American filmmaker David Lynch (1946-2025)

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American filmmaker David Lynch died January 15 at the age of 78. He had been suffering from severe emphysema after decades of heavy smoking and had reportedly been housebound in recent years. In early January, Lynch was evacuated from his home due to the Los Angeles wildfires. He died at his daughter's house. Whether his passing was hastened by the calamitous, preventable fires is not clear.

Lynch directed 10 feature films in the years 1977 to 2006, the ABC television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) and numerous short films, web series and music videos. He received various honors, including a Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 2006 Venice Film Festival and an Honorary Academy Award in 2019. Among his best-known works, in addition to the two seasons of *Twin Peaks*, are *Eraserhead* (1977), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Dune* (1984), *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001).

Originally determined to become a painter, Lynch undoubtedly possessed certain gifts, including an eye for juxtapositions of an often shocking or grotesque variety. Under certain conditions, he had the ability to look in a fresh way at things. *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive* in particular include some striking moments.

At the time of his death, Lynch's reputation and following had suffered erosion from their high point in the 1990s and early 2000s, but he retained devoted admirers. He continues to be regarded by many as an innovative, even visionary figure, and a critic of suburban or small-town conformism and the American Dream.

Lynch attracted so much attention and interest in part because he stood out as an expressive, undoubtedly unusual figure in the generally bleak cultural landscape of the Reagan-Bush-Clinton years. At a time when inventiveness and originality were being sucked out of the American film industry by bland, large-scale productions and their inevitable sequels, Lynch seemed to represent a different, more artistic path.

The opening, dialogue-free sequence of *Blue Velvet*, released in September 1986 during Ronald Reagan's second term, probably represents Lynch at his most vivid and pointed. With Bobby Vinton's smooth, insinuating 1963 hit "Blue Velvet" in the background, the camera shows us a sunny day and blue skies, then descends to a white picket fence and red roses swaying in the warm breeze. On an idyllic small town street, a fire truck drives by with a waving fireman on board. School children safely troop across the road. But disaster suddenly strikes a middle-aged man peacefully watering his lawn. The hose becomes choked, and the man himself suffers a stroke of some sort. He lies stricken, perhaps dying, while the water continues to pour out, a dog tries to help and a small, helpless child wanders into view. The camera then digs deep into the grass, bringing into view a frightening swarm of crunching, buzzing insects. A giant billboard reads, "Welcome to Lumberton."

Something dangerous and threatening, even depraved, lies beneath the benign surface of American life, as *Blue Velvet*'s drama itself will confirm. Nefarious deeds are taking place in "Lumberton" at variance with the locale's complacent self-representation. A naïve young couple encounter a distressed nightclub singer and her psychopathic, drug-dealing boy-friend and abuser, and uncover a criminal network. Later in the film, as the screenplay describes it, the central character, Jeffrey (Kyle McLachlan), a wide-eyed innocent and our guide into the ordinarily hidden infernal underworld of the town,

> sees something strange. He looks closer. It is a HUMAN EAR, covered with crawling ants.

The difficulty is that Lynch never went very far beyond these isolated, albeit significant and troubling impressions. In a sense, his work either repeats or offers variations on, often less powerfully, this central motif of an eternal, abstract struggle between Good and Evil. For a variety of reasons, his recognition that virtue and vice both exist in the world never—or rarely—reached the stage of "a concrete analysis of a concrete situation." Decades of meditation (and mysticism—"important universal realities, enunciated for him … by the Holy Vedas of the Hindu religion") became the contrived means by which Lynch attempted to resolve painful contradictions.

A partial exception might be made in the cases of *Mulholland Drive* (a deliberate echo of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, whose title referred to another Los Angeles thoroughfare) and Lynch's final feature, *Inland Empire* (2006). The former movie portrays the film business as a cruel operation (as did Wilder), now under the thumb of criminals and thugs, while the latter depicts the victims of that enterprise, performers and others, driven mad by its fantasies and manipulations. The final scene of *Inland Empire*'s protagonist, an actress (Laura Dern), collapsing and dying among the homeless on Hollywood Boulevard, speaks to Lynch's credit. Unfortunately, the two films are so otherwise piled high with obscurity and misdirection that the sharper, compassionate elements tend to lose their forcefulness.

