movies and mainstream cinema). This shift signifies an analogous shift in the political tenor from the radical 1960s to the Reagan Era 1980s. Furthermore, Pynchon’s
inclusion of his protagonist Frenesi Gates’ participation in 1960s political documentary-making and subsequent informing on behalf of the federal government illustrates another way in which socially relevant forms of expression have been evacuated over that twenty-year period. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner describe the film culture of the Reagan Era:

In the early eighties, under the leadership of Ronald Reagan, the revived conservative social movements managed to turn back many of the liberal social gains of the preceding fifty years. [. . .] The most popular films of the early to mid-eighties – Raiders of the Lost Ark, E.T., The Empire Strikes Back, Return of the Jedi, Beverly Hills Cop, Rambo – suggest that conservative values, escapist fantasies, and cinematic regressions to traditional social forms were resonating with audiences by now exhausted by economic crisis and the resulting insecurity and ready to identify with images of a reinvigorated patriarchal family (On Golden Pond), a revived male-centered romantic couple (An Officer and a Gentleman), a renewed military (the Star Wars series), new stronger male heroes (Indiana Jones), and triumphant Americanism (return-to-Vietnam films).(11-12)

Considering Ronald Reagan’s public persona as both political leader and silverscreen star, his administration’s social policies and abstract conception of evil seemed more informed by Frank Capra, than by a thorough understanding of economic distribution of wealth and social welfare. In 1982, Reagan famously revived the notion of evil in truly Gothic fashion, where he pronounced an “Evil Empire” in his speech to the British House of Commons: “We see totalitarian forces in the world who seek subversion and conflict around the globe to further their barbarous assault on the human spirit. What, then, is our course? Must civilization perish in a hail of fiery atoms? Must freedom wither in a quiet, deadening accommodation with totalitarian evil?”(1). As previously noted, Pynchon’s privileging of metonymic representations over the metaphorical conflicts with conservative discourse that relies upon abstractions such as “freedom” and “evil” to ground its rhetoric. Vineland, in its parody of eighties cinematic culture, responds heavily to the conservative
trajectory of film history, and moreover, the abstracted notions of American Exceptionalism and evil resuscitated by Ronald Reagan in his unrefined Cold War conservatism.

Like *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* where Pynchon pronounces America a “Kingdom of Death,” in *Vineland* he again describes America as a geographical space distinguished by its relationship to death, as dealt by the state’s exercise of power. In a passage following Prairie’s first viewing of Frenesi on film - “this hard frightening light, this white outpouring” - Prairie emerges from the darkroom where she has been watching the home-movie footage of Frenesi detailing her involvement in the FBI’s operation and she thinks of the ominous astrological forecast made by an acquaintance, “For most planets, this would be a change for the better [the planet Pluto in retrograde], but for the ruler of the Land of Death, retrograde was the best it ever got [. . .] . Pluto was about to get back to its ancient underworld and nihilistic ways, also known as Business as Usual”(262). The conclusion finally drawn from this, “Meaning Reagan gets reelected,” indicates the connection Pynchon makes between the “Land of Death” and its ruler, Reagan.

Zoyd Wheeler relies upon state-resources to fund his life of stasis by annually staging an act of mental instability in order to receive a disability check. Entombed in a haze of marijuana and televisual white noise, Zoyd embodies the complacency that enabled the rise of the likes of Reagan and Bush after him. Pynchon directly states his opposition to Reagan’s, and subsequently George H. W. Bush’s, administrations and their policies in his 1993 essay “Nearer, My Couch, to Thee”: “In this century we have come to think of Sloth as primarily political, a failure of public will allowing the introduction of evil policies and the rise of evil regimes, the worldwide fascist ascendancy of the 1920’s and 30’s being perhaps Sloth’s finest hour, though the Vietnam era and the Reagan-Bush years are not far behind”(57). Pynchon’s connection of fascism, Vietnam, and the Reagan-Bush
administrations illustrates the historical gravity of those themes addressed in *Vineland*, a text whose initial critical reception was frosty and cited as distinctly different from *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as it offered no “glimpses of the sublime and demonic” (Mackey 1993, 268). Mackey’s use of typically Gothic terms, “sublime” and “demonic” would suggest that *Vineland* creates none of the Gothic imagery or constructions that the present examination suggests, but rather, *Vineland* employs alternative strategies for accessing a Gothic mode from those used in its predecessors.

Pynchon adapts the Gothic convention of the ghost in *Vineland* to signify an aesthetic departure from the ghost as source of terror, to the ghost, as in *Hamlet*, as warning signal. To make this representative shift, Pynchon creates a sardonic manifestation of the specter, called the Thanatoid. Housed in a community, aptly named, Shade Creek, the Thanatoids are described clearly: “They were victims [. . .] of karmic imbalances – unanswered blows, unredeemed suffering, escapes by the guilty – anything that frustrated their daily expeditions on into the interior of Death, with Shade Creek a psychic jumping-off town – behind it, unrolling, regions unmapped, dwelt in by these transient souls in constant turnover, not living but persisting, on the skimpiest of hopes” (173). Pynchon creates the Thanatoids and Shade Creek in the image of a low-income housing project, transforming the concept of haunting or limbo to include the conditions of the upwardly immobile. Based on Pynchon’s perpetual mention of Reagan, it is no great leap to suggest that the Thanatoids represent those disaffected and disenfranchised under the economic conditions created by Reaganomics.5 Again, Pynchon aligns his use of the conventional Gothic aesthetic with a

5 “Reaganomics” refers to radio personality Paul Harvey’s portmanteau term for those economic policies espoused by Ronald Reagan and his administration. These policies included decreases in non-defense spending, increases in defense spending, large increases in federal deficit spending, and broad tax cuts. These
more metonymic manifestation, making the Thanatoids far less supernatural, and more quotidian. Pynchon further illustrates the Thanatoids' connection to Reaganomics where he describes their relationship to Death in banal, economic terms: “Death was the driving pulse — everything had moved as slowly as the cycles of birth and death, but this proved to be too slow for enough people to begin, eventually, to provide a market niche. There arose a system of deferment, of borrowing against karmic futures. Death, in Modern Karmic Adjustment, got removed from the process”(174-175). Here, Pynchon depicts Reaganomics as a Faustian pact, equating the Reagan administration’s deficit spending with the condition of selling (or, more specifically, borrowing on) one’s soul. The Thanatoids find themselves stranded at Shade Creek, apparitional, immobile and powerless, just like those estranged economically during the Reagan era.

One of the novel’s closing images illustrates a subdued, but insidious form of Gothic dread, as Pynchon depicts the American political conscience as paralyzed by the phantasms just inside the television screen. He writes: “And other grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows”(371). Pynchon, ever the Luddite, expresses the horrifying revelation that, like his policies, which adhered to the theory of supply-side economics, were widely received by the political left as benefiting those with high incomes, while widening the gap between those households with lower income. During the 1980 election, George H. W. Bush famously derided the economic promises Reagan suggested while campaigning as “voodoo economics,” and Senator Howard Baker (the Senate majority leader during Reagan’s first term and White House chief of staff beginning in 1987) later called Reagan’s policies “a riverboat gamble”(Reaganomics 5). Pynchon’s attack upon Reaganomics in Vineland reflects the general public’s sense that the deficit had grown perilously large. Former economic advisor to Ronald Reagan during his presidency, William Niskanen attests to the popular outcry for a change in deficit spending in his 1988 book Reaganomics: An Insider’s Account of the Policies and the People: “The case for reducing the growth of federal spending is, I would suggest, overwhelming”(320).
farcical Thanatoids, the American public has succumbed to political hegemony due to their fascination with television. Like Poltergeist’s Carol Ann transfixed by the voices she senses in the television, the “bright-colored shadows” render American social conscious virtually anesthetized. Pynchon culminates the passage by directly relating this figurative hypnosis to historical icons, demagogues, and despot who embody global power-systems:

Hitler, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Reagan, Kissinger, that collection of names and their tragic interweaving that stood not constellated above in any nightwide remoteness of light, but below, diminished to the last unfaceable American secret, to be pressed, each time deeper, again and again beneath the meanest of random soles, one blackly fermenting leaf on the forest floor that nobody wanted to turn over, because of all that lived, virulent, waiting, just beneath. (372)

Again, Pynchon illustrates the significance of historiography by employing a distinctly Gothic mode. Pynchon transmutes the metaphorical expressionism of darkness, a conventional symbolic trope of the Gothic to signify the monstrous or diabolical, to accommodate his commentary upon the clandestine affairs that undermine the American public will to know. History becomes a contested gambit of that which will be acknowledged, and that which will be conveniently left to lurk unsettlingly in the darkness. Pynchon signifies the shift from the metaphorical monsters of past Gothic practices, “constellated above in any nightwide remoteness of light,” to those actual “monsters” whom he directly names.

Vineland depicts a world where, just as in Gravity’s Rainbow and V., the rigid division between the living and the non-living is playfully disrupted (the Thanatoids), a further institution of the Gothic mode to impart Pynchon’s social motivations. In The Order of Things (1970), Michel Foucault presents a genealogy of Enlightenment subjectivity through an exploration of the human sciences. Foucault identifies the Enlightenment’s reliance upon the Cartesian concept of the subject, cogito ergo sum, which posits an anthropocentric vision of
the world. The Gothic and Pynchon’s use of a Gothic aesthetic challenge this Enlightenment construct by rendering the irruption of a the Other, represented succinctly in the figures of monsters, ghouls, and undead. Just as we saw in *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon’s return in *Vineland* to themes of the non-living who cohabitate with the living suggests a Gothic refiguring of Enlightenment subjectivity.
CHAPTER 2:
‘NOW IT’S DARK’: STAGING TERROR IN THE FILMS OF DAVID LYNCH

...once you’re exposed to fearful things, and you see that really and truly many, many things are wrong, and so many people are participating in strange and horrible things, you begin to worry that the peaceful, happy life could vanish or be threatened.

David Lynch, in an interview with David Breskin, 1990; p. 57

My childhood was elegant homes, tree-lined streets, the milkman, building backyard forts, droning airplanes, blue skies, picket fences, green grass, cherry trees. Middle America as it’s supposed to be. But on the cherry tree there’s this pitch oozing out – some black, some yellow, and millions of red ants crawling all over it. I discovered that if one looks a little closer at this beautiful world, there are always red ants underneath. Because I grew up in a perfect world, other things were a contrast. (Lynch, in an interview with Chris Rodley, 1997, p. 10,11)

This is the way America is to me. There’s a very innocent, naïve quality to life, and there’s a horror and a sickness as well. It’s everything.

Lynch to Rodley, p. 139

In his cult classic, Blue Velvet (1986), filmmaker David Lynch recreates a typical scene from his childhood by framing a slow shot on an idyllic Middle American neighborhood, featuring happy fireman, sounds of playful children, and lawnmowers. The scene culminates with an extreme close-up on the insects that toil beneath the surface of this lush setting. As his own words purport, David Lynch’s films depict a “strange” and “horrible” world of “fearful things” diabolically intertwined with “the peaceful, happy life.” For Lynch, this uneasy amalgamation of the abject and beautiful is both natural and ineluctable, like the cherry tree and its oozing pitch. Lynch’s skillful navigation of various cinematic modes has
garnered a great amount of critical attention: from his arthouse classic, *Eraserhead* (1977), to the Oscar-winning *The Elephant Man* (1980), to his big-budget, blockbuster flop *Dune* (1984), to the academically celebrated *Blue Velvet*, and his cultishly embraced foray into television, *Twin Peaks* (1990). Scholarship by Martha Nochimson, Annette Davison, Steven Jay Schneider, and Norman Denzin identifies Lynch’s work as postmodernist, due to his play of intertexts, blending of high and low culture, and self-reflexivity. My own study of Lynch’s films acknowledges the postmodern character of his art, but goes further to differentiate Lynch’s work from that of other postmodern artists. In my analysis, I will show how Lynch’s art succinctly merges the postmodern and the Gothic, and how this postmodern Gothic interpretation of Lynch’s work reveals the social impact of his singular aesthetic. In this chapter, I will chart Lynch’s growing disillusionment with the Hollywood film industry and what Lynch perceives as the industry’s attacks against artists, their vision, and their creations. I will argue that Lynch’s films employ horrific images and disturbing themes in order to translate the immediacy of his growing personal outrage with the mass-market film industry and communicate his developing critique of iconic Hollywood. Lynch’s work exhibits an evolution in his relationship to conglomerate Hollywood, as we see him initially adopt the language of classic horror cinema in *Eraserhead*, then parody the nostalgic small-town America perpetually projected in Classical Hollywood cinema in *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, and ultimately, in *Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive*, and *INLAND EMPIRE*, envision Hollywood as a monstrous institutional space of sociopathic desire, sadism, human exploitation, and homicidal decadence.

In a now famous clip from YouTube, Lynch begins a hopeless public campaign to promote Laura Dern’s performance in his film *INLAND EMPIRE* (2006) by sitting on a
Hollywood corner with a cow and speaking with passers-by, a response to the suggestion that an Academy Award publicity campaign for Dern would cost upwards of $2 million. When asked why he was sitting out on a corner with a cow, Lynch remarked tautologically “The Academy members love show business and this is show business, being out with a cow” (“Yes, That’s David Lynch” 134). Seething beneath this peculiar gesture, David Lynch has reached his boiling point. The filmmaker has always cultivated a wide-eyed innocence in the face of the Hollywood machine, simultaneously suggesting his distance from industry practices and his enduring belief in the magic of Hollywood filmmaking. Lynch’s deliberately futile promotional statement represents an eccentric mode of resistance, imparting his own political attack on an impersonal and profiteering industry. Lynch’s affront to the Academy’s promotional protocols also discretely characterizes his own maverick status, extending beyond simply his independent practice of filmmaking.

Lynch artfully depicts America as a land of wide-eyed hope and a coeval capacity for unapologetic cruelty and extreme terror. While many critics have viewed Lynch’s representations of American naïveté and innocence as necessarily saccharine or critically ironic, evidence of their innate postmodernism, I would suggest that Lynch depicts America as a culture perpetuated by a humanist narrative of innocence, whether misguided, inauthentic, or nostalgic, whose security is precarious and whose collapse is genuinely terrifying. Lynch’s America persists through narrative, artifice, iconicity, and myth and, ultimately, Lynch’s America is filmic. The innocence contrived by classical Hollywood’s thematic adherence to the notorious Hays Code and support of patriarchal, heterocentric, nationalistic, and racially hierarchical ideologies remains a lingering presence that Lynch exploits in his films to generate terror. Just as Octave Mannoni spoke of the “Je sais bien, mais quand meme” [“I know full well, but nevertheless. . .”] of cinema in his famed *Clefs pour
L'imaginaire, ou, l'Autre scène (1969), Lynch builds upon the fantasies that support and haunt the American imaginary. It is the “mais quand même” [“but nevertheless”] of cinema, its essential fetishism that engenders the powers of horror in Gothic film, and Lynch self-reflexively employs this cinematic fetishism in his construction of a postmodern Gothic mode. Lynch, a devout lover of cinema and the imagined worlds it envisions, capitalizes on the audiences’ eagerness to be engrossed into alternate narrative realities, but rather than projecting a place of comfort and escape, Lynch’s diegetic worlds rely upon terrifying reimaginings of everyday America.

The return of the repressed, a grounding logic within the constitution of the Gothic mode, expresses the violent conflict at play within the two sides of Mannoni’s formulation, for just as one mental process rejects or demystifies certain events and identities, so does another always accept them willingly. The pleasure of the cinema, like that of the Gothic, rests in this cognitive contradiction, and David Lynch’s films, at times, playfully and, at other times, frighteningly expose the crux of this central paradox. Horror films, despite their extreme popularity, remain codified as banal or marginal for their various depictions of the abject. Gothic narratives subvert the dominant ideologies and institutions that perpetuate oppressive social and intellectual conditions. David Lynch, in his relentless critique of iconic Hollywood and its supporting industries, admits much of the hope and wonder of classical Hollywood cinema into his films, but also conveys the dangers of a “dream factory” that, as Laura Mulvey noted, institutionalizes the degradation of women and standardizes the language of desire. Ultimately, Lynch champions a cinema founded upon the integrity of the artist’s vision, regardless of the work’s commercial viability, and an inclusive aesthetic that synthesizes many genres and aesthetic modes.
For the purposes of this analysis, I will explore Lynch’s resolution of the seemingly paradoxical worlds of “fearful things” and halcyon America’s “peaceful, happy life” by framing Lynch’s *oeuvre* within the cultural and historical contexts of the Gothic. While many critics employ the term Gothic as a descriptor of Lynch’s work, only Laura Mulvey’s analysis of *Blue Velvet* in *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) has attempted to incorporate the motifs and history of Gothic fiction as a means for analyzing Lynch’s film. Building upon her example, I will extend the Gothic reading of Lynch’s films, articulating the political functions of Lynch’s consistent creation of Gothic imagery.⁶ The principle goal of this chapter will be to chart David Lynch’s growing disillusionment from the nostalgia of an idealized conception of Hollywood bound to his own drive for artistic freedom. Lynch’s visions of America are innately filmic, referencing the cohesive concept of nation established during the classic Hollywood era by a studio system operated and governed by a rigid, industrial process that attempted to curtail ambiguity, flights of imagination, and subversion. I assert that Lynch’s work represents a filmic historiography, as he manipulates and revalues the unified concept of America by way of its filmic representation. Lynch rigorously critiques the American dreams of unlimited opportunity, the promise of the West, and the default goodness in people, as well as the ancillary American dream of venturing to Hollywood to become a celebrated film star. In each case, Lynch grafts the apocryphal dream onto a narrative of abject horror, sadism, and death. Lynch’s films exhibit an evolution in the nature of horror itself, as he adapts the terms of monstrosity from one film to the next, ultimately, making Hollywood the most formidable monster of all.

⁶ While the current analysis will “extend” Mulvey’s employment of the Gothic to interpret Lynch’s work, I will not be relying, as Mulvey does, upon psychoanalytic theory as my primary locus of philosophical interpretation.
2.1. History

David Lynch began his career as a filmmaker in 1966 while working as an experimental visual artist at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His first foray into film was entitled *Six Figures Getting Sick*, a hybrid installation piece that projected film of people vomiting onto a contoured screen. This piece illustrates Lynch’s lasting interest in visceral expressions of the abject, a concept that threads its way throughout his entire film oeuvre. Coming from a fine art background, Lynch’s first engagement with film was as a medium of personal expression, like the paints and textures used in his artworks. Following the critical success of his first piece, Lynch subsequently made a number of short films that continued to demonstrate a filmic vision that paid homage to aesthetic traditions outside of commercially-driven modes of expression, from surrealism to German expressionism. It wasn’t until production began on his first feature-length film, *Eraserhead*, in 1971 that Lynch first acknowledged a Hollywood progenitor to his own filmmaking style, Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Lynch famously screened the film for the cast and crew of *Eraserhead* immediately prior to shooting, and said of it: “There wasn’t anything in particular about it that related to *Eraserhead*. It was just a black-and-white experience of a certain mood”(Rodley, 71). Just as the wind creates a ghostly moan when passing through the enormous organ pipes in Norma Desmond’s withering mansion in *Sunset Boulevard*, so would Lynch suffuse all of his films with an ominous droning hum, extending the eerie tone of Wilder’s Gothic Hollywood to his own cinematic worlds.
Lynch’s interest in Wilder also prefigures their similar distrust for Hollywood and its exploitative culture of consumption.

After *The Elephant Man*’s enthusiastic public reception and *Dune*’s overwhelming critical disappointment, Lynch had personally experienced the peaks and valleys of mainstream exposure and, with *Blue Velvet*, reestablished himself as a distinctive auteur who valued control over the film’s final cut over its ultimate financial marketability. Lynch’s adored television project, *Twin Peaks*, became a national phenomenon, setting new standards for primetime drama while pushing the limits of television censorship. *Twin Peaks* meteoric rise to popularity was paralleled only by its spectacular demise, corresponding to Lynch’s waning involvement in the series’ narrative development and stylistic control during the second half of its run. Lynch had put *Twin Peaks* aside to concentrate on *Wild at Heart* (1990), a film that would subsequently net him the Cannes film festival’s venerated *Palm d’Or*, further strengthening Lynch’s reputation as an art film auteur. Lynch learned, firsthand, about pressures applied to the creative process as network executives and public demands for narrative closure drove the series to comical and trite storylines. While the television medium allowed Lynch to explore an expansive conception of narrative development, his filmic remediation of the series, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992), presented a prequel to the events depicted in the series.

With *Last Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *INLAND EMPIRE* (2006), Lynch initiated a creative assault on the Hollywood film industry, neatly synthesizing the commercial interests that obstructed his artistic vision. Lynch also levees a pointed critique of Hollywood’s systemic diminution of women, by reproducing the degrading conditions thrust upon actresses within the narratives of his films. Whether examining the evils of Los Angeles’ underground porn industry or revealing the dangers that face actresses as they
attempt to garner attention within the impersonal world of the Hollywood film industry, Lynch’s films forcefully convey the diabolical figures that govern the production of films. Considering Lynch’s devout concern for the integrity of the director’s cinematic vision, these sinister characters represent a powerful and dangerous force, which threatens the artistic nature of the medium itself.

Drawing on many genres and historical eras, Lynch creates a cosmology of sinister forces that function within his narratives at a quotidian level. Norman Denzin identifies Lynch’s capacity to present the “unpresentable,” signified by such things as “rotting, cut-off ears, sexual violence, brutality, insanity, homosexuality, the degradation of women, sadomasochistic rituals, drug and alcohol abuse,” as a source of horror and, concomitantly, allure (68). While author and critic, David Foster Wallace suggests that Lynch’s films are essentially apolitical, their ability to transmit a feeling of the uncanny, repulsion, and terror forces the viewer of Lynch’s works to come to grips with their stance on various forms of transgression, from criminality to sexual deviance. Therefore, whether or not Lynch’s intent is political, the screening of his film in an inevitably political/moral/cultural space and moment represents an expression of political agency. Moreover, and most significantly, Lynch’s perpetual inclusion of the voyeuristic viewer as a complicit and knowing participant in depictions of the perverse or “unpresentable” signifies a rigorous social commentary. Throughout his films, Lynch creates visual indictments through the *mise-en-abîme* technique of the viewer gaining illicit knowledge through the on-screen voyeurism of characters within the filmic space. The characters’ perspective is naturally extended to the film’s viewer, completing Lynch’s staging of the cinematic experience within the film itself.
2.2. Eraserhead and The Elephant Man: Marginal(ized) Monsters

David Lynch’s first full-length feature film, *Eraserhead* (1977), gave birth to a new brand of American horror, suturing the aesthetics of the Gothic and art cinema. *Eraserhead* represents both this new aesthetic and also a culmination of techniques and ideas that Lynch exercised in some of his early short films. An early review of the film in *Variety* touted it as a work of “sickening bad-taste” with “little substance or subtlety. [. . .] bent on emulating Herschell Gordon Lewis, the king of low-budget gore” (March 19, 1977 as cited in *Midnight Movies* 215, 216). Rife with images of urban decay, oozing fluids, and grotesque little monstrosities, the film presents an expressionistic narrative that repels discrete summary as much as its images repel conventional forms of aesthetic beauty. Later critical examinations of the film would emphasize *Eraserhead’s* place within the tradition of experimental film, citing the possible influences of Luis Bunuel’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Critic Steven Jay Schneider describes *Eraserhead’s* debt to the graphic excesses of the horror film and literature traditions, as well as the stylistic connections with avant-garde film. Schneider chronicles aesthetic and narrative connections between *Eraserhead* and a historical who’s-who of horror works such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), Robert Weine’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Bunuel’s *Un Chien Andalou*, Roger Corman’s *Bucket of Blood* (1959), the aforementioned filmmaker Herschell Gordon Lewis’ *Blood Feast* (1963) and *Color Me Blood Red* (1965), Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1972), Tobe Hooper’s cult-classic *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), David Cronenberg’s *Shivers* (1975), and Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980). Schneider amasses this impressive horror genealogy and places *Eraserhead* stylistically within its continuum. The current examination will use as a starting point Schneider’s claims and move forward to
illustrate how *Eraserhead* functions as a Gothic work of resistance against the increasingly conservative trajectory of American film during the late 1970s.

Cinephile and independent theater owner Ben Barenholtz linked *Eraserhead* to its contemporary political moment when he noted following its release: “I think Lynch knew about Reagan and that the bleakness of the landscape is coming true. There’s a strong feeling of helplessness, of being controlled by forces that you don’t know. Henry is the innocent; he doesn’t know what he’s doing. I think it’s a general feeling that younger people have been coming to over the past few years. *Eraserhead* couldn’t have done anything in the late sixties or early seventies” (as cited in *Midnight Movies* 242). Borne of the political tumult and youthful energy of the original punk era, *Eraserhead* expresses the subcultural Zeitgeist of what punk icon Richard Hell called “The Blank Generation.”

In her study “Horror and the Carnivalesque,” Barbara Creed examines many standard motifs that perpetually return within the narratives of the horror film, historically. In my analysis, I will use Creed’s model to discuss the ways in which *Eraserhead* activates a number of these archetypes in order to generate horror and anxiety, situating itself firmly within the aesthetic sphere of the contemporary Gothic. Basing her work upon observations made by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, as well as Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, Creed focuses on the impact of the excesses and transformations exhibited in the horror film genre, illustrating the social anxieties innate to the constitution of the form. Creed focuses upon what she terms “the body-monstrous,” a reworking of Bakhtin’s “grotesque body” that Stallybrass and White describe as “multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. [. . .] it is always becoming, it is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits, obscenely decentered and off-balance, a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and
inversion”(9). Creed’s body-monstrous manifests itself in twelve “faces”: the metamorphosing body (bodies marked by deformity and degeneration most notably); the supernatural body; the bestial body; the body of nature; the generative body (women typically due to their capacity to produce off-spring); the infant body; the mortal body (wounds and maladies); the mechanical body; the sexually deviant body; the body of the slasher; the maternal body; and, finally, the body of the archaic mother. Creed splits these broad categories further by delineating subset classifications of specific modes that persist within these twelve “faces.” Creed’s general perspective illustrates the conventions innate to the logic of horror cinema, while Steven Jay Schneider’s case study of Eraserhead locates specific instances of horror’s cinematic methodology in Lynch’s debut film. I will show how Eraserhead’s aesthetic moves beyond the strategies of disquiet native to horror cinema, towards a socially-oriented Gothic aesthetic.

While Eraserhead resists a discrete synopsis, the following summary of the film is the most concise and lucid in Lynch scholarship:

In the depths of The Planet, a Man pulls levers. Images implying conception and birth occur. We surface. On arriving home at his strange, squalid apartment in the midst of a desolate industrial landscape, Henry Spencer is told by a neighbour that his girlfriend Mary has invited him for dinner at her parents’ home. Once there, he discovers that he has fathered a premature ‘baby’, which is still at the hospital. Mary moves in with Henry but soon returns to her parents, unable to sleep through the ‘baby’s’ constant crying. Henry fantasises about a lady who appears on a stage inside his radiator. She sings about Heaven, while stamping on strange worm-like creatures. The ‘baby’ falls ill and, having been seduced by his neighbour, Henry fantasises about being on the radiator stage. His head is pushed off by the ‘baby’ growing inside him and is taken to a workshop to be processed into pencil-top erasers. Henry finally kills the ‘baby’, causing a cosmic catastrophe. The Planet explodes, despite the efforts of The Man at its centre, pulling levers in vain. A blinding white flash. Henry meets The Lady in the Radiator in what might be the afterlife. They embrace tenderly. (Rodley 246, 247)
This account captures much of the surreal and expressionistic qualities of Lynch’s first feature. *Eraserhead* depicts an unreality littered with industrial detritus, homes marked by their dilapidated interiors, and lives mired in a grim stasis. Within this dismal diegesis, Lynch populates the film with figures that strongly adhere to Creed’s description of the body-monstrous.

*Eraserhead’s* most striking example of the body-monstrous, Henry’s infant, appears to be only vaguely human, with an anemic frame, sloping forehead, and alien features, mouth and eyes. The ‘baby’ could be more readily called a tiny creature. Creed describes the infant body-monstrous: “the monster takes the form of a foetus or infant which is misshapen or deformed in some way. It is the mutant, partially formed nature of the body which is exploited to create scenarios of horror. The monstrous infant films also present a critique of the nuclear family, with the infant itself symbolic of a canker eating at the heart of the family” (*Fields of Vision* 142). Creed continues by listing films that display such an infant and includes *Eraserhead*. The infant initially appears to be only partially gestated when it first appears in the film, and subsequently becomes sickly, causing its features to decay. As Schneider describes it, the ‘baby’ is shot in “an extreme close-up of its diseased face, complete with leprous growths, rolled-back eyes and a mouth completely rotted on the inside” (*The Cinema of David Lynch* 8, 9). As Creed suggested, the infant’s appearance and effect upon its parents illustrate the critique of the nuclear family signified in the presence of the infant body-monstrous. Moreover, the use of generic horror techniques, a banal and maligned aesthetic, shows Lynch’s radical digression from both mainstream cinema and even the intellectually oriented films of the arthouse or the American post-classical cinema that was challenging the prevailing ideologies of Hollywood and American conservative politics during the many years of *Eraserhead’s* production.
Kaleta comments on the excess of bodily fluids associated with the dying infant, lending visceral disgust to the creature’s capacity to horrify and perpetrating another “face” of the body-monstrous, the mortal body. The mortal body, according to Creed, takes a number of forms: the bleeding body, the hysterical body, the dismembered body, the disintegrating/exploding body, the invaded body, the body as living corpse, and the corpse. Henry’s infant bleeds, vomits, and leaks fluids, signifying the bleeding body, while the decay of the creature suggests the disintegrating body and the body as living corpse. Finally, Henry kills the infant and it becomes the corpse, signifying abjection and a dramatic repudiation of the self. The profusion of disgusting images that disturbs and simultaneously fascinates the viewer communicates the loss of control Henry experiences, as he first finds his banal and standardized existence as some manner of clerical worker disrupted by the news of a pregnancy. The child’s appearance instantiates the ultimate dread and anxiety felt by new parents as they anticipate the birth of their child. Moreover, the monstrous infant signifies a proverbial albatross, suggesting a cautionary devise alerting the viewer to the dangers of bringing new life into a perilous and deadening world. Henry’s repulsion for the child seems to inscribe itself upon the infant’s skin and within the child’s immune system, as we see it grow more decayed and destitute, until Henry commits the unthinkable act of infanticide.

Returning to Creed’s model, Eraserhead exhibits other examples of the body-monstrous, the generative body represented by Henry’s girlfriend, Mary, when she gives birth to the hideous infant that torments its parents until its subsequent murder. Creed says of this form of the body-monstrous: “In many of these films, woman’s body becomes capable of amazing feats and her womb assumes new powers – it is able to conceive alien life forms and is capable of assuming enormous proportions and of coming to full-term pregnancy in a matter of hours. […] Woman’s most monstrous feature is her womb”(141).
Accordingly, Mary announces the baby and it arrives shortly thereafter, without accounting for the standard gestation period of nine months. Its arrival seems hurried and startlingly improbable, even within the compressed plot time of the cinema. Moreover, like other horror genre films where a demonic infant emerges from a monstrous womb (Rosemary’s Baby; the dream sequence from David Cronenberg’s The Fly where Geena Davis gives birth to a large maggot; Alien’s “birth” of the larval alien from John Hurt’s stomach), the vulnerability of the mother and her infant are supplanted by the dread of a “bad birth.” Schneider describes the effect of the infant’s gruesome appearance: “By fashioning Henry’s baby skinless, boneless and poised to spill its guts out all over the place, Lynch forces Daddy and audience alike to contemplate a living, breathing (temporarily, at least) transgression of the deeply-entrenched cultural opposition, inside vs. outside” (The Cinema of David Lynch 13). The inversion of the inside/outside dialectic mirrors the reversal of the collective notions of infant purity and maternal nurturing, dramatizing the social anxiety over a threat to the nuclear family. Henry’s post-natal abortion of the infant represents a final, decisive gesture cementing this complete annihilation of the idyllic American family.

Henry’s escapist fantasy of stage inside of his home’s radiator features a woman whose bulbous cheeks approximate softball-size tumors. The Lady in the Radiator, an example of the metamorphosing body-monstrous identified by Creed, appears basically benevolent, but, as Steven Jay Schneider suggests, her “chipmunk cheeks, adorable smile and saccharine voice still betray something distinctly ominous” (The Cinema of David Lynch 14). The Man in the Planet’s hideous appearance (chipped and crumbling face) equally suggests an example of the body-monstrous. However, the most striking example of the metamorphosing body-monstrous is Henry’s transformation in the film’s titular scene, where Henry’s head falls from his body only to be supplanted by the head of his hideous progeny.
A radical melding of the metamorphosing and generative bodies, this sequence has provided much fodder for psychoanalytical critiques of the film, but at a purely imagistic level instantiates an example of Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject.

As Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror*, identity relies upon the designation of boundaries between self and other-than-self. Moreover, the acknowledgement and preservation of one’s subjectivity requires the establishment of the abject, any threat to life. These threats assume many forms, but generally include any manner of human waste or excretion, and metaphorically, instances where the boundary between the interior and exterior of the body is transgressed or inverted. Creed explains the link between the abject and horror, when referring to Kristeva’s theoretical model of abjection,

> The existence of the abject points always to the subject’s precarious hold on what it means to be human. For the abject can never be fully excluded; it beckons from the boundaries, seeking to upset the already unstable nature of subjectivity, waiting to claim victory over the ‘human.’ Fear of the abject inspires the human subject to deny the corporeal, material, animalistic nature of existence.(150)

The repudiation of the “corporeal, material, animalistic” nature of his deformed infant’s existence, illustrates Henry’s ultimate denial of his own identity, since he and the child are metonymically linked, as well as literally consubstantial. From its arrival in Henry’s home, the child’s appearance and bestial murmuring hearken its abject position in regard to both parents. Mary’s flight from the site of the nuclear family graphically illustrates the child’s treatment as waste and/or threat.

The fear and disgust Lynch manifests in his characters is visually transmitted to his audience. Schneider describes the generic horror effects Lynch employs in order to identify the tradition from which Lynch’s aesthetic springs. To take a further rhetorical step, I would suggest that Lynch’s use of horror motifs and visual tropes points beyond a simple generic
affiliation, towards a theoretical position that Lynch’s film takes. Lynch’s creation of
Henry’s hideous infant and the construction of its murder at Henry’s hands illustrates the
Lynch’s profound debt to horror cinema. By adopting the bracing gore aesthetic of a B-
horror film, in the style of Roger Corman or Herschell Gordon Lewis, Lynch positions
Eraserhead against the mainstream aesthetic of the post-classical Hollywood films and
growing blockbuster trend fostered by such hits as Star Wars and Jaws. Beyond its reception
as an art film, Lynch’s first feature owes much to the low-budget grindhouse flicks that
operated on the outside of critical film circles and production modes of the Hollywood
industry. Fitting, then, that Lynch’s story of a quiet schlemiel alienated from his life and,
ultimately, his own identity should fit within the subculture of exploitation films and the
debased genre of horror movies. Lynch, even at this early stage in his directorial career,
functions at the margins, tacitly commenting on the mainstream by initiating an alternative
aesthetic whose visual impact was, I would argue, equally visceral to that of Spielberg’s Jaws,
but whose narration was far less transparent, relying more upon ambiguity and psychological
obscurity than upon conventional constructions of narrative suspense.

For the purposes of this analysis, I examine Lynch’s The Elephant Man (1980) only
briefly, citing its debt to horror cinematography and continued interest in the abject. The
story of John Merrick’s passionate rejection of his society’s degrading pronouncements and
cruel behavior testifies to Lynch’s continued interest in the monstrous, though in The
Elephant Man, Lynch’s protagonist is the horribly disfigured Merrick. Similar to Tod
Browning’s Freaks (1932), the story of a group of sideshow freaks who rise up to defeat their
cruel oppressors, Lynch’s film narrates the true story of a man physically deformed by
neurofibromatosis, whose appearance relegated to the degrading position of a traveling
sideshow freak and whose gentle and active mind allowed him to transcend his malicious treatment. Unlike Browning’s freaks, actors selected for their actual physical irregularities, Lynch casts John Hurt and transforms him into Merrick through an arduous course of make-up and prostheses. As many commentators have noted, Merrick’s appearance is not revealed until thirty minutes into the film, and done so in a manner that deliberately builds suspense until he is finally shown, through the clinical, but shocked, gaze of an attending nurse. Joe Kember, in “David Lynch and the Mug Shot: Facework in *The Elephant Man* and *The Straight Story*,” describes the methods Lynch employs in the unveiling of Merrick’s face in extreme close-up:

The long-desired mug shot is violently invasive, brutally realizing for us the desire to examine the face closely. It is achieved by means of an inversion of the discovery scene experienced earlier by Treves [Merrick’s friend and doctor, played by Anthony Hopkins]; if Merrick has been the occasion of shock in other characters, it is Merrick himself who experiences the shock here. Furthermore his startled reaction is caused by the bell, a mechanism which creaks punctually into operation as if heralding the film’s inevitable and systematic violation of his space and face. (*The Cinema of David Lynch*, 26)

As Kember suggests, the camera replicates the tantalized eye of the sideshow patron, probing Merrick’s body with a heightened degree of suspense in examining his grotesque face and crippled frame.

While Lynch’s film arguably presents Merrick’s tale in conventional terms that ultimately support the societal definition of normality that Merrick esteems throughout the film, I would argue that for the purposes of the current analysis, *The Elephant Man* signifies Lynch’s early debt to horror cinema, an aesthetic that he would develop and expand in his later films, cementing their place in the Gothic genre. Just as Lynch would adopt the horror-producing effects of horror cinema, he would also later rely on the distribution and exhibition practices similar to those of the independent grindhouse horror films so reviled
by high art and blockbuster film crowds alike. Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc point out that “The Elephant Man initially signposts itself as a horror picture [ . . . ]”(39). Bruce Kawin, in his review of The Elephant Man, noted:

The humanism of The Elephant Man is conveyed not through its script so much as through its deliberate echoes of such compassionate horror film as The Island of Lost Souls (“Are we not men!”), The Bride of Frankenstein, Freaks, and The Hunchback of Notre Dame; the spirit of Lon Chaney Sr. is particularly felt, not just the eloquently vulnerable performance of John Hurt as Merrick, but in the tone of the entire project.(21)

Kenneth Kaleta cites the rich tradition of classical horror films from which springs the tenor of Lynch’s second feature. Among the films that he mentions, Kaleta includes Frankenstein (1931), The Invisible Man (1933), Freaks (1932), The Island of Lost Souls (1933), The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1939), The Phantom of the Opera (1925), Metropolis (1925), and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919).

Lynch begins the film by constructing a monstrous form of desire, where we see a sequence of shots with accompanying sounds that suggest either the violent trampling or sexual coupling of a woman and an elephant, invoking a grotesque transformation of the mythic imagery of Leda and the swan. The subsequent efforts of clinicians and doctors to scrutinize and classify Merrick express the anxiety he poses to the symbolic order, as well as to the Enlightenment’s notion of human progress. The Elephant Man uses John Merrick’s physical monstrosity to expose the more profound psychological monstrosity of his contemporary society, whose members so quickly emblematized him and sought to physically and socially re-form the disfigured man. Ironically, Lynch’s nascently industrial Victorian England appears similar to Eraserhead’s post-industrial Philadelphia – a space where darkness overwhelms light and shadows, both literally and figuratively, control the space.
In the aftermath of *The Elephant Man*’s critical success (nominated for eight Academy awards, but won none), Lynch notes his growing leeriness with the impersonality of Hollywood and its ostensible notion of success: “I remember hearing about the nominations, but I didn’t hear Freddie’s name [Freddie Francis, cinematographer] so I called him up and we commiserated a little bit. But it was like going from zero to sixty in no time. It didn’t really register, you know, how rare a thing that was. And in America they all thought I was British. [. . .] They didn’t know anything about me” (*Lynch on Lynch* 104).

Following Lynch’s next film, the epic disaster *Dune*, we begin to see, in *Blue Velvet*, the filmmaker’s creative shift from relative oblivion in the face of Hollywood acclaim, to a resentful and direct opposition to Hollywood’s blockbuster formula. With *Blue Velvet*, Lynch returned, from filming in England and Mexico (*Dune*), to America – his homeland and site of his subsequent films. *Blue Velvet* marks the inception of Lynch’s radicalism, beyond simply his aesthetic singularity, as a filmmaker whose works would become terror-driven meditations upon the Hollywood conglomerate culture, personal and public modes of censorship, and more broadly, the role of the artist as political advocate.

### 2.3. Blue Velvet: Now It’s Dark

The “candy-colored” small town setting of *Blue Velvet* disguises the infernal subculture that seethes beneath its ostensible wholesomeness. Lumberton, a logging community, practically fetishizes wood and its cultivation, as we continually hear radio personalities and advertisements chattering about cutting down trees and, at the local hardware store, the only product sold during the film is, appropriately, an ax. Lumberton’s kitschy obsession with wood, strikes the viewer as quaint or charmingly hokey, like all of the
Americana pieces that populate each of Lynch’s highly stylized mise-en-scène. Beneath the kitsch of Lumberton’s outer appearance dwells a ghoulish criminal underworld, where such playful fetishizing becomes dangerous and violent. Laura Mulvey describes the unique setting in relation to the Gothic, historically:

The Gothic genre is, of course, literally haunted by the past, by its gloomy ruins, its subterranean passages, by its archaic superstitions and the ‘returns’ that mark its narratives. It is, perhaps, for this reason that it has never been easy to depict the archaic landscape and beliefs of the Gothic within the so-called New World. This is one of Blue Velvet’s most significant achievements. Its narrative topographies manage to install a ‘nether’world within small-town America [. . .].(Fetishism and Curiosity 138)

Lumberton’s play of fetishistic spectacles – wood, blue velvet, sadistic sexual acts – evinces the dialectic that subtends the entire film between the nostalgic space of small-town America and the actual, more grotesque subcultural activity. The public becomes a space of superficial trust and innocence, whereas the private is depicted throughout the film as libidinal, sociopathic, and toxic. Moreover, both the idealized and actual spaces denote sites of performativity, where the social realm is dramatically critiqued through distortion and revaluation. The type of performativity depicted, however, is unique to each. Lynch’s vision of rustic America is based on a society’s desperate attempt to create an insular environment, where the performance of cultural bliss seamlessly pervades. Naturally, this improbable notion crumbles, and the terrifying underworld irrupts in both dramatic and distinctly theatrical ways.

Blue Velvet is the tale of a young, naïve, small-town man, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan), whose persistent curiosity embroils him in the psychosexual rape and torture of a woman, Dorothy Valens (Isabella Rossellini), and her family. Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper), the psychotic criminal who sexually abuses Dorothy in return for the lives of her
husband and son, exposes a nightmarish subtext to the parochial American myths of unchecked hope and wholesomeness that shaped Lynch’s own childhood. After finding a severed ear in a neighboring field, Jeffrey enlists the help of his quasi-love-interest Sandy Williams (Laura Dern), the sheriff’s daughter, to determine the circumstances that led to his discovery. Sandy directs Jeffrey to local torch songstress, Dorothy Valens’ apartment, where Jeffrey gains clandestine access and is initiated into the terrifying reality of Dorothy’s psychological torture.

After being discovered spying on Dorothy in her apartment, Jeffrey is forced by Dorothy to strip, effectively placing Dorothy in a sexually dominant position. Later hiding in Dorothy’s closet, but able to view the main room through the door’s blinds, Jeffrey looks on as Frank violently orders Dorothy to don her blue velvet robe, sit on a chair, and perform his sexual fantasy. Frank, immediately establishes his gothic character, as he demands darkness for his ritualistic sex acts, and affirms the rite, through symbolic utterance, as he repeats here, and throughout the film: “Now it’s dark.” Frank’s general ghoulishness is augmented by his periodic reliance on a mysterious gas that seems to fuel his degenerate behavior. Throughout his sadistic exhortations to Dorothy, as he sits at her feet, and looks at her genitals, Frank demands: “Don’t you fuckin’ look at me!” Frank’s requirement that Dorothy avert her eyes signals Lynch’s construction of an aesthetic *mise-en-abime*, as the film’s viewer inhabits Jeffrey’s subjective position in the closet, viewing Frank’s histrionic performance. The scene evolves depicting a sequence of gendered spaces where male and female subjects are free to take up the passive and active forms of the feminine and masculine gaze. Masochistic and sadistic gazes perpetually shift back and forth between Dorothy, Frank, and Jeffrey.
Frank’s control of Dorothy’s gaze further suggests the conflation of the terms that Michael Fried establishes in his historical study of modern painting, where Fried describes the artistic representation of “absorptive” qualities as “a state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed” that “establish the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas” (10, 108). Fried calls the reaffirmation of the beholder “theatricality,” as in a portrait where the figure is represented looking back at the beholder. Frank demands absorption from Dorothy, through her reversal of theatricality, as he positions himself as the absorptive participant in this violent aesthetic. Lynch employs this effect in his work, not to seal off the filmic space and secure its absolute integrity, but, rather, to accomplish a dialogically opposite effect through its visual subversion. Lynch privileges diegetic porousness over an imagined space that functions only at the level of its own epistemic reality. The blurring of the boundary between viewer and participant, as is the case for Jeffrey, also intimates the role of the film’s beholder. Instead of a film experience that neutralizes or negates the viewer, Lynch’s art demands the complicity of the beholder within the instance of this absorptive break down.

This shifting agency and passivity, and Jeffrey’s consequent active participation in the violence and sex of Frank and Dorothy’s world, constitute the inauguration of a counterpublic, as described by Michael Warner, based in sexual deviance and criminality. Warner describes counterpublics and their corresponding discourse as designating a “cultural horizon against which it marks itself off [. . .]. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (51). Sexual deviance and criminality are no strangers to gothic fiction. Critic Louis Gross, in Redefining the American Gothic, notes the gothic’s innate connection to societal constructions of perversion, abnormality, and
decadence. He writes: “the Gothic at once wallows in these ‘perverted’ desires yet retains society’s righteous horror at their practice” (53). Frank’s aggressive demands of Dorothy, like those she issued to Jeffrey, function as the discourse that supports the counterpublic. This discourse will expand as Frank’s verbal recoding of 1950s and 60s rock ‘n’ roll love songs situates their exclusive counterpublic against the mythology of innocuous, small-town America.

Later in the film, Lynch again creates another visual image of postmodern gothic theatricality. Ben, a sadistic, queer analogue for Frank (whom Frank simply calls “a suave fucker”), performs a mock-serenade of Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams,” at the apartment where Frank has stashed Dorothy’s family. The cognitive dissociation that results from the incongruence of visual performance and sound elicits an extreme form of simulacral imagery. Ben’s illumination emphasizes his ghostly, disembodied face as it generates a similar effect as those employed to render a campfire ghost story. Lynch further reiterates Ben’s performance, as Frank erratically applies lipstick and performs Orbison’s song, this time, as a similarly-lit, spoken word piece. In a truly gothic move, Lynch captures the terrifying potential of the simulacral, as he reinterprets Orbison’s haunting song and voice as a sinister accompaniment to a sadistic gangster’s mock-performance. Whereas Ben’s performance tacitly queers Orbison’s classic rock ‘n roll song through his gesticulations towards Frank, Frank’s iteration of “In Dreams” reinscribes the song’s lyrical content to suggest the violation of Jeffrey’s psyche, to actually haunt his dreams. Lynch employs a structural _mise-en-abîme_ as both the filmic audience and the film audience experience Frank’s eerie performance. More than simply recreating the experience of film spectatorship by staging a performance within a film, Lynch restages a performance of the same Orbison song, continually destabilizing the song’s nostalgic reception. Again, Lynch mimetically
situates the performative moment as a mode of visual decoding, dramatizing the postmodern American gothic concisely, through its revaluation of Orbison through the representation of a horrific unreality.

Equally haunting is Dorothy’s mournful reinterpretation of Bobby Vinton’s “Blue Velvet.” As the titular song whose emergence recurs throughout the film, “Blue Velvet” succinctly captures the temporal shiftiness of Lynch’s film, as various eras in American ideology battle for dominance within the narrative. Moreover, Vinton’s song, like Orbison’s, must necessarily accrue a new meaning whose interpretation relies upon the symptoms of the prevailing social register. So, as Dorothy’s rendition signifies the manifestation of Frank’s manic compulsion for performance, the song’s lyrics acquire a more relevant meaning that approaches the profound pain – physical and psychological – that Dorothy endures. Frank demands Ben’s eerie recital and Dorothy’s performance of his fantasies, eliciting the various degrees of artifice that support his personal narratives of control. The reconstitution of meaning in the various songs that affect Frank expresses the idiosyncratic nature of the aesthetic experience, supporting the pluralistic over the universal, and a more intimate concept of horror that makes the threat truly unknowable.

Though Lynch populates his film with grotesque and terrifying characters, these monstrous figures are typically mere appendages to the more profoundly diabolical, and distinctly American, horrors of cultural exploitation and ideological suppression. Through his representations of the voyeuristic, the psychopathic, the monstrous, and the perverse, Lynch questions those ideological systems that sub tend their presence in his narratives, and, in social reality. Both the postmodern and the gothic express a critical awareness of history and its production, and though Lynch admittedly aspires to be apolitical, his films levy a rigorous critique upon the concept of cultural normativity and its supporting nostalgia.
Instead of simply exposing the seediness that lingers beneath the surface, Lynch makes the superficial, the simulacral, terrifying. Lynch expresses not only the seduction of highly stylized visual culture, emblematized succinctly in a swatch of lush blue velvet, but also what such aestheticized reification culturally enables, whether through its capacity to dissemble or be dangerously fetishized. Just as the town is simplistically represented by lumber—a seemingly organic and innocuous material—this too suggests the fetishistic coding that exists alongside the horrifying reality of kidnapping, rape, torture, extortion, and murder.

2.4. Twin Peaks and Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me: Corrupting the Local

What is it about the ambience of that town and the dark firs looming deep in the wood carvings that lends itself to this time, this mystery and this sense of doubleness about all the characters? Just picture this kind of darkness and this wind going through the these needles of the Douglas firs and you start getting a little bit of a mood coming along. And if you hear footsteps and you see a little in the window and you start moving toward it, little by little you’re sucked in. And a mood, this fantastic mood and a sense of place comes along, and hopefully you like to go back and feel this each week.

David Lynch, *Soap Opera Weekly*

*Twin Peaks* (1990), David Lynch and writer Mark Frost’s popular television series, gave rise to a massive cult following and Lynch’s subsequent feature film, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992).7 To read Lynch’s description of the series, one would easily imagine the inauguration of a horror film, suffused in the “darkness” and eerie “moods” of a mysterious rural town. While critics have acknowledged *Twin Peaks*’ debt to the Gothic, few have specifically identified the show as belonging to a Gothic tradition. The premise of the

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7 During the course of the series production, Lynch became less and less involved with the writing and directing, choosing, by the second and final season, to direct only episodes whose narrative significance was considerable (the season opener, the reveal episode where Laura’s killer is identified, the season finale).
show was ostensibly focused on an investigation by a federal agent, Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle Machlachlan), into the murder of a small-town adolescent, Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), whose life had become complicated by her involvement in criminal activity and drug use. While this description defines the broad purpose of the show, Twin Peaks, like Blue Velvet, engagement with the banal parochialism of small-town America elicits a horrifying narrative of corruption, decadence, and evil that lingers in the shadows of a nostalgic American melodrama. Like Blue Velvet’s Lumberton, a purely filmic space where temporal fixity is impossible, the town of Twin Peaks represents a specifically televisual locale, defined by its hokey charms and rustic Americana. Lynch creates a soap opera within his soap opera entitled Invitation to Love that illustrates another layer of signification beyond the setting of Twin Peaks, furthering the development of the series as a palimpsest of realities, myth, and dreamworlds that intersect dramatically and with dire consequences. Furthermore, Twin Peaks represents the classical Hollywood version of America and the enduring sense of security innate to its small-towns. Like the ostensibly quaint setting of Lumberton, Twin Peaks signifies a space of superficial innocence and profound psychic turmoil. Just as Lumberton suggests a gross fetishishization of wood, Twin Peaks experiences a similar fetishization of its component mise-en-scene: props such as the “damn fine coffee” and doughnuts associated wryly with law enforcement; settings such as the local hotel (the Great Northern), the mill, the high school, the local diner (The Double-R), and the local gas station (Big Ed’s Gas Farm). However, unlike Blue Velvet, Twin Peaks depicts social evils that manifest from within an idyllic suburban setting, both physically and psychically, instead of at its margins, as expressed in the abject criminal community that lives close to Jeffrey and Sandy, but not actually among them.
Tom O’Connor, in “Bourgeois Myth Versus Media Poetry in Prime-time: Re-visiting Mark Frost and David Lynch’s Twin Peaks,” argues that Twin Peaks disrupts what Roland Barthes calls the “bourgeois myth” through its stylistic visualization of poetic signification (media poetry). O’Connor formulation appears similar to Adorno’s vision of the avant-garde as an aesthetic force which shatters the banality and consumerist mentality of the everyday. While the concept of media poetry is dogged by ambiguity, O’Connor’s invocation of Barthes’ bourgeois myth can provide a productive means for establishing the social commentary rendered within Twin Peaks. O’Connor cites Barthes where he describes the relationship between bourgeois conventions and the social construction of myth: “bourgeois norms are experienced as the evident laws of a natural order – the further the bourgeois class propagates its representations, the more naturalized they become [. . .] The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short, a perceptible absence” (Mythologies 129-131). Barthes’ claim assumes a coherent and discrete understanding of the bourgeois that may have been adequate in older societies, but whose persistence is impossible within the diverse population of the late twentieth-century United States. Moreover, Barthes’ bourgeois suggests a neat cultural stratification that transcends socio-economic status. Despite these concerns, Barthes’ bourgeois myth can be said to exist in the media’s production and perpetuation of a virtual bourgeois, through the morality and social ethos proliferated by network television and countless major market film releases.

Considered as a function of the political and social climate of 1980s and 1990s United States, the nostalgic vision of America disseminated during the eight-year presidency of Ronald Reagan, and continued predominantly during the following administration, promotes a similar bourgeois myth of natural order. Ronald Reagan’s bourgeois myth relied
heavily upon his own connection to film culture, as he was both a Hollywood star and political ideologue. Moreover, the film industry's turn from the narrative experimentation and social liberalism of the post-classical Hollywood era towards producing films that endorsed conservative ideology illustrates the pervasive nature of the virtual bourgeois myth during Reagan era. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, in _Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film_, address the growing conservatism in Hollywood film, beginning in the late 1960s, and continuing most stridently during the 1980s. Ryan and Kellner describe the bourgeois myth encoded within these conservative films:

What conservatives posit as nature is merely an illusion created by a metaphoric representational structure which creates the sense of a hidden meaning, a true identity, a fundamental stratum behind historical contingency. The liberal and radical attitudes accept the realm of metonymic contingency, the possibility that meaning is not determinate, identity not fixed, as the only one that exists and consequently see the social world posited by such rhetoric as malleable and indeterminate. (41)

Where O'Connor's notion of media-poetry as a repudiation or evacuation of the bourgeois myth remains somewhat abstract, Lynch's use of the Gothic can be more definitively traced and shown to critique Reagan's bourgeois myth, in _Twin Peaks_, as well as _Blue Velvet_ and _Eraserhead_.

_Twin Peaks_ perpetually emphasizes “the local” as an aesthetic that promises familiarity, wholesomeness, and security. However, the show’s disruption of “the local,” by forces that invade from its liminal spaces and from within, obliterates its security, substituting for it a sense of alienation and betrayal commensurate with the dark secrets that populate classic Gothic fiction. Like Walpole's or Radcliffe's haunted castle, the setting of Twin Peaks is rife with long-hidden mysteries – sinister and benign – whose emergence coincide with the investigation of Laura Palmer’s brutal murder. The series emphasizes the superficiality of the town’s outward persona and the depravity concealed within the lives of
the town’s inhabitants. More than the simple melodrama of standard serial soap operas, where a bastard child or faked death would entangle the narrative, *Twin Peaks* heightens the melodrama by assimilating tropes and images whose supernatural horror augment the already profound social terrors of incest and rape. I would position Lynch’s aesthetic in creating *Twin Peaks* against what David Punter terms the “schizophrenic Gothic”:

> the presentation of worlds of cognitive and hallucinated disjunction in which there is no access below the surface, in which everything has been ‘closed down.’ [. . .] This is, of course, in one sense an illusion, albeit a powerful one. What is frequently inside is the rage of despair; what is patrolling the outside is the massive array of forces which the ego erects to protect us from hypotheses of inner emptiness. Death of affect is only part of the story: we may indeed continue, after two centuries, to want ‘gross and violent stimulants’ (*Lyrical Ballads* 248), but this is because we detect the stirrings of grossness within ourselves which cannot nevertheless be admitted. (*Literature of Terror, Vol II* 213)

With the intermingling of various cognitive realities, from the quaintness of the Double R Diner to the cryptic declarations by the local prophetess and log enthusiast to the bizarre Red Room, *Twin Peaks* suggests the surface that Punter describes as “schizophrenic,” but this surface is entirely porous, allowing the viewer to experience the “gross and violent stimulants” *de profundis* that tear apart Laura Palmer’s world. The bridge that links these worlds, as suggested near the series’ conclusion, is fear. Fear signifies the key that unlocks the entry to the mysterious Black Lodge, just as within the show’s narrative, Leland and BOB represent figures from both the natural and supernatural worlds linked by their shared act of horrifying brutality. Laura Palmer’s murder, more than simply representing a standard mystery convention, resonates with the terror that enables transcendence between the multiple realities of *Twin Peaks* diegesis.

Laura Palmer represents the prototypical “girl next door” whom Lynch has specifically referred to as “the classic American girl” (*Passion of David Lynch* 174). Lynch’s
acknowledgement of Laura in conjunction with an American mythos of femininity and youth evinces the critical engagement enacted through her gross sexualization and brutal murder. Martha Nochimson describes Laura’s singularity as a monstrous precursor to her spectrality in the series:

[. . .] her very synchronicity with the portrait of the perfect girl – daddy’s princess – afflicts her. Her living energies are as alienated as were those of the freak John Merrick [The Elephant Man], although for exactly the opposite reason. She is cut off from culture as well as from reality by being the cultural image of desire. Trapped within the stereotype, she lives an alienated life, peering frantically at the world through her desirable shell.(174)

Lynch’s series adapts the melodrama of soap opera narratives to conform to the dreaded revelations of Gothic fiction. Kenneth Kaleta indirectly describes Twin Peaks as the extension of America’s Gothic tradition, by suggesting that the series invokes the poetic and stylistic practices of Edgar Allan Poe. Kaleta writes: “Poe creates a nether world – somewhere between history and legend, somewhere between dream and nightmare. His stories and poems detail the bizarre; his characters ominously move toward unraveled secrets. [ . . . ] Lynch on the screen – particularly in Twin Peaks – is on Poe’s wavelength”(136). The macabre alienation of the everyday represents the critical link between Poe and Lynch that demonstrates the verisimilitude of their respective Gothic aesthetics. Both artists litter their imagined worlds with all manner of necrophilic desire, satanic birds (ravens and owls), and mysterious murders that will inevitably out. Both artists render their imagined narrative spaces with poetic significations and imagery, whether the dread image of a deadly pendulum or the bluish corpse of the girl-next-door wrapped tightly in sepals of plastic.

Lynch constructs a visual iconography of dread by imbuing typically innocuous, mundane objects with supernatural resonance. Perhaps the single most iconic image from the show – Laura Palmer’s framed homecoming queen photograph – resides on the side
table in the Palmer home and in the trophy case at school, succinctly reminding the viewer of her abuse at home, her perpetual commodification in the community (“So you want to fuck the homecoming queen,” Laura says while working as a prostitute in *Fire Walk With Me*), and of her persistent spectral presence within the psychic world of Twin Peaks’ inhabitants. Like Walter Pater’s decadent vision of DaVinci’s Mona Lisa, Laura’s knowing smile haunts the series, appearing in the closing credits, and physically reminding the audience of her demonic position between life and death. John Richardson notes the ironic disjunction between the mundane pose and conventional sweetness of Laura in her portrait in contrast to the tumult of her life in Twin Peaks: “The poignancy of the ‘Homecoming Queen’ photographic portrait of Laura, seen on numerous occasions in the series and during the closing titles of each episode (with the exception of the pilot), inheres in the fact that this image of the girl bears little resemblance to almost everything Agent Cooper finds out about her in the course of his investigation” (Sheen and Davison, 80-81). Laura’s prostitution metonymically illustrates the means by which her iconicity as Lynch’s symbolic “classic American girl” becomes libidinal and fetishized through the process of narrative. The wholesome image of Laura promoted throughout the community prior to Cooper’s investigation accentuates the filmic construction of feminine passivity that Laura Mulvey famously has termed “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Ironically, as Cooper “looks at” Laura more closely, all of the assumptions of her purity and passivity are summarily repudiated. Through this cognitive dissonance between her life and her iconic photo, Laura’s radical descent from canonized local sweetheart to a tortured feminine subjectivity becomes less a linear trajectory and, more precisely, a double-exposure image whose tensions resulted with fatal conclusions.

The repeated low-angle shots of the ceiling fan in the Palmer’s home, the wind-blown pines, and the swinging streetlamp reinforce the subtext of doom through their
coupling with a droning, non-diegetic hum. This strategy is reminiscent of surrealism, an artistic movement commonly invoked within Lynch scholarship. Kenneth Kaleta illuminates the relationship between *Twin Peaks* and the surrealist movement: “*Twin Peaks* is in the world of surrealism. [. . .] The early surrealists found that life was continually nonsensical. They drew from life and from pieces of art in a hat. They were attracted to the serial, which maintained reality in spurts. They appreciated its exaltation of parts dominating the whole”(150). It is precisely this strategy that pervades Lynch’s aesthetic, as fractal narratives and banal objects overwhelm the coherence of the town, and its promise of security. Ayers describes the show’s reliance upon iconic symbolism: “[. . .]through *Twin Peaks*’ secular allegory, an experience of historical transformation takes the form of an untidy collection of cultural materials, an aesthetics of the domestic replete with ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological capers’”(Sheen and Davison, 100). Again and again, Lynch infuses *Twin Peaks*’ mise-en-scene with a battery of clichéd objects and accents that produce a quaint familiarity, accompanied by a lingering awareness of the false security that they offer.

Lynch’s strategy of corrupting the local and the everyday manifests on an intimate level through the mystical transmigration of demonic souls, such as the murderous spirit BOB, into community leaders and family members, such as Leland Palmer, Laura’s father. BOB, a malevolent ghoul who parasitically inhabits members of the Twin Peaks community, represents a distilled form of evil whose repetition in mirrors and various visions makes his ubiquity and control appear absolute. Moreover, this repetition suggests BOB’s connection to the Gothic trope of the uncanny. The question that drove the popularity of the television series, “Who killed Laura Palmer?,” resulted in two answers: BOB and Leland Palmer. Metonymically, BOB’s supernatural possession of Leland project the real, evils of child abuse, molestation, incest, rape, and murder within the suburban setting of the quaint Twin Peaks.
Peaks community. The amalgamation of BOB and Leland succinctly illustrates the allegorical device that endows the show with such horror. Not only are we aware that Leland unwillingly participated in the rape and murder of his own daughter, but due to his possession, we are unable to conclusively allay our terror and disgust because the evil occupies two subjective positions.

The infamous Red Room, or as it would be later called, the Black Lodge, with its saw-wave patterned floor and lush red curtains, signifies the cradle of all evil within the show’s narrative, and yet, its design is based on a waiting room, the very epitome of drab banality. Arguably the most iconic setting depicted in all of Lynch’s oeuvre, the Red Room conjures associations with the highly stylized mise-en-scene of German expressionist cinema, specifically Robert Weine’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) in the jagged saw-tooth black and white floor, and theater, as connoted by the red curtains so typical to both theaters and vintage cinemas. Through the direct reversal of human speech and bodily movement, the eerie chatter and dancing of a Little Man in a red suit (Michael Anderson) become defamiliarized to the extent that they represent a dream logic whose message remains encrypted in Cooper’s psyche, establishing another level of mystery.

Looking extensively at the most elaborate sequence of the Red Room, from the series’ final episode, directed by Lynch, I hope to illustrate the expressionistic and surrealist style of the Gothic that Lynch constructs, also describing Lynch’s technique for rendering the mundane preternaturally terrifying. This particular visit to the Red Room, unlike the psychic forays made earlier by Agent Cooper in his dreams, marks an actual corporeal transportation to the Red Room, through a supernatural portal opened by Cooper’s arch-nemesis and former mentor, the criminally-insane murderer, Windham Earle. Earle, who has summoned the entrance to the portal through ancient incantations and the practice of
black magic, sets out to achieve spiritual supremacy by entering the Black Lodge and harnessing its sinister powers. Lynch subsequently and summarily disposes of Earle, whose presence as a villain is clichéd and trite, at best, leaving Cooper to contend with far more formidable phantasms as he wanders the labyrinthine passages of the Black Lodge.

