

‘BLUE VELVET’ (1986) A DARK TRIP DOWN THE SLIPPERY ISLES OF VOYEURISM AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

While it is next to impossible to completely decipher any of the works from the stables of David Lynch, ‘Blue Velvet’ (1986) does provide us with a reasonable clue to unlocking his much discussed world of human subconscious. ‘Blue Velvet’ is not just a film; it is more of a cinematic revolution. It entirely transformed the traditional yet mundane ways of American cinema and how! No wonder it is considered one of the most influential movies in the history of not just American cinema but global cinema as well. It was at once revered and hated for reasons pretty much the same. Ingrained violence, a debilitating atmosphere, weirdness, a nightmarish world, darkness and the propensity to unleash the inner crudeness have since marked all of Lynch’s films. However, ‘Blue Velvet’ provides all of that and in a way that is not too palatable to an ordinary cinemagoer. Lynch had himself referred to the movie’s autobiographical nature. One look at the film and it becomes crystal clear that it primarily delves into the sheepish worlds of voyeurism and resultant sexuality. This paper makes an attempt at unraveling these primary motifs of the movie through the dissection of its numerous symbolisms and frames, some of them being absolutely audacious even when looked at through a rather liberal reel lens.

KEYWORDS: *Blue Velvet, David Lynch, Sexuality, Surrealist Cinema & Voyeurism*

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INTRODUCTION

Before delving deep into the confounding and stupefying world of ‘Blue Velvet’, let us first make an honest effort at understanding as to what it fundamentally signifies to the world at large. By traditional definitions, it falls under the twin genres of neo noir and mystery (Rubin, 1999). While, both the genres somehow satisfy the central theme of the movie, it is not at all just about darkness and unsolved riddles. For anyone who has some sort of a background in watching movies, the film provides a good mirror to look into the finer details about human voyeurism and sexuality. To be a little more precise, it unearths the darker aspects of masculinity. Be it the central character Jeffrey Beaumont or the sadistic goon Frank Booth, there are enough reasons to believe that both of them represent some sort of twisted masculinity. While Jeffrey may be called the honest one caught in the quagmire of crime, violence and hatred, the fact remains that his tenacity to investigate the life of Dorothy Vallens cannot be to pure curiosity alone (Lynch, 1986). From the beginning, it becomes more than clear that there is an undercurrent of sexuality that drives Jeffrey to pursue ascribed Dorothy. On the other hand, Frank is the quintessential bad person, one who does not suffer from any remorse for being what he actually is. The pure and simple fact that Jeffrey finally has sex with Dorothy further establishes this commonality beyond any perceptible doubt. Laura Mulvey, the renowned feminist film theorist, powerfully contends that ‘Blue Velvet’ aptly represent the true Oedipal family and compares Jeffrey to the child, Dorothy to the mother and Frank to the father (Mulvey, 1996). Similarly, renowned

film critic Michael Atkinson tries to analyze the movie using the Freudian perspective. He likens Dorothy to the mother figure while associating Jeffrey's obsession to that of the infantile impulses. Whatever it is, there is hardly any doubt about the fact that healthy and normal sexuality hardly plays its part. One of the key symbolisms in the movie is that of the severed human ear. When Jeffrey finds it towards the beginning of the film, the camera zooms in inside the canal of the ear and does not zoom out until the end of the movie (Atkinson, 1997). This establishes the parallel world that Lynch tries to create through the movie. If we were to look at the text of the movie a little more carefully, we would find that the director is talking about a hidden world. Although this world exists within the confines of the usual suburban paradigm, people remain oblivious to it for reasons that are based more on reasons of perception than reality.

THE Murky World of Jeffrey, Voyeurism and Sexuality

For anyone dealing with the weird world of David Lynch, the diegesis of 'Blue Velvet' is rather easy to understand. However, the essential enigma of the movie is not associated with that. The murky and confusing characterizations baffle us. Take for instance the curious case of Jeffrey Beaumont. Until the end of the movie, there remains a haze as to what propelled him to investigate the life of Dorothy Vallens. While some cinema enthusiasts might ascribe his curiosity simply to a deep penchant for detection, there is not an iota of doubt that the idea behind Jeffrey's character was not that simple.

