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## EXPLORING WOMEN'S PORTRAYAL AND NARRATIVE ENTANGLEMENT IN DAVID LYNCH'S 'BLUE VELVET' (1986): POSTMODERN CINEMATIC ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

This study conducted a concise postmodern cinematic analysis of 'Blue Velvet' (1986), directed by David Lynch, focusing on the portrayal of women and their narrative roles. 'Blue Velvet' exemplifies postmodern cinema through its subversion of conventional storytelling and exploration of dark undercurrents in suburban America. The analysis delved into the multifaceted depiction of women, examining how Lynch employs the "male gaze" through camera work and narrative structure, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics. By scrutinizing key scenes, we revealed women often depicted for male viewer gratification. This study provided a new viewpoint on 'Blue Velvet,' shedding light on its challenge to cinematic norms and highlighting the interplay of gender, power, and narrative in a postmodern context.

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### INTRODUCTION

The representation of everyday lives has been mediated through the characterizations and narratives in a film. Film in the postmodern era is also believed to be one of the essential media in bringing up the representation of our lives. According to Sari (2021), postmodern is seen as a response to the failure of previous theories of modernity in describing the extraordinary transformation in current civilization. Postmodernism is also defined as distrust in various forms metanarrative, disbelief in claims truth of objective science– universal (Prihantono. 2018). Postmodernist traits has

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first emerged in the cultural production in the 1950s (*A Bout de Souffle*) or in the 1960s (*Cul-de-Sac*) (Norman, 2011).

The film *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986) is one of the postmodern films with some characteristics such as meta-fiction, paranoia, and film noir. Postmodernism frequently questions and deconstructs established standards. David Lynch, through “*Blue Velvet*”, accomplishes so by going under the surface of suburban America to discover its dark, frightening underbelly (Knafo, 2012; Mayhew, 2015; Ruers and Marianski, 2022; Tembo, 2020). It reveals the sinister side of a seemingly lovely tiny town.

The narrative centers around Jeffrey Beaumont, away at college, but has just returned to his little hometown, Lumberton, because of his father’s stroke. On his way back from the hospital to his house, he finds a human ear. He picks it up and puts it into a paper bag. He brings it to the local police office and meets Detective Williams, who is his neighbor. Because of a deep curiosity, Jeffrey visits the Detective’s house. Later, on his way home, he meets Detective William’s daughter, Sandy, and they walk around together. Sandy shows Jeffrey the apartment of the woman singer whose name keeps appearing in his father’s office. The name of the woman bar singer is Dorothy Vallens. Jeffrey starts to involve himself in the mystery of Dorothy’s life.

While “*Blue Velvet*” has been the subject of numerous studies, the majority of previous research has primarily focused on Jeffrey’s character development and the film’s postmodern aspects. For instance, Sofía Martincorena’s research titled “‘Are You a Bad Boy?’: Variations of the American Adam in David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*” examines how the film employs the masculine paradigm (Martincorena, 2021). Another study, “*Blue Velvet: a parable of male development*” by Lynne Layton, centers on Jeffrey’s character evolution (Layton, 1994). To be more specific, Bodin and Poulsen further analysed Jeffrey’s development from boyhood to manhood in their paper entitled “*Blue velvet by David Lynch: A fairy tale about the developmental conflicts of growing from boyhood to manhood*” (Bodin and Poulsen, 1998).

The perspective of a male dominates most films. According to Laura Mulvey, in her paper, the traditional role women are continuously to be looked at and displayed (Mulvey, 1989). An essay entitled “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*” written by Laura Mulvey stated five concept which are male gaze, scopophilia, cinematic identification, narrative disruption, and psychoanalysis and Film Theory (Mulvey, 2013). Male gaze is one of the themes employed in this study, in which she believes that the camera and narrative

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structure frequently match with the male point of view, supporting patriarchal power dynamics.

This concept implies that women in movies are often portrayed for the pleasure and consumption of male viewers. In this film, Lynch tries to capture woman within that concept. Lynch, through the camera works, wants the spectator to view the characters from a heterosexual male's perspective. We can see that every scene in the film includes Jeffrey in it, and everything is based on Jeffrey's, a heterosexual male, point of view. Thus, this paper aims to delve deep into the multifaceted portrayal of women in "Blue Velvet" and their connection to crime within the narrative and presents some engaging signs, symbols, and scenes found along the way. "Blue Velvet" made a profound impact on cinema and popular culture by both contributing to and challenging cinematic norms of its time, particularly in its portrayal of women. Therefore, this study aims to offer a fresh perspective by exploring the complex portrayal of women in "Blue Velvet" and their entanglement within the narrative.

