

Affective Incongruity in the Work of David Lynch

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Cognitive psychology approaches to film have recently advanced to incorporating cognitive and neuroscience. With the exception of a few scholars such as David Bordwell, one of the first to bring a cognitive approach to film, film studies is only just beginning to take full advantage of the advances made in this area. We have seen some resplendent results that bring together cognitive science, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and neuroanatomy in ways that have shed new, interdisciplinary light on the arts. Recently, emotional-affective research has added yet another important dimension to these approaches to film, enabling us to build frameworks for understanding better how viewers' perspective and understanding of film are filtered through our affective mechanisms.

Researchers such as Noël Carroll, Ed Tan, and Greg M. Smith look into basic reflex emotions processes like feeling, mood and affect (Huygens, 40). In my research, I examine the incongruent emotions, feeling, mood, and affect produced by David Lynch's work, which push the boundaries of accepted emotions in 'mainstream' cinema. I use his work, specifically the opening sequences of *The Elephant Man* (1980) and *Blue Velvet* (1986) to study how narrative structure and stylistic techniques can effect and produce incongruent emotions, thus affecting how we make meaning and connection in the experience of viewing his film. In order to understand the connection of emotion and film, I use existing critical film theory on Lynch's work and combine this theory with cognitive science and emotional research. The goal: to encapsulate the whole emotional process that occurs from his work and film in general. Often affective incongruity confuses a viewer; what they see on screen does not match with their feelings or understanding of the film, therefore acceptance and meaning from a 'mainstream' audience is hard to garner, especially in David Lynch's enigmatic work. It is important to pay attention to these how these incongruent types of emotions (atypical in commercial cinema) are

built into his film blueprints--and a cognitive and neurobiological approach promise to shed light on this.

The work of David Bordwell and colleagues stands alone with the more scientific connection between film and cognitive science. Another theorist who has bridged the gap between science and film is Carl Plantinga, a professor of film and media studies at Calvin College and also the president of the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image. His paper “Affective Incongruity and *The Thin Red Line*” inspired my cognitive analysis of the work of David Lynch looking into the incongruent emotions experienced in his films like *The Elephant Man* and *Blue Velvet*, deconstructing the films both narratively and stylistically. In Plantinga’s article he discusses the affective incongruity within the film *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and how this gives the film a dual meaning of classical narrative war film and the emotional sense of wonder. This study investigates how the narrative structure and stylistic techniques effect and produce incongruent emotions, thus affecting how the viewers make meaning and connection in the experience of watching film, specifically Lynch’s work.

Psychological research defines affect as a purely bodily, visceral, chemical, or physiological reaction that occurs on a non-conscious and automatic level, however new research has proved empirically and scientifically that experience can take place on primary and perceptual level thus saying affect is a step to cognitive processes but also a level of experience (Huygens, 41). Therefore affect in filmic research can be looked at through the low-level emotions of experience. Incongruent emotions can be explained by defining their opposite, congruent emotions. These types of emotions can be described as a similar effect to synesthesia where senses are unified in experience, when one modality, say sound, is automatically

triggered, by color. Experiencing emotion is described in Ed S. Tan's book as an experience that accounts for a whole range of psychological events, it is not possible to separate what stages of these events we process (Tan, 46). Plantinga describes this experience in film as 'synesthetic affects,' when film 'attempts to provide a holistic affective experience congruent with the film's unfolding narrative and thematic concerns,' giving the viewers a fitting experience that cues them in the 'right' way to feel (Plantinga, 89).

Cinema in general is a holistic experience, combining cognitive, affective, and sensual experiences all into one. In detail, when a viewer watches a film they are deciphering meaning (cognitive experience) based upon what is happening in the film both stylistically and narratively while processing information or emotions (affective experience). Also, while the affective and cognitive experience is happening viewers are also aware of what is occurring in their reality around them (sensory experience), whether in a theater or on their couch. These three experiences cannot be separated from one another; they make up the overall holistic movie-watching experience.

