

Lynched

The short films of David Lynch by Megan Spencer

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He's a self-confessed caffeine, nicotine and donut addict. He's also addicted to directing films, Transcendental Meditation and making art.

And over the years in his shorts, animations, features and TV series, American filmmaker David Lynch has presented us with an array

of characters wrestling with addictions of their own, be it coffee (Agent Cooper, *Twin Peaks*), violence (Frank, *Blue Velvet*), mystery (Betty/Diane, *Mulholland Drive*), anger, (Randy, *Dumbland*) and beyond.

Lynch's work seems to be born from if not addiction, then compulsion. Prolific in his output, when he's not painting, writing books, taking photos, speaking at film festivals and conferences, meditating, animating, directing TV and features, or uploading his latest 'weather report' onto his website... Well there aren't many hours left in the day.

However addicted to words the filmmaker is not. Perhaps a 'war with words' is too harsh a depiction of the struggle David Lynch appears to go through when he speaks about his work. But if you have heard him talk you will know that speaking doesn't come easily to the director; not his preferred mode of communication. Perhaps it might be fairer to say that words are Lynch's 'second language', with images, pictures and sounds romping it in in first place.

From *Eraserhead* (1976) through to *Inland Empire* (2006), neither are words tantamount in his features. Lynch doesn't write a script like others. Meaning, dialogue doesn't carry story in his work (if anything silence does). Hazarding a guess, he probably doesn't subscribe to the Joseph Campbell 'Hero's Journey' myth either. And he might just be one of the last directors in Hollywood who hasn't taken a Robert McKee script-writing seminar. (Hallelujah).

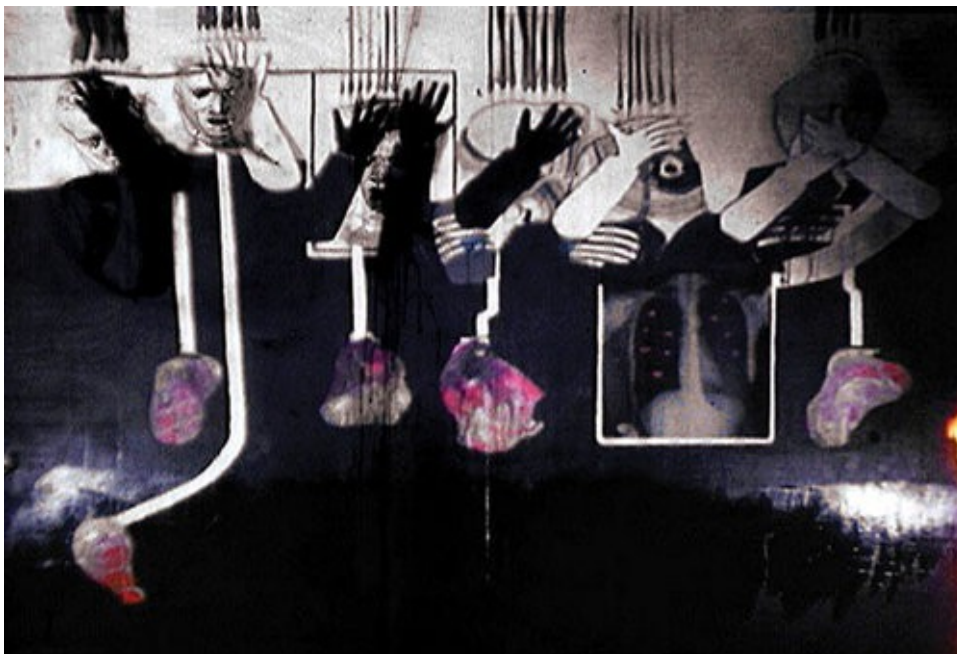
Lynch is an articulate, intelligent and entertaining speaker, there's no question; but watching



Portrait by Yuko Nasu

him trying to turn thoughts into a sentences is tantamount to watching a man wrestle a crocodile. Words are there, floating around in his mind, but the gap between idea, word and thought.. It's big. And trying to grab just one word – let alone an entire sentence – it's like dragging a beast out of a swamp. They don't seem to satisfy him, almost too 'banal' to use. Why talk when you can make films? Paint a picture? Brew an evocative soundscape? They don't do justice to the marvellous array of ideas flowing at a rate of knots through that brilliant skull of his, beneath that fabulous head of hair.