## **METHOD**

Observing the research's objects, issues, and goals is necessary to determine the research approach. A movie that falls within the audio-visual text category serves as this study's subject. Generally, there are two basic ways to conduct research: a qualitative approach and a quantitative method. The topic of this study is examined in relation to the study's object using a qualitative analysis.

### ***Narrative***

The first method employed in this study was narrative analysis. This method will be used to analyze the film. According to Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, some components that will be employed in studying the movie in narrative analysis are storylines, plot, and character (Corrigan and White, 2012).

### ***Non-Narrative***

In non-narrative analysis, the writer will examine the film using cinematography components such as point of view and four shot qualities (frame, aspect ratio, depth of field, contrast, and color). The position from which a person, an event, or an object is seen (or filmed) is referred to as the point of view in cinematography. The action will be seen

through the eyes of an impersonal character. There are four elements in this shot attribute:

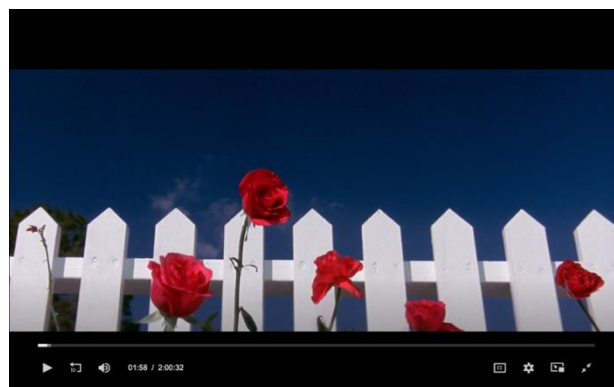
- a. Framing: The framing of a shot contains, limits, and directs the point of view within the borders of the rectangular frame
- b. Aspect Ratio: The relation of width to height of the film frame as it appears on a movie screen or television monitor
- c. Depth of Field (Focus): indicates what is significant in the image

Contrast and Color: Color profoundly affects our experience and understanding of a film shot; even black-and-white films use contrast and gradations to create atmosphere or emphasize certain motifs (Corrigan and White, 2012).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Subversion of The Ideal American Suburb**

The film begins with a blue velvet piece of cloth, might be curtains, to introduce the producer and the actors. The movement of the cloth implies that there is a room behind it, something that is concealed from the audience and will soon be revealed to the audience. The scene switched from the blue velvet curtain to a scene portrays the happy, peaceful, and simple life of the Americans living in suburban area. The setting of the film is the fictional Northwestern town of Lumberton. It shows a blue sky, white picket fence, and red roses, which are the primary color of the United States flag. The classic white picket fence is a symbol of American Suburbs. The white picket fence represented the American dream of success, stability, and family values (Burke, 2016).



**Figure 1.** blue sky, white picket fence, and red roses

The firefighter standing on the fire truck with the Dalmatian is trying to deconstruct the reality that firetruck is usually in a hurry as a sign of danger in a certain place. He is waving to the camera's point of view as if he knows he is being filmed. This is one of the postmodern film characteristics, which is meta-fiction.



**Figure 2.** Firefighter waving to the camera

After the rose, yellow tulips and white picket fence, students safely crossing the road, and a typical American house with the white picket fence start showing. The camera starts showing the backyard of the house while a man, whom later we know that his name is Tom Beaumont, is watering his garden. However, a few seconds later, the camera starts showing the hose leaked and get caught in the plants. Tom Beaumont suddenly had a stroke. The snagged hose represents one of many causes of stroke, which is the blocked blood vessel.



**Figure 3.** Tom Beaumont has a stroke while watering his lawn

The scene of having a stroke is in contrast to the peaceful and safe life presented by the film earlier. Moreover, the scene of insects fighting fiercely beneath the grass shows how suburban areas conceal a mystery beneath their seeming placid lives which ready to invade the area



4a



4b

**Figure 4a. and Figure 4b:** Camera going beneath the grass and shows fierce insects.

After Jeffrey's father collapses, the camera zooms down on the grass, past the earth to where the insects crawl as a wriggling mass of legs. Their insectoid noise is amplified by the music, as though they are rustling against one other and making physical contact with the spectator as well.

