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Dreaming and the Cinema of David Lynch

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This essay explores the influence of dreams and dreaming on the filmmaking of David Lynch. Focusing particular attention on Mulholland Drive (2001), Lost Highway (1997), Blue Velvet (1986), and the television series Twin Peaks (1990–91), the essay will discuss the multiple dream elements in Lynch's work and how they have contributed to the broad cultural influence of his films. Lynch's filmmaking offers an excellent case study of the powerful connection between dreaming and movies in contemporary American society.

KEY WORDS: dreams; film; David Lynch.

I

More than perhaps any other contemporary director, David Lynch draws upon dream experience as a primal wellspring of his creative energy. Dreams and dreaming suffuse every moment of his approach to filmmaking. The disturbing impact of watching *Mulholland Drive* and his other works (especially *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway*, and the television series *Twin Peaks*) derives in large part from his uncanny skill in using cinema as a means of conveying the moods, mysteries, and carnivalesque wildness of our dreams. One of his biographers, Chris Rodley, puts it this way:

> The feelings that excite him most are those that approximate the sensations and emotional traces of dreams: the crucial element of the nightmare that is impossible to communicate simply by describing events. Conventional film narrative, with its demand for logic and legibility, is therefore of little interest to Lynch .... Insecurity, estrangement, and lack of orientation and balance are sometimes so acute in Lynchland that the question becomes one of whether it is ever possible to feel "at home"... If Lynch could be called a Surrealist, it is because of his interest in the "defamiliarization" process and the waking/dream state—not in his frequent use of the absurd or the incongruous (Rodley, 1997).

On a first viewing Lynch's works seem baldly psychoanalytic in their emotional preoccupations, almost to the point where there does not seem to be anything for a latter-day Freudian or Jungian to interpret. All the great passions of the unconscious are right there, out in the open, without any disguise, repression, or arcane symbolism. Although I do believe psychoanalytic film criticism has its uses, that is not the path I want to follow in this

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essay. My interest here is both more focused and more expansive. First, I want to identify and describe several specific means by which dreaming is woven into Lynch's approach to filmmaking. These include the use of dreaming as a narrative structuring device, the inclusion of scenes in which characters experience a dream, the inclusion of dialogue in which characters discuss dreams, and the use of Lynch's own dream experience as an inspirational source for his creative work. After that, I want to reflect on the role these multiple dream elements have played in the broader cultural influence of his films. Lynch's filmmaking offers an excellent case study of the powerful connection between dreams and movies in contemporary American society, and at the end of the essay I will suggest the common nickname for Hollywood—the "dream factory"—is not merely a figure of speech but is in fact an accurate description of the profoundly interactive influence of films on dreaming and dreaming on films. It is this mutual interplay of dreams and movies that ultimately interests me, and my hope is that this essay will open a new path toward a better understanding of that dynamic relationship.

II

Dreams and dreaming play several different roles in Lynch's filmmaking. The following summary of the most prominent of these roles is not intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive. Indeed, a complete accounting of these roles would require a detailed review of Lynch's whole body of work. But even the limited description I am offering should be sufficient to prove my basic point, which is that dreams and dreaming play an absolutely central role in his filmmaking process. Is there any director who does more than Lynch to integrate dreaming and filmmaking? Perhaps so; I would enjoy hearing someone try to make the case. For the present, I offer the following analysis not to prove Lynch's superiority to other directors, but rather to illustrate the dream-inspired artistry of one particular director who has made, and is continuing to make, a substantial contribution to contemporary attitudes toward the dream-film connection.

