

Look At Me and Tell Me If You've Known Me Before: Exploring Affect After *Inland Empire*

Kate Rennebohm

Written in a style evoking the feeling of some of Deleuze's theories on affect, this article explores the author's own affective experience while watching David Lynch's *Inland Empire*. Perhaps an understanding of Deleuze is the best way to understand what IS actually going on in any of Lynch's films....

When I returned a second time to *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2007), after having seen it only two days before, I convinced an unwitting friend to accompany me to the film. When the lights came up in the theatre at the end of the three hour film, I noticed my friend's white knuckles gripping the seat in front of her. When I asked her if she was alright, she spectacularly replied, "I think I actually lost track of who I am!" Why is it that her response struck me then, and still does strike me, as the perfect response to this film? Did her (loss of) perception of her self echo my own experience? Did it echo the film's own experience of itself? By examining the film in terms of the concept of affect, I will attempt to answer some of these questions. I will also attempt that most difficult task of describing one's own affective response to something.

Inland Empire is a film perceiving itself; a film perceiving specific films; a film perceiving all film. A most basic, and inevitably false, description of the film presents Nikki Grace (Laura Dern), an actress, as she begins work on the new film, *On High In Blue Tomorrows*. Nikki soon learns that this film is actually a remake of a never-finished film from Eastern Europe. The production was effectively halted when the two lead

actors were murdered. In addition to this information, within the first few minutes of the *Inland Empire*, we also see glimpses of 1920s Poland, a sitcom-esque space inhabited by giant anthropomorphic rabbits and a crying girl watching a television screen in a modern hotel room. Soon after, Nikki's role/ life/ identity begins to disintegrate, change, and multiply just as the various stories/ times/ places of the film do the same. The multiplicity and multifariousness of character, space, time, and meaning in *Inland Empire* preclude a traditional narrative approach to the film, both in watching it and recounting it here. What little narrative description I do attempt in this essay will simply be for the sake of providing clarity in this discussion.

As such, any narrative description of the film would be cursory and completely inadequate in explaining my friend's reaction to the film. Why did she lose track of herself? And, most importantly, why did she notice when she found herself again? We can lose ourselves in any number of activities throughout a day, and not experience this level of shock when we return to self-awareness. Perhaps, as Gilles Deleuze would say, "We are in the domain of the perception of affection, the most terrifying, that which still survives when all the others have been destroyed: it is the perception of the self by self, the affection-image."¹ This concept of the affection-image, or affect, must be outlined briefly before we can explore its relation to *Inland Empire*.

As part of his larger re-thinking of Henri Bergson's arguments about consciousness, movement, and perception, Deleuze identifies affection as occurring within a person, within the gap which opens between

the perception of something and the determination of a response to that perception. It is this gap, or centre of indetermination, with its individual processes of determining reaction, which Deleuze links to human subjectivity.² Within this gap between perception and action Deleuze also places Bergson's recollection-image: this is the mental image which allows us to recognize and respond to something through attentive recognition. Discussing the recollection-image and attentive recognition within the gap, Deleuze writes:

*Attentive recognition informs us to a much greater degree when it fails than when it succeeds. When we cannot remember, sensorymotor extension remains suspended, and the actual image, the present optical perception, does not link up with either a motorimage or a recollection-image which would re-establish contact. It rather enters into relation with genuinely virtual elements. Feelings of déjà vu or past 'in general' (I must have seen that man somewhere...), dream-images (I have the feeling that I saw him in a dream...), fantasies or theatre scenes (he seems to play a role that I am familiar with...).*³

There is a connection in Deleuze's thinking between affect and this entry 'into relation with genuinely virtual elements' which will help us explore *Inland Empire* and my own reaction to the film. Affect is connected with these virtual elements in their shared location within each person's subjective gap between perception and action. When we cannot remember, and cannot find a response to something we perceive, we cannot close this gap, cannot cross it and, as such, affect roams; as the gap expands, so does the space in which affect operates. We can then see a first point of entry into *Inland Empire*—the majority of the film consists of aspects which cannot be placed, cannot be recollected, cannot be remembered – because they do not, and cannot, by our understanding of the world, exist. There are numerous elements of the film which fit this description (or, really, avoid any description). This experience is provoked, for example, by an event which occurs throughout the film: Nikki repeatedly encounters her own person existing outside of the self that she is now. Within the filmic space, these moments indicate to the viewer a larger, impossible simultaneity, a folding-over of time and space. As Deleuze writes, the viewer, unable to recognize this scene as realistic, would think to themselves: 'this is a fantasy,' or 'this is a dream' (and who among us does not remember thinking this,

at one or another point, during a David Lynch film?). And, while such a conclusion may occur consciously, does arriving at this belief close the gap? Or does this grasping at the 'genuinely virtual' elements of dream and fantasy only extend and expand the affective gap in our consciousness? Other aspects of the film, and other theories concerning affect itself, suggest the latter is our answer.

