

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

It Is What It Is

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David Lynch, Edited by Chris Rodley (2004) *Lynch on Lynch: Revised Edition*

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Edited by filmmaker Chris Rodley, *Lynch on Lynch* is part of Faber & Faber's Directors on Directing interview book series (now numbering 25) which present interviews and dialogues of various filmmakers like Scorsese and Hitchcock. This revised edition of *Lynch on Lynch* brings the book up-to-date. It includes a new introduction, an updated filmography, and an additional interview that translates into two additional chapters discussing Lynch's work since 1997, including the Academy Award-nominated *Mulholland Drive*. This book is a comprehensive look at the avant-garde filmmaker using Lynch's own words. This is Chris Rodley's second contribution to the series; his first book is *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, which also has an updated edition.

The structure of this book is simple, a strict question and answer format. Although hesitant to classify this work as biographical or autobiographical, it is somewhat similar to a memoir, in that it comprises mostly of Lynch's memories and thoughts. Despite this, its simple structure has a lot to offer. The book provides a rare glimpse into an artist's mind. It does not discuss Lynch's life in its entirety nor is it a critique or an analysis of his films. Rather, it is a dialogue with Lynch about him and his films. Using his own words the reader hears what Lynch has to say untainted by outside commentary and interpretation of his

words. This series of interviews provides a new perspective from which to view and experience Lynch, bringing us closer to the man who created these telling films.

As the book talks candidly about all of Lynch's films, an initial reaction may be that *Lynch on Lynch* is only for those already familiar with his movies. However, upon further exploration and reading its detailed and well-written filmography it is quite evident that anyone who has an interest in film and filmmaking would enjoy this book. Those who are looking for a more analytical piece may be pleasantly surprised with the simplicity of this book and all it has to provide.

Lynch's films say a lot regarding the notion of self and personal identity. As a filmmaker, Lynch provides us with some very interesting anecdotes of his experiences making these films, lessons learned, and comments about the films and characters themselves. His responses provides context for his compositions, which in turn helps readers deepen their understanding of his work. Rodley also explores Lynch's other passions and non-film creations, and gets Lynch to talk about artists who have inspired him, like Francis Bacon and Edward Hopper. Through this book the reader gets to know the "other" Lynch.

Unlike other books about David Lynch, the layout of *Lynch on Lynch* follows an interview format in a chronological and theme based order. Each chapter begins with an introduction by Chris Rodley providing background information that enhances the chapter and entices you to read further. The introductions and questions are his only commentary on Lynch as the remainder of the book consists only of Lynch's responses. This set up provides for a fairly straightforward and enjoyable read.

The introductions by Rodley are insightful and the interview material itself provides the perfect "take" on the world of David Lynch. In the Introduction to the revised edition, Rodley states that the "the uncanny lies at the very core of Lynch's work" (ix). Interestingly he defines the uncanny as that which is both oddly familiar and yet strange, and that falls into the realm of dread rather than terror. Rodley is correct in associating Lynch's films with the uncanny, yet, as he illustrates throughout the book, that is not the entire essence of Lynch. Revisiting the notion of the uncanny throughout the book would have been more powerful in demonstrating the uncanny nature of Lynch's films.

As Rodley mentions, "in Lynch's universe, worlds – both real and imagined – collide." (x). Interestingly enough, Lynch actually creates a world when he conceives his films, and immerses himself in it. His films are organic, emerging from his subconscious mind. As this

work comprises of Lynch's words, his memories, it is assumed that there may be some inaccuracies. Rodley does not contest anything mentioned by Lynch. However, his introductions do supply some validity to certain facts providing context and additional information regarding the filmmaker, completing the picture of David Lynch. Rodley even brings in commentary from those who are or who have been the closest to Lynch: ex-wife Peggy Reavey; longtime friend Toby Keeler; and actress Isabella Rossellini, a former girlfriend. Rodley's introductions and well-crafted questions provide evidence of thorough research. He also seems to be a big fan of Lynch's filmmaking as he makes some strong claims regarding the filmmaker: "it seems that David Lynch virtually owns the sole American franchise on movie 'dreamtime'" (xi).

