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Masters by Research

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Straight Stories:
Class, Exploitation and Americana
in the Films of David Lynch

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Introduction

In 2007, a panel writing for *The Guardian* acknowledged that “no one could fault the conclusion that David Lynch is the most important film-maker of the current era”. Film history, in a relatively short 100-or-so-year span, has developed an impressive number of filmmaking icons; people to celebrate and consider champions of the artform across the globe. The art-house circuit boasts the likes of Andrei Tarkovsky, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Robert Bresson, while popular and mainstream circles, though no less artistically gifted, can honour the likes of Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, and Guillermo del Toro; but this research project aims to explore a figure who has straddled both sides of the spectrum and can almost be claimed by both parties in David Lynch. Winning the Palme d’Or at Cannes, receiving three Academy Award nominations, his status as an icon has been firmly cemented.

And yet, as this project will argue, David Lynch, despite his popularity, accolades, and reputation has largely been misrepresented on a wider scale. A common, popular, perception of Lynch among film fans and some critics is that he’s “the weirdo’s weirdo” (Fattal, 2022), emphasising strangeness, an oddity, with some fans ranking his films “by their weirdness” (Goyaz, 2022), but this largely feels like a surface level analysis of the director’s work and efforts. More nuanced and in-depth analysis on a number of topics from fans, critics, and academics alike certainly exists, and will be evidenced in the project’s Literature Review, concerning psychological and philosophical interpretations of his movies, Marxist criticisms of others; but this research project aims to confront the popular image of David Lynch and argue, instead, that he is a foundational and groundbreaking, inherently American, artist whose work is best read when contextualising it as part of a quintessential Americana canon; from a director deeply fascinated by the place he is from. A large part of this project will take shape in the form of class-based analysis. In an effort to “understand” David Lynch and his films on this level, he can act as a mirror – taking what he sees from the United States and its complex socio-economical issues, racial and misogynistic history, and return his interpretation as motion picture. These Marxist interpretations are inspired by Karl Marx’s writings in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848, 1994 ed.), *Das Kapital* (1867, 2012 ed.) and the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932, 2015 ed.) and

carried by more modern, contemporary interpretations by the likes of Alain Badiou (1988) and Antonio Negri (2009).

I believe that this is a project worth exploring for its unique subject matter, one rarely touched upon by others in depth and hardly, if at all, in connection with a celebration and condemnation of Americana and the idea of America, respectively. While, as my literature review chapter will prove, class-based analysis of Lynch's work exists, it is not a common topic explored. I also believe that my added perspective as a non-American benefits this "outsider"'s view of the country, Hollywood, capitalist systems and injustices. Likewise, in aiming to establish Lynch as an inherent part of the country's long line of celebrated filmmakers and creatives (with him having many interests and passions outside of movies alone), this additional distance helps provide a more balanced perspective on his place in the world. The analysis alone will not provide revelatory insight, but in combining these two topics, we can arrive at a new, unexplored angle that seems to provide an answer for the people seeking to achieve a meaning or understanding of his films. I believe that in successfully doing so, we will arrive at a new perspective of the man himself. Re-contextualising David Lynch's feature-length motion pictures in this context of American cinema and culture allows us a richer understanding of the themes at play in his work.

Following this, this project aims to explore the ten feature-length fiction films of David Lynch across a number of chapters. Following a detailed literature review and methodology, the work will be analysed through a class-based lens of leftist political philosophical thought. Continuing, a chapter on the concept of exploitation, both economically and socially, emphasising the ill treatment many (if not most) women in his films suffer at the hands of men, and its broader societal implications. Cataloguing Lynch's influences and establishing his social surroundings will receive its dedicated chapter, succeeded by a final chapter tackling notions of "realism" and genre-filmmaking, how Lynch's films can be viewed and what his directorial trademarks are, how they make him unique; while also tying up many connective tissues throughout the length of the project as a whole.

Of course, Lynch is also famous for his continued refusal to answer questions and theories about his work directly, often repeating that the audience interpretation is just as important as his

own, quoted as saying “everybody’s a detective and whatever they come up with is valid in my mind” (Fox, *The Guardian*, 2019). It serves as a reminder that no one specific angle, thought, or perspective is, to him, above any other.

A purely psychoanalytical approach is, essentially, as valid as my own class-based and culturally American ones; but I believe it is important to continue promoting the existence of different schools of thought, ways to approach a subject or an interest. In David Bordwell’s *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Theory* (1996, 2012 ed.) acknowledges different methodological approaches in film theory and yet rejects deliberately interpretive approaches, arguing that they, essentially, warp the film over their own predetermined frameworks, rather than applying more accurate research benefitting the film and how it works. He continues: “according to most such theorizing, the subject... is rather a category of knowing defined by its relation to objects and to other objects” (pg. 6). While this project does still aim to work with Lynch’s body of work in a deliberate manner, it acknowledges that there are a multitude of ways to approach these films and doing so is encouraged by the director himself. The act in itself feels quintessentially Lynchian in that, over the course of his career, he has tackled a number of wildly different genres (from science-fiction to mystery noir to road-crime-comedy), and even approached the films in the same genres in different ways; considering the change in scope and protagonist gender in *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Dr.* alone make them radically different films. To approach this project from a new angle is to attempt to act as a detective, finding one more clue, a piece to the puzzle.

Over the course of the coming chapters, this project aims to justify this action. David Lynch’s body of work is an engaging and rewarding one full of secrets and mystery, but the real magic that comes from this detective work is to understand the worlds he has created and, in turn, the world in which the works are being created.

Literature Review

With this research I believe there has been a lot of important material to cover and understand prior to tackling the main body of work, looking at David Lynch as an American artist and how representations of class in his films can be used to reflect America (and the *idea* of America). Despite being an active filmmaker since his debut short film, *Six Men Getting Sick (Six Times)* in 1967, Lynch has only released 10 feature length films. These include body-horror *Eraserhead* (1977), period drama *The Elephant Man* (1980), science-fiction epic *Dune* (1984), psychosexual suburban nightmare *Blue Velvet* (1986), wild and violent love story *Wild at Heart* (1990), prequel-sequel to the acclaimed *Twin Peaks* (1990-91; 2017) series co-created by Lynch *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992), neo-noir thriller *Lost Highway* (1995), Disney-distributed biopic *The Straight Story* (1999), *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), a dark and tragic love letter to Hollywood, and, finally, experimental nightmare on acting and filmmaking *INLAND EMPIRE* (2006); which remains Lynch's latest feature length project to date.

Despite the surprisingly varied subject matter of each of these works, becoming familiar with each (through many rewatches), I intend to prove that what links them, beyond Lynch's typical mise-en-scene, recurring actors, and stylistic choices; is a deep thread that runs through each work that manages to encapsulate many sides of the quintessentially American experience. Whether in industrial Philadelphia, PA (*Eraserhead*), Hollywood (*Mulholland Dr.*) or the Midwest (*The Straight Story*).

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge and recognise the inherent differences that come with *The Elephant Man* and *Dune* when considering this project and its interests. Both films are, of course, set outside of the United States (Victorian London and another planet entirely, respectively), but both provide valuable context and insight towards the topics of class and exploitation in such a significant manner that both films still manage to serve the aims of this project fittingly.

In my research I have found a number of books on Lynch, often thanks due to his relative popularity and cultural capital, including *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood*

(Nochimison, 2005 ed) which I found useful for providing a wider portrait of the man himself with focuses on his art (which invites similarities to both Jackson Pollock and Edward Hopper as well as “hero” Francis Bacon) and provides strong analyses on most of Lynch’s works.

Nochimison’s work engages in talks about Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and voyeurism, however, it sadly disappoints when it comes to a more specific class angle. Nochimison’s work is a good place to start and is certainly knowledgeable, however, it lacks the specific depth that this research requires.

Similarly, *Lynch on Lynch* (Rodley, 2005), lacks an entire career overview but is more efficient in getting David Lynch’s own thoughts and opinions across. Unlike memoir/biography *Room to Dream* (Lynch/McKenna, 2018), *Lynch on Lynch* is more guided in approach with Rodley asking more direct questions.

Rodley’s questioning is oftentimes standard and predictable, avoiding a more nuanced or analytical approach that would benefit this research project, but still promotes some understanding of poverty and working class issues, in particular acknowledging *Eraserhead* factory-worker protagonist Henry’s drastic living conditions as causing spiralling mental health conditions. Conversely, *Room to Dream*, instead of offering much analysis, provides a unique insight to Lynch’s own thought process that Rodley is not able to get across – making it an important resource when considering Lynch’s upbringings and personal idea of America. Dennis Lim’s *David Lynch: The Man From Another Place* (2015) also promotes “Three Ideas of America” (a chapter beginning on pg. 16) which mentions Lynch’s upbringings and perspectives, becoming important to consider the idea that Lynch might be “unconsciously” socially concerned.

This project’s most valuable source on Lynch himself, however, seems to come from Todd McGowan’s *The Impossible David Lynch* (2007). McGowan’s book is recent enough to provide information on *Mulholland Dr.* and *INLAND EMPIRE* while both applying and combating critiques from relevant film theorists such as David Bordwell and Laura Mulvey. He is able to apply the works and philosophies of Karl Marx, Lacan, Freud and Georg Hegel and their significance on Lynch, consciously or otherwise; it is only in a less explored Americana aspect that McGowan provides any kind of disappointment. Despite this, it can be argued that the more relevant and important exploration of America can be found in other sources, both on Lynch (Lim, Rodley, etc.), and in its own topic of focus.

As a popular filmmaker, further reading on Lynch has been discovered through general film theory books that introduce a number of concepts and theories relevant to my research. Lynch was mentioned and appeared in *Breaking In: How 20 Film Directors Got Their Start* (Jarecki, 2001), which provides some background on the production of *Eraserhead* (pg. 76), Judith Weston's *The Film Director's Intuition* (2003), *Fifty Contemporary Film Directors* (Weston, 2003, pg. 10), and Joel Martin's *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (1995, pg. 71) He is discussed in both *The Art of Watching Films* (Petrie/Boggs, 2018 ed., pg. 193) and *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Hill, 1998, pg. 256), though these are kept minimal; it is in these two works nevertheless that we can find a number of perspectives, criticisms, and ways to approach film as an artform and learn how to analyse and understand visual content and the various meanings and interpretations that can come from them – which is essential when Lynch has repeated often that he audience interpretation is just as important as his own, quoted as saying “everybody’s a detective and whatever they come up with is valid in my mind” (Fox, *The Guardian*, 2019).

Film Theory: An Introduction (Lapsley/Westlake, 2018) proved itself to be an especially useful source for notably mentioning both Jacques Lacan and Karl Marx but also Louis Althusser, who added ideas of structuralist theory, post-structuralism, and attempted to blend structuralism with Marxism. When considering these perspectives in relation to Lynch, the biggest fault in Althusser’s writings is a rejection of “humanist” Marxism (in Merrifield’s *Reinterpreting Marxist Humanism and Anti-Humanism*) that clashes with Lynch’s compassion for his characters. This compassion is most evident in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*), as well as the almost romantic and heroic notion that people can change the world around them (Jeffrey Beaumont in *Blue Velvet* especially); but Lapsley and Westlake’s book contains notable sections on Marxism and its influence in relation to psychoanalysis as well as auteurism, making it a very important groundwork for my entire project.

Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks (ed. D., Lavery. 1995), though mostly focussing on *Twin Peaks* as a television series, is a Lynch-specific work of critical approaches and applications of theories presented in the previously mentioned film theory works. With less emphasis on any of Lynch’s feature works, including *Fire Walk With Me*, it nevertheless does provide resourceful points on the works that came prior, calling *Peaks* and Lynch “wistfully, desperately, quintessentially American” (pg. 25) and adds that “Lynch’s social orientation became

much clearer with *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*". Beyond Marx, there are also feminist readings to be made that reflect on American society at large, noting that "violence and aggression toward women are implicitly accepted, the murder of women perceived as sexually active is not only tolerated but unconsciously encouraged... the end product of cultural misogyny is sexualised murder" (pg. 112) which provides valuable context into other works such as *Blue Velvet*, *Mulholland Dr.* and *Wild at Heart*.

The Marxist concept of Reification is discussed and explored in *Politicising Lynch/Lynching Politics: Reification in Blue Velvet and Wild at Heart* by Kiel Hume (2010, pg. 219) which approaches the director from an entirely political lens, albeit only on two pictures, but Hume chooses to look at a popular work (*Velvet*) and an underdiscussed one (*Wild*) which provides a great sense of balance; especially considering reification is a concept largely unreferenced in most standard Marxist analysis. Hume also takes advantage of both films' "inherent sense of American-ness" giving him ample opportunity to do what most other sources don't do – reflect the works back onto the America that influenced them.

One last but important piece found is Drazin's *Blue Velvet: A Bloomsbury Movie Guide* (1998) which acts as an encyclopaedia on Lynch's 1986 film (with a few minor references to other works), providing context on a range of topics, misogyny, voyeurism, Americana, and BDSM; only lacking in more direct class analysis but is otherwise highly valuable.

After a substantial research period, the literature review for this project has proven fruitful and worthwhile. Materials on both Lynch specifically and film theory, or political philosophy, have helped guide and shape this project and provided focus and intent.

Methodology

Through close textual analysis, I will be approaching this project, looking at David Lynch's feature-length films, from a number of different perspectives in a chiefly chronological order. Largely concerning Leftist social and economic perspectives and influenced by feminist schools of thought, this project will evaluate David Lynch himself, his films, and the society and culture from which he, and the work, is produced, in a unique manner.

While the idea of moving from one film to the next presents itself as a viable approach; I believe that in order to avoid obvious points of repetition the work is best suited to be broken down by subject, topic, themes, and explored thoroughly and in depth in a chapter best suited for each point. A later section on exploitation, for example, may feature notes from across each film, but a more specific one on film production (and its relationship to Capitalism) can give *Mulholland Dr.* and *INLAND EMPIRE* their own focus, or suburbia (and ideas of the "American dream") can be devoted to *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* as nightmarish subversions. With this ability we can go into much more distinct details and features that a purely chronological approach might not benefit. An additional benefit of this approach is the ability to jump between different works in a much more discursive manner that emphasises the important points when they need to be brought up.

Although *The Elephant Man* and *Dune* take place outside of both the United States and the 20th (into the 21st) Century, the two productions are still worth discussing in this research project. *The Elephant Man* and *Dune* both successfully challenge notions of class, exploitation, and more, and are still works that have been ultimately shaped by David Lynch and produced as such – even if they are, as mentioned previously, are not original ideas from him. The treatment of John Merrick (in actuality Joseph), in *The Elephant Man*, treated as a circus act, is not dissimilar to ideas of capitalist exploitation of performance for money, as the film productions in *Mulholland Dr.* and *INLAND EMPIRE* dehumanise and demoralise their participants; albeit in different and less explicit ways. Similarly, the planet of Arrakis in *Dune* and the empires that fight for control of Spice can be considered as symbolic of Western, if not specifically American, expansionism, colonialism and exploitation. Baron Harkonnen's extreme

obesity can easily be considered a result of the same greed and hedonism that inspires and drives images of bureaucracy and “fat cat” capitalists in modern America. These differences in setting are notable and large, but I believe it still essential to look at every one of David Lynch’s feature films regardless of his personal opinions on the state of *Dune* or its apparent lack of similarities with the rest of his work, for example.

Firstly, however, I believe the main tool to approach this work is to be from an auteurist perspective. French film director (then critic) François Truffaut in 1955 first explored the works of certain directors like Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford as “a body revealing recurring themes and preoccupations”, then developed and refined by American critic Andrew Sarris in 1962 in *Notes on the Auteur Theory* and then *The Auteur Theory (Film Quarterly, 1963)*; that certain filmmakers hold an inherent control over their work that defines it as their own – regardless of whether or not the director is the original author. It is essential to understand Lynch’s distinctive approach and unique style, as well as identifying his control over the production, to recognise Lynch’s feature length films as being creatively unique when compared to other films and filmmakers of his time. In recognising Lynch’s films as his specifically, we can interpret more of the elements that they contain, in any form, as belonging uniquely to him and as, in most cases, being done intentionally.

While there has been an increasing sense of reaction to auteurist philosophies, Pauline Kael first doubting Orson Welles’ importance on *Citizen Kane* (1941) in *Raising Kane* (1971) then Richard Corliss and David Kipen developing *The Schreiber Theory: A Radical Rewrite of American Film History* in 2006, in which they argue for a film’s success primarily being down to its script, that the screenwriter is the film’s principal author. However, both Kael and Kipen/Corliss’s arguments reflect more on screenwriting and screenwriters. With the exception of *The Straight Story*, Lynch has been credited with writing or co-writing each of his ten feature productions. Four of these are solo scripts working on original ideas, *Dune* being a solo adaptation of Frank Herbert’s novel, as well as two more original ideas in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* and *Lost Highway* in which Lynch is credited as the primary writer with Robert Engels and Barry Gifford receiving co-credits on each, respectively. Going further; for Lynch to have served as writer, director, producer, cinematographer and editor on *INLAND EMPIRE* as well as composer, production designer and art director on *Eraserhead*, his first and last films; it is no question in my mind that

Lynch operates entirely on his own intuition and that his films, like all of his work, come entirely, originally, from himself as one of cinema's true auteurs. Even the legendary Stanley Kubrick complimented his work, citing *Eraserhead* as his favourite film (Lynch, 2006, pg. 89), and that while making *The Shining* (1980), he even screened the film for the cast and crew to drive towards the same mood he wanted his film to achieve (Roberts, 2013).

