

Adrian Fuoco  
March 17, 1999  
N. Tausky

#### DAVID LYNCH AND AMERICANA: FILM ART POPULARIZED IN BLUE VELVET

Throughout the history of cinema, achieving artistic and commercial success has always been a problem for filmmakers. Major studios, who invest vast sums of money in their films, are usually more concerned with turning a profit than allowing directors to express themselves artistically. This situation has created somewhat of an enigma, in that, as film increasingly becomes appreciated as an art form, its greatest innovators are hindered by factors outside their control. David Lynch is one filmmaker who has been able to overcome these obstacles.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his career, he has been praised by critics while filling his films with artistic abstraction, experimentation and innovation. On the other hand, Lynch has been commercially successful for nearly two decades, allowing him to continue with his work.

The question of how David Lynch has been able to achieve this difficult task is rooted in a common motif found throughout his films; the desire to uncover that which is hidden below what is presented.<sup>2</sup> Lynch himself has said that; "I like the idea that everything has a surface which hides much more underneath", and this is clearly manifest in his films.<sup>3</sup> The surface that Lynch has chosen in many of his films, notably *Blue Velvet*, is that of 'Lynchtown'.<sup>4</sup> 'Lynchtown' can be seen as a "cute, typically American, small town in the midst of an ocean of forest", where white picket fences litter the landscape, and everybody knows each other.<sup>5</sup> In grounding his films in such innocent, familiar settings, Lynch is able to best satisfy his desire to find something dark, something sinister in the most unlikely of places. At the same time, these settings allow the viewer to enter Lynch's world through settings they can relate to and understand, making his films appealing with large audiences.

David Lynch was born in Missoula, Montana in 1946, and seems to have lived the life of the all-American boy. He grew up in the Pacific Northwest, joined the Boy Scouts, ran for high school treasurer,

---

<sup>1</sup>Alexander, John. *The Films of David Lynch*, 11.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.*, 20.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup>Chion, Michael. *David Lynch*, 83.  
*ibid.*, 83.

and was an usher at John F. Kennedy's inauguration.<sup>6</sup> From an early age, however, Lynch recalls of having dark fantasies and being fascinated with the unknown.<sup>7</sup> This, 'promiscuous curiosity', that is, the idea of a naive person, in a innocent surroundings, looking to find that which is hidden, is prevalent throughout Lynch's best work.<sup>8</sup> In college, Lynch decided to pursue a career as an artist and immediately became interested in the work of art theorist Robert Henry.<sup>9</sup> Henry's teachings on the dual intentions of an artist, which are both to "evoke pleasure and abhorrence" in their work, fascinated Lynch.<sup>10</sup>

Lynch's taste's soon turned to film, and it was through this medium that he decided to express himself.<sup>11</sup> To Lynch, the idea of creating something that the audience could enjoy, and yet be repelled by at the same time, was fascinating. This concept would also help Lynch succeed in drawing audiences and thus making his films commercially viable. The attractive surface of 'Lynchtown', littered with attractive characters and beautiful settings, contrasted with what Lynch saw as lurking underneath, proved fascinating to both the 'art house' and mainstream crowd. *Blue Velvet*, considered by many to be Lynch's masterpiece is a clear example of the Director at his artistic best while appealing to a vast audience.<sup>12</sup>

*Blue Velvet* takes place in Lumbertown, an imaginary small town in the Pacific Northwest. The film's protagonist, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) arrives home from college to visit his father, who has recently suffered a stroke. On his way home from the hospital, Jeffrey discovers a severed ear in a field. He is intrigued by his discovery and, along with his neighbour, Sandy (Laura Dern), begins to uncover a mystery. Jeffrey soon finds out that the ear may belong to the missing husband of a night-club singer, Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini).<sup>13</sup> He decides to seek evidence in her apartment, but is forced to hide in her closet when she unexpectedly returns home.<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey is soon discovered by Dorothy, who forces him to caress her until she hears a knock on the door. Dorothy hides Jeffrey in the closet, and allows Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) into her apartment. It soon becomes clear that Frank has kidnapped

---

<sup>6</sup>Kaleta, Kenneth C.. *David Lynch*, 1.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.*, 2.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.*, 3.

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.*, 3.

<sup>11</sup>Alexander, 2.

<sup>12</sup>Katz, Ephraim. *The Film Encyclopedia*, 856.

<sup>13</sup>Alexander, 91.

<sup>14</sup>*ibid.*

Dorothy's husband and son, and is forcing her to satiate his sexual desires in return for their lives.<sup>15</sup>

Frank's behaviour is terrifying, he "forces her to engage in frantic intercourse punctuated by insults and punches as he speaks successively in the voices of a baby and a daddy."<sup>16</sup>

After this scene, the film becomes a visual depiction of the hidden sickness that lies below the surface of Lumbertown. Jeffrey discovers a drug ring run by Frank and his cohorts, most of whom are excessively violent psychopaths. Jeffrey also becomes Dorothy's lover, while he attempts to pursue a relationship with Sandy. In the end, Jeffrey, along with the police, are able to do away with Frank and his gang, Dorothy is reunited with her son (her husband, however, is killed) and Jeffrey and Sandy fall in love.

