



British Academy of Film and Television Arts  
The 2007 David Lean Lecture given by David Lynch

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BRITISH ACADEMY  
OF FILM AND TELEVISION ARTS



Moviestore Collection

Above: *Eraserhead* (1977)

Cover: Lynch pictured in 1986. Image: Ronald Grant Archive

## Overview

A singular film director with a more diverse body of work than he is often given credit for, David Lynch is a true American original. For more than 40 years he has remained on the artistic cutting edge of filmmaking, establishing a cinematic language of his own that famously combines an ambiguous narrative style with unsettling imagery.

After a series of shorts in the late 60s, Lynch's film school feature *Eraserhead* (1977) enjoyed cult success, bringing him to the attention of Mel Brooks, who was exec-producing *The Elephant Man* (1980). His spare direction shaped a hauntingly memorable film which earned him BAFTA nominations as director and co-screenwriter. By 1984, his reputation prompted an invitation from George Lucas to direct *Return Of The Jedi* although – perhaps wisely – Lynch declined the opportunity.

He has rarely relished the role of director for hire, proving instead to be a provocative auteur, a commentator on the darker psychologies within us. Typically he shakes up the complacent imagery of picture perfect Americana, subverting suburban 'normality' in *Blue Velvet* (1986) by introducing darker elements (the memorable severed ear on the lawn, for example). The equally enthralling *Wild At Heart* (1990), a fevered love story, picked up the Palme d'Or at Cannes, confirming Lynch as a director at the height of his powers.

Translating this movie success to a mainstream television audience seemed a risky venture, but *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) proved a cultural phenomenon both at home and abroad. A murder mystery populated by a compelling roster of characters, it led to a big screen prequel, subtitled *Fire Walk With Me* (1992). More TV work followed, including comedy series *On The Air* (1992) and mini-series *Hotel Room* (1993) before

a triumphant return to the big screen with the psychological noir *Lost Highway* in 1997, and the surprisingly heart-warming pleasures of *The Straight Story* two years later.

"That was maybe my most experimental film," he says of the latter. "When I read the script I was thinking: 'This is a beautiful feeling; how do you capture that?'. A lot of times you see people crying on the screen but you don't feel like crying. But when you have something that brings a real emotion in there, that's the power of cinema."

And that has been David Lynch's quest throughout his career, challenging audiences to feel, to participate rather than passively accept what is presented on screen. Amnesiac mystery *Mulholland Drive* (2001) saw a return to enigmatic form for Lynch. Praised by one critic for its "extraordinary atmosphere and lush visual invention," it earned Lynch his fourth Oscar nomination.

With its modest tagline, 'A Woman in Trouble', his latest feature, *INLAND EMPIRE* (2007), is arguably his most challenging yet. Shot entirely on digital video, it explores the fragmented personalities of a Hollywood actress via dancing prostitutes, a cursed Polish folk tale and a sitcom of talking rabbits; evidence surely that the maverick filmmaker, now 61, is not about to settle down or sell out.

Anwar Brett

## An American Filmmaker in London

At the time, it was impossible to imagine what, if anything, David Lynch would ever find to do after his first feature, *Eraserhead*. A labour of love that had taken some five years to complete, it was a personal, original and disturbing debut. As its cult status grew, what transpired for this young American was equally surprising.

“It was like going from zero to 60 in no time.” That’s how Lynch once described finding himself with eight Oscar nominations for his second feature, *The Elephant Man*, in 1980. Unfortunately, Tinsletown’s heavyweight actor Robert Redford had directed his debut that year, and the story of *Ordinary People* was a more obvious attraction than that of Victorian sideshow freak John Merrick. *The Elephant Man* went home empty-handed on Oscar night, although later it scooped three of its seven BAFTA nominations.

Many of the Hollywood ‘community’ had assumed that the film’s unknown director was British. So how had an Eagle Scout from Missoula, Montana with only one bizarre cult film on his CV come to direct the likes of Sir John Gielgud in a London-based period drama, backed by a major studio?

