

Confounding the Lynchian Model

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David Lynch is known for his bizarre and hard to understand films. It is often only with subsequent viewings, and a degree of thought, that his works typically come together in such a way as to make logical sense. The Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul shares some apparent similarities with Lynch. Both filmmakers have cast aside traditional narrative structures, both favor an intuitive approach to constructing their ideas, and both have a taste for the otherworldly. Lynchian films tend to have a sort of key, that the audience can find through careful examination, which allows them to piece the film together into a cohesive, understandable whole. However, if one attempts to understand one of Weerasethakul's works, such as *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, by approaching it with a Lynchian model of examination, the film's meaning will remain elusive. This is important both thematically and philosophically. While *Mulholland Drive* deals with earthly issues, such as showbusiness, paranoia, and despair, *Uncle Boonmee* is more concerned with the unearthly, such as reincarnation, and what happens when someone dies. Beyond that *Mulholland Drive* is a product of a "western" mindset, which values logic, deductive reasoning, and practical examination, whereas *Uncle Boonmee* is very much a product of Thailand and "eastern" thought, which tends to be more concerned with spirituality and intuitive understanding. Which means this very confounding of the Lynchian model is part of the point.

Despite the ultimate futility of trying to use the Lynchian model to understand *Uncle Boonmee*, the desire to do so is reasonable considering the commonalities between Lynch and Weerasethakul in terms of how they approach their work. Both filmmakers ultimately favor an intuitive approach to constructing their stories over a more structured approach. For example, when Lynch got the greenlight on *Mulholland Drive*, he had no idea what to do, so he meditated. During his meditation, "like a string of pearls, one idea after another came, and [he] knew exactly what to do."¹ This emphasis on meditation and instinct is characteristic of Lynch's creative process. Weerasethakul likewise employs a more instinctual method of filmmaking, including meditation.² In an interview, he describes how he learned about the structure of films, but that, over time, he came to "throw away these, [he] would say, restrictions, and [he] just go[es] with [his] feelings. It's become more internal."³ Unsurprisingly, these similarities in terms of creation method carries over into certain similarities in end product. As both filmmakers by and large disregard traditional narrative structures, their films can be hard to follow. On first viewings, it is difficult to glean what the film is trying to convey to the audience. Both Lynch and Weerasethakul use elements of the supernatural or otherworldly in their stories. However, an important trait of Lynchian films, unshared with *Uncle Boonmee*, is that they do make sense when they are watched and examined with an analytical eye. Which is part of what makes Lynchian works so compelling. Audiences' comparatively greater familiarity with how filmmakers like Lynch work, and the apparent similarities between *Uncle Boonmee* and Lynchian films like *Mulholland Drive* leads to a temptation to utilize a Lynchian model of analysis to try and force *Uncle Boonmee* to make sense.

David Lynch's work is iconic to the point that the very word "Lynchian" has become almost synonymous with American surrealism. Lynch is concerned with the revealing of the American dream's dark underbelly, which is achieved by setting his surreal and twisted plots in the most romanticized places of Americana, such as the suburbs in *Blue Velvet*, the small, rustic town of *Twin Peaks*, and the idealized Hollywood of *Mulholland Drive*. The resulting uncanny sensations are heightened through the usage of off-kilter and seemingly banal dialogue, intentionally bad acting, scenes that are complete non-sequiturs, and a frequent use of surreal supernatural

elements. It is through this usage of the uncanny that, as Mariani asserts in an article for *The Atlantic* regarding Lynch's influence, "Lynch's work entices viewers to question their own desires and moral compasses."⁴ Mariani points out that "Capturing Lynch's puzzle-box structure is a feat most filmmakers have wisely chosen to stay away from."⁵ This is not to say that few filmmakers emulate Lynch, but rather to say that most Lynchian films utilize certain Lynchian techniques while forgoing others. Therefore, it is difficult to find a film that is quintessentially Lynchian in the same way as one of Lynch's films. He also points out the influence of Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, "*Blue Velvet* changed the way both directors and audiences think about small-town American life. The unassuming setting of suburbia and the atmosphere of film noir, once worlds apart, became inextricable after the movie's release."⁶ In his essay, "David Lynch Keeps His Head", the novelist David Foster Wallace describes Lynch's influence throughout pop culture, particularly regarding the work of Quentin Tarantino:

