

DAVID LYNCH AS A POSTMODERN FILMMAKER

BY

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ABSTRACT

It is the intention of this thesis to provide a reasoned analysis of the films of David Lynch, in order to locate Lynch as a Postmodern filmmaker.

Although other filmmakers have been seen to include elements of Postmodernism in their work (Tim Burton is an example), few directors have attained Lynch's recent prominence or popularity. His recent television series, *Twin Peaks*, has created an even larger audience for his filmic style, and the guest directors employed were obviously encouraged to employ a similar technique, in order to create a coherent filmic philosophy.

This work will concentrate specifically on the three films Lynch has completed which are located in America, in order to attempt to discover whether Lynch's films can literally be termed Postmodern, or merely the products of a society in which Pop Art has encouraged the destruction of so-called High Culture. In other words, an investigation will be conducted in order to ascertain the extent of Lynch's awareness of the Postmodern philosophy, and, if Lynch can be termed a Postmodernist, the manner in which this can be discovered within the three chosen film texts.

INTRODUCTION

David Lynch's (1946-) recent prominence within the field of American cinema encourages an enquiry as to why his popularity has become increasingly pronounced. From the comparatively small cult following which eventually ensured the fame of his first full-length feature film, *Eraserhead* (1976), to the wide cinema release of *Wild at Heart* (1990), his most recent filmic offering, Lynch has shown himself to be constantly aware of contemporary philosophical issues. He is also increasingly discussed as an *auteur*, his films arousing specific expectations from his audience. Most obviously, Lynch utilises all the icons of an idealised America and subverts them to reveal the inner putrefaction.

The intention of this thesis is to demonstrate Lynch's appreciation of the Postmodern¹ movement, as seen in three of his films, namely *Eraserhead* (1976), *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Wild at Heart* (1990). The characteristics discussed in this work can also be viewed in Lynch's television series, *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), but the sheer scale of the work (that is, thirty-two fifty minute episodes), was considered to be too vast for this project. However, frequent references have been made to the series, in order to reinforce statements made about the other film texts under discussion.

By making the decision to choose three films which all represent aspects of American culture, it is hoped that Lynch's frequent references to established genres and other films will be revealed to indicate a specifically American Postmodern sensibility.

It is difficult to consider Lynch's filmic quotations as existing merely as solemn or exuberant homages to favoured films or directors, since the references are frequently altered in order to display an unexpected aspect. It is this Janus-faced quality which places Lynch in an unique artistic position. His films are not affectionate

¹For the duration of this thesis the word Postmodern will be spelt as one word, and with a capital letter. However, when other critics are quoted (for example, Charles Jencks) the word will sometimes appear with a hyphen.

tributes to filmic history as, for example, George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973) recalls Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955), and his *Indiana Jones* series conjures images of Saturday matinees, before the advent of television. Neither are they spoofs, such as Abrahams, Zucker and Zucker's *Top Secret*, *Airplane* and *Naked Gun* films, although Lynch's work often seems too laden with humour to describe it as mere pastiche. It has a strong parodic element, but veers away from the slapstick comedy which characterises the work Jim Abrahams and David and Jerry Zucker.

The fact that Lynch's work has predominantly reflected (and subverted) the ideology of American culture contributes towards his importance as an unique and wholly individual voice. Instead of being primarily concerned with propounding the ideals considered by so-called Hollywood directors to be appropriate, Lynch neglects to propound a philosophy of morality and familial harmony.

The three film texts discussed within the context of this thesis all operate as devices to reveal the unsavoury facet of American cultural and family life. This fact cannot easily be disputed, however, it is the task of this text to attempt to prove that the director constantly applies the philosophy and style of Postmodernism in order to achieve this end.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO ASPECTS OF DAVID LYNCH'S PHILOSOPHY AS FILMMAKER

The primary focus of this thesis will be a study of the changes viewed in David Lynch's work as a filmmaker, from his early Modernist short films of the 1960s, to the Postmodern appearance and structure of *Wild at Heart* (1990). It is hoped that a rationale may be found which explains Lynch's changing style, and his more recent tendency to cleave increasingly to the stylistic and thematic opportunities which may be termed Postmodern.²

Having received his training in the Fine Arts at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art in Philadelphia, David Lynch began to make films in the 1960s, originally as a response to the inability of the canvas to provide the various effects which he required of his work. In an article in *Cinefantastique*, K. George Godwin noted that, "His first love was painting, and his work with film began as an extension of his exploration of painting techniques." (Godwin: 1984, p.42) In a televised interview with Chris Auty on Britain's Channel Four, Lynch revealed that he wished to tell stories, and found that the two-dimensionality of the canvas was preventing him from discovering the potential of movement and narrative. In this way, a movement away from the Fine Arts to Film seemed inevitable.

His first short film, *The Alphabet*, (1967), combines human actors and animation and employs an extremely disrupted narrative. (Godwin: 1984, p.43) Despite lasting only four minutes, the work demonstrates a clearly Modernist technique in its complete lack of a conventional Realist narrative structure and the deliberate two-dimensionality of the central female character. According to Lynch, *The Alphabet's*

² For instance, Lynch's frequent tendency to quote past styles and film texts in his work. *Blue Velvet* mirrors the heavily saturated shades of the early days of Technicolour, as Lumberton echoes the type of small town often depicted in American films which exalt the so-called American way, for instance, George Lucas's popular work, *American Graffiti*, (1973). Lynch proceeds to subvert these values by manipulating the past forms in order to make an entirely new statement about America's decaying underbelly.

main concern is the trauma involved in the process of learning (Ibid.), and this feeling of trauma is conveyed to the viewer by his deliberate use of alienating techniques, such as distorted sound and Surrealist imagery.

In 1970 Lynch completed his second short film, *The Grandmother*, which was a longer work than *The Alphabet*, lasting 34 minutes. (Godwin: 1984, p.42) Although Lynch still employed the combination of human actors and animation this second film text had a more coherent narrative than the first. Briefly, a young boy who is frequently in trouble with his dislikable and animalistic parents for wetting his bed, grows himself a grandmother from a seed and a mound of earth. She is literally an 'Earth Mother' and she enables the boy to cope with life in a more positive manner. As with *The Alphabet* the soundtrack is full of bizarre sounds, the parents growling and barking like animals and the narrative structure being frequently disrupted by animated hallucinations. Instead of employing conventional music, Lynch used a combination of industrial noises and discordant musical sounds.³

At this stage of his career Lynch seems to have been influenced primarily by Modernist techniques, particularly in his lack of interest regarding coherent narrative structure.⁴ By the time Lynch completed his first full length feature film, *Eraserhead*, in 1976, he appeared to be questioning the artistic possibilities of Modernism. For instance, although a characteristic of Modernism is the acknowledgement that, "...the deep structure of reality is *known*..." (Boyne & Rattansi: 1990, p.7, my italics) Lynch provides no explanation of the meaning of *Eraserhead*, leaving the disorientated viewer mentally to interpret the work from his or her own perspective.

Superficially, it would appear that *Eraserhead* was little more than a lengthy example of what Lynch was attempting to codify in his earlier works. However, a more detailed examination of this film indicates that Lynch was beginning to test the boundaries of Modernism, and extend his vision towards a Postmodern aesthetic.

3 For instance, Lynch used a number of sounds which resembled the noises made by steam-powered machinery and combined this with harsh single chords for dramatic effect.

4 M.H. Abrams describes Modernist narrative structure thus: "Major works of Modernist fiction...subvert the basic conventions of earlier prose fiction by breaking up the narrative continuity, departing from the standard ways of representing characters, and violating the traditional syntax and coherence of narrative language." (Abrams: 1981, ps.109-110)

In Chapter Two, *Eraserhead* is examined, and its style and content linked to Lynch's later work, most specifically *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Wild at Heart* (1990), but reference will also be made to *The Elephant Man* (1980), which they closely resemble. Apart from the fact that both *Eraserhead* and *The Elephant Man* feature characters whose physical appearance is grotesque, both films obviously use Expressionism and Surrealism in order to create a frequently threatening and hostile environment. This use of a similar atmosphere is more obvious because of the use of monochrome, rather than Technicolour.

One of the most noticeable factors about *Eraserhead* is its duality. While it appears to be another example of Modernism within Lynch's oeuvre, it also operates as a Modernist pastiche. This element of pastiche would seem to link it strongly to the later, more obviously Postmodern films, such as *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart*, but it differs in many ways, quite distinctly lacking the accessibility of the latter films. Most conspicuously, it employs a narrative structure which is so disjointed that the viewer is forced to participate vigorously in a reading of the film, (although any intrinsic meaning remains essentially unknowable, or relies primarily on personal translation.) While many Modernist filmmakers have a specific point to make, or some definite political statement to expound, Lynch seems to be merely experimenting with form. If one attempts to recount *Eraserhead*'s plot, very few words are needed, although mere description of the film's content cannot begin to express its form.⁵

Although a brief comparison between *Eraserhead* and *The Elephant Man* (1980) will be undertaken in Chapter Two, the latter film, as well as *Dune* (1984) will not be the subject of a detailed examination. The primary reason for this is that they were not generated by David Lynch, *The Elephant Man* being a Mel Brooks project and *Dune* having been a film financed and controlled by Dino de Laurentis. Lynch involved himself in the scripts of each film, but was not allowed unlimited artistic licence on either project. (Auty: Channel Four Video, 1984) It is certainly possible to argue that artists throughout the centuries were commissioned to undertake tasks and were, nonetheless, able to make the project unmistakably their own. However, the degree of interference by external forces was certainly not as imposing and, particu-

⁵ A more rigorous examination of *Eraserhead*'s elements of pastiche will be offered in Chapter Two.

larly on the set of *Dune*, Lynch frequently felt as though his decisions were being undermined. In a recent interview with Richard B. Woodward, featured in the British film magazine, *Empire*, he stated that, "The experience taught me a lesson...I would rather not make a film than make one where I don't have final cut." (Lynch, quoted by Woodward: 1990, p.78) Furthermore, he states that he finds the subject of *Dune* and its subsequent critical condemnation, "...extremely painful to talk about." (Ibid.)

A typical example of this criticism is displayed by Andy Gill in a critical retrospective of Lynch's work, also featured in *Empire*:

Lynch's first colour film is a complete disaster, with the director admitting years later that even he can't quite understand what's going on in the version finally released. His basic problem was in trying to be too faithful to the Frank Herbert book, which, with its four planets, varied life-forms and apparently ageless dynastic intrigues, is simply too big even for a 140-minute movie. Thus, despite the entire first half of the film being given over to dutiful exposition, it is still completely unintelligible to anyone who has not read the book. The sci-fi plot - opposing galactic factions battle it out for control of a giant-worm infested planet which produces a valuable drug-spice - is too infested with a vast array of unnecessary characters, none of whom is adequately introduced. Still, with its vast desert locations and imaginatively-designed interiors, *Dune* looks like a million dollars. Unfortunately it cost 50. (Gill: 1990, p.76)

In 1986 Lynch completed *Blue Velvet*, a project on which he was given complete artistic licence by Dino de Laurentis's company. In order to obtain this artistic freedom, Lynch accepted a limited budget, but after considerable interference by producers on the set of *Dune* he was willing to forgo much of the financial aid originally offered by de Laurentis. (Gill: 1990, p.77)

Blue Velvet clearly demonstrates a change in aesthetic on the part of Lynch, who, after working in Technicolour on *Dune*, now chose to move away from his earlier obsession with monochrome. This immediately helped the director to become a

more popular filmmaker,⁶ and his willingness to draw on American icons in order to structure his narrative also aided him in his movement away from the more esoteric diégesis of *Eraserhead*. Although Lynch's first full length feature film (*Eraserhead*) had since become a cult film it was not accessible to the less literate cinema-goer in the same way that *Blue Velvet* was. This may have been because of the nature of the film's structure as well as its use of generic formulae.

This tendency to conflate genres was not confined to film. Although genre is possibly more obvious within the area of film, the tendency is also apparent within the sphere of literature. For instance, if one considers Alisdair Gray's novel *Lanark*, it is obvious that the author has drawn on mythological texts in his creation of the world of Unthank, as well as relying on the British trend of Social Realism for its asthmatic anti-hero, Duncan Thaw. It is the jarring combination of the heroic and the banal that provides the main thrust for Gray's tale, not to mention the more obvious quotations from poets, such as T.S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath. (Gray: 1982)

In film, conventions which are recognized as being typical of a specific cinematic genre (for instance, the Western or the Musical), replace literary genres (for instance poetry and drama.) Alisdair Gray often turns his novel into a dictionary of sorts, separating the page into two sections, so that words in the text can be simultaneously semantically analysed. The effect of concurrently exploring two or more genres at one time may, however, be achieved in a less jarring manner with the use of film because of audience familiarity with the conventions of filmic genres, as well as cinematic historical precedents having already been set. Consider, for example, the number of detective films which contain elements of the love story. However, Postmodern film uses more than one genre for different reasons, the generic conflation being utilised in order to attempt to create new meaning.

In 1990 Lynch won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival with his latest film, *Wild at Heart*, which, while continuing many of the filmic peculiarities of *Blue Velvet* also appeared to extend his vision of America. This was achieved primarily by the use of many locations, *Wild at Heart* being a 'road' movie,⁷ as opposed to *Blue Velvet*

6 Since the increasingly widespread use of Technicolour from its inception in the 1930s, monochrome became associated, certainly by the 1970s, with more complex or so-called art films.

7 The term 'road movie' is used when describing a feature film in which two or more characters are

which was focused on the town of Lumberjon. (This use of a small community was further explored in Lynch and Mark Frost's TV series, *Twin Peaks*, which focused on the darker aspects of a small, seemingly inoffensive, neighbourhood.) However, as this thesis will show, there is also a definite movement towards a pure Postmodernism in Lynch's oeuvre, from *Eraserhead*'s use (and pastiche) of Modernism, to *Wild at Heart*'s obvious elements of Postmodernism.

This thesis will be primarily concerned with conducting a chronological study into three of Lynch's films, completed in the years between 1976 and 1990. It is hoped that a close examination will reveal an evolutionary process from the use of Modernism in his early work to the employment of Postmodernism in his most recent films. The argument propounded will be that Postmodernism, apart from displaying Lynch's propensity to acknowledge current artistic trends, provides the perfect framework for the director's obsessions. It also renders an excellent opportunity for Lynch to examine American society in a critical manner, and enables him to utilise history in order to do this.

For instance, the use, in *Twin Peaks*, of names which acknowledge America's political and economic past also comments on the current state of the USA. The most obvious examples are the sheriff, Harry S. Truman, and Josie Packard, the Asian widow of one of the most economically powerful members of the community. The fact that Josie has inherited the wealth of the Caucasian Andrew Packard, says a great deal about American anti-Asian paranoia. In recent months some major Hollywood properties have been purchased by large Japanese corporations, which is echoed in *Twin Peaks* by Josie's initial control of the Packard sawmill. Packard⁸ is one of the most prominent names in American economic history and the fact that Lynch chose to use an Asian actress to play Josie Packard cannot be coincidental, (despite the fact that Joan Chen is Chinese, not Japanese.)

However, before an examination of Lynch's Modern and Postmodern tendencies can be conducted it is essential to attempt a definition of these terms. Since Post-

involved in a peripatetic series of incidents or adventures, for instance in the 1969 film *Easy Rider*. (See also Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel, *On the Road*.)

⁸ For many years the name Packard was synonymous with the automobile industry. Now it is strongly linked to the computer industry.

modernism is at least partially a reaction against Modernism, it seems logical to define the latter term. a reasoned discussion of Postmodernism can commence.

Marshall Berman states in his text, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, that Modernism is a weapon of empowerment, the movement consisting of

...visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernisation, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them. (Berman: 1982, p.16)

Eugene Lunn (Lunn: 1982, ps.34-37) identifies four major characteristics of Modernist works. Firstly, the presence of an 'aesthetic self-reflexiveness' which examines the material and form utilized in the formation of the work in question. Boyne & Rattansi ((eds.): 1990, ps.6-7) mention, in particular, Picasso's investigation of "...the two-dimensionality of the painting surface" (Boyne & Rattansi (eds.): 1990, p.6) and Brecht's exposure of theatrical conventions and structures in his work. These concepts all subscribe to the so-called Modernist Theory, the most obvious characteristic of which is the tendency to examine the possibilities of each literary and artistic genre utilised.

Secondly, Lunn names juxtaposition (that is, montage) as a recurring Modernist motif in film. Montage, as demonstrated by filmmakers such as Eisenstein and Pudovkin, consisted of the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated or opposing images. Therefore, in attempting a reading of the film, audiences were obliged to engage themselves intellectually before being able to 'break the code' and thereby read the film. The writers James Joyce and Gertrude Stein also were beginning to discover new creative possibilities in their chosen artistic genres, especially with the breakdown of the linear narrative.

9 M.H. Abrams describes the philosophical roots of Modernism: "The (M)odernist revolt against traditional literary forms and subjects manifested itself strongly after the catastrophe of World War I shook men's faith in the foundations and continuity of Western civilization and culture." Perhaps this introverted artistic tendency was a desire to disengage from the outer world, with which many artists and writers felt themselves to be at odds.

Related to this breakdown of the simple narrative structure in the Novel, Play, Fine Arts and Film, is the conflation of multiple narrative voices and temporal divisions. In much Modernist work there is a "...continuous present..." (Boyne & Rattansi (eds.): 1990, p.7) rather than a clearly defined past, present and future.

Finally, Lunn indicates the importance, in Modernist theoretical structure, of the abandonment of the integrated individual subject. (Lunn: 1982, p.37) Boyne & Rattansi state that,

"...the (M)odernist novel presents individuals as riven by psychic conflicts, while in (E)xpressionist and (C)ubist (A)rt the human form is either distorted or geometrically recomposed." (Boyne & Rattansi (eds.): 1990, p.7)

Whether or not Lunn is entirely accurate or sufficiently comprehensive in his summation of Modernism, one can at least acknowledge the fact that Modernist artists began to alter the expectations and perceptions of their audience. The Cubists and Surrealist artists distorted form and rejected purely representational art, the Dadaists concocted (amongst other anti-artistic artifacts), theatrical revues, entirely alien to an audience conversant with the Naturalism of Chekhov and Ibsen. James Joyce experimented with the narrative form in novels such as *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939). Creators such as Dali, Picasso, Henry Moore and Franz Kafka seemed to feel uncomfortable in continuing to work with forms which had been formulated during the Age of Reason. In the infancy of the twentieth century, in a Europe dominated by the spectre of war, and beginning to be influenced by the theories of Freud and Marx, linear logic was frequently rejected in favour of means of expression more fitting for a new Age of Disorder. Since Realism and Naturalism (the previously dominant artistic forms) had relied heavily on the use of logic in the plot and in character development, as well as on crafting dialogue which gave the appearance, at least, of closely resembling 'real speech', it was reasonable to assume that the new artistic forms would break from this format.

The Industrial Revolution and the First World War had also been instrumental in creating a sense of dissatisfaction with universal values, since both events were responsible for major demographic upheavals, the Industrial Revolution encourag-

ing the large-scale resettlement of rural dwellers in urban areas, and the First World War caused the death of almost a full generation of young men. The reaction to this enormous (and sanctioned) loss of life was generally characterised by one of two responses; either by a deliberate embracing of the frivolous, or by a tendency to question the societal values that led to such wholesale destruction.

Humphrey Carpenter's text, *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh and his Friends*, discusses in detail the reaction to the First World War of a generation of British writers who were too young to have died in the trenches. Carpenter notes the tendency of some of these writers to return to the extreme form of aestheticism practised by late nineteenth century artistic figures, such as Ronald Firbank, Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. Carpenter describes a piece of writing submitted by Harold Acton to the *Eton Candle*, a school arts magazine which was formed during Acton's years at the public school:

Harold's (contribution) was a heavy piece of Nineties pastiche, with the perverse title 'Hansom Cab no. 213 bis', about a rich aesthete named Athelstane who lives entirely for his own sensations - he drinks milk because he finds it more stimulating than whisky, and bathes in mauve twilight to the accompaniment of organ music. (Carpenter: 1989, p.28)

In opposition to this aimless aestheticism stood the Modernists, many of whom believed in the revolutionary power of the new forms. However, not all Modernists believed in a leftist political solution, since writers such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Evelyn Waugh were notoriously right-wing.

Whatever the political solution envisaged, however, many were angered by the waste of lives and financial resources and a feeling of gloom and hopelessness was prevalent. The position of the British and European aristocracy was considerably weakened and the bourgeoisie, already in a position of power before the Great War, consolidated their economic situation.¹⁰

¹⁰ This situation was described in great detail by Evelyn Waugh in his novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945).

Marshall Berman, throughout *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, makes the connection between modernization and Modernism. After naming Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the first true Modernist, Berman explains that Saint-Preux, the hero of Rousseau's Romantic novel, *The New Eloise*, moves to the city from the country. His letters describe the turbulence of urban life as a maze of conflicting styles and opinions:

...a perpetual clash of groups and cabals, a continual flux and reflux of prejudices and conflicting opinions...Everyone constantly places himself in contradiction with himself...everything is absurd, but nothing is shocking, because everyone is accustomed to everything. (Rousseau, quoted in Berman: 1982, p.18)

It is this feeling of "flux and reflux" which Marx describes in the phrase which constitutes the title of Berman's work. Berman locates the core of the Marxian argument within the dialectic concerning the development of a world market. This is made possible by various factors, including technological advancement, demand for products exceeding the ability of local industry to supply them, an increasing desire for more cosmopolitan products and the phenomenon foreseen by Rousseau, that is, the large scale resettlement in the urban areas of rural dwellers.

