

David Lynch keeps his head

1 what movie this article is about

David Lynch's *Lost Highway*, written by Lynch and Barry Gifford, featuring Bill Pullman, Patricia Arquette, Balthazar Getty. Financed by CIBY 2000, France. ©1996 by one Asymmetrical Productions, Lynch's company, whose offices are right next door to Lynch's own house in the Hollywood Hills and whose logo, designed by Lynch, is a very cool graphic that looks like this:



Lost Highway is set in Los Angeles and the desertish terrain immediately inland from it. Actual shooting goes from December '95 through February '96. Lynch normally runs a Closed Set, with redundant security arrangements and an almost Masonic air of secrecy around his movies' productions, but I am allowed onto the *Lost Highway* set on 8–10 January 1996. This is not just because I'm a fanatical Lynch fan from way back, though I did make my pro-Lynch fanaticism known when the Asymmetrical people were trying to decide whether to let a writer onto the set. The fact is I was let onto *Lost Highway*'s set because of *Premiere* magazine's industry juice, and because there's rather a lot at stake for

Lynch and Asymmetrical on this movie (see Section 5), and they probably feel like they can't afford to indulge their allergy to PR and the Media Machine quite the way they have in the past.

2 what David Lynch is really like

I have absolutely no idea. I rarely got closer than five feet away from him and never talked to him. One of the minor reasons Asymmetrical Productions let me onto the set is that I don't even pretend to be journalist and have no idea how to interview somebody and saw no real point in trying to interview Lynch, which turned out perversely to be an advantage, because Lynch emphatically didn't want to be interviewed while *Lost Highway* was in production, because when he's shooting a movie he's incredibly busy and preoccupied and immersed and has very little attention or brain-space available for anything other than the movie. This may sound like PR bullshit, but it turns out to be true — e.g.:

The first time I lay actual eyes on the real David Lynch on the set of his movie, he's peeing on a tree. I am not kidding. This is on 8 January in West LA's Griffith Park, where some of *Lost Highway*'s exteriors and driving scenes are being shot. Lynch is standing in the bristly underbrush off the dirt road between the Base Camp's trailers and the set, peeing on a stunted pine. Mr. David Lynch, a prodigious coffee-drinker, apparently pees hard and often, and neither he nor the production can afford the time it'd take him to run down the Base Camp's long line of trailers to the trailer where the bathrooms are every time he needs to pee. So my first sight of Lynch is only from the back, and (understandably) from a distance. *Lost Highway*'s cast and crew pretty much ignore Lynch's urinating in public, and they ignore it in a relaxed rather than a tense or uncomfortable way, sort of the way you'd ignore a child's alfresco peeing.

trivia tidbit: what movie people on location sets call the special trailer that houses the bathrooms

"The Honeywagon."

3 entertainments David Lynch has created/directed that are mentioned in this article

Eraserhead (1977), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Dune* (1984), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Wild at Heart* (1989), two televised seasons of *Twin Peaks* (1990–92), *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), and the mercifully ablated TV program *On the Air* (1992).

4 other renaissance-mannish things he's done

Has directed music videos for Chris Isaak; has directed the theater-teaser for Michael Jackson's lavish 30-minute "Dangerous" video; has directed commercials for Klein's Obsession, Saint-Laurent's Opium, Alka-Seltzer, the National Breast Cancer Campaign,¹ and New York City's new Garbage Collection Program. Has produced *Into the Night*, an album by Julee Cruise of songs cowritten by Lynch and Angelo Badalamenti, songs that include the *Twin Peaks* theme and *Blue Velvet*'s "Mysteries of Love."² Had for a few years a weekly *L.A. Reader* comic strip, "The Angriest Dog in the World." Has cowritten with Badalamenti (who's also doing the original music for *Lost Highway*) *Industrial Symphony #1*, the 1990 video of which features Nicolas Cage and Laura Dern and Julee Cruise and the hieratic dwarf from *Twin Peaks* and topless cheerleaders and a flayed deer, and which sounds pretty much like the title suggests it would — *IS#1* was also performed live at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1992, to somewhat mixed reviews. Has had a bunch of gallery shows of his Abstract Expressionist paintings, reviews of which have been rather worse than mixed. Has codirected, with James Signorelli, 1992's³ *Hotel Room*, a feature-length video of vignettes all

¹ (I haven't yet been able to track down clips of the N.B.C.C. spots, but the mind reels at the possibilities implicit in the conjunction of D. Lynch and radical mastectomy. . . .)

² "M.o.L." only snippets of which are on *BV*'s soundtrack, has acquired an underground reputation as one of the great make-out tunes of all time — well worth checking out.

³ ('92 having been a year of simply manic creative activity for Lynch, apparently)

set in one certain room of a NYC railroad hotel, a hoary mainstream conceit ripped off from Neil Simon and sufficiently Lynchianized in *Hotel Room* to be then subsequently rip-offable by Tarantino *et posse* in 1995's *Four Rooms*. Has published *Images* (Hyperion, 1993, \$40.00), a sort of coffee-table book consisting of movie stills, prints of Lynch's paintings, and some of Lynch's art photos (some of which art photos are creepy and moody and sexy and cool and some of which are just photos of spark plugs and dental equipment and seem kind of dumb⁴).

5 this article's special focus or "angle" w/r/t *Lost Highway*, suggested (not all that subtly) by certain editorial presences at *Premiere* magazine

With the smash *Blue Velvet*, a Palme d'Or at Cannes for *Wild at Heart*, and then the national phenomenon of *Twin Peaks*'s first season, David Lynch clearly established himself as the U.S.A.'s foremost avant-garde / commercially viable avant-garde / "offbeat" director, and for a while there it looked like he might be able single-handedly to broker a new marriage between art and commerce in U.S. movies, opening formula-frozen Hollywood to some of the eccentricity and vigor of art film.

Then 1992 saw *Twin Peaks*'s unpopular second season, the critical and commercial failure of *Fire Walk with Me*, and the bottomlessly horrid *On the Air*, which was euthanized by ABC after six very long-seeming weeks. This triple whammy had critics racing back to their PC's to re-evaluate Lynch's whole oeuvre. The former subject of a *Time* cover-story

⁴ Dentistry seems to be a new passion for Lynch, by the way — the photo on the title page of *Lost Highway*'s script, which is of a guy with half his face normal and half unbelievably distended and ventricose and gross, was apparently culled from a textbook on extreme dental emergencies. There's great enthusiasm for this photo around Asymmetrical Productions, and they're looking into the legalities of using it in *Lost Highway*'s ads and posters, which if I was the guy in the photo I'd want a truly astronomical permission fee.

in 1990 became the object of a withering ad hominem backlash, stuff like the *L.A. Weekly's*: "Hip audiences assume Lynch must be satiric, but nothing could be further [sic] from the truth. He isn't equipped for critiquing [sic] anything, satirically or otherwise; his work doesn't pass through any intellectual checkpoints. One reason so many people say 'Huh?' to his on-screen fantasies is that the director himself never does."

So the obvious "Hollywood Insider"-type question w/r/t *Lost Highway* is whether the movie is going to rehabilitate Lynch's reputation. This is a legitimately interesting question, although, given the extreme unpredictability of the sorts of forces that put people on *Time* covers, it's probably more realistic to shoot for whether *LH* ought to put Lynch back on top of whatever exactly it was he was on top of. For me, though, a more interesting question ended up being whether David Lynch really gives much of a shit about whether his reputation is rehabilitated or not. The impression I get from rewatching his movies and from hanging around his latest production is that he doesn't, much. This attitude — like Lynch himself, like his work — seems to me to be both admirable and sort of nuts.

6 what *Lost Highway* is apparently about

According to Lynch's own blurb on the title page of the script's circulating copy, it's

A 21st Century Noir Horror Film

A graphic investigation into parallel identity crises

A world where time is dangerously out of control

A terrifying ride down the lost highway

which is a bit overheated, prose-wise, maybe, but was probably put there as a High-Concept sound-bite for potential distributors or something. The spiel's second line is what comes closest to describing *Lost Highway*, though "parallel identity crises" seems like kind of an uptown way of saying the movie is about somebody literally turning into somebody else. And this, despite the many new and different things about *Lost Highway*, makes the movie almost classically Lynchian — the theme of multi-

ple/ambiguous identity has been almost as much a Lynch trademark as ominous ambient noises on his soundtracks.

7 last bit of (6) used as a segue into a quick sketch of Lynch's genesis as a heroic auteur

However concerned with fluxes in identity his movies are, David Lynch has remained remarkably himself throughout his filmmaking career. You could probably argue it either way — that Lynch hasn't compromised/sold out, or that he hasn't grown all that much in twenty years of making movies — but the fact remains that Lynch has held fast to his own intensely personal vision and approach to filmmaking, and that he's made significant sacrifices in order to do so. "I mean come on, David could make movies for anybody," says Tom Sternberg, one of *Lost Highway's* producers. "But David's not part of the Hollywood Process. He makes his own choices about what he wants. He's an artist."

This is essentially true, though like most artists Lynch has not been without patrons. It was on the strength of *Eraserhead* that Mel Brooks's production company hired Lynch to make *The Elephant Man* in 1980, and that movie earned Lynch an Oscar nomination and was in turn the reason that no less an ur-Hollywood-Process figure than Dino De Laurentiis picked Lynch to make the film adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, offering Lynch not only big money but a development deal for future projects with De Laurentiis's production company.

1984's *Dune* is unquestionably the worst movie of Lynch's career, and it's pretty darn bad. In some ways it seems that Lynch was miscast as its director: *Eraserhead* had been one of those sell-your-own-plasma-to-buy-the-film-stock masterpieces, with a tiny and largely unpaid cast and crew. *Dune*, on the other hand, had one of the biggest budgets in Hollywood history, and its production staff was the size of a small Caribbean nation, and the movie involved lavish and cutting-edge special effects (half the fourteen-month shooting schedule was given over to miniatures and stop-action). Plus Herbert's novel itself is incredibly long and complex, and so besides all the headaches of a major commercial production financed by men in Ray-Bans Lynch also had

trouble making cinematic sense of the plot, which even in the novel is convoluted to the point of pain. In short, *Dune*'s direction called for a combination technician and administrator, and Lynch, though as good a technician as anyone in film,⁵ is more like the type of bright child you sometimes see who's ingenious at structuring fantasies and gets totally immersed in them but will let other kids take part in them only if he retains complete imaginative control over the game and its rules and appurtenances — in short very definitely *not* an administrator.

Watching *Dune* again on video you can see that some of its defects are clearly Lynch's responsibility, e.g. casting the nerdy and potato-faced Kyle MacLachlan as an epic hero and the Police's resoundingly unthespian Sting as a psycho villain, or — worse — trying to provide plot exposition by having characters' thoughts audibilized (w/ that slight thinking-out-loud reverb) on the soundtrack while the camera zooms in on the character making a thinking-face, a cheesy old device that *Saturday Night Live* had already been parodying for years when *Dune* came out. The overall result is a movie that's funny while it's trying to be deadly serious, which is as good a definition of a flop as there is, and *Dune* was indeed a huge, pretentious, incoherent flop. But a good part of the incoherence is the responsibility of De Laurentiis's producers, who cut thousands of feet of film out of Lynch's final print right before the movie's release, apparently already smelling disaster and wanting to get the movie down to more like a normal theatrical running-time. Even on video, it's not hard to see where a lot of these cuts were made; the movie looks gutted, unintentionally surreal.

In a strange way, though, *Dune* actually ended up being Lynch's "big break" as a filmmaker. The version of *Dune* that finally appeared in the theaters was by all reliable reports heartbreaking for him, the kind of debacle that in myths about Innocent, Idealistic Artists In The

⁵ (And *Dune* really is visually awesome, especially the desert planet's giant worm-monsters, who with their tripartately phallic snouts bear a weird resemblance to the mysterious worm Henry Spencer keeps in the mysterious thrumming cabinet in *Eraserhead*.)

Maw Of The Hollywood Process signals the violent end of the artist's Innocence — seduced, overwhelmed, fucked over, left to take the public heat and the mogul's wrath. The experience could easily have turned Lynch into an embittered hack (though probably a rich hack), doing f/x-intensive gorefests for commercial studios.⁶ Or it could have sent him scurrying to the safety of academe, making obscure plotless 16mm.'s for the pipe-and-beret crowd. The experience did neither. Lynch both hung in and, on some level, gave up. *Dune* convinced him of something that all the really interesting independent filmmakers — Campion, the Coens, Jarmusch, Jaglom — seem to steer by. "The experience taught me a valuable lesson," he told an interviewer years later. "I learned I would rather not make a film than make one where I don't have final cut."

And this, in an almost Lynchianly weird way, is what led to *Blue Velvet*. *BV*'s development had been one part of the deal under which Lynch had agreed to do *Dune*, and the latter's huge splat caused two years of rather chilly relations between Dino & Dave while the latter complained about the final cut of *Dune* and wrote *BV*'s script and the former wrathfully clutched his head and the De Laurentiis Entertainment Group's accountants did the postmortem on a \$40,000,000 stillbirth. Then, sort of out of nowhere, De Laurentiis offered Lynch a deal for making *BV*, a very unusual sort of arrangement that I'll bet anything was inspired by Lynch's bitching over *Dune*'s final cut and De Laurentiis's being amused and pissed off about that bitching. For *Blue Velvet*, De Laurentiis offered Lynch a tiny budget and an absurdly low directorial fee, but 100% control over the film. It seems clear that the offer was a kind of punitive bluff on the mogul's part, a kind of Be-Careful-What-You-Publicly-Pray-For thing. History unfortunately hasn't recorded what De Laurentiis's reaction was when Lynch jumped at the deal. It seems that Lynch's Innocent Idealism had survived *Dune*, and that he cared less about money and production budgets than about regaining control of the fantasy. Lynch

⁶ Anybody who wants to see how the Process and its inducements destroy what's cool and alive in a director should consider the recent trajectory of Richard Rodriguez, from the plasma-financed vitality of *El Mariachi* to the gory pretension of *Desperado* to the empty and embarrassing *From Dusk to Dawn*. Very sad.

not only wrote and directed *Blue Velvet*, he cast it,⁷ edited it, even cowrote the original music with Badalamenti. The sound and cinematography were done by Lynch's cronies Alan Splet and Frederick Elmes. *Blue Velvet* was, again, in its visual intimacy and sure touch, a distinctively homemade film (the home being, again, D. Lynch's skull), and it was a surprise hit, and it remains one of the '80s' great U.S. films. And its greatness is a direct result of Lynch's decision to stay in the Process but to rule in small personal films rather than to serve in large corporate ones. Whether you believe he's a good auteur or a bad one, his career makes it clear that he is indeed, in the literal *Cahiers du Cinema* sense, an auteur, willing to make the sorts of sacrifices for creative control that real auteurs have to make — choices that indicate either raging egotism or passionate dedication or a childlike desire to run the whole sandbox, or all three.

trivia tidbit

Like Jim Jarmusch's, Lynch's films are immensely popular overseas, especially in France and Japan. It's not an accident that the financing for *Lost Highway* is French. It's primarily because of foreign sales that no Lynch movie has ever lost money (though it took a long time for *Dune* to clear the red).

6a more specifically — judging by the script and rough-cut footage — what *Lost Highway* is apparently about

In its rough-cut incarnation, the movie opens in motion, driving, with the kind of frenetic behind-the-wheel perspective we know from *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart*. It's a nighttime highway, a minor two-laner, and we're moving down the middle of the road, the divided centerline

⁷ (using MacLachlan perfectly this time — since the role of Jeffrey actually calls for potato-faced nerdiness — plus *Eraserhead*'s Jack Nance and *Dune*'s Dean Stockwell and Brad Dourif, none of whom has ever been creepier, plus using *Dallas*'s Priscilla Pointer and everything's Hope Lange as scary moms . . .)

flashing strobishly just below our perspective. The sequence is beautifully lit and shot at "half time," six frames per second, so that it feels like we're going very fast indeed.⁸ Nothing is visible in the headlights; the car seems to be speeding in a void; the shot is thus hyperkinetic and static at the same time. Music is always vitally important to Lynch films, and *Lost Highway* may break new ground for Lynch because its title song is actually post-'50s; it's a dreamy David Bowie number called "I'm De-ranged." A way more appropriate theme song for the movie, though, in my opinion, would be the Flaming Lips' recent "Be My Head," because get a load of this:

Bill Pullman is a jazz saxophonist whose relationship with his wife, a brunette Patricia Arquette, is creepy and occluded and full of unspoken tensions. They start getting incredibly mysterious videotapes in the mail that are of them sleeping or of Bill Pullman's face looking at the camera with a grotesquely horrified expression, etc.; and they're wiggling out, understandably, because they regard it as pretty obvious that somebody's breaking into their house at night and videotaping them; and they call the cops, which cops show up at their house and turn out in best Lynch fashion to be just ineffectual blowholes of *Dragnet*-era clichés.