In his article, "The Autonomy of Affect," Brian Massumi discusses affect, or intensity, in terms of the relationship between the stimulus and the embodied response, and the interchange between the conscious and autonomic responses to that stimulus. He states, "intensity is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin – at the surface of the body, at its interface with things."⁴ Massumi also separates these reactions of intensity from emotional reactions. Emotional reactions, unlike reactions of intensity, are dictated by the quality of the stimulus, and these are reflected in variations of breath and heartbeat.⁵ While these emotional reactions are accessible to consciousness, reactions of intensity are not: intensity is a "non-conscious, never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder."⁶ Throughout the article, Massumi addresses various aspects of the things which may stimulate or limit these responses of intensity.

One effect which limits intensity, according to Massumi, is matter-of-factness. Similarly, language, when used to emphasize matter-of-factness, or to verbalize "a more or less definite expectation, an intimation of what comes next in a conventional progression,"⁷ also prevents reactions of intensity. My own inability to completely describe the film here is likely a good indicator to those who have not seen the film that *Inland Empire* does not contain anything that can be described as traditionally matter-of-fact. Presumably, a film would require a fundamental plane on which 'real' things occur for factness to even be possible, and, while *Inland Empire* contains many planes on which things occur, none could be described as any more 'real' (both by our everyday standards of the possibilities of reality and traditional filmmaking standards of how to present reality) than the other.

Rather, *Inland Empire* falls easily into the categories which, according to Massumi, open up possibilities for intensity. The first of these categories concerns linearity: "Intensity would seem to be associated with non-linear processes: resonance and feedback that momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future."⁸ *Inland Empire*, as a film, could

be said to consist almost entirely of these moments suspended in linear progress. While the scenes which compose the film might, on occasion, seem to follow the rules of convention within themselves—including a linear progression from beginning to end—this breaks down the minute we enter the next sequence of the film: we are constantly reminded that there is no real linearity in the film. How can there be any such linearity when one or many characters from the past live ‘now,’ characters in modern dress appear in the ‘past,’ and Nikki can return to ‘yesterday’ to watch herself rehearse? This disjunction of time is one of the ways the film approaches another of Massumi’s designations: “Intensity is the unassimilable.”⁹ *Inland Empire*’s seemingly impossible presentation of time, however, is only one factor of the unassimilability of the film.

From my description of the film so far, it would seem a reasonable question to ask why anyone would watch this film under the rubric of narrative at all. Why not simply accept the film as experimental, as a series of strange and beautiful images strung together? Admittedly, in my own experience of watching *Inland Empire* the first time, there were periods during the three hours where I let myself wander in that interpretational direction. However, before I could step too far down that path, the film would always pull me back; this was, for me, caused by the use of specific lines within the film. Similar to the doubling of characters/actors in the different time periods and places, certain lines are repeated throughout the film in wildly different circumstances. Two examples include, “Look at me and tell me if you’ve known me before,” and, “Some people have a way with animals.” And though, of course, the repetition of these lines across the film do not have a narrative explanation, they seem to imply, and to taunt, that, somewhere—buried within this film—there is a master plan, there are answers, there is some sort of narrative. It seems that you cannot approach this film as containing a narrative, but you also cannot approach the film as being entirely without narrative. In this way, the film is unassimilable. And there are, of course, myriad other ways: I, personally, have never been able to assimilate the rabbits.

It is important to note that I am not discussing these aspects of Massumi’s work simply to say, “*Inland Empire* fulfills these requirements and is, therefore, a film which causes affect in its viewers.” Affect relies on individual centres of indetermination, and, as such, I could not make a claim of affect on another viewer’s behalf. Rather, I have chosen to employ these arguments because Massumi’s article opens productive

avenues to voice my own interaction with the film and to approach that impossible task—discussing one’s own affective response to something. As stated by the remarks quoted from “The Autonomy of Affect,” intensity occurs outside of consciousness and, as such, cannot be described. As well, the discussion of affect is further problematized by its relation to the virtual, those immanent elements of our existence which exist outside of the actual, or perceivable, in the space of the becoming-actual.¹⁰ Massumi further discusses the relation between the virtual and affect:

*The autonomy of affect is its participation in the virtual. Its autonomy is its openness. Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect.*¹¹

We can see then that it is impossible to discuss affect in any direct sense—if we were to become aware of the experience of affect, we would effectively and immediately end that experience. Similarly, the virtual cannot be described because the moment it enters a space available to description it has become actual.

This connection between the virtual and affect presents another way of discussing *Inland Empire*. When reapproaching the film on DVD, I discovered that watching one or two scenes individually, separated from the whole of the film, entirely changed my experience of them. On their own, they were only mildly strange scenes, albeit remarkable for their unusual use of sound, lighting and other numerous techniques. If we compare this to the night I watched the entire film, the moment when I took a break in the third act presents a distinct difference. As I hurriedly turned on all of the lights on the way to the kitchen, I slowly realized that I was absolutely terrified. The power and effect of *Inland Empire* are found not, or at least not entirely, in the construction of the individual scenes, but rather they are found in the space between the scenes. It is in these spaces—the territory that the film does not cover, the questions it does not answer (but distinctly presents), the virtual elements which are gone, have already-happened, before we realize it—that affect is able to operate on us.

