

## INTRODUCTION

# *American Dreams, Nightmare Visions*

Erica Sheen & Annette Davison

ABCNEWS.com runs an online feature called The Wolf Files written by Buck Wolf. Late in summer 2000, Wolf posted an item called 'A Topless Cow in New York' which related a recent incident in the career of David Lynch. Lynch – 'one of the country's darkest directors' – had been asked to provide a statue for New York City's Cow Parade and what he came up with was, apparently, 'gruesome':

The fibreglass heifer is quite a sight. Its severed head rests on bloody, gorged-out shoulders. Forks and knives have been stabbed into the rump. And scrawled across the side are the words: 'Eat My Fear'. (Wolf 2001)

City Parks Commissioner Henry J. Stern compared the statue to the work of Charles Manson: 'These cows are meant to be PG,' Stern said. 'Would you want a swastika cow, or a KKK cow, or a cow performing an obscene act?'

Needless to say, the statue was not included in the parade. It was stored in a warehouse in Connecticut and finally exhibited in an art gallery in downtown Manhattan. Lynch, whom the article also described as 'a notorious shock artist', commented, 'I'm happy folks got a chance to see what they missed'. When asked what he was 'trying to say', Lynch replied, 'I never interpret my art. I let the audience do that.'

The question, 'what are you trying to say?' is a clichéd address to, perhaps even an accusation of, artistic impenetrability. It implies that any difficulties experienced in understanding an artwork derive from the formal struggle between artist and medium. It is symptomatic of the facile interpretability of Hollywood cinema that the phrase is rarely applied to mainstream film-makers, and that we are rarely invited to see the medium as one that produces formal struggle. David Lynch is an exception on both these counts. He is a director who has sought to position his work within mainstream production, yet whose creative practices constantly defamiliarise his chosen medium.

As the essays in this collection show, Lynch's work can be seen as an anticipation of, even a formative influence on, the independent aesthetic that has become increasingly dominant in Hollywood over the last fifteen years. Beginning his career in fine art and mixed media, Lynch entered mainstream movie-making at a time when it was in a state of economic and technological transformation. After *Eraserhead* (1977) and *The Elephant Man* (1980), he took the opportunity of *Dune* (1984) to gain access to a system of production that has consistently appeared puzzled by or suspicious of his way of seeing. Since then his work has been distinctively situated at the nexus of changing systems of distribution and exhibition: the introduction of video and pay television at the end of the 1970s and across the 1980s; the rise of the multiplex, with its extended market reach; the growth of the regional independent cinemas.

From the arthouse avant-garde of *Eraserhead*, to the blockbuster *Dune*, the television serial *Twin Peaks* (1990), the porn video culture of *Lost Highway* (1997) and the 'Disney' family film *The Straight Story* (1999), Lynch's films give aesthetic form to the synergies of post-classical Hollywood in a way no other contemporary film-maker's work has done. If the intellectual consistency of his vision suggests we might approach him as an auteur, the formal and generic range of his work raises questions about that status. Like classical directors who brought European aesthetic traditions to studio-system working practices, he has a quality more pertinent to our understanding of his work than either narrative or genre: an intensely creative approach to the activity of production. In his partnerships with Alan Splet and Angelo Badalamenti or with the veteran British cinematographer Freddy Francis, Lynch displays an almost utopian sense of Hollywood as an ideal system of production that plays against his parallel perception of it as an oppressive commercial dystopia. As Martha Nochimson's chapter in this collection suggests, *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is a particularly well-developed statement of this position. In an interview about ABC-Disney's failure to option the pilot, Lynch was asked if he had ever thought of moving to Europe, where his work is always better received. His reply was paradoxical:

'Yeah. I've thought about it quite a bit. But I love Los Angeles.'

'What do you love about it?'

'The light ... and the feeling in the air ... the feeling of optimism.'

(Lynch in Lantos 1999: 71)

There is a link between this ‘feeling of optimism’ and his openness to critical freedom: ‘I never interpret my art. I let the audience do that.’ The writers of the essays in this collection take up this invitation, but they also seek to focus the implications of his paradoxicality.

