

**The Films of David Lynch and the Surreal**

by

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The idea of surrealism has existed in the world of the arts for over a century, and has had a long-lasting impact on art, whether it be in paintings, films, and so on. The term existed on its own for a time before becoming a movement with the Surrealist Manifesto, published by André Breton in 1924 and 1929. Surrealism means how something specific, or the world in general, may be portrayed in a way that does not quite line up with reality, but still grounds itself within the real world, making for something unsettling. The imagery the surreal can produce is usually considered bizarre and strange, with an intended effect sometimes being to make the viewer feel uneasy about what they are seeing. It may resemble a dream or a nightmare, in that it possibly has some basis in the real world, but leans heavily into a whole other world when it comes to the actual contents on display. This also ties into the idea of the uncanny, which refers to something that would be considered strange and unnatural, and possibly supernatural. Surrealism has a greater basis in reality, but both the surreal and the uncanny focus on bizarre imagery, something that has always been a part of the arts.

Many artists have taken the idea of the surreal and used it in plenty of creative ways, including filmmakers, and one of the most prominent filmmakers who has gained attention for his use of surrealism is David Lynch. He has made many noteworthy and acclaimed films (and a few television shows) over the course of his decade-spanning career, with many citing him as one of the most influential filmmakers in the history of cinema. His films tell stories that are based in some form of the real world, and may appear to tell relatively simple stories, but there is far more underneath the surface, which is where Lynch's use of surrealism comes into play. It is one of the key elements of his films, right from his very first feature, *Eraserhead*, (1977) and it plays into all of them in some form or another. He uses the surreal both through the imagery as well as the filmmaking and technical elements that go into these scenes. They can be quite

complex films that require plenty of analysis and thought, and audience members may feel alienated at how confusing and strange they are. But those who champion Lynch as a top-tier filmmaker say that the surreal elements add to the overall themes and ideas that his films try to get across, and they enhance the story and world-building that Lynch sets up as well.

All of David Lynch's work has elements of surrealism in play, but three films that stand out in this regard are *Blue Velvet*, (1986) *Lost Highway*, (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). These come from very different stages in Lynch's career, and they tell different stories, but they all share the same qualities of the surreal and the bizarre in how they go about telling these stories. They also all fit into the same genre, that being the mystery/noir genre with elements of the thriller genre mixed in, in their own ways. Through taking a deeper look at these films, and the surreal scenes that lay within them, a greater light can be shed on what these moments mean for the story and characters featured, as well as how they impact and develop the greater themes and ideas present that discuss the hidden depths of reality and the darkness that lies underneath. The filmmaking that goes into these scenes is also important to examine, as it too can have an impact on the greater picture and how these scenes play out. This can include the mise-en-scene, editing, cinematography, and anything else that may contribute further to the scene at hand. The genres of the films at hand and how these surreal and bizarre moments upend what the viewer might expect from them is also relevant. What these examinations are meant to do overall is get a full sense of the worlds that David Lynch has crafted, how they ground themselves in reality while not quite getting to realism, and to show Lynch's tendencies as a filmmaker. He uses the surreal to better establish the stories within his films, and further develop elements such as their atmosphere and darkness. This all helps him to stand out as a unique voice in the filmmaking world, and adds plenty of new layers to his films. Surrealism is key to David

Lynch, and he uses it as a tool to meaningfully craft and enhance his art through several methods.

One thing that Lynch excels at throughout his entire body of work is what he puts out in his opening scenes. Openings are one of the most crucial parts of any film, they can immediately establish the plot, introduce the characters, and, perhaps most importantly, set the tone that the rest of the film will follow from there. Naturally, Lynch is a filmmaker who gets right to the core of surrealism from the get go, and as a result, the openings within his films, while not usually that heavy on plot itself, quickly establish that what the viewer is about to see will be anything but ordinary. The tone settled upon is one that can be quite unsettling, and the surrealist tendencies in play are brought up and utilized from there on out. A lot of the tools of surrealism that Lynch uses become quickly apparent from the start, and this is why looking at these opening scenes is a crucial factor when examining these films. With that in mind, the opening scene of *Blue Velvet* is one that not only shows what is going to be in store for the rest of the film in terms of the tone and the surreal, but also establishes one of the main themes at hand, all within only a few minutes of screentime. It is one of the many films that put Lynch on the map, and one can see why right from the get-go, there is nothing else quite like this out there.

The opening credits begin, and they play out over the image of what seems to be blue curtains. The score playing behind it is one that seems to be relatively light, but there is almost an air of mystery to it, which makes one wonder where the film is going to go from there. After this, the curtains fade out, and the viewer is greeted with the perfect neighborhood. The opening shots show what is essentially the most idyllic, picturesque, crystal-clear view of what suburbia is envisioned to be. It is a bright and sunny morning, the flowers are in full bloom right next to the white picket fences, children cross the street while the crossing guard moves them along,

people wave, (to what almost appears to be the viewer themselves) from the back of trucks, and the world seems to be at a total and complete peace. The song that overlays the scene is one of total serenity, it draws one in with its soothing melodies, and makes it seem like nothing could ever break this spell. A man waters his plants in the backyard, what may be his significant other sips tea and watches TV inside, the peace continues.

The man continues to water the garden, but then, something seems to go wrong. The man notices a problem with his hose, and it seems to be stuck around a bush. He cannot pull the hose where he wants to anymore, he tries to fix it, water begins to leak out from the geyser, and suddenly, the man reaches for his neck, and falls to the ground. It is sudden and shocking, while he lies there, having a stroke, the water continues to flow from the hose, and in the next shot, he lies there, seemingly close to death. A dog runs up to him and begins barking, a toddler is seen walking over, yet the song continues to play, even over this moment. Cut to a slow-motion shot of the dog barking, and then cut to a shot of the grass surrounding the scene, one which slowly zooms in on the ground. The song begins to fade out as the camera pushes in further on the ground/grass, going right into it even, with the eventual reveal of a cacophony of ants swarming the area. The viewer is put right up next to them almost, with the noises of their movements and activities exploding into the film. After several seconds of watching that, the film then does a smash cut to a sign that welcomes the viewer to the town of Lumberton. The atmosphere and tone wrap back around to being calm for the moment, the nightmare of the opening being put behind the viewer for a short while.

