

## **“Bad Form”: Contemporary Cinema’s Turn to the Perverse**

**David Lynch: *Lost Highway* (1997)**

**Lars von Trier: *Breaking the Waves* (1996)**

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The form of Western mainstream film is the crux of its ideological efficiency: by using established formal techniques, films ensure audiences understand that aesthetic decisions support and clarify the narrative to ensure maximum spectatorial satisfaction. However, some films exploit their formal aesthetics in order to prevent clarification, thwarting satisfaction in favour of viewing practices that can be considered perverse in that they withhold, suspend or obstruct immediate pleasure.

Contemporary Western filmmaking in the mid-1990s witnessed the emergence of a distinct group of filmmakers and films that, in the popular discourse of cinematic criticism, were together coded as “difficult” or “perverse.” These films were, as a result of the characteristics we identify below, situated obliquely in relation to the larger economic and artistic structures of a commercially oriented “mainstream” cinema. Included in this new form of cinematic production were films from directors such as Tim Burton: *Edward Scissorhands* (1990); David Cronenberg: *eXistenZ* (1999); David Fincher: *Se7en* (1995); Peter Greenaway: *The Baby of Maçon* (1993); David Lynch: *Lost Highway* (1997); Quentin Tarantino: *Pulp Fiction* (1994)

and Lars von Trier: *Breaking the Waves* (1996). Whilst Western cinema as a whole has a long history of exploring "difficult" or "perverse" material within the overt or covert content of narrative, plot and story, such films demonstrate a particular relationship between the content being explored and the specific formal characteristics utilised in the delivery of that content. Thus where previous examples would utilise standardised formal techniques as a way of both delivering and containing the difficult or objectionable material, the films instead offer instances where the material of the narrative content seems to bleed backwards, affecting the form and rendering the very materiality of the film itself suspect and problematic.

In these films, which utilise techniques that could be considered "bad form" in direct relation to the "good form" of Classic Hollywood cinema, the standard recuperative devices of continuity editing, sound and image relations, shot motivation and narrative resolution (amongst other techniques) could not be relied upon to work in the ways audiences, through consistent exposure to these stable forms, might otherwise have expected. By subverting Classic Hollywood techniques and the hermeneutic activity associated with such techniques, the films all bring their prohibited thematic features (desires, hallucinations, suspicions, obsessions, guilts) forward to exist and be experienced as formal aberrations, extraneous details that are designed to "stick out" from the skin of the film texts. These act as interruptions to narrative progression and spectatorial interpretation, becoming perverse as they confound their audience's ready desire to resolve the narrative and offering, instead, the possibility of new forms of pleasure based on the very difficulty that marks these films as distinct from their mainstream counterparts. Our formal analysis of examples from *Lost Highway* and *Breaking the Waves* suggests that the films can be analysed as individually perverse given their relationship to a mainstream cinema based on narrative resolution and the recuperation of difficult content material. By deliberately disrupting or subverting what is usually a linear hermeneutic process, the texts seek either to postpone or locate pleasure away from the act of successful interpretation and in this wilful disruption or subversion they may be thought of as perverse.

While these films appear to offer moments of spectatorial interpretive freedom that would move away from the dictates of a cinematic mainstream, when more closely examined, they can be seen to be doing something entirely different. Our focus throughout this work is to discuss the relationship between the intelligibility of a particular text and the audience member who seeks pleasure from the text by interpreting it and who interprets it by comparing it with previous texts. As has been argued elsewhere, cinema "forges its own spectator"<sup>1</sup> and any individual spectator is neces-

sarily schooled in the art of interpreting the film text in line with other filmic experiences. Whilst this does not deny the possibility for multiple and varied interpretations, this does permit us to examine the film text as a collection of signifiers that stand in relation to both their authorially intended and spectatorially expected signifieds, with the relation between signifier and signified being entirely conventional and remaining effective through repetition. Interpreting any individual film involves an understanding of, and an adherence to, a series of communicative codes for both the film and the audience. Yet the films we indicate as constituting a period of “Bad Form” production all knowingly subvert this interpretive process, which means that any particular spectator’s position with regard to the interpretive process alters as a result. Because this knowing subversion, “a turning away from dominant notions of ‘right’ [and] ‘good’<sup>2</sup> or “normal” interpretation, occurs at a formal level, we argue that these moments signal acts of individual perversity on the part of the filmmaker, and lead towards the recuperation of the perversity within larger industrial and cultural structures.

