

**THE PASSION OF**

# DAVID LYNCH

**WILD AT HEART IN HOLLYWOOD**



**MARTHA P. NOCHIMSON**



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## WILD AT HEART IN HOLLYWOOD



Martha P. Nochimson



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To know that balance does not quite rest,  
That the mask is strange, however like.

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WALLACE STEVENS,  
"The Man with the Blue Guitar"

. . . there is a "good ambiguity" in the phenomenon of expression, a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements, a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole. To establish this wonder would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics.

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY,  
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## Introduction

# David Lynch at a (Feminine) Glance, or Her Eyes Were Moving, but She Didn't Know It

*The comedy of hollow sounds derives From truth and not from satire on our lives.*

—WALLACE STEVENS

When I began writing this book, I thought I knew my direction, but much changed after a series of encounters with David Lynch. These meetings started with an intense half-hour phone call on January 31, 1992. A year later, March 29–April 1, 1993, I made a series of daily visits to his studio offices in Los Angeles to interview him. In 1996, I observed him directing on the set of *Lost Highway* (January 15–18) and subsequently met him in New York on March 13, and again in Los Angeles on April 12, to hold the conversations for which there had been no time in the hurly-burly of production. Our early meetings confounded many of my expectations, especially of what Lynch would clarify for me about his manner of representing reality in movies. Our later meetings brought both more finely detailed nuances to the revelations of our first encounters and still more revelations.

Before I met Lynch, the prospect of speaking with him filled me with the anticipation of *acquiring* knowledge. I would fill in the gaps of a picture already sketched in my mind. I would *get* an enormously precious something, which I would transmit in my book. As it turned out, much of the value of my time with David Lynch came as a result of *letting go*. The core of my vision as a film critic is a distinctly feminist dissatisfaction with what Hollywood films generally present as reality, particularly regarding the representation of masculinity and femininity. I have in no way surrendered my dissatisfaction, but I have relinquished some old conceptions about gender issues, Lynch's work, and Hollywood's potential for realism.

First, I had to let go of the customary identification of Lynch's work with that of Joel and Ethan Coen (*Barton Fink*, 1991), Peter Greenaway (*Drowning by Numbers*, 1988), David Mamet (*House of Games*, 1987), Neil Jordan (*Mona Lisa*, 1986), and David Cronenberg (*Naked Lunch*, 1991). All of these filmmakers reveal the labyrinthine self-referentiality of narrative; all despair, in varying ways, of representing any reality beyond that of structure. They may share with Lynch a vibrant distrust of the mimetic illusions of conventional Hollywood realism, but, as my time with Lynch revealed, seminal differences exist that make comparisons relatively trivial.

I also had to let go of some of my presuppositions about realism in Lynch's representation of women. I had thought that, for the most part, Lynch had eliminated realism from his films in a way that deconstructs Hollywood's images of women and men and thus intersects with some feminist attitudes.<sup>1</sup> So I was prepared to talk with Lynch about the deconstruction of sadism and fetishism in *Blue Velvet*, and about the gendered implication of a particular shot-reverse shot in *Wild at Heart*, where the camera holds a toilet bowl within the unspecified gaze of perhaps Marietta Fortune, perhaps Sailor Ripley. I had been expecting Lynch to confirm my feeling—in his own terms of course—that his use of this shot pattern subverts Hollywood's use of the shot-reverse shot to establish the controlling male gaze as a biological "reality."<sup>2</sup> But how does one venture this kind of analytical statement with a director who has already declined to pass judgment on whether, in the final cut of his own *Wild at Heart*, Marietta was represented as loving her daughter Lula? "Diane [Ladd, portraying Marietta] thought she did," he said. Don't film directors control these details? I wondered, as my argument about gender representation floated away.

Letting go became the theme of my early visits with Lynch. Much of my preparation turned out

be an obstacle to seeing what was right in front of me. I began to see that what I had come for was watch (and listen to) Lynch let go. He had no intention of nailing down any truths for me by asserting himself through language. At his most direct, Lynch explained that, when he is directing, ninety percent of the time he doesn't know, intellectually, what he is doing. However, there is nothing uncertain in him about the powerful rightness of his artistic choices. His insistence on letting things happen to him while he works is part of his faith that film is a place where reality enters without something other than willfully applied reason does the talking.

I remain astonished both by the seamlessness of his faith and by its contagiousness. Few of his current and former associates whom I interviewed have any overall grasp of the films on which they have worked, and most were baffled by their zest for working on films about which they were frankly confused. But lack of clarity hadn't affected the quality of their work. Lynch had made them feel comfortable about jumping in and moving with the process, and they had come up with beautiful results. The most theoretical illumination of what Lynch is about came from his first wife, Peggy Reavey, who told me that he has always been intensely wary of how we are "dictated to by language and things like language." This sounds like the description of a constructionist/relativist, who theorizes on the insufficiency of words to connect with an out-there reality. But the schism that Lynch intuitively feels between the rational logic of language and existence has led him in quite a different direction.

During my first meetings with Lynch, he created a situation in which I felt I was bumping up against an invisible force field surrounding meaning. God knows what he felt. I believe I was sometimes cranky with him, and he was sometimes bored with me. But we came back day after day while the tape rolled in the recorder that he permitted, indeed encouraged, me to use. After hours of sending out verbal probes that bounced off an elastic surface instead of engaging him, as I thought they would, *within* a linguistic grid—self-referential though it might be—I began to feel that he was talking to me. However, our conversation took an unforeseen form, generating in me a feeling for which I find a visual analogue in the delighted surprise of Laura Palmer at her discovery of the angle in the Red Room at the end of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. It is this feeling that has led me to follow Lynch into an augmented understanding of reality, meaning, and order in cinema.

