Class-ifying contemporary cinema

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Even in the 'digital age' of advancing video and computer markets, the scale and hype of Hollywood, its spin-offs and the rest of the cinema industry lead films to dominate many peoples' relationships with commercial popular culture. They tend to be the organising centre for the private consumption of TV's visual wallpaper, while multiple screens proliferate to cater for that special public submission to overwhelming sounds and images. This strength of impact allows elements of film narratives, styles and characters to become markers of experience and identity, so that cinema is as thoroughly woven into social and cultural life as, say, sport or music.

However, public discourse on cinema has been surprisingly limited: film-as-art theory and philosophy, gee-whizz journalism, technical studies, family viewing advice; all entailing a fair degree of snobbery of one kind or another. But writing about films is now catching up with the sophistication and diversity of the commodities it addresses[1], largely thanks to cultural and media studies shifting the terms of debate on 'mass culture.' The sheer complexity of responses to films, and thus the general significance of cinema for modern cultures, can now be questioned along with the wider social, economic and political dynamics of culture.

Established rhetorics of art, morality and taste still have useful mileage for a range of interests: many films are produced and marketed in terms of them being the 'cutting edge' of experimental cinema as an art form. Claims made for their value relate more to avant garde form and risky content, rather than any 'uplifting' qualities; indeed, their controversial nature and success are more likely to be attributed to regressive and reactionary tendencies, both of the film maker and the audience. So-called independent or art-house films follow commercial pressures just as much as the mainstream, but not necessarily with the same budgets or agendas of Hollywood (that is, multinational) companies. The films exploit niche marketing by targeting diverse audiences—combining styles, genres and narrative structures in one product[2]. This also makes them 'postmodern' so they tend to have cachet as art. And as the major companies begin to exploit the profit potential of each new wave of film makers, the names of the directors (as stars/auteurs) become the promotional focus—rather than films being vehicles for their celebrity actors or their titles functioning as commodities.

Hysterical images

One effect of the breaking down of conventional categories of genre and narrative is that films may be relatively open-ended, confusing to viewers, or even downright unintelligible. Other films and media images are referred to as much as real situations, using pastiche and parody, while nostalgic images and styles bring versions of the past firmly into the present. Horrific, sublime, unrepresentable aspects of human experience are not funnelled off in embarrassment into specialised genres such as horror or pornography. Instead they are brought into the centre of mundane existence. Significantly, these 'postmodern' films usually strongly privilege white male middle class perspectives and choices—and the film literature generally mirrors this tendency, especially ignoring what non-middle class viewers might make of them. However, the frightening, exotic or disgusting contexts that middle class protagonists struggle in and out of are usually represented by poor and dangerous Black and/or working class communities and characters.

So the 'slumming' in *Something Wild*, *After Hours*, *Blue Velvet*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* etc., contrasts with earlier generations where magic and horror are located in the wealth and decadence of upper class life (of course, many films continue this tradition). Respectable lifestyles are portrayed as not only boring and sterile, but totally insecure—hardly the morale-boosting stuff of aspiration and meritocracy peddled elsewhere by education and the media. Slumming in the yuppie nightmare is a cautionary tale—titillation, then reassurance for middle class viewers. Waking from the bad dream, having sampled the terrifying but sublime environment of the gutter (a commodity on offer in the supermarket of life), audiences feel refreshed for the rigours of their professional lives. But how will the inhabitants of the gutter (that is, poor, Black, and/or working class viewers) respond to their portrayals? The film literature seems to find it very difficult to pay attention to such questions.

But just as interpreting films need not focus on questions of artistic, intellectual or political merit, neither is there any inevitable identification with middle class characters and dilemmas. Ordinary viewers will select some elements of the films, and will enlarge on these in the imagination and in discussion. They can experiment, identifying with different characters, positions and possibilities within the narrative—and can switch among them during viewing and afterwards. With their open-ended plots and bizarre characters, the new films in particular are likely to stimulate very varied and complex feelings and thoughts, in wider audiences, as they achieve higher box office returns and wider cinema, video and TV distribution.

