

# Monster movies

The films of David Lynch have perhaps alienated more viewers than they have captivated, in part because their hallucinatory synthesis of the mundane and the surreal rarely allows for passive enjoyment or tidy appraisals. When, in his study of Lynch for the University of Illinois Press's ever-expanding Contemporary Film Directors series, Justus Nieland writes that *The Elephant Man* (1980) deals with "the very kinds of monsters that have always frustrated [our] taxonomies and schemes of order—hybrids of nature and culture, animal and machine, human and inhuman", he might as well be describing the director's entire body of work. But cinematic "monsters" like these can be as fascinating as they are frustrating, and the difficulty in imposing order on them does not stop us from trying. We are continually attempting to fashion cohesion from chaos, narrative from arbitrary events. Cinema—and indeed most manifestations of art and analysis—would not exist without that impulse.

For his part, Nieland yields to that impulse by identifying plastic as the "prime matter of Lynch's filmmaking". It dominates a quintessential Lynchian scene: the opening of his groundbreaking television series *Twin Peaks*, where Laura Palmer's corpse washes ashore wrapped in the stuff, triggering the otherworldly murder investigation on which the series hinges. In career terms, plastic could also be said to symbolize the director's cool irony, postmodern aesthetic and exploitation of kitsch—all of which are evident in early experimental works such as *Six Men Getting Sick* (1967), continuing through the critical successes of *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001), up to Lynch's most recent feature, the digitally shot *Inland Empire* (2006). However, it is a conceit that Nieland does not extend very far beyond his introduction, after which we are invited to consider new, awkwardly contrived metaphorical riffs like the "bad plumbing" of *Eraserhead* (1977) or the "furniture porn" of *Lost Highway* (1997). The case for plastic is also weakened by the director himself, who speaks to his much more overt and pervasive fondness for wood in one of the two interviews included at the end of the book. "Plastic has a place and it's a really cool thing", Lynch says. "But it's two or three steps removed from something that's organic. So, wood talks to you and you can relate to it."

Despite Nieland's mixed success in shrink-wrapping Lynch's work (and it is worth pointing out that his argument is persuasive, albeit gnarled by jargon), of the four books under review, Lynch is rather surprisingly the director whose work most easily lends itself to this quest for taxonomy and order. Annette Insdorf takes on the far more challenging task of finding consistency in Philip Kaufman's eclectic filmography, which, with several exceptions, primarily rests on adaptations of ostensibly unadaptable books: *The Right Stuff* by Tom Wolfe, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera, Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun* and *The Wanderers* by Richard Price, to name only a few. The resulting films reflect the wild variety of their source material. Whether taken individually or collec-

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Justus Nieland

DAVID LYNCH  
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Annette Insdorf

PHILIP KAUFMAN  
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David R. Shumway

JOHN SAYLES  
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David T. Johnson

RICHARD LINKLATER  
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tively, Kaufman's movies rarely coalesce around any unifying vision or approach; instead, their shared DNA is revealed in their idiosyncrasies. They are generally fragmented and episodic, marked (or bedevilled) by abrupt changes in tone, as if different movies had been spliced together, and preoccupied with an unabashedly priapic form of masculinity that is redeemed in part by an inspiring anti-establishmentarianism. Insdorf collects this incongruity of style and subject under the term "versatility". Pauline Kael, in her contemporary review of *The Right Stuff* (1983), might have touched on a broader truth when she called the Cold War space-race epic "an enjoyable mess".

Insdorf portrays Kaufman's messiness not as a flaw but a strength. In her section on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), widely regarded as the director's masterpiece, she writes, "After returning to Prague, Tomas is suddenly a clinic doctor; then . . . he is suddenly washing windows. This suggests the abrupt and absurd shifts that characterize life under Communism". She later continues this tack by quoting one of many papers written by her students: "Kaufman created ambiguous ellipses in the story, narrative gaps that let audience members connect the dots for themselves". On the contrary, those "abrupt and absurd shifts" and "ambiguous ellipses" are more characteristic of Kaufman's fractured directorial approach than life under Communism or his unusually high esteem for the audience. In the case of *Unbearable Lightness* (and many films since), Kaufman misapplied the same impetuosity that had worked relatively well in his early New Wave comedies, *Goldstein* (1965) and *Fearless Frank* (1967). To my mind neither Sven Nyquist's renowned cinematography nor Daniel Day-Lewis's unintentionally funny Dracula impression are able to redeem what amounts to an overlong, oversexed, overwrought and ultimately overrated shadow of *Doctor Zhivago*.

