AMERICAN DREAMS FT. DAVID LYNCH

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We're like the dreamer who dreams and then lives inside the dream.
But who is the dreamer?

—Twin Peaks: The Return *(created by Mark Frost and David Lynch, 2017, U.S.)*

"Hello, you're tuned into *Interview Project*. Today we're meeting Suzy. Suzy is Daniela's aunt. Enjoy the interview." Or: "Hello, you're tuned into *Interview Project*. Today we're meeting Darryl. Darryl is waiting to buy a ranch in Montana. Enjoy the interview." We're tuned into *Interview Project*, a web-based series of 121 video portraits directed by Austin Lynch and Jason S. The videos are about four minutes each and they were posted online every three days between June 2009 and

Figure 1. David Lynch presents:

Figure 2. The image scrambles while tuning in on Lynch.

Figure 3. *Welcome to Interview Project*.

May 2010. Together they document the road trip Lynch, Jason S., and their team made across a small-town United States that remains unseen by the interstate traveler. It is a portrait of a nation reminiscent of John Steinbeck (*The Grapes of Wrath*, *Travels with Charley*) as well as Walter Evans's *American Photographs* of the Great Depression, and it is in the vein of those Great-American works that *Interview Project* captures the dilapidated state of the American dream.

TUNING INTO AMERICA

Interview Project was produced by Absurda, the production company of David Lynch, Austin's father, and the project is also hosted on David Lynch's website: interviewproject.davidlynch.com. Although Lynch—David, that is—did not go along on the trip, he does introduce each of the videos, in his own Lynchian way, and above all in the *same* way each time. We press "play" and the scrambling image makes it seem like we've just powered on one of those old-school color televisions from the time color television was still a new medium. Once the image has stabilized on a close-up of his face, Lynch welcomes the viewer: "Hello, you're tuned into *Interview Project*. Today we're meeting Spira" (Figures 1–3). As always, Lynch's spirits are high. He is seated in front of a concrete wall and a yellow chest of drawers, while he's wearing a blue suit and a white, tie-less shirt that is completely buttoned up. His silver hair is combed yet messy and contrasts nicely with the wall. Cut to a medium-long, awkwardly high-angled shot that shows him sitting at a giant desk in a space that Lynch followers will recognize as his Los Angeles studio, from where for a while he also broadcast his odd daily weather reports, and which also forms the setting for the 2016 documentary *David Lynch: The Art Life* (d. Jon Nguyen, Rick Barnes, U.S./Denmark). Like so many others in this online era, Lynch has been working a lot from home lately. On his desk—messy-arranged as Lynch himself—there is an ashtray, a box of drawing utensils, a red shiny ball the size of an apple, a steaming cup of coffee (brewed, we assume, from his own signature blend), while a ray of sunlight casts all of this in a homely glow. "Spira used to dance to *The Doors* at the Whisky-a-Go-Go." Cut to the original camera position. Lynch smiles: "Enjoy the interview," upon which the intro dissolves into a disclaimer that "the views expressed in these interviews are those of the participants alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of *Interview Project* or its sponsors."

The portraits themselves are utterly sincere slices of American life. Take episode 3, which shows Kee, whom the team met in a Navajo reservation in Tuba City, Arizona (Figure 4). "Hello, my name is K, K.J., I go by K.J., but my name is Kee Jackson." Kee is framed in close-up against the backdrop of the red rocks of the Arizona desert. His mouth twitches, he seems a little nervous. A harmonica tune sets in,

Figure 4. Episode 3: Kee (Tuba City, Arizona).

a title card states Kee's name, and the now-vignetted frame offers us some *couleur locale*: a dog on a dusty road, a school bus, the city's water tower. Then Kee tells his story, which I will transcribe here with camera positions, because, as in Lynch's intros something's going on with them, even though it is hard to state in what way:

> [Long, low-angle shot of Kee, seated on the rocks] Well, I'm Virgo, and if you know anything about astrology, we are *very* wild. We are definitely naughty. [Jump cut to a close-up of Kee] Actually I grew up with a lot of friends, a lot of people that I grew up with, I was raised with. And [cut back to the long shot] because there are no jobs here in Tuba City, my parents often, you know, went out of state to provide for us, and while they did that, they put us in dormitories, which is what they call the B.I.A. [Bureau of Indian Affairs]. [Close-up] When I was in grade school, I made honors. I made great grades. I used to win spelling bees, I used to win speech contests and everything, you know, I was academically inclined in grade school. [Long shot] When I got to high school, I definitely had to deal a lot with my sexuality, where I belong, who I belong, everything, you know, just a lot of questions regarding my sexuality, and there was a time when I was depressed, because I was trying to identify who I am. [Close-up] Being raised gay, I guess, it really matters a lot when you go out there, because there is a lot of things that you're confronted with when you go out into, um, society. [Cut to a bald eagle shrieking in

> the sky. The frame has been vignetted like earlier. Kee, off-screen now:] You guys are definitely seeing what God has done for me. When I was fifteen to twenty-three, I looked like a girl. [Cut to a frontal long of shot of Kee, seated silently in the vignetted frame, while we hear him in voice-over] I was wearing heels. I was, I was cross-dressing. [Close-up, sound and image still dissociated] I got to the point where you guys wouldn't've even realized that I'm a guy. You know, I was that, I was that lost. [Long shot: Kee is speaking on camera again; the frame has gone back to normal] I definitely was, and what really put me back into place was college, if, when I went back to school, that's when I learned: you can be who you wanna be without having to change yourself. [Close-up] But I'm glad that God changed me. If you guys believe in God, you'll understand what I'm talking about.

Kee's eyes light up, he smiles. Cut to the desert and a keyboard tune, and before the image fades out Kee walks back into the frame, away from the viewer, looking over his shoulder, twice, toward what must be Tuba City on the horizon.

Most interviews follow the same format as the one cited here: the interviewee introduces him- or herself, their name appears on-screen, and we hear a harmonica or piano tune of the kind so fitting for life-story portraiture that it is also somewhat cliché (and in fact some of the same tunes are heard in multiple videos). Next, with this tune as the sound bridge, we have a few vignetted mood shots: a sunset, a train, a neighborhood bar with tin ceiling and deer head, a decal "God is my co-pilot," a graffiti that reads "love," an "America" sign along the road (Figures 5–7). Many of the Americans we're introduced to are sitting in front of their houses or on their porches. Others are at their jobs, like Huey P. Long from Janesville, Wisconsin, who owns an antique store, or Kirstin from Asheville, North Carolina, who while she tells her story continues handling the dough balls spit out by a kneading machine. As in the interview with Kee, most videos at one point show the person sitting or standing silently in the vignetted frame, while their voice continues on the soundtrack, so as a voice-over now. With the interviewee speaking as if in third person, the camera just observes their mere presence, or it zooms in onto their faces, hands, and shoes, in the same intimate yet self-consciously cinematic fashion the camera at other moments gazes at the water tower, train, or decal. Through this self-reflexive cinematography, and by alternating conventional camera positions with more unusual points of view, *Interview Project* abstracts

Figures 5–7. *Interview Project* (d. Austin Lynch, Jason S., 2009–10, Absurda).

the stories from the people who live them. *Interview Project* is thus not simply the stories of 121 Americans, it also is a story of America, a *forgotten* America.

