

HOW DAVID LYNCH BECAME AN ICON OF CINEMA


The late director's unique vision and the love that his persona inspires make it easy to forget how winding his path to greatness was.

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Thursday morning, I happened to be rereading Pauline Kael's classic 1969 essay "Trash, Art, and the Movies." A few hours later, I learned that David Lynch had died, and a sentence from the piece immediately came

back to me: “The world doesn’t work the way the schoolbooks said it did and we are different from what our parents and teachers expected us to be.” I felt Lynch’s critical spirit in Kael’s remark. Lynch, more than any filmmaker of his time, faced down carefully argued lies and reckoned with the burden of alienated identities. Many films are called revelatory and visionary, but Lynch’s films seem made to exemplify these terms. He sees what’s kept invisible and reveals what’s kept scrupulously hidden, and his visions shatter veneers of respectability to depict, in fantasy form, unbearable realities.

With “Blue Velvet,” from 1986, Lynch instantly became the exemplary filmmaker of the Reagan era, blasting through its ambient hypocrisy and sanctimony with methods that went past observational reporting. In a drama about the criminal underside of a small town, he brings out nefarious schemes involving officials who lead double lives. The machinations are less like coherent conspiracies than like the mysterious reverberations of dreams—violent, predatory dreams that seem like the underside of the virtuous myths that Americans eagerly bought from their Hollywood President. For all its sharp-eyed precision, the film feels flung onto the screen in the heat of artistic and diagnostic urgency. Lynch’s work, with its audacious invention and exquisite realization of symbolic details and uncanny realms, is reminiscent of the cinema’s other great Surrealist, Luis Buñuel, but, with its specifically American and local perspective, it also brings to mind a cinematic updating of Sherwood Anderson’s “Winesburg, Ohio.”

Lynch’s ambition came to full flowering in a monumental work for network television, a medium seldom welcoming to the monumental and the ambitious: “Twin Peaks,” the two seasons of which were broadcast in 1990 and 1991. For all its imagistic riot and hallucinatory depths, the show was another Winesburg-style portrait of a town and of the even more elaborately intertwined relationships among a teeming cast of characters. And, like “Blue Velvet,” it was a tale of crime and impunity, of sexual violence and the elaborate effort to keep it hidden. Lynch expands the dark insights of “Blue

Velvet” to stand the seen world on its head—the disturbed surfaces and disturbing phantasmagoria of a small town and the equally uncanny strangeness of its ordinary lives, all of which come together in a single horror, the murder of a teen-age girl named Laura Palmer. As groundbreaking as the series was, it did not entirely fulfill its promise (the formatting of TV remained strong), and, when it was cancelled, it soon became clear that Lynch himself was not done with it. Having directed only six of its thirty episodes, he followed the series with a feature film, “Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me” (1992), a prequel that allowed him, essentially self-revising, to deepen the imagistic subjectivity that the series had touched on.

Lynch, who was born in 1946, finished his first feature, “Eraserhead,” an ultra-low-budget production, in 1977, and from that wildly inventive beginning until the end of his career he experienced the paradox of Surrealism—the effort to put into images a fundamentally literary concept. Lynch started out as a painter but also became a writer, a poet, a memoirist, and a screenwriter (not to mention a musician). The painterly Surrealism of a Dalí or a Magritte comes equipped with humor, because it’s easy to manipulate semblances of reality with a paintbrush. (That’s also why the fantasy worlds of most C.G.I. spectacles are so grimly self-serious: one pinprick of self-deprecation and the overinflated franchises would pop like balloons.) But in literature it’s not easy to stop making sense, and even harder to make seeming nonsense start making sense. The risk of Surrealistic cinema is that its main inventions are conceptual—creating the wildness on the page and merely executing it on the screen. “Eraserhead” is a minimal yet spectacular proof of concept for movies that come alive in fantastical dreamlike imagery despite being bound to burdensome and inconsequential scripts. Yet Mel Brooks, recognizing the power of Lynch’s ideas, hired him to direct “The Elephant Man” (1980), which Brooks co-produced. In retrospect, the film seems arguably one of his least Lynchian works, and yet his empathetic sensibility and his instinct for passionately tactile images combined to create a masterwork of historical reconstruction.

Lynch followed this with his adaptation of “Dune,” from 1984, a project doomed by studio interference which nonetheless hints at how radically, given a chance, he could reconfigure familiar genres. He found himself in a quandary akin to that of Buñuel, whose first films were collages and parodies, and who eventually entered the industry by channelling his scathing symbolism into familiar narrative formats. Lynch did so, too, but the formats and the studios that he faced were particularly unforgiving, and he found a distinctively modern solution—but it took him a painfully long time to do so.