"The peculiar narrative tone of Tarantino's films-the thing that makes them seem at once strident and obscure, not-quite-clear in a haunting way-is Lynch's tone; Lynch invented this tone... In a way, what Tarantino has done with the French New Wave and with Lynch is what Pat Boone did with Little Richard and Fats Domino: He's found (rather ingeniously) a way to take what is ragged and distinctive and menacing about their work and homogenize it, churn it until it's smooth and cool and hygienic enough for mass consumption."⁷

The prevalence of Lynchian influences in film gives a Lynchian model of analysis viability when confronted with films that exhibit such influences.

The Lynchian model is, put simply, a method of applying logical analysis to a film in order to impose order and reveal hidden meaning. The process begins with the viewing, and subsequent contemplation, of a film such as Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, which is confusing and lacks traditional structure. What is necessary is the finding of a sort of key which allows the film's structure to pull together in a meaningful way. What makes *Mulholland Drive* a perfect film with which to explore this concept is the fact that a literal key is one of the clues leading to the metaphorical key. *Mulholland Drive* can be reasonably seen as two films in one. One part is the tale of the idealistic and naïve Betty (Naomi Watts) and an amnesiac woman called Rita (Laura Herring). The other part is the tonally much darker story of failed, paranoid actress Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts) and the object of her unhealthy fixation, Camilla Rhodes (Laura Herring). The former part of the film is characterized by a comparably light tone, over the top performances, and a traditionally positive Hollywood feel that brings people like Betty to follow their dreams. The latter is dark, depressing, and represents the dark underbelly of LA built on the broken dreams of actresses like Diane. The necessary key to unlock the meaning of the film is the determination that one of the realities is false. Lynch provides clues to help the audience figure out which one it is through symbolism. Blue is utilized particularly frequently for this purpose. In Diane's reality, she hires a hitman (Mark Pellegrino) to kill Camilla Rhodes. The signal of the hit's completion is a blue key left on Diane's coffee table. In Betty's reality, there is a blue box, and an accompanying blue key. When the key is used to open the box, Betty's reality ends, and the audience is sent to Diane's reality. The key is a symbol of just how far Diane gone is in her own brokenness. The key destroys Betty's reality because Diane's crimes and brokenness are incompatible with the lighthearted, charming reality of Betty. With this knowledge, it can be established that Betty's reality is a dream had by Diane, brought on by her guilt over Camilla's death and her inability to cope with her failed career.

Diane Selwyn is a failed product of the great and glorious Hollywood dream. One of the many broken people that fuel the terrible machine of Los Angeles. She lives in a drab and depressing apartment. She seems to only be working by getting a steady stream of bit parts that get thrown her way by her ex-girlfriend, Camilla Rhodes. Camilla, a successful actress, is by no means kind to Diane. In fact, Camilla seems to take a level of delight in tormenting Diane with her success, and by using Diane's attachment to her against her. Such as inviting her to a party where she announces her engagement to Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux), a director. All of this cumulates in Diane hiring a hit man to kill Camilla. After this, a distraught Diane dreams the story which takes up the first part of the film.