The two-word answer is Stuart Cornfeld, a young executive working for Mel Brooks. Having loved *Eraserhead*, he called Lynch to see if he could help with the next project. This was the ill-fated *Ronnie Rocket* but discussions finally led to *The Elephant Man*, a film Cornfeld was developing for Brooks’ own company. There was a script and a producer but no director. Mel would have to see *Eraserhead*. Lynch recalls the experience of waiting outside that screening: “I can’t see anything. I can’t feel anything. I’m just there...”

Brooks emerged from the theatre, announcing: “You’re a madman. I love you. You’re in.”

During production there were times when Lynch wished he was ‘out’. He spent months making an Elephant Man suit for actor John Hurt. It had all the flexibility of concrete and had to be abandoned. So little of Merrick’s world still existed that Lynch had to find inspiration from books about historic London: he couldn’t ‘feel’ it. Some of the actors were sceptical about this young “Jimmy Stewart from Mars” and told him so. “I would have nightmares. You know how you feel when you wake up, how thankful you are? Well, I’d wish I could go back into the nightmare, because it was worse being awake!”

However, Brooks fiercely supported his chosen director in a manner Lynch has rarely experienced since, and his gamble paid off. The industrial sights and sounds of *Eraserhead* perfectly characterise *The Elephant Man*’s world – a London so stained by the Industrial Revolution that its effects manifest themselves as slow motion explosions from within Merrick’s own body. And those surprised by the emotional punch of Lynch’s *The Straight Story* (1999) should look again at the impossibly sad conclusion to Merrick’s life as imagined by the director. Lynchland has always been the site of broken hearts and dreams.

Chris Rodley



Above: *The Elephant Man* (1980)

## John Hurt CBE Actor

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John Hurt received Golden Globe, Oscar and BAFTA nominations in 1981 for his leading role as John Merrick in *The Elephant Man*, winning the BAFTA.

Image: David Fisher/Rex Features

In order to persuade me that I should play John Merrick (persuasion was considered necessary as I would be unrecognisable and David was a first-time director), a screening of his student film *Eraserhead* had been set up. Not an easy film for an early morning screening and the friend who was with me groaned; “well, you won’t be working with him then.”

On the contrary, I had witnessed a film that was a revelation. It re-defined the language of cinema – images by the dozen, aural, visual and musical that would remain with me forever. Metaphysical images, amusing, horrifying and tragic, all presented in a language that was entirely cinematic and nothing to do with its cousin, literature.

His genius in regard to *The Elephant Man* was that he was able to apply his personal imagery to a story that was both narrative and accessible.

## Laura Dern Actress

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Laura Dern has collaborated with Lynch on *Blue Velvet*, *Wild At Heart*, *Industrial Symphony No. 1: The Dream Of the Broken Hearted* and *INLAND EMPIRE*.

Image: Keystone USA/Rex Features

I have worked with David Lynch since I was 17 years of age. I can single out those creative opportunities as the ones that built a deep trust of myself and introduced me to the idea of being bold and making brave choices. David so clearly embodies that as an artist and it is infectious for all who surround him. Working with David Lynch is just like seeing a David Lynch film. You are given a world without boundaries to inhabit. He is there letting you know that you can do no wrong. As an actor, every turn you take is worth taking. And as an audience, it is you who decides your own experience. He fearlessly invites us into his brain, his vision. And from these experiences, we feel as if we will never be the same.

## Naomi Watts Actress

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Naomi Watts’ breakthrough role came in Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*. She has since provided the voice for Suzie Rabbit in both *Rabbits* and *INLAND EMPIRE*.

David is an incredibly charming, highly-spirited human being who is great to be around. He’s got one of the funniest senses of humour I’ve ever experienced in a man. A real dry wit but incredibly mischievous at the same time. As actors, for the most part we’re trained to know where we’ve come from, where we’re going, what the truth and meaning is behind every scene. He basically asks us to undo all that. He’s saying that all those questions don’t matter, that you simply treat each scene with the right mood and ideas that it needs. David guides you along but he doesn’t tell you exactly what it is or what it means, so it’s up to you to make those things up. I trusted him 100% and it worked. I was putty in his hands and there was *nothing* I wouldn’t do for him. I say that with total conviction.

