

“It’s a Strange World”: Violence and the Uncanny in David Lynch’s “Blue Velvet”

by

Darren Springer

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in

partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

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Abstract

In general, critics have theorized that the two “worlds” within the fictional small town of Lumberton in David Lynch’s Blue Velvet—the excessively idyllic suburban area inhabited by the film’s protagonist, Jeffrey Beaumont, and the nightmarish “underworld” populated by characters like Frank Booth and Dorothy Vallens—exist in antagonistic opposition to each other. This antagonism is typically explained using the topographical psychoanalytic model of conscious/repressed, with many critics assuming that the “underneath” represented in the film by such characters as Frank Booth is where the film’s real interest lies. In my thesis, I use Freud’s conception of the “uncanny” in order to show that, rather than existing in marked, severe opposition to each other, the film’s two “neighborhoods”, Frank’s and Jeffrey’s, actually infect each other to such a degree that the film becomes a sustained example of that mixture of the familiar and the unsettling that comprises the uncanny. I place particular consideration on the film’s scenes of violence as instances in which this sense of the uncanny is most apparent.

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1) INTRODUCTION

About three years ago, I saw the band the Handsome Family perform for the first time. The band creates dark and fatalistic Gothic folk music whose subject matter abounds in mystery and suggestion. In their songs, mundane and insignificant details and images are often juxtaposed with those that are more obviously remarkable or alarming. For instance, in the song “No One Fell Asleep Alone,” the line “I saw a deer limp across/A supermarket parking lot/Last night as I drove home from work” is soon followed by the images of “Abandoned buildings full of smoke/Children jumping from the roof/Cars and ditches leaking blood/Rivers full of drowning bugs.” And in “Weightless Again,” the specifics of a romantic tryst (“We stopped for coffee in the redwood forest/Giant dripping leaves, spoons of powdered cream”) accumulate to create in the singer a sensation so euphoric that it borders on the self-destructive (“This is why people OD on pills/And jump from the Golden Gate Bridge/Anything to feel weightless again”).

The Handsome Family fan becomes accustomed to such lyrical contrasts between the ordinary and the dramatic. For those experiencing the band’s music for the first time, however, these contrasts can be shocking. This was the case with the show I attended three years ago. They were performing the song “A Beautiful Thing” when the chorus caught me off-balance: “Darling, don’t you know/It’s only human to want a kill/A beautiful thing.” I, along with what must have been anywhere from fifty to a hundred of the people in attendance, reacted instinctively with a guffaw. It wasn’t clear to me then (and it still isn’t) what the precise reason was for my laughter. I felt certain at the time that my amusement was a side effect of the shock of the unexpected. And yet, what other

sentiment might I have expected from a group whose lyrics so openly embraced death as theme, as event, as obsession, as state of being?¹

Perhaps it's wrong, though, to say that the shock of the unexpected played no role in my outburst. It's impossible for me to know the feelings of my fellow audience members, but I can't help but suspect that those of us in the crowd who laughed at the line were reacting the way that people often do when confronted with something that strikes us as undeniably true or real, yet is difficult to accept. Our laughter wasn't derisive or sneering. It was a sign that the slight discomfort the chorus awoke in us might've made us feel made the singers, and the song, more attractive to us rather than less so. Our expression of mirth wasn't an attempt to laugh the line out of existence, but an indication of the affinity we felt for the idea expressed in it even as it made us initially apprehensive. Evidence for the affinity I'm arguing for might be found in the fact that the singer's subsequent repetitions of the chorus were met, not with laughter, but, judging at least from the faces of those around me, with understanding smiles.

As my friend and I made our way to her car after the show, I thought more about that line and the crowd's initial reaction to it. I began to think of that line as coming from a place in which every thought and emotion usually repressed, every word typically left unsaid, is expressed rather than concealed. As I wondered what such a place might feel like, what codes of social conduct might govern such a world, I began to wonder at the same time what kind of adjustment would be required in order to face, in the realm of the

¹See also 2001's "I Know You Are There", in which the dying singer's connection with his beloved allows him to weather any brand of torture leading up to his demise: "When white owls circle screaming/And gravel fills my mouth/I know you are there". In keeping with our discussion of lyrical contrasts in the Handsome Family's music, however, it should be noted that this image is preceded by the line "When softly calling bluebirds/Drift through the lazy clouds". Both lines are sung by Brett Sparks with the same air of resigned serenity, as if the screeching owls and singing bluebirds had equal claims on keeping watch over the singer's dying day.

everyday, what we would normally hide or ignore. For instance, what if, instead of denying the darker aspects of ourselves, such as a temptation towards violence, or a fascination with the taboo (and the urge to violate it), we openly acknowledged these darker, more shameful aspects of ourselves, coming to terms with their presence instead of feeling the need to barricade them from our consciousness in order to survive?

Of course, I knew even as I envisioned such a place that it was impossibly idyllic—and that it would, of course, drastically alter our encounter with a line such as “It’s only human to want to kill a beautiful thing.” In the kind of unconditionally open realm of experience I’d pictured, such an idea would be commonplace, and would be drained of, if not all, then at least some of the mystery, surprise and unease it seems to generate in us. The essence of the effect that the line quoted above has on us as an audience is the fact that it leaves neither entirely comfortable nor entirely unnerved, but rather causes us to feel a combination of both. The thesis that follows examines an analogous collision between the comfortable and the unnerving, between what many would term the “façade” of the normal and the darker, repressed matter hidden beneath, in David Lynch’s film Blue Velvet.

This film’s imagery evokes the same world that is depicted in the lyrics of a group like the Handsome Family: a world whose essence is a mingling of the “everyday” and the extraordinary. My main focus will be on the way in which Lynch’s film creates what we might call a “Gothic of the everyday.” This phrase is meant to evoke the role that violence plays in the world of the film. Rather than being depicted as something bubbling under the everyday, overtly harmonious “surface” of the world of the film, as something that is actively repressed by that seemingly peaceful surface, I argue that this

“harmonious” surface is in itself inherently violent, that the threat or promise of violence suffuses even the depictions of Jeffrey Beaumont’s sunny, friendly neighborhood. This ever-present mixture of the violent and the peaceful affects the viewer in an uncanny way, since it establishes the violent as familiar and the familiar as violent. As a result, the film resists attempts to analyze it as an easy opposition between the “false” harmony of the “daylight” world of the film and the violence and darkness depicted most prominently in the “nighttime” scenes taking place in what we might refer to as “Boothville,” that area of both the town and the film inhabited by the villainous Frank Booth and his partners in crime. These two areas of the film and the town, geographically distinct though they may be, both infect their “opposing” areas with their own unique properties and characteristics, so that both areas are touched at least in some measure with both violence and familiarity.

Much of the criticism and scholarship written on David Lynch’s Blue Velvet has taken for granted that the contrast that the film presents between the overtly folksy and genteel presentation of everyday life among “average citizens” in the film’s setting, the small town of Lumberton, and the disturbing nightlife represented by characters like Frank Booth and Ben, is an opposition meant to be read from the top down. This argument can be summed up by the following: the bland, Norman Rockwell-esque workings and interactions found among the main streets of Lumberton represent a concerted effort made by the town’s citizens to display a respectable front, denying and repressing, in the process, the darker emotions and impulses that course beneath the surface. In short: the stiff, cliché-embracing world of “normal” Lumberton is a lie, constructed by Lynch mainly to instruct the viewer as to where the story’s real action is

located. That, of course, would be the world populated by Frank Booth and Dorothy Vallens, one of deeper, darker passions and real emotional honesty.

Such a view of the film as governed by easily discernable binary oppositions is exemplified by Laura Mulvey, who writes of the film's opening sequence that "the binary opposition between the everyday and nether worlds is there for all to see and to grasp [...] This opposition is easy to understand and forebodes the topographical organization of the story that is to come, between light/day and dark/night [...] conscious perception and unconscious experience" (Mulvey 53). It's astonishing to think that in a film in which visual and audio confusion plays such a prominent role, there would be any binary that would be presented "for all to see and to grasp," any pair of opposing values that are not blurred, but instead remain identifiably and definitively separate.

It should be noted, of course, that Mulvey does not entirely exclude the idea of the blurring of such boundaries from her analysis of Blue Velvet. Mulvey argues that "the power of cinematic language juxtaposes spaces and images which disturb the familiar with strangeness and the uneasy intimations of fear and desire" (53). However, even as she acknowledges that the divide between the familiar and the strange does not keep one from affecting (or infecting) the other, Mulvey still relies on received notions of the relationship between familiar and strange (read: surface and underneath) in attempting to understand the interplay of both forces in Blue Velvet. Relating the film's composition to the structure of Gothic literature, Mulvey points out the way in which, like Blue Velvet, Gothic fiction explores binaries such as that between the familiar and the strange: "All these spatial representations, the ruins of the past, the criminal milieu, make use of the division between surface and nether world. Blue Velvet's opening sequence is

designed around these intricate topographical metaphors, but in such a way as to make its implications as apparent as possible” (53). What these implications might be is suggested in Mulvey’s assertion that “the story buries a narrative of the unconscious within a frame that belongs to a world of normality” (54).

What is frustrating about Mulvey’s analysis is its complacency regarding the use of terms like “normality.” It is unclear what such a word might mean within the world of the film. What element of Blue Velvet could truly hold up as an example of the “normal”? A brief synopsis of the sequence to which Mulvey refers, the film’s opening scene following the title credit sequence, will be useful at this point. The scene begins as a montage of immediately identifiable, archetypal images of American small-town life: a smiling fireman waving as he rides past the camera, a close-up of a white picket fence with a rose garden situated almost too perfectly in front of it, a kindly crossing guard helping schoolchildren cross an intersection. This tableau of American clichés concludes with the image of a man watering his front lawn, only to fall to the ground suddenly after suffering an apparent stroke. As a dog laps at the stream pouring from the stricken man’s hose, the camera seemingly tracks downward into the earth below the lawn’s surface, where it finds an army of insects gnawing brutally at the soil.

When Mulvey refers to the “frame that belongs to a world of normality” in this scene, she is referring, it would seem, to the parade of the seemingly banal that comprises the scene just before Lynch’s camera plunges below ground to capture the vicious insects. There is no doubt, of course, that the images in this sequence are readily *familiar*, steeped in the language of Norman Rockwell, or the work of Frank Capra with every trace of negative emotions drained from them. However, the concepts of the

familiar and the normal are not synonymous. In contrast to Mulvey, who also writes of this early sequence that “unlike the flatness and colour saturation of the opening images, the darkness draws in the camera with the force of fascinated curiosity”(53), Greil Marcus argues that Lumberton’s bright surface is the true point of attraction for the viewer of Blue Velvet’s next-to-opening scene:

[In this sequence] it is the pastoral that stays in the mind, not nightmare bugs and things-are-not-as-they-seem. Lynch’s picture of things-as-they-ought-to-be is elegant; it feels whole, not like a cheat, not like an advertisement for anything, but rather like a step out of the devices of a movie, for a moment a step out of the theater and into an idea of real life [...] The slightly stiff nature of Lynch’s framing and timing of the fireman, the children, the crossing guard, the too-bright images of the fences and the flowers, is not a matter of making the familiar strange, but of getting at how familiar the familiar actually is. (Marcus 117)

Marcus’s assertion that the viewer of this scene takes “a step out of the theater and into an *idea* of real life” suggests that the parade of the familiar within this sequence represents reality with a difference. The question that lies behind Marcus’s passage, the thought that governs his argument, is this: what if the familiar, the settings and images which we recognize as having some kind of presence either in our immediate lives or our memories, cannot in itself be classified as *normal*? When Marcus argues that Lynch’s intention is not “making the familiar strange,” he seems to suggest, not that the bucolic suburban images that populate the sequence aren’t strange, but rather that in their excessive yet somehow dreamlike familiarity, they are *inherently* bizarre. Contrary to

Mulvey's argument that the surface world of the film is necessarily dependent on the underneath, as represented by Frank and Dorothy, for its air of the bizarre, the strangeness of the everyday world of Lumberton depicted in this sequence is one that is native to the surface, not leached from below. In this way, the world of Lumberton, and the world of the film, is actually *familiar* in its bizarre nature, and the fact that it contains both of these properties, each enveloped within the other, establishes it as *uncanny*.

The "uncanny," or *unheimlich*, is a concept I have been hinting at so far without acknowledging directly. In discussing this term, it seems necessary to begin by addressing a term that is often treated as its opposite, the homely, or *heimlich*. Typically, the homely or *heimlich* is used to describe what is familiar, natural or comfortable—in other words, what we are "at home" in or with. The *heimlich* is thought of as that which confirms the subject's sense of the real and the unreal. It reassures the subject that what they believe to be true or real is in fact so, and that there is nothing beyond what they believe to be true or real.

Meanwhile, the *unheimlich* or uncanny offers the normal with a difference. In this sense, that which is considered uncanny cannot be considered in direct opposition to the *heimlich*, since it shares enough of the attributes of what is typically described as "homely" to be considered directly related to the "normal." Without the trappings of the familiar, the uncanny would simply be viewed as a monstrous, fantastic other, so alien that the subject who experiences that other feels no affinity for it, sees nothing in common between him or herself and the other. Instead, the uncanny is in fact largely similar to an image, object or figure that we might consider "normal," that we might encounter routinely in our everyday life, but which differs from normality in a way that

unsettles the subject, that informs or reminds the subject of how little they actually know, of just how much lies beyond their comprehension and perception. It is this impossibility of classifying the uncanny as entirely other or truly familiar that leads to the uncertainty inherent, not only in the subject's ability to determine what exactly he/she feels towards the source of the uncanny, but also in the very attempt to institute the uncanny as a concept, to gather any characteristics that might be unique to it under one umbrella. Indeed, as Anneleen Masschelein notes, "the uncanny as a concept thematizes and performs the complexity of an ongoing process of conceptualization," a process that Masschelein sees as being marked by "the constant, unsolvable tension between metaphor and concept, between theory and practice" (Masschelein 65). Masschelein goes on to suggest that these tensions actually help to define the "uncanny" as what she refers to as an "unconcept," which she describes as a concept "that manage[s] to keep a kernel of indeterminacy, instability, and openness" (65). To relate this more closely to the uncanny, we can say that the uncanny as a *sensation* exists, but that a concrete definition of the uncanny as a concept, a definitive encapsulation of its properties and effects, does not, and in fact cannot, exist, and that it is this "unconceptual" slipperiness that defines it.

The difficulty of conceptualizing the uncanny is the basis for much of the criticism of Freud's essay "The Uncanny." In his article, Freud writes that the uncanny is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general. Yet we may expect that

a special core of feeling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term. (Freud 930)

The phrase “special core” (or, to be even more specific, the term “core” itself) is what is especially contentious here. Freud is clearly seeking out the essence of the uncanny here, some commonality among both the test cases and literary works that he consults in examining the uncanny as phenomenon. His description of one of the possible methods of defining the uncanny is fairly explicit on this point: “We can collect all those properties of persons, things, sense-impressions, experiences and situations which arouse in us the feeling of uncanniness, and then infer the unknown nature of the uncanny from what all these examples have in common” (930). Of course, regardless of what method he uses, Freud is convinced he will come to the same conclusion: “The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (930).