The yuppie nightmare soon retreated into the more smug subgenre of 'x from hell', where 'x' may be a neighbour, flatmate, employee, etc.—showing the further social alienation and paranoia of recent generations of successful middle class consumers. Meanwhile the mixed genre characteristics of the yuppie dilemma are used in films which purport to apply more to waking life than to nightmares or romantic dreams, such as in *Cape Fear*, *Candyman*, *Deep Cover*, *Kalifornia*, *White Palace* and *Pretty Woman*. Alternatively, the slumming may be performed by the audience carried along by the narrative in sampling unhappier lives or by parachuting obviously middle class characters into lower class narratives (such as in *City of Hope*, *Short Cuts*, *Shopping* and *Lone Star*).

The 1990s mixed genre films continue to go further in blending fantasy and narrative layering. Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* use the crudest of genre stories and characters, stitched together with inventive camera direction, editing and plot devices. The films twist and turn according to the minutiae of real human personality, random accidents, banality and psychopathology of daily life, recalcitrant complexity of the world and over-determination of events. A remarkable kind of emotional and situational realism ensues, in the midst of elaborate homages to just about the most unrealistic cinema styles imaginable. Tarantino's scripts are compelling enough for their power to persist even through Tony Scott's sentimentalism (*True Romance*), or Oliver Stone's moralising individualism (*Natural Born Killers*)[3]. In general, even though big budget mainstream films now routinely use the virtuoso camerawork, editing techniques and narrative complexity learned from independent film makers, their stories and characters are often even weaker and narrower than before. As in the cases of cult and exploitation genres, new film methods are mainly enlisted by Hollywood merely as a gloss on the superficiality of conventional genres, and in the process the most interesting and powerful aspects of the source material are lost[4]. Except, perhaps, when the success of independent directors propels them into the big budget arena—as in Tarantino's meteoric rise, or more modestly in the case of David Lynch.

A body of films

David Lynch has been exemplary in experimenting with style and genre. He is uncompromising in locating extremes of sexuality, violence, fear and pleasure within ordinary life; transgresses boundaries of taste and moral and political acceptability; and keeps to his own trajectory despite fluctuations in popularity with both audiences and the industry. He depicts Middle America as full of emotional excess, signposted by his characters' weirdness, where scratching the surface reveals rich and hysterical depths. The films can be read as critiques of bourgeois social arrangements and morals, which suppress, fear and may be undone by the effects of passion and fantasy on bodies and behaviour, relationships and institutions.

Lynch's early films are notable for bizarre, lurid, nightmare visions of grotesque bodily excrescence, infantile emotion, dreams and a powerful sense of nostalgia for past eras and lost innocence. These subjects are not treated by romanticising them: typical moods are depression, rage and ambivalent desire. In the short film *The Grandmother* (1970), and in *Eraserhead* (1976), these effects are achieved against backdrops of industrial, urban and domestic blight, but without relying on traditional surrealist or horror genre conventions. Critics were thus left with no easy way of dismissing the films, except for their weirdness—and this mute response no doubt helped *Eraserhead* become a cult classic for horror audiences. Something similar might have happened with *Elephant Man* (1980), if it hadn't been for the prop of a 'true' story funded by the mainstream industry with corresponding budget and hype.

Dune (1984) failed even as cult, partly because the source material (Frank Herbert's sci-fi epic) was too vast. But Lynch continued to harness the body's vulnerability, power and monstrosity—bypassing thought and language—to illuminate and complicate personal dilemmas and their

social contexts. From *Dune* onwards Lynch's films deal explicitly with recognisable coming-of-age and family dramas. Such developments possibly say as much about what was needed to consolidate his move into the mainstream, as opposed to the director's 'artistic' ambition—for example when market imperatives insist on appealing to younger audiences.[5]

Blue Velvet (1986) was a turning point, set in an identifiable postwar America, and not the timeless, fantastic worlds of its forerunners. In all Lynch films the implacable, menacing presence of the flesh, raw nature, and their excesses of degradation and ecstasy, are central motifs. In *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks* (1989-1990) *Wild At Heart* (1990), and *Twin Peaks, Fire Walk With Me* (1992), the fascination of these images and experiences is thoroughly woven into depictions of 'real life'. It becomes difficult to distinguish fantasy from reality; to identify boundaries between them; or even to know whether or not any such boundaries exist at all—as in *Lost Highway* (1997).

