

OLLI@Berkeley Summer 2025

The Cinema of David Lynch

Few individuals have influenced the shape of late 20th/21st century film and television more than David Lynch. Widely acknowledged as a latter-day Surrealist, his inimitable body of work has etched itself into popular Western culture so indelibly as to become adjectival ("Lynchian"). Dreamlike imagery, haunting soundscapes and unforgettable characters coalesce into films that dive straight into the heart, and often the underbelly, of contemporary American life. With his characteristic 4-H Club affect and impeccable style and coiff (famously described by Mel Brooks as "Jimmy Stewart from Mars"), Lynch's contributions to American popular culture – and the surprising humanism that underlies his work – cannot be overstated, and are worthy of exploration and revisitation. This course will focus on four feature films from the oeuvre of David Lynch.

Dates/Times: Wednesdays 1pm-3pm June 4, 11, 18, and 25

Course type: Hybrid (in-person and Zoom)

Location: Golden Bear Center Suite #365, 1995 University Avenue, Berkeley

Instructor: (contact: kdavis@csumb.edu)

Karen Davis is Senior Film Programmer Emerita and Program Consultant for the Mill Valley Film Festival and Professor Emerita at California State University at Monterey Bay. She has also taught courses in world cinema at Vassar College, St. Mary's College of California and University of California at Santa Cruz.

Films to be discussed include:

Week 1: June 4 ERASERHEAD (1977) 89 min. Available: Kanopy, AppleTV, Prime Video, more options here:

<https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/eraserhead>

The release of David Lynch's *Eraserhead* marked the birth of both an iconic career as well as a shift in American film that is continually felt today. Eschewing any and all traditional ideas of what American horror films should look, sound, and feel like, *Eraserhead* is a haunting, but also very funny, story of a man coming to terms with his role and responsibility, as well as his reluctance, as a father. Featuring gorgeous cinematography and a soundtrack that to this day is unmatched in its design and craft, everything about the film is wholly unique and original, likely never replicated or matched in film since. *Film description: Northwest Film Center*

Week 2: June 11 THE ELEPHANT MAN (1980) 125min. Available free: <https://m.ok.ru/video/9291155311310> (for sound, click on the speaker icon in the upper left corner of the frame) Or: <https://ok.ru/video/10076986673683>

Following *Eraserhead*, few could have foreseen that David Lynch would win over broader audiences with his second feature, even making it all the way to the Oscars. *The Elephant Man*, with its charismatic cast (Anthony Hopkins, John Hurt, Anne Bancroft) and its immersive black-and-white cinematography, the film garnered eight Oscar nominations (prompting the Academy to introduce an Oscar for Best Makeup the following year) and won a César Award for Best Foreign Film. Drawing inspiration from the true story of Joseph Merrick, David Lynch presents a tale marked by compassion and the acceptance of difference, reminding us all that there is nothing more monstrous than a (high) society that enjoys freak shows without shame, yet never plucks up the courage to look at its own inner monsters in the mirror. *Film description: Thessaloniki Int'l. Film Festival*

Week 3: June 18 BLUE VELVET (1986) 120 min. Available: AppleTV, Prime Video, more options here:

<https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/blue-velvet>

Like the great filmmaker Guy Maddin said, there's cinema before *Blue Velvet* and cinema after *Blue Velvet*. After a brilliant opening scene that puts you right in the heart of a town called Lumberton, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) returns from college and quickly discovers a severed human ear lying in a field. From there, along with fellow amateur sleuth and budding love interest Sandy (Laura Dern), Jeffrey falls into the orbit of lounge singer Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini) and the demonic Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper). Nearly 40 years after its release, *Blue Velvet* remains an unforgettable vision of innocence lost, and one of the most influential American films of the late 20th century. *Film description: Vermont International Film Festival*

Week 4: June 25 THE STRAIGHT STORY (1999) 112 min. Available: AppleTV, Prime Video, more options here:

<https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/the-straight-story>

When septuagenarian Alvin Straight (Richard Farnsworth, in an Academy Award-nominated performance) gets word that his estranged brother Lyle has suffered a stroke, Alvin sets off to visit him and make things right. Despite his own health issues and much to the chagrin of his daughter Rose (Sissy Spacek), Alvin packs up the only vehicle he has: a 1996 John Deere lawn mower, and leaves Iowa enroute to Wisconsin. Along his journey, Alvin encounters a series of strangers, allowing him to reflect on his life, impart wisdom, and get one step closer to his destination. As much a gentle exploration of old age as it is a portrait of the American heartland, David Lynch calls this warm, introspective odyssey his "most experimental film." *Film description: Gene Siskel Film Center.*