The sequence begins as the camera assumes Cooper’s subjective position, slowly tilting up, scanning the black and white saw-wave pattern of the floor, and tracking forward down a corridor comprised of two walls of thick, red curtains. The images, now familiar to the Twin Peaks audience, take on a new urgency as the camera’s forward tracking simulates Cooper’s experience and the slow motion creeping towards an uncertain and portentous situation. Lynch’s camerawork here resembles that of a horror film, whose conventional subjective camera technique creates an intimacy and uneasy identification with the on-screen character (sometimes the terrorized victim, other times, the terrorizing victimizer) and generates suspense. Cooper enters the familiar Red Room to find the Little Man, who again speaks in the Red Room’s backwards dreamtongue. He addresses Cooper, “I’m waiting for you,” and the camera fades to black, signifying the commercial interruption. The fade to black here creates an ominous punctuating effect, leaving Cooper, symbolically suspended temporally in the Red Room for a short duration of a commercial break.⁸

When we return to the show, Cooper and the Little Man are seated. The Little Man utters, “When you see me again, it won’t be me,” suggesting that things in the Black Lodge are not what they seem. The Little Man introduces Cooper to other specters that haunt this phantasmagoric space, “Some of your friends are here.” This declaration signifies an initial

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⁸ Lynch utilizes the commercial break as yet another narrative tool in creating the foreboding atmosphere of the Red Room, aware that the disjunction created by exiting the Red Room diegesis to the frivolous imagined world of television advertisements makes them appear, in their juxtaposition, as surreal and confusing as the Red Room itself.
example of Lynch’s alienation and corruption of the commonplace. Typically, such a statement would imply familiarity and comfort, but in the Red Room, the promise of friends means nothing of the sort. From this point forward, Cooper encounters many individuals whose outward appearance he recognizes, but who bear little resemblance, behaviorally, to those he knows. Lynch employs the Gothic narrative trope of uncanny doppelgangers to create this defamiliarizing dream-logic of identity. Just as members of the Twin Peaks community have been possessed and inhabited by dark spirits, the Black Lodge features menacing copies of people, evil repetitions whose presence is concomitant with their real-world counterparts.

Following the brief encounter with the Little Man, Laura Palmer appears, dressed elegantly in a black gown, and sits next to Cooper, who continues to look on without any noticeable emotion aside from a visible uncertainty in his face. She tells Cooper that she will see him again in 25 years, then simply says “Meanwhile,” strikes an awkward, histrionic pose, and disappears. This brief and expressionistic visitation conjures up the sensation of dream symbolism, where each of her words and movements suggest another more profound revelation. While it would be merely speculative to attempt deciphering this ostensibly coded interchange, Laura’s appearance underscores the unmoored temporality of the Black Lodge. The reference to an actual period of time seems implausible due to the Lodge’s existence outside the limitations of earthly space and time. Moreover, the term “meanwhile” invokes the parallel temporality of the Lodge in purely discursive terms, self-reflexively acknowledging Laura’s dual nature as both murdered girl and figment of Cooper’s psychic musings. Following Laura’s dissolution, Cooper sees a familiar Giant, associated with the Red Room in previous episodes, and an elderly bell-hop whom Lynch conjured in all of his Season Two directorial spots. These apparitions, while associated with the Lodge and its
mystical character, represent benign and potentially benevolent spirits who have aided
Cooper in his past investigative exploits. This positive moment quickly dissipates as Cooper
looks again at the Little Man, whose face is locked in menacing rictus as he rubs his hands
together like a silent film villain plotting something fiendish. Bathed in the blood-red light
from the ambient lights that illuminate the curtains, the scene acquires an expressionistic
note of dread and impending violence.

Cooper raises a cup of coffee that he has been given to his mouth, only to discover
that it is solidified in the cup. Subsequent attempts produce spills and viscous dribbles from
the cup, further denaturalizing the everyday comfort of coffee, Cooper’s most cherished
quotidian element within the iconography of the show. Again, the Lodge represents a place
where the local is consistently corrupted. The Little Man announces the next act in this
theater of the absurd, as he invokes the name of BOB, the show’s most diabolical ghoul, and
utters the oft-spoken and occultish mantra “Fire Walk With Me” as a wall of flames appears,
filling the camera frame (a similar image used in the opening of Lynch’s *Wild At Heart*). The
name BOB itself signifies an abbreviated and informal name, common in American parlance,
and nearly comical when used to represent an evil spirit. BOB’s nemesis, a spiritual entity
who inhabits the body of a one-armed man called MIKE, also illustrates Lynch’s
transmogrification of the commonplace into the numinous. Martha Nochimson, in “Desire
Under the Douglas Firs: Entering the Body of Reality in *Twin Peaks,*” notes the series’
creators’ awareness of the ironic names: “The absurdly banal names adopted by these
devastating powers once they have crossed into the plane of ‘ordinary’ reality are, according
to [Mark] Frost and Robert Engels, a writer-producer on the series, a primary example of the
‘Twin Peaks’ tone: here, banalities tragicomically mask strange forces”(25). Within the Red
Room, however, the irony of these banalities are shed, and the demonic entities achieve a
graver insistence. The wall of fire calls to mind satanic associations, lending even greater dread to the scene as it presciently suggests the dangers to come.

Directly following the explosion of flames, the lights go out, leaving the screen and Cooper in blackness. A strobe light begins to pulse, disorienting the spatial dimensions of the set and visually disjointing the movements of characters in the space. A scream is heard, like the speech of every inhabitant of the Lodge, but Agent Cooper, in reverse, doubling the anxiety produced by the defamiliarizing pulsation of the strobe. Cooper crosses the room and begins a movement up and down the curtained corridor, seemingly entering different rooms with each trek up and down the hall. Just as the scene began with the camera tracking forward to instantiate Cooper’s vision, now the camera tracks backward, simulating Cooper’s discombobulated steps in reverse, and illustrating the disassembling of temporality as both time and space seem to be continually challenged by the rapid transformations of the room. The room itself shifts in dimension, lighting, and scenery, simulating the effect of many rooms, but whose components are eerily and unevenly iterated. Lynch’s perpetual manipulation of the space of both the Red Room and its adjoining corridor generates a tortuous and infernal circuit of inescapable repetitions whose rapid transformations augment a sense of claustrophobic terror. Lynch’s Black Lodge represents a postmodern Gothic adaptation of the serpentine corridors, clandestine passageways, and hidden rooms of Horace Walpole’s or Matthew Lewis’ Gothic castles and abbeys. Furthermore, the Black Lodge signifies a narrative predecessor to another postmodern Gothic dwelling, the perpetually shifting house of Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000).

The Gothic trope of the uncanny double factors largely in the *Twin Peaks* series, and revisits Cooper ghoulishly in the Black Lodge. After a number of confusing twists and turns in the ever-changing anti-structure of the Lodge, Cooper finds himself in the Red Room
with the Little Man in front of him laughing and dancing demonically. The Little Man tells Cooper of “another friend” who appears in silhouette behind the far curtained wall. When she emerges, we can see that this silhouette is Maddy, Laura Palmer’s cousin, played by Sheryl Lee, who also plays Laura, lending a visual doubling to her dual role. Like Laura’s previous spectral presence in the Red Room, Maddy is costumed in a black gown and she warns Cooper: “Watch out for my cousin.” Maddy, whose character was similarly murdered like Laura, by the spiritually-possessed Leland Palmer, appears here as she had in the series, benevolent and compassionate. After more bewildered wandering in the Lodge, Cooper sees the Little Man, and this time Lynch shoots the Little Man from a high angle perspective, making his size even more diminutive and giving the Little Man a more impish quality. As Cooper watches his creepy gesticulations, the miniature man intones, “Doppelganger,” explicitly articulating the ghostly repetition of figures within the Lodge, and the series more generally. This mention of a doppelganger instantiates the Gothic doubling that has threaded its way throughout the entire series, in the form of Maddy, BOB as himself and Leland, and the apparitions who reside in the Black Lodge.

Immediately following Maddy’s admonition and the Little Man’s utterance, Laura appears again, but her countenance has changed dramatically – her eyes milky and dead, her face contorted in a spiteful scowl. Laura, or rather her wraithlike doppelganger, utters the same word spoken earlier by Laura, “meanwhile,” and as she does, the lighting shifts casting a blood-red hue on Laura’s face momentarily before a spotlight shows on her and strobe light suffuses the room, outside the sphere of the spotlight, in chaotic pulsation. Laura gnashes her teeth and screams, appearing hostile and truly frightening. Lynch cultivates a sensation of disquiet through the radical shift in lighting, marshaling all focus on Laura’s deadened eyes and the flash of her teeth against her deep red lips. Following her scream
Laura climbs, in reverse motion, behind an s-shaped loveseat with alternately positioned seats (an iconically double faced chair), then rushes forward again into an extreme close-up, that simulates her aggressive approach of Cooper, whose subjective eye the viewer inhabits through the camera work. This approach is punctuated by an image of the Little Man's face in red-tinted negative, establishing the expressionism Lynch associates with the color red, constantly reinforcing the satanic threat that always simmers below the surface of the Red Room’s mise-en-scene, even in its kitschier moments. Following this intense onrush of visual and auditory noise, Agent Cooper bolts out of the room in terror but the camera returns to Laura’s frightening features, forcing the audience to be trapped in the moment even after Cooper, whose subjectivity has up until now guided the viewers’ navigation of the Lodge, makes his escape. This persistence of Laura’s image emphasizes the Black Lodge’s disturbing inescapability and, in effect, mimetically intimates Cooper’s unaccompanied wandering through this psychic house of horrors.

Laura’s appearance and blocking in this brief interchange suggest a profound connection with the Gothic figure of the vampire. As Laura shows her teeth, she tilts her head slightly, in the fashion of countless prior movie vampires as they draw near in anticipation of their victim’s jugular vein. Her subsequent movements appear, though shot in reverse, bestial and predatory, calling to mind the transformative nature of the vampire, as bat, wolf, or inhabited mist. Laura’s defilement and death represents the central locus of the series’ labyrinthine narrative, just as Lucy Westenra’s victimization and seduction by the vampiric count accounts for much of Stoker’s capacity to generate narrative suspense and horror. Carol Senf, in “Daughters of Lilith: Women Vampires in Popular Literature,” comments that female vampires share three characteristics: bloodsucking, rebellion, and overt eroticism. These traits contradicted conventional expectations for women during the
18th and 19th centuries, where the vampire legends flourished in Gothic tales and literature.

Senf describes the singularity of the female vampire:

The most important distinction is that these traits were more feared in traditional women than in men, primarily because the traditional woman was expected to be a nurturer rather than a bloodsucker, a docile creature rather than a rebel, and a being who sublimated her eroticism to child-rearing and monogamous marriage. Because of her extreme deviation from the ideal, therefore, the female vampire was both more fear-inspiring and more desire-provoking than her male counterpart. (Heldreth and Pharr 207)

Laura Palmer, the rebellious, drug-abusing (rather than bloodsucking, necessarily), vixen of Twin Peaks suggests a thematic parallel to the anxieties provoked by the female vampire historically. Within the imagined narrative space of Twin Peaks, the Black Lodge represents the vampire’s Gothic castle, shrouded in mystery and darkness; BOB signifies an analogue for Dracula, the nocturnal seducer and violator; Laura succinctly represents the tragic figure of Lucy, whose goodness is inverted by her involvement in monstrous sexuality. Typically, vampire females in Gothic literature occupy two dominant positions: the dangerous seductress and the demonic murderess. Lynch’s transformation of Laura into a ghoulish succubus within the Lodge histrionically demonstrates her vampiric character, as she appears both sultry and terrifying. Just as in her Twin Peaks adolescence, Laura’s sexual presence represents a disquieting form of monstrosity.

The connection to vampire narrative extends beyond the nightmarish logic of the Black Lodge. BOB, like Dracula and countless other fictional vampires, possesses a unique topological relationship to mirrors, though instead of presenting no mirror-image (as a representation of an entity without a soul), BOB supplants his victim’s images when they stand in front of the looking-glass (effectively usurping their souls). William Patrick Day, in *Vampire Legends in Contemporary Culture*, describes the vampire’s relationship to nature:
they are literally post-human: they were once human and now they are something else. Rather than being a sign of the suppression or transcendence of nature, as an android would be, post-human vampires are the natural unleashed. Pure predators, pure need, vampires may be death incarnate but they also embody the most basic human drive: to live. Vampires reject their place in the cycle of nature, but in this they represent nature exceeding itself; though undead, they are the triumph of the individual survival instinct over death.(83)

Day, though discussing conventional vampire fiction, could just as easily be describing BOB. Lynch perpetually inundates the series visually with images of “nature exceeding itself”: an enormous waterfall, the wind-blown pines, the ominous and predatory owls. The Black Lodge itself can only be accessed through an ephemeral portal in the forest. The common representation of vampires in literature and film depicts them as gluttonous, virtually engorging themselves on the blood of their victims, so much so that the blood spills from their mouths, creating a terrifying visual iconography of excess. Countless film posters exhibit Count Dracula with blood running from his mouth, in a grisly extension of his canine fangs. Similarly, Lynch’s BOB expresses an appetite for his victims, though his excesses are not so clearly expressed through the visual metonym of blood, but rather through his insatiable sexual appetite for Laura. Lynch transforms the horror generated by the ravenous overindulgence of one form of natural appetite, the basic need for nourishment, into another, the reproductive act that would further the species.

Following this brief moment of divergence from Cooper’s immediate experience, the camera returns to Cooper, who staggers into the Red Room, only to look down and notice he’s bleeding profusely from the gut. With fresh bloody tracks behind him staining the black and white floor, the metonymical association of the red curtains with blood is made manifest. The stark image of blood splattered on the geometric tile pattern introduces the concept of death more directly, as Cooper now envisions his own body bleeding and laying
next to his former lover, Caroline, who was murdered by Windham Earl years earlier. Cooper’s experience here initiates the uncanny moment of feeling outside one’s body, literally being beside one’s self. The woman rises from the floor and is now Cooper’s current love interest, Annie, and he calls out to her. His voice, unlike everybody in the Black Lodge, intones clearly and without the reverse speech effect, privileging Cooper’s experience as unique and authentic. The strobe light begins again, signaling in its abstraction, the reiteration of sinister effects already accumulated in this phantasmagoric setting. As Cooper’s vision of Annie dissolves along with the curtains and floor into another image of the curtained corridor outside the Red Room, the camera begins to track backwards down the hall, suggesting a reversal of temporality or the encounters in the Black Lodge. This reverse tracking shot also suggests a frightened retreat by Agent Cooper, as his deepest fears and insecurities materialize within the psychic tortures of the Lodge. At the conclusion of this tracking shot, Cooper finds himself again in the Red Room, this time with Annie before him. When the camera lingers on Cooper within a shot-reverse-shot sequence, Annie morphs into Caroline, whose eyes, like Laura Palmer’s earlier, are deadened a milky white. The two females alternatively metamorphose from one to the other whenever the camera returns to Cooper, combining them under the function of lover within Cooper’s psyche. Following this instance of interchanging identities, the demonic Laura returns briefly, again screaming and arching her ghastly countenance in the fashion of a movie vampire preparing to attack the neck of their prey. Martha Nochimson compares the women whom Cooper intimately encounters in the series to *femme fatales* of the large and small screen detective/mystery tradition (“Desire Under the Douglas Firs”). While Nochimson’s point is both apt and illuminating as a means for interpreting the detective tradition from which *Twin Peaks* clearly emerges, my own examination suggests a different reading of these women
when they are encountered within the Red Room of the Black Lodge. When seen within the surreal dream-logic of the Red Room, these women assume a more Gothic signification. The effect of these mutating women, beautiful and beloved to the attendant Cooper, creates a narrative effect similar to that of Dracula’s succubus brides, who tantalize but ultimately horrify Jonathan Harker. The women represent Cooper’s desires, but also a brooding sense of evil when encountered within the drapes of the Red Room.

Following Cooper’s visitation from the women, Windham Earle appears as a Faustian figure, poised and invigorated within the Black Lodge, assuming diabolical new powers over reality. Earle mistakenly informs Cooper that Cooper can trade his own soul in order to save his intended, Annie, and Cooper accepts, allowing Earle to plunge a knife deep into is abdomen. This sequence underscores the Lodge’s temporal disarticulation once again, as Cooper has already received this mysterious wound, prior to the meeting with Earle. Immediately following the stabbing, the familiar infernal imagery of fire returns followed by abject blackness, then the ominous throb of the strobe, satanically announcing the entrance of BOB. As the foremost evil presence in the series, BOB’s revelation signifies an epic and decisive meeting between he and Cooper, the most heroic figure established in the show. BOB disposes of Earle in a minor pyrotechnical flourish, snickering and sneering, uttering guttural phrases in the dreamtongue of the Red Room. The brevity of Earle’s destruction contrasts strikingly with his narrative prominence, as the central antagonist following the death of Leland Palmer, and BOB’s consequent relegation to narrative dormancy within the second season’s later episodes. This gesture effectively solidifies BOB as the more formidable evil, his manipulation of Leland in committing the crimes of rape, torture, incest, and murder trump Earle’s theatrical, cat-and-mouse persona as the master
criminal, a la Sherlock Holmes’ nemesis, Dr. Moriarty. Cooper exits the scene, perpetually trying to find an exit from this increasingly claustrophobic puzzleworld.

As was the case when Laura’s uncanny double appeared, the camera remains with the frightening image of BOB, establishing his dominance in this parallel world. In the background, we see the silhouette of what appears to be a confused and disoriented Cooper tangled in the curtains, but as the figure emerges from the background, we see another ghoulish doppelganger: Agent Cooper with the familiar white-glazed eyes of the Red Room’s living dead. Unlike the previous doubles, Cooper’s signifies the first whose original was not already dead, blurring the status of these ghastly repetitions as not simply zombies, but ambiguous entities whose existence parallels their originals (or vice versa). The evil Cooper and Bob take a moment together to laugh wildly, then the camera returns to the actual Agent Cooper who encounters Leland in the corridor. Avoiding Leland, Cooper proceeds to the end of the hall, but before entering the Red Room, he glances back down the corridor. Here, Lynch constructs a shot-reverse-shot sequence that shows Cooper looking down the corridor at his uncanny double, a compositional graphic match when framed from either end of the corridor. This switching visually illustrates the narrative confusion of these two figures, for as the evil Cooper ultimately pursues his real world counterpart, their similarities obscure both their visual and narrative differentiation. In the chase and melee that follows, the two figures replace one another in their respective worlds, and the demon Cooper returns to Twin Peaks, as our hero remains locked within the confines of the Black Lodge. The final image of the series, Cooper laughing devilishly as he sees BOB’s reflection in his bathroom mirror, testifies to the identity switching perpetrated behind those sinister curtains. BOB released again onto the idyllic streets of small-town U.S.A. signifies the
perpetual dominion of death and decadence, even within the most cherished and innocuous spaces.

The conclusion of this bizarre sequence of images and of the series resonates with the Gothic expressionism that exemplifies Lynch’s oeuvre. The Black Lodge’s surreal iconography suggests a clandestine or deeply codified logic that entrances while simultaneously frightening the viewer. That these images suggest a dream logic is clear, and precisely why most scholarship on David Lynch has tended towards psychoanalytical criticism. While these studies illuminate many aspects of Lynch’s work, the consideration of Lynch’s work as Gothic allegory suggests the social anxieties that reverberate throughout his artistic practices. The unmapability of the Red Room with its esoteric imagery presents an epistemological crisis, where correspondence between signifier and sign are brutally disrupted. The true danger that haunts Lynch’s series is not that a murderous entity stalks the streets of this nostalgic dreamland, rather, it is that no true meaning or solution can be derived from the resolution of the conventional mystery plot. Lynch’s privileging of narrative ambiguity over tidy plotlines also generates a greater degree of discomfort for the viewer, further establishing the postmodern Gothic nature of his work. Lynch’s combination of the postmodern fragmentation of narrative and the Gothic’s insistence upon the fear of the unknown produces an aesthetic experience of disquiet and horror. Moreover, the psychoanalytical detective work espoused in solving Lynch’s mystery provides a similar confounding.

Lynch’s directorial spots and initial composition of Twin Peaks constitute the most visually disturbing moments in the series. Lynch translated an even more visceral form of terror to the feature film prequel, Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me, which caused an overwhelming backlash from the enormous Twin Peaks viewership. Martha Nochimson
chronicles the aesthetic loggerheads between Lynch and co-creator and writer of the initial series, Mark Frost. As Nochimson asserts, “Lynch’s faith in the subconscious and the feminine experience, and Frost’s faith in reason and masculine will” commenced a creative conflict that dogged the narrative of the show, marginalizing Lynch from the project due to Frost’s more sensational and commercially savvy storylines. *Fire Walk With Me* represents Lynch’s repossession of the show’s surreal and terrifying initial vision, cutting through the saccharine melodrama and rationalized plots that ultimately stifled the show’s original impact. *Fire Walk With Me* also represents Lynch’s deliberate positioning of his artistic vision against the show’s trajectory, which had left it “drifting, sustained by the original actors who labored against increasingly self-conscious dialogue, hackneyed casting of new characters, and emotional and action-oriented storylines that occasionally sank to cult strategies of parodying and commenting on itself” (*Passion of David Lynch* 93).9

The public distaste for *Fire Walk With Me* reflected the feeling that it had fouled up the beloved story of Special Agent Dale Cooper and his quirky adventures among the strange and nostalgic Twin Peaks locals. However, as a prequel, Lynch’s project focused on the demons and dark forces that conspired to ruin Laura Palmer, rescuing Laura from her trivialization and subsequent commodification in the original series as the function of a standard television plot (consider that t-shirts that said “Who Killed Laura Palmer?” became a popular item during the series’ heyday, not unlike the infamous “Who Killed J.R.?” t-shirts a decade earlier).10 Whereas the television series depicted the eccentric Cooper as its central

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9 Mark Frost functioned as an executive producer for *Fire Walk With Me* but Lynch penned the screenplay himself.

10 Michel Chion details the commerce generated by the series: “The Twin Peaks phenomenon gave rise to major merchandising campaigns. Cherry pies stamped RR (the town coffee-shop and restaurant where the main characters often meet) and *Twin Peaks* coffee cups (FBI agent Dale Cooper’s favourite drink) were put on
figure, the series’ murder victims, specifically Laura Palmer, become the film’s locus of action. Todd McGowan describes the effect of this shift in narrative strategy:

In the television series, Laura Palmer serves as a structuring absence that organizes the desire of the other characters and the spectator (who wants both to understand Laura and to find the solution to her murder).[. . .] In Fire Walk With Me, Laura continues to embody the impossible object, but the difference between the series and the film resides in the location of this object. Where the series leaves it perpetually out of reach, the film allows this absent object to become present. Rather than remaining a mystery that we can desire and fantasize about, Laura Palmer becomes a fully realized character. (130)

Laura, the fantasy for some many characters – Bobby, Dr. Jacoby, Leland, James, Donna – irrupts from the repressed world of the series in all of her thorny (corpo)reality. Fire Walk With Me strips away the nostalgia and quaintness that established the series’ popularity, defamiliarizing the town and its inhabitants through more realistic portrayals of horror and brutality. For the Twin Peaks film, Lynch marshals the terror and disquieting unreality native to the series’ Black Lodge and makes them endemic to the town and its surrounding environs.

Divided into two parts: a prologue entitled “Teresa Banks” introduces another FBI murder investigation predating Laura Palmer’s, but again linked to BOB; and the much more expansive chronicle of Laura Palmer’s final week of life, culminating in the well-known conclusion of her torture, rape, and murder at the hands of her possessed father. The final
scene’s of Fire Walk With Me represent the first time Twin Peaks fans would see the abject horror of the scene in its entirety, since its reconstruction by Special Agent Dale Cooper during the run of the Twin Peaks series relied upon the suspense of seeing only its aftermath. Once the film returns to the familiar locale of Twin Peaks, it immediately becomes apparent that the town and its inhabitants are not quite like their representations on the series. Something has changed. The town appears less idyllic, less theatrical, and more, an actual place. Moreover, the characters seem equally deaestheticized, more edgy and jaded. The effect of this transformation could potentially inform a retrospective interpretation of the series. One conclusion for this difference could reside in the character of Cooper, whose presence in Twin Peaks would be impossible within the terms of the series narrative. Cooper represents the central figure within the show’s narrative, so his experience of the town, his expectations of wholesomeness and nostalgic imagination, could be subjectively inflected in the series, since he effectively acts as a character within the plot, as well as its omniscient narrator (consider his recorded monologue to Diane, his personal recorder, and his ability to transcend the earthly limits of Twin Peaks to gather intelligence on its happenings). Also, Lynch’s depiction of the town in Fire Walk With Me could represent a space stripped of its unifying film noir narrative structure, thus necessarily transformed in its filmic composition. In either case, the Twin Peaks represents an entirely different space when translated to the silver screen, and Lynch’s vision becomes more considerably acerbic in its critique of the classical Hollywood version of America and its attending small-town culture. By rendering America in these distinctly filmic terms, Lynch ultimately levies a critique of the vision of America promulgated by Ronald Reagan, and indirectly, by his successor, George H.W. Bush.
Whereas *Twin Peaks* narrates Cooper’s story, *Fire Walk With Me* presents Laura’s. Like her secret diary where Laura foretells her own violent end, *Fire Walk With Me* represents a posthumous female voice, emerging from beyond the grave to enunciate a subjectivity regardless of corporeal limitations. During the film, we see Laura composing the contents of the secret diary, visually reminding us of her persistent voice in the face of what we know to be her impending demise. Claire Raymond articulates the function of such a voice:

The trope of the posthumous voice takes prosopopeia, a given patriarchal technique of rhetoric, and reverses it: here the living do not conjure the dead to speak; rather the dead speaker conjures the living into audience. From a trauma metaphorized as an unending posthumousness, the disembodied posthumous voice creates a feminine speaker who has surpassed a history of trauma [. . .] the disembodied posthumous voice places in text a linguistic rebuttal of the feminine speaker’s interdiction without revivifying the figurative narrator. The energy of the posthumous voices adheres to a rejection of the domestic scene of the corpse, the corpse as the edge of domesticity. (*The Posthumous Voice* 10)

Laura’s diary and the ubiquitous shot of her portrait refute the deadly finality of her corpse wrapped in plastic. *Fire Walk With Me*’s narrative reanimation of Laura as a rebellious, sexual, and charismatic figure whose ineluctable doom instantiates a macabre counterpoint to the patriarchal detective genre represented in the series. BOB places type-written letters beneath the fingernails of his female victims, essentially forcing them to act as his method of discourse, human signifiers announcing a masculine will and voice. Laura’s tragic story and posthumous voice represent a counterforce to the patriarchal discourse presented by her supernatural molester. This alternation towards a more feminine subjective narrative might also account for the public backlash against the film after the cultish popularity of the series.
Throughout the film, Laura’s decadent lifestyle is linked to her years of abuse at the hands of BOB/Leland. As the film progresses, Laura’s troubled life spirals further out of control, implicating her loved ones and friends in her severe death drive. The well-worn trope of the behavioral “cry for help” fits Laura’s condition, but as the audience knows, she has no outlet for salvation. The film broadly represents Laura’s unanswered cry for help, from the eventual grave we know she will soon occupy. Raymond describes the symbolic impact of the posthumous voice: “The posthumous voice, then, uses metaphor as the direction toward a death left undescribed to imply a never-completed motion that itself becomes text’s telos. It is death as this space of incompleteness, a sort of radical homelessness or bodilessness, that the posthumous voice tropologically indicates” (12-13).

With her father serving as her psychosexual tormentor, her mother representing an emotional void, and her friends estranged by her guilty participation in a double life of sexual perversion and chronic drug abuse, Laura’s life declares her virtual homelessness at every narrative turn. Ultimately, Laura embraces her death and, in doing so, abandons bodily restraint and torture experienced in her nightmarish life, leaving her disembodied voice to instantiate her agency and liberation. This freeing of Laura signifies a rare moment of hope within the troubled filmic narrative of her life.

2.5. Wild At Heart: And Weird On Top

Freedom had to weigh heavily upon David Lynch’s mind as ABC’s network executives applied pressure upon he and Mark Frost to resolve Laura’s murder during the television series’ second season. Consequently, Lynch distanced himself from his beloved world of Twin Peaks and refocused his artistic energies upon a new film project that, aptly,
made its setting the American landscape, in all its enormity. From the television melodrama and film noir aesthetic of *Twin Peaks*, Lynch tried his hand at the genre of the American road movie. The liberation offered by the iconic American road grounds David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart* (1990) and, America, with all its vast panoramas and multitude of bustling subcultures, becomes Lynch’s subject. Lynch’s adaptation of Barry Gifford’s novel of the same name, depicts the narrative trajectory of protagonists Sailor Ripley (Nicholas Cage) and Lula Pace (Laura Dern) as they make their way across the United States, running from legal scrutiny and a gruesome band of killers contracted by Lula’s wicked mother, Marietta. Lynch’s film, and more generally, the American road film’s popularity may involve their ability to satisfy or at least insert themselves into the conjunction of desire and mobility. Lynch’s film is not merely American in its iconography, but anchored around to the mythos of the American West, where there is an ineluctable pull and lingering sense of Manifest Destiny in which freedom (or agency) is associated with movement itself. Lula and Sailor hope for a better life, a subjective mobility afforded only to those on the road. Gregory Pepetone notes the American tale of movement within the frame of the Gothic: “America’s archetypal Gothic plot details an inward journey toward our own telltale heart of darkness.” It compels us to identify and scrutinize those cultural ambiguities, traumas, and inconsistencies that we would prefer to forget, deny, or simply dismiss” (Pepetone, 170). Lynch takes up this archetypal narrative, transforming the “inward journey” into the cross-country trek of two hopeful outlaws. Rife with “ambiguities, traumas, and inconsistencies,” Lynch advances a psychic phantasmagoria that parallels the personal horrors each character experiences.

11 Gifford’s title certainly begs comparison with Conrad’s text. This comparison is identified, ironically, on the DVD jacket, in a blurb from *Variety* that promises a “rollercoaster ride to redemption through an American gothic heart of darkness.” Again, though it is suggested, the gothic remains a facile descriptor. Admittedly, *Variety* offers a more insightful blurb than *Rolling Stone*s, “bonfire of a movie,” comment.
Wild at Heart, both narratively and structurally, relies heavily upon an iconic American film whose plot is overwhelmingly teleological. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), historically significant for its spectacular introduction of color to film audiences, stands as a symbol of the deeply ingrained American cultural imagination. Lynch’s deployment of the classic film’s themes and tropes signals both an ironic revaluation of *The Wizard’s* sincerity and magical settings. As

Marietta Fortune (Dianne Ladd) covers her entire face and hands in blood-red lipstick, becoming a newly born Wicked Witch of the West as she psychopathically degenerates in front of her bathroom mirror. This diabolical image, among countless other allusions to 1939 classic *The Wizard of Oz*, grounds the central narrative of David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart*. Lynch addresses the personal and collective impact of *The Wizard of Oz*: “There’s a certain amount of fear in the picture, as well as things to dream about. So it seems truthful in some way. It must’ve got inside me when I first saw it, like it did with a million other people” (Rodley, 194). The “certain amount of fear” that pervades the diegetic world of Oz firmly situates the 1939 film within the American gothic tradition, as it capitalizes on America’s historical fascination with witches.12 It is notable that Oz originally exists as a space native to Dorothy’s dreams. Lynch signifies the American imaginative connection to *The Wizard of Oz* by linking the film’s iconography to his own characters’

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12 Bridget M. Marshall notes the contemporary American interest in witches and their historical past: “Modern Salem is more than just a historic site; it is a profit center. . . Instead of hiding its past connections with witchcraft, the town has created a thriving heritage-tourist destination. Teeming with witch-themed products and attractions, Salem disguises the real horror of the past with sites and performances that offer the visitor a manufactured horror that only scares for entertainment and fails to convey a real sense of the town’s tragic history” (*Spectral America* 244-245). The troubled figure of the witch in the American historical imagination potently conveys at once the terror of childhood mythology and the systemic attack on female subjectivity emblematized by the witch trials.
dreams and psychological irruptions. Instead of transporting his characters to Oz, Lynch visually and psychically entwines Oz with the America depicted in *Wild at Heart*.

Like Oz, with its grotesque and sinister figures – a witch that acts in the name of a dead sister, her winged minions, and talking trees – Lynch’s *Wild America* has its share of terrifying characters. And, while they exist in a quotidian sense, Lynch endows these creatures with quasi-mystical powers of sadism and terror that express their gothic character. Filmic recurrences of the shot of a crystal ball, a black finger-nailed hand, and the inferred surveillance by a sinister outside being, sets up both an insistence of unearthly magic and a Foucauldian panoptic sense of systemic authority. Specifically, *Wild at Heart*’s demons function in concert to fix and eradicate the film’s childlike protagonists. The motivating force that compels the antagonists activities becomes vague as their behavior becomes increasingly erratic. Within the standard narrative, the viewer gathers that they are working for a crime-syndicate, undertaking a standard contract-killing scenario. This capitalist narrative disintegrates as the infernal characters grow more sociopathic and unmoored. Their sadism and insanity augmented, Lynch’s postmodern gothic truly comes to life. Despite its postmodern critical awareness and instances of humorous bathos, Lynch’s film

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13 Martha Nochimson addresses the shot of the witch’s crystal ball: “. . . Lynch prevents the narrative aspect of, for example, the image of the Wicked Witch’s crystal ball from suppressing its sensory aspect, as is standard practice in Hollywood. Instead, the pact of the refraction of light through the crystal is at least as engaging as the significance the image may have to the story. In proliferating this kind of complex representation of images, Lynch prohibits the customary dominance of narrative and encourages a richer, more heterogeneous movie experience”(51). Nochimson identifies the means by which Lynch accesses a more expressionistic level of representation, not devoid of narrative, but imagistically equivalent.

