

David Lynch as a cult auter



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David Lynch as a Cult Auteur David Lynch has long been known for his abstract, surrealist, highly ambiguous, and often confusing films. Since his first film, the bizarre and depressing *Eraserhead*, Lynch has become synonymous with the word "baffled." He has been responsible for heady acid trips such as *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Inland Empire*. He has created a bizarre examination of sex and violence in *Blue Velvet* and a quiet, emotional character study in *The Elephant Man*.

Lynch has always been the artsy type; throughout high school, he was a keen painter, with a very abstract style, and after leaving school, he studied painting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1964. However, he left after only a year, stating that "I was not inspired AT ALL in that place". He then proceeded to travel around Europe to study the works of Austrian expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka. He returned to America, however, after only 15 days. He then studied Fine Arts at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, before moving to Los Angeles in 1971 to study filmmaking at the AFI Conservatory.

It was at this time that Lynch began winning grants in order to fund his films, including one for \$10,000 which he received from AFI in 1970 to make his debut feature-length film, *Eraserhead*. Over his lengthy career, Lynch has been nominated for four Oscars, but has yet to win. Four of his films have been nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival; 1990's *Wild at Heart* won the prestigious award, and Lynch also won Best Director at the festival for his 2001 film *Mulholland Drive*. Lynch, like many other burgeoning directors, started his audio visual career making short films.

From 1966-1974, he created four of film history's arguably most memorable shorts, leading up to his breakout, oft-critiqued feature, *Eraserhead* (1977). His style is defined by the dark, the grotesquely physical, and the straight out bizarre. Many of his shorts included animation of his paintings. Sound and music for films was also of utmost importance to the paranoia-filled atmosphere of his works. The dark and the bizarre were aspects he would carry over to his television show, *Twin Peaks*, which aired for two seasons in 1990 and 1991.

Lynch is valuable because he explodes conventions, both cinematic and psychological, but it's not enough for him to be as strange as possible—even an approach based on throwing off the fetters of the conventional and the logical demands a kind of discipline. The trick is to allow one's imagination free play, but to be able to recognize what is genuinely strange and unsettling, rather than merely bizarre, to distinguish between the rare specimens you've unearthed from the darkness of the ocean floor and the seaweed clinging to you when you emerge from the water.

It's a completely unscientific process, and one that can't be forced, so in a sense it's achievement enough that Lynch has remained devoted to exploring his own subconscious, however successful he's been in conveying his findings to the screen. Leading film critics Le Blanc and Odell state that Lynch's films "are so packed with motifs, recurrent characters, images, compositions and techniques that you could view his entire output as one large jigsaw puzzle of ideas. One of the key themes that they noted was the usage of dreams and dreamlike imagery within his works, something they related to the "surrealist ethos" of relying "on the subconscious to provide

visual drive. " This can be seen in John Merrick's dream of his mother in *The Elephant Man*, Agent Cooper's dreams of the red room in *Twin Peaks* and the " dreamlike logic" of the narrative found in *Eraserhead*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*. Another defining pattern of Lynch's films is that he tends to feature his leading female actors in multiple or " split" roles, so that many of his female characters have multiple, fractured identities.

This practice began with his choice to cast Sheryl Lee as both Laura Palmer and her cousin Maddy Ferguson in *Twin Peaks* and continued in his later works. In *Lost Highway*, Patricia Arquette plays the dual role of Renee Madison/Alice Wakefield, while in *Mulholland Drive*, Naomi Watts plays Diane Selwyn/Betty Elms and Laura Harring plays Camilla Rhodes/Rita and in *Inland Empire*, Laura Dern plays Nikki Grace/Susan Blue. By contrast, Lynch rarely creates multi-character roles for his male actors.