I also believe that an important aspect of this auteurist perspective is understanding Lynch's influences more than from other sources. In aiming to present this research as new, unexplored, and different, I believe it is perhaps best done in unifying all of the aspects of David Lynch explored in the works of Nochimson in *The Passion of David Lynch*, to reference his artistic interests and other explorations, Lin in *The Man From Another Place*, to consider Lynch's upbringings, perspectives, and personality, and McGowan's *The Impossible David Lynch*, to engage with his work on a thematically rich, relevant and important level; to name just three key pieces.

When looking at everything written about David Lynch, it feels as though far too few emphasise Lynch's character and work outside of cinema. Considering that many seem primarily concerned with quote-unquote "understanding" Lynch, I believe that it is a great misstep to ignore these external factors, that Lynch is a culmination of all of these different aspects, projects, and inspirations. Jason Hellerman acknowledges that Lynch's name is "synonymous with 'weird' and 'unusual'", that, "no filmmaking name elicits more reactions when you tell someone "it's from David Lynch" (2021); demonstrating a pop-culture perception that fails to appreciate the acclaimed artist in a substantial manner. This project promotes a vital need to explore these aspects in depth. Despite the auteur-canonisation that Lynch has surely and deservedly received, the almost narrow focus that film critics, fans, and academics insist on applying to him and his work renders a large amount of it to be ineffective when wanting to, as touched on, "understand" David Lynch.

Before becoming a filmmaker, as he explains in memoir *Room to Dream*, Lynch was first a boy scout and then a painter, making his first film *Six Men Getting Sick* to experiment with art on a broader scale. Only Nochimson seems to consider Lynch's art side when bringing up how dearly he loves the works of Francis Bacon and Edward Hopper, who, as described by Renner as a "master of mood... and Modernist America" (pg. 7) similarly fits Lynch as a far more apt comparison than surrealists such as Salvador Dali, Man Ray, or the film driven Luis Buñuel. Lynch is admittedly "not really a movie buff" (Celada, 2017), a quote that seems to emphasise both his artistic priorities

and the idea that movies are, to David Lynch, a tool to create with just as much as a brush. This, again, expresses a need to challenge the popular perception of David Lynch in this project.

He is not shy about talking about the films he does love, however. Having named his character in *Twin Peaks* (1990-91, 2017) Gordon Cole after a name that appears in Billy Wilder's almost-poison pen letter to Hollywood *SUNSET BLVD.* (1950), it may be unsurprising to learn that Wilder's masterpiece is Lynch's favourite film (even less so considering the inspiration it further extends to *Mulholland Dr.*, see fig. 1). Yet when we look at some of his other favourite films (via *Far Out Magazine*), we can see how far the American influence extends with his love for Stanley Kubrick; more specifically, Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962), adapted from the novel of the same name by Vladimir Nabokov from 1955, which serves as the perfect document of the darkness behind happy, suburban, middle class America up to that point. Likewise, Lynch's love for *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), a masterpiece of early American cinema, appears most blatantly in *Wild at Heart*. Unlike a film like *8½* (1963), which also appears among Lynch's favourites, the career-long obsessions with a good vs. evil, light vs. dark, purity vs. corruption, love vs. hate; it is all *right there* in unpretentious, popular, *American* presentation. It remains important that these influences are considered when analysing the content and characteristics of his film, as this project aims to do.



fig. 1; a visual reference to Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* in *Mulholland Dr.*

Likewise, the visual similarities that Lynch shares with Edward Hopper, and the abstractions of Bacon and Pollock, are similarly obvious yet easily missed – hiding directly under many an audience member’s and academic’s nose. I believe that these influences are too important to ignore; that David Lynch is less mysterious than led to believe, and aim to emphasise these artistic influences as a means to both understand and explain David Lynch as well as his work.

A benefit of this auteurist approach comes in seeing how the writings of Lapsley and Westlake in *Film Theory: An Introduction*, and its referencing Marxism, Althusserism, (both in Chapter 1: Politics, pgs. 1-32) and auteurism, (in Part 2, Chapter 4: Authorship, pgs. 107-162) prove most useful. While an emphasis on traditional auteurism is an important angle to consider, my research aims to focus most heavily on auteurism in addition to Marxism, as explored and updated in the mentioned Lapsley and Westlake work, Wayne’s *Marxism Goes to the Movies*, Edward Menang’s *Marxism and Film: A Marxist Approach to Filmmaking* (no publishing date given), and *Marxism, Film and Theory: From the Barricades to Postmodernism* by Scott Forsyth (1997); all of which promote Marxism and the understanding of it (including how to analyse media through a Marxist lens) specifically in film. Of course all of these are modern writings evolved and developed from Karl Marx’s own in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848, with Frederick Engels), *Das Kapital* (1867) and the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932). Marx, a philosopher, provided deeply influential analysis and critiques of capitalism and its systemic issues, inequalities, and injustices – inherent flaws and predatory behaviours within societal systems. Considering Lynch’s fascination with unknown and abstract evils, familiarity with Marxist perspectives is essential; being able to analyse class and exploitation on a level both broader and deeper. Naturally, Marx’s original writings are largely outdated, but the influence remains and these other sources update and re-contextualise the original writings.

While Althusser provides an interesting twist, deviating from Marx in its century-later update, I believe his philosophies would be stretched too thin when spread across Lynch’s entire filmography. His writings may influence certain perspectives, but will not be carried throughout the majority of the project, though they have proved valuable in their own ways. Instead I will largely be taking ideas and perspectives from the likes of Slavoj Zizek, whose admitted love of Lynch’s work proves especially helpful when looking at films like *Blue Velvet* as he did in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*. While most contemporary Marxist philosophers specifically identify as

communist, as is the case with Alain Badiou, who writes about the concepts of “being”, “truth”, “events” and “the subject” (originally developed in 1988’s *Being and Event*, also examined and evaluated by McLaverty-Robinson for *Ceasefire*, 2015); all of which have their place in Lynch’s work. Michael Hardt’s book *Empire* (2000), though primarily focused on imperialism and a number of postmodern concepts relating to the idea of nation-states (all of which can be helpful when discussing *Dune* and the United States), it has been celebrated by Žižek who called it the “*Communist Manifesto* of the 21st Century” (2001), asserting its relevance. With other philosophers including Antonio Negri and Jodi Dean, as well as writings such as G.A. Cohen’s *Why Not Socialism?* (2009); I believe that not only will this perspective on Lynch’s work, that his feature films are ripe for leftist interpretation and critique of the United States, is an original one; but also one that can be done far better now than it could have pre-21st Century or even pre-financial crises since 2008.

The topics of Marxism and auteurism stand as the most beneficial and unique ways to approach this project and present a number of highly interesting perspectives on David Lynch and his work. Considering the amount of work available on Lynch, relatively few are actively interested in engaging with his work on such a level – in pursuing Marxism as a method to analyse his films, we will gain a more unique comprehension of both his works and the present day capitalist systems we live in that influence and produce them.

Demonstrating a willingness to explore complicated and complex ideas and theories, this project aims to provide a unique, thoughtful, analysis of a misunderstood and polarising figure and his work through relevant social commentaries and issues.

Class

Having established a literature review and methodology, we can begin discussing David Lynch and his work by approaching firstly through class and the ways it appears and manifests in Lynch's work. In acknowledging the class systems and positions of class within the films, we can understand the worlds, and plots, Lynch is building through the environments, the characters, their relationships.

Beginning with his 1976 debut; Lynch is already utilising hostile, industrial landscapes and ethereal drone soundscapes to present the environment around Henry Spencer, his working class protagonist, as deeply uncaring. On his way home, he navigates a world filled with pipes, oil drums, and rubble as he carries his groceries, establishing that this is a usual way home. In doing so, Lynch begins his film with the acknowledgement that for working class people in inner-city environments, these alien locations are simply normal and routine. Until Henry's neighbour, known as the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall, informs him that his girlfriend Mary has invited her to dinner, there is no dialogue, further emphasising the loneliness of these lives and forcing focus on the reality of their situations.

Mary's family are shown to be living in similarly poor conditions. While, unlike Henry, they live in an actual house, the yard is cluttered, the walls smeared with mould, and the small environment, without decor, is inhabited by Mary, her parents, her grandmother, and a dog with a litter of puppies. It is cramped and crowded and no one is happy save for Mary's father who is excited about the new guest and very eccentric.

During dinner, Mary's father relates how after an operation in which function was feared lost, he ended up losing feeling in his arm. After having explained he was the one who fit pipes all over town, it's hard not to come to the conclusion that this is a direct result of his years of hard, manual labour. Mary's mother similarly seems to prioritise learning about Henry's work early on and insists on knowing "what *did* you do?" when he replies that he's currently "on vacation". Mary comes to his defence, that "Henry's very clever at printing" but the line of work doesn't sound satisfying to her mother. The clear unhappiness in the X household is, of course, largely motivated by the news of Mary's pregnancy and birth, meaning another mouth to feed, less space; but these

are worries because of the family's lack of financial security. The mother's displeasure does not stem from her own self-importance and higher social standing, but rather out of wanting more for her daughter and eventual grandchild. In taking the baby back to Henry's apartment, his circumstances seem even worse – with little more than a squeaking bed, a dresser, and a radio to his room with a walled off window. Now he has to share this little space with a partner who doesn't work and a baby that doesn't stop crying.

Eraserhead features the smallest cast in a Lynch film and not one of the characters, save for perhaps the Beautiful Girl, seem to be in any kind of comfortable status or way of living.

Considering the Beautiful Girl lives in the same hallway as Henry, we can assume that her conditions are relatively similar to Henry's. Likewise, The Lady in the Radiator and The Man in the Planet are both somewhat ambiguous presences and there is little to infer from either.

Eraserhead does not shy from showing explicitly homeless persons sleeping in the street in a sequence that follows a young child, something of a street urchin, taking Henry's head to a pencil factory where his head is converted into erasers, giving the film its title. Lynch does not treat us to an image of the factory from the exterior, keeping the atmosphere claustrophobic and isolated, but it's clear that this is a similarly soul-crushing environment to the rest of the world; what makes this scene notable, however, is the appearance of The Boss, who immediately berates employee Paul upon entrance. The Boss, like Henry, wears a suit but his is clearly of a higher quality and is, more importantly, clean. He's comfortably overweight, suggesting a regular diet, and well groomed. From his incredibly brief appearance, we can understand that this man is afforded opportunities and luxuries that Paul or Henry don't have access to.

Though *Eraserhead* lacks a clear antagonist, it is interesting to note that The Boss is the most outwardly antagonistic presence in the film through his treatment of the two workers shown to us; also providing a foundational image for the rest of Lynch's work that falls into commonly explored ground in media – the antagonist's physical gluttonous appearance symbolising decadence and greed, much like Jabba the Hut in *Return of the Jedi* (1983) or Kasper "The Fat Man" Gutman in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Though considerably problematic for the trope's possible fatphobia, and Lynch is arguably guilty of exploiting overweight bodies for comedy, it serves as a simple and direct metaphor in demonstrating the sheer disparity between those in power, and those not.

Lynch has often discussed the importance of the city of Philadelphia to his work, writing for *artforum* in 2015, Dennis Lim writes how it “looms large” in his personal mythology and “terrorized him and changed the course of his life” and further enforced by Thomas Devaney in *David Lynch: The Unified Field* (2014, pg. 199) in which Lynch notes the city as a key inspiration to *Eraserhead* specifically – the crime filled neighbourhoods and awful living conditions are easily and obviously reflected as early as Henry’s return home.

Lynch, surprisingly, followed *Eraserhead* with an unoriginal idea, picking up the script for the Mel Brooks produced *Elephant Man* set in 1880s London. Though Philadelphia lacks the obvious connection to the Industrial revolution era Victorian city, Lynch again explores grime, poverty, disease, mortality, pollution, and exploitation in stark black and white imagery.

The circus imagery that opens the film (and provides the first post-nightmare setting) already establishes clear and immediate thoughts of both the working class and the exploitation of both them and the animals, explicitly by a ringmaster; in here, Mr. Bytes, who is happy to show “freaks” to touring upperclassmen in top hats who deride his exhibition as “monstrous”. Dr. Frederick Treves is drawn to the act and pays “handsomely” for a private viewing of John Merrick, “The Elephant Man”. On his way he passes a number of street urchins, homeless, similarly disabled and disadvantaged persons – while his intentions as a person and as a doctor are both good natured; he clearly displays a level of privilege. He can choose who to help. He is also cautious about using the term “owner” in front of Merrick, correcting himself to “the man who looks after you”, which, though a kindness, suggests he is capable of the clearly inhumane conditions he is being kept in. During a lecture at the hospital in which Treves shows Merrick and his conditions to his colleagues, their apparent class and literal seated positions mean that each of these relatively wealthy men is looking down on Merrick; it is through Lynch showing Merrick through silhouette only do we avoid further exploitation of his persons.

Byers is also a member of the working class, living in the same destitution as Merrick (in slightly better circumstances), and the closest thing, with Jim the night porter, the film has to an antagonist; desperate to reclaim Merrick, referring to him as “my livelihood”. While his treatment of Merrick is obviously abhorrent, Bytes’ desperation serves as stark contrast to Treves’ situation. Bytes is possibly destined to starve without income whereas Treves lives in a spacious environment

with his wife, a clear upper-class home filled with surprisingly lavish furniture and decor, picture frames, large mirrors, and lounging chairs. When spending time with Bytes, the omnipresent industrial hiss and drones from *Eraserhead* make a return and are totally absent from Treves' home; making Bytes an almost sympathetic character out of the inherent inescapable nature of his class. Bong-Joon Ho's *Parasite* (2019) comes to mind as another film that represents the oppressed as monstrous and discarded people, with the Kim family worming their way into the affluent Park family home only to discover a forgotten housekeeper living under the house and now clearly in a deranged, deprived, state.

Conversely, it isn't until Merrick is able to prove his intellectual capabilities that he is actively defended by Treves. It further proves that Treves is a good, kind, person, but it almost begs the question – what if he really was entirely stunted? The idea calls to mind Marx's "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs", as part of the 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme* document (and explored in Pablo Gilabert's *The Socialist Principle*); that a person should contribute to society according to their best efforts, or ability, to do so and in turn receive what is required to survive in good health and security. Staffan Bengtsson criticises Marx's "exclusion of people with disabilities from the regular working class" (2017), but his unintentional doing so only further portrays the disabled, like Merrick, as lost and forgotten, oppressed, victims.

Dune features a rich and complex plot, adapted from Frank Herbert's highly influential science-fiction novel of the same name and proves challenging to summarise, but chiefly concerns wars over the production of the "spice" known as melange in the year 10,191; an invaluable substance to the universe and its empire (ruled by Shaddam IV) that allows instantaneous interstellar travel that can be exploited by an organisation known as the Spacing Guild, who hold a monopoly on interstellar travel and banking. The spice is only available on the desert planet Arrakis. Conspiring against the House Atreides over a belief in a secret army, Shaddam and the Guild grant rule to the Atreides over Arrakis, where they will be attacked by House Harkonnen and Shaddam's personal troops, all to ensure spice production is continued and kept under the same monopoly it has existed under until then. Detailing all of *Dune's* plot points requires more time than this research project allows, however, Paul Atreides (son of the Duke) soon becomes the primary focus. After surviving the planned attack, Paul is taken in by the native people of Arrakis

and leads them, halting spice production. Upon learning of his planned assassination by the Emperor and Guild in a prophetic dream, he, with Arrakis' Fremen people, control the planet's gigantic sandworms, the creatures responsible for producing the spice, and retaliates with his own attack that leads to the Baron Harkonnen's death and the Emperor conceding his throne and exiled to a prison planet.

With this material existing on the page, it is important for Lynch to adapt the material visually and incorporate his personal, auteuristic, aesthetics and sensibilities. Baron Harkonnen is, in all of his power, portrayed as grossly overweight (following a pattern from *Eraserhead*'s boss character), gluttonous, featured with boils and pus filled spots on his face and hands, so fat that he cannot walk by conventional means and relies on anti-gravity devices to float. He is the perfect visual representation of the 20th century idea of a fat cat businessman adapted to a science-fiction setting. His death, in which his suspenders rocket him through a hole in the ceiling after being poisoned, is symbolic of being crushed under one's own wealth; deeply ironic that it had to happen during an offensive movement by the Fremen people, the *proletariat*. Their attack, controlling and riding the sandworms, is a literal seizing the means of production, (in this case spice/oil); a core tenet of Marxist philosophy developed in *Das Kapital* (1867, 2012 ed., pgs. 215-16) where he stressed the importance that a labourer should "own (his) means of production and was satisfied to live as a labourer" (though it was specifically in W. E. B. DuBois' 1968 *Autobiography* in which the term "seize the means of production" were first specifically stated, pg. 160) – the Fremen uprising, their revolution, is portrayed as heroic and righteous. Paul's white-saviour aspects do deserve focused discussion, but for now he is to be considered a true leader to guide the disenfranchised to victory.

