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The Lynchian Gaze: David Lynch and Nudity in Film

Donald McCarthy · Wednesday, August 27th, 2014

Nudity in cinema has a long history. American mainstream films began featuring nudity as early as 1915 with the film *Inspiration*. Nudity in large studio films was not common during the silent era, but nor was it unheard of. Come the Hays Code, essentially a puritanical list of what could and couldn't be put in film, in 1936, nudity vanished from films almost entirely. A few exceptions slipped past the censors, but the films did not receive much mainstream release. When the Hays Code ended in the 1960s, nudity once more cropped up. By the 1970s, you'd be hard pressed to find a film that didn't have nudity (slight exaggeration).

Nudity and art have an even longer history. From the Greek statues to Renaissance paintings, nudity has been a key part of art. However, film has brought it to life in a way it previously could not be—it gave it motion.

There are two main approaches towards filming nudity, just as there are two general reasons nudity is used in film (there are exceptions, of course, but there always are in art). The approach normally seen, and often the character on screen need not be completely nude for this, is objectification of the body. This often includes the camera panning over the character's body or tilting upward. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this approach. The problem comes in with when and how it is deployed. A problematic approach can be seen in many an action film or cable drama. The camera has a tendency to linger on and objectify young women and solely young women. This *is* an intrinsically wrong approach as it leads to an intense sexualizing of people of a certain appearance, implying that only they can be truly seen as attractive, and it is also an exclusive approach as it is designed solely for the male eye. Considering that women make up a large percentage of the viewing population, this seems to be a questionable approach from an economic standpoint, let alone a sexism standpoint.

I want to stress that there is nothing wrong with nudity in film or even the occasional objectification of nudity. However, the fact that nudity is used to objectify only one gender and only specific members of that gender is a difficult approach to defend. An example of this approach can be found in HBO's otherwise excellent *Game of Thrones*. It features almost exclusively women naked and it films them in an objectifying fashion, as opposed to in a neutral fashion. The camera focuses on the naked women in a way it does not when a male character is nude.

Another annoying aspect of this approach is that it interrupts the story, as if the creators have no faith the audience will pay attention if there is not a dose of nudity. It is a condescending approach

and an insult to the viewer.

The second approach is to use nudity in a thematic fashion and to film it as any other scene would be filmed. This approach can be found in many a foreign film, films which usually contain more nudity than American films, but feel as though it is not as prominent because the camera does not focus on the nude body during the scene for no purpose other than titillation.

The director who tends to use nudity in the most fascinating way is David Lynch, director of *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive* and the creator of the television drama *Twin Peaks*. Lynch's *Blue Velvet* divided critics upon release thanks to its nudity and sexuality. Pauline Kael's review was praising while Roger Ebert despised it, leading to a very contentious [argument with Gene Siskel](#).

The schism in reviews revolved around the relationship between Kyle MacLachlan's Jeffrey and Isabella Rossellini's Dorothy. The pair has a sadomasochistic relationship and Lynch portrays their relationship with an almost cruel detachment, objectifying none of it and making the audience a neutral observer. He's saying, "Here's what it is, uncensored." An audience used to glamorized nude scenes will have a difficult time dealing with such a different representation of a relationship. It is one of the many virtues that makes Lynch's films both difficult and fascinating.

Lynch's film deconstructs the use of nudity by having Jeffrey watch through a closet door Dorothy change her clothes. The camera flips back and forth between Dorothy, as seen through Jeffrey's eyes, and Jeffrey watching Dorothy, with Dorothy out of view. This is an intriguing duality that Lynch leaves us to deal with. We see the nudity and then see what we must look like when we're watching nudity. Jeffrey appears excited, but also nervous, going right along with the puritanical feelings Americans often have towards nudity (which is why American cinema has such a complicated relationship with it) and therefore the feelings some members of the audience have. Rossellini's appearance is of special note because she looks much less glamorous than she does in other films and in reality. At one point, Dorothy removes a wig to reveal her actual hair is curled up in a very tight ponytail, further revealing herself to Jeffrey, albeit unknowingly. Lynch is showing how initial appearance of a person can be revealing and the nude form should act as a revelation about that person.