In some ways, Lynch is part of a cultural ferment that has been building since the beginning of the twentieth century, when assumptions about order and meaning began to unravel. His suspicion of language interfaces with the twentieth-century attack on our assumption of a connection between language and an external reality. But if Lynch perceives that language creates its own self-referential reality, he does not imagine that civilization is utterly dependent on it.<sup>3</sup> He does play with the ironic contrast between the essential insubstantiality of words and the power we grant them. However, unlike most linguistic relativists, Lynch has instinctively shifted to a narrative practice that is essentially optimistic.

## Optimism

The development of Lynch's body of work is informed by a realist's optimism that there is an exit from the linguistic labyrinth and that this exit is richly available to us. In our later meetings, Lynch told me this, in so many words, confirming the interpretations of his films that I had evolved in the intervening years. His use of language—and of cinematic vocabulary—suggests that, once we understand that we ourselves have created cultural forms and that they only have the meaning we give them, we are free to understand the forces in the universe that are truly larger than we are and how they connect us to a greater reality.

Lynch intuitively seizes upon logocentrism as the paradigm of cultural imbalances, but he deeply believes that they are not fatal cultural malfunctions. The Lynchian seeker, as either artist or detective,

—or filmmaker—can always get us out of the labyrinth. We only have to let it happen. Coming in his own way to conclusions that have been formulated by a number of phenomenologists—Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the early Jean-François Lyotard, for example—Lynch acts upon a faith that the illusion of control that language and other cultural structures give us is not as rewarding as losing the illusion and gaining larger, less contingent truths. These truths are always present for us, unless we insist on the fantasy of control and thereby doom ourselves to the sense of disconnectedness we feel when we fool ourselves into believing only in the control that we exert over our own creations.

Lynch's art is the art of removing the blockage to larger truths by deglamorizing and denaturalizing our priorities of remaining in control. Different moments from my interviews with Lynch merge in retrospect as maps routing me past logical impediments to perception. I now see how bound up Lynch's vision of making meaning is with the freedom to respond through the subconscious, by playfully losing control instead of stridently taking charge. One moment of our 1993 conversation made this especially clear, one during which we both looked at the textured surface of *Blue Pole Number 11, 1952*, a painting by Jackson Pollock full of patches, slashes, lines, drippings, and blobs with barely a hint of blue (see [figure 1](#)). "I don't understand this," I said. "Yes you do," Lynch said. "Your eyes are moving." They must have been, but I had not paid any attention. I had automatically experienced a lack of meaning because I could not stand at the prescribed, controlling viewing distance and read the painting as a rationally controlled system of shapes. Lynch had spontaneously identified the painting as a meaningful representation for me because it had released my moving eyes from conventional viewer expectations. I saw that I could not contain the painting in some theoretical framework; he saw me performing with the painting. He saw as crucial that part of me that my education had taught me is inconsequential to my grasp of meaning.



1. Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles: Number 11, 1952*—Lynch could see my eyes were moving around this composition.

Looking back on this experience, I have come to the conclusion that Lynch was talking about *balance* between reason and direct subconscious engagement with the materiality of the paint, not about an *abandonment* of reason. The movement of the eye that Lynch focused on is only possible if it occurs within an intelligence that possesses reason to suspend. The experience is not dependent on a pure form of body or on irrationalism; rather it is dependent on a tension that denotes powerful connectedness. Indeed, for Lynch connectedness is what emerges from the tension between reason and the subconscious.

In encouraging my ability to see with a part of me that precedes my education, Lynch suggested a possible relationship with Jungian thought, and I would say that the label developed by Carl Jung, "the collective unconscious," roughly evokes the kind of connectedness Lynch referred me to as I looked at *Blue Poles*. In fact, on occasion Lynch resorts to this term, as I do in this study, because it is a convenient handle offered by an established cultural vocabulary. However, if I understand him, h

would rewrite the term as “collective subconscious.” As he says, he is representing a level of nonrational energy on which all kinds of meaningful activity takes place, and for him the word unconscious means “nothing is going on.” Furthermore, in referring to this painting, Lynch clearly does not have the universal repertoire of images that Jung catalogued. Thus, I am implying no overstatement of “Jungianism” on Lynch’s part when I refer now and then to the collective unconscious. With the exception, I consistently refer to the operation of the nonrational faculties in Lynch’s work using his term, the subconscious.

A Lynchian subconscious, but pervasive, connectedness is also suggested by another moment I recall from our conversations. Early in our series of discussions, Lynch emotionally drew back from continuing a point he was making, frustrated by his sense that his words were insufficient because they were ugly; his goal was, he said, to speak to me through the beauty and meaning of the poet’s word. Despite his exuberance about the found beauty of the nonverbal, he expressed in this sudden conversational caesura a passionate feeling for verbal form but not for one that stands remote from the materials of verbal sounds and rhythms. Lynch wanted to use language in a way usually associated with plastic artists who discover structure in materiality as they work. In a mere conversation, I keenly felt the impossibility of discovering that form in his words.

I imagine that Lynch might put it this way: there was no time to get out of the way and let the nonrational aspect of words as sensory texture tell him about their poetry. Here is a crucial distinction between his realism and the constructionism of the linguistic relativist. The relativist increases control over language to reveal its tendency toward self-referentiality. Relativist filmmakers like Cronenberg, Greenaway, Mamet, the Coen brothers, Jordan, and Bergman approach their films like watchmakers; they are known for the exquisite micromanagement of each frame. Thus the constructionist seeks to represent at least the reality of his self-referentiality as a thinker even if he cannot force cultural structures to open out onto a reality more enduring. As a matter of course, Cronenberg’s films, for example, encourage spectators to go through the usual narrative process as if it were pointing toward some meaning despite the constant presence of dark undertones. They then impress on the audience that this process has been one of disconnection from reality. By contrast, although also exquisite in visual detail, Lynch’s films encourage spectators to perceive the hollowness of linguistic structure and then discover a more complex form of connection through the subconscious.

