

# David Lynch's compassion

The Straight Story, directed by David Lynch, written by John Roach and Mary Sweeney

By David Walsh  
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In 1994 73-year-old Alvin Straight traveled by lawn mower several hundred miles across northern Iowa to visit his ailing brother, whom he had not seen or spoken to in 10 years, in Wisconsin. Strongly independent, Straight could no longer drive a car because of bad eyesight and didn't like the idea of traveling by bus. Filmmaker David Lynch has chosen to fictionally recreate Straight's journey.

Lynch—in *Eraserhead*, *Elephant Man*, *Dune*, *Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart* and *Twin Peaks*, among other film and television works—has made a career out of evoking the grotesque. He seems to have been struck at some point in his life by the oddities of small-town American life in particular. Not struck very deeply, unhappily. Lynch's overall complacency and sense of his own cleverness prevent him by and large from making contact with the deeper currents of life. As a rule he chooses to remain on the surface of things, having a laugh, along with his admirers, at the expense of those not quick-witted enough to be in on the joke.

Straight (played by veteran performer Richard Farnsworth) has a number of encounters on his trip in Lynch's film. He meets a pregnant young woman whom he counsels to return to her family home; he tries, without success, to calm down another woman who keeps running into deer on her daily commute to and from work; when his lawn mower breaks down, he accepts the invitation of a friendly couple to camp out in their yard; he shares war stories with a fellow World War II veteran; he sets straight a pair of bickering brothers who run an auto repair shop; he philosophizes with a priest in a country graveyard.

How seriously are we to take Straight's musings about life and old age? Some of them feel genuine. Any human being in his situation, near the end of his life and embarked on an effort to effect a reconciliation with a

once-beloved brother, would have his share of memories and regrets. But Lynch, for all his vaunted sense of irony, gives us a relatively narrow and foreshortened view of the man. In reality, we don't know much more about Straight at the end of the film than we knew at the beginning; not much more, in fact, than we might have gleaned from a 90-second "human interest" segment on the nightly news.

In the final analysis, a film artist's interpretation of an individual human personality depends on his or her view of society as a whole. If the artist takes the social organism at face value, as the limit more or less of social possibility, then the character he or she creates will tend to be little more than the sum-total of the insights and platitudes such a figure articulates somewhat arbitrarily; the characterization will lack aesthetic *distance*. Alvin Straight in Lynch's film is such a sum-total.

The secret of an individual's life, however, particularly someone who has lived his life in relatively oppressed circumstances, may not lie in his own ken. Lynch does not trouble himself to explore the possibility that in Straight the mixture of truth and banality might express both the manner in which harsh reality has forced its way through to consciousness and the generally unfavorable conditions for intellectual development. In other words, the director presents us only with the choice of sneering at the man or accepting him as the latter sees himself.

*The Straight Story* essentially slides back and forth between these poles, without ever suggesting an alternative: that one might admire *and* criticize such a figure. Genuine contradiction (in which the opposites interpenetrate and transform themselves)—as opposed to paradox (in which the opposed elements are rigidly held apart)—is largely a closed book to Lynch.

The one element of the film that offers possibilities is Straight's relationship with his mentally impaired daughter, Rose (Sissy Spacek). When we learn that state

authorities took her four children away after one of them was injured in a fire that was not her fault, one's heart skips a beat. Perhaps Lynch, after all, will draw attention to the important facts, the facts that might determine the course of a person's life. These hopes fade quickly. Such moments are merely window-dressing, or a lure to draw in the naive. Lynch wants his clever "road movie" and nothing will stop him.

Critics have praised *The Straight Story* for the compassionate treatment of its central character. Farnsworth (Straight) gives a dignified accounting of himself. Spacek, a wonderful actress, is fine. Whether from genuine feeling or for tactical reasons, Lynch leaves those characters more or less alone. Anyone, however, that Lynch can safely caricature, or half-caricature or hint at caricaturing, he does. The director's sensitivity can be gauged by the first scene of his film in which he makes fun of an overweight woman eating pink Sno-Balls, a particularly coarse and fattening snack food.

Whatever degree of compassion, real or feigned, the film goes on to demonstrate, this brief opening sequence sets the tone. Right from the start Lynch is letting his audience know what's what. After this sort of preface—and other townspeople are similarly lampooned—why should one let down one's guard enough to take Lynch's concern for Straight or anyone like him entirely seriously?

Of course, when Lynch is not mocking his characters, one almost longs for it. Because for much of the rest of the time, he forces us to listen to Straight's words of wisdom. The character simply doesn't cohere. This is a man who drank too much, who quarreled bitterly with his brother, who presumably committed other sins and misdeeds—but there is no trace of irascibility or backwardness in his behavior. He's an all-seeing, all-knowing sage. Rather than recounting the concrete details of an act of reconciliation and redemption, Lynch has begun from the abstract categories Reconciliation and Redemption and worked backwards. And numerous shots of wheat fields and rolling hills, charming enough in and of themselves, are not a substitute for working out the problems of a dramatic situation.

Commentators propose two theories to explain how Lynch, the director of the "depraved" *Blue Velvet* (1986), has come to make a G-rated film for Walt Disney Pictures. Some see in it a evidence of a trend of once-daring directors who have, so to speak, been tamed; others see *The Straight Story* as a continuation of Lynch's effort to penetrate the underbelly of American life. A third possibility suggests itself: that beneath the

extravagant veneer, Lynch's work has always had an essentially conformist and conventional character.

I don't believe a case can be made that *Blue Velvet* represented a serious challenge to the Reagan-Thatcher ethos. It was not the sort of film, after all, that would have caused your garden-variety arbitrageur or commodities broker to lose any sleep. Its kind of amorphous "daring," with hints of decadence and brutality, appealed strongly, in fact, to some within a selfish and cold social layer.

That mood, or the possibility of brazenly displaying it, has passed. Within certain circles, as we know, a more "compassionate" face is now presented to the public. In filmmaking too—and this is an international trend—a certain "seriousness about human problems" is in vogue. I think it's worth considering in each case how deep it goes.

I wouldn't want to be overly harsh. Lynch may feel strongly about some of the issues he raises; he may even be hostile to the status quo. It's difficult to tell. I would suggest that his intellectual and artistic laziness, and the need to be seen in a certain light by the "right people," renders him vulnerable to some unpleasant ideological currents. After all, this is a film, if one is to take it on its own terms, that manages to imply sympathy for family, religion, the military and "the American way of life." At a time, interestingly, when the population's alienation from existing institutions is increasingly noticeable.

I don't sense active maliciousness on Lynch's part. One of the obvious difficulties is that he—like many in the filmmaking community—is far, far away from the way people live and how they think and feel in America. He's in good company. There are a great many film directors and critics who simply have no idea what is going on in modern society, and not only in this country. A French film critic in a respected publication, for example, compares Lynch's direction in *The Straight Story* to that of Hou Hsiao-hsien and Abbas Kiarostami. What can one say?

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