
DAVID LYNCH



BEAUTIFUL DARK

GREG OLSON



To the source:

D A V I D L Y N C H

Beautiful Dark

Greg Olson

Filmmakers #126



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One who, preferring light,
Prefers darkness also
Is in himself an image of the world
And, being an image of the world,
Is continuously, endlessly
The dwelling of creation.

Lao Tzu, *The Way of Life*



We'll go beneath the surface



To the source:



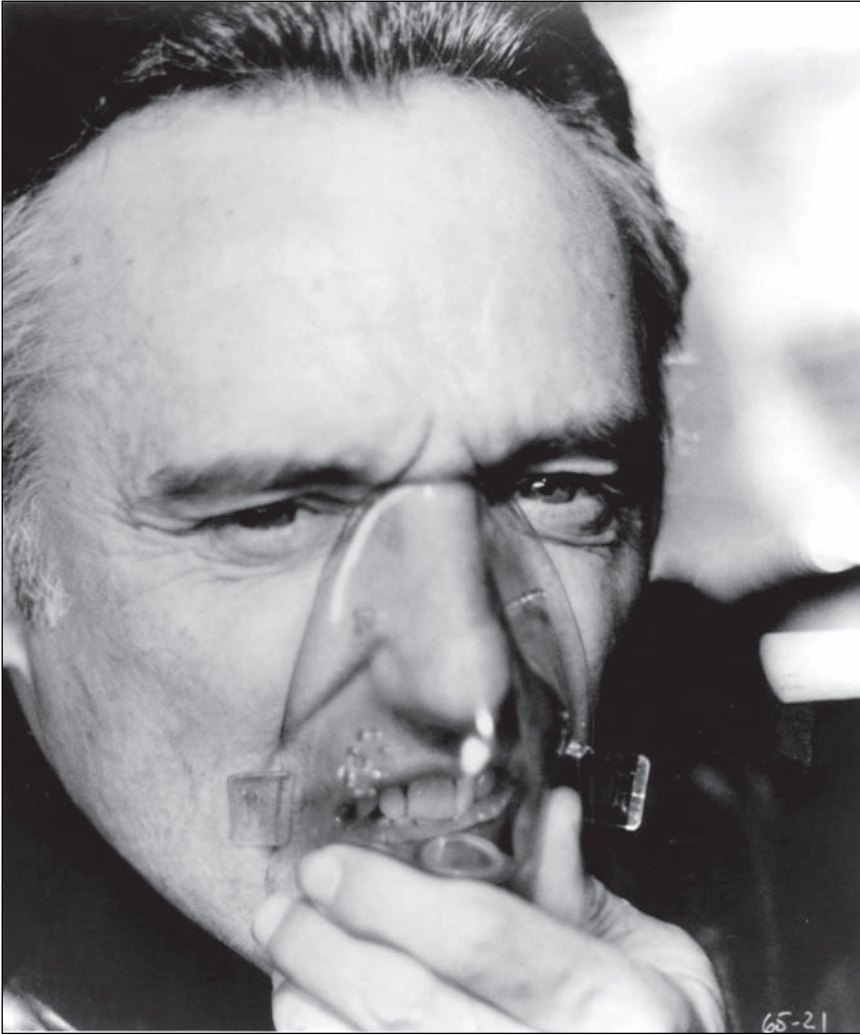
The man,



And his inner self.