As much as this opening scene may confuse the viewer, it turns out that there is a level of importance to it in some form, as we soon find out that the man who had the stroke is the father of the lead character, Jeffery Beaumont. He is returning to his hometown to look after his dad,

remaining there for the rest of the film as a result of that and the story that follows. It is important on that level, but perhaps even more crucially, the tone and themes for *Blue Velvet* are set right then and there. While the film opens with peaceful, serene shots of a neighborhood that seems to be in total harmony, what happens afterward could not be further from that. The sudden dark turn of the scene is one that establishes a main theme that comes up often within Lynch's work, that nothing is quite as it seems, and there is always darkness lurking right beneath the surface.

What the viewer might see as a place where the stars align perfectly and the sun always shines, is completely upended by the turn of events that take place. This is reflected in the filmmaking, as before the stroke happens, the cuts in the editing feel natural, flowing from one shot to the next in an orderly fashion. Then, the hose gets stuck, and the cuts become quick and sharp, jolting the viewer, and giving the impression that what may appear peaceful is not to be completely trusted. The zoom in on all the ants further pushes this idea, a literal representation of something lurking right underneath the surface of this neighborhood. The tone is shown to be one that can flip on a dime to darkness when one may least expect it. It is a memorable opening, and it ties itself to surrealism very directly as well. The imagery at the start of the scene that gives off peaceful vibes almost feels like it is coming straight out of a dream. The word, "idyllic" comes to mind, and it seems like someone's vision of what the world should look like, echoing the type of imagery that a dream may provide. All the suburban trademarks are front and center, and even a little over-the-top, which, when thinking of it from the stand-point of what dreams can look like, is not so far-fetched. It appears to be a form of reality, but it is not quite there, and is exaggerated in ways that hue it closer to a dream-world. But then comes the darkness, and just like that, the imagery takes a turn for the nightmarish. The surreal imagery hits in full force with

the stroke and the swarm of ants moving about, disrupting the serenity, and giving way to a large sense of uneasiness and dread. Zhu Yuzhou argues the same in their writing, “Analysis on the Freudism on David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*.” It is an opening scene filled with dread and reveals a hidden truth among the peaceful setting presented, and the same sentiment is agreed upon here. Yuzhou says, “These bugs are magnified by the camera, producing rattling sounds and making the audience feel uneasy and restless. David Lynch shows the negative and devilish things beneath the fake perfection of the town...” (Yuzhou 1232). This further establishes that the world the film resides in is somewhere in between reality and fantasy, not particularly leaning towards one over the other, and can switch between them, and the dream and the nightmare, at a moment’s notice. This is something the rest of the film follows-up on, with scenes of a seemingly ordinary reality coming down to make way for disturbing, surreal imagery, characters, and story elements, showing that even the places that seem the safest can be overtaken by the darkness, and the surreal.

As the film continues onward, it becomes clear that the scene was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the story that plays out from here on out. Jeffrey comes back home to visit his father, and then, when walking home, he stumbles upon a severed human ear laying in a field. This is an image that recalls the imagery presented in the opening scene, and how it told the viewer to expect the unexpected when it comes to what lies beneath the scenic environments shown in the film. Lynch very well knows all of that, and uses the art of the surreal to his advantage to craft similar imagery that feels more like something that would be at home in a vision or dream than the real world. It crafts a great sense of bizarreness and uneasiness, as there are many unfortunate implications as to what that could realistically mean, but it also could make one think that something more unnatural is happening too. It carefully balances both its real

world and dream-like implications, and this continues as Jeffrey explores the mystery of this severed ear, and gets wrapped up in a complex plot that further pushes itself away from the lightness of the setting it presents.

The story shifts from here, as Jeffrey discovers that the ear may somehow relate to lounge singer Dorothy Vallens, who he gets into a complicated relationship with as a result, and learns exactly whose ear it was, and why it happened. It turns out to be the result of main antagonist Frank Booth, a drug-dealer and criminal prone to extreme violence and going to drastic measures to get what he desires, which in this case, is Dorothy. Her husband's ear is the one that was cut off, and Frank then holds him and her son hostage, forcing her into sexual slavery. At this point, the film relies heavily on the presence of Frank in order to stir up conflict and move the story, and this character ends up being a central source of the surreal for the film. Lynch has crafted some incredibly devious characters throughout his career, some being definite villains, and the ways in which he shows their heartlessness, and how they go about their lives, absolutely contributes to the surreal nature of his work. His introduction to the film is equal parts harrowing and unsettling, as he is an unpredictable figure that does horrible things in an increasingly bizarre manner.

When the viewer first meets Frank, it follows a scene where Jeffrey attempts to sneak into Dorothy's apartment to find clues. She finds him, thinks his reasoning for being there is sexual in nature, and starts to perform a sexual act on him. Before things go further, Frank arrives, and he hides in the closet. Frank walks in, and immediately acts aggressive towards her, yelling and cursing. He forces her to spread her legs, then inhales some sort of gas from a mask. He continues to do this, calling her, "Mommy," and growing increasingly unhinged and vulgar. It becomes clear that she is being forced by him to partake in this. He rapes and abuses her, while



breaking down into sobbing fits and continuing to scream his displeasures, after which he leaves. Jeffrey comes back out and tries to comfort Dorothy, who then tries to seduce him and asks him to hit her. She is broken and traumatized, and, not knowing what to do, Jeffrey leaves the scene.