The apparent certainty with which Freud writes of the nature of the uncanny, the determination he seems to display in pursuing his own conception of the term rather than maintaining a more open-ended approach to his critical pursuit, is the feature that many critics single out as the most significant shortcoming in Freud’s article. Masschelein, in summarizing Helene Cixous’s criticism of Freud’s essay “The Uncanny,” writes that “Freud is not only caught in a hermeneutic circle; he is also unable to distinguish between a literal and a figurative meaning, between connotation and denotation, and ultimately between reality and fiction. He ends up the victim of the very uncertainty and ambiguity that he seeks to control and expel with his analysis” (Masschelein 60). One can say, then, that Freud fails, quite necessarily, in his attempt to establish the uncanny in the realm of

science. I say “necessarily” because he is attempting to find the essence of something that depends for its existence, much like the concept of the sublime, on being ultimately elusive and free of capture. If the essence of the uncanny is determined, then it would seem to enter the realm of the merely frightening, losing the unsettling ambiguity that marks it most prominently, an ambiguity that is not experienced by every subject in the same way. He himself seems to acknowledge the subjective quality of the uncanny when he writes, regarding Ernest Jentsch’s “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” that “Jentsch quite rightly lays stress on the obstacle presented by the fact that people vary so very greatly in their sensitivity to this quality of feeling. The writer of the present contribution, indeed, must himself plead guilty to a special obtuseness in the matter [...] it is long since he has experienced or heard of anything which has given him an uncanny impression” (Freud 930). In addition, he himself points out that one of the definitions of *heimlich* that he cites at length seems to actually come closer to his own conception of the *unheimlich*: “The word ‘*heimlich*’ is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other what is concealed and kept out of sight” (933). Despite this contradiction, which he cannot adequately explain, Freud persists in using *heimlich* essentially in opposition to the *unheimlich*, despite their similarities.

If Freud’s essay fails on a scientific level, however, then it is far more interesting, as Cixous points out, when considered aesthetically. Cixous, at the outset of her article on Freud’s essay, announces that “these pages are meant as a reading divided between literature and psychoanalysis, with special attention paid to what is produced and what escapes in the unfolding of a text” (Cixous 525). Neil Hertz, in his reading of Freud’s

essay, notes that in attempting to capture a phenomenon as elusive as the uncanny, a phenomenon for which he has very little concrete evidence, Freud is forced to use “figurative language,” metaphors that have “the effect of rendering that force [which is being described] ‘visible’” (Hertz 167). The very term “uncanny” would qualify here as figurative language, since the term bears more uncertainties and questions than solid, tangible characteristics. The concept of repression, integral to Freud’s theory of the uncanny, also qualifies as figurative language; it is a material/linguistic representation of a phenomenon that cannot in itself be made material or be strictly proven. The term acts as a kind of placeholder for a theory marked by its absence more than its presence.

This particular function alludes to the ambiguity we’ve discussed previously: The psychoanalytic method, of which “The Uncanny” is one expression, makes an allowance, then, for a confusion or ambiguity of meaning; as Masschelein writes, “the uncanny as univocal destination is not easy to locate” (Masschelein 64). What is essential, then, to an embrace of the ambiguity inherent, not only in psychoanalysis, but in the film under analysis, is to avoid putting either the surface (conscious) level or the “hidden” (sub or unconscious) level of the film in a position of dominance. It can be said that in Blue Velvet, the air of dread and unease that saturates it can be traced to a blurring of the boundaries between conscious and unconscious, between surface and repressed. Drawing on such binaries to examine Blue Velvet would result in an analytical neatness that would prove to be as misguided and insufficient as it would be elegant. In reading this film, it is necessary to remain aware of a mingling between the conscious and the repressed. The world of Blue Velvet is intermingled in this way, and within this merging the film exemplifies the uncanny, precariously suspended as it is between what is typically

associated with the surface of “everyday” life and what is typically thought to lurk beneath that surface.

The most readily obvious embodiment of the uncanny in Blue Velvet is Frank Booth, the otherworldly fountain of criminal malevolence who menaces and beats Jeffrey Beaumont, the film’s naively perverse protagonist, and tortures Dorothy Vallens, the lounge singer who serves as a mother/lover figure for Jeffrey. Frank is alternately vicious and tender, perceptive and ignorant, frighteningly childlike and frighteningly adult, seemingly unstoppable yet ultimately (relatively) easy for Jeffrey to outwit. In discussing Frank’s character, it is helpful to invoke the tenets of the Gothic form, specifically the American strain, with its consistent refutation of the sensible and rational, its steadfast refusal to remain within the laws of both literary writing and Enlightenment notions of subjectivity operating at the time of its inception.

Eric Savoy writes that in America, where the Gothic has “stubbornly flourished,” the Gothic’s “cultural role [...] has been entirely paradoxical: an optimistic country founded upon the Enlightenment principles of liberty and ‘the pursuit of happiness,’ a country that supposedly repudiated the burden of history and its irrational claims, has produced a strain of literature that is haunted by an insistent, undead past” (Savoy 167). Far from defeating or beating back this “undead past,” Savoy argues that American Gothic literature enters into a conversation with that past that refutes the simple binary construction of dream vs. nightmare used too often to explain away American Gothic literature’s bizarre properties:

The Gothic, it is frequently reasoned, embodies and gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of “the American dream” [...] Yet a simple

opposition between the convenient figures of dream and nightmare is overly reductive. These clichés, and the impulses in American life that they represent, are not in mere opposition; they actually interfuse and interact with each other. This realization will take us far in understanding the odd centrality of Gothic cultural production in the United States, where the past constantly inhabits the present [...] and where an insatiable appetite for spectacles of grotesque violence is part of the texture of everyday reality. (167)

Frank is the key example in Blue Velvet of the way in which dream and nightmare coexist in the film in the same way Savoy claims they do in the Gothic form. Frank, in the destruction and pain he causes throughout the film, can certainly be classified as a nightmare. This is particularly true of his relation to Jeffrey, since Frank represents the manifestation of the kind of darker desires that Jeffrey has largely learned to control—with the exception, of course, of his striking of Dorothy after a lovemaking session in response to her pleading request to be hit. Frank, however, is also a dreamer, desiring to eradicate the barriers between himself and others, to escape the confines of his own subjectivity, even as he seems to be aware that these barriers are in fact indestructible. In fact, the very social structure of Lumberton depends on such barriers remaining in place, regardless of how often they might be transgressed. The term “transgressed” here is particularly significant; it indicates that the boundaries separating Frank from others, and Frank’s world (which we will establish in the second chapter as “Boothville”) from Jeffrey’s neighborhood may be breached, but can never be broken. Nevertheless, until

his death at Jeffrey's hands, Frank continues to pursue, through the use of violence, a permanent break of the membrane separating him from others.

It is this violent search for unity with that which is outside of him that links Frank most strongly with the tradition of the Gothic. A particularly relevant example might come from the murder ballad "Pretty Polly." That song tells the story of the titular character and her beau, typically referred to as Willy in the versions I've heard (although Billy is a common substitute). Polly and Willy are soon to be married—but, suggests Willy, not before the two of them have some innocent premarital fun in the woods: "Oh Polly, pretty Polly, come go along with me/Before we get married, some pleasure can we seek". Rennie Sparks of the Handsome Family, describing the ballad in an essay, notes that "their path twists in circles as if they're descending the rings of hell. Deep in the forest, Polly begins to get nervous. Dark thoughts enter her head for the first time. Only now, lost under black branches, does she wonder whether her lover is leading her astray" (Sparks 38). She's right to be afraid, says Willy: "Oh Polly, pretty Polly, you're guessin' about right/I dug up your grave the better part of last night." Polly pleads for her life, but Willy refuses to hear her: "And into her bosom, I plunged that fatal knife." "Who is this snickering psycho?" Sparks wonders, noting that "he, unlike so many murder-ballad beaus, does not murder the girl 'he loved so well.' His love for Polly was always rotten with the desire to kill" (38).

What is at work in Willy, which is also at work in Frank Booth, seems to be, as Sparks's comments suggest, closer to desire, particularly as Lacan outlines it: "Desire is what manifests itself in the interval demand excavates just shy of itself, insofar as the subject, articulating the signifying chain, brings to light his lack of being [...] with his

call to receive the complement of this lack from the Other—assuming that the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this lack”(Lacan 25). There is always some matter, then, some need that the subject feels, that lies outside of what the subject can articulate. Beyond that which the subject is consciously aware of needing, that which can consciously and directly *be demanded*, lies a need which cannot be articulated in such a way, yet which is present in its very absence within the subject. In unconsciously attempting to fill this absence, the subject looks to the Other, to a figure that the subject, again unconsciously, views as possessing what is missing in the subject’s being. Lacan expands on this further:

What it is thus the Other’s job to provide—and, indeed, it is what he does not have, since he too lacks being—is what is called love, but it is also hate and ignorance. Those passions for being are, moreover, evoked by any demand beyond the need articulated in that demand, and the more the need articulated in that demand is satisfied, the more the subject remains deprived of those passions. (252-53).

To be aware of the lack of which Lacan writes here, even as we cannot express what the true nature of such a lack might be, is to experience a consistent and unceasing defeat when the immediate need expressed in our demand of love from the Other, that which can be fulfilled and which can be expressed, is redeemed by the Other—in lieu, of course, of the fulfillment of those “passions,” to use Lacan’s own term, which are irretrievably outside of expression and realization.

Frank Booth is the most prominent illustration of the workings of desire in Blue Velvet. Frank’s choice of the Other encompasses Jeffrey, Dorothy, Jeffrey’s

neighborhood (the “everyday” world of Lumberton), even his androgynous criminal cohort Ben. In particular, the relationship between Frank and Jeffrey is marked by the fact that Frank seems to see something of his own nature in Jeffrey, yet Jeffrey seems either unwilling or unable to see himself in Frank, to acknowledge that the barriers between the two are not entirely impermeable. The scene in which Frank beats Jeffrey while Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams” plays on the car radio in the background, a scene I will analyze in greater detail in my second chapter, suggests that Frank does not see himself and Jeffrey as the polar opposites that Jeffrey would like to perceive them as. As Frank smears the outside of his lips with lipstick, muttering “pretty, pretty,” he seems bent on showing Jeffrey the absurdity of Jeffrey attacking him, of lashing out at Frank as if the two of them weren’t different sides of the same person. “In dreams I walk with you/In dreams I talk to you,” Frank recites along with Orbison’s song, bunching his fingers next to Jeffrey’s head in a prodding position, as if trying to force the reality of his bond with Jeffrey into the kid’s head. Despite the fact that Frank can see a connection between himself and Jeffrey that Jeffrey does not seem to acknowledge, this does not allow Frank a position of smug superiority over Jeffrey; rather, this awareness seems to torture Frank, since it reminds him that, even though he is *like* Jeffrey, he is *not* Jeffrey. This is a distinction that seems to add to the frustration and rage that define him as a character, feelings originating from Frank’s inability to permanently shatter the boundaries separating him from the feeling of unity and completion that, according to Lacan, we all unavoidably lack.

In this thesis, I will explore the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, world of Blue Velvet, and trace the way this film combines the homeliness of the stereotypical depiction of

American small-town life with the darkness that is typically repressed in such a depiction. In contrast to the vertical psychoanalytic model of analysis typically used to analyze the film, I argue that the bizarre world of the film is to be read on a horizontal axis, since the film's strangeness manifests itself on the surface instead of being hidden beneath a façade of peace and "normality", as Mulvey and other readers might suggest. On this horizontal axis of analysis, the strangeness normally pushed below the surface of the film manifests itself as violence, yet violence within the film is not uncontrolled, but rather segregated, contained largely within proscribed areas of Lumberton. Those areas fall under the jurisdiction of what we will refer to as "Boothville", a collective term for those areas inhabited by Frank Booth and those others who have no place within the more placid areas of Lumberton in which citizens like Jeffrey and his "good" girlfriend Sandy dwell.

The first chapter establishes the uncanny nature of "Jeffrey's neighborhood" and its relationship with violence as a segregated, largely controlled phenomenon, existing on the "everyday" surface reality of the film yet essentially remaining within the confines of particular areas of that surface. In this way, violence, rather than registering as a violation of everyday life in Lumberton, is actually "homely," familiar, within the world of the film. The second chapter examines "Boothville", what we might refer to as the "night-time" world of Lumberton, ruled by Frank Booth. Frank's life is defined by the attempt to make a permanent break of the barrier between "Boothville" and "Jeffrey's neighborhood." Frank displays a desire to escape the confines of his own skin, his own identity, and become someone like Dorothy, Jeffrey, or Ben—someone beautiful. Just like *Pretty Polly's* lover/killer Willy, Frank wants to be beautiful too, and the only way he can imagine becoming so is through violence, through the mutual destruction of both

himself and the Other who he sees as possessing that mysterious quality of beauty. Ultimately, however, Frank finds only frustration in this ongoing attempt to fulfill his desire for beauty, and the boundaries separating “Jeffrey’s neighborhood” and “Boothville,” everyday domestic splendor and the violence Frank represents, remain in place, even as elements of both areas infect the other. In the conclusion, I will draw on the film’s final scene, in which everything in Lumberton has supposedly returned to “normal” following Frank’s death, to illustrate this mutual contagion, and to confirm the way in which the film oscillates unceasingly between the two psychic areas, never quite resting decisively on one side or the other, a fact that lends the film its uncanny quality.

2) FIRST IT'S BRIGHT: THE VIOLENTLY FAMILIAR IN "JEFFREY'S NEIGHBORHOOD"

In this chapter, I will examine the "small-town pageant," the parade of intensely familiar, bucolic images of Americana, that follows the opening title-credit sequence of the film. I read this sequence as an instance of the uncanny, in that it displays characteristics of both the familiar and the unfamiliar, of both the conscious and what is typically relegated to the unconscious. In this way, the peace suggested in this depiction of "everyday" Lumberton life coexists with the violence that many who write on the film view as existing "beneath the surface." In reading this sequence, and the film in general, I am proposing a horizontal model of analysis rather than a vertical, "top-down" one. Far from registering as a facade of false harmony being invaded by the darker desires bubbling underneath, this opening sequence suggests that the "everyday world" within the film is already either inherently violent, or containing the potential for violence.

Blue Velvet's opening scene proper, the scene following the opening credits that I have discussed briefly in the introduction, is deceptive in its positioning of two apparently divergent worlds, one layered neatly on top of the other. It is worthwhile, however, to reexamine the scene with the intention of letting each image and shot speak on its own, rather than viewing each as placeholders the director is using to signify a larger idea. The title-credit shot of the blue velvet curtain fades into the equally dark, decadent blue of the sky above Lumberton, the logging town in which the story unfolds. Lynch's camera pans down to encounter a portion of a picket fence, its whiteness starkly contrasted both by the deep blue of the sky behind it and the blood-red of the roses blooming in front of it. If we are inclined to read this image as pure American

stereotype, as sheer unabashed corn, then it is tempting to view the roses as fake and plastic, contributing to the impossibly idyllic small-town image that America likes to project both *of* itself and *to* itself in order to plaster over its seething underbelly.

