

---

William J. Devlin and Shai Biderman (eds.), *The Philosophy of David Lynch*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011, 248 pp.

---

The book *The Philosophy of David Lynch*, edited by William J. Devlin and Shai Biderman, consists of the Introduction (1–7) and the following parts: Part 1. The World of David Lynch (five essays, 7–74), Part 2. Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Existential Drive toward Self-Understanding (five essays, 95–174), and Part 3. The Self Confronts the World: Issues in Ethics, Society, and Religion (four essays, 175–238). The book is described as follows:

In *The Philosophy of David Lynch*, editors William J. Devlin and Shai Biderman have compiled an impressive list of contributors to explore the philosophy at the core of the filmmaker's work. Lynch is examined as a postmodern artist, and the themes of darkness, logic, and time are discussed in depth. Other prominent issues in Lynch's films, such as Bad faith and freedom, ethics, politics, and religion, are also considered. Investigating myriad aspects of Lynch's influential and innovative work, *The Philosophy of David Lynch* provides a fascinating look at the philosophical underpinnings of the famous cult director. (<http://www.amazon.com/Philosophy-David-Lynch-Popular-Culture/dp/0813129915> Retrieved 3. 11. 2011)

Now, is this information provided by the publisher the right one? One can be suspicious about the quote. Why? It is said that the purpose of the book is to “explore the philosophy at the core of the filmmaker's work” and this allegedly “provides a fascinating look at the philosophical underpinnings of the famous cult director”. Furthermore, some other leading experts say the following:

...this definitive volume will gain the attention of scholars and the gratitude of Lynch's many fans. (S. M. Sanders, [http://www.kentuckypress.com/live/title\\_detail.php?Titleid=2600](http://www.kentuckypress.com/live/title_detail.php?Titleid=2600), Retrieved 3. 11. 2011)

Why? Because the book “explores philosophy at the core / philosophical underpinnings” of Lynch's work. Generally speaking, the book spells out what his films are under their philosophical aspects. On the other hand, David Lynch said:

It's a dangerous thing to say *what a picture is*. If things get too specific, *the dream stops*. (Van Straaten 2007: 255, italics added)

If Lynch is right, and partly he must be, then what is the purpose of such book? The general purpose is that the topic is a legitimate part of “popular

philosophy". Of course, there is nothing popular about the philosophy "in the book" or "in Lynch's films", but his films are popular and to philosophize about popular phenomena makes the topic possible. More specific purpose of the book is to present the "thread viewers can follow to help guide them through Lynch's maze and come to understand Lynch's cinematic collection: namely, the human psyche". So philosophy of his films can help us understand the "human psyche", "the human mind", "his own distinct philosophical account of reality, the human being, and human issues" (2).

Finally, the book "is designed to assist the viewers of Lynch's films to come to understand the philosophical ideas portrayed in his body of work" (2). Therefore, there is philosophy in his films. How surprising that there is philosophy at the core of all popular phenomena. In the sentence that follows the quoted one the expression "the philosophical ideas" is changed into the expression "Lynch's philosophy". It is not just the case that there is some philosophy "in" his films and that it is important "to explicate it", but also that there is something as "his philosophy" i.e. the philosophy of the very director. I am sorry if I am completely ignorant but I never came across a philosophical book by David Lynch. How stupid of me, of course, *his films are his philosophical works*. So the essays by philosophers in the collection are discussions about the director's philosophy in his films. On the other hand, the volume is made to assist "viewers" not "philosophers".

This issue about popular philosophy can be bypassed in the case of Lynch's films. As editors claim in the Introduction, there are three distinct philosophical standpoints made by Lynch:

- (1) ...he is able to create a new reality, a new world for the audience. Lynch pulls us into his constructed reality so that the dividing line between the world on the screen and the audience members is blurred. (2)
- (2) Given that the traditional conception of the world in terms of logic, epistemology, and ethics has collapsed, Lynch provides us with an existential approach toward creating our own identity and our own meaning in life. (3)
- (3) Lynch unites the world and the individual ... Lynch's analysis of how the individual confronts the chaotic world. (4)

The first statement is important. Namely, it states that the film itself is the reality. Everyone who saw his movies, for instance *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (especially after the so called "Bang Bang Bar" scene, see Olson 2008: 341–95), after watching it and exiting the theatre, has the distinct feeling, caused by sounds, colors, shapes, expressions, gestures, bodily movements etc. that create certain sign of warning, the sign which says that perhaps the reality was in there, and one needs few minutes to accom-

modate to “non-film reality” again. In a way, one needs to remember the reality “before the film”, to leave it. Now, what is the philosophical significance of such a view? Is Lynch simply saying “I’m a pragmatist or even anti-realist concerning reality” and does he provide some arguments to support this claim? Well, one might wonder if the mentioned “feeling” can be counted as an argument of a kind. Or does he merely give us an additional reason to doubt reality? The statement (2) is also important. It shows the meaning of the first. There is no objective, or given world, so one is forced to create one, and does this by creating herself. In a way, Lynch is claiming that in today’s world one needs to invent herself in order to exist (3). This is a disturbing experience, as it is claimed by the third statement, but this is the only way in which one can survive and get united with the world.