While the severed ear, found at the beginning of the movie, serves as the primary intention behind Jeffrey's initial rendezvous, it metamorphoses into something more carnal towards the later part, as could be seen from multiple shots and scenes. A careful analysis could unearth the fact that Dorothy represents the motherly form of lust for the young Jeffrey (Prince, 2007). Although he is romantically inclined to Sandy Williams, he cannot ignore the obvious yet sinful charms of Dorothy. While Dorothy gets aroused by sadomasochism and almost pleads Jeffrey to hit her during multiple sexual encounters, it in a way represents female repression and abusive relationships as well.

Although there is an undercurrent of love and care for Jeffrey that permeates through Dorothy's characterization, there is an ingrained sense of guilt that flows through her for having continually seduced him. Jeffrey, on the other hand, seems to enjoy all the attention that Dorothy gives him. While both the parties understand that the relationship is not really endowed with a future, an uncontrollable passion drives both of them to continue along the trajectory. In stricter sense of the term, Jeffrey is nothing compared to the sadistic Frank Booth. However, both of them are unified by their inner desire to have complete hold over Dorothy, their ultimate object of desire. What separates them, however, is the way they pursue to that end! It is another thing though that by pursuing Dorothy, Jeffrey actually pursues his own darker self and becomes voyeuristic by nature. This voyeurism, in turn, stems from deep sexual underpinnings and an innate desire to taste the water from the forbidden fountain.

What is interesting though is the role played by Sandy (Layton, 1994). She is Jeffrey's window to sanity, his path back to the normal folds. Sandy sees the world in clear black and white and there are no shades of grey. She tries to make some sense out of Jeffrey's inconsistent behaviour in her pursuit to understand if he is actually a detective or simply a pervert. This approach brings forth some sort of clarity to the declared mission of Jeffrey, that of uncovering the mystery of the severed ear and save Dorothy from the clutches of Frank.

It is important to understand here that there is an intended moral haze in deciphering the character of Jeffrey. Anyone who knows Lynch would say for sure that Lynch does not see the world in bright hues; rather colours cannot

describe his vision at all. This is where the enigma sets in. The viewer cannot really identify with the central character even though there is an element of uncanny innocence about Jeffrey, an innocence that is tempting to say the least.

Frank Booth, Sadomasochism and Sexual Depravity

Before we get down to understand as to what Frank Booth stands for in 'Blue Velvet', let us for a change look at what sadomasochism is all about. According to psychologist Neel Burton, sadomasochism can be defined as the giving or receiving of pleasure, often sexual, from the infliction or reception of pain or humiliation (Burton, 2014). While, at times, it enhances sexual pleasure, there are times when it substitutes real sex. If we look at the cinematic text of 'Blue Velvet', we would find that Frank receives his pleasure through dry humping, inhaling of an unnamed gas and the infliction of pain on Dorothy. These acts are nothing but various forms of sadomasochistic activities.

Frank essentially represents a deranged form of masculinity. He constitutes the ultimate fear any woman would have of any man. However, there is also an oedipal tendency that is at work during his sexual encounters with Dorothy. He keeps on referring to himself as either the "Baby" or the "Daddy" while calling Dorothy "Mommy". While for Jeffrey, the oedipal tendency acts on a subconscious level, for Frank, it is clear and obvious. In addition, Frank, given the character that he is, does not care a fig as to how that affects other characters in the movie.

It is also important to comprehend the differences between Frank and Jeffrey. While Dorothy consensually and sometimes forcefully is entangled in sexual affairs with Jeffrey, it is quite the opposite for Frank. Frank uses coercion to compel Dorothy to have sex with him. He kidnaps the husband and son of Dorothy to use them as baits to compel Dorothy into action. At times though, we can argue that Frank draws his power not from the fact that he has kidnapped Dorothy's husband and son but by the suppressed fact that Dorothy is also aroused by his brute masculinity. Although, Dorothy does not specifically make that clear in the movie, there are clear signs at multiple points in the movie that directs towards this.