DREAMING AS NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

For many viewers the most striking feature of *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is the abrupt rupture in the narrative about two-thirds of the way through the film. Although there are several other story threads woven in and out of *Mulholland Drive*, the main narrative follows the experiences of Betty (Naomi Watts), a pert young blond who has just arrived in Hollywood with hopes of becoming an actress but who instead finds herself caught up in a dangerous mystery involving a dark-haired woman with amnesia (Laura Harring) who adopts the name "Rita" from a movie poster (among other things, *Mulholland Drive* is a wicked satire of the ultimate emptiness of "Hollywood dreams"). Betty and Rita find a little blue box that matches the strange blue key they found in Rita's purse, but just when they go to put the key in the box, Betty all of a sudden wakes up—and even though it's still her, it soon becomes clear that it's *not* her, at least not the same person whose life viewers have been following for the past hour and a half. This Betty (now her name is Diane Selwyn) is darker, angrier, and full of bitterness and despair. Likewise, many of the same people from the earlier scenes are still present, but they are different, too, with different names, personalities, and relationships to one another. Confronted with all these sudden changes,

viewers are forced into a radical reconsideration of their understanding of all the preceding scenes in the movie. Each new scene that follows this profound shift in the narrative takes on an added layer of meaning in its retrospective revelation of what was happening in the earlier scenes, and this in turn creates a mounting sense of inexplicable foreboding as the story builds to a climax. (A similar narrative rupture occurs in Ron Howard's film *A Beautiful Mind*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture and Best Director the same year as Lynch was nominated for Best Director for *Mulholland Drive*. The different use of this narrative device in the two films is a good measure of the difference between mainstream Hollywood movies and Lynch's distinctive, "Jimmy Stewart from Mars" brand of filmmaking.)

When the film finally ends, with Betty's/Diane's horrific suicide, viewers are still left with several open questions about the precise relationship of the various scenes to each other. It is plausible to think of the "second" Betty as the "real" one, who was having a dream that involved the fantasized experiences of the "first" Betty (the image of a red pillow frames both ends of the "first" Betty's scenes). But even that interpretation does not account for everything (e.g., how exactly does the willful director Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux) fit into the dreaming/waking interaction?), and in the end it seems contrary to the spirit of the movie to insist on any one explanatory framework.

The film *Lost Highway* (1997) also involves an unexpected rupture in the narrative. Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) is a musician plagued by the fear that his wife Renee (Patricia Arquette) is being unfaithful to him. When she is found horribly murdered in their home, Fred is arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death, even though he professes his innocence. While Fred is sitting despondently in his prison cell, something strange happens—and suddenly it's not him any more, but a young man named Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty) sitting in the cell. The baffled authorities have no choice but to let Pete go, and he returns home to his parents and girlfriend. Viewers are naturally at a loss to explain what has happened, and whatever initial expectations they may have formed about where the story was going have been abruptly dashed. Funny things start happening to Pete, and soon he meets a beautiful, vivacious woman whom viewers immediately recognize as the same woman as Fred's wife, even though she says her name is Alice Wakefield. Pete and Alice fall in love, but their torrid affair soon leads to violence, betrayal, and death. When Pete's life has finally collapsed into ruins, when Alice has abandoned him and he realizes that his life has been completely destroyed, he suddenly disappears—and Fred is back. Dazed, Fred gets in his car and speeds away down a dark highway. The police are right behind him with flashing lights and red sirens, and the film ends with Fred becoming consumed by a violent physical frenzy.

So what was happening during the interlude with Pete? Was Fred having a dream? Did Fred really murder his wife (something hinted at by one of his dreams—more on that later), and in his abject despair did he fantasize being an entirely different person? And in the end was the fantasy not strong enough to escape the gravitational pull of the agonies of his "real life?" I am reminded of the famous painting called "The Prisoner's Dream" in which a downtrodden young man is sleeping in a jail cell, while an ethereal version of himself lifts off from his body and soars through the metal bars at the window, out into the freedom of the air and the light. The painting testifies to the power of dreaming to relieve people's suffering by imagining different and better lives for themselves. Freud's notion of dreams as disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes is based on this power, and even though Lynch is reluctant to endorse any psychoanalytic interpretation of his films he does grant that what happens to Fred in *Lost Highway* could be considered a "psychogenic

fugue," i.e. a form of amnesia involving a flight from reality. He says he had never heard of that mental condition before making the film, but appreciated learning about it later—"it sounds like such a beautiful thing—'psychogenic fugue.' It has music and it has a certain *force* and dreamlike quality. I think it's beautiful, even if it didn't mean anything" (Rodley, 1997).