This is a testament to Lynch's ability to make something incredibly disturbing, but also give it an intense sense of dread and uneasiness that can only come with something that is surreal in nature. The character of Frank is one that operates on a different level than the rest of the characters featured in the film. He is not an ordinary criminal, he is someone who will take every opportunity to break someone down until they are inconsolable, and partakes in bizarre practices, (such as inhaling a gas-mask and participating in sadomasochistic acts while going through a violent fit of emotions) that only serve to highlight just how far off he is from sanity. In a way, he feels like a figure one may encounter in their nightmares, someone who functions only on a plane of pure darkness, and who only serves to cause suffering and pain to anyone who crosses him and his strange ways. There is also ample opportunity to make a case that Frank is almost like a warped, darker version of Jeffrey himself, if he lets darkness consume him, an element that fits well into a surrealist landscape. This is something that Nolan Boyd examined in his writing *Dark Reflections: Fantasy and Duality in the Work of David Lynch*. It is argued that Jeffrey is seeing his own dark thoughts reflected at him through seeing this event play out, and it troubles him just as much as the act itself it seems. Boyd says, "Jeffrey... ..is shocked and disturbed... ..not only because the scene is horrific, but because he sees in Frank a reflection of his own dark sexual desires. When Dorothy asks Jeffrey to as Frank did... ..Jeffrey emphatically refuses, afraid of accessing this part of himself" (Boyd 11). It brings up the idea of surrealist landscapes being able to hold darker versions of someone, like an alternate view of the same person, which further Lynch projects go in-depth on exploring. It is very much a dream-like idea

presented that adds to the uneasiness and surrealism in play here. Even then, the movie still grounds itself in a sort of reality, so it makes Frank seem like a figure who could really exist, again striking a balance between the two.

It is also important to look at the mise-en-scene here, as it is surprisingly ordinary for a scene as disturbing as this. It takes place in a relatively well-lit apartment room, it is not incredibly bright, but everything can be made out, and it does not take place in a darkened and gloomy locale like one may expect. This serves to highlight the darkness underneath the surface once again, the fact that such a cruel and brutal act can take place in a location as simple as this room in a regular apartment shows exactly what Lynch is going for within the scene and the film overall. And it tethers itself to reality more, despite the events and character at hand feeling like they do not exactly come from that same reality. Lynch is able to create these heightened worlds where nothing is what it appears to be, and the surreal and the real directly cross paths in ways that make the experience of watching the film that much more unsettling. And the more Frank and the story of the ear is developed upon, and the further Jeffrey descends into the depths, the more the film spirals further into this landscape.

In what might be considered one of the most memorable scenes of the film, Frank ends up taking both Dorothy and Jeffrey with him on what he calls a, "joyride." This leads them, and his other criminal friends, to the house of someone only known as Ben. He is a suave-looking associate of Frank's and he is the one holding Dorothy's family hostage. Once again, the scene is made uneasy by Frank's sudden outbursts and general unpredictability, as well as the coldness of Ben, who seems to be perfectly level-headed and cool with all of it. Then, Frank convinces Ben to put on a song, "In Dreams" by Roy Orbison, and lip-sync along to it. No one in the room knows how to react to this uneasy display, but Frank loves it, and appears to be brought to tears

by the performance. After this, the scene continues, and then finishes with a sudden cut, where the characters suddenly disappear from the environment, before fading into the next scene as if nothing happened. Lynch uses editing techniques that to increase the viewer's displeasure and uneasiness with the events in the story, as it increases feelings of fear and the idea that something is not right with the world on display. As for the rest of the scene, everything that plays out is made stranger by the choice of song, and the fact that these characters seem to take pleasure in putting on a peaceful-sounding piece while partaking in horrific acts of violence. This connection continues in the following scene, in which Frank beats Jeffrey, not before repeating specific words from the song. As A.D. Jones notes in his work *Between Self and Other: Abjection and Unheimlichkeit in the films of David Lynch*, this relates back to surrealism directly as the lyrics mention the world of dreams. As Jones notes, "Frank... ..repeats the words to Jeffrey before beating him senseless: 'in dreams, I talk to you ... in dreams, you are mine.' These dream forms indicate the general function of the dream as a narrative device, bridging the naïve world... ..and the disturbing world" (Jones 97). Surrealism can put itself up against elements that seem normal, such as a song, or a location, and make them come off as unsettling instead, as seen by this mix of dream-like elements and a real-world setting and situation. Lynch does this throughout his entire career, and it is well illustrated by this sequence.

Looking at how *Blue Velvet* presents its story, and how Lynch utilizes the surreal in order to enhance it, the film takes what could have been a relatively straight-forward noir story and twists it into something that, while it still fits into the genre, propels itself away from the sense of reality that most noir projects follow. While the film does still take place in a reality of sorts, it is brought into the realm of the surreal by its dream-like imagery, sudden bizarre darkness, and characters/scenes that feel like the stuff of true nightmares. A combination of the real and the

surreal comes together to make for a world where shadows lurk in every corner, and, as the opening scene showcases, even the most serene of settings can be overtaken by those shadows. Lynch continues to explore this idea, and others, in films that only continue to increase in their unsettling nature, and delve full on into the uncanny, something which *Blue Velvet* did touched upon, but not in the full-on supernatural form. He experiments further from here, and the results are nothing short of surreal.

In the years between 1986 and 1997, Lynch would work on various other projects, notable among them the film *Wild at Heart* (1990) and the television show *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991). With these, especially the latter, Lynch would further explore the possibilities of the surreal in media, and would also take step further into the uncanny, portraying events that go far beyond what may be expected of the real-world. Despite this, he does not lose touch with the basis in a semi-real world that Lynch and surrealism is known for, despite the strange places the stories could go to. This is where *Lost Highway* comes into the picture, a film that tells the story of a man, Fred Madison, who is put through events that are practically unexplainable, and sometimes completely otherworldly. Lynch continues developing upon the ideas presented in previous projects, including *Blue Velvet*, and gives them new life through an entirely new structure, that still contains the surreal, bizarre imagery, and the technical prowess that only serves to enhance those ideas for the audience.

Once again, the opening minutes of the film are ones that leave a notable impression on the viewer, setting the tone and exploring what the upcoming film will have in store. Unlike *Blue Velvet*, this one does not start out bright and sunny, but rather much darker and mysterious. The opening credits play out over what appears to be a first-person view of a vehicle driving down a long, seemingly endless highway. The viewer is put at the front, right into the action, as the

camera shakes and swerves as the vehicle moves quickly down the road. It is dark outside, with nothing but the highway ahead being lit up by the headlights. The credits almost seem to be slamming into the screen from afar, much like the yellow road lines below. A song plays “I’m Deranged” by David Bowie, which matches the dark, puzzling tone of the scene strongly, with lyrics such as “Thin skies, the man chains his hands held high,” which, while not making too much sense, give the viewer the idea that things are going to be strange, and there will be a great sense of darkness ahead.