## Realism

Lynch’s desire to represent meaning by balancing the energy of the subconscious and the logic of the linguistic informs his narratives. His models for this balance were initially the paintings of Francis Bacon, Jackson Pollock, and Edward Hopper, as well as *The Art Spirit*, a theoretical tract by Robert Henri. Of this influence there will be much more in [Chapter 1](#), because to understand Lynch’s powerful sense of the benign role of the subconscious in art, we must trace the lessons he learned from the painters he admires for their part in the pleasure he takes in storytelling.

Here, I will lay the foundation for examining the influence of the painters on David Lynch the director by cautioning against the usual comparisons between art and film. Ordinarily, we concentrate on similarities of color, themes, and particular images. However, my conversations with Lynch have led me to believe that such an analysis will mire us in secondary considerations. Lynch has been less affected by the surfaces of his painter ancestors than by the way he understands the role of the subconscious in their work. Indeed, what struck me so forcefully about his response when I appealed to him for help in understanding Pollock was that he said *absolutely nothing* about the painting’s surface but directed me toward my subconscious engagement solely *through my eyes*. However, since artists—particularly Lynch—rarely articulate their underlying definitions, to understand their artists

legacy we will need to determine where Lynch falls within available frameworks of discussing the subconscious.

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Understanding Lynch's collaboration with the subconscious hinges on the definition of the subconscious that we adopt, and there are a number in circulation. Although the subconscious is always evoked as distinct from voluntary and rational processes, there is much controversy surrounding this crucial relationship. Lynch's response to the paintings we viewed together, the totality of the time we spent together, his work, and everything he has said publicly all suggest to me that his stance vis à vis the alogical diverges significantly from the dominant understanding of its influence. That is, when he refers to the subconscious, he does not mean what is meant by the logocentric Freudian tradition. The short version of the difference between Lynch's attitude toward the subconscious and the Freudian attitude is that he trusts it and Freudians don't. For those readers versed in psychological theory, a more nuanced discussion follows. (Other readers may not wish to engage in this kind of theoretical discussion and should feel free to skip directly to my application of the lessons from his art education to his films on p. 10).

The Freudian tradition has been utilized by film critics primarily through the lens of Freud's intellectual descendant Jacques Lacan, particularly in reference to Lacan's well-known theory of the mirror stage, which he tells us occurs at the age of roughly eighteen months. Lacan's mirror stage—currently the dominant paradigm of the relations among subconscious, conscious, and image—will not serve us when we talk about David Lynch. In the Lacanian paradigm, the image—our contact with which is initiated by early childhood glimpses of ourselves as a whole shape reflected in the mirror—divorces us from the real. According to Lacan, the seductiveness of the mirror image's alluring wholeness directs our desires toward *an illusion* of totality and away from the erratic surges of energy that are our innate experience of the self. This experience imprints on us our lifelong relationship with the beautiful image and becomes in turn the analogue of our relationship with language and with the primary illusion of inherent meaning. To summarize in a generalization simplified for the purpose of clarity in this discussion, the artist's image, according to the Lacanian view, seduces us, directing our desires toward a consuming passion for our "ego ideal," dooming us to solipsism while we yearn for the illusion of wholeness.

Viewed within this framework, art traps the conscious mind in a net of hopeless desire, and the world of the beautiful object is naught but illusion. As Lacan writes in "The Split between the Eye and the Gaze," "The picture certainly is in my eye, but I am not in the picture" (p. 96). This view of the relationship between the subconscious and narrative suffuses the works of Cronenberg, Greenaway, Jordan, and the Coens, who all keenly feel the enchantment of the illusionist image as well as its despair. They portray in their films the intense pleasures experienced by a spectator in the beauty and coherence of the ideal form that he or she first saw in infancy as Lacan's mirror image. Inevitably, these pleasures lead us to impossible yearnings.

Lynch's responses to Pollock, Bacon, and Hopper tell a different story. Eye and picture *are in each other* as they move together. Lynch has internalized through his experience of their art a sense of narrative image that holds the possibility, not of the doomed quest for an illusory holy grail, but of empathy—among people, and between people and the universe. His belief in the image as a possible bridge to the real does not depend on any abstract framework but rather on a visceral sense of the essential truth of an empathetic—not solipsistic—relationship with art. (In the Lynchian world, solipsism occurs in a relationship with *bad* art.) To clarify this discussion of Lynch, I suggest that the phenomenological model of our conscious and subconscious relationships with the mirror, and the image—as articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty—may be quite helpful.

I offer Merleau-Ponty's method, knowing that some readers will find it a credible model but others will not. However, I contend that belief is not the issue. Merleau-Ponty is useful as a clear analogy of

how Lynch's imagination seizes on narrative, not as a vain quest for the impossible ideal, but as an empathetic bridge. In "The Child's Relation with Others," Merleau-Ponty theorizes that when children first recognize a mirror reflection they gain the capacity to see a similarity between themselves and others that is less possible before the mirror grants them a sense of wholeness. At that point, an evolved sense of connection—a mature sense of bondedness with the universe—becomes a possibility (pp. 96–155). Here, Merleau-Ponty suggests an alternate, non-Freudian relationship between the beautiful image and the subconscious, one that goes beyond the limitations of language. Lynch has seen this kind of empathy and this kind of hope in the narrative image via his painter influences.

