

POST MODERN DRIVE

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Abstract: The paper "POSTMODERN DRIVE" highlights the connections between the postmodern literary theories and their implementation in the cinema, having as main point for the analysis the film directed by David Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, as what he produces has always been central in academic discussions of postmodern film. Thus, the focus of the investigation is upon the way in which postmodern ideas are reflected in this film or the manner in which they can be used to interpret the film.

Key-words: Postmodernism, cinema, literary theory, interpretation.

The fields of "film studies" are more and more connected to a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches regarding the study of cultural significance of media in employing features of literary theory in the contents of films. Going to the cinema can become not only a visual experience but a way of decoding the deeper meanings that are transmitted through the images.

In *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Mary Klages underlined that postmodernism, like modernism, rejects the boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejects the rigid genre distinctions, emphasises pastiche, the mild parody, the technique of collage, irony, and playfulness. Postmodern art favours reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentariness and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and emphasises on the deconstructed, decentred, dehumanized subject, debunking, decanonization, dephelessness, selflessness, intertextuality, performance, participation, progress.

Regarding these features, we will understand the reason for which the viewers need to watch very carefully every scene from *Mulholland Drive* exactly because of the fragmentation of ideas and this apparent discontinuity. Postmodernism does not just lament on the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense, even though this nonsense is only positioned on the surface of an intended idea.

Postmodern theory challenges the modernists' beliefs and "master narratives" associated with "progress," "truth," "human improvement," "high art," "science," "technology" with the assumption that these "narratives" lead the humans to a greater sense of happiness and fulfilment. Postmodern perspectives are evident in contemporary art, film, architecture, fiction, and music, which challenge traditional forms.

Postmodern strategies are also well displayed as juxtaposition or overlapping of worlds which are skilfully used in *Mulholland Drive*.

David Lynch, the director of *Mulholland Drive*, is an American filmmaker, television director, visual artist, musician and occasional actor. Known for his surrealist films, he has developed his own unique cinematic style, which has been dubbed "Lynchian", and which is characterized by its dream imagery and meticulous sound design. The surreal and in many cases violent elements in his films have earned him the reputation that the images he uses "disturb, offend or mystify" the audiences.

The first motion picture that he produced was the surrealist horror *Eraserhead* (1977). After *Eraserhead* became a cult classic on the midnight movie circuit, Lynch was employed to direct *The Elephant Man* (1980) from which he gained mainstream success.

He directed the highly popular murder mystery *Twin Peaks* that had a great success in Romania, in the 90's as at that time, there were not so many movies from this category broadcasted on television.

Turning further towards surrealist filmmaking, three of his following films worked on "dream logic" non-linear narrative structures: *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2006). Lynch proceeded to embrace the internet as a medium, producing several web-based shows, such as the

animation *Dumbland* (2002) and the surreal sitcom *Rabbits* (2002).

In the course of his career, Lynch had three Academy nominations for Best Director, and a nomination for best screenplay. Lynch was awarded twice France's César for Best Foreign Film, as well as Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and a Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the Venice Film Festival.

The French Government awarded him with the Legion of Honour, the country's top civilian honour, as a Chevalier in 2002 and then as Officer in 2007, while in that same year, "The Guardian" described Lynch as "the most important director of this era".

Regarding *Mulholland Drive*, David Lynch both written and directed it. It was highly acclaimed by many critics and earned Lynch the Prix de la Mise en Scène (Best Director Award) at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival as well as an Oscar nomination for Best Director.

The movie cannot be considered very easy to digest as it is not exactly for entertaining the audience while eating popcorn, but to reveal a puzzling, deep story. The strong points of this film are the various interpretations and the impact on the viewers that hold important background postmodern literary knowledge.