Everything within the dream is a manifestation of what Diane is dealing with psychologically. Betty Elms, the perky actress newly arrived in LA represents a likely look at what Diane expected to be like in LA. Betty is pleasant, outgoing, and talented. She does marvelously at an audition, proving to be a shoo-in for the part, she finds a beautiful girlfriend in the form of Rita, who is a manifestation of Camilla, and everyone adores her. One of the many clues provided by Lynch that Betty's reality is a dream is the quality of the acting produced by Naomi Watts. As Betty, her portrayal is of one note. It lacks depth or signs of skill. Naomi Watts giving such a performance unintentionally would be highly unusual. Watts's later performance as Diane is much more in line with the usual quality of her performances. She shows great emotional range and depth as Diane, really drawing the audience into the world of Diane Selwyn. Watts's mediocre performance as Betty is actually related to one of David Lynch's trademarks. He has a tendency to direct actors to perform badly at times in order to serve the point he is trying to make. In this case, he is having Watts perform the role of Betty badly to highlight the fact that Betty is not real. She cannot draw the audience fully into believing her, because to do so would violate the purpose of the extended dream sequence.

Another hint that the world of Betty is not real lies in the form of a bizarre conspiracy to force Adam Kesher to cast "Camilla Rhodes" (Melissa George) as the star of his new film. The conspiracy is never truly explained enough to make sense. A mysterious, small-headed man named Mr. Roque (Michael J. Anderson) has decided that "Camilla" must be the star of Adam's new film. Adam is informed prior to the casting process that "Camilla" must be cast as the female lead by an extremely unpleasant man (Angelo Badalamenti) with a weird thing about coffee. When Adam resists, he finds his wife (Lori Loughlin) to be having an affair with the pool cleaner (Billy Ray Cyrus), his assets are frozen, and he is confronted and threatened by the Cowboy (Monty Montgomery). In the end, Adam yields, and the conspiracy is successful. Many aspects seem to exist to prevent the audience from being able to fully suspend disbelief. The overtly bizarre appearance of Mr. Roque, and his room's similarity to the Black Lodge of *Twin Peaks*, Lynch's classic TV series, the absurdity of Billy Ray Cyrus as the pool boy, and the almost supernatural nature of the encounter with the Cowboy all seem to shout at the audience that it is not real. The conspiracy does not make sense. It is convoluted, hard to follow, never explained, but it works as a dream. The conspiracy is the product of Diane's paranoia regarding her failed career. She does not believe that her lack of roles is tied to a lack of acting ability, she believes that Los Angeles itself is out to get her. This is represented by faceless studio executives enacting a convoluted, ridiculous conspiracy that prevents Betty/Diane from getting the adoration and success that she deserves.

Betty's friendship and subsequent romance with the amnesiac Rita further plays into the emotional baggage of Diane Selwyn. In Diane's real-life relationship with Camilla, the latter

holds all of the power in the relationship. Camilla was the one who helped Diane's career by sending regular small parts her way, and in this way kept Diane dependent upon her. Later, Camilla was the one to end the relationship. She would torment Diane by putting her in positions where she would see Camilla getting romantic with other people, including making Diane endure the reveal of her engagement to Adam. Rita's amnesiac state in the dream demonstrates a complete role reversal. Rita has amnesia after a car accident and wanders into the apartment where Betty is staying. The two meet, and Betty is placed in the position of caretaker to Rita. Betty devotes her time and energy to trying to help Rita discover her identity. The effect of this is that Betty has power over Rita in a way that Diane never had over Camilla. In this relationship, Betty/Diane is able to, as she sees it, correct the power dynamic she had to endure in reality. Betty's comparatively kind usage of the power she wields in the relationship also allows Betty/Diane to experience the exciting, but good-natured, whirlwind romance that she feels deprived of in reality.

Of course, as this is a Lynchian film, even reality is not totally devoid of otherworldly elements. During the final sequence of the film, an exceedingly ugly creature (Bonnie Aarons) behind a diner looses an elderly couple (Jeanne Bates and Dan Birnbaum), encountered by Betty as she arrived in LA, on to Diane. The two, initially small in stature, make their way into her apartment, where they grow and chase her into her room, where Diane shoots and kills herself. The unusualness of this sequence is distinctly different from the kind presented in Betty's world. It is bizarre, but does not so much hinder the realism of the world as it heightens the emotional reality of it. The creature behind the diner clearly represents Diane's guilt over Camilla's murder, and the elderly couple represent the wide-eyed innocence held by her idealized self. This intense manifestation of Diane's inner demons driving her to suicide is otherworldly and strange, but makes sense with analysis, much like *Mulholland Drive* as a whole.