This serves as more of a tone-setter than the credits/opening scene of *Blue Velvet*, but it does get across the idea of how the surreal will impact this film, with the imagery of an endless highway surrounded by constant shadows being straight out of a dream. Martha P. Nochimson discusses this further in her book, “*David Lynch Swerves: Uncertainty from Lost Highway to Inland Empire*.” She brings up the idea of the uncertain here, and compares it to the ideas of matter, and being uncertain of aspects of the physical world. As she says, “It’s a fraught image of the material world with major resemblances to the way the uncertainty principle defines human observation of matter... ..Modern uncertainty about the physical world means we can never have a complete image of it, only a partial one” (Nochimson 49). The point being made is that not knowing the positions of where this vehicle and highway are in any sort of physical sense lends itself to a great sense of uncertainty, and creates an image that, while resembling a real-world place, feels more in line with something that may come from somewhere like a dream. That type of imagery only increases from here, as the film travels this mysterious realm between the real and the surreal, where it seems that anything can happen.

Now for a while, the film follows the story of Fred and his wife Renee, an ordinary couple whose lives are going to soon become completely undone. Before this, however, they are

plagued by strange happenings that do not appear to make much sense. The first proper scene is of Fred waking up to buzzing coming from his intercom, and when he goes to answer the message, all he hears is, "Dick Laurent is dead." Soon after, a VHS tape arrives at their house, and when played, it shows the exterior of the home in detail, before turning to static. A later tape goes on longer and shows the two sleeping in bed, leading to the disturbing idea that someone may be stalking them. This, combined with other odd events, makes one wonder how things are going to proceed from here, and immediately places this film, like *Blue Velvet*, into mystery-noir territory, with a touch of the thriller as well.

While the surreal and strange imagery is still present, it is toned down in service of the story being set-up, something which later parts of the film are not as reliant on. This is not an accident on Lynch's part, it is all very deliberate to get the viewer settled into the world being presented, which at this point, hues closer to reality than anything else. It has a specific genre it seems to follow closely enough, things move at a moderate pace, and the viewer may think they know how things are going to go, only to have their expectations completely upended by what follows. It is another way of Lynch delivering the idea that things are not what they appear to be, and the darkness/the surreal is lurking underneath the surface of even seemingly ordinary, real lives. Many Lynch projects start off as more ordinary than they really are, despite touches of the surreal still being present, before diving headfirst into it, and this film is not an exception. The film takes countless turns from here, and the film at hand evolves with it.

One of the most noteworthy scenes before the large twist of the story comes when Fred tells Renee of a dream he had. Fred says that he was inside the house, and he heard her calling his name, but he could not find her. Then, he finally comes across her, but it was not her, it "looked like you, but it wasn't." Suddenly, the camera zooms in on her like someone is fast

approaching, and she screams, as if being attacked. Fred then wakes up from this, but when he turns to look at Renee, he sees a man's face superimposed over her own. When he turns on the light and looks back, things are back to normal again. Along with being slight foreshadowing for certain events later in the film, this is a scene that portrays a literal dream that ends up mixing in with reality near the end, a direct relation to what the surreal is meant to do in Lynch's films.

It unsettles the viewer, and makes them uncertain of what is being shown, whether it is something that leans closer to the real, or the surreal, represented by the dream and the ending of said dream at hand. The house in the dream is presented like it is a maze that Fred needs to find the way out of to find his wife, an image that can sometimes be synonymous with dreams/nightmares, a maze where what one finds at the end of the long journey is not what one expects or wants. The filmmaking put in play here also uses lighting to its advantage, making things low-key and relatively dark, shrouding the dream in mystery, and making the familiar environment seem further away than it really is. The boundaries of reality are there, but they are kept hidden by the darkness in the lighting, which makes everything feel more off than it should, which keeps one firmly in the zone of the surreal. The fast-paced editing at the end, when the woman who looks like Renee is attacked by something, is a jolting image, one that launches Fred awake in an instant, reflecting what a real dream might do to someone, and making for a surreal and uneasy image that one will continue to ponder in the following scenes of the film. It increases the surreal nature of how Lynch approaches the world, and sets-up a key factor that plays into the rest of the film, as well as other Lynch projects.

In the coming section of the film, everything changes, for both the characters, and the story itself. While at a friend's house for a party, Fred encounters a strange individual, who only goes by the Mystery Man. This man says they have met before, and that he is somehow also at

Fred's house right that very second, which he proves. After this, he learns that this man is a friend of Dick Laurent, the name he heard earlier on the intercom. Disturbed, he and Renee leave and go back home, where, after another unsettling dream, Fred wakes to another VHS tape, this one depicting him as having murdered Renee, the grisly remains lying all over the room. Fred does not remember this, and next thing he knows, he is found guilty of murder, and is put on death row. Fred has disturbing visions while sleeping, and then, in an instant, everything changes. A guard comes upon Fred's cell, and a completely different man is in there. His name is Pete Dayton, and he has suddenly appeared in place of Fred for reasons that remain unclear. Whatever the case, He does not know why he is in jail, and is released when it appears that Pete is an almost entirely innocent man, having convicted only one minor crime years prior. As he adjusts to his new life as an auto mechanic something equally as strange happens. One day, he happens to come upon a woman named Alice Wakefield, who looks exactly like Renee, and is played by the same actress, Patricia Arquette. While Pete does not recognize her, and she is a completely different character in every respect, there is a rather quick chemistry launched between the two, almost as if there are lingering memories there. The levels of surreal Lynch and the film operate on have increased tenfold, and there is a lot to examine about this decision.