Concerning the scene as a whole, one might say that there is simply *too much* there, with each of the colors of the American flag, red, white, and blue, represented with a vividness that passes into excess. The elements of the shot seem so aggressively cheerful, so life-affirming, that they are immediately suspect; surely they must be hiding *something* from us.

That stiffness continues through the rest of the scene. From the image of the roses fore-grounded against the white fence and dark-blue sky, we fade to a shot of a suburban residential street. The camera, seemingly situated on the sidewalk outside of one of the neighborhood houses, looks across the street at a modestly spacious two-story house. From the angle at which the camera is placed, we see most of the front of the house, as well as whatever portion of the house's right side that isn't obscured by a large tree on the far right of the frame. Whatever sunlight occupies the scene falls in the center of the frame, directly onto the two-story house. From the far left side of the frame, coming slowly into focus as it drives towards us in slow motion, is a red fire truck, the make and model of which can't possibly date from later than the early 1960's. On the running board on the passenger side stands a middle-aged fireman in blue workshirt and black pants, a Dalmatian sitting to his right. As he passes, he smiles and waves directly to the camera, as if we in the audience were residents of this neighbourhood, this town, as if we see him passing us on the street every day. And of course, a typical reading of the film, as an unearthing of what's concealed beneath the stiflingly bland surface of the everyday,

is that this is in fact what we're meant to take from the scene: in our lives outside of the film, we *have* seen that fireman on the street, driving that same fire truck, and he *has* waved to us—and we've waved back, with the same air of familiarity.

In truth, that's not quite how the scene plays out. The images within the scene are familiar, yes, but they don't instill the same sense of familiarity in the viewer that an instance of true cinematic realism would. We may see flowers set against a white picket fence on countless occasions in the world outside of the film, but we haven't seen roses with that deep, decadent shade, or a sky that thick with blue. And as for the fireman, our familiarity with him seems touched by the haziness of fantasy; if we have seen him at all, it is because we have dreamed him, riding astride his Mayberry fire truck with faithful Dalmatian at hand, and not because we have encountered such a bizarrely archaic image in reality. Martha Nochimson, writing of the fireman shot as illustrating "the lure of the real beyond the fence," or beyond "the fabricated aspects of the most ordinary limits of communal life," writes that the depiction of the fireman waving is "more like the spectacle of a parade than an everyday action" (Nochimson 105).

This is undeniable, yet I am less inclined, in contrast to Nochimson, to read the sequence as a sociopolitical statement of sorts. Nochimson goes on to argue that the images that comprise this opening scene "are not parodies of old films, as so many critics have suspected. Rather, they are representations that emphasize the social construction of the forms of ordinary social life. Curiously, we believe in these forms as if they were real" (105). The chain of representations here, as described by Nochimson, is somewhat convoluted: Lynch defamiliarizes "ordinary social life," makes it enticingly new and strange, in order to better illustrate that these forms of "ordinary social life" are

constructed (i.e. fake), even as these forms are presumably real in their effect on our perceptions of “ordinary social life.” A more concise summary of Nochimson’s argument is that Lynch’s intention is to point us beyond the numbing banality of everyday “reality” towards a real beyond the horizon of social life. “It is as though,” Nochimson writes, “Lumberton were, in the words of Bakhtin, ‘a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators’ [...] The visibility of these contradictions breeds desire for realities greater than those of the flat and shallow forms of culture” (105).

We are faced, then, with a variation on the topographical model of visual representation as proposed by Mulvey. Nochimson’s paradigm differs in its direction, of course; instead of moving from top to bottom, Nochimson proposes horizontal boundaries between the constructed surface and the real that lies outside of it. In either case, however, the principle is the same: the images that we encounter directly in this scene serve a transitional purpose; they are not to be analyzed in themselves, but exist to point you *past* their own specific contours and details to what is either beyond or below them. In contrast, Sam Ishii-Gonzales argues that “it is an axiom of Lynch’s universe that if we carefully inspect the exterior of things, the texture of existence—sometimes just by sitting and waiting, being very still—we will discover another dimension of reality, another layer of pleasure: a depth which rises upon the surface, a vertical axis which bisects horizontality and vice versa” (Ishii-Gonzales 57). In keeping with my thesis, I would contest, of course, Ishii-Gonzales’s notion that the film’s “depth [...] rises upon the surface” (57). As I will illustrate in my further analysis of the film’s opening sequence, I do not believe that the film’s “underneath,” as represented by such images as

the worms beneath the soil at the conclusion of the opening scene, “feeds” its surface in this way, supplying it with a fascinating “richness” that it would otherwise lack. What is useful about Ishii-Gonzales’s analysis here, however, is the notion that the “texture of existence” within the film lies right on Lumberton’s surface; the ease and familiarity with which these opening scenes greet us is offset by an unsettling intimation of darkness that lends this representation of the “surface” world of Lumberton its uncanny quality.

In his general disposition, the fireman who gives the camera a cheerful wave exemplifies two of the definitions of the *Heimlich*, or homely, that Freud provides: “Intimate, friendly, comfortable,” and “kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it” (Freud 3). His general demeanor suggests the first definition quite overtly, of course; the relation of the second definition—that of the *Heimlich* as of a private nature—to the image of the fireman is less obvious. I invoke this second definition to suggest that the antiquated figure of the fireman seems to have been excavated, to have been dug up. It seems to originate from a Norman Rockwell era that may never have existed in reality, outside of an image America used to promote itself—in which case, we might note that with the red fire truck, the blue workshirt, and the white Dalmatian, we have a reoccurrence of the American flag colour scheme found in the previous shot of the roses. In any case, the image of the fireman is temporally displaced within the film’s ostensibly present-day setting. Perhaps in keeping with this sense of displacement, in contrast to the previous flower-shot, which conveyed a deep sense of focus, the fireman’s image is somehow hazy, unclear; the truck’s slow-motion speed is slow enough for us to at least register him, to gain some impression of him as a figure, yet it is still too quick to pick up a complete sense of his image.

This indeterminacy, this sense of the in-between generated from the image's status as both enticing in its friendliness and warmth yet unsettling in its air of being displaced in time, would seem to be the prime source of the uncanny nature of the shot. The image of the fireman, while not the kind of image that can be said to be actively and willfully repressed or hidden away, contains at the very least the properties of an image that we habitually forget about until we are reminded of it. We can conceive of this, of course, as the return of the repressed, in which case it is natural that the repressed (the image of the fireman) would return to us in a form that is altered from that of our memory of the repressed in question. I am reminded here of one of Deleuze's arguments concerning difference and repetition: "Repetition as a conduct and as a point of view concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities. Reflections, echoes, doubles and souls do not belong to the domain of resemblance or equivalence [...] If exchange is the criterion of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition" (Deleuze 1).

Since the fireman in Lynch's scene seems to belong very much to the "domain of resemblance," to borrow Deleuze's phrase, in his simultaneous similarity to and difference from the kind of iconic, small town-Americana figure we are familiar with, we run the risk here of essentializing the image by claiming that it is, in fact, *without* essence, as opposed to those beings *with* essence and soul that can only be strictly repeated, or doubled, in their reoccurrence. To the contrary: rather than suggesting that the figure of the American small-town fireman has lost something in its transference to Lynch's film, that he has been altered to more closely resemble a zombie than a human being, it would be more accurate to say that the fireman figure has *gained* something in its emergence in Blue Velvet, has acquired an indeterminacy that implies an added,

disquieting intensity to the figure. Its time spent out of consciousness has only bolstered its fascination. Rennie Sparks, writing about the murder-ballad tradition, writes that “the magic is in the mystery, the parts left unsaid. Like the wordless, unspeakable parts of our own psyche, murder ballads hold secrets that loom larger the farther down they’re pushed. The more holes we cut in these songs, the more powerful they become” (Sparks 39). A similar principle seems to be at work in the icons-with-a-difference with which Lynch presents us in this opening scene: the more these images are scrutinized, the stranger and more intoxicating they reveal themselves to be.

Shortly after we encounter the antiquated fire truck, we are presented with a shot of a middle-aged female crossing guard standing in the middle of a crosswalk, red “STOP” sign in her right hand, waving a row of schoolchildren across the street. The guard stands almost dead-center in the frame, while the children move across the frame from right to left, the girls for the most part in skirts and dresses, the boys neatly dressed and groomed, all of which suggests that it might be picture day at Lumberton Elementary. The guard looks to the right, motioning the children across the street with a flick of the fingers on her left hand. They follow this non-verbal command dutifully and nearly in unison, without a trace of the unruliness or impatience that most children of that age would display at the prospect of another day of school. What this shot in particular tells us about Lumberton, even more than any of the previous shots in this sequence, is that law and order are, in this town, firmly in place; these concepts not only structure the town on a larger political scale, they also govern the social rituals and interactions that comprise everyday life as it is lived in that setting.

Such a notion might make Lumberton sound like an oppressive and sterile environment determined to squeeze every last drop of the urge for freedom or individuality from its compliant citizens. Nochimson's characterization of the opening scene as displaying the "flat and shallow forms of culture" (Nochimson 105) would, in particular, encourage such a view of the town. If such a program of subjugation is being carried out, however, it doesn't register as such on the faces of the subjects within the scene, including the crossing guard and the schoolchildren in this specific shot. What does register is a calm that seems to be a result of a certain acceptance of their condition. If they struggle under the restrictions of their surroundings, or live in fear of whatever darker emotions or values they might have repressed in order to reach their apparent state of relative ease, then those inner struggles or feelings of fear are well-hidden. The notion of the law as a concept that might shape how people understand, not only each other, but themselves, is something that, judging from the somewhat circumscribed yet serene manner of the town's inhabitants, seems to have taken deep root in Lumberton.

As complacent as the town's citizens may seem in their way of life, however, there is no denying the menace that is subtly imbedded within each of the images in this scene, a menace that seems to suggest that the demeanor of the scene's inhabitants does not fully divulge the story of Lumberton. This menace fully manifests itself in the scene's final passage, in which we encounter a man watering his front lawn with a green garden hose while wearing a shirt, hat and pair of pants that seem oddly formal for yardwork. Just before he appears onscreen, we are given a master shot of his house, which looks much like the house that our fireman rode past in his truck earlier. This similarity reinforces the idea that uniformity and wholeness are touchstones of

Lumberton life, touchstones kept in place through unwritten laws of conduct. In this context in particular, it would almost seem as if there is a template for the “Lumberton House,” a standard which most of its residents adhere to in choosing a home: two stories, front porch with pillars for support—and, naturally, a white picket fence out front. From this image of the house, we cut to the Watering Man, his right hand hooked into his belt while he performs his chore.

The sense of comfort and satisfaction that the man displays during this task is somewhat undermined, however, by a cut to a shot of a woman watching television in her living room—presumably the living room of the same house in which the Watering Man resides, although we can’t be entirely sure about this. The woman takes a sip from a cup of what is probably either coffee or tea in a manner befitting someone taking in a report from the Weather Channel; she is both interested and uninvolved in what she’s watching. We then cut to a shot of her television, on top of which are placed a few unidentifiable knickknacks with a doily lying underneath. The shot is dimly lit, as if the woman had drawn every curtain in the house in an effort to shut out every natural source of light she could to avoid glare from the sun. On her screen, we see a disembodied hand holding a gun, as the unseen possessor of both gun and hand advances to the left of the frame, towards an unknown source of enmity. What is perhaps most striking about this shot is that, instead of a standard full-screen insert of the program that the woman is watching, Lynch chooses to include the outlines of the television itself within the frame.

The significance of this decision is twofold. First, the inclusion of the television’s contours within the frame emphasizes that the danger depicted on its screen is mediated even within the scene itself, so that technically we are twice removed from its effects.

This does not mean, however, that the power of the image on the television has been neutered or entirely robbed of its power; rather, that power seems to spread from this shot to the next, so that it infects that which is outside its immediate frame. This is the second aspect of its significance: the way in which the depiction of the television itself serves to open up the image's field of influence, so that its resonance extends to other areas within the film. The juxtaposition of the trappings of the living room with the image of the gun on the TV screen does not nullify the force of that wielded gun. Instead, it establishes for the viewer the nature of the film's attitude toward violence—namely, that violence in its various forms and characteristics refuses to be contained within that psychological X/Y axis wherein the peaceful daytime opposes the dark, violent night. Violence in the world of the film is too fundamentally irrational to adhere to this system of analysis. As a result, it spreads willfully into the daytime world, the realm that is supposed to be a refuge from nighttime Frank Booths. The shot of the televised gun-wielding hand can be seen, then, as a sign akin to the sharp, ominous branches and brambles that *Pretty Polly* winds through on the way to her death. It is a sign that we might think of as hiding in plain sight of the viewer, refusing to announce itself, yet waiting patiently to be read.

The gun-in-hand points the way to a shot of the *Watering Man* continuing to perform his duty, quickly followed by a close-up of the hose furiously spurting water from the end opposite that through which the *Watering Man* hydrates his grass. At the same time that the hose itself hisses, the tap gives off a rumbling far more aggressive than the typical gurgle that would be expected in such a situation. On the heels of the televised gun, we might expect this to herald an explosion of some kind, a release of the subtle yet undeniable tension that has built throughout this sequence. The *Watering Man*

turns and gives a frustrated pull on his hose as we cut to a close-up of the section of the hose that has become kinked, twisted around a tree branch. As the hose becomes constricted, the scene itself seems to become constrained in its movement. Unlike the previous shots in the sequence, which flowed gracefully in their journey through the small-town tableau in which they were included, this segment cuts rapidly, and in real time, among different locations within the same setting. The kinking of the hose effectively signals the kinking of the sequence itself, a cessation of that satisfying progression through which things flow and develop as they are meant to.

Conformity has up to this point been the watchword for this scene. It has been the primary concept through which to read the sequence: as a collection of autonomous images of tranquil yet subtly bizarre small-town life, images that converge to form a single overall conception of Lumberton as largely peaceful yet vaguely unsettling. However, this uniformity, this sense in which the shots leading up to this segment are essentially of a piece in the image they convey of the world of the film, is momentarily fractured by the constricting of the hose, in tandem with the internal physical attack that the Watering Man is apparently suffering. He grimaces painfully, clutching the left side of his neck, his ordeal made all the more disquieting by the fact that its source is invisible. His reaction is similar to that of someone who has suffered a bee or wasp sting, yet we are given no indication of an insect in the vicinity. We learn later that the man has suffered some kind of internal affliction, most likely a stroke, and that he is the father of the film's protagonist, Jeffrey Beaumont. The location of his attack, then, is interior, yet it is externalized through the image of the kinked hose; it is difficult to see the two shots

juxtaposed without thinking of the Watering Man's very insides being twisted and constrained.