Anyway, while the creepy-video thing is under way there are also some scenes of Pullman looking very natty and East Village in all-black and jamming on his tenor sax in front of a packed dance floor (only in a David Lynch movie would people dance ecstatically to abstract jazz),

⁸ TIDBIT: HOW LYNCH AND HIS CINEMATOGRAPHER FOR *BV* FILMED THAT HELLACIOUS FORCED "JOYRIDE" IN FRANK BOOTH'S CAR, THE SCENE WHERE FRANK AND JACK NANCE AND BRAD DOURIF HAVE KIDNAPPED JEFFREY BEAUMONT AND ARE MENACING HIM INSIDE THE CAR WHILE THEY'RE GOING WHAT LOOKS LIKE 100+ DOWN A DISMAL RURAL TWO-LANER: The reason it looks like the car's going so fast is that lights outside the car are going by so fast. In fact the car wasn't even moving. A burly grip was bouncing madly up and down on the back bumper to make the car jiggle and roll, and other crewpeople with hand-held lamps were sprinting back and forth outside the car to make it look like the car was whizzing past streetlights. The whole scene's got a claustrophobia-in-motion feel that they never could have gotten if the car'd actually been moving (the production's insurance wouldn't have allowed that kind of speed in a real take), and the whole thing was done for about \$8.95.

and of Patricia Arquette seeming restless and unhappy in a kind of narcotized, disassociated way and generally being creepy and mysterious and making it clear that she has a kind of double life involving decadent, lounge-lizardy men, men of whom Bill Pullman would doubtless not approve one bit. One of the creepier scenes in the movie's first act takes place at a decadent Hollywood party held by one of Patricia Arquette's mysterious lizardy friends. At the party Bill Pullman is approached by somebody the script identifies only as "The Mystery Man," who claims not only that he's been in Bill Pullman and Patricia Arquette's house but that he's actually there at their house *right now*, and he apparently is, because he pulls out a cellular (the movie's full of great LA touches, like everybody having a cellular) and invites Bill Pullman to call his house, and Bill Pullman has an extremely creepy three-way conversation with the Mystery Man at the party and the same Mystery Man's voice there at his house. (The Mystery Man is played by Robert Blake, which by the way get ready for Robert Blake in this movie — see below.)

But so then, driving home from the party, Bill Pullman criticizes Patricia Arquette's decadent friends but doesn't say anything specific about the creepy and metaphysically impossible conversation he just had with one guy in two places, which I think is supposed to reinforce our impression that Bill Pullman and Patricia Arquette are not exactly confiding intimately in each other at this stage of their relationship. This impression is further reinforced in some creepy sex scenes in which Bill Pullman has frantic wheezing sex with a Patricia Arquette who just lies there blank and inert and all but looking at her watch.⁹

But then so the thrust of *Lost Highway*'s first act is that a final and climactic mysterious video comes in the mail, and it shows Bill Pullman standing over the mutilated corpse of Patricia Arquette — we see it only on the video. And then Bill Pullman's arrested and convicted and put on Death Row.

Then there are some scenes of Bill Pullman on a penal institution's Death Row, looking about as tortured and uncomprehending as any *noir* protagonist ever in the history of film has looked, and part of his torment

⁹ (sex scenes that are creepy in part because they're exactly what the viewer himself imagines having sex with Patricia Arquette would be like)

is that he's having terrible headaches and his skull is starting to bulge out in different places and in general to look really painful and weird.

Then there's this scene where Bill Pullman's head turns into Balthazar Getty's head. As in the Bill Pullman character in *Lost Highway* turns into somebody completely else, somebody played by *Lord of the Flies*'s Balthazar Getty, who's barely out of puberty and looks nothing like Bill Pullman. The scene is indescribable, and I won't even try to describe it except to say that it's as ghastly and riveting and totally indescribable as anything I've seen in a U.S. movie.

The administration of the penal institution is understandably non-plussed when they see Balthazar Getty in Bill Pullman's cell instead of Bill Pullman. Balthazar Getty is no help in explaining how he got there, because he's got a huge hematoma on his forehead and his eyes are rolling around and he's basically in the sort of dazed state you can imagine somebody being in when somebody else's head has just changed painfully into his own head. The penal authorities ID Balthazar Getty as a 24-year-old LA auto mechanic who lives with his parents, who are apparently a retired biker and biker-chick. Meaning he's a whole other valid IDable human being, with an identity and a history, instead of just being Bill Pullman with a new head.

No one's ever escaped from this prison's Death Row before, apparently, and the penal authorities and cops, being unable to figure out how Bill Pullman escaped, and getting little more than dazed winces from Balthazar Getty, decide (in a move whose judicial realism may be a bit shaky) to let Balthazar Getty just go home. Which he does.

Balthazar Getty goes home to his room full of motorcycle parts and Snap-On Tool cheesecake posters and slowly gets his wits back, though he still has what now looks like a wicked carbuncle on his forehead and has no idea what happened or how he ended up in Bill Pullman's cell, and he wanders around his parents' seedy house with a facial expression that looks the way a bad dream feels. There are a few scenes of him doing stuff like watching a lady hang up laundry while an ominous low-register noise sounds, and his eyes look like there's some timelessly horrific fact that's slipped his mind and he both wants to recall it and doesn't want to. His parents — who smoke dope and watch huge amounts of TV and engage in a lot of conspiratorial whispering and creepy looks, like they know important stuff Balthazar Getty and we don't know — don't

ask Balthazar Getty what happened . . . and again we get the feeling that relationships in this movie are not what you would call open and sharing, etc.

But it turns out that Balthazar Getty is an incredibly gifted professional mechanic who's been sorely missed at the auto shop where he works — his mother has apparently told Balthazar Getty's employer, who's played by Richard Pryor, that Balthazar Getty's absence has been due to a "fever." At this point we're still not sure whether Bill Pullman has really and truly metamorphosized into Balthazar Getty or whether this whole turning-into-Balthazar-Getty thing is taking place in Bill Pullman's head, a sort of prolonged extreme-stress pre-execution hallucination à la Gilliam's *Brazil* or Bierce's "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." But the evidence for literal metamorphosis mounts in the movie's second act, because Balthazar Getty has a fully valid life and history, including a girlfriend who keeps looking suspiciously at Balthazar Getty's hellacious forehead-carbuncle and saying he "doesn't seem himself," which with repetition stops being an arch pun and becomes genuinely frightening. Balthazar Getty also has a loyal clientele at Richard Pryor's auto shop, one of whom, played by Robert Loggia, is an extremely creepy and menacing crime-boss-type figure with a thuggish entourage and a black Mercedes 6.9 with esoteric troubles that he'll trust only Balthazar Getty to diagnose and fix. Robert Loggia clearly has a history with Balthazar Getty and treats Balthazar Getty with a creepy blend of avuncular affection and patronizing ferocity. And so on this one day, when Robert Loggia pulls into Richard Pryor's auto shop with his troubled Mercedes 6.9, sitting in the car alongside Robert Loggia's thugs is an unbelievably gorgeous gun-moll-type girl, played by Patricia Arquette and clearly recognizable as same, i.e. as Bill Pullman's wife, except now she's a platinum blond. (If you're thinking *Vertigo* here, you're not far astray. Lynch has a track record of making allusions and homages to Hitchcock — e.g. *BV*'s first shot of Kyle MacLachlan spying on Isabella Rossellini through the louvered slots of her closet door is identical in every technical particular to the first shot of Anthony Perkins spying on Janet Leigh's ablutions in *Psycho* — that are more like intertextual touchstones than outright allusions, and are always taken in weird and creepy and uniquely Lynchian directions. Anyway, the *Vertigo* allusion here seems less important than the way Patricia Arquette's Duessa-like

doubleness acts as a counterpoint to the movie's other "identity crisis": here are two different women (for a while) portrayed by what is recognizably the same actress, while two totally different actors portray what are simultaneously the same "person" (for a while) and two different "identities.")

And but so when Balthazar Getty's new blue-collar incarnation of Bill Pullman and Patricia Arquette's apparent blond incarnation of Bill Pullman's wife make eye-contact, sparks are generated on a scale that lends the hackneyed "I-feel-I-know-you-from-somewhere" component of erotic attraction whole new fresh layers of creepy literality. Then there are some scenes that fill in the new blond Patricia Arquette incarnation's seedy history, and some scenes showing how deeply and ferociously attached to the blond Patricia Arquette Robert Loggia is, and some scenes that make it abundantly clear that Robert Loggia is a total psychopath who is most definitely not to be fucked around with or snuck around behind the back of with the girlfriend of. And then we get some scenes showing that Balthazar Getty and the blond Patricia Arquette are — Getty's forehead-carbuncle notwithstanding, apparently — instantly and ferociously attracted to one another, and then some more scenes where they consummate this attraction with all the heavily stilted affectless vigor Lynch's sex scenes are famous for.¹⁰

And then there are some more scenes that reveal that Robert Loggia's character *also* has more than one identity in the movie, and that at least one of these identities knows both the decadent, lounge-lizardy, mysterious friend of Bill Pullman's deceased wife *and* the Mephistophelian Mystery Man, with whom Loggia begins making creepy and ambiguous threatening phone calls to Balthazar Getty's home, which Balthazar Getty has to listen to and try to interpret while his parents (who are played by Gary Busey and an actress named Lucy Dayton) smoke pot and exchange mysterious significant looks in front of the TV.

It's probably better not to give away too much of *Lost Highway's*

¹⁰ (a stilted, tranced quality that renders the sex scenes both sexually "hot" and aesthetically "cold," a sort of meta-erotic effect you could see Gus Van Sant trying to emulate when he had the sex scenes in *My Own Private Idaho* rendered as series of complexly postured stills, which instead of giving them Lynch's creepy tranced quality made them look more like illustrations from the *Kama-Sutra*)

final act, though you maybe ought to be apprised: that the blond Patricia Arquette's intentions toward Balthazar Getty turn out to be less than honorable; that Balthazar Getty's carbuncle all but completely heals up; that Bill Pullman does reappear in the movie; that the brunette Patricia Arquette also reappears, but not in the (so to speak) flesh; that both the blond and the brunette P. Arquette turn out to be involved (via lizardy friends) in the world of porn, as in hardcore, an involvement whose video fruits are shown (at least in the rough cut) in so much detail that I don't see how Lynch's movie is going to escape an NC-17 rating; and that *Lost Highway*'s ending is by no means an "upbeat" or "feel-good" ending. Also that Robert Blake, while a good deal more restrained and almost *effete* than Dennis Hopper was in *Blue Velvet*, is at least as riveting and creepy and unforgettable as Hopper's Frank Booth was, and that his Mystery Man is pretty clearly the devil, or at least somebody's very troubling idea of the devil, a kind of pure floating spirit of malevolence à la *Twin Peaks*'s Leland/"Bob"/Scary Owl.

6b approximate number of ways *Lost Highway* seems like it can be interpreted

Roughly 37. The big interpretive fork, as mentioned, looks to be whether we are meant to take the sudden unexplained shift in Bill Pullman's identity straight (i.e. as literally real within the movie), or as some Kafkaesque metaphor for guilt and denial and psychic evasion, or whether we're to see the whole thing — from invasive videos through Death Row through metamorphosis into mechanic, etc. — as one long hallucination on the part of a natty jazz saxophonist who could very much benefit from some professionally dispensed medication. The least interesting possibility seems to be to the last, and I'd be very surprised if anybody at *Asymmetrical* will want *Lost Highway* interpreted as one long psychotic dream.

Or the movie's plot could, on still another hand, simply be incoherent and make no rational sense and not be conventionally interpretable at all. This won't necessarily make it a bad David Lynch movie: *Eraserhead*'s dream-logic makes it a "narrative" only in a very loose, nonlinear way, and large parts of *Twin Peaks* and *Fire Walk with Me*

make no real sense and yet are compelling and meaningful and just plain cool. Lynch seems to run into trouble only when his movies seem to the viewer to *want* to have a point — i.e. when they set the viewer up to expect some kind of coherent connection between plot elements — and then fail to deliver any such point. Examples here include *Wild at Heart* — where the connections between Santos and Mr. Reindeer (the Colonel Sandersish-looking guy who commissions hits by pushing silver dollars through hit men's mail slots) and the Harry Dean Stanton character and the death of Lula's father are intricately set up and then don't go anywhere either visually or narratively — and the first half hour of *Fire Walk with Me*, which concerns the FBI investigation of the pre-Palmer murder of another girl, and sets us up to think it's going to have important connections to the Palmer case, and instead is full of odd cues and clues that go nowhere, and is the part of the movie that even pro-Lynch critics singled out for special savagery.

Since it might bear on the movie's final quality, be apprised that *Lost Highway* is the most expensive movie Lynch has ever made on his own. Its budget is something like sixteen million dollars, which is three times *Blue Velvet's* and at least 50% more than either *Wild at Heart's* or *Fire Walk with Me's*.

But so it is, at this point, probably impossible to tell whether *Lost Highway* is going to be a *Dune*-level turkey or a *Blue Velvet*-caliber masterpiece or something in-between or what. The one thing I feel I can say with total confidence is that the movie will be: *Lynchian*.

S what *Lynchian* means and why it's important

An academic definition of *Lynchian* might be that the term "refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter." But like *postmodern* or *pornographic*, *Lynchian* is one of those Potter Stewart-type words that's definable only ostensibly — i.e. we know it when we see it. Ted Bundy wasn't particularly *Lynchian*, but good old Jeffrey Dahmer, with his victim's various anatomies neatly separated and stored in his fridge alongside his chocolate milk and

Shedd Spread, was thoroughgoingly Lynchian. A recent homicide in Boston, where the deacon of a South Shore church gave chase to a vehicle that had cut him off, forced the car off the road, and shot the driver with a high-powered crossbow, was borderline-Lynchian.

A domestic-type homicide, on the other hand, could fall on various points along the continuum of Lynchianism. Some guy killing his wife in and of itself doesn't have much of a Lynchian tang to it, though if it turns out the guy killed his wife over something like a persistent failure to refill the ice-cube tray after taking the last ice cube or an obdurate refusal to buy the particular brand of peanut butter the guy was devoted to, the homicide could be described as having Lynchian elements. And if the guy, sitting over the mutilated corpse of his wife (whose retrograde '50s bouffant is, however, weirdly unmussed) with the first cops on the scene as they all wait for the boys from Homicide and the M.E.'s office, begins defending his actions by giving an involved analysis of the comparative merits of Jif and Skippy, and if the beat cops, however repelled by the carnage on the floor, have to admit that the guy's got a point, that if you've developed a sophisticated peanut-butter palate and that palate prefers Jif there's simply no way Skippy's going to be anything like an acceptable facsimile, and that a wife who fails repeatedly to grasp the importance of Jif is making some very significant and troubling statements about her empathy for and commitment to the sacrament of marriage as a bond between two bodies, minds, spirits, and palates . . . you get the idea.

For me, Lynch's movies' deconstruction of this weird "irony of the banal" has affected the way I see and organize the world. I've noted since 1986 that a good 65% of the people in metropolitan bus terminals between the hours of midnight and 6:00 A.M. tend to qualify as Lynchian figures — flamboyantly unattractive, enfeebled, grotesque, freighted with a woe out of all proportion to evident circumstances. Or we've all seen people assume sudden and grotesque facial expressions — e.g. like when receiving shocking news, or biting into something that turns out to be foul, or around small kids for no particular reason other than to be weird — but I've determined that a sudden grotesque facial expression won't qualify as a really *Lynchian* facial expression unless the expression is held for several moments longer than the circumstances could even

possibly warrant, is just held there, fixed and grotesque, until it starts to signify about seventeen different things at once.¹¹

trivia tidbit

Bill Pullman's distended and long-held expression of torment as he screams over Patricia Arquette's body in *Lost Highway* is nearly identical to the scream-face Jack Nance wears during *Eraserhead*'s opening's conception montage.