Though *Dune* does not appear typically Lynchian, much like *The Straight Story*, the level of interest in these class dynamics do provide strong comparisons and hooks to tie the epic to the rest of Lynch's work and cement it as another important part of its body.

Class may appear a less obvious factor in Lynch's next two features, *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart* but both contain important and vital themes that reflect on Lynch and his world. The oft-discussed opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* demonstrates the notion of seedy underbellies, facades, darkness in the every-day. Lumberton is a perfectly middle-class town, evidenced in its

white picket fences, looked after lawns and 1950s nostalgia. It is an overwhelmingly white location and its most blue-collar representation, a hardware store, seems cushy, seeing how Jeffrey Beaumont's father's home in the suburbs is clearly one to be appreciated. Lumberton is undoubtedly a Reaganesque fantasy. Of course, the point of *Blue Velvet* and its opening sequence is that there is more beneath the surface – the world of Lumberton is a facade hiding the ugliness underneath. The Reaganesque fantasy is nothing but fantasy, illusion, lies. It is a word that does not, cannot, exist practically or logically. James Midgley defines Reaganism, holding political positions similar to US president Ronald Reagan, as “based on economic individualism, traditionalism, and authoritarian populism” (1992, pg. 13), an ideology that could “appeal to urbane Wall Street stockbrokers, mainstream middle-class suburban Americans... Reaganism offered a credible alternative to centrist liberalism” (pg.14). This popular appeal (Reagan's election won him 44 of 50 states) is to be primarily considered in the context of the suburbanites who dream of detached houses and nuclear families. The resulting “New American Economy” has been described as a “Failure” (Bartlett, 2009) that promoted “Growing Inequalities” (Sloan, 2005, pg. 1) and “negative long-run impacts” (Meeropol) evidenced even as early as 1988.



fig. 2; frame from *Blue Velvet*'s opening sequence, emblematic of the Reaganite fantasy

Lynch does not explore many working class environments or characters as explicitly as he did in his first two films in *Blue Velvet*; villain Frank Booth prefers Pabst Blue Ribbon over Heineken but is otherwise a well dressed, big earning figure in the crime world with a deep

fascination with the luxury of blue velvet dresses and crime associate Ben's "so fuckin' suave" character. Instead, we can observe that the bad guys have the money. Neither Booth nor Ben's wealth is explicitly flaunted, but is a fair presumption to make considering their line of work, the connections they have, and the extent of their operations; including a mole in the police force. Behind Frank Booth and his associates, we can assume that, based on his home and his position, Detective Williams is the next step down the ladder. While Lynch seems to present an inherent distrust in authority, or at least a skepticism, over the course of his work, never fully adopting an All Cops Are Bastards stance; Detective Williams' hands are tied in bureaucratic tape. The police department are successful in bringing down Frank Booth's men in a climactic shootout, but Williams himself is ineffective at putting pieces together or stopping Booth himself – Jeffrey being the hero of the story. Though he is presented as mild mannered, kind, and work driven, Lynch's ultimate portrayal of Williams, and the Idea of the successful police officer, as ineffective, inherently weighed down and slowed by the class and social systems that they choose to uphold.

To the protagonists of *Wild at Heart*, lovers on the run, Sailor and Lula, class and its concern do not play particularly conscious concerns, and yet, *Wild at Heart* depicts an interesting act of class conflict and warfare. Sailor breaks parole, having previously been arrested for the public killing of a man hired by Lula's mother Marietta to attack Sailor for rebuffing her advances. Sailor is more so depicted as an individual (as symbolised by his snakeskin jacket) rather than an active member of the working class, though many of his tastes, in beer, in music, fashion, and attitude, all reflect similar levels of interest. Both he and Lula share a "white-trash-kitsch" but it is something to be celebrated and emphasised for a change. They wholly embrace their identity.

He is in many ways an American hero. He is Elvis. The King. He possesses the strongest ideals of any of Lynch's protagonists and has genuine confidence, drive, and devotion to the people he holds dear. He is both sensitive and tough, willing to "defend Lula's honour" in a bar fight over flirtatiousness, and is enough of an outlaw to rob a bank so that he and his love will be able to survive on enough money to keep themselves going – paired with a much more sadistic and evil character in Bobby Peru to remind us that Sailor is not a bad person, just a person trying to navigate the American landscape and survive it, with aims of going to California as a kind of promised land. A long time popular perspective for the working class, evidenced in Woody

Guthrie's song 'Do Re Mi' about Dust Bowl migrants heading to California, only to be harassed by authorities for not having enough money, or "do-re-mi" (Coombs, 2003, pg. 45). Bobby Peru, however, is aware of another bounty on Sailor's head, again courtesy of Marietta, this time for stealing her daughter away from her. Marietta is shown to live in relative extravagance. She is very well pampered and looked after in a house full of ornate furniture and decor, wide open space, white and beige covers, dresses, curtains, that all represent a purity and cleanliness (made all the more shocking when she has a breakdown that covers her skin in lipstick), a sense of elevation above the dirtier, less clean, working class. Marietta, though not as evil as Bobby Peru or Marcellus Santos, is directly responsible for some of their actions and her class, her economic position and privilege, allows her to do so and get away with it.

Sailor and Lula spend time in Texas with "trailer trash types" and through them they become acquainted with Bobby Peru, this group, however, is almost viewed with the same sense of fascination Lynch uses to spotlight his leads. Their eccentricities are certainly recognised as such, but these people are portrayed as so much more genuine than the middle class types that one can imagine infest the social circles Marietta belongs to. Because these people are largely much less distracted by money, they are free to pursue their lives however they wish to do so, much in the same vein as Sailor and Lula. *Wild at Heart's* surprisingly optimistic, hopeful, ending that reunites Sailor, Lula, and child, after another jail stint then serves to stand as a message, a rally; that it is possible to persevere and overcome and escape in a way that matters to you. This may be seen as naïve, too idealistic, but considering the negative portrayals of class otherwise, it seems easy to argue that at least one positive representation of working class people is deserved.

The town of Twin Peaks, WA, is flipped upside down following the murder of high school-homecoming queen Laura Palmer, whose death kickstarts the legendary series that originally ran for two seasons between 1990 to 1991. Following the series' cancellation, Lynch next pursued *Twin Peaks; Fire Walk With Me*; a prequel set in the last week of Laura's life. Her killer is formally revealed and resolved in the second season, but here we see it happen at the hands of her father Leland, possessed by Killer BOB, a spirit representing "the evil that men do". With the source of Laura's trauma and pain being so close to her – in her relationships as well as literally and physically, we can explore the horrors that befall her as a symptom of middle-class living.

Lynch is obviously sympathetic to Laura Palmer, warts and all. David Lavery acknowledges “Lynch’s social orientation becoming much clearer with *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* with... his infatuation with 1950s small town America” (1995, pg. 25) He equates her to an angel in her final moments and has her smile, redeemed after death. As is revealed over the course of the series, as well as explored in *Fire Walk With Me*, Laura, despite being seen as “a nice girl”, the homecoming queen who runs the Meals on Wheels service, moonlights as a sex worker with an addiction to cocaine and multiple sexual partners. Her actions serve as a private way of distancing herself from her family, from her father, a successful attorney working for businessman Ben Horne (who has established himself as the most successful and rich person in Twin Peaks). Her home, multi-storeyed, with ornate pots that adjoin the stairs along a well maintained garden, with wide, open seating areas and expensive furnishings in the well-cleaned living room, is where she is subject to the nightly abuse. In taking herself away from her abuse, she is taking herself away from the class setting she has grown up in and been a part of for her 18 years. In doing cocaine with Bobby Briggs and in sleeping with Leo Johnson, a truck driver, and Jacques Renault, a bartender, she is embracing the opposite; the same misanthropic and nihilistic working class that exploit John Merrick in *The Elephant Man*. It should still be noted, however, that though Leo and Jacques profit from their drug smuggling operations, they are still portrayed as fairly “white trash” characters in spite of however much they may be earning. Lavery again comments on Lynch’s “collapsing a Marxist [Luis Buñuel] with a formalist [himself] to create something “quintessentially American”.

Before turning to Laura Palmer, Lynch spends much of the first act following special agents Chet Desmon and Sam Stanley trying to solve the murder of Teresa Banks in Deer Meadow, WA, a year prior to Laura Palmer’s death in 1989. Deer Meadow, another fictional town, and the prologue as a whole, is intended to serve as a counterpoint to the almost idyllic Twin Peaks. Banks herself is something of a reference point for Laura, as another young blonde waitress who has been murdered by BOB/Leland. There are locations such as Hap’s Diner, with a rude waitress, and the Fat Trout Trailer Park, with a crotchety manager, that serve to replicate the Double R Diner and the Great Northern Hotel respectively. We are shown these places and these people, working class and run down, to suggest that there are Laura Palmers all over the world – both she, and Twin Peaks as a whole, have the middle class privilege to present the same kinds of facades that

Lumberton does in *Blue Velvet*. Though Lynch would do it to a greater effect in *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), as explored by Dan Hassler-Forest (2020) and in Rife and Wheeler's "*I'll See You Again in 25 Years*" (2020), the exploitation of nostalgia is a deliberate act. While *The Return* aims to challenge the expectations of a television sequel or revival, *Fire Walk With Me*'s inversion and corruption challenges the American life the American public *thought* they knew and longed for in the Reagan era that had just ended.

In a similar turn to *Fire Walk with Me*, Lynch's dark ode to noir films, *Lost Highway* can similarly be read as an example of middle class hell. Fred and Renee Madison live in a modern Los Angeles home until they begin to receive strange videotapes of their property, and then eventually of the inside of it. Fred makes a living as a saxophone player and together the two enjoy lavish parties hosted by Renee's friend Andy, until Fred is greeted by The Mystery Man at an event, who tells Fred he is "at your house. I'm there right now". After this encounter, Fred receives another tape, this time of him playing with Renee's mutilated corpse, with him being arrested and sentenced to death shortly after.

With The Mystery Man eventually seen wielding a video camera and taunting Fred, we can assume that he has been the one filming his house and leaving the tapes, as Lynch provides no direct closure on this. His introduction at a relatively expensive party in an expensive house then leads us to suspect he is a manifestation of Fred's paranoia, anxieties, and fears about his wife's possible affairs with richer, more successful men than him; which ultimately lead to the several deaths in the film, including Andy's during Pete's arc; a persona that Fred manifests and becomes while in prison. Pete, played by an entirely different actor, already has a job, and a family, but is soon drawn into the middle class magnetism exuded by Mr. Eddy and his mistress Alice, sharing Patricia Arquette as Renee's actress, and with whom he begins an affair.

Pete's background is clearly more working class, though not poor. His parents celebrate a rockabilly aesthetic and his suburban home, though in a nice area, is fairly small and unremarkable. Alice's glamour and Mr. Eddy's power are clear, powerful, understandable draws. What this arc serves to suggest, however, is a toxic, predatory, aspect to the middle class as Alice tells Pete mid-intercourse "you'll never have me", signalling his shift back into Fred – meaning his attempted assimilation into the life is a failure. In addition to this, the dual roles of Renee/Alice and Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurant, as well as repeated locations such as Andy's house, present an idea resembling

a class homogeneity akin to *American Psycho* (2000) in which characters are often mistaken for one another due to the Wall Street lifestyle's, and Capitalism at large's dehumanising effects.

These dual roles tell us that everybody in upper middle class Los Angeles is alike – and that they are, as with previous Lynch efforts, not good people. Mr. Eddy – the character with more money than anyone else in the picture, is among Lynch's most violent, volatile, unstable characters with an insatiable greed that manifests in sexual conquest, physical abuse, manipulation, and more. When he beats an innocent man for the relatively minor issue of tailgating; Pete is unable to intervene out of fear of both Mr. Eddy and his bodyguards. Simply because Mr. Eddy has the money for their loyalty and their service, he extends his power and his influence over both the everyman he is treading on and the everyman wanting to stop him.

Lynch's return to biopic comes by way of Alvin Straight, the 75-year-old World War Two veteran who travelled almost 250 miles to reunite and make amends with his estranged brother following a stroke, all on a John Deere tractor. The first images in the film are all classic Midwestern town signifiers, harvesters, farms, main streets, local and independent services and businesses. Laurens, Iowa is clearly small and tightly knit; all of the residents we are introduced to seem to know one another and on good terms and meet in bars to spend their time. We are introduced to Alvin Straight following a fall at home after failing to turn up to one of these regular meetings with friends. Though his neighbourhood and furnishings are all nice-looking, it is evident that neither Alvin, his daughter Rose, or anyone else in their lives are middle-class. Their home looks like one of the simple wooden bird boxes that Rosa makes. There is no sign of any kind of extravagance, Alvin evidently surviving on social security checks to get by.

Alvin quickly defines himself as a stubborn man at the doctor's office, refusing to pay for x-rays (which also prompts the question can he even afford to?) but is reminded of his conditions; years of past drinking and his age have caught up with him and ruining his body, going blind, hip issues, liver damage; it is made clear that Alvin does not have much time left and he does not have the privilege to afford better care to make those last months turn to years.

After hearing of his estranged brother's stroke he sets off to visit him to make amends, almost 250 miles away by tractor, due to his eyesight being so poor he cannot get a driver's licence. His tractor soon breaks down and dies shortly after departing, in returning and getting a new

tractor, a John Deere, he is guided by a strong, traditionalist, buy-American ethic, even if he does so subconsciously. This very American vehicle provides the best mode of transport for exploring the Midwestern essence of the United States.

Along his travels he encounters a number of people of different ages and lifestyles but all are at least positioned as similarly financially relatable. *The Straight Story* builds off of Alvin helping others, in the instance of the young and pregnant runaway whom he tells of the importance of family; mutual assistance, in which he and another war veteran share stories and vent, processing deep emotional traumas (with Alvin's guilt and Post-Traumatic Stress likely being the reason for his heavy drinking); or in Alvin being helped by a group of people after his tractor breaks down yet again. They help him find people to repair the damage and host him, offering food and shelter while he waits on his next social security cheque to come through – helping him despite his temporary loss of money. *The Straight Story* is carried by the idea of community action and assistance. Its lack of any antagonist figures make it a unique entry in Lynch's catalogue, up to and beyond this point. The absence of any direct class conflict, economic exploitation, or crime, make this his most idyllic picture; rather than an exploration of the Midwest we get a journey through it. It is a love letter to America because Lynch sees the world, without the distractions class offers, as its people, while never letting us forget the significance of class.

In perhaps his most explicit exploration of class, economy, social standing and setting, Lynch goes more modern than ever before, setting *Mulholland Dr.* in Hollywood. The title credits take place over a limousine driving through the titular location before a car accident that renders its passenger, a young woman, an amnesiac who wanders through the LA night before sneaking into an older woman's house as she leaves and falling asleep. Soon she is met by Betty, the older woman's niece, an actress who is minding her aunt's home while she is away.

The scene follows two, seemingly unrelated, others: the first of which consists of a man telling his acquaintance of a "terrible" dream he had set in the same Winkie's diner they're sitting at, involving a strange, horrific figure. On investigating the alley behind the diner, the figure appears and he collapses, seemingly dead of shock. Then, film director Adam Kesher is intimidated by the Castiglione brothers, who insist he hire Camilla Rhodes for the lead in his film. Following his refusal, they tell him "It's no longer your film" and he finds himself off the project with his bank

account frozen.

In analysing these scenes from the same class-based perspective as the entirety of this project, it seems clear that they exist to establish a middle-class fear of failure, of losing money. The figure that lurks behind the Winkies resembles a homeless person, a caricature of one, walking in unspeakable filth, and the simple confrontation with that idea is enough to potentially kill a man. Mimi Kirk (2020) identifies the “pandemic” of homelessness as an “emergency we’ve already been living in” and specifically points to capitalism as the singular cause of homelessness, a system that aims for profit over individual needs, that homeless has become “positioned outside of a community of normatively legitimate subjectivities” (Farrugia/Gerrard, 2015) in much the same way Merrick is othered in *The Elephant Man*, made more real by the undeniably contemporary and comfortable setting. Lynch does not linger on the subject of homelessness specifically to promote any specific thoughts on the concept beyond a fear – for what it represents rather than the persons unfortunate enough to become victims of it. When Kesher’s project is essentially stolen from him by a shadowy web of conspirators if he does not cooperate with their demands, the possibility of homelessness is, again, made a subtle yet harrowing potential; made especially dramatic considering his relative wealth and apparent fame.

This web serves as a sort of upper-upper-class whose existence does not seem to be made apparent to even Adam Kesher, though clearly aware of something going on behind the scenes. His victimisation is deeply important for showing that capitalism negatively affects men and women, working-class and middle-class, as there is always, essentially, someone with more money, (meaning more power), than you. Mr. Roque and his atypical body represent The 1%; practically impossible to conceive. While *Mulholland Dr.* lacks another typical antagonist figure, and Diane in her fantasy creates Mr. Roque as the reason behind Camilla’s success as an actress compared to her own miniscule affluence and fame, when in the reality of Diane’s situation, she is simply a victim of capitalism. There is no one singular entity to blame (disregarding notions of her own talent holding her back), but the system entirely driving her to her heartbreak. Camilla’s affair with the real Kesher and her continued prosperity provides such jealousy that Diane spends, seemingly, all of her money on the hitman at the beginning of the film to kill her. Deeply regretful, heartbroken, faced with the reality that she will soon be living in poverty, she (visited by a powerful and frightening

hallucination) takes her own life. In a city like Los Angeles, Hollywood, perhaps the single greatest signifier of wealth and success; the idea of failure is simply too much to bear.