As he plunges to the ground, his glasses tumbling off during the fall, he lands, curiously enough, in between two lengths of string. We can only assume that the string has been erected to demarcate the boundaries of a garden, an assumption that is confirmed when the camera pulls back a moment later to obtain a master shot of the scene. Regardless of the actual purpose of the string, it is difficult to observe this plummet without feeling that the spot marked out by the pieces of string has somehow been designated for the Watering Man to fall into. The symmetry of the string, coupled with the mound of dirt that lies underneath the Watering Man, carries unnerving connotations of being buried alive, yet the schematic nature of the shot, the way in which his attack is anticipated by the string markers, makes the man's plunge seem ritualistic, a fulfillment of something preordained. Of course, everything in this opening scene has seemed ritualistic, as yet another performance of the duties and activity of everyday life. This sequence is remarkable, however, for foregrounding the fact that violence is as at-home in Lumberton as the kind of docile happiness depicted in the images of the fireman and the crossing guard. In fact, what the image of Mr. Beaumont's stroke tells us is that even those scenes of idyllic small-town life are imbued with a sense of violence; in their unfamiliarity, their contention that what we would typically think of as normal and safe is in fact stranger and more unsettling than we realize, these images establish the relationship between violence and the "homely" as one in which both conditions are inherent in the other. Rather than moving back and forth clearly between the two states, between scenes of violence and scenes of the *Heimlich*, the film constantly oscillates

between both points, never landing squarely on either one, but instead remaining in a persistent state of motion between the two poles. In this way, violence is actually a familiar element in the world of the film—no less so in the scenes of “everyday” Lumberton life than in the later scenes taking place in “Boothville.”

The connection between the image of the gun and the image of Mr. Beaumont’s stroke illustrates this mutually dependent relationship between Lumberton’s “everyday” and violence. Such a connection could, of course, be read quite easily as a pointed, ironic juxtaposition: we’re given a shot of the gun, and then we cut to a figure who is, presumably, that gun’s target; that target recoils and falls to the ground, as if he has been shot by said gun. The juxtaposition does produce this effect, of course, but through the use of framing in both shots, it also does more. The (implied) violence of the televised hand in the woman’s living room is framed by the contours of her television screen, which is offset by the living-room furnishings and knickknacks that surround it. The internal violence on the front lawn, meanwhile, is framed by the symmetrical pieces of string, which is offset by the rest of the lawn—and, in a shot that Lynch cuts to a moment later, a suggestion of the rest of the neighborhood, as represented by a dog that drinks greedily from the still-spurting hose and a toddler who wanders into the frame from a distance. What these twin uses of framing tell us about the nature of violence within the world of the film is significant. It confirms that there is room for violence within the film’s daylight world, but that such violence does tend to occur within proscribed areas.

The question I am pursuing here, then, concerns effect: What are we to make of this seemingly predicted and contained scene of interior assault? What is the nature of our reaction to it? It would be too great a leap to argue that this segment is a natural part

of both the opening sequence and the world of Lumberton as a whole. Indeed, this scene registers as a violation of sorts, a relative anomaly when placed following the (admittedly eerie) tranquility of the rest of the opening sequence. And yet, I keep returning to those parallel lines of string in between which the man collapses. They cause me to wonder if perhaps such violations, such eruptions of violence or death evoked in our discussion of the Gothic, can exist within the film as unconscious ritual, as an endless ongoing performance with which both players and audience can never be fully satisfied. In other words, the scene may come across as a disturbance of the order established by the rest of the scene, but at the same time it still seems oddly at-home in this slightly unnerving depiction of suburban calm—or we might say, to return to a phrase we have evoked earlier, that it evokes a sense of the “homely,” or *heimlich*.

It is in this sense that the uncanny can be particularly helpful in coming to terms with our reaction to Mr. Beaumont’s stroke. Rather than being experienced as the binary opposite of the “parade of blandness” that has preceded it, this scene is both distinct from this previous procession and of a piece with it. This is partly due to the way in which this sequence serves as a culmination of the more free-floating, uncertain sense of unease that has infected the scene up to that point. In this sense, then, the sequence reflects the way in which the *unheimlich* can bear some of the same connotations and properties as its opposite, the *heimlich*. In relating this notion to the scene at hand, we can note that the poles of dark/light and day/night that seem to exist with no small prominence in Lumberton do not reside in hostile competition to each other, but actually exist in a sort of productive opposition, with each pole sometimes sliding across the other, transgressing the other’s boundaries. This is apparent in a shot of the wandering dog lapping up the

water that is gushing from Mr. Beaumont's hose. As we cut to a close-up of the animal, Lynch's photography switches back to slow-motion—and yet, this particular incarnation of slow-motion can't be said to be the same kind we have encountered earlier in the opening sequence. Its speed is even slower, more painstaking, as if the film strip had become warped and was now operating at half-speed. Perhaps even more unsettling, however, is the look of the film stock itself in this shot; it becomes far grainier and hazier than the smooth, flat surfaces of the previous shots that have introduced us to the film.

This look is reproduced in another key scene in the film, which I will discuss in the second chapter of this thesis: the scene in which Jeffrey, after having been beaten in a field by Frank Booth and his gang, has a dream in which moments that are significant in both the film and in his move from “innocence” to experience are replayed using much the same effect. Both moments seem to herald a break, a shift (however momentary) in which the rich, suggestive, yet somehow placid unease with which most of the film is permeated is momentarily disturbed by an emergence of the unconscious material that typically courses, stealthy and undetected, through the veins of the film. These are moments in which that which is typically hinted at throughout the film directly announces its presence, only to then disappear in a way that is as unexpected as that in which it appeared. In the context of this scene, the slow-motion image of the dog lapping at the hose, in a manner that can only be described as feral, carries the shift that has begun with Mr. Beaumont's internal attack through to its conclusion, as the camera tracks below the lawn into the soil underneath, where insects chomp away brutally at the dirt.

It would be relatively easy to read this scene as an example of what has been repressed in maintaining the town's insipidly pleasant surface—in which case, the move

underground can be read as a move toward the “real,” toward the true source of Lumberton’s uncanny and bizarre nature. There is too much overlap, however, between the kind of ferocious intensity displayed by the dog lapping at the hose and the kind of viciousness that the insects display in satisfying their own hunger. The question, then, is one of direction: in what way does the scene point, above or below ground, to the surface or to what is underneath? More questions arise in turn: can either of these images be said to have a direct influence on the other? And if so, can we still be said to be in the realm of the uncanny? Freud, after all, does not specifically suggest the possibility that the uncanny can be contagious, that it can spread from one image or one area to another; his conception of the term seems to hinge on the idea that the *unheimlich* is comprised of a single image or scene that appears within a relatively normal (or, as it were, “homely”) framework. In other words, the uncanny as conceived by Freud seems to be defined in opposition to what surrounds it.

The fact remains, however, that concerning a concept such as the uncanny, a concept that, as previously discussed, is defined by its lack of concrete definition and boundaries, we cannot dictate when, where, or how it is experienced any more than we can determine with any true accuracy *why* it is experienced. Neither can we segment our experience of the uncanny within an artistic work, whether it be literature, film, music or artwork; there is nothing to dictate that the sensation of the uncanny in a particular scene or section of an artistic piece does not affect our reading of that work as a whole. It would seem necessary, then, to refine how we might view the sort of violent “eruption” onto the surface of a particular scene that we have just discussed in relation to the lapping dog and the ravenous insects. I would propose that these “eruptions” be thought of as

instances in which the uncanny nature of a particular scene becomes overdetermined, building to such an extent that the tension created by this increase in *unheimlich* feeling eventually diminishes—although not to such an extent that it leaves the scene or the film altogether.

The manner in which the uncanny effect of the film manages to “build” is, I think, related to the transgressing of boundaries, as suggested in the sequence we have examined in this chapter. This will provide us with a way of tentatively answering the question previously posed of where the scene “points,” where Lynch might be asking us to direct our attention: there is no specific area, whether above or below, from which the bizarre nature of the film’s atmosphere originates. The source of the film’s uncanny effect is indeterminate in this way; it is difficult to discern if our reaction to the ferociously thirsty dog is coloring our reaction to the insects, or if the unsettling nature of the image and sound of the insects is simply unsettling on its own, independent of what comes before or after it. Indeed, if the term “uncanny” is to be applied to this film at all, then this is a necessary effect, since one of the defining characteristics of the uncanny is that its source is essentially indeterminate, untraceable. What we can say about Blue Velvet’s uncanniness, however, is that the confusion between binaries that it creates, the disregard for boundaries (in this instance, between above and below) that it represents, manifests itself as a material, physical *site* that is very much on the surface; it exists in the realm of the observable, and not in the shadow world lurking behind it.

To the potential disclaimer that such an uncanniness, although it might exist on the surface, is in fact “powered” by that which is not directly on the surface, that which is repressed or at least concealed, I would reply that it is nearly impossible to determine if

there has ever been an original, “normal” Lumberton that has been complicated or corrupted by “Boothville”, that primarily “off-site” area in which Frank Booth and his comrades dwell. Given the fact that both areas of Lumberton seem to exist perpetually in two distinct worlds of 1950’s nostalgia (Frank, after all, exemplifies to some degree the image of the 1950’s tough-guy greaser from the wrong side of the tracks), it is difficult to determine which “area” of the town might lay claim to being the original settlement. If it cannot be proven, then, that the everyday world of Lumberton originated as a genuinely harmonious and peaceful community, only to be eventually corrupted by encroaching forces of darkness such as Frank Booth, then I would argue that one cannot safely conclude that it is the “off-site” or “underneath” material that lends the surface of Lumberton its uncanny quality.

The scene that follows this opening sequence reinforces the sense in which such an intermingling of opposites becomes uncanny *material* residing on the film’s surface. Directly after the shot of the insects, we cut to a shot of a “Welcome to Lumberton” billboard that is as firmly rooted in the 1950’s as the fire engine was in the previous scene. The camera pans down to reveal a body of water, on the other side of which is the townscape of Lumberton, composed of modest yet stately buildings and storefronts. Due to our distance from the town, it appears familiar yet distant, recognizable yet not quite in focus, in keeping with the sense of the town established in the opening sequence. We then cut to a shot of our protagonist, Jeffrey Beaumont, walking along a path in the woods, wearing a black suit that seems seasonably inappropriate for the lovely weather that Lumberton seems to be experiencing (that day, at least, if not eternally). Providing

audio accompaniment to this scene is WOOD, the musical voice of Lumberton, which, if the music in this scene is any indication, seems to specialize in light jazz.

“There’s a whole lotta wood waitin’ out there,” urges the station’s warm, folksy DJ, “so let’s get goin’!” It’s that “let’s” that’s particularly significant here; it draws us, at least momentarily, back into the realm of the social, of the harmonious, all-encompassing community united by its respect for, and dependence on, lumber. Jeffrey, in his somehow anxious stroll through the woods, somehow seems to be both at one with this community and apart from it; he displays a familiarity, and even a certain comfort, with his woodsy surroundings, yet in this scene seems somehow anxious and ill at ease, the reason for which we will find out in the following scene.

Jeffrey picks up a small stone sitting along his path and throws it at a nearby barrel, in a way that suggests someone who is, at least at present, attempting to go through the motions of “relaxed” everyday life without being able to truly invest anything of himself in the ritual; he does not quite grasp, at this moment, his role in the uniform “we” of Lumberton, his place within the “us” in the WOOD DJ’s “let’s get goin’,” and yet does not seem entirely dislocated from the community at large either. It may be more accurate to describe him as being temporarily cut off from the call of the falling timber that WOOD uses to signal that it’s 9:30, and that it’s time for all in the community to perform their part to ensure that Lumberton operates as a fully-functioning whole: firemen, grab your faithful Dalmatians and hit those trucks; crossing guards, pick up those handheld stop signs and get Lumberton’s children to school safely. The deafness that Jeffrey seems to display in this scene establishes a lack of awareness in him that he

will begin to emerge from with his visit to his father, and later with his discovery of the ear.

After two more quick shots of everyday existence in Lumberton, including a view of some decidedly leisurely traffic and a shot of what looks like a local farmer idly twirling a set of keys in front of what seems to be a gift store (taken, as with many of the shots in the film's opening scene, from a distance, whether across the street or across the water), we cut, without any setup or establishing shot, to a nurse at the hospital cheerfully and briskly ripping open the curtain that separates the bedridden Mr. Beaumont from view. Beaumont's neck is apparently held steady by a neckbrace of some kind that starts from above his head and runs down to his chin, under which some kind of plastic device sits in order to keep his chin up. The combination of his physical appearance, which seems dominated by the bolts from the brace and the white pads that connect him to the monitor that he's hooked up to, and his movement, which seems to be controlled largely through some kind of electronic device attached to his throat (he has to press it in order to extend his arm to shake Jeffrey's hand), brings to mind two of the instances that Freud discusses in which the uncanny might be said to be at work.

Freud borrows both from Jentsch's study of the uncanny. Describing the first, he writes that "Jentsch has taken as a very good instance [one's] 'doubts [about] whether an apparently animate being is really alive'"; in describing the second, he notes that Jentsch "adds the uncanny effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity; because these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity" (Freud 5). In the case of Mr. Beaumont, it might be said that the first notion of the uncanny can be seen as a result of the second.

While one would never equate Beaumont's seizure with an epileptic fit or a bout of insanity, it can be said that the sight of Beaumont's stroke bears at least some similarity in its effects to those of the sight of an epileptic seizure.

The effect of the sight of such a seizure as Freud describes it seems to fit both our reading of the event of Mr. Beaumont's stroke within the opening sequence and Jeffrey's reaction to the sight of his father in the hospital. Freud states that "the uncanny effect of epilepsy and of madness has the same origin. The layman sees in them the working of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-men, but at the same time he is dimly aware of them in remote corners of his own being" (13). Just as Mr. Beaumont's stroke is both unsettling and familiar to the viewer, so does Jeffrey's father, in his hospitalized condition, seem to register as being both startling and somehow identifiable to his son.

Freud's phrase "fellow-men" in particular seems to suggest the nature of Jeffrey's reaction to the sight of his father. Beyond, of course, the immediate shock of seeing a loved one in such a diminished state, Jeffrey seems additionally confused by his father's apparent liminal state between sentient and inanimate. There is in fact a light in his father's eyes that suggests the persistence of some kind of essence, some residue of the character his father may have had before his stroke and which he might still regain, yet his severely restricted range of physical motion and virtually complete lack of verbal expression mean that that character is transmitted to Jeffrey in a highly circumscribed and altered fashion. Whatever direct message Mr. Beaumont might have wanted to convey to his son is trapped behind the physical barriers that prohibit him from full expression. Just as the scene of his stroke registers as a violation of the activity that preceded it, activity that is easily integrated into the social order governing Lumberton, so does the sight of

Jeffrey's father in his hospital bed contradict the sense of both uniformity and openness evoked in the previous scene by the WOOD DJ's friendly exhortation to "get goin," to contribute to the organism called "Lumberton" of which all citizens (except, perhaps, for the Franks, Bens and Dorothys) are a valued part. Mr. Beaumont, as he gazes at Jeffrey, is unable to impart anything quite so direct, instead telegraphing his sadness and the futility of his actions through his audible yet slightly muffled sobs.

Jeffrey's father evokes a sense of the incomplete in two crucial ways: in the sense in which he is only a portion, physically at least, of the figure Jeffrey has known, and in the way in which he is disconnected from the community, from the social order, of Lumberton that has been suggested in the opening sequence. The sense of separation evoked by his physical state, the way in which it deviates from the unity and wholeness evoked by the majority of the images and sounds we've encountered thus far, seems to anticipate Jeffrey's discovery of the ear in the subsequent scene. In both instances, Jeffrey encounters parts that have been divorced from the bodies to which they once belonged. In the case of the ear, the body in question is that of Dorothy Vallens's husband Don, while Jeffrey's father has been excised, if only temporarily, from the social structure of the town, from the community as a single, cohesive body. This sense of separation, of segmentation, is reinforced by the muted sobs that Mr. Beaumont releases while clutching Jeffrey's hand. They are released in fragments, resembling shards or pieces of sob s rather than registering as complete, uninhibited emotional release.