## Kyle MacLachlan Actor

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Kyle MacLachlan has collaborated with Lynch on *Dune*, *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks* and *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*.

Image: Charles Sykes/Rex Features

David Lynch is responsible for quite possibly my entire film and television career. David cast me, a complete unknown, in the film *Dune*. During the making of that film, he shared with me the script of *Blue Velvet* and I was stunned. It was amazing. Nine months later there we were in Wilmington, North Carolina to begin making what I think is one of David’s greatest films.

I have never worked with a director like David Lynch. It is difficult to explain to a non-actor just how special his creative process is. He doesn’t audition actors in the traditional sense. He meets you, has a chat and then invites you to be a part of the cast. You now feel as if you’re an equal in the creative process and therefore much more confident to explore your own impulses. To be on his set is perhaps the most creatively stimulating environment an actor can experience. There is not a single actor who has worked with David that wouldn’t drop everything to be in that creative space with him.

## Room To Dream

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For more than 30 years, David Lynch has created a body of work so distinctive it has even spawned its very own adjective: Lynchian. Offering us disturbing trips into an inland empire that exists somewhere in the cut between reality and dream, his cinema employs every aspect of the filmmaking process to cast its hypnotic spell.

David Lynch probably doesn't much like the term Lynchian. He's an enigmatic, occasionally evasive, filmmaker who prefers to let his work speak for itself. "A mystery," he once remarked, "is the most beautiful thing in the world." Yet, his films are so idiosyncratic that it would be impossible to mistake them for those of any other director. You always know when you're watching a David Lynch movie; his flair is unmistakable.

Lynch has always been a filmmaker rather than a director. An auteur in the old-fashioned sense, he uses everything from art direction to sound design to create a very specific atmosphere: "All my movies are about strange worlds that you can't go into unless you build them and film them," he says. Trained as a painter, skilled as a musician and even possessing a side interest in furniture design, Lynch builds these worlds from the ground up, aided by long-time collaborators including composer Angelo Badalamenti and production/costume designer Patricia Norris.

Fascinated with what happens beneath the surface of everyday reality, he has made repeated dives down into the shadowy depths of the unconscious. His films frequently replicate a dreamlike state, not only through their fractured storylines but also through their technical aesthetic. Dissonant industrial sound effects and near-subliminal rumblings of white noise complement the gathering narrative unease in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*

and suggest a waking nightmare. It was a technique Lynch learnt early: while filming his avant-garde horror movie *Eraserhead*, he created an eerie, otherworldly soundscape by placing microphones in bottles.

Music is equally important to him; his eclectic, off-kilter soundtracks perfectly capture the playfully uncanny atmosphere of his films. Can anyone who's been exposed to the psychosexual drama of *Blue Velvet* ever listen to Bobby Vinton the same way again? Meanwhile, his production design favours his peculiar brand of down home surrealism; it blends kitsch Americana with a hellish existentialism straight out of Kafka or Francis Bacon. Even his television series *Twin Peaks* was infused with this haunting/haunted quality bringing, in the words of critic David Thompson, "Magritte to the masses."

It's no surprise that Lynch has enthusiastically embraced digital technology. Sections of his deliberately fragmented epic *INLAND EMPIRE* grew out of online projects and viral videos, including his eight-episode series *Rabbits*, in which "three rabbits live with a fearful mystery." Digital video has allowed him to work more intimately, arguably bringing his cinema closer to painting than ever before with the murky quality of DV, Lynch says, offering more "room to dream."

Jamie Russell



Above: *Mulholland Drive* (2001)

### Angelo Badalamenti Composer

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Angelo Badalamenti has scored numerous projects for Lynch, including *Wild At Heart*, *Twin Peaks*, *On The Air*, *Hotel Room*, *Lost Highway*, *The Straight Story*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Rabbits*.

I first met David in 1986 while he was shooting the last scene of *Blue Velvet*. I had been asked to work with Isabella Rossellini because David needed her vocal performance for the film. Isabella and I walked to the set, bringing an audio cassette with her singing and me playing piano. David listened, then immediately smiled and said, “That’s the ticket, this is peachy keen.”