Blue ambivalence

The avalanche of criticism and analysis following *Blue Velvet's* release was as contradictory as the film itself[6]. Mainstream critics pigeonholed the narrative as small town or rites of passage drama, film noir, psychological thriller, soft porn cult, nostalgia film, gothic comedy or surrealism, or even as a religious parable of sin and redemption. Cultural analysts tended to feel that blending styles and images from several periods was superficial—everything being made equally bizarre, as well as appearing normal, without sufficient context to make it socially or politically meaningful. The 'unspeakably' fascinating images and behaviour—dirt, nature, flesh, violence and perversion—were interpreted as distractions, depicting evil in a way that evokes distaste rather than horror. Worse still, in linking sexual desire with violence and voyeurism, the psychological logic was said to leave the characters no better options. But the use of songs, names, nicknames, media and advertising fragments, plus images of the cruelty of nature, resonate strongly with all sorts of unexpected significance. Bypassing rationality, such sounds and images have more power to focus the hidden desires of the protagonists. They explode into the viewer's awareness, in extremes of colour and lingering close up, with an impact that can't easily be grasped by analysing the narrative. For both characters and viewers, events in the film resemble dreams—where apparently random elements condense, combine and multiply, uneasily reconstructed in memory or description.

Critics and academics were frustrated in their need to impose authoritative readings, in the absence of a congenial 'message'. So, every single review and analysis assumed that the final scene represented Jeffrey's return to normal real life. But it could just as easily be another twist in the nightmare. By crudely embedding Jeffrey's dream or fantasy in a small town mystery, Lynch fulfils his ambition to reveal strange desires lying beneath a respectable veneer. Yes, the film does threaten safe middle class life. It depicts perverse inadequacy, the fear, hatred, idealisation and stereotyping of women and the dangerous potential of the criminal lower classes to invade and ruin the pleasant security of the American Dream. These feelings aren't conveniently attributed to an 'other'. They are hidden under the nice, clean-cut exterior of a young man ready to take his place of power in the middle class scheme of things, grounded in the trivia of romantic consumerism. Viewers who aren't middle class may not make Lynch's and the critics' mistake, seeing Jeffrey as representative of 'Everyman'. Instead we might glimpse and understand a little more clearly the attitudes of those with power over us—attitudes which may be multi-layered and complex, but which are also very concrete in shaping the conduct of those in the professions, commerce, education and the media.

The American nightmare

Wild At Heart is a family drama, road movie and love story. Lynch transforms Barry Gifford's novel, focusing again on the body's ecstasy, agony and violation, and the visual impact of fire, sex and death. Sailor (Nicholas Cage) and Lula (Laura Dern) avoid awareness of their excesses by weaving all experience into fairytale yearning via images and narratives from rock and roll. Sex is their drug and their anaesthetic, and as they lurch between catastrophes the past always catches up with them. The past and the present are more complicated than in *Blue Velvet*, however. The lovers seek freedom from Lula's well-off mother (Dianne Ladd) whose status derives from gangsterism—in many ways more representative of American economic history than shop owners.

The underclass hell looms, and the concerns and illusions of Sailor, Lula, their family and community, collide with and mirror the cruel animal passions of its denizens—personified by Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe). They are distinguishable from the main protagonists by the latters' race, suburban accoutrements and aspirations for themselves and their children. So, the fate of a rich teenager affects the lovers far more deeply than their own predicament, as she frets about her handbag and her parents' anger while bleeding to death after a car crash. The film can be read as reflecting the fantasies and fears of the new middle classes. They escaped from the ghetto, but expressing dangerous passion could return them there. To be safe, romance must stay within the class and race limits staked out in geography and psychology, by conventional American social structures.[7]

Twin Peaks is a bizarre murder mystery and comic soap opera, attracting huge TV audiences. Lynch parodies the soaps, giving the characters absurd idiosyncrasies and relationships, although sticking to emotional realism in the family and neighbourhood dramas depicted. But everything hinges on the mystery of the naughty teen queen's murder. The convoluted plot keeps fans of detective stories alert, identifying with FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle Maclachlan). As before, the series can be read in terms of the main character's fantasies. Only Cooper has more than two dimensions—ace detective, father figure, scientist, masculine ideal, bureaucrat, all-American WASP, new man, philosopher and mystic, government representative, tourist, pervert, angel ... you name it! In his desire to master truth, fight evil and control his world, he embodies the middle class ambition for domination via knowledge and individual merit. Displaying superhumanity, he charismatically enrols the entire community to his agenda, so that by the end they all inhabit what amounts to his imaginative world. Crucially, *Twin Peaks* shows that the whole project must fail—the narrative, the TV concept and the worldview. Neither Lynch nor Cooper, nor the reign of science and middle class values, can run the show, or solve the problems—the nearer Cooper thinks he gets, the more the *Twin Peaks* community falls apart. That *Twin Peaks* needed to go to such extremes to reach this conclusion bears witness to the power and fascination of those myths.