Recent scholarship has tended to situate Lynch’s complexities within the critical frame of postmodernism. Many of these essays adopt that position; many are openly critical of it. But they all push beyond it towards a fuller account of the cultural contexts and intertexts within which Lynch’s work has been situated, and of his intense creative engagement with the specific working practices of his industry. Thus Sheli Ayers, Jana Evans Braziel, Greg Hainge and Anne Jerslev offer new readings of Lynch’s films in relation to the work of Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, Paul Virilio and Slavoj Žižek and – particularly – Gilles Deleuze, and Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whilst Joe Kember looks at Lynch’s approach to dialogue and the close-up, Annette Davison and John Richardson discuss his work on sound, and Erica Sheen and Martha Nochimson consider his relation to the industry as a whole. In his almost excessive attention to the complete range of working practices at his disposal, Lynch encourages a reconsideration of the periodicity of cinema: Ayers, Hainge and Sheen show that his work breaches boundaries between old and new media, while Kember suggests continuities with the pragmatics of early cinema – a continuity Lynch himself explored directly in his 52-second contribution to *Lumière et Compagnie* (1995). These continuities illuminate our understanding of the sources of Lynch’s own creativity, but they also identify his role in a twenty-first-century cinema that is more in a state of becoming than of having been.

In this respect, one of the most important features of Lynch’s work is his continuing engagement with the *noir* aesthetic. Arguably the strand of filmmaking that has maintained the disruptive potential of European traditions within mainstream production, *noir* has emerged in post-classical Hollywood as the narrative and stylistic template for an independent aesthetic. Jerslev, Richardson and Braziel all offer accounts of the Lynchian *noir*, the latter two in relation to its implications for gender-based responses to his work. Like most writers in this collection, Braziel engages strongly with the work of leading Lynch scholar Martha Nochimson, whose immensely rich reading of female performance in *Mulholland Drive* – ‘Lynch’s own *Sunset Boulevard*’ – suggests the extent to which the *noir* paradigm has provided Lynch with a position of critical response to the failure of creativity in Hollywood cinema.

Braziel’s Deleuzian account of ‘becoming woman’ as a process of ‘spilling over’ in *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Wild at Heart* (1990) finds resonance with Schneider’s reading of *Eraserhead* as a horror film. According to Schneider, horror results from violations of existing cultural categories – living/dead; human/machine; inside/outside. Hainge, Jerslev and Davison find a related effect in the deconstruction of depth and surface produced by a magnified focus on textures – both auditory and visual. Hainge and Davison link these moments of *jouissance* with a dissolution of the spectator’s engagement with the narrative.

Nicholas Rombes situates *Blue Velvet* within the context of 1980s post-modernism, but finds that a reading of the film as ironic critique of American suburban values cannot adequately account for the film's disturbing mood and effects. For him, Lynch's films are simply not 'safe enough' to allow us to side-step the disquieting process of reading them as 'straight' stories. Taking up a position which both complements and contrasts this view, Ayers argues that the postmodern critique offered by *Twin Peaks* was to acquire distinctly non-ironic connotations when the programme reached its second series. Rather than being too uncomfortable to accommodate a retreat into irony or parody, *Twin Peaks* ceased to imply self-conscious critique, because – for its fans – it increasingly felt too much like home. Lynch's juxtaposition of the homely and the strange is a recurring preoccupation in this book: thus Hainge discusses the 'unhomeliness' of *Lost Highway* in relation to the deforming aesthetic of Francis Bacon's paintings, and Ishii-Gonzales offers a particularly full new reading of the relation between *Blue Velvet* and Freud's study of the Wolfman.

Such strange familiarity is ultimately unsettling and the case of Laura Palmer, so lovingly mourned on television only to be resurrected in order to die again in the cinema, aptly demonstrates how Lynch can push his spectators into reviewing their terms and conditions of reception. From this perspective, Laura Palmer is an emblem of his position as a director whose films have pre-eminently achieved success on video and television, and whose work is as a consequence distinctively located in a critical and academic context rather than merely one of entertainment.

What these similar yet divergent readings imply is the difficulty Lynch's viewers have in locating stable interpretative positions, both within individual works and in relation to generic or media conventions. What they all suggest is that the process of watching Lynch's work is just that: a continuing, unfixed, fluctuating experience. These are narratives that perhaps above all never seem or want to finish. Lynch's work tells a story of artistic and professional struggle which neither concludes nor allows for easy conclusions.