When Lynch told me that my eyes were moving, he was invoking the subconscious as the basis for a sympathetic bond between me and the picture, a bond that would, if I let it, permit the image to become a bridge between me and the world. This is not to say that he sees the subconscious as purely benign. In his work he always seizes upon false dreams and upon the kind of art that divorces the characters from reality and torments them, but he inevitably reveals them to be lesser aspects of the subconscious. During my later meetings with Lynch, he began to talk more directly than he had previously, clearly defining the way these destructive aspects of the subconscious fit into his worldview. There is, he says, a base element in our involuntary energies. It tends to erupt in his work as a danger, but as one that must be encountered before we are released into the productions of the finer levels of the subconscious that are our major connections to the real. By the productions of the finer aspect of subconscious energies Lynch does not mean mimetic surfaces but rather the way such energies in art work to conform us to the life-affirming energies of nature.

The beautiful and true image has the power to join culture and nature. This bond is Lynch's deepest artistic pleasure, found in art that moves him, for example the work of Francis Bacon. Indeed, Lynch's affinity for Bacon offers an opportunity for exploring the former's idea of the beautiful and the image, since Bacon's painting is not beautiful in any ordinary way. It is tempting to look for the connection between Lynch and Bacon in perversity, not loveliness, such as in specific images of open mouths and in the presence of violence in both of their narratives. These resemblances, while present, are almost homage to the primary influence Lynch has received from Bacon, but they are certainly not the seminal influences. Concentrating on surface resemblances is the trap of illusionist realism which restricts us to its notion of the real in film as solely a matter of surfaces. What is beautiful and true for Lynch about Bacon is what was most important to Bacon about Bacon—his struggle to engage the viewer in the paint first through the "nerves," in Bacon's words, and only belatedly through thought. Bacon's paintings contain important narrative elements, and Bacon insists on the urgent nature of narrative as a part of his work. But his conscious desire to subordinate the logic of narrative to the subconscious event and to explosive feeling shows how narrative can teach us empathy with the larger forces in the subconscious and the world (see [Chapter 1](#)).

In film narrative this has translated for Lynch into a heroic ideal opposed to the prevalent Hollywood understanding of the hero as one who takes control by means of violent domination strategies. For Lynch, a hero tends to be one who can unlearn that absurd cultural lesson, one who can become receptive to life. The Lynchian hero must learn to let go, even though such suspension of the self will often leads to the initial terrors of the baser aspects of the involuntary within him or her. We, too, as spectators, must endure the pain, but the faith of the Lynch film is that, inevitably, the hero and the spectator will reach the centering energies of the higher and beautiful element in the human subconscious.

As we shall see in [Chapters 2–7](#), letting go is the form and substance of the Lynch narrative. The spectator is invited to suspend the desire for control by engaging in an empathetic relationship with the protagonist who, as a matter of survival, must learn to permit a channel to the subconscious in order to open the self to the universe. This emphasis obviously challenges numerous cultural priorities. "Talk



control” is whispered into our cradles by those who wish us well. A problematic aggressiveness nurtured by this cultural bias; it is also one of the most powerful allies of sexism. The imbalance value on force to the exclusion of receptivity—often equated with weakness—biases the culture and the movies against much that is associated with women’s wisdom. Lynch’s belief that the real requires a balance between force and receptivity suspends the usual exclusion of women from the centers of cultural and narrative importance. In his films, the hero must get in touch with—or be—what has been excluded when the conventional Hollywood hero “takes control.” Thus Lynch’s lessons from his painter influence have led directly to a narrative valuation of femininity and to fresh and encouraging relationships between male and female identity.

In a David Lynch narrative, when the audience feels that it or the protagonists are of “out of control”—a state of being traditionally associated with the perils of femininity and the subconscious—~~the attitude toward this release bears little resemblance to standard images of losing one’s grip.~~ In the Lynchian concept of realism, “being out of control” promotes a connection through the subconscious that leads us beyond the tyranny of the rational illusionism of the real-seeming Lacanian mirror image. The issue of whether one can operate well while “out of control” is central to Lynch’s protagonists. For both men and women, this Lynchian practice means a refreshing realism that does away with Hollywood’s straightjacketing of gender identity. Lynch denaturalizes and deglamorizes the usual Hollywood definition of control over the individual female and over everything associated with femininity—a definition that presents such control as both a natural good and a healthy masculine prerogative.

In fact, Lynch’s vision of the connection between women and the subconscious causes him to portray his female characters as paradigms of connection—generally hard-won—with forces beyond rational control. Frequently, they are models for his male characters to emulate in their need to break through their social conditioning. In his films, the character who puts too much faith in will or logic is frequently male and inevitably destructive—the night porter in *The Elephant Man*, the Harkonnen in *Dune*, the police in any Lynch film. (I will suggest in the individual chapters on these films that it is *not* coincidental that all of these cast in a narcissistic/solipsistic light the conventionally validated “masculine” desire to dominate, what I shall call the will-to-control.)

