



FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Review: Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc (2007)

David Lynch

Harpenden: Kamera Books

ISBN 978-1-84243-225-9

192pp

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David Lynch's first foray into the world of filmmaking was the animated sculpture *Six Figures Getting Sick*. Since this 1966 début he has made nine feature films, two television series as well as several short films, commercials and music videos. In their book Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc comprehensively and enjoyably cover the entirety of David Lynch's oeuvre.

The authors have structured the book in a very user-friendly way. Chapter one is an introduction to the man and his work. Chapter two to thirteen each covers a specific film or a set of films that can be linked thematically or were made around the same time. By the time one reaches the last seven chapters, however, they almost feel like addenda because they do not follow the film-per-chapter format previously established.

Chapter fourteen is about projects Lynch has worked on other than feature and short films, while fifteen presents some of his unmade projects. Sixteen is a transcript of an interview conducted with novelist and long time Lynch's collaborator Barry Gifford. Seventeen analyses the contribution Lynch has made to the field of sound design. Eighteen serves to analyse Lynch's visual style. Nineteen focusses on the mysteries and secrets so central to all Lynch films and twenty looks at Lynch's relationship with Surrealism.

Of these last seven chapters, only the inclusion of the Barry Gifford interview is a bit of a mystery. Interesting as it is, it is not exclusively focussed on the subject of the book, David Lynch. Its inclusion also makes one wonders why they only included this one interview, or indeed why they didn't rather include an interview with Lynch himself. Perhaps the authors purposely avoided conducting an interview with Lynch himself, or perhaps he was as elusive in this case as he has been reported to be about giving interviews on his work in general.

The layout of the book does justice to the content. Its typography is pleasing and consistent, it contains both black and white and colour images from various Lynch artworks and films, the soft cover is firm and folds over front and back to provide space for praise for the book as well as handy appendages for those who struggle to maintain possession of a serviceable bookmark. The pages are thick and glossy and the front cover is adorned with an image of Nicholas Cage as Sailor Ripley in *Wild at Heart*. He stands towards the side of a slightly patched road that disappears into the semi-desert behind him. He wears that iconic symbol of his individuality, his snakeskin jacket, and a look of utter puzzlement and resignation: a deceptively simple and yet entirely appropriate image for the cover of the book.

Each chapter begins with an paragraph introducing the film to be discussed and the context it was made in. Key crew and cast are conveniently listed, but the film durations are omitted here. This information could have been very helpful to readers, especially since another resource absent from the book is a full Lynch filmography listing his works chronologically. This would have complemented the approach and content of the book and would certainly have appealed to the target reader. One can only assume this was omitted because in essence chapter two to thirteen are such a list. For those who want to delve further into the subject of the book, the end notes provide website addresses of interviews cited in the text, and the bibliography is an inspiration for further reading.

The authors provide a succinct synopsis followed by some discussion of the narrative, events and themes for each of Lynch's films. They are careful to indicate when "spoiler" information is to follow, as they do just before revealing the identity of Laura Palmer's killer in the *Twin Peaks* chapter.

The chapter names - making use of applicable lines from the film(s) covered - display a sense of humour grounded in the context of the work. "This must be where

pies go when they die" is the title of the *Twin Peaks* chapter for example, and "The Wierding Way" is devoted to *Dune*. In a way it's a shame that this light-hearted touch does not carry through into the text. The authors do, however consistently provide insight into the production process and collaborations between the director and his "Lynch mob". A sprinkling of interesting anecdotes around the making of the films is also included, such as a year passing in the production of *Eraserhead* between filming a shot of Henry opening a door and the following shot of him entering the room behind it and the now famous inclusion of production designer Frank Silva in *Twin Peaks* as killer Bob after his reflection in a mirror was accidentally filmed while he was hiding during a take on the Laura Palmer bedroom set. After reading some chapters, though, I felt distinctly that I did not learn much more from the book than I did from watching the film and the special features on its DVD.

Though it is clear that much research and consideration has gone into creating this book, it is not a heavy, academic read. In appealing to a broad readership, this is to its credit. The analysis is kept light and is not conducted from a specific theoretical framework. At most one can say that the method is close reading and if there is a theoretical perspective it's psychoanalytical, but unobtrusively so. The most direct mention of a Freudian perspective is in reference to *Blue Velvet's* arch villain, Frank Booth, who is described as "an id let free" who is "clearly relating to an Oedipal need to fuck his mother and usurp his father" (59). Odell and Le Blanc, prove here - as Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek has done - that psychoanalysis is an invaluable tool to bring to a reading of a Lynch text.

Lynch is famously shy of in-depth interviews and steers clear of elucidating "what he meant" with a film. In the July 1996 issue of *Sight and Sound* he is quoted as saying: "It's a dangerous thing to say what a picture is. If things get too specific, the dream stops". He rather prefers to leave the interpretation open and conclusion individual. The authors seem to follow the filmmaker's lead in this regard, by not providing singular answers to the questions posed by the films. Even if this were not a stated policy when writing the book, it would be impossible to go into more depth evaluating any one film without neglecting another in the short space of 192 pages.

