locates such steadiness of theme, form, narrative, and style in Hitchcock’s work is itself a defense of the auteurist perspective. Allen’s conclusions would stand on even firmer ground, however, if he had set forth a rationale for his auteur-based approach, and if he’d taken note of instances that call Hitchcock’s authorship into question, as when Paramount vetoed his last-minute scramble to recall the prints of Vertigo so the crucial confession/revelation scene could be removed. Along the same lines, Allen has little to say about most of the brilliant collaborators—Robert Burks, Ben Hecht, Henry Bumstead, and so on—who made important contributions to Hitchcock masterpieces, although he does quote the half-baked theories of Technicolor consultant Natalie Kalmus at surprising length. But these aren’t major complaints, and my other quibbles with the book are smaller still—minor inaccuracies, occasional oversimplifications, and omissions of interesting material, as when he links the opening camera movement in Psycho (1960) to Hitchcock’s often-used bird imagery without mentioning its origin in a “fly on the wall” motif that was mostly excised from the final screenplay.

None of which should dissuade Hitchcockians from digging into this carefully researched and artfully written book; thanks to its fine scholarship, critics will be tracing the ramifications of Hitchcock’s romantic irony for a long time to come. Unity within diversity. Both/and. Criss-cross. “Isn’t it a fascinating design?” as Hitchcock rhetorically asked in relation to Strangers on a Train (1951). “You could study it forever.” © 2009 David Sterritt

DAVID STERRITT is chair of the National Society of Film Critics, adjunct professor at Columbia University and the Maryland Institute College of Art, and author of The Films of Alfred Hitchcock (Cambridge University Press, 1993).


MARTIN FRADLEY

The Impossible David Lynch
by Todd McGowan

After the commercial failure of both the second season of Twin Peaks (1990–91) and its big-screen prequel, Fire Walk with Me (1992), director David Lynch was regularly dismissed as obscurantist or an aimless postmodern cynic. His reputation was restored following the widespread acclaim achieved by Mulholland Dr. (2001). A revival of serious critical interest also occurred, evidenced by the publication of books about Lynch: Jeff Johnson’s Pervert in the Pulpit: Morality in the

Works of David Lynch (McFarland, 2004), Erica Sheen and Annette Davison’s edited collection The Cinema of David Lynch: American Dreams, Nightmare Visions (Wallflower, 2004), Eric G. Wilson’s The Strange World of David Lynch: Transcendental Irony from “Eraserhead” to “Mulholland Drive” (Continuum, 2007), updated editions of Chris Rodley’s Lynch on Lynch (Faber and Faber, 2005) and Michael Chion’s David Lynch (BFI Publishing, 2006), and now Todd McGowan’s study, which is one of the most sustained and original accounts of Lynch’s uncanny and often bewildering oeuvre.

McGowan begins The Impossible David Lynch with the contention that the director’s films repeatedly demonstrate a central preoccupation: “the bizarre nature of normality” (1). For this author, Lynch’s movies are neither ironic nor fundamentally reactionary (as they have often been characterized). Instead McGowan sees them as interrogations of late-capitalist social alienation and, in turn, our individual reliance on compensatory fantasy. Rather than offering some respite from the oppressive nature of reality, Lynch’s films are argued to demystify the fantasies which serve to structure and underpin our relationship to the material world. McGowan claims that Lynch’s pop-expressionist aesthetic erases the artificial boundary between psychic and social reality, providing a surreal critique of Hollywood “realism” and our perverse relationship to the “normality” it supposedly depicts. Lynch’s films “don’t strike us as realistic,” suggests McGowan, “because we are so enmeshed in an ideologically driven fantasy underwritten by Hollywood” (11). However, Lynch does not simply employ the Brechtian tactic of startling audiences, as many of Godard’s films do; Lynch’s films take as their subject a powerful desire to escape dissatisfying reality by means of cinematic artifice.

