

The Reader Must Awaken

On A Masterpiece in Disarray: David Lynch's Dune

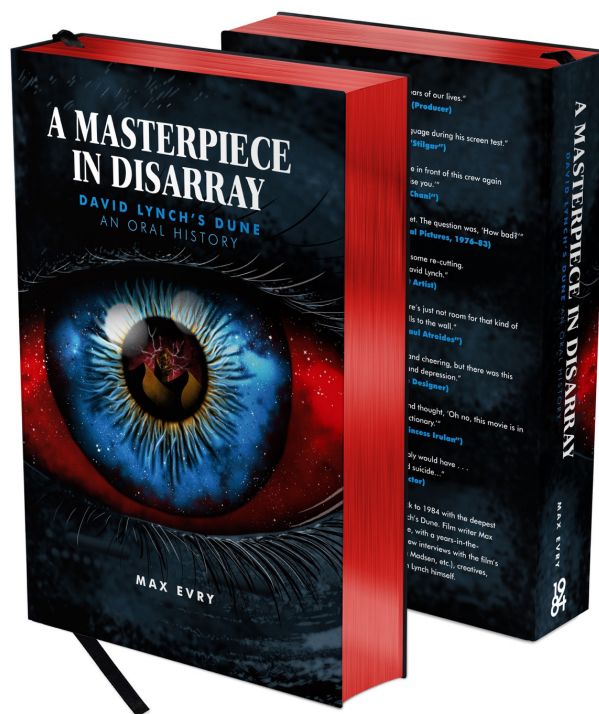
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INTRODUCTION

Max Evry's 2023 tome, *A Masterpiece in Disarray: David Lynch's Dune*, claims a spot in the top echelon of books that explore the production, release, and legacy of a cinematic work. This detailed history of Lynch's *Dune* (1984) makes many of the same productive moves to historicize the era of production alongside the director's career arc and to present a wide range of reflective perspectives as Herbert Biberman's *Salt of the Earth: The Story of a Film*, Clark Collis's *You've Got Red on You: How Shaun of the Dead Was Brought to Life*, Todd Melby's *A Lot Can Happen in the Middle of Nowhere: The Untold Story of the Making of Fargo*, and Kyle Buchanan's *Blood, Sweat & Chrome: The Wild and True Story of Mad Max: Fury Road*, among other notable members of this niche genre. In particular, Evry transfers the electricity of his passion for *Dune* and the cinema of David Lynch without producing a mere hagiography. The author's admiration for, and authority on, all things Lynch fuel an open curiosity about the diverse perspectives of cast and crew members who have been part of *Dune*, past and present. While reading *A Masterpiece in Disarray*, I found myself balancing two competing urges. Many passages made me keen to re-watch the scenes under discussion that I wanted to mark the page, close the book, and pull up the film. At the same time, I felt compelled to table that urge in order to maintain the flow of reading Evry's assiduously curated interview material and the complex accounts he constructed.

The book is organized into four sections: Pre-Production, Production, Post-Production and Release, and Legacy. Within them are subsections where Evry presents informative contextualization of that phase of the film for readers to keep in mind



A Masterpiece in Disarray: David Lynch's Dune
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while diving into the oral history subsections. The interview excerpts in the oral history evince a curatorial mastery. While some oral histories of film and television carry an obnoxious whiff of fanboy impulses to collect, colonize, and own anecdotes as if to flaunt exclusive access to the people involved and establish superfan status, Evry assembles clusters of interrelated memories the way an editor creates montages that imply connections yet put the agency to arrange and triangulate the points of view in the audience's hands. In other words, *A Masterpiece in Disarray* is an act of open archive sharing to catalyze reader wonder and analysis rather than promote the author's theories or status. Within this archive is a treasure trove of options that were considered and would have made for deeply different renditions of *Dune* as well as anecdotes of life on- and off-set. Relatedly, Evry reminds readers that Lynch's *Dune* was considered inside the industry and by critics and fans alike to be the It-Project of its early 1980s moment—a point that is easy to neglect or overlook from our current moment as mainstream critics then and now, and the director himself, have disparaged this film that nonetheless sustains a cult following and renewed interest in light of director Denis Villeneuve's new versions (2021, 2024). In this review, I highlight a range of insights and information that prove valuable for revisiting the film, whether your interest entails film research, film history, *Dune* fandom, or more.