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times. All fixed, fast frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men. (Marx, quoted in Berman: 1982, p.95)

In his description of bourgeois society, Marx also appeared to grapple, intellectually, with the spirit of Modernism. Modernization, the combination of,

...great discoveries in the physical sciences...the industrialization of production...immense demographic upheavals...rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth...systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development...increasingly powerful national states...mass social movements of people and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers...finally...an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market...(Berman: 1982, p.16)

engendered the Modernist sensibility.

Eugene Lunn links the process of modernization to the increasing emphasis placed on originality. He states that by the late nineteenth century, the "market systems" in the arts (which had developed after the decline of the system of patronage) were overcrowded, therefore much emphasis was placed on "...originality and innovation..." (Lunn: 1982, p.41) Lunn also mentions that a feeling of martyrdom was prevalent amongst the artistic community,¹¹ who felt that they were being forced to prostitute their talents for the tastes of the bourgeoisie, since the art they were forced to produce was less their own creation, than a product required by an often tasteless and avaricious art-market.

Lunn further states that the late nineteenth century marked the point at which

...the full implications of the new market situation, taken together with the cultural changes... were to be felt in a radically altered aesthetic form and perspective... (Lunn: 1982, p.41)

At this point, the artistic object became "...a self-referential construct instead of...a mirror of nature or society." (Ibid.) In other words, artists began to create objects which examined their own form and function, rather than being conceived as a representation of an already existing being or object.

Although Modernism is generally typified by a complete break from the old norms of representation and reliance on linear and closed narrative, it is, however, impossible to consider it as a unified movement. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane point out the lack of unanimity in the so-called 'Modernist movement', describing it as,

...the art consequent on Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty principle', of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity. (Bradbury & McFarlane (eds.): 1976, p.27)

¹¹ For instance, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

(Lynch's adoption of some of the Modernist sub-groups will be discussed later in this chapter, as well as his use of the philosophy of Existentialism.)

The difficulties inherent in interpreting Modernist works encouraged the prevalence of critics and theoreticians. Since *trompe l'oeil* work did not demand a high degree of engagement with an artistic work, the need for a visual translation generally did not exist. (It can be argued that the work of some Surrealist artists, for instance Salvador Dali and René Magritte, is an exception to this rule because, unlike truly *trompe l'oeil* art, this type of painting often places easily recognisable objects in unusual or disturbing juxtaposition. Alternatively, the object represented might be placed in an absurd, or unlikely, locale.) Because of the widespread appeal of Realist and Naturalist forms, many cultural consumers found themselves to be challenged by the work of Modernist artists and were frequently reliant on critics and theoreticians in order to make sense of the work under scrutiny.

However, as previously mentioned, the most obvious characteristic of Modernism is the increased awareness displayed by its creators of their various artistic media. This factor is the underlying feature of all Modernist artifacts, and is continued by Postmodernism, although usually in a less intrusive manner. For instance, Postmodernism first became obvious as a new artistic trend in architecture, and was largely characterised by an awareness of the surrounding environment, as well as the decorative possibilities of architecture, facilitated by the architect's awareness of the history of his creative genre.

In the realm of architecture and design, Modernism has come to be associated with functionalism, particularly in the work of Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright. Most Modernist buildings have little connection with their environment, existing as structures which have been designed for maximum spatial utilization. Charles Jencks, somewhat facetiously, refers to the Modernist movement in architecture being "...a Protestant Reformation..." (Jencks: 1986, p.28) as opposed to the ebullient Catholicism of Postmodernism. Jencks extends his religious metaphor to a description of the dominant ethos of Modernist architecture:

The reigning religion of architectural Modernism could be called pragmatic amelioration, that is the belief that by 'doing more with less' as Buckminster Fuller said, social problems would slowly disappear. (Jencks: 1986, p.28)

Jencks justifies his ecclesiastical analogies by referring to Modern creators and intellectuals as the new priesthood.

In their most exalted role, they would heal society's rifts; in 'purifying the language of the tribe', they could purify its sensibility and provide an aesthetic-moral base - if not a political one. (Jencks: 1986, p.29)

However, Jencks acknowledges that by focusing on Modern architecture, one tends to ignore Modernism's pessimism:

...the other arts and philosophy... are not optimistic and progressive at all. Think of Nietzsche, Goedel (sic), Heisenberg, Heidegger and Sartre - closer to nihilism than to the positivism of Fuller. Or think of Yeats, Joyce, Pound, T.S. Eliot, or De Chirico, Picasso, Duchamp and Grosz - hardly liberal, not very socialist and certainly not optimistic. Whereas Modernism in architecture has furthered the ideology of industrialisation and progress, Modernism in most other fields has either fought these trends or lamented them. (Jencks: 1986, p.28)

This indicates a schizophrenic sensibility. Modernist artists reject representation and the linear narrative as being of little use in the world of Freud and Einstein, yet are seen to mourn their destruction in almost elegiac fashion (for example, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.)

Commenting on Clement Greenberg's critical appraisal of Modernism, Jencks states that,

Modernism as Clement Greenberg has defined it always has this irreducible goal: to focus on the essence of each art language. By doing this, he argues, standards are kept high in an age of secularisation, where there are few shared values and little left of a common symbolic system. All one can do in an agnostic age of consumer pluralism is

The reigning religion of architectural Modernism could be called pragmatic amelioration, that is the belief that by 'doing more with less' as Buckminster Fuller said, social problems would slowly disappear. (Jencks: 1986, p.28)

Jencks justifies his ecclesiastical analogies by referring to Modern creators and intellectuals as the new priesthood.

In their most exalted role, they would heal society's rifts; in 'purifying the language of the tribe', they could purify its sensibility and provide an aesthetic-moral base - if not a political one. (Jencks: 1986, p.28)

However, Jencks acknowledges that by focusing on Modern architecture, one tends to ignore Modernism's pessimism:

...the other arts and philosophy... are not optimistic and progressive at all. Think of Nietzsche, Goedel (sic), Heisenberg, Heidegger and Sartre - closer to nihilism than to the positivism of Fuller. Or think of Yeats, Joyce, Pound, T.S. Eliot, or De Chirico, Picasso, Duchamp and Grosz - hardly liberal, not very socialist and certainly not optimistic. Whereas Modernism in architecture furthered the ideology of industrialisation and progress, Modernism in most other fields has either fought these trends or lamented them. (Jencks: 1986, p.28)

This indicates a schizophrenic sensibility. Modernist artists reject representation and the linear narrative as being of little use in the world of Freud and Einstein, yet are seen to mourn their destruction in almost elegiac fashion (for example, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.)

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sharpen the tools of one's trade, or 'purify the language of the tribe', as Mallarmé and T.S. Eliot defined the poet's role. (Jencks: 1986, p.28)

Given this artistic Puritanism, one can understand Jencks's Protestant analogy for Modernism.

The way in which Modernists sought to 'purify the language of the tribe', was by re-defining their media and by constructing the idea (and ideal) of the New as a secular Holy Grail. Contained within the concept of Modernism was the idea of empowerment, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, and Modernism was primarily a revolutionary movement which originated as an attempt to seize the reins of artistic power from the bourgeoisie. Terry Eagleton, in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, comments at length on the Modernist form and content debate which is typified by the polarised views of Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht. (Eagleton: 1976, ps. 20-36)

Lukács believed that the preferred form of the bourgeoisie (that is, Realism) could be filled with revolutionary content, enabling the largely uneducated proletariat to understand the work more easily, therefore allowing them to respond 'appropriately'. Eagleton traces Lukács's philosophy to Hegel and isolates his three "major critical concepts (as) 'totality', 'typicality', 'world-historical'." (Eagleton: 1976, p.28) This approach operates by acknowledging the effects of world forces upon an individual, typically representative of his society. According to Eagleton, Lukács believed that,

All great art is socially progressive in the sense that, whatever the author's conscious political allegiance (and in the case of Scott and Balzac it is overtly reactionary), it realizes the vital 'world-historical' forces of an epoch which make for change and growth, revealing their unfolding potential in its fullest complexity. The realist writer, then, penetrates through the accidental phenomena of social life to disclose the essences or essentials of a condition, selecting and combining them into a total form and fleshing them out in concrete experience. (Eagleton: 1976, p.29)

The essential element here is contact with the 'social process'. According to Eagleton, if Realism disconnects itself from "...the vital 'world-historical' forces..." (Ibid.), it transfigures either into Naturalism or Formalism.

By (N)aturalism Lukacs means that distortion of (R)ealism, epitomized by Zola, which merely photographically reproduces the surface phenomena of society without penetrating to their significant essences. (Eagleton: 1976, p.30)

Formalism also involves a loss of historical meaning, and the 'heroes' of works by writers such as Kafka, Beckett and Camus are "...stripped of (their) history and (have) no reality beyond the self; character dissolved to mental states, objective reality reduced to unintelligible chaos." (Eagleton: 1976, p.31)

Brecht, however, believed in the alteration of form as the only means of breaking away from the history of bourgeois art. At the heart of Brecht's use of the epic style was his utilization of the 'alienation effect', which was used, primarily, as a means of stimulating the critical faculties of his audiences. Brecht argued that Realism encouraged blind acceptance in an audience, and that by interrupting the narrative flow it was possible to reveal the "...mechanics of theatricality." (Boyne & Rattansi: 1990, p.7) He was critical of Lukacs's theories and scornfully summarized them as, "Be like Balzac - only up-to-date." (Brecht, quoted in Eagleton: 1976, p.71)

Boyne and Rattansi emphasise the importance of "...the demise of the 'integrated individual subject'..." (Boyne & Rattansi: 1990, p.7) but warn against the misconception that Modernism views the universe as being entirely meaningless and unknowable:

This preoccupation of (M)odernism with highlighting the means of representation, the disruption of narrative, contradiction and fragmentation in subjectivity and identity, and so on, should not, however, be allowed to obscure the significance of an underlying, and sometimes contradictory, tendency within most (M)odernist projects to cling to the belief that in principle the deep structure of reality is knowable, that it is intellectually and culturally penetrable, as it were, but requires aesthetic, philosophical and psychic strategies more complex, inventive and self-reflexive than the ones typically deployed in (R)ealist and (N)aturalist forms. (Boyne & Rattansi: 1990, p.7)

In describing the aims of the Russian Formalists, Victor Shklovsky, in the following quotation, also succeeds in providing a detailed analysis of the aspirations of the Modernists in general.

Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar" to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object itself is not important. (Shklovsky, quoted in Dudley Andrew, 1976, p.80)

Here, Shklovsky clearly indicates the importance of self-reflexiveness; it is not important to link the chosen object to its surroundings. The emphasis lies in the composition (or "artfulness") of the object itself. Later, this very abstract quality would contribute to the argument against Modernism, as many artists were accused of being incomprehensibly esoteric and therefore contributing to intellectual elitism.

Near the end of the nineteenth century there was what Gillian Naylor, in her book entitled *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, described as "a crisis of conscience." (Naylor, quoted in Sparke: 1987, p.69) This crisis of conscience revolved around the effect that mechanisation might have on the environment, and led to the formation between 1880 and 1890 of a number of guilds. Sparke mentions specifically Mack-Murdo's Century Guild (formed in 1882), Lethaby and Crane's Art Workers' Guild (1884), the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (1885) and C.R. Ashbee's Guild and School of Handicraft, established in 1888. (Ibid.)

The most prominent characters in this rejection of the factory made object were C.A. Voysey, MackMurdo, Walter Crane and C.R. Ashbee, who had all become involved in interior decorating, following the example of their ideological mentor, William Morris.

Penny Sparke describes Morris's ideas concerning the morality of design:

Following Ruskin closely, Morris advocated the principle of truth to nature and felt very close to the medieval world, both aesthetically and spiritually. In his designs he combined natural imagery (albeit in a stylized form), handwork, recognition of the moral and social implications of medievalism and, most importantly, a visual simplicity which extended (the) idea of relating form, or ornament, to function. (Sparke: 1987, p.67)

Morris represented a considerable opposition to the dominant trend of factory designed products. In the same way that Postmodernism later emerged as a reaction against Modernism's functionalism, the Arts and Crafts movement advocated a return to decoration and emphasised the importance of the craftsman (as opposed to the factory worker.)¹²

In the debate between Modernism and Postmodernism, it is possible to see how the importance placed by the Postmodernists on a movement away from stark design and functionalism can be compared to Morris's philosophy. It is also interesting to note that, just as the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement eventually degenerated into aestheticism, so Postmodernism is frequently used today as mere design, bereft of its philosophical framework. This factor will be discussed later in the chapter, with specific regard to film.

Jim Collins, in his text, *Uncommon Cultures*, places this tendency to view mechanization as an unnecessary evil in an historical light:

Rather than conceiving of the transition from the Enlightenment to the Industrial Age as a shift from one public sphere to multiple spheres, critics of mass culture, from Matthew Arnold to Jean

¹² Morris placed great importance on the concept of work, believing strongly in the dignity of labour, writing

Nothing should be made by man's labour which is not worth making or which must be made by labour degrading to the makers...I don't want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few...Art will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-side: it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirits to come from the open country into a town. Every man's house will be fair and decent, soothing to his mind and helpful to his work. (Morris, quoted in Sparke: 1987, p.68)

Although considering himself a socialist, it seems clear by Morris's statements that he was more a Romantic, emphasising the dignity of the individual as a means of benefiting society as a whole.

Baudrillard, have characterized this transition as a profound fall from grace, in which the twin evils of mechanization and commodification have eliminated any kind of cultural heterogeneity. (Collins: 1989, p.7)

While the earlier Modernists had striven for originality in their work, this obsession was mocked by the Pop Artists, who rebelled against Modernism's tenets of originality, complexity and intellectual exclusivity. While artists such as Picasso and Miró were renowned for the complexity of their metaphors, the Pop Artists sought to banish metaphor from their work.¹³

The avant-garde has desensitised the public to such an extent that the unfamiliar now seems familiar. If it is possible to consider the work of the Abstract Expressionists as representing the apex of the intellectually demanding artistic product, then it is perhaps more easy to place the work of the Pop Art movement.

Since the artistic market was already flourishing under artists such as Pollock, it is possible to argue that Pop Art was displaying a certain amount of honesty regarding its aims. Commercially trained artists such as Warhol were aware of the power of advertising, and used that knowledge to sell their work. Lucy Lippard, describing the collages of John McHale, enables the concerns of Pop Art to be placed in an his-

13 Lucy R. Lippard states that the conditions necessary for Pop Art's advancement were, "...a serious taste for popular culture, a belief in multi-evocative imagery, and a sense of the interplay of technology and man." (Lippard: 1970, p.36) By this time, many Modernist artists had also discovered the financial benefits to be reaped from the world of art.

Since the 1950s the art world has become increasingly associated with the area of finance, many wealthy citizens now choosing to invest their excess capital in the so-called art market, rather than in gold shares. Suzy Gablik, in an essay unambiguously entitled, "BUREAUCRATIZATION: The Death of the Avant-Garde" provides a convincing explanation for this phenomenon:

For some time now it has been evident that the critical intransigence of the avant-garde is evaporating in front of our eyes. Provocations that once seemed radical have long since lost their power to shock. Even the most difficult art has become comfortably familiar, and the unpredictable predictable. Whether in spite of itself or due to circumstances beyond its control, the vanguard concept has been traded in for good marketing strategy, and has become a big, booming juggernaut. The critic Peter Schjeldahl put it well when he wrote that the ritual anticommmercialism of the late '60s and '70s has had "roughly the impact on capitalism of a beanbag hurled against cement." (Gablik: 1984, p.55)

torical perspective. The collages are, "...portraits of consumers, full of the good things of postwar abundance." (Lippard: 1970, p.35) It is at this point that representational art once again begins to dominate, allowing Postmodernism to be seen as a powerful artistic and philosophical force.

Elaine de Kooning, describing Franz Kline, a member of the New York School (an artistic clique in vogue at the time that the Pop Art movement was emerging as an artistic force) might have been describing David Lynch's later films:

The American style as he saw it - with a fan's zest and expertise - had an element of the comic; the big brash breezy gesture that, carried to its extreme, becomes a not-unconscious parody of itself, as in the design of a Cadillac or the cut of a zoot-suit...the forceful sentimentality of Tin Pan Alley songs. (de Kooning, quoted in Lippard: 1970, p.74)

From this time on, it became less essential for art to retain an aggressive non-representational stance. However, since Modernism had been such a major force for so long, it was not possible for artists and writers to return successfully to a Realist mode. The Modernist revolution had rendered the transparency of Realism and Naturalism inadequate. The way in which Postmodernism dealt with this quandary will be discussed later in this chapter.

Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane view the spawning of numerous artistic movements to be Modernism's overwhelming characteristic.

It has been generally recognised that Modernism was very much a movement of movements; the broad tendency divides into a sequence of phases, theories, social groupings, occurring in different places at different times, yet having sufficient in common to make up a controlling set of aesthetics and tempers. Some of the movements were social groups; others were broad intellectual and aesthetic theories that passed from country to country; yet others were small groups of activists. The movements were often the behavioural dimension of Modernist writing; they helped sustain its image as a neo-political force, a true *avant-garde*. (Bradbury & McFarlane: 1976, p.191)

David Lynch was particularly influenced by the artistic aims and characteristics of Expressionism, Surrealism, and Futurism, as well as by the philosophy of Existentialism (as may be discerned in his work to be discussed in the relevant chapters), which particularly affected the thought processes of many Modernist creators.

Lynch's most obvious use of Expressionism occurs in *Eraserhead*, since the film's appearance is dominated by heavily saturated monochrome, not to mention the use which is made of Expressionist design and chiaroscuro lighting. When Lynch turns to Technicolour he again indicates the influence of the Expressionists, with his use of saturated colour, which is reminiscent of Matisse's early work with the Fauves. Both *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart* contain scenes which refer to Expressionist techniques, in order to create a sense of unease and menace.

Perhaps the director's adoption of Surrealism as a major artistic motif is even more apparent than his exploitation of Expressionism. The three films which will be discussed in this thesis all openly bear Surrealist stigmata, from Henry's first walk across the industrial wasteland in *Eraserhead* to Sailor's encounter with a Good Fairy in *Wild at Heart*. However, initially examining the three cinematic texts in question, it seems as though Lynch initially adopted Expressionism as his primary focus in *Eraserhead*, and used Surrealism as a secondary influence, but by the time *Wild at Heart* was completed, Surrealism had overtaken Expressionism as the chief obsession.

Another major artistic inclination is Futurism. Machines and industrial noises frequently feature in Lynch's films, and Lynch has acknowledged his love of machines and technology. In *Wild at Heart* the noises and sights of technology are largely absent, but speed is celebrated instead, in the shape of Sailor's sports car.

In their text entitled *Futurism*, Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla describe the roots of Futurism, thus:

The roots of Futurism are a tangled web of turn-of-the-century political, cultural and philosophical currents that come to light, unacknowledged, in 'The Founding and Manifesto'. Few, if any, of the ideas in it are totally original. Violence, war, anarchy, nationalism, the cult of the superman, glorification of urban life, of technology

and of speed, together with hatred of the past and scorn of academic values, had all been voiced before. What was new was the way in which they were all brought together and synthesized into one inflammatory cultural document ripe for distribution. (Tisdall & Bozzolla: 1977, ps. 17-18).

Obviously, not all of Futurism's tenets apply to Lynch, for example, the hatred of the past, mooted by Tisdall and Bozzolla, is clearly rejected by Lynch, who appears to combine a love of technology with a genuine interest in historical artifacts and styles. Consider, for instance, the character of Dorothy Vallens in *Blue Velvet* who seems borrowed directly from an earlier *film noir* mode. Clearly, Lynch's Postmodern style can easily incorporate the Modernist elements of Expressionism, Surrealism and Futurism, for, as Charles Jencks states:

Perhaps the ultimate paradox of the Post-Modern situation, the condition built on paradox and irony, is that it can willingly include the Modern and Pre-Modern conditions as essential parts of its existence. It has not taken an aggressive stance with respect to an agricultural civilisation, it has not sought to destroy industrialisation, nor put forward a single totalising ideology. (Jencks: 1986, p.56)

The other major element of Modernism which is frequently used by Lynch is the philosophy of Existentialism. Primarily, Existentialism is concerned with human freedom. Potentially, all human beings are free, but are constantly confined by moral and social conventions. Part of the trauma of the Existential hero/victim is that as *subject* he cannot be *object* (and the use of the male pronoun is deliberate - Existential heroes/victims are rarely female, despite the fact that women are traditionally more socially and morally restricted than men.) According to Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer:

...he is not an object, that which is experienced, but an experiencer; not that which is acted upon, but an actor. He is a potentially free being, *but* he is trapped in a tight cocoon of body, conventions and meanings, so that the moments of being and experiencing are fleeting. Even when he feels himself to be acting freely, he is acting in accordance with the norms of the society; even as he looks at someone, he is also being looked at and thus objectified, made not-subject. This is the tragedy. (Cameron & Frazer: 1987, p.59)

This definition implies a seriously schismatized and tormented individual, a character who became familiar to readers of Modernist fiction. Cubist painters, such as Braque and Picasso, were able to display this Existential anguish by distorting the human form and questioning the two-dimensional limitations of the canvas.