It is natural forces that intrude upon the garden fantasies of Lumberton. It is a reminder that even the most controlled environments contain unwelcome elements. Indeed, over-determined spaces, such as these domestic lawns, are most vulnerable to corruption (Martin, 2013).

Insects and bugs are used by Lynch as symbols of decay, depravity, and the hidden world under the surface. They occur in scenes depicting the town's corrupt and frightening elements, reinforcing the sense that darkness lurks just beyond the surface of normalcy (Joseph, 2017).

## **Portrayal of Women**

### **The Mothers and Aunt Barbara**

The first group is the mothers and Aunt Barbara. Since the very beginning of the film, Sandy's mother, Jeffrey's mother, and Aunt Barbara are always inside the house. Most of the time, they are being captured while doing domestic works at domestic place

such as knitting and helping her daughter at home. From most of the scenes of Aunt Barbara, Jeffrey's mother, and Sandy's mother, they are always inside the house and expected to do so.



**Figure 5.** Aunt Barbara and Jeffrey's Mother

In the movie, Aunt Barbara plays a little role and only makes one brief appearance. She plays a rather typical position as the older generation of women in Lumberton and personifies the image of the kind, benevolent mother. She worries and attempts to shield Jeffrey after learning of his engagement in the perilous world of Dorothy Vallens. Her persona embodies the town's more traditional, antiquated ideals.

Jeffrey's Mother, however, is portrayed as somehow mysterious woman. She is intriguing and complex. Eventhough she is captured mostly inside the house, her character challenges traditional gender roles and expectations in several ways. Referring to the first scene in which she is smoking in the living room while watching a noir film on the television while her husband watering their lawn before collapsing. The scene where she is seen reclining on the couch, smoking, and watching television contrasts sharply with the stereotypical image of a nurturing and caring mother. Instead, it portrays her as a more independent and possibly even rebellious figure. This depiction subverts the conventional expectations of women as passive and solely focused on domestic works related to housemaking.



**Figure 6.** Phoning Jeffrey

In figure 6, she phones Jeffrey to inform him about the condition of his father. She, now, becomes concern about the financial matter of the family and has to maintain the family. The character of Jeffrey's mother may represent the degradation and dissolution of traditional family structures in such environment. Her husband's accident and the events that follow in the film disrupt the family's lives. Yet, at the same time, she could also be interpreted as a depiction of the difficulties that women endure in raising their families during times of crisis. Her attempts to keep her family together in the midst of chaos and danger in the film might be interpreted as a statement on women's resilience and strength in the face of adversity.



**Figure 7.** Sandy's Mother helping Sandy

Sandy's mother, on the other hand, embraces the social norms on how a woman, or a mother should behave. Different from Aunt Barbara and Jeffrey's mother, Sandy's mother becomes the symbol of normalcy. She embodies conventional, a middle-class suburban ideal of motherhood and femininity. Her home is clean, her demeanor is polite, and she adheres to traditional gender roles as it is shown in figure 7. She represents the protective and caring aspect of motherhood. This concern is evident when she questions

Sandy about her involvement with the film's protagonist, Jeffrey Beaumont. Much like the film's overall theme of duality, Sandy's Mother's character highlights the stark contrast between the surface appearances of suburban life and the hidden, darker underbelly that Jeffrey explores. Her character is a representation of the façade that conceals the disturbing truths beneath.

### **Sandy and Dorothy Vallens**

Sandy and Dorothy Vallens are other things. In this film, Lynch, as if, wants to make a clear distinction through these two women characters in the film. What we can notice from the film is that Lynch tries to lead the spectators to identify and categorize Sandy and Dorothy into good and evils. As the film goes by, Sandy mostly appears during the day scenes, and Dorothy always appears during the night scene. [And Innocence and Sexuality; Light and Dark, etc.] Sandy's first appearance in the scene is coming from the darkness outside her house while talking to Jeffrey about the cut ear [Her voice from the darkness before she appears]. Sandy's coming out of the darkness may symbolize or give the spectators a hint that Sandy is a good woman who later will become the motivations, lead for Jeffrey to involve into the mystery, and solve it.

