

The idea of Spectatorship in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) We don't stop here!

Jyotika¹, Umesh Arya²

¹ Ph. D. Scholar, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology,

² Professor (Ph. D.) Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology,

Email - ¹jyotika8888gmail.com ²umesharya1973@gmail.com

Abstract: Films have always been a medium of great importance and still continue to amuse and interest its audience. Films of different languages and different genres are released worldwide over a year. Some of them grab the attention of a large audience while some others go even unnoticed. The success and greatness of a film is usually connected with its ability to influence and transform the audience. This Aristotelian aesthetics unconsciously works in a film spectator who feels himself in a position internal to the events on the screen.

But such monolithic traditional film conventions have been challenged by radical film-makers like Godard, by distancing the passionate identification of the spectator. Such dislocations destroy the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the invisible guest spectator, as Laura Mulvey put it (140). Godard argues that the proximity one feels with the screen is imaginary and it is proximity from a distance, and the distance allows the spectator to avoid any encounter in the cinema that might challenge or alter the spectator's subjectivity. Any experience of a film's immediacy is a thoroughly mediated one because characters on the screen remain seen but never see, while the spectators see without being seen.

According to Todd McGowan, 'there is a problem with the attempt to create a spectator whom the cinema does not seduce. It imagines that the spectator can attain a pure viewing position' (10). Radical Godardian aesthetics forgets about the desire of the spectator and fails to see how desire necessarily implicates the spectator in what occurs on the screen. Even though distance is inherent in the cinematic viewing situation itself, no spectator can remain completely distanced, even from a Godard film. Certain element or fascination remains at work and continues to involve the spectator in the images on the screen—or else the spectator would simply walk out of the film. Films' alienation effect has to fail to some extent in order to retain the fascination of its spectators. The successfully distanced spectator ceases to be a spectator at all.

Key Words: Films, experimental narratives, surrealism, neo-noir, lesbian sex

1. INTRODUCTION:

Right from the beginning of his career, David Lynch has challenged the idea of a distanced spectator. His films break down the distance between spectator and screen. Lynch's films implicate the spectator in its very structure. His style of filming is unique and often considered weird. The structure of a Lynch film challenges the spectators' traditional experience of the cinema. This essay takes up the challenge to pursue the theoretical possibilities of a new spectatorship that Lynch constructs, which is consciously distancing the aesthetics of Aristotelian proximity and the Godardian and Brechtian alienation, and thereby exploring the possibilities of a third new space for experiencing fantasy with a distance.

From his very first feature *Eraserhead* (1977), Lynch creates a new place for his spectators. The greatness of his films lies in their ability to break down the distance between spectator and the screen. While conventional movies provide the imaginary proximity for its spectators, Lynch's films implicate the spectator in their very structure. He attains this through a radical shift in various elements of his movies. The basic structure of his films itself alters the filmic viewing situation. It denies the viewers to remain at a safe distance from what is taking place on the screen.

2. RESEARCH ELABORATIONS:

Mulholland Drive begins with a jitterbug dance contest. This dancing is not filmed in a straightforward manner. Instead, it consists of a series of superimposed images of dancers. Over these pictures are superimposed an additional set of images, of Betty accompanied by what we can assume are her parents. Furthermore, these images of Betty and her parents are overexposed and out of focus, and have been recorded with a jittery camera. The film thus begins with heavily stylized images. The spectators thus discover the significance of this opening dance contest scene only later. Similar images of Betty and her parents are repeated later in the film, when Betty arrives at Los Angeles Airport. And much later, in the second section of the film the dream section, we discover that Diane won a jitterbug

contest, which led to her acting in Hollywood. The spectator therefore eventually receives the back story behind and motivation for these opening shots.