We could say, moreover, that *Interview Project* tunes into America. The act of manually tuning into a radio or television signal frequency has really disappeared from our pallet of everyday gestures. Gone is the delicate interplay between fingers and ears in order to hear what the ether has to say. Gone are the days a snowstorm made its way to our bulging screens, or one even had to climb the roof to restore reception (though soon we may talk nostalgically about spotty *wireless* fidelity during bad rainstorms). This fact that we no longer physically tune into our electronic portals as musicians tune their instrument is something to be nostalgic about. I certainly am, and so is *Interview Project*, which is an analog galore. Besides Lynch's appearance of a television announcer from the era when people still tuned into channels rather than programs, or the scrambling image at the start of each video (which in some videos returns during the actual interviews themselves, as if transmission were temporarily interrupted), there are the old media effects of the sound of a record stuck in its groove at the start of each video, the black-and-white of the interviews with Palmer Black (Blanding, Utah) and Manuel (Nashville, Tennessee), and the super-saturated 8-mm-home-video quality of the interview with T.J. from Morganton, North Carolina. In this last video the editing is also more frantic and the camera more restless, mirroring the young man's encounters with drugs: "Maybe this is just God's day, and God's night," T.J. speaks. "We get to be like souls, for like billions of years. . . . I don't understand how people can walk through their lives and not just have their minds just, completely, blown all the time, just like a baby. What do you think a baby thinks?"

To stay with the project's old media feel: in its "About" video, the sound of a reel projector accompanies a series of black-and-white samples, in which a few of the interviewed subjects repeat a question they've been asked: "How would I describe myself?" "What were my dreams as a child?" "How did I meet my wife?" "What are my plans for the future?" "What is this town like?" "How would I like to be remembered?" "When did I first experience death?" In response to this last question, Logan from Dakota, Iowa, says: "I don't know how to say this. I have died four times. . . . The fourth time was the reason

why I went to the facility, because I was tired of all the pain. I was tired of all the hurt, and I ended up pouring gasoline all over my body, light myself on fire. Hour later it starts raining and I'm still standing there alive."

The questions are timeless, and they're good questions, as they allowed Angie Schmidt and Julie Pepin, who did the actual interviewing, to *tune into* and become sensitive to the stories of people whose story is not often heard in the mainstream media. In most interviews the team's perspective is edited out, by which I mean that we only hear and see the answers but not the "questions asked" (the line spoken by a sampled canned voice that the close listener is able to pick up at the start of each video). There are a few exceptions. In some videos we have a clapboard syncing sound and image, while in others we hear the interviewers' voices, as in "Can you tell us what you are doing today?" to Joyce and June while they're seated on the steps of the Methodist church in Fostoria, Ohio. Or the question is spelled out in the frame: "What do you think of America right now?" (Figure 8). Chris Swartz, from Richfield, Pennsylvania, in response to this question: "It sucks. America sucks. You know, I think we're heading into a depression. The weather is messed up. You know you got global warming going on. Makes me wonder how much the world is even going to last. . . . I used to go to church a lot, but I think this religious thing is overrated." Or Kalmar Stevenson from Anaconda, Montana: "Are you optimistic about the future?" Her response: "Well, depends on what future. This country, I don't know. Economically, I don't know, things don't look good. Look, gas just went up ten cents this week. At least here, I don't know what it's doing elsewhere. It's just terrible." But of course the questions are *always* there, if only because the participants were instructed to repeat them. "Have I lived out my dream

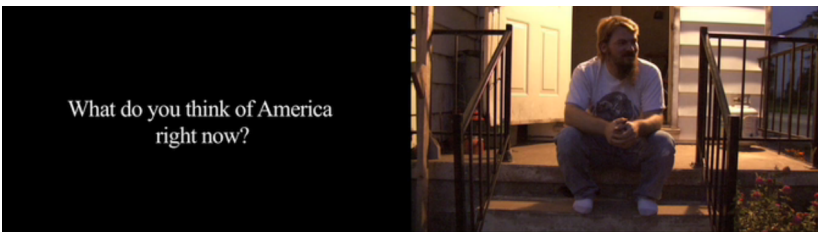

Figure 8. Episode 51: Chris Swartz (Richfield, Pennsylvania).

of life?," Richard from Jackson, Louisiana, asks himself. "I lived out the life that was there for me, I lived out the part of my life that I took." Or Lynn from Graham, Texas: "How would I describe myself? Broken, broken, I guess." And Jeff from Needles, California, in the very first interview: "Regrets? I have a basketful of them, but I cannot do anything about them."

Dreams and regrets is the thread that runs through *Interview Project*. Most of the persons the team met on their journey articulate modest expectations about life, such as finishing school or spending more time with their family. Some stories are little tragedies, like that of Wayne from Billings, Montana, who sees no way out of his life in a missionary shelter, or the story of Jess, who hasn't spoken to his children in twenty-five years and states to not be "proud of anything except for being alive." But there are also a few upbeat accounts, like the interview with Lauren Beach, an "earthiest" in her own words who now lives in Asheville, North Carolina, traditionally a hippie town at the

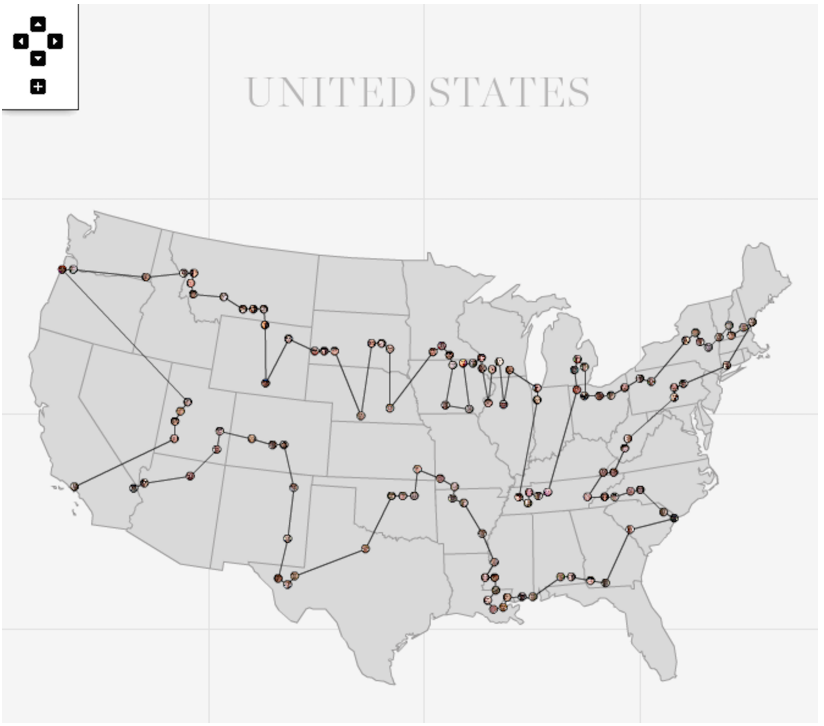

Figure 9. Across the United States bypassing interstates.

foot of the Appalachian Mountains: "I like just letting my life go. . . . I mean, living in America, and having opportunity, it's pretty nice."