At first, *Mulholland Drive* was created as a television pilot, but David Lynch planned to shoot the scenes and keep an open ending. After being rejected by the television executives, Lynch provided an ending to the project and he transformed it into a feature film. Still, the end of the film, along with Lynch's characteristic style has left the audiences the assignment to decide upon the different meanings and interpretations on the scenes. In several interviews, Lynch has declined to offer a clear explanation of his intentions for the narrative, leaving the critics to speculate on the several layers of the plot.

The film tells the story of an aspiring actress named Betty Elms, newly arrived in Los Angeles, California, who meets and befriends an amnesiac hiding in her aunt's apartment. The story includes several other seemingly unrelated events that eventually connect in various ways, as well as some surreal scenes and images that relate to the cryptic narrative. A.O. Scott of "The New York Times" writes that while some might consider the plot an "offense against narrative order ... the film is an intoxicating liberation from sense, with moments of feeling all the more powerful for seeming to emerge from the murky night world of the unconscious."

One of the main keys of this movie may be the concept of the *unconscious* as the whole film was created after a deep process of creative ideas. In regards to this thought, David Lynch explained that:

"One night, I sat down, the ideas came in, and it was a most beautiful experience. Everything was seen from a different angle ... Now, looking back, I see that [the film] always wanted to be this way. It just took this strange beginning to cause it to be what it is".

The title *Mulholland Drive* is used to construct a recognizable Hollywood's product, to generate the energy and interest of the viewers upon what it represents. The reviewer Roger Ebert marked that "the movie is hypnotic; we're drawn along as if one thing leads to another, but nothing leads anywhere."

Thus, to love David Lynch's movies means to love postmodern confusion. His films both excite and puzzle the audience. Meaning is fleeting there for a moment before dissolving into a whole new layer of confusion and contradiction.

Mulholland Drive seems like an obvious and deliberate embodiment of postmodernist theory, as the general plot is fragmented into parts that have no apparent connection. In the early twentieth century, modernism strove to explore and hold on to individual identity in a chaotic world to find meaning, shift through fragments, and make sense of a crumbling environment. After the Second World War, however, postmodernism descended. Still reacting against realism and taking ideas of fragmentation and meaning to a new level, postmodernism thrived in chaos, seeing it as something to which no sense can be made - where a quest for meaning is futile.

At its simplest, the film reveals the death of dreams, the harshness of reality, and the falseness inherent in Hollywood's idyllic, cinematic dream. This comes from both the plot and its filmmaker. As David Lynch explained *“I look at the world and I see absurdity all around me. People do strange things constantly, to the point that, for the most part, we manage not to see it. That's why I love coffee shops and public places – I mean, they're all out there”*.

In the film, the viewers discover the juxtaposition of a generic, aspiring actress, and a dejected and struggling woman whose life is falling apart.

There are two stories joined together by a blue box and club Silencio, where everything is an illusion. At first, there is Betty's cheery, Hollywood adventure. Her acting skills are stunning, her hair and image are perfect, and she has an aunt who gives her an apartment to temporarily live in.

She's not struggling and is therefore secure enough to get carried away in Rita's mystery. But as she insists on digging into the truth, the security crumbles. As she's told everything is an illusion, her body quite visibly convulses, trying to reject the truth. A blue box is discovered, which fits Rita's strange blue key, and the world is flipped. Betty is actually Diane Selwyn, the decomposing girl at the heart of Rita's mystery. She wakes up, and lives obsessed with memories of a better past, emotionally decomposing rather than physically. She loved Camilla Rhodes (Rita), and struggled to make it as an actress. But Camilla left her for their director (Adam), and took her fame, success, and happiness. As a result, Diane is a mess. Her memories of passion and happiness lay out of her reach. She's a visual mess, continually humiliated by the woman she loves. Desperate, she turns to murder, thinking revenge will

release her pain. A normal key, painted blue, will tell her when the deed is done⁸.