In a short film titled " How to Make a David Lynch Film" a group of young film makers explored just that. In the short, the group highlight a number of definitive features found in Lynch's films. They mention that " the people who like David Lynch do so because he is the master of mood, or because he's all about atmosphere" and that " the ' artsier' the fan you speak to, the more they pretend to understand Lynch's nonexistent plots. " Other Lynchian traits mentioned in the short include: * Unneeded tension brought about by dramatic pauses between dialogue * There must be ominous sounds or music in every scene to create a mysterious atmosphere * There must always be a character that goes by the name of Mr. , followed by a common first name (eg. Mr. Jimmy) * When in doubt, add close ups of eyes and lips * Phone calls to add suspense * Halfway through the film, change the

actor/actress playing the lead character * In between scenes always fade in and out of black * There should be nudity for no apparent reason * Random shots of out of focus movement * Lots of kissing * Painted fingernails * Lesbian love scenes At least one sex scene, often overexposed * Infantilism (eg. Dennis Hopper as Frank Booth in Blue Velvet) * Use of black and white * Abrupt endings and loose ends Lynch is an established auteur; in fact, not only does he write his screenplays, but he has been involved with every level of his films production at one point or another: sound design, editing, camera work, lighting, casting, special effects, music, etc. His hands-on approach to every aspect of his films has helped to tie them all together with a common thread.

Lynch has sufficient strength of identity within his work and peculiarity of world view to warrant his position as auteur, and David Foster Wallace, in his 'Premiere' article for Lost Highway, said : " Whether you believe he's a good auteur or a bad one, his career makes it clear that he is indeed, in the literal Cahiers du Cinema sense, an auteur, willing to make the sorts of sacrifices for creative control that real auteurs have to make - choices that indicate either raging egotism or passionate dedication or a childlike desire to run the sandbox, or all three. As Orson Welles said, " Cinema is the work of a single man, the director". Lynch's films, good or bad, successful or not, have been the work of a film-maker in control of his medium, aware of his position as auteur and willing to assert it within his texts. Many of Lynch's works have developed a cult following over the years. Of note are Eraserhead, Blue Velvet and Mulholland Drive.

There are also many in the Lynchian "cult" who are not film specific. That is, they are fans and followers of David Lynch himself, and are intrigued by all things Lynchian. The major reason that Lynch's films stand the test of time is due to their very nature; because his innovative style is so surreal and cryptic, a selection of viewers are compelled to delve further into understanding his films.

That's the beauty of Lynch; his films deeply intrigue his audiences, igniting a thirst in the niche, cult followers to decipher meaning in films where others see none. In most cases, a director cannot really foresee whether or not a film will develop a cult following over time. However, a further urge to make sense of his works is almost inherent of Lynch's style, and some may argue that Lynch has constructed his films with the intention of being labelled by society as 'weird', or 'strange'.

It almost gives his loyal followers an excuse to be self righteous of their involvement in the cult community; "Hey look at me, I study Lynchian films, aren't I cultured?" It can give them a sense of intellectual snobbery. Lynch's most recent feature, Mulholland Drive was initially scripted and filmed as a television pilot, however, the project was turned down by several networks, and so, after some deliberation, Lynch decided to finish the text as a feature film.

As a pilot, the story didn't have a proper ending, and it took Lynch quite some time to formulate an ending for the film; however he says that it all came to him one night when he sat down on a chair and closed his eyes. In Mulholland Drive, Lynch dwells upon the theme of duality of identity, set in the world of Hollywood. After the failure of both her movie career and her love

affair, the main protagonist, Diane, imagines a fantasy of her as another character named Betty, by recreating her ruined career and failed relationship with the woman she loves.

To further expand on his main themes of identity, fantasy and reality, duality of things and Hollywood, Lynch uses contrasted filming techniques for each of the parts of the movie, creating a visual dichotomy between Diane's fantasy (where everything is embellished in a way, highly illuminated, colourful and visually striking) and reality (which is almost completely dark and uses very little lighting, making it seem quite surreal), thus blurring the edges between the two. In her fantasy, Diane loses her identity, as her dream presents another aspect of herself. One might argue that this fantasy is actually Diane's attempt at self-identification, but it is also another representation of her own personality. In the end, Diane must understand that she is comprised of, and capable of, both light and dark, good and evil, naivete and deep mystery. Therefore, she cannot escape or ignore the darker parts of herself - her failure, her hatred, her jealousy. Lynch has explained duality in his films in this way: " You must have the contrasts. Films should have power. The power of good and the power of darkness, so you can get some thrills and shake things up a bit.