But Lynch has plenty to say. Like every filmmaker and artist, he loves having a conversation with an audience. His agenda can include traditional elements of film conversation – romance, loss, sadness, survival, family, heroes and villains... But more often than not, his are about things that words buckle under the weight of: consciousness, nightmares, fear, creativity, death, viscera, bliss, the great joke of life.. The way he manifests these more ethereal concepts on screen is akin to the rites of addiction; they are continuous, repetitious, impulsive and ritualistic in manner, a far cry from the stoic conventions of mainstream American storytelling.



'Six Men Getting Sick' (1967)

Forget the story; there isn't one. Forget characterisation; there isn't any. Forget 'plot points' and all that Screenwriting 101 palaver; it just doesn't matter. Nor does logic, rationality, reality or expectations. Chuck them all out. What does matter in a Lynch film is atmosphere, transition, repeating motifs, symbolism, chaos and, *not* knowing what's going on but the exact opposite: 'not knowing' what's going on. Only then you get the full experience and thus entertainment value out of a David Lynch film.

Lynch talks about filmmaking – and the ideas behind them - almost as if it's an itch he has to scratch. Not in a loud maniacal film-nerd Tarantino-kind of way... More in a compulsive, corporeal David-Cronenberg kind of way, where an invasive worm has taken over his system and he has to get it out lest he bust or burst.

On DVD 'The Short Films Of David Lynch', Lynch speaks about his very first film *Six Men Getting Sick* (1967), which he made as a painting student. Lynch describes being taken over by

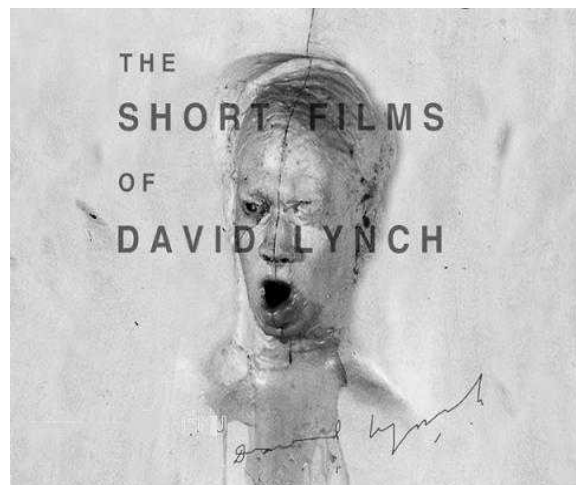
the green and black colours he was painting, and just *having* to see them move - "I wanted to see a painting move and have sound to it". His foray into filmmaking was as simple and as anguished as that. So he made a one minute looped animation projected. Six disembodied male heads attached to stomachs via finely-drawn alimentary canals, spew rhythmically and abstractly in different colours, to the soundtrack of a looped ambulance siren. It is at once mesmerising and discomfiting to watch, and feels like it goes for one hour not one minute. But he did win first prize in his school's annual experimental art contest.

Going back to Lynch's early short films is instructive. They give fascinating and illuminating insight into the themes and symbols that have underwritten his features for years. That war with words was there from day one. Characters scowl, beam, stare, frown, grunt, vomit, bark, cry or talk nonsense – anything *but* speak a logical sentence. Repetition is rife and symbols are dark and potent, springing forth from deep recesses. Soundtracks are mostly soundscapes, with plenty of discomfiting squelching and elemental sounds, not necessarily synched to visuals either.

Speaking of discomfort, Lynch's obsession with 'goo' also comes to the fore early on in *The Amputee* (1973), a short he and co-conspirator Freddie Elmes (Lynch's erstwhile cinematographer) made when they had run out of money on *Eraserhead*, still enrolled at the American Film Institute. Elmes was about to test new video stock for the film school; Lynch commandeered the project by writing a 'script' that consisted of an amputee woman writing a letter in a chair (the Log Lady from *Twin Peaks*), while her 'unable and scared nurse' (Lynch) changes her bandages and cleans the wound. The banality of her letter (audible in voice over) only compounds the horror as her weeping legs gush forth and the nurse stumbles out of frame, beaten by the unstoppable leak. By god it's funny, but again, *The Amputee* shows Lynch's abhorrence for conventional film story-telling *and* dialogue, and yet strangely, an affection for how things can go wrong in the most ordinary of circumstances. Another of his signature themes.