It is possible, then, to label the texts themselves as perverse – and individually as either psychotic or hysterical – given their relationship to a series of ubiquitous communicative codes that guide both their construction and interpretation. The films are not necessarily about psychosis or hysteria: rather, the films are in themselves constructed as psychotic or hysterical utterances that emerge in relation and response to the discourses that surround their production and consumption. By this we suggest that the standard recuperative cinema that constitutes the greater part of Western cinematic production offers a form of “storytelling agency” wherein each film’s narrative content is delivered by self-effacing techniques which are, in turn, met by the hermeneutic activity of spectators long-accustomed to expect and decipher material presented in this fashion.

As a result, one can consider the bulk of Western cinema to be both conservative (insofar as these films work to conform to a formal and hermeneutic model that pre-exists their construction) and normative (insofar as audience displeasure based on the violation of this model has serious economic consequences). This means that the articulation of perversity (understood here as attempts at a renegotiation of the link between the ways cinematic texts offer opportunities for spectatorial pleasure based on interpretive activity) occurs as each “Bad Form” film struggles to demonstrate the manner of its filmic subjectivity in opposition to the standard “Good Form” cinematic agency that functions in the West as the globally dominant model. Necessarily, the long-term outcome of this struggle (as played out in the latter half of the 1990s) saw the eventual recuperation of these initially difficult techniques and their increasing use within the mainstream that they

temporarily resisted. Such moments are therefore a "rationalised" perversion, a recuperation of the perverse.

### ***Lost Highway* as Psychotic Utterance**

What makes *Lost Highway* an example of a psychotic cinematic utterance is the manner by which it utilises a variety of standard representational structures – or appears to take part in a conventional cinematic discourse – but in unique, self-referential and confusing ways. This undercutting divests these structures of the security of interpretive meaning they might ordinarily hold for an audience, meaning that *Lost Highway*, as Chris Rodley puts it, is a "complex weave of parallel worlds and identities that refuses to yield its many secrets easily."<sup>3</sup> Thus, if psychosis involves a problematic relationship of the subject to communication and language, an entirely unique and personal unfixing of signifieds from their conventional signifiers such that "there is something different about the psychotic's being in language,"<sup>4</sup> then *Lost Highway*, in demonstrating these formal symptoms, can be thought of as highlighting a moment of formal psychosis or as functioning as an example of just such a psychotic utterance. What *Lost Highway* and, indeed, all of the "Bad Form" films demonstrate is a willingness to use conventional cinematic codes primarily in order to distort them. In this manner the film obeys its own rules, its own structures of diegetic logic (that is, a logic pertinent to the interior world of the narrative) – but in a way that sees it move away from the long-established discursive structures drawn upon for standard narrative and diegetic intelligibility.

*Lost Highway* utilises a variety of methods to avoid confronting any spectatorial desire for resolution for as long as it possibly can. Chief amongst these are the film's markers of generic membership, utilising the formal (cinematographic and aural) and narrative tropes of Film Noir as a way of indicating that complete resolution and intelligibility will only be obtained late in the narrative, perhaps only as part of the film's resolving moments. Nevertheless, even these methods of forestalling resolution can only work for so long and it is no accident that the following example takes place at the film's mid-point and demonstrates the ways in which this film reveals that it has no intention of providing a standard resolution.

After the murder of Renee (Patricia Arquette), which is central to the unfolding plot, her husband Fred (Bill Pullman) is incarcerated. It is significant to what follows that the short sequence dealing with Renee's murder is framed and shot utilising what we are led to assume are objectively represented tropes of Fred's subjective pathology. He is shown watching a video cassette containing grainy black-and-white footage of him amongst the

dismembered remains of Renee's body, a sequence that is intercut with a second or two of colour footage demonstrating the direct and, we presume, diegetically stable relationship between the two types of images and the ways they can be interpreted as referring to either subjective or objective representations. Whilst in prison, and prior to his mysterious, and never-explained, transformation into Pete (a new character played by a different actor – Balthazar Getty), Fred begins to suffer from insomnia and debilitating headaches. Consequently, after collapsing in the exercise yard of the prison (in which we never see any other inmates) Fred is taken to the prison doctor who prescribes a series of sedatives. Thus one might understand that because Fred is ill with headaches, he is taken to a doctor and that perhaps the headaches are of some significance in the events just witnessed, possibly providing some causal rationale for the murder that may or may not have happened.