In the more upbeat stories, the people interviewed often express their love for their families and children, and for God. God has been mentioned a few times now, and given the team's route (Figure 9) and the demographic of its subjects, this ubiquity of Christianity is not surprising. With exceptions including Billings, Asheville, and Nashville, all of the stops were small towns in what in terms of the U.S. political landscape we can refer to as the red parts of the nation, or now Trump country, to the extent the Republican voter base and Trump's electorate overlap. The majority of interviewees belong, moreover, to the working or lower middle classes, while like much independent cinema from the last quarter decade the project also gives face to the fact that the precarious struggle for a life story runs through traditional class divides. Moreover, like many films that can be considered part of the new realist tendency in world cinema—as far as U.S. independent cinema is concerned, one can think of *Chop Shop* (d. Ramin Bahrani, 2007), *Wendy and Lucy* (d. Kelly Reichardt, 2008), and *Rich Hill* (Tracy Droz Tragos and Andrew Droz Palermo, 2014)—*Interview Project* demonstrates a certain humanist, secular-religious outlook on people and their small worlds. This humanism is felt in the interview questions as well as in the captions that accompany the videos on the website. For example, in the caption for the video with Gordon from Moab, Utah, the team writes: "As we drove away, we all commented to each other that Gordon seemed to have found an inner peace." Or about Spira from Topanga Canyon, California: "Spira was our final interview and we think she was the perfect choice. Her spirit and beautiful outlook on life and love represents something which we hope people can take into their own lives." Directly connected to this humanist, somewhat redemptive gaze articulated by the captions, is the *instantaneous connection* to its interview subjects the team often felt. The team could "*instantly*" tell that Kee was "going to be a very special person"; they "saw Danny sitting on his porch as [they] drove past his house and *immediately* turned around to ask him for an interview"; or in the case of the seventeen-year-old Amber from Richfield, Utah, who in her interview says that she considers joining the military: "She *immediately* struck us as an interesting subject to interview" (italics in these quotations are mine).

What informed this special, immediate, and above all *human* connection the team felt so often? What informed their choice of interviewees? David Lynch's commentary on the project is not of much help here but is worth citing nonetheless. "What is *Interview Project?*" Lynch asks himself in the "About" video, while he stands against a plain black background, his shirt still fully buttoned up. I cite his answer, with a slash for each of the many cuts:

> *Interview Project* is a road trip where people have been found and interviewed. / People should watch *Interview Project*, because they're going to meet hundreds of people. / There was no plan really for *Interview Project*. / The people who were interviewed: each was different. / *Interview Project* is a 20,000 mile road trip over 70 days across and back the United States. / The team found the people driving along the roads, / going into bars, going into, you know, different locations, and there they were. / The people told their story. / It's so fascinating to look and listen to people. / What I hope people get out of *Interview Project* is a chance to meet these people. / It's, it's something that's human and you can't stay away from it.

Are the stories indeed that different from one another? Not according to Edmund Mullins, who observes a "relative sameness" of the people interviewed. "Broken dreams and missing teeth," he writes, "are the two most consistent elements that unite these individuals, making the project feel at times like a sustained exercise in poverty porn" (Mullins 2009). While I am also critical of *Interview Project*, I think Mullins is too harsh. *Interview Project* is not a freak show but a complex document of a nation in which indeed many are poor and lack access to health care. It is true, though, that the demographic of people sought out is somewhat homogenous. We mostly meet white people of fifty or above, while the project shows relatively few young people and people of color. Given the team's route, though, the project also never aimed to paint a complete, representative picture of America, or even of an *other* America, of the American 99 percent, so to speak. Whether or not we believe Lynch's claim that "there was no plan," the team stuck to less-traveled roads and smaller towns with predominantly white and older populations, while it bypassed metropolitan centers like Chicago, Baltimore, New Orleans, and thus also their large African American populations.

That inclusion would have made *Interview Project*'s chronicle of a nation even more compelling. Why, for example, didn't *Interview Project*

stop by Compton, California, not that far from Lynch's home? As Dr. Dre reports on his studio album named after the city just south of LA, once Compton counted as the "black American Dream," now it's a place where crime is "as high the ghetto," while the dream that many African Americans "thought they were buying has turned sour." To stay with this African American perspective on the American dream, in *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son:

> I knew that West Baltimore, where I lived; that the north side of Philadelphia, where my cousins lived; that the South Side of Chicago, where friends of my father lived, comprised a world apart. Somewhere out there beyond the firmament, past the asteroid belt, there were other worlds where children did not regularly fear for their bodies. I knew this because there was a large television resting in my living room. In the evenings I would sit before this television bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world. (Coates, 29)

Interview Project fails to incorporate this African American perspective on the American dream, as it fails to ask the question "What does it mean to be black in America today?" But like Coates, *Interview Project* also offers an outside, albeit predominantly white, outlook on an imagined other world. So how does *Interview Project* portray the America that it does? How sincere is its apparent humanism? Do we sense a tongue-in-cheek in the bright-eyed optimism of the captions? What to make of the hollowness of Lynch's "About" video? What about his smile in the intros? Is *Interview Project* playing a game with the viewer, who gets carried away by the often heartbreaking and sometimes heartwarming stories? Does the project play a game with its participants, not necessarily in the sense that it would be poking fun at them, but in that it makes them part of some ironic scheme that they've not been let into, a postmodern double layer that with stories like Kee's and T.J.'s would be nothing less than cruel? Let me be clear right away that *Interview Project* is not ironic and that its frequent invocation of a human connection actually seems heartfelt. This still leaves the question, though, of how to interpret Lynch's odd, alienating framing of the project. Lynch had no hands-on involvement in the interviews, so in that sense he's not one of *Interview Project*'s creative authors. But he's definitely the project's face. Lynch introduces each of the videos; he explains the project as a whole; and, crucially, his name is in the website's URL. In sum, Lynch's name and persona brand *Interview Project*,

which I take as an invitation to consider the project in dialogue with his cinematographic oeuvre.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

When considered in the context of Lynch's oeuvre, *Interview Project* seems an odd one out, but it's not, and in fact the project gets to the core of that oeuvre's fundamentally nonironic nature. From *Eraserhead* (1977) to *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), the Lynchian universe is surreal, absurd, weird, and often also creepy. These adjectives even apply to *The Straight Story* (1999), which of all of Lynch's films comes closest to *Interview Project*.[1] *The Straight Story* chronicles the three-hundred-mile trip that Alvin Straight (Richard Farmsworth) makes from Laurens, Iowa, across the Mississippi River, to Mt. Zion, Wisconsin, while driving a lawnmower, in order to mend his relationship with his sick brother (Figure 10). A seventy-three-year-old World War II veteran who used to have issues with drinking, Straight is above all a quintessential Midwesterner, originally from Moorhead, Minnesota, where he and his brother grew up on a farm. Regrets? Straight has a basketful of them, to cite Jeff from *Interview Project*, but Straight has grown older and wiser. He has learned to separate "the wheat from the chaff," as he tells a hitchhiker (Anastasia Webb) whom he meets on the road. When the young woman confides her fear about her family's reaction to her pregnancy, Straight tells her a story, sitting by the

Figure 10. Alvin Straight on his lawnmower cross-fading into a snapshot of big agriculture (*The Straight Story*, dir. David Lynch, 1999).

campfire, roasting wieners: "When my kids were real little, I used to play a game with 'm. I'd give each one of 'm a stick, one for each one of 'm, and I said: 'You break that.' Of course they could, real easy. Then I said, tie them sticks in a bundle and try to break that. Of course they couldn't. Then I'd say that bundle, that's family."

As its title suggests, *The Straight Story* has a linear narrative, and at first sight it is also Lynch's most realist film. But of course the film is not realist. Take for instance those agricultural screenscapes in which John Deere vehicles, shiny as at the state fair, solemnly tend to the grain belt of America. As Todd McGowan writes in *The Impossible David Lynch* (2007):

> What appears to be an absence of fantasmatic distortion in *The Straight Story* is misleading. The deception results from the nature of the fantasy it presents—the American heartland as a site of authentic community—and the extent to which we cannot see the film as fantasmatic indicates the extent of our investment in the fantasy that it presents. The exaggerated purity of the American heartland in the film is an index of the film's fantasmatic distortion, indicating that this distortion is fully at work in *The Straight Story*. The film's central character commits himself to the logic of fantasy in a way that no character in another Lynch film does. . . . Alvin never deviates from his effort to realize this fantasy despite the trauma attached to it, and his commitment has a direct effect on the structure of the film. (McGowan, 178)

Now, as often with Lynch, the question is: Does *The Straight Story* revel in this phantasmagoric Americana, or do we also detect some irony in Lynch's audiovisual voice? For McGowan this question of whether Lynch is ironic or not is a false dilemma that says more about "our own cultural immersion in irony as spectators" than about Lynch's films themselves. McGowan observes that the urge to interpret Lynch as ironic reaches a climax with *The Straight Story*, because the only alternative would seem to interpret his vision of America as "even more mythical than the Republican National Committee" (Johnson, 138). Yet, so McGowan continues, the fantasy of *The Straight Story* differs from that of the RNC. Even though *The Straight Story* is not ironic, the film foregrounds itself as fantasmatic and in doing so exposes the phantasmagoric nature of Midwestern myths. Lynch does not necessarily deconstruct or critique that mythological understanding. "*The Straight Story* neither affirms nor undermines the image of America it proffers,"

McGowan writes. "Instead, the film illustrates precisely what it would take to construct such a mythical world" (ibid.).