9 Lynchianism's ambit in contemporary movies

In 1995, PBS ran a lavish ten-part documentary called *American Cinema* whose final episode was devoted to "The Edge of Hollywood" and the increasing influence of young independent filmmakers — the Coens, Jim Jarmusch, Carl Franklin, Q. Tarantino et al. It was not just unfair but bizarre that David Lynch's name was never once mentioned in the episode, because his influence is all over these directors. The Band-Aid on the neck of *Pulp Fiction*'s Marcellus Wallace — unexplained, visually incongruous, and featured prominently in three separate set-ups — is textbook Lynch. So are the long, self-consciously mundane dialogues on pork, foot massages, TV pilots, etc. that punctuate *Pulp Fiction*'s violence, a violence whose creepy/comic stylization is also resoundingly Lynchian. The peculiar narrative tone of Tarantino's films — the thing that makes them seem at once strident and obscure, not-quite-clear in a haunting way — is Lynch's tone; Lynch invented this tone. It seems to

¹¹ (And as an aside, but a true aside, I'll add that I have had since 1986 a personal rule w/r/t dating, which is that any date where I go to a female's residence to pick her up and have any kind of conversation with parents or roommates that's an even remotely Lynchian conversation is automatically the only date I ever have with that female, regardless of her appeal in other areas. And that this rule, developed after seeing *Blue Velvet*, has served me remarkably well and kept me out of all kinds of hair-raising entanglements and jams, and that friends to whom I've promulgated the rule but who have willfully ignored it and have continued dating females with clear elements of Lynchianism in their characters or associations have done so to their regret.)

me fair to say that the commercial Hollywood phenomenon that is Mr. Quentin Tarantino would not exist without David Lynch as a touchstone, a set of allusive codes and contexts in the viewer's deep-brain core. In a way, what Tarantino's done with the French New Wave and with Lynch is what Pat Boone did with Little Richard and Fats Domino: he's found (rather ingeniously) a way to take what is ragged and distinctive and menacing about their work and homogenize it, churn it until it's smooth and cool and hygienic enough for mass consumption. *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, with its comically banal lunch-chatter, creepily otiose code names, and intrusive soundtrack of campy pop from decades past, is Lynch made commercial, i.e. faster, linearer, and with what was idiosyncratically surreal now made fashionably (i.e. "hiply") surreal.

In Carl Franklin's powerful *One False Move*, the director's crucial decision to focus only on the faces of witnesses during violent scenes — i.e. to have the violence played out on watching faces, to render its effect as affect — is thoroughly Lynchian. So is the relentless, *noir*-parodic use of chiaroscuro lighting in the Coens' *Blood Simple* and *The Hudsucker Proxy* and in all Jim Jarmusch's films, especially Jarmusch's 1984 *Stranger Than Paradise*, which, in terms of cinematography, blighted setting, wet-fuse pace, heavy dissolves between scenes, and a Bressonian style of acting that is at once manic and wooden, is all but an homage to Lynch's early work. Other homages you've maybe seen include Gus Van Sant's use of a quirky superstition about hats on beds as an ironic plot engine in *Drugstore Cowboy*, Mike Leigh's use of incongruous parallel plots in *Naked*, Todd Haynes's use of a creepy ambient industrial-thrum score in *Safe*, and Van Sant's use of surreal dream scenes to develop River Phoenix's character in *My Own Private Idaho*. In this same *M.O.P. Idaho*, the German john's creepy Expressionist lip-synch number, where he uses a hand-held lamp as a microphone, is a more or less explicit reference to Dean Stockwell's unforgettable lamp-synch scene in *Blue Velvet*.

Or take the granddaddy of in-your-ribs *Blue Velvet* references: the scene in *Reservoir Dogs* where Michael Madsen, dancing to a cheesy '70s tune, *cuts off a hostage's ear*. This just isn't subtle at all.

None of this is to say that Lynch himself doesn't owe debts — to Hitchcock, to Cassavetes, to Bresson and Deren and Wiene. But it is to

say that Lynch has in many ways cleared and made arable the contemporary "anti-Hollywood" territory that Tarantino et al. are cash-cropping right now.¹² Recall that both *The Elephant Man* and *Blue Velvet* came out in the 1980s, that metastatic decade of cable, VCRs, merchandising tie-ins and multinational blockbusters, all the big-money stuff that threatened to empty the American film industry of everything that wasn't High Concept. Lynch's moody, creepy, obsessive, unmistakably personal movies were to High Concept what the first great '40s *noir* films were to toothy musicals: unforeseen critical and commercial successes that struck a nerve with audiences and expanded studios' and distributors' idea of what would sell. It is to say that we owe Lynch a lot.

And it is also to say that David Lynch, at age 50, is a better, more complex, more interesting director than any of the hip young "rebels" making violently ironic films for New Line and Miramax today. It is particularly to say that — even without considering recent cringers like *Four Rooms* or *From Dusk to Dawn* — D. Lynch is an exponentially better filmmaker than Q. Tarantino. For, unlike Tarantino, D. Lynch knows that an act of violence in an American film has, through repetition and desensitization, lost the ability to refer to anything but itself. This is why violence in Lynch's films, grotesque and coldly stylized and symbolically heavy as it may be, is qualitatively different from Hollywood's or even anti-Hollywood's hip cartoon-violence. Lynch's violence always tries to *mean* something.

¹² Lynch's influence extends into mainstream Hollywood movies, too, by the way. The surfeit of dark dense machinery, sudden gouts of vented steam, ambient industrial sounds, etc., in Lynch's early stuff has clearly affected James Cameron and Terry Gilliam, and Gilliam has taken to the limit Lynch's preoccupation with blatantly Freudian fantasies (*Brazil*) and interpenetrations of ancient myth and modern psychoses (*The Fisher King*).

And across the spectrum, in the world of caviar-for-the-general art films, one has only to look at Atom Egoyan or Guy Maddin's abstruse, mood-lit, slow-moving angst-fests, or at the Frenchman Arnaud DesPlechin's 1992 *La Sentinelle* (which the director describes as "a brooding, intuitive study in split consciousness" and which is actually about a disassociated med-student's relationship with a severed head), or actually at just about anything recent that's directed by a French male under 35, to see Lynch's sensibility stamped like an exergue on art cinema's hot young Turks, too.

9a a better way to put what i just tried to say

Quentin Tarantino is interested in watching somebody's ear getting cut off; David Lynch is interested in the ear.

10 re the issue of whether and in what way David Lynch's movies are "sick"

Pauline Kael has a famous epigram to her 1986 *New Yorker* review of *Blue Velvet*: she quotes somebody she left the theater behind as saying to a friend "Maybe I'm sick, but I want to see that again." And Lynch's movies are indeed — in all sorts of ways, some more interesting than others — "sick." Some of them are brilliant and unforgettable; others are jejune and incoherent and bad. It's no wonder that Lynch's critical reputation over the last decade has looked like an EKG: it's sometimes hard to tell whether the director's a genius or an idiot. This is part of his fascination.

If the word *sick* seems excessive to you, simply substitute the word *creepy*. Lynch's movies are inarguably creepy, and a big part of their creepiness is that they seem so *personal*. A kind way to put it is that Lynch seems to be one of these people with unusual access to their own unconscious. A less kind way to put it would be that Lynch's movies seem to be expressions of certain anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally arrested, borderlinish parts of the director's psyche, expressions presented with very little inhibition or semiotic layering, i.e. presented with something like a child's ingenuous (and sociopathic) lack of self-consciousness. It's the psychic intimacy of the work that makes it hard to sort out what you are feeling about one of David Lynch's movies and what you are feeling about David Lynch. The ad hominem impression one tends to carry away from a *Blue Velvet* or a *Fire Walk with Me* is that they're really powerful movies but that David Lynch is the sort of person you really hope you don't get stuck next to on a long flight or in line at the DMV or something. In other words a *creepy* person.

Depending on whom you talk to, Lynch's creepiness is either enhanced or diluted by the odd distance that seems to separate his movies from the audience. Lynch's movies tend to be both extremely personal

and extremely remote. The absence of linearity and narrative logic, the heavy multivalence of the symbolism, the glazed opacity of the characters' faces, the weird ponderous quality of the dialogue, the regular deployment of grotesques as figurants, the precise, painterly way scenes are staged and lit, and the overlush, possibly voyeuristic way that violence, deviance, and general hideousness are depicted — these all give Lynch's movies a cool, detached quality, one that some cinéastes view as more like cold and clinical.

Here's something that's unsettling but true: Lynch's best movies are also his creepiest/sickest. This is probably because his best movies, however surreal, tend to be anchored by strongly developed main characters — *Blue Velvet's* Jeffrey Beaumont, *Fire Walk with Me's* Laura, *The Elephant Man's* Merrick and Treeves. When his characters are sufficiently developed and human to evoke our empathy, it tends to cut the distance and detachment that can keep Lynch's films at arm's length, and at the same time it makes the movies creepier — we're way more easily disturbed when a disturbing movie has characters in whom we can see parts of ourselves. For example, there's way more general ickiness in *Wild at Heart* than there is in *Blue Velvet*, and yet *Blue Velvet* is a far creepier/sicker/nastier film, simply because Jeffrey Beaumont is a sufficiently 3-D character for us to feel about/for/with. Since the really disturbing stuff in *Blue Velvet* isn't about Frank Booth or anything Jeffrey discovers about Lumberton but about the fact that a part of Jeffrey himself gets off on voyeurism and primal violence and degeneracy, and since Lynch carefully sets up his film both so that we feel a/f/w Jeffrey and so that we (I, anyway) find some parts of the sadism and degeneracy he witnesses compelling and somehow erotic, it's little wonder that I find Lynch's movie "sick" — nothing sickens me like seeing on-screen some of the very parts of myself I've gone to the movies to try to forget about.

Wild at Heart's characters, on the other hand, aren't "round" or 3-D. (This was apparently by design.) Sailor and Lula are inflated parodies of Faulknerian passion; Santo and Marietta and Bobby Peru are cartoon ghouls, collections of wicked grins and Kabuki hysterics. The movie itself is incredibly violent (horrible beatings, bloody auto wrecks, dogs stealing amputated limbs, Willem DaFoe's head blown off by a shotgun and flying around the set like a pricked balloon), but the violence comes off less as sick than as empty, a stream of stylized gestures. And empty

not because the violence is gratuitous or excessive but because none of it involves a living character through whom our capacities for horror or shock could be accessed. *Wild at Heart*, though it won at Cannes, didn't get very good reviews in the U.S., and it wasn't an accident that the most savage attacks came from female critics, nor that they particularly disliked the film's coldness and emotional poverty. See for just one example *Film Comment's* Kathleen Murphy, who saw *Wild at Heart* as little more than "a litter of quotation marks. As voyeurs, we're encouraged to twitch and giggle at a bracketed reality: well-known detritus from pop-culture memory, a kind of cinematic vogue-ing that passes for the play of human emotions." (This was not the only pan-job along these lines, and to be honest most of them had a point.)

The thing is that Lynch's uneven oeuvre presents a whole bunch of paradoxes. His best movies tend to be his sickest, and they tend to derive a lot of their emotional power from their ability to make us feel complicit in their sickness. And this ability in turn depends on Lynch's defying a historical convention that has often served to distinguish avant-garde, "nonlinear" art film from commercial narrative film. Nonlinear movies, i.e. ones without a conventional plot, usually reject the idea of strong individual characterization as well. Only one of Lynch's movies, *The Elephant Man*, has had a conventional linear narrative.¹³ But most of them (the best) have devoted quite a lot of energy to character. I.e. they've had human beings in them. It may be that Jeffrey, Merrick, Laura et al. function for Lynch as they do for audiences, as nodes of identification and engines of emotional pain. The extent (large) to which Lynch seems to identify with his movies' main characters is one more thing that makes the films so disturbingly "personal." The fact that he doesn't seem to identify much with his *audience* is what makes the movies "cold," though the detachment has some advantages as well.

trivia tidbit w/ respect to (10)

Wild at Heart, starring Laura Dern as Lula and Nicolas Cage as Sailor, also features Diane Ladd as Lula's mother. The actress Diane Ladd hap-

¹³ (This isn't counting *Dune*, which was in the dreadful position of looking like it wanted to have one but not in fact having one.)

pens to be the actress Laura Dern's real mother. *Wild at Heart* itself, for all its heavy references to *The Wizard of Oz*, is actually a pomish remake of Sidney Lumet's 1959 *The Fugitive Kind*, which starred Anna Magnani and Marlon Brando. The fact that Cage's performance in *Wild at Heart* strongly suggests either Brando doing an Elvis imitation or vice versa is not an accident, nor is the fact that both *Wild at Heart* and *The Fugitive Kind* use fire as a key image, nor is the fact that Sailor's beloved snakeskin jacket — "a symbol of my belief in freedom and individual choice" — is just like the snakeskin jacket Brando wore in *The Fugitive Kind*. *The Fugitive Kind* happens to be the film version of Tennessee Williams's little-known *Orpheus Descending*, a play which in 1960, enjoying a new vogue in the wake of Lumet's film adaptation, ran Off-Broadway in NYC and featured Bruce Dern and Diane Ladd, Laura Dern's parents, who met and married while starring in this play.

The extent to which David Lynch could expect a regular civilian viewer of *Wild at Heart* to know about any of these textual and organic connections is: 0; the extent to which he cares whether anybody got it or not is apparently: also 0.

11 last bit of (10) used as a segue into the issue of what exactly David Lynch seems to want from you

Movies are an authoritarian medium. They vulnerabilize you and then dominate you. Part of the magic of going to a movie is surrendering to it, letting it dominate you. The sitting in the dark, the looking up, the tranced distance from the screen, the being able to see the people on the screen without being seen by the people on the screen, the people on the screen being so much bigger than you, prettier than you, more compelling than you, etc. Film's overwhelming power isn't news. But different kinds of movies use this power in different ways. Art film is essentially teleological: it tries in various ways to "wake the audience up" or render us more "conscious." (This kind of agenda can easily degenerate into pretentiousness and self-righteousness and condescending horsetwaddle, but the agenda itself is large-hearted and fine.) Commercial film doesn't seem like it cares very much about an audience's

instruction or enlightenment. Commercial film's goal is to "entertain," which usually means enabling various fantasies that allow the moviegoer to pretend he's somebody else and that life is somehow bigger and more coherent and more compelling and attractive and in general just more entertaining than a moviegoer's life really is. You could say that a commercial movie doesn't try to wake people up but rather to make their sleep so comfortable and their dreams so pleasant that they will fork over money to experience it — this seduction, a fantasy-for-money transaction, is a commercial movie's basic point. An art film's point is usually more intellectual or aesthetic, and you usually have to do some interpretive work to get it, so that when you pay to see an art film you're actually paying to do work (whereas the only work you have to do w/r/t most commercial film is whatever work you did to afford the price of the ticket).

David Lynch's movies are often described as occupying a kind of middle ground between art film and commercial film. But what they really occupy is a whole third different kind of territory. Most of Lynch's best films don't really *have* much of a point, and in lots of ways they seem to resist the film-interpretive process by which movies' (certainly avant-garde movies') central points are understood. This is something the British critic Paul Taylor seems to get when he says that Lynch's movies are "to be experienced rather than explained." Lynch's movies are indeed susceptible to a variety of sophisticated interpretations, but it would be a serious mistake to conclude from this that his movies' point is "film-interpretation is necessarily multivalent" or something — they're just not that kind of movie.

Nor are they *seductive*, though, at least in the commercial senses of being comfortable or linear or High-Concept or "feel-good." You almost never in a Lynch movie get the sense that the point is to "entertain" you, and never that the point is to get you to fork over money to see it. This is one of the unsettling things about a Lynch movie: you don't feel like you're entering into any of the standard unspoken/unconscious contracts you normally enter into with other kinds of movies. This is unsettling because in the absence of such an unconscious contract we lose some of the psychic protections we normally (and necessarily) bring to bear on a medium as powerful as film. That is, if we know on some level what a movie *wants* from us, we can erect certain

internal defenses that let us choose how much of ourselves we give away to it.¹⁴ The absence of point or recognizable agenda in Lynch's films, though, strips these subliminal defenses and lets Lynch get inside your head in a way movies normally don't. This is why his best films' effects are often so emotional and nightmarish (we're defenseless in our dreams, too).

This may, in fact, be Lynch's true and only agenda: just to get inside your head.¹⁵ He sure seems to care more about penetrating your head than about what he does once he's in there. Is this "good" art? It's hard to say. It seems — once again — either ingenious or psychopathic.