By contrast, in the chapters to follow we shall see that the Lynchian protagonists who engage our affections and move in positive ways also move in abidingly successful ways that are often associated with, affiliated with, or embodied by women. In *The Elephant Man*, Frederick Treves purportedly uses the sanctuary of medical science to save John Merrick, but it is Merrick with his receptive masculine identity, closely associated in the film with women, who has the capacity for moving Treves beyond the constricting logic of his profession. In some ways, Treves’s development, leading him past the narrow confines of scientific applications of control, is the real event of the film. Paul Atreides in *Dune* gets his real power from reaching out beyond logic to vision through his subconscious, emulating and connecting with his mother and sister. In *Twin Peaks*, Dale Cooper solves the mystery of Laura Palmer’s murder through the modification of his standard FBI procedures by his dreams of Laura and through his crucial affiliation with the Log Lady. Marietta Fortune in *Wild at Heart* is the deviation that proves the rule. Here, it is a woman’s catastrophic rejection of her own empathy that threatens the bond with the real. As a result, Lula and Sailor can find release from the downward spiral of the logic of their social entanglements only through their capacity to be receptive to the maternal-like energy of the collective unconscious of society in the form of images from *The Wizard of Oz* and popular music.

The delight in and gratitude to the better energies in popular culture that are expressed in *Wild at Heart* are crucial to Lynch’s filmmaking, for, while he runs somewhat against the Hollywood grain, he is at the same time filled with a faith in the extraordinary possibilities within popular

culture/Hollywood that he can use for his own vision. Film, for him, contains the potential to truly instill hope in the masses through pleasure, and it is that potential that impels him to be a Hollywood filmmaker. Lynch's works, which consistently recognize clichés for what they are, find the hope for a real offer of something of more permanent value. In a time in which we are bombarded with a sense of meaninglessness and fragmentation, his films are an assertion that this fragmentation is only a surface phenomenon. Lynchian narrative images promoting empathy reveal a fundamental connectedness among people and with the universe. Lynch seeks to avoid the Hollywood trap of creating substitutes for life. Rather, he seeks to use the power of Hollywood to make film narrative a subconscious bridge to real perceptions of life.

## Hollywood

The analyses of Lynch's films in the chapters that follow will explore how he uses his aesthetic of the connective image, an image purified of illusions of its own transparency—that is, of the illusion that the image is realistic because it resembles our idea of reality. As we examine his empathetic images, we will find that he uses the images, both visual and aural, of Hollywood culture, with their mass appeal, to bring the greatest consolation to the greatest number of people. Lynch reopens the Hollywood image; he does not merely repeat it. His methods, derived from painters who impressed him as a young student, give him the insight to represent both the mirror-image ideals of the film image and the wild energies that disturb it. In this balance, we find that he taps into the vitality of Hollywood *and* is often a corrective to the lies and repressions involved in Hollywood's pretense of a rationalist form of realism.

In his methods, Lynch is foreshadowed and influenced by a significant number of great films made in the heyday of the Hollywood studio system. In these prefigurations, there is an important narrative relationship with both the formulae of Hollywood genres and with the subconscious as an integral part of the film's realism. Such divergence from, but affiliation with, Hollywood film production occurs in the films of Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, two of Lynch's major Hollywood ancestors. Both Welles and Hitchcock were constrained by the studio system. Nevertheless, each altered Hollywood by arriving at a form of realism that, like Lynch's, finds it necessary to incorporate the collision of the subconscious's unmediated energies with Hollywood's. In [Chapter 1](#), I shall explore Welles and Hitchcock as antecedents of the type of Hollywood filmmaking that continues to evolve in Lynch's films. I shall elaborate on Lynch's kinship with his great precursors regarding the role of the subconscious in commercial film and the crafting of the consoling vision demanded by the mass audience so that the vision is real.

By refraining from engaging me within the conventions of the interview, Lynch might have appeared perverse to me if I had not let go of my conventional expectations. This book will suggest the same about the enjoyment of a Lynch film—that the perversity enters when we try to interpret it in the normal manner; simply stated, our eyes are moving, but we don't know it. The general cultural tendency to disregard responses that don't fit the parameters of social control mechanisms—e.g. highly aggressive linguistic structures, logical frameworks, and force—is reflected in the way the repetition of conventional responses blocks perception of Lynch's originality.

## Agenda

In the chapters on Lynch's filmworks to follow, I invite the reader to join me in looking closely at the way his narrative appeals to both the authority of cultural clichés and the authority of a reality that is larger and wilder than society. In this way I hope to rescue Lynch's films from being overwhelmed not only by untenable hostile readings founded on an implacable Lacanian definition of the narrative

image, but also by Lynch's "cooler than thou" reputation. Too many who aspire to "do the Lynch thing" for hip thrills also betray the empathy his art promotes by turning it into a static (Lacanian) illusion.

By contrast, Lynch struggles to use the eloquent tools of popular culture to portray unspeakable reality for a mass audience. This is a struggle from which I have much to gain since so much about me as a woman has been unspeakable in cultural discourse. However, *all* moviegoers have a stake in Lynch's filmmaking, for nothing is so prevalent—or so I judge from private conversation and from the media—as the feeling of being invisible in some important respect. Lynch puts us in touch, as a social community, with many longings that we simultaneously resist and yearn to share publicly. He has achieved an impressive fluency in moving toward an inclusive realism that both releases us from being overwhelmed completely by the seductively estranging ideals of culture and binds us to an inherent, complex order in the universe.

The comedy of hollow sounds derives  
From truth and not from satire on our lives.

# Portrait of the Director as a Surfer in the Waves of the Collective Unconscious

When David Lynch tells us, as he does in his every public statement, that he makes films to give his audience a place to dream, he is not waxing metaphorical. Rather, he is referring as directly as he can to a relationship between narrative and image, one that he first saw as a young art student in the work of his early painter ideals—Robert Henri, Francis Bacon, Jackson Pollock, and Edward Hopper—from whom he took much more than inspiration for the still image on canvas.