The Straight Story was based on a true story (and turned into a screenplay by John Roach and Mary Sweeney). It would have also made a great story for *Interview Project*, which in the words of Lee Siegel "is like the elementary materials of [Lynch's] movies before they become fictions." Siegel continues:

> All of Lynch's artistic creations seem to take as their starting point Norman Mailer's remark that the essence of America is the smell of gasoline and cheap perfume. For Lynch, the reality of the American dream is in marginal and vulnerable American places, where rough mobility and desperate sexuality collide and down-and-out people have no buffers between themselves and life's hard knocks. Getting knocked around is dreamlike, and Lynch always seems to be saying, through his surrealist devices, that in its hidden core, the American dream is dreamlike. (Siegel)

The American dream is indeed at the heart of Lynch's oeuvre, and in his ongoing engagement with that dream Lynch has been much more realist than his surrealism may lead one to believe. When I visited the United States for the first time, I was struck by how much diners and dive bars look like the ones I knew from *Twin Peaks* and one could say that what Fellini did for the spectacle that is Italy, Lynch has done for the dream that is America. It is a dream that is surreal in its reality, and it is this absurd, fundamentally ideological, dreamlike reality that Lynch keeps tuning into. As McGowan writes, Lynch reveals the oddity of the mainstream, a tactic McGowan sees reflected in Lynch's fully buttoned yet tieless shirt, an "odd appearance . . . at a time when fashion dictates an unbuttoned look" (McGowan, 13).

The American dream was originally the story of settlers and frontier towns, but it then became the story of the neighborhood. Lynch's work is all about neighborhoods. "In Lynchtown," Michel Chion writes, "everything is close and everyone knows each other," and he adds that "since *Eraserhead* and its next-door neighbor, the 'neighborhood' takes an almost metaphysical sense in Lynch" (Chion, 101, my translation). The quintessential Lynchtown is of course Twin Peaks, Washington, where dreams and reality flow into one another seamlessly. The television series of that name (which Lynch coauthored with Mark Frost and whose first two seasons aired on ABC in the early 1990s) sucks the viewer into the weird things that happen in this tight-knit

northeastern community in the wake of Laura Palmer's murder. In charge of this murder's investigation is special agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan), who needed some time off from the big city anyway. Whereas in American police drama, federal agents usually have a hard time winning the trust of the local authorities, Cooper blends in instantaneously. He is a community man whose heart beats faster from the smell of pine trees, doughnuts, and "a damn good cup of coffee" (Figure 11). He also meditates a lot and takes a keen interest in Tibet. In other words, he's your ideal neighbor. Other than police drama, *Twin Peaks* models itself on soap opera. The viewer is hooked by personal intrigue much like the show's characters themselves are hooked by the show-within-the-show *Invitation to Love* that is seen in each of the first season's episodes. To cite Lynch on the appeal of *Interview Project* out of context: "It's human and you can't stay away from it."

By incorporating popular television and, in his later work, plunging into a hyperbolic Hollywood (*Mulholland Dr.*, *Inland Empire*), Lynch has been postmodern in his strategies. But Lynch, so I agree with McGowan, is not ironic, at least not in a way in which irony is defined in opposition to sincerity. David Foster Wallace in his 1997 essay "David Lynch Keeps His Head" defines "*Lynchian*" as "a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter"

Figure 11. Special agent Dale Cooper (left) lets Harry, the local sheriff of Twin Peaks, in on his little secret: "Harry, every day, once a day, give yourself a present. Don't plan it, don't wait for it, just let it happen" (*Twin Peaks*, season 1, 1990).

(Wallace, 161). Further on in this essay Wallace writes: "Nobody in Lynch's movies analyzes or metacriticizes or hermeneuticizes or anything, including Lynch himself. This set of restrictions makes Lynch's movies fundamentally unironic, and I submit that Lynch's lack of irony is the real reason some cinéastes . . . see him as naïf or a buffoon" (199). In his railing against irony, Wallace has been associated with a cultural tendency known as the "new sincerity." The term first popped up in the mid-1980s and has served as an umbrella for art, music, fiction, and cinema that seeks to reinvent a belief in speaking authentically in the wake of postmodern irony, and especially, according to Wallace, of what irony has become under the influence of television. "All U.S. irony," Wallace argues in the essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993), "is based on an implicit 'I don't really mean what I say.' So what does irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it's impossible to mean what you say? That maybe it's too bad it's impossible, but wake up and smell the coffee already? Most likely, I think, today's irony ends up saying: 'How very banal to ask what I mean'" (Wallace, 67–68).

Irony depends on the incongruity between a statement and its intended meaning, or in the case of situational irony, a planned and an actual course of events (not to be confounded with tough luck, which is what most situations in Alanis Morissette's song come down to). In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson distinguishes between two modes of irony: pastiche and parody. Both forms of discourse imitate, yet with different stakes and intentions. Parody, Jameson writes, imitates with the intention of critique or laughter. Here a good example is David Byrne's 1986 film *True Stories*, in which the Talking-Heads-frontman-donned-as-Texas-cowboy addresses the viewer while he parks his convertible in a majestic parking lot. "The shopping mall has replaced the town square as the center of many American cities," so he speaks, "Shopping itself has become the activity that brings people together. . . . What time is it? No time to look back." Byrne's parody of an America that doesn't look back lines up with Jameson's analysis of postmodern society as one that has "forgotten how to think historically" (Jameson, ix). For that precise reason Jameson is critical of pastiche. Pastiche imitates, but without thinking historically, and without political motivation. Jameson writes,

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs: it is to parody what that other interesting and historically original modern thing, the practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the "stable ironies" of the eighteenth century. (17)

At first sight, much of Jameson's definition of pastiche applies to Lynch, because doesn't Lynch over and again imitate the dead language of the post–World War II era American dream without positing a "healthy linguistic normality" (Jameson, 17) alongside that borrowed, abnormal tongue? The situation is more complex. Lynch does not imitate the American dream discourse, rather he speaks the language of the dream itself. Lynch's work and appearance offer no position of normality, not even *Interview Project* (to the degree, again, this is a Lynch project), whose documentation of an American Precariat seems to call for a political stance and critical distance. With Lynch we're always in the middle of the dream, even those moments when we seem to have cruelly woken up. Think of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*, narratives from which there is really no way out.

