

Inland Empire-2006: It's about a woman in trouble ... but which woman, and what trouble?

Following *Lost Highway* (1997), and *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Lynch now treats us to *Inland Empire* (IE), another exposition about the human psyche. It has a multi-layered plot – but only one real story; ‘real’ in this context meaning the core story that Lynch wants to tell. There are so many plot threads and devices, in fact, that many reviewers use words like ‘impenetrable’, ‘beyond explanation’, ‘surreal’ and so forth. Like Lynch’s previous two above, however, in my opinion IE’s narrative is understandable, despite the apparent chaos that batters our visual and aural senses.

Because, batter it does, from the opening scene of an old phonograph scratching out a barely discernible message, as though foreshadowing the difficulty of understanding all that is to follow....

The film then continues with a literally fuzzy episode between a prostitute and her client discussing terms, all in Polish with English subtitles, and in black and white – or smeary gray, to be more precise; another metaphor, perhaps, for the shades of gray that permeate all our understanding of the world, ourselves and each other.

Then a quick scene change to a weeping woman, sitting alone on a bed, in what appears to be a hotel room, watching a TV screen with snow and static. She’s distraught; she seems lost. Her eyes fixate on the TV screen....

Suddenly, an image of another woman walking towards a house flashes briefly on the TV, then the *whole* scene changes to a parody of a TV sitcom, but with giant rabbits and canned, inappropriate laughter: an obvious symbol for the inane and vacuous nature of most TV programming. After a few minutes, another quick scene change again to that woman approaching a house ... which is now the house of Nikki Grace (Laura Dern), the star of a movie to be produced, called ‘On High in Blue Tomorrows’.

The director Kingsley Stewart (Jeremy Irons) soon reveals to the actors that the new movie is to be a remake of a Polish production in which the female and male lead actors were murdered before the film was finished; and still remains unfinished....

And so, Nikki and her co-star, Devon Birk (Justin Theroux), begin the process of making the movie, during which they find themselves drawn to each other, to the point where they begin a torrid love affair outside of the fictional love affair between Sue (Dern) and Billy (Theroux) within the story being filmed ... with tragic results, because Nikki has a very jealous, Polish husband. But Nikki is now enmeshed in something beyond her control; and the horror increases as she begins to confuse her identities, leading to a worsening nightmare of different situations, people and places.

There are *apparently* disjointed, unrelated and impossible scenes – for example, the Rabbit characters, Nikki/Sue suddenly assuming another identity, as a downtrodden housewife, as a prostitute, or being transported instantaneously to Poland – which appear

at odd, random moments; there are, seemingly, nonsensical scenes of violence; there are time transpositions that offend logic; there are numerous characters; and, there appear to be direct contradictions about who is who. Occasionally, there is a cut to the weeping woman on the bed, still watching the snowy TV and, much later, Nikki/Sue appears on that same TV and seems to look directly at that woman....

Complex barely expresses the point: this is Lynch's most challenging film to understand. So, what's really going on here? Lynch uses every trick of the camera and sound to subvert our perceptions of what's actually presented. And that's *precisely* what happens in our dreams, where so often nothing seems to make any sense. So, is it only the weeping woman who is in real trouble; or is it Nikki, with her love affair, spiraling out of control? Which is the real story? Who is the real person? Here's a clue: when Nikki and the weeping, TV-watching woman meet for the one and only time, you can decide for yourself. (Hint: watch carefully to note who disappears.) That meeting suggests to me, however, that dreams can indeed come true.

Beyond the narrative, however, this film is arguably the most introspective and self-referential story about Hollywood and what it means to be a star. It implicitly explores the degree to which an actor can be overtaken by a role to the point of obsession or madness. Unlike the prior two movies, however, IE ends on a note of hope – real hope – that the whole acting process need not end in personal disaster (as it so often has, for some hapless actors). The closing scene of a most beautiful Laura Dern, as *herself*, is exquisite proof, and a direct counterpoint to the horrific end of *Mulholland Drive*.

At three hours, this is a long movie, so some may feel that length. But don't give up on this film: it's the type of movie – like all Lynch efforts – which invites repeat viewings because, make no mistake, Lynch *always* has a message and a real story to tell. He's an artist of the highest calibre and all artists want to make a statement with every work of art they produce. Otherwise, the art is fake.

This is also Laura Dern's best performance. When you see her transform from Hollywood star, to downtrodden suburban housewife, to sleazy streetwalker, to femme fatale – all in the same narrative, you'll appreciate her skill, one worthy of an Oscar but which, unhappily, never came. Kudos also to the supporting cast, even the brief few seconds that William H. Macy is on screen.

The cryptic title may refer to Riverside and San Bernadino counties, as some say. I think it simply refers to each body as being an 'empire' for the persona within, and for each of us to explore throughout life.

Lynch had a lot of fun making this film, no question. Join his fun by watching it, right to the dancing girls as the credits roll....

Rating: 9

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