INLAND EMPIRE, Lynch's most recent feature film, takes its name from a county of California in the San Berdino area, within 60 miles of greater Los Angeles. *INLAND EMPIRE* is, arguably, Lynch's most dense and complicated narrative work, as to be discussed in the coming chapters, and a plot breakdown is difficult to do. The film begins with "the Lost Girl", a sex worker who engages in an unpleasant act with a client and then tearfully uses television as escapism. The remainder of the feature focuses mostly on Nikki Grace, a successful Hollywood actress who then begins to take on the personality of the character she plays during the production of a supposedly "cursed" film about adultery. Nikki's home is, as displayed in her introductory sequence, one that signifies affluence, one that employs a butler, making her the arguable richest protagonist in a Lynch film, not considering Paul Atreides' status as inheritor.

Without a direct antagonist, like *Mulholland Dr.*, *INLAND EMPIRE* serves as something of a critique, or a poisoned love letter to Hollywood, criticising the culture, celebrity, and class systems that enable the poor conditions – but these arguments are better suited for the next chapter. Though we can consider the inherent ambiguity, the mystery worlds Lynch protagonists find themselves in, as consequential of systemic, societal systems, being the "real" antagonists. What is notable to discuss in the film's approach to class issues is in its use of the Lost Girl. Nikki is able to save the Lost Girl in the climax. She is a young Polish woman reunited with her husband and her son and finally happy. In 2006, the same year as the film's release, the *Los Angeles Times* reported a scheme in which "young women were lured into the US and forced to become prostitutes in Los Angeles" (Krikorian, 2006), providing a timely example of issues still relevant (Adams, 2020). Migrant sex work has been considered especially dangerous for its "stigmatized status, workers... struggle to access affordable, unbiased, and supportive health care" (Hoefinger, et al, 2020) and in *Complex Inequality*, Leslie McCall provides relevant and understanding material in analysing these varying factors in judging class and exploitation, in areas related to sex work, and how to address them. In Nikki's saving Lost Girl, we can understand how the arts can be considered important to the working class for escapism, but also arrive at the idea that the middle-to-upper classes, people in positions of power and privilege, need to be made aware of working-class realities and situations.

This posits a somewhat idealistic position as any kind of answer or resolution, if one is to take *INLAND EMPIRE* and its plot at face value, but should reflect Lynch's underlying faith and love for Hollywood and the people who work in it. He positions Nikki as someone outside of the corporate studio system and acknowledges her similar position as a worker above all else, as her mental spiral is, similarly to *Eraserhead*, brought on by the intense work and labour she provides in adjusting to her role in the film. Paul McDonald identifies acting as "creative labour" (2021), establishing it as a valid form of work (with the act of "getting work" being equally difficult as "doing work"), thus making the union of Nikki and the Lost Girl as fitting comparisons to Marx's famous "workers of the world, unite!" (*The Communist Manifesto*). The two cannot together take down any capitalist systems, but this act between two people is enough to inspire hope and the possibility of more.

Lynch's work is, consciously or not, (as he tends to avoid direct, confrontational approaches), deeply concerned with class issues, as this chapter has demonstrated. Going hand in hand with these ideas is the notion of exploitation, economic or otherwise. While these topics have already been touched on briefly here, the following chapter will allow us to explore the subject in greater depth and giving it the justice it deserves as an essential aspect of Lynch's work.

Exploitation

Continuing from the previous chapter, we must now consider the consequences of class and its variables, class warfare, and class exploitation, with a wider focus, now considering the ideas of exploitation, as an extent of, and consequence of, masculinity, patriarchy and (unifying them) the United States. While this chapter aims to broaden the scope of this project by looking at class in addition to other ideas, lenses, and themes, it will largely consider the feminine perspective and the exploitation and suffering of women where available, but is still intended to look at exploitation in all of its forms.

Eraserhead can be examined most thoroughly with Marx's theory of Alienation, (Marx 1932, Mészáros 1970 and Hames, 2014); how Henry is subjected to menial and unimportant labour in a pencil factory deteriorates his sense of self, isolating and detaching him from the similarly harrowing world around him and causing him to spiral further into his lack of emotional human connection, (with himself and his close ones), as a result of his "vacation". While Henry is never shown to suffer any explicit, cruel, exploitation as a direct result of his labour from prior to the events of the movie, we see it manifested in the essential harvesting of his body; turning his head into erasers for pencils. With his disembodied head serving no productive purpose, the remains are exploited for the scraps that remain (similarly to Carol Adams' feminist arguments in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* that will become more prominent further on) with a silent acceptance that suggests an understanding of "this is how it [capitalism] works". Todd McGowan recognises *Eraserhead* as a film that "perpetuates Henry's alienation on the spectator" (pg. 35) while stressing "grasping one's alienation would... revolutionise capitalist society" (pg. 9) in *The Impossible David Lynch*, which then promotes the idea that the beginning of Lynch's feature film career comes with have "woken up" to the realities of capitalism and exploitation around him.

The Boss's almost extreme verbal abuse towards Paul, his employee, carries a strong comedic tone, with strong pointed finger and ballooning posture, because he serves as an identifiable and relatable figure for many audience members. We know The Boss because we know a boss like him. Despite this tone, it is a grim reminder that he is a man who has obvious power over people smaller than him, physically, as framed, as well as culturally, socially, economically. He owns

him.

Further exploring Henry as a victim of alienation, one of *Eraserhead*'s most striking images is the apartment window only revealing a brick wall. It is hard to view this as little else than a metaphor for "no way out", much like Foucault's writings on the State's need to "partition off space" (pg. 144), "spaces of exclusion" (pg. 199) and "penal power driven social spaces" (pg. 129) in *Discipline and Punish* (1975, 1997). It serves as pure claustrophobia, a reminder that Henry has been stripped and left in this condition (further exacerbated by the recent developments in his personal life), culminating in the attempted (possibly successful) murder of his child; echoing the same images of other common-person pushed too far explored in a song like Suicide's 'Frankie Teardrop' (1977) or films like Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) or Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993). Henry's act is a direct result of the mental anguish and suffering under a capitalist system that has slowly eroded his sense of self, and while one might have to hesitate to judge Henry's actions in any moral sense, the progression to them, though not logical or reasonable, are rather understandable, empathetic, considering the conditions that they resulted from.

Discussing the notion of class in *The Elephant Man*, as in the previous chapter, inevitably leads to a more accurate discussion of exploitation. I have already referenced the objectification of Merrick, both visually and as a commodity, as well as suggesting certain attitudes towards him from the likes of Treves, but this chapter will allow me to go into further detail.

While the economic exploitation and sense of alienation remains, from both the previous chapter and *Eraserhead*, another aspect that is vital to consider is Lynch's film as a firmly anti-ableist text. Nolan Boyd describes ableism as a "cultural power structure that oppresses and dehumanizes a marginalized group of people – in this case, people with disabilities." (2016), and a film that aims to humanise a de-humanised person. Kenneth Kaleta also understands that the film "focuses not on what is, but how it is seen" (1993, pg49); reminding us of the scene in which Treves first shows Merrick's body and conditions to his colleagues, with Lynch smartly keeping details from view, allowing both the option of preserving Merrick's dignity as well as framing the scene to clarify that this is more about the treatment of Merrick's person by the people (literally) above him than anything else. This framing is an example of Jacques Lacan's idea of *objet petit a*, a concept developed in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973/78, pg. 17), an

object that causes desire (much like how Hitchcock frequently used the MacGuffin), that is, for one reason or another, unavailable, promoting fantasies. For Lynch to be using Lacan, not a Marxist specifically but an anti-capitalist thinker, in an effort to challenge ableist exploitation, provides another useful piece of the puzzle when building an idea of Lynch's issues with America, capitalism, and exploitation.

Treves as (an intended) audience avatar, (in that he serves as a non-disabled spectator), but unintentionally profits off of Merrick, gains career success through his treatment of Merrick and introduction to a more conventionally proper society (Treves' crowd is almost entirely upper class). While it is important to remember that Treves is certainly considered "good", as an avatar for an able-bodied audience it is fairly important, his profiting can be seen as a form of exploitation not dissimilar to Mr. Bytes, who "owned" Merrick; though unintentionally so. As referenced earlier, it is only after Merrick provides strong proof of intelligence that he is then considered the effort of treating, that he is potentially useful. From this point on, Merrick appears near-constantly on screen and in every scene. It could be considered an almost meta approach from Lynch, using Merrick to gain acclaim as a filmmaker for providing plenty of Academy Award worthy performances (though nominated for 8 it received none), but the purpose should be considered primarily to establish familiarity and no longer cause any discomfort or disturb in an able-bodied audience. Lynch encourages us to empathise with the actual Merrick and not just the silhouetted medical marvel, the *objet petit a*; to overcome the same pressures and failings of an alienating, ableist, capitalist society in both Victorian London and in modern day America.

As a key text in science-fiction canon, a genre widely agreed to "reflect our innermost fears" (Berlatsky, 2017), *Dune* incorporates many thematic concerns that reflect societal worries relevant during Herbert's writing, Lynch's production, and since. Before becoming a novelist, Herbert was an active ecologist and the environmentalist nature shines through into his work and *Dune* is often considered "an environmental text" (Kratz, 2020). The work, in appreciating the vast expanses and biomes, is "highly borrowed from Arabic and Islamic cultures" (Baheyeldin, 2004) and features many terms finding root in Arabic etymology – with the most notable and arguably most important example being found in Arrakis' phonetic variation on "Iraq"; a clear inspiration on the environment. To then consider the spice melange as a substitute for oil in the real, American,

world, is to understand a key element of the work; *Dune* drawing from the Middle East reflects oil being drawn from the Middle East. Anthony Gramuglia notes (2017) that while “alternative fuel sources have risen to prominence in recent years, back in the 1960s, oil was the be-all, end-all energy source”, that in Herbert’s time it was a deeply important source that “without, entire countries would collapse”. To then consider the Iraq War from 2003-2011 was really over the control of oil, the “real objective of the US invasion” (Noshab, 2003), with Robert Longley acknowledging in 2021 that the “Sands of Iraq held the world’s 2nd largest oil reserve in 2003” (*ThoughtCo*) and *Forbes* reporting that US oil companies have “increased drilling by 60% in one year” (Rapier, 2022) – Lynch’s film can then be considered reflective of Imperialism, Colonialism, and a critique of both, with an essential need to disrupt exploitation of indigenous people for their land and their resources.

Blue Velvet again serves as a turning point for Lynch in his focus, his themes, his mission; the exploitation here is no longer (primarily) concerned with economics and is now focussing on the literal exploitation, the mistreatment, of women. Matha Gimenez’s *Capitalism and the Oppression of Women* (2005) understands the ways in which women are visibly oppressed “in the labour market, by the underlying relations between men and women, between the capitalist mode of production, etc.” (pg. 11), but the mistreatment contained from here through to *Lost Highway* is literal and raw, sexual and violent, as explored in the contents of *Misogyny as Hate Crime* (Zempi, 1984), and *Feminist Theory and the Problem of Misogyny* (Wrisley, 2021). *Blue Velvet* is presented as, arguably, more extreme than the majority of Lynch’s works (with the possible exception of *Fire Walk With Me*) when it comes to the deliberate suffering of the female.

Dorothy Valens is presented as a complex character, the perfect fantasy for the scopophilic and the sadistic, but the direct, literal, situational abuse her character suffers is undeniably surface level. Her attractiveness and allure, her femininity, is essentially punished by Frank Booth, an entitled and psychopathic criminal, resulting in her husband and her young child being kidnapped and held hostage so that he may exploit her for intense sexual assaults. The events leading to this act are never fully explored but, considering Booth’s character and how Zizek defines him as “pure phallic aggression” (*The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, 2006), essentially a total male, it is not

unreasonable to assume he chose to do this simply because he saw her and liked what he saw. Though clearly moved to tears by her singing and her presence, he entirely lacks respect or empathy for her agency and her life; presumably intent on getting as much out of her as he can, he (we assume) beats her to a bloody pulp and discards her completely naked and exposed in front of Jeffrey's porch. She is treated like a piece of meat. The bluntness of her situation is comparable to work in *The Sexualisation of Meat* (Florio, 2017), which explores the comparisons between the Woman and animals, meat, explaining; "In a patriarchal society, both animals and women are perceived as weaker than and inferior to men, and are objectified as a result. While humans (both men and women) objectify animals by killing them and turning them into fragmented pieces of "meat," women are figuratively objectified and fragmented in patriarchal societies as well". Florio's work is influenced by the previously mentioned *Sexual Politics of Meat* by Carol J. Adams, who wrote that: "The process of viewing another as consumable, as something, is usually invisible to us... because it corresponds to the view of the dominant culture. The process is also invisible to use because the end product of the process - the object of consumption - is available everywhere." (pg. 15) Together, these two pieces identify the objectification and exploitation of women as consequential of a dominant masculine social hierarchy. Frank Booth and his (all-male) gang serve as Lynch's most explicit emblematic figures of society thus far, challenging the impossibility of innocence that *Blue Velvet*'s women, Dorothy and Sandy, both dream of. Chris Rodley continues when interviewing Lynch – that Frank is "not unlike Killer BOB in *Twin Peaks* in that he seems to represent masculinity at the extreme – twisted, violent, and psychotic" (pg. 144).

The comparisons to BOB serve as extra significance in that BOB, possessing Laura's father Leland, embodies the patriarch wholly, the successful capitalist capable and guilty of incredible horrors under simple facades. Frank runs a successful criminal organisation while appearing as an emotional, sensitive man, moved to tears by a performance of 'Blue Velvet'. This, Frank's most public and least criminal appearance, is significant. *Blue Velvet*, already established as a film about facades, is more than the white-picket-fence to bugs-in-dirt; it's about the facades of people, on whom a society or a small town consists of. Essentially, any man is capable of this explosive temper and violent disposition, of this exploitation of women. Jeffrey, who is even told "you're like me", is shown the same potential in his sexual encounters with Dorothy – giving in and striking her; yet what is more important, arguably, is how he exploits both Dorothy and Sandy in different ways. "I

can't tell if you're a detective or a pervert" rings truer when considering how Jeffrey, though clearly infatuated with Sandy, uses her to explore the mysteries the severed ear reveals. He encourages her to break up with a partner by spending time with her yet ignores the potential consequences of his frequent trips to Dorothy's, a relationship that evolves from the voyeuristic to the sadistic in the same way Frank's might have.

Like Treves in *The Elephant Man*, Jeffrey is undeniably supposed to represent a hero, yet seems to reach those heights by, subconsciously, exploiting another person(s) abilities, time, status, etc. What then unifies Merrick with Dorothy and Sandy is their position as minorities, whether as disabled persons or as women (Helen Mayer Hacker has argued women as a minority group since 1951). Of course Lynch does not intend to consider Treves or Jeffrey as bad or as guilty as the masculine, active abusers such as Mr. Bytes or Frank Booth, but it instead reveals a more nuanced position for his protagonists and plays with how, or if, they should be treated as necessarily heroic, especially considering their privileged positions as relatively wealthy, independent men. While this does promote an interesting and thoughtful debate towards gender and problematic perspectives (just to begin with), it would deviate a little too far from the established themes and restraints of this research project.

From this point on, Lynch seems to take a significant interest in the suffering feminine. Freud's Madonna-Whore complex begins to appear as consequence of Lynch's fascination with dichotomies, personas, and the unconscious mind (the Freudian ego). Lynch's representation is less of the heterosexual man's inability to love both aspects of the woman (except in *Lost Highway*, explored later), but rather the fascination in their intertwined nature itself and the mysteries and scenarios it leads to. Lula serves as both a guiding light to Sailor, through her, he can escape and live free, as well as his partner in hedonism, through music, alcohol, and sex. *Wild at Heart*, though full of class conflict, is less about exploitation than these previous entries, but again reveals surprising depth when considering its secondary, female characters.

Bobby Peru provides the film's most impactful moment when he harrasses, gropes, threatens Lula when the two are alone. It is an assault and a severe violation that brings her to tears and scars her. It is largely considered a game to Peru, who laughs afterwards. He has the power to change someone's life so radically and finds it funny. Despite the opportunity to tell Sailor about

this, Lula avoids the subject and instead tearfully warns him about Bobby as a “black angel” not to be trusted; a warning he opts to ignore. Her hesitancy may stem from his recent trip to a bar with Bobby, drinking together. Perhaps they’ve become friendly, and an accusation might spur another violent reaction. Ultimately, Sailor continues with the robbery that goes awry and is sent to jail, where Lula gives birth to their child. Upon release, he decides he is not a good man for Lula or their child, causing her heartbreak.