Dorothy eventually discovers Jeffrey and in a reversal of the current dynamic, forces him to strip down naked at knife point. Her intention is to humiliate him, forcing him to become the objectified instead of her. Jeffrey's character ends up as nude as Dorothy's and both characters are filmed in a neutral, removed fashion, as if Lynch was just filming two people talking. If you compare this to film scenes where the nude body, again, usually that of a woman's, is slowly panned over and the lighting accentuates her appearance, you will see how different the two styles of nudity are. Lynch is not interested in putting an *Esquire* photo shoot in the middle of his film.

About a decade later, Lynch once more explored nudity in film with, in my opinion, his best film: *Mulholland Drive*. *Mulholland Drive* is almost incomprehensible come the final act when viewers watch it the first time, but it is also addictive, almost daring the watcher to give up on relying on a narrative. On second viewing, the film's plot comes together and everything falls into place. That first viewing, though, is where Lynch's portrayal of nudity comes in. Nudity is still considered so taboo in American society that a film is more likely to get hit with an "R" rating due to nudity than due to violence. The absurdity of this has been discussed by many, but I'd be remiss if I did not take a moment to comment on how ridiculous this is. After all, this is a country with a very large violence problem as opposed to a very large public nudity problem (not that I find public nudity to be much of a problem to begin with). However, this bizarre fear of nudity is important to any

discussion of the way film uses the naked or near naked body. I find it interesting that most mainstream films and television use nudity for objectification as opposed to plotting or characterization since one would think this would be the least likely way it would be used in a country that fears the bare body. Perhaps this is why Lynch so loves reversing nudity tropes in his films.

Mulholland Drive best exemplifies Lynch's use of nudity because it deconstructs the mainstream, near pornographic, use of nudity and turns it into something else. The first occurrence of nudity is a love scene between Naomi Watts and Laura Harring. It is shot in the dark, but the camera still shows us much of the two actresses' naked bodies, lingering over them on occasion. Compound this with the fact that the two characters have only just met and this scene looks like a fantasy sequence designed to deliver some nudity to keep the audience sated.

This doesn't last, though. Lynch is too difficult a director and would never give the audience what they wanted if he thought it wasn't important to the plot. In the last third of the film, the plot reveals the first two thirds have been a fantasy of Naomi Watts' and the sex scene never happened. We are instead shown Naomi Watts, whose appearance is that of a very worn out person in the last third, masturbating while thinking of Laura Harring. A brief fantasy sequence shows Watts angrily penetrating Harring with her finger, with Lynch hinting it could be construed as a rape fantasy. No matter how much the audience might find Watts or Harring attractive, the scene is disturbing and depressing, showing how far our protagonist has fallen. Had this scene not been present in the film, we would not understand Watts' character as well. To make the sex fantasy so real, so in our face, we comprehend how Watts' fantasy has deteriorated. It is in such sharp contrast to the earlier love scene that we have no choice but to admit that the scene presented earlier was both a fantasy to us and a fantasy to Watts. It is a fantasy both the character and the audience wanted to buy into.

The naked body is an interesting focus for art as it is a person at his/her most revealing. To misrepresent this, to remove its flaws, to remove what makes it human, to ignore the contradictions in views society has of it is dishonest storytelling at best. Lynch's works act as a refutation of this phenomenon and also an exploration of it. That Lynch will dabble in surrealism while exploring nudity only makes the fact that he presents it so honestly more interesting. Only by getting outside of mainstream narrative is Lynch able to show the reality of the naked body.

Top Image: Naomi Watts (r) and Laura Elena Harring in 'Mulholland Drive'

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