

Not By Lynch is a screening series exploring the "Lynchian": an often-used but rarely examined term whose lineage stretches before, around and after David Lynch's own cinema. While Lynch's films offers the clearest expression of this sensibility, the roots and afterlives of what we call the "Lynchian" extend across film history. From haunted noir and ghostly Americana to experimental digital worlds and paranoid Los Angeles labyrinths, nine films — spanning the nine decades of Lynch's life — trace different faces of the Lynchian: dream-logic beneath everyday life, the uncanny invading domestic space, identities slipping or doubling, worlds that bend at the edges, and dread that mingles uneasily with play, humour and desire.

...at the Cinema Museum
January - October 2026



THE CINEMA MUSEUM
LONDON
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NOT BY LYNCH

THE LYNCHIAN BEFORE
AND AFTER DAVID LYNCH

...at the Cinema Museum
January - October 2026

Curated by **Arta Barzanji**
Presented in collaboration
with **Cinema Year Zero**

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

+ Programme note by Sam Warren Miell

Coming soon...

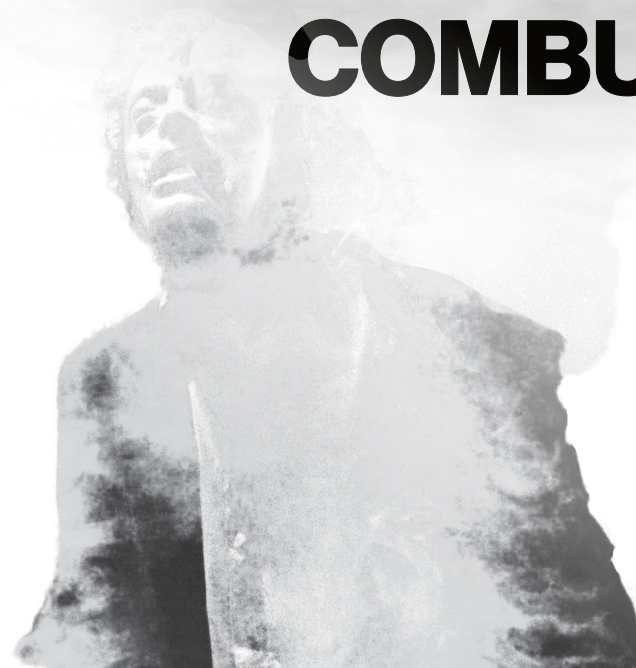
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+ Introduction

Saturday 11 July
at 7.30pm

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Two in the Shadows

Words by **Sam Warren Miell**

Spontaneous Combustion (1990)

Directed by Tobe Hooper

With Brad Dourif, Cynthia Bain

Written by Tobe Hooper, Howard Goldberg | Cinematography by Levie Isaacks

Edited by David Kern | 97 minutes

In the summer of 1973, aged thirty, Tobe Hooper shot *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). In the spring of 1976, also aged thirty, David Lynch finished *Eraserhead* (1977), which he had begun shooting around four years earlier. The influence of these two quintessential midnight movies is by now so deeply ingrained that it would be near impossible to map, forming part of the bedrock of whole continents of cinema. Lynch died a filmmaker of enormous renown, a cult hero who was also a Palme d'Or winner, his work the subject of countless academic works and two *Simpsons* references. Hooper's obituaries, meanwhile, relay the narrative of a wunderkind whose promise dissipated somewhere along the way; his 'later work for the cinema and television was said to lack the impact of his early films', the BBC drily reported.

Were a dual biography of the pair to be written, however, *Spontaneous Combustion* (1990) would have to occupy a privileged place as the most acute site of creative parallelism. The film is built on a shadowy conspiratorialism of a piece with that of *Twin Peaks*, which premiered six weeks after it in the spring of 1990, and it dazzlingly pre-empted Lynch's use of arcing electricity and bursts of flames as animistic symbols of a deep pact between industrial modernity and primal, pre-social forces. Most obviously, its quasi-metaphysical expression of atomic anxiety presages the unforgettable eighth episode of *The Return* (2017). Yet if Lynch's nostalgia for the America in which he and Hooper grew up makes much of his work so fascinatingly ambivalent, Hooper's film looks back on the fifties without romance, as the onset of a national sickness that is now reaching a crisis point at the end of the Reagan era, here played out in the person of Sam Kramer/David Bell (Brad Dourif).

If Hooper's cinema starts from social and political commentary, it ultimately tends towards a place of extreme inwardness, a lonely core inhabited by the most intimate and fragile emotions, which almost seem to collapse time and space altogether. In this, he moves in the opposite direction to Lynch, who started from stark, isolated mental images and worked them into forms which suggested the larger thematic interests that, despite his refusal to explain himself, have made his work such ripe material for interpretation. If we can perceive a congruence in Hooper and Lynch's shared compassion for the victimized, Hooper pursues this via a classicism disarming in its ingenuousness. A film like *Spontaneous Combustion* has very little to do with the surreal or the postmodern; as Julius Banzon, founder of the Tobe Hooper Appreciation Society, has pointed out, its affinities are with Passion plays, Greek tragedy, and soap opera (played straight).

Classicism characterizes Hooper's whole approach. By the time of *Spontaneous Combustion*, the disorientating syncopation of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* had evolved into a style closer than that of his peers to the postwar American cinema that was their shared wellspring. Hooper's greatest gifts were as a *metteur en scène*: the more one watches his films, the more one notices the consistency of his commitment to subtly expressive framing, blocking, and camera movement. His films resist reduction to single images because he was dedicated to the effect—rhythmic, cumulative, contrapuntal—of shots in sequence, whereas for Lynch discrete visual ideas tend to dominate, and the weakest moments come from lapses in the fluency with which these ideas are rendered cinematically. Yet Hooper could run into problems with dramatic construction, which likely stemmed from a combination of the material he was given, the conditions in which he was obliged to work, and his own limitations. Uncharacteristically, Hooper wrote *Spontaneous Combustion* himself, but according to Dourif he ended up with enough material for three different films. Ultimately, two subplots that were filmed were entirely excised, and the original ending was scrapped and reshot, likely at the behest of the producers. The final product is marred by a feeling of incompleteness: the conspiracy remains murky even after its apparent revelation, and it's not clear what is actually happening during the film's rushed denouement.



Though it's tempting to wonder what Hooper could have achieved with Lynch's hard-fought autonomy, it's unclear whether he would have wanted to pursue such a path. The irony of Hooper's career is that, after making the film that ushered in a new era of horror, he proved to be something of a man out of time, a classical genre filmmaker for an era which saw genre cinema as fodder either for bargain bin schlock or arch reworking. Yet *Spontaneous Combustion* remains a testament to the strength of a simple idea pursued to its end. At a time of even greater distrust in our governments, and when the doomsday clock is again nearing midnight, its parable of one made to bear within his very flesh the destructive force of our civilisation's nuclear hubris ought to be viewed alongside Lynch's work as a powerful emanation from the dark unconscious of Pax Americana.

Sam Warren Miell is on the editorial board of the magazine *Narrow Margin*.