My experiences working and collaborating with David are different than most composer/director’s working processes. Composers are generally brought in late and don’t start working until after the film has been shot. However, often before David would shoot a single frame, he would sit beside me at a keyboard and, in a soft voice, describe it. A scene, a setting and the emotions of the characters [would] verbally paint a mood that would naturally put me in a mindset, triggering the music composition to marry his images and emotions. Composing and collaborating with my friend David Lynch has been and still is “peachy keen.”

### Mark Frost Writer

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Mark Frost collaborated with Lynch on *Twin Peaks*, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, *On The Air* and *American Chronicles*.

Image: J. Lingo/Rex Features

I had a strange premonition on seeing *The Elephant Man* that I would some day work with David Lynch, so I was eager to explore the possibility. We hit it off immediately. David is somewhat inaccessible to other people and very solitary but there was some chemistry between us and we had a lot of fun together [on *Twin Peaks*]. The thing I remember the most is laughing ourselves ill from some of the things we would think of. I mean, we thought of some pretty odd things.\*

### Johanna Ray Casting Director

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Johanna Ray has cast *Blue Velvet*, *The Cowboy And The Frenchman*, *Twin Peaks*, *Wild At Heart*, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *INLAND EMPIRE*.

Working with David has been the most pleasurable experience I’ve had in this business. Aside from his brilliance he is the most humorous, considerate, flexible and appreciative person. In his work he is decisive and knows exactly what he wants and completely trusts his instinct. On the other hand, if there is an actor who has a quality that particularly interests him, he will cast them even if they’re not how the role was described.

He has this uncanny willingness and ability to make use of certain accidents and mistakes in a scene where another director would say he’d have to do another take. I think everyone knows that ‘Killer Bob’ in *Twin Peaks* evolved from the prop man’s reflection accidentally caught in the mirror when he was crouching by the bed trying not to be seen. I feel very fortunate to have his friendship and I have Raffaella Di Laurentiis to thank for making the introduction on *Blue Velvet*. If only David would make movies more frequently.

### Frederick Elmes Cinematographer

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Frederick Elmes has lit a number of shorts and features for Lynch including *The Amputee*, *Eraserhead*, *Dune*, *Blue Velvet*, *The Cowboy And The Frenchman* and *Wild At Heart*.

In addition to his work in film, David is an accomplished painter. I’ve always found his painting particularly powerful in its ability to invoke a specific mood and emotional response. This is true of his films as well, which establish a world that although foreign, feels strangely familiar. David is able to translate these feelings into imagery which resonates with audiences. I believe the precision with which he invokes particular emotions or sensations makes his peculiar landscapes at once recognisable and unusually fascinating.

My work as a cinematographer has been inspired by his vision of the world – often by the small details that are important to him. The way a tree shadow plays on a wall at night may evoke the mood for a dramatic moment in a film. Finding the exact colour for the walls of Dorothy’s apartment in *Blue Velvet* supported the powerful emotional scenes that unfold there. Like individual elements of a painting they mean nothing alone, but combined they support the emotional foundation of his films.



Above: *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991)

## In His Own Words

“A mystery is like a magnet. If you were in a room and there was an open doorway, stairs going down and the light just fell away, you’d be very tempted to go down there. When you only see a part, it’s even stronger than seeing the whole. The whole might have logic but, out of context, the fragment takes on a tremendous value of abstraction.”<sup>†</sup>

### On darker themes

Films should have power. The power of good and the power of darkness, so you can get some thrills and shake things up a bit. If you back off from that stuff, you’re shooting right down into lukewarm junk. A lot of the time when you go out to an extreme, you can make a fool of yourself or of the film. You have to believe things so much that you make them honest. I’m not trying to manipulate an audience. I’m just trying to get in there and let the material talk. To work inside a dream. If it’s real, and if you believe it, you can say almost anything.<sup>‡</sup>

### On filmmaking

I want to make movies that you can’t go to in a car or plane or a boat. You’ve got to buy a theatre ticket to go into that world, to have that experience. I would like to think you could be taken into a space that is film-space, even if it’s only for a moment within the film and it needs all the rest of the film to make it happen. In this sound-and-picture space, you should know something, or have a feeling that you couldn’t have unless there was cinema. I know there has to be a story. I’m interested in that. But I like the idea that film can be really *film* as well as do the other things.<sup>‡</sup>

