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Throughout his decades-long career, the filmmaker David Lynch famously refused to disclose the meanings behind his richly-layered moving images, advising viewers to 'come to your own conclusion'.<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have adopted various approaches to doing so and the past decade has given rise to an ever-expanding catalogue of publications exploring Lynch's oeuvre. These include academic monographs that focus on a single title in Lynch's filmography alongside larger tomes that feature research spanning his entire body of work, in addition to international exhibition catalogues that document the artist's multidisciplinary exploits in photography, object design, and painting. In 2019, with the assistance of Kristine McKenna, Lynch penned his own memoirs, *Room to Dream* (Cannongate Books), providing readers with new biographical details and a few fresh hints regarding his creative process. This material was immediately cited in the next wave of publications on Lynch, including the book reviewed below.

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1 'David Lynch: David Lean Lecture', posted 26 May 2017, by BAFTA, 32 min., 9 sec., YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpomrL0qA-E>

Mike Miley's *David Lynch's American Dreamscape: Music, Literature, Cinema* from Bloomsbury's Academic imprint is a recent addition to the field of Lynch studies, with a publication release that unintentionally coincided with the director's death in January 2025. The author, like Lynch, is an alumnus of the American Film Institute, and has spent much of his career teaching American literature and film studies. Miley's book explores how Lynch's films resonate with the spirit of American literary and musical movements, as much as they do the country's film heritage. In an interview about his motivation for the book, Miley noted, 'So much of Lynch's work is about dreams and about the things that people subconsciously desire or fear or yearn for, and so many of those things are also expressed through songs. They're expressed in stories.'<sup>2</sup> Miley was inspired by Lynch's observation that, 'People are like radios, they pick up signals.'<sup>3</sup> These literary and musical 'signals' comprise the book's two main sections, the first entitled 'Words', the second 'Music'.

From the outset, Miley describes how this approach represents an alternative to the debates that arise from attempting to prove the veracity of specific influences and references present in an artist's work.<sup>4</sup> As he indicates in his introduction, Lynch's films are often the subject of two opposing approaches: on one end of the spectrum, the artist has been hailed as a wholly unique genius *in vacuo*, and on the other, repeatedly analysed through the lens of documented cultural influences, such as Francis Bacon, Edward Hopper, and various Surrealists. While acknowledging the scholarly contributions that both methods have produced, Miley contends that even if one can prove that a particular work of art was influential for a filmmaker, the question still remains how much critical insight such information may or may not provide. His alternative approach recognises that creatives do indeed respond to specific works of art but underscores that they also draw inspiration just as frequently from wider cultural currents or 'signals', resulting in materials and motifs that may have been

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2 Emma Specter, 'Author Mike Miley on the Loss of David Lynch', *Vogue*, 23 January 2025, <https://www.vogue.com/article/mike-miley-david-lynch-american-dreamscape-interview>

3 Quoted in *Ibid.*

4 Mike Miley, *David Lynch's American Dreamscape: Music, Literature, Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), p. 1-3.

integrated unconsciously, and/or remain uncredited. For Miley, these artistic echoes are underexplored and worthy of study, rooted in the heritage of plurality and networks, as elaborated in Julie Kristeva and Roland Barthes' early writing on intertextuality.<sup>5</sup> Miley aptly describes Lynch as a channeler of ideas who tapped into external sources that were then shaped by the artist as they entered a given project before being presented in the final work.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to concrete and measurable references, this intertextuality creates a larger tapestry of overlapping threads, in what Lynch might have called the unified field,<sup>7</sup> a universal consciousness he embraced through Transcendental Meditation (though Miley doesn't dwell on Lynch's involvement with the Vedic meditation movement).

Miley has also identified 'affiliating identifications' as a useful framework, citing Anahid Kassabian's book *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*<sup>8</sup> as the source of the term. She coined this usage over twenty years ago to describe how previously recorded music in films can evoke diverse responses in each viewer, drawing on their vastly different encounters with and memories of a song, thus impacting individual reception of the film. Kassabian's writing does not directly refer to intertextuality, but Miley asserts that her concept of affiliating identifications offers a concise example of intertextuality in action and establishes an important distinction from artistic influence. He notes the following example of affiliating identification: 'An audience member can interpret a needle drop in a film based on their familiarity with another film that uses the same drop. Even if the filmmaker is not directly referencing (or even aware of) the previous needle drop, the viewer's reading could be quite useful and transformative.'<sup>9</sup> In other words, without specifically referencing one another, works of art and literature may enter into a shared dialogue by virtue of the viewer's unique cultural literacy. Here, complementary

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5 Ibid., p. 19-20.

6 Ibid., p.23.

7 See David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, Creativity* (Tarchier Perigree, 2007).

8 Routledge, 2001.

9 Miles, *ibid.*, p. 21.

references to Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*<sup>10</sup> may have been helpful for readers in developing a deeper appreciation of how plurality, interactive readings, and reception intersect, but Miley's accessible introduction offers a thoughtful point of entry into the book's methods of examining Lynch's postwar American dreamscape.

Save the final entry, Miley's chapters are dedicated to the pairing of a Lynch film or series with a literary or musical constellation (readers will note the absence of *The Elephant Man* and *Dune* on account of their distinct historical references, in addition to being set outside the United States). The resulting correspondences offer new contexts in which to consider Lynch's work, such as the first chapter's analysis of the late Victorian/early Modernist hysterical literature genre that reflects widespread patriarchal attempts to undermine women's sanity and sexuality, as exemplified in Charlotte Perkins Gilmore's short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), or works by Sylvia Plath, particularly her 1967 novel, *The Bell Jar*. The chapter frames *Eraserhead* in relationship to these literary texts and their gender politics, with a focus on agency and confinement, as well as other aspects of identity related to space (be it physical, artistic or mental).<sup>11</sup> While Miley doesn't hesitate to express what he views as the reactionary shortcomings of *Eraserhead*, he closes the chapter with a section on the redeeming qualities of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, that the author describes as a 'spiritual remake' of *Eraserhead*.

