

How does auteur, David Lynch, immerse the spectator into a Lynchian world of subconscious absurdity and eerie juxtaposition, with the creation of mood and atmosphere in the film *Blue Velvet*? (David Lynch, 1984)

Gumbrecht (2012a, p.3) captures the essence of a uniquely transcendent form of Mood and Atmosphere, defining mood as, “an inner feeling so private it cannot be precisely circumscribed”, which when combined with “climate” - which ‘objectively surrounds the spectator and exercises a physical influence’ - translates into German as, “stimmung” (Gumbrecht, 2012b, p.4). When watching the auteur, David Lynch’s, films, the spectator is privileged with a metaphoric pair of lynch-tinted glasses, through which they can immerse themselves into a Lynchian stimmung. The documentary, *David Lynch: The Art Life* (2017a), gives insight into the building blocks of his unique character, which clearly translates into his, now iconic, cinematic style. The opening of *Blue Velvet* sets the mood for the rest of the film, submerging the spectator into a twisted world of eerie juxtapositions and contradicted ideologies through visual complexity and the relationship between sound and image. Mood is further explored in the “In dreams” sequence, through setting, performance, and use of song. Sinnerbrink (2012a), amongst others, analyse how narrative becomes superfluous, and abstractions take the foreground in storytelling. Layton (1994a) goes on to analyse these abstractions from a psychoanalytical stand point, uncovering deeper truths. Finally, Lynch’s art background is evident in his stylistically strange portrayal of sex. He experiments with a voyeuristic and dangerous mood and atmosphere, creating a cathartic depiction which combines beauty and horror through visual distortion; much like a Francis Bacon painting. Sobchack’s (2014a, p.50) revelations on sound, decode Lynch’s artistic choice of a disturbing soundscape – which, when combined with rich symbolism, exorcises a unique stimmung.

The film opens on a blue velvet curtain undulating on screen to an unnerving musical score. A suspenseful genre is implied, reminiscent of Film Noir, introducing the theme of hidden truths. However, as the curtain dissolves into a perfect blue sky, the spectator is immediately immersed into a contrastingly safe atmosphere, constructed by the sounds of birds chirping and the bitterly sweet song “Blue Velvet” by Bobby Vinton. The camera floats down to a pristine white picket fence, behind red roses, making up patriotic flag colours and setting up what McGowan (2007, p.8) refers to as the “illusion” of an all-American utopian “bourgeois ideology”, demonstrated further through heavenly establishing shots of the local fireman waving in slow motion and “clean happy, school children”, as described, vividly, in the original screenplay by Lynch (Lynch, 1984, p.4), “safely” being guided across the street by the lollipop lady. In *The Art Life* documentary (*David Lynch: The Art Life* 2017b), the auteur recalls growing up as a child in a “super happy” household, with loving parents, until one night - in what seemed like a safe neighborhood - he saw a naked and distressed woman with a bloodied mouth emerge from the darkness. He remembers the incident as “unworldly”, much like the atmosphere he constructs in the *Blue Velvet* neighborhood, built upon what Routledge (1991), as stated by Pearson (1997a), denotes to be, “familiarity”, that “stubbornly and violently refuses the comfort of psychological or historical meaning”. The shots transition peacefully with cross fades, lulling the audience into a calm state, before the first element of danger is visually implied. A woman is watching a close-up of someone holding a gun on TV, while outside a man, serenely watering his front lawn, is suddenly struck down by a heart attack and spasms on the ground. From this moment on, the non-diegetic music becomes contrapuntal to the morbid action, and the more recognisable Lynchian world is introduced, filled with “visual complexity and symbolic consistency that justifies its designation as a world.” (Sinnerbrink, 2012b, p.148) A toddler wanders onto the lawn and unwillingly observes the horror. Much like Lynch’s childhood experience, this is a metaphor