12 one of the relatively picayune *Lost Highway* scenes I got to be on the set of

Given his movies' penchant for creepy small towns, Los Angeles might seem an unlikely place for Lynch to set *Lost Highway*, and at first I'm thinking its choice might represent either a cost-cutting move or a grim sign of Lynch having finally Gone Hollywood.

LA in January, though, turns out to be plenty Lynchian in its own right. Surreal/banal juxtapositions and interpenetrations are everywhere you look. The cab from LAX has a DDS machines attached to the meter so you can pay the fare by major credit card. Or there's my hotel's¹⁶ lobby, which is filled with beautiful Steinway piano music, except when you go over to put a buck in the piano player's snifter or whatever it turns out there's nobody playing, the piano's playing itself, but it's not a player

¹⁴ I know I'm not putting this well; it seems too complicated to be put well. It has something to do with the fact that some movies are too scary or intense for younger viewers: a little kid, whose psychic defenses aren't yet developed, can be terribly frightened by a horror movie that you or I would regard as cheesy and dumb.

¹⁵ The way *Lost Highway* makes the idea of head-entry literal is not an accident.

¹⁶ (*Premiere* magazine puts its writers in extremely snazzy hotels, by the way. I strongly doubt all hotels in LA are like this.)

piano, it's a regular Steinway with a weird computerized box attached to the underside of its keyboard; the piano plays 24 hours a day and never once repeats a song. My hotel's in what's either West Hollywood or the downscale part of Beverly Hills; two clerks at the registration desk start arguing the point when I ask where exactly in LA we are. The argument goes on for an absurdly long time with me just standing there.

My hotel room has unbelievably fancy and expensive French doors that open out onto a balcony, except the balcony's exactly ten inches wide and has an iron fence with decorations so sharp-looking you don't want to get anywhere near it. I don't think the French doors and balcony are meant to be a joke. There's an enormous aqua-and-salmon mall across the street, very upscale, with pricey futuristic escalators slanting up across the mall's exterior, and yet I never in three days see a single person a- or descend the escalator; the mall is all lit up and open and seems totally deserted. The winter sky seems smogless but unreal, its blue the same supersaturant blue as *Blue Velvet's* opening's famous sky.

LA has a big city's street musicians, but here the musicians play on median strips instead of on the sidewalk or subway, and patrons throw change and fluttering bills at them from their speeding cars, many with the casual accuracy of long practice. On the median strips between the hotel and David Lynch's sets, most of the street musicians were playing instruments like finger-cymbals and citterns.

Fact: in my three days here for *Premiere* magazine I will meet two (2) different people named Balloon.

The major industry around here seems to be valet parking; even some of the fast food restaurants here have valet parking; I'd love to have the West Hollywood/Beverly Hills concession on maroon valet sportcoats. A lot of the parking attendants have long complicated hair and look sort of like the Italian male model who's on Harlequin Romance covers. In fact pretty much everybody on the street seems ridiculously good-looking. Everybody is also extremely well- and fashionably dressed; by the third day I figure out that the way to tell poor and homeless people is that they look like they dress off the rack.¹⁷ The only even marginally ravaged-

¹⁷ I know things like this sound like a cheap gag, but I swear I'm serious. The incongruous realism of cheap gags is what made the whole thing Lynchian.

looking persons in view are the hard-faced Latin guys selling oranges out of grocery carts on whatever median strips aren't already taken by cittern players. Supermodels can be seen running across four-lane roads against the light and getting honked at by people in fuchsia Saabs and tan Mercedeses.

And it's true, the big stereotype: from any given vantage at any given time there are about four million cars to be seen on the roads, and none of them seems to be unwaxed. People here have got not only vanity license plates but vanity license-plate *frames*. And just about everybody talks on the phone as they drive; after a while you get the crazy but unshakable feeling that they're all talking to each other, that whoever's talking on the phone as they drive is talking to somebody else who's driving.

On the first night's return from the set, a Karmann-Ghia passed us on Mulholland with its headlights off and an older woman behind the wheel holding a paper plate between her teeth and *still* talking on a phone.

So the point is Lynch isn't as out of his filmic element in LA as one might have initially feared.

Plus the location helps make this movie "personal" in a new way, because LA is where Lynch and his S.O., Ms. Mary Sweeney,¹⁸ make their home. Corporate and technical headquarters for Asymmetrical Productions is the house right next door to theirs. Two houses down on the same street is the house Lynch has chosen to use for the home of Bill Pullman and brunette Patricia Arquette in *Lost Highway*'s first act. It's a house that looks rather a lot like Lynch's own, a house whose architecture could be called Spanish in roughly the same way Goya could be called Spanish.

A film's director usually has a number of Assistant Directors, whose various responsibilities are firmly established by Hollywood convention. The First Assistant Director's responsibility is the maximally smooth ordered flow of the set. He's in charge of coordinating details, shouting for quiet on the set, worrying, and yelling at people and being disliked for it. This allows the director himself to be kind of a benign and unhassled monarch, occupied mostly with high-level creative concerns and popu-

¹⁸ Mary Sweeney is one of *Lost Highway*'s three producers. Her main responsibilities seem to be the daily rushes and the rough cut and its storage and organization. She was Lynch's editor on *Fire Walk with Me*.

lar with the crew in a kind of grandfatherly way. *Lost Highway's* First Assistant Director is a veteran 1st A.D. named Scott Cameron, who wears khaki shorts and has stubble and is good-looking in a kind of unhappy way.¹⁹ The Second Assistant Director is in charge of scheduling and is the person who makes up the daily Call Sheet, which outlines the day's production schedule and says who has to show up where and when. There's also a Second Second Assistant Director,²⁰ who's in charge of interfacing with the actors and actresses and making sure their makeup and costumes are OK and going to summon them from their trailers when the stand-ins are done blocking off the positions and angles for a scene and everything's ready for the first string to come on.

Part of the 2nd A.D.'s daily Call Sheet is a kind of charty-looking précis of the scenes to be shot that day; it's called a "One Line Schedule" or "One Liner." Here is what January 8's One Liner looks like:

(1) Scs 112 INT MR. EDDY'S MERCEDES /DAY/ 1 pgs

MR. EDDY²¹ DRIVES MERCEDES, PETE²² LISTENS FOR CAR TROUBLE.

¹⁹ (One *Lost Highway* crewperson described Scott Cameron as "the Mozart of stress," whatever that's supposed to mean.)

²⁰ (not "Third Assistant," for some firmly established reason)

²¹ (= Robert Loggia)

²² (= Balthazar Getty, about whom the less said the better, probably, except maybe to say that he looks sort of like Tom Hanks and John Cusack and Charlie Sheen all mashed together and then emptied of some vital essence. He's not particularly tall, but he looks tall in *Lost Highway's* footage because he has extremely poor posture and David Lynch has for some reason instructed him to exaggerate the poor posture. As a Hot Young Male Actor, Balthazar Getty is to Leonardo DiCaprio roughly what a Ford Escort is to a Lexus. His breakthrough role was as Ralph in the latest *Lord of the Flies*, in which he was bland and essenceless but not terrible. He was miscast and misdirected as a homeless kid in *Where the Day Takes You* (like how does a homeless kid manage to have fresh mousse in his hair every day?) and really good in a surly bit part in *Mr. Holland's Opus*.

To be frank, it's almost impossible for me to separate predictions about how good Balthazar Getty's going to be in *Lost Highway* from my impressions of him as a human being around the set, which latter impressions were so uniformly negative that it's probably better not to say too much about it. For just one thing, he'd annoy hell out

(2) Scs 113 *EXT MULHOLLAND DRIVE /DAY/ 1/8 pgs*

MR. EDDY TAKES THE CAR FOR A CRUISE, INFINITI MOVES UP FAST BEHIND THEM

(3) Scs 114 *EXT MR. EDDY'S MERCEDES /DAY/ 1/8 pgs*

MR. EDDY LETS INFINITI PASS AND FORCES IT OFF ROAD

These car-intensive scenes are, as was mentioned, being shot in Griffith Park, a roughly Delaware-sized expanse out in the foothills of the Santa Monicas. Imagine a kind of semi-arid Yellowstone, full of ridges and buttes and spontaneous little landslides of dirt and gravel. Asymmetrical's advance team has established what's called a Base Camp of about a dozen trailers along one of the little roads between Mulholland and the San Diego freeway,²³ and Security has blocked off areas of sev-

of everybody between takes by running around trying to borrow everybody's cellular phone for an "emergency." I'll confess that I eavesdropped on some of his emergency cellular phone conversations, and in one of them he said to somebody "But what did she say about *me*?" three times in a row. For another thing, he was a heavy smoker but never had his own cigarettes and was always bumming cigarettes from crewpeople who you could tell were making about 1% of what he was making on this movie. I admit that none of these are exactly capital offenses, but they added up. Getty also suffered from comparison with his stand-in, who was apparently his friend and who always stood right near him, wearing an identical auto-shop jumpsuit with "Pete" sewn in cursive on the breast and an identically gruesome ersatz carbuncle on his forehead, and who was laid back and cool and very funny — e.g. when I expressed surprise that so much time on a movie set was spent standing around waiting with nothing to do, Balthazar Getty's stand-in was the one who said "We actually work for free; it's the waiting around we get paid for," which maybe you had to be there but in the context of the mind-shattering boredom of standing around the set all day seemed incredibly funny.

OK, fuck it: the single most annoying thing about Balthazar Getty was that whenever David Lynch was around Getty would be very unctuous and over-respectful and asskissy, but when Lynch wasn't around Getty would make fun of him and do an unkind imitation of his distinctive speaking voice (w/r/t which see below) that wasn't a very good imitation but was clearly intended to be disrespectful and mean.)

²³ Eleven trailers, actually, most of them from Foothill Studio Equipment Rentals of Glendale and Transcord Mobile Studios of Burbank. All the trailers are detached and up on blocks. The Honeywagon is the fourth trailer in the line. There are trailers for Lights, Props, F/X, Wardrobe, Grippish stuff, and some for the bigger stars in the cast, though the stars' trailers don't have their names or a gold star on the door or anything. The F/X trailer flies a Jolly Roger. Hard grunge issues from the Lighting trailer, and

eral other roads for the driving scenes, burly guys with walkie-talkies and roadie-black T-shirts forming barricades at various places to keep joggers and civilian drivers from intruding into the driving shots or exposing the production to insurance liability during stunts. LA civilians are easygoing about being turned back from the barricades and seem as blasé as New Yorkers about movies being filmed on their turf.

Griffith Park, though lovely in a kind of desiccated, lunar way, turns out to be a thoroughgoing Lynchian filming environment, with perfusive sunshine and imported-beer-colored light but a weird kind of subliminal ominousness about it. This ominousness is hard to put a finger on or describe in any sensuous way. It turns out that there's a warning out that day for a Santa Ana Wind, a strange weather phenomenon that causes fire hazards²⁴ and also a weird but verifiable kind of high-ion anxiety in man and beast alike. LA's murder rate is apparently higher

outside a couple other trailers tough-looking crewpeople sit in canvas chairs reading *Car Action* and *Guns and Ammo*. Some portion of the movie's crew spends just about all their time in Base Camp doing various stuff in trailers, though it's hard to figure out just what they're doing, because these crewpeople have the kind of carny-esque vibe about them of people who spend a lot of time with their trailers and regard the trailers as their special territory and aren't particularly keen on having you climb up in there and see what they're doing. But a lot of it is highly technical. The area closest to daylight in the back of the Lighting and/or Camera-Related trailer, for example, has tripods and lightpoles and attachments of all lengths and sizes lined up very precisely, like ordnance. Shelves near the tripods have labeled sections for "2 × MIGHTY," "2 × 8 JUNIOR," "2 × MICKEY MOLES," "2 × BABY BJ's," on and on. Boxes of lenses in rows have labels like

LONG PRIMES

50mm "E" T2 4'

75mm "E" T2 4'

100mm "E" T2 4'

A FILTS/4 × 5/DIOPS

SPC 200-108A

B FILTS 4 × 5

WIDEPRIMES

30mm "C" T3 4'

40mm "E" T2 3.5'

²⁴ LAFD inspectors were all over the set, glaring at you if you lit a cigarette, and nicotinic conditions were pretty rugged because Scott Cameron decreed that people could smoke only if they were standing near the sand-filled butt can, of which there was apparently only one, and David Lynch, a devoted smoker of American Spirit All-Natural cigarettes, tended to commandeer the butt can, and people who wanted to smoke and were not near Lynch pretty much had to chew their knuckle and wait for him to turn his back so they could steal the can.

during Santa Ana Wind periods than any other time, and in Griffith Park it's easy to confirm that something's up atmospherically: sounds sound harsher, smells smell stronger, breathing tastes funny, the sunlight has a way of diffracting into spikes that penetrate all the way to the back of the skull, and overall there's a weird leathery stillness to the air, the West-Coast equivalent of the odd aquarial stillness that tends to precede Mid-western thunderstorms. The air smells of sage and pine and dust and distant creosote. Wild mustard, yucca, sumac, and various grasses form a kind of five-o'clock shadow on the hillsides, and scrub oak and pine jut at unlikely angles, and some of the trees' trunks are creepily curved and deformed, and there are also a lot of obstreperous weeds and things with thorns that discourage much hiking around. The texture of the site's flora is basically that of a broom's business end. A single red-tailed hawk circles overhead through the whole first day of shooting, just one hawk, and always the same circle, so that after a while the circle seemed etched. The road where the set is is like a kind of small canyon between a butte on one side and an outright cliff on the other. The cliff affords both a good place to study the choreography of the set and, in the other direction, a spectacular view of Hollywood to the right and to the left the S.F. Valley and the Santa Monicas and the distant sea's little curved rind of blue. It's hard to get straight on whether Asymmetrical chose this particular bit of Griffith Park or whether it was simply assigned to them by the LA office that grants location-licenses to movies, but it's good tight cozy site. The whole thing forms a rough triangle, with the line of Base Camp trailers extending down one small road and the catering trailer and salad bars and picnic tables for lunch spread out along a perpendicular road and a hypotenusally-angled larger road between them that's where the actual location set is; it's the c^2 road with the set that's got the great hill and cliff for viewing.

Basically what happens all morning is that Robert Loggia's sinister black Mercedes 6.9 and the tailgating Infiniti and the production's big complicated camera truck will go off and be gone for long stretches of time, tooling back and forth along the same barricaded mile of what is ostensibly Mulholland Drive while Lynch and his Director of Photography try to capture whatever particular combinations of light and angle and speed add up to a distinctively Lynchian shot of people driving. While the car-filming is going on, the other 60 or so members of

the location crew and staff all perform small maintenance and preparatory tasks and lounge around and shoot the shit and basically kill enormous amounts of time. There are, on location today, grips, propmasters, sound people, script people, dialogue coaches, camera people, electricians, makeup and hair people, a First Aid guy, production assistants, stand-ins, stunt doubles, producers, lighting technicians, on-set dressers, set decorators, A.D.'s, unit publicists, location managers, costume people with rollable racks of clothes like you see in NYC's Garment District, continuity people, script people, special effects coordinators and technicians, LAFD cigarette-discouragers, a representative of the production's insurance underwriter, a variety of personal assistants and factota and interns, and a substantial number of persons with no discernible function at all. The whole thing is tremendously complex and confusing, and a precise census is hard to take because a lot of the crew look generally alike and the functions they perform are extremely technical and complicated and performed with high-speed efficiency, and when everybody's in motion the set's choreography is the visual equivalent of an Altman group-dialogue, and it takes a while even to start picking up on the various distinguishing cues in appearance and gear that allow you to distinguish one species of crew personnel from another, so that the following rough taxonomy doesn't start emerging until late on 9 January:

Grips tend to be large beefy blue-collar guys with walrus mustaches and baseball caps and big wrists and beer-guts but extremely alive alert intelligent eyes — they look like very bright professional movers, which is basically what they are. The production's electricians, lighting guys, and F/X guys, who are also as a rule male and large, are distinguished from the grips via their tendency to have long hair in a ponytail and to wear T-shirts advertising various brands of esoteric hi-tech gear. None of the grips wear earrings, but over 50% of the technical guys wear earrings, and a couple have beards, and four of the five electricians for some reason have Fu Manchu mustaches, and with their ponytails and pallor they all have the distinctive look of guys who work in record- or head-shops; plus in general the recreational-chemical vibe around these more technical blue-collar guys is very decidedly not a beer-type vibe.

The male camera operators, for some reason, tend to wear pith helmets, and the Steadicam operator's pith helmet in particular looks

authentic and armed-combat-souvenirish, with a fine mesh of coir all over it for camouflage and a jaunty feather in the band.