Frank draws a picture of peculiar contrast when compared with Jeffrey. While Jeffrey makes use of sentimentality in getting close to Dorothy, Frank does so through the usage of obscenities and raw power. As has been argued earlier, the end strikingly seems to be the same for both Jeffrey and Frank. Both want Dorothy only for themselves. While mystery remains the overriding theme of the movie, the typical elements of film noir make their appearances at various stages. It can be contented that Dorothy fits into the role of the femme fatale as well over and above her placement as the mother figure (Johnson, 2004). In addition, the questionable ethical stand of Jeffrey comes to sharp focus.

Is Jeffrey trying to help Dorothy to get out of the inhuman loop or is he just another character who wants to exploit the sexuality of Dorothy? The answers could be multifarious again depending on what perspective one has towards the movie. Finally, Frank and his stated villainy just hit the right spot.

Lynch's movie characters have to be understood in layers and not according to existing benchmarks. Therefore, Jeffrey's character remains an interesting amalgam of an intent to act and sexual drive.

Lynch always intertwines his movies with multiple references from popular culture and 'Blue Velvet' is not an exception either. Most of the time, the intent is to create an interesting amalgam of culture and rude imageries. While the name of the movie is a popular song from the 1950, Frank often refers to the song "In Dreams", sung by renowned rock and roll performer Roy Orbison (DANKO, 2016). A look into the film and it becomes rather clear that Frank is representative of the usual decay that had set in the American society. He represents the dark underbelly of the society, an underbelly that people are not very comfortable dealing. American suburban culture has never been dealt with the way

'Blue Velvet' deals with it.

In a way, Frank becomes the surrogate father of Jeffrey. In some metaphorical sense, he teaches Jeffrey the pleasures of being an adult, the pleasures of discovering sexuality in its true form. Frank is like some rogue father who has no idea about how to treat a child. The subsequent interaction between Frank and Jeffrey towards the later part of the movie clearly points towards that. However, the beauty of any Lynch movie is in its capacity to be ambiguous, not in terms of just meaning but in terms of scope as well. 'Blue Velvet' serves that purpose well.

Dorothy and Sexuality

While trying to analyze Jeffrey and Frank, people seldom forget that Dorothy is the chord that unites the two characters. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to note that Dorothy is the principal character in the movie. Thus, it is important to attempt to understand Dorothy as well. She is the ultimate mascot of repressed femininity and female sexuality. Insecurity, suspicion, fear, unfulfilled desire and an ocean of emotions make their way into the film through her characterization.

On one hand, she is worried about the safety of her child and her husband kidnapped by Frank and on the other, she makes sexual advances to Jeffrey in an agonizing fashion. From the beginning itself, we see that Dorothy has a strange liking for Jeffrey. Like all other Lynch characterizations, it is very difficult to identify the exact nature of the attraction. It might be the fact that Jeffrey sexually arouses her. We can also consider the possibility that Dorothy has a motherly affection for Jeffrey that manifests itself in the form of sexual intimacy. There is a third distinct possibility as well. Dorothy might as well seek comfort from the young and energetic Jeffrey, who is very different from any male character that she has met in her life.

While Frank represents brute masculinity and pure sexual urge, Jeffrey is someone who she could dominate through her sexual charm. Repressed sexually and physically, Dorothy searches for some viable avenue to escape from the tragedy in her life. Jeffrey offers that opportunity to her. With his natural charm and boyish demeanour, Dorothy has found someone who she can instruct and get her desires fulfilled. Although she is overtly aware about the voyeuristic tendencies of Jeffrey, she lets him continue with it with the hope that he would offer a way out of her apparently miserable existence.

The scene, where Jeffrey discovers her battered and nude is traumatic to say the least (Ebert, 1986). Multiple scholars point out that the true nature of Dorothy remains obscure until the very end. Whether or not she can fit the role of the quintessential femme fatale is something that could be argued with sufficient pointers on both sides of the debate. However, one thing is for sure. She remains the driving force for most of the actions in the movie.

