
DAVID LYNCH – THE ART OF THE REAL

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

INTRODUCTION

David Lynch is one of the most influential contemporary filmmakers, and one of the few whose impact stretches far beyond the mere aesthetics of film.

In the field of film, Lynch's artistic development can be traced from one extreme to another: from the often experimental, disturbing or *hermetic film d'auteur* to Hollywood mainstream catering to conventional reception habits and commercial constraints. Indeed, part of Lynch's artistic genius is the very ability to bring these extremes together.

Blending High Art and Hollywood, Lynch's film work remains influential. Recent quality TV series such as *Breaking Bad*, *True detective*, and hyped "quality soaps" like *Game of Thrones*, each pay tribute to his work, especially to the pioneering achievement of the 1990/91 series *Twin Peaks*.

Much like the directors of the French Nouvelle Vague, David Lynch began not as a trained film maker, but a visual artist, having studied painting in Philadelphia. Moreover, again like the European authors' film, he had only moderate means at hand for his first experimental films. This challenged him to invent a new aesthetic language for underground film.

One of Lynch's most characteristic motifs is "Americana", an in-depth socio-psychological analysis of the American way of life, which he pursued long after his underground period. Interestingly, it was on the other side of the Atlantic, in Europe, where it was particularly well received.

A typical "Lynchean" feature film would be to present the shiny surface of the American dream – for example the 1950s, its consumerism, the apparent tranquillity of the white garden fences of suburbia – only to reveal its dark abysses through an uncanny visual language. Sigmund Freud first introduced the notion of the uncanny [*das Unheimliche*] to explore a paranoid feeling in between the everyday and dread. Lynch found an appropriate aesthetic language for this feeling which underlies the quintessential "Lynch factor" of many of his films. This is also what makes his films appeal to interpretations by psychoanalytically informed film theory, especially from a Lacanian perspective.

Yet Lynch's artistic language can and actually must be analyzed from various angles. This was a key motive for our interdisciplinary conference.

Lynch draws on a large variety of artistic media, such as the cartoons that he continued to create even when an internationally renowned filmmaker. Above all, it is Lynch's background

in the visual arts – painting, photography, graphic design, installations and more – and his indebtedness to great directors like Orson Welles, which call for a comprehensive interdisciplinary and inter-media analysis. Yet Lynch himself also cited other points of reference for his film aesthetics, such as the literary universe of Franz Kafka.

To date there have been only a few exhibitions or scholarly events featuring works by David Lynch. These include a 2007 exhibition with the title *The Air Is On Fire* in Paris, at the *Fondation Cartier*, that honored Lynch's artistic work. In 2010 the Max Ernst Museum in the city of Brühl (Germany) dedicated a larger exhibition to Lynch's fine art works: *David Lynch - Dark Splendor* sought to reveal the influence of Lynch's art production on his filmic language in particular.

Thus, the 2012 Berlin conference *David Lynch – The Art of the Real* was the first international scholarly event to provide a comprehensive and interdisciplinary perspective on Lynch's artistic work as a whole.

ABSTRACTS

SAMUEL WEBER analyzes the relationship between the *Unheimlich* phenomenon in film and the uncanny in contemporary US-American culture. In the early author-films of Fritz Lang, for example, *Das Unheimliche* is above all a social force. In Lynch's films the uncanny may more specifically be defined as the divide within a presumably individual (undivided) person, a person desperately seeking to overcome this gap within them. As Weber demonstrates, there is a long European tradition from Nietzsche to Freud addressing this problem. For Nietzsche, the individual is rather a 'dividual'. However, according to Weber, such a postmodern understanding of the uncanny in the movies of contemporary US-American culture has important consequences. It implies that the motive of the murderer in *Twin Peaks* was to control the uncertainty caused by the uncanny division of persons, places or times. This in turn can suggest a political critique: The murder motive must be decoded not as a denunciation of subjectivity as such, but as a metaphor for the pitfalls of postmodern capitalism.

THOMAS ELSAESSER's essay on Lynch's LA trilogy sets out to demonstrate how the late films of Lynch must be understood as a reflection of the author position under the condition of a highly innovative media industry in times of global network economies. If sitcoms or TV series convince the viewer to believe that some actions have no consequences then Lynch shows how such a belief has real consequences in the end. The emergence of the genre of the 'mind game movie' in which narratives no longer have a linear logic (like in a paranoid worldview denying causality and order) is a sign of this new social condition of intermediality over the last twenty years. Although there are other contemporary filmmakers who could be classified as working in the genre of mind game movies (e.g. Michael Haneke), Lynch stands out due to his singular aesthetic idiom that qualifies him as an author-filmmaker. Elsaesser suggests that Lynch profits from the opportunities of Hollywood and the media industries while pushing the logic of their mediality to extremes, particularly through the use of non-linear narratives and the absence of causality, a feature that is comparable to video-games. Therefore he is in a position to create a new cinematic language, revealing authorship in the form of performative self-contradiction.