for innocence corrupted. This juxtaposed world is magnified in the proceeding extreme close-up shot used by Lynch to draw the spectator into the “underbelly of decay and ugliness”, delving deep into the grass, where insects are seen feeding “beneath the veneer of normalcy” (Hardin, 2017). The spectator is forced to look closer and become inquisitive of the macabre, much like Lynch, who, ‘as a child, would examine the texture of dead insects, birds and decaying fruit, to satisfy his allure and fixation with death’. (*David Lynch: The Art Life*, 2017c). His obsession with the intimate observation of these organisms distinctly influences the tangible mood of the shot. Halsall (2002a) explores the importance of music and sound, in creating this mood through a parallel “audio narrative that works in conjunction with the visual story”, and gives insight into a deeper and more abstracted truth, which in this case is the theme of the manifesting evil of mankind. Sobchack, (2014b, p.50.) furthers this idea, reflecting upon how it is the sound that “solicits our sense of touch” through bringing “animal and even cellular life into the foreground”, which is evident in the gruesomely heightened synchronous sounds of foraging, which leaves the spectator with a memorably invasive sense of uncomfortable tactility.

The “In dreams” scene “portrays an otherworldness” of “detached absurdity” (Halsall, 2002b, channeling Alexander, 1993) in the narrative, which submerges the spectator even deeper in a subjective Lynchian atmosphere. Sinnerbrink (2012c, p.161) explores the inability to articulate certain complex cinematic moods, such as these, with words. Lynch furthers this concept in an interview (Lynch 2012a), illustrating the use of abstractions to create something that can rather be “intuited” by the spectator. This is evident in this scene, which transcends narrative and creates a dream-like sequence, where ‘cinematic stimmung becomes autonomous in the composition of the fictional world’ and enables the spectator to engage with the characters’ subconscious thoughts through music, setting, mise-en-scene and

performance (Sinnerbrink 2012d, p.161). Frank Booth, the deranged and violently perverted villain in the film, who rapes Dorothy whilst pretending to be both her baby and her father, takes the impressionable protagonist, Jefferey, on a “joy ride”. They go to “Pussy Heaven”, a parallel universe of strange, introduced primarily through setting. Sinnerbrink (2012e, p.149) explains how “the aesthetic dimensions” give “life and expression...to spaces and material things”. Chiaroscuro lighting slices through the room and casts shadows on the characters, revealing their dark sides. Green curtains frame the room, like a theatre, representing life as a stage on which the characters are all performing a version of self, masking their secrets. The pretty-pink wall’s innocent connotations are tainted by an isolated painting of a naked woman hanging above, contrasting with a large clown-like doll with a misshapen face. This peculiar combination of the symptomatic mise-en-scene is reminiscent of Lynch’s own beautiful, yet disturbed, artwork, as seen in his documentary, (*David Lynch: The Art Life*, 2017d) and adds to the perverse, fetish-fueled atmosphere. Sinnerbrink (2012f, p.148) refers to mood as ‘an element of cinema whose obviousness is deeply mysterious’. A few, grotesque, bored-looking, overweight women sit in complete silence. One fiddling with her fingernails, the other two chain-smoking, creating what Diehl (2012a) refers to as a “beguiling combination of the cosmic and the mundane”, in keeping with Lynch’s “abnormally normal-seeming normal” persona - a walking contradiction and “breathing analog to his art”. (Diehl 2012b)

Layton (1994b, p.377) analyses Frank’s behavior in relation to Freudian concepts of the subconscious mind and believes that Lynch used the character as a representation of “the id, sex and aggression lying just beneath a surface of civilization”, like the bugs introduced in the opening sequence. Halsall (2002c) discusses the device employed by Lynch to expose this subconscious truth and “peels back layers”, inviting the spectator into the weak complexities of a character unable to honestly express emotion through dialogue, with Roy

Orbison's song "In Dreams", which has an "abstract quality within the framework" that works to "define the narrative" on a deeper level (Halsall 2002d). Ben, a slim, ghostly man with sparkling eyes and an unnervingly serene tone of voice, which has a certain hypnotic charm, begins mouthing to the song. Kaleta (1993, p.124) analyses the artificial nature of the lip-syncing performance and how it is crafted by the masking of his face with "grotesque staged lighting", molding the song into an "anthem in the film for secrets within each of us". Specifically, Frank, who Layton (1994c) describes as becoming 'possessed' by the lyrics, "In dreams you're mine". The spectator is snapped out of this transient state, however, when the "lobotomized Mr Happy Face" (Layton, 1994d, p.376), Frank, is overcome with a traumatised look, which descends into agony, and finally fury, before he switches the tape off, unable to tolerate the sad ending: "I awake to find you gone.". He insists that everyone leave with him, screaming, "Let's fuck! I'll fuck anything that moves!". Layton reflects on Neale's (1983a, pp.2-16) study of male desire and violence (which is in-keeping with Layton's psychoanalytical analysis) to interpret the song's ability to abstractly imply the character's dark past of "abandonment, loss" and "powerlessness" through Frank's inability to tolerate the final lyrics. The eroticism of his pain, that follows, "inextricably fused with pre-Oedipal rage and violence", could be seen as a coping mechanism which explains his fixation. (Neale, 1983b, pp.2-16.).