Does it mean anything, then, that *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* end ambiguously, tantalizing viewers with unanswered questions about the basic narrative structure of the films? If nothing else, this had the perhaps predictable consequence of stimulating widespread criticism from viewers who accused the films of being too hard to understand. In the eyes of many viewers, Lynch had failed a filmmaker's primary responsibility to tell a coherent story. According to critics, either he didn't know *how* to present a comprehensible narrative, or he didn't *want* to because he was more interested in self-indulgent artistry than in communicating with an audience. The modest box office returns for both movies underscores this failure to attract or satisfy a broad public audience. In appraising Lynch's films it must be noted that they have always earned more critical than commercial success, indicating that the appeal of his work may be very intense for a limited group of people (he has a remarkable number of passionately devoted fans) but does not extend very far into the general population. Although I would grant the criticism that some of his films are more emotionally effective and aesthetically powerful than others (for example, I would argue that *Blue Velvet* is a better film than *Wild at Heart*), I believe it misses the point to condemn Lynch's films for their failure to provide clear, conventional narrative frameworks for their viewers. Movies like *Mulholland Drive* and *Lost Highway* remind me of certain Hindu myths in which people become so entangled in each other's dreams and dreams-within-dreams that readers cannot help but feel confused about the basic existential question of *what is real*. For example, the *Yogavasistha*, a philosophical treatise written sometime between the tenth and twelfth centuries C.E. in Kashmir, tells the story of a hunter meeting a sage in the woods. The sage is telling the hunter a story about how the sage once entered the dream of someone else and lived in that person's world until it was suddenly destroyed by a flood at doomsday; then the sage thinks he wakes up, but another sage comes and tells him they are both characters in someone else's dream. This makes the first sage wake up again, and he now realizes he needs to get back to his real body. He isn't sure how to do this, however, and the story ends with no clear-cut resolution to his dilemma. Commenting on this myth, historian of religions Wendy Doniger says

> As the tale progresses, we realize that our confusion is neither our own mistake nor the mistake of the author of the text; it is a device of the narrative, constructed to make us realize how impossible and, finally, how irrelevant it is to attempt to determine the precise level of consciousness at which we are existing. We cannot do it, and it does not matter. (Doniger, 2001)

The Hindu myths, like Lynch's films, draw upon the powerful *realness* of dreaming to frustrate people's conventional narrative expectations and provoke new reflection and new self-awareness. Their dreamy visions are enticing invitations to explore experiential realms beyond the boundaries of ordinary rational consciousness and personal identity.

DREAM SCENES

Many characters in Lynch's films are shown having experiences that are explicitly identified as dreams. These scenes all include the basic elements of a character going to

sleep, dreaming, then waking up and trying to figure out what the dream means. Here are three examples:

- Fred in *Lost Highway* tells his wife Renee about a dream he had in which he comes into their house and hears her calling his name. He sees a fire blazing in the fireplace, and pink smoke coming from the hall. He walks into their bedroom and finds her—"There you were . . . lying in bed . . . but it wasn't you . . . .It looked like you . . . but it wasn't" (Hughes, 2001). Renee looks up at him and suddenly screams, as if being struck by something, and then Fred wakes up. Deeply shaken, he looks across the bed to the "real" Renee for reassurance. But instead of his wife he sees the leering face of "The Mystery Man" (Robert Blake), a demonic figure who haunts Fred throughout the film (in a case of life imitating art, Blake was recently arrested for the murder of his wife). Fred cries out in terror, turns on the light switch, and finds his wife right there, looking at him with concern. He lays back in bed, shaking.
- Paul Atreides (Kyle MacLachlan), the messianic hero of *Dune* (1984), has a series of dreams and spice-induced visions that portend his future and the future of the universe. In these visionary experiences Paul passively observes several different images—the planet Dune, the monstrous worms that dwell in its sands, a beautiful young woman, a pool of water, his enemies the Harkonnens. As Paul's story unfolds (in a grandly epic fashion—there are no *Mulholland Drive*-like narrative twists here, and it may not be a coincidence that *Dune* was Lynch's only big-budget studio film and was, by his own reckoning, his biggest failure as a filmmaker), his dreams become prophetic heralds of his future as the savior of the Fremen, the mysterious folk who live in the deepest deserts of Dune.
- When FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) comes to the Northwest lumber town of *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) to solve the murder of Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), a beautiful, much beloved, but deeply secretive high school girl, he has a remarkable dream that becomes a primary resource in his investigation. Agent Cooper's dream occurs in the second episode of the series, and is referred to throughout the remaining episodes. It involves several striking images, the most prominent being Agent Cooper sitting in "The Red Room" with a strangely deformed midget ("The Man From Another Place" (Michael J. Anderson)) and Laura Palmer herself, alive and as beautiful as ever. Cooper finds himself much older, with deeply wrinkled skin, and he listens to the strange little man tell him several enigmatic bits of information in a bizarrely distorted voice. After the strange midget dances a jazzy little jig out of the room, Laura comes over to Agent Cooper, leans over, and kisses him. She whispers something in his ear, and then he wakes up. He immediately calls the Twin Peaks Sheriff on the phone and announces, "I know who killed Laura Palmer."

These three dream scenes are all quite different, both in their cinematic form and their emotional content. Fred's dream in *Lost Highway* is a dark, frightening revelation of sexual rage and spiritual despair. It draws viewers deeper and deeper into the seething passions of Fred's soul, without any hope of escape—even "waking up" can't be trusted, because you can never know for sure if you've fully escaped the nightmare. By contrast, Paul's visionary experiences in *Dune* are mystical openings into the future, and they reflect the grandly epic tone of the story as a whole. Paul's dreams remind me of the dreams ascribed to the kings

and priests of Ancient Egypt, Babylonia, and Sumeria, as reported by A. Leo Oppenheim in his *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (1956). The majority of these kingly dreams are prophetic revelations in which the dreamer passively receives messages and sees symbolic images relating to the king's future glory and success. Given that *Dune* is set on a desert planet that has many social, religious, and geographic similarities to the ancient Near East, the prophetic quality of Paul's dreams is very much in keeping with the overall tone of the film. Very different from those dreams is Agent Cooper's dream of The Red Room, with its vivid characters saying and doing the most bizarre things imaginable. Everything in the dream revolves around Agent Cooper's investigation of the murder of Laura Palmer, and at the climax of the dream Laura Palmer herself, back from the dead, tells Cooper who killed her (although he admits that when he woke up, he forgot what she said). For viewers with a preexisting interest in dreams and film, the immediate analogy is to the Salvador Dali-designed dream scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), in which John Ballantine (Gregory Peck) has a fantastic, seemingly nonsensical dream that turns out to be the key to solving his role in a mysterious death. Countless mystery stories from around the world have used this same theme of a puzzling dream that is found, thanks to the efforts of a clever sleuth, to hold the answer to an awful crime. Agent Cooper's dream in *Twin Peaks* is, in that sense, Lynch's unique take on that perennial narrative theme.

As dissimilar as they may be in form and content, each of these dream scenes plays a crucial role in its respective story. Fred's dream offers a brief but vital insight into the truth of what happened to his wife. Paul's visionary dreams accurately predict his destiny as savior of Dune. Agent Cooper's dream provides a wealth of clues that help him in his effort to solve the murder of Laura Palmer. In each case both the characters in the film and the viewers outside the film are compelled to pay close attention to the enigmatic dreams as their best hope for understanding what is happening in the story.

Lynch's use of dream scenes in his films is certainly not unique to him. Many other directors have portrayed characters experiencing dreams in their films, often to good effect. But I would argue that very few directors use dream scenes in as many movies, or give the dream scenes such central aesthetic roles, as Lynch has.