This notion of segmentation, of cutting-off, reinforces our conception that the film's psychology does, in fact, work in a spatial matter—but horizontally, not vertically. In thinking of the film's psychological structure, it can be said that, in keeping with

Nochimson's model for reading the film, one moves from side to side, not from the top down, but unlike Nochimson's model, we focus on the very materiality of the film, the opening sequence in particular, rather than looking past or underneath the film's images to what they might represent. Mr. Beaumont's presence in this sense seems to illustrate this idea of such a horizontal model as being the most promising method of analyzing the film. His appearance may be an anomaly in the context of the apparently smooth, unworried surface that we have been shown to this point. However, the brisk-yet-friendly demeanor of the nurse that helps to usher Jeffrey into the room, as well as the curtain that separates Mr. Beaumont's hospital bed from the other patients, both suggest a standard Lumberton order of juxtaposition, of horizontal positioning, rather than the model of conscious/repressed. Mr. Beaumont's anguish originates, not from being repressed or forgotten about in his diminished physical state, but from being separated, cordoned-off from his son by the barrier of his condition.

And yet, despite this physical separation, Mr. Beaumont cannot be said to be entirely removed from either his son or his town. In the warmth and deference shown by both the nurse and the doctor who escort Jeffrey into his father's room, there is a distinct sense of homeliness, of the inviting; by virtue of the requirements of their respective jobs, both medical professionals quite pointedly convey the idea, both to Jeffrey and to the audience, that Mr. Beaumont is both distinct from *and* a part of the everyday structure of Lumberton. As Jeffrey clutches his father's hand, attempting to interpret his gasps until they finally give out, he gives the appearance of viewing someone who echoes his own existence, of the subjectivity that he has tenuously constructed for himself, even as he seems to exist very much outside of that construction, external to the kind of person

Jeffrey might believe himself to be. The scene that directly follows the hospital scene, in which Jeffrey walks back home through the same field that he passed through on the way to visit his father, extends this confusion between the internal and external. Passing the same barrel that served as his target for his earlier game of impromptu bull's-eye, Jeffrey resumes his play and begins to scout for particularly suitable stones near his path. The determination with which Jeffrey forges ahead in his attempt to continue his private game seems to speak to a sudden desire in Jeffrey for wholeness, for the satisfaction and sense of completion denied to him during his visit to his father. After his first two throws both miss the mark, he continues to root around in the grass for another weapon—at which point he discovers a human ear crawling with what appear to be ants, much smaller than the insects we have previously encountered underground.

Jeffrey's discovery marks what may be the most significant instance of the breaching of boundaries that we have traced throughout this opening sequence. Its significance lies mainly in the fact that it brings Jeffrey back "into the fold," so to speak; perversely enough, in facing back-to-back instances of separation, of disconnection (one arguably more severe than the other, naturally), Jeffrey seems to become more bound within the social web from which he seems alienated when we first saw him. We can use the phrase "social web" instead of the tempting cliché "social fabric" in order to emphasize the simultaneously malevolent and enticing nature of the invitation that the ear represents. For the ear is in fact an invitation, a summons that requests Jeffrey's presence in a system that will require him to be immersed in both the comfort and relative safety typically associated with his side of town and in the darkness associated with what he might refer to as Boothville—and not on separate occasions, of course, but

simultaneously. As the boundaries of these ostensibly separate regions reveal themselves to be confused, the notion of the uncanny reveals itself to be the determining factor in tracking our response to the film. In this particular instance, the image of the ear would, at least in theory, seem to qualify as simply horrific; our response to it would normally seem to lack the ambiguity that marks the subject's response to the uncanny. There is in fact an uncertainty, however, in the possible origin of the ear; it certainly looks lifelike, but we are no more certain than Jeffrey is that the ear is authentic. The opportunity to discover its authenticity, to gain access to the story of origin that the ear possesses, can be paralleled by the attraction that the uncanny possesses; it too seems to offer the prospect of revealing that matter of which we might otherwise choose to remain ignorant, or unconscious. This might explain why Jeffrey's reaction seems to be one of puzzlement or shocked curiosity rather than outright fear. The confusion elicited in Jeffrey can be equated with the confusion evoked when the repressed becomes material. In this way, then, Jeffrey's encounter with the ear is emblematic of the uncanny, a transgression of boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness.

For the viewer, the site of such a transgression becomes a source of analytical uncertainty, an instance which cannot be definitively understood or explained away on a conscious level. Such an occurrence is especially troubling in its material presence; it suggests the physical existence of something that would not normally be made manifest. This is the role that the severed ear plays in relation to Jeffrey; it points him in the direction of Boothville, the area of Lumberton that, in Jeffrey's view, has previously existed "below the surface" of the town. In reality, of course, Jeffrey has previously been unaware of where to look for such a discovery; violence in Lumberton has been residing

either in plain sight or just around the corner from Jeffrey's own home, with Jeffrey unable or unwilling to acknowledge its presence. It is not a matter of violence and darkness being unearthed, but of Jeffrey finally being able to see it, to identify the areas of his hometown in which it might dwell.

I have argued here that violence within the "daytime" world of Lumberton is present, yet contained within designated areas, controlled and tempered in such a way that it does not completely overtake the pleasant atmosphere of Lumberton but rather infects it with an air of the uncanny. In the next chapter, I will examine the "night-time" world of Lumberton, which I call "Boothville," to show how the boundaries that separate "Boothville" from Jeffrey's neighborhood, even as they are transgressed routinely as both areas infect the other in creating an air of the *unheimlich*, still remain in place. Even Frank Booth's desire to rend permanently the boundaries between himself and others, and between his world and Jeffrey's, cannot bring about such an obliteration of these barriers; they define the relationship between violence and the uncanny world of Blue Velvet.

3) "NOW IT'S DARK": THE FAMILIARLY VIOLENT IN "BOOTHVILLE"

In chapter one, I examined the "everyday world" of Lumberton, represented in the opening scene of the film. The parade of typical small-town images, of firemen, crossing guards and white picket fences, retains the welcoming, familiar air it would possess in any other circumstance, yet it also contains elements of violence that would otherwise be overlooked in such a tableau of images. Indeed, in contrast to other critics who view the darker, more violent aspects of the world of Lumberton as actively repressed or hidden by its sunny surface, I argue that the two worlds of the film should not be read in such a topographical manner, with the world of "Jeffrey's neighborhood" acting as the pleasant façade meant to cover the festering darkness of "Boothville" lurking underneath. Rather, the relationship between the two realms is closer to a horizontal one. The two realms seem to be divided more like neighboring areas; they are clearly separated by invisible barriers of geography, yet those geographical boundaries are transgressed constantly, with elements of the "homeliness" or familiarity of "Jeffrey's neighborhood" infecting "Boothville," and elements of the darkness and violence associated with Boothville spreading into Jeffrey and Sandy's domain.

As a result of this mingling, we must read the world of the film as containing elements of both areas simultaneously, constantly oscillating back and forth between the two distinct yet intermingling spheres of Lumberton existence. In this chapter, my analysis is extended to "Boothville," the area of Lumberton that we might think of as the "night-time world" of both the town and the film. Elements of the familiar and the "homely" are inherent in the more overtly violent world of Boothville, illustrated most prominently in the character of Frank Booth. Frank, perhaps more than any other

character in the film, is ruled by his desires, one of which seems to be to escape the boundaries of his own subjectivity, his own “skin,” and find unity and completion in another. This “unity and completion” is what is suggested in the “daytime” opening sequence of the film, yet as Mr. Beaumont’s stroke suggests, absolute harmony does not exist in Lumberton. The boundaries between people, and between Boothville and Jeffrey’s neighborhood, remain intact, virtually indestructible, regardless of how often they are transgressed. Frank cannot accept such a separation, and it is this denial that marks him as essentially doomed. Jeffrey, as a kind of double for Frank, represents what Frank might have been had he learned to consent to this separation between both subjects and worlds, to resign himself to the reality that his desire for complete unity will never be satisfied. Frank, for his part, acts as a key figure in Jeffrey’s emergence as a subject, helping Jeffrey to position himself in opposition to Frank, even as elements of both Frank and Jeffrey infect each other’s character.

“You’re like me,” says Frank Booth to Jeffrey Beaumont at the end of a “joyride” that Frank and Jeffrey have just taken with a group that includes Dorothy Vallens, Frank’s henchmen, and one of the casually bizarre female friends of the casually bizarre Ben, the elegant, androgynous criminal lowlife that Frank has reverently described as “one suave motherfucker.” Earlier in the evening, Frank and his cohorts surprise Jeffrey and Dorothy as Jeffrey is leaving her apartment post-lovemaking. “Who is this fuck?” Frank barks, as concerned as ever with social graces. Frank’s incessant use of the word “fuck” not only cycles through virtually all of the most common meanings of the term, it can also be said to conjure up multiple meanings within the same utterance. This particular declaration is no exception.

On the most obvious level, Frank's classification of Jeffrey as a "fuck" reveals that Frank sees him as a jerk, a miserable excuse for humanity who might, by all appearances, be trying to move in on Frank's territory. On another level, however, his use of the word in this context can't help but call ahead to his use of another, explicitly sexual word in reference to Jeffrey: "pussy." As the entire ensemble speeds toward Ben's abode, Frank's buddy Raymond refers to Jeffrey as a "pussy." Frank immediately qualifies Raymond's assessment: "He's *our* pussy!" Frank's designation of Jeffrey as a "fuck" is, in that sense, synonymous with such a pronouncement; in either case, Jeffrey, following Frank's apparent conception of how sex should operate, is someone to be dominated, someone who is easily coerced into becoming submissive and relinquishing his/her free will.

Frank's view of Jeffrey as both a "fuck" and a "pussy" complicates our reading of Frank's statement that Jeffrey is, in fact, like him. Frank's comparison (or, if you will, his simile) seems to suggest much about the nature of what we have previously named "Boothville," that world of switchblades, fast cars, and Roy Orbison on the radio that is, perhaps ironically, as inextricably linked with the 1950's as the film's neo-Leave it to Beaver opening sequence. The question ultimately raised by the scene of Jeffrey and Frank's first meeting is this: if Jeffrey is "like" Frank, and Jeffrey is also a "pussy" who apparently needs to be "fucked" in order to be integrated into the group, then who did Frank let himself be "fucked" by in order to acquire his particular subjecthood? In asking this question, what I am implying is that, in asserting that the weak-willed "pussy" Jeffrey is "like" him, Frank insinuates two things: one, that inside Frank lies a subservient "pussy" waiting to be let out (during, for instance, his sexual games with Dorothy, in

which he reverts to the status of an infant), and two, that inside Jeffrey lies the potential to become Frank. In staring into the other, both see shaded, altered versions of themselves. Both Frank and Jeffrey seem to be confronting each other at the border separating two alternate versions of the same story. Frank, in looking at Jeffrey, could be observing a model for what he himself might look like with his demons and desires “safely” contained and inhibited. Meanwhile, Jeffrey, in encountering Frank, might be said to be facing the kind of form he might take if he became unbound, trading in the curious detachment with which he has for the most part treated his desires for a rabid, id-driven pursuit of the objects of that desire.

The kind of recognition we are charting here is, of course, related to issues of the double, particularly as Freud discusses it in relation to the uncanny. Freud writes that the notion of the double is in part “marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self” (Freud 9). In the case of Jeffrey’s perception of Frank, it is uncertain whether or not Jeffrey’s subjectivity, his own conception of his identity, is particularly solid. In making his pitch for his private surveillance of Dorothy to his “good” paramour Sandy (a name inextricably linked in this context with Sandra Dee, that blond 1950’s teen star whose persona was and is as steeped in blondness and purity as Sandy’s personality seems to be), Jeffrey might seem to have at least some idea of both his own identity and Sandy’s: “No one would suspect us, because no one would think that two people like us would be crazy enough to do something like this.” The reality, of course, is that two people “like them” most certainly *would* do something like that—if by “people like them,” we mean

people who are in fact unsure of precisely what they would or would not be willing to do in a situation as unusual as the one in which Jeffrey finds himself regarding Dorothy and the ear.

In keeping with Jeffrey's uncertainty regarding his own subjectivity, then, his initial status as detective/voyeur in Dorothy's life, which takes a turn away from curious detachment to direct involvement upon witnessing Frank's rape of Dorothy, seems to be initially adopted as a role, a set of characteristics that he can assume in order to gain the kind of insight into an area (which we might, again, call Boothville) that he wouldn't normally be exposed to. Jeffrey makes his surveillance pitch to Sandy in precisely this kind of language: "There are opportunities in life," he tells Sandy, "for gaining knowledge and experience." He is, in other words, still at a stage in which he is assuming masks, trying personae on for size in an effort to determine which seems to fit him most closely.

Inherent in this kind of "experimentation" is the fact that Jeffrey is, whether he will admit it explicitly or not, implacably attracted to the potential wonders/horrors of Boothville as much as he is to the apparently safer realm in which Sandy dwells. Pauline Kael, discussing the nature of Sandy's attraction to Jeffrey in her review of the film, states that "Jeffrey himself is the mystery that Sandy is drawn to [...] and you can't help giggling a little when she turns to him with a worried, earnest face and says, 'I don't know if you're a detective or a pervert.' She's still a kid; she thinks it's either/or" (Kael 204). Kael goes on to note that Jeffrey "has been pulled—with no kicking or screaming—into the inferno of corrupt adult sexuality" (204).

Kael's comments here convey the way in which Jeffrey is positioned midway between two separate areas of experience in a way that emphasizes the impossibility of both. Jeffrey certainly cannot exist in the state of relative purity in which Sandy seems to dwell; his curiosity, his urge to perform the sinister, treacherous dance with alien partners like Dorothy and Frank that constitutes his self-assumed role as detective, essentially rules out such a scenario. However, he also cannot simply shed the necessary inhibitions instilled in him by the social structure of Lumberton as a whole; the town in this sense is an ego that indulges Jeffrey's fascination with Boothville up to a point before drawing him back from the precipice.

If, as Kael, suggests, the sexuality indulged in by/forced upon Frank and Dorothy can be described as "corrupt," it is because their particular brand of sexuality seems to have broken free, as is true of corruption in general, of any system of checks and balances that might once have normalized and controlled it; the egoistic mediation of their sexual desires and drives, given a physical form by the socializing strictures of the town itself, seems for Dorothy and Frank to have broken, causing them to lurch to the disreputable side of the axis separating the conscious control of citizens like Sandy and her police-chief father from the relatively unbridled pursuit of typically-repressed desires in which Dorothy and Frank both, to varying degrees, indulge. It is this axis on which Jeffrey precariously perches himself in the middle, much like a man standing on a teeter-totter, struggling to keep either side of the device from banging onto the ground.