PLANS WITHIN PLANS WITHIN PLANS WITHIN PLANS

Among the most fascinating elements of *Dune* that Evry's book delivers is the complicated fabric of production alternative possibilities that were considered but cut. Interview excerpts from costume designer Bob Ringwood provide detailed background on the origins of design concepts, the processes of decision making, and reflections on how this work continues to influence cinema aesthetics in science fiction and beyond. Alongside production designs are extensive lists, drawn from rigorous archival research, that document the actors considered when casting for many of the roles. These materials provide a speculative glimpse into the many versions of *Dune* that could have materialized but ultimately did not. For those actors who did join the cast, the interviews with or about them capture the moods and activities of life on and off the set in Mexico.

Through the Ringwood interviews, Evry takes readers back to a very different time, when film professionals had different formulas and oversight shaping their work. It was a time when creative team members brought eclectic approaches to production and when curiosity more than algorithms drove inspiration and surprise. Ringwood's anecdote about being recruited to the film by producer Raffaella De Laurentiis is as fun as it is illustrative of how open to uncalculated serendipity the decision makers on *Dune* could be. Moreover, he recounts his inspiration for costumes in gallery exhibitions he had visited where particular elements of works stuck in his memory. Alongside Ringwood, costume assistant Mary Vogt shares an appropriately weird story about them sourcing the base materials for the black Guild member outfits, though I will leave the details

vague here to preserve the discovery for those who read the book (206). As just one of many production interviewees, Ringwood insightfully points out genealogical lines of visual influence from *Dune* through many films that have followed it. While *Dune* was not, in several ways, the success it might have been, what continues to influence the creative professionals who imagine and make cinematic worlds are its stillsuits and architectures along with the realized commitment to making every aspect of the mise-en-scène clearly signal the planet to which it belongs. While these cinematic progeny include projects that did not employ Ringwood, he does recount his own role in evolving the batsuit for director Tim Burton in *Batman* (1989) from the stillsuit of *Dune*—it is another story I refrain from spoiling here (432-33).

A Masterpiece in Disarray pivots from production design to casting, imagining a panoply of different *Dunes* that might have existed if other actors had filled major and minor roles. Citing the original notes of casting director Jane Jenkins, held in Special Collections at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Evry includes comprehensive lists of wide-ranging options and anecdotes in the work of choosing, recruiting, and securing the talent. For example, the group of potentials to star as Paul Atreides has 24 names in addition to Kyle MacLachlan, who eventually took the role. Aside from MacLachlan, the relative star power and points in career trajectories of the actors on that list is an exciting film-history exercise. Each list-and-process section on the different roles grants readers access to implicit priorities and preferences of the creatives behind *Dune*. Aside from speculating on what *Dune*'s cast would have been, the more significant outcome is the robust analysis we can bring to the strategies Lynch and De Laurentiis forged to counterbalance the risk of MacLachlan as an unknown lead with Sting as an ascending global phenomenon and the edgy SF vibes Sean Young brought via Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Evry also delves into casting with emphases on Val Kilmer and Tom Cruise as top choices for Paul Atreides and a story about Gloria Swanson rudely turning down the role of Shadout Mapes because she assumed she was being cast for the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam—a turn of events that uncannily echoes Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), a Lynch favourite that he references by naming the character he plays on *Twin Peaks* Gordon Cole.

As to life on- and off-set, Evry includes a range of people beyond the core cast members. Because the story of making *Dune* is itself a synecdoche of 20th-century globalization, the collected accounts of hiring local seamstresses in Mexico City as well as the many people who stood as extras in desert shots point directly to matters of political economy within this making-of narrative. On the seamstresses, the costume assistant Vogt recounts the production team paying close attention to the textile items that Mexican and Guatemalan women were making and selling on the streets in the Zona Rosa area where the crew hotels were located. Vogt and Ringwood were so impressed by the artisanship that they hired several of the street vendors to produce costumes, and Vogt highlights one

of these employees as having made an entrepreneurial leap to owning her own shop based on working for *Dune* (207). To Evry's credit, he includes these seemingly positive tales of meritocratic philanthropy alongside more exploitative accounts that remind readers that Mexico was chosen by the De Laurentiis family principally to save money.