According to André Gide, murder, as well as suicide, is a means by which the Existential victim can break free of all moral and social constraints. It is the ultimate cry for freedom. As Cameron and Frazer acknowledge:

The act of murder is by definition an act which transgresses life itself and thereby breaks down the conditions - bodily, psychological and social - which keep man's free will in chains. (Ibid.)

Similarly, André Gide described murder as,

...the culminating *acte gratuit* that liberates man from the determinism of the material universe...the point at which -irremediably - man opts for his own freedom. (Gide, quoted in Cameron & Frazer: 1987, p.59)

Gide's philosophy quite obviously links with Lynch's decision, in *Eraserhead*, to have Henry murder his baby, which frees him to join his Dream Woman in Heaven. Also, Jeffrey's behaviour in *Blue Velvet* seems strongly motivated by a desire to move beyond the social mores and polite behaviour of the society with which he is most familiar. However, instead of grasping at his chance of Existential freedom, Jeffrey returns to his original environment, seemingly cured of his moral wanderlust, although forever changed by his glimpse of Lumberton's darker side.

Although Existentialism has its roots in France and Germany, it has also been incorporated into American culture. The basic premise of American Existentialism is the idea that the idyllic picture of America, created by hundreds of years of propaganda, is false. Therefore, it follows that if America is corrupt it is pointless to be confined by its societal values, and the most noble action is the attempt to break free from these values by rejecting the American way of life.

The parameters of American Existentialism have most obviously been set by Jack Kerouac's 'road novel', *On the Road*, and by *Easy Rider*, Peter Fonda's 1969 contribution to the 'road' genre. Two bikers with metaphorical names (Captain America and Billy the Kid) cruise America in search of truth, "...but (they) only find disillusionment and death." (Brode: 1980, p.286) This youth philosophy, that America is essentially corrupt and hypocritical, was assisted greatly by the protests against the Vietnam War, which reached their vociferous apex during the late 1960s, and have since been revived most notably by Oliver Stone in his films, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *J.F.K.*

Since the height of the protests against the Vietnam War and the exposure of the Watergate Scandal in the mid 1970s, there has been an increasing tendency to acknowledge that the American system is less than perfect. Lynch seems to have seized upon this feeling of American *glasnost*, since all of his work exhibits a recognition of the skull beneath the skin within American society, as does Stone's.

All of the Modernist movements previously mentioned display a tendency towards cerebral complexity. Since one of the achievements of Modernism was to split the sphere of artistic creativity into the dichotomies of high art and popular culture, (high art gaining prestige, while so-called low culture was dismissed), this aggressive intellectualism is unsurprising. Because of the increasing difficulty of many Modernist works the movement eventually was transformed into an elitist programme, far from its revolutionary roots.

Ultimately, Modernism's primary fault was that it failed to take into account the needs of the individual, Modernist buildings failed to sustain life and Modernist writing elicited no emotional response. Also, the movement had planted the seeds of its own destruction by (inevitably) becoming the cultural norm. As Müller and Bellido claim, "It is true of any avant-garde, that once it achieves recognition it creates its own opposition." (Müller & Bellido: 1985, p.207)

Raymond Williams describes the social structures of culture in his text, *Marxism And Literature*. In a chapter entitled, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent", he relates how, at any time in historical development there will be a dominant culture which, as the terminology implies, dominates the cultural scene. There will also be,

A residual cultural element... (which) will in most cases have had to be incorporated if the effective dominant culture is to make sense... (Williams: 1977, p.123)

(In this case, it is possible to see how some Modernist theorists, most obviously Lukacs, argued that Realism would have to be included in the new form, since an entirely revolutionary style would baffle the uneducated.)

Finally, Williams discusses the term, emergent:

By 'emergent' I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture (and in this sense 'species-specific') and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel. (Ibid.)

Since Modernism enjoyed hegemonic primacy for so long, it is unsurprising that many critics at first considered Postmodernism to be a Late Modern movement, a obvious continuation of Pop Art, or, as Fredric Jameson famously remarked, the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Since Postmodernism first emerged in the field of architecture, it is perhaps wise to commence a discussion of its basic tenets by mentioning Charles Jencks's account of the failure of Modernist architecture:

The main motive for Post-Modern architecture is obviously the social failure of Modern architecture, its mythical 'death' announced repeatedly over ten years. In 1968, an English tower block of housing, Roman Point, suffered what was called 'cumulative collapse' as its floors gave way after an explosion. In 1972, many slab blocks of housing were intentionally blown up at Pruitt-Igoe in St Louis. By the mid 1970s, these explosions were becoming a quite frequent

method of dealing with the failures of Modernist building methods: cheap prefabrication, lack of personal 'defensible' space and the alienating housing estate. (Jencks: 1986, p.16)

This is typical of Modernism's more general tendency to ignore the welfare of the individual, preferring abstract ideas to human aspirations.

M.H. Abrams, in a brief description of Postmodernism also stresses its environmental aspect:

The term (P)ostmodernism is sometimes applied to the literature and art after World War II, when the disastrous effects on Western morale of the first world war were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi Totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the devastation of the natural environment, and the ominous fact of overpopulation and the threat of starvation. Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, carried to an extreme, of the counter-traditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional. A familiar undertaking in postmodernist writings is to subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the "meaninglessness" of existence and the underlying "abyss," or "void," or "nothingness" on which our supposed security is precariously suspended. In recent developments in linguistic and literary theory, there is an effort to subvert the foundations of language itself so as to show that its seeming meaningfulness dissipates, to an unillusioned inquirer, into a play of unresolvable indeterminacies. (Abrams: 1981, p.110)

Definitions of Postmodernism are numerous, but most agree that the dominant characteristics include non-closure, multiple storylines, use of historical sources, (in fact a blatant reliance on other sources) and almost always involve a certain amount of game-playing. All of these attributes will be discussed with specific reference to Lynch's films, also a debate about the particular appearance of these films will be attempted.

Jim Collins links the emergence of Postmodernism with the need of the 'general public' to be afforded a popular narrative, a factor which Modernism's intellectual elitism did not acknowledge:

Post-Modernism is most productively understood not just as a transitional reaction against Modernism, but as the culmination of the ongoing proliferation of popular narrative that began nearly two centuries ago. (Collins: 1989, p.xiii)

Collins provides a further definition of Postmodernism (as well as its link with popular culture) when he states that,

We need to see popular culture and Post-Modernism as a continuum because both reflect and produce the same cultural perspective - that "culture" no longer can be conceived as a Grand Hotel, as a totalizable system that somehow orchestrates all cultural production and reception according to one master system. Both insist, implicitly or explicitly, that what we consider "our culture" has become *discourse-sensitive*, that how we conceptualize that culture depends upon discourses which construct it in conflicting, often contradictory ways, according to interests and values of those discourses as they struggle to legitimize themselves as privileged forms of representation. (Ibid.)

Clearly, this positions Postmodernism in direct opposition to Modernism's cultural totalitarianism.

If one considers Lynch's films with Collins's comment about a cultural Grand Hotel in mind, one can see how Lynch is also moving away from this concept of a closed system. Where the Modernists privileged originality, he acknowledges, visually and thematically, a whole tradition of popular culture. The most obvious example, here, would be his use of motifs from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* in *Wild at Heart*, although his other films also contain stylistic paeans to earlier works.

The decline of the closed system can be, at least partially, attributed to the so-called information explosion, which began at the end of the Second World War, and seems to have reached its apex today. As Charles Jencks states, quoting Marshall McLuhan, "...nothing is so bizarre as the juxtapositions that occur everyday on the front page of a good newspaper..." (Jencks: 1986, p.55), continuing to mention that, with the advent of television, these juxtapositions are even more pronounced.

Rather than attributing this new plurality to technological progress, Jean-François Lyotard preferred to relate it instead to the collapse of the great scientific narratives. He links the modern era with a tendency to defer to grand narratives:

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. (Lyotard: 1984, p.xxiii)

This appeal to some kind of ultimate truth, or scientific discourse would seem to uphold the argument put forward by Roy Boyne and Ali Rattansi, that Modernism retains the belief in there being some knowable deep structure of reality, which a rigorous examination could, potentially, unearth. (Boyne & Rattansi: 1990, p.7) As A.S. Byatt notes, however, in her novel, *Possession*, "Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable." (Byatt: 1990, p.422)

So, paradoxically, although proponents of Postmodernism advocate a return to popular narrative, they are also abandoning the tradition, followed by the Modernists as well as by the Realists, of trying to find some underlying truth. In the same way, it might be possible to observe a transition of a similar kind in the work of David Lynch. He adopts Modernism for the duration of *Eraserhead*, and seems to have moved to a pure form of Postmodernism for his 1990 offering, *Wild at Heart*, although Lynch's use of visual and verbal references to *The Wizard of Oz* leave some doubt as to whether Lynch has entirely invalidated the metanarrative.

Lyotard provides a personal definition of Postmodernism:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. (Lyotard: 1984, p.xxiv)

Perhaps this "incredulity toward metanarratives" can be related to the information explosion, which is named by Jencks as being one of the primary causes of the Post-modern crisis:

The Post-Modern Age is a time of incessant choosing. It's an era when no orthodoxy can be adopted without self-consciousness and irony, because all traditions seem to have some validity. This is partly a consequence of what is called the information explosion, the advent of organised knowledge, world communication and cybernetics. It is not only the rich who become collectors, eclectic travellers in time with a superabundance of choice, but almost every urban dweller. Pluralism, the 'ism' of our time, is both the great problem and the great opportunity... (Jencks: 1986, p.7)

When discussing Lynch, the most important aspect of Jencks's argument about the possibilities offered by the information explosion, is the access to historical material. Lynch 'eclects' very little from other contemporary cultures, his primary interest being the residual American artefacts (particularly cinematic) which are available to him.¹⁴ Although he claims to admire several of his contemporaries, most obviously Kubrick and Scorsese (Woodward: 1990, p.75), there is little evidence to suggest that he has been influenced by them. (Although parallels in design, editing and narrative could always be noted this would prove to be a rather forced comparison instead of a logical argument.)

The pluralism invoked by Postmodernism contributes to the movement's tendency towards non-closure. As Byatt stated, coherence and closure seem simplistic and outdated in the Postmodern Age, and the viewer, or reader, is usually denied the pleasure of a firm and resounding conclusion. One might argue this to be the result of hyper-Realist thought, that is, that life generally evades the discipline of a definite resolution, so it seems illogical that art should conform to this pattern. However, it is more likely that it results from a realisation that Modernism has rendered ineligible the possibility of a single coherent outcome. The Modernist movement

¹⁴ One might consider, as examples, the mingling of well established genres in *Blue Velvet* and Henry's Chaplinesque walk in *Eraserhead*.

heralded a loss of faith in the linear narrative, and criticised the Realists' tendency to be slaves to logical plot construction and character development.¹⁵

Another possible reason for this movement away from narrative closure, is that the Postmodern tendency towards developing multiple narratives within one work tends to hinder a simple outcome. Jencks writes of the carnivalesque aspect of Postmodernism, when referring to the work of Fellini:

Federico Fellini often turns the mad competition of many opposite tastes into a melancholic spectacle of hilarious sadness and nearly every one of his movies has such a scene - a Post-Modern carnival. This kaleidoscope of pluralism is not to everyone's taste and it can be tiresome. But it is a fact of life in the global village, and many artists...will incorporate incongruous matter into their work because this disjunctive variety appeals to their sense of reality. If the culture is heterodox, then the best artists will deal with this truth. (Jencks: 1986, p.55)

If one believes in a heterodox culture it becomes more difficult to believe that one is obliged to provide a firm conclusion to a novel or a film, especially if the work in question contains multiple storylines or narratives. For instance, *Blue Velvet* contains elements of a teen romance, a clichéd pornographic relationship, a detective story and even elements of a Western in Jeffrey's return to his home town in order to fight the villain and win (by combat) the affections of Sandy, a girl he knew before leaving town.

This continual 'eclecting' from other filmic genres can be viewed as a development of the Modernist obsession with self-reflexivity. Although the Modernists prized originality before all else, and the Postmodern tendency is towards quoting historical sources, Lynch is still examining the boundaries of film.

15 An extreme example of this loss of faith was Samuel Beckett's creation of Nag and Nell in *Endgame*, who are not permitted coherent memory or thought and who, for the entire duration of the play, are confined to their dustbins.

The manner in which Postmodernists view language also contributes to this sense of generic exploration. Linda Hutcheon quotes Charles Russell's opinion of Postmodernism's tendency to be, "...an art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning." (Hutcheon: 1988, p.11) Hutcheon extends the consequence of this tendency to explain that,

(A) consequence of (the) far-reaching (P)ostmodern inquiry into the very nature of subjectivity is the frequent challenge to traditional notions of perspective, especially in narrative and painting. The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to a (sic) coherent, meaning-generating entity. (Ibid.)

Lynch tends to duplicate this sense of shifting perspective by the use of characters which differ from the traditional 'well-rounded' characters of American cinema. For instance, Henry Spencer in *Eraserhead* is a clown-like character whose inner life remains outside the realm of information given to the viewer and Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet* is a two-dimensional villain whose motives are never as clear as his actions. Classic American cinema tends to disguise its fictional nature by the use of conventions such as invisible editing, while Lynch seems determined to 'blow its cover', to reveal its fraudulence, but not in such a way that the viewer becomes alienated from the narrative. Despite the manner in which *Wild at Heart* frequently exposes its own false nature, by references to *The Wizard of Oz*, blatantly non-realist acting and deliberately fatuous dialogue, the narrative remains a dynamic force designed to focus the viewer's attention.

Finally, probably the most obvious aspect of Lynch's films is their distinctive 'look'. This has changed somewhat from *Eraserhead*'s chiaroscuro Expressionism, to *Wild at Heart*'s bright Surrealism, but many common characteristics may still be observed,

For example, most obviously the three films which have been selected as points of discussion in this thesis are characterised by their conflation of past styles and fashions. *Eraserhead*, completed in 1976, contains a number of anachronisms, for instance, the furniture and light fittings of Mary X's house might have appeared less unusual in a house furnished in the 1930s or 40s, but in the 1970s look bizarre.

Blue Velvet contains the highest number of temporal anomalies, with 50s clothes and cars jarring blatantly with 1980s technology, and a 1940s *film noir femme fatale* (Dorothy) rubbing shoulders with a 1950s bobbysoxer (Sandy). (This juxtaposition is not, however, unique to Lynch, since Tim Burton's 1991 film, *Edward Scissorhands* displays the same temporal confusion of styles.)

In *Wild at Heart* an Elvis obsessed Sailor Ripley wears a snakeskin jacket strongly reminiscent of the 1960 Brando film, *The Fugitive Kind*, and drives a contemporary car. His relationship with Lula contains elements of an earlier chivalry, while mostly their alliance retains a contemporary openness and equality.

When filming in monochrome Lynch uses heavily saturated black and white, which encourages comparisons with early Expressionist masterpieces, such as *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1919) and *Metropolis* (1927). His colour films utilise heavily saturated colours which evokes remembrance of the early days of Technicolour. Lynch appears to have been heavily influenced by Postmodernism's determination to reincorporate historical sources into its creative considerations. As Charles Jencks states, "The tradition of the new made such a fetish of discontinuity that now a radical work of quality is likely to have a shock of the old." (Jencks: 1986, p.38) Lynch joins the Postmodern tendency towards a new historicism, but is also characteristically Postmodern in the way in which he adopts past styles and quotes from old films in order to make a different statement about the contemporary world.

This Postmodern preclivity is described by Charles Jencks as double coding, and he quotes Umberto Eco in order to reinforce his argument:

Umberto Eco has described this irony or double coding: 'I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly", because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that

these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly". At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said that clearly it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated, both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony...But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.' (Eco, quoted in Jencks: 1986, p.16)

Despite its somewhat flippant tone, this description of the Postmodern attitude is a thoughtful and accurate one. The task of this thesis is to conduct an investigation into the methods David Lynch employs in order to make films, "in an age of lost innocence", and which allow him to make an original statement, while responding to the influence of history.

CHAPTER TWO

ERASERHEAD AND THE FAILURE OF MODERNITY

In Chapter One Marshall Berman's thesis, that Modernism and modernity are closely linked, was discussed. While examining *Eraserhead* it will be advantageous to bear this philosophy in mind, since the film's Modernist narrative is reflected by the industrial landscape which surrounds the characters, and which affects and echoes their psyches.

Berman describes what he considers to be the central tenet of Modernism:

They (the Modernists) are moved at once by a will to change - to transform both themselves and their world - and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart. They all know the thrill and the dread of a world in which 'all that is solid melts into air'. (Berman: 1982, p.13)

Taking this into consideration (and Lynch must have been aware of this tenet) it is unsurprising that Lynch displays an environment so uniformly unpleasant. It would appear that Henry's world is unable to sustain life, for instance he is forced to traverse a barren, industrial wasteland in order to gain access to his apartment, in which a woman behind the radiator spends her time squashing sperm-like objects. Sex is viewed as a repugnant act, presumably because it results in the creation of new life. Modernity, in Henry's world, is a negative, oppressive force which results in the destruction of the environment.

Berman recognizes both the positive and the negative aspects of living in the modern age:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world - and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we are. (Berman: 1982, p.15)

Henry and Mary's world promises little but the prospect of industrial decay, and the responsibility of nurturing to adulthood a mutant child. Although Modernists initially regarded the growth of technology with a great deal of optimism, Lynch's view appears jaundiced, and the positive qualities indicated by earlier celebrants of modernity have been eroded.

Berman's description of the demographic shifts which were caused by the development of technology are therefore relevant here. The movement from the rural regions to the urban areas also encouraged the development of the nuclear family, which became the dominant social grouping in Europe and America. *Eraserhead* chronicles the death of a nuclear family,¹⁶ from Henry and Mary's 'shotgun wedding' to Mary's eventual defection, Henry's adultery and his eventual murder of their malformed child. As Lynch appears to view the situation, the dominance of the nuclear family has done little but force human beings into restrictive social structures.

This criticism of the family structure can be seen throughout Lynch's work, from the unpleasant parents of *The Grandmother*, to Lula's Wicked Witch of the East mother in *Wild at Heart*.

Apart from Henry and Mary X's miserable marriage in *Eraserhead*, there is also evidence of sickness in Mary's parents' marital situation. Mrs. X sexually harasses Henry, and Mary's barely animate grandmother is used as a human salad-tosser. Since the growth of the nuclear family, as has previously been mentioned, has been encouraged by the development of industry, it is possible to view Lynch's attack of it as a response to the effect that modernization has had on the 'American Dream'.

Berman describes the modern world as an environment which encourages action and debate:

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own. It is to be

¹⁶ For another example of a recent film which attacks the nuclear family, see Bob Balaban's 1988 film, *Parents*, in which a small boy discovers that his wholesome, all-American parents are cannibals.

both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and to hold onto something as everything melts. (Berman: 1982, ps. 13-14)

However, the environment of *Eraserhead* offers little hope for happiness and seems already to have been destroyed by unseen forces. Although Henry reveals that he is on vacation from his job as a printer, he never returns to work. This indicates that perhaps the ugliness of the city or town in which the film is set is created by machinery which is seldom utilised, in which case the destruction of the environment seems additionally futile. It seems particularly tragic to view the aesthetic degeneration of an urban area by machines and factories which have since become useless, since it is unlikely that Henry's workplace is more visually pleasing than any of the other buildings seen in the film. Also, the fact that Henry seems to lack work as a printer reveals that there is a dearth of communication, despite the unsightly evidence of technology.

As *Eraserhead* is examined more closely one is able to view, with increased clarity, Lynch's pessimistic reaction to the visible results of modernization and Modernism. Berman discerns this negativity as characteristic of twentieth century critics of the modern age:

...Marx and Nietzsche - and Tocqueville and Carlyle and Mill and Kierkegaard and all the other great nineteenth-century critics - also understood the ways in which modern technology and social organization determined man's fate. But they all believed that modern individuals had the capacity both to understand this fate and, once they had understood it, to fight it. Hence, even in the midst of a wretched present, they could imagine an open future. Twentieth-century critics of modernity almost entirely lack this empathy with, and faith in, their fellow modern men and women. (Berman: 1982, p.27)

Berman quotes Herbert Marcuse's cynical observation, that,

The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobiles, hi-fi sets, split-level homes, kitchen equipment. (Berman: 1982, p.29)

Again criticising contemporary theorists, Berman adopts a defensive position in order to refute Marcuse's censure,

Now this is a familiar twentieth-century refrain, shared by those who love the modern world and those who hate it: modernity is constituted by its machines, of which modern men and women are merely mechanical reproductions. But it is a travesty of the nineteenth-century modern tradition in whose orbit Marcuse claimed to move, the critical tradition of Hegel and Marx. To invoke those thinkers while rejecting their vision of history as restless activity, dynamic contradiction, dialectical struggle and progress, is to retain little but their names. (Ibid.)

Normally classified as a horror film, *Eraserhead* is both less and more than its generic description. There are conventional scenes of horror, for instance in Henry's murder of his *enfant terrible*, but the dominant feeling is one of despondency. This is largely due to Lynch's portrayal of his modern world as a grey and uninteresting atmosphere, dominated by malfunctioning technology (for instance, the electric lights which frequently blow) and squalor.