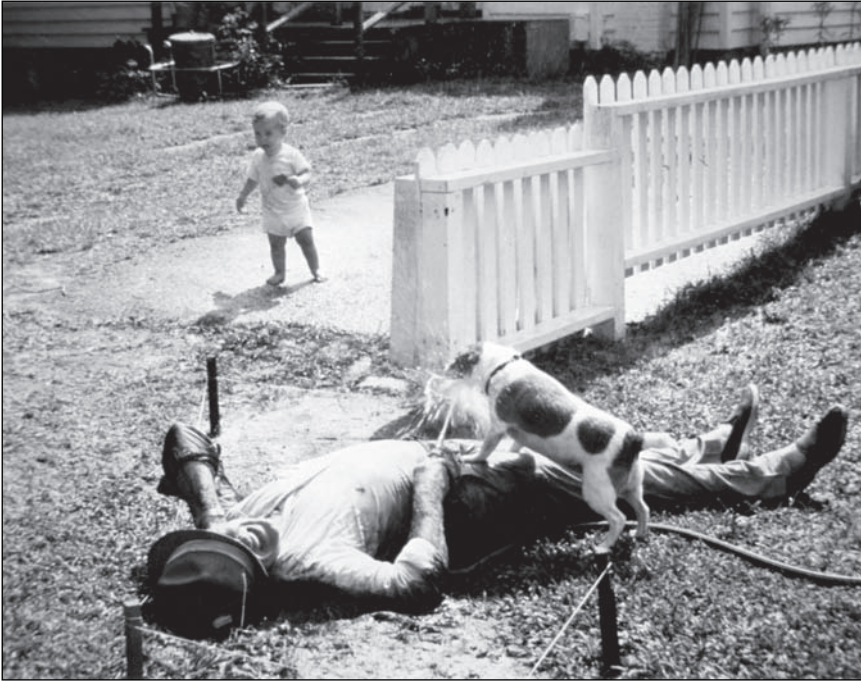
We'll live the Hollywood life,



Meet monsters,



And angels,



And discover our strange world.



Light and dark, the house and the trees: the Lynch family's 1950s summer place.

FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE

1946–1970

(*The Alphabet, The Grandmother*)

It's the early 1950s, in the woods outside of Idaho City, Idaho, where families of National Forest Service employees are vacationing in simple little white houses among the trees. The Curtises have invited the Lynches over for dinner, and as dusk begins to chill the air, the parents fire up the barbecue and sip cocktails, while nearby their children yell and cavort in the twilight. They play Red Rover and seven-year-old David Lynch, spotting the weakest link in the opposing line of kids, breaks through their defenses where a little girl stands.

Out of nowhere, a sound silences the buzz of the grown-ups' chitchat and the kids' playful taunts and shouts. Unlike Douglas fir trees in the western region of the Northwest, which grow close together and interweave their branches into a solid visual mass, the eastern Northwest's pines grow with airy spaces in between, so that you can see deep into the woods between their trunks. Parents and children, straining their eyes in the dim light, can make out nothing but the endless repetitions of dark vertical pine tree shapes. Yet there it is again—an eerie low moan that isn't all human or all animal. In the hushed, shivery air, David Lynch's mother, Sunny, nervously makes a joke: "I hope those are friendly sounds."¹

A child of Big Sky Country, David Keith Lynch entered the world on January 20, 1946, in Missoula, the Garden City of Montana, which nestles between Mount Sentinel and Mount Jumbo. Aside from having twin peaks, Missoula possessed other characteristics that resonate with David Lynch's

legend. The town grew up around a lumber mill, as have a number of the settlements in Lynch's fictions. And with its dusty streets, weathered two-story brick buildings, and rodeos, and with its site at the convergence of the Blackfoot and Bitterroot rivers and proximity to Rattlesnake Creek, the Deer Lodge and Pioneer mountains, grazing buffalo, and ghost towns, it evokes the Western American spirit Lynch loves. And as is common in Lynch's art works, the town had a double life, for beneath the surface streets was a netherworld of steam-heat tunnels, where Chinese laborers used to huddle on cold nights, and others, leading a secret life of drink, drugs, and worse, would lurk. Missoula was the perfect birthplace for Lynch, who sees the world as a flow of wonder and mystery, for the Salish Indian name for the city is "In-mis-sou-let-ka": "river of awe."²

His father, Donald Lynch, grew up on a Montana farm during the Great Depression, but financial hardship didn't hinder him from pursuing the life he wanted. Donald earned a master's degree in forestry at Duke and studied engineering at the Annapolis Naval Academy before being stationed as an officer on a South Pacific battleship during World War II. He was in Cuba with the Navy when the United States dropped the atom bombs on Japan, ending the war.