This sense of shaky indeterminacy, this notion that Jeffrey's fate at this point in the film is still relatively open, relates to another of Freud's claims regarding the uncanny. He suggests that one could also include, as elements inherent in the notion of

the double, “all the unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed, and all our suppressed acts of volition which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will” (9-10). It seems distinctly possible that Jeffrey does in fact see all of these elements in Frank. The notion of free will in particular plays a significant role in coloring Jeffrey’s perception of Booth. In discussing the story of “The Ring of Polycrates” as a suggestion of the nature of the uncanny, Freud recounts that “the King of Egypt turns away in horror from his host, Polycrates, because he sees that his friend’s every wish is at once fulfilled, his every care promptly removed by kindly fate. His host has become ‘uncanny’ to him” (11).

In comparing such a scene to our (and Jeffrey’s) experience of Frank, we must note, of course, that such an “uncanny” sense of completion is never present in Frank any more than it might be for Jeffrey. Frank’s desires are not truly fulfilled (indeed, cannot be, as is the always-elusive nature of desire) any more than Jeffrey’s might be said to be. What distinguishes Frank from Jeffrey, however, is the raging urgency with which Frank pursues the satisfaction of that desire; seemingly unbound by the kind of social constraints that bind Jeffrey, Frank seems to feel freer to pursue the kind of fulfillment that is virtually indistinguishable from obliteration. An air of fatality, whether it be his own or another’s by his own hand, pervades every scene that Frank inhabits, and the uncanny nature of such an air is supported by Freud’s assertion that “‘All men are mortal’ is paraded in text-books of logic as an example of a general proposition; but no human being really grasps it, and our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality” (12). When in Frank’s presence, however, Jeffrey is made, in ways

both tangible and intangible, to face the idea of mortality consciously; the veil separating consciousness and unconsciousness, the curtain that keeps a true awareness of death from traversing the border into consciousness, is pulled back. What Jeffrey seems to see at the moment of such a revelation can be said to be disconcertingly liminal; elements that might otherwise carry features of the familiar or “homely” shade distressingly into the bizarre, while matter that should ideally, at least for the sake of Jeffrey’s fragile sense of his own identity as a person “like” Sandy, register as being entirely alien materializes as something disturbingly, if vaguely, recognizable as being a part of his own makeup.

The scene in which Frank is first introduced provides us with an image of Jeffrey literally observing Frank and Dorothy behind a barrier, one that could be read on first viewing as concretely separating him from their actions. Jeffrey has carried out, with Sandy’s help, his plan to search Dorothy’s house while she is out singing at The Slow Club, a Lumberton nightclub. Unfortunately, Jeffrey, while flushing Dorothy’s toilet after going to the bathroom, fails to hear Sandy’s car horn signaling that Dorothy has returned home. Caught off-guard by her arrival, he hides in her closet, and is eventually discovered. An initially frightened Dorothy, wielding a knife to protect herself, eventually forces Jeffrey to strip and starts to make love to him on her living-room couch. This act is interrupted, however, by a knock on the door. Dorothy, knowing that the visitor is Frank, hustles Jeffrey and his clothing back into her closet. Upon entering, Frank reminds her angrily of the proper way to address him (“It’s Daddy, you shithead!”) and demands a glass of bourbon that Dorothy has dared to forget to have at the ready to await his arrival. “Can’t you fuckin’ remember anything?” Frank asks as Dorothy switches off the lamp on the table to Frank’s right. “Now it’s dark,” he announces, in a

tone of voice that seems to be pitched somewhere between dread and tired resignation, before sitting down somewhat wearily on Dorothy's couch as she seats herself on a chair to his right. The scene is illuminated only by a light fixture hanging on the center of the wall and the residual light from the bathroom.

Frank's proclamation invites the viewer to conclude that Frank is one who is truly in his element, or at home, when he is in the dark. This is certainly true, yet it seems that the concept of "darkness" as we are dealing with it here needs some elaboration. Darkness for Frank seems to suggest a condition that isn't entirely phenomenological. Frank's conception of "darkness," beyond the simple lack of illumination within a given environment, also seems to refer to something intangible about the situation itself, the very scenario in which Frank and whoever he happens to be in the same space with at a given time seem to find themselves in. In announcing "now it's dark," Frank seems to be suggesting that, now that all of the proper elements are in place, he and Dorothy have reached a point at which neither of them can back away from the satisfaction of Frank's urges. The darkness that envelops them in that moment might be thought of as overtaking them like water in a flood; Frank and Dorothy are moving steadily away from whatever threadbare source of light that either might have possessed before this moment and into a space in which both are in danger of becoming consumed. In preparing for this consumption, Frank momentarily reasserts his role as director, angrily insisting within the same breath that within this position he does not double as actor or audience member, all evidence to the contrary: "Don't you fuckin' look at me," he growls at Dorothy, pointing his bourbon in her direction.

What he might as well be saying is that in relation to Dorothy, he is most certainly not a fellow performer, at whom an actor might at some point direct their attention during a scene. On the other hand, his relation to Dorothy is certainly more intimate than that of an audience member such as Jeffrey. Jeffrey's removal from the scene he is witnessing, however, may be seen as necessary, for he is the closest that Frank really comes to a conscience. Jeffrey's presence may represent, as discussed earlier, a doubling of Frank, and vice versa. If the kind of critical "gaze" inherent in the conscience exists at all in relation to Frank, it is supplied by Jeffrey, both unbeknownst to Frank (as in the scene currently under analysis) or with his full awareness and acknowledgment (as in the joy-ride scene). Let us trace the layers of perception here: Jeffrey, in both scenes, possesses the critical gaze of the conscience that Frank does not quite possess himself. In the rape scene, he is highly suspicious of such a look emanating from Dorothy, yet is entirely unaware of Jeffrey's observation of him. She looks away, learning her lesson about reminding Frank of his audience, of the onlooker reminding him that he is not invisible, that his power must still be exercised, that he is still very much in the world even if he is currently outside of himself. Jeffrey refuses to learn this lesson, however, which seems to lead to his expulsion from Frank's "family."

We might distinguish here, however, between the way that Frank feels about feeling Dorothy's gaze upon him and the rage and embarrassment that seems to overcome him when feeling Jeffrey's eyes directed his way. The distinction to be made here seems to be one of outside vs. inside. As Frank kneels down in front of Dorothy's crotch, observing what seems for him to be an abyss that might swallow him, as per his own wishes, if he stares upon it for too long, he is viewing what he believes to be his own

property; certainly, it isn't a stretch to conclude that Frank views Dorothy's genitalia as "his" in some way, as belonging to him before anyone else, especially her kidnapped and mutilated husband Don. The notion that Dorothy's parts are "his," however, seems to carry implications beyond that of claiming someone else's property for one's own use. There is a longing inherent in the way that Frank views "his" parts that suggests that he not only wishes to possess them sexually, but also anatomically. In this context, then, the piece of blue velvet that he orders Dorothy to insert into his mouth might be viewed as a piece of Dorothy, served for him to both taste and adopt as a part of his own body.

The almost sumptuous way Frank tastes the velvet in his mouth, as if trying to digest its juices, followed by the ugly, brutal force with which he makes his way inside of Dorothy during the rape, both propose that he is trying to break through the barriers erected by both Dorothy's skin and his own and truly *enter* her; as he pushes his genitals inside of Dorothy, he is also attempting, within the heat of the moment, to push *himself* inside of her. The spell under which Frank seems to dwell in this moment, a state in which he can summon the will to try to collapse himself into Dorothy, is broken, however, by her stare. It is a disturbing reminder of what he is trying to forget: Dorothy's subjectivity, a less-than-subtle indication that *he* is most certainly not *her*. Greg Olson, describing the relationship between the evil spirit Bob and the heroine Laura Palmer in Lynch's 1992 film Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me, sums up their sinister dalliance in a way that also evokes the nature of the connection between Frank and Dorothy, not to mention Frank and Jeffrey: "Bob isn't the fantasized partner of a woman awakening to her erotic nature; he's a palpable force who already has Laura sexually whenever he wants to and increasingly hungers for her very personhood: 'He wants to *be*

me or he'll kill me'" (Olson 44). It isn't clear if Frank is offering such a severe ultimatum; in his case, there is no proof to suggest that continuing to use Dorothy to fulfill whatever sexual appetites he cannot satisfy elsewhere would not remain a viable option should he fail to immerse himself in her with enough force to become her. It seems clear, however, that a similar desire drives Frank, even if the outcome of his furious strivings to feed that desire is less certain than it is for Bob. In any case, it would seem that we are back in the territory of Willy and Pretty Polly, where to become someone else, particularly your "beloved," to take on their identity, characteristics and essence, is synonymous with destroying them.

This is illustrated perhaps most vividly in the aforementioned scene at the end of the troupe's joyride in Frank's car. Frank is barreling down the highway with Jeffrey, Dorothy and the rest of the gang after leaving Ben's residence/hangout/hideout. Dorothy asks Frank where they're going, to which he responds, "I'm takin' your neighbor out to fuckin' country!" As fervent as Frank may be in satisfying his rapacious hunger, whether it be for sex or just general thrills, even he seems to acknowledge that in a town like Lumberton, there are designated areas for such behavior. Areas such as Lincoln Street, which happens to be Dorothy's street of residence. "Jeffrey, you're not going down by Lincoln, are you?" asks Jeffrey's worried Aunt Barbara, after Jeffrey informs her and his mother that he's going out for a walk. He insists he isn't, but of course, following the discovery of the ear, and his introduction to Sandy, who happens to know precisely where Dorothy's building is, Jeffrey is virtually at the mercy of his curiosity. The woman singer to whom Sandy keeps overhearing her father refer "lives in an apartment building

real close to your house,” she informs Jeffrey, who muses with some wonderment, “It’s a strange world.”

It’s tempting to conclude from Jeffrey’s statement that what we have been referring to up to now as the “everyday life” or “surface” of Lumberton, which we might also simply refer to as “Jeffrey’s neighborhood,” is not “of” the world; the world at large may be strange, but we can thank God that our neighborhood isn’t, that we’ve found some kind of asylum from the madness, our own sealed-off, hermetic conclave devoted to peace and decency. The awe in Jeffrey’s voice, however, betrays the fascination that such an eerie proximity inspires in him. Jeffrey is aware of the fact that the confines of his immediate surroundings don’t begin to suggest the full range of experience offered by life, a belief reflected in his pronouncement to Sandy at the diner that “there are opportunities in life for gaining knowledge and experience.”

What Jeffrey doesn’t quite seem to realize, at least until the rape scene between Frank and Dorothy, are the full dimensions of such experience, the true consequences of becoming involved even with what is merely a few blocks from your own neighborhood. Not only does he not have a real understanding of the “strange world” to which he refers, he doesn’t yet have a full grasp of Lumberton. Earning such an awareness entails gaining a better familiarity with the rhythms and contours of his own darker nature, but just as important in this process of enlightenment is knowing *where* to look on the outside, becoming aware of what physical, corporeal areas of the town might yield the “strange” secrets to which he is so undeniably drawn. Confronting such a strangeness, then, is not quite a matter of dredging up the repressed from the unconscious, but of shifting one’s perspective, on a vertical plane of meaning, to an area that has been previously

overlooked. If whatever is to be found there registers as the “uncanny,” it is because the discoveries awaiting the investigator of this “uncanny realm” are indeed typically associated with the realm of the repressed or the “underneath”—at least, in most *other* worlds. In Lumberton, however, such a space can’t quite be said to be actively repressed, but instead, more than anything, seems to be regulated, cordoned-off by invisible boundaries as any other neighborhood might be; it is as if “Boothville” were under the jurisdiction of the Lumberton Zoning Board as surely as Jeffrey and Sandy’s neighborhood would be. It is, in this sense, separate but acknowledged, if not “equal.” Frank’s resolution to subject Jeffrey to the joys of “fuckin’ country,” i.e. that designated space in which true “fucking” is meant to be done (as opposed, we must assume, to regular sex, which is suitable in any home in any part of town), is an acknowledgment of such segregation, as well as an (initially) gleeful seizing of the opportunity to cross the boundaries between these two distinct, and typically divided, areas.

The apparent delight in Frank’s manic manner suddenly evaporates, however, in the middle of the joyride, presumably before Frank and the crew reach the promised land of “fuckin’ country.” After seeing Dorothy, sitting in between Frank and one of his henchmen in the front seat, turn to the back to look at Jeffrey, Frank suddenly barks, “What does this fuck got to do with anything?” On one level, this agitated query is simply meant to point out what is surely by that point obvious to everyone assembled: that Jeffrey doesn’t belong in their company, that he is, in relation to the rest of the group, and especially Frank, a piece of detritus that has, in a way that Frank seems unable to articulate, emptied itself of whatever usefulness it might’ve had, and as a result has outstayed its conditional welcome. Frank slams on the brakes and steers the car off the

road. Turning to the backseat, Frank snarls, “You fuck! What are you lookin’ at?” This is a seemingly unanswerable question, but since it is reasonable to assume that silence would only provoke Frank further, Jeffrey responds, “Nothing.” This answer is apparently neutral enough to placate Frank, although he does feel the need to remind Jeffrey, “Don’t you look at me, fuck!” When Jeffrey opts not to respond to this, Frank offers him a somewhat muttered clue as to what might happen if he fails to heed his warning: “I shoot when I see the whites of the eyes.”

Frank’s pronouncement would seem to have no literal meaning, considering that the whites of Jeffrey’s eyes are in full view, and that he continues, in fact, to look at Frank, out of fear-driven paralysis rather than a sense of defiance. We might be able to glean at least a suggestion of what is operating in Frank’s momentary transformation into a gunslinger from Howard Hampton, who writes that David Lynch characters in general are “archetypes, but scrambled, distorted ones; feeding on each other, they negate themselves. Inundated with this sensory overload (and turned on by it), they slip out of their normal roles into deviant reveries. They assume new identities—double lives—as serial killers, voyeur detectives, pagan homecoming queens, or good-looking roadkill” (Hampton 39). Applying this description of the dynamics of Lynch’s characters to Frank’s momentary adoption of the gunslinger persona is complicated by the fact that Frank, on initial consideration, doesn’t seem to *have* a normal role, even by the altered standards of normality under which the social structure of Lumberton operates. It might be said, however, that this very lack constitutes a presence in Frank’s case; his abnormality reinforces the Lumberton standard of (relative) normality and ensures him a

place within the system of normative roles and personas that comprise the social life of the town.

Frank's particular role is that of Criminal Element, and he is meant to exist as a caution against the abandonment of the civility that allows the residents of Jeffrey and Sandy's section of Lumberton to keep their darker desires or natures in check, manifesting themselves on television screens and in peace-rending acts of nature (such as Mr. Beaumont's stroke and the cacophony of the hungry insects) rather than in the acts of citizens. Frank, however, is about as interested in abiding by the law of his role, and the expectations surrounding how he might relate to others, as he is in celibacy, and his casting of Jeffrey in the position of the destructive menace that must be eradicated indicates that Frank seems to possess his own sense of justice and order, one that revolves around the notion that hindrance, a concept for which Jeffrey might be seen to serve as a walking symbol in Frank's eyes, is an enemy phenomenon that must be defeated.