Considering Sailor’s actions, his beliefs are no doubt sincere, however, it is another form of a heroic, masculine, posturing that hurts the people close to him; a woman and his child. Her faithfulness is punished by prideful, masculine ideals that are directly challenged by Sheryl Lee as The Good Witch, a reference to *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), after an assault; telling him not to “turn away from love”, leading to the climactic reconciliation. This change of heart is significant – without the direct influence of a seemingly divinely (and explicitly) feminine figure intervening, *Wild at Heart*’s ending would be considerably more bleak. By returning to Lula, forming the loving, family, Sailor’s heroic, positive, American nature is finally realised and represented; the acknowledgement of the feminine figure does not drastically undo any significant exploitation but it presents further and more damning consequences, leading one to wonder where *Wild at Heart* might have gone had Sailor listened to Lula about Bobby Peru after all.

Lynch’s thematic trajectory at this point in his career is described as an “obsession” by Dennis Lavery, considering it an “infatuation with small town America and dirty little secrets” with another remind that women are now most often “Madonnas or whores” (1995, pg. 25). Laura Palmer serves as perhaps the single most important character in any of his works. The previous chapter takes effort in analysing her position as a middle-class victim, which will be continued here, but the principal focus is now on Laura Palmer as a woman.

Despite her numerous sexual partners, her sex work, and her cocaine addiction, Laura is never judged for her actions by Lynch. Her portrayal remains dignified, never sexualised, and is simply accepted and understood. Her addictions, to drugs or to sex, are part of what hold her together, preventing collapse under the weight of the abuse she has suffered for years at the hands of BOB – it is her way of medicating the mental trauma caused by a being considered “the evil that men do” by Agent Albert Rosenfeld in ‘Episode 16’ of the original series (1990). BOB’s

significance is that he possesses, to Laura, the ultimate man; her father, the literal patriarch. Leland, under BOB's control, is also responsible for the rape and murder of Teresa Banks. In a further similarity to Laura, she is never judged by Lynch either. She is also treated like an adult, or rather, a real human being, in both script and in front of the camera. During her autopsy, the camera lingers on an extreme close-up of her face, mouth agape and eyes wide. Though there are mentions of the cause of death and the details around it, they are not the focus of the scene in a way that another film, like *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) by Jonathan Demme is guilty of doing during its famous autopsy scene, the constant cuts back to Banks' face and the contents of it, with the discussions of her life as a waitress; emphasise and remind the audience that Teresa Banks was a person. A human being. Produced the following year, the brief section might be a deliberate response to the cold, carelessness, of Demme's film. Here, Lynch is intent on celebrating the humanity, warts and all, of these people and mourning their losses.

Still, Laura is still casually exploited throughout the events of the film in a number of ways, primarily sexually. When considering Lynch's penchant for nudity, specifically female, it is arguable and tempting to consider him voyeuristic at best if not sexist at worst. While this is a heavy question that would certainly value discussion in the "#MeToo era", his intent could perhaps best be described as empathetic. In emphasising a womanhood through traditional feminine beauty, he simultaneously mourns the destruction and corruption of it when portraying exploitation; never seeking to ridicule.

Laura's relationships with James Hurley and Bobby Briggs are unsatisfying because of James' immaturity and Bobby's drug dealing. Her relationships with Leo Johnson and Jacques Renault are unpleasant because they wholly use her for violent, sadomasochistic sex and deny her any emotional connections. To the boys her age, James especially, she is a Madonna, to the older men, she is a whore. The horror in *Fire Walk With Me* partly, but importantly, stems from BOB/Leland being able to see through her as both. Donna Hayward serves as Laura's naive opposite and the one true friend that she has, which is why her reaction to Donna's attempted seduction at The Power and the Glory bar is so visceral. In begging Donna not to be like her, Laura is hoping for her to avoid the same exploitation and use all of the men in her life have caused.

Robin McConnell writes that part of the film's initial negative reception was caused by the lack of new answers to the show, that the foregone conclusion of Laura's death was

“discomforting” (2014) but Laura Palmer’s last week is deeply important in what it represents. Lavery’s work is again relevant, referencing Nicole Ward Jouve’s “argument, Marxist as well as feminist... maintains that in a society in which violence and aggression toward women are implicitly accepted, the murder of women perceived as sexually active is not only tolerated but unconsciously encouraged”; Lynch’s empathy and humanisation, as he had previously displayed towards John Merrick, is essential to avoid “the end product of cultural misogyny, sexualised murder” (pg. 112). Laura’s rape is an unavoidable factor in her death and never shied away from, but by showing the routine abuse she faces, the one that is ultimately fatal is at the hands of someone who symbolises all of them in unison, a white, middle-class, capitalist serves as the ultimate figure for a young woman’s sad, all-too-real downfall.

The downfalls continue in *Lost Highway* – returning to a male protagonist, Fred Madison, his journey (also through Pete Dayton’s) is a chaotic, hypnotising spiral into madness similar to the title images of a car barrelling into the darkness at high speeds. It is Fred’s jealousy that spurs the murder of Renee, a shattered masculine ego that cannot compete with the charismatic Mr. Eddy. The circumstances of Eddy and Renee’s (or Andy and Renee’s) seduction are not ultimately clear, whether it was consensual and romantic, or whether she engaged in sex work and being used for her services. *Lost Highway*, one of the more complex narratives in Lynch’s works, is one that lends itself strongly to the notion of male-victims of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, territorial control over women, etc. It is once Pete hears Alice whisper “you’ll never have me” that Fred Madison, a stronger, more brooding and masculine figure, returns. Pete and Alice have, of course, been engaged in an affair, but “having” her is an impossibility, her statement is an act of defiance and a claim to her own independence; one strong enough to result in a violent, murderous rage towards Mr. Eddy (in addition to Renee, but considering the timeline of *Lost Highway*, it’s harder to say “when” this is). This jealousy over sexuality and inability to control stems from a masculine honour system, one explored in depth by Mohammad Mazher Idriss in his *Abused by the Patriarchy* (2021), following on and criticising the same notions that George J. Malcolm discusses in *The “Great Taboo” and the Role of Patriarchy in Husband and Wife Abuse* (2007); that “men should not be victims” is a dishonest and harmful “patriarchal meme” that leads to the disinterest in men’s emotional and physical health, creating cycles over and over.

The Straight Story's oddness is how it again deviates from the established pattern thus far, in that it features shockingly little sense of exploitation in the manner many Lynch fans might expect; its Eagleland optimism, the hopefulness, is communicated through the specific and deliberate absence of malice and systemic abuse. The only, if any, sign of it takes place during one of Alvin's multiple stops to repair his tractor. When a pair of twins, mechanics, work on it, Alvin believes himself to be overcharged and staunchly refuses to pay their initial asking price, proving himself a cunning negotiator to lower the amount, exposing their sly business practices and their lack of intelligence. This scene is deliberately kept light and almost comedic, however, it is worth considering that their scam on the elderly Alvin, intentional or otherwise, is a similarly direct result of their own lives under American capitalism that has resulted in poor education in addition to the simple need for a small business to survive and prevent its (presumably sole) employees from starving.

Mulholland Dr. then stands as the arguable pinnacle of Lynch's talents, thematic obsessions and concerns. Continuing the trend, Lynch is again concerned with female protagonists, their struggles, the malleability of their identities, but in Hollywood it is explicitly western; inherently bigger in scale and consequently far more broadly representative than the small town backdrops we have, until now, been used to. The shadow of Hollywood, using glitz and glamour to hide years of systemic abuse and classist oppression, looms heavily over Betty and Rita, as explored in the previous chapter; but even something as simple as a name deeply informs the audience of a history of exploitation associated with the town.

An amnesiac, "Rita" claims the name when she spots the poster for Charles Vidor's *Gilda* (1946) starring Rita Hayworth. A Hollywood star nicknamed "The Love Goddess" who in addition to ranking 19th in the American Film Institute's *100 Years... 100 Stars* (1999), was noted to have been the top pin-up girl for American GIs in World War II (Chicago Tribune, 1987), which establishes her as an inherently American star but also one who was exploited for her looks and sex appeal. *The Making of Rita Hayworth* (Blakemore, 2017) documents her "exhaustive makeovers that eliminated most traces of her ethnicity", Hayworth was born Margarita Carmen Cansino and

of Hispanic origin, and notes that she was the “perfectly groomed star”, as does Adrienne McLean in *I’m a Cantino* (1993); with Seth Abramovitch (for *Hollywood Reporter*) explicitly noting her continual “decades-long” sexual harrassment from the founder of Columbia Pictures, one of the original “Big Five” of film studios in Hollywood’s infancy. In adopting Rita’s (also-adopted) name, Laura Elane Harring becomes a new avatar for Latin and Hispanic women in a city as overwhelmingly capitalist as Hollywood, Los Angeles to be used.



fig. 3; a frame from *Mulholland Dr.*, the dream Camilla looks to Rita Hayworth for guidance

Though Betty, in the majority of the film, is the one with the drive and intent on acting, Rita, and the eventual Camilla Rhodes reveal, present her as a simple asset; only “the girl”. Camilla’s star studded role is forced into Adam Kesher’s film. Communicating through brief, cryptic telephone calls we catch glimpses of Mr. Roque’s shadowy web of people, an organisation of higher-ups seemingly controlled by money (with Roque’s emphasised dwarfish-head in a larger suit it places significance on the suit itself – the idea of an even larger Capitalist businessman). Kesher is threatened with a message: “it’s no longer your film”. This primarily represents the loss of artistic freedom, especially when considering auteur cinema in a studio environment, but also, as does *Lost Highway*, present the idea of the able-bodied, heterosexual, white man as a victim under patriarchy and capitalism – *Lost Highway* features a deliberate victimisation, a suffering brought by

feelings and social expectations, but *Mulholland Dr.* shows the inhuman side of capitalism, that it is inorganic and systemic; a root of evils. Indian economist Prabhat Patnaik writes (2019) that “every effort to resolve the crisis *within the broad confines of the system*, only worsens the [systemic] crisis of capitalism” Patnaik’s work reflects specifically on a worldwide capitalism unable to be changed by influence, which is symbolised in Adam Kesher’s need to give-in – with Roque’s organisation kicking him off of the film (threatening to shut it down entirely), locking him out of his bank account, and contacting the motel he’s staying at, another subtle threat. Lynch is aware that the individual is helpless to fight against the using and the exploitation the capitalism offers, especially in the place most ripe for it – and while he is more intent on showing the horrors and the tragedy that befall people as a result, the logical conclusion that stems is that it is a force and one that would have to be rid of entirely, rather than reformed.

In the film’s final act, in which Betty is Diane and Rita is Camilla, the transformation from (relatively) ordinary people to now almost inhuman monsters is put clearly on display. Betty had resisted Charlton Heston/Clint Eastwood influenced Jimmy Katz’s attempts of exploiting a naïve, young, actress with his celebrity, age and status in his seduction during her audition, (by delivering a shocking, powerful, performance); Camilla is seemingly less able to avoid relationships with her older male colleagues; of course, considering her possible engagement or pregnancy with Kesher, she doesn’t seem opposed to the idea. However, considering the environment the film takes place in, with Katz as fictional example to real world issues, in regards to predatory actors and producers who rely on grooming their victims, the possibility of Camilla being groomed (much like Rita Hayworth), feels like a reasonable conclusion to reach. Alisdair Gillespie, when talking about grooming children, defines the act as “the process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in an attempt to gain the child’s confidence and trust, enabling them to get the child to acquiesce to abusive activity” (2002, p.411), with Shelby Harper writing that Hollywood has “many horrific examples of grooming over the past fifty years” (2018), with the most notorious example being prolific Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. The situation is ambiguous and without context but considering the cynicism of *Mulholland Dr.*, it is not an illogical assumption to make that Camilla earned her parts through sexual exploitation from her superiors and was groomed away from her relationship with Diane into a more “beneficial” and socially acceptable heterosexual one.

Remaining in Los Angeles, *INLAND EMPIRE* continues to explore Lynch's fascination with Hollywood and, again, provides plenty of thematic weight when analysing and criticising studio power structures. *INLAND EMPIRE* is less direct or obvious in its approach compared to its predecessor, but is similarly concerned with how the upper-class, studio businesses, control actors, who are still workers or labourers despite their celebrity – even if their labour is more emotional than manual.

One of the film's main narrative drives is the increasing slippage between Nikki's sense of self as an actress outside of the film and the unconscious slip into her role as Sue Blue in *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, a period drama. The first instance of this begins following the beginning of an affair with her co-star Devon Berk (who plays Billy Side). Under the covers, Nikki slips into "Sue", brandishing a Southern accent fit for the film. She quickly reverts back to Nikki's point of view but Devon refers to her as Sue, and despite her insistence that "it's me, Nikki", he fails to understand and laughs. Though the two are equals, as co-workers and stars of the film, Devon holds more power over Nikki as a man in Hollywood, one who benefits from the same environment created by the Harvey Weinstains and Les Moonves (*Fox*, 2018) of the world, still "as White, Straight and Male as Ever" (Salam, 2018). He has the privilege to disregard her identity and her position, both in the literal sense, and seemingly mock her for it.

Nikki is, through a series of different plotlines, joined with a group of prostitutes and seemingly considered one of them, as discussed in the previous chapter, acting can simply be considered a different kind of selling one's body as a service; then shown to be married to a man named "Smithy", the same person as Nikki's original Polish husband Piotrek, who is involved with a travelling circus. This circus and Polish setting serve as a mirror to Hollywood and its movie-making system, one environment considered clean, luxurious and affluent, and the other much more simple, working class and dirty. But both of these serve as stages for exploitation, for actors and crews or for animals and carnies. Their connection intensified by the appearance of Piotrek/Smithy, creating a human link between both worlds and environments. Nikki's mental slip between selves is a symptom of working in the Hollywood studio system – she is a worker pushed too far and alienated like Henry in *Eraserhead* and she is simply a piece in a production rather than a person, much like Diane's work as an extra in *Mulholland Dr.*'s films.

INLAND EMPIRE is then, in this sense, an arguable culmination of Lynch's work, even if, for example, *Mulholland Dr.* might go deeper into certain themes. It embodies many previous concerns with a newer, largely cynical, approach and perspective that seems only natural after decades in the Hollywood environment. Despite an optimistic ending, its position as Lynch's most recent feature is perhaps only natural when Lynch had to fund the project (initially) largely by himself and take control of most of its production aspects. The man himself, an American artist in the middle of the perfect landscape for art, is one who has been left outside of it without support, possibly because of his critical reflections on these systems that enable abuse, poverty, and more.

INT/EXT: Influence

In a turn, we must now consider how Lynch is a culmination of many of his influences and instincts. Though still undeniably unique, there are a number of important building blocks that make up aspects of his personality, his tastes, and his craft. The aim of this chapter is to establish David Lynch as an inherent piece of the same American landscape that inspires him so clearly; that he is one artist (in any medium) along the chain that surrounds and borders the United States and the people that constitute it. Unlike previous chapters, however, the focus is more aimed towards the areas and ideas, people or subjects, that David Lynch has been influenced by (whether conscious and confirmed or reminding us of his place among these people) and how he uses them; rather than by the previous chronological stepping stones. This allows us to view him and his work as part of the same, large, tapestry, like a Jackson Pollock painting, wherever one might start, there is something to see.

Born in Missoula, Montana (a city name dropped by Killer BOB in *Twin Peaks*), Lynch would live in a number of midwestern states by the time he was 14; going to Spokane, WI (in the northwest), Durham, NC, Boise, ID, and Alexandria, VA (Rodley, pg.1). Having travelled across so many states and landscapes, he clearly developed a strong idea, despite his age, of “what Middle America was supposed to be”, meaning “blue skies, picket fences, green grass, cherry trees”, but picked up on an important, defining image; that “on the cherry tree would be this pitch oozing out... and there were millions of red ants racing all over the sticky pitch. There’s this beautiful world and you look a little closer and it’s all red ants” (Olsen, 2008, pg. 8). This image, of course, is highly reminiscent of the ants in the dirt in *Blue Velvet*’s opening sequence. What the quote itself reveals however, is that this is how the young David Lynch, as well as his older self, perceived Middle America as “actually” being, as opposed to a “supposed to be”.

Dennis Hopper, quoted in *Far Out Magazine* (2022), joked that David Lynch was “like a Boy Scout”, making light of his surprisingly chipper personality with remarks like “Howdy-doody!” and “solid gold!”; but Lynch was, in fact, once a boy scout, eventually reaching the rank of Eagle Scout, the highest rank attainable in the organisation. Scout duties, a strong work ethic, combined with his clearly unique perspective as a self-identified “outsider” (Rodley, pg.3),

demonstrate an apparent life-long sense of both the uniqueness and the American-ness. Childhood friend Toby Keeler remarked that the Scout motto of “be prepared” helped form Lynch’s do-it-yourself approach to both filmmaking and art on a broader scale. This aspect has been picked up by others, with Jonathan Monovich noting that Lynch’s films contain “Eagle Scout-like heroes” and that they are, indeed “Eagle Scout films”, Lynch is enough of an “auteur in using recurring thematic preoccupations and stylistic tendencies... with an Eagle Scout-like set of morals” (2021).