As it happens, Lynch signals that this interlude is not to be trusted with the use of an alternating display of very high and low angle shots. A standard interpretive practice would understand these shots as either belonging to some diegetic presence, or as a formal device designed to highlight a discrepancy between the two characters in the scene. However, both of these interpretive avenues are confounded with provision of additional, tightly-framed two-shots between Fred and the Doctor that reveal no motivating diegetic presence, and which do not distinguish between the characters in terms of power. It is difficult now to recognise how disruptive this moment was when first viewed, and yet this is entirely the point of our argument. *Lost Highway* is, here, utilising a series of entirely conventional techniques and, at the same time, divorcing them from the hermeneutic framework that would ordinarily render them as invisible methods of delivering narrative content. Therefore it seems that those moments when the film is being more "normal" are those in which the film is also at its most difficult – at least in terms of the role of narrative comprehensibility within *Lost Highway*. And yet, such a view is undercut by the film's formal recognition of the hopelessness of narrative intelligibility.

Therefore, to encounter, as in the Doctor sequence, the use of shots so clearly and conventionally coded towards specific meaning, and to have them not only subverted but also emptied of meaning *altogether* is a profoundly unsettling experience for an audience. When faced with such shots, previously so clearly meaningful, one inevitably struggles to make them intelligible, coming up always against the smooth face of what has become Lynch's signature deliberate unintelligibility. In this manner, as the shots and their meaning diverge, as the shots are constructed in order to divest themselves of their conventionally coded meaning (as they might occur

within films occurring within a certain cultural epoch, emerging from a specific location), they become increasingly psychotic: split from their conventional and spectatorially anticipated meaning, they are floating signifiers and all the more terrifying for that. Thus, the utilisation of alternating high and low angle shots, in such a manner as to not mirror whatever power dynamic is on-screen, renders this film at formal odds with its audience, which has, through numerous previous examples, come to expect such shots as being inherently significant and interpretable.

So what is the purpose of this use of form within the construction of film? These disrupted interpretive codes, as upsetting to their audiences as they might be, remain for the most part unutilised by conventional film in general; hence their continued indecipherability. The specific examples provided above do not refer to any meta-cinematic codes or interpretive practices; they refer only to themselves. This means that those films that are constructed utilising self-referential formal techniques will also be subject to initial audience resistance, as self-referentiality is itself a resistance to interpretation. Yet, as we have signalled, the fact that Lynch persists in undercutting genre and form has itself become a marker of authorial presence; so much so that the initial perversity present in *Lost Highway's* self-referential form becomes a recognisable aesthetic and, thus, a marketable – and recuperated – commodity. This is an analytical aspect we will develop later in this paper.

### ***Breaking the Waves* as a Hysterical Object**

Much analysis of *Breaking the Waves* lies in an interpretation of Bess (Emily Watson) as the hysteric or the hysteric *qua* mystic. Using Creed's analysis of *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986) as a hysterical text<sup>5</sup> and identifying four characteristic "symptoms" in the formal structure of *Breaking the Waves*, we argue that this film positions itself as perverse, as a hysterical text. The four formal aspects of *Breaking the Waves* that "stand out," that demand attention in this analysis, are the plethora of symptoms that present within the cinematography, Bess's direct looks to camera, the digitised postcard shots combined with seventies music and the towerless bells that sound after Bess's burial at sea. These and other formal signs are present in all areas of the cinematography, in the editing and post-production of the film stock. Together, the features suggest an overtly excessive attempt to contradict classical film form and to pose a new language of communication that is at once fascinating and confounding.

Like *Blue Velvet*, *Breaking the Waves* is a postmodern text,<sup>6</sup> displaying generic characteristics of melodrama, erotic romanticism, family drama,

documentary realism, and reality television. To consider the film only as a hysterical text, as Creed does with *Blue Velvet*, would be to be drawn into an analysis of its narrative content. By focusing on the film's formal features, its structural components allow us to consider *Breaking the Waves* as symptomatic and, specifically, as hysterical.

In an attempt to integrate *Breaking the Waves* into a narrative of consistency within von Trier's filmography, much analysis focuses on the narratives of his previous films and his preoccupation with hypnosis. These analyses cite *Breaking the Waves* as signalling a shift from the earlier work that was "about hypnosis" to a film that is hypnotic in form. Von Trier himself identifies the film as hypnotic in its "masquerade as 'real life.'"<sup>7</sup> It is the formal excesses, indeed the excessive avoidance of classical film language (the language of the Father) and the display of such formal features as symptoms that position the film as a hysterical text.

What is often remarked upon about *Breaking the Waves* is its cinematic features. The camera work includes wild tracking, a circling handheld camera, sudden close-ups and seemingly unchoreographed ensemble scenes; the editing involves a play with real time, jump cuts within and between scenes, and the creation of ellipses. The "painstakingly produced film stock"<sup>8</sup> was shot in super 35mm format, colour degraded on video before being transferred back to film, creating a monochromatic, grainy realism. Combined with an editing style that breaks the rules of continuity editing, the cinematography creates a hypnotic, "spinning" diegesis. There is a disjunction in that the primitive, raw form *looks like* a lack of normal cinematic apparatus but is achieved through highly technical and sophisticated post-production processes. These are symptoms, an outward show that alerts the audience to the possibility of a hysterical object.