In the second chapter, “The Great Confinement,” in *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault discusses the compulsion to fix nomadic populations in modern society. He illustrates that this drive sprang up with the Classical Age in Europe, as capitalism and nation-statehood were solidifying in society. As extended space came increasingly under the control of markets and state powers, nomadic populations came to be seen as a threat to sovereignty. Their mobile status not only cut across the borders of the new system, but it seemed to repudiate its fixity at the core. In *Wild at Heart*, state authority is supplanted by the actual ruling “hand” of an infernal authority. Sailor and Lula, only ostensibly function as outlaws, while their pursuers seek to establish an absolute monopoly on violence.
conveys a traditional sense of pure evil separated entirely from self-reflexive irony. Again, it is the juxtaposition of ostensible opposites that fuels Lynch’s craft.

David Punter delimits the terms of the contemporary gothic as those narratives that are “concerned with terror,” often concerning rapid transformations in technology and/or social formations (Literature of Terror 146). This broad conception allows for a liberal treatment of the gothic, opening the dialogue to further critical examination. Lynch’s film oeuvre accesses terror visually and aurally. In Wild at Heart, the recurrent imagery and thundering sound of fire, explosions, and extreme auditory and visual close-ups of matches perpetually signify irruptive terror. The wall of fire that fulminates during the opening credits functions later within the narrative, as Lynch locates the seminal moment of the film’s primary action in the murderous immolation of Lula’s father, Clyde. The iteration of fire suggests the terror that haunts Lula. Whereas fire explicitly signified terror for Boris Karloff’s Frankenstein’s monster, Lula’s terror has been effectively repressed and sublimated within her childhood experience of The Wizard of Oz. Lynch conveys this coeval process of repression and sublimation where an explosive match-strike followed by an off-screen woman’s cackling cause Lula to describe a feeling of horror. A flashback to Clyde’s murder and Marietta laughing wildly allow the audience, but not Lula to make sense of her personal disquiet. This wedding of sound and images concisely renders the psychological profundity of Lula’s initial trauma and enables the uncanny Wizard of Oz references that Lynch and his characters advance within the narrative. The analogue for the witch established, through perpetual images of Marietta as the witch, Lynch truly endows his film with a distinctly

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14 The first experience of the Wizard in The Wizard of Oz is his disembodied voice from behind a fire and smoke screen.
gothic frame through his translation of the witch’s flying minions into a ghoulish group of contract killers.

The demonic crew of criminals, that hunts Sailor and Lula at the behest of Marietta, works for the mysterious mob-boss Mr. Reindeer. The most prominent demonic character in *Wild at Heart* is gargoyle-esque Bobby Peru, played frighteningly by Willem Dafoe. Bobby is joined by the succubae sisters, Juana (Grace Zabriskie) and Perdita (Isabella Rossellini) Durango, underboss Marcellos Santos (J.E. Freeman), and quirky contract killers Drop Shadow (David Patrick Kelly) and Reggie (Calvin Lockhart). Clad entirely in black and referred to as “The Black Angel,” Bobby Peru manifests darkness and sadism in his corporeal presence and expressionistically embodies the multiple diabolical forces that stalk Sailor and Lula throughout the film. Bobby’s mouth is a congeries of rotted, twisted teeth and his greased hair completes his ominous appearance. Bobby’s most significant scene occurs as he physically and psychologically molests Lula in her hotel room, in Sailor’s absence. During this disturbing scene, the camera focuses an extreme close-up on Peru’s snarling mouth and nostrils as he commands Lula to say “Fuck Me,” conveying, through the camera’s position, the disgust and fear innate to Lula’s subjective location. Moreover, by emphasizing Peru’s gruesome mouth, his most physically grotesque feature, Lynch mimetically expresses Peru’s monstrousness as absolute. Tightly inscribed in this visual coding is a rarified example of the gothic. Later in the film, a nylon mask augments Peru’s horrifying appearance, again communicating this visual subtext.

Equally dark and fearsome, Juana Durango’s appearance emphasizes her grotesqueness and frightening, ritualistic behavior. In a particularly graphic scene, Juana and her helpers, Drop Shadow and Reggie, torture and kill the well-intentioned Johnnie Farragut
(Harry Dean Stanton), and again, Lynch situates the camera in the place of the victim.

Martha Nochimson describes this aspect of the *mise-en-scène*:

Johnnie’s death scene is shot and edited such that the spectator is in Johnnie’s position and everything that attacks him also attacks the spectator. As Juana torments him, her face, distorted by gut-level screaming and a tongue flickering obscenely, is inches away from the camera of which Johnnie is the invisible point of origin and a surrogate for the spectator. (*Passion* 61)

This scene culminates with the killers having violent sex, signified by Juana’s address to Reggie, “Fuck me now; I can’t wait no longer,” and the discordant aural accompaniment of crashing noise. Whereas Bobby Peru brutally coerces Lula into saying “fuck me,” demonstrating his potent psychological domination, Juana’s corresponding “fuck me now” elicits her sexual agency and transmutes the sex act as a consecration of her sadistic criminality. In the *Wild At Heart* DVD’s “Special Features” vignettes, Lynch describes the original screening audience’s reaction to this scene, before it was edited to its current state. He states that a vast majority of the audience left the theater, because the scene initially *visually* depicted the long and violent sex scene following the torture/killing of Johnnie Farragut. Lynch preserves this terrifying psycho-sexual ritual through the force of expressionistic aural coding. The dark world that Sailor and Lula venture into, like the witch’s castle in Oz, represents a clearly gothic tenor. The horrors and psychological trauma that haunt the two lovers are as real and dangerous as the actual murders that pursue them.
2.6. Lost Highway (1996): Dick Laurent is Dead

“In the East... when a person is sentenced to death... they are sent to a far place never knowing when an executioner will step up behind them and fire a bullet into the back of their head. It could be days... weeks... or even years after the death sentence has been pronounced.”

The Mystery Man, *Lost Highway*

David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* introduces what may be his most Gothic character: the ghoulish, pale-faced Mystery Man (played terrifyingly by Robert Blake). As his words above testify, the Mystery Man signifies psychic violence and perpetual threat. Shot in a dark, explicitly *noir* style, *Lost Highway*’s diegetic world operates through contrapuntal shifts from menacing silence to bracing, dischordant violence. Lynch describes the film in his blurb on the title page of the circulating script on-set as: “A 21st Century Film Noir, A graphic investigation into parallel identity crises, A world where time is dangerously out of control, A terrifying ride down the lost highway”(Foster Wallace, 150). Lynch creates an overwhelming sense of foreboding whose only relief comes through the explosive moments of brutality and bloodshed that ultimately make the audience complicit in the film’s depictions of horror and perversity. The first of Lynch’s films to be set in Los Angeles/Hollywood, *Lost Highway*’s setting signals his increasingly direct critique of iconic Hollywood, this time via the seedy subculture of pornography and snuff films. *Lost Highway* interrogates the process of filmmaking itself, as an artistic project and, equally, as an exploitative and sinister pursuit.

*Lost Highway* opens with a tightly framed shot of headlights on a highway at night, driving directly down the middle of a road, conveying both blinding speed, as the yellow lines’ disappear one after another, and absolute fixity through the tedious repetition of those
This behind the wheel perspective shot has become one of Lynch’s hallmarks, as it was used similarly in *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart*. The speed of the shot seems disconcerting and reckless, immediately conveying the “terrifying” and “dangerously out of control” transportation of the viewer into Lynch’s disorienting ontological space. The film’s narrative begins with the stilted communication between Fred Madison (Bill Pullman), a jazz saxophonist, and his vampiric-looking wife, Renee (Patricia Arquette). Their relationship’s paranoiac and pregnant silences reach a crescendo during their discovery of video tapes sent to them by a stalker that has been filming them in their home while they sleep in their bed. Despite the ostensible benignity of voyeurism, the personal sense of violation and immanent danger conveyed by the discovery of the tapes is both aggressive and terrifying. Odell and Le Blanc note the significance of surveillance and voyeurism in *Lost Highway*: “[. . .]*Lost Highway* extends its voyeurism into the realm of the technical and in doing so seeks to question the audience’s desire to watch without consequences”(99). The moral complicity of the film’s audience in the film’s exhibition suggests a profound contemplation upon the nature of film as art. Lynch’s films, such as *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart*, depict violence directed towards female characters, but Lynch’s depictions refrain from sadistically celebrating or prolonging such acts. While Lynch has been attacked by reviewers for his depictions of violence towards women, these representations are always employed to produce the sensations of terror and disgust, signaling moments where Lynch is announcing the face of monstrosity to be, in essence, defined by a certain degree of misogyny.

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15 Lynch shot the sequence in “half-time,” six frames per second, creating an illusion of even greater speed (Foster Wallace, 155).
Lynch augments the horror potential of the filmic eye, as the final tape’s visual imagery culminates in a scene of Fred having brutally murdered and dismembered his wife. Upon Fred’s viewing of the televisual image, this perceived filmic reality supplants his immediate temporal reality, and he is subsequently incarcerated for the murder. The disintegration and recombination of Fred’s initial life into an alternate filmed life suggests a new and terrifying conception of the mise-en-scene as more “real” than reality itself. Odell and Le Blanc describe the film’s expression of realism: “The film [Lost Highway] is grounded in the realms of reality, albeit a sleazy one, that the viewer, unlike Fred, would rather not confront”(98). The sleaziness of the diegetic world relies upon a Lynch’s use of the filmic eye as an invasive and threatening instrument. Lynch makes surveillance, a concept that equally imparts notions of home security and violation, into an ontologically interruptive force.

Lynch creates a contrast between various electronic images, film and video, in Lost Highway where he introduces the degrading world of pornographic film production. Lynch depicts the porn industry metonymically, as both representative of the broader Hollywood motion picture industry and all its exploitative measures and a part of the glamorous world of Hollywood, since after all, the porn industry has historically relied upon the steady stream of young actors/actresses/models that venture to Hollywood seeking fame and fortune, and who eventually participate in pornographic films. Odell and Le Blanc identify the tenuous link between the industries of Hollywood film and pornography:

Lost Highway, whilst still under the falling auspices of the MPAA, shows the other side [of wholesome American life]. It’s this contradiction that is so fascinating – a culture where one exposed nipple creates a national scandal in a country that consumes enormous amounts of hardcore pornography. Lost Highway shows the seedier side of even the porno industry. Mr. Eddy’s manner of coercing his actresses is not pleasant as he forces them to strip and fellate him at gunpoint in front of a roomful of strangers. They are then compelled to star in increasingly dark films,
culminating in orgies of sexual degradation, designed to arouse Mr. Eddy’s need for ever more extreme pornography.(100)

Lynch’s film exposes these cultural contradictions by equating the voyeuristic snuff film of a man murdering his wife to the depravity of violent pornographic images. In both cases, the camera’s eye represents a technology of terrifying power and malevolence. Lost Highway depicts the pornography industry as parasitic and decadent in its escalating violence and trajectory towards murder. Ultimately, Lynch will render the same conclusion in Mulholland Drive and INLAND EMPIRE, illustrating the connective thread of political critique and horror that link Lynch’s filmic meditations on Hollywood, both the physical space and the figurative concept.

This initial integration of the film-within-the-film introduces a postmodern manifestation of the gothic, as Lynch uses the film’s self-reflexivity to impart a powerful sense of terror concerning the authority and power of the camera (and those who wield it). While the video’s mise-en-scene replaces Madison’s original life (Lynch’s mise-en-scene), the handheld point of view shot indicates an invisible, but innately present, author – the Mystery Man. During a party, where Fred experiences jealousy over Renee’s ostensible infidelity, he meets the Mystery Man. The Mystery Man tells Fred that he’s at Fred’s house at that moment, and produces a phone that Fred uses to call the Mystery Man, who is, in fact, also at Fred’s home. This memorable scene conveys the uncanny doubling that has historically characterized the gothic, and, through the contemporary technology of the cell phone, an ominous sense of mobility and omnipresence. Lynch’s use of mobile phone technologically advances the primordial notion of evil that Blake’s character embodies, particularly as the scene climaxes in the Mystery Man’s discordant crescendo of laughter, simultaneously at
both ends of the phone’s line. The demonic insinuation of technology continues as Fred hastily ushers Renee home to find the final videotape.

Blake’s character returns throughout the film, always linking his haunting presence to technology, and most significantly, a hand-held camera. In “Beyond Boundaries: David Lynch’s Lost Highway,” Anne Jerslev echoes the theoretical work of Paul Virilio, addressing the Mystery Man’s use of the camera throughout the film:

Mystery Man is staged as a vision machine, a body with a visual prosthesis attached to one eye, the video camera, that transforms the eye into a televisual receiver able to project itself in and penetrate space. The eye is thus provided with the ability to telescope near and far [. . .] . These shots may be understood as subjective point of view shots, as if the video camera, or technology itself had become part of the Mystery Man’s body [. . .] .(Sheen and Davison, 161)\(^\text{16}\)

Lynch and his androgynous, cyborgic Mystery Man generate a profound sense of horror through their radical blurring of conventional dialectics: the technological and the personal, the inanimate and the animate, female and male, real and unreal, normal and paranormal. Furthermore, the immediacy and subjective P.O.V. signified by the hand-held camera amplify the urgency of the film’s terror, an effect later employed similarly within The Blair Witch Project (1999) that restricts the vision of the film viewer by marshaling their gaze towards or away from something on-screen that is potentially terrifying. The anxiety generated by this aesthetic relies upon the claustrophobic sense of the forced look, removing the audience’s agency in creating a coherent understanding of the mise-en-scene. Again, such forced looks imply an uneasy identification with the perverse and sadistic, demonstrating Lynch’s further meditation upon the role of the filmmaker and the industry that facilitates/resists their work.

In his depiction of the filmmaker, Lynch allegorizes terror in *Lost Highway* with examples from the everyday of Hollywood culture, rather than the necessarily fantastical. Lynch’s metonymical representation of monstrosity, specifically in the figure of the filmmaker/Mystery Man, signifies another key concept that grounds my interpretation of the postmodern Gothic. To illustrate my point, I will begin with Adam Lowenstein’s analysis of the modern horror film and connect his reading with my own argument. Lowenstein introduces what he has termed “the allegorical moment” in the modern horror film’s representation of various historical traumas. He argues that horror cinema “throws into question the entire impulse to categorize representations of historical trauma” and that the allegorical moment “invit[es] us to unite shocking cinematic representation with the need to shock the very concept of representation in regard to historical trauma”(4). Lowenstein identifies one social function of the modern horror film, namely, to allegorize, not through a simple binary correspondence, but rather, via a provocative and disruptive aesthetic that transmogrifies the horrors of lived trauma into cinematic modes of terror. He also notes horror cinema’s shift from “compensation to confrontation,” an aesthetic that rigorously critiques the reality from which it is born, rather than neatly translating the horrors of history. I extend Lowenstein’s model of horror cinema’s cultural awareness to address Lynch’s postmodern Gothic cinema. The metonymical mode of representation initiates a more immediate sense of fear or dread by avoiding an abstract transformation of terror. So, for example, rather than distance the conditions of sexual exploitation from its everyday actuality by transforming human violence into some dissimilar and metaphorical monster, like Dracula or Frankenstein’s monster, Lynch bases his Gothic narrative in the decadence and sexual depravity of Hollywood’s brutal underworld, with a predatoryial filmmaker
terrorizing the films’ protagonists and other filmmakers producing works of harsh cruelty and fetishistic sadism.

Through his purposeful dislocation of linear temporality, Lynch expresses the felt instability of static concepts such as individual identity. Lynch depicts subjective experience as perpetually atomized by memory, psychic irruptions, and violence that evacuates temporal understanding. After being placed in his prison cell, Fred undergoes a violent and painful transmogrification into an entirely different person, Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty), a garage mechanic who subsequently becomes embroiled in a dangerous sexual triste with the wife, Alice Wakeland (also played by Patricia Arquette) of a mobster, Mr. Eddy (Robert Loggia). This uncanny visual parallelism returns throughout the film, through the continual doubling of characters and corporeal transmigrations – Fred becomes Pete, two distinct characters played by notably different actors and Renee and Alice, distinct but visually repetitive figures because of their mutual casting of Arquette – rendering the characters’ lives mere congeries of narrative moments perpetually constructed and deconstructed by inconceivable and hostile forces. In the case of Renee and Alice, identified possibly as identical twin sisters (an actual physical doubling in utero) or as a supernatural doppelganger, the visual repetition of Patricia Arquette’s appearance enables Lynch to destabilize any discrete understanding of her function as either Renee or Alice. Pete’s mysterious transmigration goes unexplained, as does Fred’s disappearance, though Fred returns in the film’s concluding scenes. The narrative dislocation initiated through the substitution of the film’s protagonist indicates Lynch’s formal departure from linearity. With the narrative unmoored to conventional linearity, many critics have noted the strange behavior and imagery as a depiction of the dream-state. Jerslev calls Lost Highway “an uncanny fantasy about entrapment in the maelstrom of visual culture; the nightmare that, after all, and beyond postmodern euphoria,
images constitute the sole reality, a kind of obscene boundless non-referentiality” (Ibid). Jerslev aptly describes Lynch’s film as a confusing play of signifiers. Lynch’s collection of visually disruptive images and linear displacements in *Lost Highway* instantiate expressions of the postmodern American gothic.

Fred’s incarceration for murder is based upon his imagined crime. While Martha Nochimson suggests that Fred and the Mystery Man represent aspects of the same person – “a new Lynchian representation of that place in the subconscious dominated by frightening elements of ourselves” — this explanation suggests a particularly conventional narrative that discretely connects the viewer to the filmic (213). The machinic Mystery Man, arguably the film’s most gothic element, constructs and films horrifying images and experiences, suggesting an uncanny parallelism that *irrupts from* the film’s diegesis – the Mystery Man becomes an analogue for Lynch, himself. Just as Lynch has created *Lost Highway*, a postmodern diegetic world of “obscene non-referentiality,” so are the films of the Mystery Man menacing simulations whose referent is non-existent. The Mystery Man’s use of a handheld camera prefigures Lynch’s own adoption of handheld digital technology, nearly a decade later, in *INLAND EMPIRE*. The film-within-the-film motif, repeated throughout the film, transforms the *mise-en-scène* into *mise-en-abîme*, tacitly, intimating the respective vision of different directors and audiences, within the film, and without. Lynch links the process of filming with the uncanny, by substituting surrogate images that undermine narrative expectations, producing a sense of terror in the logical disparity between reality and filmed reality.

Lynch advances the palimpsestic layering of repetitions and remediations in the film’s conclusion, as he “resets the counter,” reversing the prior transmigration undergone by Fred and Pete. Fred ultimately returns to his home, goes to the outside telecom, and
announces “Dick Laurent is dead.” One of the film’s initial scenes sees Fred, inside his house receiving the same message, this time from the other end. Lynch’s disjunction of linear temporality and discrete notions of identity enable the reformulation of standard temporality; creating, within the diegesis, the illusion of time’s perpetual repetition. Lynch’s films often abandon a conventional, linear conception of time, exposing a critical link to postmodern narrative. As Lytoard notes, relating the postmodern to aesthetic play:

[T]ime ceases to be a support for memory to become an immemorial beating that, in the absence of a noticeable separation between periods, prevents their being numbered and consigns them to oblivion [. . .] they [proverbs] are like splinters of potential narratives, or molds of old ones, which have continued to circulate on certain levels of the contemporary social edifice. In their prosody can be recognized the mark of that strange temporalization that jars the golden rule of our knowledge: “never forget.” (Natoli and Hutcheon 78)

Lynch’s disfigured time could be called a “strange temporalization” in the service of temporalizing the strange. Through Lost Highway’s dislocated narrative, a postmodern concept of narrative and temporality emerges that engenders both the uncanny sensation that marks Lynch’s film, and an unweaving of the historical structures that support the primacy of certain forms of narrative over others.

2.7. Mulholland Drive (2001): Silencio

Against the backdrop of glamorous Hollywood, Lynch’s Mulholland Drive limns a menacing world of paranormal power systems interacting and colliding within the contemporary film industry and its corresponding subcultures. Begun as a potential television project in the vein of the extremely popular Twin Peaks, Mulholland Drive’s enigmatic aesthetic proved too mystifying for ABC’s top executives, forcing Lynch to encapsulate the broader narrative threads of his original project within the space of a feature
The film consists of several narrative threads that intersect dramatically, but the central plot is archetypal: the story of the small-town ingénue, Betty Elms, (played wide-eyed and naïve by Naomi Watts) trying to make it in the corrupt and powerful world of Hollywood films. Lynch’s rendering of this specifically American cinematic story veers from the standard plot crucially, as he endows the corruptive culture of Hollywood film with horrifying and supernatural power. This critical adaptation forcefully conveys the gothic aesthetic at play in *Mulholland Drive*. In her essay, “‘All I Need is the Girl’: The Life and Death of Creativity in *Mulholland Drive*,” Martha Nochimson describes Lynch’s film and its cultural context succinctly:

In *Mulholland Drive* (2001) the figure of the performing woman is situated within a narrative about the official site of fantasy and female performance, the Hollywood film [. . .] . At first sight, this attribution of importance to ‘the girl’ [the female star] may seem excessive, since women in Hollywood are radically disempowered. But consider the hordes of very young women who come and go as flavour of the month, objects of desire on whom hundreds of inconsequential, money-making films depend, and we must acknowledge how much hinges on the exploitation of this disposable figure whose energy briefly attracts and enchants. (Sheen and Davison 166)18

Nochimson goes on to describe the three catalytic events that make up the majority of the film’s action: first, the car crash that renders a beautiful actress (Laura Elena Harring) amnesiac and commences her stumbling off into the night; second, the arrival of small-town

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17 While any reading of Lynch’s films for symbolic clues or meanings is, in my estimation, a misreading, this is particularly the case with *Mulholland Drive*, due to its production adaptation from television to film. The film stands on its own as a cohesive artistic artifact, but many of the bizarre and contingent elements must be understood as belonging originally to more developed narratives and motifs.

18 It should come as no surprise that Nochimson identifies *Mulholland Drive* as “Lynch’s own Sunset Boulevard,” referencing Billy Wilder’s cinematic tale of Hollywood’s corruptive usurpation of individual creativity and innocence (Sheen and Davison 170). Nochimson writes: “*Mulholland Drive* is a r-vision of what also held Wilder’s attention: the transition from human hope to putrefaction”(Ibid). In fact, Lynch further extends his intertextual gesture as, following a car crash, an actress stumbles into the Hollywood night and later, across Sunset Boulevard.
Betty on her quest to achieve Hollywood stardom; finally, the numerous manifestations of a panoptic, “death-dealing power structure” that attempts to intimidate a young director, Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux), to cast a certain actress for his upcoming project (Ibid).

Many of the themes and motifs that Lynch employed in *Lost Highway* resonate within the mise-en-scene of *Mulholland Drive* – the *noir* aesthetic; an uncanny doubling of characters and events; and terrifying simulacral images. Instead of attempting to recount the film’s narrative trajectory, a critically unproductive exercise, I will instead focus on several scenes and images that Lynch employs in *Mulholland Drive* that distinctly convey his creation of a postmodern American gothic.

One such scene occurs as a man and his therapist sit in a diner, Winkies, as the man describes a traumatic dream where he and his therapist are talking to one another at Winkies. Immediately, this uncanny scenario of waking-life recreating the setting of a dream imbues the scene with an eerie sense of foreboding. As the strangely serene man narrates his dream, the therapist and he exit Winkies and walk to the rear of the store, towards the terrifying heart of the man’s dream, further escalating the ominous aura. Finally, as the man describes a demonic presence residing just behind a brick abutment in his dream, the two men approach the actual abutment and a grotesque and filthy homeless person steps out and frightens the man so intensely that the man’s heart seizes, and he collapses. The simultaneous narration of the dream as the camera’s point of view places the viewer in the subject position of the man as he approaches his ultimate terror, rendering a standard horror movie effect. The blurring of dream state and reality heightens the scene’s horror through its escalation from the uncanny to the frightening. Moreover, again Lynch effectively employs a *mise-en-abîme* that extends beyond the imagined space of the *mise-en-scène*, as the viewer hears the narration of the dream, witnesses its coeval realization, and experiences the
filmic remediation of the man’s horror through the startling appearance of the monstrous figure from behind the brick wall. While, the bathetic irony of the scene is apparent, the ostensibly innocent homeless person whose presence has, up until this point, been simply coincidental, later returns as a threatening mystical figure in the infernal light of a fire, laughing maniacally.

Lynch’s films perpetually engage their beholder, through a stylistic usurpation of the viewer’s experience within the film itself. This postmodern *mise-en-abîme* that I have described, functions in both directions, to place the viewer in the character’s subject position, but the opposite is true, as Lynch continually uses the motifs of spectatorship and witnessing to simultaneously reenact the conditions of watching a film. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub address this crisis of witnessing:

> We underscore the question of the witness, and or witnessing, as nonhabitual, estranged *conceptual prisms* through which we attempt to apprehend – and to make tangible to the imagination – the ways in which our cultural frames of reference and our preexisting categories which delimit and determine our perception of reality have failed, essentially, both to contain, and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary history. (xv)

While Felman and Laub locate witnessing in the true, historical present, Lynch’s witnesses experience a similar disintegration of those “conceptual prisms” through which we attempt to comprehend those uncanny elements that populate his films. The *mise-en-abîme* technique culminates in what may be arguably the most emblematic scene of his entire oeuvre: Club Silencio.

After making love for the first time, Betty and the amnesiac actress, calling herself Rita, are mystically compelled from bed in the middle of the night to a large theater called Club Silencio. As the two protagonists sit and watch the show, the *mise-en-abîme* is complete.
Their subjectivity is mimicked by the camera; the film’s viewer inhabits the position of the filmic viewer. Nochimson concisely describes the scene at Silencio:

We hear a band, but there is no band; everything is tape recorded. Nor are the apparently present bodies really there. They disappear and appear abruptly, illusions of sight and sound in a reality of silence. The most powerful of these silences is obliquely rendered by Rebekah Del Rio, singing a Spanish translation of Roy Orbison’s “Crying.” Del Rio, a seemingly sensual, full-bodied presence, at one point collapses like a hollow doll, while her rich voice continues to intone (Sheen and Davison 176).

The cognitive dissociation that results from the incongruence of performance and sound elicits a potent form of simulacral imagery. Silencio, itself, represents a radical form of simulacra, where the seductive performance leaves the theater audience emotionally transformed; unswerving in their captivation with the scene, despite its apparent lack of verisimilitude with any real referent. Considering this scene as a *mise-en-abîme*, Rita and Betty become filmic surrogates for film’s viewer, and their absorption in the scene at Silencio, despite its overt theatricality, conflates the terms that Michael Fried establishes in his historical study of painting in the time of Diderot, where Fried suggests that the artistic representation of “absorptive” qualities (“a state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed”) lead to an aesthetic experience of absorption (10). Fried uses the word “somnambulistic” to describe the absorptive, illuminating the somnambulistic compulsion that Betty experiences in her ineluctable trajectory towards Club Silencio (Ibid).

Fried describes absorption as “establish[ing] the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas”(108). Lynch employs this effects in his work, not to seal off the ontological diegesis and secure its absolute integrity, but, rather, to accomplish a dialogically opposite effect through its visual subversion. Betty and Rita’s absorptive witnessing of the scene at Club Silencio becomes, structurally, a simultaneous witnessing for Lynch’s audience,
just as Del Rio’s performance, despite its passionate undertaking, is undermined by its visual and aural deconstruction. Fried calls this reaffirmation of the beholder theatricality, as in a portrait where the figure is represented looking back at the beholder. Lynch privileges this diegetic porosity over an imagined space that functions only at the level of its own epistemic reality. What makes this particular scene so emblematic is that Lynch has effectively simulated the conditions of viewing one of his own films. Just as Blue Velvet’s Jeffery Beaumont (Kyle Maclachlan) and Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) watch the androgynous Ben (Dean Stockwell), lip-synching Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams,” so do Rita and Betty reiterate an uncannily similar and equally performative scene. Orbison, an icon of America’s nostalgic musical past, also links these scenes through the repetition and consequent revaluation of his haunting melodies. Naturally, the beholder of Lynch’s films participates in this visual intertext as it bridges Lynch’s own works. Instead of a film experience that neutralizes or negates the viewer, Lynch’s art demands the complicity of the beholder within the instance of this absorptive breakdown.

At Club Silencio, Betty discovers an ominous blue box in her purse. Later, Rita opens the box with a distinctive key of the same color, silently introduced earlier in the narrative. Considering the critical compulsion to allegorize the box’s meaning within the narrative, Lynch characteristically undermines any discrete interpretation affixed to the box’s significance by shattering the already bizarre narrative trajectory. Upon the box’s opening, identities and appearances of the film’s characters are immediately shifted and shifted again. Names and naming are effectively suspended, as Lynch interrupts the act of signification, privileging ambiguity over fixity. Nochimson notes: “Time and space have come unglued, along with the identities of the three leading characters” (Sheen and Davison 178). Betty becomes Diane Selwyn, Rita becomes Camilla Rhodes, both previously introduced
characters; Adam becomes a new Adam, whose identity, if not his name, has changed. Lynch recasts all the subtending relationships between the characters, creating the uncanny sensation that all of these transmigratorial lives exist in parallel, cosmically determined permutations, controlled by vague, surreptitious forces beyond conventional interpretation. These potentially sinister forces manifest within the mise-en-scene as a cryptic and knowing Cowboy, a silent, wheelchair-ridden crime boss, and a maniacal and demonic older couple that Lynch cartoonishly shrinks to the size of elves. The postmodern atomizing of the film’s narrative and recombination of its disparate elements causes the film’s conclusion to act as a form of anachronistic prefiguring. Ultimately, as in Lost Highway, the effect creates a cyclical understanding of time, initiating a Heideggerian hermeneutic circle of continual repetition that forcefully renders Mulholland Drive’s nonlinear diegetic temporality. Such repetition, coupled with the film’s unexplained and supernatural imagery creates the eerie doubling that characterizes gothic.


The director who intends to film life, or to film fantasy, always does so, to a much greater extent than he is aware of, in relation to other films – if only by the fact that what he will produce will not be, in the end, a section of life, or a body of fantasies, but a film.

Christian Metz “The Saying and the Said”

An hysterical actress stumbles frantically across the famed intersection of Hollywood and Vine, collapses on the ground and vomits a flurry of blood onto the venerated Hollywood Walk of Fame as two transient women conduct a banal conversation about the potential bus schedule from their current position to Pomona, California. This striking and oddly juxtaposed coupling of the dramatic and the quotidian creates an uncanny metonym
for the exploitative conditions actresses face within the Hollywood filmmaking industry, as they are symbolically forced to empty themselves, body and soul, for the distant promise of stardom. Immediately following this episode, the scene itself is revealed to be just another scene in a melodrama entitled *On High In Blue Tomorrows* being shot within the diegesis of David Lynch’s latest film *INLAND EMPIRE*. Again, we find Lynch examining the film industry by staging the filmmaking experience as part of his film’s narrative. Again, Lynch makes identity slippery as actor and character become interchangeable, their psychic energies intermingled, and their experiences intertwined. The concept of method acting takes on a frightful and dangerous connotation within the worlds depicted in *INLAND EMPIRE*.

*INLAND EMPIRE* marks Lynch’s departure from the medium of celluloid film and his plunge into digital video, with its promise of greater mobility and immediacy. Aesthetically, the move to digital video strips the film’s visual appearance of Lynch’s signature richness and striking palette, but the new format’s effect upon the actual production was eagerly embraced by Lynch: “When you don’t have to stop and spend two hours relighting, you’re just able to boogie together” (Lim). Speaking of the film’s production methods on the film’s DVD special features disc, Lynch describes the day-to-day script improvisations and on-the-spot formulation of scenes as a fertile and expedited process of idea generation, speaking of the inspiration sparked: “it’s like the babies were hiding.” Aside from the crucial departure from his previous methods, Lynch’s *INLAND EMPIRE* signifies a continued trajectory towards avant-garde film, exhibiting an even greater rejection of conventional narrative, film industry production protocols, and standard distribution practices.

