

Lynch Mob

Eraserhead, Claire Henry (120pp, BFI/Bloomsbury)

Good Day Today. David Lynch Destabilises the Spectator, Daniel Neofetou (933pp, Zero Books)

Twin Peaks: The Return – It's a Wonderful Lie!, Gino C. Mongelli (340pp, Amazon)

Claire Henry's book in the wonderful British Film Institute series, each of which focuses on an individual 'film classic', is a thoughtful and individual look at David Lynch's unsettling late 1970s black and white film *Eraserhead*. A claustrophobic 89 minutes of surreal and shadowy unreality, set mostly in windowless apartment rooms in an industrial dystopian town, it is both intensely funny and horrific and has continued to elude deconstruction and meaning since it was first screened.

One thing it did do was present many of the tropes Lynch has continued to use since: doppelgängers, decay, parallel universes, and bizarre, fragmented stories. Henry convincingly talks about Lynch in relation to Francis Bacon's paintings of sliding skin and facial disfiguration, which is a brief consideration of how *Eraserhead* has influenced and informed many other films.

In the first chapter Henry considers the role/motif of 'The Baby' in the film, writing as a pregnant mother as she does so, but also considering fears relating to parenthood and *Eraserhead's* nightmare extended family, as well as how the film's models were made and the industrial city and soundtrack produced. Chapter 2 moves onto a consideration of how the film is contained within a brilliantly conceived, constructed and mostly implied world. Viewers are immersed in this world from the moment the film starts, with no explanation or notion of reality; and they do much of the creation of the world for themselves.

Eraserhead is hyper-real in many ways, with Henry suggesting in her third chapter that the inability to summarise or explain the film, whilst viewing or in retrospect, having watched it, produces a dream state or psychological transformation in the viewer. 'The Viewer Becomes the Dreamer' is the bold chapter title, but the discussion also encompasses Lynch's practice and use of Transcendental Meditation and how it informs his film-making. The chapter is the most intriguing and ambitious here, but also the most confusing, whilst the following chapter considers the film as 'The Ultimate Midnight Movie'.

Here, Henry charts how the film's notoriety and cult status gradually evolved, originally because of a distributor's and film scheduler's stubborn dedication, then word-of-mouth acclaim, followed by re-releases to follow-up fans' interest in Lynch's work as he achieved fame (or notoriety) with the likes of *Blue Velvet*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Twin Peaks*. Gradually, Henry argues, *Eraserhead* has been subsumed into a whole body of work by Lynch, just as the term 'Lynchian' has entered the vocabulary of film criticism. The book is an intriguing addition to the BFI Film Classics library, although I do wish they had used a film still on the

front, not the awful drawing that they chose.

Daniel Neofetou's book – published back in 2012, but which I have only just come across – is not so much a discussion of Lynch as a political or sociological treatise which uses Lynch's films as a critical lens or example. It is basically an argument for recognition of the complexity of life and individual interpretation and belief, set against the then emerging authoritarianism and moral outrage the likes of David Cameron was promoting in 2012. Neofetou's writing is intriguing and difficult as he struggles to make claims for what was once called postmodernism: no absolute truths, only relative or personal ones; the questioning of values, linear history (as opposed to various and often conflicting histories), 'fundamentalist positions' and 'religious imperialism'. At times touching on gnostic ideas, and admitting to a resulting instability and lack of knowledge, the book ends with the positive suggestion that we must learn to question and understand *for ourselves* rather than rely on what is accepted or common knowledge.

Although Claire Henry is critical of those who seek to explain and/or summarise Lynch's films and art, and I might question – whilst admitting to being intrigued by – Daniel Neofetou's appropriation of Lynch to discuss philosophy, it is Gino C. Mongelli who most embraces the Lynchian in his disorganised, rambling and at times mind-blowing volume, which is as ridiculous, addictive and strange as *Twin Peaks: The Return*, ostensibly the book's subject matter, was.

Mongelli does not try to summarise and explain everything, he carefully presents various – often conflicting and contrasting – ideas which *might* explain what is going on. At various points it is suggested that the viewer is dreaming the whole thing, or a character is, or that there might be a difference between a character dreaming or being dreamed, or the notion that perhaps the actors themselves are outside the Lynchian world they are acting in. Who is who and who is what? Why does Lynch love *The Wizard of Oz* so much, and does it hold the key to the series? (Probably not, to be honest.)

There is time travel, absence, superheroes, gnosticism, demonology, magic, the holy grail, chains of associations, mind-blowing ideas, ridiculous propositions, conspiracy theories and confusion. Once we understand what 'reality tunnels' are (I still don't) we apparently should be able to embrace the fact that '[i]n Lynch's work, miscommunications and failures of understanding are often used to describe the confusion'. Mongelli also suggests that 'the way you look at the world means you either find gibberish or meaning' and that '[w]e must try to make sense of it all ourselves', ultimately buying in to Lynch's reliance on intuition and 'inner knowing' to 'discern more of the greater pattern at work'.

Whilst at times I longed for Mongelli to tell us where the ideas he re-presents came from, rather than just name the (often obscure online) authors, I loved trying to make my way through his potpourri of info-dumps, theories, observations and comments. If at times I skipped a few pages (I am not going to engage with Ken Wilber's ideas ever again, having been hassled by some of his 'disciples' who were more like aggressive cult members!) and simply sometimes

failed to understand the suggested connections, *It's a Wonderful Lie!* is the kind of book I like: one that produces more questions than answers and is entirely appropriate to its subject matter.

Rupert Loydell