

Enter the Neighbour

An *Inland Empire* Mise-en-scène Metonymy

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by teaching films that challenge narrative conventions and comprehension, this featurette demonstrates the power of sustained mise-en-scène analysis as a tool for interpreting challenging texts like *Inland Empire*. The featurette brings granular attention to various formal elements at work in a vital scene early in the film when a neighbour arrives for an unannounced visit that unsettles the protagonist with a message that feels as urgent as it is cryptic. David Lynch uses camera angles and proximity to frame and shape spaces, faces, and objects in ways that align with the film's motifs and meanings. In this sequence, a mesh comes into view of wealth, light, passageways, hospitality, and marriage. Though the mesh retains gaps, it holds together as a unit that also works as a metonymy for connecting, though not containing, the disparate pieces of the film.

The 2006 film *Inland Empire* is widely considered David Lynch's most enigmatic feature to date. The film is brilliant and baffling, entrancing and evasive, and it effectively resists totalizing gestures of interpretive containment. For those unfamiliar with *Inland Empire*, the film features Laura Dern playing Nikki Grace, an actress who takes on the role of Susan Blue in a film called *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. Nikki's and Susan's subjectivities blend and blur, so it's difficult for her, them, and us to tell who the person embodied by Laura Dern on screen is. What's more, this narrative line on acting is juxtaposed with *A Lost Girl in Poland*, a surreal sitcom that stars human-size anthropomorphized rabbits, interrogations, hypnosis, and one of the weirdest backyard barbecue scenes in cinema. While it appears impossible to map the interconnectedness of these disparate pieces of the

film, a close mise-en-scène investigation of a vital sequence is a powerful way to ground interpretive work that may reach across the narrative as a whole.

One of the most vital sequences in *Inland Empire* unfolds early in the film when a self-proclaimed "new neighbour" (Grace Zabriskie) drops by Nikki's house to "say hello." This is the first appearance on screen of the protagonist, Nikki, in one of her oft-shifting subjectivities. As the narrative proceeds, Nikki's subjectivity grows increasingly permeable and promethean to a degree immeasurably beyond the Betty/Diane/Camilla/Rita identity flux in Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). This sequence centres around a parable the new neighbour abruptly shares with Nikki. Actually, the parable is more than one—but not quite two—since the neighbour tells the story and then retells it "with



Fig. 1 | The luxury and distance of Nikki's foyer as the neighbour arrives, 09:54. *Absurda*, 2006.

a variation.” By including a parable, the sequence conjures a story meant to produce meaning through the work of interpretation, and the variation further complicates the interpretative work. The parable itself emphasizes places, particularly thresholds. As this film contains many spatial transitions, the sequence promises to be a key metonymy, and this essay investigates its mise-en-scène in four distinct parts.

INTO THE FOYER

After the camera follows the as-yet-unidentified new neighbour's approach to the door of Nikki's expansive palazzo, the doorbell rings and there's a cut to the interior foyer (Fig. 1). Notably weird is the distortion of this space that an extremely wide-angle shot creates. Seen from Nikki's position at the far end of foyer, this elongated area is lavishly decorated in a style that signals an antiquated European bourgeois taste. Turkish style rugs, wooden furniture, and paintings on the wall adorn the scene, while the compressed framing generates a cacophony of patterns and atmosphere of claustrophobia despite the preceding exterior shots establishing this house as massive.

As a further index of Nikki's wealth, her butler, Henry, is positioned at the far end of the shot where he answers the door. He inhabits the scene as an additional safeguard to the space between the wealthy homeowners inside and the world and people outside. Henry physically keeps the visitor outside of the home's threshold until Nikki signals her approval to invite this mysterious person inside. As soon as the new neighbour has crossed into the house, the shot is reframed. While Lynch continues to deploy the space-distorting wide angle, Nikki moves toward the door and becomes visible in the same shot as Henry

In the case of *Inland Empire* (2006), widely considered Lynch's most enigmatic feature, close mise-en-scène investigation can provide an anchoring node that enables interpretive work to reach across the narrative as a whole.

and the unexpected guest. The sense of a safely distanced remove collapses. Enhancing this spatial and tonal shift is the neighbour's movement and dialogue. She says, in that spooky way that Grace Zabriskie commands, here with a Slavic accent, “I don't mean to intrude. I'm your new neighbour. I [pauses for a long beat] hope this isn't inconvenient for you.” At the same time, this visiting neighbour steps further into the house and stops when she occupies a position between Nikki and Henry, the three of them forming a diagonal line (Fig. 2). The scene syncs the dialogue of intrusion and hospitality with the person formally welcomed in cutting off access to both the servant and the door as potential way out.

Connected with the neighbour asserting an intimate proximity that broaches Nikki's wealth-enabled private space, the margins of the shot are oddly framed. On the far left and right are unconventionally partial views into adjacent rooms, somewhere between slivers of distinct light that could frame the shot and glimpses of complete furniture or decor that could allow a sense of plenitude. Instead, both rooms include windows, and the daytime sunlight streaming through is intense, overexposed. The partially visible rooms appear as potential paths to avoid this



Fig. 2 | Invited in hospitably, the neighbour positions herself between Nikki and Henry, the butler, and the doorway, contracting space and dilating intimacy, 10:30. *Absurda*, 2006.

neighbour, and the windows are portals of egress, but ones typically associated with looking rather than passing through. All of these mise-en-scène elements initiate the neighbour's visit as a sequence of wealth, remove, hospitality, intimacy, danger, and a proliferation of egress and ingress points.