Hollywood, for Lynch, represents a historical analogue for the decrepit castles of Ann Radcliffe or Horace Walpole’s fiction, a fallen nobility and way of life whose legitimacy
was only ever apocryphal. Just as Radcliffe’s nobility are constituted by acts of violence and incest, so is Lynch’s Hollywood cemented by the blood of its female stars. As Lynch’s films literally bend away from the Hollywood machine, his art becomes more idiosyncratic, surreal, and personal. It’s no wonder that Lynch would so passionately hail the immediacy offered through the medium of digital video. As illustrated in his previous films, Lynch’s obsession with Hollywood decadence continues in \textit{INLAND EMPIRE}, where he further catalogues the dangers and demons of the Hollywood industry through the use of horror and abjection. In addition to his aesthetic break with the conventional Hollywood film formulae, Lynch chose to distribute the film himself by embarking on a promotional tour of the United States, screening his film in 8 major cities. Borrowing the old roadshow format of underground B-films, like those of Kroger Babb and other controversial directors, Lynch’s \textit{EMPIRE} circus severely limited access to his film, and virtually doomed its commercial viability. This calculated move clearly shows Lynch’s personal investment in displaying his films as purely artistic artifacts.

In their introduction of \textit{INLAND EMPIRE}, countless reviewers used the terms “surreal” and “nightmare.” \textit{The New York Times’} Manohla Dargis described the film as not “for the faint of heart or lazy of thought, notably those for whom moviegoing is simply a more socially acceptable version of sucking on a pacifier” and, as opposed to most recent major releases, “art” (\textit{New York Times}, Dec 24, 2006; “The Trippy Dream Factory of David Lynch”). Shot with a relatively inexpensive Sony PD-150 digicam, lacking any clear coordinating narrative, and running at 179 minutes, Lynch’s film radically challenges its audience, but also, very directly, the film business that it positions itself against. In perhaps his most overtly political film, Lynch amplifies his indictment of the film industry begun indirectly in \textit{Blue Velvet} and continued more expressly in \textit{Lost Highway} and \textit{Mulholland Drive},
again utilizing the Gothic as a mode of representation that most aptly conveys disruption, disturbance, and despair.

*INLAND EMPIRE* is quintessentially a Gothic text. The film, like Scott Brewster’s description of the Gothic, “does not merely transcribe disturbed, perverse or horrifying worlds: its narrative structures and voices are interwoven with and intensify the madness they represent. Gothic’s inexhaustible capacity to generate readings resembles an intoxicating excess of meaning” (*Companion to the Gothic* 281). Essentially non-linear and episodic, the film blends dialogue that sounds like spoken word poetry and several narrative spaces whose relation remains deliberately ambiguous. The film begins with the grainy black and white image of a needle pressed to a record, the sound of the dusty vinyl corresponding, and a woman weeping as she watches television in a hotel room. Immediately, filmed images imply aesthetic and psychic layers, as Lynch places visual media within the film. The film’s most central narrative concerns an actress of a certain age, Nikki Grace (Laura Dern), who learns from a mysterious woman (called “Visitor #1” in the credits and played by Grace Zabriskie), purportedly her neighbor “from just down the way,” who foretells the actress’ participation in a new film (that we subsequently learn is entitled *On High in Blue Tomorrows*).

The scene begins with a wobbly, reverse tracking shot, focused on Visitor #1 as she approaches large estate of Nikki Grace. Despite the bright sunshine and generally cheerful appearance of Visitor #1, the soft din of wind and ambient sound signals a threatening subtext to the scene. The camera cuts to the home’s interior, where the mise-en-scene conveys extreme opulence: antique furniture, ancient paintings, enormous Persian rugs, massive drapes, and large windows. The foyer is bathed in a dim, reddish-orange light created by the many table lamps that line the wide corridor. As Visitor #1 is met by Henry the Butler, Nikki Grace appears and watches warily as the visitor enters, augmenting the
foreboding tenor of the scene. The neighbor, in a thick, Eastern European accent reminiscent of Lugosi’s Dracula or the gypsy woman from Lon Chaney Jr.’s *The Wolfman*, explains that she is from “just down the way” and is canvassing the neighborhood, and meeting her neighbors. Quickly, she sheds this thinly-veiled charade, and foretells Nikki’s participation in a new film, for which she has already auditioned.

Lynch creates an alienating sensation by cultivating an awkward rhythm to the two women’s conversation, punctuated by inordinately long pauses between sentences and delayed reactions. The camera commences a standard shot-reverse-shot sequence, but alters the angle and depth of the shot so that Nikki Grace is shot from a standard distance, while Visitor #1 is shot from a sharper angle to the side, and with a startling close-up that emphasizes each of her many facial mannerisms and histrionic ticks. The camera work coupled with the menacing non-diegetic hum creates a scene of dread by alternating between the Visitor’s grotesque appearance and the actress’ visible disquiet. This unsettling effect is heightened by the dialogue, as the Visitor relates a mysterious parable:

A little boy went out to play. When he opened the door, he saw the world. As he passed through the doorway, he caused a reflection. Evil was born. Evil was born and followed the boy. [...] An old tale, and a variation: A little girl went out to play, lost in the marketplace as if half-born. Then, not through the marketplace, [...] but through the alley behind the marketplace, this is the way to the past, but it isn’t something you remember. Forgetfulness, it happens to us all.

Immediately following this strange recitation, Visitor #1 asks “Is there a murder in your film?” The Visitor’s tale of diabolical genesis summons visions of innocence and purity lost, with reference to the standard Gothic trope of the doppelganger. More than a simple story of doubling and an irruption of evil, the eerie parable introduces the viewer to the themes of parallel identities and a coeval evil, an ambiguous and discursive concept. “Evil,” a term rarely referenced except to conjure fear or designate a binary with the equally
ambiguous concept of “good,” calls attention to itself and to the Visitor’s act of storytelling. Lynch conveys the performativity of using such a word by situating it within the cryptic speech of the Visitor, a character defined by an overwhelming sense of mystery tinged with menace. The effect of uttering the word “evil” introduces the term and then, shortly after, the juridical term “murder” grounds the concept of “evil” in a concrete act. The Visitor’s final question returns the terms of her small speech to the reality facing Nikki as she embarks upon a new film project.

In response to the question, Nikki calmly responds, “No, it’s not part of the story,” but Visitor #1 rejects Grace’s claim and angrily growls “Bloody Fucking Murder!” This graphic and violent utterance coupled with the intensification of the non-diegetic music augments the horror of the scene, approximating the horror felt by Nikki Grace as she sits uncomfortably staring back at her unexpected Visitor. This visitation continues after Grace asks the stranger to leave her home, and the Visitor compels Grace to look at the distant couch, suggesting that the actress will sit there the following day with her friends and learn that she has received the coveted film role. The camera assumes a POV shot from the perspective of the Visitor, her bony hand outstretched pointing towards the other end of the large sitting room. As though commanding a crystal ball, the Visitor’s prediction inspires a vision and the camera focuses on the far end of the room, where presumably the next day, Nikki Grace and a couple friends sit. Henry the butler brings a phone and tells Nikki that her agent is calling. She takes the call and immediately begins screaming with joy, because she has, as foretold, gotten the coveted role. Next, the camera cuts to the stairway above the sitting room where Grace and her friends celebrate effusively. A man in a black suit, presumably Nikki Grace’s husband, appears on the landing and peers down onto the scene below. He registers no visible reaction and makes no further progress down the stairs to
address his wife about the joyous display, perhaps showing anxiety at the knowledge of
Nikki Grace’s future costar, Devon Berk (Justin Theroux), a notorious celebrity womanizer
whom we subsequently meet in the next scene.

Immediately following the shot of Nikki’s husband stranded on the stairs, the camera
cuts to a distant shot of the Hollywood sign with an aggressive and threatening industrial din
loudly playing non-diegetically. The effect created by sound and image weds the most
celebrated and visual iconography of Hollywood to a foreboding noise that revalues the
signification of the sign itself, substituting dread for excitement. The juxtaposition of
Nikki’s receiving the role and the eerie image of the Hollywood sign succinctly alters the
standard narrative of Hollywood fame, where an actor/actress comes to Hollywood,
metonymically represented by the hillside sign, and launches their career in motion pictures.
Lynch incorporates this conventional scene, but initiates a diabolical subtext through his
strategic deployment of an ominous score. Furthermore, by embedding Nikki Grace’s story
in the Gothic narrative of the gypsy soothsayer who prophesies the future, including the
anticipation of “bloody fucking murder,” Lynch commences a terrifying account of the
Hollywood dream, abandoning glory and hope for horror and confusion.

From this point on, the nightmare imagery and nonsensical dialogue seem to stem
from the concept of an alien curse, whose origins are never realized, but whose menace
continues into the present day. Just as with Lost Highway and Mulholland Drive, Lynch
employs the mise-en-abîme technique of staging a film within a film. The eerie twist here
resides in the horrors that lurk in the actual staging/shooting of the film. Lynch initiates a
return of repressed material as we learn that the film is a remake, doubling Nikki’s character
another time, as she now signifies not only Sue, but also any prior manifestation of the part
(both actress and character). Todd McGowan suggests that staging fantasy, the work of the
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cinematic, represents a liberatory experience since it unbinds the strictures of thought that limit our reality. He writes: “Fantasy takes the subject beyond the rules that govern possible experience – beyond the limits of the understanding – and thereby envisions the impossible, as we have seen in each of Lynch’s films. [. . .] By immersing ourselves in this beyond and remaining faithful to fantasy’s logic, we inject, as it were, a different order of causality into the phenomenal world” (The Impossible David Lynch 223). Lynch’s film, more than representations of fantasy, self-reflexively interrogate the process of fantasy by showing the machinations of filmmaking, exhibiting the process by which fantasy is constructed. Moreover, what McGowan identifies in the staging of fantasy is readily adapted, in Lynch’s films, to the staging of terror. Immersion, for the audience and the central character, in the fractal “fantasy logic” of INLAND EMPIRE proves to be unsettling and difficult. The film chronicles various narrative moments/diegeses, violating any concept of spatial and temporal continuity. Dern’s character roams through these varied scenes, initiating a filmic journey without the benefit of any ontological certainty or coordinating narrative trajectory. With the sound stage set, Lynch’s film begins its surreal critique of the Hollywood machine, via the ghosts who rattle about amongst its cogs and gears.

As exhibited in all of Lynch’s work, INLAND EMPIRE and, by extension, the film’s central character explore the nature of desire and its relationship to fantasy. Hollywood, the land of dreams, broken and fulfilled, represents an imaginative world where some people stage fantasies while others profit from the buying and selling of those fantasies. Just as Diane discovers the empty dreams and promises of Hollywood, so does Nikki Grace as she succumbs to the make-believe world of her character and finds herself adrift in a sequence of disordered moments and places, where the standard Hollywood narrative is entirely abandoned. McGowan writes: “The worlds of fantasy in Lynch’s films
mark a definitive contrast. Here, the excess and heightened presence of the filmic image that we associate with cinema as such bursts forth. Rather than enduring the absence of the impossible object-cause of desire, the spectator finds indications of this object everywhere”(19). McGowan identifies the ways in which desire structures Lynch’s films and how their expressionism results from their associative connection to the characters’ fantasy worlds. Nikki desires Devon and Sue desires Billy until the excess of this cinematic fantasy subsequently conflates the terms so that identity is sacrificed in the surfeit of desire. The cinematic world of INLAND EMPIRE, already a film within a film, transgresses the boundaries that separate the characters from their leading roles, eroding the coordinating narratives that support the delineation of the real and the fictive.

Aside from the general premise of a cursed film, INLAND EMPIRE, like Lynch’s first feature Eraserhead, defies any effective plot description. When asked repeatedly to describe the film, prior to its release, Lynch would cryptically state that it was about “a woman in trouble” (a phrase he would subsequently emblazon on the cover of the DVD). This vague characterization identifies a crucial element of the film, but also a significant narrative motif of the Gothic since its early imaginings, from Otranto to Udolpho to Dracula, and into the present moment. Kate Ferguson Ellis elaborates upon the role of women in Gothic narratives historically:

The task of the classic Gothic heroine is to escape from the castle that has become her prison, to preside over its demystification, a process that usually requires its violent destruction, and to claim the fortune and lineage that the villain has sought to make his own. [. . .] Unhooked from ‘romance,’ the contemporary Gothic might be titled ‘men on the rampage,’ a designation that would include more fiction of the last two decades than it would exclude. Women are still present, but they are powerless to stop the rampage and are sometimes its objects. (A Companion to the Gothic 263)
Lynch transforms glamorous Hollywood from the proverbial castle to the patriarchal prison, as we see the film’s heroine shunted from one nightmarish moment to another, seemingly trying to escape to the initial innocence her character shows at opening her home to an ominous neighbor. From this relatively lucid point in the film, we see both the physical spaces and the characters metamorphose unpredictably, plunging the entire film into the horror experienced by its central, female figure.

Dern’s troubled character represents a dramatic example of Hollywood’s institutional degradation of women, through a process of labeling and exterior codification. Janet Beizer in, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France*, narrates the conditions of the hysterics brutalized and put on display by Jean-Martin Charcot at Salpetriere. Beizer describes the actual labeling of female patients by doctors who would inscribe their diagnosis upon the skin of the afflicted woman, physically externalizing identity through a shorthand of disease. As a result, the patient would manifest the symptoms of their alleged condition, theatrically supplicating their subjectivities to the hegemony of a patriarchal medical profession (Beizer 15-29). Similarly, Lynch’s actresses, in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *INLAND EMPIRE*, physically manifest the desires and power inscriptions invoked by the films’ male figures, though Lynch often grants these females a renewed subjectivity by offering access to their interior thoughts, fantasies, and nightmares. This aesthetic choice elicits the critique of an institutional subjugation similar to the practices of Charcot and his colleagues. I choose to invoke Beizer’s discussion of Charcot specifically because Lynch’s film expresses chaos, and at times, instances of apparent hysteria on the part of Dern’s character. Lynch’s film turns the camera back upon Hollywood, shifting the focus from the pathology of his heroine, to the pathology of the system that effectively imprisons her.
The film’s central figure represents a number of characters, from the actress Nikki Grace, to her starring role as Sue in *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, to a hardened and violent victim of domestic abuse, to a Polish prostitute. Her perpetual shifting between these roles is never directly signaled and, at times, confused even by the character herself during the film. Dern’s screen image signifies a conduit, channeling the multiple feminine enterprises engaged in the film, but never necessarily asserting the deeper significance of one over another. Geoff Pevere of *Toronto Star* describes the Lynch’s aesthetic strategy as a “fixation on the movie business as a kind of soul-sucking wormhole down which its multiply-named, evershifting protagonist (played by the remarkable Laura Dern) plunges like Alice in Hollywoodland” (E4). Pevere’s analogy to Alice’s adventure through the looking glass resonates particularly as the viewer is introduced to a family of rabbit-headed figures, presented in the manner of a sitcom, with an arbitrarily timed laugh-track to punctuate the nonsensical lines delivered ostensibly by the rabbitheads.

The rabbit sequences amplify the surrealist tenor of the film in their appearance and lack of discrete, coherent meaning, but also implicate the medium of television, another televisual conduit for the depiction of American cultural identity. Like Lynch’s films and his famous television foray *Twin Peaks*, the rabbit sequences in *EMPIRE* provide no clear historical moment, though they appear reminiscent of simply dressed early sitcom sets, like *The Honeymooners* or *I Love Lucy*. Lynch critiques the historical iconicity of the television sitcom and its familiar directive laugh-track by disconnecting the laughter from any clear comedic cue and undermines the illusion of the set’s verisimilitude by shooting the action from long shots that display the superficial structure of the set. Moreover, Lynch denaturalizes the lighting by using ambient lighting and a heavy use of chiaroscuro, further alienating the hallmark sitcom look and feel. Lynch’s highly conflicted relationship with
television executives following the aborted attempt to produce *Mulholland Drive* informs the ways in which the enigmatic rabbit sequences indict American television consumption. In fact, though these sequences appear in *INLAND EMPIRE*, they were originally intended for use in *Mulholland Drive* television series (Elena Haring and Naomi Watts from *Mulholland Drive* play the giant rabbits), and appeared as a series on David Lynch’s website, www.davidlynch.com. Effectively, Lynch deconstructs one of America’s most historically beloved passions, the sitcom. By disconnecting the laugh track and alienating it from its original aesthetic, Lynch calls attention to the coercive and repetitive nature of the sitcom as a medium for entertainment, showing the surfeit of artifice at the detriment of art and transforming the sitcom into a surreal narrative universe.

The film’s episodes shift dramatically from one to the next, providing an unsettling challenge to continuity, but ultimately creating a sense of play within the chaos. *EMPIRE*’s perpetual mutation represents liberation from conventional narrative and aesthetic ways of communicating, because despite the radical break from Hollywood standards, the film communicates expressionistically through visual and mental associations. Predictably, Lynch most effectively conveys the emotional experience of terror and confusion. In “Shape and Shadow: On Poetry and the Uncanny,” David Punter succinctly describes the uncanny mood initiated by Lynch’s disruptive method:

> Perhaps the uncanny has to do with those moments when the ceaseless whirl of desire stops [...]; perhaps what is uncanny about déjà vu is not that we have been here before, but what we have never escaped. Below the flux of activity would lie, then, a differently structured world, different in its sense of time, endlessly, slowly circling, but without forward progression. One way of referring to this world is as the unconscious. One way of referring to its operation, like that of the Gothic, is as a savage negation of history. (*A Companion to the Gothic* 201).
Punter reference to déjà vu strikes a resonant chord in Lynch’s entire oeuvre, where time often doubles upon itself, and moments are repeated. Lynch enacts this repetition during INLAND EMPIRE a number of times, but most notably, when a script reading is interrupted by a noise heard, far off within the darkened, half-built set. Justin Theroux’s character, Devon, stalks off to find the hidden perpetrator who flees among the poorly-lit props and corridors. This scene occurs later in the film, but this time, Laura Dern/Sue/Nikki stands looking at the script reading, where she, Nikki, sits rehearsing lines with Devon. Laura/Sue/Nikki makes a noise, and it is her shadowy form that escapes from Devon as he leaves the reading to attend to the noise. This coupling of déjà vu and an uncanny doubling of Nikki infuses the scene with the dreamy feeling of the unconscious. All reasonable logic has fallen away, exposing this new impossible unreality.

Nikki/Sue’s journey through the labyrinthine episodes of the film corresponds aesthetically to Agent Dale Cooper’s wandering through the Black Lodge, a place defined by its dream-logic and nightmare visions. Like the Black Lodge, the film initiates meaning through the dream-logic of associations and moods created by the radical juxtaposition or words, sounds, and images. The film itself marks an aesthetic space where coordinating gestures are apocryphal and ontological and epistemological uncertainty dominates. Lynch mimetically reproduces the confusion and terror experienced by his main character in his viewer, through the deliberate alternation between subjective camera shots and extreme close-ups. Just as Agent Cooper experiences persons and situations that approximate the conditions of dream, so does Nikki find herself ineluctably imprisoned in a perpetual nightmare state. EMPIRE’s diegesis maintains no coordinating rules or governing ontology, like the impossible world of the Black Lodge, where language is backwards and forwards again, and where the dead walk amongst the living.
Dern’s Nikki/Sue figure wanders through the film’s many episodes, at times very animated and present, but more often she appears to be ghostly, detached and unacknowledged. This ghostly sensation lends an even greater degree of anxiety to the scenes, since it challenges Nikki/Sue’s agency. This challenge restricts the control of the main character, fragmenting her experience even more, as her many personae elicit a challenge to her agency as a unified self. Amy Taubin describes the link between the film’s structure and the psychic journey of Dern’s character:

Like all of Lynch’s films, *Inland Empire* is an exploration of consciousness, specifically process of consciousness involved in making a work of art.[. . .] One might comfortably read the narrative of *Inland Empire* as the map of an actor’s explorations in building a character: the alleyways and doorways behind the set are concretizations of imaginary places she visits to gather background; the dredging up of personal memories that might serve the character, and the feeling of being taken over by the character are both routine parts of the process, as it the somewhat scary but oddly pleasurable sense of being two people – the actor and the character – at once. (“The Big Rupture,” 56)

While Nikki Grace is supposed to be a famous actress, her fame affords to self-possession or influence, particularly as Nikki finds herself becoming the troubled and dependent Sue. As she slips increasingly into the role of Sue, her ability to maintain her own identity lessens, leaving her in a liminal state, at once present and simultaneously posthumous.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims, in her study of Gothic fiction, that instances of crisis pertaining to the transgression of boundaries (sexual, social, the boundary between the living and the dead) signify the Gothic’s most fundamental disturbance. . Nikki Grace’s transmigration of identity amongst various individuals, including her fictional counterpart Sue, along with her journey’s disruption of spatial and temporal reality elicit part of the film’s Gothic character. Like the central figures of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, Nikki
experiences the state of psychogenic fugue, a dissociative disorder characterized by loss of identity and amnesia. Lynch strategically employs this condition as a disruptive narrative trope that unsettles the audience’s ability to discretely comprehend the characters’ motivations and behavior, but also because the concept of psychogenic fugue inspires terror. The complete unmooring of one’s identity, through a psychic break with one’s self accompanied by the actual transformation into another being, regardless of outward appearance, places the narrative ontology in a transgressive state of madness. Such a narrative trope constituted the action and Gothic suspense of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Stevenson’s famous work, like Lynch’s, addresses the base appetites of corrupt men by engaging the public anxiety over the abuse of women (prostitution, rape, murder) and secret double identities.

Prostitution factors largely in Lynch’s film, as a group of prostitutes appear repeatedly in various states of mind and behavior. Lynch clearly initiates a comparison between prostitution and women in the entertainment industry, a link that he initially made in *Blue Velvet*, and more directly in *Twin Peaks, Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me, Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. Sexual objectification and its relationship to economic consumption provides Lynch with a motif that he suffuses with a preternatural degree of horror, in effect illustrating the inimitable pain and terror felt by women within a patriarchal system, such as the Hollywood film industry. Lynch depicts the prostitutes of *INLAND EMPIRE* as acting as a Greek chorus. They also elicit a sense of friendship and warmth absent from other interpersonal interactions in the film. The prostitutes express their solidarity in many instances, but the most dramatic and equally comical moment comes when the women dance in choreographed formation to the 1950s’ hit “The Locomotion.” The cheery familiarity of the song contrasts sharply with the scene’s decrepit mise-en-scene and jump
cuts to silence preceding and concluding the dance scene. The effect of beginning the dance number, but jump cutting away from it renders the silence following the music and the mass ornament of the dancers ephemeral instances of joy in this dark and chaotic diegesis. The order and festivity of the dance sequence interrupts the melee of surrealist images and nonsensical dialogue, briefly promising a moment of hope, then, just as quickly, snuffing it out. Just as Lynch’s film includes countless images of a small light nearly usurped in total darkness, the dancing women represent a spark of light in the film’s Gothic menace.

Male characters in INLAND EMPIRE signify various positions of power, whether as a hapless director, a womanizing leading man, or an adulterous, Southern gentlemen holding his mistress at bay. The impact of these roles emerges as Dern’s character interacts with men, identifying their contribution to her confounding journey and responding to their attacks. Amy Taubin comments on INLAND EMPIRE via Lynch’s crude animated series Dumbland: “The sadism visited on women in Dumbland erupts throughout INLAND EMPIRE, where Laura Dern’s character (in its various incarnations) and its Polish counterpart (played by Karolina Gruszka) are used as punching bags by the husbands, lovers, and johns that proliferate in pursuit of them” (“The Big Rupture,” 56). Taubin identifies the often-violent nature of the masculinity expressed in Lynch’s film, but the masculine presence extends beyond physicality to a more insidious and systemic form of domination. The power that men wield in this film, never transparent, emerges from the relationships that are exposed: pimp/prostitute; adulterer/mistress; filmmaker/actress. Devon represents an intersection of his actual personality, his public persona, and his character Billy Side. Within each of these positions, he is granted a mode of authority, by virtue of his gender, which perpetually shapes Nikki/Sue’s journey.
Some reviewers suggest that INLAND EMPIRE should be read as an exploration of Nikki’s unconscious, just as Mulholland Drive can serve as an expression of Diane’s psychic experience. While these interpretations are seductively neat, they also appear strikingly reductive. To imagine such reading would infer Lynch to be, like Flaubert’s insinuation “Madame Bovary, c’est moi”, awkwardly inhabiting the role of heroine, expressing the thoughts and desires of a female character with whom he shares little in common. Rather, I believe the films share a common interest in the plight of women, and artists more generally, among the nearly cabbalistic congress of executives who control Hollywood’s cultural production.

2.9. Conclusions

David Lynch, in his relentless critique of conglomerate Hollywood, admits much of the hope and wonder of classical Hollywood cinema into his films, but also conveys the dangers of a “dream factory” that institutionalizes the degradation of women and standardizes the language of desire. Throughout his career, Lynch has repeatedly met with resistance to his work, from his unorthodox film narratives to his unique technical approach to film production. Whether enduring critical marginalization as a director of either art or horror cinema in the case of Eraserhead, wrestling with television executives over narrative content in Twin Peaks and Mulholland Drive, or deliberately distancing himself and his art from standard modes of production and distribution with INLAND EMPIRE, time and time again, Lynch has taken an adversarial stance towards the commercial Hollywood entertainment industry.
Lynch’s concern over the controlling and corrupt nature of the film industry has been widely and publicly expressed. In his book *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*, Lynch states his position in plain and resolute terms: “It’s a joke to think that a film is going to mean anything if somebody else fiddles with it. If they give you the right to make the film, they owe you the right to make it the way you think it should be. The filmmaker should decide on every single element, every single word, every single sound, every single thing going down that highway through time” (60). While Lynch’s statement ostensibly depicts the artist as isolated and nearly authoritarian in the realization of her/his creative enterprise, his recent turn towards a more flexible approach to scriptwriting and inclusion of his casts’ suggestions and improvisations signifies the truly extraordinary character of Lynch’s current work, and its conspicuous divergence from studio-run productions. After ABC rejected *Mulholland Drive* as a television project, Lynch described the “air of euphoria” and advantages of adapting the work into a film, citing a close attention to the work’s final exhibition: “It was beautiful. So it was not a total let-down. In fact, there was a little air of euphoria at its rejection from TV [. . .]. TV is a bad picture, bad-quality sound interrupted by commercials and a heartache from the get-go. I knew it all along, especially after *Twin Peaks*. They [television executives] feel the show is secondary to the commercials” (Rodley 281). Lynch’s apparent enjoyment of his maverick status accompanies what he calls the “horror” and “paranoia” that attends any outside interference with his original vision for the project. Lynch declares: “If you don’t have final cut, you can lose your way very quickly and die the slow, agonizing death” (Rodley 275). Invoking such dramatic terms, Lynch shows how deeply runs his antagonism for conglomerate Hollywood. Ultimately, Lynch champions a cinema that privileges the artist’s vision, regardless of the work’s commercial viability.
If we examine the trajectory of Lynch’s career alongside another pair of contemporary auteurs, Joel and Ethan Coen, whose earlier films, like Lynch’s, were called dark and noir-ish, we can appreciate the truly renegade position that Lynch currently occupies. With Blood Simple (1983), Miller’s Crossing (1990), Barton Fink (1991), and Fargo (1996), the Coen’s, like Lynch, established themselves as filmmakers with a distinctive and, at times, disturbing artistic vision. However, despite the infernal depiction of Hollywood culture presented in Barton Fink, the Coen brothers expanded their efforts to produce popular comedies such as O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000) and Intolerable Cruelty (2003), and the critically-acclaimed No Country for Old Men (2007). While No Country for Old Men, the adaptation of Cormac McCarthy’s novel of the same name, again depicts dark and gruesome elements, its critical and popular appeal differ strikingly from the reception of Lynch’s INLAND EMPIRE, for as the Coen brothers have managed to retain a singularity in their films, they have worked within the production protocols of the studios. While Lynch sat musing on a roadside with a cow in support of Laura Dern’s best-actress bid at the 2006 Academy Awards, the Coen’s received top honors at the 2007 Academy Awards for both the best film and best adapted screenplay, appearing alongside Cormac McCarthy (the critically-acclaimed novelist and honoree in Oprah Winfrey’s esteemed Oprah’s Book Club) on the red carpet. The dramatic difference between the Coens’ and Lynch’s respective experiences illustrates the profound impact of Lynch’s self-marginalizing tactics. Lynch’s purposeful attack on the industry’s economic imperatives has set him apart, not only from those who produce formula-driven blockbusters, but also from those celebrated filmmakers who were once paired with Lynch before his decisive break with the industry’s methods.

INLAND EMPIRE attacks the Hollywood machine, as David Lynch manipulates and revalues the glamour and hope bound to iconic conceptions of the Hollywood film
industry. The film concludes with the scene of an ornate room and a group of women dancing as the credits roll. Nina Simone’s “Sinner Man” plays and, as the dancers lip-synch and perform a choreographed routine, it would seem that the camera is depicting a festivity of sorts. With this culminating sequence, Lynch concludes the film on a jubilant and triumphant note, a celebration to mark the end of the film, but also perhaps, the act of its filming. With Lynch’s creation of INLAND EMPIRE, we see him expose his anger and frustration with the industry by confronting the standard modes of production and distribution with a barrage of disturbing scenes and images, but, as the film’s closing performance illustrates, Lynch retains the hope and joy that has endured throughout his 40-years in filmmaking. That Lynch chooses to construct his film with this trajectory from horror to exultation, speaks more to Lynch’s conception of humanity, and the history of Hollywood filmmaking as indelibly narrative; a perpetual oscillation along a continuum of profound personal triumph and devastating human tragedy. Lynch’s postmodern play with narrative – the temporal dislocations, the Surrealist imagery, the destabilization of character conventions – enhances all of his films’ gothic character by reflexively exposing the structures that gird American cultural ideology. With his hideous progeny INLAND EMPIRE and his uncompromising approach to each facet of its inception, from production through exhibition, Lynch deliberately undermines the conception of film as a consumer product, instead asserting his strident belief in film as, very simply, art.
We made America and scared ourselves, and left. (148)

Steve Erickson, _Leap Year_ (1989)

Steve Erickson, author of fiction and non-fiction, essayist, film critic, narrates the darkest elements of America and American identity. Thomas Pynchon introduces Erickson in a jacket blurb that appears on Erickson’s debut, _Days Between Stations_ (1985): “Steve Erickson has that rare and luminous gift for reporting back from the nocturnal side of reality [. . .].” Pynchon signals the dark and macabre aesthetic that marks Erickson’s prose, and also raises the notion of distinct sides to reality, a distinction that I argue Erickson consistently exploits and muddies in his fiction. In _The Coherence of Gothic Conventions_, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick devotes a great deal of critical attention to the Gothic’s thematic turn towards moments of physical transgression or disturbance, be it the discovery of a hidden passage or the breaking of lock to access some secret knowledge. Erickson’s texts continually return the theme of transgressing boundaries – physical, sexual, temporal, moral – and the exhumation of buried pasts and memories. Just as early Gothic texts attacked the clarity and truth offered by Enlightenment thought and scientific methodology, Erickson’s postmodern
Gothic texts reject discrete notions of space, time, and identity (both individual and communal).

In a short-story entitled “Zeroville” (2004), a reference to a quote from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville* (1965) and the title of Erickson’s subsequent 2007 novel, Erickson tells the story of Monk, a cinephile and film editor fascinated by doors that he spots in the background of numerous films from an array of countries, genres, and eras: “Lining the stairway of his house are the enlarged celluloid images of a thousand doors, although really they’re all the same door, moving from one location to another, each growing closer to him or, more exactly, he grows closer to each” (69). The repetition of the door succinctly illustrates Erickson’s postmodern project and signals the Gothic nature of the narratives that he constructs in several of his novels. The door signifies the postmodern through its persistence as the simulation of a door since the door exists as *mise-en-scene* in a fictive diegesis separate from lived reality; a simulacral image metonymically representing the boundary that delimits interior and exterior. Monk’s obsession with the superficial doors conveys the story’s thematic exploration of parallel realities, histories, and temporalities, a hallmark of Erickson’s fiction. Like the proliferation of key imagery in David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* or the windows that Erickson highlights in *Days Between Stations*, Monk’s door signifies a material emblem of the liminal, privileging the potential realities offered by the in-between or beyond over the static or finite and further establishing the postmodern character of the narrative. In his interpretation of the postmodern, Homi Bhabha emphasizes the postmodern’s continual representation of liminal or hybrid states and argues that their generative nature as “the intervening space ‘beyond,’ becomes a space of intervention in the here and now” (*Location of Culture* 7). It is from these transitional sites and
dimensions that Erickson constructs his narratives and initiates his social interventions “in the here and now” of American political life.