Creed identifies three forms of fantasy in *Blue Velvet*: the film as "public fantasy," fantasy contained in the hero's dream, and the primal fantasies that are played out within the narrative. *Breaking the Waves* has the first and last of these – the film as public fantasy and the articulation of primal fantasies are part of the narrative. The wounding or rape of the mother by the father is expressed in Bess's violation and then rape (even if this is seen in terms of being motivated by Jan's (Stellan Skarsgård) perverse desires). Castration is in Jan's accident and the seduction between daughter and father is apparent in several of Bess's sexual encounters. To move from narrative to formal analysis at this point raises the question of whether the film plays these fantasies out with the audience on a non-narrative, formal level as well as a narrative level. By establishing a spectatorial position and then violating that position, it does.

As Creed explains, the turn to fantasy has enabled film theorists to

emphasise the sliding subject positions of the female protagonist and the multiple positions of identification for viewers.<sup>9</sup> We argue that *Breaking the Waves* has a sliding subject position with no fixed point of view. If fantasy is the basis of psychic reality, then fantasy is not the object of desire but is its setting, its *mise-en-scène*. Fantasy does not depend on particular objects but rather on the setting out of images in which the subject is caught up. *Breaking the Waves* does not distinguish between desire and fantasy either at a narrative level – Bess's fantasy is her desire/desire is her fantasy – or at a formal level. Instead there is a collapse of the boundary between desire and fantasy. Bess's overwhelming desire is manifest as fantasy as form, problematising the normal construction of desire within classical film form. The paradox of the hysteric is apparent in analysis of the formal features of the film. By offering an alternative form, the film exposes the inadequacy of the phallic function and its accompanying signifiers usually upheld by classical film structure. Like the hysteric, the film is bent on lack of fulfilment of desire and poses questions about identification.

The third formal feature we are identifying is the postcard scenes of the Scottish coastline. Paintings by Per Kirkeby, a Danish painter, were computer coloured and animated before being transferred to film. Like the rest of the film they were rigorously post-produced but to opposite effect. Rather than looking like raw footage, they are highly wrought inserts that act as containment, defining sections of the film as chapters with individual chapter headings. The device takes us back to von Trier's sources for the script, de Sade's *Justine* and a storybook from the director's childhood called *Goldenhearted*.<sup>10</sup> That von Trier never knew the end of the latter story because the picture book's last few pages were missing<sup>11</sup> posits it as a sublime object that remains untold. Using this source to narrativise Bess's condition is an epistemological device that attempts unsuccessfully to recover the film's other symptoms. The "stolen" images bring with them a lack of closure and indecipherability that emphasises rather than secures the hysterical symptoms. The failure of this is cynically side stepped by von Trier's use of kitsch 70s pop music, with its accompanying pap lyrics, in the soundtrack.

Defining *Breaking the Waves* as a hysterical utterance suggests seduction through symptom. But the film refuses to be defined merely as seductress – it refuses analysis. The character of Bess, rather than being analysed as hysterical,<sup>12</sup> serves our purposes to be defined as a symptom of the film's condition. The intensity of Watson's performance and the return of Bess's look on several occasions are the means by which the film betrays normative filmic codes. Bess's action of looking out from the screen has the effect of the film looking back, its point of anamorphosis.<sup>13</sup> It is an-



other sign of the collapse of the boundary between desire and fantasy and blurs the line between Bess's character and Emily Watson's performance. With reference to Hitchcock's tracking shots in *Rear Window* (1954), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963), which Slavoj Žižek identifies as "isolating the remainder of the real,"<sup>14</sup> Bess's look frustrates us by breaking the fantasy of the screen and confronts our desire to be seduced into the diegesis. Instead of the Hitchcockian montage that identifies the "uncanny" object by means of a series of shots, in *Breaking the Waves* the gaze situates Bess as the Thing, with the audience as the unidentified holder of it. Her look, in revealing all that is there to be revealed, is pornographic, thereby disturbing the audience's desire and positioning the audience as the "uncanny" Other. Further, Bess takes on the film's hysterical persona and her gaze compromises her/its interpretability.