Everything that had been established prior is thrown out the window for an entirely new side of the story. The audience had been following the character of Fred for the first extended section of the film, but now they are asked to follow the character of Pete, who, despite being put in the place of Fred, is completely different in every way. The same goes for Alice, who, despite looking like Renee, is also a totally separate character, and the audience is not ever sure if she is someone put in the place of Renee. Later parts of the film hint at this, with the reappearance of the Mystery Man, who claims there was never an Alice, and Pete changing back into Fred prior



to this, but otherwise, there is not much of an explanation given to this. Some things are, like finding out that Fred himself was the one who left the message on the intercom at the beginning of the film, but this just leads to more confusion. And by the end, we are not left with a wrapped-up story, as the film closes with Fred being chased by the police, as it cuts back to the same highway from the start of the film, with the Bowie song kicking in once again as the credits roll.

The viewer here is left with lingering questions of what they just saw, and perhaps interpretations of what any of it could mean. Maybe the story was a figurative look at how someone changes and evolves overtime in the face of disturbing revelations. Maybe everything that happened was literal, and the viewer should take everything they see at face value. This confusion is something Sunayan Bhattacharjee discusses in his writing, “‘Lost Highway’ (1997) A Bizarre Juxtaposition of Realism and Surrealism.” What is really happening in this film is not made clear, and this is all intentional on the part of the filmmaker here, it increases the surreal and bizarre elements of the film. Bhattacharjee says, “It is a little difficult though, identifying which storyline depicts the reality and which one is simply a fanciful figment of imagination. When Fred... ..morphs into another individual... ..it happens realistically and verifiably... ..This is where the bizarreness lies” (Bhattacharjee 16). It is not spelled out by Lynch, with the confusion at hand, and the depths of which the downright supernatural are explored with this complete physical transformation, and how straight it is played, make the placement of the world Lynch crafts here even more difficult to properly place in a real-world or dream-world context. This and other elements featured in the film, such as the Mystery Man’s otherworldly powers, make this into a thoroughly surreal art-piece.

As *Blue Velvet* did before this, the film hues itself to reality in some form, depicting occupations such as Fred's job as a jazz musician, or Pete's job as an auto mechanic, as the equivalents to how those jobs would function in the real world. Then, the surreal comes in, with these bizarre transformations, strange dreams, and unclear characters, who completely flip the noir-subtext on its head, and push the film much further into the fantastical than what came before. Elements of this came into play before, with the otherworldly dreams and visions the characters were experiencing, and the strange VHS tapes recording the house and themselves, but it did not completely invade the reality they were living in until this point.

In fact, this transition between the two sides of the film is depicted literally right before the transformation of Fred. As he has nightmares of the Mystery Man and a burning cabin, (both of which are important later) the film cuts back to the long, endless highway. It is a similar shot to the opening scene, but then, the car pulls to a stop at the side of the road, and one can see Pete standing off in the darkness, almost as if he is a passenger waiting to arrive in the car. Then, amidst various flashing lights, the droning score, and the room growing smokey, there is a close-up of the eyes of Pete turning into those of Fred's. It is Lynch's way of showing that Pete is joining the story in place of Fred, in the most dream-like manner possible. While *Blue Velvet* was a film that focused more on the noir trappings, while doing plenty with it to keep things surreal, this one goes a step beyond and takes things to the level of the uncanny, depicting disturbing events that are completely unnatural, despite the world still appearing to be grounded in a reality.

Lynch's worlds are occupied by characters who operate on an entirely different level of logic than those that exist in a full reality, navigating these surreal landscapes in ways that mimic real people, but do not quite reach that level. It is an idea that is explored in detail in the book *The Philosophy of David Lynch*, edited by William J. Devlin and Shai Biderman. In the section

titled, “The Owls Are Not What They Seem,” by Robert Arp and Patricia Brace, Lynchian logic is analyzed, and is described how characters can come about successful findings and reach their goals through strange decisions that most in the real world would probably not partake in. They use the example of the main character from *Twin Peaks* conducting investigations following bizarre methods that do not make sense, but work out anyway. Arp and Brace claim, “...his reliance upon nonrational methods... ..would not allow him to bring about proper conclusions under the standard norms of logic... ..Lynchian logic is twisted and chaotic, similar to a surrealist visual artist’s approach” (Arp and Brace, 17). All of this can be seen with Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet*, who, upon finding the severed ear on the ground, takes it upon himself to explore the mystery of whose it is and why it happened, going about finding clues in quite the unsavory manner, sneaking into apartments, getting involved with dangerous, vicious criminals, and so on. He is a relatively ordinary person who willingly puts himself in the face of danger just to get closer to the truth, and while it is not uncommon for someone to want to explore a mystery, it feels as though most would not go about in ways that puts them close to someone like Frank Booth. Becoming so convinced that a lounge singer is involved with the ear, and then breaking into their place of living to find out more, feels like an irrational decision, but in the world that Lynch crafts, it does not even feel that out of place. Irrational character decisions and the logic they follow through on also add to the surreal nature of what is being displayed. It ends up working out for Jeffrey as well, as things do get solved over the course of the movie, meaning this bizarre way of going about the mystery paid off, and Lynchian logic ended up serving a positive outcome in that regard.

*Lost Highway* goes about its characters in similar ways in regards to logic, but it is done in a completely different manner here. While the decisions being made are ones that would not

hue close to reality, instead of being in service of a greater mystery, and following-through on strange choices in order to correctly get to some greater answer, here, this is put on the backburner, as the film instead explores how Frank/Pete does not seem to want to go any further into exploring what happened to him. He very quickly adjusts to his new life as Pete, with a new family, a new love interest, and a new job, and seems mostly content with it at a certain point. It goes against the world that is set up, as while it is a constantly shrouded in surrealism and mystery, Fred/Pete does not want any part of that after the transformation, and, until Alice is introduced, he seems to be fine with just living this new life completely unrelated to the previous one he had. If this was a more realistic situation, there would be an exploration of why it happened, with him wanting to find out more. But, in a strange way, Fred/Pete, for a while, is the opposite of what Lynch does with surrealism here, instead of taking into consideration the surreal nature of what is happening around him, he goes against it at every turn. That, in and of itself, is surreal, as it is not a decision that operates on a full level of reality, it keeps the balance of the real and the surreal strong and active.