The Impossible David Lynch traces the evolution of Lynch’s treatment of fantasy in a chronological series of close readings of all the feature films, from Eraserhead (1977) through to Mulholland Dr. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of McGowan’s study is his revisionist impulse to continually refute the director’s reputation as apolitical: “If there has been one sustained theme of criticism of Lynch’s work, it has followed these lines: he creates filmic worlds that show little sign of the material world—of class inequality, marginalized people, or economic struggle” (26). As a counterblast, The Impossible David Lynch goes to great lengths to argue that, from the outset of his career with films like Eraserhead and The Elephant Man (1980), Lynch’s movies have always explored the endlessly permeable boundary between individual subjectivity and the material world’s ideological impositions and interpolations. This avowed emphasis on challenging critical doctrine concerning Lynch does some-
times lead McGowan to arrive at some surprising (and occasionally hyperbolic) conclusions: the critically scorned sci-fi adaptation *Dune* (1984—which Lynch himself has practically disowned) is boldly reimagined as his “most overtly political film” (89), arguing here that fantasy *drives* social revolution; commercial flop *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* is called the director’s “most important and original film” (131) because it insistently deconstructs the cultural fantasy surrounding the doomed Laura Palmer.

McGowan’s individual analyses of films such as *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Wild at Heart* (1990), and *Lost Highway* (1997) are methodical, thoughtful, and largely persuasive, though the prose does have an occasional tendency to become arcane and overly scholarly, something that will doubtless alienate readers without at least some training in contemporary film theory. These lapses into convoluted conceptual abstraction are due in no small part to the author’s insistence on employing psychoanalytic concepts as an integral part of his project—“films that blur the line between desire and fantasy,” he writes in a representative passage, “best approximate our quotidian experience of the world, in which fantasy saves us from having to endure the inherent traumatic desire of the Other unprepared” (17). Of course, this usage is in many ways understandable given the films’ blend of expressionism and surrealism, and its themes of psychopathology and sexual obsession. Lynch explores—as the title of his most recent film, *Inland Empire* (2006), makes plain—the psyche’s inner and unconscious expanses. Yet McGowan’s claim that the director’s films “make sense only if we turn to the insights of psychoanalysis” (145) is surely an overstatement. Might we not, for example, understand *Blue Velvet* (1986), with its overt foregrounding of various Freudian themes and tropes, as a *parody* of psychoanalysis? Likewise, McGowan’s take on *The Straight Story* (1999)—that it presents Lynch’s “mythical image of the heartland not as reality but as the result of an extreme fantasmatic distortion” (79)—risks overlooking the film’s gentle humor and its self-mockery of key Lynch tropes and images, the author perhaps straining too hard to apply his thesis to Lynch’s *oeuvre* in its entirety. Yet what is most admirable finally in *The Impossible David Lynch* is the author’s critical imagination and theoretical ambition, which provide the basis for a genuine rethinking of a much-discussed filmmaker. © 2009 Martin Fradley


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**OVERVIEWS**

**DONALD F. LARSSON**

* Becoming Film Literate: The Art and Craft of Motion Pictures by Vincent LoBrutto

* Film: A Critical Introduction by Maria T. Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis

Some of us can recall a time when there was not much guidance for the nascent cineaste. Despite a handful of available film histories and essay collections, something still was missing. One had to dive into those works, sampling here and there, comparing and contrasting word with film until something clicked, some cumulative weight of knowledge finally tipped a switch that allowed you to understand what you had been hearing and seeing in the theater all along. Now there is a huge range of available resources, including *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Movies, Flicks, and Film* (Alpha, 2000); the Internet; and the mini-film archives included on some DVDs. The growth of film study in higher education has also established one pathway for the film initiate through structured knowledge, but how many film students will actually hear that click of understanding? These thoughts are prompted by two very different books with similar aims. Both *Film: A Critical Introduction* by Maria T. Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis of North Carolina State University, and *Becoming Film Literate* by Vincent LoBrutto, who teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York, aim to introduce readers to motion pictures, yet each book’s structure and content reflect a different understanding of who those readers might be.

As a college text, *Film: A Critical Introduction* is the more conventional book. Now in its second edition, this work stands apart from its competitors through its new emphasis on writing about film. Few other textbooks combine such detailed discussion of the elements of film with, in the authors’ words, “the importance of developing interpretive and evaluative skills by constructing written arguments” (xii). Thus, in part 1, Pramaggiore and Wallis lay out the groundwork of film study in relation to audience expectations; formal structures of narrative, image and sound; and the extra-textual references inherent in so much of the film experience, all in relation to the goal of film analysis: “to make statements about a film’s themes and meaning” (26). A discussion of different types of interpretive claims is then followed by an analysis of Carl Franklin’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995). A similar pattern holds throughout part 2 of the book as explanations and