SENDING OUT AN S-R-S

The potential danger that comes bundled with acts of hospitality, such as inviting a stranger into one's home, formally suffuses the mise-en-scène of the shot-reverse-shot (s-r-s) exchange that follows the neighbour's entry. Lynch has previously demonstrated his acumen for building nuanced terror through formally unsettling s-r-s exchanges, such as the in the "Breakfast at Winkie's" scene in *Mulholland Drive*. The s-r-s element of this *Inland Empire* neighbour sequence is every bit as ominous.

The shots of Nikki throughout the exchange are consistent (Fig. 3). Her face is framed near the centre of the shot. To her right and just above her face is the lower opening of a lampshade; it presents an ellipsis of over-bright illumination at the periphery with a design on the lamp post resembling candle wax melting downward. To her left is the corner of an oil painting, the texture and cracks in the paint visibly in focus, as well as a green glass bauble like a plant bud ready to blossom upward. Nikki resides between electric light and a duo of original art and mass-produced manufacture. As such, Nikki is in the middle of a world where art and kitsch coexist on one side, while on the other side is a lamp, which Lynch famously loves and builds, powered by electricity, which he repeatedly codes as

a conduit for bad things. It's a dynamic world. Yet, Nikki's face is shot in clear focus and with a camera proximity and angle that capture her naturally, realistically. She is, for now at least, at ease in this place and life.

In the alternate shots that feature the neighbour, the framing is inconsistent. Her face dominates each shot, claiming a range of screen space from half to nearly two-thirds. When the intensity of her dialogue amplifies, the neighbour fills more of the screen via closer camera proximity and the unsettling intimacy it signifies. Enhancing these proximity shifts are subtle shifts in camera angle. As a result, the neighbour's forehead looks exaggeratedly large so that Grace Zabriskie's already dramatic eyebrow movements become supercharged (Fig. 4). The impact of these framing elements is escalated by the fact that the neighbour's face is shot out of focus. She is close enough to feel dangerous, but despite, or perhaps because of, this spatial intimacy, who she is and what she's trying to communicate are blurred. Furthermore, as this part of the sequence progresses, the framing and proximity changes make the neighbour's head physically blot out the one window in the room. This leaves the stairway as the only visible egress from the room. As a composite, the mise-en-scène underscores Nikki's increasingly urgent desire to comprehend just what she has so casually invited into her home.

The parable the neighbour shares is itself a powerful conjuring of mise-en-scène as well. She begins with the following version: "A little boy went out to play. When he opened his 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." Nikki, perplexed, asks what this is, and then the neighbour



Fig. 3 | Nikki is centred between lamp, painting, and glass, her face in focus, 12:56. Absurda, 2006.

This supposed neighbour is close enough to feel dangerous, but despite, or perhaps because of, this spatial intimacy, who she is and what she's trying to communicate are blurred.



Fig. 4 | The neighbour's face is blurred and distorted through proximity, 17:48. Absurda, 2006.



Fig. 5 | The indicating finger conjures a weird conflation of subjectivities, 18:05. *Absurda*, 2006.

adds, “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, you see that, don’t you, but through the alley behind the marketplace. This is the way to the palace.” Martha P. Nochimson has pointed out in *David Lynch Swerves* that the discourse of the palace references Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and she reads the sequence and film as a whole by connecting Lynch’s deep engagement with Transcendental Meditation to the aesthetics of uncertainty and paradox (134). For this sequence analysis, though, the focus is on the inclusion of a threshold, an alley to bypass, a shadow, a way. The parable’s spatial portrait maps onto the very elements strangely at play in the room where the neighbour and Nikki sit. The boy may be the husband, and the girl may be Nikki. As to “lost” though, is Nikki disoriented, isolated from goodness, or both? This sequence—and its metonymic resonance across the film—is a process of working out how to answer that question through the egresses that proliferate but which Nikki perceives as prohibited to her. This parable, which is more than one but not quite two, is a letter from the dark—from the unconscious and, therefore, from no one—yet, it contains the power to bring its receivers into the light, to borrow what Lynch has said is one of his favorite images to commit to film (*Catching* 129).

TIME TRAVEL IN THE LIVING ROOM

The transition to the next part of this sequence comes through a conflation of perspectives. The neighbour’s contribution to their conversation reaches a peak of intensity when she loudly and abruptly proclaims, “Brutal Fucking Murder.” She then dials it down and speaks of temporalities. The neighbour says, “Me,

But the visit, like the sequence within the film, is unforgettable, so it continues to speak even if it elides standard subjective perceptions of temporality and causality.