Any viewer of *Mulholland Drive* notes that the first part of the film bodes well for a David Lynch film. As opposed to the beginnings of *Twin Peaks: Fire walk with Me* (1992) or *Lost Highway*, this film opens with a moderately clear, if particular narrative. A woman emerges from a car crash without any memory. While hiding out in an apartment she has stuck into, she meets an alternate lady who helps her in the journey to find out her personality. During this search, the two fall in deep love. This, in short, represents the narrative trajectory of the first part of the film. Despite the fact that there are peculiar backups and perplexing additional events to this trajectory, the essential story itself bodes well. It appears to totally misinterpret Stanley Kauffmann's claim, in his discussion of film's opening that sense is not the point: the responses are the point (Kauffmann, 28). While one may be enticed to concur with Kauffmann concerning the movie's conclusion, its opening certainly has a high level of coherence. It also has an unusual aura about it that serves to undermine this rationality and to provide some acceptance to Kauffmann's dispute that Lynch implies the first part of the film to be more suggestive than sensible. By joining together sense with the fantasy and imagination, Lynch utilises the first part of *Mulholland Drive* to explore the role that fantasy has in rendering the spectators experience lucid,

The soundness of the first section gets to be particularly declared when we differentiate it with what takes after. The first part shows the experience of fantasy while the second part portrays desire mainly. The second part of the film is organised around the perpetual disappointment of desire: it denies Diane (Naomi Watts) and the spectator any knowledge of Camilla (Laura Harring), her love object- and it underlines this disappointment outwardly. The first part of the film interestingly delivers a situation in which Diane, appearing as Betty, can enjoy the love-object. As seen in other Lynch films, this separation between the experience of desire and fantasy is accomplished by dramatic changes in scenes, editing, and the overall character of the various shots between the first and second parts of the film.

While the first section of the film is full of strange characters and happenings such as the hired killer's humorously botched murder, the *mise-en-scene* follows on the whole, the conventions of a typical Hollywood film. The scenes are well-lit, conversations between characters flow without awkwardness, and even the plainest ornamentation appear to shimmer. The editing here likewise has a tendency to take over the classical Hollywood style, sustaining the spectator's sense of spatial and temporal orientation. Nonetheless, in the second part of the film, the lighting gets to be much darker, almost every conversation incorporates long and uncomfortable stops, and the sets become dreary, failing to offer the pervasive brightness of those in the first part of the film. A radical shift happens with editing also in the second section. The fact that the worlds of fantasy and desire are ontologically distinct is depicted through editing techniques in the second section. There is a disruption of the shot/reverse-shot sequence which is absent in the first part of the film.

As we contrast the first part of the film with the second, it becomes evident that the first appears to be all the more genuine, more in keeping with our expectations concerning reality. But this feeling of reality results from the film's fantastic dimension rather than its realism. Where we usually contrast fantasy with reality, *Mulholland Drive* underlines the connection between the two, portraying fantasy's role in giving reality with the structure that it has. The film supports Lacan's claim that "everything we are allowed to approach by way of reality remains rooted in fantasy" (Stavrakakis 62). Hence fantasy should not be seen as opposed to reality because it is fantasy that sustains what we experience as reality. This idea that fantasy supports our sense of reality-is evident in *Lost Highway* and earlier Lynch films, and he uses fantasy as a major category or theme in almost all of his films.

The movie creates a sense of mystery and a sense of basic uncertainty that we normally connect with the element of desire. It uses darkness, threatening characters, ominous music and unusual editing sequences, all of which represents desire in a manner very typical of Hollywood narrative style. Desire is always associated with not knowing, posing questions that do not have answers, lack of narrative elements and confusing irrational series of random events. As Lacan speaks about desire in Seminar X, "as long as I desire, I know nothing of what I desire" (98). To depict this desire, the spectator is put in a position of lack of knowledge. This is what exactly happens in the beginning of *Mulholland Drive*. The most notable lack is that of an exposition in the movie. The spectator has to wait for around two hours or more to get the background of the events. The film also uses Angelo Badalamenti's slow and haunting music to add to the feel of mystery and enigma.