This extractivist aspect of globalization comes through when the book documents the extremes of heat and dehydration faced by the masses of low-paid extras who had to endure sweltering desert temperatures in heavy costumes without the prospects of cooled escape spaces that the major talent could access as well as being denied bottled water to stay hydrated (177-78). Evry's passages of Hollywood film production in Mexico City in the early 1980s do not shy away from putting the troubling realities of hierarchy and hazard in full view, especially as experienced by below-the-line personnel. How the admirers of Lynch reconcile these facts of production with his well-known practice of Transcendental Meditation and the multiple glowing accounts by top-billed actors of working with him, is something that Evry prompts readers to consider. Did the scale of wealth disparity and socio-economic exploitation contribute to Lynch's *Dune* despondency? While we do not hear that idea from Lynch, or explicitly from Evry, within *A Masterpiece in Disarray*, the author makes it possible to wonder about the affects, conscious or otherwise, of Lynch being the director in a filmmaking model that leverages some of the same settler-colonial logics that are sharply critiqued within Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

Meanwhile, running parallel to the below-the-line folks making the film possible, the top-billed actors share fascinating insights that connect with the film's performances. MacLachlan gives sustained anecdotes of being chosen from relative obscurity in the Seattle stage scene. The sequence of steps to a major role were new and strange to him, and once he was selected he had to focus deeply on delivering the role while also projecting into the future potential that being Paul in *Dune* would open up to him. MacLachlan's memories tell the story of his career breakthrough aligning almost uncannily with his character Paul's ascendancy. Furthermore, it turns out that MacLachlan was one of the biggest *Dune* obsessives in the cast and crew, so he had been living with the narrative and its characters for a long time before the prospect of being in a major adaptation existed. One revealing insight comes from MacLachlan and others recounting a performance impasse he reached when trying to pivot from killing Jamis (Judd Omen) to giving moisture to the dead, the Fremex expression for shedding tears (222-23). MacLachlan exposes a weak spot in his acting abilities at that time to illustrate how the adaptation of Herbert's complex prose in print lent to the disarray of what made it to the big screen. Along the path of MacLachlan's experiences, Evry folds in fun gems like the camaraderie and mischief shared among MacLachlan, Patrick Stewart, and Everett McGill (215-17).

Complementing the adult actors' anecdotes are actress Alicia Witt's memories of moving to Mexico as a child with her parents and experiencing a radically altered family life in addition to getting mentorship and friendship with the adults in

the cast. Witt, who played Alia Atreides, notably worked again with Lynch in a minor role in the television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) before reprising the role in *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), so she brings first-hand knowledge with the benefit of reflection over decades. Since Witt filmed with Lynch both when he was mired in the film he eventually would disavow and most recently when he was filming the 18-hour-long film that many hold to be his true masterpiece, she is uniquely positioned to share a complex profile of the fabled director. Witt takes us behind the scenes of a precocious child actor who thrived in a community of colleagues who respected her abilities and whose middle-class family suddenly enjoyed more opportunities to expand their cultural horizons together.

PROFILES OF DAVID LYNCH

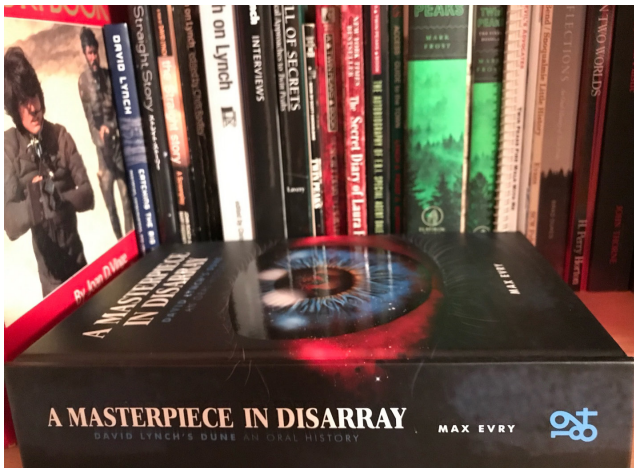
Just as Witt's memories differ in profiling Lynch early and late in his career, the interviewees in *A Masterpiece in Disarray* represent a diversity of profiles within the scope of making *Dune*. This composite demonstrates Evry's interviewing and curating expertise and sets the book apart from other works on Lynch's cinema which feel aimed at bolstering his hagiography. To be sure, the accounts collected here are predominantly positive accounts of admiration and collegiality. Yet, the positivity underscores different values and characteristics in Lynch, and there are some documented moments of struggle and strain, too.