The dialogue established between *Blue Velvet* and children's literature in chapter two offers an insightful alternative to numerous psychoanalytical takes on Lynch's 1986 decidedly adult film. Miley turns here to the imagination and how fantasy can result in a transformative taming when characters return to order following a chaotic upheaval in their surroundings and worldview. To illustrate this, the author highlights Maurice Sendak's 20<sup>th</sup> century classic, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), that like *Blue Velvet*, places its protagonist in a sharply-contrasting environment, a hidden and sombre world, 'where law and reason do not dwell'.<sup>12</sup> This modern cautionary tale builds upon

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10 Translated by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

11 Miley, *Ibid.*, p. 37.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

the binary and liminal world of fairy tales, both analysed intertextually in Franck Boulègue and Courtenay Stallings' earlier respective Lynch publications that are not mentioned here.<sup>13</sup> While fairy tale scholarship, like *Blue Velvet*, is too often approached through a narrow psychoanalytical lens--including America's 'homegrown' fairy tale so dear to Lynch, Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*-- the structure, ethics, archetypes and sensorial qualities of the fairy tale are important avenues of exploration in Lynch's filmography to which Miley's contribution on children's literature and *Blue Velvet* provides a valuable parallel.

The remaining two chapters in the 'Words' section consider resonances between the recurring dream cycles found in writer Nathanael West's novels and *Muholland Drive* (2001), followed by a study of atomic motifs in Cormac McCarthy's recent novels and the Trinity Test of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, particularly part eight. As these early chapters attest, the first section of *David Lynch's American Dreamscape* refreshingly overturns the stereotype that Lynch was merely an intuitive, visual creator and therefore unworthy of consideration with regards to literary resonances in his films. The author further develops the book's guiding principle of cultural 'signals' in its second section dedicated to music, whose chapters may strike readers as more cohesive than those of the 'Word' section, perhaps because many of the compositions discussed are heard within the films themselves and are thus already associated with Lynch's work. Additionally, the music discussed spans a shorter period of time in American history, primarily the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, making their cultural context less of a patchwork. From the powerful force of rock in *Wild at Heart* that battles darkness to the social function of sentimental ballads in *Twin Peaks*, the music discussed largely belongs to familiar genres of American pop-rock.

Miley's discussion of cover songs in *Lost Highway* is a strong contribution to this section, identifying the synergy between sound and image in a film whose popular soundtrack has been largely ignored in critical writing. Yet, as Miley observes, cover songs provide a sonic twinning to the feature film's depiction of doppelgängers and

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13 See Franck Boulègue's *Twin Peaks: Unwrapping the Plastic* (Bristol: Intellect, 2017) and Courtenay Stallings, 'Twin Peaks: The Return as Subversive Fairy Tale' in *Supernatural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, p. 98-116.



hauntings, emphasizing the disorienting quality of unfamiliar sounds in a recognizable structure. Like Patricia Arquette's two roles that shift her appearance from brunette to blonde, the author refers to the use of cover songs as 'affiliating *misidentifications*', a second musical skin for which song recognition fails to provide comfort.

Gently transitioning from analysing the music used in Lynch's films to how the latter might dialogue with other musical 'texts', Miley's eighth chapter 'David Lynch's Old Weird America' outlines an original approach to Lynch's understudied feature, *The Straight Story* (1999). Miley centres his discussion around the film's reflection of styles and themes of the American folk revival, particularly two important album projects released in the 1950s and 1960s, the six-LP Smithsonian Folkways *The Anthology of American Folk Music* compiled by Harry Smith (an intriguing animator and filmmaker in his own right) and Bob Dylan's *The Basement Tapes* (1967), featuring Dylan's signature poetic prose. Another critically-undervalued Lynch title is the subject of discussion in the penultimate chapter, examining how the structure and symbolism of analogue mixtapes reflect an affiliated identification in *Inland Empire* (2006). Miley builds upon the ethos and fragments that surround the culture of mixtapes, viewing them as an aesthetic approach towards acquiring meaning, not unlike Lynch's offering of *Inland Empire* as a compilation film composed of old and new projects. Miley concludes *David Lynch's American Dreamscape* with a valuable look that inverts the book's previous formula by observing how contemporary literary and musical texts of today interact with Lynch's oeuvre. While numerous artists cite Lynch as an influence, Miley argues that some have downright *absorbed* the filmmaker's work into their own, concluding with analyses of David Foster Wallace and Lana Del Ray's Lynchian sensibilities, that he concedes are *generative* not derivative.

Throughout the book, Miley mercifully insists he doesn't arrive at any definitive interpretations of Lynch's work but does succeed at creating an open forum for considering Lynch's filmography, engaging with fresh perspectives via the valuable integration of affiliating identifications. Having evolved over the course of a decade, Miley isn't particularly forthcoming about positioning where his own cultural

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references originate, but that is a bagatelle in a robust and worthwhile study that engages readers to reflect on how various literary and musical currents offer critical points of entry into Lynch's oeuvre, approaches that will surely broaden the book's appeal beyond the obvious film studies readers to students and researchers from musicology, literature, and other interdisciplinary fields of study.