Blue Velvet has been described by some critics as a 'demented matinee'.<sup>17</sup> To many it evokes feelings of old Hollywood films without being their clone. Some have looked to Kyle MacLachlan and Laura Dern's performances as "somehow rooted in the leaden ten stars of another era" and yet apart from them. They evoke memories of 1950's teen idols such as Troy Donahue and Sandra Dee in their mannerisms and dress.<sup>19</sup> These preconceptions, however, will soon be torn down by Lynch, as the characters undergo a series of changes. By the end of the film they become unique, 'Lynchian' amalgams, combining elements of innocence from a previous era and more sinister characteristics from the present.<sup>20</sup>

Jeffrey, in particular, changes as he becomes aware of that which lurks beneath the pristine veneer of Lumbertown. The viewer is, from the beginning of the film, made aware that there clearly is something hidden below this innocent setting. The film opens with a musical montage, in which a series of shots, accompanied by Bobby Vinton's song, 'Blue Velvet' introduce us to Lumbertown.<sup>21</sup> A fire engine passes by while the fireman smiles and waves, white picket fences are in abundance, and Mr. Beaumont waters the lawn. As the song fades, however, Mr. Beaumont has a stroke, and as he falls to the ground, the scene changes dramatically. We now see a close up shot of the grass Mr. Beaumont was watering,

---

<sup>15</sup>Chion, 85.

<sup>16</sup>ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Kaleta, 91.

<sup>18</sup>ibid., 90.

<sup>19</sup>ibid., 91.

<sup>20</sup>ibid., 91.

<sup>21</sup>Alexander, 93.

which appears to be swarming with beetles. They are tearing each other apart.<sup>22</sup> Thus, from the initial scene in the film we see Lynch's sinister motif weaving its way throughout the narrative.

When Jeffrey discovers the ear we are once again reminded of Lynch's concept of something hidden, something to be discovered. According to Lynch, "It had to be an ear because it's an opening .... It goes somewhere vast."<sup>23</sup> The ear will thus become "a symbol for what is beyond understanding and for the pursued secret."<sup>24</sup> It is because of his discovery of the ear that Jeffrey will discover that which is hidden, not only in Lumbertown, but in himself.

In demonstrating Jeffrey's discovery of his innermost thoughts and desires, Lynch asks the viewer to do the same. Thus, in the scene at Dorothy's apartment where Jeffrey begins the process of losing his innocence, we are only allowed to see what is happening through the eyes of a voyeur.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the viewer's curiosity in seeing what transpires in the apartment, mirrors Jeffrey's own.<sup>26</sup> The first part of the scene involves Jeffrey watching Dorothy undress and speak to her kidnapped son on the telephone. Here, the viewer observes Dorothy through Jeffrey's eyes. After he is discovered by Dorothy, however, only the audience is left in the closet observing both Dorothy and Jeffrey together.<sup>27</sup> The viewer is now the sole voyeur, Jeffrey's curiosities are now our own. We watch Dorothy undress Jeffrey as she arouses and humiliates him at the same time. Upon Frank's arrival, Jeffrey is forced back into the closet, where once again the audience joins him in observing Dorothy, and now, Frank.<sup>28</sup>

This scene, one of the most repulsive in the film, disturbs and yet fascinates Jeffrey. The same is true of the audience's reaction to the film.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, the image of a psychotic man abusing and humiliating an innocent woman is not appealing to most people. What makes it enduring, however, is the context in which this scene is placed (innocent Lumbertown), and the manner in which it is filmed. Lynch thus encourages the audience to relate to Jeffrey by watching the scene through his perspective.

---

ibid.

ibid., 94.

<sup>24</sup>Kaleta., 95.

<sup>25</sup>ibid., 105.

<sup>26</sup>ibid., 105.

<sup>27</sup>ibid., 103.

<sup>28</sup>Nochimson, Martha P. *The Passion of David Lynch*, 108.

<sup>29</sup>Kaleta, 108.

Jeffrey, terrified by Frank, and yet aroused by Dorothy, cannot help but delve further into the mysteries of Lumbertown's secret world. He becomes increasingly fascinated with Dorothy's plight and he does so, begins to learn more about himself. He becomes Dorothy's lover, yet soon finds himself hitting her in a fit of passion. When Jeffrey is eventually kidnapped by Frank and his gang, his innocence is finally lost completely. He is taken to Frank's friend, Ben's home, where he sees Lumbertown's true underbelly.<sup>30</sup> The house is filled with grotesque prostitutes, drug use, and Ben (Dean Stockwell) singing a perverted version of Roy Orbison's "In Dreams".<sup>31</sup> Afterwards, Frank covers Jeffrey's face with red lipstick, kisses him, then beats him within an inch of his life. The next morning, Jeffrey awakes in a ditch, and returns to the innocent beauty of his home in Lumbertown. When his Aunt inquires about his bruises, Jeffrey quips, "Aunt Barbara, I Love you, but your going to get it."<sup>32</sup> The suggestion of violence has now made it's way even into the pristine image of Jeffrey's home.

The film, like most of Lynch's features, ends on a happy note. Dorothy is reconciled with her son, while Jeffrey and Sandy fall in love. Once again, all appears to be well in Lumbertown. Blue Velvet thus gives the audience a glimpse into the darker side of reality, no matter how pristine it may appear to be on the surface. In the film, Lynch was able to delve into his own psyche, grounded in a fascination for both the innocent and the grotesque. As such, Blue Velvet is both repulsive and beautiful at the same time. It is a highly unconventional and groundbreaking film that appeals to many because of it's ability to present an unknown, highly abstract world in familiar settings.

---

<sup>30</sup>Kaleta, 123.

<sup>31</sup>ibid., 124.

<sup>32</sup>ibid., 125.