Lynch creates voyeuristic cinema through his evocation of mood and atmosphere in Dorothy and Jeffery's sadomasochist act, as described by Dujardin (2017a) as not only providing the audience with "escapist entertainment" but also 'satisfying hidden urges' through exploring 'perversions that may otherwise remain locked away'. Jeffery gives in to his curious desire, slapping Dorothy across the face and cueing the spectator to be sucked into a surreal and abstract realm through an extreme close-up of her mouth. Her striking red lips open into a

smile, revealing her chipped teeth, which are metaphoric of the imperfections within beauty. Flames appear over the shot, burning as the dramatic string music intensifies. The fire motif conveys the burning desire heating up, as an element of violence is introduced. When it cuts back to the pair, naked, Lynch ‘condenses and figures the amorphous’ stimmung of sex into “concrete imagery” (Sobchack, 2015c, p.50) through the slow shutter speed, used to blur the act into a wild, Bacon-esque painting, brought to life. This style can be traced back to Lynch’s initial aspiration, to paint and become an artist, which later developed into using moving image as a way of ‘making a moving painting’ (Lynch, 2012b), in turn, explaining his inclination towards mood and atmosphere, over dialogue and narrative. Lynch refers to Francis Bacon as one of his “giant inspirations. I just love him to pieces.” (Lynch, 2012c). The documentary *Francis Bacon: A brush with Violence* (2017) highlights how Bacon was abused by his father, as a child, and came to develop his own fetish for violence later in life, which clearly influenced his macabre paintings. His cathartic depictions of disembodied figures against richly coloured, perfect backdrops, echo the same metaphoric juxtaposed mood of beauty-torn-apart and sexual violence, that Lynch nods to in *Blue Velvet*.

Sobchack’s (2015d, p.50) exploration of the power of sound, in inducing certain moods, resonates with this particular scene, analysing the “atonal” sounds as ‘present, but not synchronous with the hereness and nowness of the images’. The soft and sentimental diegetic sounds of touch and sensuality, ordinarily associated with filmic love-making scenes, are removed and replaced by non-diegetic sounds, that Sobchack (2015e, p.50) believes “listen” to the image and, rather, exorcise the characters’ hidden desires, as mentioned earlier by Dujardin (2017b). The unnaturally slowed down and lowered pitch of the non-diegetic sound is haunting. Animal growls and high-pitched screeches pierce through the hollow undertone, reflective of the violent and animalistic nature of the moment tearing through. This disturbing

mix of seemingly contrapuntal sounds creates a “paradox of an experience that is both immersive and alienating” for the spectator. (Sobchack 2015f, p.50)

To conclude, Lynch succeeds in challenging cinema’s “powers of discernment and description, as well as the potential of language to capture" Stimmung (Gumbrecht 2012c, p.3), unlike mainstream genre-oriented cinema, which separates human emotion into universally understood categories and expresses them through the use of dialogue and narrative clichés. Like him, Lynch challenges the spectator to scratch beneath the surface of ideological paradise. The surreal behaviors, unworldly settings, and narrative abstractions uncovered, expose a deeper truth and sense of illogical realism which, I feel, is in fact a more accurate depiction of reality. The human mind is bizarre and incomprehensible, which when translated into film, should reflect that same ambiguity. Lynch’s films are infused with black holes into a completely obscure Lynchian dimension, which the spectator is drawn into through an innovative use of sound and extreme close-ups in the film. This device enables the mood that follows to be dream-like or metaphoric, and in some cases, allows the spectator to explore subconscious wishes in a cathartic way. Finally, as Sinnerbrink states, I fully agree that without “the expression of cinematic mood...we could not appreciate or be moved by the art of narrative film.” (Sinnerbrink, 2012g, p.161)

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