For anyone coming to *David Lynch* (the book or the man, for that matter) expecting absolute answers and indisputable analysis would find very little satisfaction. Instead Odell and Le Blanc suggest frameworks within which to view the

films, possible avenues down which to wander in search of your own clarity...or more unanswered questions. They neatly avoid the intentional fallacy by not ascribing all decodable meaning to the encoder. I dare say Lynch himself would be proud. To paraphrase them, one of the most satisfactory things about Lynch's films is that they bear (or perhaps demand) repeated viewing. As they say themselves: "...this is the nature of the puzzle that the viewer must unravel" (123).

With Lynch's work, there is often a temptation to impose a dream or fantasy interpretation. It is comforting in the sense that it offers ways of compartmentalising certain disconcerting and disturbing scenes or events as figments of the protagonist's imagination or dream-world, or even visual metaphors for his fears or childhood traumas. The authors argue that Lynch makes it abundantly clear when a dream is being presented. It is therefore that they suggest, as they do in the case of *Mulholland Dr.*, that we view the films "at face value" (114). It's scary indeed to read Lynch's texts as glimpses of a world disconcertingly like ours but infinitely stranger and less predictable. Odell and Le Blanc suggest looking at the film as a subjective "perception of reality rather than reality itself" (114), and pose that in Lynch narratives time is "fractured" and "malleable" (83). The key to our engagement with the films, however, is that each film "has its own internal logic" (113), albeit circular.

This is but one of many common threads and themes running through various films identified by the authors. They return, for example, several times to an idea expressed early in the *Eraserhead* chapter that "industrial growth is viewed with abject horror yet at the same time with fascination" (31) in Lynch's work. They show parallels in his other films, even the seemingly most un-Lynch Lynch film *Straight Story* makes reference to industrialisation. But Alvin Straight's world is one where "machinery is devoid of its menacing aspect" (107).

Other themes identified and discussed include "the absurd as part of the mundane" (34). From the beautiful lawn covering the insect world in *Blue Velvet* to the almost anachronistic use of contemporary technology like a video camera and a mobile phone by silent filmsque Mystery Man in *Lost Highway*, this is one of the most frightening aspects of Lynch's work. He plants the seed of doubt about what we see as normal, and provides "portals into other worlds" (32).

Electricity also recurs as “a chaotic force that flows through Lynch's films” (34). A flickering bulb indicates the arrival of The Cowboy in *Mulholland Drive*, while the darkness caused by an absence of electricity triggers disclosure in *The Dark Room*.

There is hardly a Lynch film that does not contain a reference to “voyeurism and how the watcher can become tainted by the subject” (56). Lynch repeatedly places a seemingly innocent character (Diane/Betty in *Mulholland Drive*, Sandy in *Blue Velvet*) in the position of investigator. This allows the “innocent” to explore their own dark side while uncovering the truth beneath the thin veneer of others. This “duality of good and corrupted innocence crops up in many of Lynch's characters” (56-7).

Fire is one of the most well known of Lynch's motifs and “can serve evil as well as good” (66). In *Lost Highway* the cabin in the desert burns as if in reverse, this early image connected to an unforgettable, typically Lynchian sound-scape. Lula and Sailor repeatedly indulge in post-coital cigarettes, their larger than life match flames both celebratory and ominous.

And what would a Lynch film be without the “dark sexual frustration” (78)? Poor Henry is decapitated by his own penis in *Eraserhead*. Bobby Peru verbally rapes Lula in *Wild at Heart* and the further he delves into her world the more *Lost Highway's* Pete finds out about the increasingly dangerous sexual games in which Alice is involved. Renee patronisingly consoles Fred when he cannot make love to her, and Alice taunts Pete by saying “you'll never have me” when he's about to consummate their relationship. This is to say nothing of the recurring implied castration metaphor of head shots and decapitations.

Lynch's themes and preoccupations are presented in his films not through the dialogue of the characters, but through hypnotic visuals with “visceral intensity” (81-2). Lynch doesn't tell stories, he shows them, and when it comes to engaging his audience: “given the choice between narrative cohesion and emotional cohesion, Lynch always plumps for the latter” (114). It is this emotional connection made with the characters and their world that make the sometimes “disturbing and impenetrable existential horror” (37) so real to the audience that they keep coming back for more Lynch.

David Lynch is a good introduction to the man and his work. It provides a bit of biographical information, but not so much that it starts to feel like a biography. It is the perfect read for someone whose interest is peaked by seeing a few of Lynch's films

and wants to know more, or someone who wants an overview of his work for the silver (and small) screen. It is not a work for a Lynch academic, someone who is making a study of the man's oeuvre or of a specific Lynch film. It inspires enthusiasm for the films and curiosity to delve deeper. After only a few chapters one can not help but want to rewatch every film Lynch has made.