I can’t seem to remember if it’s today, two days from now, or yesterday. I suppose if it was 9:45, I’d think it was after midnight. For instance, if today was tomorrow, you wouldn’t even remember that you owed on an unpaid bill If it was tomorrow, you would be sitting, over there.” Just then, the film cuts to an unsteadily floating shot of the neighbour’s hand, index finger indicating a direction (Fig. 5). The point of view is the neighbour’s subjective one. But in the shot that follows, Nikki’s face is for the first time distorted through camera angle, proximity, and focus. In addition to these formal alignments with the neighbour’s face, when Nikki is shown turning to look where the finger points, she’s framed from her other side, as the camera is no longer switching back and forth from a place between Nikki and the neighbour. She’s shot from the same side as the neighbour has been. Through these mise-en-scène elements, one experiences a paradoxical toggling, as if both women are focalizing through the same eyes, sharing a subject position and point of view. These formal moves complicate Nikki’s multiple subjectivities across the film as the neighbour here oozes between being a separate person and a part of Nikki’s self speaking to itself. This turn in the sequence points at the unconscious. I’m reminded of Mark Fisher’s remark about *Mulholland Drive* in *The Weird and The Eerie*, that with the unconscious there is dreaming but



Fig. 6 | The husband's hand projects his overconfident sense of control, 19:15. *Absurda*, 2006.

no dreamer (58). In this instance, Fisher's claim nudges our attention towards the neighbour as one among many of Nikki's subjectivities rather than as a letter addressed from one monadic subject to another.

The next shot looks where the finger had pointed, to the far end of the living room. The lighting, which in this room is chiefly natural via the windows, is precisely the same, as if it is the same time on the same day. Only, that cannot be, because where Nikki and the neighbour are looking, Nikki is sitting snugly between two friends on a sofa. Is this a vision or premonition? A subsequent shot reinforces the question, since the Nikki on the sofa looks across the room when hailed by her butler with a phone call from her agent, and the two chairs she and the neighbour occupy are now empty. This Nikki on the sofa seems blissfully unaware of the neighbour's unsettling visit and cautionary nearly-double parable. She thrills to the news on the phone that she's been offered a coveted role. But, to answer the question in the negative presumes a stable, monadic subject. In a vital way, some aspect of Nikki is also watching as the telephone call creates a crossroads where she will either enter the marketplace or the alley behind it. Her exuberant reaction to the call implies the neighbour's visit may have been too early or too late. But the visit, like the sequence within the film, is unforgettable, so it continues to speak even if it elides conventional subjective perceptions of temporality and causality.

A TILTED EGRESS

The sequence closes on an ominous note with Nikki having walked, big smile on her face, into the trap of the marketplace. The final shots show her husband approaching the top of the

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stairway to a position where he can see Nikki and her friends without being seen. Across Lynch's works, stairways are powerful passageways, diagonal corridors that lead up and down but at angles and with each step requiring intentional ascent or descent. Indeed, the ceiling fan connected with BOB in *Twin Peaks* resides atop the stairway of the Palmer house, and in *The Return*, Mr. C and Agent Cooper must ascend a stairway to meet with Phillip Jefferies in his metallic non-human form. In this shot of *Inland Empire*, the last remaining egress from the sitting room appears closed off by the spectral menace of the husband. From the neighbour's visit, it's implied that he used his influence to ensure Nikki got the role, so his gaze suggests he's observing the first result in what is ultimately his sadomasochistic test of her commitment to their marital bond.

One subtle piece of the mise-en-scène manages, however, paradoxically to maintain an opening within the overwhelming sense of closure. As the husband observes Nikki's joy, he places a hand on a newel, a key support post of the stairway (Fig. 6). The emphasized hand gesture rhymes with the weird framing of the neighbour's pointing hand. In this latter case, the husband's hands grip the post with deliberate and furious control. Yet, the stairway is porous, comprised of many holes between posts on the bannister side. The corridor still includes a way out, and the alley remains an alternative to the marketplace, albeit a narrow and temporary way. The sequence ends with a cut to an exterior

view of the Hollywood sign. Yes, the iconic sign implies that Nikki is now lost in the marketplace. Yet, I agree with Alanna Thain that there is something else besides a condemnation of Hollywood as an evil marketplace at work (92). The neighbour's visit sequence has, after all, established the persistence of egress points if one can imagine and seek them out.

METONYMY IN THE MESH

The neighbour's visit is a productive node in the network of *Inland Empire*. It connects with the many living rooms that span the film, from the set of the *Rabbits* television show and the shots on set when Nikki and Susan bubble into each other, including the unforgettable "Locomotion" dance sequence, to the finale musical dance sequence of liberation that reclaims

and reinvents the domestic hearth place. The visit connects with the ethical moments of hospitality, from the interviews with the hypnotized victim to the spontaneous picnic with the circus personnel. And it connects with Nikki's visions (whether literal or figurative, past or present or future) of the alleyway and the door marked "AXXONN." By paying close attention to the mise-en-scène of the neighbour's visit, one identifies objects and ideas to analyze discretely across the film, ultimately assembling them into an interpretive mesh. Yes, there will still be gaps. But didn't the neighbour's visit instruct us that the gaps are the way to the palace? *Inland Empire* builds our capacity to engage fully and ethically because living is uncertainty. ■

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