

The Straight Story (1999)

In the readings of *Driving Visions: Driving the Engine* it is explained how David Lynch's *The Straight Story* is a film that reinvents the classic themes on the meanings of home and family similar to the themes in *The Wizard of Oz*. The opening shot of the film shows stars in the sky as the shot sweeps down upon beautiful farmlands. The film's next shot then shifts to a more Lynchian like scene of a woman sunbathing on the lawn. With this odd shot of suburbia you get a feel of Lynch's dark noir film *Blue Velvet* but except of the dark hidden perversity's that lie under the suburban grounds of that story, *The Straight Story* gives a more calm and gentle feel.

And yet there are still several Lynchian scenes leaking through the seams of the film, whether it's the awkward transaction of the salesman not wanting to separate from his favorite hardware tool called 'the grabber' or the two twin brother mechanics who are clearly trying to overcharge Straight on his broken down lawnmower. In one of the most obvious scenes of his style is the absurd story of a woman who Straight encounters on the road going hysterical after she supposedly killed thirteen deer within seven weeks.

And yet beyond all that Lynch has still developed a story so different from the rest of his work that is honest and pure. Like other road films Alvin Straight encounters several different characters during his travels. The most moving of them all is a pregnant teenage girl who

happened to run away from her family. In a revealing scene Straight reveals to her about his daughter Rose and how she had her children taken away from her from the state. Straight then brings up the theme of family as he gives the girl a metaphor on sticks and how they can break easily individually but if tied together in a bundle they are unbreakable which is very similar to the bond of family. The next morning Straight finds the teenager had moved on but had left him a bundle of sticks tied together that she had made for him. That form of gesture shows that even if she may not decide to return home to her parents, she had been moved by Straight's message.

In one of my favorite scenes of the film Straight stays a few nights with a man named Riordan and his family while his lawnmower needs to be repaired. One afternoon Straight and Riordan's father drive into town and have a few beers sharing World War II stories. In a beautifully written and acted scene, Straight reveals to Riordan's father how he accidentally killed one of his own men during the war. Grandpa Riordan then reveals to Straight how his unit was attacked and he was the only survivor; with Riordan's father barely trying not to burst into tears. This scene not only moves us but gives us more information on the character of Straight as we learn more about a hidden guilt he secretly keeps to himself. The character of Alvin Straight is also a very rebellious character which reflects back to the rebellious characters of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*. Even though Straight is in very poor health and is using a form of transportation that isn't too safe; he stubbornly ignores his daughter and friends and tells them that he must go back on the road.

In the readings *Revising the Postmodern American Road Movie* by Devin Oregon, he explains how Lynch's style is similar to the style of *The Wizard of Oz* because of its sense of reunion and community within the story structure. He also says that the style is similar to the works of the great Douglas Sirk because the style of the film is drowned with a sense of irony and

melodrama. *The Straight Story* is a beautiful and profound tale of a man who wants to confront the mistakes and sins he had committed in his past. Interestingly enough the story has many similarities to the story of Ingmar Bergman's road film *Wild Strawberries* which is also about an elderly man on the road confronting the demons of his past. Straight is a man who finally confronts the mistakes he had made with his brother which involved anger, vanity and liquor and which he tells a priest is "a story as old as the bible". The ending of the two brother's reunion is left ambiguous as the camera pans up into the sky once again gazing at the stars and into an unpredictable future.