If Frank is in this moment a Western sheriff, then the biggest crime in his eyes would seem to be to insist, as Jeffrey does both explicitly and in his very presence, that proceeding at a dead run toward obliteration, whether it be of yourself, another, or both, is an urge to fight against, to be kept in reserve instead of acted upon. Frank's "whites of the eyes" remark to Jeffrey is an indirect way of reminding Jeffrey whose jurisdiction he's currently under. Robert D. Newman notes:

As agent of the law and replica of the ideal father from 1950's TV, Sandy's [...] father, Detective Williams, opposes Dorothy's (Sandy's shadow self) 'Daddy', Frank, as another agent to initiate Jeffrey into fatherly knowledge. Indeed, the inhaler Frank places over his face to

enhance his sensations during rape and murder replicates the iron lung in which Jeffrey finds his father in his visit to the hospital. (Newman 76)

As Newman points out, Frank can be seen as a father figure in relation to Dorothy; his vicious reprimands on the occasion of Dorothy's failure to remember the demands of her role ("It's Daddy, you shithead!") and his subsequent discipline administered to correct such imprecision both seem to establish Frank as the kind of socializing agent in relation to Dorothy that a father might be in relation to his daughter. Just as a father would be for his daughter, Frank seems intent on teaching Dorothy both the acceptable and unacceptable modes of living in the world—*his* particular corner of the world, to be exact.

It must also be noted, however, that even as Frank serves as a father figure to Dorothy, Frank and Dorothy in tandem reveal themselves to be an alternate parental unit for Jeffrey; they are as much Father and Mother as they are Father and Daughter. Dorothy's persistent direction of Jeffrey's attention to her breasts during their previous lovemaking suggests this, as does her implied threat of castration as she kneels in front of a naked Jeffrey with the butcher knife after he emerges from her closet. Dorothy has, in some way, helped to give birth to Jeffrey as a subject, as someone who is beginning to define himself through his sexual relationship with Dorothy; in this scene, however, it appears that Dorothy can also deprive him of that subjectivity with a flick of her knife. The arrangement of the scene in the car with Frank, Dorothy, Jeffrey and the rest of Frank's cronies suggests, then, as other critics have pointed out, a family outing, with mother and father in the front seat and the children fidgeting restlessly in the back. Oddly, despite the harmony in which Jeffrey's section of Lumberton is portrayed as

existing, this configuration is the closest we come to an image of a complete family unit up to this point in the film. Jeffrey's parents are never shown in the same room or place together, and Jeffrey's mother is not shown visiting her husband in the hospital.

Meanwhile, Sandy's parents, Detective John Williams and his unnamed wife, are often shown dwelling in separate rooms of the Williams residence; one example is the scene in which Jeffrey meets with Detective Williams to discuss the case of the ear, conferring with him in his study, the physical isolation of the detective from his wife portrayed as a natural, necessary element of the comfort afforded them by Detective Williams's prominence and influence in the community.

It is tempting to view this shift in the expected setting of the scene of family togetherness as an ironic commentary on the contrasting values between "Boothville" and Jeffrey's neighborhood; despite the surface happiness and peace depicted in the "everyday" world of Lumberton, we might be tempted to say, it's the freaks who truly understand unity and togetherness. It seems more accurate to suggest, however, that the denizens of both districts yearn for a sense of oneness and wholeness with those they love, a desire which neither faction can fully articulate, and at which both parties have their own particular ways of hinting. Charles Drazin writes that "Detective Williams believes in a clear division between the world of adults and the world of children"; for Williams, "being grown-up is about controlling your feelings and keeping things hidden" (Drazin 194-95). This suggests the source of such an essential isolation, at least in the case of the Williams family, as illustrated in the scene in which Jeffrey visits Detective Williams to discuss the case of the missing ear a bit further. Williams orders Jeffrey, in the form of a warm yet firm directive, not to talk to anyone else about the details of the

case, informing him that he can't divulge the full nature of the investigation to Jeffrey until the case is "all sewed up", a darkly ironic choice of words considering the absence that stands as the topic of their conversation.

The literal "sewing-up" of the ear plays a role in Detective Williams's wish for completion, of course; once that alienated, estranged organ can be traced to its source, so can the town, or at least the neighborhood, as a body be restored to its former sense of wholeness—if only temporarily, of course. The detective seems to understand this all too well: when Jeffrey exclaims that Williams's profession "must be neat," Williams counters, "It's horrible too." The existence of the horrible is, of course, what supplies Detective Williams with a salary; his ability to support his family is contingent on the continued occurrence of the horrible, if not simply the unlawful. When Williams follows this statement with the conversation-ceasing announcement "I'm sorry, Jeffrey, that's the way it has to be," it's clear that he's referring, on a more literal level, to his inability to delve further into the details of the case with our hero, yet it's difficult to avoid inferring that "it" also refers to the nature of Detective Williams's vocation. A mixture, or perhaps confusion, of the "neat" (a term that, in Jeffrey's repeated use of it, seems to be equated with "fascinating" or "wondrous") and the horrible—that's the way "it," or Lumberton, has to be.

The "horrible" aspects of Williams's job entail that even as Williams's consistent exposure to things or people broken, deceased, or out of operation comprises a significant element in his life, the specifics surrounding that element must be kept obscured from the people he loves—that's also "the way it has to be." In the process of keeping this matter separate from Sandy and his wife, it becomes as conspicuous in its absence as a phantom

limb; it takes on some of the air of the material that dwells in the unconscious, revealing itself only partially, and through hints and suggestions. This is illustrated in the scene in which Jeffrey, exiting the Williams residence after his conversation with the detective, first meets Sandy. She emerges from the dark to become illuminated by the soft glare from a streetlight, entering Jeffrey's consciousness in a way that makes her seem immediately familiar, knowable. When asked by Jeffrey what she knows about the missing-ear case, she replies in a manner that matches her father's previous remark about the case being "all sewed up" for dark irony: "I don't know much but bits and pieces." Her status as interpreter of her father's "bits and pieces" is evoked by Maggie Kilgour's discussion of Gothic narrative as a genre pieced together, often incoherently, from a list of stock conventions. She writes that "narrative incoherence [...] has been the subject of much critical complaint [...] Made up of these assorted bits and pieces, gothic novels often seem to disintegrate into fragments [...] which never refer back to the central point" (Kilgour 4-5).

Sandy, perhaps much like many Gothic readers, seems more interested at first in the mystery surrounding the details themselves rather than assembling them into a coherent narrative as Jeffrey would like to do. Her tone is seemingly casual, resigned to the partial knowledge of both the case and her father's life that she probably won't be able to transcend. Her next remark, however, betrays at least a measure of the curiosity she feels towards both her father and his profession: "I hear things [...] My room is right above my father's office." The "bits and pieces" that Sandy assembles and presents to Jeffrey suggest *something*, some kind of criminal plot perhaps, but at this point the various details of the case exhibit an essential absence that prohibits these assembled bits

of informational detritus from achieving the kind of unity that one desires. Regardless of the familiarity with which the pieces might register, there is a mystifying distance from logic and coherence maintained by those pieces that effaces that familiarity. This same distance applies, then, to Sandy's knowledge of her father, a distance that is necessary for her own self-preservation, a protection that would be much more difficult for her father to preserve if he were to allow her to directly confront the full ramifications of his job.

Christoph Grunenberg writes that "the physical and mental embedding of the patriarchal family into the comforting shelter of the home is not without ambiguity and there is something claustrophobic about this desperate and complete retreat" (Grunenberg 58). Sandy's position in relation to her father is indeed claustrophobic, in the proximity in which he seems to keep her in order to ensure her safety, and ambiguous, in her uncertainty regarding such an essential aspect of his life as his career. This is perhaps why Sandy feels so familiar to Jeffrey, why he seems to feel so at home with her. In their shared alienation from their parents and friends (Jeffrey's have all moved away, while Sandy dumps her boyfriend Mike for Jeffrey and seems to forget about her friends, who we see in only one shot outside of the high school, after becoming involved with Jeffrey), Sandy and Jeffrey seem to see each other as partners, not just in putting together the facts of the case, but in reassembling some sense of unity, of family. Both are inextricably bound to their families *and* at least partially alienated from them.

Jeffrey's apparent feeling of unity with Sandy will be distorted, however, by the later scene in which the underworld fop Ben lip-synchs to Roy Orbison's "In Dreams" with the aid of a worklight whose presence is inexplicable in his headquarters. Ben's performance radiates, to at least some degree, the *Heimlich*, the familiar, in its

conjuring of the illumination supplied by Sandy's introduction, yet it refutes the notion that the familiar can ever be truly known. Ben, with his white pancake makeup and blood-red lips, represents the kind of decadence and decay that Sandy has been raised to either avoid or stave off; it is almost as if Ben is projecting an image of Sandy that makes those cracks and wrinkles that Jeffrey can't yet see readily apparent, much more eminently visible, yet still essentially mysterious and elusive in the attempt to fully understand them. In Jeffrey's introduction to Sandy, which doubles as ours, she is still largely as "In Dreams" as Ben is. The difference is that Sandy, in her initial appearance, offers one version of the always-present dream of completion, of something or someone fully-formed and realized, while in Ben's version of the dream, the decay that is at work in anything that is fallible and human, even something as lovely as Sandy, takes over completely, retaining only an echo of the beauty that once kept it at bay.

In providing a faint yet resonant echo of our introduction to Sandy, the scene at Ben's also illustrates the way in which the yearning for another to complete oneself is as inarticulate and coded here as it is in Jeffrey and Sandy's neighborhood. The kind of yearning expressed by Frank in this scene is distinguished mainly through its seething, urgent nature. Unlike Detective Williams, Sandy, or Jeffrey, Frank has no constructed sense of self in particular, at least not one that is designed to allow him to function in Lumberton society, to present an "acceptable" face to others and to operate with a manner or demeanor suggesting that he has accepted that each subject in a place like Lumberton is essentially separate from all others, that the unity implied in its daily business only goes to a certain degree. Frank refuses to accept this, denying the boundaries that separate him from other subjects, yet furious in the knowledge that he

cannot go as far as he would like in incorporating the objects of his fascination or obsession into himself—which is, of course, another way of saying that he wants to become them. This desire in Frank might be described through Deleuze’s reference to Nietzsche’s discussion of the *Physis*, of nature. Nietzsche, writes Deleuze, “discovers in the *Physis* something superior to the reign of laws: a will willing itself through all change, a power opposed to law, an interior of the earth opposed to the laws of its surface” (Deleuze 7). Frank’s desire, of course, lies largely *on* that surface, rather than raging underneath it, but he is most certainly opposed to the “laws” of that surface—laws suggesting that he is Frank Booth, and will be forever, and that he can ultimately do nothing to change that. Frank’s predicament is further evoked by another of Maggie Kilgour’s arguments regarding the Gothic novel: “The Gothic appears to be a transgressive rebellion against norms which yet ends up reinstating them, an eruption of unlicensed desire that is fully controlled by governing systems of limitation” (Kilgour 8). The “laws of Lumberton” have a similar hold on Frank, allowing him to go only so far in his transgression, his violent “acting-out,” before he must be restrained.

Frank’s desire for completion in another, in any case, remains unabated. Ben serves as such a figure of desire for Frank, a notion suggested initially in Frank’s repeated, awed description of Ben as “suave”; he even allows Ben to hit Jeffrey in the stomach, a blow that immediately follows Frank’s first striking of the young man. This may be proof enough of the degree of Frank’s esteem for Ben: allowing him “seconds” after popping young Jeffrey’s cherry. After discussing the details of a drug transaction (or drug *theft*; it isn’t exactly clear which) conducted by Frank’s associate Gordon, who we later learn is one of Detective Williams’s fellow officers, Frank decides to pop in an

audio cassette that he has made a point of showing to Ben, announcing, “The candy-colored clown they call the Sandman!” Jeffrey is preoccupied with the sound of Dorothy’s pleading, alarmed voice coming from behind the door to the room in which her son Donny is being held, having been kidnapped along with Don. Jeffrey is physically coerced, however, into focusing his attention on the *real* show being prepared in front of him. Ben wrenches the cord of the work light in a manner that replicates the way in which a Vegas showman like Frank Sinatra might wrench the microphone cord in order to give himself a bit more walking room. Ben moves to the far right side of the doorway and, leaning against the green curtain residing there, flicks on the work light in his hand and begins to lip-synch as Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams” fills the room.

As a performer Ben is as smooth as Frank has repeatedly insisted he is, and as Ben mouths the words, including that immortal opening line “The candy-colored clown they call the Sandman/Tip-toes through my room late at night,” we cut to a shot of Frank gazing intently, and even tenderly, at Ben as he, too, mimics Orbison’s performance. The scene might be easy to view as a travesty of the kind of values seemingly espoused in the film’s opening tableau of too-perfect small-town beauty accompanied by the sounds of Bobby Vinton’s “Blue Velvet,” a song just as deceptively genteel and peaceful as “In Dreams.” What complicates such a reading, however, is that there is also a sense in which Ben seems, at least for the duration of the scene, to *enter* the realm of the images and sounds encountered in the film’s opening. A travesty it may be, but there is nothing to suggest that a travesty cannot still pulse with longing for the very object of its caricature.

This longing is suggested in Frank even more strongly than it is in Ben. After the camera cuts away to a shot of the rest of the group, none of whom seem to be appreciating the performance on the same level that Frank is, we cut back to a mid-range shot, some distance away from the “stage” area, which reveals that Frank is not standing at a distance in front of Ben, but is rather standing directly *beside* him as he performs, gaping at him while Ben’s attention is on the rest of the crowd. Frank steadfastly refuses to abide by the customary distance between performer and audience, primarily because he lacks, particularly at this moment, the patience to accept the kind of mediation between himself and the object of his desire that the viewer of a performance must allow. Frank’s denial of this separation brings to mind the notion of the “sublime,” particularly as shaped and defined by both Immanuel Kant and, later, Edmund Burke. Kant speaks of the sublime in relation to the beautiful, much as Burke does, in terms of a combination or confusion of the beautiful and the terrible: “The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peak rises above the clouds, the description of a raging storm [...] arouse enjoyment but with horror; on the other hand, the sight of flower-strewn meadows, valleys with winding brooks and covered with grazing flocks [...] also occasion a pleasant sensation but one that is joyous and smiling” (Kant 47). In short, Kant proposes, “The sublime *moves*, the beautiful *charms*” (47). Kant views the feeling of the sublime as belonging to the class of feelings that are “of a more delicate sort” since they denote in the subject experiencing them “a sensitivity of the soul,” as opposed to those baser, more elemental sensations “which can take place without any thought whatever” (47).

It may seem incredible to position someone as vicious and destructive as Frank Booth as being in possession of a great “sensitivity of the soul,” yet there is no denying

that he reacts to Ben's performance, particularly in its closing moments, in the manner of a large, raw nerve being prodded by a needle. As Orbison/Ben reach the line "I softly say/ A silent prayer/ Like dreamers do," Frank's expression shifts from that of rapture, of silent awe, to a sort of pained bliss, closing his eyes as if to suggest that Ben's performance, and Orbison's song, are both so beautiful that they are to be *endured* rather than simply enjoyed. His peculiar brand of absorption seems to speak somewhat more closely to Burke's encapsulation of the sublime: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke 63-4). Burke's foregrounding of the presence of *pain* and *danger* within the experience of the sublime is further solidified when he offers that "the torments which we may be made to suffer, are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest" (64).