Lynch's discourse is thus oneiric, dreamlike, rather than ironic, and his work is an ongoing diagnosis of a dreaming America, which is why Wallace saw an ally in him. In dreams there are no incongruities, no facts and fictions, no difference between ironic and nonironic speech. Things just are, because it is not the conscious *me* who dreams, but something in me that's doing the dreaming, or as Jacques Lacan writes: the dreaming "subject does not see where [the dream] is leading, [s]he follows" (Lacan, 75). Dreaming is an activity usually done at home and it therefore would make one really uncomfortable to suspect their home was under surveillance by a stranger. One of the creepiest scenes in all of Lynch is when in *Lost Highway* (1997) Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) meets the Mystery Man (Robert Blake), and the latter claims to be at Fred's house, *right at this moment*. "Call me," the bulgy-eyed guy instructs Fred, while he hands him an early-generation mobile phone. Fred calls, and the same guy he's talking to right here at this party

answers his landline: "I told you I was here." Now Fred is creeped out. "Who are you?" he asks, upon which both incarnations of the creepy guy start laughing out loud: "Give me back my phone." Just earlier that evening, Fred and his wife Renee (Patricia Arquette) were still on their couch, watching video tapings of their house anonymously left on their porch (a horror premise copied by Michael Haneke for his 2005 *Caché*, like *Lost Highway* a dream-reality Moebius strip). Understandably that night Fred and Renee don't dream that comfortable anymore.

Lost Highway, as well as *Mulholland Dr.* and *Inland Empire,* are part of a wider tendency of complex storytelling in contemporary cinema. They are films that destabilize the classical plot-story relation, because in these films elements "are not simply interwoven, but *entangled*," as Warren Buckland defines the puzzle film (Buckland, 3). But Lynch's films are not mind-game films. Mind-game films, so Thomas Elsaesser writes, are "indicative of a 'crisis' in the spectator-film relation, in the sense that the traditional 'suspension of disbelief' [is] . . . no longer deemed appropriate, compelling, or challenging enough" (Elsaesser, 16). Lynch, though, doesn't play games with the viewer. Lynch is serious, even though his smile may suggest otherwise, not deadpan serious, but serious in his surrealism and, in the case of *Mulholland Dr.* and *Inland Empire*, in his surrealist submersion in the Hollywood dream. And here it's important to emphasize that these are not Hollywood films, but films *about* Hollywood, because Lynch has always worked in the auteur tradition, the tradition of film as art.

In *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the Lynchian oneiric discourse is captured poignantly by Monica Bellucci, as she appears in a dream by FBI director Gordon Cole (acted by Lynch himself; see Figure 12): "We're like the dreamer who dreams and then lives inside the dream. But who is the dreamer?" Where the original *Twin Peaks* at least still had one unambiguous answer to this question, namely "Dale Cooper," in the show's 2017 return Cooper's character has bifurcated. While the only thing the viewer wants is to be reunited with the old Coop, there are now "two Coopers," as Cole, who is hard of hearing, yells into his smartphone. (In contrast with *Interview Project,* there's a lot of new media technology in *Twin Peaks: The Return*, from Skype and Macbooks to vlogging and texting; see Figure 13.) The two Coopers, both acted by MacLachlan, are most easily referred to as bad Coop and good Coop. Bad Coop goes back to Cooper's possession by evil, or "BOB" in the

show's terminology, twenty-five years earlier at the end of season 2. Good Coop, meanwhile, is in a sleep-walker-like state and for most of the season is mistaken for Dougie Jones, an insurance agent who lives in a white-picket-fenced Las Vegas suburb with his wife Janey-E (Naomi Watts) and their son.

Twin Peaks: The Return is an absolute highlight in Lynch's oeuvre, in particular episode 8, which tells the show's origin myth. At the start

Figure 12. FBI director Gordon Cole (played by David Lynch) against the backdrop of the first nuclear bomb test in the New Mexico desert (*Twin Peaks: The Return*, 2017).

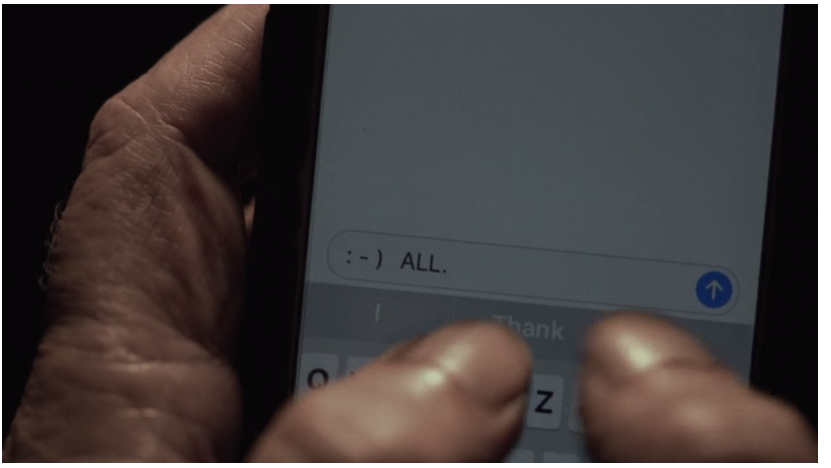

Figure 13. Bad Coop (Kyle MacLachlan) texting that the job is done.

Figure 14. Good Coop (also Kyle MacLachlan) trapped in the American dream, together with his wife Janey-E. (Naomi Watts).

of this episode we're in a car. Bad Coop is in shotgun. He has just escaped from jail and now tosses his cell phone out of the window, wary that the device might be tracked. In the next scene, he is killed, upon which he is reanimated by hobolike spirits flickering over the screen. Following an intermezzo by Nine Inch Nails in The Road House (Twin Peaks' music venue that in the last quarter century has become a stellar place to catch touring acts), the episode cuts to the first nuclear bomb test in the New Mexico desert in 1945, which coincides with the birth of BOB. The camera zooms in on the nuclear mushroom, and then *enters* it, unleashing a ten-minute avant-garde-cinema explosion: from black and white to color and at once reminiscent of Stan Brakhage and the star-gate sequence in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). In fact, later in this crazy episode we *are* in space, from where a crystal ball containing Laura Palmer's iconic high-school image is tossed to earth to wake up Good Coop from the American dream in which he has been trapped (Figure 14). Do we read a critique of America in *Twin Peaks: The Return*, which travels from New York City to South Dakota, from Vegas to a face-off between good and bad Coop in Twin Peaks? I prefer to resist such an interpretation of *Twin Peaks* according to which the show would be an interpretation of a real dreaming America. *Twin Peaks* is a parallel reality, much like the extradimensional Black Lodge within the show's dreamworld.

As far as that American dream is concerned, its story goes back to the era that John Winthrop outlined for his Puritan audience "a city upon a hill." In his sermon on the boat to Massachusetts, Winthrop sketched a society of opportunity in which God wants that hard work shall be rewarded. The expression "American Dream" first showed up in newspapers and books in the mid- to late 1800s in reference to the ongoing stream of European settlers and the pioneers who ventured westward into the land of bounty. The myth was popularized during the Great Depression, with an important role for James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (1931). Adams describes the "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Adams, xvi). For the happy few, that life is the heroic journey from newspaper boy to millionaire, which on its turn is the urban adaptation of the gold rush legend, mythologized in the twentieth century by, among others, Walt Disney.

For the masses, the American dream became the middle-class ideal of a safe home, of a place for you and your family to lead a life undisturbed by outlaws and crime, a place in other words where your dreams are safe. After all, having worked all day—in the city (men) or at home (women)—in order to sustain one's dream, a good night's sleep is most welcome. Roughly speaking, this ideal of home was born in the first settlements and frontier towns. It then traveled to the small towns of Main Street, U.S.A., and from there, through time, to a neatly trimmed suburbia. Recently, the American middle classes have been moving back into the city, where the dream continues in the condo quarters that suck the life from urban centers all over America and beyond, from Seattle (Cooper's homebase) via Minneapolis to Brooklyn, Toronto, Amsterdam, and so on, because condo architecture is a transnational phenomenon.[2]

For a long time many people really believed in the American dream, and many still do, in spite of everything, like Billy in *Interview Project*:

> Hi, my name is Bill Bar; I live in Wells, Minnesota. It's a little town in Southern Minnesota, a farming community. And it's a town of about 2,400 people, and it's been hit by the agricultural revolution like most of the small towns in rural America, and the farms have all gotten bigger, and so the population has dwindled, and the main streets are being hit by the box stores and the big cities. But it's a good place to live, it's an Eden,

> because we have very little crime. You can walk, jog at night, send your children out, don't have to worry about them, and people just generally look out for each other.