It would, perhaps, be more accurate to describe *Eraserhead* as a pastiche, both of the horror film and of the Modernist film text. Jameson defines pastiche as,

...like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor... (Jameson in Kaplan (ed.): 1988, p.16)

It is unlikely that Lynch's employment of pastiche is as humourless as Jameson believes the usual Postmodern adoption of it to be, but it undoubtedly features prominently in much of his work, including *Eraserhead*.

Certainly, *Eraserhead* incorporates many characteristics of the horror film within its structure, the most obvious example being the physical repulsiveness of Henry and Mary's baby. The use of Expressionist techniques also aids the uneasy *ambience*

which defines the film, for instance Lynch's constant use of major contrasts of light and shade (or chiaroscuro), which has prominently featured in many filmic works dealing with the horror genre, for instance, George A. Romero's 1968 film, *Night Of The Living Dead*.

If an overview of Lynch's *oeuvre* is attempted one is able to observe an element of horror in all of his work. Consider the cannibalistic insects at the beginning of *Blue Velvet* or the violent decapitation of Bobby Peru in *Wild at Heart*, not to mention the considerable use of the horrific in *Twin Peaks*, as Leland Palmer transmogrifies into his psychopathic alter-ego. One must observe, however, that Lynch rarely incorporates stylistic or generic elements into his work for no reason. When he uses such conventions it is always in an attempt to make an original statement, such as Bobby Peru's decapitation revealing that the character is (literally) brainless.

Eraserhead is quite specifically based upon the issues raised by Mary Shelley's nineteenth century novel, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1817). Mary X (perhaps one could read Shelley for 'X?') does, quite literally, give birth to a monster, but in Lynch's re-working of Shelley's tale she is an unwitting victim, whereas Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein displays a Faustian tendency towards scientific supremacy.

This important difference can be equated with Marshall Berman's response to the twentieth century critics of Modernism. Possibly Lynch is stating that while we exist in a modern world which is blatantly decaying, we cannot help giving birth to monsters. This would indicate an extremely unsympathetic response to all that is modern, since while Dr. Frankenstein had to work in order to create his monster, Mary X seems to be totally passive.

Lynch normally uses horror conventions in order to illustrate an aversion to the human condition. *Eraserhead* was a reaction to incidents which he observed whilst living in Philadelphia during the 1960s:

Just like in Philadelphia, the fact that a family is going to this christening. I happened to be upstairs painting the third floor black. And my wife at the time, Peggy, was taking my daughter, Jennifer, who was one, out in this perambulator...And a large family across the

street was going to a christening. And a gang came swooping down and attacked the family. And in the family there was a teenage son who tried to defend the whole bunch, and they beat him down, and they shot him in the back of the head. Those kind of things will spoil the atmosphere - permanently - and bring it way down. (Lynch, quoted by Breskin: 1990, p.60)

Lynch also recalled a less violent incident from his days in Philadelphia, when, "I saw a grown woman grab her breasts and speak like a baby, complaining her nipples hurt. This kind of thing will set you back." (Lynch, quoted by Woodward: 1990, p.77) (Given Lynch's seemingly frequent exposure to this type of weird behaviour one might consider *Eraserhead* as a realist film, in an absurd manner, especially after he once commented, "*Eraserhead* is the real Philadelphia story." (Lynch, quoted by Godwin: 1984, p.47))

The terror contained in Lynch's first feature film is, however, primarily of a psychological nature, the mental condition of the characters finding expression in physical form. The horror is contained within Henry, rather than being imposed from the outside¹⁷ and is primarily motivated by the corrupted environment in which the characters exist.

Lynch is constantly aware of the conventions of the horror film, but chooses to acknowledge this filmic tradition in a more sardonic than reverential manner. For instance, Henry's attempt to leave the apartment without attracting the attention of his 'child' is punctuated by a loud organ blast when he is discovered, and his startled reaction is comic, rather than dramatic. Also, the acting style employed in the film is blatantly non-realistic and fails to engage the viewer. (Much of the 1919 film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* employed similar alienating techniques.) Since it is the task of the director of the horror film to engage the audience in a continual crescendo of tension, the mode of acting normally utilised is realist, a factor which Lynch chooses to ignore. Henry's general appearance and behaviour inspire laughter rather than anxiety, although his situation would seem likely to evoke a sympathetic response.

17 The film *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1985) adopted this idea in order to create a monster, Freddy Krueger, who appeared only when his victims were asleep.

If Abrams's definition of Postmodernism (first analysed in Chapter One) is considered, it is possible to see how, even with his frequent use of Modernist techniques, Lynch is already displaying Postmodern tendencies within *Eraserhead*. Abrams highlights Postmodernism's concern for the continued well-being of the natural environment, as well as its tendency to consider seriously other threats to health in the guise of over-population and starvation. Although Henry wanders through seemingly uninhabited areas at the beginning of the film, his apartment and Mary's parents' house appear uncomfortably small, as though many such habitations were constructed for a large population. The fact that Mary's mother serves 'man-made' chickens for dinner also hints at a shortage of natural foodstuffs.

In an essay entitled, "Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing", Brian McHale separates what he views as the primary concern of Modernist writing from the dominant focus of Postmodernist writing:

THESIS 1. The dominant of Modernist writing is *epistemological*. That is, Modernist writing is designed to raise such questions as: what is there to be known? who knows it? how do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? how is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability? how does object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower? what are the limits of knowledge? and so on. (McHale in Fokkema and Bertens: 1986, p.58)

McHale's view of Modernist writing equates with Boyne and Rattansi's previously quoted claim, that Modernism has not abandoned the search for truth, or the deep structure of reality, but merely chooses to employ more rigorous interrogative methods than those utilised by Realist or Naturalist artists. (Boyne & Rattansi: 1990, p.7)

This formulation contrasts considerably with McHale's view of Postmodern writing:

THESIS 2. The dominant of Postmodernist writing is *ontological*. That is, Postmodernist writing is designed to raise such questions as: what is a world? what kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? what happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between

worlds are violated? what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? how is a projected world structured? and so on. (Ibid.: p.60)

Although McHale was referring primarily to literature when he made these distinctions, one may convert them into filmic terms, although his continual use of the term "world" (Ibid.) seems less appropriate than the phrase 'alternate realms of reality'. (Despite the fact that *Dune* is literally concerned with other worlds, it is less relevant to a description of how these worlds operate within the framework of Postmodernism than the film *Blue Velvet*. Therefore, it seems sensible to retain McHale's verbal economy, but to state that when a discussion of other worlds is intimated, the word is used in a more abstract manner.)

The most obvious fact is that within Lynch's films both the epistemological and the ontological tendency can be considered dominant. For instance, the tortured structure of *Eraserhead* encourages the viewer to believe that, with an amount of intellectual exercise, there is a reality which is knowable, "...that...is intellectually and culturally penetrable..." (Boyne & Rattansi: 1990, p.7). However, it soon becomes obvious that Lynch is also obsessed by the world which he has created, and chooses to focus his attention primarily on this universe in which mechanization has taken over and sexuality is viewed as repulsive. In the following chapters McHale's theories will be discussed with reference to *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart*.

Having stated that *Eraserhead* contains elements of both Modernism and Postmodernism, it is essential to discuss the film with reference both to its epistemological and ontological characteristics.

The pessimism with which Lynch views the external evidence of modernity has already been discussed, therefore, an examination of *Eraserhead*'s structure and subtext should be attempted. These factors indicate, as clearly as the film's *mise-en-scène*, that the director finds it difficult to impart meaning within the universe which he has created.

At least part of *Eraserhead's* horror is derived from the fact that, within the urban environment, in which Henry and Mary exist, all hope of finding meaning has been abandoned. The awkward scene in which Mary invites Henry to dinner epitomises the inability of Lynch's characters to communicate with each other. Mary's father, after suffering an accident at work, lacks any feeling in his arm. Similarly, Mary's mother lacks the ability to behave appropriately in a social situation, eventually making unsubtle sexual advances towards Henry. Mary's grandmother is totally insensible and cannot negotiate a simple task, such as removing a burnt out cigarette from her mouth. Even at the level of basic social interaction, these people are doomed to failure.

McHale indicates that the Modernist concern with the gaining of knowledge can be discovered as a theme within the novel, but also within the narrative structure of the piece. Describing William Faulkner's novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, McHale states that,

...in a typically Modernist mode, *Absalom* transfers the epistemological difficulties of its characters to its readers; its strategies of "impeded form" (dislocated chronology, withheld or indirectly-presented information, difficult "mind-styles," and so on) stimulate for the reader... problems of accessibility, reliability, and limitation... (McHale in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.59)

Similarly, *Eraserhead's* deliberately difficult narrative structure forces the viewer to enter into an intellectual struggle to comprehend the film. This, in turn, enables the audience to cooperate in the quest for knowledge, which, as McHale claims, is the dominant feature of Modernist creativity.

The narrative form of *Eraserhead* is indicative of a world corrupted by machinery. One is continually shown the evidence of mechanical progress, but the film's characters seem less aided by technological advancement, than rendered unable to reason or communicate. Even if one ignores the previously stated fact that much of the technology displayed in *Eraserhead* either malfunctions, or refuses to operate at all, it seems obvious that the so-called machine age has failed to improve and, perhaps,

has hindered the human ability to relate socially or intellectually within a societal framework. Lynch's *mise-en-scène* of defunct machinery acts as a visual indicator of the malaise of a society in which people and machinery seem equally redundant.

To return to Marshall Berman's argument, that Modernism and modernity are both a combination of, "...a will to change...and...a terror of disorientation and disintegration..." (Berman: 1982, p.13), one might argue that although Lynch continually demonstrates the disorientation and disintegration of modern society, this is accompanied by *ennui* rather than by excitement. Although the narrative structure of the film suggests that Lynch is attempting a Modernist approach, the deep structure of the film indicates that any attempts to 'know the truth' will be futile. There is, perhaps, a nihilistic influence in operation here.

Eraserhead is also a film which frequently appears nihilistic, yet the final scene in which the murder is committed encourages the idea that, despite the suffering which Henry is forced to endure on earth, there is a personal heaven to which there is access after death. However, Lynch's depiction of this nirvana is so vague that it provides no concrete answers for the viewer. K. George Godwin, in his "Eraserhead Retrospect" (Godwin: 1984, p.51) clearly believes that Henry's murder of his child invokes the end of the world, yet there is no solid evidence to encourage such a reading.

If one attempts to answer any of McHale's questions relating to his Modernist thesis, "...what is there to be known? who knows it? how do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?..." (McHale in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.58), the answers are uniformly negative. This is not to say that Lynch does not raise such questions, but he neglects to provide any concrete solutions. For instance, when Mary's mother informs Henry of the birth of his baby, Mary exclaims, "They're not sure that it is a baby!" Even universal certainties such as this cannot be taken for granted.

The possibility of *Eraserhead* being a Modernist pastiche has already been mentioned. In returning to this idea, it is essential to consider that Lynch chooses to employ a narrative form more complex than the style of any of his other feature films. As Boyne and Rattansi state, this tendency of Modernism, to employ complex struc-

tures in order to understand more fully the underlying truth of the situation, or the deep-structure of reality, is utilised in order to gain knowledge. However, within the tortured structure of *Eraserhead*, Lynch demonstrates that such activity is futile.

Postmodern creators frequently display doubts relating to the gathering of factual information. They realise that objectivity is rarely present in the creation of an artistic work, whether that work is a painting, a film or a novel.

For instance Salman Rushdie, in his novel, *Midnight's Children*, constantly exposes his narrator, Saleem Sinai, as being an unreliable source. For instance, he describes Gandhi's assassination as occurring on the wrong date.

Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date...Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything - to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? (Rushdie: 1982, p.166)

Saleem frequently relies on other informants in order to furnish his story with events which he failed to witness, and these, too, are often exposed as being unreliable:

What follows is a reconstruction of the recent career of Major Shiva; I pieced the story together from Parvati's accounts, which I got out of her after our marriage. It seems my arch-rival was fond of boasting to her about his exploits, so you may wish to make allowances for the distortions of truth which such chest-beating creates... (Ibid.: p. 407)

Consider the distortions of truth which Rushdie is suggesting here. The story concerns Saleem's rival, so he might feel obliged to corrupt the story himself, in order to make Major Shiva appear more malevolent or imbecilic than a rational report might suggest. Apart from this factor, Saleem is relying on his wife's account, which is also potentially biased, the tale originating from a man who has been exposed, at best, as a murderer and braggart. Although Rushdie's novel incorporates many historical events, his story involves such a bizarre melding of fact and fiction that it is

frequently impossible to separate fact from fabulation, and the use of such an imperfect narrator as Saleem further questions the possibility of knowing, for certain, the deep-structure of any reality.

It should be noted, however, that film performs a different function to that of the novel. What, in a work of literature, can be left largely to the imagination of the reader, is made more specific through the use of celluloid or videotape imagery. For instance, the mention of a cat in a novel or poem may be left to the reader to visualise, but film must be specific. Therefore, the word 'cat', which may remain non-specific in a piece of writing, is always precisely defined by the use of film, 'cat' becoming (for example) 'large, male neutered, ginger mixed-breed feline'. This obviously lessens (but does not eradicate) the occurrence of the kind of testimonial discrepancies described by Salman Rushdie.

Lynch enters this debate in *Wild at Heart* when a seemingly drugged inhabitant of Big Tuna (played by Jack Nance) talks of his dog to Sailor and Lula. He suggests that, since they have not seen his dog, they should picture Toto, Dorothy's dog in *The Wizard of Oz*. Apart from providing another link with the latter film, this sequence relates to the Postmodern debate regarding the reliability of evidence provided by history, as well as by other people.

Similarly, David Lynch creates this sense of doubt within *Eraserhead*. Henry's existence, which is strange even before the arrival of his mewling infant, is further complicated by sequences which appear to be dreams, or hallucinations. However, given the tenuous resemblance which Henry's life bears to our own, these might also be a part of the film's initial reality. Because of Lynch's determination to present a world at least superficially removed from our own, we lack the ability to judge whether dream or reality is in operation. Parts of Saleem's story seem also to inhabit a confusing limbo, as Rushdie investigates similar territory.

What is to be known? who knows it? how does knowledge change when it is passed from one knower to another? These are some of the questions which Brian McHale views as being dominant within the mode of Modernist enquiry, but they cannot easily be answered. With the current dominance of Postmodern thought

they appear to have disappeared from the pantheon of 'important' issues.

As well as being exposed as an infrequently achieved (or achievable) goal, it seems as though the appeal for verification is no longer so important, since the Scientific Age has been usurped by mass-communications. Another Postmodern paradox; with the increased availability of 'knowledge', the contemporary information-gatherer is frequently surprised by its ephemeral nature. For instance, if one consults more than one British daily newspaper in order to gain a better understanding of a political or economic event, it is likely that the same incident will be reported very differently in each paper, because of the bias of the editor, the economic concerns of the newspaper's owners, and the market at which each is aimed.

There is also a growing tendency, in this age of flux, to regard the hopes which the Modernists retained with a degree of scepticism. In an article entitled, "From Here To Modernity: Feminism And Postmodernism", Barbara Creed states that,

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard discusses in detail the question of knowledge and the problem of its legitimization in so-called advanced societies given what he sees as a collapse of the grands recits or Great Narratives, that is, narratives which have been used to legitimate the quest for knowledge and the importance of scientific research. (Creed: 1987, p.50)

Deprived of the prop of scientific certainties, then, the Postmodernists have set their sights on creating and exploring new worlds. McHale claims that Postmodern writing is dominated by a tendency towards ontological enquiry and this would appear to be more helpful in conducting an examination involving the world of *Eraserhead* than any epistemological focus. As has been previously discussed, *Eraserhead's* structure encourages the viewer to believe that Lynch is attempting to use Modernist form in order to uncover some universal truth. The film's major difficulty lies in the fact that, beneath its complex exterior, no knowledge is to be gained, nor does any specific reading of the film reveal a coherent philosophy. *Eraserhead* is a filmic folly, a complex exterior concealing an interior bereft of epistemological value.

they appear to have disappeared from the pantheon of 'important' issues.

As well as being exposed as an infrequently achieved (or achievable) goal, it seems as though the appeal for verification is no longer so important, since the Scientific Age has been usurped by mass-communications. Another Postmodern paradox; with the increased availability of 'knowledge', the contemporary information-gatherer is frequently surprised by its ephemeral nature. For instance, if one consults more than one British daily newspaper in order to gain a better understanding of a political or economic event, it is likely that the same incident will be reported very differently in each paper, because of the bias of the editor, the economic concerns of the newspaper's owners, and the market at which each is aimed.

There is also a growing tendency, in this age of flux, to regard the hopes which the Modernists retained with a degree of scepticism. In an article entitled, "From Here To Modernity: Feminism And Postmodernism", Barbara Creed states that,

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard discusses in detail the question of knowledge and the problem of its legitimization in so-called advanced societies given what he sees as a collapse of the grands recits or Great Narratives, that is, narratives which have been used to legitimate the quest for knowledge and the importance of scientific research. (Creed: 1987, p.50)

Deprived of the prop of scientific certainties, then, the Postmodernists have set their sights on creating and exploring new worlds. McHale claims that Postmodern writing is dominated by a tendency towards ontological enquiry and this would appear to be more helpful in conducting an examination involving the world of *Eraserhead* than any epistemological focus. As has been previously discussed, *Eraserhead's* structure encourages the viewer to believe that Lynch is attempting to use Modernist form in order to uncover some universal truth. The film's major difficulty lies in the fact that, beneath its complex exterior, no knowledge is to be gained, nor does any specific reading of the film reveal a coherent philosophy. *Eraserhead* is a filmic folly, a complex exterior concealing an interior bereft of epistemological value.

Although it is often difficult to separate the epistemological from the ontological (the interest in different worlds is merely another way of accumulating knowledge), it is clear that more can be gained from an ontological approach when discussing *Eraserhead*, for as McHale states,

Intractable epistemological uncertainty...becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions - the progression is not linear and one-way, but circular and reversible. (McHale in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.63)

Obviously, increased communications networks have fuelled the Postmodern interest in other worlds, and modern cities have mutated into collections of different worlds, extreme poverty existing within metres of luxury urban dwellings.

Returning to Lynch's worlds, one can observe Henry in his decaying bed-sit being enraptured by visions of a heavenly world centimetres from his bed. If *Eraserhead* truly represents Lynch's experiences in Philadelphia, one may observe the social dichotomies contained within that city. It is not necessary to discuss or display more exotic environments when such contrasts exist within one urban area. Perhaps the tendency to divide into rural and urban areas, noted by Marshall Berman as a characteristic of modernization, encouraged the Postmodern interest in other worlds, since Henry's quest to enter a realm in which industry does not feature, is viewed by him as being heavenly.

Although Lynch's other American work, that is *Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart* and *Twin Peaks*, represents life in a smaller American town, *Eraserhead* depicts an environment equally American. The director's experiences in Philadelphia have already been noted, and obviously affected him. The so-called American Dream, celebrated in countless Hollywood movies, is exposed by Lynch as a fallacy. Whether investigating an ugly industrial centre or a rural community, Lynch's interest in other worlds is a key cinematic issue.

Eraserhead, as has already been noted, differs from Lynch's other films in several regards. Most obviously, the characters in *Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart* and *Twin Peaks* exist in a world in which both positive and negative forces are constantly vying for attention. Unfortunately for Henry, his existence offers nothing in the way of hope or happiness. His only chance to be Lappy appears to involve the murder of his child, (to whom he is seen to display a large amount of parental attention), in order to end his present situation and find contentment in an alternative universe.

If one contrasts the environment of *Eraserhead* with the community of *Twin Peaks*, for example, the differences with regard to Lynch's attitude towards America may be observed. Although the citizens of *Twin Peaks* are frequently exposed to danger and evil, in the shapes of Bob and Windom Earle, as well as the malevolent forces surrounding the Black Lodge, there is an equally valid world contained in the benevolent surroundings of places such as the Double R Diner, and in the shape of the White Lodge and the Bookhouse Boys. In Lynch's more industrial realm, there is no alternative but to reject entirely one's surroundings. *Eraserhead* offers no place of refuge, and presents a more cohesive world than the more dualistic societies seen in Lynch's other, and later, American films.

However, the use of costume in *Dune* indicates that even the futuristic societies depicted are dualistic in nature. The strict hierarchy present in the various social groups is reinforced by the use of influences from Elizabethan costume design. The Elizabethan influences are combined with a style more obviously suited to a science fiction text, but exist as a reminder of the strict hierarchical order of the Elizabethan court. Again, Lynch can be seen to be making an original statement by combining previously existing factors. However, all of *Eraserhead*'s characters are similarly dressed in clothes which cannot easily be categorised as belonging to a specific period, although they would appear to be influenced more by the 1950s than the 1970s. However, the lack of a schizophrenic society does not indicate an environment more conducive to mental well-being. Although Henry periodically escapes from his mundane and ugly existence through his dream world, these dreams or hallucinations fail to provide a less threatening alternative.