In any event, in regard to Lynch's devotion to the Upanishads and other Vedic scriptures ("texts that document the transition from the archaic ritualism of the Veda into new religious ideas and institutions and the emergence of the central religious concepts of Hinduism"), an artist may have poor or confused ideas and still do important work. But there are poor or confused ideas and there are poor or confused ideas. Lynch's conceptions turned him away from historical, social and, for the most part, psychological realism. His feeling for life became damaged, he shrank from a coming to terms with reality, the world of three dimensions was *not* for him "a sufficient and invaluable theme for art." Working over the conflict between America's image and its reality sank into mere mockery or cynicism at times, or, even worse, an Andy Warhol-like, camp submission to the accomplished fact. His admirers do not care to take note of the clichés that abound in his work, whether Lynch is pulling one's leg

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or not—he may not have always known himself.

If Lynch's achievement seems quite limited, even an indication to a sizeable extent of artistic predicament and floundering, this has a great deal to do, as noted above, with the conditions in which he carried out his creating, above all, the 1980s and 1990s in the US. He was shaped far more than he or his enthusiasts understood by the unfavorable, generally stagnant and regressive political and cultural circumstances of the epoch. And while he may have struck some as a critic of those circumstances, by and large his work tended to flow along with them, and even at some points reinforced them.

These were the decades when the worship of greed, ruthlessness and the "free market" became more open and malevolent in America than ever. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 prompted the blather about the "end of history" and a reactionary "farewell to the working class." The bourgeois media boasted following the Gulf War that lethal "force works." Wide swaths of the upper petty bourgeois, "liberated" from their collective social conscience and making up for lost time, rushed feverishly into hedonism and selfishness. Strike activity and public displays of political discontent reached their lowest levels in modern times.

Lynch was a sensitive figure, apparently appalled by the conditions he encountered in big American cities and later by official venality and the conspiracies of the powerful, but very distant from any notion that the overall state of things could be altered. Indeed, although he came of age during a socially explosive era, we have no evidence that such a notion ever arose in his mind. The state-sponsored culture of virulent anti-communism helped wall him off from a left-wing response to the American situation.

"We all reflect the world we live in," Lynch himself once wrote. "Even if you make a period film, it will reflect your times." Taking this comment to heart, one would have to conclude that Lynch's filmmaking had to be in part a convoluted response to the growing crisis and decay, including a loss of psychological confidence and strong sense of self, of American society. What were the main features of this response?

"There are many, many dark things flowing around in this world now," he remarked. But what counts for Lynch is not examining to their source these "many dark things," much less mounting opposition to them, but immersion in the world of Self, consciousness, dreams and desires apart from and outside conventional society. A spiritual revolution, in short. "What's wrong with us?" asks a character. The answer seems to be, "Fix your heart or die," as another says.

Lynch once memorably declared, "I don't know why people expect art to make sense, when they accept the fact that life doesn't make sense." The absurd, the quasi-surreal, the dreamlike fill in the gaps in his films, or attempt to.

Born in Missoula, Montana at the end of World War II, Lynch and his family moved around when he was a child, depending on where the Department of Agriculture transferred his father, a research scientist. The family lived in Idaho, Washington, North Carolina, Idaho again and Virginia. Following high school, and after various academic and other sorts of missteps, Lynch enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1965.

Soon afterward he began making short films. After several semesters at the art school, he moved with his first wife to Los Angeles and began studying at the AFI (American Film Institute) Conservatory.

In 1972, he and a number of associates began work on *Eraserhead*, a disturbing story set in a nightmarish urban environment. It was finally completed in 1976 and released in 1977. The interest evoked by the grisly, disturbing film, about a repressed, melancholy man and the monstrous creature he and his eventual wife spawn, led to offers of more conventional movie projects.

The problem with the big cities

As numerous sources indicate, when Lynch moved to Philadelphia in the mid-1960s, he was appalled by what he saw and experienced. Michel Chion in his *David Lynch* (1995) observes that Lynch would even reach the point, in regard to "this Philadelphia period," of **"**describing *Eraserhead* as an expression of the fear and tension he felt in that city during his five years there: 'I have said it before and I will repeat it again: 'Philadelphia is the most violent, run-down, sick, decadent, dirty and dark city in America. To go there is like entering an ocean of fear. Its motto is 'the city of brotherly love.''"

In *Room to Dream*, co-written with Lynch, Kristine McKenna observes that one of the first urban riots

> of the civil rights era erupted in Philadelphia [in August 1964] less than a year and a half before Lynch arrived there, and it left 225 stores damaged or destroyed; many never reopened, and once-bustling commercial avenues were transformed into empty corridors of shuttered storefronts and broken windows. A vigorous drug trade contributed to the violence of the city, and poverty demoralized the residents.