In addition, it is like telling the spectator that Sandy will mostly be seen during the daytime. she wears a pink blouse. Pink is a stereotyped color which has been constructed and bequeathed by the society to be girls' color (Cunningham and Macrae, 2011; Lipkin, 2009). Most of the time, Sandy's clothes are mostly in pink and soft shade color, as it is shown in picture 4 to 6. Sandy is the one who shows Jeffrey the apartment in Lincoln Street, which is the apartment of Dorothy Vallens. As Mulvey has stated that, woman appearance will solely have associated to a man. It happens in this film; Sandy will be there with Jeffrey for him to share the rational and organized plans to solve the mystery while Sandy cannot reject that and just easily persuaded to follow Jeffrey's plan. This is in line with traditional gender roles, which cast men as rational, protective, and decisive, while cast women as irrational, nurturing, and submissive (Tyson, 2014).



8a



8b



8c

**Figure 8a.** Persuading Sandy to do the plan; **Figure 8b.** Jeffrey as pest-control man; **Figure 8c.** Jeffrey is going to sneak into the apartment

On the other hand, Dorothy Vallens, a bar singer with more appealing clothes, compared to Sandy, and red lipstick which has two narratives in representing woman during that period. It conveys both empowerment and oppression lips. She is always seen during the nighttime when it is dark. In terms of the male gaze, compare to Sandy, Dorothy has more function in this film, which is displayed as an erotic object for both the character within the story and the spectators.



**Figure 9.** Dorothy Vallens singing in a bar with a complete band

The spectators always see Dorothy from Jeffrey's or other heterosexual males' point of view as we can see how Jeffrey is looking at Dorothy. In figure 9, Dorothy is singing, and Jeffrey is there as the audience. We notice a completely different wardrobe between the two women, or even between Dorothy and the rest of the women in the film.



**Figure 10.** A quick shifting from Dorothy with the complete band to Dorothy only with the piano based on Jeffrey’s point of view

The strange thing is the quick-change figure 9 to figure 10. We do not know which one is the real Dorothy’s performance because after having figure 9, the camera moves to shot Jeffrey, and then the scene changes with only one pianist and Dorothy with a different dress. The most obvious scene is when Jeffrey sneaks into her apartment at night, using the key he got when he disguises as the pest-control man during the day.

Jeffrey hides in the closet because Dorothy suddenly comes home from working at the bar. Picture 12 shows how the camera angle is suited to Jeffrey’s limited point of view from the closet. But Jeffrey’s perspective is very different from Frank’s perspective.



**Figure 11.** Jeffrey is inside the closet in Dorothy’s Apartment, and his limited view to the living room

Besides the actors, there is a catchy sign which is the staircases. This film presents many scenes in the staircases. In film noir, staircases often lead to violence waiting at the top of the staircase, and it represents a place of crisis; an arena for psychological tension (Shin & Gallagher, 2015). One of the most obvious scenes is that night when Jeffrey sneaks into Dorothy’s apartment using the staircases. There are many more things which show that Blue Velvet is a real postmodern film, for example, temporal distortion (the event

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that does not make sense) namely the man with sunglasses in the middle of the night, the talked about the boy with the biggest tongue, the chicken walk, and the walking baby in the middle of the stroke attack. At the ending of the film, the camera is zooming out from Jeffrey's ears in minute 01:56:05 until 01:56:21 and moves to Jeffrey closed eyes, which at first the camera zoom in and go inside the cut ear in minute 10:30 until 10:45. It ends with Jeffrey is waiting outside Detective's house.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The paper explores the complex portrayal of women in David Lynch's 1986 film "Blue Velvet" within the context of postmodernism. It discusses how the film subverts the idealized image of suburban America by delving into its dark and disturbing underbelly. Through an analysis of various female characters in the film, including Sandy's Mother, Aunt Barbara, Dorothy Vallens, and Sandy, the paper highlights the different roles and representations of women.

One central theme in the paper is the dichotomy between light and dark, innocence and sexuality, which is reflected in the characters of Sandy and Dorothy. Sandy is depicted as the embodiment of innocence, associated with daylight and soft colors, while Dorothy represents a more erotic and complex figure associated with darkness and bold red lipstick. This contrast reflects traditional gender roles and the concept of the male gaze, where women are often portrayed for the pleasure and consumption of male viewers.

The paper also examines the film's use of meta-fiction, paranoia, and film noir elements, all of which are characteristic of postmodernism. These elements contribute to the film's subversion of established norms and its exploration of hidden, unsettling truths beneath the surface of suburban life.

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