Doaue Fokkema, in the article entitled, "The Semantic and Syntactic Organization of Postmodernist Texts", lists some motifs which frequently occur in Postmodern texts. Unsurprisingly, he notes that the theme of the labyrinth is a very common factor (as it is to Lynch's work), but also claims that "journey" (without destination)" frequently recurs. (Fokkema in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.37) This can be applied to David Lynch's work more literally when *Wild at Heart* is considered, but *Eraserhead*'s convoluted narrative performs a similar function. The viewer is exposed to a film which offers no easy access to any definite reading of the complex narrative structure, and which also offers no definite closure. Therefore, an audience might experience the type of frustrations felt by a traveller who cannot find his or her way through the multitudinous passageways of a labyrinth. Each turning, which is assumed will find a way out of the maze, is discovered to offer false hope. The viewer of *Eraserhead* is similarly thwarted in his or her quest to find meaning.

Fokkema refers to the opinions of David Lodge and Ihab Hassan regarding the differences between the Modern and Postmodern creative process:

In discussing Postmodernism, several authors have further specified the notion of nonselection or quasi nonselection. Lodge sees the following manifestations of the principle of nonselection: contradiction, permutation discontinuity, randomness, excess, short circuits... Ihab Hassan... provides a long list of oppositions between Modernism and Postmodernism, several of which can be made operational in an empirical investigation, notably the binary distinctions: purpose / play, design / chance, distance / participation, hypotaxis / parataxis, selection / combination, determinacy / indeterminacy. (Ibid.: p.85)

Clearly, the characteristics of Postmodernism are seen here to lack coherence, and are attributed to chance, rather than any inherent artistic design. This would seem to describe the form and function of *Eraserhead* more clearly than the more purposeful qualities ascribed to Modernism. Any attempted reading of the film is equally aligned to chance as Henry's experiences within the film seem to be. Fokkema attempts an explanation of the widespread presence of chance within Postmodernism:

Just as the products of *écriture automatique* were often edited in order to suggest the ideal of automatic writing...the Postmodernist writer may, quite deliberately, produce texts which have the *appearance* of being built on the principle of nonselection. We should remind ourselves that the Postmodernists are polemical: they wish to make texts that are different from Modernist texts. (Ibid., p.84)

The fact that the primary force behind Postmodernism is to break away from the characteristics of Modernism, is often overlooked in the more complex issues surrounding the Modern/Postmodern debate. *Eraserhead* is a film which successfully camouflages its Postmodern tendencies by using an outer shell of Modern narrative characteristics, such as fragmentation and the incongruous juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images.

Marshall Berman might view Lynch as being an example of twentieth century Man's tendency to view the evidence of modernization with a jaundiced eye, although Abrams's definition of Postmodernism would adequately incorporate Lynch's concern with his environment.

Undoubtedly, *Eraserhead*'s broken narrative and concern with Surrealist imagery could not have been achieved without the pervasive influence of Modernism. The scene in which Henry stands in what appears to be a makeshift courtroom and is decapitated, his head being replaced by the phallic head of his baby, directly refers to the Freudian symbols so beloved of the Surrealists.

Without the work of Buñuel, Breton and Dalí it is highly unlikely that Lynch would have had access to the imagery which he uses so freely in *Eraserhead*. To claim that Lynch has been extensively influenced by the Modernists would not be an exaggeration, the fact that he intended to study painting under Oskar Kokoschka (Jones: 1990, p.46) providing more proof of his indebtedness to the spirit of the Modern movement in the Fine Arts, especially since Kokoschka's work embraces elements of Expressionism and Surrealism (see *The Storm*).

However, just as his awareness of the artistic possibilities suggested by Modernism influenced Lynch's choice of structure for *Eraserhead*, the existence of the Postmodern aesthetic ensured the film's ultimate rejection of the Modern world. As Mary's father enthusiastically praises the man-made chickens the viewer is made aware of their limitations. They are impossible to carve and ooze a substance which sickeningly resembles blood. Although they have been created by a society which possesses a high level of technology, they are inedible and demonstrate, as well as comment on, the negative side of modernity.

Although the scene involving the man-made chickens is not central to the film's plot it has significance when one considers the radical nature of such an invention. Technology has played a major role in supplementing natural processes, for instance, one might quote the example of the combine harvester as a welcome aid to the farm worker, but the introduction of industrially produced fowl seems less of a benevolent assistance to humanity. If industry is able to replicate chickens, this process might be easily applied to the human form, in fact Henry and Mary frequently behave as if they are automats.

Marshall Berman's optimistic view of the power of technological innovation frequently appears misplaced, while Henry and Mary struggle to exist within an ecologically unsound world, allied to the environments created in places such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The earth seems barren and unable to produce or sustain life. In fact Henry's bedside decoration of a branch in a mound of earth suggests the scarceness of natural growth.

Eraserhead's post-nuclear environment does manage to encourage life and growth, but the objects which it nurtures are either deformed (Henry and Mary's baby) or unpleasant (the worm in the cupboard which develops and swells with obscene haste.) The puppies at the X's house look and sound like a host of voracious rats, an image which hardly suggests any genuine optimism at the evidence of new life.

Although the viewer can be distracted by Lynch's nominal plot and confusing narrative structure, as well as the frequently unpleasant Surrealist imagery, it is possible to view *Eraserhead* as conforming to a Lynchian pattern. Continually present is the

motif of the labyrinth, present in all of Lynch's films and represented in this first feature film by the narrative structure, as well as by the dark corridors which continually challenge Henry.

The interest in other worlds is also present in *Eraserhead*, although displayed in less detail than in *Blue Velvet*, *Dune*, or *Wild at Heart*. The film is set in motion by a strange character referred to as The Man in the Planet, who appears to be a god-like figure, and Henry gazes longingly at his dream woman who also inhabits another world, or dimension. However, most of the action takes place in the industrial wasteland of Henry's immediate experience and which seems the least unfamiliar to the average viewer, factory sounds and urban decay being a constant reality to many city dwellers.

This visual motif of urban decay features strongly in *Dune*, and defines the appearance and environment of the Harkonnens. Again, Lynch is commenting negatively on the intrusive presence of technology which leads the viewer to question to what extent he is subverting the tenets of Futurism. The most obvious clue indicating that a surfeit of machinery is not a good thing is positioned at the end of the film. For all their technological sophistication, the space travellers of *Dune* are still obliged to rely on the age old patterns of the weather. The rain does not appear in Frank Herbert's novel, which reveals that it is Lynch who has provided this piece of irony. It is the rain which is capable of revitalizing Arrakis, while the technology of Giedi Prime seems comparatively redundant.

The fact that Futurism is being quoted in order to investigate the negative aspects of speed and the machine, suggests that Lynch's vision is again reverting to Postmodernism. The director pays a visual tribute to the Futurist movement, within the science fiction genre, which itself demands the extensive use of futuristic machines and gadgets, and demonstrates the negative aspect of both. This use of subversion is characteristically Postmodern, since, while the Postmodern creator frequently refers to established genres and past styles, these are incongruously treated in order to give life to an entirely new creation.

The conclusion of *Eraserhead* seems directly to prefigure *Blue Velvet* and Jeffrey's

battle with the underbelly (figuratively and literally) of Lumberton. As Jeffrey battles with Frank Booth, who threatens Jeffrey's happiness with Sandy, so Henry cannot hope to join his dream woman until he has confronted the demanding presence of his deformed child, and destroyed it. Lynch reverts to mythology in order to submit his heroes and heroines to a test of their fidelity and courage. Before leaving the labyrinth, the minotaur must be slain. This thematic device is used in several of Lynch's films, most obviously in *Blue Velvet*, as Jeffrey is forced to murder Frank Booth, but it can also be seen in *Dune*, with the murder of Baron Harkonnen. At the conclusion of *The Elephant Man*, John Merrick commits suicide in order to escape from the restrictions of his body, in itself a labyrinth from which there seems no deliverance in life.

Lynch's next truly American film, *Blue Velvet* developed many of the themes present in *Eraserhead*, and continued to display his interest in the bizarre and grotesque. However, instead of choosing to continue his examination of the Modernist film, *Blue Velvet* displays Lynch's ability to work within a predominantly mainstream framework.

CHAPTER THREE

BLUE VELVET AS AN EXAMINATION OF THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

When Lynch filmed *Blue Velvet*, he had, at that period, abandoned his affinity for monochrome only once; this was while making *Dune*. However, working in Technicolour did little to curb his interest in past cinematic styles, since the heavily saturated colour he used in *Blue Velvet* immediately associated an identification with the 'look' of the early Technicolour films, that is, very bold and deep colours, which were later rendered more subtle by more sophisticated methods of film stock production and developing.

His awareness of past filmic styles was also evident in the generic mixture of which *Blue Velvet* was comprised. Elements of the detective film, the teenage romance and even the soft-core pornographic film are represented, and Jeffrey Beaumont, the film's main protagonist is soon seen to be the main actor in each of these aspects of the film. Frank Booth opposes Jeffrey in the detective section of the film. Sandy Williams provides motivation for a wholesome teen romance, and the nightclub singer, Dorothy Vallens, may be classed in a scenario borrowed directly from the pantheon of soft-core pornographic films.

The fact that the dominant motivator of *Blue Velvet*'s plot is the detective story automatically privileges its epistemological function (which Brian McHale has equated with the Modernist text, as was discussed in Chapter Two.) As McHale states, "...the detective story (is) the epistemological genre *par excellence*." (McHale in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.58) Furthermore, in his discussion of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, McHale notes that,

Faulkner's protagonists, like characters in many classic Modernist texts - Henry James's and Joseph Conrad's, for instance - sift through the evidence of witnesses of different degrees of reliability in order to reconstruct and solve a "crime"...(Ibid.)

In the course of his investigation Jeffrey Beaumont is confronted with various pieces of evidence which eventually enable him to solve the mystery which he uncovers at the beginning of the film, but in solving the mystery he is confronted by another way of life. As has previously been noted, Brian McHale regards an obsession with other worlds, ways of life (or ontology) as a characteristic of Postmodernism. McHale acknowledges that epistemological and ontological questions can often be seen to be two sides of the same coin, and that epistemological questions can easily become ontological, and vice versa, and this will be demonstrated through the analysis of *Blue Velvet*.

Jeffrey takes on the role of detective when he discovers a severed ear. This aspect leads him to discover a side of Lumberton (his hometown) of which he was unaware. From the beginning of the film Jeffrey is set up as an interesting mixture of insider and outsider, since he has left Lumberton in order to attend college, and is only recalled from there because of his father's sudden illness. However, he is remembered as a local by Sandy and her father, Detective Williams, as well as being enthusiastically welcomed by the two men who work in the Beaumonts' hardware store. In many ways Jeffrey resembles the stereotyped lawman from the East, characteristic of so many Westerns. He is not only obliged to fight the forces of evil in the name of the law, but also in order to win the respect of the woman he loves.

Epistemological and ontological concerns are intertwined throughout the film, because the knowledge which Jeffrey gains leads him further into Lumberton's underworld. Jeffrey's fascination with this previously undiscovered world leads him to strive to uncover as much knowledge about it (and its inhabitants) as he can, which, in turn, leads him yet more deeply into the realm of Frank Booth, his cohorts and Ben, the sleazy drug dealer.

McHale, discussing Samuel Beckett's trilogy of novels, *Molloy* (1950-55), *Malone Dies* (1951-56) and *The Unnamable* (1952-59) mentions that, during the course of *Molloy*, Beckett's

...Modernist poetics begins to *haemorrhage*, to leak away - though not fatally, since it is still (barely) possible to recuperate these internal contradictions by invoking the model of the "unreliable narrator" thus stabilizing the projected world and reasserting the epistemological dominant of the text. (Ibid., p.61)

Blue Velvet lacks a formal narrator (there is no voice-over), however the camera frequently reveals Jeffrey to be an unreliable protagonist. Often he gains an epistemological advantage by revealing a previously hidden aspect of his personality. However, the revelation of Jeffrey's complex and schismatised psyche does little to help in the stabilization of either of the projected worlds. He frequently appears to be more a psychological collage than a unified human being, and his environment reinforces this sense of dislocation, since Lumberton's underworld appears to be so incongruous, given the idyllic picture of the town which Lynch promotes at the beginning of the film.

Blue Velvet's opening scene depicts an idyllic Norman Rockwell type of setting. A fire truck moves (in slow motion) through a green and well-tended suburb and a friendly fireman waves. The heavily saturated colours of the fire truck, a row of tulips, a white picket fence and the sky are emphasised, reverting to a homage to early Technicolour processes, as well as comprising the colours of the American flag.

The first hint of the duality of Lumberton occurs when Lynch shows a patriarchal figure (who we later discover to be Jeffrey's father) collapsing while watering the lawn, apparently having suffered a stroke. After this incident the viewer is shown the cannibalistic insect life, which moves unseen beneath the grass, and which prefigures many of the negative incidents which occur later in the film. The pan down into the grass which reveals the insects is merely the final movement in a scene which began by exposing the intense blue of the sky over Lumberton, moving down to reveal the white picket fence and colourful flowers. It is only when Mr. Beaumont collapses that the negative aspect of the garden is revealed.

Later in the film the superficial, well-tended garden which surrounds the Beaumonts' house is revealed to be a pretty facade, the criminal element which thrives in Lumberton representing the dark side of small-town America in the same way in which the ugly insects infest the edenic garden.

Danny Peary feels justified in matching the opening shot of the insects with many of the human inhabitants of Lumberton:

It is (a) startling image, illustrating one of Lynch's two main themes: If you search beneath the surface of idyllic, tree-lined Norman Rockwell America you'll find a terrifying, violent, soulless world. Lynch's scientist father researched disease in trees, and now we sense disease is infesting Lumberton. This unsettling image of scary black bugs is our introduction to the insect motif that is so important to the picture. It is Lynch's intention to present his villains, Frank and the other criminals of Lumberton, as the "less-than-animal" human equivalents of insects (ugly insects - not ladybugs or butterflies etc.) Just as bugs emerge at night and run rampant, depraved criminals rule Lumberton once the sun goes down. (Peary: 1989, p.39)

Although Peary's tendency to emphasise the importance of the insect motif initially seems misguided, given the many other important factors which combine to characterise the film's appearance, there are many reasons to believe that Peary is correct when he highlights its centrality to the plot.

For instance, when Jeffrey visits Dorothy's apartment he is disguised as an insect exterminator, an early indication of his later role as the destroyer of Frank and his gang. Also, Frank's erratic behaviour aligns him with the cannibalistic insects seen at the beginning of the film. He is capable of behaving violently towards the other members of his gang, seemingly without provocation. Danny Peary compares Frank's bizarre appearance with that of the voracious beetles which are exposed in the first scene of the film: "Dressed in black and with a plastic inhaler over his contorted face, Frank actually resembles an insect." (Ibid., p.41)

At the end of the film an absurdly mechanical robin holds a large beetle in its beak, another sign that the human insects of Lumberton have been vanquished. In an earlier scene Sandy relates a dream she has experienced to Jeffrey, in which the earth, bereft of robins, is a place of darkness, but love and peace are restored with

their return. It is therefore possible to regard this dream as an explanation of the bird at the end of the film - the robins of love have been able to destroy the corruption and evil of Lumberton's dark half.

To return to McHale's two theses of the epistemological and the ontological, the insects and the robins represent two sides of the same community, in the same way that Sandy Williams and Dorothy Vallens are contrasted as two examples of Lumberton's female citizenry. Jeffrey's compulsion to discover Dorothy's secrets (in other words, to gain knowledge) leads him further from his safe world into the dangerous environment of the gang.

Interestingly, Lynch chooses to identify Lumberton's two communities with two different physical environments. While Sandy is safely ensconced in a typically middle-class American house (complete with white picket fence) in an equally respectable suburb, Frank and his henchmen are frequently identified with ugly industrial areas. In one scene, Frank meets an accomplice (who is later revealed to be a police officer) in an abandoned sawmill. When Jeffrey is violently attacked by Frank, he is dumped miles from his home in a dirty industrial area. Dorothy, who is a more ambiguous figure, lives in the centre of town in an area which is sufficiently undesirable for Jeffrey's Aunt Margaret to warn him not to go there when he takes an evening stroll. These factors are further evidence of Lynch's interest in contrasting aspects of a 'place' (worlds) within the framework of a film.

The fact that Lumberton is divided into two, strongly contrasting, halves, aids Lynch's examination of the American Dream, which is personified by the Williams family, as well as by Jeffrey's parents and Aunt Margaret. Opposing this almost unreasonably idyllic image of family life is Frank Booth, who represents the snake in the garden of Eden. This analogy is enforced by the shot of the garden hose, which wrapped itself around a plant in the garden and illogically appeared to cause Mr. Beaumont's stroke, as he fought to free it. This incident may be seen to prefigure all of the unpleasant occurrences which dominate the film from this point.

If this religious analogy is to be extended further, it is possible to view Dorothy's role in the film in a different light. She is not so much represented as Eve, the perennial

ruin of Man (although her encounters with Jeffrey have a lapsarian quality), as much as Mary Magdalene. She is forced into having sex with Frank in order to protect the interests of her kidnapped husband and son, but also appears to gain some pleasure from these encounters. However, the final scene of the film shows Dorothy to be capable of reverting to her former role of loving mother to her son, Donny, despite the sexual abuse she has suffered at the hands of Frank. She represents the culturally popular conflation of virgin and whore, in the same way as the two Marys portrayed the virgin/whore dichotomy in the New Testament.

While *Eraserhead* offered no indication of a positive side to the repugnant world in which Henry existed, *Blue Velvet* proposes a perfect world for the inhabitants of Lumberton, as long as they are willing to be circumscribed by the limits of the law, and, most importantly, do not ask questions. Jeffrey is accepted back into the 'respectable' community after the conclusion of his quest for knowledge, he has not been expelled from the garden of Eden, but he will be forever changed by his epistemological supremacy. His innocence has been irrevocably damaged, and his realization that Lumberton's rotten underbelly exists will permanently change him.

The image of the labyrinth, which, as Douwe Fokkema notes, is a frequently recurring motif in Postmodern texts (Fokkema in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.87) appears in *Blue Velvet* in more literal form. As Jeffrey pays an evening visit to Detective Williams's house, in an attempt to gain more information about the ear which he found, the camera appears to track into the severed ear. This may be read as an indication of the journey into darkness which Jeffrey will embark upon, as he strives to find out more about the hidden aspects of his hometown, the labyrinth being visually epitomised by the cavity of the inner ear.

The theme of the labyrinth originated in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The Minotaur was a fierce creature, half man and half bull, which was kept in an impossibly complex structure of passages and emerged only to feed on virgins provided by the king, Minos. After much opposition, the King agreed that the sacrifices should stop, but only on condition that someone could kill the Minotaur. Theseus volunteered, and in order to be able to find his way out of the labyrinth, was accompanied by the king's daughter, Ariadne, who stayed outside and held a large ball of

thread, which Theseus unravelled as he walked through the labyrinth. By this method Theseus was easily able to find his way out after killing the Minotaur.

This myth can be seen to link directly to *Blue Velvet*, as Jeffrey can be viewed as the equivalent of Theseus, who has to confront the Minotaur (Frank). Sandy, posted outside Dorothy's apartment building to warn of danger, is Ariadne, since her help should enable Jeffrey/Theseus to vacate the apartment/labyrinth safely. Theseus's later abandonment of Ariadne in favour of her sister, Phædre, can be compared to Jeffrey's discovery of Dorothy's sexual nature, which further highlights the use of the virgin/whore myth. Sandy is the blonde epitome of pure American teenhood, while Dorothy is a dark (and, most importantly, foreign) woman of the night.

Jorge Luis Borges has written obsessively about labyrinths, attempting a detailed description of one in his short story, "The Immortal". (Borges: 1970, ps.135-149)

A labyrinth is a structure compounded to confuse men; its architecture, rich in symmetries, is subordinated to that end. In the palace I imperfectly explored, the architecture lacked any such finality. It abounded in dead-end corridors, high unattainable windows, portentous doors which led to a cell or pit, incredible inverted stairways whose steps and balustrades hung downwards. Other stairways, clinging airily to the side of the monumental wall, would die without leading anywhere, after making two or three turns in the lofty darkness of the cupolas. I do not know if all the examples I have enumerated are literal; I know that for many years they infested my nightmares; I am no longer able to know if such and such a detail is a transcription of reality or of the forms which unhinged my nights. (Ibid., p.141)

Dorothy's apartment, while lacking the eerie magnificence of the building described by Borges, is as much a mixture of the ascendant and the descendant. While Jeffrey believes that the knowledge gained there will enable him to ascend sufficiently to be able to solve the entire mystery of the severed ear, the evil which he encounters forces him to descend into Lumberton's dark side. The sadistic sexual acts which Dorothy persuades him to perform unhinge his nights, as much as the narrator of "The Immortal" is disturbed by his encounter with the labyrinth.

Also contained in *Labyrinths*, Borges's collection of essays on the subject, is a piece of writing (described as a 'fiction' in the table of contents) entitled, "The Library of Babel" (Ibid., ps. 78-86). The figure of the labyrinth is extended to the uncertain and obfuscatory nature of language. As Borges points out;

This much is already known: for every sensible line of straightforward statement, there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherences. (I know of an uncouth region whose librarians repudiate the vain and superstitious custom of finding a meaning in books and equate it with that of finding a meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines of one's palm... They admit that the inventors of this writing imitated the twenty-five natural symbols, but maintain that this application is accidental and that the books signify nothing in themselves...) (Ibid., p. 80)

This philosophy is most notably echoed by Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose* (1984), where the labyrinthine library forms an important part of the novel's plot (and structure.) Italo Calvino, in his text, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller...* (1982), also questions literature's sinuous aspect as the novel's main protagonist fruitlessly attempts to recover the lost section of a novel, only to discover more novels which also prove to lack a conclusion. In *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989), Eco describes the method by which his protagonist, Casaubon, enters random information into a computer and obtains a narrative no more bizarre than the ones offered by so-called authoritative texts.