That America does indeed exist, but on its dark side the United States is also a country where a city like Detroit—once the cradle of the modern American dream—can go bankrupt (as if the United States is not really a union), a country chronically divided and stuck in political stalemates, of racial segregation and institutionalized police violence, a country where almost one percent of the adult population is in prison, a country where many people are sick, and where Wal-Mart encourages its underpaid "associates" to apply for food stamps. Moreover, also well before @realDonaldTrump's " Great America" show, the United States was a place where fact and fiction, reality and parody, are hard to tell apart. Who could distinguish Tina Fey from Sarah Palin? How many first-time viewers of *The Colbert Report*—in which political humorist Stephen Colbert parodized the "fair and balanced" outlook of conservative pundit programs—must have checked their remote controls to verify they had not accidentally tuned into Fox News? And which Facebook users scrolling through their timeline have never mistaken an *Onion* article for an actual news story, or vice versa? "A dream dies," *The Onion* reported in March 2011, following the news that Edward Tuffy from Pennington, Illinois, who was the last person who still believed that America is the land of boundless opportunity, "quietly let go of the dream, while watching television and eating cereal on his couch" (Figure 15).[3]

In a similar vein, *Interview Project* investigates what's left of life in small-town America after the decay of the small town, long the backbone of the American dream, now crushed by box stores, abandoned by railroads, and bypassed by interstates. Only in Disneyland, where dreams come true, has Main Street remained the thriving artery it once used to be (though truth be told, over the past few decades many small towns have adopted Main Street programs in order to preserve and revitalize traditional commercial districts).[4] But the decay of Main Street—in Disneyland only a short train ride away from Frontier Land—has not caused the fiction of America itself to disappear, a fiction that, as stated, in the second half of the twentieth century found a new home in suburbia, and in the car that gets you there. The dream became

Figure 15. March 2011: The Death of the American Dream.

an advertized life, a lifestyle, and the life that advertising sold was still a fundamentally nonironic dream. As Raymond Williams writes in "Advertising: The Magic System" (1980), modern advertising enchants the material object sold, because "if we were sensibly materialist . . . a washing-machine would be a useful machine to wash clothes, rather than an indication that we are forward-looking or an object of envy to our neighbors" (Williams, 185).

LYNCH™

A good illustration of this sincere promotion of the American way of life is found in *Mad Men* (created by Matthew Weiner, 2007–15, AMC), the story of a rookie advertising agency in 1960s New York City. In the first season's finale, titled "The Wheel," the viewer is seated front row when Don Draper (Jon Hamm) pitches his campaign for Kodak's new slide projector. Don starts by recalling the memory of an old colleague, "a Greek named Teddy," from whom he learned how to stir in his audience "a sentimental bond" with the product that goes deeper than its newness: "Nostalgia, it's delicate, but potent." On the cue of Don's "sweetheart," the only woman in the room switches on the projector, and the camera places the viewer among the men at the conference table. While the machine soothingly clicks from slide to slide,

Don continues, speaking over the frame-filling snapshots of his own seemingly perfect family life:

> Teddie told me that in Greek, nostalgia literally means the pain from an old wound. It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn't a spaceship; it's a time machine. It goes backwards, forwards, takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called The Wheel, it's called The Carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels, around and around, and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved.

There is no reason to believe that Don is not feeling what he's saying. He even tears up a bit. Moreover, Don is totally right that the most iconic campaigns of early post–World War II American consumer society at once tapped into and fed a collective nostalgia for a mythical, childhoodlike era in which dreams were still straightforward wish fulfillments. Similarly, *Mad Men* itself taps into the nostalgia many of us may feel for obsolete media such as slide projectors, typewriters, and Bakelite phones, and more generally for the aesthetics of the early decades of consumer culture: the fashion, the glossy household appliances, pastel-colored Chevies, habits now considered unhealthy or illicit like smoking, drinking, or having sex at work, *and* advertising. Advertising was different in the golden age, not better but different, as campaigns still sought to create the illusion to actually *believe* in the things they sold, and here it probably helped that this new car or that new laundry machine—in sum, this new *life*—was actually still "made in America."

Sincerity is more difficult to feign when the thing promoted is less a thing and above all a brand. One strategy to promote your semblance of a semblance is simply to lie that it's "the real thing," but ironically, since Coca Cola substituted sugar for high-fructose corn syrup—corn harvested from those endless Midwestern fields Alvin Straight traverses—the American consumer still in love with that old-fashioned real-sugar taste has to buy a bottle imported from Mexico, which on its turn is only a watered-down version of the Coke of the early days of Prohibition. Another strategy is to be openly ironic with your audience, like Pepsi. In his essay on television cited earlier, David Foster Wallace discusses Pepsi's famous 1980s campaign as a case in point of TV irony at work. In the ad we see a packed beach going wild at the amplified sound of a fresh can of Pepsi as it is being poured into

a glass. While the voice-over calls Pepsi "the choice of a new generation," a hip and hot crowd flocks toward the concession van. The ad's irony, Wallace argues (following Mark Crispin Miller), is that there is in fact little "choice" in the horde's Pavlovian reaction. It is not the revolutionary taste of the beverage itself that the ad calls to the viewer's attention, but the implied fact that Pepsi has *already* been advertised successfully. Joe Briefcase, however, who is the protagonist of Wallace's essay, is not like those will-deprived masses, and instead *gets* the ad's double layer. "The commercial invites a complicity," Wallace argues, "between its own witty irony and veteran viewer Joe's cynical, nobody's fool appreciation of that irony. It invites Joe into an in-joke that the audience is the butt of. It congratulates Joe Briefcase, in other words, on transcending the very crowd that defines him" (Wallace, 60–61). That's why Joe, and with him indeed many of his generation, chooses Pepsi, and hence also the title of Wallace's essay: "E Unibus Pluram" ("From one, many"), a pun on "*E Pluribus Unum*" ("Out of many, one"), which for long was considered the de facto motto of the U.S. (until 1956 when Congress adopted "In God We Trust" as the union's official motto).

For Lynch, there are no in-jokes. His dream worlds contain a lot of pop culture, but there are no pop culture *references*, and here it's relevant to note that the 1986 film *Blue Velvet* is from well before the time that Pabst Blue Ribbon became ironic. (Moreover, Frank, played by Dennis Hopper, prefers his PBR in a glass, not in a can.) But "Lynch" definitely has become a brand. His organic Signature Cup Coffee is available at Whole Foods and online. He owns a nightclub in Paris named Silencio (after the nightclub in *Mulholland Dr.*). Lynch has taught at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. Since 2005 there is the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace, which brings Transcendental Meditation—a form of mantra meditation—to "at risk populations."[5] Lynch paints, writes, and sings, often about dreams. And even though in his book *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity* (2006), he claims to be "through with film as a medium. For me, film is dead" (Lynch, 149),[6] he occasionally still does make a short on commission, including *Lady Blue Shanghai* (a 2010 Internet promotion film for Christian Dior), a music video for Nine Inch Nails ("Came Back Haunted," 2013), and in 2011 a feature-length live web broadcast of a Duran Duran concert, unironically sponsored by American Express (after having made

commercials for Giorgio Armani, Adidas, and Sony, among others, earlier in his career). Moreover, Lynch tweets, announcing for example, in 2016, the return of *Twin Peaks*: "That gum you like is going to come back in style! #damngoodcoffee."