Philadelphia exposed Lynch, who grew up in mostly semi-idyllic rural settings,

> to things he hadn't previously been familiar with. Random violence, racial prejudice, the bizarre behavior that often goes hand in hand with deprivation—he'd seen these things in the streets of the city and they'd altered his fundamental worldview. The chaos of Philadelphia was in direct opposition to the abundance and optimism of the world he'd grown up in, and reconciling these two extremes was to become one of the enduring themes of his art.

A *Philadelphia Inquirer* article from August 2024 ("David Lynch wouldn't be making films if it hadn't been for Philly's 'filth'") noted that in a 1987 BBC documentary, the writer-director termed Philadelphia "one of the sickest, most corrupt, decadent, fear-ridden cities that exists." The article went on:

> During a 2014 talk at the Bryn Mawr Film Institute, Lynch expounded on his feelings about the city. "It was a filthy city," he said. "In the atmosphere there was fear, there was violence, there was despair, and sadness. There was a feeling of insanity. … This kind of seeped into me."
>
> Though shot in California, Lynch has called *Eraserhead* "my *Philadelphia Story*." It's a play both on George Cukor's 1940 romantic comedy (which presents a differently complicated view of love and marriage) and on the city itself, whose postindustrial landscape of broken down factories, and general atmosphere of evil and fear, influenced the film.

Lynch had a similar reaction to New York City when, as a child, he was taken to visit his mother's parents in Brooklyn.

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> It's true that going to New York would upset me when I was growing up. Everything about New York made me fearful. The subways were just unreal. Going down into this place, and the smell, and this wind would come with the trains, and the sound—I'd see different things in New York that made me very fearful.

In various comments, Lynch later tried to transform his Philadelphia experience into a "positive" factor in his art work, but the unresolved character of his feelings is clear in his filmmaking—a combination of neo-expressionist horror and angst (his favorite painters included Oskar Kokoschka and Francis Bacon), with undertones of hysteria, and laconic, blank Warhol-like calm. This artificial "calm" was associated with a belief in the philosophically idealist banalities of Transcendental Meditation, which Lynch expounded here:

> When you dive within, the Self is there and true happiness is there. There's a pure, huge, unbounded ocean of it. It's bliss—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual happiness that starts growing from within. And all those things that used to kill you diminish. In the film business, there's so much pressure; there's so much room for anxiety and fear. But transcending makes life more like a game—a fantastic game. And creativity can really flow. It's an ocean of creativity. It's the same creativity that creates everything that is a thing. It's us.

If the external reality is very unpleasant and threatening, the artist may conclude that the only safe and productive place to be is "inside."

The film that the interest aroused by *Eraserhead* made possible, *The Elephant Man*, is often described as a deeply compassionate work. Featuring John Hurt and Anthony Hopkins, it was loosely based on the life of Joseph Merrick, a severely deformed man who lived in England in the late 19th century. The film was a critical and commercial success, receiving eight Academy Award nominations.

Viewing it again, one has to take note of its "selective" compassion. Lynch's treatment of Merrick-Hurt is indeed empathetic and caring. Moreover, enlightened, artistic and aristocratic London—including Alexandra, Princess of Wales (daughter-in-law of Queen Victoria)—acts with the greatest consideration toward the unfortunate Merrick. However, Lynch, perhaps unconsciously bringing forward his Philadelphia experiences, is not so generous toward the city's working class. The hospital's night porter, Jim Renshaw (Michael Elphick), who organizes groups of revelers for a fee to gape at and cruelly mock the "freakish" Merrick, is a malevolent, almost fiendish figure. The crowd, collected in a local pub, that follows him is drunk, stupid and backward.

Chion, in his study, offers excuses:

> Some viewers have been disturbed by the film's portrait of the lower classes with their coarse laughter at the hero's deformity, their excitement at seeing him, and so on. However, the film makes no judgments. The lower classes with their uncouth, rough characters, are treated in a Dickensian vein. The people who go to see the elephant man are not especially bad; they are like us. They are us.

This is nonsense. There is nothing here of Dickens' humane social criticism and "the people who go to see the elephant man" are certainly *not* Lynch, the sensitive artist, or those he is appealing to. In Lynch's work as a whole, cities, industry, machinery and factories and those associated with them are sources of aggression, often unrestrained, or corruption. Both *Eraserhead* and *The Elephant Man* open with menacing depictions of grim urban districts. After that, most of the other films are set in imaginary small towns or, finally, Los Angeles. But even in *Blue Velvet*, the "headquarters" of the drug traffickers or whatever they are is a factory or warehouse, which seems out of place. The opening sequence of each *Twin Peaks* episode includes the belching smokestacks of a sawmill contrasted with a bird perched on a branch.