DISCUSSIONS OF DREAMS AND DREAMING

Beyond scenes of characters actually having dreams, Lynch's works are replete with characters talking about dreams, singing about them, sharing them, alluding to them, and wondering about them. Some of the comments refer to a character's own dreams, while other comments rely on dreams and dreaming as deeply evocative metaphorical expressions. The total number of these dream-related comments is quite large, so I have limited my examples to those found in *Mulholland Drive*, *Twin Peaks*, and *Blue Velvet*:

Mulholland Drive

- A nervous young man named Dan (Patrick Fischler) meets his friend Herb (Michael Cooke) at the Winkie's Diner on Sunset Boulevard and tells him of an incredibly frightening dream in which he discovers, in the alley behind that very restaurant, a dark, monstrous man with a horrifying face—"I hope I don't ever see that face outside a dream." With Herb's sober encouragement, Dan goes outside the diner, around to the alley, and comes face to face with the monstrous man.

Twin Peaks

- Agent Cooper tells a group of baffled Twin Peaks police officers about a dream he experienced three years earlier relating to the spiritual plight of Tibet, and he describes how he learned to use his dreams as tools in his criminal investigations.
- Audrey Horne (Sherilyn Fenn), the vivacious 18-year old who has a crush on Agent Cooper, says she is going to help him find Laura Palmer's killer so he will realize that Audrey is "the girl of his dreams." Her reluctant confidante Donna Hayward (Lara Flynn Boyle) dismisses Audrey's romantic fantasies by saying, "Dream on."
- Laura's mom Sarah Palmer (Grace Zabriskie) has visions of a frighteningly bestial man in her house, and Donna says Sarah has always had spooky dreams, just like Laura did.
- An audiotape is found in which Laura is heard speaking to her psychiatrist, Dr. Jacoby (Russ Tamblyn). In a langorous voice she says "I feel like I'm going to dream tonight. Big, bad ones. The kind you like?"
- Hank Jennings (Chris Mulkey), just released from prison and trying to win his way back into the heart of his wife Norma (Peggy Lipton), tells her that while he lay in his jail cell he dreamed about her (another instance of the "prisoner's dream" theme). She says, rather evasively, "I can't blame you for dreaming."
- Ben Horne (Richard Beymer), the scheming owner of the Twin Peaks Lodge, also turns out to be the owner of One Eyed-Jack's, the infamous casino and bordello. Exercising his *droit du seigneur*, Ben enters a bedroom where he will initiate the newest girl to the business. "Close your eyes," he croons to her, with his own eyes closed, "This is such stuff as dreams are made on." Waiting in the room is Audrey, his daughter, who has sneaked into Jack's in a misguided attempt to help Agent Cooper's investigation.

Blue Velvet

- Young sweethearts Sandy Williams (Laura Dern) and Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) are out on a date, and with the image of a radiant church behind her Sandy tells Jeffrey, "I had a dream. In fact, it was the night I met you. In the dream, there was our world, and the world was dark, because there weren't any robins. And the robins represented love. And for the longest time there was just this darkness, and all of a sudden, thousands of robins were set free, and they flew down and brought this blinding light of love. And it seemed like that love would be the only thing that would make any difference. And it did. So I guess it means there is trouble till the robins come" (Hughes, 2001). As Sandy finishes describing her dream, organ music from the nearby church swells to a harmonious climax.
- A supremely "suave" and well-anesthetized Ben (Dean Stockwell), holding an electrician's light up to his face, lip-syncs along with Roy Orbison's song "In Dreams," while Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper), the maniacal *uber*-villain of the film, stares at Ben and listens to the song with an intense emotional involvement that is gradually transformed into irrepressible rage and hyper-sexualized aggression.