The element that holds this frenzy of creativity together is above all Lynch's persona, his media persona, which he himself describes nicely in his coffee web-shop: "It's all about the beans . . . and I'm just full of beans."[7] Besides loads of caffeine, the secret behind his high spirits is meditation, twice a day for twenty minutes, for over thirty years. "It was as if, as they say, I was in an elevator, and someone snipped the cables," Lynch in a television interview describes his first encounter with meditation. "Down . . . Bliss . . . The most beautiful. It was familiar and yet unique. . . . I said . . . since then, the word 'unique' should be saved for this experience."[8] As good cultural critics, we have been trained not to read the author into his work, or vice versa, but clicking through the many Lynch videos on YouTube and also following his recent appearances on both the big and the small screen, what perhaps is most striking is the consistency of Lynch's appearance across his nonscripted, "real life" performances (interviews, his lectures on meditation, the long interview with him in *The Art Life*), his creative self-performances (including the *Interview Project* intros, his daily LA weather reports, and the television episodes of *Louie* in which Lynch instructs Louis C.K. how to become a better comedian), and his acting performances, like in *Twin Peaks: The Return* and the film *Lucky* (2017, U.S.), directed by John Caroll Lynch (no family relationship), in which Lynch (David that is) plays a guy named Howard whose tortoise, "President Roosevelt," has escaped. As Howard philosophizes in a way only Lynch would be able to: "He affected me. There are some things in this universe that is bigger than all of us, and a tortoise is one of them." Though in the scripted performances like this one there is an acted absurdity absent from the nonscripted ones, there is always that familiar buttoned-up and combed-yet-wild look. And there is never any trace of irony in Lynch's voice, no double layers, no tongue-in-cheek, unlike, as for example, with Jean-Luc Godard, who always seems to be performing his media persona, also in interviews (and who, case in point, didn't show in Agnès Varda's 2017 *Visages, villages*, despite their rendez-vous, unable as he is to surrender control of the montage). Fact or fiction, Lynch's Lynchian self-presentation is always somewhat

like that of a dream character with whom fiction and fact continuously blend into each other.

"Lynch" is a strong brand, but I'm not sure if it strengthens *Interview Project*. Of course, Lynch's involvement, including his name in the URL, has boosted the project's exposure and probably made it financially possible in the first place. But his presence also legitimizes us to redirect to him *Interview Project*'s guiding question, "What do you think of America right now?" Lynch in fact did answer this question in 2001, in an interview with John Powers for *LA Weekly*. Enjoy the interview:

> It's not [Powers writes] that Lynch has no idea of how he'd like the world to be. For all his dark, perverse imaginings, his social values are rooted in the sunlit credo of the American West: *Don't tread on me*. Nothing matters to him more than his freedom to do whatever he thinks up. I first saw this side of him one afternoon in 1989 when he began railing about the city government: It wouldn't let him put razor wire around his property to keep itinerants from cutting across his property. He shook his head:
>
> "You know, John, this country's in pretty bad shape when human scum can walk across your lawn, and they put *you* in jail if you shoot 'em."
>
> While Lynch doesn't seem like the sort of man who's packing heat, he was drawn to Ronald Reagan because of his "cowboy image" and laments that L.A.'s wonderland of individual freedom is being hedged in by rules and regulations. He takes building-code restrictions personally. "People," he says, "should be able to build *what* they want to build, *when* they want to build it, *how* they want to build it."
>
> . . .
>
> Lynch's picture of the world was formed in the 1950s, and he clearly adores the mythologized version, that fabulous decade of jukeboxes and sneaky-perverse movies like *Rear Window*.
>
> "It was a feeling in the air that anything was possible. People were enthusiastically inventing things that thrilled them. And there was a happiness in the air. There was plenty going on beneath the surface, but it wasn't as dark a time because there was that other thing going along with it. The '50s was a time when people seemed to be going crazy with design. And the cars were just incredible. I mean, you look at them, and it's like you start to fall in love. That changed, you know, in the '60s and '70s. The cars were pitiful. I mean *pitiful*. It made you ashamed. You'd wanna hang your head and go in a corner. It was sickening."
>
> We're talking a couple of days before September 11, but Lynch is already gloomy about the state of the world:

> "You just get the feeling that you're sort of powerless in the big picture. And it's not like 'I better get mine,' but I'm gonna burrow in and concentrate and enjoy doing that. Not try to put my head in the sand, but for my own protection let as little of that outside negativity affect me."
>
> He lights another American Spirit. (Powers)

Now, it wouldn't be totally fair to read Lynch's crass statements about shooting people into *Interview Project*. Moreover, based on a tweet that he was feeling *the bern* (Figure 16), Lynch's political leanings may have altered since this interview. Still, *Interview Project*, in its retro-analog and naively humanist framing, unmistakably bears Lynch's outspoken and somewhat conservative stamp, thereby somewhat reducing the participants' life stories to a preconceived, mildly reactionary, and predominantly white vision on the state of the union. In other words, the "Lynch" brand imposes itself too much onto *Interview Project*. Granted, like many in this digital era I share some of Lynch's nostalgia for the design of the immediate post–World War II decades—the 1960s and '70s and also the 1980s and '90s—but it's also important to be critical of nostalgia, and to recognize one's desire for bygone times as an act of historical amnesia, to invoke Jameson's diagnosis of the postmodern condition. *Interview Project* isn't critical about its play on nostalgia, unlike *Mad Men*, which through its self-reflexive aesthetic and its exploration of the 1960s dream industry makes its viewers reflect on their own retro fetishism. *Mad Men* ends, by the way, with Don meditating, mindfully letting go of all that "outside negativity," to cite Lynch. Then, in its final moments, *Mad Men* gives us one of more proof of Don's creative genius, as a close-up of his blissful face gives way to Coca Cola's iconic 1971 hilltop commercial, bubbling up in Don's

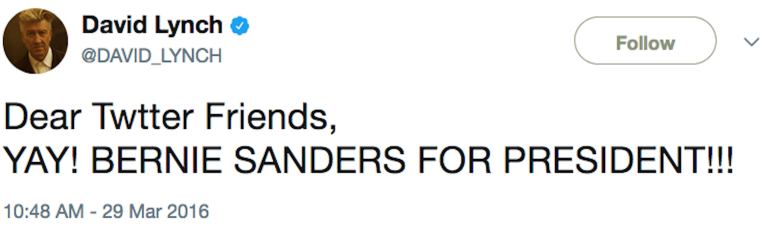

Figure 16. David Lynch feelin' the Bern.

well-rested mind. I take *Mad Men*'s finale as a reminder to not confuse meditation with politics, which is what Lynch seems to do with his Transcendental Meditation project, and as *Interview Project* does with its lovingkind outlook.