In 1980, Margaret Thatcher was already in power in Britain, Jimmy Carter and Paul Volcker had initiated a recession and a major assault on living standards in the US and Reagan (for whom Lynch voted in 1984) was about to launch ferocious attacks. To justify the counter-offensive against the working class, right-wing ideologists invented fables about the poor as lazy parasites, "welfare queens," etc. Regrettably, Lynch's insulting portrait of London's "great unwashed" does not conflict with this sort of view.

The opportunity with *Twin Peaks*

Following the commercial success of *Blue Velvet*, Lynch had the chance with *Twin Peaks* to address a wide audience through one of the major networks, ABC, which still had an average prime-time audience of nearly 20 million viewers in 1990. Here was the opportunity for Lynch to truly make his mark, and, if he were up to it, offer a genuine critique—cultural, psychological or otherwise—of contemporary American society. In fact, he failed the test badly. It was his "gamble with greatness, and he lost."

The series, taking place in an imaginary Pacific Northwest town on the Canadian border, follows the investigation into the brutal death of a local girl. Titillating sex and drug trafficking, incest, rape and hints of various perversities, corporate malfeasance, murder and attempted murder and terrifying supernatural spirits, each plays its respective, disjointed role. The series was unusual for American television in its format and approach, combining various genres, detective fiction, horror, science fiction and soap opera, with elements of camp and offbeat humor. As we noted in 2017, "Young people in particular, searching for something outside the official conformism of the Reagan-Bush-Clinton era, responded in considerable numbers to Lynch's eccentricities."

Unfortunately, *Twin Peaks* quickly became bogged down in (and in the second season thoroughly undermined by) interminable and unrewarding plot twists and turns, which could only have been meaningful to the series creators. It became little more than a "quirky," especially byzantine soap opera. The show had initially sparked genuine public interest. Its two-hour pilot was the highest-rated movie of the 1989–90 season, and the one-hour dramas quickly gathered a weekly audience of some 15 million people. However, by introducing an abundance of muddled and mystical (and tedious) elements, Lynch and his collaborators largely (and deservedly) lost their viewership. It turned out they had relatively little to say to a wide audience. By the time ABC announced its cancellation, *Twin Peaks* had sunk to 85th out of 89 rated shows.

Again, Lynch's more uncritical admirers tend to forget how many of the filmmaker's tropes and figures or situations to which he returned tracked—no matter how indirectly or "surrealistically"—certain generally retrograde political and cultural processes in the US. His relentless turn inward toward the "ocean of pure consciousness, pure knowingness," his conviction that "True happiness lies within" and his indifference to the concrete political conditions rendered him vulnerable to self-centered, essentially right-wing moods that swept through the intelligentsia at the time.

New Yorker magazine film critic David Denby (interestingly, a strong advocate of Lynch's work), in his book *American Sucker* (2004), explained how the upper middle class to which he belonged had benefited from the stock market, real estate and profit boom of the late 20th and

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early 21st centuries:

> The change was not just financial, it was cultural. Liberals like me had watched with surprise as their residual distaste for capitalism slipped away, turning to grudging tolerance, and then, by degrees, to outright admiration.

Some of the retrograde cultural changes at the time included a growing disgust with the inner cities and their population, and the poor generally, and a shift toward law and order. Quite literally. The television series *Law & Order* premiered in September 1990. And that has been one of the more *liberal-minded* of the innumerable law enforcement-focused television programs ever since (featuring police, FBI, CIA, NCIS, CSI units, etc.). In that regard, Lynch's decision to make a clean-cut FBI agent and his sheriff colleague the central and most stable protagonists of *Twin Peaks*, whether semi-mockingly or not, was telling.

Likewise, there is the presence of stereotyped, irredeemably monstrous gangsters and lowlifes (or historical or science fiction versions of them) in Lynch's films, straight out of the worst sort of vigilante and "anti-crime" movies of the period: including the night porter Renshaw in *The Elephant Man*, Baron Harkonnen and his brood in *Dune*, Frank Booth and accomplices in *Blue Velvet*, the ridiculous Bobby Peru in *Wild at Heart* and more.

