

# CURSED EMPIRES

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**Abstract** In the article, the author uses a philosophical understanding of an oath to interpret an artwork, and then uses this interpretation to criticize modern politics as cursed empires. The narrative is presented in four steps. It begins with a short presentation of Mark Lilla's and John Gray's diagnosis of the Anglo-American ideological crisis, in which liberalism is modified by cultural politics which to both writers looks like a revivalist religion. Lilla and Gray metaphorically use the word "curse" to explain the new ideological constellation determined by the phenomenon called "woke". The second part presents Agamben's understanding of the relationship between an oath and a curse, which is used to interpret David Lynch's film *Inland Empire* in the third part. The author tries to show that the film deals with an original idea that a work of art can break a curse. In the fourth part, the author uses the idea of cursing and uncursing to criticize the West for failures in the war in former Yugoslavia, during the migrant crisis, and in the ongoing reappearance of "radical evil" in Gaza. The argument is constructed with a help of Greil Marcus' idea that politics can curse themselves if they fail to live up to their ideological promises. The author concludes that the EU and the USA failed to live up to their alleged founding principles and became cursed empires. The cultural war in which they find themselves seen from the perspective of magico-religious domain in which the oath and the curse originally appeared is not metaphorically a curse but literally the payment for the sin of omission.

**Key words** David Lynch, Giorgio Agamben, Greil Marcus, Mark Lilla, John Gray, curse in politics, oath, empire, USA, EU

## Introduction

During the war in Bosnia in the mid-nineties an international TV journalist talked to a man from Sarajevo who was holding a few months old baby in his arms. The baby had only one leg because the other one was cut off by a sniper bullet. The father calmly said: "Stići će ga njena suza" ("Her tear will get him", "He will pay for her tears"). I do not think the journalist understood what the man said but this is an almost poetic way to pronounce the call for justice in the form of a curse.

This is a text in which I will write about the concept of a curse in a relatively unusual way. I will try to interpret an American movie with some help from a few rearranged ideas from a book written by an Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

I will try to show that David Lynch's movie *Inland Empire* deals with the problem of cursing which creates a type of hatred capable of outliving those who originally uttered it. The old curses are understood as the bills that still must be paid.

My interpretation is organized in four segments. In the first one, I will briefly present Lilla's and Gray's understanding of the mutation of liberalism caused by cultural politics and explain what I mean by empire in this text. In the second part of the paper, I will write about Agamben's understanding of the relationship between the oath and the curse as discussed by him in *The Sacrament of Language*, and then show how Croatian language shows the connection between the concepts of oath, curse, perjury, swearing and damnation. In the third segment, I will focus on David Lynch's film *Inland Empire* and briefly present and comment two different interpretations of this film (Olson's and Nochimson's). Their understandings of the movie differ dramatically but both point out the role Transcendental meditation plays in Lynch's life and try to use and point out elements of Hindu teachings relevant for the story. In the final part of this paper, I will interpret *Inland Empire* as an artistic attempt to pay an old bill and as an example of uncursing. If curses are related to events of pain and suffering and if they are designed to outlive the injured persons who uttered them originally, there is a possibility that someone may walk into an old curse and get affected by it, and even that someone walks into his/her own curse years after he/she forgot she unleashed it into the future. While Lilla and Gray use the word "curse" metaphorically, in this text the word "curse" is understood literally and with help from Lynch and Marcus a magico-religious horizon of understanding is recreated to interpret politics.

## Wokeism as a revivalist religion

The title *Cursed Empires* demands an explanation. The empires which I have on my mind are the US and the EU. I use the word empire in the way in which European politician Guy Verhofstadt uses it when he talks about the future world order. In his speech to British Liberal Democrats delivered in 2019, Verhofstadt sees the US and China as empires and argues that, in order to compete with them, the EU should become an empire as well (Johnson, 2019). Strictly speaking, EU is more a potential empire than the existing one, but this is not relevant for my narrative. It is a polity *sui generis* originally created by a number of post-imperialistic nation states. It is a substitute for lost empires.<sup>1</sup> The question is whether polities can be cursed, and I will argue with Grail Marcus that they can. For him the self-cursing happens because of betrayal of the constitutional promises.

Two contemporary authors writing about the ideological crisis in Anglo-American liberal democracies also used word "curse". They are Mark Lilla and John Gray. In his book *The Once and Future Liberal*, Lilla criticizes "identity-liberalism" and in *The New Leviathans* Gray rejects "hyper-liberalism". Those two mutations of liberalism are in their opinion caused by the metastasis of identity, cultural politics and the influence it has on universities in the US and the UK. Word "woke" is usually used for that phenomenon, and both use it. Postcolonial discourse is a key part of the radical criticism of the US and the UK, and it questions not only the betrayal of the original belief that all men were created equal but the very belief itself. This idea is rejected together with the Enlightenment project from which it originates.<sup>2</sup> Gray

<sup>1</sup> See Ch. 3 "Integration or Empire" in Snyder (2018), esp. pp. 67-69.

<sup>2</sup> In her book *Left is Not Woke* Susan Neiman discusses postcolonial attacks on Kant and

writes: "Liberalism has once again become a creature eating its own tail. The current generation of liberals never tires of denouncing the West as the most destructive force in history – racist, imperialist and sexist. Education must be 'de-colonised' in order to expose the West's unique crimes. Western civilization has been a curse for humankind" (Gray, 2023: 69). So, the word curse is used to describe the post-colonial position and it is used metaphorically. This de-colonization started at university campuses and in Grays opinion "it is the model for an inquisitional regime that has extended its reach throughout society" (Gray, 2023: 112).