This particular brand of Lynchian humanism also inspired Austin Lynch, Jason S, and their team to take their equipment across the Atlantic for *Interview Project Germany* (2011, www.interviewproject.de). Fifty videos from all over Germany, the same introductions shot in Lynch's L.A. house ("Today we're meeting Klaus. The team found Klaus mending his neighbor's fence"), the same plan, and the same twinkle in Lynch's eyes: "There's no plan when the team sets out. They don't know who they're gonna meet. They just set out," as Lynch explains in the *Über* video. "What type of food did the team eat for *Interview Project Germany*? The team ate German food for *Interview Project Germany*." A loosely recurring theme is that of the former East-West divide. For example, Heidemarie from Nordhausen, Thüringen, born in 1944, and whose father was in the Luftwaffe, taught Russian, German, and geography. "We had to be multi-skilled in the times of the GDR," she explains in German and subtitled in English, "You had to go where you were needed." Or take Klaus Münstermann, 54, from Neubukow, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Klaus grew up on a farm, and he spent a year in prison, after he had been accused of "*Republikflucht*." Klaus is sitting in an electric wheelchair behind a supermarket covered in graffiti (Figure 17). Back in the day, the Stasi pressured Klaus to sign up to be an informer, but he resisted, upon which he was promised "a miserable life, that's what's taken care of." Since then, Klaus has felt like the black sheep of his community. "Here they'd like to get rid of me rather today, rather yesterday than today or tomorrow. They'd like to push me far away." How would Klaus like to be remembered? "I want to be remembered as someone who helped out, was there. . . . Who doesn't talk. Who isn't a police spy, till today. Like it's always been."

The interview with Klaus is one of the many moving portraits in what like the original *Interview Project* is a unique yet again predominantly white cross section of a population tested by life in a Western superpower. But to see Lynch struggling with the German names just makes his whole Lynchian performance a little too performed. Out of his comfort zone of the nonironic American dream discourse, Lynch's

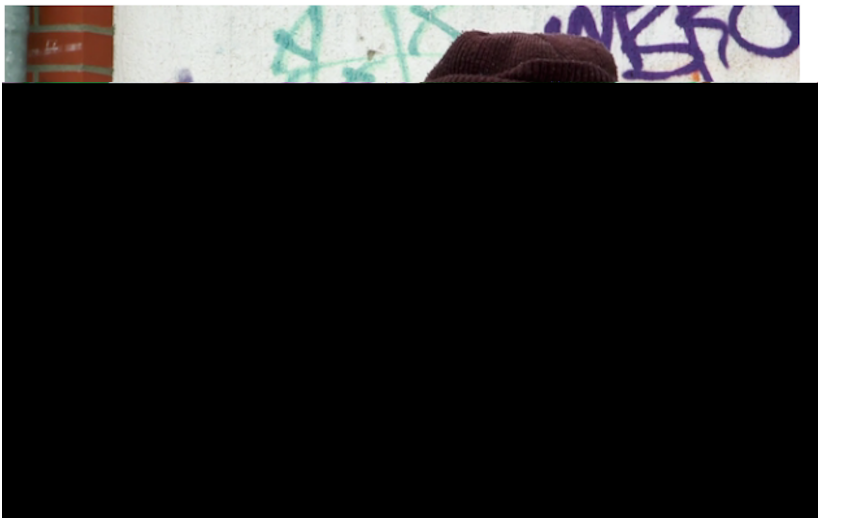

Figure 17. Klaus Münstermann (Neubukow, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) in *Interview Project Germany.*

Figure 18. Billie from Wells, Minnesota, about the American dream.

"particular kind of irony" (Wallace), his particular brand of unironic irony, becomes too much of a gimmicky, hollow pastiche. Whereas the American *Interview Project* still allows us to understand Lynch's jolly and weird appearance as a sort of immanent expression of the American dream discourse, in *Interview Project Germany* the director appears as what Jameson calls "a statue with blind eyeballs."

To end on a positive note, let's look at one more American story, told by someone we've already met, namely Billy from Minnesota (the only state that, together with the District of Columbia, turned blue when Lynch's once-hero Ronald Reagan was elected president). After having eloquently praised the virtues of rural America in spite of its colonization by big agriculture, Billy, who is seated at a picnic table and who's wearing a red sweater saying "Billy's" and a purple Wildcats cap, tells the following story (Figure 18):

> A fellow during the Depression was outta work and he became a hobo. And he came into this one town, and he rapped on the door, and a gal came to the door, and he said, "I'm hungry, do you have any work for me, so I can have some food?" She said: "No, this is a house of ill repute. I have no work for you. But here's 50 cents." So he walked into town and there was a fellow sellin' bananas. And he bought 25 cents worth of bananas and ate, and then he bought some more, and he sold those bananas for 50 cents. And he started out in the American Dream. He started building a business. Pretty soon he had a stand of his own. Pretty soon he had a store of his own. Pretty soon he was a warehouse. Just was doing great. And some guy came in and said: "You know, my son just graduated from Harvard. And I'd like to buy a business for him. You have a nice, clean business. Would you like to sell?" And he says: "No, I really don't wanna sell. I'm very happy with what I'm doing." He says, "well," he says, "don't you have a price?" "No, I just don't wanna sell." He said: "I'll give you a check. You just write out what you want." And the guy says: "No, no, no, no." He says: "No, I don't want it." "Well," he said, "you could've just, you know, done anything what you wanted to. You could have gone to college and become an accountant." And he said: "If I had gone to college and become an accountant I probably would have ended up as a bookkeeper in a house of ill repute."

Billy smiles a big smile. Cut to a long shot of Billy waving presidentially from the balcony of his typically Minnesotan home, set against a joyous harmonica tune and a laugh track. Once the epitome of cheap TV, in the digital era the canned laughter makes a little nostalgic, and in doing so sums up the lure—the appeal but also the pitfall—of *Interview*

Project. *Interview Project* captures the current crisis of the American dream in an aesthetic framework reminiscent of the post–World War II heydays of that dream. But regardless of how much we may still be in love with that aesthetic, let's not be *too* nostalgic, lest we forget that in the United States the contradictions inherent to capitalism have always been more absurd than anywhere else.

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Notes

1. Here I should also mention *American Chronicles*, a documentary TV series produced by Lynch/Frost Productions that Lynch was sideways involved in artistically. The show aired on Fox for three months in the fall of 1990 before the network pulled it because of poor viewer ratings. It was largely the work of Mark Frost, with whom Lynch co-wrote *Twin Peaks* (that same fall in its second season on ABC). Lynch served as an uncredited Executive Producer for *American Chronicles*, and he codirected one episode, "Champions," which aired in the U.K. but not in the United States. Taking the form of montage sequences with occasional narration by Richard Dreyfuss, *American Chronicles* looks at unusual aspects of American society, including the New Orleans Mardi Gras celebrations, the Miss Texas pageant shows, Manhattan nightlife, and *Playboy*'s Hugh Hefner. See also Josh Zyber, "Auteur Theory: 'American Chronicles,'" *High-Def Digest* (September 4, 2012), http://www.highdefdigest.com/blog/american-chronicles-david-lynch/.

2. As far as Minneapolis is concerned, in a recent *Atlantic* article, "The Miracle of Minneapolis," Derek Thompson suggests substituting the question "What's wrong with American cities?" for "What's right with Minneapolis?" He observes that "no other place mixes affordability, opportunity, and wealth so well." Indeed, Minneapolis is, and historically has been, a progressive city, for a long time the Midwestern grain-exchange center, now also a center for health care and the arts. Moreover, unlike many midsize American cities, Minneapolis has a developed public infrastructure, including transit and affordable wi-fi (connected to the streetlight network). On the other side, like so many U.S. cities, Minneapolis is also a place that suffers from institutionalized racism and police shootings.

3. "American Dream Declared Dead As Final Believer Gives Up" (video), *The Onion: America's Finest News Source*, http://www.theonion.com/video/american-dream-declared-dead-as-final-believer-giv,19846/.

4. See http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/the-programs/.

5. http://www.davidlynchfoundation.org/.

6. See also Tim Walker, "Waxing Lyrical: David Lynch on His New Passion—And Why He May Never Make Another Movie," *The Independent* (June 23, 2013), http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/waxing-lyrical-david-lynch-on-his-new-passion—and-why-he-may-never-make-another-movie-8665457.html.

7. http://www.davidlynchcoffee.co.uk/.

8. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPsgsuSvbXo.

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