She is voluptuous, she is luscious and she is sexy. She represents everything that could be desirable for any man. She is the epitome of womanly perfection (Levy, 2005). Since the movie is beset with sexual underpinnings, Dorothy is the reason why Jeffrey behaves the way he does and Frank acts out the way he actually does. In fact, it would not be an overstatement if it were to be said that Dorothy is worth a subject to be voyeuristic about. While Jeffrey and Frank exhibit different layers of human sexuality, Dorothy is the ultimate enigma that the film creates through its darkly rich and skewed visuals (Levy, 2005).

Alternative Explanation

'Blue Velvet' in ways more than one is representative of the decomposition of the family space. If we look a little carefully, we shall be able to find that it is also about the vulnerability of the human body. It is pertinent to note the presence of a detached ear that gets the story going. Jeffrey is an archetypal character – young, carefree and idealistic. While investigating about the ear, he gets into an investigation that reveals the dark components of the typical American dream. There are multiple moments of physical intimacy in the movie, moments that continue to pose uncomfortable questions. It is important that we make an effort to dissect those moments in order to get a clearer grasp of what is going on. There are multiple points in the movie that clearly shake the very foundations what we considered sacred – the family space and the body.

'Blue Velvet' can also be recognized subject to its ingrained intensity and instability. Always a chaos and tension mark the relationship between the characters in the movie. A process of churning is always on, something that is always recognizable on the surface of the movie. Throughout the movie, there is not a single point when things have settled down, something that is deliberate to the core. Lynch wants that tension to run throughout the course of the movie.

Let us try to understand this phenomenon quoting individual scenes. When Dorothy comes back from the nightclub and starts to undress, it becomes clear that exterior forces start determining her actions. Although she inhabits the home space and is at her own home, out-of-home forces constantly disturb her.

We can take an example to understand this point. When she tries to put on something, which is more fitting and comfortable, she gets a call from Frank. This makes her tensed and that tension shows in her actions. Therefore, her effort to sink into the home space is disturbed in the process. While she resides in the home space, she is unable to come to terms with the space. She constantly moves and the obvious tension becomes visible.

As Jeffrey follows her actions, he finds out that she takes off her wig and puts it back on immediately. Although Dorothy is not aware of Jeffrey, she acts as if she is being watched. This deprives the private space of its privacy. It becomes obvious that the public life of Dorothy has invaded her private life as well. Throughout the movie, we see that Dorothy's private space and body are being subjected to constant interruptions.

Dorothy's apartment remains a space that is being constantly broken into throughout the movie. In fact, a close look and we understand that there are familial disturbances that are already there. The lines between the interior and exterior remains blurred. Let us take for example the furniture and equipment that we find at her home. We see a television, a record player, a telephone and houseplants – outdoor things that have been converted into domesticated objects. Thus, it is not just Jeffrey and Frank, who are outside presences inside the domestic space of Dorothy. The next thing in line is the physical intrusion of Dorothy. Frank arrives with an air of authority and starts invading the body of Dorothy. The background score reverberates ominously while the boundary between the outside world and the inside world becomes invisible.

Now, let us look at it from another perspective. Dorothy's domestic space becomes a playground where Frank and Dorothy play their roles as actors and Jeffrey becomes the obvious spectator. Home is no longer the home. It is in fact a space that constricts and restricts. Frank violently engages with Dorothy and he alternately becomes either the "baby" or the "daddy". Dorothy plays the multiple roles of either being the mother or the daughter of Frank. Dorothy thus wears her characters and performs thereby removing the distinction between inside and outside.

In this regard, it is important that we take stock of an opinion expressed by Roger Ebert, one of the most celebrated film critics of all time. He wrote in his review of the movie, “The movie is powerful, challenging and made with great skill, and yet it made me feel pity for the actors who worked in it and anger at the director for taking liberties with them” (Ebert, 1986). Probably, Ebert’s anger stems from the physical and emotional domination of the lead woman character in the movie. She is shown powerless and at the mercy of two of the leading male characters in the movie. The movie was made almost to the point of being misogynist. However, given the way Lynch is, it is impossible that he had that kind of an intention.