Although the questioning of narrative authority is by no means an original function of literature it is a specific concern of Postmodern texts. This is also present in *Blue Velvet* in the form of Jeffrey, the unreliable protagonist, who displays a large number of public and private personae. (Lynch's most advanced experiment, to date, with multi-faceted characters has been *Twin Peaks*, in which the town's name suggests the two-faced quality of its inhabitants.)

Earlier in the chapter Brian McHale's response to Samuel Beckett's trilogy of novels was mentioned. McHale's suggestion, that the use of the "unreliable narrator" was a means of "reasserting the epistemological dominant of the text" (McHale in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.58) can also be seen to describe Jeffrey's function in *Blue Velvet*.

As the film progresses Jeffrey is exposed to an increasing amount of violence, perverse sexuality and corruption, but Lynch indicates that Jeffrey's psyche is damaged not only by his negative experiences. When Frank discovers him leaving Dorothy's apartment one evening he forces them to accompany him on a "joy ride", during which he confronts Jeffrey with the statement, "You're like me." This is correct, but it is only true of the corrupt aspect of his nature. While operating as a detective, sexual pervert and peeping Tom, Jeffrey retains his positive personae as upright college student and loving son. Despite his adventures in the labyrinth, he seems able to retain a connection with the world outside.

Since Sandy and Jeffrey are taken directly from the genre of the teenage romance film, the viewer will retain a number of expectations about their behavioural patterns and realm of experience. Sandy exists as a reminder of the genre's normal parameters, which Jeffrey frequently subverts. While Sandy worries about the effect that her relationship with Jeffrey will have on her boyfriend, Mike, Jeffrey is crossing generic boundaries into the Bogartian territory of the detective film, and having a concomitant amount of trouble with the inevitable *film noir* woman.

The fact that Sandy does not enter Dorothy's apartment when Jeffrey, disguised as the 'bug man' sets the detective story in motion says a great deal about her role in the film. Although she initially provides the information which enables Jeffrey to view Dorothy as part of the mystery, she acts as a restraining influence for the rest of the film, continually indicating the danger inherent in Jeffrey's situation.

The relationship between these two characters clearly demonstrates the concerns of the genres represented. Sandy is worried about the possibility of her father (and boyfriend) finding out about her misdemeanours, while Jeffrey is forced to abandon such typically teenage anxieties for the more immediate dangers as found in the detective film genre.

McHale, commenting on the novels of Carlos Fuentes, mentions the recurring motif of the "transhistorical party",

...where characters apparently from disparate historical eras are brought together at the same time and place. Obviously a carnivalesque motif, in Baxtin's sense, it is also related to the typical Modernist motif of the party that assembles, or reassembles, all the characters of the novel at a single locus - for instance, the Guermantes party in *Le Temps retrouvé*, Clarissa's party in *Mrs. Dalloway*, or even the fiesta at Pamplona in *The Sun Also Rises*. (McHale in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.68)

Although McHale's emphasis upon the assembled party being a motif of the Modernist novel is, perhaps, stretching the point a little too far (the reassembled party being an integral part also of the novels of Agatha Christie, amongst others, who can hardly be described as a Modernist), the motif of the carnival is definitely an integral part of Postmodernism.

The most logical explanation for this Postmodern emphasis on the carnivalesque is that one of the movement's primary concerns is to challenge the "...increasing uniformization of mass culture..." as Linda Hutcheon describes it. (Hutcheon: 1988, p.6)

Lynch operates within the parameters of American culture, but his vision of this culture is frequently fractured, for instance in the deliberate confusion of period styles and genres in *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart*, for example Jeffrey assumes the role of a 1950s teenager and simultaneously a 1940s detective, both derived from the generic codes inherent within filmic stereotypes.

When consulting Brian McHale's paper, "Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing", the reader is made constantly aware of the vast importance many critics place on the detective novel, when discussing aspects of Modernist writing. McHale quotes Douwe Fokkema who,

...identifies themes of intellection and intellectual independence and detachment as being typical of Modernism. The semantic universe of Modernism, according to him, is organized around terms such as *detachment, awareness, observation*. (McHale in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.57)

Obviously, Jeffrey's obsession with solving the mystery of Dorothy, Frank and the missing ear indicates a certain intellectual detachment. His ability to conceptualise and process the information which he has gained depends on his ability to attain a certain amount of detachment, but he is also wholly immersed in the new world which he has unwittingly uncovered.

In the same way that the tracking shot at the beginning of the film revealed the cannibalistic insects which exist in the underworld of the grass, so the information which Jeffrey obtains enables him to enter an unfamiliar environment.

However, due to his burgeoning relationship with Dorothy, Jeffrey is unable to maintain the type of detachment normally associated with film detectives. His brutalization of Dorothy, although requested by her, profoundly upsets him, and the different worlds, which he discovers within himself, appear to unnerve him.

The character of Jeffrey Beaumont represents the *film noir* hero (or anti-hero) who has been exposed to the Postmodern carnival of opposing cultures, styles and generic influences. Charles Jencks credits the information explosion for the creation of the Postmodern philosophy of cultural heterogeneity (Jencks: 1986, p.7), and it is true that the Modernist tendency to propound a cultural uniformity seems singularly unsuitable in a world in which the strange or foreign is so accessible.

Jencks also views Postmodern heterogeneity as a reaction against the "less is more" "...minimalism of Late-Modern ideology and all revivals which are based on an exclusive dogma or taste." (Ibid.)

Hutcheon extends the Modernism vs. Postmodernism debate into a discussion of the differing aesthetic and moral values of both movements:

Modernists like Eliot and Joyce have usually been seen as profoundly humanistic...in their paradoxical desire for stable aesthetic and moral values, even in the face of their realization of the inevitable absence of such universals. Postmodernism differs from this, not in its humanistic contradictions, but in the provisionality of its response to them: it refuses to posit any structure or, what Lyotard...calls, master narrative - such as art or myth - which for such modernists, would have been consolatory. (Hutcheon: 1988, p.6)

This ideological gap between Modernists and Postmodernists is seen by Hutcheon to have emerged from a fundamental difference of approach between the movements. Postmodernism has elected to challenge the notion of consensus, and,

Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement have now been questioned by the acknowledgement of differences - in theory and in artistic practice. (Ibid, p.7)

While the Modernists retained their belief in reality's deep structure, the Postmodernists rejected this idea that any knowable truths existed. (This type of non-closure may also be observed in the novels of John Fowles, for instance, *The Magus*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *A Maggot*.)

Here we have the heart of *Blue Velvet*'s difficulty as a detective story. Although Postmodern writers have frequently embraced the detective genre as an area of investigation it is clear that their distrust of 'master narratives', or consensus, as Linda Hutcheon describes it, renders them unable to provide the type of closure offered by conventional writers, such as Agatha Christie or P.D. James. Lynch's lack of

commitment to any one genre (although the detective genre dominates) also affects the visual style of the film, with visual characteristics from the 1940s, 50s and 60s mixing strangely with 1980s technology.

The fact that Lumberton is a small town helps considerably in the creation of this temporal uncertainty, since technological progress is not so obvious in a rural setting. Commenting on *Body Heat* (1981), Frederic Jameson perceives the move away from the city to be an important component of the Postmodern film:

One begins to realize after a while that the small town setting has a crucial strategic function; it allows the film to do without most of the signals and references which we might associate with the contemporary world, with consumer society - the appliances and artifacts, the high rises, the object world of late capitalism. Technically, then, its objects (its cars, for instance) are 1980s products, but everything in the film conspires to blur that immediate contemporary reference and to make it possible to receive this too as nostalgia work - as a narrative set in some indefinable nostalgic past, an eternal 1930s, say, beyond history. (Jameson in Kaplan: 1988, p.20)

It is obvious that Lumberton shares many of the characteristics of the small town which also dominate *Body Heat*. In her review of *Body Heat*, Pauline Kael described it as, "...a 40s pastiche that verges on camp but takes itself straight..." (Kael, quoted in Peary: 1989, p.43), which echoes almost exactly Jameson's claim: that pastiche is, "...parody that has lost its sense of humor." (Jameson, quoted in Kaplan: 1988, p.16) Although Lynch's work is frequently less than wholly serious (consider, for example, the slapstick humour in *Twin Peaks*), there are undoubtedly similarities between Kasdan's film and Lynch's, largely due to the vague temporal setting of both films.

Matty Walker, the *noir* woman of *Body Heat*, is wholly American, but Dorothy Valens is noticeably foreign. Lynch constantly capitalises on Isabella Rossellini's Italian accent, although Dorothy's nationality is never stated. Hans Bertens, in an essay entitled, "The Postmodern *Weltanschauung* and its Relation with Modernism: An Introductory Survey", discusses the manner in which Postmodern writers emphasise the,

...inaccessibility of the object world. For them, the world outside the subject (nature, objects, other people) must be restored in all its object-ness, to its total inaccessibility... (Bertens in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.19)

This philosophy is reflected in the character of Dorothy, who seems unknowable to Jeffrey, as well as to Frank, who does not relate directly to her, but plays Oedipal sexual games with her, calling her "Mommy" and referring to himself as "Baby".

Dorothy is unknowable because of her multi-faceted personality and also because of her foreign background. Lynch later returned to the theme of the inscrutable foreigner in *Twin Peaks*, where Josie Packard displays evidence of a seedy past which she hides from the people that she loves, notably Sheriff Truman and Pete Martell. However, her history is never made entirely clear to the audience, either, despite frequent hints that she was a prostitute in Hong Kong. Since Postmodernism characteristically fails to appeal to any so-called established truth, this failure to provide a concrete history for a character is entirely congruent.

Dorothy's sexual nature is similarly muddled, since she is shown to be a masochist as well as being a good mother and wife. It is true that she has been forced into having sex with Frank, but her decision to seduce Jeffrey is entirely voluntary.

Since Postmodernism signals a return to the concerns and icons of popular culture (via the Pop Art movement) it is unsurprising that Lynch chose to cast Isabella Rossellini as Dorothy Vallens. Disregarding Lynch's personal involvement with Rossellini, her presence contributes a great deal to the Postmodern vision which defines *Blue Velvet*.

As the 'Lancôme girl', Rossellini has become an omnipresent image in magazines and on advertising posters worldwide, her presence indicating beauty and glamour. Lynch uses Rossellini's glamorous aspect when, as the Blue Lady, she performs at the Slow Club, but also subverts the image for which she has become famous.

While Jeffrey hides in the closet, Dorothy removes her clothes and wig and, stripped of these accoutrements, looks less than seductive. Later, when Jeffrey and Sandy arrive at the Williams's house and confront Mike, Sandy's jealous boyfriend, Dorothy stands naked and hysterical on the lawn, a vision of pale cellulite. Her appearance is entirely consistent with her age and the fact that she has had children, but it is a long way from the elegance which Rossellini normally exudes.

Most obviously, Lynch's decision to negate the actress's beauty in this way is a return to the unflinching interest which he has displayed in all his films for the freakish and grotesque. Although it would be stretching a point to compare Dorothy to John Merrick, or to Baron Harkonnen, it is nonetheless obvious that this interest in physical ugliness is a major theme in Lynch's work. Even in *Twin Peaks*, a series characterised by the beauty of most of the cast, Lynch saw fit to include a giant and a dwarf, two more examples of a departure from physical 'normality'.

Linda Hutcheon claims that ex-centricity is an important component of Postmodernism:

The ex-centric, the off-center: ineluctably identified with the center it desires but is denied. This is the paradox of the postmodern and its images are often as deviant as this language of decentering might suggest: the freak is one common example... (Hutcheon: 1988, p.61)

Hutcheon further claims that this concern with freakishness is not arbitrary, but exists as a criticism of the self/other dichotomy which features strongly in much Modernist work:

Postmodernism retains, and indeed celebrates, differences against what has been called the "racist logic of the exclusive"...The (M)odernist concept of single and alienated otherness is challenged by the (P)ostmodern questioning of binaries that conceal hierarchies (self/other). When Edward Said calls for theory today to have an "awareness of the differences between situations"...in its "critical consciousness" of its position in the world, he is going beyond the early Foucauldian...definition of modernity in terms of otherness alone. Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion. (Ibid.)

Dorothy is not the only example, in *Blue Velvet*, of Lynch's obsession with the 'freak', Frank Booth being an even more obvious example of the species. Danny Peary sees Frank as strongly representing the film's insect motif:

Frank is meant to be the human counterpart of those hideous black bugs we saw in the opening - that's why it is necessary for him to have *no* human qualities, not even an ounce of sensitivity to make him more palatable. His foul language reflects how the bugs would speak if they could. His brutal sexual manner, consisting of groping, clutching, slapping, and mounting - while spewing vulgar threats - seems patterned on a bug's violent reproductive act. (Peary: 1989, p.41)

Frank would certainly seem to be an alien presence, and Lynch's decision to have Dennis Hopper (who plays Frank) inhaling some unnamed gas adds substance to this argument. Although Frank is probably hooked on the effects of nitrous oxide, the fact that he finds it necessary to inhale encourages the theory that he is alien, one who cannot exist in the earth's atmosphere without added assistance.

Frank is also an unhappy existential hero, since, despite engaging in spurious acts of violence and murder, he cannot seem to break sufficiently free from society's strictures to find peace. Although Frank is never less than menacing, whether having sex with Dorothy, or threatening Jeffrey, he is simultaneously a comic figure. His mental torment is frequently so intense that he is unable to speak coherently, continually repeating the word, "Fuck".

In a *Rolling Stone* interview Lynch confessed that he found a great deal of humour in the scene in which Jeffrey watches Frank raping Dorothy:

I'm sure pretty near every psychiatrist could tell me right now why I was laughing, but I don't know. It was hysterically funny to me. Frank was completely obsessed. He was like a dog in a chocolate store. He could not help himself. He was completely into it. But because I was laughing and I am a human being, there must be some logical reason why. It has something to do with the fact that it was so horrible and so frightening and so intense and violent, that there was also this layer of humor. It has to do with the degree of obsession where people cannot help themselves. (Lynch, quoted in Breskin: 1990, p.62)

Again, Lynch uses a pre-existing form, and, with the use of double-coding, manages to make an original statement.

Frank has moved beyond the existing parameters of the existential hero, who, through his destruction, is able to move away from the restrictions of the law and society's beliefs and mores, to a realm in which the individual loses his self-control entirely. Existentialism does propound a structured philosophy, albeit a destructive one, but Frank is no longer able to function within any ideological framework which places even the smallest constraint on his excessive libidinous energy.

Although Lynch provides definite portrayals of good and bad in *Blue Velvet*, Sandy and her family representing America's law-abiding citizens and Frank and his gang existing as stereotyped baddies, what is interesting is that he chooses to focus most of his attention on a character who is able to thrive in both worlds. Although Jeffrey is beaten up by Frank, while trying to protect Dorothy, he soon learns enough from Frank to be able to shoot him in the forehead. He frequently appears to be similar to Billy Bathgate, the character who features in E.L. Doctorow's novel of the same name, who obtains his 'education' from the mobster, Dutch Schultz.

Jeffrey is a college boy, but we learn nothing of his educational pursuits after leaving high school. At the beginning of the film his unsophisticated attempt to amuse Sandy by performing the chicken walk leads the viewer to believe that he has failed to mature successfully, but by the film's conclusion he has killed a man, a significant rite of passage. Kyle MacLachlan's performance as Jeffrey Beaumont prefigures his appearance as Agent Dale Cooper in *Twin Peaks*. Throughout the series Cooper represents the positive side of America's F.B.I., since he is brave, incorruptible and morally sound, but at the end of the final episode he is shown to have been possessed by the evil which pervades the community of Twin Peaks.

What makes Lynch's work unique is his realisation that murder and mayhem are as much a part of America's heritage as the white picket fences and tidy gardens of Lumberton. He feels no compunction, therefore, about displaying them side by side in his work.

The violent shoot-out at the end of *Blue Velvet* is reminiscent of numerous westerns and gangster films, where men habitually engaged in territorial battles. After his decision to salvage his relationship with Sandy, Jeffrey is able to ally himself to Lumberton's positive side, in order to be able to destroy Frank.

The 'happy ending' which Lynch offers at *Blue Velvet*'s conclusion is problematic. As the camera zooms out of Jeffrey's ear, the viewer is made aware that he has escaped from the dark part of Lumberton. Frank has been eliminated by the 'bug man', and Jeffrey is free to enjoy his innocent relationship with Sandy, represented by the peaceful domestic scene into which he awakens. Sandy and her parents are visiting the Beaumonts for a barbecue, the women gathered in the kitchen and Mr. Beaumont (fully recovered from his stroke), conversing with Detective Williams around the barbecue.

The image of the journey out of the ear (which is obviously linked to the zoom into the labyrinth which occurs near the beginning of the film), could suggest that Jeffrey's experiences with Frank and Dorothy have been a dream. The fact that Jeffrey is reclining in a deck chair at this point, and seems to be woken by his father and Detective Williams calling to him from the other end of the garden, reinforces this idea of being woken from a fantasy. However, this seems unlikely, since the sight of the robin with an insect in its beak points to Jeffrey's victory over Frank and his cronies.

The robin, too, is an ambiguous image, since Sandy earlier spoke of the robin being a symbol of love in her dream, but this bird would seem to be related to the hawk, rather than the dove. Nevertheless, given Lynch's understanding that America is a combination of savagery and sentimentality, this is possibly the only manner in which love is able to flourish in such a divided society. Since the robin is, at that moment, crushing an insect in its beak, it is evident that, despite Jeffrey's victory over Frank, there are more human insects surviving within Lumberton's underworld.

It has been noted that, despite Lynch's superficially happy domestic conclusion, there are a number of lapses of logic which remain unresolved at the end of *Blue Velvet*. Danny Peary, viewing the film as a detective story, notes some of these:

Why does Jeffrey *rush* to Dorothy's apartment? I assume Frank killed the Yellow Man and Dorothy's husband (who, earless, resembles an insect) but why did he do it? What happened? And why did he leave them there? Why does Frank return to Dorothy's apartment, especially if he already left the corpses there? And why is he in disguise, especially a disguise the cops must be familiar with? (Peary: 1989, p.42)

If *Blue Velvet* is viewed merely as an addition to the detective genre, then these 'loose ends' indicate an inability, by Lynch, to conclude his film in a logical and intelligent manner. However, given the other Postmodern characteristics prevalent in the film, this lack of interest in unequivocal closure reveals a positive interest in Postmodernism in the director's philosophy.

Hutcheon states that,

...the (M)odernist tradition of the more "open" ending is both used and abused by (P)ostmodern self-consciously multiple endings (Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) or resolutely arbitrary closure (Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*). (Hutcheon: 1988, p.59)

The conclusion of *Blue Velvet* comes only after Jeffrey has ended Frank's control of Lambertson's underworld, but, as previously stated, the fact that there are still ugly insects to be found at the end of the film indicates that perhaps the cycle of extermination will have to begin again.

This theory is supported by the fact that the final shot of the film, a tilt into the blue skies over Lambertson, matches the first shot of the film, a slow tilt down from the sky, concluding with a shot of the insects in the grass. This circularity discourages a strong feeling of closure, but encourages a notion of continuity; the beginning of another cycle.

Lynch's next feature film, *Wild at Heart* (1990), continued Lynch's Postmodern vision, and dealt with the issue of closure, or non-closure, in an entirely different manner.

CHAPTER FOUR

WILD AT HEART, A POSTMODERN 'ROAD MOVIE'

Although *Wild at Heart* contrasts strongly with some of the major themes used in *Blue Velvet*, here the bucolic attractions of Amberton are replaced by the highways of America, Lynch's latest feature film continuing to explore his interests and theories of filmmaking.

Lynch again narrates a story which involves a rite of passage; in this film two innocents are involved, namely Lula Pace Fortune, a rich girl from the East coast, and Sailor Ripley, a young convict who confesses that he lacks parental guidance.

Neither Lula, nor Sailor, are remotely original characters, Lula closely resembling the type of gum-snapping slut popularised by such musicals as *Grease*, as well as teenagers in films such as *Rebel Without a Cause*. Sailor is a composite of James Dean, Elvis Presley and Marlon Brando. For example, clad in his snakeskin jacket, he resembles Brando in the 1960 film, *The Fugitive Kind*. His declaration that he was deprived of his parents' attention when young brings to mind the song, "Gee, Officer Krupke!" from *West Side Story*, another American icon of misunderstood youth.

While *Blue Velvet* was quite plainly shaped by Postmodern ideology it was, nonetheless, quite accessible for the viewer who wished to categorise it as a detective film, albeit one with certain complications. However, with *Wild at Heart*, Lynch chose to ignore many of the constraints of so-called mainstream cinema.

For example, although the performance by Dennis Hopper as Frank Booth was memorably exaggerated and unsubtle, the acting in *Blue Velvet* was predominantly 'realistic'. The same cannot be said for *Wild at Heart*, the acting styles employed ranging from melodramatic to wooden. Nevertheless, considering that most of the characters in the film were obviously based on cinematic stereotypes, this lack of 'Realism' is wholly consistent with Lynch's vision, since the film includes so many

stereotypical generic characteristics and situations. To impose a rigidly Realist style upon a film which concludes with a Romantic serenade on a car bonnet would be misguided, at best.