Mark Lilla's argument also focuses on universities and the role they played in the transformation of the Democratic party and American liberalism in general. In *The Once and Future Liberal*, he writes: "That one now hears the word *woke* everywhere is a giveaway that spiritual conversion, not political agreement, is the demand. Relentless speech surveillance, the protection of virgin ears, the inflation of venial sins into mortal ones, the banning of preachers of unclean ideas – all these campus identity follies have their precedents in American revivalist religion" (Lilla, 2017:115). In Lilla's opinion the identity education will have a long-term negative consequences for the entire nation. "The universities of our time ... cultivate students so obsessed with their personal identities and campus pseudo-politics that they have much less interest in, less engagement with, and frankly less knowledge of the great *out there*. Neither Elizabeth Cady Stanton (who studied Greek) nor Martin Luther King Jr. (who studied Christian theology) nor Angela Davis (who studied Western philosophy) received an identity-based education. And it is difficult to imagine them becoming who they became had they been cursed with one" (Lilla, 2017: 139). Like Gray Lilla also uses the word curse metaphorically. In the next segment I will write about the original meaning of the word.

## Oath, Curse, and Swearing

The subtitle of Agamben's book is *An Archeology of the Oath*. It is a very original attempt to rethink the relationship between the oath and the curse within the context of Agamben's enormous *Homo Sacer* project. I will not try to do any justice to the set of interesting and imaginative moves designed to philosophically strengthen the original argument presented in *Homo Sacer*, *The State of the Exception*, and other related books. I will use Agamben's introductory discussion of the importance of oath to clearly demarcate my understanding of the curse and then to try to unlock Lynch's film with it.

*The Sacrament of Language* is a relatively tiny, 72-page book which opens with Agamben's presentation of Paolo Prodi's book *Il sacramento del potere* ("The Sacrament of Power"). Prodi strongly believes, and Agamben agrees, that the oath plays important role in the political history of the West. The problem is that the oath, as a specific phenomenon which connects the religious and the political, loses its importance and that the current generation lives its political life without the sacred bond to its political community. Inspired by this thought, Agamben decides to make a philosophical archaeology of the oath, and in his case this leads him to the very question of the relationship between language and politics. "If the oath is declining, if the name of God is withdrawing from language – and this is what has happened beginning from the event that has been called 'death of God' ... then metaphysics

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Jefferson and concludes: "That Jefferson and Kant did not practice what they preached is no argument against the sermon" (Neiman, 2019: 23).

also reaches completion" (Agamben, 2011: 56). This means that the task of philosophy, as he understands it, is to rethink the relationships between the oath, religion, politics and language.<sup>3</sup>

In order to make this operation comprehensible Agamben starts with the presentation of a few relevant researchers of the oath as a legal and religious phenomenon relevant for the stability of a political community. He quotes Lycurgus who believed that the oath was the power which held democracy together. It is important because the person who takes an oath swears before God that he would either keep his promise or speak truth. In this form oaths survived in modern representative democracies in which officials and jurors take them regularly as a part of the political and legal process. So, the purpose of the oath is to seal the covenants and to force the persons who sworn them to keep their promises and tell truth. The oath is a linguistic act, an utterance with a special social purpose, it forces the one who takes it to perform in a certain way. Agamben presents Cicero's definition from *De officiis*: "an oath is an assurance backed by religious sanctity; and a solemn promise given as before God as one's witness" (Agamben, 2011: 3).

In the context of my attempt to interpret Lynch's *Inland Empire* as a film about uncursing, the structure of an oath is interesting because it consists of three elements: an affirmation, an invocation of God as a witness and finally a curse designed as a punishment for perjury. So, the curse is an essential part of the oath designed to give it the punishing force. Agamben quotes Rudolf Hirzel who writes: "To swear is first of all to curse, to curse oneself in the event that one says what is false or does not do what has been promised" (Agamben, 2011: 30). The curse as the frightening part of the oath makes the oath itself something like a delayed, or potential curse. The one who takes an oath takes a debt and if the oath is not fulfilled the payment of the debt is put in God's hands. Broken promises and perjuries trigger the curse.

Understandably, for a curse to be really frightening and for the oath to be functional, one must believe either in God or in some other force which will sanction the broken promise. For that reason, a number of authors presented by Agamben, write about the magico-religious aspect of the phenomenon. If the involved do not believe in the existence of the punishing force the oath becomes toothless. The oath as a phenomenon in which religion and politics meet presupposes the existence of religion and politics and the actual fear of this punishing force. This is the moment in which Agamben's archaeology becomes an attempt to rethink the oath not as a linguistic act performed by persons who believe in the magico-religious domain within a polity in which it has meaning and strength, but as event of language relevant for the entire *Homo Sacer* project. "Religion and law do not preexist the performative experience of language that is in question in oath, but rather they were invented to guarantee the truth and trustworthiness of the logos through a series of apparatuses among which the technicalization of the oath into a specific 'sacrament' – the 'sacrament of power' – occupies a central place" (Agamben, 2011: 59).

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that the oath as an important form survived in non-religious and atheist states like the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in which two oaths were particularly important. The first one given by the members of socialist youth (*pioniri*) and the second one given by the soldiers in the Yugoslav National Army (*JNA*). Both oaths called for the protection of brotherhood and unity of all the consisting nation and nationalities, and for the defense of socialist self-management. However, neither of them included a curse. The curse was present in the national anthem in the line: "Damned be the traitor of his homeland" (*Proklet bio izdajica svoje domovine*).

The neo-ontotheological archaeology goes beyond the existing intersection between the religious and the political and unsurprisingly "calls into question the very nature of man as speaking being and a political animal" (Agamben, 2011: 11). Agamben concludes that "the oath can function as a sacrament of power insofar as it is first of all the *sacrament of language*. This original *sacratio* that takes place in the oath takes the technical form of the curse, of the *politike ara* that accompanies the proclamation of the law" (*ibid.*: 66). Curse thus loses its magico-religious power and becomes linked to the law, and, as we know from Agamben's previous writings, the new liberating politics must break away from law and consequently from curse.