A majority of the camera and sound and makeup crew are female, but a lot of these, too, have a similar look: 30ish, makeupless, insouciantly pretty, wearing faded jeans and old running shoes and black T-shirts, and with lush well-conditioned hair tied carelessly out of the way so that strands tend to escape and trail and have to be chuffed out of the eyes periodically or brushed away with the back of a ringless hand — in sum, the sort of sloppily pretty tech-savvy young woman you can just tell smokes pot and owns a dog. Most of these hands-on technical females have that certain expression around the eyes that communicates the exact same attitude communicated by somebody's use of the phrase "Been there, done that." At lunch several of them won't eat anything but bean curd, and they make it clear that they don't regard certain grips' comments about what bean curd looks like as in any way worthy of response. One of the technical women, the production's still-photographer — whose name is Suzanne and is fun to talk to about her dog — has on the inside of her forearm a tattoo of the Japanese character for "strength," and she can manipulate her forearm's muscles in such a way as to make the ideogram bulge Nietzscheanly out and then recede.

A lot of the script people and wardrobe people and production assistants are also female, but they're of a different genus — younger, less lean and more vulnerable, without the technically savvy self-esteem of the camera/sound women. As opposed to the hands-on women's weltanschauung cool, the script and P.A. females all have the same pained "I-went-to-a-really-good-college-and-what-am-I-doing-with-my-life" look in their eyes, the sort of look where you know that if they're not in twice-a-week therapy it's only because they can't afford it.

Another way to distinguish different crewpeople's status and function is to look at what kind of personal communication gear they have. The rank-and-file grips are pretty much the only people without any kind of personal communicative gear. The rest of the hands-on and technical crew carry walkie-talkies, as do the location manager, the people in touch with the camera truck, and the burly guys manning the road's barricades. Many of the other crew carry cellular phones in snazzy hip-side

holsters, and the amount of cellular-phone talking going on more than lives up to popular stereotypes about LA and cellulators.²⁵ The Second A.D., a young black lady named Simone whom I get to interact with a lot because she's always having to inform me that I'm in the way of something and need to move (though she isn't ever crabby or impolite about it), has an actual cellular *headset* instead of just a holstered cellular phone, though with Simone the headset isn't an affectation: the poor lady spends more time conferring on the phone than any non-teenage human being I've ever seen, and the headset leaves her hands free to write stuff on the various clipboards she carries around in an actual clipboard-holder.

The set's true executive class — line producer, unit publicist, underwriter, D.P. — have personal pagers that sometimes will all sound at

²⁵ After absorbing so much about it from the media, actually visiting Los Angeles in person produces a curious feeling of relief at finding a place that actually confirms your stereotyped preconceptions instead of confounding them and making you loathe your own ignorance and susceptibility to media stereotype: viz. stuff like cellular phones, rampant pulchritude, the odd ambient blend of New Age gooeyness and right-wing financial acumen. (E.g., one of the two prenominate people named Balloon, a guy who wore Birkenstocks and looked like he subsisted entirely on cellulose, had worked out an involved formula for describing statistical relationships between margin-calls on certain kinds of commodity futures and the market value of certain types of real estate, and had somehow gotten the impression that I and/or *Premiere* magazine ought to be interested in describing the formula in this article in such a way as to allow Balloon to start up a kind of pricey newsletter-type thing where people would for some reason pay large amounts of money for access to this formula, and for the better part of an afternoon he was absolutely unshakable, his obtuseness almost Zen — like a Lynchian bus-station wacko with an advanced degree from the L.S.E. — and the only way to peel him off me was to promise on my honor to find some way to work him and his formula into this article, an honor-obligation I've now fulfilled, though if *Premiere* wants to take the old editorial machete to it there's not really any way I can be held responsible.

(By the way, in case you think I'm lying or exaggerating about having met two unconnected persons named Balloon on this visit, the other Balloon was part of a rather unaccomplished banjo-and-maraca street duo on the median strip just outside the lavish deserted mall across the street from the gorgeous balcony that was too narrow and hazardously fenced to step onto, and the reason I approached this Balloon was that I wanted to know whether the wicked welts on his face-and-neck-area were by any chance from errant quarters or half-dollars thrown at him from speeding cars, which they turned out not to be.))

once but just slightly out of synch, producing in the weird ionized Santa Ana air a sound-blend that fully qualifies as Lynchian. And that's how you can tell people apart telecommunicationally. (The exception to every rule is Scott Cameron, the 1st A.D., who bears with Sisyphean resignation the burden of two walkie-talkies, a cellular phone, a pager, and a very serious battery-powered bullhorn all at the same time.)

But then so about like once an hour everybody's walkie-talkie starts crackling, and then a couple minutes later Lynch and the actual shooting team and cars come hauling back in to Base and everybody on the crew springs into frantic but purposeful action so that from the specular vantage of the roadside cliff the set resembles an anthill that's been stirred with a stick. Sometimes the shooting team comes back just to change cars for a shot: the production has somehow acquired two identical black Mercedes 6.9's, and each is now embellished with different kind of filmmaking attachments and equipment. For a particular shot inside the moving Mercedes, some of the grips construct a kind of platform out of reticulate piping and secure it to the hood of the car with clamps and straps, and then various other technicians attach a 35mm Panavision camera, several different complicatedly angled mole and Bambino lights, and a 3' \times 5' bounce²⁶ to various parts of the hood's platform. This stuff is locked down tight, and the 2nd Asst. Cameraperson, a breathtaking and all-business lady everyone addresses as "Chesney,"²⁷ fiddles complexly with the camera's anamorphic lens and various filters. When sunlight off the Mercedes's windshield becomes a problem,²⁸ the Director of Photography and the camera guy in the especially authentic-looking pith helmet and Chesney all huddle and

²⁶ (looks like a blank canvas or stunted sail, helps concentrate light where they want it)

²⁷ It's unclear whether this is her first name or her last name or a diminutive or what. Chesney is dressed in standard grunge flannel and dirty sneakers, has about 8 feet of sun-colored hair piled high on her head and held (tenuously) in place with sunglasses, and can handle an anamorphic lens like nobody's business.

²⁸ (There's one young guy on the crew whose entire function seems to be going around with a bottle of Windex and a roll of paper towels and Windexing every glass surface blindingly clean.)

confer and decide to brace a gauzy diffusion filter between the camera and the windshield.

The camera truck is a complex green pickup whose side door says it's the property of *Camera Trucks, Unltd.* The back part has three tiers for gear, lights, a Steadicam, a video monitor and sound feed, and then little seats for David Lynch and the Director of Photography and a camera operator. When it's back at Base, technical crewpeople converge on the truck in clusters of entomological-looking avidity and efficiency.

During the crews' frantic activity — all of it punctuated with loud bullhorn commands from Scott Cameron — the technicians from the camera truck and the stand-ins from the cars take their own turns standing around and talking on cellulators and rooting through the baskets of corporate snacks on the snack table looking for stuff they like; i.e. it's their turn to stand around and kill time. The exterior driving-shots all have stand-ins in the cars, but usually when the shooting team returns to Base the actual name actors will emerge from their trailers and join the roil. Robert Loggia in particular likes to come out and stand around chatting with his stand-in, who's of the same meaty build and olive complexion and has the same strand-intensive balding pattern and craggy facial menace as Loggia, and of course is identically dressed in mobster Armani, so that from the distance of the roadside cliff their conversation looks like its own surreal metacommentary on parallel identity crises.

David Lynch himself uses the down-time between takes to confer with A.D.'s and producers and to drink coffee and/or micturate into the undergrowth, and to smoke American Spirits and walk pensively around the Mercedeses and camera truck's technical fray, sometimes holding one hand to his cheek in a way that recalls Jack Benny. Now 50 years old, Lynch still looks like an adult version of the kind of kid who gets beat up a lot at recess. He's large, not exactly fat but soft-looking, and is far and away the palest person anywhere in view, his paleness dwarfing even the head-shop pallor of the lighting and F/X guys. He wears a black long-sleeved dress shirt with every possible button buttoned, baggy tan Chinos that are too short and flap around his ankles, and a deep-sea fisherman's cap with a very long bill. The tan cap matches his pants, and his socks match both each other and his shirt, suggesting an extremely nerdy costume that's been chosen and coordinated with care — a suggestion that with Lynch seems somehow endear-

ing rather than pathetic. The sunglasses he wears on the camera truck are the cheap bulgey wrap-around kind that villains in old Japanese monster movies used to wear. The overstiff quality of his posture suggests either an ultradisciplinarian upbringing or a back brace. The general impression is that of a sort of geeky person who doesn't especially care whether people think he's geeky or not, an impression which equals a certain kind of physical dignity.

Lynch's face is the best thing about him, and I spend a lot of time staring at it from a variety of perspectives as he works the set. In photos of Lynch as a young man, he looks rather uncannily like James Spader, but he doesn't look like James Spader anymore. His face is now full in the sort of way that makes certain people's faces square, and it's pale and soft-looking — the cheeks you can tell are close-shaved daily and then moisturized afterward — and his eyes, which never once do that grotesque looking-in-opposite-directions-at-once thing they were doing on the 1990 *Time* cover, are large and mild and kind. In case you're one of the people who figure that Lynch must be as "sick" as his films, know that he doesn't have the beady or glassy look one associates with degeneracy-grade mental trouble. His eyes are good eyes: he looks at his set with very intense interest, but it's a warm and full-hearted interest, sort of the way you look when you're watching somebody you love doing something you also love. He doesn't fret or intrude on any of the technicians, though he will come over and confer when somebody needs to know what exactly he wants for the next set-up. He's the sort who manages to appear restful even in activity; i.e. he looks both very alert and very calm. There might be something about his calm that's a little creepy — one tends to think of really high-end maniacs being oddly calm, e.g. the way Hannibal Lecter's pulse rate stays under 80 as he bites somebody's tongue out.

13 what several different members of the crew and production staff, some of whom have been to film school, have to say about *Lost Highway*

"David's idea is to do this like dystopic vision of LA. You could do a dystopic vision of New York, but who'd care? New York's been done before."

"It's about deformity. Remember *Eraserhead*? This guy's going to be the ultimate Penishead."

"This is a movie that explores psychosis subjectively."

"I'm sure not going to go see it, I know that."

"It's a reflection on society as he sees it."

"This is a sort of a middle ground between an art film and a major studio release. This is a hard niche to work in. It's an economically fragile niche, you could say."

"This is his territory. This is taking us deeper into a space he's already carved out in previous work already — subjectivity and psychosis."

"He's doing a *Diane Arbus* number on LA, showing the *slimy undersection* of a dream-city. *Chinatown* did it, but it did it in a *historical* way, as a type of *noir-history*. David's film's about *madness*; it's *subjective*, not *historical*."

"It's like, if you're a doctor or a nurse, are you going to go buy tickets to go see an operation for fun in your spare time, when you're done working?"

"This film represents schizophrenia *performatively*, not just *representationally*. This is done in terms of *loosening of identity*, *ontology*, and *continuity in time*."

"Let me just say I have utmost respect — for David, for the industry, for what David means to this industry. Let me say for the record I'm excited. That I'm thrilled and have the utmost respect."

"It's a specialty film. Like *The Piano*, say. I mean it's not going to open in a thousand theaters."

" 'Utmost' is one word. There is no hyphen in 'utmost.' "

"It's about LA as hell. This is not unrealistic, if you want my opinion."

"It's a product like any other in a business like any other."

"It's a Negative Pick-Up. Fine Line, New Line, Miramax — they're all interested."

"David is the Id of the Now. If you quote me, say I quipped it. Say 'David is the Id of the Now,' quipped _____, who is the film's _____."

"David, as an artist, makes his own choices about what he wants. He makes a film when he feels he has something to say. The people who are interested in his films . . . some [of his films] are better than others."

Some are perceived as better than others. David does not look at this as his area of concern."

"He's a genius. You have to understand this. In these areas he's not like you and me."

"The head-changings are being done with makeup and lights. No CGIs."²⁹

"Read *City of Quartz*. That's what this film's about right there in a nutshell."

"Some of [the producers] were talking about Hegel, whatever the hell *that* has to do with it."

"Let me just say I hope you're not planning to compromise him or us or the film in any way."

trivia tidbit

Laura Dern's soft blond hairstyle as Sandy in *Blue Velvet* is identical to Charlotte Stewart's soft blond hairstyle as Mary in *Eraserhead*.

14 a section that's a mix of extrapolations from other sections and is impossible to come up with a unified heading for

The word *postmodern* is admittedly overused, but the incongruity between the peaceful health of his mien and the creepy ambition of his films is something about David Lynch that is resoundingly postmodern. Other postmodern things about him are his speaking voice — which can be described only as sounding like Jimmy Stewart on acid — and the fact that it's literally impossible to know how seriously to take what he says. This is a genius auteur whose vocabulary in person consists of things like "Okey-doke" and "Marvy" and "Terrif" and "Gee." After the last car-filming run and then the return to Base Camp, as people are dismantling cameras and bounces and the unbelievably alluring Chesney is putting the afternoon's unused film under a reflective NASA blanket, Lynch three times in five minutes says "Golly!" Not one of these times does he utter "Golly!" with any evident irony or disingenuity or even

²⁹ (= "Computer-Generated Images," as in *Jumanji*)

the flattened affect of somebody who's parodying himself. (Let's also remember that this is a man with every button on his shirt buttoned and highwater pants: it's like the only thing missing is a pocket protector.) During this same tri-"Golly!" interval, though, about fifty yards down the little hypotenusal road the catering trailer's on Mr. Bill Pullman, who's sitting in a big canvas director's chair getting interviewed for his E.P.K.,³⁰ is leaning forward earnestly and saying of David Lynch both: "He's so truthful — that's what you build your trust on as an actor, with a director" and: "He's got this kind of *modality* to him, the way he speaks, that lets him be very open and honest and at the same time very sly. There's an irony about the way he speaks."

Whether *Lost Highway* is a smash hit or not, its atmosphere of tranced menace is going to be really good for Bill Pullman's career. From movies like *Sleepless in Seattle* and *While You Were Sleeping* and (ulp) *Casper*, I formed this view of Pullman the actor as a kind of good and decent but basically ineffectual guy, an *edgeless* guy; I always thought of him as kind of a watered-down version of the already pretty watery Jeff Daniels.³¹ *Lost Highway* — for which Pullman has either lost weight or done Nautilus or both (he has, at any rate, somehow grown a set of cheekbones), and in which he's creepy and tormented and plays jagged, haunting jazz saxophone under a supersaturated red-and-blue spot, and in which his face contorts in agony over the mutilated corpse of Patricia Arquette and then changes more than once into somebody else's face — is going to reveal edges and depths in Pullman that I believe will make him a true Star. For the E.P.K. he's in a tight all-black jazz musician's costume, and his makeup, already applied for a night scene

³⁰ I.e. "Electronic Press Kit," a bite-intensive interview that *Lost Highway*'s publicists can then send off to *Entertainment Tonight*, local TV stations that want Pullman-bites, etc. If the movie's a huge hit, the E.P.K.'s can then apparently be woven together into one of those *Behind the Scenes at the Making of Thus-and-Such* documentaries that HBO seems to be so fond of. Apparently all name stars have to do an E.P.K. for every movie they make; it's in their contract or something. I watched everybody's E.P.K. except Balthazar Getty's.

³¹ (Pullman's turn as the jilted con man in *The Last Seduction* had some edge to it, but Pullman seems to have done such a good acting job in that one that few people realized it was him.)

in a couple hours, gives his face a creepily Reaganesque ruddiness, and while various kinds of crepuscular bugs plague the E.P.K. interviewer and cameraman and sound guy these bugs don't seem to come anywhere near Pullman, as if he's already got the aura of genuine stardom around him, the kind you can't quite define but that even insects can sense — it's like he's not even quite *there*, in his tall chair, or else simultaneously there and somewhere primally else.