The significant short foreunner to Lynch's feature films has to be *The Grandmother* (1970), the 'grand guignol' of his short work, also made at the American Film Institute. (Lynch was terrified the prestigious AFI would have to change it's name to the "American Video Institute" after his adventures into video on *The Amputee*.)

A nightmare about family life, *The Grandmother* is a haunting animated/live action 34 minute short. Animalistic parents raise a boy with aggression and violence. He is starved for love and stimulation. The parents either race around the yard like dogs or preen at the kitchen table. He decides to 'grow a kindly grandmother' in his bed after finding a sack of seeds in the attic.



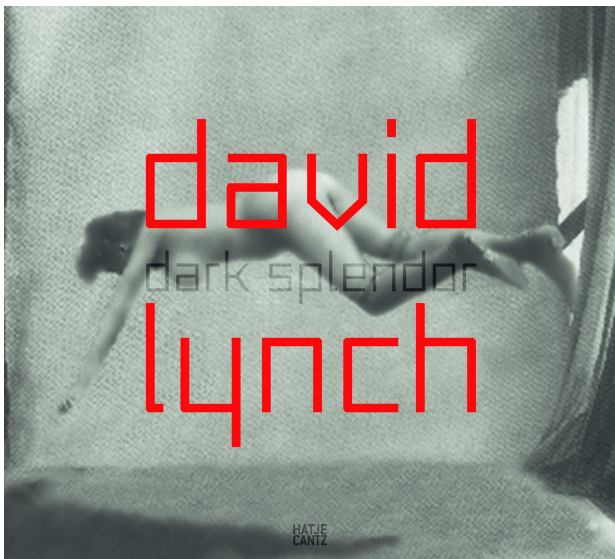
She hatches from a giant, dirty pod and gives him the connection and affection he is looking for, while his parents morph into even more callous monsters. (Much of this is communicated via an art-brut industrial soundtrack auspiced by Alan Splet – the pioneer sound designer responsible for Lynch's signature *Eraserhead* soundtrack – and animated paintings, at once

beautiful and hideous.) Another cycle Lynch is likely never to break – juxtaposing innocence with evil, and primitive misanthropic brutes with naive optimists.

The first time I experienced Lynch's short films, it was in the perfect environment, at a 'guerilla' DVD screening in Sydney a warehouse, alongside the loyal freaks and geeks of the then increasingly rarified underground cinema movement (of which I was one at that time), circa 2007. I remember being utterly enthralled and exhilarated, loudly responding to the screen with giant audible guffaws and gasps, so taken was I with his early work and the narration between them. It made me feel great to hear Lynch -'Jimmy Stewart on acid' as I fondly think of him – speak, albeit reluctantly, of his quest to make films from his distinctly artistic perspective. So strange yet, so right...

It's no secret that David Lynch is a meditator. He was attracted to Transcendental Meditation the same year he made *The Amputee* - not so much by the promise of finding "true happiness" but of finding true happiness *within*. Lynch wanted to dive inside. Deep. To see what was there.

Ever since, in all of his films, videos and artwork, we've had the privilege of witnessing what he found. This is a man who knows both sides of consciousness – dark and light/horror and bliss – and is not afraid to show it.



I was struck by this realisation when I was fortunate enough to see Lynch's 'Dark Splendor' painting exhibition at Max Ernst Museum in Germany earlier this year.

I have to admit to finding his paintings more disturbing than anything he had ever put on celluloid.

I was transfixed by the intense Lynchian dichotomy of horror and beauty on canvas; it was relentless and I was paralysed by it. In film you always have time on your side, as the emulsion clatters through the projector, moving the images onward and forward.

In an art gallery, well, no-one can hear you scream...

Standing there viewing the various panels of his latest work – which are mostly large with some small, and a soundtrack you can switch on yourself – I felt nauseous and shocked, yet comforted by the clear view of humanity he was revealing. Then it came to me; only someone who understands bliss – the pure unadulterated, unconditional, infinite feeling of 'life energy' – could understand the true horror of having that taken away. That's what I was seeing... understanding and wrestling with. It's an experience I will never forget and am eternally grateful for. It was overwhelming and something that I couldn't turn away or run from.

'Wrestling with crocodiles', courtesy of one very addicted filmmaker, David Lynch...

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