The otherworldly and bizarre aspects of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* initially make it a hard film to understand, but as has now been established, analysis can bring it to a point of being understood. "Whereas we usually contrast fantasy with reality, *Mulholland Drive* underlines the link between the two, thereby depicting the role of fantasy in providing reality with structure" (McGowan, 68). This is the brilliance of David Lynch. By utilizing his famously odd way of constructing films, he is able to highlight things about reality that would not resonate as strongly were the film given a more traditional narrative format. This also highlights how the Lynchian method of analysis can be utilized. By using clues given throughout the film, the audience can establish a key, in this case the fact that the first part of the film is a dream, that allows them to delve into the true meanings and intricacies of the story that Lynch is telling. The fact that Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee* shares many qualities with Lynch's work, the attempt to apply the Lynchian model to the film is an understandable one.

In contrast to the heavily plot-driven nature of *Mulholland Drive*, not much happens in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. Put simply, a man named Boonmee (Thanapat Saisaymar) is dying of kidney failure. The spirits of his deceased wife (Natthakarn Aphaiwonk) and missing son (Geerasak Kulhong) both come to visit him. He finds himself contemplating his death, the reasons for it, and his other lives. Finally, he passes away in a cave that he believes is the birth place of one of his past lives.

The first scene where the film seems to take on a truly bizarre turn is the dinner scene, in which Boonmee's wife and child return to the world in the form of spirits. His wife, Huay, died

nineteen years prior to the beginning of the film, yet her appearance only seems to truly shock Tong (Sakda Kaebuadee). Both Boonmee and Jen (Jenjira Pongpas) seem surprised, but they recover and accept the situation with remarkable ease. Boonmee seems glad to see Huay, as does Jen, her sister. Curiously, neither Boonmee or Jen question the fact that Huay has returned from the dead. In fact, she is spoken to as though she has simply been gone on an extended trip. Though Jen does ask whether the offerings she left for Huay were received, and is told they were. The spirit of Huay remains as Boonmee's son, Boonsong, arrives. Boonsong disappeared thirteen years prior, and has returned in a beastly form, covered in black hair, with glowing red eyes. The costume worn by Kulhong in this scene seems intentionally bad. Rather than making Boonsong look like a monkey ghost, he looks like a man in a stereotypically bad gorilla suit like one might see in a sitcom. Unlike the appearance of his wife, Boonmee questions whether this spirit is truly Boonsong, though he is assured by his wife that it is so. Boonsong informs everyone that the house is surrounded by "spirits and hungry animals."⁸ Despite this ominous tiding, nobody seems concerned. Of all the questions one could ask, one of the women questions why he has let his hair grow out so much.⁹ The question could be construed as normal if phrased differently, like questioning the presence of fur. However, she phrases it as one might to a teenager who has gone too long without a haircut. Nothing in the story ever establishes why these reactions might be normal, it is simply presented to the audience as a given.

Boonsong's story of how he became a monkey-spirit is likewise bizarre. He tells of how, after his mother's death, he became fascinated with "the art of photography."¹⁰ He saw a mysterious thing in one of his photos and set out to find out what it was. He became obsessed with the creature he had discovered, which turned out to be a monkey ghost. His transformation is attributed to the fact that he mated with one of them. Clearly, this is not a usual result of sexual relations with another species, and yet no explanation is offered beyond that. Further, no one at the table seems perturbed by the fact that Boonsong mated with an animalistic spirit. In fact, the initial reaction by Jen is to tell Boonmee that he ought to be rejoicing at the return of his family. Despite the unusualness of the circumstance being presented, the audience is left with nothing to help them make sense of it.