The layout of the book implies that the answers are presented in chronological order but there is no confirming comment to substantiate that assumption. Despite this, as this book contains dialogue from a series of interviews ranging from 1993 to 2002, if possible, it would have been interesting to know which answers came from which years. Alternately, it would have been interesting for Rodley to revisit previous questions in his 2002 interview with Lynch to see if his opinions have changed or if he would expand on certain aspects of the previous interviews.

Having a filmmaker interview another filmmaker provides a fascinating lens through which to learn about David Lynch as the questions angle towards the creation of the films themselves. For the most part, the questions posed by Rodley are interesting, thought provoking, and offer a bit of commentary about Lynch and his methods and influences. The conversation is easy to follow; however, at times it seemed as if Rodley gave up too quickly on the harder questions when Lynch either avoided or provided an indirect response to them (typically, this is towards the more analytical questions on his films and artwork). Rodley does acknowledge Lynch's apprehension in discussing his films in detail, especially when it came to *Eraserhead*, Lynch's most personal work. This lack of pressing further may just be Rodley's respect for a fellow filmmaker who he seems to admire quite a bit. However, it is Lynch who reveals that discussing the more intimate details of films or the decisions of filmmakers takes away some of the "magic" in film. As Rodley surmises, Lynch's "desire is to 'speak directly' through the films" (54). Although it is well known that Lynch does not discuss his movies in depth, Rodley is successful in getting him to make some interesting and thought-provoking comments about his films. These discussions provide a great sense of how organic Lynch's films and artwork really are.

The first chapter looks at Lynch's pre-film days: childhood memories and his emergence into the art world. We learn of his passion for the past and its influence on his films and artwork. This is the perfect base to the book as it provides the underlying context to the dual personality of David Lynch. Laying the groundwork for Lynch's filmmaking style is found in Chapter 2, which looks at Lynch's first film experiments. As the book progresses one gets a sense of reliving some of his experiences and the portrait of David Lynch becomes more complex.

The remaining chapters focus on his films in chronological order, but do not attempt to thoroughly analyze them. Rodley questions Lynch on what happened during the making of each of his films, how he got involved in making particular films, and how some of his professional relationships were formed. He also asks some probing questions that get Lynch to reveal more about the nature of his films. Rodley even discusses with the director some of the recurring themes and character types found in his films. Most of these chapters also discuss other artistic creations by Lynch, such as his paintings and his music. Each chapter seems to reveal a new layer of Lynch's personality.

Lynch's films are intimate works that are part dream, part reality, with no distinction between the two. One could argue that only he could shed light on what they mean – because what they really mean has to do with him. Nevertheless, artworks can have multiple meanings and can be read differently by every individual. This book definitely reinforces this belief. Even the format of the book lends itself to multiple impressions, as there is no direct critique or analysis of what Lynch says. The questions themselves push Lynch towards certain revelations and commentary, but Rodley rarely questions Lynch's answers. This lack of critical analysis allows the reader to form their own opinion about Lynch and his views. This aspect of the book can also be seen as a negative to those looking for a more analytical piece. A concluding chapter with some analysis would have been a nice addition to this book.

Obviously, the focus of this book is what David Lynch has to say about making his movies. In the interviews, Lynch comes across as a "normal" person who had an enjoyable childhood. He avoids laying blame when it comes to his more unsuccessful films, like *Dune* (1984) and seems a very positive person. Yet his dark natured films present a paradoxical quality to his character as he delves into the subconscious and surreal world of repressed thoughts and ideas. Much like his characters, this book exposes Lynch as a dual personality. As Lynch comments, "It's sorta true because you have an interior and an exterior and

sometimes they're in contradiction – everybody, every human" (25). In fact, maybe his movie *The Straight Story* (1999) provides a glimpse into his "conscious" self. As Rodley surmises, *The Straight Story* has many hints of "Lynchland" and "Lynchisms" and that the film is still all Lynch; just the other side of him – the one presented in these interviews.