Despite its relative difficulty to achieve (with only four percent of Scouts achieving the rank of Eagle Scout, per. Malone, 2012), it canonises Lynch in another line of culturally iconic Americans to be a part of the organisation as symbols for hard work and endurance. He joins hero James Stewart, who stars in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), which David Lynch “often mentions with his favourite films” (Lončar, 2017) and Western icon John Wayne in achieving the rank (*Scouting Magazine*, Oct. 1980); as well as contemporary filmmaker Steven Spielberg (McBride, pg. 78). These men share an inherent American-ness, fellow creatives who have come from similar, American backgrounds, with Wayne born in Iowa, Spielberg in Ohio, making both, with Lynch, Midwesterners. Stewart was born in Pennsylvania, a northeastern state, but one that shares borders with the midwest; keeping him geographically close to his contemporaries. Mel Brooks’ oft quoted description of Lynch, “he’s Jimmy Stewart from Mars” (Conterio, 2017), is relevant specifically because of their small-town Americanisms just as much as their quirks and perceived “square”-ness.

While film is, of course, what Lynch is primarily known for, and while *The Straight Story* is his most easily considered Midwestern; it is in painting that he found his first love and inspirations (as explored in *David Lynch: The Art Life*, 2016); his original career focus. When interviewed, he once remarked that “All I wanted to be was a painter” (Belcove, 2018). It is easy to find visual comparisons to Francis Bacon (as demonstrated in fig. 4), whom Lynch has long considered “his favourite artist of all time” (quoted in Bose, 2022). While Bacon’s influence is important and to be considered, especially later in this chapter, there are also deep and worthwhile comparisons to other, American, painters that Lynch has also expressed an admiration for; most notably Edward Hopper, who provides a deeply important point of reference to Lynch.

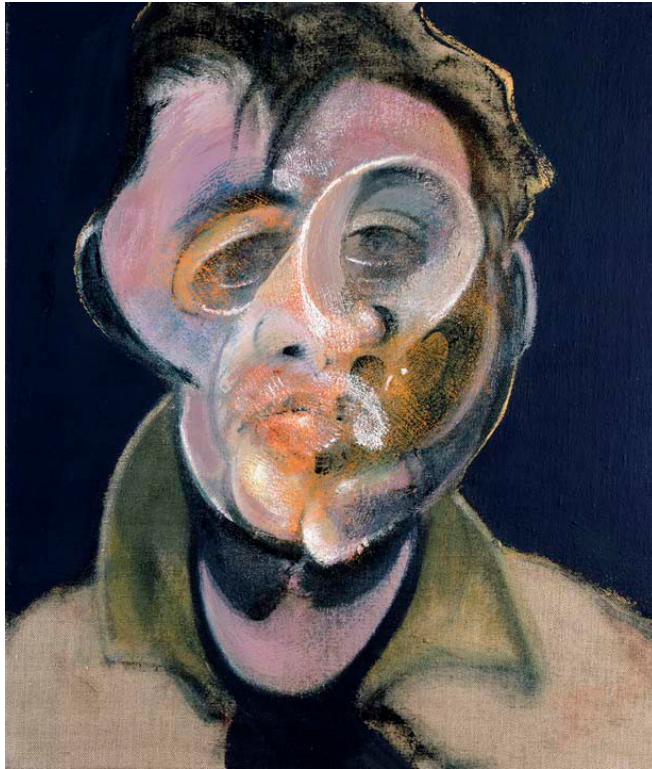


fig. 4a; Francis Bacon's *Self-Portrait* (1969), 14x12in.



fig. 4b; John Hurt as John Merrick in *The Elephant Man*

Described as a master of “mood” (pg. 89), “place and setting” (pg.34), and “modernist America” (pg. 84) by R.G. Renner (1994), Hopper is firmly established as part of the American canon of great 20th Century painters, “able to provide simple, yet accurate, representations of the ‘American psyche’” (pg. 16). Renner’s emphasis on the American psyche is deeply important for

how it, in turn, reflects on David Lynch when he is quoted as saying “for mood and painting quality, I like Edward Hopper” (Woodward, 2020); a quality he clearly considers important to his own work when, interviewed by Dennis Lim, he worries about “break[ing] the mood” (2015). Like Bacon, Hopper is an artist that Lynch has directly referenced visually, referencing several paintings in *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017)’s celebrated ‘Part 8’, as shown in fig. 5. Part of the significance lies in Hopper belonging so deeply to the same mid-Century period that Lynch has time and again proven himself to be fascinated with (most notably in *Blue Velvet*’s aesthetics), as well as a shared emphasis on striking, rigid, visual compositions and an overall similar visual style. It provides a fascinating level of comparison when considering Hopper’s status as “a shy, meticulous, Republican” (quoted by Gonzalez, 2004) and even an “anti-Communist” (*Washington Examiner*, 2007); that the anti-idealist perspectives he held join the same facades of the American suburbia that Lynch deconstructs in *Blue Velvet*’s opening sequence.



fig. 5a; Hopper’s *Office at Night* (1940), 22.2x25.1in. paralleled in ‘Part 8’ of *Twin Peaks: The Return*



fig. 5b; Hopper's *Summer Evening* (1947), 18x24in. paralleled in 'Part 8' of *Twin Peaks: The Return*

Hopper's influence on cinema has been considered on a broader scale in *Cinematographic Uses of Edward Hopper's Work* (2017), but what is also important to consider, more uniquely to Hopper and Lynch than other influencees, is a strong contrast between the idea of man and the idea of nature. Hopper frequently uses window frames as dividing lines and borders to represent a literal interior and exterior divide, notably in works such as *South Carolina Morning* (1955), *Compartment C*, *Car 193* (1938) or *Cape Cod Morning* (1950). Within the literal frame of the canvas, much as Lynch's compositions are framed within a lens, Hopper serves to unify these halves as a yin-yang set, doubles, yet opposites. Thematically, this is deeply relevant to the plots of several of Lynch's works, especially *Mulholland Dr.* and *Lost Highway*, but while Hopper portrays his characters as, most often, isolated (the woman in *Compartment C* is relegated to the corner of the frame and lost in her book, closing off her body language even moreso), he does so to essentially build pieces into one larger puzzle; the literal canvas and, going larger, symbolically building up fragments of the United States itself. Instead, Lynch, when looking at Henry in *Eraserhead*, sat on his bed, brick wall visible on the other side of the window frame, or Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet* crying next to a window with classic noir blinds (fig. 6, one of Lynch's most Hopper-inspired visual compositions), his use of isolation, now considered within the context of the entire film, seems to

rather express more deliberate emotion and more deliberate anxieties. The distinct lack of nature from Henry's window, and the harsh reality of the violent, patriarchal, masculine violence present in Lumberton (and by extension, the United States), seem to now further reflect Marxist ideals of Alienation; crushed spirits under capitalism and its socio-economic symptoms and the kind of men who reinforce these ideals. Lynch is using his love of a deeply American artist to reflect the quiet, dehumanising, horrors brought about by America and its inhuman systems.



fig. 6; Jeffrey post-assault in *Blue Velvet*. The minimalist mise-en-scene, muted colours, and deliberate lighting provide strong influence from Edward Hopper's works

In addition to Edward Hopper, another quintessentially American artist is also worth exploring in comparison to David Lynch. Less explicit in direct influence, with Lynch making few public comments, celebrated and pioneering abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock is highly worth considering – his works are understandably harder to reference, but it is in Pollock's style itself, his philosophies, and his background, that there is substantial reason to put David Lynch on a similar level. A key figure in art history, Leonard Emmerling writes that Pollock “rejected convention to develop his own way of seeing, interpreting, and expression” (2003); an iconoclastic reflection akin to Lynch's reputation, though of course preceding it by several decades, especially in narrative and formal considerations. But the element that serves this similarity most well is in Pollock's background. Like Lynch, Pollock was a product of the American midwest, hailing from Cody, Wyoming (a state that borders Lynch's native Montana).

Before developing his style into abstract expressionism and action painting, Pollock was primarily a member of the regionalist art movement; a form of realist art that developed in response to the Great Depression and usually featured rural and small-town Midwest American scenes, as Pollock demonstrates in *Going West* (1934/5, fig. 7). Like Lynch, he moved around the midwest while growing up before landing in a large city to focus on painting (and would remain in New York state for the rest of his life). It would be foolish to assume that both artists developed their own unique, influential, styles, simply because they moved often in their childhoods, but it provides an interesting parallel between the two when both are considered deeply American artists; Lynch as discussed, and Pollock in *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (1989, Naifeh/Smith), in addition to countless gallery and museum biographies including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and even the British Tate Britannica.



fig. 7; *Going West* by Jackson Pollock (1934-5), 15 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ in., an example of Regionalist Art

Unlike Hopper, direct visual quotes and comparisons are, understandably given Pollock's pure abstraction, much harder to connect to David Lynch – however it is arguable that in the ethos, the ideas, and the actual productions we can find similarities. Figure 8(a-f) intends to replicate Lynch's own adventures into visual abstraction and, though impossible to replicate, the importance is to be placed on the act of abstraction itself.



fig. 8a; dancers layered on top of one another in *Mulholland Dr.*'s opening sequence using digital effects



fig. 8b; Pollock's *Untitled (Naked Man with Knife)*, 1938-40), 50x36in.



fig. 8c; frame from *INLAND EMPIRE* – the camera layers several images, speeds up the footage, creating visual abstraction akin to Marie Menken's *Lights* (1966)



fig. 8d; frame from the same scene as *INLAND EMPIRE* as fig. 5c



fig. 8e; Pollock's *Convergence* (1952), 93.5x155in.



fig. 8f; Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* (1950), 105x207in.

In this sense, *INLAND EMPIRE* might serve as the most Pollock-like film Lynch has produced. Dealing with both visual abstraction, in using a handheld camcorder for the entire project as well as sequences reminiscent of Marie Menken's experimental short film *Lights* (1966) (see fig. 8c-d), Lynch's 2006 feature is his most narratively abstract as well. Named after the Southern Californian area, only several hours from where Pollock grew up in Chico, California, Lynch has frequently commented on *INLAND EMPIRE*'s unique production, during and after its filming; that he would choose to write and shoot scenes periodically, unconnected from a larger script as a framework, "trusting" that the larger picture would eventually become apparent because "there couldn't be a fragment that doesn't relate to everything". (Lynch, 2006, pg. 141). When asked for clues regarding the film's narrative, Lynch would quote the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, a key text in Hinduism (further emphasising his position as a cultural sponge, even outside of Americana); "We are like the spider. We weave our life and then move along in it. We are like the dreamer who dreams and then lives in the dream. This is true for the entire universe" (Guillen, 2007). Zoran Samardžija expands on this idea of "the spider", likening the film's narrative structure to "a web where individual moments hyperlink to each other and other Lynch films" (2010).

In unifying so many elements of past works, in references, themes or styles, Lynch arguably tells the most about himself in a work commonly considered his most experimental and unapproachable; so it is telling that the film to do so is also (debatably) his most American. This narrative shuffle, branching pieces of web, again circle back to Pollock's approach to painting. Pollock's "idiosyncratic employment of gravity" (Cernuschi/Herczynski, 2008), which included pouring paint directly onto the canvas (placed on the floor), using "sticks, hardened brushes, tubes... standing on the floor and using cans of house paint" (Lee Krasner quoted in Friedman, 2015) to pioneer "drip" paintings. It is not dissimilar to Lynch, in ultimate auteur fashion, writing, producing, directing, *INLAND EMPIRE*, in addition to serving as cinematographer, composer, sound designer, and editor. Lynch discussed his work as solo editor, which he had not done since *Eraserhead*, claiming that "No one else could edit this since there wasn't a real organised script to go by and no one knew what was going on except me" (Blair, 2007).

These comparisons to Pollock and Hopper are intended to serve as complimentary to Lynch's talents and proof of his command, his status as an auteur, but to further emphasise he is one more American artists in a chain of American artists, regardless of medium, defined by and inspired by their roots, environments, and connection to other American artists. In acknowledging this, it is difficult to view *Blue Velvet*'s opening sequence as much more than a theoretical, ideal blend of all three artists. Combining Hopper's blue skies, white picket fences, interior/exterior dynamics with the violent, abstracted movements akin to Pollock's paint drips of the bugs underneath the surface; Lynch manages to use celebrated American imagery to in turn comment on America, turning the "as it should be" into the "all red ants" and facades he had mentioned.

Art, again, seems to inspire David Lynch in many forms. As an artist himself, he is deeply interested in painting, as discussed, as well as sculpture, photography, film, music, but perhaps unsurprisingly considering his Renaissance Man levels of interests and talents; is also very much inspired by architecture and design. Focusing primarily on the architectural, Lynch has owned three properties (off of the real Mulholland Dr.), all of which designed by Lloyd Wright, son of the legendary Frank Lloyd Wright. Lynch has principally lived in the "Beverly Johnson" house since 1986 (Lynch/McKenna, p.242) (acquiring the second after a neighbour's death in 1992, mentioned in *Room to Dream*, p.313), and a third house in 2003 (per. *US Modernist*). Lynch has used each of his homes for different purposes, with two serving as a sound/recording studio, and the other adjacent property as Lynch's Asymmetrical Productions HQ. Lynch has primarily resided in the "Beverly" house but also used it as Fred and Renee's house in *Lost Highway* (Gilmore, 1997). Gilmore writes that "In Lynch's mind, the house had to be a certain way.", noting that he also "remodeled its exterior so the front featured eerie-looking slot windows", and "added a tunnel like hallway".

The significance of this act is in the idea that Lynch is taking material, a source from an artist he has frequently admired, noting "all the Wright family" as "great architects" (*outrjournal*, 2014), and putting his own "twists" on them. He adapts and uses the work of other artists, in this case culturally iconic American architects (crowned "America's Architect" in 2004) who have inspired novels and songs such as Nancy Horan's *Loving Frank* (2007) or Simon & Garfunkel's 'So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright' (1970) and re-shaping them, using them as tools, as means to his own

end. Frank Lloyd Wright, and his son, are simply two brushes that Lynch uses to paint the world of David Lynch. Whether consciously, in the case of Edward Hopper and Wright, or subconsciously in his politics, in Jackson Pollock, Lynch further builds himself as someone built from the work, the people, and the environments around him. This approach, this attitude, is comparable to “idiosyncratic icon” (Dretzk, 1996) of American independent cinema Jim Jarmusch who commented “nothing is original”, instructing budding creatives to “steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination” as part of his “golden rules” (2004, rule #5). Jarmusch’s argument, ironically echoing Jean-Luc Godard, is that knowing how to use these influences provides the authenticity that is “invaluable”. Together, Jarmusch (a fellow Midwesterner, from Ohio) and Lynch, with their lifting, borrowing, stealing, seem to make the act an American one; making it a prime example of individualism and one voice (auteurism) above others.

Perhaps this midwestern perspective, when applied to these iconoclastic filmmakers, might be part of the reason as to why they are able to create material relating to class, individualism, and Americana. When considering the notion of “outsider art” (a term coined in 1972 as a book title by Roger Cardinal, reported by Katharine Conley in 2006), art made by typically self-taught creatives with little considerations for typical art world conventions, regardless of medium, it may be tempting to credit Lynch and Jarmusch as outsider artists, as reported in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (2017) and *Madman Entertainment* (2014) have done respectively. However, it can be argued that the primary reason these filmmakers are given tags and reputations like “outsiders”, (on a broader scale), is simply because the cultural capitals in the United States, whether on the west coast in Los Angeles or in the east in New York, seem to struggle to understand talent or perspectives from outside upper-middle class and Hollywood circles. Lynch and Jarmusch can be described as on the outside looking in, providing more objective considerations of the class issues and socio-economic exploitation that occurs in places like Los Angeles or the inner-city living conditions in Philadelphia or New York; but as talented and respected filmmakers who have achieved festival circuit success, “outsider art” seems like a disingenuous and obtuse label to apply to either, rather than simply, if anything, midwest-American.

Their ideas about “stealing everything” being an attitude that we can consider authentically American may also come from the history of the United States, especially over the midwest, when

acknowledging Manifest Destiny, a 19th-century cultural belief that American settlers were destined to expand across North America at the cost of dozens of thousands of Native American lives and their land in the name of Colonialism. Both Ohio and Montana were rich with Indigenous tribes, with Jessie Walton citing Ohio as the home of the Kickapoo and Erie tribes and nations (2020), and Rick and Susie Graetz's celebration of the Blackfeet nation's "long, epic history" in Montana (*University of Montana*). Exploitation and classism are an inherent part of the environments Lynch and his contemporaries were born and grew up in. One can certainly argue that Lynch, as a white man in the area he grew up in, stole from Natives, if by-proxy, by inheriting this place, a conversation that would go deep into the ideas of reparations (one too large to discuss in this research project), the focus should perhaps be shifted to Lynch acknowledging and being aware of the expansionist theft and genocide. Seeing it firsthand, he reshapes the experiences into the narrative and themes found in his motion pictures.