The film's most bizarre scene whisks the audience away from Boonmee's farm to a forest, where a princess (Wallapa Mongkolprasert) is being carried by a group of servants to an unknown destination. They stop at a pond, where the princess grapples with her feelings of unattractiveness before engaging in dialogue with a catfish, who assures her that she is beautiful. The princess then enters the creek and has sex with the fish. This scene is presented with no context, and never gets related back to the story of Boonmee himself. Considering the cut to the scene was from Boonmee lost in thought, this scene could be seen as a glimpse at one of his past lives. However, whether he was the princess, the catfish, or neither is never made clear. Once again, the audience is left to ponder the meaning of a scene, with no ability to logically work it out.

Clearly, the application of the Lynchian model to *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* is unsuccessful. There is a lot in the film that begs the audience to consider and think about it, and yet attempting to apply a cohesive logic to it results only in frustration. This is because David Lynch and Apichatpong Weerasethakul are using their somewhat similar approaches to discuss two wildly different topics. Ultimately, *Mulholland Drive* is an examination of Los Angeles and the Hollywood dream. The first part, Betty's world, is the Hollywood ideal that lures countless young people to the city. The second part, Diane's reality, looks at the other side

of that tale. It looks at the countless broken dreams and people that serve as the foundation of La La Land. *Uncle Boonmee*, on the other hand, really is not trying to convey something about a specific facet of real life that the audience would be familiar with. It deals with concepts like death, the afterlife, and having other lives. No matter how hard one tries to logic the film into submission, no key like the one present in *Mulholland Drive* ever presents itself. However, the inability to analyze it logically part of the point.

Death is a part of life that everyone experiences, and yet nobody truly understands. No one actually knows what happens when someone dies. No one knows whether they will get reincarnated, go to heaven or hell, or cease to exist entirely. *Uncle Boonmee* is talking about things related to these concepts. It never gives the audience a key to understand the meaning of the film, because to do so would utterly violate the point. The way life works denies people the context with which to understand the nature of death, and so Weerasethakul denies his audience the context with which to understand the nature of *Uncle Boonmee*. However, this does not mean that there is no meaning to be found. It simply cannot be found utilizing a logical approach. Instead one must be willing and able to sit with the film, allow *Uncle Boonmee* to do its own thing, and let the experience of watching the film wash over them. Even this will not give the audience a definitive answer, but individual people will be able to find individual meanings that work for them. However, this is not to say that there is no value in the attempt to examine the film as one would with one of Lynch's works. The process of having one's attempts to use logic thwarted by the film serves to highlight the elusiveness of what the film is trying to say.

This defiance against being logically analyzed goes deeper than just the themes being dealt with in *Uncle Boonmee*. It is bound up in the very traditions that spawned the film. *Uncle Boonmee* is very much a product of Thailand and Thai traditions. It is a part of an "eastern" school of thought that is quite alien to audiences from America and western Europe. It is significant that an attempt to enforce a western rationalism on the film would deprive it of its meaning. This concept is demonstrated in the film itself by the nature of the otherworldly, ghostly elements. The ghosts disappear from the farm when the sun rises, or when bright lights are turned on. The ghosts are a spiritual thing that cannot be understood through rational thought. Light is a common symbol of understanding and knowledge, but in this case, it chases away the very thing it seeks to understand. In the same way, applying a western rationalist mindset to *Uncle Boonmee* chases away the very meaning that it is trying to convey.