- A few scenes later, Frank is viciously pummeling Jeffrey, and as Orbison's song plays from the car radio Frank says between punches that he'll always be in Jeffrey's dreams, always haunting him....
- At the conclusion of the film, Jeffrey, Sandy, and her grandmother look out the kitchen window and see a robin with a squirming roach in its mouth. Sandy says it's just like her dream, and Jeffrey smiles in agreement, although her grandmother is disgusted at the sight of the roach and says, "I don't know how they eat those things."

Each of these references to dreams and dreaming comes at a specific moment in its respective story, and each one has shades of mood and meaning relating to that particular narrative context. At the same time, at least two common threads run through nearly all of them. First, they all reflect in differing ways a fundamental sense of dreams as revelations of truth, especially the truth of our deepest passions. From the darkest rage to the brightest hope, from overwhelming horror to lustful desire, dreaming in Lynch's films is understood as giving voice to the primal wishes, fears, hopes, and aspirations of the human soul.

The second common thread in these various comments relates to the first, in that the revelatory truthfulness of dreaming is continuously contrasted in Lynch's work with a sense of relentless, agonzing uncertainty about what is real and what is illusion. His characters are constantly questioning who they are and what is happening to them; again and again they find themselves deceived, deluded, and misled by appearances. The "realness" of dreaming only intensifies their uncertainty and confusion about the "realness" of their waking lives.

In my estimation, the best example of this is the "Winkie's Diner" scene in *Mulholland Drive*. This scene essentially comes out of nowhere—the preceding narrative has been following Rita from the initial car crash down into the bright lights of L.A. and into the apartment of Betty's aunt. Rita, her head still bleeding from the accident, finds a hidden place under the kitchen table and goes to sleep. Then all of a sudden the story shifts to a nervous young man named Dan sitting at a table in Winkie's Diner, telling a slightly older and more mature man named Herb about his dream (which, Dan explains, he's had twice). Herb is skeptical, but willing to hear what Dan has to say. Dan tells how he was in this very Winkie's, in a strange half-day/half-night kind of light, and he was very scared. He saw Herb up at the cash register, and Herb was scared, too, which made Dan even more scared. Then he realized there was a man behind the place, doing all of this. Dan could see him through the wall, could see his face—and that was the end of the dream. When Dan is finished, Herb gets up to pay the bill (he finds himself standing at the cash register, just like in Dan's dream) and then leads Dan outside to the back of the restaurant. Trembling and covered with nervous sweat, Dan comes to the corner of the alley—and suddenly sees a dark, monstrous man flash before him. Dan stumbles backwards, falls to the ground, and passes out, as Herb rushes over to help him. Then there is a quick cut back to the figure of Rita under the kitchen table, still sleeping.

As the film proceeds we leave this scene at Winkie's behind, and for the next two hours it remains a strange little island in the main currents of the narrative. But at the very end it comes back to the center of the story. Diane (*ne* Betty) and the hipster hit-man Joe (Mark Pellegrino) are sitting at a table in Winkie's, making plans to murder Rita (whose name is now Camilla Rhodes). At the very moment when Joe shows her the blue key that will signal when he has successfully killed Camilla, Diane sees Dan standing at the cash register, just like in his dream when he saw Herb standing there. Shaken, Diane asks Joe what the blue

key opens, and he just starts to laugh. The scene suddenly shifts to the alley at night, where the monstrous man is sitting in the firelight, surrounded by shadowy refuse. He has the little blue box in his hands, and he places it in an old brown bag on the ground. Out of the blue box come the tiny figures of Diane's parents, maniacally animated and laughing hysterically, with arms flapping and crazed smiles on their faces. They scamper to Diane's apartment and she frantically tries to lock them out, but they crawl under her door and chase her into her bedroom, where in a screaming, frenzied panic she lunges for her bedside table, grabs a gun, and shoots herself in the face. As smoke silently envelops her bed, one final image of the monstrous man floats across the screen.