The movie is also a representation of changeability of the human nature. The movie disturbs not because it has bad people doing bad things. It inherently disturbs because it has good people doing bad things. It depicts the ugly underbelly of the civilized human society. The movie is like a mirror. It actually shows what we are capable of albeit in the negative direction. Psychologically, we always try to distance ourselves from undesirable human deeds. However, here we are with a movie like ‘Blue Velvet’ that suddenly shows us as monsters, as human beings who are just as bad as the next one on the street.

It is important to understand that the movie offers a very stark contrast, a contrast that is manifested in everyday life. On one end of the spectrum, we have rich people who enjoy an enviable life. On the other hand, dark secrets tumble out of the closed closets of people. All of us are aware about this duplicity. However, only a handful of us are intent on talking about it because we always like to sugarcoat things.

Throughout the movie, we see that all the people in Dorothy’s life make her the obvious victim. However, what very few people realize is the masochist in her. On multiple occasions, she asks Jeffrey to perform masochist acts. In fact, on some of those occasions, Jeffrey looks like the victim. Therefore, the movie is a clear case of all the characters being ambiguous in moral terms. There is also a clear ambiguity vis-à-vis the beginning of Frank’s depravity involving Dorothy.

If we take out the other elements, the movie is also about a lot of style. The way it has been portrayed shows cinematic brilliance. However, as Ebert pointed out, is it reason enough to humiliate a woman in front of the camera? The question can be asked repeatedly without ever arriving at the answer. Like all other Lynch movie, ‘Blue Velvet’ is also a cinematic painting, a painting that stands tall even if some of the elements are taken away. Starting with the opening sequence to the last scene, the movie is about identifying the right elements at the right place. However, the painting here is not an abstract one. The fact that it is not abstract is the biggest enigma.

‘Blue Velvet’ is a significant piece of work subject to multiple reasons. One of the reasons why the movie has established a place for itself, is the presence of the Lynchian askew vision. Askew vision distorts everything and makes us look at known subjects from an unknown perspective. Lynch also introduced some of his most important cinematic elements through this movie. Some such elements include the presence of skewed characters, a diabolical world and damage to the brain. However, one thing that stands out is the reanalysis of what is normal and what is abnormal.

Jeffrey tries to find out something that is hidden, something that has been deliberately been kept away from the human gaze. During multiple points in the movie, we find uncanny resemblances between the movie and Alfred Hitchcock’s ‘Psycho’ (1960). Both ‘Blue Velvet’ and ‘Psycho’ deal with repressed and resultant criminality. It is interesting to note that through the movie, Lynch looks at ingrained criminality as something that is a primordial constituent of human nature. ‘Blue Velvet’ can also be looked at from the perspective of familial discord and familial

violence. Somehow, the movie is representative of the familial decay in the United States of America. Like all other surrealist works from the coffers of Lynch, this movie is also a Freudian narrative. There are multiple layers that one needs to understand before attempting to comprehend the movie.

The movie is also remarkable for its obvious symbolisms. One of the central motifs of the movie constitute insects. The insect motif is shown at the beginning of the movie itself, which is probably representative of suburban decay. It could also point towards the emotional decay that characterizes the subsequent parts of the movie. Jeffrey also enters Dorothy's apartment as an insect exterminator. It might be interesting to note that the entire movie is about removing these insets that point towards social decay. While Jeffrey metaphorically enters the life of Dorothy as an insect exterminator, he himself becomes an inset at multiple points in the movie.

The cut ear also acts as one of the other motifs in the movie. This ear starts the entire narrative in the movie and continues until the end. What it possibly might mean is the usage of ears in satisfying voyeuristic instincts. The ear also ends the story.

One of the other important points about the movie is its very intricately designed sound track. Largely considered one of the finest soundtracks of all time, the music perfectly matches the emotions on display in the screen.