One of the very first scenes of the film is that of a street sign for Mulholland Drive. This shot of the street sign is trailed by a Cadillac driving along Mulholland Drive in the dead of night. The Cadillac appears to float along the drive. The dark haired woman is in the back of the Cadillac, and we share her POV shots of the street ahead. This scene is rehashed in the movie's second segment, however with Diane sitting in the back. The shots are actually taped in precisely the same way, making an uncanny reverberation. The Cadillac driver stops the Cadillac. The dark haired woman says: 'What are you doing? We don't stop here'. He then requests her out of the Cadillac. There is a sudden minute of omniscient portrayal, as the Director provides for us more information than any of the characters know: two cars are racing along Mulholland Drive. The racers don't know of the Cadillac, and the people in the Cadillac are unconscious of the approaching racers. Just the spectators know. The driver turns around and focuses a gun at the dark

haired lady. This gesture and the dark-haired woman's line are repeated in the film's second section, except that Diane is in the back of the car, and the driver has no gun. After the dark-haired woman is ordered out of the car, one of the drag racing cars collide with the Cadillac. Smoke gradually fills the place. The image of smoke filling the place is repeated in the *Silencio* club and at the film's end, after Diane shoots herself.

Both the danger on the dark haired woman's life and the car crash represent a defining moment that shifts the movie's narrative into disequilibrium, an unevenness that emerges a considerable measure of inquiries in the viewer's mind: Who is this lady? Why is her life being undermined? Who is undermining her life? These inquiries are just somewhat tended to as the film advances. We acknowledge later that the dark haired woman has lost her memory, which makes hindrances to the basic replying of these inquiries. The absence of responses and the incomplete uncertain dangling reasons are hence persuaded by the dark haired woman's amnesia. Rita the amnesiac and the spectator share the same position in the first part of the film. After the car collision, she meanders through the streets of Los Angeles, unsure of where to go and without even a piece of information about her identity. The spectator likewise has no clue about what is going on. S/he has no establishments on which to comprehend the happenings. The absence of an exposition puts the spectator into a position of not-knowingness. It is only later, when the occasions in the second section unfold that, the viewer could connect up these events and comprehend them. Thus Lynch guarantees an overall involvement and participation of his onlookers in the movie, as opposed to avoiding them as much as possible and keeping them at a distance.

The movie has a lot of scenes and characters that are not sufficiently addressed. These characters and scenes make the viewer's more confused, but alert too in a sense. It ensures total involvement from their part. Examples of such scenes with few explanation and character motivation, from *Mulholland Drive* are plenty. The scene at Winkies is one such instance. Dan and Herb sit at a table in Winkies talking about dreams. Dan recounts a dream about a frightening man behind the restaurant. The recounted dream seems to come real, because the man is shown to be behind the wall. His appearance literally frightens Dan to death. It is difficult to connect up this scene to others, since neither Dan nor Herb play prominent roles in the film. There is no cause-effect link between this and other scenes. The presence of the frightening ghostly man is also unexplained. Another such scene is that between Joe, the hit man and Ed, a business man. They seem to be talking about Rita's car accident, although it is unclear. Unexpectedly, Joe kills Ed and steals his black book of phone numbers. But there is insufficient exposition to explain what is happening in his scene, and the dangling causes are not properly resolved later in the film. Thus the murder of Ed and stealing of the black book remains as question marks in the viewers' minds till the end. These surreal events go very well with the cryptic narrative.

The 'Cowboy' forms an important character in the movie. He simply appears from nowhere and disappears into the darkness. He knows a great deal about the predicaments of the characters and much information about the happenings, but we do not know where he gets all these information from, or who he is in league with. There is a presence of 'flickering light' whenever he is shown on the screen. This motif and the Cowboy's sudden disappearance give us an impression that he does not exist. The identity of this real or imaginary Cowboy becomes another unresolved instance. The Cowboy may also be seen as a personification of the superego, the conscience that pushes Diane out of fantasy with his call to 'wake up'. The spectator is thus placed in the midst of more and more confusions and probing questions, but left without answers. This encourages him/her to pay more attention to the thread of the story and be totally into the film.

Lynch creates a more complex and expansive idea of fantasy in this film, than in his earlier films. The world of desire, that is, the second part of the film lacks a sense of temporality. There is no clear logic and events occur randomly. At the beginning of this section, Diane's former roommate comes to her apartment to fetch an ashtray shaped like a miniature piano, and her other belongings. She takes her thing and leave. But in one of the following scenes, the piano ashtray is shown lying on the coffee table, as if it had not been removed. The disappearance and reappearance of objects make things hard for the spectator to understand.