The idea of "borrowing" or "using" another artist's materials can be followed further into *Twin Peaks'* in-show-sitcom *Invitation to Love* being filmed inside Los Angeles' legendary Ennis House (*Room to Dream*, p. 252); a large building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright inspired by (or "stolen") from Mayan architecture. The house has a history of being used in Hollywood filmmaking, (with tiles being used for the Club Silencio door frame in *Mulholland Dr.*), and Lynch's utilisation of such an iconic landmark; even in forms as small and minute as tiles or interiors, are reflective of his inherent love of America, its culture, its products, its very essence. The Iowa farmland horizons filmed in *The Straight Story* are equally as iconic and as important in building the ideas and culture of America. Together, they represent a yin and a yang, the same kind of dualities that Lynch loves in his characters (Laura Palmer/Maddy Ferguson, Rita/Diane, Fred/Pete) and in his art. Edward Hopper's interior/exterior boundaries and borders serve the same purpose in paintings such as *Excursion into Philosophy* (1959) and the timeless *Nighthawks* (1942). They once again serve the same unifying, bonding purpose in building Lynch as a product of America, American arts, and American attitudes.

This chapter has aimed to celebrate Lynch's position as a vessel, someone who carries and embodies many of the influences he wears on his sleeve and the world, the country, around him. To state that while he is certainly a unique, iconic, individual filmmaker, that position is one that has

been created over time, shaped and sculpted like one of his own artworks. In understanding these influencing factors, attitudes, and motivators around him, we can further understand and accept his need to explore class and exploitation so consistently and to such an extent; using this project as a means to appreciate every aspect of David Lynch.

Realism and Genre

Finally, we must consider specifically how Lynch operates, how he has been classified and how he enables or subverts these expectations and labels. Called “the first popular surrealist” by Pauline Kael (quoted in Bose, 2021), we can find what gives him these defining auteuristic traits and understand why he has been called such by Kael, and discuss whether it should be considered an accurate descriptor. We can also navigating ideas of “realism” and how they apply to Lynch’s films, to understand his place in the film world, and to connect them to ideas of film genres – where we can again use him as a lightning rod for comparison. This chapter aims to explore Lynch’s straying from typical or “pure” genre paths (the notion of “pure” or “straight” genres being criticised by Susan Hayward for “crossed boundaries” with other genres, pg. 183) and examine how his films behave. Most importantly, we re-establish their connections to the heart of this project, acknowledging the relevance of their explorations of class, exploitation, and how they have reflected a number of aspects, positive and negative, about the United States; America itself.

The differences in genre theory and auteur theory have been written about often, historically by Robin Wood (1977), Luis Mainar (2002), and more recently by Jade Grisham (2019). However, little seems to exist on auteur filmmakers who exist specifically within genre filmmaking. *Halloween* (1978) director John Carpenter has joked “In France, I’m an auteur, in Germany a filmmaker, in England a genre film director, in the USA a bum” (quoted in *So the Theory Goes*, 2017). It is a playful comment but still suggests the possibility, or unification, of a director being both an auteur as well as a genre film director. Of all potential sources, it seems surprising that the most relevant and beneficial to this idea, a genre auteurist, comes from the previously mentioned *The “Eagle Scout Film”: David Lynch as Auteur and Genre Filmmaker* (2021). In acknowledging Lynch’s position as a bridge between art cinema and genre movies, he can be respected and recognised as another great, American artist, but also one who can represent the width, scope, and greatness of the American movie in a single entity. It also promotes a sense of kinship with these filmmakers that came before him. Bobby Peru’s head getting blown off is not unlike General Mapache getting gunned down in *The Wild Bunch*. Nor is Frank Booth’s death

dissimilar to the titular Bonnie and Clyde's climactic ambush; when one considers the use of slow-motion as one of Lynch's most idiosyncratic trademarks, in both beautiful moments and in nightmarish ones. We see him employ the effect when Frank Booth and Bobby Peru get their heads blown off, when Lula's father's car and the Mystery Man's isolated cabins explode; but also in more tender, intimate moments like *Mulholland Dr.*'s penultimate image of Betty and Rita's smiling faces over the LA skyline, or Laura Palmer watching her angel appear in a slow descent. It is a technique that requires and demands attention and Lynch tends to employ the effect during important moments to "present familiar qualities of movement but reveal in them entirely unknown ones... the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (Koch, 1993). Allister Mactaggart, writing about Laura's angel, notes "slow motion allows the spectator to experience the ethereal figure... these shots form far reaching components of Western philosophy and present the limits or traps of existing discourses on identity, sexuality and gender" (2010, p.42); positioning the sequence as one that transcends human experience and worries, justifying its significance with the slow-motion technique.

The argument here is to again establish Lynch as an inherently American artist, this time focusing on his genre-isms to reaffirm these links. While it would be foolish to deny connections to other common Lynch comparisons, namely Federico Fellini, Alejandro Jodorowsky, etc., on the basis of slow-motion alone, it is important to remember these other connections that are often overlooked for the sake of championing him as a proponent and defender of surrealism. Lynch's versatility across a number of genres is an achievement in itself, and his clear, consistent, mode of operation and steady exploration of key interests, and how they evolve; is what elevates him above "standard" genre-film norm. This slow-motion technique is, of course, not unique to Lynch and his filmography. Famously used in the climax to Arthur Penn's *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967) and popularised with Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), it most often serves as a means to emphasise violence amid shootouts and gunfights, eulogising fallen heroes, celebrating fallen villains... the slow-motion technique was not invented by the Americans but there lies a certain kinship and spiritual, cultural bond between these directors, due to the slow-mo technique evolving into a powerful tool of genre filmmaking.

Lynch has indeed been labelled a surrealist by a number of sources (including the aforementioned American film critic Pauline Kael) popularly since the 1980s, and described as "one

of the most unalloyed surrealists ever to work in the movies” by Lloyd Rose (*The Atlantic*, 1984). It should be considered, however, that prior to Rose’s article, Lynch had only released *Eraserhead* and *The Elephant Man* (*Dune* would follow in December). *Eraserhead*’s claim to surrealism is justified with its imagery, sound design, minimalist plot and performances, with the work fitting most comfortably among the horror movie genre; as demonstrated by its inclusion in the “uncanny horror” chapter of *The Naked and The Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Freeland, 2000) and considered a “serious example of the horror movie” by Dylan Price (2018). *The Elephant Man*, however, is a much more conventional historical drama, unconventional in its work to challenge ableism and exploitation and unconventional in its occasional, brief, nightmarish visions. It is worth arguing that, though complimentary, Rose has essentially acted prematurely and abruptly in his estimation of Lynch; who would follow with a science-fiction epic, a neo-noir erotic thriller, romantic crime comedy, and a Disney-produced biographical road movie before returning to, now typical; dark, surreal mysteries. To ignore these films, and the genres they belong to, is to ignore half of his work. As displayed in this project’s previous chapters: the films are full of rich, valuable social commentaries, demonstrations and representations of class conflicts, economic and misogynist exploitations, and more. Their status as genre films do not take these achievements away, nor do they reflect negatively on Lynch himself. He accomplishes heights few filmmakers, worldwide, are able to reach while still grounding himself in American culture; both in filmmaking tradition and the environments of industrial Philadelphia, the midwest, and Hollywood.

Lynch’s love for small town America and all of its quirks has been documented and commented upon a number of instances in previous chapters, as have other particular trademarks such as dualities (and dual-roles); which have together constructed his idea of façades and the darker realities under them. Lynch has utilised these tropes extensively across several different genres and subgenres, with a number of directorial techniques (such as the aforementioned slow-motion, with more to follow), that, again, help establish him as another successful and influential artist in a long line of American talent.

The next concerns based around Lynch and genre center on notions of realism, social and magical, the ideas of realist (and differences to notions of “realistic” qualities) film and behaviours,

and observing how Lynch's films operate; in performance and how they adhere to or stray from genre norms and conventional filmmaking techniques.

As mentioned, it is vital to clarify the distinction between “realist”, with its synonymous “realism”, and “realistic” when considering genre and the modes in which Lynch operates. Realism is not a concept exclusive to literature or cinema. Existing for centuries, it is primarily concerned with representing its subject with honesty; as close to the “truth” as it can be. In contrast, essentially anything can be “realistic”, despite subject matter. Though *Dune* portrays alien life, spice travel, and a far future, it is largely represented as “artistically truthful”, or, “realistic”, even if the concept itself is not necessarily “realist”. Roman Jakobson stresses a difference between the two in his essay *On Realism in Art*; that “realism can be an artistic intention, e.g. some kind of quality the artist considers his own work to inhibit”, and that, “realism can be something perceived (by others than the artist himself) as realistic” (1971, p 42). Emphasising the idea of realism being the approach of making something considered realistic, rather than the result itself which would potentially be considered realist. It is then the successful application of these intentions, approaches, and attempts that ultimately make a work “realist”.

In *Realism as Third Film Practise* (2011), Birger Langkjær explains that “The concept of realism is notoriously opaque” but manages to identify a number of shared themes that make the concept, in film, easier to understand; including what is arguably the most important – social issues and working-class backgrounds. “...in terms of content, for example in the form of an emphasis on social issues, a preference for dealing with working-class people etc.”, which leads us to question if *Eraserhead* is potentially a realist film despite an unrealistic appearance. As explored in the first two chapters of this project, the film, though usually considered a horror movie, can largely be considered an exploration of working-class alienation. When compared to the Italian neo-realist movement of the 1940s, *Eraserhead* tackles less explicit and direct topics resulting from the fallout of World War Two such as extreme poverty, a lack of food, and destruction of a city as demonstrated in *Bicycle Thieves* (de Sica, 1948); but instead opts to reflect on more contemporary, lasting issues regarding unemployment (a shared topic with *Bicycle Thieves* but an eternal one nonetheless) and the labourer's alienation – as explored by Marx. These films from the neo-realist movement are often typified as war movies or dramas, a stark contrast to *Eraserhead*, but not all. De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951) acts as a comedic, fantastical departure but serves as a further

comparison, if we choose to expand our horizons and consider Lynch as a figure in “magical realism”.

Defined as “what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe” by Matthew Stretcher (1999, p. 267), magical realism as a genre serves as a similar purpose to the expressionist painting movement of the early 20th century in its subjective perspective and intended emotional effect. Though, of course, the genre is not exclusive to cinema, in *Miracle in Milan* or *Eraserhead*, it also exists in literature, with Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) (with Ian Johnston exploring its significance as a piece of magical realism in 1995) being a key example. The term itself is still, as with the other forms of realism discussed in this chapter, fairly difficult to define properly and is simply meant to be more descriptive than concrete. Regardless, we can start to see an argument form that perhaps “magical realist” is a much more fitting term for Lynch and his films than surrealist or anything else; if American artist is not enough for some. David Foster Wallace writes in *David Lynch Keeps his Head* (1997) that “of course both. This is what Lynch is *about* in his movies: *both* innocence and damnation; *both* sinned-against and sinning”, which, of course, reflects these magical realist notions of specifically blending lines between fantasy and reality.

They, for lack of a better term, help explain many of the quirks in Lynch’s films, in the behaviours and traits. Lynch has directed his actors at varying levels of intensity and specificity. Nicholas Cage, for example, who was considered the “jazz musician of American acting” by Lynch (quoted in Hall, 1990), received notably more freedom than Crispin Glover in his brief *Wild at Heart* cameo; as detailed in *Room to Dream’s Finding Love in Hell* chapter. The acting in a number of his projects can be described as awkward, whether “over the top” or “wooden”, both of which have been frequent fan criticisms of *Twin Peaks* and *Twin Peaks: The Return*, but for the already detail-driven Lynch, these are important and there for a reason – the sense of stiffness present in *The Return* or in Betty’s introductory scene in *Mulholland Dr.* is reminiscent of Brechtian alienation; an acting technique developed specifically to “play in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play... acceptance or rejection of their actions was meant to take place on a conscious plane instead of the audience’s subconscious” (Willett, 1964, p. 91); essentially putting up a front of bad acting or any other deliberate, unconventional approach, to place emphasis on the deliberate actions performed by the actor,

adding weight to their character and said character's decisions.

This Brechtian distancing effect directly challenges typical and conventional acting techniques long established in Hollywood and America as a whole. In its opposition to normalcy it serves as a challenge to the capitalist and mainstream American society as a whole; further fuelled by originator Bertolt Brecht's own Marxist perspectives and beliefs (Fonseca-Wollheim, 2018). We can now start to consider Lynch's filmic methods as ones that oppose many "realistic" techniques – both in performance and in behaviours in the staging, filming, and editing.

However, the arguable greatest tool Lynch possesses in challenging the normalcy, common tropes, conventions of realism and contemporary filmmaking influenced by Hollywood studio practises is his use of the uncanny and irony; effecting the realism of the world in which his movies inhabit as well as re-tooling typical genre conventions. The oft-loved trademark of Lynch's, the delicate 1950s pop ballad or rockabilly tune that undercuts moments of tension and suspense often ends up specifically creating these tense sequences, if not enhancing them. The simple image of a firefighter waving his hand at the camera as he rides past in *Blue Velvet's* opening sequence is, in itself, harmless, but when shown in slow motion with the titular Bobby Vinton song playing over the footage; it transforms into something otherworldly and almost menacing, even though it might be hard to explain why. The same stands for the spinning ceiling fan central to the Palmer family home in *Twin Peaks* and Laura's glaring stare at it in *Fire Walk with Me*. This Freudian idea of the uncanny is one wherein "the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (1919, p. 243), one that does indeed apply towards *Eraserhead* and *INLAND EMPIRE* most in particular – but in the century that has passed since Freud his work has been elaborated on and scrutinised in psychoanalysis as well as media and film theory. The work needs to properly address the concept of defamiliarization, which, though being coined by Russian theorists two years prior to Freud, has been developed and evolved through further theorists, writers, and academics such as Uri Margolin and Anaïs Nin. In "making strange", the perception of once familiar items, objects, persons and places take on entirely new meanings and become frightening because they are now unknown. Lynch's specific use of defamiliarization of the mundane can be found in Mazullo's *Remembering Pop* (2005) and Schaffner's *Fantasmatic Splittings and Destructive Desires* (2009), but Mitch Cunningham relates these concepts of the uncanny, defamiliarization, and irony, together; commenting that: "the defamiliarising of telephones, domestic spaces and ordinary dialogue

produces some of Lynch's more memorable sequences. What, then, is the nature of a mindset in which the world at large is both ironised and uncanny?" (2012). In defamiliarizing the image of a police officer (fig. 2), the architectural centre of a common suburban home, using the uncanny effect to associate these environments with something unsafe, wrong; he is able to extend these same, new, concerns to the real world. Associating real world police officers and suburbia as wrong; symptomatic of the capitalist Western society that dominates the United States, the "perfect" image of the 1950s that defined America. The nuclear family and the culture that breeds it is the same kind of facade Lynch is dedicated to deconstructing in *Blue Velvet* and *Fire Walk With Me*. These two films are strong pieces of genre fiction, playing into typical crime (and erotic-thriller) and horror trademarks respectively, but doing so in such unconventional ways.

In identifying Lynch's sense of the uncanny and the ironic, and his bending of genres, we can choose to identify his work as oftentimes incongruous – largely due to surprising comedic elements that frequently appear in almost all of his features. Whether explicitly comedic, *The Straight Story*'s scamming brothers, awkward and disarming, *Blue Velvet*'s "Pabst! Blue! Ribbon!" and the pencil factory boss in *Eraserhead*'s previously mentioned "Okay, PAUL!" (which manages to be both funny and concerning from a class perspective), or some kind of blend of both in something like the espresso scene in *Mulholland Dr.*; Lynch is actively using comedy as a tool to subvert audience expectation and momentum. These comedic moments are as large a part in disrupting traditional sense of genre as the defamiliarization and the 50s pop songs. More importantly, if there is often a purpose to these comedic left turns, it is to further emphasise notions of magical realism – creating the seemingly unreal atmosphere for the audience.

Perhaps the best and most fitting example of this lies in *Lost Highway*'s tailgating scene with Robert Loggia's Mr. Eddy beating a pedestrian as Pete watches on helplessly. The scene blends Lynch's penchant for shocking violence with his almost prankster and childlike sense of humour. The very image of a gangster preaching for strict road laws as he wails on an innocent unarmed man is humorous, and Lynch intends it to be. He still, however, guides us to still identify with Pete, the ineffective passenger and new protagonist who is visibly confused. While Pete's confusion is on the literal object of his gaze, Mr. Eddy's assault, the audience's confusion becomes more abstract, focusing on the nature and the qualities of these events. Though not necessarily implausible, the

scene feels unreal, strange to be unfolding, strange to be happening, in front of our eyes. This is a more lowkey and casual application of the previously discussed magical realism qualities Lynch is, as demonstrated, largely familiar with. Acknowledging this as comedy comes through people such as Greg Tuck explicitly identifying irony and black comedy in Lynch's work (*Laughter in the Dark*, 2009) to name just one, validating the perspective though he again subverts traditional genre mechanisms. The hitman in *Mulholland Dr.*'s bullet to the butt is the closest that Lynch gets to a conventional pie in the face. Certain lines are certainly funny but there is little written across the 10 features that passes for a straight joke. It is, again, in Lynch's cinematic techniques and auteurist approach to his material that shapes his comedy into one of feeling, a notion both direct and abstract.

Having now discussed the distancing and defamiliarization effects and how they shape performance and perception, in addition to abstract editing and visual effects comparable to Jackson Pollock's paintings in the previous chapter; we must begin to explore Lynch's specific visual trademarks and directing style, to recognise him as both highly adaptable to the material he is filming as well as having clear, auteurist, sensibilities and traits that keep his films identifiable as David Lynch pictures. Ryan Stewart identifies David Lynch's "specialty, it seems, is taking the well-known genres of crime thriller, neo-noir, and mystery, and twisting them into disturbing and often existential psychological horrors", celebrating the director for his ability to alter conventional perception of these genre pictures through "specific motifs, aesthetic elements... that catch the eye and capture attention" (2018), deliberately identifying these directorial touches as the reasons why he is able to transform and shape genre the way he does.