Now, these statements capture David Lynch’s philosophy. However, do they have any significance for contemporary professional philosophy? Perhaps this question is meaningless since the purpose of the volume is not to discuss the “current philosophical standpoints”, but to help the “viewers”. It surely helps the viewers, but given that most viewers are not educated philosophers, the book can easily interpret Lynch’s movies without critical philosophical apparatus, that is, without mentioning other possible interpretations. On the other hand, if this is a meaningful question, then it is perhaps worthy of trying to provide the answer to it. The point of my objection to the book is that it doesn’t provide such answer, at least not in some important form. Surely, one can find some indications of such answer in many essays, if not in all of them, and that is the basic reason why philosophers, even those uninterested in Lynch’s films, should study the book and eventually watch some of his classics.

It seems to me, and now I am trying to write both as a professional philosopher and a fan of Lynch’s films at the same time, that his movies are really saying something philosophically important. But I am not sure what exactly that is. Perhaps it has something to do with our confrontations with reality, world, life, and eventually ourselves. If his movies could be compared to philosophical essays by professional philosophers, and it can be argued that they are, then he is saying that the door one needs to open in order to enter philosophy is the door of certain aesthetics, beauty, and style. Wittgenstein wrote that philosophical book can be entitled “The Wonders of Jungle” (Wittgenstein 2000: Item 147). What is the point of such book? It is about the jungle after all, not about philosophy. Yet, the jungle is something mysterious and strange. For instance, by wondering why and how caterpillars turn into butterflies one can become a biologist, but one can also wonder about the plurality and diversity of forms of life of jungle and become a philosopher by trying to understand this simple fact. What I will say is a kind of Wittgensteinian approach to the issue.

The point is that both philosophy and science start with simple marvel over something strange. They are just about *looking-at* something and being *surprised* by it. Afterwards both, the future biologist and philosopher, are *looking-for* the source of wonder of weird and wonderful phenomena that they encounter, but after that they move in different directions. They both look-at a strange world but have different ideas about it. A philosopher is looking-at the world not in order to *intervene into the world* like a scientist does, but in order to *understand the pattern of the world*. In order to do so she turns from *looking-at* to *seeing-as*, seeing various aspects of phenomena, and finally to seeing the pattern of it. This creates *understanding* of it.

It seems to me that in at least some David Lynch's films these elements are presented and need to be explicated. Some of them are surely interpreted in the present volume, which is the primary source for "viewers", but some should be interpreted in order to be the primary source for "philosophers" as well.

Perhaps this is completely wrong. I am only saying that a philosopher and a movie director can equally influence one's philosophy. However, the following list of ideas in Lynch's films should be further examined in order to establish my point, and since one cannot do that in a book review I leave the reader, hopefully a philosopher, a Lynch films fan, or both, with the good book, a list of "links", and film(s) that need to be watched once again, but from the different aspect. Previous claims (1–3) stated by editors of the book are partially examined in some essays, for instance (1) in terms of rationality and sanity of irrational and insane world, or change of rationality from deductive to mystical is examined (*Twin Peaks*) in the first and second essay, especially in case of *Twin Peaks* television series (13–5; 26–9); (2) in terms of opposition and harmony between two sides of human nature, one transparent, normal, public, and ordinary, and the other, hidden, abnormal, private, and extraordinary (*in Blue Velvet*) in the third essay, (50–3); and (3) in terms that there is constant struggle and finally harmony with evil which isn't outside in the world, but in each and every one of us (*in Twin Peaks*, 175–86).

Of course there are many such places in essays of this collection and in David Lynch's films which make the examination worthy, not just in terms of popular philosophy, meaning popularizing philosophy by certain films which may or may not be genuinely philosophical work, but popularizing certain films which are genuinely philosophical in terms of a director's basic idea, the very film, and finally the influence toward fans, fans-philosophers, and philosophers. Of course, some topics are more philosophical than others, and this goes for some directors and their films as well. There are such directors, like S. Kubrick or J. Carpenter among classics, and M. Night Shyamalan among more contemporary, and there

are such genres like sci-fi, horror, and their various mixtures (like *Alien* among classics, or *Even Horizon* or *Dark City* among more contemporary). Some films, among which there are some by David Lynch, are not philosophical just in this manner. In a way, they are completely finished philosophical essays. One can watch them and enjoy, or perhaps not. One can say or write something about them.

Yet, essentially David Lynch's films *don't have philosophical aspects*, they do not *imply* them; rather they *are filming aspects of philosophy*, aesthetically *manifested* aspects of it. ("Style is the expression of a general human necessity. This holds for a writing style or a building style (and any other)", Wittgenstein 2003: 17.) His films are essentially crime stories (even *Dune* is in a way a crime story) overcrowded with various aesthetic elements that mix say the metaphysics and mysticism of a crime with the forensics of it. Of course, this statement still needs to be argued for, but by and large, the idea is that not only certain style of thinking, writing, and speaking is an important, if not indispensable aspect of philosophy, but that the philosophy itself has aspects that can be presented only in art, film for instance. In many cases the present book only points to this direction and it doesn't go there really.

It seems that in this sense the collection of essays *The Philosophy of David Lynch* by William J. Devlin and Shai Biderman should be studied, films should be watched again under some new aspects, and some new philosophical issues should be raised based on these films, perhaps as the previously mentioned one.

### References

- Olson, G. 2008. *David Lynch, Beautiful Dark* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press).
- Van Straaten, L. 2007. "Review: Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc (2007) David Lynch", *Film-Philosophy* vol. 11, 254–259.
- Wittgenstein, L. 2000. *Wittgenstein's Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- . 2003. *Public and Private Occasions*, edited by J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield).

**Kristijan Krkač**  
 Zagreb School of Economics and Management  
 Jordanovac 110  
 10 000 Zagreb  
 kristian.krkač@gmail.com