Kaufman found the ideal vehicle for his fancies and fetishes when he brought Doug Wright's play *Quills* to the screen in 2000. The largely static location of Wright's play—a lunatic asylum in Napoleonic France—worked against Kaufman's tendency to teleport his



From David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006)

characters, and he found a precise point of focus in the Marquis de Sade's (romanticized and glorified) struggle against prudishness and censorship. No doubt Kaufman recognized a kindred spirit in this particular anti-hero. There is an air of the sadist when he writes in 1988, in a letter to Milan Kundera, excerpted by Insdorf: "You said you shouldn't be on the set watching me film, that it would be like a father watching someone make love to his daughter. And I must admit it was a pleasure. I went off and violated your work . . . I fucked it with reverence".

While all four authors adopt a deeply reverential approach to their own subjects, David R. Shumway in his profile of John Sayles is the only one among them to go so far as to suggest that something is wrong with those who do not. Shumway's rhetorical strategy at the end of each section is to elevate Sayles by belittling his detractors. With *Matewan* (1987), "only Vincent Canby seems to have understood the complexity of Sayles's vision". The ending of *Lone Star* (1996), with its unsettling overtones of isolation and incest, is welcomed by "more mature, self-aware viewers". And the "mixed reviews" for *Silver City* (2004) "suggest that many critics didn't get what Sayles was attempting to do". This dismissiveness is a shame, because Shumway is otherwise the most even-handed among his counterparts. Whereas Nieland, Insdorf and David T. Johnson (writing on Richard Linklater) might lead the reader to believe that their chosen directors never operate at any level below perfection, Shumway is prepared to offer honest appraisals of the weaknesses of Sayles's films. Furthermore, despite its lack of an interview with the director (Shumway attributes this to Sayles's reticence), the book's chronological profile is also the most in keeping with what I perceive to be the intent of the Contemporary Film Directors series, that is, to provide a thoughtful overview of a given director's work and milieu, making it approachable for first-year film studies students or the general reader. The repeated implication that anyone who dislikes a Sayles film doesn't "get" him risks estranging the book's natural audience.

That is a valid concern, because the inclusion of Sayles in the cinematic pantheon has always been questionable. He is prolific, sure, directing on average one film every other year since he made his debut in 1979 with *Return of the Secaucus 7*; he is credited with writing nearly twice as many more. But it is rare for his films to feel like more than a

formal exercise, usually in cultural or political awareness (or lack of it), or for his characters to blossom into something beyond one-dimensional archetypes. *Matewan*, though, which Shumway also believes gets short shrift, transcends its dramatization of the Matewan Massacre of 1920 to become both timeless and compelling. Its merits stand on their own; they do not increase because they have been unfairly overlooked.

Shumway places considerable emphasis on Sayles's status as an "independent" filmmaker. Although this term has financial implications, it is more commonly used to evoke a quality of artistic autonomy and integrity in a filmmaker's work, regardless of whether that work is carried out in or outside the Hollywood system. While Sayles has resolutely remained outside that system when it comes to his own movies, other directors have come to recognize it as a means to an end. Linklater's breakthrough film *Slacker* (1990), a clever concatenation of incidental "baton passes" around one neighbourhood in Austin, Texas, "embodies a narrative of independent filmmaking as eclectic creative act, performed on a small budget and outside of studio oversight, that nonetheless finds mainstream distribution. This narrative", writes Johnson, "has been a powerful one for filmmakers, distributors, critics, and the popular imagination". The power of this narrative could be why Linklater has maintained his indie cred over the years, despite his occasional ties to major studios and mainstream releases, including *School of Rock* (2003), a stock comedy about high school rock and roll rebellion, and an unimaginative remake of *Bad News Bears* (2005), a tale of baseball underdogs. Johnson makes several worthwhile points about these and Linklater's more adventurous or cerebral films, not least about the director's "fascination with temporality", but he tends to get carried away by his enthusiasm. Is the fact that "nitroglycerin" sounds vaguely like "nitrate" ("the flammable chemical used in film stock") substantial evidence of *The Newton Boys* (1998; with a script doctored by Sayles, incidentally) being "indebted . . . to the history of cinema itself"? Does *School of Rock* really tout the benefits of a humanities education? And does the time the cast spends waiting around in *Me and Orson Welles* (2008) actually speak to Linklater's obsession with the present moment, or is it simply meant to highlight Welles's absolute authority? Sometimes we long so desperately for schemes of order that we find them where they do not exist.