Western and Eastern America merged when Donald married Brooklyn-born Edwina (Sunny) Sundholm, who he met on a nature hike in North Carolina, and who also served in the Navy during the war. After the war, Donald returned to his roots in Montana, which he calls "the garden spot of the whole world."³ He and Sunny settled in Missoula, where, as Donald says, they "eagerly got back into regular life and wanted to do the normal human things: build a home and raise children. Living a good, healthy, happy home life"⁴ was important to Donald, but he also had a deep personal need to "advance my knowledge and ability, to do good work in the forest. I felt my life had a dual purpose."⁵ While Donald was in the woods employing the scientific method to combat "insect problems, root rots, and contagious diseases, and striving to grow healthy trees,"⁶ Sunny, who had a degree in English and foreign languages, was busy tutoring English and being a housewife.

Donald's research-scientist job kept the family—which, in addition to David, included his younger brother, John, and sister, Martha—moving around the lush, green Pacific Northwest landscape, from Sandpoint, Idaho, to Spokane, Washington, to Boise, Idaho. David attended elementary and junior high school in Boise and finished his high school career in Alexandria, Virginia.

Lynch's earliest memory is of himself and a friend sitting in a mud puddle, "kind of working the mud."⁷ How appropriate a core self-image for an artist

who today plunges into the messy stuff of life and shapes it to the contours of his unique vision. The adult Lynch is still moved by the elemental “idea of man and earth together.”⁸ As a boy growing up in the 1950s Northwest, Lynch and his native earth maintained an idyllic balance—with a twist. He calls his childhood “‘Good Times On Our Street.’ It was ‘See Spot Run.’ It was beautiful old houses, tree-lined streets, the milkman, building forts, lots and lots of friends. It was a dream world, those droning airplanes, blue skies, picket fences, green grass, cherry trees. Middle America as it was supposed to be. But then on the cherry tree would be this pitch oozing out, some of it black, some of it yellow, and there were millions and millions of red ants racing all over the sticky pitch, all over the tree. So you see, there’s this beautiful world and you just look a little bit closer and it’s all red ants.”⁹

These few sentences conjure up the universe of Lynch’s films. The sense of a dreamy, yet familiar world; the small-town landscape; the vivid, saturated hues of his cinematography; the droning sounds, usually of electricity and industry, that he melds with his images; the detailed, close-up fascination with textures. Most fundamental is the thrust of the wounded, ant-swarmed tree into a picture of an American paradise. A feeling of apprehensive alertness to an intriguing, yet threatening otherness within a realm of everyday safety. Even as a boy, Lynch had an extraordinary ability to sense the hum of malevolent, invisible energies at work in the world, a poetic gift he shared with two artistic giants he would someday idolize: Czechoslovakian writer Franz Kafka (1883–1924) and English painter Francis Bacon (1909–1992). French critic Gilles Deleuze speaks of Kafka and Bacon’s ability to detect “the diabolic powers of the future knocking at the door.”¹⁰ Lynch, as well as the Diane Selwyn character he created for his film *Mulholland Drive* (2001), can also hear that monstrous pounding at the door.