In his non-fiction work Leap Year, Erickson writes: “In the terror of the nuclear imagination which finally consumes us is ideology’s last opportunity to hold people in its power”(157). Erickson’s understanding of the doom and dread inspired by the advent of the nuclear age represents a collective relationship with certain death. An outspoken critic of Ronald Reagan, Erickson’s fiction seeks to supplant the abstractions of “evil” promulgated by ideologues such as Reagan (during his 1982 House of Commons speech on “the Evil Empire”) with characters and landscapes scarred and traumatized by humanity’s often violent interactions. While little scholarship has been devoted to the critical study of Erickson’s works, Lee Spinks’ “Jefferson at the Millennial Gates: History and Apocalypse in the Fiction of Steve Erickson” examines Erickson’s narrative investment in the writing of historical accounts and “Erickson’s fascination with the apocalyptic structure of the American origin”(215). Spinks aptly describes Erickson’s writing as providing “both structural and thematic expression to the complex relationship between temporality, history, and narrative”(215). While I agree with Spinks’ analysis of Erickson’s work as producing “a stubbornly dissident counternarrative of American history that stands in careful counterpoise to the collection of historical incidents that he presents to our attention,” my own examination of Erickson’s work takes up the author’s perpetual reinterpretation of historical record as dark, violent, and suffused with horror (222). It is my assertion that Erickson’s works view history not as an empirical record but as a series of intense hauntings that impact contemporary experience by perpetually re/de-valuing cohesive notions of nationality, sexuality, gender, and race. Specifically, unlike Spinks, I interpret Erickson’s
counternarrative of America, its cultures, and its history as both distinctly *postmodern* and *Gothic* and my analysis will show how these critical paradigms manifest in Erickson’s works.

In this chapter, I will examine several of Erickson’s novels, tracking his use of gothic imagery and tropes to address how he transforms his own political outrage into representations of horror and brutality, amplifying the urgency and visceral impact of his social critique. As with my analyses of the works of Thomas Pynchon and David Lynch, my examination of Erickson’s work will demonstrate the allegorical dimension upon which his novels operate, treating his discursive spaces and Gothic imagery as symbolic indicators of real life horror. I will also make occasional reference to his non-fiction work, as Erickson deliberately and intertextually overlaps themes and characters from his non-fiction within his fiction works. For example, both *Leap Year* and 1993’s fictional *Arc D’X* contemplate the grave significance of Sally Hemmings’ identity as both exploited female slave and evidence of America’s political forefathers’ absolute hypocrisy. Erickson’s blurring of the non-fiction/fiction divide mimesatically corresponds to the blurring of reality and unreality that characterizes his texts’ imagined worlds. I will also show how Erickson’s concept of historiography foregrounds his manipulation of the cinematic, as a form of temporal recording that ultimately dislocates time from its diachronic moorings. Ultimately, this dislocation becomes, in and of itself, a source of horror. This disruption of the temporal further conveys the notion of haunting that I have chosen to describe Erickson’s historical engagement, but also signifies a postmodern narrative mode. Erickson’s texts deny the possibility of a sustainable division between the discursive and the historical, demonstrating the fact that one only interacts with history through its representation. Whereas standard historiographical endeavors seek to reconstruct the events in ways faithful to their original circumstances, Erickson’s texts substitute a dark and often terrifying alternate history whose
temporal instability calls attention to history’s function as a guiding narrative. Rather than lead us to the light of truth or verisimilitude with original events, Erickson’s historical narratives pilot the reader into threatening and shadowy iterations of America.

3.1. Erickson’s Los Angeles

Steve Erickson depicts an imagined America where the clock always reads five minutes to midnight. Los Angeles, the city of Angels, represents the epicenter of Erickson’s haunted American history. Far from Winthrop’s mythic “city on the hill” that grounded the ideals of America’s puritan forefathers, and equally removed from the promise of the West distilled historically under the banner of Manifest Destiny, Erickson’s Los Angeles is not some bastion of modern civilization. Rather, Erickson depicts an emblematic space where meaning is precariously suspended at a temporal and psychic precipice where the descent into pure surreality appears immanent. Erickson transmutes the American dream of the West into a futuristic, often totalitarian netherworld populated by traumatized individuals whose libidinal excesses suggest a world characterized by sexual violence and only fugitive moments of hope.

In the case of Hollywood, the site of America’s glamour and perpetual allure, Erickson, like David Lynch, shows us a culture where all of the hopeful dreams for fame and fortune have accumulated and folded back upon themselves, leaving only a nostalgic past, whose actuality is rife with tragedy and horror. For both Erickson and Lynch, Hollywood signifies a distinctly Gothic site, like the setting of a classical Gothic narrative, characterized by its decayed magnificence, fallen nobility, and incipient ruin. Furthermore, Los Angeles and Hollywood embody the allegorical aspect of Gothic spaces, representing America itself
as perpetually in danger of collapsing in upon itself. Josh Cohen, in *Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing*, describes the representative function of Los Angeles in contemporary literature. Cohen notes the inherently postmodern sensibility that characterizes representations of Los Angeles and its allegorical relationship to both America and the postmodern:

Hollywood, Disneyland, ‘revivalist’ and ‘fantastical’ architectural styles, the futuristic skyscrapers of Downtown, and the widespread deployment of electronic surveillance converge to form a showcase for the globalist logic of postmodernity whose organizing principle is the simulation of reality. [. . .] Los Angeles, like America itself, is at the centre of a decentralised universe, the site at which the collapse of reality into the ‘reality-effect’ is enacted. Its ‘pure’ indeterminacy is marked by its endless proliferation of images, sprawling outward with infinite license.(116)

In essence, Los Angeles exemplifies the postmodern in its material geography and America in its fundamental iconicity. Implicit in Erickson’s Los Angeles is the suggestion that the American dream and the democratic values that support America’s ideology of exceptionalism have found their terminus, a site of endless simulation, “a phantom landscape in which material and filmic reality become interchangeable”(Cohen 116). With regards to the future, Erickson’s Los Angeles prophesies America as site of endless devastation, a police-state where power is centralized, and a city where subcultures emerge as the sole intermediaries of free thought and speech.

Erickson’s novels employ cosmic tales, adapted from biblical models, to convey socially-directed points about the state of contemporary American politics. Whether flooding California in a tacit comparison to Noah’s story from the Bible, or causing storms of epic proportion, Erickson’s novels adopt the cautionary mode of the Bible to divine and admonish certain political practices that Erickson opposes. Commenting specifically about the state of America during the Reagan administration of the 1980s, Erickson attacks
Reagan’s advancement of a fictitious America based in nostalgic fabrication. Lee Spinks describes Erickson’s interpretation of the Reagan’s presidency as a collection of simultaneous, illusory, and self-canceling interpretations of America: “The paradox of the phase of American history that the Reagan presidency inaugurated is that its concerted emphasis on the robust assertion of American identity gradually disengaged history from memory and produced a number of ‘secret’ or private Americas, utopian spaces for the private citizen to experience the 1980s as the 1950s and re-create contemporary reality as a form of historical fantasy”(222). Erickson’s pointed criticism expresses the deep suspicion he harbors towards the conservativism of the Reagan administration, and Ronald Reagan’s personal mode of self-fashioning:

The legacy of Ronald Reagan who has transformed America into a television event is that, as with all television events, two things have been rendered essentially illusory: the truth of what’s happened, and one’s involvement with it. [. . .] The actuality of what happened under Reagan is impertinent, and we can sneer at Reagan’s unspoken contention that wishing something makes it so, but in an era of ubiquitous images and information over a dizzying cosmos of media outlets, that contention is borne out at least until the consequences of mindboggling debt and the illiteracy of seventeen-year-olds graduating underfunded schools and the rebellion of a planet that’s sick of us come washing over us like the garbage of the ocean.(Leap Year 140)

Erickson’s cautionary comparison of America’s reckoning as an ocean of garbage washing over the populace corresponds to his fictional depictions of American spaces, flooded by the ocean or immersed in a suffocating blanket of sand. These horrifying outcomes represent the dread that Erickson perceives as the abuses of American politicians in the media-saturated contemporary age.

Erickson examines America, as an abstract concept, an untidy amalgamation of personal histories and memory. He interrogates the purported foundations of democracy and equality that ground the idealized accounts of the United States and its history.
Erickson’s novels imagine America’s forefathers as vampiric and predatorial, as he recasts Thomas Jefferson as a rapist and slaveowner, in addition to his prominent role as father of American democracy. In *American Nomad*, a non-fiction collection of Erickson’s take the American cultural and political scenes, the author describes the implausibility of American Exceptionalism:

> It is not possible to call innocent a country where the original residents were systematically wiped out and the new tenants built a society in large part on the labor of people who were shipped over in chains from another continent in the hulls of boats. These original sins do not negate America’s idealism and romanticism. But that such an idealistic and romantic country was created out of such profound transgressions is a more complicated paradox than we can entertain. (32)

Erickson does not position himself against America, the concept or the nation, rather, he speaks as a nationalist who refuses to ignore the terrifying truths imbricated in American history and identity. In Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, Zinn describes the purpose of his historiographical: “If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win” (11). Like Zinn’s, Erickson’s project plumbs the depths of America’s dark secrets, rigorously probing, what he terms, “the delusion of American innocence.” However, unlike Zinn, Erickson’s work interprets the future that could await the nation as bleak and authoritarian where information and power are centralized and bureaucratized and extreme violence lays in wait at every turn. Also, unlike Zinn, Erickson’s narratives of American history shuffle continually between past, present, and future, deliberately disorienting readers and characters alike, and, in doing so, laying bare the intersection between narrative, history, and memory. Erickson’s Gothic approach to American history reclaims the horror and abjection that characterizes America
at its most monstrous. For Erickson, American conservatism and its legacy of racial
oppression signify examples of the true monsters. Like the castles of Radcliffe’s or
Walpole’s Gothic fiction, Erickson’s America bends sinister and possesses a labyrinthine
history populated by ghosts and secrets that undermine the regality and nobility of those
who would claim entitlement to power and privilege.

3.2. Days Between Stations

Steve Erickson’s first novel, Days Between Stations, commences the braided narrative
style that has become a hallmark of Erickson’s work, fiction and nonfiction. Erickson tells
the story of a lost silent film from the nascent years of cinema and the various generations of
families and lovers connected to the film and its creator. The novel begins with the stories
of two figures, a man, Michel, and a woman, Lauren, who each feel mysteriously compelled
towards the other, and whose memories are disrupted by traumatic events from their
respective pasts. Both characters seek to escape painful episodes that haunt their current
existence. Erickson underscores the fragility of subjectivity as both Michel and Lauren
struggle to establish coherent identities for themselves in the face of their troubled histories.
Michel, a young filmmaker, addresses his past through the medium of film, translating
memory and temporality to celluloid. Such a translation illustrates the postmodern self-
reflexivity encountered in David Lynch’s films, where the process of creating art (for both
Erickson and Lynch, filmmaking, specifically) is depicted within the work. This aesthetic
trope demonstrates the ways in which memory and experience are actively manipulated by
artists, rather than simply recorded within the mind. For both Erickson and Lynch, the
transmogrification of experience to the creative work initiates a turn towards surrealism.
Both artists invoke a dreamlogic through their use of unique and uncanny imagery. Moreover, both Erickson and Lynch thread their works with elements of dread and terror that suggest a profound link with the Gothic.

Set in Los Angeles, Erickson’s actual home, the city appears as a dreamscape where reality is perpetually challenged by the psychic disturbances that beset the central characters as well as savage sand storms that tear, figuratively and literally, at the city’s material foundations. Erickson describes the sand-bitten landscape of Los Angeles as a phantasmagoria:

The moon was rising over the dunes and they looked like the waves of the Atlantic, as he had seen them before he return from France. [. . .] Everything was still: the branches of the trees against the moon were bare but for white clumps of sand that occasionally shook loose; and standing knee-deep he saw nothing move. He watched the sandtrees for some minutes until one shuddered from something unknown, a breeze he didn’t feel or the weight of the sand on a high branch. It was only then, from far away, he heard it; as he listened he realized it was bells in the night. [. . .] in the black lightless city it sounded at first like the voices of children. The landscape shuddered again, the stripped white forms of sandtrees drooling over the curbs in the moonlight. (73)

Erickson’s description of Los Angeles evacuates any prior associations with an actual city, supplanting reality with an alien world blanketed in sand. Los Angeles becomes a macabre desert, as the silence and stillness of death and blackness of night efface its prior vitality. Erickson’s desert Los Angeles represents a transgression of nature, as the weather itself becomes disrupted to the point of crisis. As Michel cautiously navigates the city in search of Lauren, he moves among groups of dead bodies heightening the grisliness of the scene.

Erickson heightens the surreal appearance of the besieged city as Michel finds Lauren interred in the sand, first mistaking her hair for a strand of seaweed. As Michel pulls at the strand, he discovers Lauren, who has been listening to him, conscious and aware.
Erickson describes Lauren’s thoughts: “It was like in the hospital, when she had listened to her womb talk to her, only now it seemed a bit the other way around, that she was the one enveloped”(73). Lauren places herself in the position of her child, Jules, whose death led her to Michel. Erickson amplifies the horror of the desolate landscape by including the frightening imagery of live burial and Lauren’s personal trauma of losing her child. Lauren imagines herself as the ghost of her dead child, secure and protected in her deadly womb of sand. Erickson’s novel, like Toni Morrison’s Beloved, a contemporary Gothic text that also depicts a violently fractured maternal connection, initiates a dead child’s haunting that subsequently plunges the mother into psychic disarray. The conflation of the setting, dead and damaged bodies, and memories of a dead child imbue Erickson’s narrative with a pronounced sense of gothic dread.

Mystery defines the relationship between Michel and Lauren. Brought together by a cosmology of unseen forces, linked to death and the insistence of their pasts, the two characters are thrust together and set on a narrative trajectory to find catharsis for their mutual traumas. For Lauren, resolution comes through communion with her estranged husband, Jason, whose personal detachment towards her throughout their marriage paralleled Lauren’s detachment from Jules. Both share some level of complicity in the death of their child, linking them ineluctably within the narrative despite the overdetermined magnetism that compels Lauren towards Michel. For Michel, personal relief from his past comes not through communion with another, but rather, through a tortuous journey of self-revelation.

Erickson links the breakdown of language and memory with trauma as Michel struggles with a debilitating stutter and amnesia. Upon arriving to the United States as a young boy from a rural town in France, Michel shows the signs of an unexplained
disturbance through the fragmentation of his utterances into stammered French and pained screams. His strange behavior and speech difficulties continue into his adulthood as he and his uncle Jack clash, primarily because Michel embodies the values of his as yet unnamed grandfather, the estranged father whom Jack resents. Within the novel, Michel's stutter signals his emotional immediacy to the traumatic events that marred his childhood. Erickson indicates this proximal relationship as Michel’s stutter disappears during the period of the novel where Michel suffers from amnesia. Near the novel’s conclusion, as Michel nears the place of his early childhood in France, his stutter returns, linking the disruptive pangs of his personal history to his ability to express himself through language. Erickson’s equation of language with memory here illustrates the damage incurred through trauma, a correspondence that Erickson charges with a sense of horror and surrealism throughout the text.

Just as Los Angeles effaced by sandstorms suggests a surreal landscape, Erickson employs similar climatological forces to denaturalize well-known locations, revaluing their appearance and function within the terms of the everyday. Venice is first scorched with a drought-inducing heat then obscured in a mystical fog. The once vibrant Paris is frozen with a cold so brutal that the streets and riverways are virtually deserted by living beings. Erickson describes Paris in Gothic terms, enunciating the eeriness of the scene:

Primordial Paris: empty, frozen, infernal, undetermined inhabitants scurrying though its subterranean passages, the increasingly panicky sounds of more furniture broken to feed the fires, the crackling of more pages igniting, more incinerated mementos. [. . . ] All the city moaned at first like the cry of cats, then old and deathly, then overwhelming in unison and power. By the last of the year, when there was no more the sound of the cars or pedestrians in the street or, certainly, the river rushing by or, certainly, the radios or televisions, that moan was the only sound of the city [. . . ].(173)
Erickson’s Paris represents a wasteland, stripped of language and human contact. The image of pyres reducing books to fuel calls to mind the suppressive terror of the Nazis and the replacement of language and activity with a single moan conveys the “deathly” horror innate to the setting. Walter Benjamin, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” describes Paris, as shot by the photographer Eugene Atget, who photographed Paris’ deserted streets around at the fin-de-siecle. Benjamin writes: “It’s quite justly been said of him that he photographed them like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence” (Illuminations 226). Similarly, Erickson’s Paris, Los Angeles, and Venice represent effaced spaces beyond morality, legality, and the security of nature’s patterns. Like Atget’s deserted Paris, Erickson’s cities bear an inherent disquiet in their depictions of felt absence.

Erickson makes these real places surreal, endowing their actual locales and addresses with a dream-like detachment that Pynchon so aptly called, “the nocturnal side of reality.” Erickson’s transformation of everyday space into nightmarish dreamscapes suggests a function to nightmares that Valdine Clemens identifies in Gothic fiction:

For a person who pays attention to the dream life, the nightmare is a message from the unconscious, often arising when a given attitude is proving inadequate to a current life situation. This type of nightmare vividly predicts the potentially disastrous consequences of persisting in a particular attitude or mode of action. It may also simultaneously reveal something that has been previously rejected or unacknowledged by consciousness, and so indirectly indicate the means of readjusting one’s mental attitude. (3)

Clemens illustrates the figurative meaning of Erickson’s aesthetic, linking the environment to the mental experience of the characters. By invoking the logic of dreamstate, Erickson concomitantly implies the Gothic trope of the uncanny, as repressed material forces its way into consciousness. Considering Michel’s trauma-induced amnesia,
the entire novel’s narrative function as a dramatic return of repressed material, simply through the revelation of his and his family’s personal histories. Also, by deploying extreme weather as a means for defamiliarizing the environments of various global cities, Erickson suggests a nearly cosmological compulsion of the narrative, as these conditions catalyze events within the story. Rather than employing fanciful or magical situations to advance these episodes, Erickson uses climate, a quintessential marker of the everyday, against the everyday spaces he depicts, using the natural world to denaturalize the world of the story. Whereas, historically, Gothic fiction relied upon tropes such as the Gothic castle, with its subterranean passages and hidden rooms, Erickson turns entire cities into Gothic spaces defined by their uncanny likeness to actual locations, but overwhelming singularity. Throughout Erickson’s later works, Los Angeles represents such a Gothic space, sometimes buried in sand, other times submerged in water. This gesture expresses the metonymical representation of surreality and fear so prevalent in postmodern Gothic texts by relying upon the natural to alter perception, rather than a supernatural explanation for events.

As Michel navigates these alienated spaces in search of his amnesiac past, Erickson develops the parallel narrative of Michel’s grandfather, Adolphe Sarre, a French filmmaker from the silent era of film whose film is subsequently abandoned and lost. Like Carl Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, a film that Erickson examines in *Zeroville* (2007), Adolphe Sarre’s *Le Mort de Marat* tells tragic story of a historical figure whose death impacted the French nation, and like *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, Sarre’s film is said to be a cinematic feat for its editing and mise-en-scene. Erickson privileges the vision of the artist as he chronicles Sarre’s cunning and tireless efforts to realize his film, despite pressures from investors, rival studios, and his own film crew. Sarre markets his film to a small, obscure studio and moves the production to an insulated, rural village archly named *Wyndeuax*, allowing himself a greater degree of
autonomy as a director. *Wyndeaux*, a phonetic analogue for “window,” signifies the town’s figurative associations with deliberate modes of vision, just as a window implies sight, but through a specific frame. Windows return tropically throughout the novel signifying a connection to the framing exacted in film composition, as well as the more general relation to looking out from an interior space (cognitive or actual), or within from an exterior position. Sarre’s artistic vision comes to loggerheads with his crew as they deliberate over the culminating scene of the film:

History was his and it was what Adolphe said it was; and if he determined that Charlotte raped Marat in the bathtub before murdering him, then that was how it happened. When someone else on set said perhaps this would seem a bit melodramatic, Adolphe exploded, screaming that, all right, Charlotte would not rape Marat, Charlotte would not kiss Marat, but Charlotte must kill Marat with more passion than Janine was giving the scene; and he showed her as she began to cry: he place the knife in her hands and brought it high above her head, and brought it down aimed for his own chest.(128)

This sequence illustrates Sarre’s fervor to actualize the film as he imagines it, but also the morbid scene of the murder invests the novel’s narrative with a dark compulsion towards death. In this, his debut novel, Erickson positions first-time filmmaker Sarre against these capital-driven forces, perhaps self-reflexively depicting the charged environment experienced by all artists as they strike a necessary balance between their imagined work and the material conditions of its production.

Erickson narrates the film’s production, characterized by its director’s obsession with death, but also depicts, in macabre terms, the film itself. When production ends, Sarre sabotages its exhibition by claiming the film to be unfinished and intentionally withholding the reel containing the film’s climactic murder scene. Interest in Sarre’s film and career wanes as *Marat* fades into obscurity. Sarre’s *Marat* subsequently becomes an enigma for film scholars. Finally, the film’s fragmented reels which had been scattered from Paris to
Hollywood are rescued and reassembled by the son of a painter whose work appeared in the original film. Upon finding the final piece, the painter’s son experiences the film’s conclusion:

> Faded as the images were in the afternoon light, they were nonetheless what he’d always imagined they would be, and that was what so astounded him – the lack of surprise, the manifestation of his own imagination; and he had a difficult time believing it was real, the woman on Adolphe’s wall coming into Marat’s private bath, and in ecstatic frenzy killing him. His body lurched at the knife, and every detail was vivid: the steam rising from the bath, the way the muscles in her legs tensed when she committed the act, the splash of water from the tub, the passion with which she back away from the blood. (154-155)

The description of the film narrates Marat’s murder, but given that the film’s heroine is also Michel’s grandmother, the images take on an additional connection to death, as her image appears like a ghost on the wall. Andre Bazin, in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” describes one of the original purposes of visual representation was to “provid[e] a defense against the passage of time [. . .] for death is but the victory of time” (What is Cinema? 9). This preservation impulse inherent visual reproduction becomes complicated further by cinema, as Bazin continues: “The film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber. The film delivers baroque art from it convulsive catalepsy. Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were” (14-15). Bazin’s formulation of film’s representational connection to death demonstrates the haunting quality of the images that Erickson describes. Sarre’s film at once preserves the images of his long dead love and Marat’s murderer, effectively allowing them to persist beyond the grave, but also, the film allows the dead to move, breath, and kill.

The narrative reality of Erickson’s novel presents a far more surreal and terrifying world than the cinematic reality of Sarre’s film. During his quest to discover his obscured
past, Michel boards a train that allows him to glimpse earlier moments of his life, from the window. This episode marks a distinct divergence from reality, as the train continues for years, always leaving Wyndeaux, but never stopping. Caught in this perpetual circuit of scrambled temporality, Michel feels confined within the train:

He ran to the next car, and the one after, looking for one cabin window in which was not trapped in daylight. He realized, instead, that he was the one trapped – on a train where the deepest night was on one side and the brightest day was on the other, from which unconscious, unrecalled scenes of his past gasped into each compartment. [. . .] Michel was listening to something else, coming not from any one compartment, or the end of the aisle, or the next car. It was coming from outside the train, just beyond the closed windows. It was a furious tapping on the glass, and their high frantic little voices calling to him to come and open the shutters. (204)

This episode exposes the suffocating terror that Michel feels, as his past literally stalks him, as he is trapped in a continuous moment of transit, never allowed to reach the comfort of land. Michel’s forced nomadism signifies the figurative homelessness that he has experienced, emotionally and psychically, within the narrative. The “furious tapping” on the panes of the train windows casts a horrific light on the scene, giving the ghosts of Michel’s past physical form and agency. The window, like Wyndeaux, functions again as a potent symbol of the barrier between spaces, but on the train, also, times. Just as Thomas Pynchon hailed Erickson’s channeling of “the nocturnal side of reality,” Michel’s train ride illustrates the separation of darkness and light in the train’s opposing windows, but also Michel’s position in the liminal space between the alternate temporal dimensions. It is only from this distinct vantage that Michel is able to access the memories and horrors of his lost past. The dreamlike logic of Michel’s train ride reinforces the novel’s surreality, and amplifies the episode’s terror, since Michel cannot wake from this nightmare when he is already awake.
3.3. Rubicon Beach

Erickson’s next novel, *Rubicon Beach* (1986), returns to Los Angeles, where the landscape again undergoes a radical metamorphosis. I will examine part one of the text, the most macabre and decidedly Gothic portion of the novel. *Rubicon Beach* commences with the introduction of a narrator named Cale, wearied and cynical from nearly two and a half years spent in prison, returning to a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles under totalitarian rule. Cale details the mysterious conditions of his release from imprisonment: “We came into L.A. middusk. Behind us the sky was yellow and black and the city was blue and orange. It took two hours sailing in, past the blank smoky moors of the Hollywood Peninsula to our north, navigating our way through the outlying swamps where the Hancock Park mansions loomed in ruin, sea water rolling in and out of the porticoes and doors”(11). Los Angeles, once vibrant and teeming with people, now appears ghostly, submerged in seawater. Erickson’s inclusion of the city’s colored appearance expressionistically amplifies the scene’s somber and uncanny mood. In *Leap Year*, Erickson explains the significance of Los Angeles as a symbolic space:

America, which against every denial it might muster both longs for and despises the future that Los Angeles means, will sort through that future’s rubble like a seer through leaves of tea. [. . .] Because America and whatever function it’s determined to perform in the evolution of moral time will insist on reducing its future to a physical rubble if only to be free of it once and for all. It’s a future still waiting to understand the past is dead: an America that waits to understand it’s now only the United States.(11)

Both *Days Between Stations* and *Rubicon Beach*, show us a ruined Los Angeles whose “physical rubble” signifies the American dream in negative, an inversion of the hope and immanence of a coherent national identity. Erickson’s Los Angeles is physically devastated and populated by estranged individuals whose fractal narratives depict a dissolute America.
As Cale contemplates the porousness of the city and his possibilities for escape, he notes that the city emits a peculiar music that seems to rise up from its foundations. He describes the music of the city: “I hadn’t been in town long before I noticed that music was everywhere, the music I heard out of Chinatown that first night. It came out of the buildings, a distinct and different melody out of each one. The few people you did run into hummed a lot”(13). The music augments the significance of the spaces that the narrator encounters, and the singularity of the city. The immersion of Los Angeles in seawater and music symbolically effaces the city’s landmarks, altering its cartography and defamiliarizing its spatial touchstones.

Erickson continues the landscape’s erasure and alienation as Los Angeles’ buildings inexplicably fall to pieces. After Cale’s jailers bring him to the city and set him to work in a library that towers over the city, Cale describes the precariousness of his surroundings: “One day you’d see a building standing upright and the next day it was entirely collapsed, the earth caved in around it, the music turning into a hiss from out of the rubble. In Chinatown they called the shops along the water the Weeping Storefronts; at night you could hear them gurgling and howling in the dark all the way from the library tower”(13). Erickson renders the “Weeping Storefronts” mortal and animate, and in a Gothic turn, explicitly connects the area’s activities to darkness and night. Cale’s description of the city approximates the haunting or ghostly behavior of other horror narratives, such as *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist*.

Erickson undermines the mythos of the American West and the United States’ identity as a nation of immigrants where he connects Cale’s experience of the space’s ghoulishness with a ship of itinerant refugees. Cale describes the vessel in Gothic terms:
I saw before the shadowmansions of the lagoon something like a black mountain rising from out of the water, alive with insects; not until it blocked out the sun entirely could I tell it was a boat. [. . .] The deck was swarming with voices, Asian and Spanish and Portuguese and German, to the dull percussion of the tide and the sobbing storefronts at my back. [. . .] When they got right next to me about thirty feet away I saw, in the fast groan of the last sun and the few nagging lights of Chinatown, the nullified blaze of all their dead eyes; every one of them was blind.(14)

The description of the seacraft commences cinematically, emerging from the gloom to reveal a ghostship of blind immigrants. Their “dead eyes” suggest a symbolic ghostliness, as though their bodies were divested of souls. The vessel’s inhabitants are set adrift, seeking a homeland in a place where land is absent, replaced by the flood waters that necessitate their perpetual nomadism. The ghostship represents a revision of the biblical tale of Noah’s Ark, functioning as an allegory on American identity as an immigrant nation. The blinded immigrants, deprived of vision, a soul, and a home in this dystopian setting, signify the nation’s abandonment of its immigrant populations, the death of the American dream.

Erickson’s depiction of a totalitarian Los Angeles and the symbolic ghostship represent metonymical indictments of Reagan’s America, a conservative administration that Erickson publicly criticized. Erickson’s symbols are metonymical because they adapt the American landscape, rather than abstracting the entire narrative into some distant fantasy world. In Leap Year, Erickson launches an assault on Ronald Reagan and the conservativism of the 1980s: “The freedom to make a profit has for Reagan warranted passion even at the expense of individual freedoms that derive from the most human of liberties, the freedom to think. Reagan the nemesis of government power almost never speaks with force about freedom of speech unless it’s purely in the abstract or in the context of communist oppression,”(153) and later, “The basic tendencies of men like Reagan and Meese and Bork and Bush, not even to mention Quayle and Hatch and Helms, are authoritarian”(155).
Writing in a time of conservative rule, with a clear vision of the freedoms at stake, Erickson depicts America in his novel as oppressive and bent wholly towards the authoritarian tendencies he identifies in the Republican leaders of the 1980s.

In *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and The Modern Horror Film*, Adam Lowenstein establishes what he terms “the allegorical moment,” a specific mode of social commentary demonstrated in modern horror cinema that transmutes real world trauma into cinematic horror. Lowenstein writes: “Rather than offering reassuring displays of artistic ‘meaning’ validated as ‘productive’ in the face of historical trauma, they [modern horror films] demand that we acknowledge how these impulses to make productive meaning from trauma often coincide with wishes to divorce ourselves from any real implications within it. In short, these films invite us to recognize our connection to historical trauma across the axes of text, context, and spectatorship”(9). Lowenstein describes the social function of films such as George Romero’s zombie saga as they extend a political allegory through their depictions of the undead as representations of mass culture. Critics such as Carol Clover and Barbara Creed have explored the allegorical function of horror films, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Halloween*, in their depictions of gender. Lowenstein’s claims about the allegorical function of modern horror films extends aptly to Erickson’s text, for just as Erickson uses the actual site of the American West as his setting, so does he use horrific images to convey his symbolic message about the traumatic experiences of immigrant populations. Erickson’s texts often conjure a cinematic association from their direct references to film, and their imagistic descriptions.

As Cale narrates his life as an ex-convict working for the state, the depictions of the bureaucratic government and its attending nation signify Erickson’s critique of American identity and conservative politics. Cale works in the tower, managing the confidential
government documents and meeting with his abrasive parole officer, Jon Wade. Speaking about Wade and the government personnel that assume dominion over his existence, Cale describes the inefficacy and chaos that undermine their abilities to control him: “That first month I presumed a rhyme or reason to the way they’d let my leash out and then pull it in, but now I saw there was no rhyme or reason. Now I saw they didn’t know what to do with me. They kept saying I was on their side now but they didn’t know that, because I didn’t know it”(25). Cale questions his complicity in the activities of the government and, ultimately, their power. His suspicion leads him to take greater and wilder risks, maintaining a constant and rigorous dissidence. This stance towards the authoritarian state illustrates a similar defiance to Erickson’s, whose critiques of the Republican leadership cast them as the promoters of a fascistic mode of power that denies creativity and the free circulation of information. Cale’s job, managing the documents of the state, emphasizes the narrative importance of information as a type of power and implicitly demonstrates the government’s lack of forethought by putting a political radical in such a privileged position.

Erickson threads Cale’s experiences with grisly moments and terrifying encounters that magnify the Gothic nature of the text and connect the text’s political implications with its Gothicism. During one of his unlawful breaches of the state’s mandate over him, Cale takes a boat from Los Angeles up to Seattle. As he approaches the shore, he spots two figures, a man kneeling in front of a woman, and guides the boat closer to see what is happening, only to find a gruesome scene. He describes the experience: “I looked again, and again, and nothing else had changed; there were still the two of them on shore; but his face was gone: and then I saw it in her hand, the source of the flash, a two foot long blade that had flown from beneath her pale dress and caught the light of the moon and very efficiently separated the head she held in her hand from the rest of the man’s body”(22). The obscurity
of the scene, a violent decapitation, acquires a dreamlike quality through the avoidance of graphic descriptions or bloody detail. Erickson evacuates the episode of its intense abjection by reducing the beheading to a balletic movement, made painterly by the inclusion of the moonlight’s perceptible play upon the blade. Like the blade of a slasher film, such as Brian DePalma’s *Dressed to Kill* (1980), where the killer’s razor repeatedly appears primed and menacing only after the light hits it, the woman’s blade becomes even more visibly threatening when caught in the light of the moon. The scene’s muted brutality attests to the sadism and lawlessness that dictate the night in Erickson’s new America once Cale leaves the sanctuary of his daily drudgery. Unlike the quotidian time that Cale spends toiling in the tower looking after documents, the liminal spaces that exist outside the government’s Foucaultian panopticon of control signify a reversion to horror and transgression when viewed in the darkness of night. Erickson demonstrates the aggression and brutality that irrupts from the system of absolute control that persists in his text. Considering Erickson’s comments about the authoritarian practices of the Reagan administration, the eponymous Rubicon Beach of the novel signifies a cautionary tale about the promulgation of subcultural violence represents an undesirable but ineluctable side-effect of such a mode of governance.