The Winkie's scene illustrates as well as anything could those twin dream threads of revelatory truth and epistemological uncertainty in Lynch's films. The monstrous man is the embodiment of Dan's deepest, darkest fears, a terrifying alien presence with Jungian shadow imagery right out of archetype central casting. Viewers are never sure what exactly happens to Dan when he turns the corner in the alley. Is the monstrous man really there, or is he just a figment of Dan's fevered imagination? Did Dan's dream come "true"? Is the monstrous man just a bum, or is he actually controlling everything? At the end of the film, when viewers see the monstrous man again right before and right after Diane kills herself, the sense emerges that his darkly powerful presence lies at the heart of her tragic self-destruction.

As discussed earlier, the basic narrative structure of *Mulholland Drive* is patterned on dream experience, and yet nowhere else in the film are dreams or dreaming explicitly mentioned—only in the Winkie's scene. This suggests that an additional level of truth revealed in Dan's dream is a truth about the film as a whole. The lone discussion of dreams becomes the key (so to speak) to opening a new way of understanding everything that happens in the movie.

LYNCH'S USE OF HIS OWN DREAMS AND THE DREAMS OF OTHERS

Several filmmakers have described particular instances in which they have drawn on their own dreams or the dreams of other people they knew to shape and influence their movies (see, for example, James Pagel's article in the present issue on dreams in the filmmaking of John Sayles). It comes as no surprise that Lynch also draws upon dreams in this way. Here are two examples.

- One of Lynch's first film projects, *The Alphabet* (1968), is a four-minute work showing a girl lying in bed at night tormented by the letters of the alphabet. When asked where he came up with the idea for *The Alphabet*, Lynch said, "My wife Peggy's niece was having a bad dream one night and was saying the alphabet in her sleep in a tormented way. So that's sort of what started *The Alphabet* going . . . . It just struck me that learning, instead of being something that's a happy process, is turned around to being almost like a nightmarish process, so it gives people dreams—bad dreams. So *The Alphabet* is a little nightmare about the fear connected with learning." (Rodley, 1997)
- After the disappointment of the big studio project *Dune*, Lynch's next film was the artistic breakthrough *Blue Velvet*, an aesthetically stunning movie that generated enormous controversy for its "frank" portrayal of sado-masochistic sexuality. Lynch says it was a while before the full story of *Blue Velvet* took shape in his imagination:

> "The early drafts were terrible, so I wrote at least two more. The fourth draft was almost finished, and I was sitting in a building waiting to go into an office in some studio. I don't even know why I was there. I was sitting on a bench and suddenly I remembered this dream that I'd had the night before. And the dream was the ending to *Blue Velvet*. The dream gave me the police radio; the dream gave me Frank's disguise; the dream gave me the gun in the yellow man's jacket; the dream gave me the scene where Jeffrey was in the back of Dorothy's apartment, sending the wrong message, knowing Frank would hear it. I don't know how it happened, but I just had to plug and change a few things to bring it all together. Everything else had been done except that." (Rodley, 1997)

In describing his filmmaking process Lynch continuously refers to his reliance on "accidents and strange things" (Rodley, 1997). Rather than seeing such unplanned happenings as impediments to the execution of his preordained plan, he takes them as opportunities to include something new and fresh into the ongoing work. He's a *bricoleur* in Levi-Strauss's sense of using whatever bits and pieces of material are ready at hand, all in the service of a personal creative vision. This openness to serendipitous events and chance occurrences flows naturally from his understanding of dreams (When *Blue Velvet* came out, *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael said "Lynch might turn out to be the first populist surrealist—a Frank Capra of dream logic" (Hughes, 2001)), and in this sense his films truly are products of his own personal "dream factory." Indeed, Lynch's fascination with factories, machinery, and industrialization comes through in his photography and in many of his films, and the complexity of bodily functioning has led him to comment, "human beings are like little factories" (Rodley, 1997, 103).