I will not spend any time interpreting Agamben's original archaeological work in this text, but it helps to point out that my attempt to interpret Lynch's film actually goes in the exactly opposite direction. So, the idea is not to take the magico-religious aspect from the curse but to stress it as a central problem of the movie.

While reading Agamben's book in English, I was making notes in Croatian and I realized that Croatian language itself points in another direction. When one translates the sentence "The oath is not a conditional curse" into Croatian it sounds like this: *Zakletva nije uvjetovana kletva*. The words *za-kletva* (oath) and *kletva* (curse) are strongly linked. Literal translation of *za-kletva* would be for-curse. How do they belong together? The key concepts discussed in Agamben's book are, of course, curse, oath and perjury but they are related to damnation and swearing. The Croatian translation for these words is: curse – *kletva*, oath – *zakletva*, perjury – *krivo-kletstvo*, damned – *proklet*, to swear – *kleti*, psovati. Curses and spells are linked in language and the same word can be used – *kletva*. To swear an oath is in Croatian *zakleti se*, and to swear, to use obscene language is, in some parts of Croatia, *kleti*. Do not swear: *Nemoj kleti*.

While reading *The Sacrament of Language*, I made a note on the margins: *Jebo mi pas mater ako ga ja ne ubijem*. It is an example of everyday way of swearing in Croatia, which often has a form of self-cursing. Literally, it means: "Let a dog fuck my mother if I do not kill him." The sentence is of course never taken literally by persons who utter it, but what it implicates is that the person saying it is so angry that he/she is prepared to call punishment on himself/herself if the appropriate action is not taken against the offender. Implicit in the way of putting is the belief that one can lock himself with the language, and by saying a sentence affect one's future luck. The same can be done in the case of telling truth. *Jebo me pas ako on nije komunist*: "Let a dog fuck me if he is not a communist." The self-cursing which happens in this sentence is a vulgar equivalent of saying "I swear to God he is a communist."

The structure of the sentence in swearing is similar to the oath-taking, and a person who swears invokes bad luck if she/he is not telling do truth or fulfilling the self-given promise. So, a delayed curse is present in this type of everyday swearing despite the fact that persons uttering sentences of this kind are usually unaware of it.<sup>4</sup> What is important is that, in swearing as implicit self-cursing, one presupposes the existence of the magic-religious domain somehow related to language. By cursing, we can affect future events by sentences. This is why in Croatian language, and a few other Slavic languages, it does not have to be separated from a spell or damna-

<sup>4</sup> There are ways in which someone can force an oath type situation on another person by saying: "I beseech you with my health to tell me if you take drugs." The formulation in Croatian would be *Zaklinjem te svojim zdravljem...* This is an oath-like moral blackmail because if the sun does not answer his mother's question truthfully, she, by calling bad health on herself, by cursing herself, eventually hurts him and makes him feel guilty.

tion. The best way to translate the subtitle of the first volume of Popper's *Open Society – The Spell of Plato* is *Platonovo prokletstvo* (literally, "Plato's curse"). By saying a self-curse, someone puts him/herself in debt and in order to avoid paying it forces him/herself to act in accordance with the given promise.

The other form of getting in debt by oath-related activity is through vows and praying-related promises. This is something as common in Croatia as self-cursing swearing. The standard way of praying and vowing is by asking Holy Mary or a favorite saint, Saint Anthony of Padua being one of the first choices, for help in exchange for a debt offered by a person who vows. That can be anything from saying a prayer and lighting a candle to building a church.<sup>5</sup>

In her popular book on swearing, *Holy Sh\*t*, Melisa Mohr writes about the biblical origins of this type of vow-taking:

In the Bible a vow establishes a reciprocal economic relationship between God and the person vowing – it is an exchange. If God does something for me, I will do something for God. A farmer might vow that if God helps him have a successful crop, he will sacrifice a heifer to him at the end of the harvest. Hannah, an infertile woman, vows that if God gives her a son, she will make him a son of Nazarite, a person specially dedicated to the service of the Lord. If God comes through and does what you have asked, you must "pay" your vow, "the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt" (Deut. 23:21). Vowing means going into debt, and payback is always involved (Mohr, 2013: 68).

The Croatian word for vow is *zavjet*. The same word can also mean oath, sacrament, covenant and testament which shows how the language links phenomena.

The third way in which the magico-religious domain needed for curses and debts is involved in our culture is through the beliefs that one can cause good or bad luck by the way one talks. For example, athletes who brag about their success can jinx themselves, or we can bring them bad luck by over-glorifying their achievements. A commentator can curse a player just by mentioning a maximum in snooker or a no-hitter in baseball. Croatian word for that phenomenon is *urok* (spell, bewitchment, evil eye) and someone can *ureći* i.e. bring bad luck to somebody else by saying something wrong either on purpose or unintentionally. Cursing is about language and about our belief that by saying things in a certain way we can involve ourselves with forces which are capable of destroying lives and bringing misery to the cursed for centuries to come. Curse is a way in which someone tries to secure the painful future to the cursed by uttering a desired punishment or just by formulating a threat like "Your day will come" or *Da Bog da ti se vratilo* ("By God it comes back to you"). In this way curses are attempts to achieve justice and revenge when they are impossible by law or individual activity. The curse from the beginning of this text is exactly this kind of an activity. It is a magical linguistic act fired into the future like an arrow of pain, misery and hatred.