As I have already outlined all the ways in which it is impossible to talk about affect and the virtual, how can

I now describe the way affect was able to operate on me as I watched *Inland Empire*.² Here, again, I return to my friend's response to the film as a starting point. Just as Kristina was able to comment on the shock of finding herself again, I noticed certain things when I returned from being lost in the film, or rather, lost in my own affect. Even though I cannot describe exactly what I felt while in that affective state, I can attempt to describe the effects of returning from that state and of the remnants of affect. These were most noticeable, for me, at moments during the final sequences of the film; particularly, the sequence in which Nikki encounters impossible images on a movie screen, and then encounters the Phantom in the halls above the movie theatre. In my experience of the film, these scenes constitute the epitome at which we, the viewer, have been completely removed from any logical understanding, any recognizable plane, with which to approach the experience of the film. As the character of Nikki approaches the movie screen in the empty movie theatre, she sees various unsettling images onscreen: First, she sees an image of herself which could only be possible if the movie screen was simultaneously, impossibly, both a camera and projector. Nikki then sees an image that we have seen earlier in the film in which Nikki speaks to the camera/ an unnamed listening figure. Next, there is an image of that same unnamed figure on the steps of the movie theatre, an image which, again, could only be possible if Nikki herself were a camera and a projector at that very moment. Finally, we see another impossible image on the movie screen (within the real screen), that of Nikki walking up those same stairs. These things were, for me, at those moments, so far outside of the realm of physical possibility that were no questions to be asked; there was only wonder.

At moments throughout these images, the self-reflexivity of watching a movie screen onscreen allowed me momentary escape from a complete immersion in the experience of total metaphysical breakdown. It was in these moments that I became aware of my hands. While that may seem extremely dull, I would qualify that statement in that I became aware of my hands in a way which only occurs while I watch films. Really, I should say that, when this occurs, I become aware of the absence of the normal experience of my hands. In what is perhaps a strange link to Massumi's claim that that affect is "most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things,"¹² I become aware that my hands do not feel separate from those things it is touching—my legs, the armrest, the air. I cannot tell where one begins and the other ends.

Beyond this, I have the distinct sensation that, if I were to move my elbows, my arms/ fingers/ wrists would move right through these other solid objects touching them. Paradoxically, I can also clearly feel that my hands have a surface, a limit, because I can feel the inside, the internal, moving; moving as though the surface were expressing that movement. Because the surface actually expresses nothing (my hands remain quietly folded in my lap) a schism opens as the inner rends away from the outer. This makes me dizzy. But, then, the film grabs my attention completely again, and I forget.

And so, as Kristina tells me of the terror of realizing that she had left herself behind, I shake my hands, and the effect of the film begins to fade. I cannot tell you anymore about the affect of *Inland Empire* except, perhaps, that there were moments in the film when the affective response crossed into the emotional (quantifiable) response of pure terror. By outlining theoretical arguments about affect, and arguing that *Inland Empire* presents an ideal experiential terrain for engagement with affect, I hope to have put forward a possibility for understanding, or at least approaching, one's own individual affective experience within the realm of cinema. This avenue for exploration hinges on the fact that, while I experience the remnants of affect in my hands, I'm sure others do not. As such, while *Inland Empire* and films like it may be terrifying, they might, if we allow them, also present a way to understand how our minds and bodies bring us to that terror and why.

FOOTNOTES

1 Deleuze, Gilles. *The Movement-Image*. p. 67-68. Deleuze also notes that "the interval is not merely defined by the specialization of the two limit-facets, perceptive and active. There is an in-between. Affection is what occupies the interval, what occupies it without filling it in or filling it up... it is a coincidence of subject and object, or the way in which the subject perceives itself, or rather experiences itself or feels itself 'from the inside.'" *The Movement- Image*. p. 65

2 *Ibid.* *The Time-Image*. p. 47

3 *Ibid.* *The Time-Image*. p.54-55

4 Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect." p. 25

5 *Ibid.* "The Autonomy of Affect." p. 25

6 Ibid. “The Autonomy of Affect.” p. 25

7 Ibid. “The Autonomy of Affect.” p. 25-26

8 Ibid. “The Autonomy of Affect.” p. 26

9 Ibid. “The Autonomy of Affect.” p. 27

10 Massumi notes, “The virtual is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt – albeit reduced and contained.” “The Autonomy of Affect.” p.30

11 Ibid. “The Autonomy of Affect.” p. 35

12 Massumi, Brian. “The Autonomy of Affect.” p. 25

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Deleuze, Gilles. *The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991.

—. *The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991.

Massumi, Brian. “The Autonomy of Affect.” *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

Edited by Paul Monticone, Amanda D’Aoust