When asked directly if dreaming is important in his own personal life, Lynch answered: "Waking dreams are the ones that are important, the ones that come when I'm quietly sitting in a chair, gently letting my mind wander. When you sleep, you don't control your dream. I like to dive into a dream world that I've made or discovered; a world I choose." (Rodley, 1997). He is explicit in his use of hypnogogic states as a means of generating new ideas (see Rodley, 1997). Lynch likens himself to a radio: "It all comes in from somewhere else, like I was a radio. But I'm a bad radio, so sometimes the parts don't hook together" (Rodley, 1997). This is how he explains what enabled him to turn the disappointment of ABC rejecting the *Mulholland Drive* pilot into a feature film: "One night, I sat down around 6:30 and closed my eyes, and in came, over the next half-hour, all these ideas. And by 7 o'clock I was a happy camper. The new ideas married with what had gone before, but they changed the angle of seeing it: they affected the beginning, the middle and the end. I felt so lucky and blessed that those things came in. It was kind of unbelievable. I wasn't even thinking about *Mulholland Drive*, then—bango!—the door opened and there they were" (Rafferty, 2002). Rafferty comments that Lynch "speaks of ideas as if they were things entirely outside him, buzzing in the air like the insects he uses as part of the texture of his paintings. He speaks of them the way a devout Christian speaks of grace" (Rafferty, 2002). Later in this interview Lynch says he strongly believes in the potential of everyone to tap into these creative energies: "'Intuition is alive and well in people,' he says excitedly. Your use it all the time in daily life, and that means you get an inner knowing, which isn't always able to be expressed in words. I'm convinced—maybe because I want to be – that people do have that inner knowing when they see abstraction in film. And they should trust that feeling. With intuition, it's the detective in us that comes alive.'" (Rafferty, 2002)

III

Even in this relatively short space, I believe the examples provided are more than sufficient to demonstrate that dreams and dreaming are primary inspirations for the filmmaking of David Lynch. From the original ideas through the shaping of his stories, the filming of particular images, and the dialogue spoken by his characters, Lynch's films offer as deep an immersion in the world of dreams as can be found in the work of any other contemporary director.

The question remains, then, of the minimal commercial success of his works. His one big-budget venture was a flop, and none of his movies have earned major financial success. Even *Mulholland Drive* had a very modest run in the theaters, and its commercial fate was foreseen in its initial production troubles: originally produced as a television series for ABC, it was ultimately cancelled because of the network's concerns that its strange plot and slow pacing would not attract a wide enough audience (Hughes, 2001). Despite the existence of several fan clubs zealously devoted to Lynch and his works, it would be hard to argue that his films, for all their creative wizardry, have had much impact on contemporary American society.

Nevertheless, Lynch has been successful enough to continue producing large-scale works with tremendous artistic freedom, which indicates that some degree of financial reward has come of his work. But having said that, commercial success is clearly not the best standard to use in evaluating the influence of Lynch's films. I would suggest the true impact of his films involves something less tangible, but ultimately more powerful: his films create a sense of radical openness to the world, a total embracing of all its beauty and wonder, all its horror and suffering, all its humor and absurdity. Put more simply, *his films make people dream.* Thinking of this influence in negative terms, Lynch's movies highlight what so many other contemporary films are *not*—i.e., original, daring, challenging. In this sense Hollywood is a dream factory in the worst possible way, producing generic, homogenized fantasies that constrain the imagination and stunt the spirit. This is precisely where the cultural significance of Lynch's work lies. The simple fact that he is out there doing the strange, dreamy things he does, is an influential reminder of the potential of cinema to evoke the transformational otherness of *real* dreaming, to use film as a way of provoking new imaginative creativity instead of cynically steering people's dreams into morally compliant and commercially profitable channels. In Lynch's work the notion of "the dream factory" comes to life in a much more stimulating and liberating way, as he creates works that defy conventional genres, stimulate emotions of profound intensity and startling complexity, and draw viewers into a world where *anything* is possible, where ordinary rationality is suspended, where it's impossible to predict what's going to happen next. Lynch has said a theme in many of his creative works is "life in darkness and confusion" (Rodley, 1997), and I regard that as a wonderfully poetic expression of the very essence of dreaming—both the kind that occurs within our private imaginations and the kind that occasionally appears before us on the silver screen.

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