The young Lynch was sensitive to the mysterious strangeness of life, and he lingered at the point where reality becomes surreal. When his father took him into the woods where Donald probed beneath tree bark for hidden pockets of disease, David saw sections of the living forest in which everything was labeled—and a furnished office among the trees, whose walls were covered with mounted and catalogued insects. In 1993, Lynch appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, sporting his typical black suit, white, top-buttoned shirt, and tall topknot of graying sandy hair. Projecting a wry, polite, laconic manner, he showed Leno his *Bee Board*, a collage from his current art exhibit. Lynch had mounted symmetrically spaced dead bees on a white background and attached little white nametags (“DON,” “BING,” “PHIL”) below each one. Lynch’s show-and-tell displayed the re-

flexive sequence-building tendency of a born director. Lynch had arranged for (1) Leno to show a close-up of the bees; (2) Bandleader Branford Marsalis to play “Flight of the Bumble Bees”; with the result that, (3) the audience laughed. More importantly, the linkage between the young Lynch’s observance of labeled trees and insects and the bemused adult Lynch’s *Bee Board* showed the creative interplay between his life experiences and what he calls his “Art Life.”¹¹ In 1992, Lynch said that “a lot of my art work comes from memories of Boise, Idaho, and Spokane, Washington.”¹²

Frightful sights also riveted the boy’s attention and he learned that fear-some forces can invade a seemingly secure environment. At the age of six, Lynch saw Henry King’s 1952 film *Wait ’Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* with his parents at a drive-in theater. “I remember this scene where a guy was machine-gunned while relaxing in a barber chair, and a scene where a little girl is playing with a button and suddenly her parents realize she’s gotten it caught in her throat. I remember feeling a real sense of horror.”¹³ As a boy, Lynch “had a touch of that disease where you are afraid to go out of the house.”¹⁴ This fear, which he came to realize was agoraphobia (a panic that grips the sufferer when they venture outside self-defined “safe” precincts), persisted into adulthood. Speaking of a period when he consistently wore three neckties, he said, “That’s the sign of a person who’s very insecure and needs protection. I would have worn three coats if it wasn’t so warm. I felt vulnerable, I had things I wanted to do outside, but I didn’t like being out in the world. I liked being inside. There are many things to deal with outside the house; bad things can happen. Why bother with that? Why not stay inside and do your work?”¹⁵

Traveling with his parents from the “perfect world”¹⁶ of his safe, sylvan home to his grandparents’ house in Brooklyn “scared the hell”¹⁷ out of him. “Going into the subway, I felt I was really going down into hell. As I went down the steps, going deeper into it, I realized it was almost as difficult to go back up and get out of it than to go through with this ride. It was the total fear of the unknown. I could feel this wind coming from the train down the tunnel. First the wind and then a smell and then a sound. I had lots of tiny tastes of horror every time I went to New York.”¹⁸

Characteristically, Lynch, though apprehensive, went through with his subway ride and, years later, profited artistically from this intense, formative experience. For those spooky subway winds have become the soul-chilling, almost subliminal air currents that course through Lynch’s filmscapes like the underworld’s dark breath. As he matured, Lynch intuitively grasped the saving grace of transmuting his chaotic fears and unruly emotions into art: “the gift of feeling that you’re in control, even if it’s an illusion.”¹⁹ As he says,

“It’s too frightening to really go certain places, so we can only go there in the movies.”²⁰ Control is a key concept in Lynch’s psychology. The process of his life organizes the chaotic fragments of existence into artistic forms, thus dealing with explosive, threatening actions and emotions in a manageable way. An abstract, invasive force of irrational, haphazard disorder is out beyond his carefully structured zone of safety, hungry to harm him and everything he loves. As he says, “the world outside, it’s too random. I lose a bit of control thinking of the word ‘outside.’”²¹ In 2004, Jennifer Lynch, his daughter, adds that “he’s afraid of things coming at him.”²² Because Lynch is so sensitive to the menace of uncontrollable randomness, he’s able to portray it artistically with stunning, harrowing power, and the dynamic interplay between this threat and the haven of well-organized security drives his work. It’s vitally important for Lynch to control his little portion of the world, the home base that generates his sacred creative ideas, so the worst thing this abstract force of randomness could do is to break in and control *him*, thus destroying the purity of his art. Lynch’s house and head are well-guarded fortresses.