Finally, there is a belief that some places, objects, books or projects can be cursed because something terrible happened in them or related to them. Houses can be cursed because murders or suicides happened in them, projects can be cursed because during their realization human lives were lost, precious stones can be cursed because they were stolen, money can be cursed because it was taken by blackmail or

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<sup>5</sup> Saint Anthony is the saint protector of the Croatian island of Silba. The standard offering for good health is to walk barefoot from the main church to the saint Anthony's tiny chapel in Saint Anthony's Bay and to lite a candle in the chapel.



extortion. Curse in this sense acts as a force even without the spoken curse and all languages have numerous words and sayings relating to this phenomenon.

In my opinion David Lynch's film *Inland Empire* is fundamentally about the way in which art can become a medium for atonement and uncursing.

## **Inland Empire**

*Inland Empire* was made in 2006. When it was released, the reviews differed dramatically which is not surprising. However, the film was made after *Mulholland Drive* now considered to be one of the best, if not the best, Lynch's film ever, so a number of fans and critics were relatively disappointed. The film was shot with a video camera and edited by computer. It developed scene by scene without a script. The filming started with a long monologue of "a women in trouble" played by Laura Dern and new scenes and sequences were added and integrated as they were shot. In his book on Lynch *The Man from Another Place*, Dennis Lim describes it as a film-making equivalent of the surrealist practice of automatic writing. The result of this method is a three-hour long movie which causes problems even on the most basic level of describing what happened with characters and who they are. Just by checking the most commonly visited imdb.com or Wikipedia one can instantly recognize fundamental disagreements in the basic presentation of the storyline or plot summery. The things are not any better in American and international reviews either. There are few reasons for the confusion but none of them obviously bothered Lynch, and the proliferation of worlds, dimensions, periods and characters makes a rationally coherent reconstruction of *Inland Empire* extremely difficult if not impossible. One of the writers who did it is Martha Notchimson, and I will present her interpretation in the following segment. The others either reject the entire project as murky, incomprehensible and dull, or accept it as a louse, *Alice in Wonderland* type of an artistic endeavor.

So, what is happening in the film and to whom?

*Inland Empire* opens with a ray of light and a sound of an old gramophone playing AXXo N. "the longest-running radio play in history tonight continuing in the Baltic region." Somewhere in Poland, probably in the past, a man enters a room with a prostitute. From their conversation it is obvious that she is new in the job. Their faces are blurred. In a small room, a young women watches TV and cries. She is "the Lost girl" (Karolina Gluszka). She watches Rabbits" an anti-sitcom experiment Lynch originally made for his lynchnet.com in which three actors with rabbit heads exchange unrelated sentences.

An older women with a strong Slavic accent (Grace Zabriskie) enters the house of a Hollywood actress Nikki Grace (Laura Dern). After just a few sentences, it is obvious that the women knows that Nikki is going to get a role in the new film before the decision was made. She also knows that the film is about marriage and that jealousy is involved. She tells two stories the first one about the boy and Evil born from his reflection and the second one about the girl lost in the marketplace, "as if half born." She suggests that the right way to the palace is not through the marketplace but via an ally behind it. After that the old Slavic women asks if there is a murder in the movie and when Nikki suggest that there is not, the visitor repeats loudly: "Brutal fucking murder!" obviously knowing that there is one. She also implies that there is an unpaid bill involved and that actions have consequences.

After first twenty minutes of the film, we already have a Polish world from the past, a young woman in a room watching the invented world of Rabbits and a clairvoyant telling future to an actress. The story of the movie unfolds when Nikki gets the role she was hoping for. She will play a lead in the film *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, her partner will be Devon (Justin Theroux) and an Englishmen Kingsley Stewart (Jeremy Irons) will direct it. During the introductory meeting after the first reading of a scene, there is some kind of disturbance on the set. Devon investigates and finds nothing. However, the reading is interrupted so Kingsley decides to inform his lead actors that the film they are making is a *de facto* remake of a never made movie. The original production named *Vier sieben 47* was based on the Polish gypsy tale and it was never finished because the two leads were killed. 47 was cursed and the brutal murder is related to the project.

Devon is warned not to start a relationship with Nikki because she has a powerful and jealous husband, and a woman with a screwdriver in her gut informs some kind of detective that she is influenced by an entity telling her to commit murder. During the love scenes in which Nikki and Devon are playing Susan and Billy the love from the script takes over and they start realizing that the lines between the fiction and reality are blurred. In a sex scene which can be interpreted as a scene between Nikki and Devon or a dream of one of them they are watched by what appears to be Susan's husband. So, in the sex scene of two actors, the jealous witness is possibly a character from the script. During sex Nikki (or Susan) informs Devon and/or Billy about the AXXo N. door. Her sentences sound as if she has experience of two perspectives, Nikki's and Susan's. She tells her lover "It's a story that happened yesterday, but I know it's tomorrow." The sex scene introduces one of the most important moments of the film so far – the ally scene implicated in the Slavic woman's prophecy.

The character played by Dern (Nikki and/or Susan) goes through the alley behind the marketplace finds the AXXo N. door goes through it and finds herself behind the set of *Blue Tomorrows*. She sees Nikki and others interrupted by the noise caused by her. Devon investigates, she calls him Billy but they cannot contact each other. She runs confused and enters a pink room which is in a completely different location. The man in the room looks like Nikki's husband but he is probably Susan's husband.

In the next sequence, which is one of the most beautifully directed parts of the film, Lynch, after dramatically introducing the sequence with a flickering light from the lamp, pushes his character into a room full of openly sexy young women. She finds herself in a new world or dimension. The girls in the room talk sex and the music in the background is Lynch's *Ghost of Love*. "Strange what love does", says one of the girls, which happens to be a line from Lynch's song. "When you open your eyes someone familiar will be there", says another girl. When she opens her eyes, she finds herself in another time in a Polish city covered with snow. She is in the street with two girls from the room and the record playing AXXo N. is edited as a part of the sequence. The Lost girl is crying. A young woman played by the same actress, or the Lost girl in another time shows Susan (?) how to burn a hole in silk with a cigarette. This is the first scene in the movie in which the main character switched from one world to another and back linking different times, planes of existence and narratives.