In the feature film 'prequel', *Twin Peaks, Fire Walk With Me*, this theme was spectacularly pared down to the failure of the American nuclear family as well as the FBI. On TV we saw the diverse manifestations of 'evil forces' (i.e. some of the more appalling expressions of masculine insecurity) in an extended community. Whereas the film begins with the authorities' arrogance and stupidity—obsessed with their worldview, rituals and trivia, the incompetent FBI men chase around pontificating about the nature of evil. Meanwhile, in the face of forces which pose as benign, a young woman struggles to establish an identity and a sense of agency over her life. Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) lurches desperately between agony, anger and an ambivalent search for distraction in drugs, sex and friendship. All of these she abuses, mirroring her father's (Ray Wise's) denied cruelty and her mother's (Grace Zabriskie's) distant, preoccupied neglect—in possibly the most powerful cinematic treatment ever of long term sexual abuse. Navigating an intolerable course, some of her troubled dreams begin to unravel, and she can see the dread reality more clearly. Her father kills her, rather than allow truth to surface. And the rest of the adult world, by implication, colludes. The community holds onto its complacent ignorance, and the police maintain their delusions of control and grandeur.

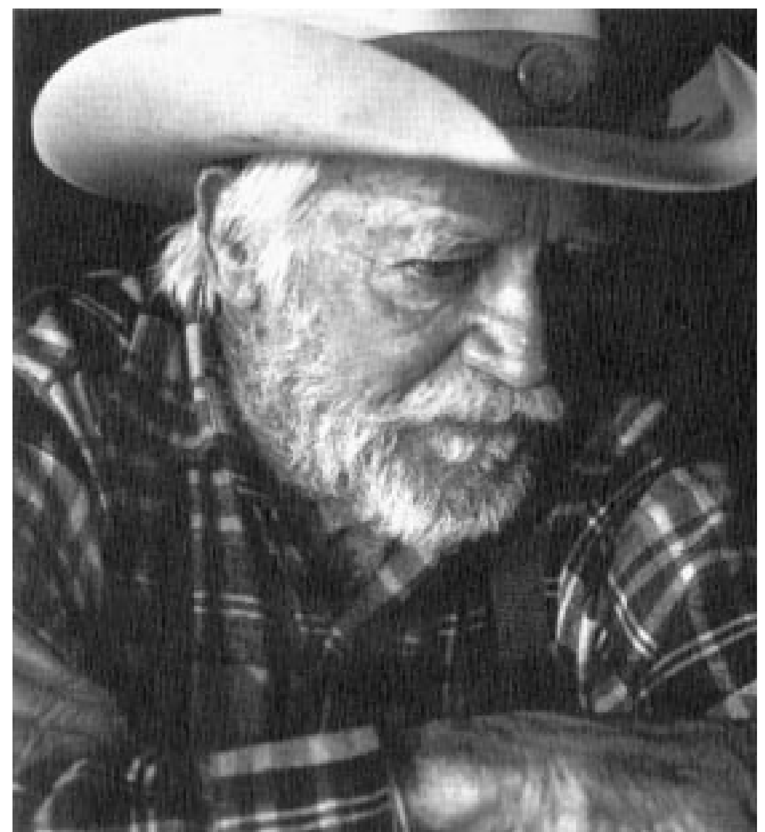
You take the high road...