After “Twin Peaks” and “Fire Walk with Me,” Lynch headed into strange new terrain: inward. His film “Lost Highway,” from 1997, is an intricate variation on noir themes; although it gets lost in its own hectic byways, these nonetheless give rise to grandly inventive stylistic flourishes that suggest a self-focussed psychoanalysis of Hollywood genres and tropes. The film represented a major step on what turned out to be a long and winding road to his ultimate cinematic self-reinvention. He stayed with Hollywood in “Mulholland Drive,” from 2001, which started as a TV pilot and plays like it, smothered under the bulk of its story. Near the end, the film is energized by a mirroring, an identity swap as cleverly conceived as it is plainly filmed. Still, the psychological resonances, while deep, are vague, and the symbolic touches thin and plain compared to the intricacies of “Blue Velvet” and “Twin Peaks.” A mystery that remains mysterious, “Mulholland Drive” is the sort of puzzle that could almost have been designed to generate discourse, and, as such, has become an object of cinephilic veneration.

“Mulholland Drive” wasn’t a commercial success, and, inasmuch as studios were increasingly closed to directors’ freewheeling ideas, Lynch’s career stalled. Yet he continued with his inside-the-movie-world explorations, making “Inland Empire” (2006), which he shot on consumer-grade video, doing his own cinematography. This film was conceived experimentally: Lynch began without a script, instead writing one day by day throughout the shoot. The result was just as text-bound as if the script had been settled from

the start, despite the flashes of wonder and urgency issuing from Lynch's camera work and the special effects that video production enabled. Such moments of creative exhilaration were intermittent adornments of a diffuse slog.

While pointing his camera deep into his own milieu, that of filmmaking, there was one very important place that Lynch hadn't been pointing it: at himself. This was about to change, and it led to one of the grandest displays of artistic self-reinvention in recent cinema. His next major project, "Twin Peaks: The Return," which aired on Showtime in 2017, added up, across its eighteen episodes (all of which he directed), to nearly as much screen time as all of his theatrical features combined. "The Return" expanded the reach of the conspiratorial chaos surrounding the murder of Laura Palmer to cosmic dimensions; it could almost have been subtitled "Apocalypse Now," and, conceptually speaking, it does more to fulfill that phrase's implications than does Francis Ford Coppola's movie. Lynch's film also fulfills the conceptual implications of the director's own lifelong exploration of his own unconscious, of his own spontaneous and extravagant imaginings.

Throughout Lynch's career, when his repertory of images seemed untethered, as in "Inland Empire," the effect was like hearing him narrate his dreams—experiences that only he'd had and which remained to some degree incommunicable. When images were tightly tethered, as in "Twin Peaks," the effect often seemed calculated to yield meaning rather than truly embodying the free flow of the unconscious. But in "The Return" Lynch often pushed beyond the bounds of the script in sequences of performance, even of humor, so startling as to seemingly break through the screen itself. The most crucial deployment of his newfound sense of tone and performance, the most important new way in which he put his own immediate powers of invention into the series, was to put himself, personally, physically, at the center of the show. In "The Return," Lynch reprises the

role of the F.B.I. Deputy Director Gordon Cole from the first two seasons and the movie, but he now renders the character both dramatically and visually prominent—and he brings Cole to life with a flamboyantly inventive performance to match. Lynch plays Cole as a secular prophet, a grand and monumental presence dispensing wisdom and judgment with a self-deprecating yet oracular intensity.

Not only is Lynch's performance one of the greatest of any by a filmmaker appearing in his or her own work; it's one that typifies a cinematic era. In a gradual, week-by-week way, Lynch was doing what his peers in world cinema, such as Agnès Varda (“The Gleaners and I,” “The Beaches of Agnès”) and Jafar Panahi (“This Is Not a Film,” “Taxi”), would do when industrial or political conditions made it hard for them to make films: they put themselves in the frame, highlighting their personalities. In making himself the most distinctive face and voice of his mightiest directorial project, Lynch made himself the icon of his own art—and, indeed, a prime emblem for the cinema of his time.

Yet this incarnation is a troubled one, and it bears the burden of the horrors, carnal and social and moral, that Lynch brought to the screen throughout his career. He is a visual visionary first and foremost, but not only a visual one: there's more Dostoyevsky in his films than in Visconti's “White Nights” or Bresson's “Une Femme Douce”; more Kafka than in Welles's “The Trial”; more Freud than in Huston's “Freud” or Cronenberg's “A Dangerous Method.” It's terrifying to imagine that, beneath Lynch's stoic and hearty mien, he contains the shrieks and slashes, the sirens of horror and shudders of apprehension, the tangled world of surface evils and deeper evils, that he presented in his films. The marks of this inner turmoil can be seen in a movie such as “The Straight Story,” from 1999, his gentle vision of an elderly man's extended drive, on a lawnmower, to visit his estranged brother. The film plays like what those who don't dream horrors would call a living dream—a secularly redemptive vision of love and solidarity. It's a vision that Lynch's culminating onscreen presence in “The Return” embodies, as a

survivor of the knowledge and the forebodings that he unsparingly gave of, for half a century, and from which he emerged granitically principled, unyieldingly humane, empathetically steadfast to the end. ♦