In the simplest terms, David Lynch the Hollywood film director learned from his fine arts education how to tell stories in the special way that we have come to associate with him. The young David Lynch dreamed of spending his life as a painter. But as he learned to fill a canvas, he was also learning a lesson that propelled him in what some would call a very different direction. From his early influences he took an understanding that narrative can bring us to truth and to each other if it makes room for a dream. At the same time, and paradoxically, he instinctively gleaned that the logic of narrative can push an artistic expression too close to empty conventions and become a formidable barrier to the dreaming mind. To use narrative as a support for the dream, Lynch takes a page from the painters who inspired him and neutralizes as much as he can of the drive in narrative to take control of a film. In the interviews that Francis Bacon, the most articulate of his early influences, granted to David Sylvester, Bacon sheds much light on Lynch's understanding of narrative when he identifies narrative as an expression of the human will and makes the goal of his art "the will to lose one's will" (p. 13). Bacon's "will to lose one's will" resonates in Lynch's resolute determination "to get out of the way of the paint and let the paint speak," as Lynch phrases it. Lynch approaches directing in a similar manner, working from an instinct similar to the one he saw in Bacon's canvases and bringing to Hollywood the truth of the dream.

All of Lynch's art is characterized by his desire to seek ways of deliberately holding in check the conscious will—a sublime contradiction—in order to diminish the power of the mind to force the deadening influence of clichés into a movie. This ideal accounts for his assertions that ninety percent of the time he doesn't know the reason for his directorial decisions, his way of saying that he frees himself to receive ideas, images, and impulses that his active will *could not* tap into during the directing process. Dreaming, as Lynch means to connect it with his films, requires a conscious "letting go."

In seeking the will to lose his will, Lynch "lets go" of that which most other directors and their audiences commonly identify as the artist's prerogative but which he sees as a certain kind of aggressive control that meets social conventions more than halfway and obviates much of the subconscious's production. We know the power of Lynch's ninety-percent solution from the haunting visual and aural images in his films: curtains and branches rising and falling in the wind, fire, clouds, a hero whose hair literally stands on end, a blue-lipped drowned girl wrapped in plastic, a blonde matron's face smeared with scarlet lipstick, a car wreck lit by headlights on a dark country road. However, none of Lynch's detractors and only a few of his admirers apprehend how significantly Lynch is thereby helping to change the way Hollywood tells stories.

The contempt in which thoughtful people hold Hollywood's stereotypically distorted images of life has much validity, and Lynch understands this aspect of Hollywood very well. However, he also has serious reasons not to turn the critique of Hollywood into a sterile cliché of its own. He apprehends

some live coals in mass culture. He is drawn to a Hollywood tradition of touching living places in the collective unconscious in fresh, wholesome, and vital ways. For Lynch, the “letting go” that he brings with him to Hollywood is kindred in spirit to what is already there in the contradictions and intensities that abound in mass entertainment, energy that he perceives as a possible way of opening culture to its truths.

Lynch’s insight into the Hollywood movie’s capacity for such energy, truth, and beauty is the core of his blazing originality. For he sees in the popular film the potential for the kind of heterogeneous blend of the authority of the rational *and* the authority of the nonrational that Bacon and Pollock created in their painting. Artists like these established a heterogeneous mode of composition as corrective to the falsifications of traditional aesthetics overly influenced by a logical ideal of harmony. Often accused of being formless, the modern concept of art asserts that in being less rationally ordered it reflects the way we really perceive. Lynch the director has made a similar decision regarding the logic of Hollywood enshrined in decades of formulaic plots and genre conventions. His contribution is that when he directs Hollywood movies, desiring the “will to lose one’s will,” in the same way that Bacon and Pollock met and transformed the narrative traditions of painting, he meets and transforms all the conventions of Hollywood, discovering new truths within the mass-culture scene where others make false idealizations. Restraining the will, he frees his subconscious and that of the audience, tapping back into the “something else”—as he calls it—very close to the dream that once energized what have now become tired Hollywood clichés. Lynch wants to make movies that will release that original energy to speak to and for us.

Very few artists and critics who identify heterogeneity with artistic health also identify it with Hollywood. Thus, philosophically, Lynch’s work is very important because it joins the debate on the side of a small but crucial group of artists and critics who see in the wild drifts of popular culture the capacity for such imaginative forms of meaning. His work is also crucial because it asserts an optimism about cultural narratives that balances the pessimism of two other highly influential twentieth-century modes of thinking that despair of connections between rational/linguistic structure and reality: the Saussurean linguistic model and the Freudian and Lacanian psychological model. Ferdinand de Saussure proposes that language is an illusion of control to which society desperately clings to avoid perceiving the abyss. The psychological models proposed by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan assert that people invent numerous ways of imagining such control while the inevitable divisions between the human subconscious and its conscious symbolic processes make such mastery vain, ineradicable longing. Saussure, Freud, and Lacan—and their disciples—designate culture as a kind of solipsism, language as a kind of chimera, and meaning as a phantom. These widely accepted intellectual positions assume a state of affairs in which we are essentially alienated from each other despite a seemingly rich repertoire of linguistic and aesthetic forms of communication. Further, but this light mass culture is deemed by far the worst delusion that something is being said when nothing actually is. By contrast, David Lynch has joined a line of media artists who find in the subconscious the growing tip of a really interesting mass culture. For these artists, emphasizing the subconscious energies mobilized by the conventions of the media is a way of preventing the solipsism that occurs when those conventions are merely mechanically reused and recycled.