Lynch’s youthful perception of the threatening big city did not formulate a simplistic “cities are bad, small towns are good” equation in his mind. Lynch feels that films should “obey certain rules, and one of the main ones is contrast,”²³—for “when the contrast is great, the elements stand out.”²⁴ His movies are driven by the charged, high-definition opposition of light and darkness, good and evil, innocence and knowledge, exhilaration and terror. But his sense of human complexity knows that beneath the surface of one side of a duality can flow symbiotic undercurrents of its opposite. In *Blue Velvet*, upright Jeffrey Beaumont can develop a taste for his loathsome nemesis Frank Booth’s style of sadistic sexuality. Dr. Treves, savior of the monstrously deformed, sweet-souled *Elephant Man*, can fear that he is also that creature’s exploiter. And *Wild at Heart*’s Lula, feeling alienated from her good, loving Sailor, can have an against-her-will orgasm while being held in the assaultive grip of leering Bobby Peru. Reviewing his childhood homescape through bipolar glasses, Lynch said, “There is a goodness like those blue skies and flowers and stuff, but there is always a force, a sort of wild pain and decay, accompanying everything.”²⁵

In his art career, Lynch will give form to this malevolent force in paintings (*Shadow of a Twisted Hand Across My House*), photographs (the shadow of an unseen hand taints a lovely woman’s face), films (a shadowy figure stains the window shade of a sunny suburban house; a dusky shape “who’s causing all the fear” haunts Hollywood), and soundtracks (disturbing tones invade hypnotically beautiful melodies). As a boy, the world struck

Lynch as being a composition in primal Light and Darkness, and, like William Blake, he grew to become an artist who expresses his perceptions and intuitions of elemental energies through his own unique myth systems. It takes the powers of Hell *and* Heaven to make powerful, resonant art, and Lynch would certainly agree with Blake's declaration that "Fear and hope are—vision."²⁶

Young Lynch may have sensed the presence of this dark, hidden force but he couldn't find any evidence of it under his own roof. He likens his memory of home life to archetypal 1950s advertising images: "a well-dressed woman bringing a pie out of an oven—with a certain smile on her face—or a couple smiling, walking together up to their house with a picket fence. Those smiles were pretty much all I saw."²⁷ He remembers, "My parents didn't drink. They didn't smoke, they never argued. And I wanted them to smoke, I wanted them to drink, I wanted them to argue, but they never did."²⁸

Like many children of the 1950s, Lynch was raised in a church-going household. Donald Lynch was a Christian who believed that "God created the universe and all of us,"²⁹ and that even a lowly kangaroo rat was "part of God's world."³⁰ But he was also a scientist who knew that creation did not happen in a week. "He, or It, made everything through the process of evolution over a span of millions of years. You don't have to leave God out of the picture if you don't believe in instant creation."³¹ David's family practiced the Presbyterian faith, which he calls "a perfect Northwest sort of religion,"³² relating it in his mind to the 1950s and woodsy small towns. It's not surprising that a boy who sensed invisible forces in his backyard would be interested in spiritual matters, and as a youngster Lynch crafted striking *Crucifixion* and *Resurrection* pictures that hang in his parents' house to this day. As he entered adulthood, Lynch turned toward Asia and embraced Hindu beliefs and practices, but a number of films he has made since then exhibit Christian themes and motifs, and certain precepts of Presbyterianism are central to his artistic and personal worldview.

The concept of inspiration, a quickening surge of thought and feeling, is vital to Lynch, and as American theologian John S. Bonnell says, Presbyterians "believe in the 'inspiration' of the Scriptures: that God spoke through men whose minds and hearts He had touched. They therefore emphasize inspired men, not inspired words."³³ Presbyterians' conviction that "we are living in a moral universe where sin carries its own appropriate penalty and righteousness its own reward"³⁴ is in harmony with both Lynch's fictional universe and his adult belief in karmic justice. For Presbyterians, a vision of the Divine is the highest reward of virtuousness and, in Lynch's films,

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