If you back off from that stuff, you're shooting right down into lukewarm junk. ...You have to believe things so much that you make them honest". In other words, he argues that in order for films to be strong and powerful, they need to present both sides of a coin, an unrestricted view of life with all of its light and all of its darkness. However, according to him, there is no need to fear the darker side because it is a part of all of us: " Fear is based on not

seeing the whole thing and, if you could get there and see the whole thing, fear is out the window”.

Hence he argues that once we come to terms with these darker things and accept them as a natural contrast in all of us, rather than try to hide and escape them, we will be able to face and understand them. In an interview with *The Denver Post* during the release of *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch says: " we know that when we're walking around we see the surface of things, but sometimes we sense something more, sometimes what we sense approaches a kind of dreamlike state.

Those feelings take on a life of their own; they are just as real as anything else. " This echoes Breton's lecture that these often dichotomous forces of inner and external reality " are the one and the same thing. " However, Lynch does make note that we do approach these various layers of reality in different ways: " We have waking, sleeping and dreaming—for most people that's what we deal with. So all of them are real, though the brain functions in a different way for each. The final movement of *Mulholland Drive* asks its viewers to reinterpret the first 100 minutes of screen time as now being a universe fabricated in the consciousness of small-time, failed-actor Diane Selwyn, who lies dying (or dead) somewhere in a run-down apartment in Hollywood. Linking the narrative material of the film's final movement to the material that preceded it becomes critical in terms of how one understands the workings of the film. Of course, crucial as it may be to connect narrative information to the film's internal structures, it is not this alone that makes *Mulholland Drive* such a unique experience.

As in much of Lynch's other work, the film asks its viewers to attend to every aspect of its construction, from colour schemes to camera movement, from music and sound to performance, from lighting to editing patterns, from set design to costume and make-up. In short, every element of the film's construction can be a container of possible meaning. Because of this, most viewers miss much of the film's meaning, and walk out of the theatre complaining that it made no sense. Others, however, may pick up on certain symbols or motifs, and are intrigued to decipher their meaning after viewing.

What's especially interesting in Lynch's films is the way the entire mise-en-scene is presented as meaningful and significant. The hierarchy of significance that we associate with most movies, where some things are to be attended to more than others, is abandoned. We can never tell while watching a scene - at least the first time around - what its most significant features are. It's possible that a seemingly minor detail will turn out to be of critical importance. Everything is presented on the same level of significance.

Over the years, *Mulholland Drive* has developed a cult following in a niche audience, and many of its devout followers are continuously attempting to decipher elements of the film. The website mulholland-drive.net is an extensive database of information regarding the film, where the film's loyal followers can discuss the film and share their understanding of certain elements of the movie. Since all of the posts on the site are by members of the niche audience, it gives everyone a chance to see what other people thought of the movie and their analysis of its meaning.

The website epitomises the commitment of members of a films cult following. To conclude, it is fair to say that David Lynch has well established himself in society as a cult auteur to be reckoned with. His abstract style often leaves his viewers with more questions than answers, and for some viewers, a desire to learn more. It is this factor that has essentially led to Lynch's grandiose cult status. His followers are intrigued by his ambiguity. Although his time as a director will inevitably come to an end, the legacy of his films will last forever through their cult status.

----- [1]. Lynch and Rodley, 2005, p. 33 [2].

David Lynch. (2013, March 16). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia [3]. Le Blanc and Odell, 2000, p. 08 [4]. Lynch and Rodley, 2005, p. 148 [5]. Cook, 1986 [6]. David Lynch On Mulholland Drive, DVD Extra [7]. Lynch and Rodley, 2005, p. 150 [8]. Lynch and Rodley, 2005, p. 244 [9]. " Lynch composes cerebral symphony", Rosen, 2001 [10]. Breton, ed. Fotiade 2000, p. 04