Lost Highway in some ways closes the circle. None of the details in the film are necessarily 'true'—we are in the realms of identity loss and madness. The story—like the early films—tackles the main character's existential chaos: it may represent Fred's doomed attempt to fantasise solutions to his intolerable fears, since even during the most shocking events we focus on his *confusion*. Despite an enviable position and a job which is also a passion, he is uneasy and distrustful of everything—his wife, his shadowy home, the world outside. Whatever the circumstances of his metamorphosis into Pete, it surely can't be coincidence that he escapes from himself into a carefree working class youth. Except that abuse, deceit and injustice quickly filter into this incarnation too—much of it down to him. Then, mistrusting his own thoughts, perceptions and feelings, he has nowhere else to go. No one else, in either Fred or Pete's life, has much more of a grip on 'reality'. Authorities (such as the police or Pete's parents) seem especially stupid and ineffective. And Patricia Arquette's characters are full of compelling but unintelligible needs and motives. It is very tempting to see the film as excavating masculine insecurity and infantility; or even as a sustained metaphor for the artificiality of cinematic contrivances in general. Or, to stretch the analogy, a commentary on the complacency of middle class discourses of knowledge, psychological integrity and consistency, and individualistic agency and control over one's own life.

However, this film makes *no* attempt to give this (admittedly extreme) dilemma of conventional aspirations an optimistic outcome—a resolution. A yuppie nightmare you will *not* wake from, very frustrating for the viewer, with no feelgood factor and none too promising at the box office: *Lost Highway* may be a logical conclusion to Lynch's films in the way I have read them, implying that bourgeois social, cultural or political philosophy furnishes only fantasy, and not solutions. To mainstream critics this makes the film 'enigmatic', 'meaningless' or 'hollow'[8]—just as middle class discourses in general are typically reluctant to envisage, to acknowledge, or to respect any other kind of discourse.

...and I'll take the low road

By representing the dreams and fantasies of diverse modern middle class American characters, the films build complex pictures of the way such individuals and groups bring their passions to bear upon their own lives and their surroundings. From a static picture of the small-town lumpen-



bourgeoisie, through the strivings and insecurities of more mobile fractions of the middle classes, we reach an absurd allegory of white America itself. The small town boy grows up, from shop owner to professional, gangster, FBI hotshot—or even a famous film director. Then, *Fire Walk With Me* and *Lost Highway* finish the job of pulling apart all of the stereotypical elements of this macho mythos—things certainly *don't* improve when the patriarchs fantasise themselves as saints, or disavow responsibility for evil. The weight of history operates on the inner lives of the characters—their biographical, emotional baggage—and on threads of money, class, sex, race and power entwined in the social history of families, neighbourhoods and societies. The weirdness, though bizarre, rings true—in the gaps between what we see making the characters tick, what they think, say, feel and believe about themselves, and how they explain their actions. We're reminded of our own experience of our inconsistencies, quirks and foibles, our unaccountable and unruly emotions, and those of people close to us.

Lynch's latest film, *The Straight Story* (1999), reinforces these points by negating any sign of inconveniently messy inner, or public, life. An ailing 73-year-old ex-trucker drives 300 miles on a lawnmower to visit an estranged brother. We learn little about this 'Gump on a grasscutter' from his family, friends and neighbours, or from the down-home counselling assorted strangers derive from him on his journey. Everyone accepts their lot: traumas from war, poverty, ill health, family tragedy and conflict must be adapted to—meekly and unreflectively. Agency is impossible, collectivity unimaginable, struggle inconceivable. The rhetoric is conveyed in the warm sentimental glow of muted and unthreatening quirkiness; the superb photography, editing and acting; and also in Alvin Straight's kindly words of wisdom (which are unerring insults to anyone harbouring a sense of the real injustices of the world). Truly the dreams and fantasies of diverse modern middle class American *viewers*!

These resonances may be even more meaningful to lower class viewers, in the light of the pretensions of those who seek to know, teach, deploy, administer and police us. They are secure in 'knowing' the rationality of their systems, the comprehensiveness of their knowledge, rightfulness of their power, and, often enough, the ignorance and inferiority they think they see in their charges (especially those more uppity than Alvin Straight et al). Whereas we may suspect that strange and venal wishes, fears and hatreds must lie under their cool, superior demeanours, just as they do under our uncouth common-ness.

The films can reinforce these vague, uncomfortable suspicions—we don't have to rely purely on our own disquiet, pain or fury to confirm it. And, through necessity, those without the resources for, or interest in, building illusions of individual superiority might realise that social and cultural strength has the potential to weave our collective weaknesses into the possibility of a better life—except that distortions of power and wealth get in the way. But there is no reason to expect the film makers and producers to be aware of these possible kinds of impacts of their films; and scarcely any more likelihood of film criticism comprehending them either.