In Chapter 1 Rodley comments that "generally, your paintings strongly evoke the world of a terror-stricken child. Your early films *The Alphabet* and *The Grandmother* seem to come from the same place. They don't look like remembrances of a happy childhood" (12). Lynch agrees with Rodley but still maintains that he had a happy upbringing. Interestingly, he also mentions that people tend to idealise themselves in their past: "An accurate memory of the past would be depressing, probably" (13). Additionally, Rodley summarizes that "a highly developed sense of place, and the palpable influence exerted on people by their surroundings are in his movies, often fused with the 'outsider' quality of his main characters" (1). Although Lynch states that he coped well with moving so many times with his family, maybe this underlying "outsider" theme is more deeply rooted in how he felt each time he moved. As with so much of his filmmaking and artwork developed out of his subconscious, one has to wonder what all these works have to say about Lynch's self and personal identity.

The recurrence of certain actors in Lynch's films, his tendency to cast based on "feel", his willingness to let a film evolve over long periods of time, and his experimental music, all illustrate an organic quality to his movies. What begins as a simple idea gradually grows more complex and progresses into a living entity with surreal qualities. Lynch readily comments: "That's why I keep saying that making films is a subconscious thing. Words get in the way. Rational thinking gets in the way...when it comes out in a pure sort of stream, from some other place, film has a great way of giving shape to the subconscious. It's just a great language for that" (140). I mostly agree with what Lynch says about filmmaking being a subconscious "thing". When it comes to David Lynch, yes, filmmaking seems a very subconscious process for him. However, each filmmaker is different and each would most likely have a different mix of "subconscious" and "conscious" filmmaking. There is probably a stronger presence of "conscious" filmmaking in popular "Hollywood" pictures favoured by the mainstream. Spielberg for example although guided by "feel" (which is most likely the subconscious part) also makes calculated rational decisions on how to approach certain scenes and films. In other words, the subconscious is part of filmmaking, it is a part of everything we do, it is just that some are more willing or more in tune with it and allow it

to have a stronger voice and emerge in their filmmaking. I must mention that as Lynch's responses are mostly memories, it becomes difficult to critique what he personally has to say. Even with comments like that, as above, it is his belief based on his experiences. Lynch is "a cinematic philosopher-artist, presenting thought through sound and image" (Sinnerbrink, 2005, internet). In *Lynch on Lynch*, his comments illustrate just that: the images that he creates on screen (or that present themselves to him) are "subconscious" thoughts that can be both abstract and concrete and are usually difficult to interpret.

Much of what Lynch talks about concerns things like why he chose to work on certain films and his frustrations and lessons learned through his experiences in making films. As mentioned earlier, Lynch rarely does any specific analysis on his films; especially those aspects that tend to be more popular with academics, film aficionados, and die hard Lynch fans. His responses provide a context regarding the creation of his films -, bringing to the fore his interest in fear, industry, and psychological characters - and perhaps illustrates his philosophy on life and the role that filmmaking has in communicating those thoughts and images. Although he does not directly provide answers or film analysis, his responses do provide many hints on his films.

Although not a fan of David Lynch's dream-like films/manifestations, a lot of his commentary in these series of interviews resonated with me in a professional sense and compels me to view his films from a new perspective. This book brought me to a better understanding of the man, *his process*, and his films; and with that, a new respect and a lot of inspiration. One does not have to love the genre he tends to favour nor everything he does. The book leaves the reader with an understanding, a common ground from which to understand what he has to say, through his films, about this world we live in.

At times, this book seems to idolise Lynch as an amazing filmmaker and falls short of any critique of him, his work, or his comments. It peeks into the mind of Lynch, a man who makes his dreams and nightmares come to life on screen. These images are like a looking glass into a psycho(non)logical world and provide socio commentary on the world we live in (both in the external world and within ourselves). Ironically, this book has its own organic quality and presents to us Lynch *as Lynch*. Although lacking in criticisms, this book allows readers to truly make up their own minds about David Lynch and what he has to say about himself, his experiences, and his films. In some ways this book is a perfect example of post-modernism. It is what it is...take from it what you will.

Bibliography

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