

Blue Velvet-1986: Where the underbelly of The American Dream is a nightmare....

You never know what you're going to get into when you see a Lynch movie. But, that's always one of the best aspects about him, I think....

On the surface, this is a fairly run-of-the-mill story line: two young people get caught up in trying to solve a real murder mystery and kidnapping in their own hometown. Golly! Why, that could be something right out of Hardy Boys fiction, right? As the two kids sip their soft drinks and crunch their lollipops (almost), making their plans, it's like Lynch has pulled something from his own teen years and has blown it up into something that, maybe, he would've like to have done when he was Jeffrey's (Kyle MacLachlan) age.

Of course, a murder and kidnapping are just the tip of this murderburg, beneath which there are a whole bunch of nasty things and nasty people that expose Jeffrey and his girl friend, Sandy (Laura Dern), to a world that exists, for them, only in their nightmares.

So, hello, Jeffrey, hello Sandy: time to wake up to the real world!

And Lynch serves it up to them – and us - with a mix of deadbeats, small time crooks, prostitutes, drunks and, arguably, the most chilling sociopath to grace the screen until Hannibal Lecter decided to drop in for dinner in Silence of the Lambs (1991). As Frank Booth, Dennis Hopper gives the performance of his career. See this movie just to see how good an actor he is – and thereafter, you'll be even looking at people you know - or think you know - and wondering....

So, what's Frank's problem, anyway? Well, apart from his need for drugs and sex, he's obsessed with a local chanteuse called Dorothy (Isabella Rossellini). To ensure her eternal devotion to him, Frank's kidnapped her husband and son, thus forcing her to succumb to his depravities. The only poop in the soup, however, is Jeffrey (who symbolizes all young guys who want to know...) who decides he wants to know more about Dorothy and bumps into Frank at the wrong moment. Or, maybe it was the right moment because Jeffrey can't stop himself now from finding out even more – about Frank, and Dorothy, and how Dorothy needs Jeffrey and how Jeffrey finds out things about himself that he maybe wishes had remained in his subconscious. Or maybe not?

Because curious Jeffrey persists – the dumb schmuck – just digging himself in deeper and deeper until he discovers the whole truth about poor Dorothy. And, you'll wish he didn't go back to her apartment because the climactic scene when Frank busts into Dorothy's apartment to find and kill Jeffrey ranks as one of the most terrifying sequences on film.

I'll say no more about the story and plot, but I've read that this film has been severely panned by some critics, here and elsewhere, who cannot seem to grasp the point that Lynch is trying to make.

How about this: Nothing Is Ever As It Seems – Even Yourself (and only you know that).

Or what about this: Everybody has the potential for good and evil, and of the best and worst kinds.

Well, being the subversive that Lynch is, my interpretation is that he's satirizing the American Dream, showing how the riches that everybody enjoys has its underpinnings in the dirty and dark underbelly of what everybody thinks is normality. So, what better place to do that than in Small Town America, the backbone of all that's supposed to be good about God's country, the land of the free and the home of the brave? And, everybody's got so used to it, nobody seems to notice – or care, any more....

Maybe some of those critics just didn't like to see such an unpalatable idea on film, if it occurred to them? For my money, Lynch has produced a metaphorical masterpiece that skewers the truth about life in America. But not only in America now, because the American way of life - the good, the bad, and the ugly (just had to use that cliché, didn't I?) - is spreading throughout the world.

So see this movie for that message as well as Lynch's directing, his constant use of extreme closeup and dark darkness, the lyrically moody score by Angelo Badalamenti (mingled with some great standards from yesteryear), and the discordant sounds from Alan Splet; they all combine to produce a film you'll never forget. Promise.

If you like Lynch, this is a must-see. If you haven't seen a Lynch movie yet, start with this one.

4th November, 2007

Rating: 9

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