In his review of *Wild at Heart* in the September 1990 issue of *Empire*, Kenny Mathieson effectively pinpoints the major difference between this film and *Blue Velvet*:

Unlike his last feature, *Blue Velvet*, where the emotional charge came from two ultra-normal characters suddenly pitched into a world of menacing evil, *Wild at Heart* starts out from a comic book situation and just gets crazier. (Mathieson: 1990, p.19)

Although Jeffrey Beaumont's normality has been disputed in Chapter Three, this comment suggests that Lynch's latest feature film has moved further away from mainstream Realist Cinema.

While most of the dialogue provided in *Blue Velvet* was coherent (except for that provided for Frank), the characters in *Wild at Heart* communicate by using clichés, banalities and platitudes. Twice, during the course of the film, Sailor communicates his love to Lula by singing two songs made famous by Elvis Presley, namely "Love Me" and "Love Me Tender". Although both songs represent the apex of popular songwriting in the late 1950s and early 1960s, neither can be used of being complex or profound. However, Lynch, through the character of Sailor is using the Postmodern device of double-coding, although instead of saying (as Umberto Eco suggests), "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly" (Eco, quoted in Jencks: 1986, p.16), he is singing, "As Elvis Presley would put it, I love you madly."

The aspect of *Wild at Heart* which has been noted most frequently, is the constant reference to the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*. Lula's mother, Marietta, is portrayed as a witch, appearing as a figure on a broomstick who is seen by Lula as she and Sailor are driving towards Big Tuna, and is referenced as, "The Wicked Witch of the East" by Lula.

Marietta Pace Fortune is a representation of another cinematic stereotype, namely the wealthy mother who is unhappy about her daughter's association with a man who she feels is her social inferior. Her name leads the viewer to identify her as be-

ing to a more elevated social class than Sailor, since the Fortune is a direct reference to wealth, as well as the use of a double-barrelled surname. Marietta's name is a coding device which reveals her social status. She also indicates the degenerate quality of American WASP¹⁸ culture, causing her husband's death, and initiating the destruction of her lover, Johnnie Farragut. At the end of the film, following Lula's reconciliation with Sailor, her image (in a photograph on Lula's coffee table), disappears in a puff of smoke, an obvious parallel to the wicked witch's fate in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Lynch uses this coding device throughout *Wild at Heart*, for instance the name Sailor indicates a man who travels from port to port, as does Sailor Ripley. Another example of this coding device is the character O.O. Spool (played by Jack Nance.) Spool fails to interact with Sailor and Lula, speaking to them as if he is a malfunctioning tape recorder, his surname illustrating his mentally unbalanced state. Marietta Pace Fortune has passed the semantic promise of money to her daughter, but Lula chooses to reject her social status. Presumably her forthcoming marriage to Sailor will change her surname to Ripley, a less financially promising and socially elevated label.

Marietta's rich bitch/witch character is exposed throughout the film, the length of her hair inexplicably changing in every scene, and her behaviour constantly causes pain and death, although her final destruction proves that the power of Lula and Sailor's attraction for each other is capable of overriding any opposition, however powerful. However, the appearance of the "Good Fairy" at the film's conclusion might indicate that the lovers require some help, despite the strength of their relationship.

The *Wizard of Oz* theme is continued when the couple reach Big Tuna they encounter O.O. Spool, who states that, "My ~~name~~ ^{name} marks some", and, realising that neither Lula nor Sailor have seen the animal, asks them to imagine Toto, Dorothy's dog in *The Wizard of Oz*. Also, after encountering Bobby Peru's sexual aggression, Lula, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, clicks the heels of her red shoes together, in a vain attempt to hasten Sailor's return.

¹⁸ That is, White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant.

As Lula and Sailor follow the Yellow Brick Road they indulge in frequent sexual activity (during which Lula makes an X-rated reference to being taken over the rainbow) while the audience are continually exposed to violent images. These recurring scenes of violence are always related to Lula and Sailor, since they either happen during the film's main narrative, or are displayed in order to illustrate the stories which they tell each other. Most notably the audience is permitted to witness Sailor being sexually harassed by Marietta, and Lula's reaction to having been raped by Uncle Pooch, a family friend.

Incest is a constant theme in Lynch's work, from Mary's mother sexually assaulting Henry, in *Eraserhead*, to Leland and Laura Palmer's unorthodox relationship in *Twin Peaks*. In Chapter Two it was mentioned that *Eraserhead* exists partly as a criticism of the nuclear family, a structure formed predominantly by the movement to the urban areas, brought about by the Industrial Revolution, and by the Modern age.

It seems as though Lynch has chosen to highlight the theme of incest because it is a simple and effective way of causing his audience to be repelled by the unnatural structure of the nuclear family. If incest does not exist in full blown form, there is evidence of an obsessive relationship between two relatives. For example, although the audience is only allowed to see John Merrick's mother briefly at the beginning of *The Elephant Man*, and after that only in photographs, Merrick's Oedipal fixation is made quite plain.

The incest displayed in *Wild at Heart* is extremely unsubtle, as befits the film's 'comic book' style. Sailor is propositioned in the lavatory by Marietta, who asks him whether, "You wanna fuck Lula's mainma?", while Lula is shown, bloody and weeping, after being raped by Uncle Pooch. He refers to her as a "pumpkin", an American euphemism for the female genitals. These incidents, apart from continuing Lynch's thematic concern with challenging societal taboos, further encourage Lula and Sailor to rely only on each other, since people who exist outside the confines of their relationship prove to be untrustworthy. This is proved conclusively by their involvement with Bobby Peru and Perdida Durango later in the film, since these two

characters betray Sailor, Perdida untruthfully informing him that there has been no contract taken out on his life, and Bobby giving him a 'dummy' gun. Apart from lying to Sailor, Perdida and Bobby put his life in danger, and condemn him to a lengthy prison term.

By the time Lynch completed his third Technicolour feature film, it was obvious that he felt as comfortable working with colour as he previously claimed to feel about working with Monochrome. While working on *Eraserhead*, Lynch stated,

I think black and white makes things seem not so normal. Because we're used to seeing in color, it removes you one step from a normal feeling. It makes it easier to go into another world. (Lynch quoted by Godwin: 1984, p.58)

However, the worlds which Lynch created in *Dune*, *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart* clearly demonstrate that the possibilities created by the use of saturated colour were frequently as disturbing as the black, white and grey worlds which characterised Lynch's early work.

Whereas *Blue Velvet* exposed the dualistic rural community of Lumberton, *Wild at Heart* extends Lynch's focus to include America's highways, moving from an unspecified location on the East coast, to New Orleans and Big Tuna, Texas. However, the world which the lovers, Sailor and Lula, encounter, normally lacks even the superficially idyllic appearance of Lumberton. Their journey towards the West also links Lynch's film to the Western, with its generic convention of moving westwards to 'new' territory.

Wild at Heart, like *Blue Velvet*, contains a mystery, but most of the questions raised about the death of Lula's father remain unanswered at the end of the film. Where Jeffrey shows considerable determination to solve the puzzle of the severed ear, Lula remains largely incurious about her father's death, her eventual discovery of Sailor's involvement in the plot bringing her actual pain. The knowledge which Jeffrey gains about the duplicitous nature of his hometown, enables him to be aware and watchful, but Lula's discoveries cause her to note unhappily that, "This whole world's wild at heart and weird on top", a realisation that does not please her. This unhappiness could be seen to link to Sandy's emotional pain in *Blue Velvet* when she

discovers that Jeffrey has been conducting a sexual relationship with Dorothy. Although Lula is less naive than Sandy, she is nonetheless wholly dedicated to her life on the road with Sailor, and is disturbed by the discovery of her pregnancy, which will obviously impede her movements, and by Sailor's involvement with Bobby Peru, whom she has good reason to distrust. The fact that both Sandy and Lula are played by Laura Dern is no coincidence, Lula frequently exhibiting the type of optimistic innocence displayed in *Blue Velvet* by Sandy, although Lula is noticeably more streetwise.

Although *Blue Velvet* contained many Postmodern qualities, its central concern with the detective story dictated the importance of epistemological factors. As McHale indicates, the detective story is, "...the epistemological genre *par excellence*." (McHale in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.58) Taking, as an example, William Faulkner's text, *Absalom, Absalom!*, McHale continues to explain the function of the epistemological dominant within the genre of the detective story:

Faulkner's protagonists, like characters in many classic Modernist texts...sift through the evidence of witnesses of different degrees of reliability in order to reconstruct and solve a "crime" - except that in Faulkner's case the quotation-marks can be dropped from around the word crime, for there really is a murder-mystery to be solved here. *Absalom* foregrounds such epistemological themes as the accessibility and circulation of knowledge by different minds, and the problem of "unknowability" or the limits of knowledge. (Ibid., ps. 58-59)

According to McHale the epistemological element is the dominant focus of Modernist works, whereas Postmodern novels or films tend to emphasise the ontological aspect, with their interest in a different manner of viewing the world. In this case, it is logical to view *Wild at Heart* as being characteristically Postmodern, since neither of the two main protagonists seem to be interested in deductive thought. Both Lula and Sailor are continually confronted by other worlds, although they do not make any positive attempt to find these parallel universes. They also do not attempt to make intellectual sense of them, preferring to respond in a more physically active, but mentally acquiescent way.

Apart from Lula's apparent lack of curiosity about her father's death, she frequently tells Sailor bizarre stories, but seems more interested in her narrative than in discovering the motivation behind the characters who populate her tales. For instance, when relating a story about her mentally disturbed cousin, Dell, she is completely unable to provide an explanation for his obsession with Christmas, or his penchant for filling his underwear with cockroaches, but maintains a detached interest in his behaviour. While providing little meaning for Lula, Dell further demonstrates Lynch's continuing obsession with the grotesque and the surreal.

Moving away from any genuine attempt to find the answers to the mystery posed, Lynch displays an interest in the bizarre world view which Sailor and Lula encounter. As Mr. Fortune's murder is a mystery without a resolution, so Lula and Sailor's journey is a journey without a destination, a motif which Douwe Fokkema notes as a peculiarity of Postmodernism. (Fokkema in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, ps. 87-88)

Fokkema also notes that,

In discussing Postmodernism, several authors have further specified the notion of nonselection or quasi nonselection: contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess, short circuit...(Ibid., p.85)

This process of nonselection must irrevocably alter the interpretive strategies of the reader or viewer. Hans Bertens, discussing Susan Sontag's essay, "Against Interpretation", states that,

For Sontag...Postmodernism is characterized by "a flight from interpretation," and that aversion against interpretation gives rise to certain parodic, abstract, or decorative forms, all defying interpretation. Postmodern art may even become "non-art" in order to resist interpretation, and it is this avowed aversion that constitutes a definite break with Modernist art that invited, if not begged interpretation. Postmodern art simply is and must be experienced, Modernist art refers to a meaning hidden behind its surface, and must be understood. Postmodern art presents itself as surface, Modernist art claims depth behind that surface. (Bertens in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.15)

This definition of Postmodernism is echoed by Umberto Eco's paean to the surface in *Foucault's Pendulum*: "...seeking mysteries beneath the surface reduced the world to a foul cancer..." (Eco: 1989, ps. 567-568) If this philosophy is applied to David Lynch's vision in *Wild at Heart* it is possible to state that, due to the use of previously utilised generic and filmic conventions, the audience is robbed of its interpretive function. Since Lynch deliberately juxtaposes established genres and cinematic styles, not to mention his continual reference to a specific film text (*The Wizard of Oz*), the viewer is forced to accept the fact that his or her role as interpreter, or reader, has been irrevocably changed. This obsession with surface is undoubtedly an inheritance of the Pop Art movement, who originally posited the idea of the importance of surface as a reaction to Modernism's continued interest in a deep structure, abandoning metaphor and reflecting the post-war obsession with household commodities. (Although Warhol did examine the possibility of a deep structure with some of his silkscreens, for instance the *Car Crash* and *Electric Chair* series.)

Later, discussing Richard Wasson's interpretation of Sontag's essay, Bertens comments that,

In Richard Wasson's words, Sontag claims that "the new art extends its medium and means into the world of science and technology, into the popular, and does away with old distinctions" ...He goes on to quote Sontag herself: "From the vantage point of this new sensibility, the beauty of a machine or of the solution to a mathematical problem, of a painting by Jasper Johns, of a film by Jean-Luc Godard, and the personalities and music of the Beatles is equally accessible" ...This "unitary sensibility," as Sontag calls it, has obvious affinities with what Hassan will later term "immanence." It is totally committed to eclecticism, ranges far and wide across the cultural and scientific landscapes of the twentieth century and recognizes no barriers. (Bertens in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.16)

The irony of this exercise is blatant (a critic commenting on an earlier criticism of Sontag's essay, which exists solely to challenge the cultural tendency towards interpretation), but if this massive inconsistency can be overlooked it may be seen how *Wild at Heart* conforms to this "unitary sensibility", since it utilises many established cinematic devices in a manner which demonstrates that Lynch is thoroughly "committed to eclecticism". (Ibid.)

Returning to Wasson's interpretation of Postmodernism's tendencies, Bertens finds it necessary to state that,

The epistemological basis of Modernist aesthetics is seen as radically unstable. In fact nonexistent, and instead of Modernism's belief in unity, no matter how hard won, Wasson's Postmodernists believe in a literature that denies unity, that replaces a world that offers ontological anchors, so-called high discourses, with "a world of contingency, a world in which man is free to cope spontaneously with experience..." (Ibid., p. 9)

This perfectly describes the world observed in *Wild at Heart*. It appears that the interest in the epistemological, which played a major role in *Blue Velvet* has here been replaced by the arbitrary and unknowable.

For instance, when Lula and Sailor pull off the (Yellow Brick) road in order to observe more closely the results of a car accident, they encounter a confused young woman (played by Sherilyn Fenn) who has temporarily survived the accident. The scene reflects an incident in Jean-Luc Godard's film, *Weekend*, in which a well-dressed woman searches in vain for her Gucci handbag. Lynch's victim displays the same absurd obsession with finding her handbag, while her brains leak from a fissure in her head. The two scenes are sufficiently similar to lead the viewer to believe that Lynch is deliberately parodying Godard. Lynch includes this fragment from *Weekend* in the same irreverent manner in which he includes references to *The Wizard of Oz*. For instance, following Lula's description of her cousin Dell's behaviour, Sailor suggests that perhaps a visit to the Wizard of Oz might have cured him. Lynch's reference to Godard's great classic of filmic Modernism seems equally flip-pant.

After witnessing the accident victim's bloody and unpleasant death Sailor and Lula's luck changes for the worse, Lula verbally linking the accident to this negative transformation. However, there is nothing which actually links the two occurrences; they seem to be entirely unrelated, Lula's determination to find meaning retaining an air of futility.

This lack of any central meaning, or authority is also hinted at when Lula, who is driving the car in order to allow Sailor to rest, struggles to find a music station on the radio. There is no shortage of news, but it is dispersed via multitudinous radio networks, and seems to consist of many urban legends. Lula is subjected to stories about enormous mutant crocodiles living in a sewer system, and necrophilia (which, following the details disclosed during the Dahmer trial, ironically sound relatively unremarkable.) These references also indicate that Lynch is parodying the series of horror films, such as *Piranha* (1978) and *Alligator* (1980) which feature a menagerie of mean-minded mutants.

Quoting Ihab Hassan, Hans Bertens views the theme of chaos to be central to Postmodern creativity:

"...Modernism - excepting Dada and Surrealism - created its own forms of artistic Authority precisely because the center no longer held, Postmodernism has tended toward artistic Anarchy in deeper complicity with things falling apart - or has tended toward Pop"...Whereas the Modernists sought to defend themselves against their own awareness of cosmic chaos, of the impossible fragility of any "center" they might perceive, the Postmodernist recognition of the final demise of all Authority, of all higher discourse, of all centers, leads to an acceptance of chaos and sometimes even to a mystical attunement with a chaotic universe...(Ibid., p.28)

This certainly would seem to be true of Lynch's most recent feature film. Instead of setting up a vision of normality, as he had done in *Blue Velvet* (however bogus that so-called normality was eventually exposed to be), Lynch completely neglected to anchor the events in *Wild at Heart* to any kind of recognizable reality.

Obviously, any universe in which plurality, eclecticism and a sense of the carnivalesque are dominant, will display a tendency to lean towards the chaotic, rather than the ordered. Linda Hutcheon views this disordering, or decentering, tendency to be one of Postmodernism's most important features. She suggests that, "Perhaps the (P)ostmodern motto should be... 'Hail to the Edges!' (Hutcheon: 1988, p.73)

She further states that,

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She further states that,

Like much contemporary theory, the (P)ostmodernist novel puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin. (Ibid., p.57)

In Lynch's case, one must read, "the Postmodernist film" instead of "...the Postmodernist novel", but it is easy to see how the liberal humanist tradition has been transgressed by the director, particularly if one considers the case of *Wild at Heart*.

Due to *Wild at Heart*'s status as a 'road movie', (in the tradition of Jack Kerouac, as well as *Easy Rider*), David Lynch's vision of the America that is, "Wild at heart and weird on top", is extended to incorporate much of the country (unlike *Blue Velvet*, which focused on one community), as Sailor and Lula speed along the highways in their car, which is in itself a visual reference to the 1950s. The car resembles the type of vehicle popular during that era, rather than the more economical models which have become popular following the fuel crisis of the 1970s.

The fact that *Wild at Heart* involves a lengthy journey through America links it to *Easy Rider*, and its frequently pessimistic vision of America's corruption makes this comparison increasingly valid. In *Easy Rider* the two main characters call themselves Billy the Kid and Captain America, indicating that they identify themselves strongly with an optimistic, heroic view of their country, but the film's conclusion reveals that trust to have been misplaced. In *Wild at Heart* Sailor and Lula continually seem to be in danger from the power and influence of the moneyed class, represented by Marietta and the decadent Mr. Reindeer, although the closing scene reveals that, despite the corruption which he has viewed, Sailor is nonetheless still capable of hallucinating a Good Fairy when his relationship with Lula is threatened. Lynch's use of devices from Fellini and Godard look suspiciously like parody, but his reference to *Easy Rider* is less straightforward. It is possible that the 1969 film exists as a warning within Lynch's filmic palimpsest.

In New Orleans Lula and Sailor encounter a bizarre character (played by Freddie Jones) when visiting a bar. Instead of communicating by using normal speech he makes a series of strange animalistic grunts, squawks and barks, and, within the realm of Lynch's *oeuvre*, is strongly reminiscent of the parents in *The Grandmother*, despite appearing to be a more benevolent character than the unsympathetic and aggressive progenitors. Although both Lula and Sailor seem amused by his strange vocalizations, they do not seem to be particularly shocked, and again Lynch introduces an incident which would seem to demand an explanation, yet offers none, leaving the reader to locate the meaning of the scene. This is yet another example of how the role of the viewer in Postmodernism differs considerably from the emotional involvement required by Realist films. Instead of merely emotional engagement, Postmodern directors appear to demand intellectual effort.

Another visual motif common to all of Lynch's films appears in *Wild at Heart*, namely his continuing obsession with the grotesque. When Sailor and Lula arrive in Big Tuna they learn from a group of locals that there is a pornographic film being made in one of the rooms at the motel in which they are staying. One of the men adds that the film is a "Texas style" porn film, which, presumably, is a reference to the fact that the women, who are shown parading semi-naked across the motel's forecourt, are much larger than the women normally featured in pornography.

This scene also echoes much of Federico Fellini's work, in its carnivalesque aspect. Charles Jencks mentions the fact that the carnival is a constant aspect of Postmodernism, and links Fellini to this common artistic trend:

Federico Fellini often turns the mad competition of many opposite tastes into a melancholic spectacle of hilarious sadness and nearly every one of his movies has such a scene - a Post-Modern carnival. (Jencks: 1986, p.55)

As has been previously mentioned, Jencks links the frequent appearance of the carnivalesque to the plurality of modern society. He claims that if society is 'heterodox', then art will have to deal with that reality.

However, Lynch's references to the carnival frequently verge on the monstrous. Although *The Elephant Man* contains a measure of criticism of the 'freak shows' so popular in carnivals and travelling fairs, his inclusion of deformed characters is usually less judgemental, since he prefers to offer little moral comment on these characters. He displays an interest, but this is obsessional, rather than ethical.

For example, Bobby Peru can superficially be viewed as an entirely villainous character, since he involves Sailor in the bank robbery (which leads to Sailor's arrest and Bobby's death), but this is undercut in the scene in which he sexually threatens Lula. Although this is made to appear shocking by the juxtaposition of Lula's freshness with Peru's decadence (even his teeth are rotten), this tension is dispersed by the unexpected use of humour. Bobby holds Lula in a tight grip with one arm, his other hand working down her body and finally resting on her crotch as he tries to force her to say, "Fuck me." When he finally succeeds he breaks away, saying, "Someday, baby, I will, but right now I gotta go!" His unforeseen response has the effect of negating much of his earlier menace. Peru is demoted from his 'status' as a potential rapist by this piece of crude schoolboy humour, despite the fact that the viewer is left in no doubt that Lula has felt genuinely molested.