Erickson takes up the nature of American identity and its relation to national borders as a central question in his texts, and, in *Rubicon Beach*, Cale narrates his own thoughts on the subject. Just as Cale learns the significance of borders when he steps beyond a boundary to discover the decapitated man, the novel’s title reference to the Rubicon suggests the importance of transgressing a physical boundary. Cale muses:

I never understood the borders; they seemed to change all the time. They were borders of land and borders of years, but wherever and whenever they were, clearly, in that time and place I was born, it was America. Where it still is I can’t be sure. I’m not sure I want to know. [. . .] I knew there was no such thing as American rivers or foreign rivers; there were only watterivers with waterborders of waterland and
Cale’s repudiation of America’s boundaries illustrates his belief that America cannot be reduced to its materiality, rather, the space of America is ultimately arbitrary. Cale privileges a conceptual America, without the finitude or fixity of place. His reliance upon the prefix “water” discursively instantiates the fluidity and hybridity that his own understanding of America signifies, while linking Cale’s America with the actual space of his narrative’s flooded city. For Cale, the shoreline decapitation takes place at this fluid boundary between land and sea, further exaggerating the significance of the novel’s title, but also the concept of transgression that grounds the narrative. Cale’s perception of America necessarily includes an actual tide of blood and violence to mark the physical end of his nation, and perhaps for Cale, the psychological end of his nation (“Where it still is I can’t be sure.”)ibid.

Erickson closes Cale’s abstract and phantasmagoric narrative, part one of the novel, with Cale’s address to the mysterious, blade-wielding woman:

[. . .] the entire city has become a radio. It transmits songs from the deadest part of the center of the earth, and they’re living dead songs, zombie songs. [. . .] I hear the call of your knife over the songs of a zombie city. I cast myself in flight for the decapitation of my own guilt, to live where I once died, to resurrect my passion, my integrity, my courage from out of my own grave. Those things that I once thought dead. By the plain form of my delirium I will blast the obstruction of every form around me into something barely called shadow. I sail. I swim to you. I know the water.(90)

Cale’s pronouncement returns repeatedly to macabre language and images: “the living dead,” “zombies,” “decapitation,” “shadow.” Despite these gruesome elements, Cale’s address resonates with optimism and certainty as he counters the images that had previously
signified ambiguity and abstraction. Erickson used “water” earlier to undermine the concept of space and time, coupling the word with “borders,” “land,” and “years.” The effect of wedding these words was to revalue the certainty of these fixed concepts, calling into question their significance when considering nationality and nationhood. Cale links the flood waters that have usurped his country with his self-interrogation concerning his feelings of national identity. Whereas his earlier use of water showed its eroding effects upon discrete notions of nation, Cale’s statement at the end of part one ends with his self-proclaimed mastery of the water, whether by boat or swimming. By asserting “I know the water,” Cale expresses his self-awareness with regards to national identity, placing his knowledge beyond the material bounds of “borders,” “land,” and “years.” America for Cale is immanent, unbound, and necessarily uninscribed by limits or boundaries. Erickson employs the Gothic language to impart his narrator’s invocation of national identity. Rather than a public or external notion of America, Erickson’s narrator posits a personal or internalized notion of American identity, made possible by the violence and decay that he perceives around him.

3.4. Tours of the Black Clock (1989)

Erickson’s third novel, *Tours of the Black Clock*, begins with an extended epigraph from William Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1959), detailing the passionate love that Adolph Hitler maintained for his niece, Geli Raubal, who committed suicide in the summer of 1931. Erickson’s elliptical excerpts of Shirer’s account tacitly suggest, first, that Raubal’s death might not have been a suicide, rather, linked to her refusal to stay with Hitler, and, second, that Hitler’s state of mind was forever distorted by her suicide, perhaps even
precipitating his meteoric rise to world infamy. By commencing his text in this way, Erickson introduces the subject of his novel: the precarious and arbitrary nature of events that could alter the course of history in fundamental ways. Moreover, by invoking Shirer’s text, Erickson situates his novel in equivalent footng with Shirer’s historiographical project. In both Shirer’s and Erickson’s case, they endeavor to make narrative sense of the truly insane actions of the Third Reich and its notorious leader. Also, both authors posit sexual desire as a motivating force behind the destruction wrought by the Nazis.

The ultimate modern-day monsters, made more terrifying by their historical actuality, Adolph Hitler and the Nazis almost uniformly inspire visions of terror and disgust. Erickson employs these dreaded figures as narrative material for his Gothic retelling of the world following World War II. Don DeLillo, another contemporary author interested in the politics of fear, chose Adolph Hitler as an emblem for the central character in his novel, White Noise. Erickson conflates the actual events and people of World War II with both fictional characters and supernatural figures as a means for reassessing the impact of Hitler’s regime. Erickson ultimately posits Hitler and the Nazis as precursors to the conglomerate corporations and conservative ideological forces that would hold power in the United States decades later, during the era that Tours of the Black Clock was written.

Always an adamant critic of the Reagan administration, and in turn, George W.H. Bush’s, Erickson makes veiled reference to the American power structures that he indicted within his text. In Leap Year, Erickson refers to George W.H. Bush pejoratively as someone “who wakes every morning to a new day of finding a new way of proving his political masculinity” and “a glorified office boy for twenty-five years who never did an important thing in his whole political life except learn how to say Yes sir in eighteen different languages, someone who was born to do someone else’s bidding and then to have his own
office boy [Dan Quayle], handpicked by his pollster and media man that a generation of office boys might follow them” (146-147). Erickson’s vitriol for Bush emerges from a broader stream of invective concerning the grossness of American consumption and America’s abuse of its dominant position in world affairs. Erickson describes America’s troubled relationship to the earth’s resources and other world populations: “the earth isn’t going to care much about how none of the world’s major banks belong to the United States anymore, or how the United States owes a debt the world won’t tolerate anymore, or how the United States is suddenly a nation with Third World resources even as its residents have come to define Americanism in terms of First World Consumption. Then, they’re going to come for us, the earth and its people, the long death march to America [. . .]” (146). Erickson’s bleak forecast, complete with the zombie-esque “long death march” of antagonists to American consumption, grows from his strident critique of Republican administrations who have, as Erickson notes, historically promoted economic and social conditions that favor the wealthy and the white and disenfranchise those in less advantaged positions (those in positions of poverty and marginalized populations). Within Black Clock, Erickson links the oppressive regime of Hitler with the culture of consumption and exploitation that he sees at work in Republican ideology and administration.

Much of Black Clock recounts the story of Adolph Hitler’s personal pornographer, a fictional character called Banning Jainlight who also acts as the narrator of his tale. Self-described as an enormous individual, whose entire person, including his genitals, is strikingly prodigious, Jainlight takes those around him off-guard due to the ostensibly incongruence between his physical appearance and his cognitive abilities. Jainlight delivers his life story in full, including the troubled childhood he endured as the bastard illegitimate son of mixed race. Jainlight shares his tale in a perpetual present tense, detailing his turbulent and sordid
life as each incident occurred in time. This method of telling intensifies the content of Jainlight’s narrative, lending each moment a greater degree of urgency due to its immediacy. Jainlight’s early years, spent awkwardly navigating his stoic parents and menacing brothers, come to an chaotic conclusion when in a fit of rage he kills his one of his brothers and cripples his remaining family members after learning that he was adopted and that his brothers had coerced him into the attempted rape of his actual mother. After this decisive event, Jainlight takes to the road and begins producing pornographic pulp fiction that ultimately garners the attention of various members of the Nazi party, and finally, Hitler himself. After escaping potential prosecution for his violent crimes, Jainlight travels to Vienna in 1936 amidst the Nazi’s takeover of Europe, to begin his work as Hitler’s (called “Client Z”) commissioned pornographer. Hitler begins to demand that Jainlight’s female characters possess certain physical traits, specifically, those that would suggest the appearance of Geli Raubal. Jainlight’s own fantasy woman, the fodder from which he crafts his erotic tales, appears real to him, coming to him in the night like an apparition.

Erickson suggests parallels between Jainlight’s experience and those of Frankenstein’s monster, who, like Jainlight, learns to use language as a means for navigating the world, and whose narrative is recounted in picaresque fashion. Furthermore, both Jainlight and the monster exhibit a propensity for extreme violence towards their parental respective surrogates, and travel broadly in the process of reinventing themselves. Jainlight describes his relish at committing brutality against his father: “I have to be satisfied with the sound of his body hitting part of the roof below my window, the sound of its bound as he tumbles onto the ground. It’s hard to make out in the dark if he’s alive. I have to settle for the odds that his back is broken, maybe in many places”(63). The detached voice that Jainlight employs to deliver his narrative expresses his emotional distance from the scene’s
intense drama. The self-possession and lucidity that Jainlight exhibits makes his violence appear inhuman, monstrous. Erickson articulates Jainlight’s pronounced brutality and monstrosity in a threat that Jainlight poses to a homeless man who attempts to mug him at knifepoint:

“The problem is,” I explain to him in the dark, “you cut off one of my fingers, you got to take the other nine. I mean, you just have to. And if you take the other nine, it’s just imperative that you take the hands. And you take the hands —” and he’s blinking at me now in utter black consternation, “— it’s simply a serious mistake not to take the stumps. And when does it end then?” I’ve got his face so hard in my grip he can’t answer, assuming he could think of one. “You just don’t know the havoc, buddy. My hands are just filled with it these days.”(67)

Jainlight describes his violent and vicious attacks as “the havoc,” making it sound like something separate from his essential character, and yet, within him. Considered more broadly, the havoc neatly symbolizes terror that irrupts from beneath, a brutal analogue for the Gothic uncanny whose potentiality inspires the horror that generates urgency within the text. The havoc, for Jainlight an individual mode of destruction, also represents the devastating violence that communities/societies/nations perpetrate, ostensibly in the name of preservation, as would be the case for the Nazis. Erickson juxtaposes Jainlight’s extreme brutality alongside that of the Nazis to show the far-reaching impact of the havoc, and in doing so, illustrates the havoc’s Gothic nature as a distinctly political mode of producing fear.

Later, when Jainlight’s own wife and child are murdered by the Nazis, he fails to display an emotional response, only an immediate need to unleash the havoc:

Then they’re gone [his wife and daughter]. Then the next moment there’s nothing in the window but the still Vienna night. You should have taken the stumps. He buckles somewhere between my hands. . . . Someone’s hitting me with something, the soldiers with their guns I guess; I’m sure it’s rather amusing, X [Joseph Goebbels] croaking out from between my fingers, Don’t shoot him, don’t shoot; and
then, when the life starts to dribble out of his eyes, he says, Well, yes, shoot him. (179)

The narration’s lack of disquiet belies the extreme disquiet of the scene, further making Erickson’s central character appear more monstrous than human. While, ultimately Mary Shelley’s monster receives a sympathetic depiction, Erickson withholds any such characterization for Jainlight, alienating his character from all of the societies in which he interacts. Erickson chooses a socially estranged narrator whose identity is defined by racial hybridity and physical abjection as a means for establishing a critical distance from the United States, a critical distance that is paralleled by Jainlight’s exile to Europe. It is from Jainlight’s unique perspective that Erickson expresses his most direct critiques of corporate America and the high-minded notion of American Exceptionalism.

In *Black Clock*, the Nazi’s prevail in World War II, and the notion of multiple realities emerges, like Borges’ garden of forking paths. Erickson’s novel imagines time as essentially non-linear and disjointed, causing Jainlight to muse on the valences of time that depend upon choosing one ideology over another. Specifically, Jainlight considers Albert Einstein’s position on peace, rather than nuclear proliferation and the effect of Einstein’s scientific theories:

That neither the rule of evil nor its collapse could be anything but an aberration in such a century, because this is the century in which another German, small with wild white hair, has written away with his new wild poetry every Absolute; in which the black clock of the century is stripped of hands and numbers. A time in which there’s no measure of time that God understands: in such a time memories mean nothing but the fever that invents them: before such memories and beyond such clocks, good views evil the same ways as the man on a passing train who stands still to himself but soars to the eyes of the passing countryside. (168)

Jainlight suggests that various “Twentieth Centuries” are available, where the path of evil embodied in the Nazi program of usurpation and destruction can be willed away, and
supplanted by another temporal path dominated by what he perceives as the good in the world, a path without the traumas that reduce humanity to monstrousness. Linda Hutcheon describes postmodern fiction’s tendency to construct a more inclusive model of history, one that lays open the terms and allows for a multiplicity of meanings, akin to the conception proffered by Erickson. Hutcheon writes: “Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (Poetics 110). Erickson concludes Jainlight’s thoughts on the potential trajectories of the century in elegiac fashion: “I want to show him [his translator] the other century, when none of this happens, and when all he has to think about is his place in the kingdom or the death of his country. I don’t think he can see it, though” (169). Jainlight’s surmises that those around him can not imagine another telos regarding the Nazi’s program, tacitly critiquing the notion that any institution of power is immanent or beyond the scope of human choice. Erickson uses Jainlight’s postmodern notion of multiple, parallel temporalities to promote the concept of individual culpability within broader social movements, such as those individuals who allowed or participated in the Nazi genocide.

Erickson translates the horror of the Nazi program, its popular acceptance among the German people and its violent suppression of dissent, to the practices of American corporate culture and the overwhelming support of conservative dogma by the United States populace during the 1980s. Jainlight’s relationship with Hitler lasts into the novel’s contemporary moment, for in this parallel fictional space Hitler lives to see old age. Jainlight transports the decrepit leader to America, where the old man promptly dies. Jainlight explains the aftermath of Hitler’s passing, as he travels the American landscape seeking Hitler’s deadly influence:
When I found him, I pulled the root up. Fingers of him, the hairs of his mustache curling up out of the soil, the veins of him scaling walls like vines, I cut them all down. I struck down his evil no matter what name it took for itself, no matter that it called itself history or revolution, America or the son of God, no matter that it called itself righteous, a righteousness that presumed the license to bind the free word and thought, that presumed the wisdom to timetable the birth of a soul, that presumed the morality that offers its children up to the plague rather than teach them the language of love. A thousand righteous champions calcified into something venal and mean by their presumptions of something sacred and pure and undirtied by the blood and spit and semen of being human: I recognized all of them by the bit of him they carried, sometimes in one eye, sometimes under their nails.

Jainlight’s address connects the grisly history of the Third Reich and its leader with the political positions espoused by the United States’ religious conservatives. Erickson links the Nazi programs of oppression and destruction with the hot-button, contemporary political issues of censorship, the separation of Church and State, abortion, and AIDS. Erickson’s sweeping pronouncement of these contemporary conservative social agendas as existing along a continuum of ideology that stretches back to Adolph Hitler unambiguously announces the text’s own fundamental anti-conservative ethos. Jainlight, while a troubled narrator whose past is filled with its own share of violence, remains a positive force within the text for his opposition to Hitler, whose own actual evil remains intact, despite the ostensibly mitigating inclusion of his personal history of forlorn love with his cousin in the text’s epigraph.

Erickson wrote *Tours of the Black Clock* in the year preceding an American presidential election, his first work after his non-fiction election diary, *Leap Year*, where he continually excoriates the Republican party throughout the text. In *Leap Year*, Erickson discusses the concept of history as being plagued by an overwhelming sense of perpetual disconnection in contemporary America: “These moments break loose of the gravity of history, which means that history, even as my generation understood it in our
youth, is reduced to surrealism, defiant of rational chronology [. . .]. Memories may be called up to our consciousness now like bits of information called up on a computer; when memories are this easily shuffled in time, they’re subject to change and control. In the process they’re politicized as never before”(169). Erickson’s *Black Clock* embodies this reduction of “surrealism, defiant of rational chronology” as he switches temporal and spatial locations out of sequence throughout the text, undoing actual history and substituting his own unreal historiography. Erickson concludes the novel with one of his protagonists setting adrift on a melting ice flow: “Through the warm fog of his last breath, he watched the memories of a hundred ghosts drift skyward to finally and vainly burst”(320). The imagery Erickson employs again calls to mind the icy wasteland of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, while his transformation of memories into ghosts again illustrates his reliance upon the macabre. Despite the dislocation and dissolution of memories that Erickson addresses in both *Leap Year* and in this closing sentence of *Tours of the Black Clock*, the connectedness of history prevails, as Erickson uses his alternate history to allegorize the similarities that he perceives between the Nazis and United States’ conservatism in the 1980s.

### 3.5. Arc D’X (1993)

For his 1993 novel *Arc d’X*, Erickson chooses the historical figure of Sally Hemmings as a central character in his narrative and develops a fictional account of her story, effectively recovering Hemmings from the historical effacement she has suffered in the historical ascendancy of Thomas Jefferson. *Arc d’X* features a number of narrative threads, alternating temporal and spatial settings in a way that disrupts linearity. The novel
begins symbolically with the birth of Jefferson, the ostensible author of American democracy, and moves quickly to a dystopic, Orwellian, future America, where freedom and civil liberties are strictly defined by the state. Erickson introduces Hemmings early in the novel, as she attends Jefferson’s dying wife at the age of nine:

Sally wouldn’t realize it until years later, but her mother had originally belonged to the mistress’ father, who – as was not uncommon in Virginia – had a taste for fucking his female slaves. Such an encounter begat Sally. The mistress’ father, then, was in fact Sally’s father; Thomas’ dying wife was in fact also Sally’s dying half-sister. This was as much a bond between Sally and Thomas as yet another bond made between them five years later, one not so easy to break as a promise. (12)

Erickson depicts the setting and time as libidinal and dangerous for slave women, an incestuous place of murky lineage and unacknowledged relations. Erickson’s blunt language, “a taste for fucking his female slaves,” derisively illustrates the callous nature of slaveowners, and consequently, associates Jefferson with the venal brutality that characterized the slave economy. While Jefferson is not yet implicated in this critique, his inclusion becomes evident as Erickson describes his initial molestation of Hemmings.

Steve Erickson begins Leap Year, a non-fiction chronicle of his personal experiences leading up to and during the 1988 presidential campaign, with an invocation of Sally Hemmings, the slave owned by Thomas Jefferson whom Jefferson kept as his sexual partner from the time that she was just fourteen years old. The nature of their relationship remains ambiguous and controversial due to the attending historical record, but that Jefferson had slaves and that Hemmings bore several children in Jefferson’s line are part of factual record. Erickson begins Leap Year: “Sally speaks to me. I can’t live with the things you feel she says it’s enough to live with the things I feel. It’s enough to live with the feeling of a country flowing through me” (9).

While Erickson’s gesture of speaking on behalf of a figure who has been historically silenced and effaced appears dubious, he does raise the controversial question of how her experience
could shape how the concept of America is perceived, if we acknowledge Jefferson’s actions to be antithetical to his image as a defender of freedom and forefather of the nation. Erickson returns to Hemmings throughout his text, “seeing” Sally in various cities he travels to while following the presidential candidates on campaign, using her ghostly presence to interrogate an overdetermined American self-concept defined by exceptionalism, morality, and democracy. Erickson clarifies his inclusion of Hemmings where he writes: “The invention of America sprang from men of furious sexual torment [. . .]. The invention of American by these men was meant to spring them loose from the bonds of afterlife; it redefined us not as instruments of God or heaven but rather as the incarnations of our memories of our own selves” (Leap Year 33). Erickson’s repeated mention of America inventedness strips America of its authenticity and posits a constructedness to its existence. Also, the continual framing of United States’ history in terms of ghostly entities and figures who shed the “bonds of afterlife” illustrates Erickson’s commitment to fashioning his historiographical project in Gothic terms, lending immediacy to his critique by accessing the fear associated with death.

America, the iconic concept divorced of its everyday, material reality, signifies a consumable, repeatable signifier without a defined referent, suggesting a postmodern critique of the nation’s self-concept. Linda Hutcheon describes postmodern fiction’s capacity to undermine the authenticity of historical knowledge: “Postmodernism deliberately confuses the notion that history’s problem is verification, while fiction’s is veracity [. . .]. Both forms of narratives are signifying systems in our culture” (112). Erickson’s postmodern depiction of America treats the concept of nation as Hutcheon describes postmodernism’s construction of history and fiction, he has reduced America to an empty play of discursive
signs. Erickson articulates discursivity of America, its inventedness, in an admission by Thomas Jefferson in *Arc d’X*:

> I’ve invented something. As the germ of conception in my head it was the best and wildest and most elusive of my inventions. It’s a contraption halfcrazed by a love of justice, a machine oiled by fiercest hostility to those who would ride the human race as though it were a dumb beast. I’ve set it loose gyrating across the world. It spins through villages, hamlets, towns, grand cities. It’s a thing to be confronted every moment of every day by everyone who hears even its rumor: it will test most those who presume too glibly to believe in it. But I know it’s a flawed thing, and I know the flaw is of me. Just as the white ink of my loins has fired the inspiration that made it, so the same ink is scrawled across the order of its extinction. The signature is my own. I’ve written its name. I’ve called it America.(46)

Jefferson’s declaration presents America as an idea borne of racial and sexual difference, as signified by the “white ink of [his] loins” that established the fiction of America. The sexual language here also graphically conveys the terrifying material reality of Hemmings’ rape at the hands of Jefferson in *Arc d’X*. Jefferson proclamation of America’s doom, as he signed its order of extinction, undermines the possibility of nationalism, exposing the inherent racial and gendered contradictions at the heart of its legacy of democratic rule. Jefferson casts himself as the metonymical representation of America where he states that its flaws are his, further establishing the libidinal violence subtending his legitimacy and power.

Erickson later places Hemmings in the role of metonymical representation of the nation, or at least one historical rendering of it. Hemmings signifies the erasures in America’s record, the ghosts in the national house. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson cites a crucial distinction between an individual’s tale and that of the nation:

> Yet between narratives of person and nation there is a central difference of employment. In the secular story of the ‘person’ there is a beginning and an end. She emerges from parental genes and social circumstances onto a brief historical stage, there to play a role until her death. After that, nothing, but the penumbra of lingering fame or influence. [. . .] Nations, however, have no clearly identifiable births, and
their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural. Because there is no Originator, the nation’s biography can not be written evangelically, ‘down time,’ through a long procreative chain of begettings. (205)

Erickson’s narrative alters Anderson’s pronouncement, because Sally Hemmings is allowed, in Erickson’s work return and expand her “penumbra of lingering fame.” Also, while nations maintain no one Originator, Thomas Jefferson stands among a select few men who have enshrined historically in the pantheon of Founding Fathers. Erickson’s suggestion that Hemmings feels the nation “flowing through” her conflates Jefferson’s role as father to the nation, as well as his more banal role as father to Hemmings’ children.

In Arc d’X, Erickson depicts the initial sexual encounter between Jefferson and Hemmings in unmitigated fashion, as a rape. Casting Jefferson as a rapist and stereotypical slaveowner illustrates the formidable critique of Jefferson as a historical champion of freedom that Erickson’s text poses. Erickson describes the scene between Jefferson and Hemmings: “He separated and entered her. Both of them could hear the rip of her, the wet broken plunder, a spray of blood across the tiny room. She screamed so her brother James would hear, so the whole hotel would hear. She didn’t care if he killed her for it, if he pull her hair out of head for it [. . .]”(25). Sally Hemmings’ terror dominates the scene, as Erickson depicts her experience in the pyrotechnic flourishes of a slasher film. Jefferson’s brutality and the resulting bloody scene approximate the deliberate violence of cinematic gore. Erickson amplifies the scene’s graphic nature where he includes Jefferson’s self-awareness during the act: “It thrilled him, the possession of her. He only wished she were so black as not to have a face at all. He only wished she was so black that his ejaculation might be the only white squiggle across the void of his heart. When he opened her, the smoke rushed out of her in a cloud that filled the room. It thrilled him, not to be a saint for once,
not to be a champion. Not to bear, for once, the responsibility of something noble or good. Didn’t he believe that one must pursue his happiness?”(25). Erickson’s characterization of Jefferson suggests that the rape of Hemmings was compensation for the onus Jefferson felt as a leader and promoter of freedom. Lee Spinks describes the binary opposition constructed between lightness and darkness associating Jefferson with the Enlightenment and Hemmings with the barbarity that persists outside the order of Enlightenment thought: “The collocation of the thematics of enlightenment and darkness, and of violence and the law, reappears constantly within descriptions of Jefferson’s violation of Sally Hemmings. The relationship begins with her rape, and the encounters between them persistently reproduce, at both a physical and metaphorical level, this violent opposition of forces”(232). Jefferson’s historical embodiment of Enlightenment thought is contradicted by his brutality and sadism, confounding the ordered hierarchy that perpetuated the racial inequality that allowed for the violation of Hemmings, and by extension, all slaves. This representation of Jefferson’s rape of Hemmings metonymically illustrates a dramatic intersection of the postmodern and the Gothic, exposing their mutual critique of the Enlightenment thought that subtended and authorized the horrors of slavery in America. Such a characterization also posits Jefferson’s conscious action as linked to an equally conscious awareness of his historical magnitude in the development of his young nation. Erickson’s perversion of Jefferson’s famous “pursuit of happiness” casts a toxic pale on the high-minded Enlightenment language of American ideological doctrine, acknowledging the self-serving motivations that accompanied the settlement and governing of the United States from its inception and early years.
Arc d’X represents an archetypal example of postmodern historiographic metafiction, as theorized by Linda Hutcheon. Hutcheon describes how postmodern fiction engages history through “historiographic metafiction” such as Erickson’s:

In challenging the seamless quality of the history/fiction (or world/art) join implied by realist narrative, postmodern fiction does not, however, disconnect itself from history of the world. It foregrounds and thus contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of seamlessness and asks its readers to question the processes by which we represent our selves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we make sense of and construct order out of experience in our particular culture. (Politics of Postmodernism 53-54)

Hutcheon asserts that postmodern fiction, in its reordering of reality and history, draws attention to the ideological underpinnings that cohere in particular cultures. By inserting his own historicization of the Thomas Jefferson/Sally Hemmings relationship, Erickson makes visible the gaps in the historical record and their attending power relations. Moreover, Erickson’s account critiques the traditional historical rendering of Jefferson as a heroic figure for its tacit authorization of rape, by effacing the horrific act in the name of a coherent narrative. As a postmodern work, in line with Hutcheon’s description, Erickson’s novel questions the privileging of one historical account over another, by emphasizing the discrepancy in power between the white, male landowner and his cowering, naked slavegirl in the moment that she finds herself prey to his sexual whim.

Erickson provides access to Jefferson’s perspective later, in a fictional speech that Jefferson delivers to the French citizenry during their march on the Bastille. Amidst the melee, Jefferson speaks as an adored symbol of freedom and democracy, but his words confuse the subjective positions of slave and master, troubling his own engagement with the practice: “I’m only as bright as the whitest light in any man can be, tempered as it is in every man by whatever black impulse he can’t ignore. At my best I have only been the slave of a
great idea”(35). By placing himself in the position of slave and using the racially loaded language of black and white, Jefferson shifts culpability for his violent acts against Sally and hypocrisy at opposing slavery while maintaining slaves, while appearing to cast himself as a modest and reluctant leader. The casting of a binary of darkness and light reinforces the Gothicism of the narrative, as Jefferson assigns his violence and horrifying behavior to the “blackness,” some sadistic netherspace that lurks in the unknowable depths of man. While Erickson provides Sally’s intimate thoughts, he limits Jefferson to oration, where he must necessarily be assessed as a leader or a mouthpiece. Within this equation, Hemmings represents a more metonymic figure while Jefferson never relinquishes his historical role as a metaphor for American exceptionalism. Hemmings signifies the struggle and victimhood experienced by people of color and women during the establishment of the United States’ as a young nation and into its future. Jefferson signifies the slippery language, sexual depravity, and dishonesty that Erickson locates in the early conception of American democracy.

Erickson links the two intercut narratives through the figure of Sally Hemmings. In Erickson’s account, Jefferson leaves Hemmings for his presidential career, and she sets out upon a quest to find him. Hemmings ultimately finds him in a dream she has on a mesa in the American West, and she murders him savagely in the dream. Erickson describes her experience of the dream as revelatory: “When she dreamed this, the word that had been caught in the ventricles of her heart loosened itself and floated up to her throat; she could feel it on the back of her tongue”(52). When Sally wakes, however, she finds herself in a strange room, covered in blood, and at tasting the blood on her fingers, utters to herself, “America”(ibid). Erickson connects a bloody murder with the expulsion of the word “America,” again symbolically showing the nation’s history to be dominated by a profound degree of violence. Sally speaks the word “America” from her experience in dreamstate,
lending a surreal quality to the scene. This macabre surreality manifests further as Sally immediately finds herself next to the bloody corpse of a man she does not recognize, decades later in a strange and dark iteration of America: “She woke and there was blood on her pillow. There was blood on the sheets of the bed beneath her. Someone was lying in the bed with her and his head was flowing with blood; and she was startled to have found him again, and wanted to ask what had happened to him and where he’d gone, except that she knew he couldn’t answer. Then in the next moment she forgot her dream entirely, only the flotsam of it washing in and out with the tide of her consciousness [. . .]”(52). No longer is she the historical Sally Hemmings, now, she is another Sally, Sally Hurley, nee Hemmings, and she’s being questioned by the police for her part in a murder. This radical shift in the narrative disrupts the gruesome scene between Hemmings and Jefferson, as linearity and ontological certainty are violently upturned, and offers a new future reality unhinged from the present, but mysteriously linked to the American historical past.

The dramatic shift in the narrative signals an equivalent transformation of the imagined space of the story. Erickson’s novel again signifies a postmodern mode of narrative, historiographic metafiction, as it “keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here – just unresolved contradiction”(Poetics of Postmodernism 106). No longer are we in the burgeoning, young America amid the tumult of its earlier development, rather, this new narrative space appears bleak and post-apocalyptic. Moreover, the bizarre narrative shift and introduction of a new landscape creates an atmosphere of dreamlike surreality within the text. This examination asserts that the postmodern American Gothic features these moments of surreality. Like David Lynch’s Lost Highway, where the central character transmigrates midway through the
narrative, Erickson’s novel requires a reestablishment of the narrative exposition, bridging the two disparate narrative threads with a persistence of the American social issue of race. Erickson’s disordering of temporal and narrative linearity demonstrates a dreamlogic typical of the surrealist art, where the new setting possesses a surplus of meaning in its representations of space.

After the initial narrative shift, Erickson orients the reader within the future space and introduces a new central figure, Wade, employing distinctly gloomy terms. Erickson describes the city and its ambience from the perspective of Wade, the black detective who has taken Hemmings’ case:

Even under the perpetually dark sky the white of the circle shone blindingly in his eyes as he drove into the middle and parked in the shadow of the blue obelisk. As with all the residential circles of the city, nine individual units dotted the circumference of Seventeen and faced the obelisk at the center. The units were identical in size and all built of gray brick. The obelisks were so tall that from Downtown the suburban skyline of the city was a range of blue spires against the black clouds and the ash of the volcano to the east.(57)

The city, with its reliance on the numeric patterns of nine (harkening to Dante’s vision of the Inferno), circular layout, and mountains of fire and ash, instantiates Hell on earth. This future world displays threat and omen in its dreary monochromatic palette and its austere order, demonstrating its authoritarian governance. Wade’s navigation of the city often, as it does above, relies upon his physical maneuvering towards darkness, away from the light. This narrative trope symbolically enacts the racial difference that Wade feels while also communicating the social disparities based on race that persist in this distant vision of the future. Even though the narrative has been radically altered by the change in ontological space, the analogous social issues mitigate the extremity of the shift and tacitly express the ineluctability of racial inequality as characteristic of America and its culture, in any century.
The futuristic city is partitioned into sectors whose names signify emotional states, suggesting a material mapping of human sentiment and nominally deconstructing the boundary that separates interiority from exteriority. Wade traverses the city, passing through places such as “Humiliation,” “Sorrow,” “Unrequited,” and “Desire.” These proper names do not essentially correspond to their function within the city, but there exist some limited connections to their signifiers. Erickson’s strategy here signals a postmodern narrative gesture that Linda Hutcheon describes in her theorization of historiographic metafiction: “The present, as well as the past, is always already irremediably textualized for us [. . .] and the over intertextuality of historiographic metafiction serves as one of the textual signals of this postmodern realization” (Poetics of Postmodernism 128). Erickson extends this textualization beyond the past and present by setting this portion of his novel in the future. By naming the city zones as he has, he draws attention to the discursive nature of his city, explicitly enacting the text’s self-reflexivity. For example, Erickson describes Desire: “Desire got away with more than the usual shit because it operated out at the edge of the lava fields just barely within – or without -- Primacy’s threshold of righteous indignation; the zone’s anarchy particularly manifested itself in a huge neighborhood called the Arboretum, a single unit of chambers, lofts, urban caves and underground grottoes linked by hundreds of corridors and passages that shot off in every direction” (59). Desire (both the place and the human response) represents a liminal space/concept, both physically and figuratively, as it persists near the bounds of perception and authoritative control. The labyrinthine community of caves and corridors housed beneath Desire enable subversive activity to operate outside the jurisdiction of the Big Brother-esque government that employs Wade. Wade’s perpetual return to Desire demonstrates his own conflicted status, as a racially marginalized figure working on the behalf of a state power structure that continues to
maintain racial inequity. Both literally and psychically, Wade gravitates towards Desire, aligning his character with whim and human impulse, rather than the cold and sterile bureaucracy that maintains sovereignty. Erickson’s depiction of this future space relies upon a chambered underground that permits all manner of libidinal activity, from exotic dancing to installations of subversive graffiti, allowing for a direct comparison with the ancient castles, abbeys, and convents of Gothic fiction. Like these spaces of old, Erickson’s city becomes a space for exploring the physical and symbolic depths of human depravity and terror.