Lynch's views and concerns were conflicting and diverse (he supported "socialist" Bernie Sanders in 2016), but it should at least be noted that, as the *Washington Post* observed in an obituary,

> Even while *Blue Velvet* was scandalizing the country in the 1980s, he [Lynch] proudly voted for Ronald Reagan and visited the Reagan White House twice. In his work, too, Lynch was part of a slender strand of serious, often avant-garde artists whose fundamental tendency and outlook were basically conservative.

The disintegration of dramatic form

Finally, there is the matter of the dissolution of dramatic form in Lynch's work. The disintegration of plot or "story line" in his work is often presented as an indication of his forward thinking. His devotees argue that this is part of the revolt against the constraints of Hollywood, including its sentimental, unconvincing happy endings and such.

Without doubt, in Lynch's movies, and not only in his (later, Quentin Tarantino et al.), the correspondence between the consensus liberalism of the 1950s and early 1960s—tolerance on race, religion and other issues, against dictatorship and tyranny, against warmongers and militarism, learning from the Holocaust and the Second World War—and American filmmaking has broken down. The postwar gravitational pull is no longer in effect in the same manner. Lynch and others have been set loose, for better or worse. There is something here of the "beyond good and evil" effect.

Lynch, as we have indicated, was a follower of various forms of "Eastern" religion, and not, in that sense, a conscious postmodernist. That trend announced its arrival in 1979, in the form of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, which summed up the philosophical trend as "incredulity towards metanarratives," above all, the Marxist conception of the class struggle and the historic role of the working class. Lynch may very well never have read a word of Lyotard, Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida, or understood or sympathized with it if he had, but the impact of the social and political processes at work on those figures, producing an intense and cynical relativism, subjectivism and irrationalism, a denial of objective truth, can be seen and felt in his films as well.

The plotless, "atonal," logic-less character of many of his films, composed of ill-fitting, disconnected fragments, dreamlike sequences and morsels of personal intuition found by "diving into the Self" can be taken as a particular expression of the rejection of "metanarratives."

This dissolution of drama has taken place in the work of other filmmakers as well, including Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Terrence Malick, Andrei Tarkovsky, Béla Tarr, Alexander Sokurov and many, many lesser lights. There is much to be deplored in Hollywood conventionality, but the dramatic story was not a bourgeois invention designed to impose existing norms and values.

Through a consciously organized narrative, the artist proves his or her ideas about life and society, sets in motion conflicts and collisions through which the most pressing questions of his or her day emerge. One must have an important and penetrating view of things to construct a moving, convincing drama. If art "breaks with great aims," argued Trotsky, "no matter how unconsciously felt by the artist, it degenerates into a mere rattle."

About Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), a mannered, overwrought study of a man who murders his wife and whose "mind tricks itself to escape" the horror, in the director's words, critic James Naremore quite rightly commented:

> Unlike the ideal cinema of surrealist criticism (or the work of a director like Luis Buñuel), it [*Lost Highway*] looks backward to an imaginary past, preoccupied with pop art and the dream imagery of affluent America in the last decade of film noir. It deals impressively with primal anxieties, but it seems to have no destructive anger, no specific politics, no purpose other than regression.

Lynch's films, in fact, are a regression in many ways even from the best American films of the 1950s and 1960s, which already reflected a decline. It is not progress to proceed from multi-sided characters and worked-out plots, even if they were sometimes crude and over-simplified, to clichés, obsessions and unexplained, unexplored fetishes, to brightly colored bits and pieces. Neither the gangster/criminals, the "sexy babes" nor the flat policemen like McLachlan in *Twin Peaks* are that intriguing or illuminating. Spending time in their company is not sufficiently rewarding. There are relatively few genuinely moving moments. The visually striking character of the films frequently distracts from the fact that very little rich human drama is occurring.

All serious art in the modern age, *by definition*, must contain an element of protest against the conditions of life, however that is registered. All criticism of social life inevitably gravitates toward Marxism, the current that offers the most comprehensive and unrelenting critique of the existing social order.

The view that reality is incomprehensible and senseless and the accompanying disintegration of dramatic form (which finds myriad expressions) are ultimately bound up with the absence of a consistent, lucid understanding of—and orientation in—the world, above all, with the American intelligentsia's rejection of Marxism and the stultifying effects of anti-communism. The upheavals of our day and the mass movement of the oppressed will disperse "the clouds of skepticism" (and mysticism!) and open a new path by which art, recovering its vigor and coherence, will become the strong ally of social revolution.

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