These philosophical points are, of course, irrelevant to the pragmatic world of Hollywood, which never questions whether meaning is possible, only whether profits are imminent. But the bottom line is not all that there is to the mass media for David Lynch, and he is in the process of making a reality of his faith. Nor is he an anomaly. David Lynch is not widely perceived as a power and presence in the commercial capital of mass entertainment; most often he is defined as a loose cannon and a marginal aspirant in the California corridors of power. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Lynch is a part of the tradition of a small, significant group of Hollywood directors who have, like Lynch,

their time appeared to the naive eye as merely outrageous, flamboyant, or even decadent while they were in the process of creating new, heterogeneous possibilities for narrative expression. Of his Hollywood precursors, two are particularly relevant to understanding his place in Hollywood. They are Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles, who, like Lynch, seemed to stand alone in Hollywood while they changed it forever. (I shall discuss the line of continuity between Lynch and these two Hollywood giants below.) Despite the aggressive role that they will play in the directorial processes of Hitchcock and Welles, in their films they too experimented with storytelling that de-emphasized the controlling narrative line—that is, the plot—in courting the powers and pleasures of the subconscious narrative.

Certainly, there are many directors with whom Lynch might be compared. However, comparisons among Hitchcock, Welles, and Lynch are the strongest for heuristic purposes to emphasize the centrality in Hollywood of what Lynch is in the process of accomplishing. These comparisons are not intended to contradict the historical knowledge we have of Hitchcock and Welles as auteurs. Instead they are meant to emphasize the kinship of these directors with Lynch in the role that the subconscious played in the personal visions with which they shaped their work rather than the control they are known to have imposed on their productions. Given what has been written of Hitchcock and Welles (and by them as well) and what I have experienced firsthand with Lynch, there are significant differences in the behavior on the set of Hitchcock and Welles on the one hand, and of Lynch on the other. However, I contend that the procedural differences concern the differences between the historical epochs in which the earlier directors lived and worked and the new politics of Hollywood that contextualize Lynch. The dark politics of the then-omnipotent studio system and their effect on Welles and Hitchcock have been amply discussed.<sup>1</sup> The films of Welles and Hitchcock are another story. What appeared on the screen built the commercial tradition of struggling with narrative to make it more expansive and more dreamlike in the sense that Lynch employs this term.

Like Hitchcock and Welles before him, Lynch comes to the mass media with hope, as Paul Atreides came to the Water of Life in *Dune*—as to a poison from which many men have died, but which can, destiny so wills it, be the catalyst for great vision. The individuality of Lynch's path depends on his use of Hollywood materials in a way that will correct what his early influences, and he in his turn have come to see as an overdependence on a rationalist illusion of control that is ultimately an obstacle to poetic truths. This will become clearer as we explore the theories and practices of Henri Bacon, Pollock, and Hopper and how Lynch's use of the precedents they set has gained him a place in a history of commercial film alongside Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles.<sup>2</sup>

## The “Will to Lose One’s Will” on Canvas

Lynch's gift to Hollywood of more powerful films with more exciting possibilities for mass-cultural audiences begins, as I noted above, with painters who deeply impressed the young Lynch—Robert Henri, Francis Bacon, Jackson Pollock, and Edward Hopper. In the following discussion, I will sometimes refer to explicit statements they made about their art, which Lynch may or may not have read but which he certainly apprehended through their canvases. At points, I will also discuss how Lynch himself sees his relationship to them. To eliminate repetitive acknowledgments of the source of Lynch's self-portrait, in the following pages and throughout the book it should be understood that when I quote Lynch, unless otherwise indicated, I am referring to what I myself heard when I visited him on the occasions detailed in the Introduction.

Let us start with the sense of the narrative image that Lynch took from Robert Henri when, as a student, he read Henri's *The Art Spirit*. Henri was an American realist painter, whose paintings document his role in the shift in American art toward the sympathetic representation of ordinary

people. However, Henri swayed several generations of artists not so much with his canvases as with his book *The Art Spirit*, which speaks of the issue of rational control as a barrier to perception of the real:

There are moments in a day, when we seem to see beyond the usual to become—become clairvoyant. We reach then into reality. Such are the greatest moments of our greatest happiness. Such are the moments of our greatest wisdom. . . . At such times there is a song going on within us, a song to which we listen. It fills us with surprise. . . . But few are capable of holding themselves in that state of listening to their own song. . . . As the song within us is of the utmost sensitiveness, it retires in the presence of the cold material intellect. . . . Yet we live in the memory of these songs which in moments of intellectual inadvertence have been possible for us. (p. 45)

Here, in a typical passage, Henri encounters the real only when he loses control and gets away from what ordinarily passes for language and knowledge.

Happily, Henri's ideas prepared Lynch for greater "intellectual inadvertence" in the canvases of Francis Bacon. As an art student, as Lynch tells it, he encountered in Bacon's work a new world of possibilities. When Bacon listened to the interior song, it suggested that realism was only possible if the representation was not restricted by the *domination* of any form of narrative over the image. For Bacon, reality lay in the connection between the artist's nervous system and the language of the world as uninsulated by the brain and the will as possible. To represent a narrative reality that implicates the forms of reason but is not first processed rationally, Bacon selected images from such diverse sources as classical narrative motifs (e.g., Oedipus), a poem by T. S. Eliot, dental photographs, Muybridge anatomical studies of the human body, and the genre of portrait painting. Beginning with powerful narrative in his paintings, he courted that in himself that would engage the hard-edged rationality of the forms with something beyond his will. Some call the resulting images distortion; Lynch calls them beautiful and especially values the movement on the Bacon canvas.