What is clear with *Lost Highway* is that Lynch is very willing to take his explorations of his strange and surreal worlds further and further with every new project. This film introduces a lot of elements to its story that feel more uncanny in nature than films such as *Blue Velvet*, such as a Mystery Man who can seemingly do as he pleases, a transformation into another person, and, perhaps most crucially, the existence of a complete double of someone, in this case, Renee. Alice is a character who, much like Fred describes the person he saw in his early dream, is someone who looks like her, but is not her. This is an idea that Lynch seems very fascinated with, and he continues to explore it from here in various manners. It is easy to see why, as this causes a certain level of confusion within the story and the viewer, as there being two versions of

the same character, who look the same, but who are otherwise quite far apart from each other, is a strange image. It feels like something pulled from a dream, but since the different versions are fully former characters, it also has a hand in reality as well, making it that much more surreal. Lynch takes this idea to the next level four years later with *Mulholland Drive*, a surrealist look at Hollywood and the L.A. landscape that continues to thrust itself forward into the realms of the surreal and the uncanny.

*Mulholland Drive* continues to develop upon ideas and themes that have been presented in previous Lynch films, especially continuing the thread of shadows lurking in the darkness, and everything not being as it appears. This is combined with further exploration of the idea of doubles, another upending of the genre at hand, and filmmaking that enhances the surrealist qualities in play and puts the audience less at ease with what they are seeing. This time, the film takes on the entertainment industry, taking place in Hollywood, following several different stories of various characters navigating their lives and falling into a twisty plot that connects in unexpected ways, or sometimes does not connect at all. It is a complicated film, especially the closer it gets to the end, and, as with Lynch's other works, a lot can be determined just from the opening few minutes of the film in question. It sets the tone and gives the viewer a taste of what to expect, but this one makes a case for this film to stand out among the rest.

In terms of what the film is trying to accomplish in the opening scene, it is not too much different than some of what came before, including *Blue Velvet* and *Lost Highway*. What is different is how it goes about doing this, it feels much looser and is a little more difficult to follow, something that becomes very apparent right from the start. The first image seen is of shadows against a purple background, moving in slow motion, it is not clear right here what is being seen, and there is not even a score for these first few seconds. From there, it cuts to the full

picture, which is a group of people dancing against this purple background, set to an upbeat jazz song. The dance being performed here is called the Jitterbug; a form of swing/ballroom dancing that originated well before the film takes place. The dancing continues, and it is noteworthy how the shadows from the first few seconds have not gone away, they are just moved to the background. Despite that, they are still noticeable, and it also becomes apparent that both the people and the shadows seem to be overlaid onto the scenery, they do not feel like they are there, everyone seems to be floating on air. The shadows also grow bigger at a certain point, with people also showing up in the outlines of them.

This goes on for a while, before another image starts to be overlaid onto this one, a blurry, shaky image of what appears to be a woman sitting in between two older people. After this, applause comes into the audio, and another image is overlaid, this one of what looks like the same woman, smiling and lit up, almost like she won something and is being celebrated. The other image of her with the two elderly figures comes back, and they eventually overtake the dancing, before everything fades out to a shot of some sort of mysterious room. It is hard to make out what is going on at first, but the camera then moves to a bed, and pans over to the pillow. It zooms in on that, almost from the first-person perspective of someone laying down, before fading to black, and then finally cutting to the title, which appears on a road sign at night. The opening credits then play out over shots of the dark landscape, as the audience sees shots of the city, and overhead shots of a vehicle driving through the darkness, almost like what *Lost Highway* opened on, but from a different perspective.

This is a lot to take in within the first few minutes, a lot is being presented to the audience and not much of it is very sensible. While some elements of the story at hand are put into place here, such as the woman overlaid in the opening scene being one of the main characters, the

whole thing has a sense of great disconnection and looseness, as if Lynch wanted to kick things off in the most baffling way possible. Of course, by this point, it is apparent that this is all part of his style, and it is all intentional. This whole scene is designed to place the viewer into the landscape/world of the film, and make one ponder about the surreal nature of it all. The imagery at hand here is very bizarre and combines a host of elements, placing them together in what could be described as a surrealist collage of people and movement. Other scenes later in the movie will use this style of overlaying images onto other scenes, and it is a filmmaking effect that adds a whole new layer of dream-like, surreal imagery to the mix, as that feels like it could have come from any number of dreams. Also, important to note, the idea of doubles that will be expanded upon later has a subtle set up here, with the overlaying of people on-top of each other becoming a key element to what the film does with its third act. Everything here is intentional, and the rest of the film follows suit with how it portrays its world.

After this opening, the first main character is introduced, a woman whose real name is not discovered, but calls herself Rita later, because she sees a Rita Hayworth poster. Rita is in the vehicle shown driving throughout the opening credits, and the driver suddenly comes to a stop, pointing a gun at her. Before more can happen, another car crashes right into them, killing all but her. Afterward, dazed and lost, she wanders into L.A. and stumbles into an apartment somewhere in the city. Later, the other main character, Betty Elms, comes into the story. She is an aspiring actress who has just arrived in the city, but is about to be thrust into the mystery of a lifetime. She comes to the same apartment Rita ran into earlier, and comes upon her there. Rita does not know who she is, having a case of amnesia, and Betty, wanting to help, decides that they are going to try and figure out who Rita really is. There are various other characters the film meets up with along the way, giving itself a sense of large scope and an almost anthology-like format at

certain points. The most important of these characters is Adam Kesher, a director who gets embroiled in a plot involving mobsters who want an actress named Camilla Rhodes to be cast in the lead role of his film. Everything here sets-up the film to follow a loose noir structure, like previous Lynch projects, with a central mystery, complicated characters, and a twisty plot that is constantly shifting throughout. But this is also an excuse to have the expectations one might have about what they are going to see upended at every turn, which becomes obvious when, very early on, the film dips into the realm of the uncanny in a shocking way.