Uncontrollable responses

The main method the films use to achieve their strongest effects is to create images that virtually defy words, set in contrast to the visual clichés of high and low culture, fashion and taste. Poignant, disgusting, intimate, tragic, sublime and terrible experiences are just as likely to come upon us during the mundane everyday as they are in special circumstances, and the films exploit this irony to the full when such moments occur at crucial points in the narrative. In concentrating and escalating the viewer's gut responses they provide a focus to highlight the significance of events and situations for the characters.

However, mainstream entertainment critics and academic analysts depend on reading films as texts or as art, wishing to discover value and meaning within the object of their study itself. Popular audiences prefer the recognition of pleasure and pain, both in the intransigence of the world and in the fantasy of doing something different about it. Fantasy is not just escapism, however. For viewers who routinely face drudgery, degradation and domination, fantasy can connect with the possibility of effecting change in real life. But this is not the same world as the one professionally inhabited by those who 'know' for a living. Their discourse can't accommodate the immediacy and visual power the new films use to emotionally engage their viewers. Likewise, art cinema buffs can't handle their vulgar appeal to popular audiences not schooled in aesthetic subtlety. So it comes as no surprise that the tricks of the new film trade owe much to advertising—which also relies on engaging a mass audience's familiarity rather than its contempt.

Cultural theorists wrangle over whether or not the meaning of film images are sites of 'struggle'—still concerned with claiming the correct reading, even while agreeing that many are present. Searching for secret knowledge, they are frustrated by stories that don't yield straightforward answers and by viewers for whom the last thing desired is a lesson. The Political Correctness Pundits, for example, focus mainly on what they see as the negative effects of a film—desiring to police popular culture. The typical strategy is to dream up stereotyped fictional 'ideal' viewers who get attributed narrow and fixed responses. The ensuing interpretations are then universalised as the only significant political understandings (unless you're reactionary).

Lynch's films are usually trivialised as well, as the pigeonholing of *Blue Velvet* suggests. But since the viewing audience is so diverse, with highly ambivalent responses, such analyses miss the point—as do the common elitist complaints of superficiality, narcissism and style over substance, and the loss of meaning. Much of the more recent trend of cultural populism is scarcely more promising, in its tendency to glorify the subversive opportunities afforded by consumer choice in a saturated media market—seeming to confuse the potential for 'reading against the grain' with its *de facto* achievement on a mass scale.[9]

The new film criticism has begun to go beyond the arbitration of taste and morality. And by interpreting the (potential) responses of specific types of viewers, the dangers of uncritical populism are at least partially side-stepped. But there is still a strong proclivity for privileging certain viewer and subject positions and, in doing so, downplaying others. Most noticeably, social class is consistently treated as subsidiary to gender, race and sexuality, even when such analysis turns out to be incoherent without a firm grounding in class dynamics.[10]

But, in general, the most significant development in recent film criticism might be its tentative abandonment of elitism, in no longer simply treating films as special opportunities for enlightened and universal judgements. Films are part of the debris of our material cultural environments—and how they will be used is not determined from within their structure or by objective qualities, but depends on how users articulate responses to them. And this is no new, postmodern phenomenon. Symbolic material, fantasy and myth has been woven in many subversive and revolutionary directions—in the peasant cultures of early modern Europe, at the beginnings of industrialism, in carnival and religious heresy, native and aboriginal societies, and in the persistent murmurings of lower class collective cultures[11]. Media images may not be our religion, but they form a significant part of our mythic worlds. The best that traditionally leftist critics usually manage to concede is that there might be 'positive misreadings' which can prompt slight changes for the better in an aimless, distracted audience. However, we might prefer to remain distracted from *their* aims.[12]

Media and cultural critics and academics need to claim to know the pleasures of ordinary people, assuming the capacity to define our interests in ways that can establish status for their forms of knowledge, institutions and careers. The film readings given here try to enter the terrain of this discourse from the position of an outsider with different motives[13]. Cinema films are prominent in general awareness, and in their incorporation into popular imagination. Without worrying about the 'rightness' or 'goodness' of it, we may appropriate film imagery in line with what we desire the meanings to be, for particular purposes. Video technology does allow a level of control over watching and reflecting on films, so that ordinary viewers can be in the relatively unusual position of distancing ourselves from the spectacle even while being flooded by it.[14] Many contemporary films do, as it happens, lend themselves to this, in their mixtures of nostalgia and futurism, novelty and pastiche, violence, sex, comedy, magic and banality.