Finally, the bells. The final feature we have identified as symptomatic of hysteria is the film's play with the church bells. Again, the lack of bells in the church tower and their magical reinstatement have been read in narrative analyses as symbolic of Jan's lost and regained sexual power.<sup>15</sup> We would suggest they are more symbolic of the phallic failure of the religious community to contain Bess, and argue that the film itself can and does contain her. Bess's wish to replace the bells is prophetic and their sounding as she is buried is the film's last word and fulfilment of the wish. The shot is a high-angle view of the oilrig with the bells ringing, swinging in the immediate foreground. The bells float high above the earth like a celestial body, not connected to a church, as Bess in ascension. Not to be seduced, however, by narrative analysis, we argue that the film fulfils the hysteric's mission. The bell sequence is miraculous, providing an unearthly answer as closure, one that lies outside expected formal structures and narrative expectations. Bess's miracle is the film's transcendence and posits the film as hysteric *qua* mystic.

### Conclusion

Both *Lost Highway* and *Breaking the Waves* utilise audience familiarity with the conventions of the dominant discourses of cinema in order to structure their delivery of narrative content through the utilisation of familiar formal modes. As a result, both might, at first glance, appear to be realist films and to offer some semblance to filmic realism or, at the very least, of a diegetic stability within which narrative can occur and to which any spectatorial interpretive activity can return. Thus both films resist the utilisation of techniques that would ordinarily suggest an entirely subjective experience (point of view shots, for example) and instead offer formal avenues for in-

terpretation that promote an understanding of the protagonist's experience as visible through the formal techniques of the text. Therefore, because we never leave what appears to be the grounded and stable realism of each text's diegetic moments, we have no need to doubt these films' use of previously familiar formal techniques even when they indicate the ways in which their protagonists will affect the form of the films they feature within. Thus, by locating this process within the formal activity of encoding meaning to direct interpretation, we can detect moments whereby any film exceeds what might ordinarily be considered normative construction by paying attention to the manner in which that film symbolises. The main result of the self-referential codes utilised within these films is therefore a confounded spectatorial desire and compromised narrative intelligibility. Thus it is in the very use of these conventions and codes that *Lost Highway* and *Breaking the Waves* perform perversity. The utilisation of standard cinematic coding, especially against what an audience can be expected to interpret as a result of encountering these techniques, is a deliberate choice of the filmmaker and demonstrates an opening up of new interpretive ground, revealing the possibility for new modes of representing and delivering narrative. As a result, what is also new is the relationship of these texts to their audiences.

However, the larger cinematic industry is more than able to recuperate these internal codes, in some instances utilising their internally dictated meanings, anchoring these in place as fixed cinematic signs, and in other instances taking the self-referential signifiers and affixing new signifieds to them, leading to a similar conclusion. Further, a new raft of directors take the cinematic codes (if not in actuality, then in spirit) of the earlier "Bad Form" directors and uses them to secure similar authorial status. Regardless of the specific breakdown of the various components, the conclusion we come to is clear: the (however hesitant) mainstream inclusion of the modes of "Bad Form" represents a fundamental shift in the manner of cinematic representation, and a concomitant shift in audience interpretive facility. Any codification of perverse representative forms, and the use of these forms in the delivery of increasingly opaque narrative (which avoids closure and denies total or, often, even partial transparency) illustrates the movement of a film industry away from a sterility of representation towards increasingly complex film texts. No longer is the cinematic diegesis the safe arena of speculated desire and realised narrative closure: these films trade in the generation of dissatisfaction.

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NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practice of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 2.
- <sup>2</sup> Staiger, *Perverse Spectators 2*.
- <sup>3</sup> Chris Rodley (ed), *Lynch on Lynch* (London: Faber, 1997) 215.
- <sup>4</sup> Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) 46.
- <sup>5</sup> Barbara Creed, "A Journey through Blue Velvet – Film, Fantasy and the Female Spectator", *New Formations* 6 (1988) 97-117.
- <sup>6</sup> Creed, "A Journey through Blue Velvet" 97.
- <sup>7</sup> Mark van De Walle, "Heaven's Weight", *Artforum International* 35:3 (1996) 84.
- <sup>8</sup> van De Walle, "Heaven's Weight" 84.
- <sup>9</sup> Creed, "A Journey through Blue Velvet" 99.
- <sup>10</sup> Jack Stevenson, *Lars von Trier* (London: BFI, 2002) 90.
- <sup>11</sup> van De Walle, "Heaven's Weight" 84.
- <sup>12</sup> Frances L Restuccia, "Impossible Love in Breaking the Waves: Mystifying Hysteria", *Literature and Psychology* 47 (2001) 34.
- <sup>13</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991) 90.
- <sup>14</sup> Žižek, *Looking Awry* 109.
- <sup>15</sup> Harlan Kennedy, "Orbiting Sublimity", *Film Comment* 32:4 (1996) 7.