Before the character of Betty is introduced, another scene plays out, featuring two characters who will not show up in the film after this. (except for a brief appearance by one of them towards the end) It takes place, in the daylight, in a diner known as Winkie's, and is a little reminiscent of a scene in *Lost Highway*, in which Fred describes a dream he had to his wife, and then it somehow turns to almost invade the real world. Here, this ends up being taken to the extreme, but before that, the character of Dan, sat across from a man named Herb, and Dan says that he wanted to come to this diner because of a dream he had about it. It takes place at what he describes as "half-night," and he is always very scared in the dream, as is Herb, also present in the dream. He then goes on to explain that he ends up seeing a man in the back of the restaurant, who Dan sees the face of through the wall. This face is clearly a source of terror for Dan, and he hopes to never see it outside of the dream. He came to the diner to get rid of the feeling the dream caused, and, with Herb, reluctantly goes outside to the back to see what is back there. They slowly approach the back of the diner, and then suddenly, after coming to a wall, a figure pops out in front of them, presumably the same one from the dream. This figure barely looks human, and almost appears to be shrouded in an unspeakable darkness. The sight is so horrifying that Dan instantly collapses to the floor in fear, as the figure slinks back behind the wall.



This is not a scene that connects to the greater story at hand, as this is not followed up on for the rest of the film. But it does establish a certain tone that cannot be denied. The dream-like imagery is at its most apparent in this scene because the figure that is seen literally comes from a dream within the film. This already sets it within a certain surreal territory, but what seals it is the closeness the scene has with the real world. The location here is an ordinary diner in L.A. in the middle of the day, a place where seemingly nothing disturbing would ever happen, until now. The bounds of reality and dreams are clearly established here, but are quickly broken when the figure from the dream shows up in this location out of nowhere. The two mix here, and it places things firmly in the realm of the surreal, as it balances between a terrifying nightmare and an ordinary real-world location. As with other Lynch projects, the filmmaking also immensely adds to this effect, the editing is very deliberate here, ratcheting up the tension as the two characters slowly walk over to the back of the diner through careful, slow-paced editing, and no score to be spoken of, until the figure shows up. A loud chord rings out when it shows up, startling the viewer just as much as the characters in the scene, with the editing also following up the same pace, cutting to Dan fainting out of shock very suddenly. It leaves the audience in a state of surprise, and it continues to develop the idea that shadows can be lurking just around the corner, and things that seem ordinary might not be as they appear, especially in a surreal landscape such as this. It gives the viewer the impression that anything can happen with this film, and eventually, it is revealed that this is exactly the case with how the film ends up tying its story together, while making the proceedings that much more bizarre.

After the two lead characters are introduced to each other, the mystery of Rita's identity kicks off, and a few other storylines play out as well, the film opening in a manner that recalls the heightened noir-sensibilities of *Blue Velvet*. Despite this, the abundance of stories here can

make one wonder if all this is happening simultaneously, or if it is even happening at all. This point is brought up by Kiss Miklós and Steven Willemsen's writing, "Last Year at Mulholland Drive: Ambiguous Framings and Framing Ambiguities." Here, they state that the number of storylines, and some having very limited connections to the overall story at hand, lead to the displacement of time within the film, as it is not quite clear when events are happening and if they matter at all. Miklós and Willemsen say, "...Betty and Rita's journey soon disintegrates into a series of perplexing and uncanny scenes... ...The organization and hierarchy of the primary and side-events appear non-casual... ...the focalization of the primary story becomes fuzzy and intensely ambiguous..." (Miklós and Willemsen 132). Everything that occurs within the film becomes confused and all over the place, something that only enhances the surreal nature of everything that occurs, because if one cannot be sure of when something is taking place, it could be argued that where something is taking place should also be accounted for and questioned. The film still appears to be set at least in a slight version of reality, but also dips into the surreal with the ways in which the characters go about their lives, especially with Rita and Betty trying to solve the central mystery. There is even a scene where they break into an apartment to find out more, though this time a dead body is found instead. Before that though, a few other important plot details to note are that Betty goes to an audition, is praised, then is brought to meet Adam, who is still casting his film. The actress that he is being forced to cast, Camilla, auditions, and he ends up choosing her. Betty and Adam see each other, but she leaves before any interaction can take place. On the mystery side, Rita, after meeting a waitress at the diner named Diane, remembers the name Diane Selwyn. Rita and Betty attempt to call her but there is no answer, which eventually leads to the break-in and discovery of a female corpse. They go back home, Rita puts on a blonde wig, and the two end up sleeping together. A lot of this info plays into the

scenes that follow, and smooths the transition that the story takes as much as possible, as from here on out, the surreal takes over the film.

Rita and Betty end up visiting a theater known as Club Silencio, where an emcee claims that everything is an illusion, and a woman sings, then collapses, with the singing lasting even after she falls. This scene, while upon a glance not seeming crucial to anything going on, represents a sense of closeness to the full realm of the surreal that is about to be intruded upon. This is one of the final scenes before the big shift in the film, and as one watches it, they may start to get a certain feeling of dread as to what may come next. This is something touched upon Todd McGowan's work, "Lost on Mulholland Drive: Navigating David Lynch's Panegyric to Hollywood." The element of filmmaking within the scene is discussed, and how the club is shot in a way that draws uneasiness just from the image of it alone. As McGowan states, "...the way Lynch shoots their arrival... ..Betty and Rita are nearing the edge of the fantasy world... ..as they enter... ..the camera tracks rapidly to the door of the club to enter along with them. This unusual positioning... ..suggests that Club Silencio is dangerous... ..yet alluring..." (McGowan 82). The club seems to represent a literal example of the real world combining with the dream world/the surreal, and the way the cinematography plays into this is very important.

The performance moves Betty and Rita, and then Betty finds a blue box in her purse, which matches a blue key she found earlier in Rita's purse. They take the key, but Betty disappears, which only leaves Rita to open the box. When she does, the camera zooms into it, and then the film cuts to a shot of the box falling to the floor. Betty's aunt enters the room to find no one there. The film is turning into a strange collection of scenes that, while still tethering themselves to reality, are drifting into a dream-like state of mind that enhances their surrealist qualities, while also slowly unsettling the viewer, drawing them in and leaving them wondering

what will happen next. As it turns out, the film at this point almost seems to literally take a turn into a whole other world.