The second part of the idea that Plantinga discusses is the idea of a fitting experience or a movie that 'cues' viewers to experience a film in a certain way. Lynch's work is notorious for not giving exact cues thus his work does not always have a cohesive meaning or interpretation. Plantinga interprets these cues through the use of two terms that refer to what the 'right' way to view a film means: the Searchlight Function (Carroll, 157) and Criterial Prefocusing (Carroll, 263-264). The searchlight function is when a viewer attends to certain things in a film based on their emotional state. For example, if a viewer was nervous previous to seeing an Alfred Hitchcock film, then the MacGuffin, a mysterious suitcase or a bomb, that creates anxiety would

be an object or item the viewer would pay close attention to. Also, criterial prefocusing is the idea that emotions are coordinated for particular purposes, by showing sequences that are explicitly designed to elicit congruent emotions (Plantinga, 88).

Criterial prefocusing commonly occurs in classical cinema, like Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) or Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). In these films narrative and stylistic cues, such as mise-en-scène, sound, and lighting, cue specific emotions for each film's genre. In the famous 'Trolley Song' sequence in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the use of bright costume colors, straight-on composition, and low-contrast lighting codes for a classical musical in that time era, similar to Minnelli's other musical *An American in Paris* (1951) or film musicals like *Oklahoma!* (1955), *The Music Man* (1962), and *The Sound of Music* (1965).



This is completely different than how *Touch of Evil* uses specific narrative and stylistic cues for a film noir. Sequences in this film frequently use shadowy high-contrast lighting and different

angles in composition, all techniques that are frequently used in noir films to create mystery and suspense.



Thomas Schatz's article on film genre sheds light on how these cues are coded to create expectations in viewers. Audiences that have seen multiple types of genre films develop 'rules' that set up viewer's expectations, like in the musicals above. He speaks of the deep structures that render a musical, western, film noir, etc. by coalescing the vaguely defined combination of actions and attitudes of characters and locales. He states that "genre functions like a language, as a formalized sign system whose rules have been assimilated, consciously or otherwise through cultural consensus. (565)" Also, in David Bordwell's work in fiction film defines that in classical cinema is extremely straightforward. One of the many characteristics he outlines that typify narrative fiction film is, "Uncertainties of gaps in the information that the viewer is given concerning the action are always temporary. In the end, the action invariably proves to be a complete series of causally related events (Bordwell, 8)." The rules of a genre not only define actions and attitudes of what happens within films but also a resolution that fits with the specific

genre. For example classical resolution in a musical would be a couple ending up together or a marriage, comparable to romantic comedies.

Resolution is absent in Lynch's work, therefore expectations of viewers are never fulfilled adding to the affective incongruence viewers feel on a general level. What a viewer experiences during his films is at least partly ambiguous. His films differ from commercial cinema; the stylistic and narrative techniques used do not point viewers in a specific direction, instead pointing them to an unexpected affective experience. Lynch's style in general is full of these unexpected affective experiences, so startling that his style has its own name, 'Lynchian,' that can be seen in the same light as the term specific to Franz Kafka, 'Kafkaesque.' This style is typified by surrealistic elements, mechanical sound design, and disturbing narrative themes. While fanatics are familiar with 'Lynchian' style, an average audience will be surprised and affected by the atypical emotional experience he creates.

Lynch's films have been described by Richard A. Barney, who has edited a volume of David Lynch interviews from his first feature film, *Eraserhead* (1977) to his latest *Inland Empire* (2006), as films "that will remain *perpetually* mysterious, in the sense of inducing a sense of wonder that both provokes and resists—in a potentially endless cycle—viewers' desire to make sense of the images and stories he offers them" (Barney, x). Not only does Lynch play with this *perpetual* mystery in his films but also after. Often times in interviews Lynch dances around the main content questions of his films, he gets by with describing them with words like, 'beautiful,' 'thrilling,' and 'magical,' words that can have several connotations depending on who is doing the interpreting. This apparent ambiguity in interviews further serves the purpose of allowing this mystery to be interpreted by viewers, never having a true definitive answer to

the film. Lynch also has been transcendental meditator (TM) since 1973 and uses his interest in altered, distended, and enhanced states of consciousness to create subtext in his films for viewers to consider (Barney, xii).

The films for this paper were explored through a shot by shot scene analysis in relation to the film on a whole, by looking at how the stylistic techniques used in a sequence impact the expectations for the rest of the film. Coincidentally both of the sequences analyzed are at the beginning of the films; however both sequences set up expectations and affective incongruity in different ways. Firstly, in *The Elephant Man* (1980) Lynch starts the film off with a sequence that could function on its own as an avant-garde short. This sequence sets viewers expectations and emotions up for an art cinema view of John Merrick's life, where instead the rest of the film follows a relatively classical narrative structure. In *Blue Velvet* (1986), the film begins with a picturesque setting but instead is overturned by typical Lynchian values of mechanical sound design and disturbing narrative themes to expose a psycho-sexual film noir.