Susan burns a hole in the cloth and travels back in time to see a Polish man killing a young woman. The actor who plays a killer (Krzysztof Majchrzak) will also



play a trans-world demon-like character Phantom who will appear in different times and spaces. The Lost girl watches the movie as it develops on her TV and constantly cries.

The movie does not get any easier from this moment and new characters and subworlds are added. One of the most important is also played by Dern. It is a tough woman with herpes or injured lip. She talks to Mr. K (Erik Crary) who can be a social worker, psychiatrist or some kind of confessor. This character appears in the middle of the film and opens numerous interpretative possibilities because the entire project of *Inland Empire* started when Lynch and Dern shot the tough woman's monologue. She informs Mr. K that when she was young, she gouged rapist's eye out and ripped off his testicles. When the ambulance guys asked "What the fuck happened here?", she explained: "He came to reaping what he been sowing. That's what." They concluded: "Fucker been sowing some kind of heavy shit."

Towards the end of the movie Susan and the tough women merge and this character is a prostitute in Hollywood. That person gets killed by a woman who at the beginning of the film admitted, while showing a screwdriver in her gut, that she was possessed by someone. This happens to be Phantom, an inter-world dwelling threat of apparently Polish origin. The person who kills Dern's character is played by Julia Ormond who also plays Bill's wife in *Blue Tomorrows*. The tough women/Susan dies in the company of nice but unmoved homeless people and Kingsley shouts: "Cut it and print it!" It seems we are back at the movie set and in the "real" life again. However, Nikki stays in the role, ignores the compliments and literally without a word visits some of the sub-worlds Susan inhabited. She finds the AXXo N. doors goes through them and in a corridor just in front of another doors, 47, kills Phantom. Death of this creature liberates two sexy girls who appeared in the snow-covered Polish city with Susan and of course the Lost girl who gets reunited with her husband and sun in the pink room Susan discovered after her first AXXo N. incident.

The film ending scene is rather joyful and includes glowing Laura Dern, Nastassja Kinski, Laura Harring, dancing girls, lumberjack and a monkey.

Unsurprisingly, the film with a plot like this one encouraged wildly different interpretations. In the remainder of this segment, I will briefly present two. The first one is Greg Olson's from his book on Lynch entitled *Beautiful Dark*. The second one is Martha Nochimson's presented in *David Lynch Swerves*. I decided to include these two attempts to unlock *Inland Empire* because they appear in well-researched books written by authors who also know Lynch personally. Both writers try to show how Transcendental meditation (TM) and Hindu concepts influenced the film, but they ended up with completely different understanding of what actually happened in the film and about what it is essentially about.

For Olson, the film is primarily about the karmic debts and about the need to pay them. For Nochimson it is about the enlightening self-development of the main character Nikki who liberates herself and others through her art – acting. Olson, whose approach in the book is biographical, points out the fact that the entire project started with a long shot of Dern's monologue in which she plays a woman in trouble. The entire movie was pitched as a film about "a woman in trouble" and that woman is in Olson's opinion the character which appears in the middle of the film. It is a tough talking woman with either herpes or injured lip who tells violent stories including the one in which she seriously injured the rapist. One of the sentences she used when describing the incident was: "He came to reaping what he been sowing." Olson holds that the central idea of the entire film is that the bills from the past must

be paid. He writes: "More than ever he (Lynch) would express his spiritual beliefs in his art, for INLAND EMPIRE's organizing principle would be reincarnation and past lives, and a recurring karmic remainder would proclaim, "There is a bill that must be paid"' (Olson, 2011: 666). The question is who has to pay and for what, and Olson believes that the main character, "the woman in trouble" is the tough talking violent character who tells her stories to Mr. K. Olson calls her "the Battered Woman." He explains:

Before the lights went down for INLAND EMPIRE to begin, Lynch read some lines from *The Upanishads*: "We are like the dreamer who dreams and then lives in the dream." INLAND EMPIRE is the Battered Woman living in her broken psyche's multifaceted dream, and as a Hollywood's TV announcer says, "dreams make stars." In *Mulholland Drive* terms, the Battered Woman, with her sad world of loss, pain, and violence, is like the later, dark aspect of Diane Selwyn, while movie star Nikki is like the early, optimistic, creative, life-is-wonderful Betty Elms aspect of Diane. The Nikki persona is the Battered Woman's escape route from the hellish, intolerable real life. But as we know, self-erected barriers are often violated in Lynch's world, and just as Diane and Fred Madison's safe, rewarding psychic compartments are pierced by strange, disturbing forces, so is the Battered Woman's inner I'm-movie-star scenario (Olson, 2011: 672).

This quotation clearly shows how previous Lynch's movies influenced Olson's understanding of the latest one. This approach is understandable, and a number of writers, bloggers and online discussants, came with the same idea and concluded that some sub-characters played by Dern must be imagined. In the analogy with *Mulholland Drive*, they decided it was Nikki. Olson suggested in his book that even Dern, who did not know what she was playing because the script did not exist, believes that the original woman in trouble is the Battered Woman as Olson calls her.