Like Elsaesser, **MICHEL CHION** tackles Lynch's *INLAND EMPIRE* in order to demonstrate that it is

impossible to draw a clear line between the cinematic real and the diegetic real in Lynch's films. Lynch very often presents a diegetic real, which actually belongs to a cinematic real, or more exactly he presents a diegetic real that is increasingly affected by a cinematic real, so that the protagonists appear to be in a world which they can no longer understand. Locations appear and disappear, the everyday logic of time and space fails. Even though there may be some examples for this practice in film history, *INLAND EMPIRE* drives this practice to its limits, as if the steady diegetic reality was absorbed by a precarious cinematic reality implying 'wrong' shots or cuts. If, therefore, the narratives in *Mulholland Drive* or *INLAND EMPIRE* appear to show us the view of schizoid persons, Chion warns us against seeing this merely as a psychological study in a permanently shifting logic between two realities. Rather, Lynch points to the power of cinematic language to reveal the aesthetics of this logic.

Through his analysis of various Lynch cartoons, **THOMAS BECKER** highlights Lynch's powerful use of abstraction even in mimetic or realistic images. This allows a consideration of the difference between picture-sequences in film and cartoon – which in turn yields a critique of Deleuzian film theory's principle of the time-image as opposed to images in time. Even the stillness of filmic pictures must always be seen as an illusion, never as a real-time stillness. This is because the repetition of stillness in time is brought about by a technical dispositive. However, there is an unconscious bracing of body with time and space, like the ontological ground of human beings that Merleau-Ponty proposed and was later adopted by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. This unconsciousness is another automatism rather than the workings of the apparatus. Becker detects an aesthetic evolution with respect to the subject of a never ending oscillography between these two unconsciousnesses, between the reality and the illusion of a participating body, beginning with the movies by Murnau or Orson Wells, to the innovations of David Lynch's underground films and their new critique of capitalistic media industries.

ALEXANDRA VON STOSCH traces the context of Lynch's intermedia approach within its scientific, philosophical and literary contexts, expanding the discussion to concepts of the sublime in 18th century thought, William Blake, Romanticism, and the beginnings of Modernism. She associates this discourse with David Lynch's oeuvre, including the visual language of his commercial movies, such as *Lady Blue Shanghai* (USA 2010). Since his early short films, Lynch's movies have struck audiences with their mysterious defiance of linear narrative, moebius-stripe structures and flexible notions of time and space. This avant-garde approach, along with Lynch's interest in music as an individual role in itself rather than as mere filmic illustration, invites a dialogue with music pioneer John Cage. A comparative analysis of Lynch's *Intervalometer Experiments/Steps* (USA 2007) with John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* (USA, 1939) allows for a better evaluation of the role of time and space for both Cage and Lynch, and their respective definitions of the artist within the world, especially in terms of political stance.

WOLFRAM BERGANDE'S discussion of Lynch's later film work is focused on a specific form of humor. In the so-called LA trilogy (*Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, *INLAND EMPIRE*) and in the series *Twin Peaks* (USA 1990), Bergande detects a particularly erratic humor. For Bergande, this becomes a key for understanding modern subjectivity. To develop the concept of erratic humor, Bergande draws on Hegel's theory of humor, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, and Julia Kristeva's theory of the 20th century literary avant-gardes and her theory of the abject. From a Hegelian perspective, humor as an aesthetic form points to an ultimate consummation of subjectivity that is impossible since subjectivity cannot consummate its individual death. According to Bergande, erratic humor takes shape whenever such a consummation of death as the ultimate consummation of subjectivity fails. Lynch's later film work stages and explores such erratic humor. It can be found in both key and minor scenes in which the protagonists are facing an imaginary or symbolic death, such as in the famous dying-on-the-walk-of-fame-scene of the main character Nicki (Laura Dern) in *INLAND EMPIRE*.

ANDREAS CREMONINI'S contribution, *The Uncanny Other: David Lynch as Social Philosopher*, investigates the ways in which Lynch's mature film work conceives of the loving relationship between a man and a woman. With a discussion of *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway* and *Wild at Heart*, Cremonini argues that the romantic relationships depicted in these movies can be interpreted in terms of Stanley Cavell's reading of Freud's concept of the "uncanny". The unconscious real kernel of love, threatening the stability of couple relationships and appearing in the form of an uncanniness of the beloved other, can and should be transformed into an enlightened everydayness. This is what, according to Cremonini, the three films teach, with the exception of *Lost Highway* in which the transformation into harmony of a love which is passionately bound into fail is not achieved.