The Elephant Man is a film that is loosely based on the story of Joseph Merrick's life, incorrectly named John Merrick, who suffered from severe physical deformities that caused the nickname 'Elephant Man' (Kember, 22). This film, as stated, begins with an avant-garde piece that lasts for no more than three minutes, but continues after that with a classical narrative structure depicting Mr. Merrick's (John Hurt) life from when he was first discovered by the British doctor Frederick Treves (Anthony Hopkins) at a freak show to the end of the film where Joseph 'John' Merrick lies down in his bed, the decision which will ultimately asphyxiate him. The film could have ended there, but Lynch added another similar avant-garde piece to the end of the film that is a continuation of themes, mechanical and distorted sound, smoke, and the

mother that appears in the moon through a dissolve in and zooms to her eyes similar to the beginning sequence.

The film's introduction starts with the names of all involved as the viewers are introduced to the over-arching soundtrack that accompanies the beginning of the classical narrative when Dr. Treves discovers the 'Elephant Man' at a Victorian freak show. The first shot we see [00:0048] in the avant-garde piece is a close-up of a woman's eyes (1), who we later find out is Joseph 'John' Merrick's mother. The camera then begins to tilt down to the woman's lips, a cut occurs and the whole portrait of a similar looking woman can be seen in a medium shot (2).



The next edit is a dissolve of the woman we saw 'painted' in the first shot (3); she is also framed in a medium shot as the portrait before her. What is inherently interesting about this shot is the fade of the non-diegetic score to the non-diegetic mechanical sound that is common of Lynch's films. The camera then fades to black and then back in to reveal elephants marching to the right of the screen (4), which matches well with the rhythmic thumping of the mechanical audio. A matching dissolve to the previous one is used with the close-up of the woman's eyes this time each eye is framed by an elephant (5). The still of the woman's eyes fades to black and again fades back into the elephants walking towards the camera until it blacks out. A cut, then a close up of the elephants truck, here another sound is added to the methodical thumping, a distortion of an elephant sound. As the shot continues the elephant rears its head and trunk eventually coming down on the woman we see standing in the screen. (The remaining sequences are edited with a cut). The next shot is a quick cut to the woman falling to the ground, with the same 'elephant' sound being used as her scream (6). The woman then continues to flail from side to side on the ground and the sound continues; now she is framed in a close up rather than the medium seen in shot 6 in the graphic. The sound then cuts out completely as smoke is seen fading from the darkness (8). Lynch leaves the viewers with the growing cloud of smoke as the mechanical sound is reintroduced with the addition of a baby crying.

This whole sequence is removed from the classical narrative, besides the very end sequence after Mr. Merrick dies of asphyxiation and his mother reads Tennyson's poem 'Nothing Will Die' among the mechanical sound of the first sequence. The ending of the film also functions as an ending to the avant-garde piece at the opening of the film, using similar stylistic techniques and shots. What links these two sequences besides the similar sound design is the new space of the stars and moon that dissolves into the mother's eyes similar to shot (3),

and also the smoke that occurs in shot (8) of the beginning sequence. After the camera zooms in on the mother in moon, and she recites 'Nothing will die' the camera fades to gray than black and the beginning non-diegetic sounds continue as the names of the people involved appear on screen.

The unnecessary additions of these two avant-garde pieces in the film beg the question of why they were put there in the first place. While I cannot speak to their narrative significance to the film, as Lynch constantly views his films as works that don't have one message, I can speak to how their inclusion impacts the viewers' expectations and reaction to the film. Specifically in regards to the idea of affective incongruity, these two sequences miscue the viewer to judge the film at first as an avant-garde piece. The inclusion of the second sequence is a reminder of how viewers were initially cued to understand the film, a strange mythical tale of the life of the 'Elephant Man' pieced together through the classical Lynchian style of odd mechanical soundscapes, abstract visuals, and ambiguous meaning. However, what they get is very different from what will come next in the following two hours of the film, getting a classical narrative of how Joseph 'John' Merrick lived.