Erickson uses the city’s graffiti to signify a discursive mode of resistance to the controlling, theocratic government, and as a narrative connection to America’s revolutionary roots. Wade returns to an area of the city, at the intersection of Desolate and Unrequited, to read subversive graffiti, as opposed to the state-authorized graffiti that adorns much of the city in the form of propaganda and sloganeering. The cryptic phrases that Wade chronicles express some facet of American history or nation, either directly or indirectly. Wade notes such phrases as, “BLUES FALLING DOWN LIKE HAIL,” taken from a 1937 Robert Johnson blues song entitled “Hellhound On My Trail,” “ICH BIN EIN BERLINER,” (literally, “I am a Berliner”) the famous quote from John F. Kennedy’s 1963 Cold War speech to throngs of people in West Berlin as he outlined the United States’ support of West Berlin in opposition to the encroachment of Communist forces, and, most significantly, “THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS,” Thomas Jefferson’s famous phrase from the Declaration of Independence (“life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”) detailing man’s inalienable rights, adapted from the Declaration of Colonial Rights’ initial phrasing, “life, liberty, and property.” Each of these axioms represent declarations whose personal impact was made communal, and ultimately, national in scope; blues music, a mode of expression
that is colloquially and distinctly American in its origins, Kennedy’s declaration of the United States’ support of global democracy, and Jefferson’s enunciation of a specifically American articulation of democracy. Erickson employs these discursive expressions in a mode analogous to their original use, as an individual’s defiance in the face of oppressive authorities. The reiteration of these historically significant slogans demonstrates Erickson’s political project, as he expresses America’s chronicle of opposition in various public modes of transmission, from art to political discourse. While sustaining a symbolic link to Erickson’s construction of a fictional Jefferson, this collection of phrases also elicits an ironic understanding, as Johnson’s blues were expressions of African-Americans’ experience of slavery and oppression, while both Jefferson and Kennedy signified voices from America’s nobility, and Jefferson a slave-owner. The association of these adages collectively and simultaneously articulates America’s historical repudiation of oppression, but includes within its terms a frictional tension between those whose rights and interests were being represented under the auspices of nation.

Erickson depicts the setting that surrounds this unique graffiti in primordial and ominous terms, evincing the gloom and darkness of the Gothic. While most futuristic spaces imply technological advances and a visual streamlining of a city’s design, Erickson’s future space appears chaotic and regressive. He describes the city and its threat to the government:

The volcano towered high enough in the east that the sun didn’t rise until a couple of hours before noon [. . .]. Mostly Church Central feared the volcano because it represented the most alarming of possibilities: that there was indeed a God, who manifested himself daily in the mix of volcano smoke and ocean fog that the residents called the Vog. What’s more, God’s molten wrath might be reserved not for the hedonists of the Arboretum but the priests’ cynical impertinence, though this consideration demanded a moral imagination no on in Primacy possessed enough to fully formulate or understand.(65)
The gothic dread generated within the city’s deviant zone does not signify a shared or collective social anxiety, but rather Erickson, like Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto*, isolates the threat to those who hold power. Like John Carpenter’s 1980 horror film *The Fog*, the Vog of the city possesses an otherworldly menace that the theocratic authorities fear for its ostensible possession. Erickson attacks the theocratic government, a thinly veiled analogue for America’s Christian right, by positing their foundations of belief as contradictory, suggesting that they fear the possibility of the existence of God. Church Central produces of a false God, an illusion for the masses to worship, but indirectly senses that their exploitation invokes their doom. Fear and dread suffuse the setting in the material form of the volcano and its climatic effects, signs of an irate and true deity. Erickson’s powerful church rules from a crippled position between the dread of subversion and the superstitious fear of God.

The fears of the church materialize in the form of Etcher, another central figure in the book, who manages a government archive, where he locates and steals the secret history of the United States that is housed within the depths of the library’s vault. Erickson describes Etcher following his arrival at the archives in macabre terms, emphasizing the character’s association with death: “Over the next ten years, as a dead man traveling surreptitiously in the body of a living one, he committed so many more such infractions that he lost count”(111). Etcher, a cog in the machinery of the church/government, lives a life of drudgery and dirge, feeling very much his role as a clerk within a large, faceless bureaucracy. As what began as a insignificant act of personal rebellion, Etcher pilfers a key from one of the church officials, in order to examine the vault, out of curiosity. Upon entering the small vault, Etcher discovers the “Unexpurgated Volumes of Unconscious History” and understands immediately that “the breach of entering this room with these books was more than simply treason, it was heresy”(117). Such is the case when violating a
government whose authority originates in divinity. Erickson describes Etcher’s discovery: “The volumes told of people no one had every known and countries no one had ever seen. He read of lives no one had ever lived and pored over maps of places no one had ever been”(117). Like the fantastic texts that populate the short fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, Erickson’s “Unexpurgated Volumes” represent an alternative narrative of cultural heritage, where not only time and events are reimagined, but space itself in the form of a map. Etcher’s discovery, however, is not fantastic, rather, he has found the true history of the United States, the land where he now resides, but whose effacement was deliberately enacted in the establishment of the current theocratic regime.

Erickson’s novel, a historiographic metanarrative, chronicling the illicit activities of Thomas Jefferson, finds its self-reflexive representation within the text as Etcher closely examines the history volumes, finding the name of Sally Hemmings. Etcher’s reading and eventual theft of the secret history leads him to meet and begin a relationship with a mysterious woman named Sally Hemmings, now free from police custody for lack of evidence in her murder case, though she retains the memory of killing a man. Sally’s memory of murder signifies, for her, a liberatory act, and so when Etcher tells her she has killed no one, she is distraught, feeling as though she is still a slave – to the police, the priests, and her husband in the novel, Gann Hurley. Emotional and vulnerable, both Etcher and Sally consummate their new, secret affair in a prayer room that Erickson describes in macabre terms:

In the black altar room the air was thick with wine. He clutched her dress; its tones of earth and ash and blood, not unlike the color of her skin, ran between his fingers. The feeling of its cotton, not unlike the touch of her body, ran through his hands. He head pounded with wine and blood. For a moment he thought of the glasses, he worried they would be smashed underneath, and then the idea of it – his smashed glasses – went straight to his head like wine and blood. When he kissed her he emptied wine and blood and the freedom of smashed glasses into her mouth.(132)
Erickson’s depiction of the scene represents a ritual consecrated in blood and wine and broken glass. The reiteration of “wine and blood,” the materials typically associated with Christ’s transubstantiation, take on a more ambiguous meaning here, as they enact their sexual congress upon a “black altar”. Erickson conflates the meanings of the term “black” here, invoking not only the Gothic history of gloom and death, but also the racial discourse on blackness that remains actively engaged throughout the various narrative threads that Erickson incorporates within the novel.

Erickson explores this critical intersection of blackness, as a Gothic trope and racial identifier. By suggesting that Sally retains the cultural memory of her race, Erickson presents a fugitive moment of redemption and liberation, following Etcher and Sally’s communion:

No light penetrated the black of the altar room, instead the black rushed from her. It poured from the middle of her, more blackness than she’d ever believed was hers, the truth of her rushing out ever as the blackness of the altar room became wan with the tears that rolled down her face. It was only at that moment she realized her wrists were tangled in the string of the light above; and now at the moment she slipped from its bondage, in the jerk of her wrists, the room’s light flashed on and off long enough to leave a small rip in her memory through which she couldn’t bear to look, ever as her lover saw everything.(133)

Sally, like the historical Sally Hemmings, is a woman of black and white heritage, so the graphic representation of her bound by strings of light and expelling her blackness on an altar creates an environment charged with signification. Sally’s release of her blackness and simultaneous release from her bonds in the moments following her sexual coupling with Etcher posits this moment as liberatory, an awakening. Erickson includes the problematic notion that Sally’s liberation relies upon her sexual activity with a white man. Moreover, the scene ends with Sally’s reduction of agency, her inability to look, while her lover possesses full ability to assess the scene, showing the mitigated liberation that this scenario offers, as Sally remains limited by her race and her gender within the confines of the narrative.
Erickson returns Sally’s narrative to her secret alternate past with Thomas Jefferson, as this other future Sally experiences nightmares, haunted by “the ghost called Thomas” (161). The return of Thomas creates a sense of the uncanny, as Sally’s repressed memories cause him to irrupt in her dreams. This repression and irruption pattern parallels Etcher’s experience at the archives, where a secret history emerges, despite its physical suppression by the church authorities. Erickson provides no clear reason why the church authorities would want to precariously maintain the sanctity of such a dangerous document, suggesting the inevitability of its discovery and theft. The return of Thomas also signals a bridge between the two disparate ontological spaces that Erickson depicts within the novel, America’s troubled racial past and the nation formerly-called-America’s troubled racial future. This linkage between the two times and places demonstrates the pervasive and ineluctable nature of racial conflict as a facet of national identity, while also suggesting the generational passage of historical material as an interior, biological rather than intellectual process. According to Erickson, we pass our traumas to future generations not as information but as psychic infection. Erickson likens America’s history of racial conflict to a disease that operates outside of conventional temporality.

In a dramatic gesture of postmodern self-reflexivity, Erickson writes a character named Steve Erickson into the text, an author operating metatextually, at times, describing in first person narrative voice the composition of the current novel, and also appearing as the subject of an omniscient narration. While ostensibly the analogue for the actual Steve Erickson, this character makes a pilgrimage to Berlin, running from the despair and misfortunes that have plagued his recent life, and believing that:

Berlin was the psychitecture of the Twentieth Century, and if he or anyone should emerge on the other side of Day X in the new millennium as anything more than a grease skid on the driveway of oblivion, they were bound to all come out on the
Unter den Linden, the only boulevard haunted enough to hold all of it; dictators and democrats, authoritarians and anarchists, accountants and artists, businessmen and bohemians, decadents and the devout each contradicting their lives with their hearts, SS troops with blood running from their fingers wearing the wreaths an American president laid around their necks [...]. (227)

Erickson’s description of Berlin, a geographical space haunted by the city’s diverse population over the years, emphasizes the ghostly presence of the past as a defining quality of the European city. Erickson’s Berlin represents a site associated with apocalypse, dread and oblivion bricked into streets rife with apparitions and memories of genocide and totalitarian rule. Seeking to escape a life of dislocation and pain, the fictional Erickson ventures to Berlin attempting to make a stand against the tide of chaos that seems to be slowly enveloping him and his world. The actual Erickson will renew this interest in apocalypse, a theme he established in his earlier fiction, in his next three novels *Amnesiascope* (1997), *The Sea Came In At Midnight* (2000) and *Our Ecstatic Days* (2005).

The introduction of a fictional Steve Erickson, seeking to find some material explanation for the historical events that have shaped his contemporary moment, expresses the implicit project of the actual Steve Erickson in writing *Arc d’X*, to understand how the past is palpably imbricated in our contemporary moment. Fictional Steve Erickson finds himself in Berlin following the fall of the Wall that separated East Berlin from West Berlin, and continues to hear a local legend/ghost story about the end of the Wall about a professor who attempts to elude the East Berlin police by walling himself into an unfinished tunnel with provisions, and the promise of finishing the tunnel to emerge in democratic West Germany. Erickson writes: “To this day, the story went, he was still down in the tunnel [...]. For ten years the Tunneler honey-combed the no-man’s-land of the ghost Wall; amid the new, unfinished Potsdam Plaza one could hear his echoes from underground in the plaza’s
empty corridors” (217). The macabre story of the Tunneler, Poe-esque and ghoulish, expresses the spatial significance of Germany’s history of oppressive, totalitarian rule. Like the United States’ history of contingent democracy available originally to those of white, male privilege and slowly offered to the rest of the populace, Erickson relates Germany’s democratic history through the voice of a ghost, tangled in the subterranean passages of the city, and echoing the cries for freedom that went unheard during the city’s separation. The two nations’ histories intersect here, as the Tunneler, like so many American slaves, sought freedom in the use of an underground similar to the famous Underground Railroad, the network of Abolitionists and former slaves that aided escaped slaves in their passage to a free life by hiding them, often in secret rooms and basements. Again, Erickson relies upon a ghost story to convey the connective thread that links the two nations’ histories and the narratives that include his fictional analogue in Germany and the fictional Sally Hemmings’ inclusion in his text. In both cases, the text returns to democracy and its casualties as the fodder for its Gothic imagery.

3.6. The Sea Came In At Midnight (2000) and Our Ecstatic Days (2005)

In his next two novels, Erickson relates the story of a young woman, Kristin who escapes her fate as the 2000th casualty of a mass suicide, only to enter into a life of psychic prostitution and sexual slavery. The Sea Came In At Midnight begins by introducing us to Kristin, her tumultuous back story, and her encounter with a man who claims to be the world’s leading apocalyptologist. This man, called “the Occupant,” finds Kristin through the wanted ads, where he has placed a cryptic passage asking, more or less, for a sexual consort without identity or judgment. The Occupant appears as a tortured and singular entity,
whose carnal needs require that Kristin subject herself to his sexual advances and bizarre lifestyle. His identification as an apocalyptologist derives from his construction of a map of the Twentieth century, where he attempts to locate the start of the new millennium. The Occupant describes the basis for his theory of the map:

“You see, sometime in the last half century,” he said, “modern apocalypse outgrew God.” Modern apocalypse was no longer about cataclysmic upheaval as related to divine revelation; modern apocalypse, the Occupant told Kristin, speaking with more passion than she had ever heard him express before, was “an explosion of time in a void of meaning,” when apocalypse lost nothing less than its very faith – and in fact the true Age of Apocalypse had begun well before 31 December 1999, at exactly 3:02 in the morning on the seventh of May, in the year 1968.(49)

The points that the Occupant charts on his map are dates that signify historical events of less than monumental popular importance, such as the assassination of the mother of Martin Luther King Jr., rather than the assassination of King. These more obscure historical events signify less rationality and, thus, become part of the Occupants spatialized chronicle of growing chaos. Erickson’s Occupant represents an embodiment of dread and the paranoid compulsion to find pattern in chaos as he attempts his write his desperate history. Erickson demonstrates a terrifying lesson innate to historiography: ultimately, no pattern is sufficient to connect and lend meaning to generations of catastrophic events; there is only randomness.

Erickson describes the futility of narrating history as anything aside from a collection of violence and despair. He writes:

Every morning people emerged stunned from their homes, cut loose from psychic moorings, panicked by the onslaught of their lives’ many meanings. In the light of dawn, their blackened satellite dishes left them feeling as if sometime during the hours of the previous night they had been marked by the angel of the Twentieth Century flying by overhead, though whether such a mark meant the angel would spare them or descend on them wasn’t clear: had the blackened dishes been exorcised? Or were they now rips in the fabric of a millennium that had nothing to
do with the banal arithmetic of arbitrary calendars – gashes behind which marshaled, and through which rushed, a terrible invasion of the soul?(153)

Erickson’s image of black satellite dishes graphically expresses a sense of foreboding and danger. The satellites symbolize the threat of death; their proliferation signifies the growth of technology and its ultimate failure to offer meaning in or escape from destruction. The connectivity that ostensibly constitutes historical patterns and expressions of community, comes to represent isolation and uncertainty.

In *The Sea Came In At Midnight*, Erickson introduces another macabre technology to signify the disconnection and alienation of humanity: the memory grave. In Erickson’s Los Angeles, where memories have been commodified and now, like narcotics, signify highly coveted items for black market sale, we are introduced to Yoshi, a grave-robber who trades in the memories he acquires from the memory-graves. Erickson describes Yoshi’s activities, in terms akin to the exchange of drugs: “It did seem to Yoshi that the flow of Western memory had been tainted lately, the pure grade-A stuff being cut with something unidentifiable but particularly toxic; recently reports came back from Tokyo of violent reactions and even overdoses in extreme cases, all of which, unless it was completely Yoshi’s imagination, seemed to coincide with the rising incidents of vandalized satellite dishes in the Hollywood Hills”(158). Harkening to the grave-robbing activities of its Gothic precursor, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Erickson’s modern grave-robber doesn’t seek to revitalize the dead or control the power of animation. Rather, Yoshi’s grave raids signify the consumption of the dead, their only evidence of life, as part of an economic system constructed to expropriate and exploit. While Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein robs graves so that he might give life, Yoshi, and those for whom he toils, violate graves in order to take possessions, altering the terms of the Gothic relationship between the living and the dead. Erickson’s contemporary
manipulation of this relationship illustrates the impact of late-capitalism on cultural production.

When considered in conjunction, Erickson’s introduction of the memory-graves and the Occupant’s apocalyptic map both attempt to spatialize death. Both apparatuses physically plot past events whose significance lies in their ability to conjure the dead through the act of narrative. Erickson’s creation of the map and the memory cemetery privilege the act of historiography as a mode of producing meaning, but also indicate the precarious nature of that meaning, since in both cases the artifacts rely upon acts of human will. Erickson deconstructs the reliability of past events, their ability to render truth or fact, by making them subject to commodification and manipulation for theoretical purposes (in the case of the Occupant). Just as Erickson renarrates the life of Sally Hemmings as the crack in the foundation of American democracy, so do the Occupant and Yoshi revalue the past by way of their respective contemporary perspectives, eliciting the innate textuality of human engagement with the past.

Building on themes established in *The Sea Came In At Midnight*, Erickson’s *Our Ecstatic Days* (2005), his first novel following 9.11.2001, focuses attention on the dread anticipation of apocalypse. Erickson examines horror as an individual experience, where immanent doom suffuses the narrative. Like the contemporary American public constantly made conscious of the terror threat level coded chromatically, Erickson’s characters experience the anxiety of annihilation and madness against the dramatic visual backdrop of a city besieged by natural disaster. Erickson engages post-9.11 America via Los Angeles, a narrative space whose uncertainty and precariousness signify the dread and disquiet that usurped public consciousness in the days and years following the terrorist attacks. Erickson
succinctly allegorizes the development of this communal fear in the image of a lake that threatens to drown Los Angeles from within. Erickson’s allegorical drowning city, like Don DeLillo’s more realistic 9.11 New York City in *Falling Man* (2007), signifies the merging of public and personal impressions of psychic and physical upheaval.

*Our Ecstatic Days* marks Erickson’s first experimentation with manipulating the look of the page itself. Erickson typeset the entire novel himself. Using his own word processor, he employs prose poetry, altered margins that expand the text across the page, and an italicized sentence that cuts the page in two, commencing on page 83 and finally ending on page 315. The discursive labyrinths that Erickson visually creates correspond mimetically to the narrative maneuvers that defy discrete linearity and return continually to the notion of humanity’s confrontation with chaos unbridled.

In *Our Ecstatic Days*, Kristin reappears in the narrative as a mother, raising her son Kierkegaard, and responding to the lake that has sprung up and begun to grow inexplicably. Erickson commences the novel in the style of a memoir, introducing Kristin’s fear of apocalypse as a central motif: “Sometimes I’m paralyzed [sic] by my love for him. [. . .] In my heart he opens the door to this vast terrain of fear. It’s a fear stretching out beyond these young years of mine when mortality is supposed to be so inconceivable. How have mothers down through the ages survived their love for their kids? The thought of his mortality is abysmal to me. . . .”(3). Erickson manipulates the layout of the paragraphs on the page, eliciting a stanzaic quality to Kristin’s confessional voice. Kristin’s profound fear for her son’s life grounds the narrative and establishes the Gothic character of the novel. Erickson employs classical Gothic imagery at the end of Kristin’s first entry:

> Every night I wait for the sun to set before writing this, there it goes now, slipping down behind the San Vincente Bridge that crosses the lake to the northwest, I see it from my window. . . . sun goes down sky goes dark, lake goes black, and owls swoop
across the rising moon like leaves blown loose from some phantasmagoric tree twisting up out of the ground and my voice rises from the crypt of my consciousness shaking words off like topsoil. Kirk and I are bonded by a cord of blood that runs from his heart to my thighs. Menstrual waves crash against the inner beach of my belly.(4)

Kristin depicts Los Angeles as a haunted space, rife with imagistic totems of Gothicism: owls framed in relief against the ghostly light of the moon, the mind depicted as a crypt, the symbolic blood covenant, the setting a phantasmagoria. Kristin’s description of the setting intimates the terror she feels as she considers her son’s safety. The image of Kristin’s “menstrual waves” elicits comparisons with the waters that menace Los Angeles, linking the visceral terror that seizes Kristin with the actual mortal peril posed by the mysterious lake.

Erickson revisits the structural devastation of 9.11 where he depicts Kristin and her son setting out in a boat on the rapidly growing lake, surveying the places that formerly existed, now consumed by the rising tide. The submerged city signifies the effacement of individual memories for Kristin, as she, her son, and some other dispossessed people navigate the desolate spaces littered with a congeries of detritus and displaced personal effects. After sifting through the wreckage of old apartment buildings, Kristin describes the surroundings in macabre terms:

From up over the hills in the far west the first wave of owls, still far away enough that their shadows on my back skitter up my spine like small black spiders. Reflexively I turn to face the sun through the window, squinting for sight of them and looking to my own building on the other side of the lake, hoping Valerie has scurried Kirk to safety. For a while Doc seems frozen where she stands. With a kind of hesitation I’ve never seen in her, she lays her hands on the walls and moves through the apartment slowly, from the far doorway that already darkens with night into the part of it blood-red with sunset, like she’s melting into the decomposed smear of the dead day, hands spreading out away from her until it’s like she’s scorched to the wall, face burned in the plaster.(38)
Again, Kristin conjures imagery that expresses the bleakness of her existence, as she struggles to keep her son and herself alive. The layered image of a wave of owls figuratively becoming a team of spiders crawling up her spine gives tactile sensation to the dramatic vision of the birds. The owls, already foreboding signatures of the Gothic traditionally, signal the dreamlike quality of Erickson’s Los Angeles, a fictive space now dominated by floodwaters and plagues of non-native fauna. Kristin’s image of her friend, framed in the doorway, conveys Kristin’s state of mind: overwhelmed with panic and hunted by a feeling of impending death. Kristin imagines her friend’s face “burned in the plaster,” a contrasting image amid the proliferation of water that connects to both the infamous video of people frozen in the windows of the Trade Towers, panicked as they realized the reality of their situation and the Shock and Awe campaign waged upon Baghdad, a militaristic and fiery purge of the city. Erickson merges the visual elements of the narrative, water and fire, to create a symbolic connection between his nightmarish fictional space destroyed by an inexplicable flood, and the horrifying actuality of those spaces devastated by human wrath.

Kristin confronts her terror head-on, setting into motion Erickson’s dramatic manipulation of the typeset as her memoir continues to bifurcate the page in the form of a sentence that lasts for over 200 pages, as she leaves Kirk alone in the boat and dives into the lake, traveling through a narrative wormhole, and surfacing from her plunge as Lulu Blu, the dominatrix of the lake-locked Chateau X. Kristin’s abandonment of Kirk, an inexplicable act that defies the essentialist notion of a maternal bond, contrasts with Sethe’s matricide in Toni Morrison’s contemporary Gothic novel *Beloved*. Whereas the former slave, Sethe, kills her own daughter to protect the child from a life of slavery, Kristin’s plunge represents a repudiation of the restrictions of motherhood, the love that inspires a paralyzing terror in the face of calamity. Historically, the Gothic has featured narratives of poor parenting,
emphasizing the unnaturalness of hurting one’s young. Erickson’s narrative, rather than using Kristin’s choice to generate horror, substitutes the cause for the effect as Kristin’s fear compels her to do the unthinkable acts of renouncing her motherhood and leaving her child to navigate the rising waters alone.

Gothic fiction has historically employed sexual taboos and fetish as means for exploring the liminal spaces of social propriety. Erickson depicts the alternate future space where Kristin emerges as libidinal and rife with fetishistic rituals. As Lulu Blu, Kristin controls men’s sexual energies without succumbing to actual sexual intercourse. She describes her work, in terms of performance: “Like I said, before, there’s a line drawn on the discipline I’ll inflict, because while it’s all very amusing to blindfold and harness a naked man by his ankles and wrists and beat him awhile, it’s not like I’m a sadist or something. Erotoasphyxiation, electrocution, cattle prods, I don’t go in for any of that. It’s all about limits isn’t it, the ones you test and the ones you observe”(184). Kristin finds herself aping control, but understands clearly that she remains limited by the bounds of male fantasy. Erickson articulates the gendered imbalance that persists in Kristin’s profession, as she muses: “A female client, she’s different, to the extent I’ve had any and can really tell. I confess I wouldn’t mind more female clients. For a while I was a bit surprised I didn’t have more but that was me being naïve, women just aren’t wired that way are they. […] Perhaps for women submission has been such a fact of life for so long that they don’t have the luxury of making a game of it”(184-185). Kristin’s sexual slavery supplants the terror that oppressed her in her former life as a mother. Erickson exposes the social inequalities that accompany essential ideas of the maternal bond, for as Kristin sheds her former life, the only alternative is to participate in the illicit sex trade. This uneasy exchange suggests a terrifying
group of choices left to women, even in the future, a concept typically accompanied by hope for social change.

Throughout his narratives, Steve Erickson prophecies an American future defined by its trajectory towards apocalypse. Taking pages from the nation’s history, its cultural roots and deracinations, Erickson constructs imagined spaces oppressed by authoritarian governments whose power comes from their administration of everyday fear. The dystopias that Erickson depicts teeter on the precipice of their own annihilation, and their leaders capitalize on the public’s insecurities by remedying the ontological uncertainty with fascism. Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, describes the narrative use of horror in the American novel, historically:

As far back as American books go, there are images of horror: the torn corpse stuffed up the chimney; the skull split by a tomahawk; the whale spouting blood. There are, however, to final transformations in the function and treatment of violence in fiction, which go beyond the simple fact of its “neutralization” – its demotion from the world of the supernatural to that of everyday life. The first is the urbanization of violence; that is to say, violence is transferred from nature to society, form the given world that man must endure to the artificial world he has made, presumably to protect himself from the ravages of the first.(482)

Erickson reverses the trajectory that Fiedler identifies, and returns to the natural world as a symbolic mode in the generation of horror and dread. Erickson invokes great floods, sandstorms, and interminable fogs, bending nature to represent the terror that usurps his characters’ ability to maintain order in their lives, forcing them into a cycle of reactions based in fear and anxiety. Erickson transforms Los Angeles and the United States, inscribing the land itself with the traumas of history, from the perceived evils of the Reagan era, to the specter of contemporary terrorism.
In his non-fiction *American Nomad*, Erickson describes the political project of an imagined fictional text entitled *American Nomad*: “Implicitly *American Nomad* argues that with a Reagan presidency, the country comes to exorcise some demon in itself; and with the collapse of a short-lived experiment in Reaganism comes the utter collapse of the American Right as well. Thus there is no American Primacy movement, this Christian fascism does not grip the land”(187-188). This description articulates a hopeful narrative of the nation, one very different from the postmodern Gothic allegories of America that Erickson typically creates. Even here, Erickson depicts his own fiction as an exorcism, again relying upon a standard Gothic trope to ground his political commentary. While Erickson’s “fictional” *American Nomad* provides a future without Christian fascism, Erickson believes the actual circumstances of the Reagan/Bush administrations led to a tighter hold by Christian conservatives on apparatuses of power in the United States. He continues to enunciate the meaning of his imagined novel:

*American Nomad* robs of us a history when, for better or worse, Americans had to face the meaning of their country. It replaces such a history with a more oblivious one, ignoring not only the symptoms of a bankruptcy that’s political, not human. The homeless. The plague-stricken. The economic affront to national self-reliance. The savaging of the planet., and of the ethereal atmosphere tissue that shelters it from space. The thing that have made America soul-sick, that exploded in the firestorm of our Nineties, instead burrow deeper into the heart of Nomad’s Nineties; and a disturbed and decadent ennui is the result. A self-absorption that has all the narcissism of self-absorption, distracted by no insight and this allowing self-deception. The history of *American Nomad* is a serpent swallowing its own being . . .(188-189)

Erickson’s imagination, constantly pitting a parallel version of history against the actual events, considers the nation as a necessarily narrated object. The self-reflexivity with which Erickson manipulates the historical record elicits the postmodern historiographical metafiction described by Hutcheon, but also demonstrates the allegorical impulse at the
heart of Gothic fiction. Erickson perverts the imagined future of his fiction, an alternative reality made monstrous by the American conservative ideology that Erickson reacts so profoundly against in his lived experience.

In *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*, Erika Gottlieb describes dystopian fiction like Erickson’s, where the generation of narrative anxiety and terror occurs somewhere between satire and tragedy. She describes the concept of dystopia as a secular representation of Judeo-Christian mythos:

In the modern scenario salvation is represented as a just society governed by worthy representatives chosen by an enlightened people; damnation, by an unjust society, a degraded mob ruled by a power-crazed elite. Works dealing with the former describe the heaven or earthly paradise of utopia; those dealing with the latter portray the dictatorship of a hell on earth, the “worst of all possible worlds” of dystopia.(3)

Gottlieb’s comparison of utopia and dystopia to the religious iconography of Heaven and Hell establishes the profound drama produced by these texts, for as the religious model offers salvation to one soul, dystopian fictions portend the loss of an entire society’s redemption. Gottlieb goes on to introduce several recurring themes characterizing Western dystopian fictions, specifically, a nightmarish state religious authority and the protagonist’s pursuit of history/the vital importance of a record of the past, signify narrative motifs that govern much of the action of Erickson’s fiction. Moreover, Gottlieb’s description of dystopian narrative approaches Erickson’s actual personal vendetta against the “Christian fascism” that he asserts has poisoned the nation. Erickson’s Los Angeles functions similarly to Gottlieb’s dystopia, but ventures beyond the realm of simple dystopia, into a space whose ontological stability is continually undermined by supernatural horror.

Erickson’s works offer hopeful resolutions to the devastation and ruin he invokes, creating space for the political opposition to the conservative forces that Erickson so
adamantly defies. In Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography, David Punter describes two alternative conclusions posed by Gothic texts: “ [. . . ] it is precisely in Gothic that the whole issue of catharsis becomes focused to its most intense point, where the possibility of being ‘healed’ by surviving atrocious experience is perpetually challenged by the alternative possibility of being overwhelmed by that experience and swept off, like so many Gothic heroes, into the abyss, far away from any available map or compass”(7). Erickson’s protagonists continue on despite the bleak landscapes they inhabit, and progress amidst the dreadful circumstances that they experience. Erickson initiates hopefulness in his texts through the passionate relationships he depicts and positions these emotionally and sexually charged couplings as a mode of political and social resistance. In Days Between Stations, Michel and Lauren seek refuge with one another as they cope with the chaos and disaster that usurps their lives. In Arc d’X, Sally Hemmings finds a fraught, but enduring comfort in the arms of both Thomas Jefferson and Etcher. In both texts, the protagonists’ ability to navigate their troubled spaces and react to the forces that oppress them relies upon their mutual dependence. Whether the troubles of an individual’s past, as experienced in Days Between Stations, or the horrors of a fascist theocratic regime, as depicted in Arc d’X, life and optimism persist only through the founding of human connections.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to consider how David Punter and Glennis Byron describe the critical intersection of the Gothic and postmodernism in the spatial terms that have historically characterized the Gothic: “Gothic has always had to do with disruptions of scale and perspective, with a terrain that we might [. . .] refer to as ‘the moment under the moment’. No point on the map is exactly where or what it seems, on the contrary, it opens into other spaces, and it does not even do that in a stable fashion”(The Gothic 50-51). Punter and Byron render the spatial ambiguity that has characterized Gothic
texts, and express the conditions found in Pynchon’s, Lynch’s, and Erickson’s works, narratives where the “transfers and translocations” occur without warning (51). Punter and Byron also establish the significance of textuality as part of postmodern artifice, an aspect of these artists’ works shown in their protagonists’ constant compulsion to reconstitute or revisit a fragmentary past by way of historical volumes, unsurfaced memories, or reels of lost film. From the surreal Wyndeaux to phantasmagoric Los Angeles, Erickson constructs spaces where identity materializes and evaporates with terrifying ease. Pynchon, whether describing the non-space of the demilitarized zone of post-WWII Europe or the imaginary line cut into the frontier of America by Mason and Dixon, depicts space as contingent and mutable, disturbing our concrete or fixed notions of nation. Lynch’s America, ever mediated by its endless repetition in Hollywood films and television, signifies a space always and already manipulated, devoid of the possibility of authenticity and perpetually haunted by everyday figures of sadism and sexual depravity. All of these artists shows us the world in negative, or rather like negatives, cut and spliced to remove the asylum of coherence, with light replaced by darkness, and images blurring rapidly towards erasure.
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