Uncle Boonmee does not fit the model created through Lynchian analysis, so a different model must be at play. Films like *Mulholland Drive* function like puzzles, appealing to the western tendency for a rational, psychoanalytic approach, while *Uncle Boonmee* asks that the viewer be a more passive and receptive participant. Time seems to be a crucial piece of the model to which *Uncle Boonmee* subscribes. The pace of the film is quite slow, to the point of being almost meditative. In this meditative exploration, time almost seems to blend together in ways congruent with Buddhist temporal ideas of transgenerational reincarnation. The scene between the princess and the fish exists as a complete non-sequitur and could as easily be a flashback as a dream sequence. When Boonmee and his family travel to the cave, Boonmee claims to have been born there, but is unsure whether that was his current life or a previous one. Finally, Boonsong's tale at the dinner scene relays his history to his family, and yet does nothing to logically explain his fate as a monkey ghost. These moments, all drawing from the past in some fashion or another, are all accompanied by supernatural elements. On the other hand, the scenes dealing with the future, such as the Boonmee's discussion with Jen over honey or explanations of

Boonmee's impending death from kidney failure, are not confusing. They are also not accompanied by supernatural elements. This dichotomy serves as the crux of how *Uncle Boonmee* works. The past is a time of magic and mystery, when ghosts and people could coexist. The march of world progress to a more logical and rationalist future makes the world less confusing, but also chases the ghosts away.

Between films like *Mulholland Drive*'s status as weird but analyzable, and the superficial similarities shared by films like *Uncle Boonmee*, the temptation to try and apply a Lynchian model of logic to the latter film makes sense intuitively. However, the concepts the films are dealing with at their cores are simply too different for such a measure to work for both films. This does not detract from either film. In fact, it is what makes both films brilliant artistic works in their own rights. Lynch uses the weirdness of *Mulholland Drive* to "explore the role that fantasy has in rendering experience coherent and meaningful."¹¹ Weerasethakul utilizes the weirdness in *Uncle Boonmee* to ask his audience to engage with subject matter that would be diminished if it were made to follow the confines of logical thought.

It is a habit of film reviewers to refer to David Lynch when discussing *Uncle Boonmee*. Tara Brady, film critic for *The Irish Times*, states that *Uncle Boonmee* will "appeal to David Lynch diehards."¹² In his review for *Paste Magazine*, Sean Gandert claims that "Anyone interested in watching *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* should know going in that what they're about to see makes David Lynch look like Chris Columbus."¹³ While not discussing *Boonmee* directly, in his review of Weerasethakul's *Cemetery of Splendor*, Justin Chang directly compares Weerasethakul to Lynch. "Few filmmakers this side of David Lynch are as adept or intuitive as Apichatpong Weerasethakul when it comes to appropriating the language of dreams."¹⁴ None of these critics are outright endorsing the application of the Lynchian model to *Uncle Boonmee*, but these references to Lynch reinforce the association between the two. Using Lynch as a frame of reference encourages the tendency to try and understand films like *Boonmee* by forcing them into the western thought paradigms that Lynch represents.

Both Lynch and Weerasethakul approach their films in non-traditional ways. Both have chosen to abandon traditional narrative structures, and both are interested in leaving their films up to interpretation. Lynch, as one of the more famous "weird" filmmakers, has given audiences a model which one is tempted to apply whenever encountering a weird film such as *Uncle Boonmee*. However, this ultimately is a futile gesture. While films like *Mulholland Drive* have a key that the audience can find to unlock meaning, films like *Uncle Boonmee* can only be understood through simply experiencing them and allowing them to do their thing.

Notes

¹ “Interview with Naomi” 00:07:20-00:07:25

² Kim, 49

³ “Apichatpong Weerasethakul” 00:01:36-00:01:45

⁴ Mariani

⁵ Mariani

⁶ Mariani

⁷ Wallace, 163-164

⁸ *Uncle Boonmee* 00:23:58-00:24:02

⁹ *Uncle Boonmee* 00:23:34-00:23:37

¹⁰ *Uncle Boonmee* 00:25:25-00:25:26

¹¹ McGowan, 67

¹² Brady

¹³ Gandert

¹⁴ Chang

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