

Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 3

I'm Going Home and Mulholland Drive

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Manoel de Oliveira, the Portuguese filmmaker, has directed a new film at the age of 92. That in itself is a remarkable feat and a tribute to human capacities. (Astonishingly, he has made 13 films since 1990, the year he turned 82.) Moreover, *I'm Going Home* (*Je rentre à la maison*) is an appealing and charming work. A number of de Oliveira's films have appeared at film festivals in recent years—*The Convent* (1995), *Journey to the Beginning of the World* (1997), *The Letter* (1999) and *Word and Utopia* (2000), for example—without creating a strong impression, one way or the other. While intelligent and elegant, they have seemed rather slight and concerned with relatively marginal problems. One couldn't help but feel that this had something to do with the situation of the Portuguese middle class, or at least a section of its intellectuals, in the twentieth century.

I'm Going Home has a broader appeal. It concerns the last days of a well-known French stage actor, Gilbert Valence. Valence is played by the wonderful Michel Piccoli (b. 1925), the veteran French actor.

In the opening sequence Valence is performing the role of Berenger the First in Ionesco's absurdist *Exit the King* (*le Roi se meurt*). The king, an egomaniac, has been ruling for hundreds of years. Now those around him are preparing him for death. "Let my name be the only one," he demands. The actor comes off stage and his agent whispers the terrible news: his wife, daughter and son-in-law have died in an automobile accident. We witness no histrionics, he takes up his existence again, now sharing his house with his young grandson. His life is made up of small pleasures: a print, a pair of comfortable shoes (which are stolen from him on the street by a mugger).

One of the delights of the film is Piccoli's interpretation of Prospero's remarkable speech in Act IV of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "Our revels now are ended. These our actors,/As I foretold you, were all spirits and/Are melted into air, into thin air ... We are such

stuff/As dreams are made on, and our little life/Is rounded with a sleep."

In the final sequences, Valence is hired by an American film director (John Malkovich) to play Buck Mulligan in a film version of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Far too old for the part, Valence is fixed up with a wig and copious amounts of make-up. His accent is also far from Irish. In the end, as the very first scene of the film is being shot, Valence begins to forget his lines. A revelation comes to him—perhaps death itself taps him on the shoulder—and he leaves the set, making his way through the streets. "I'm going home," he explains.

The quiet observations about art, drama, modern life, old age, death, while not earth-shattering, seem apt and legitimate on the whole. Valence turns down his agent, George (Antoine Chappey) on two occasions: first, when the latter advises him to take up with a young actress who has a crush on him, and later when he urges Gilbert to accept a role in some crass "action-adventure" television movie, co-starring the same actress. He finds both suggestions absurd, against his principles. His life is about something else.

Mulholland Drive is a new film by American filmmaker David Lynch (b. 1946). The film tells the story, more or less, of two women: one, a naïve native of Deep River, Ontario, who arrives in Los Angeles in an effort to break into the film business, and the other, an exotic amnesiac, who has wandered out of some life-threatening situation involving gangsters and large amounts of money. Another strand of the story concerns a self-satisfied young director who is being pressured by sinister corporate forces to cast a particular actress in his next film.

In the final section of Lynch's film, our grip on the events and characters is severely shaken; the film goes into reverse, so to speak, and it appears that the previous goings-on were merely the product of one of the women's deepening psychosis. Or that is one interpretation. Any other will probably do as well.

Lynch (*Eraserhead*, *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks*, *Wild Heart*) is associated with a particular school of filmmaking, or to give him his due, a definite social and artistic mood. Stylistically, he specializes in the paradoxical and the “surreal” as things in themselves. There are many who find his approach amusing and aesthetically pleasing. It is not clear to me why. For the most part, unhappily, one feels oneself during a Lynch film in the presence of a deep, almost bottomless cynicism, lack of principle and irresponsibility. This is an artist capable of anything, one senses, given the right circumstances.

Blue Velvet, in my view, was one of the most telling American films (and popular-cultural events, for that matter) of the 1980s. The favorable response it received was also revealing. The film tells the story of a young man who returns to his hometown and plays detective, after finding a severed human ear in a field. In the course of his investigations he discovers a world of evil beneath the pleasant surface of his small town.

In the first place, the notion that there was a sinister underside to “middle America” hardly came as a revelation in 1986, indeed it was a banality, by and large. There is little in the film’s narrative or its themes that hadn’t been treated previously, in a more persuasive manner. (One has only to think of *Touch of Evil*!) Even taking into account Lynch’s undoubted talents, his eye for color and image, the source of the film’s attraction for a considerable number of critics and others principally lay elsewhere, in social processes.

The secret of *Blue Velvet*’s success, in my view, was to be found in its loving and sensual, largely approving attitude toward the evil and depravity uncovered. Lynch’s work represented a certain break with tradition. On the one hand, it eschewed the official brand of moralizing; on the other, it offered absolutely no protest against the status quo. With postmodern “playfulness,” the director attempted to render the filthiness and irrationality of American society picturesque and seductive.

The film has to be seen in the context of the reactionary onslaught represented by Reaganism and the swing to the right by a considerable layer of the erstwhile liberal middle class. *Blue Velvet*, from the sociological point of view, was a public declaration by a segment of the arts world—the intelligentsia, more generally—that it intended to put up no resistance to Reagan’s policies, at home or abroad, or the attack on all varieties of progressive thought. Its bemused, ironical detachment delivered a clear message: we won’t stand in your way.

This is not to say, of course, that this was a well thought-out decision on Lynch’s part. Not at all. I have no idea of or interest in his political views. Such individuals would be of almost no use to the defense of the existing state of things if they were aware of their role in social life. Laziness, intellectual amorphousness, facile reliance on “intuition” and the “unconscious,” make them susceptible to changes in the moods of certain layers and turn them into the conveyor belts of retrograde currents. This is Lynch’s history.

Mulholland Drive is less reprehensible than *Blue Velvet*. Its attitude toward existing reality is less drunken and ecstatic. Something has sunk in, but not terribly much. I would argue against those who interpret the film as a criticism, in any serious sense, of the film industry. The sinister overbosses who sit in on the production meeting with the pretentious young filmmaker are so monstrous and absurd that the segment loses all its sting. There is no balance, no coherency in the presentation. The sex scenes seem entirely gratuitous.

Lynch no doubt has opinions about filmmaking and contemporary culture. *Mulholland Drive* seems to contrast the corporate-studio approach with an artistic method steeped in artifice, dreams, the dangerous and unpredictable. He is disapproving perhaps of Americans’ tendency to live vicariously through popular culture, its icons and its clichés. Again, how groundbreaking is any of this at this point in history? Beyond that, however, one is not convinced by the director’s commitment to the life-and-death struggle for art. Such a commitment would inevitably entail more of a protest against present-day society; in the first place, a more heartfelt and serious criticism of the increasingly unfavorable conditions for the creative personality itself. One feels, on the contrary, that the essential driving force of a Lynch film is the need to enhance and confirm the filmmaker’s own image and status within certain circles. The truth or non-truth of the individual work, its relation to the external world, seems entirely subordinated to that goal. This is one of the surest recipes for artistic insignificance.



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