Similar to this sequence is the beginning sequence of *Blue Velvet*, except the order of the affective incongruity is switched. First viewers are cued to think of the film as a classical narrative, but the use of surrealistic and Freudian elements creates a strange unsettling feeling different from the picturesque beginning of the film. *Blue Velvet* has elements of film noir, mystery, and a coming-of-age story, and when the film was released in 1986 this combination of elements created a lot of controversy in popular culture. Many people who saw the film thought that the strong sexual and violent content was too much, especially in the very bizarre sexual

sado-masochistic activities of Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini) a night club singer and also in the main character, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan), who decides to start his own bizarre investigation after finding a severed ear that Dorothy is mysteriously connected to. The world that transpires on screen is one laced with sex, drugs, and violence.

David Lynch described *Blue Velvet* in an interview with David Chute in 1986 as “a trip beneath the surface of a small American town, but it’s a probe into the subconscious or a place where you face things that you normally don’t face.” Lynch sees this film as ‘neighborhood picture’ and a ‘small mood film.’ Lynch sees mood as an important factor in his films because it’s ‘the feel and the smell and the place of the picture and it has to be right (Chute, 29).” While Lynch can describe the main plot and mood of the film, Chute goes on to speak more of how this film’s missing character structure and plot feel ‘klutzy’ but in the end is made up for because of Lynch’s craftsmanship. Chute deems this lack in plot and story line acceptable because, “He (Lynch) is such a wizard at inflicting us with his creepoid perceptions that he really doesn’t need to work through the intermediate steps of figuring out what it all means (Chute, 39).” This description pinpoints the feeling of affective incongruity for a viewer, which adds more significance to the film.

The first shot (1) is a low angle shot that tilts down to show a highly colorized blue sky, blood-red rose, and extremely white picket fence all while the non-diegetic soundtrack of ‘Blue Velvet’ (Bobby Vinton, 1965) smoothly plays overtop. The next shots continue to reveal the picturesque neighborhoods and people that live in Lumberton, waving firefighters, happy Dalmatians, beautiful flowers, innocent schoolchildren, and handsome houses (2), all seeming to move in a slow-motion rhythm with the early 60’s music. Then a man (Jeffrey’s dad) is seen in a

medium shot watering his lawn on a nice summer day. Next a woman, Jeffrey's mom, is seen drinking tea and watching TV. The next shot is an eyeline match to the TV in another medium shot, where the program she is watching could be some kind of mystery since someone is seen walking while holding a gun. Until this shot the overall affect of the sequence is positive. The inclusion of the gun hints that something could be wrong in the narrative. The next shot is of Mr. Beaumont again but this time the camera is closer to him, framing him in an American shot (3).



In shot (4) the water spigot the hose is connected is shown in a close-up and water is seen spraying out. The man then tugs on the hose and a quick cut shows that the hose is wrapped around a part of the bush.

The three shots of Mr. Beaumont, the hose, and the water spigot all show again, building a suspenseful moment for viewers to question what will happen next. Instead of something that has to deal with the act of gardening, Mr. Beaumont seems to have a heart attack or is shot with something and falls to the ground writhing in pain as the hose continues to shoot out water. The next cut from him on the ground is to the water spraying in spurts, which is explained by the next shot (5). Here in a medium-long shot a dog bites at the water and a little boy comes walking towards Mr. Beaumont on the ground.

Next a cut, then a closer shot of him and the dog, then another cut occurs and the camera shows a close-up of the dog. However, when the dog is shown the speed of the shot is slowed down and the non-diegetic sound of 'Blue Velvet' begins to fade in to the background as other noises in the diegesis, the water spraying and the dog barking, grow louder. At this point viewers realize that something is amiss within the storyline. These diegetic sounds continue when the next shot, an extreme close-up of the grass, is shown (6). As the camera tracks further through the grass the diegetic sound fades out and a new non-diegetic mechanical sound occurs. The next shot (7) reveals a close-up of beetles feeding, color is mostly removed from the shot and only the dark browns and blacks of the beetles are shown as a loud grotesque gnawing sound adds to the surrealistic soundscape. This shot is the most visceral emotional experience of the sequence. The next cut is to the 'Welcome to Lumberton' sign (8); all previous sound is removed and replaced by a peppy radio ad reminiscent to the first picturesque shots of the town,

switching back to the positive affect that is established at the opening of the film. Like in *The Elephant Man* Lynch puts a coda on the sequence that winks at what the sequence started as. Here this wink is the cut from the black dingy shot of the beetles to the bright 'Welcome to Lumberton' billboard accompanied by the cheery radio ad for Lumberton, USA that matches the initial perception of Lumberton, a picturesque American town.