Ms. Patricia Arquette has been bad in everything since *True Romance* without this fact seeming to have hurt her career any. It's hard to predict how audiences will react to her in *Lost Highway*. This is a totally new role(s) for her, as far as I can see. Her most credible performances to date have been as ingenues, plucky characters somehow in over their head, whereas in *Lost Highway* she herself is a part of the over-the-head stuff Bill Pullman and Balthazar Getty get plunged into. *Lost Highway*'s female lead is the kind of languid smoky narrow-eyed Incredibly-Sexy-But-Dangerous-Woman-With-Mindblowing-Secrets *noir*-type role that in recent years only *Body Heat*'s Kathleen Turner and *Miller's Crossing*'s Marcia Gay Harden have pulled off without falling into parody or camp. From the footage I saw, Arquette is OK but not great in *Lost Highway*. She vamps a lot, which is apparently the closest she can come to Sexy But Dangerous. The big problem is that her eyes are too opaque and her face too set and rigid to allow her to communicate effectively without dialogue, and so a lot of the long smoky silences Lynch requires of her come off stiff and uncomfortable, as if Arquette's forgotten her lines and is worrying about it. Even so, the truth is that Patricia Arquette is so outlandishly pretty in the film's rough-cut footage that at the time I didn't notice a whole lot aside from how she looked, which, seeing as how her Duessa-like character basically functions as an object in the film, seems OK, though I'm still a little uncomfortable saying it.³²

Lost Highway will also, I predict, do huge things for the career of

³² *Premiere* magazine's industrial juice or no, I wasn't allowed to watch footage of the porn videos both her characters frolic in, so I can't evaluate the harder-core parts of her performance in *Lost Highway*. It'll be interesting to see how much of the porn videos survives the final cut and the M.P.A.A.'s humorless review. If much of what the videos are rumored to contain appears in the final *Lost Highway*, Arquette may win a whole new kind of following.

Mr. Robert Blake,³³ who's been cast seemingly out of nowhere here as The Mystery Man. The choice of Blake shows in Lynch the same sort of genius for spotting villain-potential that led to his casting Hopper as Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet* and Willem DaFoe as Bobby Peru in *Wild at Heart*, an ability to detect and resurrect menacing depths in actors who seemed long ago to have lost any depths they'd ever had.³⁴ Gone, in *Lost Highway*, is the sensitive tough-guy of *Baretta* and the excruciating self-parody of Blake's stoned appearances on *The Tonight Show*; it's like Lynch has somehow reawakened the venomous charisma that made Blake's 1967 performance in *In Cold Blood* such a sphincter-loosener. Blake's Mystery Man is less over-the-top than was Frank Booth: The M.M. is himself velvety, almost effete, more reminiscent of Dean Stockwell's horrific cameo than of Hopper's tour de force. Blake is also here virtually unrecognizable as the steroidic cop who said things like "Dat's the name of dat tune" on '70s TV. Lynch has him many pounds lighter, hair shorn, creamed and powdered to a scotophilic pallor that makes him look both ravaged and Satanic — Blake here looks like a cross between the Klaus Kinski of *Nosferatu* and Ray Walston on some monstrous dose of PCP.

The most controversial bit of casting in *Lost Highway* is going to be Richard Pryor as Balthazar Getty's boss at the auto shop. Meaning Richard Pryor as in the Richard Pryor who's got the multiple sclerosis that's stripped him of 75 pounds and affects his speech and causes his eyes to bulge and makes him seem like a cruel child's parody of a damaged person. In *Lost Highway*, Richard Pryor's infirmity is meant to be grotesque and to jar against all our old memories of the "real" Pryor. Pryor's scenes are the parts of *Lost Highway* where I like David Lynch least: Pryor's painful to watch, and not painful in a good way or a way that has anything to do with the business of the movie, and I can't help thinking that Lynch is exploiting Pryor the same way John Waters likes to exploit

³³ R. Blake, born 1933 as Michael James Gubitosi in Nutley, New Jersey, was one of the child stars of *Our Gang*, was unforgettable as one of the killers in *In Cold Blood*, etc.

³⁴ Dennis Hopper's last powerful role before *Blue Velvet* had been the 1977 *Apocalypse Now*, and he'd become a kind of Hollywood embarrassment. DaFoe had been sort of typecast as Christ after *Platoon* and *Last Temptation*, though it's true that his sensualist's lips had whispered menace even on the cross.

Patricia Hearst, i.e. letting the actor think he's been hired to act when he's really been hired to be a spectacle, an arch joke for the audience to congratulate themselves on getting. And yet at the same time Pryor's symbolically perfect in this movie, in a way: the dissonance between the palsied husk on-screen and the vibrant man in our memory means that what we see in *Lost Highway* both is and is not the "real" Richard Pryor. His casting is thematically intriguing, then, but coldly, meanly so, and watching his scenes I again felt that I admired Lynch as an artist and from a distance but would have no wish to hang out in his trailer or be his friend.

15 addendum to (14) re Lynch and race

Except now for Richard Pryor, has there ever been even like *one* black person in a David Lynch movie?³⁵ There've been plenty of dwarves and amputees and spastics and psychotics, but have there been any other, more shall we say culturally significant minorities? Latins? Hasi-dim? Gay people?³⁶ Asian-Americans? . . . There was that sultry oriental sawmill owner in *Twin Peaks*, but her ethnicity was, to say the least, overshadowed by her sultriness.³⁷

I.e. why are Lynch's movies all so *white*?

The likely answer involves the fact that Lynch's movies are essentially apolitical. Let's face it: get white people and black people together on the

³⁵ And Richard Pryor's in the movie as Richard-Pryor-the-celebrity-who's-now-neurologically-damaged, not as a black person.

³⁶ Dean Stockwell's Ben in *Blue Velvet* was probably technically gay, but what was relevant about Ben was his creepy effeminacy, which Frank called Ben's "*suaveness*." The only homoerotic subcurrent in *Blue Velvet* is between Jeffrey and Frank, and neither of them are what you'd call gay.

³⁷ (There were also, come to think of it, those two black hardware store employees (both named Ed) in *Blue Velvet*, but, again, their blackness was incidental to the comic-symbolic issue of one Ed's blindness and the other Ed's dependence on the blind Ed's perfect memory for hardware-prices. I'm talking about characters who are, like, *centrally* minorityish in Lynch's movies.)

screen and there's going to be an automatic political voltage. Ethnic and cultural and political tensions. And Lynch's films are in no way about ethnic or cultural or political tensions. The films are all about tensions, but these tensions are always in and between individuals. There are, in Lynch's movies, no real groups or associations. There are sometimes alliances, but these are alliances based on shared obsessions. Lynch's characters are essentially alone (Alone): they're alienated from pretty much everything except the particular obsessions they've developed to help ease their alienation (. . . or is their alienation in fact a consequence of their obsessions? and does Lynch really hold an obsession or fantasy or fetish to be any kind of true anodyne for human alienation? does the average fetishist have any kind of actual *relationship* with the fetish?) Anyway, *this* kind of stuff is Lynch's movies' only real politics, viz. the primal politics of Self/Exterior and Id/Object. It's a politics all about religions, darkneses, but for Lynch these have nothing to do with testaments or skin.

interconnected trivia tidbits: what kind of car Patricia Arquette has, whom she's married to, etc.

Patricia Arquette owns a brand-new maroon Porsche, which Porsche must be very special to her because she seems to be in the freaking thing all the time, even driving it the 200 feet between her trailer and the set in Griffith Park, so that the crew always has to move carts full of equipment out of the way to let her pass, yelling at one another to be careful of Patricia Arquette's beautiful car's paint job. Plus Arquette always has her stand-in with her in the car — they're apparently close friends and go everywhere together in the maroon Porsche, from a distance looking eerily identical. Patricia Arquette's husband is Mr. Nicolas Cage, who worked with Lynch on both *Wild at Heart* and the video of *Industrial Symphony #1*.

16 Patricia Arquette's description of the central challenge for Bill Pullman and Balthazar Getty w/r/t the "motivation" of *Lost Highway's* metamorphosing protagonist (whose name when he's Bill Pullman is "Fred" and when he's Balthazar Getty is "Pete")

"The question for Bill and Balthazar is what kind of woman-hater is Fred[-dash-Pete]? Is he the kind of woman-hater who goes out with a woman and fucks her and then never calls her again, or is he the kind who goes out with a woman and fucks her and then kills her? And the real question to explore is: how different are these kinds?"

11a why what David Lynch wants from you might be a good thing

If you will keep in mind the outrageous kinds of moral manipulation we suffer at the hands of most contemporary directors,³⁸ it will be easier to convince you that something in Lynch's own clinically detached filmmaking is not only refreshing but redemptive. It's not that Lynch is somehow "above" being manipulative; it's more like he's just not interested. Lynch's movies are about images and stories in his head that he wants to see made external and complexly real. (His most illuminating statement about the making of *Eraserhead* involves "the exhilaration he felt standing in the set of Mr. and Mrs. X's apartment and realizing that what he had pictured in his mind had been exactly recreated").

³⁸ (Wholly random examples:) Think of the way Parker's *Mississippi Burning* fumbled at our consciences like a freshman at a coed's brassiere, or of *Dances with Wolves'* crude, smug reversal of old westerns' "White=Good & Indian=Bad" equation. Or think of movies like *Fatal Attraction* and *Unlawful Entry* and *Die Hard I-III* and *Copycat*, etc., where we're so relentlessly set up to approve the villains' bloody punishment in the climax that we might as well be wearing togas. (The formulaic in-exorability of these villains' defeat does give the climaxes an oddly soothing, ritualistic quality, and it makes the villains martyrs in a way, sacrifices to our desire for black-and-white morality and comfortable judgment . . . I think it was during the original *Die Hard* that I first rooted consciously for the villain.)

It's already been observed that Lynch brings to his art the sensibility of a very bright child immersed in the minutiae of his own fantasies. This kind of approach has disadvantages: his films are not especially sophisticated or intelligent; there is little critical judgment or quality-control-type checks on ideas that do not work; things tend to be hit-or-miss. Plus the films are, like a fantasy-prone little kid, self-involved to an extent that's pretty much solipsistic. Hence their coldness.³⁹

But part of the involution and coldness derives from the fact that David Lynch seems truly to possess the capacity for detachment from response that most artists only pay lip-service to: he does pretty much what he wants and appears not to give much of a shit whether you like it or even *get* it. His loyalties are fierce and passionate and almost entirely to himself.

I don't mean to make it sound like this kind of thing is wholly good or that Lynch is some kind of paragon of integrity. His passionate inwardness is refreshingly childlike, but I notice that very few of us choose to make small children our friends. And as for Lynch's serene detachment from people's response, I've noticed that, while I can't help but respect and sort of envy the moral nerve of people who truly do not care what others think of them, people like this also make me nervous, and I tend to do my admiring from a safe distance. On (again) the other hand, though, we need to acknowledge that in this age of Hollywood "message" films and focus-group screenings and pernicious Nielsenism — Cinema By Referendum, where we vote with our entertainment-dollar either for spectacular effects to make us feel something or for lalations of moral clichés that let us remain comfortable in our numbness — Lynch's rather sociopathic disinterest in our approval seems refreshing/redemptive (if also creepy).

³⁹ (solipsism being not exactly the cheery crackling hearth of psychophilosophical orientations)

17 the only part of this article that's really in any way "behind the scenes"

Asymmetrical Productions' headquarters is, as mentioned, the house next door to Lynch's house. It really is a house. In the yard outside the door are a department store swingset and a Big Wheel on its side. I don't think anybody really lives there; I think it gets treated as an annex to Lynch's own house and that Lynch's children's play spills over. You enter A.P.HQ through a sliding glass door into what is the house's kitchen, with a Mannington tile floor and a dishwasher and a fridge with witty magnets on it, plus there's a kitchen table where a college-age kid is sitting working diligently at a laptop, and at first it all looks like some ur-domestic scene of a college kid home at his folks' house for the weekend or something, except when you come closer you start to notice that the kid's got a scary haircut and a serious facial tic, and what he's doing on the laptop is cueing a still-frame shot of the brunette Patricia Arquette's mutilated corpse against some set of coded specs on a clipboard that's propped against his Boynton mug of coffee. It's unclear who the kid is or just what he's doing or whether he even gets paid to do it.⁴⁰

As in much of the Hollywood Hills, Asymmetrical's street is more

⁴⁰ For somebody whose productions are supposed to be top-secret, Lynch and Asymmetrical seem awfully tolerant about having functionless interns and weird silent young people hanging around the *Lost Highway* set. Isabella Rossellini's cousin is here, "Alesandro," a 25ish guy ostensibly taking photos of the production for an Italian magazine but in fact mostly just walking around with his girlfriend in a leather mini-skirt (the girlfriend) and grooming his crewcut and smoking nowhere near the butt can. Plus there's also "Rolande" (pronounced as an iamb: "Rolande"; my one interchange with Rolande consisted mostly of Rolande emphasizing this point). Rolande is an incredibly creepy French kid with a forehead about three feet high who somehow charmed Lynch into taking him on as an intern and lurks on the set constantly and does nothing but stand around with a little spiral notebook taking notes in a dense crabbed psychotically neat hand. Pretty much the whole crew and staff agrees that Rolande's creepy and unpleasant to be around and that God only knows what the tiny precise notes really concern, but Lynch apparently actually likes the kid, and claps him avuncularly on the shoulder whenever the kid's within reach, at which the kid smiles very widely and then afterward walks away rubbing his shoulder and muttering darkly.

like a canyon, and people's yards are 80° slopes with ice-plant lawns, and the HQ's entry/kitchen is actually on the house's top level, so that if you want access to the rest of the house you have to go down a vertiginous spiral staircase. This and various other stuff satisfies reasonable expectations of Lynchianism w/r/t the director's working environment. The HQ's bathroom's Cold knob doesn't work and the toilet seat won't stay up, but on the wall next to the toilet is an incredibly advanced and expensive Panasonic XDP phone with what looks like a fax device attached. Asymmetrical's receptionist, Jennifer, a statutorily young female who'd be gorgeous if she didn't have Nosferatic eyeshadow and cadet-blue nail polish on, blinks so slowly you have to think she's putting you on, and she declines to say for the record what music she's listening to on her headphones, and on her desk next to the computer and phones is one copy of Deleuze and Guittarri's *Anti-Oedipus* and one copy each of *Us* and *Wrestling World*. Lynch's own office — way below ground, so that its windows must look out on solid earth — has a big solid gray door that's closed and looks not only locked but somehow *armed*, such that only a fool would try the knob, but attached to the wall right outside the office door are two steel boxes labeled OUT and IN. The OUT box is empty, and the IN contains, in descending order: a 5,000-count box of Swingline-brand staples; a large promotional envelope, with Dick Clark's and Ed McMahon's pointillist faces on it, from the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes, addressed directly to Lynch at Asymmetrical's address; and a fresh shrink-wrapped copy of Jack Nicklaus's instructional video *Golf My Way*. Your guess here is as good as mine.

Premiere's industry juice (plus the niceness of Mary Sweeney) means that I am allowed to view a lot of *Lost Highway's* rough-cut footage in the actual Asymmetrical Productions editing room, where the movie itself is going to be edited. The editing room is off the kitchen and living room on the house's top level, and it clearly used to be either the master bedroom or a really ambitious study. It has gray steel shelves filled with complexly coded canisters of *Lost Highway's* exposed film. One wall is covered with rows of index cards listing each scene of *Lost Highway* and detailing technical stuff about it. There are also two separate KEM-brand flatbed viewing and editing machines, each with its own monitor and twin reel-to-reel devices for cueing up both film and sound. I am

actually allowed to pull up a padded desk chair and sit there right in front of one of the KEMs's monitor while an assistant editor loads various bits of footage. The chair is old and much-used, its padded seat beaten over what has clearly been thousands of hours into the form-fitting mold of a bottom, a bottom quite a lot larger than mine — the bottom, in fact, of a combination workaholic and inveterate milkshake-drinker — and for an epiphanic moment I'm convinced I'm sitting in Mr. David Lynch's own personal film-editing chair.

The editing room is dark, understandably, its windows first blacked out and then covered with large Abstract Expressionist paintings. These paintings, in which the color black predominates, are by David Lynch, and with all due respect are not very interesting, somehow both derivative-seeming and amateurish, like stuff you could imagine Francis Bacon doing in jr. high.⁴¹

Far more interesting are some paintings by David Lynch's ex-wife that are stacked canted against the wall of Mary Sweeney's office downstairs. It's unclear whether Lynch owns them or has borrowed them from his ex-wife or what, but in *Lost Highway*'s first act, three of these paintings are on the wall above the couch where Bill Pullman and Patricia Arquette sit watching creepy invasive videos of themselves asleep. This is just one of David Lynch's little personal flourishes in the movie. The most interesting of the paintings, done in bright primaries with a blunt blocky style that's oddly affecting, is of a lady in a tank-top sitting at a table reading a note from her child. Superimposed above this scene in the painting is the text of the note, on what is rendered as wide-rule notebook paper and in a small child's hand, w/ reversed e's and so on:

⁴¹ Lynch's best-known painting, entitled *Oww, God, Mom, the Dog He Bited Me*, is described by Lynch in his *Time* cover-story this way: "There's a clump of Band-Aids in the bottom corner. A dark background. A stick figure whose head is a blur of blood. Then a very small dog made out of glue. There is a house, a little black bump. It's pretty crude, pretty primitive and minimal. I like it." The painting itself, which is oddly absent from the book *Images* but has been published as a postcard, looks like the sort of diagnostic House-Tree-Person drawing that gets a patient institutionalized in a hurry.