### On music

Music deals with abstractions and, like film, it involves time. And through music you learn that, in order to get a particular beautiful feeling, you have to have started far back, arranging certain things in a certain way. You can’t just cut to it. When you have a note, and another detuned note buzzes against it, there’s something in between those two notes that’s the magical area. It’s a balance. And I think since we live in a world of dualities – hot and cold, high and low, the whole thing – that any balancing point is very special. It’s not an intellectual thing, it’s intuitive.<sup>□</sup>

### On the absurd

The thing I love most is absurdity. I find real humour in struggling with ignorance. If you saw a man repeatedly running into a wall until he was a bloody pulp, after a while it would make you laugh because it becomes absurd. But I don’t just find humour in unhappiness – I find it extremely heroic the way people forge on despite the despair they often feel. I look at the world and I see absurdity all around me. People do strange things constantly, to the point that, for the most part, we manage not to see it. That’s why I love coffee shops and public places – I mean, they’re all out there.<sup>†</sup>



Moviestore Collection

Above: *Blue Velvet* (1986)

## Filmography

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- 2006 INLAND EMPIRE writer, producer, director
- 2002 Darkened Room (short) writer, director
- 2002 Dumbland (online series) writer, producer, director
- 2002 Rabbits (online series) writer, producer, director
- 2001 Mulholland Drive writer, director
- 1999 The Straight Story director
- 1997 Lost Highway writer, director
- 1996 Lumière: Premonitions Following An Evil Deed (short) director
- 1994 Crumb producer
- 1993 Hotel Room (TV) director
- 1992 Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me writer, director
- 1992 On The Air (TV) writer, producer, director
- 1991 Twin Peaks (TV, series two) writer, director
- 1990 American Chronicles (TV) producer, director
- 1990 Industrial Symphony No. 1: The Dream Of The Broken Hearted (short) writer, producer, director
- 1990 Wild At Heart writer, director
- 1990 Twin Peaks (TV) writer, director
- 1988 The Cowboy And The Frenchman (short) writer, director
- 1986 Blue Velvet writer, director
- 1980 The Elephant Man writer, director
- 1977 Eraserhead writer, producer, director
- 1974 The Amputee (short) writer, producer, director
- 1970 The Grandmother (short) writer, producer, director
- 1968 The Alphabet (short) writer, producer, director
- 1966 Six Men Getting Sick (short) writer, producer, director

### Honours and Awards

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#### BAFTAs

*The Elephant Man* – nominated for Direction and Screenplay

#### Oscars

*The Elephant Man* – nominated for Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay  
*Blue Velvet* – nominated for Best Director  
*Mulholland Drive* – nominated for Best Director

This Filmography lists Writer, Producer and Director credits only. Lynch has additional credits including music videos and commercials and has worked in many other disciplines, including Animation, Cinematography, Editing, Executive Producing and Sound Design. Please note that *Dune* (1984) has been omitted at Lynch's request.

# Thanks

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The lecture series also serves to carry on the legacy of the great director David Lean, one of the founders of the British Film Academy (as it was then known) in 1947 and a continuing inspiration to many through his exceptional body of work.

Previous David Lean Lectures have been given by:

2006 Oliver Stone  
2005 Woody Allen  
2004 John Boorman  
2003 Ken Loach  
2002 Robert Altman  
2001 Sydney Pollack

A transcript and podcast of this lecture will be made available online at [www.bafta.org](http://www.bafta.org).

## Bibliography

- \* Extract from *Weirdsville USA: The Obsessive Universe Of David Lynch*, edited by Paul A. Woods, published by Plexus Publishing Limited (1997).
- † Extracts from: *Lynch On Lynch* (revised edition 2005), edited by Chris Rodley, published by Faber and Faber Limited.
- ‡ Extract from an interview with Henry Bromell in 1980 for *Rolling Stone* magazine.
- Extract from an interview with Mark Kermode in 1997 for *Q* magazine.

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