Viewers expectations in *Blue Velvet* are upset and affective incongruence occurs when they are cued for something that did not occur. This happens a few times in the first sequence, first when Mr. Beaumont is in the garden and shot by something at [00:04:11] and then second at [00:05:09] when the beetles are revealed in the grass. Both of these shots are not cued by the stylistic or narrative feature leading up to each respective shot, thus viewers may have unsettling or confused feelings that pair easily with Lynchian style. First, when the Mr. Beaumont falls to the ground, the sequences before this event have nothing to do with what occurs. The first thing that comes to my mind in this sequence is that perhaps the water spigot will break causing water spray out, not what does happen when Mr. Beaumont is shot with something. The close-ups of the water spigot and hose point to my first thought of the simple spigot problem more so than what actually occurs in the narrative.

As I described in the earlier paragraph, after Mr. Beaumont falls the camera repeatedly cuts until only the dog is left on the screen seen in a close-up. Stylistically the shot is changed through slow motion and non-diegetic sound, cuing the viewers to understand that perhaps what is happening is odd, but they are still not cued with specifics. Lynch again subverts viewers' expectations when the surrealistic mechanical soundscape that often defines his work is heard and reveals the loud and grotesque beetles. This 'creepoid' or disgusting feeling that was

described by David Chute is achieved here. As Carl Plantinga concludes, “disgust has a universal component; visual, tactile, or olfactory contact with rats, cockroaches, urine, feces, and vomit has a similar affect on people across cultures,” (Plantinga, 82). Everyone who sees the beetle shot will have a similar visceral reaction to them; it is a simple common human reaction.

The use of affective incongruence in these two films typifies viewers’ moods after watching a David Lynch film, confusion and an unsettling feeling, from the slight reminder of the wacky avant-garde myth in *The Elephant Man* to the more confusing and unsettling ending of *Mulholland Dr.* (2001). Affective incongruity within his films effect viewers’ perception. Also, affective incongruity leads to an extra cognitive process of comprehension or understanding the film. This extra comprehension then catapults the films’ significance and meaning in the realm of film in general, because viewers must rewatch the films to glean more meaning. The more one thinks about a film and tries to interpret it the larger impact the film has, either negative or positive. The constant regurgitation of the narrative and stylistic themes used within the film go under more exploration thus creating more opportunity for meaningful and significant analysis.

Meaning in film is important to create significance. In this paper meaning refers to the Oliver and Bartsch article and their idea that appreciation is based on, “The perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience (Oliver & Bartsch, 76).” Viewers of Lynch’s work qualify for this experience, for they may not have been moved in a positive light or comprehend the content of the film, but the films uninterpreted state allows for the elaboration of thoughts and feelings which then creates a deeper meaning. The enigmatic structure of his films create discourse for

the viewers, enhancing their perception and own feelings towards the films. This extra cognitive process of interpreting both emotions and thoughts not only creates more significance for the viewer themselves but also enlarges the significance of the work, meaning people continue to speak about Lynch's films which gives them more importance in the film world.

Affective incongruence also allows for the emotional boundaries of film to be pushed further than a typical classical narrative where the film is mindlessly consumed by audiences, instead films like Lynch's encourage viewers to ponder and talk about the narrative and style of his cinema and also all film. To further my exploration of affective incongruity in David Lynch's work I would propose investigation into how incongruent emotions effect viewers cognitive and neural processing of film. Specifically working with an fMRI to compare how a classical narrative is processed and what emotions are elicited versus an atypical narrative like one of David Lynch's films, building upon work that has already been done by researchers like Kristen K. Ellard and her investigation into how film, music, and images, effect personal relevance to this media (Ellard, 232-243). Only through interdisciplinary scientific and empirical psychological and cognitive research can we reach a conclusion on how film affects viewers' brains cognitively and neurologically and further the field of cognitive film studies.

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