With every scene that follows, the audience is drawn further and further in the whole labyrinth of fragmentariness and overlapping worlds and not one but several and several questions are raised: can she have the dream before the reality and death play out or when the cowboy asks Diane to wake up, does she actually wake up out of a premonition and see it acted out horrifically, or does she simply realize that Betty was the hope that died with Diane as she shot herself? The box was part of the mystery in Betty's world, and it was up to them whether they wanted to open it. When Rita did, Diane was forced out of the fantasy and into reality, just as Camilla forced Diane out of her romantic Hollywood dream. Furthermore, in Diane's world, the box is held by the scary nightmare man behind Winkies, from which an old folks couple come rushing out and crawl under Diane's locked door, growing, and chasing her into her bedroom to suicide.

As Roger Ebert stated *“Lynch strives to kill the Hollywood dream and icons, revealing both as nothing more than false imitations of false ideal”*.

After the plot is set using conventions of a typical Hollywood film, it quite literally resets itself. Established characters are re-established again, continuously used subplots, the connections and reinvented relationships between the characters, everything being fragmented into pieces of a bigger puzzle. All these interventions serve to convey the director's alternative point of view towards cliché scenario: the idyllic Hollywood dream being nothing else than a social construct.

The film illustrates the postmodernist point of relativism and scepticism towards presented realities and it questions the singularity and the competence of truth by employing the means used to convey it.

From this perspective, the film language can be seen as another form of a conceptual system – it has symbols, rules, sets of conventions which serve to lead to certain meanings which might as well be used to break the false representation of reality – the idyllic Hollywood dream by deconstructing the well established views and introducing alternative ones.

“Film is a language, it speaks to people, but not always with words and solely with the intellect, so it takes a certain attitude...to arrive with your own conclusions” as David Lynch explained.

For an audience with a background knowledge on postmodernism the film provides a great satisfaction as new and new meanings will be raised, as a web that contains only parts of a greater whole not easy to see or to understand at first but, as the audience will go in a deeper analysis the satisfaction becomes meaningful.

CONCLUSIONS:

Mulholland Drive portrays one version of events based on the traditional story of the innocent woman who arrives in Hollywood to become a successful movie star, only to juxtapose that story against a darker version of the same events. Also, the fragmentation and focus on surface images create self-reflexivity, thus, the need to reflect on the lack of coherent meaning.

Many of the individual scenes would be able to stand alone and probably make more sense than they do within the frame of the film. This lack of a narrative line also supports the self-reflexive quality of the film, in that it showcases Lynch's control in how he wishes the viewer to comprehend the film.

In many scenes, there are floating signifiers to suggest the dissemination of the film's meaning. Objects such as ashtrays and coffee cups are put in the foreground during the dream portion and during Diane Selwyn's reality and flashbacks, to suggest that most of the events in the film were in her mind. Not only are objects used for this purpose, but locations and phrases, such as *“This is the girl”* are repeated throughout the film to properly convey the impact that they had on Diane Selwyn's life. The reasoning behind the repetitive nature of objects, locations, and phrases is not clear until Diane Selwyn wakes up, and once the film catches up to the present in the narrative, these repeated elements help to connect the fragmented scenes and finally, make sense. The fragmented narrative also supports the notion of the film being self-reflexive. While the end of the film can offer some, but not much, explanation for the fragmented stories, the first three quarters of the film, that the viewer had become invested in, remains a mystery. This is due to Lynch's authorial intervention. Lynch's film leads the viewer down many paths and just when the paths might meet, the film takes an entirely new direction.

The final point is that there are no universal truths, everything is only relative and depends on the standpoint we choose, and that all is only one's own interpretation which is not perfectly true or false, not just a part of the whole or the whole itself. The viewers find themselves in an apparent silent trap yet, at the end they discover that it was only a journey of deep thoughts and new meanings, and while putting together the final pieces of the puzzle they just find the different tastes of the truth's essences.

These are the reasons for which *Mulholland Drive*, as a postmodern interpretation of Hollywood must be absorbed inch by inch by Lynch.

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