Across his ten fiction films and even in his work in television on *Twin Peaks*, Lynch has remained a fairly consistent visual artist over the years, often favouring simple static shots with wide lenses that often accentuate the environments his characters inhabit. Camera movements are often simple and traditional tracks and pans, with *INLAND EMPIRE*'s handheld, uncanny inducing, footage as the obvious outlier. It seems as though he would rather make a simple cut from one image to the other, whether it be in a scene to capture dialogue or one to capture action, with transitions (most often a fade to black or dissolve) saved for bridging scenes. Given Lynch's background in painting, working within a fixed frame, his fondness for a sense of stillness feels

expected. This control over the image has reached its arguable peak with the infamous floor sweeping scene in ‘Episode 7’ of *Twin Peaks: The Return* where the camera lingers on a wide shot of a man sweeping the floor of the Bang Bang Bar for almost 3 whole minutes – a scene that demonstrates that Lynch deliberately chooses what to include in the frame and give importance to, and in this instance he reminds the audience of the forgotten working class people who are there long after the musical guests are finished performing; who have to literally clean up other people’s waste as part of their labour... by holding on this image, keeping his camera still, the labourer is almost celebrated, lifted, deified, for his work. Despite this no-nonsense style of direction, Lynch is able to create horror and tension as well as promoting deeper and thoughtful understandings of social and political issues.

Though the final specifics and flourishes are what make David Lynch a celebrated auteur, but the solid and sturdy foundation of static shots, wide lenses, and steady straight cuts may find an unlikely connection and similarity to the works of John Ford, often considered “one of America’s greatest directors” (Paar, 2021), whom Lynch is, ironically, cast to play in Steven Spielberg’s *The Fabelmans* (2022), as reported by *World of Reel* (2022). In *The Film Encyclopaedia*, Ephraim Katz declares that: “of all American directors, Ford had the clearest personal vision and most consistent visual style... his ideas and characters, like many things branded “American”, are deceptively simple”, commemorating his “sensibility for the American past” (2005, p.490); proving a link between the two’s work in their approach. With Ford producing and directing motion pictures in an era Lynch is clearly fascinated with, we can use his techniques and films to understand Lynch’s films on another level. Kitses (2019) and Bönke (2002) acknowledge Ford as the “Founding Father” of the American Western, but also discuss his “transcendent” directing style – detailing his affinity for the medium close-up and static shots, expressionist lighting style, and deliberate and subtle instructions for actors; all of which he himself comments on when interviewed by Peter Bogdanovich in *Directed by John Ford* (1971); all of which are techniques often found in many Lynch-directed creations. Ford is, of course, but one of many, many, filmmakers and certainly not the only one to make use of these techniques, but it is in Ford’s celebrated status as an iconic American filmmaker specifically, in addition to the dedication and commitment to these techniques to craft subversive genre pictures, whether a Western or a Neo-Noir, that the connections between Ford and Lynch feel both fair and justified when compared to other

filmmakers like the international and “surreal” Federico Fellini (Kelly, 2014) or Jodorowsky (Imnidian, 2021).

This comparison is necessary in providing thought towards Lynch as both genre filmmaker and respected auteur and, through Americana and American genre conventions, the unity of these two positions. Like Lynch, Ford has considerable thematic weight attached to his films, an artist who cared deeply about social issues, presenting Native Americans for example, not always in a positive manner but an often sympathetic and respected one that admires the culture; allowing the Navajo characters in *Wagon Master* (1950), a film Ford considered “closest to what I wanted to achieve” (Bogdanovich, 1978), to speak their own language. He again uses James Stewart’s character, and by extension the Western film genre, rampant racism in *Two Rode Together* (1961) to criticise older, white, attitudes and beliefs (including his own former ones) towards the Native Americans. While the Natives are universally considered “separate from White society” (Aleiss, 1995), we can consider this repeated portrayal as consequential and symptomatic from the society that enables systemic racism and prejudice towards people of colour, especially Native Americans, exacerbated by both the time periods Ford’s films often took place in and in the decades they were being produced. Again, considering Lynch’s fascination with the era Ford worked in, the miracle here might be in finding a truly like-minded genre filmmaker to serve as a comparison. Ford’s focus may be on the more explicit, targeted racism in contrast to Lynch’s broader class-based dynamics, but the two find shared ground in their values and perspectives, unlike the “apolitical” Fellini who was “trying to free my work from certain constrictions” (Bondanella, 1978) or Jodorowsky’s prioritised mysticism and “surreal fantasy” (Peralta, 2022) over the more realistic and grounded issues that Lynch or Ford often represented.

The effort put into film genre, and its conventions, subversions, etc., is evident; but Lynch manages to achieve one of his greatest strengths through the way he portrays comedy. Comedy has already been discussed in this chapter for its use of irony and uncanny, but it is worth examining again through an auteuristic lens. While the director has never made a feature film to be primarily considered a comedy, many of his films nevertheless contain comedic elements or sequences, as the “bullet in the butt” mentioned earlier suggests. It might be Lynch’s comedic leanings that specifically separate him from other artists. When a line like “Don’t take this too seriously” appears

in *Lost Highway* it serves as comedy on a meta level; a knowing wink to the audience that the situation, and film at large, is mostly fantasy, which should be read as un-real, in addition to a jibe from one character to another.

Lynch's comedy can be described as incongruous to a great extent; lacking harmony and compatibility with the world and the situations around it. To return to *Mulholland Dr.*'s hitman and his bungled assassination, the entire scene seems to be at odds with the dark and brooding mystery thriller that preceded it. Its appearance disturbs, not necessarily for the violence, but for disrupting the narrative and the flow of the scenes up to this point – even when the film has finished the scene can still appear off, despite the rest of *Mulholland Dr.*'s extraordinary events. It does, however, serve as a strong indicator that the film, much like most of Lynch's work, operates on dream logic (which in turn disrupts and shapes notions of realism, as previously discussed). Comedy, though still occasionally played straight (for lack of a better term), is another tool that Lynch is able to utilise frequently to serve the same Freudian uncanny to promote the same unease, distance, to critique the same American society as before; only using genre rather than filmmaking techniques.

This chapter has aimed to encapsulate an appreciation of David Lynch's filmic style, or, an angle of it, and to express a deep importance in his technique, much in the same way a painter's or musician's is to be admired, in an effort to further understand David Lynch. Genre and realism intertwined promote a sensible and logical way to condense a topic with heavy thematic weight into a suitable and sizeable chapter for the purposes of this research project, with comparisons to other individualistic filmmakers seeming, once again, essential in understanding what makes Lynch specifically stand apart in both his talents and in a class-based analysis of his work.

Conclusion

While unable to engage with each and every concept brought up during the course of this research project, due to the natural constraints, I have been able to explore a number of them effectively and in depth, successfully blending Marxist philosophy with an encompassing love for the American landscape and its history. There are still topics that would benefit continued focus and interest, one subject would be further analysis of Lynch's own gaze and ego (in the Freudian sense), as hinted at in the Exploitation chapter.

While acknowledging positive intentions and representations, there is still a strong argument to be made about Lynch's almost obsession with the naked female form, regardless of context. Is the continued representation of the bare breasts of beautiful women an issue in itself? Is it made worse by the casual fatphobia found throughout his filmography, making obese men objects of disgust and gluttony while overweight women are similarly comical and repulsive? Weighing in on the topic of sexual misconduct allegations in the wake of the #MeToo movement in Hollywood, Lynch acknowledged "you feel terrible for anyone who's been a victim" yet describes "this subject [as] tricky business" (Maas, 2018). While not a vocal opponent of "political correctness" or "cancel culture" much in the same way celebrities such as Terry Gilliam (Stolworthy, 2018) or Ricky Gervais (Nugent, 2020) have, his name has nonetheless appeared on a petition calling for the pardoning of Roman Polanski in 2009 (Shoard), calling for a "release from detention in Zurich" related to the director's sexual assault of a 13-year-old in 1977. It would be disingenuous to disregard the situation entirely, and while Lynch has seemingly not advocated for the "anti-political correctness" contemporaries, his own public persona does not remain one that should be uncritically celebrated and canonised without question. In an effort to challenge preconceived notions about David Lynch's works, it is important to acknowledge and challenge preconceived notions about David Lynch himself.

Regardless, this research project has been successful in its intent. Working from Lynch's memoir *Room to Dream* and *The Impossible David Lynch*, to name two examples, has provided valuable material that demonstrates additional, worthwhile, perspectives that differ from many

popular assessments. The blend of the subjects presented in this project, and the discussions it can lead to, justify its intent and success.

There are potential ramifications that come from this work, namely in certain pre-conceived notions, expectations, and stereotypes surrounding working class backgrounds and peoples, and I do believe that both myself and other academics should acknowledge and represent the real levels of diversity to be found in these environments. How even acknowledging social-class stereotypes can often feed into, maintain and “reinforce [ideas of] inequality, but constructive contact can undermine them; future efforts need to address high-status privilege and to query more heterogeneous samples” (Durante/Fiske, 2017, para. 1). Furthermore, this project has also acts as a call to take certain studies further – with additional analysis on what makes Americana, Americana; and the exploration of the relationship between the American arthouse, the relationship between arthouse and mainstream cinema, and Americana together would also be beneficial to consider (especially when finding where Lynch himself lies on this spectrum); to name just two topics that would benefit from continued research.

To summarise, I argue that Lynch and his work is far more grounded than popular perception would lead many people to believe; meaning that relevant class-based analysis of social issues, inequalities, systems and injustices, to be a far more meaningful method of engaging with these films rather than the more commonly used psychological approach. While this project does indeed give Sigmund Freud and his ideas credit for their influence on Lynch, understanding simple Marxist concepts provides a more direct and unpretentious perspective that, in turn, become more useful in understanding the world Lynch lives in, the same that any other reader lives in. In focusing directly on America, the midwest and the big cities and industry of Los Angeles and Philadelphia, we can build more substantial connections between Lynch’s filmmaking contemporaries. One can acknowledge Lynch as a surrealist in the same way that Pauline Kael did following the release of *Blue Velvet*, but this project, hopefully, makes it clear that Lynch has far more in common with the likes of John Ford than he does Federico Fellini or Alejandro Jodorowsky. That surrealness, or alleged weirdness, stems from original, personal, filmmaking techniques, (or that it should), and does not have to clash with grounded issues rooted in realism,

rather than conscious artistic attempts, as Lynch's films largely adhere to throughout his filmography.

When coming back to the world through the lens of Marxism, through an acceptance of the multitudes that David Lynch contains, apparent deviations such as *The Elephant Man*, *Dune*, or *The Straight Story*, make more sense. In a sense, they are all "straight" stories still. Hopefully, one can appreciate the ten feature films, all significant in their own right, as part of a thoroughly connected web of ideas, themes, and passions, just as the man behind them is likewise part of a thoroughly connected web of people with ideas, themes, and passions, on a deep and rich cultural level.

Appendix:



fig. 1; a visual reference to Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* in *Mulholland Dr.*



fig. 2; frame from *Blue Velvet*'s opening sequence, emblematic of the Reaganite fantasy



fig. 3; a frame from *Mulholland Dr.*, the dream Camilla looks to Rita Hayworth for guidance

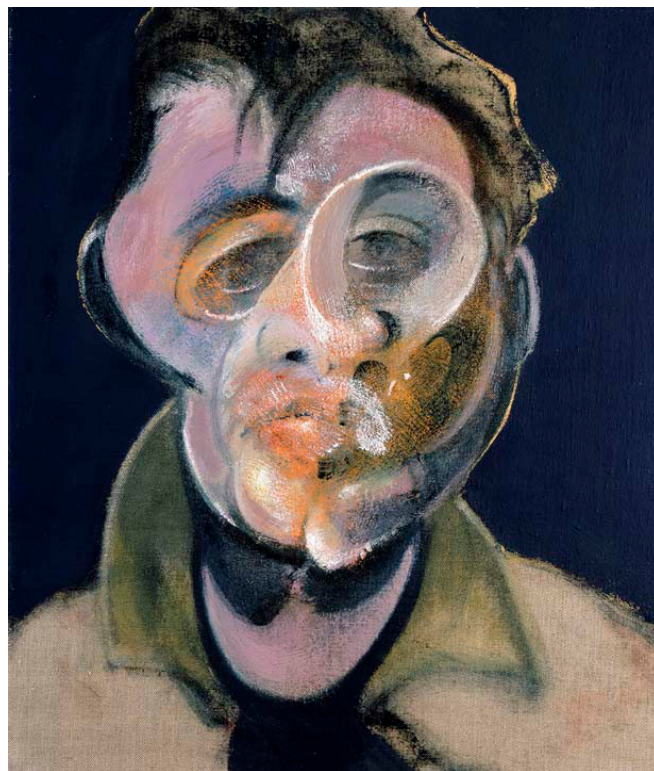


fig. 4a; Francis Bacon's *Self-Portrait* (1969), 14x12in.



fig. 4b; John Hurt as John Merrick in *The Elephant Man*



fig. 5a; Hopper's *Office at Night* (1940), 22.2x25.1in. paralleled in 'Part 8' of *Twin Peaks: The Return*



fig. 5b; Hopper's *Summer Evening* (1947), 18x24in. paralleled in 'Part 8' of *Twin Peaks: The Return*



fig. 6; Jeffrey post-assault in *Blue Velvet*. The minimalist mise-en-scene, muted colours, and deliberate lighting provide strong influence from Edward Hopper's works



fig. 7; *Going West* by Jackson Pollock (1934-5), 15 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ in., an example of Regionalist Art



fig. 8a; dancers layered on top of one another in *Mulholland Dr.*'s opening sequence using digital effects



fig. 8b; Pollock's *Untitled (Naked Man with Knife, 1938-40)*, 50x36in.



fig. 8c; frame from *INLAND EMPIRE* – the camera layers several images, speeds up the footage, creating visual abstraction akin to Marie Menken's *Lights* (1966)



fig. 8d; frame from the same scene as *INLAND EMPIRE* as fig. 5c

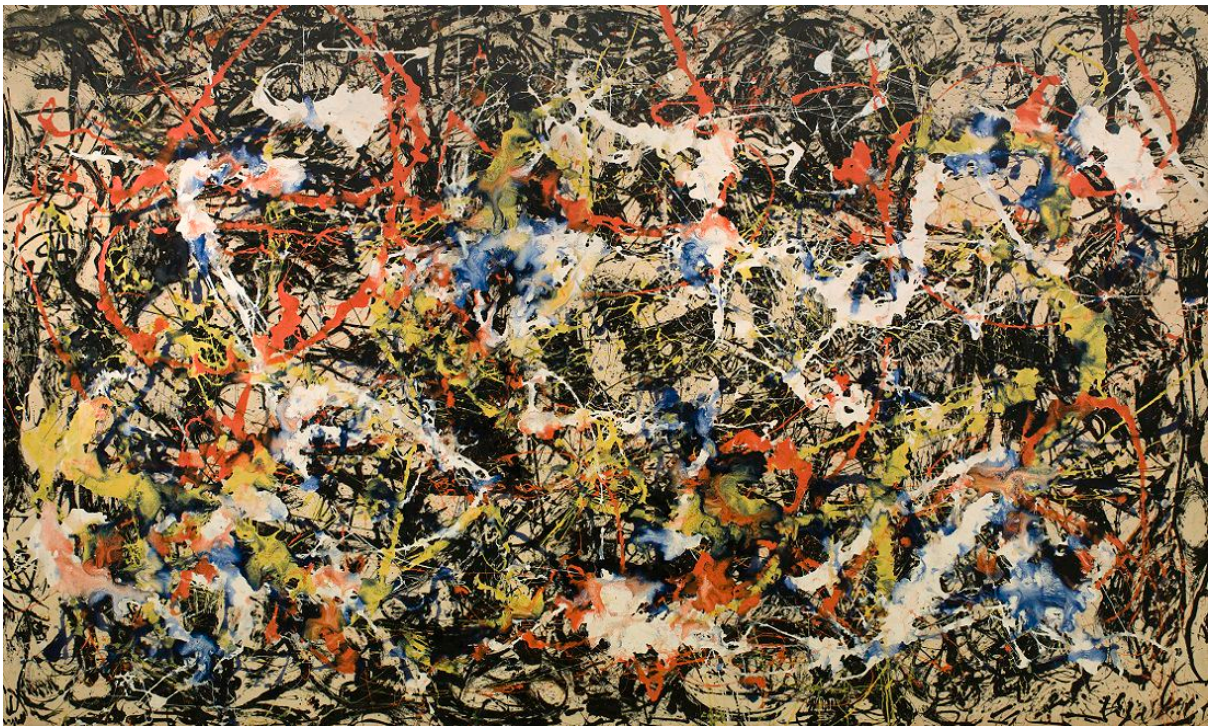


fig. 8e; Pollock's *Convergence* (1952), 93.5x155in.



fig. 8f; Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* (1950), 105x207in.

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