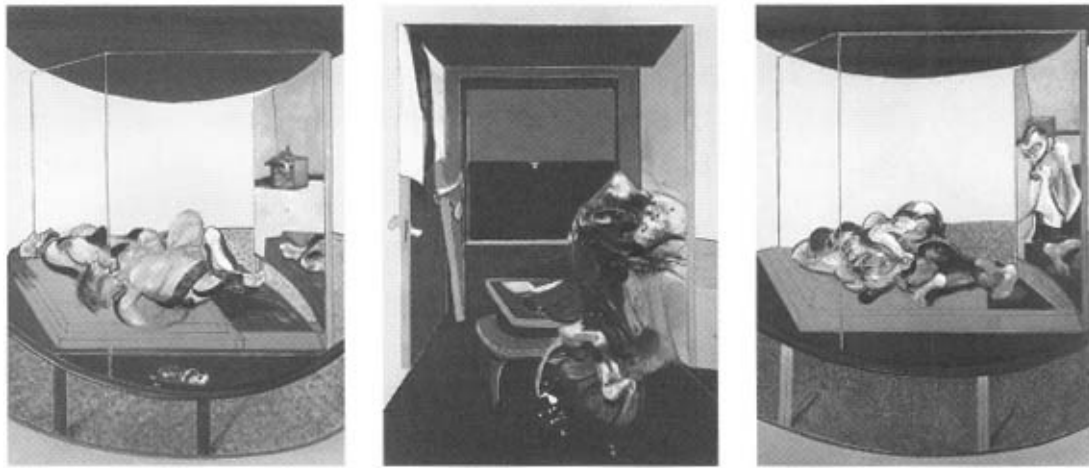
A more precise grasp of Lynch's enigmatic attribution of velocity to unmoving canvas is possible if we consult the extensive interviews of Francis Bacon by David Sylvester and combine them with what Lynch said to me about Bacon's *Triptych Inspired by T. S. Eliot's Poem "Sweeney Agonistes."* From the Sylvester transcripts, we can see that the motion Lynch perceives in Bacon's canvases is intimately connected to the "will to lose one's will." In these interviews, Bacon reveals that the artist gains vitality from the willed escape from self-control and that this escape generates the motion in the narrative image in his paintings:

. . . suddenly this thing clicked, and became exactly like this image I was trying to record. But not out of any conscious will, not was it anything to do with illustrational painting. What has never yet been analyzed is why this particular way of painting is more poignant than illustration. I suppose because it has a life completely of its own. It lives on its own, like the image one's trying to trap; it lives on its own, and therefore transfers the essence of the image more poignantly. So that the artist may be able to open or rather, should I say, unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently. (Sylvester p. 17)

For Bacon, narrative reality is inherent in the way that the image can cut through the static of its own conventions and those of the coherent self to reach the movement of feelings, the energies of the subconscious, and the nerves. That is only possible if the artist permits such fissures to occur in the composing process. If the illustrative nature of the image takes charge through the domination of the painting by the artist's will, nothing can come of the artist's work but a boring reflection of his own intellectual limits: "some paint comes across directly onto the nervous system and other paint tells you the story in a long diatribe through the brain. . . . The moment the story is elaborated, the boredom sets in; the story talks louder than the paint" (Sylvester pp. 18–22).

In talking to me about *Triptych*, Lynch, unaware of these Sylvester interviews, reveals how close *process* his art is to Bacon's. First, foremost, and always, Lynch relates all of his impressions of Bacon's canvases to motion (see [figures 2–4](#)). He turns his attention first to the center of the three panels. In it, we see a chair draped with meat and a brown coat. On the seat of the chair sits a squari-

object, and at the foot of the chair is another object much like a carryall, opened with object protruding from within and scattered around it. This grouping sits in front of an opening that is both door and a window. Lynch is captivated by the beauty of the textures in the triptych's center image and the way the "meat hooks onto this brown shape which hooks onto this thing and the way the eye just kind of flies around; it's unbelievable." He speaks of how this center image works with the right and left panels, concentrating on the way the eye moves around the "fast" and "slow" areas of the pictorial fields. The figure of the chair, Lynch identifies as fast, the floor area as slow. One must not, he says, have too much fast area; that would not work, and, he says, Bacon never does that. Lynch focuses on the movement of the eye among the three panels of the triptych. What draws him in is the movement, an engagement of the eye with a beauty that is not in geometrical stasis but in the flow created by these unmoving images. This has been true since Lynch began to paint, according to Peggy Reavey.



2-4. Francis Bacon, *Triptych Inspired by T. S. Eliot's Poem "Sweeney Agonistes,"* 1967. Lynch focuses on the "fast" and "slow" areas of the center panel.

One of the pertinent aspects of Lynch's commentary on Bacon is how little he concerns himself with the surfaces of Bacon's canvases—that is, Bacon's use of Eliot's poetry in the images, or Eliot's use of the images of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. The center of Lynch's interest is process, what he perceives as Bacon's riveting relationship to "the paint," which he iterates and reiterates is "doing it right," a process that produces a work of art that is exactly right, that seems not to have been painted by a human being but to have found its perfect configuration. Lynch's inheritance from Bacon is not his subject matter or color palette or specific images, but the tension created by the collision between the narrative and the non-narrative elements of painting.

Lynch speaks passionately about this tension when he discusses his own art, through which he yearns to move beyond familiar boundaries to a place where he can escape cultural overdependence on reason and its stale clichés. He speaks of the necessity for figures in the painting that are "painted in such a way that you know that they're figures but they're completely new, and so you really see them. It's much more than a figure; there's way more room for interpretation and there's a huge, big world that's opened up, and you add in so much on your own, and that's why they're frightening, because there's no other reason for them to be frightening; they're only paint."

The opening of a "huge, big world," as representational form that bends and breaks under pressure from the subconscious—but never disappears—is the essence of Lynch's narrative, as is well expressed in his favorite image of a duck's body as a circuit of narrative energy. The body of a duck makes the viewer's eye travel around it in a perfect flow, in the same way that Bacon creates his art. According to Lynch:



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