A number of sentences and sequences from *Inland Empire* can be reconciled with or included in this understanding of the plot and film in general. However, there are a few significant problems as well. If the Battered Woman is the one who pays the bill what is the bill. The answer is following. The Battered woman is the reincarnated polish woman who killed a prostitute with a screwdriver. As her karmic punishment, she becomes a prostitute in Hollywood and gets killed with a screwdriver by her lover's wife. If the film ended with the Battered Woman's death, that would have been a very surprising but quite elegant interpretation, as persuasive as any other. However, after the death of the Battered Woman, we still have 25 minutes of the film with Nikki who is allegedly only a figment of dead person's imagination. Who is doing the imagining if the main character is dead and why is this imagination solving problems posed throughout the film when the key debt has already been paid?

Martha Nochimson offers a completely different understanding. She is a well-known expert on Lynch and she wrote two books about his work, *The Passion of David Lynch* and *David Lynch Swerves*. In the second one, influenced by quantum physics, she dramatically changed her approach to Lynch's work. She believes that the quantum paradigm allows those who understand nature with its help to understand David Lynch's movies better. Without going into any details about her decision to use modern physics in thinking about cinema, it has to be said that the TM leaders, respected and followed by Lynch, used scientific concepts and methods in order to prove to the Westerners the "objective," "scientifically proven" effects of TM. Thus, the ancient traditional teachings were presented and promoted in a mod-

ern language of the West which is of course largely saturated with scientific jargon. Even Lynch himself talks about "the unified field" and believes that the concepts used in TM can be explained and argued for in a non-Indian way.

In her interpretation of *Inland Empire*, Nochimson also used a pair of concepts used by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi – "the marketplace" and "the palace," the pair which appears in the oracular contribution delivered by the Slavic women at the beginning of the film. She told Nikki that the road to the palace is not through the marketplace. The marketplace represents the everyday world in which we unconsciously produce and consume goods while the palace is a higher level of consciousness related to transcendence. Nochimson's interpretation thus tries to combine scientific and TM concepts. Scientific, because in her opinion, quantum physics comprehends nature in a way comparable with Lynch's film-making influenced by TM. She knows that Lynch is not interested in modern physics or any other. The key character of the entire story is Nikki. Her "voyage to a happier and more expansive personhood ... is the narrative subject of *Inland Empire*" (Nochimson, 2014: 130). Human development of an actress will happen through her art. In this way, acting as a creative process becomes an ally that can go behind the marketplace. Nochimson explains:

Nikki's progress toward freedom from the superficiality of the original written script requires that she cease being merely one person who sometimes acts like Susan Blue. She must at this point begin a creative fusion with the character-in-progress, embracing the myriad possibilities of what Susan might be and engaging the many worlds enclosed in multiple time loops. The eruption of Nikki/Susan during the sex scene with Devon/Billy propels us into the alley behind the marketplace, where Nikki/Susan speaks in her frenzy at discovering herself in superposition. Nikki/Susan, by her very nature, cannot exist in ordinary time and space, and as we watch, time and space undergo major transformation as Nikki becomes more than one person but not fully two. This is what finally produces the highly successful act of character creation that Stewart acknowledges when he has finished shooting his picture. The complicated nature of time revealed in this process replaces our ordinary sense of a linear moving from here to there within a different shape. Nikki is moving from here to a deeper non-linear here (Nochimson, 2014:143).

The growth of the human being capable of helping others and exorcising her own and other people's demons is a direct outcome of this extraordinary process. In Nochimson's understanding of the film, Nikki does not have to pay her debt. She pays the one which liberates the Lost girl and reunites her with her family. The film is full of optimism, and it sends a message of hope.

The pair of interpretations I chose for this segment shows how competent and sophisticated writers can end up with directly opposite conclusions. The film itself must be responsible for that. Lynch was not bothered with the fact that his work can be read as either a story about a ruined prostitute which goes mad before she gets killed or about a brilliant artist who, through the out-of-body experience of acting, helps herself and others. *Inland Empire* is like a drawing of a rabbit-duck. The line can be seen as either a rabbit or a duck. The problem with this film is that any attempt to reconstruct it as a clear picture leaves a lot unexplained. Nochimson leaves the original woman in trouble unexplained and ignores the problem of prostitution which runs through the entire movie. A few of reviewers calmly concluded that the film is either about an actress going mad or about mad prostitute who believes she is an actress or about something third.

In the concluding segment I will focus on the concept of a curse which was ignored in both presented interpretations.

## Polities that betray their promises, and interrelated Humanity

In his book *The Shape of Things to Come*, distinguished American cultural critic Greil Marcus wrote two outstanding chapters on David Lynch. In his opinion, Lynch is one of the American prophets. "America's prophets prophecy one thing: as God once judged the Children of Israel, America has to judge itself" (Marcus, 2006: 11). American exceptionalism is based on the Puritan belief that they were God's people who would build a new nation in a new world according to God's laws. The original promise was explicitly made by John Winthrop in a speech which is a part of the American myth of self-creation. This speech contains a famous formulation about "a City upon a Hill" which was later ideologically recycled by Ronald Reagan as "the shining city upon a hill." In the opening chapter, Marcus presents three famous speeches delivered in three different period of American history. The first one is Winthrop's from 1630, the second one is Lincoln's second inaugural address from 1865, and the third, M. L. King's speech in Washington 1963. In different ways all three of them have the structure of an oath with a curse as its integral part. The most dramatic is Winthrop's who openly says that the failure to create a City upon a Hill would "shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whether wee are going" (Marcus, 2006: 24).<sup>6</sup>

Lincoln in his address famously described the civil war as God's punishment for slavery, as a curse Americans brought upon themselves, and M. L. King said "Let freedom ring and if America is going to be a great nation, this must become true. And so let freedom ring." It is obvious, Marcus points out, that it is not a great nation yet and that it will have to fight for universal freedom to become one. "The point is that the great nation King prophesied so long ago no more exists today than it did then. America raised itself on the rock of a metaphysically perfect idea, and on that rock it broke into pieces: the nation, not the idea" (Marcus, 2006: 33).

