



INLAND EMPIRE

AUTHOR	MELISSA ANDERSON
PUBLISHER	FIREFLIES PRESS
PAGES	128
ISBN	9783981918694

REVIEWED BY ELENA GORFINKEL



ABOVE Laura Dern in David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006)

Laura Dern's crying mouth made me into a cinephile. The moment, a cinematic primal scene, as teenage Sandy's singing robins fantasy cracks apart in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), contaminated by the sight of Dorothy's (Isabella Rossellini) violated nakedness. Dern's pained, plasmatic grimace grotesquely encapsulates the figure of the suffering blonde, innocence besmirched. Her mouth was a gateway into Lynch's perverse netherworld of submerged sex and all-American cruelty.

Reading Melissa Anderson's thrillingly associative and brilliantly evocative book *Inland Empire*, the third in Fireflies Press's Decadent series (which will cover ten significant films of the 2000s), reminds us that in the cinema, in our screen obsessions, we are never alone. Examining the mesmerising Dern as avatar and axiomatic figure of Lynch's cinema, Anderson writes that her "corporeality functions as [*Inland Empire*'] irreducible reality". Dern's shapeshifting turn as the actress Nikki Grace and her various alter-egos is central to Lynch's terrifying funhouse-mirror homage to moviemaking. Anderson incisively analyses the fascinations of performance, specifically women's enactments of existential breakdown and psychosexual damage. Decentring the directorial grip on filmic meaning, Anderson develops an "acteurist" method to examine Dern's paroxysmal stardom (drawing on

a term borrowed from critic Dave Kehr) and the "wild atavistic refractions" of Dern's earlier roles and Hollywood's mythos of the "woman in trouble".

Anderson refreshingly brings to Lynch's oeuvre a queer feminist critical inflection inherited from a genealogy of writing on the frisson of star bodies from Parker Tyler to Boyd McDonald to Patricia White. In the process, she reflects on the task of film writing: how can the critic provide an account adequate to an "insoluble, labyrinthine" filmic object? Anderson gestures to that which remains beyond the grasp of words when confronting *Inland Empire*'s incendiary images. Adroitly grappling with how Dern's performance enacts a dynamic of voyeuristic pleasure and performed pain, Anderson cuts to the core of Hollywood's founding fictions and a collective cathexis on imperilled starlets and broken women, from the Arbuckle scandal and the Black Dahlia on to recent reckonings with misogyny and sexual violence *après* Weinstein.

Anderson provocatively conjures the electrifying nature of Dern's performance, that dexterous brew of incarnated artifice, elasticated expressivity and shattered hurt, finally imagining her "pliant mouth devouring" Lynch's infernal fictions in their totality. Here the star becomes both wilful instrument of the director's imaginary and the chthonic presence that exceeds it.