In his paper, **CHRISTIAN KASSUNG** considers the role of animals in the filmic cosmos of David Lynch. Beginning with a historical analysis which identifies animals as auxiliaries in the agricultural society which disappeared during the 19th century due to the industrial revolution, Kassung states that machines became the, so to speak, 'better animals'. These developments fundamentally shifted the relationship between machines, humans and animals. In Lynch's films one finds this difference permanently subverted. Indeed, his films offer a reflection on this forgotten cultural transformation. From the first underground short films such as *The Alphabet*, to the late L.A. trilogy, specific symbolic functions of different animals can be identified which point to the various specific transitions between human beings, animals and machines. Insects, for example, represent the transition from inside to outside. Dogs, to give another example, seem to play a central role: They are messengers of the future, and accordingly fulfill a temporal function; but they may also appear ambivalent, like a trickster mediating between the extra-diegetic and the intra-diegetic dimensions of the narratives. If the dog represents a faithful friend of humans on the one hand, on the other he can be seen as a wild beast: such as in *Wild at Heart*, for example, when the dog prefigures violence.

In his *Riddle and Mystery in the Art of David Lynch*, **ARITO RÜDIGER SAKAI** traces the artistic and medium-specific continuities between David Lynch's earlier work as a painter and his work as filmmaker. Arguing from an art-historical perspective and drawing on both Lynch's biography and his statements about his work as both painter and filmmaker, Sakai highlights the fascination Lynch felt for the mysterious and the enigmatic. The use of dark, somber and shadowy colors together with a seemingly contingent insertion of isolated letters and numbers into his paintings, reflects an elaborate visual language defined by singular coding.

MARTHA NOCHIMSON'S contribution describes a paradigm shift in Lynch's movie making which inspired her to draw on the theory of archetypes of the Austrian psychoanalyst C.G. Jung. While many interpretations of Lynch's films discuss the proximity of film and dream, especially with respect to scenes which lack an ordinary sense of reality, Nochimson argues that beginning with *Lost Highway* another paradigm must be used to understand scenes such as, for example, the transformation of Fred into Pete in that film. This also has consequences for the understanding of other narratives in Lynch's films. What we think of as fantasies or dreams must indeed be understood, Nochimson argues, as a higher reality of matter. This reality would have to be conceived according to modern quantum physics. Thus one point of reference would be Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which suggests that matter has no simple locality. At the same time, Nochimson suggests that a fusion of quantum mechanics and Vedic poetry can decode this new paradigm: The protagonist who does not realize the boundless possibility of this higher reality would be forced to lose his way in a negative world, especially when he believes in the so-called "marketplace" and its allegedly real-world, though illusionary, materialism.

Please note that while these contributions are thematically curated by the organizers, they do reflect in content the individual academic approaches of the participants.

CONTRIBUTORS

THOMAS BECKER

is Visiting Professor for Aesthetics and Theories of Contemporary Art at the University of Arts Braunschweig since 2012.

WOLFRAM BERGANDE

is Assistant Professor for Aesthetics at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar.

ALEXANDRA VON STOSCH

is author, curator and art historian with a focus on interdisciplinary studies; in 2014/15 and 2016 she is visiting professor at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, teaching also at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar and Hanns Eisler-Hochschule für Musik Berlin.

MICHEL CHION

is composer, author, director and Honorary Professor at the University of Buenos Aires.

ANDREAS CREMONINI

is an independent philosopher and researcher living in Basel (Switzerland). (more)

THOMAS ELSAESSER

is Emeritus Professor at the University of Amsterdam and since 2012 Visiting Professor, Columbia University.

CHRISTIAN KASSUNG

is Professor of Cultural Techniques and History of Knowledge at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

MARTHA P. NOCHIMSON

is the author of *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at heart in Hollywood* (1997) and *David Lynch Swerves: Uncertainty From Lost Highway to Inland Empire* (2013). She taught at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University for over a decade, and is Professor Emerita, Mercy College.

IAN MACGREGOR MORRIS

is Senior Lecturer, Department of English and American Studies at the University of Salzburg.

ARITO RÜDIGER SAKAI

is lecturer of Aesthetics and Media Science at Universität der Künste Berlin in Germany.

VALESKA SCHMIDT-THOMSEN

is Professor for Fashiondesign and managing director of the Institute for Fashion- and Textiledesign at the Berlin University of Arts.