Within the context of this paper Marcus offers an important idea and it is that the polities can curse themselves if they fail to live up to their fundamental ideological promises. "America became a country that was a nation because it made a covenant with itself. It made certain promises about who its citizens might be, how they might live and for what purposes. Though the blessings of God were called upon, and intimations of his judgment summoned, it was never about God. If the country betrayed its promises, it would betray itself" (Marcus, 2006: 11).

David Lynch is one of Marcus's prophets, an artist called to judge his nation. *Inland Empire* was released the same year Marcus published his book, 2006. If it is about the curse, as I will try to show, and if curses can be related to polities and nations, then even an undisciplined artwork like Lynch's last movie can help us to judge polities in which we live. Marcus' prophet Lynch takes curse literally and the domain in which occurs is magical and religious. Marcus' nation's covenant with itself is an expression of a specific American faith in democracy which believes that the founding idea that all men are created equal should actually be realized in a just society.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A 1630 text is rendered in the original, now archaic transcription.

<sup>7</sup> In his book *Achieving our Country* Richard Rorty writes about the faith in American civic religion and says: "Dewey and Whitman wanted Americans to continue to think of themselves as exceptional, both wanted to drop any reference to divine favor or wrath. They hoped to separate the fraternity of loving kindness urged by the Christian scriptures from the ideas of supernatural parentage, immortality, providence, and most important – sin. They wanted

I presented Olson's and Nochimson's attempts to reconstruct what actually happened in the film and decided to interpret it afterwords for two reasons. The first one is to avoid my own reconstruction because I find it impossible. The second one is because I think that the curse as the fundamental problem of the film presents itself in the film regardless of who actually got killed within a storyline, or why. Lynch does not limit possible interpretations of the film because he does not really care that we get his understanding of his own work, if there is a coherent self-understanding, of course. If Lim is right, and I believe he is, then *Inland Empire* is an equivalent of automatic writing (Lim, 2015: 170).<sup>8</sup> In automatic writing the writer makes himself/herself a pure medium, a receiver of words and sentences. Lynch on a number of occasions described the process of making an artwork as a mosaic building. The process starts with a promising idea and it catches other ideas. Mosaics are not puzzles. The puzzles can and have to be put together properly because they are consciously made of pieces which fit together. Mosaics are made of fragments that look good together. Lynch's mosaics consist of pieces which can be reassembled in different ways.

The curse and the unpaid bill can be presented with either Nikki or the Battered Woman being the source of mystery. However, it is presented by both women and the third one is added, the Lost girl. The question of course is – what is the original curse and what is the bill? We will never know what bill Lynch was trying to pay with his movie, but the original curse in my understanding of *Inland Empire* is the one related to the death of two leads during the first attempt to make a movie on jealousy. Crimes of passion and sex crimes permanently reappear in Lynch's movies. Most of his original scripts include them. Lynch is not making a film about the film, he is making a film about the remnants of pain and suffering which happened during the making of the original 47. The bill is related to the past crime of passion. This is a thin red line which survives both interpretations Nochimson's and Olson's.

The Slavic woman who comes to Nikki's place knows that the "brutal fucking murder" is involved. In the most powerful sequence of the entire film, the one in which Susan enters the room full of sexy girls and then finds herself in the snow-covered street in Poland, Lynch's *Ghost of Love* interprets the scene. Lines "Strange what love does" and "Strange what flies with ghosts of love" point that something is related with the ghost of love. The ghost of love is what survived the death of love, and the strange things fly with this remnant, and they fly through time. Nothing changes with the curse if it affects Nikki's performance or if it haunts the troubled women. However, from my perspective, it is more convenient to understand the storyline as

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Americans to take pride in what America might, all by itself and by its own lights, make of itself, rather than in America's obedience to any authority – even the authority of God" (Rorty, 1999: 15-16). James Miller writes about the American faith in democracy in his *Can Democracy Work?* and points out: "Tocqueville concluded that democracy in America wasn't a sham; it was (as the British writer David Runciman has put it) 'more like a true religion. Faith was the lynchpin of American democracy. The system worked, Tocqueville decided, because people believed in it. In Albany, Tocqueville saw America's political piety in action. And in *Democracy in America* he acknowledged how this civic religion, rooted in a Protestant form of 'Christianity that can best be described as democratic and republican,' served as a powerful brake on the potential wildness of self-reliant self rule" (Miller, 2018:115). In his review of Miller's book, Croatian political scientist Krešimir Petković accurately interprets Miller's position. "A secularized faith in liberal democracy is still religious in its spiritual core" (Petković, 2018: 247). The same spiritual core is present in Marcus' idea of America's self-cursing.

<sup>8</sup> See especially the chapter "The Unified Field".

the one focusing on an actress involved in a remake of a cursed project. If art is about transforming of ideas into reality and if ideas can be received like a radio signal or caught like fish, then an artist can tune in an idea with a baggage.

The film starts with a record playing the oldest radio show still playing in the Baltic region. This means that the filmmakers are tuning into something prerecorded, something from the past that still exists like a record of past misery. The idea that something can be cursed by injustice, or horror or death is in Lynch's movie related to a crime of passion, so the content which flies with 47 is the one causing disturbance. First by making two leads in current production to fall in love with each other and then by opening the numerous worlds which may be related to the original bill. The most abstract thing is the possibility that Susan as a character created by Nikki, born in her act of acting, gets in touch with the fictional world of Rabbits without Nikki. Moreover, the characters born in the work of art can have their destiny and suffer injustice. The work of art can carry the magical power to cause harm. Like stolen pieces of jewelry who bring bad luck to their new owners, or haunted places which are uninhabitable and instantly cause sense of fear and unease, the cursed films can bring bad luck unless their remakes undo the original injustice.