The Blue box and the blue key form another motif of great importance and mystery in the film. The box and the key make their first appearance in the dream section of the film. In an attempt to find out who she is, the amnesiac Rita opens her bag, to find that it contains \$125,000, plus a blue key. These are repeated in the second section of the film- in Winkies, when Diane hires Joe to kill Camilla. She opens her bag to reveal the payoff. He then shows her a blue key, and says he will leave it in a certain place to indicate when he has killed Camilla. These repetitions are events of significance in Diane's life, especially in her plan to hire a killer to murder Camilla. The second occurrence of these events provides indirect solution, as we belatedly realize that the money in Rita's purse is Joe's payoff to kill her. The box and the key make another appearance in a set of perplexing events. Rita opens the blue box with the blue key and disappears. This happens at a turning point of the film. The film radically changes protagonists and direction, and gradually begins to repeat what happened previously. The film thus enters its second section, that is, the real world. The blue key is actually the key to understanding the movie and the box represents the point of exit from the world of fantasy thereby bringing the audience into the world of reality.

The blue key is explained in the second section of the film. It is a sign that Joe has killed Camilla. The shot of Rita opening the blue box with the key therefore signifies Camilla's death. The blue key is a sign to Diane that Camilla has been killed, and the empty darkness inside the blue box represents Camilla's death. The key is shown again towards the end of the movie. In Diane's apartment, Diane stares at the blue key on the table. The room fills with blue flashing lights, and Diane goes insane. She runs into the bedroom and shoots herself. The spectator, only after watching both the sections carefully, understands the connecting link. The key remains as an element of mystery at first. But after closely watching the whole film, s/he comes to a position to link these various fragments and make sense of them. In spite of the abnormal treatment and weird representations of events and actions, David Lynch's films continue to influence, inspire and entertain the audience. Right from his very first films till the last ones he did, each of them opens to the spectators, new worlds that other mainstream directors would never even be able to think about. It might be this unique feature that makes his films different and hence stand out.

3. CONCLUSION:

Everything in Lynch's universe has another side, sometimes perverse, sometimes slightly out-of-synch and quirky. It makes the audience to notice every detail, every colour, every movement, and every sound. But his surrealism is doggedly pure and naïve even when things are at their darkest. He creates cinematic poetry that makes us see things, ordinary things, in brand new ways. His films switch tones and perspectives from make-believe fairy tale fantasies to dark dangerous alternate realities that can play with time-lines and employ dual narratives. This means it is often unsettling to watch much of his work. Lynch also has a strong sentimental streak. This sentimentality is sometimes a flaw in his films, but it is also disarming and lends a sense of warmth to his films.

Lynch explores a psychological unconscious in his films that would make even Carl Jung proud. Dreams and visions follow their own rules, rarely making logical sense, and yet something coherent is felt. Characters often reveal themselves by talking about their dreams or visions, and a unique ambience is established whereby anything is possible. These dreams give his characters insurmountable joy, crippling fear, and even clues to help solve crimes. While most Hollywood movies put the spectators in a unidirectional viewing position, Lynch's movies present a challenge to this. By implicating the spectator into the very structure of the movie itself, Lynch creates a third new space for the audience. Through radical changes in ways of film making and direction, Lynch successfully places the audience in this new Lynchian third space.

REFERENCES:

1. Buckland, W. (2008). *Film studies*. Blacklick, OH: McGraw-Hill Companies.
2. Kauffmann, S. (2001), *Stanley Kauffmann on Films: Sense and Sensibility*. New Republic.
3. Lacan J. Jaques A. and Bruce F. (1988), *The Seminar of Jaques Lacan*, Norton, New York, Print.
4. McGowan, Todd (1997), *The Impossible David Lynch*, Columbia UP, New York, Print.
5. McGowan, T. (2004). Lost on Mulholland Drive: Navigating David Lynch's Panegyric to Hollywood. *Cinema Journal*, 43(2), 67-89.
6. McGowan, T. (2007). *The impossible David Lynch*. New York, CO: Columbia University Press.
7. Mulvey, L. (1996). *Fetishism and curiosity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
8. Stavrakakis, Y. (1999). *Lacan and the political*. London: Routledge.