Dear Mom I keep having my fish
dream. They bite my face!
Tell dad I dont take naps. The
fishes are skinny an mad
I miss you. His wife makes me
eat trouts and anchovys The
fishes make nosis they blow
bubbels. How are you [unreadable] you
fine? don't forget to lock
the doors the fishes [unreadable]
me they hate me.

Love form

DANA

In the painting, what's moving is that the text of the note is superimposed such that parts of the mother's head obscure the words — those are the "[unreadable]" parts. I do not know whether Lynch has a child named Dana, but considering who the artist is, plus the painting's child's evident situation and pain, it seems both deeply moving and sort of sick that Lynch would display this piece on a wall in his movie. Anyway, now you know the text of one of Bill Pullman's *objets*, and you can get the same kind of chill I got if you squint hard enough in the movie's early interior scenes to make the picture out. And you'll be even more chilled in a later interior scene in Bill Pullman and Patricia Arquette's house, a post-murder scene, in which the same three paintings hang above the sofa but are now, without any discernible reason or explanation, upside down. The whole thing's not just creepy but *personally* creepy.

trivia tidbit

When *Eraserhead* was a surprise hit at festivals and got a distributor, David Lynch rewrote the cast and crew's contracts so they would all get a share of the money, which they still do, every fiscal quarter, in perpetuity. Lynch's A.D. and P.A. and everything else on *Eraserhead* was Catherine Coulson, who was later the Log Lady on *Twin Peaks*. Plus Coulson's son, Thomas, played the little boy who brings Henry's ablated head into the pencil factory. Lynch's loyalty to actors and his homemade,

co-op-style productions make his oeuvre a veritable pommo-anthill of interfilm connections.

trivia tidbit

It is very hard for a hot director to avoid what Hollywood mental-health specialists term "Tarantino's Disorder," which involves the sustained delusion that being a good movie director entails that you will also be a good movie actor. In 1988 Lynch actually starred, with Ms. Isabella Rossellini, in Tina Rathbone's *Zelly and Me*, which if you've never heard of it you can probably figure out why.

9a the cinematic tradition it's curious that nobody seems to have observed Lynch comes right out of (w/ an epigraph)

It has been said that the admirers of
The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari are usually
painters, or people who think and remember
graphically. This is a mistaken conception.

— Paul Rotha, "The German Film"

Since Lynch was originally trained as a painter (an Ab-Exp painter at that), it seems curious that no film critics or scholars⁴² have ever treated of his movies' clear relation to the classical Expressionist cinema tradition of Wiene, Kobe, early Lang, etc. And I am talking here about the very simplest and most straightforward sort of definition of *Expressionist*, viz. "Using objects and characters not as representations but as transmitters for the director's own internal impressions and moods."

Certainly plenty of critics have observed, with Kael, that in Lynch's movies "There's very little art between you and the filmmaker's psyche

⁴² (not even the Lynch-crazy French film pundits who've made his movies the subject of more than two dozen essays in *Cahiers du Cinéma* — the French apparently regard Lynch as God, though the fact that they also regard Jerry Lewis as God might salt the compliment a bit . . .)

... because there's less than the usual amount of inhibition." They've noted the preponderance of fetishes and fixations in Lynch's work, his characters' lack of conventional introspection (an introspection which in film equals "subjectivity"), his sexualization of everything from an amputated limb to a bathrobe's sash, from a skull to a "heart plug,"⁴³ from split lockets to length-cut timber. They've noted the elaboration of Freudian motifs that tremble on the edge of parodic cliché — the way Marietta's invitation to Sailor to "fuck Mommy" takes place in a bathroom and produces a rage that's then displaced onto Bob Ray Lemon; the way Merrick's opening dream-fantasy of his mother supine before a rampaging elephant has her face working in what's interpretable as either terror or orgasm; the way Lynch structures *Dune's* labyrinthian plot to highlight Paul Etrades's "escape" with his "witch-mother" after Paul's father's "death" by "betrayal." They have noted with particular emphasis what's pretty much Lynch's most famous scene, *Blue Velvet's* Jeffrey Beaumont peering through a closet's slats as Frank Booth rapes Dorothy while referring to himself as "Daddy" and to her as "Mommy" and promising dire punishments for "looking at me" and breathing through an unexplained gas mask that's overtly similar to the O₂-mask we'd just seen Jeffrey's own dying Dad breathing through.

They've noted all this, critics have, and they've noted how, despite its heaviness, the Freudian stuff tends to give Lynch's movies an enormous psychological power; and yet they don't seem to make the obvious point that these very heavy Freudian riffs are powerful instead of ridiculous because they're deployed Expressionistically, which among other things means they're deployed in an old-fashioned, pre-postmodern way, i.e. nakedly, *sincerely*, without postmodernism's abstraction or irony. Jeffrey Beaumont's interslat voyeurism may be a sick parody of the Primal Scene, but neither he (a "college boy") nor anybody else in the movie ever shows any inclination to say anything like "Gee, this is sort of like a sick parody of the good old Primal Scene" or even betrays any awareness that a lot of what's going on is — both symbolically and psychoanalytically — heavy as hell. Lynch's movies, for all their unsubtle archetypes and symbols and intertextual references and c., have about them the remarkable unself-consciousness that's kind of

⁴³ (q.v. Baron Harkonen's "cardiac rape" of the servant boy in *Dune's* first act)

the hallmark of Expressionist art — nobody in Lynch's movies analyzes or metacriticizes or hermeneuticizes or anything,⁴⁴ including Lynch himself. This set of restrictions makes Lynch's movies fundamentally unironic, and I submit that Lynch's lack of irony is the real reason some cinéastes — in this age when ironic self-consciousness is the one and only universally recognized badge of sophistication — see him as a naïf or a buffoon. In fact, Lynch is neither — though nor is he any kind of genius of visual coding or tertiary symbolism or anything. What he is is a weird hybrid blend of classical Expressionist and contemporary postmodernist, an artist whose own “internal impressions and moods” are (like ours) an olla podrida of neurogenic predisposition and phylogenic myth and psychoanalytic schema and pop-cultural iconography — in other words, Lynch is sort of G. W. Pabst with an Elvis ducktail.

This kind of contemporary Expressionist art, in order to be any good, seems like it needs to avoid two pitfalls. The first is a self-consciousness of form where everything gets very mannered and refers cutely to itself.⁴⁵ The second pitfall, more complicated, might be called “terminal idiosyncrasy” or “antiempathetic solipsism” or something: here the artist's own perceptions and moods and impressions and obsessions come off as just too particular to him alone. Art, after all, is supposed to be a kind of communication, and “personal expression” is cinematically interesting only to the extent that what's expressed finds and strikes chords within the viewer. The difference between experiencing art that succeeds as communication and art that doesn't is rather like the difference between being sexually intimate with a person and watching that person

⁴⁴ Here's one reason why Lynch's characters have this weird *opacity* about them, a narcotized over-earnestness that's reminiscent of lead-poisoned kids in Midwestern trailer parks. The truth is that Lynch needs his characters stolid to the point of retardation; otherwise they'd be doing all this ironic eyebrow-raising and finger-steepling about the overt symbolism of what's going on, which is the very last thing he wants his characters doing.

⁴⁵ Lynch did a one-and-a-half-gainer into this pitfall in *Wild at Heart*, which is one reason the movie comes off so pomo-cute, another being the ironic intertextual self-consciousness (q.v. *Wizard of Oz*, *Fugitive Kind*) that Lynch's better Expressionist movies have mostly avoided.

masturbate. In terms of literature, richly communicative Expressionism is epitomized by Kafka, bad and onanistic Expressionism by the average Graduate Writing Program avant-garde story.

It's the second pitfall that's especially bottomless and dreadful, and Lynch's best movie, *Blue Velvet*, avoided it so spectacularly that seeing the movie when it first came out was a kind of revelation for me. It was such a big deal that ten years later I remember the date — 30 March 1986, a Wednesday night — and what the whole group of us MFA Program⁴⁶ students did after we left the theater, which was to go to a coffeehouse and talk about how the movie was a revelation. Our Graduate MFA Program had been pretty much of a downer so far: most of us wanted to see ourselves as avant-garde writers, and our professors were all traditional commercial Realists of the *New Yorker* school, and while we loathed these teachers and resented the chilly reception our "experimental" writing received from them, we were also starting to recognize that most of our own avant-garde stuff really was solipsistic and pretentious and self-conscious and masturbatory and bad, and so that year we went around hating ourselves and everyone else and with no clue about how to get experimentally better without caving in to loathsome commercial-Realistic pressure, etc. This was the context in which *Blue Velvet* made such an impression on us. The movie's obvious "themes" — the evil flip side to picket-fence respectability, the conjunctions of sadism and sexuality and parental authority and voyeurism and cheesy '50s pop and *Coming of Age*, etc. — were for us less revelatory than the way the movie's surrealism and dream-logic *felt*: they felt *true*, *real*. And the couple things just slightly but marvelously off in every shot — the Yellow Man literally dead on his feet, Frank's unexplained gas mask, the eerie industrial thrum on the stairway outside Dorothy's apartment, the weird dentate-vagina sculpture⁴⁷ hanging on an otherwise bare wall over Jeffrey's bed at home, the dog drinking from the hose in the stricken dad's hand — it wasn't just that these touches seemed

⁴⁶ (= Master of Fine Arts Program, which is usually a two-year thing for graduate students who want to write fiction or poetry professionally)

⁴⁷ (I'm hoping now in retrospect this wasn't something Lynch's ex-wife did . . .)

eccentrically cool or experimental or arty, but that they communicated things that felt *true*. *Blue Velvet* captured something crucial about the way the U.S. present acted on our nerve endings, something crucial that couldn't be analyzed or reduced to a system of codes or aesthetic principles or workshop techniques.

This was what was epiphanic for us about *Blue Velvet* in grad school, when we saw it: the movie helped us realize that first-rate experimentalism was a way not to "transcend" or "rebel against" the truth but actually to *honor* it. It brought home to us — via images, the medium we were suckled on and most credulous of — that the very most important artistic communications took place at a level that not only wasn't intellectual but wasn't even fully conscious, that the unconscious's true medium wasn't verbal but imagistic, and that whether the images were Realistic or Postmodern or Expressionistic or Surreal or what-the-hell-ever was less important than whether they *felt true*, whether they rang psychic cherries in the communicatee.

I don't know whether any of this makes sense. But it's basically why David Lynch the filmmaker is important to me. I felt like he showed me something genuine and important on 3/30/86. And he couldn't have done it if he hadn't been thoroughly, nakedly, unpretentiously, unsophisticatedly himself, a self that communicates primarily itself — an Expressionist. Whether he is an Expressionist naïvely or pathologically or ultra-pomo-sophisticatedly is of little importance to me. What is important is that *Blue Velvet* rang cherries, and it remains for me an example of contemporary artistic heroism.

10a (w/ an epigraph)

All of Lynch's work can be described as
emotionally infantile. . . . Lynch likes to ride
his camera into orifices (a burlap hood's eyehole
or a severed ear), to plumb the blackness beyond.
There, id-deep, he fans out his deck of dirty pictures . . .

— Kathleen Murphy of *Film Comment*

One reason it's sort of heroic to be a contemporary Expressionist is that it all but invites people who don't like your art to make an ad hominem move from the art to the artist. A fair number of critics⁴⁸ object to David Lynch's movies on the grounds that they are "sick" or "dirty" or "infantile," then proceed to claim that the movies are themselves revelatory of various deficiencies in Lynch's own character,⁴⁹ troubles that range from developmental arrest to misogyny to sadism. It's not just the fact that twisted people do hideous things to one another in Lynch's films, these critics will argue, but rather the "moral attitude" implied by the way Lynch's camera records hideous behavior. In a way, his detractors have a point. Moral atrocities in Lynch movies are never staged to elicit outrage or even disapproval. The directorial attitude when hideousness occurs seems to range between clinical neutrality and an almost voyeuristic ogling. It's not an accident that Frank Booth, Bobby Peru, and Leland /"Bob" steal the show in Lynch's last three films, that there is almost a tropism about our pull toward these characters, because Lynch's camera is obsessed with them, loves them; they are his movies' heart.

Some of the ad hominem criticism is harmless, and the director himself has to a certain extent dined out on his "Master of Weird"/"Czar of Bizarre" image, see for example Lynch making his eyes go in two different directions for the cover of *Time*. The claim, though, that because Lynch's movies pass no overt "judgment" on hideousness/evil/sickness and in fact make the stuff riveting to watch, the movies are themselves

⁴⁸ (e.g.: Kathleen Murphy, Tom Carson, Steve Erickson, Laurent Vachaud)

⁴⁹ This critical two-step, a blend of New Criticism and pop psychology, might be termed the Unintentional Fallacy.

a- or immoral, even evil — this is bullshit of the rankest vintage, and not just because it's sloppy logic but because it's symptomatic of the impoverished moral assumptions we seem now to bring to the movies we watch.

I'm going to claim that evil is what David Lynch's movies are essentially about, and that Lynch's explorations of human beings' various relationships to evil are, if idiosyncratic and Expressionistic, nevertheless sensitive and insightful and true. I'm going to submit that the *real* "moral problem" a lot of us cinéastes have with Lynch is that we find his truths morally uncomfortable, and that we do not like, when watching movies, to be made uncomfortable. (Unless, of course, our discomfort is used to set up some kind of commercial catharsis — the retribution, the bloodbath, the romantic victory of the misunderstood heroine, etc. — i.e. unless the discomfort serves a conclusion that flatters the same comfortable moral certainties we came into the theater with.)

The fact is that David Lynch treats the subject of evil better than just about anybody else making movies today — better and also differently. His movies aren't anti-moral, but they are definitely anti-formulaic. Evil-ridden though his filmic world is, please notice that responsibility for evil never in his films devolves easily onto greedy corporations or corrupt politicians or faceless serial kooks. Lynch is not interested in the devolution of responsibility, and he's not interested in moral judgments of characters. Rather, he's interested in the psychic spaces in which people are capable of evil. He is interested in Darkness. And Darkness, in David Lynch's movies, *always wears more than one face*. Recall, for example, how *Blue Velvet*'s Frank Booth is both Frank Booth and "the Well-Dressed Man." How *Eraserhead*'s whole postapocalyptic world of demonic conceptions and teratoid offspring and summary decapitations is evil . . . yet how it's "poor" Henry Spencer who ends up a baby-killer. How in both TV's *Twin Peaks* and cinema's *Fire Walk with Me*, "Bob" is also Leland Palmer, how they are, "spiritually," both two and one. *The Elephant Man*'s sideshow barker is evil in his exploitation of Merrick, but so too is good old kindly Dr. Treeves — and Lynch very carefully has Treeves admit this aloud. And if *Wild at Heart*'s coherence suffered because its myriad villains seemed fuzzy and interchangeable, it was because they were all basically the same thing, i.e. they were all in the service of the same force or

spirit. Characters are not themselves evil in Lynch movies — evil wears them.

This point is worth emphasizing. Lynch's movies are not about *monsters* (i.e. people whose intrinsic natures are evil) but about *hauntings*, about evil as environment, possibility, force. This helps explain Lynch's constant deployment of *noirish* lighting and eerie sound-carpet and grotesque figurants: in his movies' world, a kind of ambient spiritual antimatter hangs just overhead. It also explains why Lynch's villains seem not merely wicked or sick but ecstatic, transported: they are, literally, *possessed*. Think here of Dennis Hopper's exultant "I'LL FUCK ANYTHING THAT MOVES" in *Blue Velvet*, or of the incredible scene in *Wild at Heart* when Diane Ladd smears her face with lipstick until it's devil-red and then screams at herself in the mirror, or of "Bob"'s look of total demonic ebullience in *Fire Walk with Me* when Laura discovers him at her dresser going through her diary and just about dies of fright. The bad guys in Lynch movies are always exultant, orgasmic, most fully present at their vilest moments, and this in turn is because they are not only actuated by evil but literally *inspired*⁵⁰: they have yielded themselves up to a Darkness way bigger than any one person. And if these villains are, at their worst moments, riveting for both the camera and the audience, it's not because Lynch is "endorsing" or "romanticizing" evil but because he's *diagnosing* it — diagnosing it without the comfortable carapace of disapproval and with an open acknowledgment of the fact that one reason why evil is so powerful is that it's hideously vital and robust and usually impossible to look away from.