Betty wakes up, but as it is soon made apparent, this is not Betty. Despite looking very similar, and still being played by Naomi Watts, now she is named Diane Selwyn, the same woman that was being investigated earlier. She also turns out to be a completely different character, as, instead of being an aspiring actress, she is a struggling actress amidst a downward spiral, particularly depressed about a failed relationship with a woman named Camilla Rhodes, the same actress who was cast in Adam's film earlier. The catch is, now Camilla looks like Rita, despite the audience having seen an entirely different actress playing the Camilla role in the scene of her auditioning. Here, she is not anything like the Rita that was introduced to the viewer for most of the runtime, as she is a successful actress who is getting engaged to Adam after ending things with Diane. To make things more odd, Adam is still the same character here, and there is an appearance by the actress seen playing Camilla earlier in the film, but she is now in a different role too, as a woman who kisses the new Camilla for unexplained reasons. This is where the remainder of the film takes place, in this strange new world where apparent doubles of the two main characters, and others, exist, and everything is thrown off balance for a finale that envelops itself in the surreal.

Lynch takes the idea of doubles that had already been established in other projects, such as *Lost Highway*, and pushes it further, pushing the characters into what could be called another dimension, where some of them look the same, but act completely differently and go by other names. The viewer at this point might doubt that the other realm the film presented was real at all, and may assume that it was all a dream, because the segment does start with Diane waking from a dream of some sort. That could very well be the case, but the ways in which the two

worlds parallel each other, such as certain characters remaining the same, and the reincorporation of elements such as the blue key and the audition scene from earlier, could also suggest that this is the dream world. Or it is possible that both are real and are occurring simultaneously somehow, with the characters being swapped out for others after the blue box was opened. An explanation is not given, but Lynch does make the parallels between these two realms clear, a notable example being in the final scene where Diane shoots herself, plagued by disturbing visions and depression, ending up in the exact same position the corpse from earlier was discovered. There are also overlays of the previous world placed over shots of the L.A. landscape, perhaps suggesting that she is envisioning them as she dies, having some sort of memory of them in the process. It is all left up to interpretation, and it directly pushes the real and the surreal straight together.

It is very apparent that, while *Mulholland Drive* may have started out as a film that, while surreal, still tethered itself to the structure of a noir film, has transformed into something completely different by the end of it. The characters that the viewer got to know for a long period of time are suddenly morphed into completely new characters, doubles of who they once were before. These doubles make one wonder if what they are seeing is real at all, or if it is just a bizarre nightmare that everyone is simultaneously stuck in. It is a point that is examined further in Anna Jerslav's book *David Lynch: Blurred Boundaries*. The idea of doubles is discussed in-depth, and it can lead to countless questions, as it directly relates to the idea of the uncanny, and seems to rise above the realm of the real world due to the nature of the idea. Jerslav says, "...the making strange of the world, the ubiquitous disorientation related to... ..characters. There are different versions of the characters... ..and it appears that... ..uncertainty can rise over whether or not characters are human" (Jerslav 227). Nothing is quite certain, and that lends itself

directly to the surreal, as while the setting may be mostly clear, the people that inhabit it and the way the world is built up are anything but that.

Things become more unfamiliar overtime, subverting expectations for what one may have expected from the film, and loosens its grip on reality to the point where it is difficult to determine what really happened at all, if any of it. That is the power of the surreal here, and with this film, it has a greater purpose of bringing up the idea of the uncertain, and that everything is not as it seems, especially with a setting such as Hollywood. Lynch has worked in the business for some time at this point, and it is probable that he is aware that the entertainment industry can be a messy, uncompromising place to work in. Darkness can be hiding anywhere you look, and if you are not careful, it can swallow you whole and never let you escape. By setting the film here, Lynch gives the theme a greater sense of scale, while the dangers in the film might be more metaphorical in nature at points, the shadows that lurk around the corners, and the figures that hide in plain sight, may be more real than one might think. Besides the surrealism, this is a main idea the film pushes through it, though the connections between the real and the surreal are still crucial, as is how Lynch uses them to create a uniquely toned world that unsettles the viewer with how it plays out in the film. He has achieved this throughout his entire career, and excels at making memorable and dream-like imagery here, and in his other projects.

In Alexander Waters' writing *Discerning a Surrealist Cinema*, while discussing what goes into making a film that could be considered surreal, one notable sensibility brought up is the ways in which the images that are shown let the audience question if what they are seeing is something that could be based in reality, or not at all. As Waters says, "...there is also a shared Surrealist sensibility... ..as they foreground the rich ambiguity of the images showcased before the audience, presenting a challenge to our immediate interpretations of reality and significance"

(Waters 11). This is being discussed in relation to much earlier surrealist films, but what Lynch does with his works is very similar in nature, he puts the bizarre imagery within the films right in the center of them, in a real-world context that cannot be ignored, and challenges the viewer to decipher what may be real, and what may only be something that comes from a dream.

The combination of the real and the surreal, and the worlds in which David Lynch crafts that put the two right up next to each other and tether them together in an unexpected fashion, lends itself to all the memorable scenes and the uneasy feelings that the audience may feel just from looking at them. This is just one factor of the power that surrealism can have over the art-form, as well as the viewer themselves. Lynch is a filmmaker who puts a lot of thought and effort into whatever he works on, and when it comes to the surreal, that could not be more true. He understands how to relate this sense of surrealism to the greater themes and ideas at hand, such as the fact that nothing is quite what it seems, as shown in *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*. These all examine those hidden realms of the real world and what lies underneath, and does so by showcasing the surreal aspects of these worlds in several ways, whether it be through the filmmaking, the ideas presented, or just the general tone and feeling the films give off. Lynch grounds everything in a sort of reality while pushing things off into a far-reaching realm with endless possibilities for what could happen next, which helps him to stand out in the field of cinema, and gives each viewer a different experience, whether that be one of confusion, anger, fear, and so on. Lynch knows exactly how to use surrealism to enhance the worlds of his stories, to give them new layers and meaning, and effectively upend and subvert what one may expect of them based on a first glance or a look at the genre alone. He has continued to incorporate these elements into further projects after these 3, and his sensibilities as filmmaker continue to evolve, along with how he uses and incorporates the surreal. Some of the

ways in which he does this may change, but the effects it can have on the audience, and their experience, cannot be denied, and remain the same as they always have, revolutionary, and unlike anything else out there.



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