If we take a closer look at the movie, we shall be able to appreciate that there is a danger element. This danger element provides the movie with its ideological base and its beauty. This element is stressed with the help of bright colours and sharp contrasts that are used throughout the movie. We should remember that colours play a very specific role in evoking certain psychological states. The emphasis of red and yellow give a textural meaning to the movie. In addition, the contrast between day and night in the movie points towards the impermanence of good sense. While the days are times of extreme exposure to light, the nights represent an absence of light. 'Blue Velvet' is not just a movie; it is much more than that. It is a statement made by an auteur. The auteur in this case has transcended the dichotomy of good and bad.

Additionally, 'Blue Velvet' is a quintessential American tale, something that captures the country's essence with some degree of conviction. In fact, the paraphernalia used in the movie do not leave any doubt that we are engaging in dissecting the reality of the American dream.

CONCLUSIONS

David Lynch has traditionally dabbled and excelled in the craft of creating a parallel world distinctly different from the perceptible one. This Lynchian world does not necessarily go by the logic that is considered acceptable in the world that we live in. Thus, there is always a conflict between what we expect to happen and what actually happens. This creates a tension amongst the audiences as well. Thus, the sense of calm is not present at any point in the movie. 'Blue Velvet' is a movie that perfectly captures that world, a world where normalcy has degraded. In addition, Lynch also deal with a world that deals with the suppressed personas of human beings.

In his pursuit to understand repressed sexuality and the eternal voyeuristic tendencies of human beings, Lynch goes the distance and paints a story so stark and so disturbing that traditional conceptualization of right and wrong are severely hit in the process. In fact, Lynch does not deal with morality at all. It seems that Lynch deliberately put the moral yardstick to the backburner. While Jeffrey, Dorothy and Frank are mere characterizations, the fact remains that they become much more than that in the eventual analysis. It would probably be justice done if it were to be said that Lynch

manipulates the idea of moral clarity with disdain and constructs a seemingly weird world that uncovers everything unsaid and undisclosed about human sexuality (Sinnerbrink, 2008).

Now that we have discussed so much about voyeurism and 'Blue Velvet', it is but necessary that we understand the term before we end the discourse. It actually represents a sexual tendency to derive pleasure while others are indulging in sexual activities. Though the term has transcended sex now. Consequently, in modern parlance, it is the practice of deriving pleasure by looking at the private acts of other individuals. Voyeurism is a trait that has marked humanity since the dawn of civilization. The fact that we watch cinema in itself is indicative of voyeurism. Lynch takes this to another level altogether and explains voyeurism in the crudest possible fashion, at times bordering on the implausible.

In some strange ways, 'Blue Velvet', in addition to being a commentary on the ugly underbelly of a seemingly small town, gives us a good window to look at ourselves and reevaluate our carnal instincts. It questions our intent and us. 'Blue Velvet' in many ways is representative of the dark alleys of humanity, those alleys that people are not comfortable discussing. It paradoxically talks about the inherent fallacies of the human civilization while attempting at understanding civilization in itself.

Lynch has never reconciled with the idea of absolute rationality and this becomes more than apparent through this decidedly faulty yet perfectly apt portrayal of repressed sexuality, masculinity, depravity, voyeurism and violence. Lynch always considered rationality as being overrated. Not without reason did the audience find it objectionable and audacious at the time of its release (L'Ecuyer, 1987). In fact, there were instances when critics have called it a voyeur's delight. As they say, facts are stranger than fiction and 'Blue Velvet' probably is a testimony to that.

Today, as we take a fresh look at the movie, we marvel not only because of its cinematic brilliance but because it managed to create a new discourse in world cinema. The novelty of 'Blue Velvet' transcends across genres. While it remains a neo-noir because of the presentation of its subject matter, it is a surrealist movie because it also deals with dream albeit in some twisted and grotesque manner. The most striking part of the movie is its versatile nature. We cannot possibly decipher the movie just by looking at the obvious elements. Any attempt to deconstruct the movie involves multiple psychoanalytic and sociological considerations. The movie also succeeds in garnering a global audience despite its decidedly American nature. Surrealist cinema will continue to rock the global cinema order. However, a movie like 'Blue Velvet' will continue to mesmerize the audience even in the years to come. While 'Eraserhead' established Lynch as a principal surrealist, 'Blue Velvet' truly put him up as the blue-eyed boy of American postmodern cinema.

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