Lynch's determination to include physical deformity in his films conforms to his overall philosophy as a filmmaker. The decision to include Isabella Rossellini in both *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart* in order to deglamourise her, might be viewed as a decision by the director merely to reject the Hollywood standard of beauty, and to make his actors conform to the physical failings commonly experienced by 'ordinary' people. However, this theory can be rejected due to the fact that Lynch almost always reaches beyond ordinariness in order to locate the point at which deformity begins.

For example, Lynch includes two female characters in *Wild at Heart* who are linked by their appearance and who apparently both work for Mr. Reindeer. Perdida Durango is played by Isabella Rossellini, who wears an obvious and tasteless blonde wig and whose (dark) eyebrows meet in the middle. She is visually matched to an equally strange character, played by Grace Zabriskie, who plays Sarah Palmer in *Twin Peaks*. She, like the Rossellini character, wears a blonde wig as well as calli-

pers, has very dark eyebrows, and is responsible for Johnnie Farragut's death, as Perdida is at least partly responsible for Sailor's incarceration. In a strange ceremony Farragut is shot while she shouts, "Fuck me now, Reggie!" to one of her accomplices. Both women dress in black and are directly involved in the death of a man, leading the viewer to define them as black widow spiders, particularly Grace Zabriskie's character who has sex at the moment of Johnnie Farragut's death.

Since Bobby Peru can be viewed as a Lynchian equivalent to the Scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz*, who lacks a brain, perhaps the two female assassins can be seen to be equivalent to the Tin Man, whose heart is missing. One of the women even sports a leg encased in metal callipers, perhaps a visual indicator. Their violent and cruel behaviour negates the dominant image of the female as being the giver of life, since they are the harbingers of death. If this view of the film is extended, Sailor can be viewed as the Cowardly Lion, who almost abandons the chance of a permanent relationship with Lula and his son, Pace, but is encouraged to persevere by the Good Fairy.

It is true that the role of a parent is considerably more demanding than the idealised situations frequently depicted by Hollywood, but few women are sufficiently unfortunate to give birth to a baby who closely resembles a skinned lamb, as does Mary X in *Eraserhead*. This type of visual overkill occurs throughout Lynch's work, indicating a schizophrenic sensibility, for Lynch uses extreme examples when indicating ugliness, yet his positive visions are equally exaggerated. Consider, for example, the idyllic Rockwellesque town of Lumberton, or the even more rural region which incorporates the town of Twin Peaks. Beauty and repulsiveness are constantly juxtaposed in Lynch's view of America.

Douw Kokema describes Postmodernism's world view thus:

The world view of Postmodernism is the product of a long process of secularization and dehumanization. In the Renaissance the conditions for a man-centred universe were established. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, under the influences of the sciences - from biology to cosmology - the idea of man being the center of the cosmos appeared more and more difficult to defend; finally it became untenable, even ridiculous. In his recent book on the origin of the universe, Steven Weinberg argues that "human life" is "just a more-or-

less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes"...Physicists, like Weinberg, tell us that for sure our world faces "a future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat"...and the awareness of irreversible destruction between now and several billions of years from now has been aggravated by a suspicion that the human race will destroy itself within the foreseeable future. The unavoidable conclusion is that mankind is no more than the result of a whim of nature, and certainly not the center of the universe. (Fokkema in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.82)

Furthermore, Fokkema posits that,

The Postmodernist world view...appears to be characterized by the conviction that any attempt towards constructing a world model - however much qualified by epistemological doubt - is pointless. The Postmodernists seem to believe that it is both impossible and useless to try and establish some hierarchical order, some system of priorities in life. If they admit a world model, it will be one based on maximum entropy...i.e. on the equiprobability and equivalidity of all constituent elements. (Ibid., ps. 82-83)

Since it is now commonly believed that the human race evolved from a chance occurrence, by Steven Weinberg amongst others, it is only fitting that artistic works should reflect that belief. Lynch's work would appear to conform to this description of Postmodernism, with its portrayal of irrational characters and illogical events, the universe depicted in *Wild at Heart* being the natural habitat for creatures such as Bobby Peru and Cousin Dell. When Lula hears the sequence of urban legends on the radio, apparently being reported as if they were legitimate news reports, she fully enters the realm of the Postmodern.

When providing an explanation of the Postmodern psyche, Douwe Fokkema also provides an interesting manner in which to view the two main protagonists of *Wild at Heart*:

...the Postmodernists see themselves as captives of the status quo, of its conventions, procedures, and compromises. Often they try to fight this situation by denying the legitimacy of the social and cultural network they are living in, one that they consider the outcome of a chance development. They are suspicious, therefore, of concepts providing a legitimization of the status quo. They deny legitimations

based on metaphysical concepts of justice and reason, on cliché distinctions of good and bad, or on the simple logic of cause and effect. (Ibid., p.83)

Sailor and Lula similarly attempt to locate a manner in which they can survive in isolation from the status quo represented by Marietta Pace Fortune, Marcello dos Santos and Mr. Reindeer. The two characters are content in their illogical behavioural pattern, which causes them to dance wildly in a field for no apparent reason. Although the motivation of the more senior characters in the film is never made entirely clear, it seems as though all are spurred into action primarily by a love of money, although Johnnie Farragut is an exception, being motivated by a misplaced love for Marietta.

Despite Sailor and Lula's desire for freedom from the restrictions of the status quo in which they have been entangled, they choose to rebel in a manner which is reminiscent of numerous 1950s films. Sailor wears his snakeskin jacket because he views it as a symbol of his individuality and personal freedom, a primary concern of 1950s youth films, and he serenades Lula with Elvis Presley songs, a convention which was a common device of Presley's films, but in the 1990s has a positive feeling of irony surrounding it. Lula acts in a manner which conjures up images of the archetypal 1950s 'bad girl', yet due to the sexual revolution she is not seen as wholly immoral, the sexuality which characterises her relationship with Sailor being depicted as entirely healthy.

Fokkema also links the Postmodern attitude to the Modernist ethic which preceded it:

The Postmodernist world view comprises more than the belief that man and his world result from a chance development. If the Postmodernists really believed that all things are equally valid, it would be difficult to explain their urge to write...As so many of their predecessors, the Postmodernists, however, seem to be motivated by the idea that the immediately preceding generations have failed in representing certain aspects of reality...Of course, they resist the Realist and Symbolist beliefs, but in particular they turn against the attempts of the Modernists to construct coherent, though hypothetical models of the world. They openly criticize and parody the Modernist hierarchies. Indeed, the world view of the Postmodernists is built on the principle of nonhierarchy...(Ibid.)

Fokkema's theory clearly demonstrates that although Postmodernism has been heavily reliant on Modernism to provide the basis for many of its theories, it also exists as a criticism of the preceding movement. Fokkema claims that Postmodernism's main function is as, "...a polemic against Modernism." (Ibid.)

The fact that David Lynch expects the viewer to become engaged in an intellectual effort in order to read his film demonstrates that the heritage of Modernism is positively present, although Lynch frequently presents his audience with a sequence of previously constructed images, for instance Sailor's serenading of Lula at the Powermad gig, which juxtaposes a contemporary musical setting with a scene which closely resembles an early Elvis Presley film. However, the viewer is then obliged to deconstruct these familiar images and/or quotations from previous films and genres, in order to discover why they have been utilised in this new context. For instance, John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* uses all the devices of the Victorian novel in order to expose their artifice, as well as to subvert some Realist conventions.

Hans Bertens, while describing "The Postmodern *Weltanschauung*", quotes Raymond Federman who, in an article entitled "Fiction Today or the Pursuit of Non-Knowledge", states that, "Novels must expose themselves continually as fictions, they must be 'an endless denunciation of [their] own fraudulence'". (Bertens quoting Federman in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.39)

Postmodern film also conforms to this artistic pattern, largely due to the frequent use of quotations from past styles, genres and even specific films. This self-conscious device, or meta-fiction, is common to many Postmodern works, and can be clearly seen to influence the form of *Wild at Heart*.

The film's final scene conclusively demonstrates the presence of the device of meta-fiction, or double-coding, as Charles Jencks prefers to label it. After Sailor's encounter with the Good Fairy (a visual counterpoint to Marietta), he is moved to change his ways and to mend his relationship with Lula. In an earlier conversation with Lula, Sailor mentions that "Love Me Tender" is his favourite Elvis song, and

when he sings it, it will be to ask Lula to marry him. In the final scene of the film Sailor locates Lula's car in a traffic jam (a bizarre sight, since previously Lynch chose to display roads empty of traffic), and sings the song to her as the credits roll.

The director and viewer are equally aware of the filmic antecedents of this scene, since such romantically successful conclusions abound throughout the history of cinema. Obviously one is expected to recall many similar endings within the genre of the musical (and more specifically, Elvis Presley films), as well as teenage orientated films, melodramas, and even soap operas, such as *Santa Barbara*.

However, despite this strong conclusion, the viewer is made aware that this 'happy ending' resounds too strongly, and a feeling of irony, rather than closure, prevails. The scene contains an element of humour too strong for even an uninitiated audience to dismiss. There are also many questions left unanswered at the conclusion, for instance the part played by Mr. Reindeer and the intentions of Marcello dos Santos. The only obstacles to Lula and Sailor's happiness to disappear by the film's end are Marietta and Bobby Peru, who decapitates himself during the bank robbery in a manner which proves that his empty-headedness is quite literal. After Lula throws the contents of her glass at her mother's photograph, the ice cubes cause her image to evaporate in a puff of smoke, a visual parallel to the fate of the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*.

The movement away from closure originated in Modernist thought, and is continued by the Postmodern creators whose multiple storylines conspire in the movement away from linearity. Linda Hutcheon, discussing Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* and D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, states that the defining feature of these works is their undermining of, "...the humanist notion of Man as a coherent and continuous subject." (Hutcheon: 1988, p.177) It is this humanist notion which Lynch subverts in *Wild at Heart*.

CONCLUSION

The three films chosen for discussion in this thesis represent David Lynch's 'American work'. This phrase indicates the subject matter of the films, rather than its financial origin. The three films selected also belong in the same category, because of their connection as Lynch's most personal statements, each project being either written by Lynch (in the cases of *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet*) or adapted by him from a chosen primary source, such as *Wild at Heart* being based on a novel by Barry Gifford. (Jones: 1990, p.46)

The three films are similar in many respects, not least because they each present a more disturbing vision of America than is commonly recognised or acknowledged by most Hollywood directors. *Eraserhead*, in particular, presents a picture of a society which seems to possess no positive aspect, its protagonist escaping only by entering another world. *Blue Velvet* offers the Rockwellesque community of Lumberton, but displays an equally dark side which is given as much screen time and credibility as its attractive rural aspect. *Wild at Heart* contains two lively and attractive protagonists, whose positive sexual relationship is threatened by numerous outsiders, including a seemingly insanely jealous mother.

These filmic works also demonstrate that Lynch's main interest lies within the area of Postmodernism, since all contain many Postmodern characteristics, despite *Eraserhead*'s superficially Modernist appearance. By the time *Wild at Heart* was completed in 1990, Lynch's artistic tendencies appear to have been fully developed, and his most recent feature film has defined him conclusively as one of the leading proponents of filmic Postmodernism.

These films also display a strong criticism of the nuclear family, in particular the American variety of this social structure. Although Lynch does not suggest an alternative to the husband, wife and children arrangement common to all nuclear families, Edward Shorter, in his text, *The Making Of The Modern Family* includes a

chapter entitled, "Towards the Postmodern Family", in which he suggests that the Postmodern family is in the process of replacing the nuclear family, describing the nuclear family as a "nest":

Another way in which the nuclear family has been giving way to the (P)ost-modern family we might call "the destruction of the nest." The nuclear family was a nest. Warm and sheltering, it kept the children secure from the pressures of the outside adult world, and gave the men an evening refuge from the icy blast of competition. (Shorter: 1976, p.279)

Unfortunately, the so-called nest proved to be an incestuous temptation for many of Lynch's characters, from Mrs. X's sexual attack on Henry in *Eraserhead*, to Laura and Leland Palmer's nocturnal assignations in *Twin Peaks*.

Shorter suggests that the Postmodern family will move away from the parents and children scenario towards more varied family structures. One can already note an acceptance of these changes by watching television sit-coms and noting the dearth of so-called conventional family units, *Who's The Boss* and *The Golden Girls* being two popular examples. (In soap operas such as *Santa Barbara*, *Dynasty* et al, the family is continually under threat, yet it still adheres to the nuclear family unit in structure.)

Shorter also speculates on the reasons for this movement away from the nuclear family. He states that the rising divorce rate has destabilised the nuclear structure, children frequently choosing to socialise according to their peer group, rather than the values promoted by their parents. Adding to this crisis is the current emphasis on the erotic element of relationships. As Shorter claims, "Because sexual attachment is notoriously unstable, couples resting atop such a base may easily be blown apart" (Ibid., p.278), thus adding to the abovementioned rising divorce rate.

Finally, the women's movement of the 1960s has changed the role of women from homemakers to contributors to the world economy. A woman who has a full-time job is less likely to be wholly enthusiastic about a role as nest maker, and may prefer

to include grandparents or other relatives as child-minders, thereby freeing herself to work for longer periods of time. In this way the extended family might be seen to become a more powerful force than the nuclear unit. (Shorter: 1976, ps.269-280)

Lynch posits no sociological solution, but effectively reveals the inadequacy of such an outdated piece of sociological architecture. It is also interesting to note that in all three films analyzed in this work, a leading character lacks one parent. In *Eraserhead* Mary walks out on Henry and her baby, unable to function without the sleep of which she is deprived by her continually crying offspring; in *Blue Velvet* Jeffrey's father is hospitalised, only being released after the danger that threatened Jeffrey is (at least temporarily) over. In *Wild at Heart* Sailor reveals that his parents both died when he was young, while Lula's father is also dead, and her mother remains a malevolent influence on her life. According to Lynch, the nuclear family is suffocating, but is not able to provide adequate protection against the danger which assails the young of the 'nest'. It is restrictive, without being safe, indeed, given the frequent instances of incest in Lynch's films, it is possibly the least safe place for a child to be.

Lynch's continual awareness of past styles, genres and film texts characterises his work. The constant use, in *Wild at Heart*, of existing cinematic conventions has been noted in Chapter Four, as well as the constant references to *The Wizard of Oz*. While discussing Postmodern literary conventions, Douwe Fokkema claims that,

In the universe of Postmodernism, words invent our world, words shape our world, words are becoming the sole justification of our world. Therefore, the Postmodernist keeps talking, even though he may be conscious of the fact that he cannot do more than recycle petrified meanings. (Fokkema: 1984, p.45)

This statement was made in reaction to the writings of Borges, but one can extend this analysis to the films of David Lynch. Although he works with images, rather than words, his films frequently appear to be a reaction to a world in which, as Jencks states, "...all traditions seem to have some validity." (Jencks: 1986, p.7)

As much as words shape our worlds, so do images, and Lynch (a director of advertisements as well as feature films), seems constantly aware of the influence of images from women's magazines and billboards. Isabella Rossellini's look of ecstasy, as she engages in sex with both Frank and Jeffrey, is typical of the pseudo-sexual pose constantly employed to sell an array of products from lipstick to swimwear. The fact that Lynch chose to employ an actress who is identified as a model for a cosmetics company adds to the ambience of pastiche and irony which permeates the director's work, and which is also a typical aspect of Postmodernism.

Lynch's constant willingness to submerge himself and his work in the medium of popular culture also indicates his status as a Postmodernist. As Jim Collins states, Postmodernism has, "...destabilized traditional distinctions between High Art and mere 'mass culture.'" (Collins: 1989, p.2), an ideological Modernist norm.

Douwe Fokkema observes the following differences between the Modern and Postmodern philosophy:

Whereas the Modernist aimed at providing a valid, authentic, though strictly personal view of the world in which he lived, the Postmodernist appears to have abandoned the attempt towards a representation of the world that is justified by the convictions and sensibility of an individual. The Modernist did not claim a general validity for his views, but defended his private assumptions and value judgements. The Postmodernist may have his private views, but sees no justification for preferring them to views held by others. He rejects the intellectual hypotheses of the Modernist as arrogant and arbitrary, and therefore irrelevant. (Fokkema: 1984, ps. 40-41)

The worlds represented in Lynch's films indubitably conform to the description of Postmodernism provided by Fokkema. In each of the three films studied, an extraordinary conflation of worlds, ideas and social mores can be observed, Lynch frequently acknowledging the presence of an ideological democracy by frequently conflating aspects of 'High Art' with popular culture.

Furthermore, Fokkema adds that,

The Postmodernist does not discriminate. He is eager to dethrone the intellectuals, who in a time of secularization tried to climb on the empty throne of God in order to spread the gospel of their private semantic universe. With the Postmodernist abuse of intellectual thinking, the capacity for discerning, judging and selecting also goes down. (Ibid., p.41)

Lynch's lack of intellectual discrimination is due less to an a decreased capacity for cerebral discernment, than to a decision to concern himself primarily with the dominant concerns of American popular culture. His visual obsession with large, fast cars, diners, and the so-called typical American small town connects him, ideologically, to popular culture.

Fokkema also links Postmodernism with the idea of the palimpsest. As he states, "The Postmodernist is convinced that the social context consists of words, and that each new text is written over an older one." (Ibid, p.46) In this case originality becomes not only unimportant, but impossible. When Lynch connects disparate generic conventions in *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart* he is not only demonstrating that he is aware of established cinematic conventions, but also that he is constantly aware of the manner in which his story is being narrated. Fokkema asserts that,

In Postmodernism the emphasis on the code is even clearer than in Modernist texts. In certain cases, the question of how a story should be told appears to be more important than the story itself. (Ibid, ps. 46-47)

Most notably, the argument posed by this thesis has been concerned with Brian McHale's two definitions of Modern and Postmodern writing. It has been demonstrated that, particularly considering Lynch's frequent use of the detective genre, it is difficult to separate the epistemological (typical of Modernism) from the ontological (typical of Postmodernism).

Despite this minor difficulty, it is possible to discern an ideological development within Lynch's *oeuvre*, as the obfuscatory narrative of *Eraserhead* eventually evolves into the Postmodern patterns of *Wild at Heart*. All three films display an intense interest in other worlds and *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet* also contain a strong epistemological element.

However, because of the confusing narrative which characterises *Eraserhead*, the viewer becomes epistemologically obsessed, whereas the characters, Henry and Mary, seem less concerned with defining their world or social situation, or in solving the mystery of why their baby looks more like a skinned sheep than a *bona fide* human being. In *Blue Velvet* the detective genre features strongly within the narrative structure, the plot and the concerns of the viewer, who is undoubtedly encouraged to participate in the mystery surrounding Jeffrey's discovery of the severed ear.

Returning to Faulkner's novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, McHale states that two of its characters, Quentin and Shreve, behave in a peculiarly Postmodern manner:

Quentin and Shreve project a world, apparently unanxiously. Abandoning the intractable problems of attaining to reliable knowledge of *our* world, they improvise a *possible world*; they *fictionalize*. (McHale in Fokkema & Bertens: 1986, p.59)

Similarly, Cousin Dell deals with the problem of *knowing* his immediate environment by erecting a mendacious fantasy that every day is Christmas. Sailor, threatened at a nightclub by a rival for Lula's affection copes with the situation by not only behaving like a young, tough, Elvis Presley, but also by singing *Love Me*, one of the songs made famous by him. Suddenly a heavy metal band (Powermad) is transformed into a tightly disciplined backing group, complete with 'doo-wop' vocals.

Similarly, Lula and Sailor project themselves as a mildly pornographic Romeo and Juliet, a pair of star-crossed lovers whose language, however, is noticeably less romantic than Shakespeare's, containing a great deal of 1950s and 1980s slang. When Sailor believes that he is abandoning his son he uses an amusingly meaningless quotation, which appears to have been plundered from the genre of the Western. Such

examples of characters creating (or projecting) worlds occur throughout *Wild at Heart*, indicating that David Lynch has now fully embraced the concept of Postmodernism.

If one considers M.H. Abrams's claim, that Postmodernism has been heavily influenced by the environmental crisis, which began to be discussed in earnest after the Second World War and is now reaching a crisis point, it is obvious that this same environmental predicament has significantly affected the filmic work of David Lynch. *Eraserhead* is located in a world which appears to be in the throes of a post-industrial crisis, *Blue Velvet*'s underworld is visually located in ugly industrial areas, and the world of *Wild at Heart* is epitomised by the community of Big Tuna. One feels compelled to enquire as to the experience a barren desert town, whose welcoming message is "Fuck You", can offer.

The most unnerving aspect of Lynch's work is the fact that, despite his decision to focus almost exclusively on the rural community after *Eraserhead*, there is no more comfort to be obtained within the comforting confines of a small town. His message implies that America is universally corrupt, as the viewer witnesses Jeffrey Beaumont's brutal rite of passage, Lula's ordeal at the hands of Bobby Peru and Laura Palmer's perverse relationship with her insane father.

However, Lynch also propounds the importance of America's positive side, so Sandy is permitted to witness her dream about the robins of love becoming a reality, Lula and Sailor are reunited as the closing credits roll, and the White Lodge in *Twin Peaks* is as powerful as the Black. The co-existence of the positive and the negative is hardly an original thematic peculiarity, but Lynch's decision to function as a non-judgemental witness, rather than a moral presence is indeed a departure for American film, and marks David Lynch, quite specifically, as a wholly Postmodern filmmaker.

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