Lynch's idea that evil is a force has unsettling implications. People can be good or bad, but forces simply *are*. And forces are — at least potentially — everywhere. Evil for Lynch thus moves and shifts,⁵¹ *pervades*; Darkness is in everything, all the time — not "lurking below" or "lying

⁵⁰ (i.e. "in-spired," = "affected, guided, aroused by divine influence," from the Latin *inspirare*, "breathed into")

⁵¹ It's possible to decode Lynch's fetish for floating/flying entities — witches on broomsticks, sprites and fairies and Good Witches, angels dangling overhead — along these lines. Likewise his use of robins = Light in *BV* and owl = Darkness in *TP*: the whole point of these animals is that they're mobile.

in wait" or "hovering on the horizon": evil is *here*, right now. And so are Light, love, redemption (since these phenomena are also, in Lynch's work, forces and spirits), etc. In fact, in a Lynchian moral scheme it doesn't make much sense to talk about either Darkness or about Light in isolation from its opposite. It's not just that evil is "implied by" good or Darkness by Light or whatever, but that the evil stuff is contained within the good stuff, *encoded* in it.

You could call this idea of evil Gnostic, or Taoist, or neo-Hegelian, but it's also Lynchian, because what Lynch's movies⁵² are all about is creating a narrative space where this idea can be worked out in its fullest detail and to its most uncomfortable consequences.

And Lynch pays a heavy price — both critically and financially — for trying to explore worlds like this. Because we Americans like our art's moral world to be cleanly limned and clearly demarcated, neat and tidy. In many respects it seems we *need* our art to be morally comfortable, and the intellectual gymnastics we'll go through to extract a black-and-white ethics from a piece of art we like are shocking if you stop and look closely at them. For example, the supposed ethical structure Lynch is most applauded for is the "Seamy Underside" structure, the idea that dark forces roil and passions seethe beneath the green lawns and PTA pot-lucks of Anytown, USA.⁵³ American critics who like Lynch applaud his "genius for penetrating the civilized surface of everyday life to discover the strange, perverse passions beneath" and his movies for providing "the password to an inner sanctum of horror and desire" and "evocations of the malevolent forces at work beneath nostalgic constructs."

It's little wonder that Lynch gets accused of voyeurism: critics have to make Lynch a voyeur in order to approve something like *Blue Velvet* from within a conventional moral framework that has Good on top/outside and Evil below/within. The fact is that critics grotesquely misread Lynch when they see this idea of perversity "*beneath*" and horror "*hidden*" as central to his movies' moral structure.

⁵² (with the exception of *Dune*, in which the good and bad guys practically wear color-coded hats — but *Dune* wasn't really Lynch's film anyway)

⁵³ This sort of interpretation informed most of the positive reviews of both *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*.

Interpreting *Blue Velvet*, for example, as a film centrally concerned with "a boy discovering corruption in the heart of a town"⁵⁴ is about as obtuse as looking at the robin perched on the Beaumonts' window-sill at the movie's end and ignoring the writhing beetle the robin's got in its beak.⁵⁵ The fact is that *Blue Velvet* is basically a coming-of-age movie, and, while the brutal rape Jeffrey watches from Dorothy's closet might be the movie's most horrifying scene, the *real* horror in the movie surrounds discoveries that Jeffrey makes about himself — for example, the discovery that a part of him is excited by what he sees Frank Booth do to Dorothy Vallens.⁵⁶ Frank's use, during the rape, of the words "Mommy" and "Daddy," the similarity between the gas mask Frank breathes through in extremis and the oxygen mask we've just seen Jeffrey's dad wearing in the hospital — this kind of stuff isn't there just to reinforce the Primal Scene aspect of the rape. The stuff's also there clearly to suggest that Frank Booth is, in a certain deep way, Jeffrey's "father," that the Darkness inside Frank is also encoded in Jeffrey. Gee-whiz Jeffrey's discovery not of dark Frank but of his own dark affinities with Frank is the engine of the movie's anxiety. Note for example that the long and somewhat heavy angst-dream Jeffrey suffers in the film's

⁵⁴ (which most admiring critics did — the quotation is from a 1/90 piece on Lynch in the *New York Times Magazine*)

⁵⁵ (Not to mention ignoring the fact that Frances Bay, as Jeffrey's Aunt Barbara, standing right next to Jeffrey and Sandy at the window and making an icky-face at the robin and saying "Who could eat a bug?" then — as far as I can tell, and I've seen the movie like eight times — proceeds to PUT A BUG IN HER MOUTH. Or at least if it's not a bug she puts in her mouth it's a tidbit sufficiently buggy-looking to let you be sure Lynch means *something* by having her do it right after she's criticized the robin for its diet. (Friends I've surveyed are evenly split on whether Aunt Barbara eats a bug in this scene — have a look for yourself.))

⁵⁶ As, to be honest, is a part of us, the audience. Excited, I mean. And Lynch clearly sets the rape scene up to be both horrifying and exciting. This is why the colors are so lush and the *mise en scène* so detailed and sensual, why the camera lingers on the rape, fetishizes it: not because Lynch is sickly or naively excited by the scene but because he — like us — is humanly, complexly excited by the scene. The camera's ogling is designed to implicate Frank and Jeffrey and the director and the audience all at the same time.

second act occurs not after he has watched Frank brutalize Dorothy but after he, Jeffrey, has consented to hit Dorothy during sex.

There are enough heavy clues like this to set up, for any marginally attentive viewer, what is *Blue Velvet*'s real climax, and its point. The climax comes unusually early,⁵⁷ near the end of the film's second act. It's the moment when Frank turns around to look at Jeffrey in the back seat of the car and says "You're like me." This moment is shot from Jeffrey's visual perspective, so that when Frank turns around in the seat he speaks both to Jeffrey and to us. And here Jeffrey — who's whacked Dorothy and liked it — is made exceedingly uncomfortable indeed; and so — if we recall that we too peeked through those closet-vents at Frank's feast of sexual fascism, and regarded, with critics, this scene as the film's most riveting — are we. When Frank says "You're like me," Jeffrey's response is to lunge wildly forward in the back seat and punch Frank in the nose — a brutally primal response that seems rather more typical of Frank than of Jeffrey, notice. In the film's audience, I, to whom Frank has also just claimed kinship, have no such luxury of violent release; I pretty much just have to sit there and be uncomfortable.⁵⁸

And I emphatically do not like to be made uncomfortable when I go to see a movie. I like my heroes virtuous and my victims pathetic and my villains' villainy clearly established and primly disapproved by both plot and camera. When I go to movies that have various kinds of hideousness in them, I like to have my own fundamental *difference* from sadists and fascists and voyeurs and psychos and Bad People unambiguously confirmed and assured by those movies. I like to judge. I like to be allowed to root for Justice To Be Done without the slight squirmy suspicion

⁵⁷ (prematurely!)

⁵⁸ I don't think it's an accident that of the grad-school friends I first saw *Blue Velvet* with in 1986, the two who were most disturbed by the movie — the two who said they felt like either the movie was really sick or they were really sick or both they and the movie were really sick, the two who acknowledged the movie's artistic power but declared that as God was their witness you'd never catch them sitting through *that* particular sickness-fest again — were both male, nor that both singled out Frank's smiling slowly while pinching Dorothy's nipple and looking out past Wall 4 and saying "You're like me" as possibly the creepiest and least pleasant moment in their personal moviegoing history.

(so prevalent and depressing in real moral life) that Justice probably wouldn't be all that keen on certain parts of *my* character, either.

I don't know whether you are like me in these regards or not . . . though from the characterizations and moral structures in the U.S. movies that do well at the box-office I deduce that there must be rather a lot of Americans who are exactly like me.

I submit that we also, as an audience, really like the idea of secret and scandalous immoralities unearthed and dragged into the light and exposed. We like this stuff because secrets' exposure in a movie creates in us impressions of epistemological privilege, of "penetrating the civilized surface of everyday life to discover the strange, perverse passions beneath." This isn't surprising: knowledge is power, and we (I, anyway) like to feel powerful. But we also like the idea of "secrets," "of malevolent forces at work *beneath* . . ." so much because we like to see confirmed our fervent hope that most bad and seamy stuff really *is* secret, "locked away" or "under the surface." We hope fervently that this is so because we need to be able to believe that our own hideousnesses and Darkneses are secret. Otherwise we get uncomfortable. And, as part of an audience, if a movie is structured in such a way that the distinction between surface/Light/good and secret/Dark/evil is messed with — in other words, not a structure whereby Dark Secrets are winched *ex machina* up to the Lit Surface to be purified by my judgment, but rather a structure in which Respectable Surfaces and Seamy Undersides are mingled, integrated, literally *mixed up* — I am going to be made acutely uncomfortable. And in response to my discomfort I'm going to do one of two things: I'm either going to find some way to punish the movie for making me uncomfortable, or I'm going to find a way to interpret the movie that eliminates as much of the discomfort as possible. From my survey of published work on Lynch's films, I can assure you that just about every established professional reviewer and critic has chosen one or the other of these responses.

I know this all looks kind of abstract and general. Consider the specific example of *Twin Peaks's* career. Its basic structure was the good old murder-whose-investigation-opens-a-can-of-worms formula that's right out of *Noir* 101 — the search for Laura Palmer's killer yields postmortem revelations of a double life (Laura Palmer = Homecoming Queen by Day & Laura Palmer = Tormented Coke-Whore by Night) that

mirrored a whole town's moral schizophrenia. The show's first season, in which the plot movement consisted mostly of more and more sub-surface hideousnesses being uncovered and exposed, was a huge smash. By the second season, though, the mystery-and-investigation structure's own logic began to compel the show to start getting more focused and explicit about who or what was actually responsible for Laura's murder. And the more explicit *Twin Peaks* tried to get, the less popular the series became. The mystery's final "resolution," in particular, was felt by critics and audiences alike to be deeply unsatisfying. And it was. The "Bob"/Leland/Evil Owl stuff was fuzzy and not very well rendered,⁵⁹ but the really deep dissatisfaction — the one that made audiences feel screwed and betrayed and fueled the critical backlash against the idea of Lynch as Genius Auteur — was, I submit, a moral one. I submit that Laura Palmer's exhaustively revealed "sins" required, by the moral logic of American mass entertainment, that the circumstances of her death turn out to be causally related to those sins. We as an audience have certain core certainties about sowing and reaping, and these certainties need to be affirmed and massaged.⁶⁰ When they were not, and as

⁵⁹ Worse, actually. Like most storytellers who use mystery as a structural device and not a thematic device, Lynch is way better at deepening and complicating mysteries than he is at wrapping them up. And the series' second season showed that he was aware of this and that it was making him really nervous. By its thirtieth episode, the show had degenerated into tics and shticks and mannerisms and red herrings, and part of the explanation for this was that Lynch was trying to divert our attention from the fact that he really had no idea how to wrap the central murder case up. Part of the reason I actually preferred *Twin Peaks*'s second season to its first was the fascinating spectacle of watching a narrative structure disintegrate and a narrative artist freeze up and try to shuck and jive when the plot reached a point where his own weaknesses as an artist were going to be exposed (just imagine the fear: this disintegration was happening on national TV).

⁶⁰ This is inarguable, axiomatic. In fact what's striking about most U.S. mystery and suspense and crime and horror films isn't these films' escalating violence but their enduring and fanatical allegiance to moral verities that come right out of the nursery: the virtuous heroine will not be serial-killed; the honest cop, who will not know his partner is corrupt until it's too late to keep the partner from getting the drop on him, will nevertheless somehow turn the tables and kill the partner in a wrenching confrontation; the predator stalking the hero/hero's family will, no matter how rational and ingenious he's been in his stalking tactics throughout the film, nevertheless turn

it became increasingly clear that they were not going to be, *Twin Peaks's* ratings fell off the shelf, and critics began to bemoan this once "daring" and "imaginative" series' decline into "self-reference" and "mannered incoherence."

And then *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, Lynch's theatrical "prequel" to the TV series, and his biggest box-office bomb since *Dune*, committed a much worse offense. It sought to transform Laura Palmer from dramatic object to dramatic subject. As a dead person, Laura's existence on the television show had been entirely verbal, and it was fairly easy to conceive her as a schizoid black/white construct — Good by Day, Naughty by Night, etc. But the movie, in which Ms. Sheryl Lee as Laura is on-screen more or less constantly, attempts to present this multivalent system of objectified personas — plaid-skirted coed/bare-breasted roadhouse slut/tormented exorcism-candidate/molested daughter — as an integrated and living whole: these different identities were all, the movie tried to claim, the same person. In *Fire Walk with Me*, Laura was no longer "an enigma" or "the password to an inner sanctum of horror." She now embodied, in full view, all the Dark Secrets that on the series had been the stuff of significant glances and delicious whispers.

This transformation of Laura from object/occasion to subject/person was actually the most morally ambitious thing a Lynch movie has ever tried to do — maybe an impossible thing, given the psychological context of the series and the fact that you had to be familiar with the series to make even marginal sense of the movie — and it required complex and contradictory and probably impossible things from Ms. Lee, who in my opinion deserved an Oscar nomination just for showing up and trying.

into a raging lunatic at the end and will mount a suicidal frontal assault; etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. The truth is that a major component of the felt suspense in contemporary U.S. suspense movies concerns how the filmmaker is going to manipulate various plot and character elements in order to engineer the required massage of our moral certainties. This is why the discomfort we feel at "suspense" movies is perceived as a pleasant discomfort. And this is why, when a filmmaker fails to wrap his product up in the appropriate verity-confirming fashion, we feel not disinterest or even offense but anger, a sense of betrayal — we feel that an unspoken but very important covenant has been violated.

The novelist Steve Erickson, in a 1992 review of *Fire Walk with Me*, is one of the few critics who gave any indication of even trying to understand what the movie was trying to do: "We always knew Laura was a wild girl, the homecoming femme fatale who was crazy for cocaine and fucked roadhouse drunks less for the money than the sheer depravity of it, but the movie is finally not so much interested in the titillation of that depravity as [in] her torment, depicted in a performance by Sheryl Lee so vixenish and demonic it's hard to know whether it's terrible or a tour de force. [But not trying too terribly hard, because now watch:] Her fit of the giggles over the body of a man whose head has just been blown off might be an act of innocence or damnation [get ready:] or both." Or both? Of course both. This is what Lynch is *about* in this movie: *both* innocence and damnation; *both* sinned-against and sinning. Laura Palmer in *Fire Walk with Me* is *both* "good" and "bad," and yet also neither: she's complex, contradictory, real. And we hate this possibility in movies; we hate this "*both*" shit. "*Both*" comes off as sloppy characterization, muddy filmmaking, lack of focus. At any rate that's what we criticized *Fire Walk with Me*'s Laura for.⁶¹ But I submit that the real reason we criticized and disliked Lynch's Laura's muddy *bothness* is that it required of us an empathetic confrontation with the exact same muddy *bothness* in ourselves and our intimates that makes the real world of moral selves so tense and uncomfortable, a *bothness* we go to the movies to get a couple hours' fucking relief from. A movie that requires that these features of ourselves and the world not be dreamed away or judged away or massaged away but *acknowledged*, and not just acknowledged but *drawn upon* in our emotional relationship to the heroine herself — this movie is going to make us feel uncomfortable, pissed off; we're going to feel, in *Premiere* magazine's own head editor's word, "Betrayed."

I am not suggesting that Lynch entirely succeeded at the project he set for himself in *Fire Walk with Me*. (He didn't.) What I am suggesting is that the withering critical reception the movie received (this movie, whose director's previous film had won the Palme d'Or, was *booed* at the 1992 Cannes Film Festival) had less to do with its failing in the project

⁶¹ (not to mention for being (from various reviews) "overwrought," "incoherent," "too much")

than with its attempting it at all. And I am suggesting that if *Lost Highway* gets similarly savaged — or, worse, ignored — by the American art-assessment machine of which *Premiere* magazine is a wonderful working part, you might want to keep all this in mind.

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