As with the oral history of life on- and off-set, Evry features the voices of production team members to great effect. Giles Masters (Art Department), Frederick Elmes (Additional Unit Cinematographer), Ringwood (Costume Designer), and Vogt (Costume Assistant) each speak to collaborating with Lynch as enjoying the director's trust. Vogt remarked:

He [David] trusted the people that were doing the visuals. David has this 1940s cast iron telephone on his desk, and he said to Bob, "This is what I want the movie to look like." Bob was like, "Okay, I get it." I think David could see that Bob was brilliant and trusted him. You're not going to get any better than Tony Masters, Freddie Francis, and Bob Ringwood. David trusted them with the visuals, then he went and did what he needed to do. (189)

It is rare to find interviews on collaborating with Lynch other than those with actors, and it is noteworthy that Vogt repeats the word "trust" when describing the director's relationship with multiple team members. Trust is such a vital component of collective projects, and Evry chose excerpts that explicitly name it and that give details on how these colleagues discerned it and why they value it.

More complicated is the overall set of memories that Young delivers. She describes a conflict on the set where she and her sister, who was visiting the set, responded to a scene being filmed in a way that angered Lynch to the point that she says he "fucking yelled at me in front of everybody" (236). She proceeds to say, "I took it. We finished it. Then I called him outside where no one could hear us, and I said, 'David,



if you ever fucking yell at me in front of this crew again like that you will regret it, I promise you” (236). Similar levels of indignation resonate across other excerpts from Young and manifest when she talks about being part of The Asylum’s mock-buster *Planet Dune* (2021), which was released to capitalize on Denis Villeneuve’s first *Dune* (2021) installment. While Young’s attitude is an outlier, it is an important part of any project and director profile to include interactions that roughed up the smooth edges.

Evry does mention the rumor, as appealing as it is apocryphal, that Lynch may have been called upon when shooting *Blue Velvet* (1986), his next film after *Dune*, to assist the first-time directing efforts of Stephen King as he filmed *Maximum Overdrive* (1986) in the same North Carolina vicinity. Sadly, the rumor simply gets rehearsed without new evidence. An extremely short interview with Lynch himself is included as practically the last word of the book. The interview is consistent with others by Lynch, particularly when it comes to *Dune*. He often opts out of speaking extensively about his films, so his brevity and circumspect tone here are in character. It is an interview that might have been more effectively placed elsewhere in the volume as it punctuates the plethora of detailed

anecdotes and perceptions across the book with a rather flat note, even as I understand Evry’s impulse to record this dialogue in a prominent position. Finally, Evry gestures at a parallel between Herbert’s sharp interrogation of “charismatic leaders” who attract vehement followers and Lynch’s own “devotion to a charismatic leader, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi” (507). The book leaves this idea largely undeveloped, and it is vital to add here that *Dune* is fully framed within a messianic cosmology that does not seamlessly apply to Transcendental Meditation. As a result, the thematic alignment of charismatic leaders that Evry posits actually brings Lynch into relief as distinctly remote from the messianism at the heart of *Dune*. By the end of *A Masterpiece in Disarray*, we can hold in mind a far more complex sense of Lynch than before we have read it.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Evry has produced an epic journey across time and space that is worthy of the quality of Herbert’s and Lynch’s versions of *Dune*. The combined oral history and research are a readerly equivalent of drinking a shot of the Water of Life: alternative visions of different iterations of the 1984 film co-exist in this space. Somewhat akin to director Quentin Tarantino’s book *Cinema Speculation* (2022), *A Masterpiece in Disarray* opens pathways to imagining the films that might have been and re-frames the film that came to be. It is pleasurable to visualize Rutger Hauer playing Duke Leto Atreides and productive to use archival cast lists to contextualize film careers and the state of the Hollywood industry and the De Laurentiis family’s part in it in the early 1980s. Plus, scholars and fans of Lynch’s cinema get a multifaceted representation of his working style from different angles, including a finely assembled *Rashomon*-effect account of what transpired between him and filmmaker George Lucas when the opportunity to direct *Return of the Jedi* (1983) could have displaced *Dune* as Lynch’s big-budget SF project (43–48). From the quality and quantity of interviews to organization and montage-style curation, *A Masterpiece in Disarray* is a model for oral history accounts of filmmaking. ■

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