If the professionally knowledgeable have to distance themselves from culture in order to objectify and monitor it; radicals these days all too often pretend to exist outside of their own living culture, hating what capitalism makes of it—and have lost *their* (high)way.

Notes

1. Studies in this category would include: Fred Pfeil (1995) *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference*, Verso; Yvonne Tasker (1998) *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, Routledge; S. Craig Watkins (1998) *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*, University of Chicago Press; Sharon Willis (1997) *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.
2. Genre-bending and recent developments in the US film industry are described by: Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood,' and Jim Collins, 'Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity', both in Jim Collins et al (Eds.) (1993) *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, Routledge; and in Timothy Corrigan (1991) *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, Routledge.
3. For what Stone did with Tarantino's script, see ref, note 1. See Sharon Willis, 'Borrowed Style: Quentin Tarantino's Figures of Masculinity', in *High* Contrast (ref. note 2). And while it makes sense to concentrate on other cinema production functions, so as to counter the hype of director-as-author, directors are the most visible focus in the motivation for these mixed genre films, and thus allow a more convenient cognitive mapping of this region of contemporary cinema. See: Yvonne Tasker (1998), 'Performers and Producers', in *Working Girls* (ref. note 1); and Lizzie Francke (1994) *Script Girls: Women Screenwriting in Hollywood*, Routledge.
4. For example, pornography: Linda Ruth Williams (1993) 'Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women', *Sight & Sound*, Vol. 3, No. 7, pp. 12-14; or horror: Carol J. Clover (1992) *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, BFI.
5. Accounts of Lynch's early films are given in: Michael Chion (1995) *David Lynch*, BFI; Corrigan (ref. note 3); and John Alexander (1993) *The Films of David Lynch*, Letts.
6. A range of perspectives on *Blue Velvet* can be found in: Michael Atkinson (1997) *Blue Velvet*, BFI; Peter Brunette & David Wills (1989) *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press; Chion (ref. note 6); Corrigan (ref. note 3); Barbara Creed (1988) 'A Journey Through Blue Velvet', *New Formations*, Vol. 6, pp. 97-117; Norman Denzin (1987) 'Blue Velvet: Postmodern Contradictions', *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 5, pp. 461-73; Fredric Jameson (1989) 'Nostalgia for the Present', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 88, pp. 53-64; and Jed Sekoff (1994) 'Blue Velvet: the Surface of Suffering', *Free Associations*, Vol. 31, pp. 421-46.
7. Sharon Willis (1997) convincingly argues that *Wild At Heart* violently displaces various middle class anxieties into its treatment of race and gender ('Do The Wrong Thing: David Lynch's Perverse Style', in *High Contrast*, ref. note 2). But this insight is left hanging, almost as an afterthought.
8. On *Lost Highway*, see: Marina Warner (1997) 'Voodoo Road', *Sight & Sound*, Vol. 7, No. 8, pp. 6-10; David Lynch & Barry Gifford, (1997) *Lost Highway*, Faber & Faber; Kim Newman (1997) [review], *Sight & Sound*, Vol. 7, No. 9, pp. 48-9.
9. An incisive critique can be found in Jim McGuigan (1992) *Cultural Populism*, Routledge.
10. Yvonne Tasker dissects representations of women and their sexuality in terms of the economic and social implications of women's employment (*Working Girls*, ref. note 2). Her discussion works partly due to its explicit attention to the articulation of social class interests in film narratives, producers and viewers. But despite recurring throughout the book, there is little sense that such questions need to be foundational—as in Sharon Willis' analysis of *Wild At Heart* (see note 8).
11. See, for example, E.P. Thompson's studies, and the work of James C. Scott—in particular, *Domination: The Arts of Resistance*, Yale University Press (1990). Tricia Rose shows how fruitful a sensitivity to grassroots audiences can be, in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, University Press of New England (1994). Ron Eyerman also discusses Black American culture and politics: 'Moving Culture', in Mike Featherstone & Scott Lash (Eds.) (1999) *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, Sage.
12. See 'Natural Born Cultures' (note 1).
13. If, as I believe, collective grass-roots action is always both political *and* cultural, then radical left criticism of popular culture should avoid elitism. But, to put it mildly, this seems rare.
14. Thanks to Stefan Szczelkun for this point.