It is much more elegant and much more interesting to read *Inland Empire* from the perspective of Nikki and Susan even if Lynch wanted it to do it from the perspective of "the Battered Women." There is nothing that calls for interpretation in the idea that you have to pay for the crimes of your soul committed in previous life, because there is nothing you can do about it. However, if Nikki is paying through the pains of her artwork for the debt which was included in the baggage that came with the original project, if she is liberating the Lost girl from the injustices committed from the others in a different time and a different place, Lynch presents, in a sloppy and unorganized way, the wonderful idea that Humanity is linked in its ability to atone for the past pain and misery wherever and whenever it happened. Art can do the uncursing. The film also presents the original curse as unhealed wound which survives long time after the original sufferers of pain and injustice are gone. The curses are actually like floating mines from previous wars, like surviving remnants of past sufferings and hatreds.

How can this be related to the oaths and curses in political communities? The curse with which I began this text was formulated by a man calling for justice during a war. His daughter lost a leg and he did not take justice in his own hands because he could not do that. Instead, he took justice into his words. He committed a linguistic act which was designed to catch the person responsible for his and his daughter's tragedy. This curse is completed when the guilty person gets punished. However, there are curses designed to inflict pain on future generations or the entire communities and states. Those curses do not expire because they can be functional forever. Like the cursing incidents from the past, as the one used in Lynch's film, the spoken curses can outlive their authors, and they are specifically designed to outlive them.

The famous proverb "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" taken out of Ezekiel 18 context, perfectly describes the problem. I tried to interpret Nikki's and Susan's experience as teeth set on edge by sour grapes eaten by people from another time and another country. This I recommended as a poetic vision of interrelated Humanity.

The cultural left criticized by Lilla and Gray is the direct result of a failure of Western liberal democracies, starting with the US to live up to their own proclaimed ideals of equal treatment of all groups. Marcus' example was the most obvious – per-



sisting racism in his country. However, unlike the post-colonial critics of the West and postmodern critics of the Enlightenment, Marcus does not reject the original faith in the republic of equals. Both Lilla and Gray used the word curse metaphorically when they described the illiberal character of the mutated identity politics. In countries in which they live, the US and the UK, the culture war is raging between the illiberal left and the illiberal right. Postliberal and preliberal evangelicals are fighting for cultural hegemony. I see that as an actual curse. As one of the characters in Lynch movie says: "They been sowing some kind of heavy shit."

The problem is that the West, whose destiny is questioned by Agamben, has two dominant constitutive parts – the US and the EU. Both believed, until recently, that the human rights mentioned in the constitutions and related documents are the rock on which they were built, as Marcus would say. Now, after all the former Yugoslav wars, after the cynical response to the refugee crisis<sup>9</sup> and the current lack of will to do anything about the reappearance of "radical evil"<sup>10</sup> in Gaza, nobody even pretends that it is the fact. At the same time, thousands of people in the most terrible of circumstances send their curses in the direction of those who could have helped but did not, and this included the Croats during the nineties. The failure to live by your proclaimed ideals was in Marcus's opinion the self-cursing broken promise, which, if clearly understood, can open a new attempt to realize the ideal. And the artists as prophets participate in this job. By interpreting one of them as an author who made a film about uncursing, I hoped to present the self-cursing failure of the entire West, especially of the EU to live up to its alleged founding principles. The most bizarre thing will happen if the curses of the EU magically contribute to the future disintegration of the union. That would mean that we walked into our own curses.

The policy recommendation in that case would be: "forgive us our debts and we will try to forgive our debtors."

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<sup>9</sup> More than 60 000 people died trying to reach "Fortress Europe" (UNITED, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> "Radical evil" as understood by Hannah Arendt.

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## Prokleta carstva

**Sažetak** U članku autor koristi filozofsko shvaćanje zakletve kako bi protumačio umjetničko djelo, a zatim koristi tu interpretaciju da kritizira moderne države kao prokleta carstva. Pripovijest je prikazana u četiri koraka. Započinje kratkim prikazom dijagnoze Marka Lilla i Johna Graya o angloameričkoj ideološkoj krizi, u kojoj je liberalizam modificiran kulturnom politikom koja obojici pisaca izgleda kao obnoviteljska religija. Lilla i Gray metaforički koriste riječ "prokletstvo" kako bi objasnili novu ideološku konstelaciju koju određuje fenomen nazvan "probuđenost". Drugi dio predstavlja Agambenovo shvaćanje odnosa između zakletve i kletve, koje se koristi za tumačenje filma *Unutarnje carstvo* Davida Lyncha u trećem dijelu. Autor nastoji pokazati da se film bavi originalnom idejom da umjetničko djelo može prekinuti prokletstvo. U četvrtom dijelu autor idejom prokletstva i skidanja prokletstva kritizira Zapad za neuspjehe u ratu u bivšoj Jugoslaviji, tijekom migrantske krize i povratku radikalnog zla u Gazi koji je u tijeku. Argument je konstruiran uz pomoć ideje Greila Marcusa da se države mogu same prokleti ako ne ispune svoja ideološka obećanja. Autor zaključuje da EU i SAD nisu ispunile svoja navodna utemeljujuća načela te su postale prokleta carstva. Kulturni rat u kojem se nalaze gledan iz perspektive magijsko-religijske domene u kojoj su se zakletva i prokletstvo izvorno pojavili nije metaforičko prokletstvo već doslovno plaćanje grijeha propusta.

**Ključne riječi** David Lynch, Giorgio Agamben, Greil Marcus, Mark Lilla, John Gray, prokletstvo u politici, zakletva, carstvo, SAD, EU

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