Burke's insistence that the full magnitude of these "torments" cannot be directly conveyed by "learned voluptuaries," such as artists or writers, is the key to understanding the sublime as a *suggestion* or partial conveyance of these torments rather than reproducing their full effects: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (64). Therein lies the source of the frustration that arises in Frank as Ben's performance progresses. Ben, noticing Frank's utterly rapt attention, moves closer to him and, for a moment, "sings" directly to him, "In dreams, I walk with you," before moving back away again. To use the kind of phrase

that Frank might cotton to, the role Ben performs in that shift of his focus is that of the consummate “cock-tease,” gently stoking Frank’s desire before pulling back and denying its satisfaction: “You’d like to be this suave? You’d like to *be* this?” Ben might be asking. “Sorry, Frank—no amount of fucking will get you *this*.”

Unlike the typical subject of the sublime as both Burke and Kant seem to conceive of him or her, Frank is frustrated, not relieved, by the mediation separating him from the awesome yet terrible depth of feeling he seems to experience in viewing Ben. It allows him pleasure, certainly, yet far from convincing him that such a pleasurable remove is more desirable than the “real thing,” Frank seems set on tearing through that web of representation and viewing what might lay on the other side. This is what distinguishes Frank’s experience of Ben’s performance from ours, or Jeffrey’s. Like Jeffrey, we view Ben’s pantomime with degrees of fascination, perhaps even pleasure. His act, much like the images at the very beginning of the film, including the archaic fire truck and the white picket fence, is uncanny to us in its simultaneous familiarity (the song itself and Ben’s lounge-singer movements transport us back to the 1950’s-early 1960’s as surely as the images at the beginning of the film do) and distortion (he also resembles the *ghost* of a lounge or pop singer from that same period).

As familiar as Ben is, however, and as fascinating as he may be in the essential yet subtle difference that establishes him ultimately as unfamiliar, we are satisfied to stay on our side of the subject/uncanny object divide. This necessary divide between viewer and viewed is what the notion of the uncanny shares with that of the sublime; we are fascinated, yet careful also to remain back at some distance, like Jeffrey and the rest of the gang watching Ben. What distinguishes our reaction to Ben’s performance, not to

mention Frank's reaction, from the experience of the sublime is the familiarity with which Ben registers in our experience of his performance. If the sublime overwhelms the senses, resisting in the process any attempts to be comprehended or captured within existing systems of understanding or thought, then the uncanny is set apart from the sublime by what we might refer to as a "degree of mystification": even as it eludes our full understanding, the uncanny object contains at least some characteristics that reflect what we already know or have experienced. Ben, as shown previously, contains, even within his mystifying strangeness, echoes of both Sandy's entrance into the film by the illumination of the streetlight and the figure of the 1950's lounge singer. Much as in Gothic literature, the uncanny in Blue Velvet takes what is familiar to us (or, in some cases, perhaps even *overly* familiar) and returns it to us in a distorted condition, presenting us with what, in other contexts, might register as idyllic or harmonious characters and scenes, those which might seem purely inviting and *heimlich* in those other contexts, and imbuing them with suggestions of those darker impulses or feelings that are normally excluded from other instances of these characters or scenes.

The sublime, then, is what Frank might be seen to be pursuing, particularly in his experience of Ben's performance: the complete overwhelming, not only of his senses, but of his *self*, his identity. Frank, however, encounters in Ben only the uncanny, which allows him to transgress the boundaries between himself and Ben, but only for a few moments, until Ben's performance begins to remind him only of the divide between the two, a divide that can be transgressed but never eradicated. Frank is miserable at the idea of having to settle for such a mediated encounter with the object of his fascination, and in this misery—which, in Frank, is virtually indistinguishable from rage—begins to twitch,

seemingly uncontrollably, causing Ben to halt his play and Frank to turn off the cassette. After Frank exhorts the rest of his posse to “hit the fuckin’ road” with him, a somewhat sheepish Ben tells Frank that he’ll see him on Tuesday. A seemingly heartbroken Frank answers in the affirmative, and as Ben turns off his work light, Frank mutters, “Now it’s dark.” The line is a repetition of Frank’s pronouncement before raping Dorothy in the “Jeffrey-in-the-closet” scene, and it carries that same connotation: that things are about to get truly *dark*, both for himself and for anyone around him. Another meaning seems to have been layered onto the phrase, though, one that is suggested quite literally in Ben’s extinguishing of the light which illuminated his performance: the vision presented to Frank in Ben’s performance, the image of unity and wholeness inherent in Orbison’s lines about being “together, in dreams.” “In dreams” is, of course, the key phrase here; such a vision of unity belongs to the realm of dreams, not because it is false or illusory, but because it is in fact *too* real. The possibility of attaining such a unity would mean that no citizen of Lumberton would remain a subject, an incomplete yet satisfied part of the everyday social order exemplified in the opening sequence. Frank, of course, is desperate to avoid remaining similarly incomplete, essentially lacking, yet encounters consistent frustration in trying to fill the lack, the incompleteness, that defines him as much as any subject.

Frank’s vigorous yet desperate cry of “I’ll fuck anything that moves” just before he and the family “hit the fuckin’ road” speaks to his feverish obsession with overcoming this inability to find the sense of wholeness that he seems to associate with, for example, Dorothy’s vagina—or more specifically, the womb beyond it. Linda Badley asserts that “Dorothy is Frank’s symbol of pre-Oedipal unity, which he is in perpetual infantile rage

at having lost” (Badley 116). Badley also argues that “Frank’s repeated ‘Don’t you fuckin’ look at me’ states his denial of female subjectivity and his fear of the feminine”; Frank’s “games” with Dorothy, then, are meant to deny or suppress the power of the feminine (116). This is certainly true, yet it also seems likely that the source of Frank’s rage and fear towards the female is a certain desire for femininity, of the properties associated with femininity as a concept. In Roger Ebert’s review of the film, which Badley references, Ebert laments that “the movie is pulled so violently in opposite directions that it pulls itself apart.” Frank embodies this turmoil as much as, if not more than, any other character in the film. This sense of turbulence is manifested at least in part in the “uncanny” way in which Frank is both familiar in his menace (he’s a small-time thug, common to any prototypical small town) and decidedly bizarre in his presence, reminding us in his impotent, needy rages of a lack inherent within ourselves which we try to forget. So, too, do his feelings towards the feminine suggest a similar confusion; his fear and urge to deny femininity are virtually indiscernible from a fascination and love for it, since they do, in fact, represent the “pre-Oedipal unity,” in Badley’s words, which he finds both alluring and terrifying.

Evidence is supplied in the scene in which he beats Jeffrey. Getting his henchmen to hold Jeffrey in place, as Dorothy looks on from the car, Frank smears lipstick around the edges of his own lips, heatedly stage-whispering “Pretty, pretty!” He takes a hit from his mask before beginning to place large kisses on Jeffrey, with Dorothy screaming at Frank to leave Jeffrey alone. Given Frank’s self-tailored criminal image, the kisses seem to register more than anything as Mafioso-style “kisses of death,” Jeffrey’s impending demise sealed with a few smooches.

Unlike the conventional “kiss of death,” however, the kisser, Frank, seems to be signaling, not only the demise of the object of his “affection,” but his own end as well. Indeed, he seems to be trying to will such an end, at least to his life as Frank Booth. In smearing lipstick on his face, Frank seems most overtly to be adopting an image of Ben for himself; the bright redness of Ben’s lips is now present in Frank, and his directive to his friend Paul to cue up “In Dreams” on the car radio suggests that Frank needs to relive that moment, in the process changing the outcome of the scene to suit his own longing for fulfillment in obliteration. Frank’s previous assertion that “you’re like me” suggests that Frank is substituting Jeffrey for himself, which is perhaps why Frank, after first screaming at Jeffrey, “Don’t you look at me, fuck,” as if Jeffrey’s gaze threatens Frank’s authority, soon has an apparent change of heart, directing Jeffrey to “*look at me.*” Unlike Dorothy, Jeffrey’s gaze—so similar to his own, after all—does not remind Frank that his condition is permanent, that he is fated to remain within both the body and the consciousness that have been allotted to him.

Donning the blood-red lipstick, with its shades of both Ben and Dorothy, and branding Jeffrey with his mouth allows Frank to adopt the personas of both Ben and Dorothy in the act of “kissing-off” Frank Booth. “Don’t be a good neighbor to her!” Frank admonishes Jeffrey. “I’ll send you a love letter, straight from my heart, fucker! You know what a love letter is? It’s a bullet from a fucking gun, fucker! You get a love letter from me, you’re fucked forever!” It’s either you or me, says Frank, which is to say it’s you *and* me, “forever.” When Jeffrey’s gone, so is Frank Booth. Frank’s placement of the piece of blue velvet near Jeffrey’s mouth, presumably the same piece he inserts in

his own mouth during his assault on Dorothy, reinforces the notion that Frank believes that he is viewing, at the very least, a version of himself.

Having projected himself onto Jeffrey, and seeming to mark Jeffrey/himself for death, it might seem puzzling that Frank decides to beat Jeffrey, punching him in the face and stomach repeatedly, rather than kill him, which would, among other results, end for good their rivalry over Dorothy. Frank, of course, is inextricably attracted to gamesmanship and ritual, and decides instead to cast Jeffrey back out into the world. After all, if you love someone, as Frank's promise to send Jeffrey a "love letter" might suggest, you set them free; if they come back, then, to paraphrase the Orbison song, they're *yours*. Jeffrey's subsequent return to Dorothy's apartment confirms that Jeffrey does indeed *belong* to Frank, and vice-versa. Jeffrey's killing of Frank is in fact a capitulation to his advances, not a rejection of them. When Frank enters Dorothy's apartment in his "Well-Dressed Man" disguise, composed of a fake moustache, wig and suit, he announces his awareness of Jeffrey's presence by shouting: "One Well-Dressed Man knows where your fuckin' cute little butt's hidin'!" Unbeknownst to Frank, Jeffrey is hiding in the very same closet in which he hid during the earlier rape scene. Frank, then, has changed places with Dorothy, a fulfillment in a sense of one of his desires, although he is tragically ignorant of it.

After finally determining Jeffrey's hiding place, Frank stands in front of the closet, inhaling sharply through his mask in anticipation of one royal fuck, and, upon opening the door to the closet, gets in a sense what he has secretly wished for—to be "fucked forever," to be penetrated deeply enough, to reach such a sense of wholeness and completion through that penetration, that he is annihilated. This annihilation would seem

to signal, then, that Boothville at large has died along with its mayor. Jeffrey has sojourned in an area of the town that most would avoid, and in doing so, we might want to proclaim, he has completed his *bildungsroman*, his journey from innocence to experience, having mastered the darker aspects of himself by doing away with Frank. The uncanny air of indeterminacy inherent in Jeffrey's relation to Frank, the sense in which one opposite somehow shades into the other, still remains, however, infecting the rigorously idyllic "happy ending" of the film, an ending which, as we will see, confirms that the bucolic "everyday" existence of life in Lumberton and the "underneath" world of Boothville are inextricably linked, existing side-by-side still.

My analysis of scenes that represent the "Boothville" segments of Blue Velvet argues that these scenes are as familiar in their violence as the film's opening scene is violent in its familiarity. Both of the worlds represented in these scenes, both Jeffrey's neighborhood and Boothville, are infected with elements of their "opposing" spheres of existence. Even as these two spheres mingle with each other in this way, however, they remain distinct "neighborhoods" within both Lumberton and the film. Given this fact, the character of Frank Booth is significant in his raging attempts to obliterate barriers, not only between worlds, but also between subjects. His furious impatience with the restrictions of his own body and identity, with his own lack of beauty, leads him to identify others—Jeffrey, Dorothy, Ben—as possible sources for the fulfillment of the lack that he feels within himself. Ultimately, his desire to find unity and completion through the destruction of others, in particular Jeffrey, remains unsatisfied due to the indestructibility of the barrier separating Boothville from Jeffrey's neighborhood. As

established in the opening scene, the violence and darkness typically associated with Boothville is present yet segregated within Jeffrey's neighborhood.

There will always be room in Lumberton, then, for the kind of violence that Frank represents, which in turn means that it can never overwhelm the "homeliness" inherent in Lumberton life. In this way, Jeffrey's neighborhood polices itself against the kind of destruction that Frank represents and ensures that he remains essentially on the opposite side of the divide separating the two "neighborhoods," no matter how often he, and the violence he represents, might cross back and forth over that divide. As I will show in my conclusion, however, it does not follow from this that the darker aspects of Lumberton society, typically embodied by Frank, are not present in the film's "happy ending"; rather, this final scene illustrates the fluidity of the film's movement between sunshine and darkness, between peace and violence. In my conclusion, I will touch on this final scene in confirming that the movement between these extremes, a movement that lends the film the air of the uncanny, never comes to a halt; rather, it flickers constantly between these opposing properties, making the familiar violent and the violent familiar.

4) CONCLUSION

The final scene of Blue Velvet lends itself easily to interpretations suggesting that Lynch intends the sequence as a parody of the kind of joyous, idyllic ending one might expect from the conventional Hollywood film, especially one set in such a deceptively bucolic, near-fantasy small town as Lumberton. After Jeffrey kills Frank, he has a lover's embrace with Sandy, who has raced to Dorothy's apartment—possibly along with her father and the rest of his officers, although we can't quite be sure. As the two lovers kiss, the frame is steadily engulfed by a bright light serving as a wipe to transfer us to the next scene, in which an extreme closeup of the inside of an ear pulls back to show that it belongs to Jeffrey, whose eyes are closed, and who appears to be lying down.

Jeffrey opens his eyes to see a robin perched in the tree above him, at which point we hear Sandy calling Jeffrey to supper offscreen. We cut to a shot of Jeffrey rising from the lawnchair on which he's been reclining. Making his way to the front door of his house, Jeffrey looks to his left, off toward an unspecified point and asks, "How you guys doin'?" We then cut to a long-range shot of Chief Williams and Jeffrey's father, gathered around a birdfeeder performing some mysterious task involving a garden hoe. Both greet Jeffrey back, with Jeffrey's father assuring him that he's "feelin' much better now, Jeff," as if Jeffrey needs to be assured of this, or as if he's learning this for the first time. "Good deal, Dad," Jeffrey replies, heading inside for dinner, where Sandy and his Aunt Barbara are waiting to show him the robin perched outside their kitchen window—the very same robin Jeffrey's just seen outside. The robin has a worm snagged in its beak. "Maybe the robins are here," Jeffrey speculates, referring to the dream she has described to Jeffrey earlier, in which "the robins" come to bring happiness and an end to darkness

and suffering. “I don’t see how they could do *that*,” says an unsettled Aunt Barbara. “I could never eat a *bug*.” As Jeffrey and Sandy gaze harmoniously out of the kitchen window, we cut to a repeat of images from the film’s opening sequence: the flowers backed by a white picket fence, the smiling, waving fireman. We then cut to a scene in which we see, for the first time, young Donny, as he runs toward his mother’s open arms. We then cut to a shot of the blue velvet curtains that opened the film.

Alice Kuzniar, at the conclusion of an essay that skillfully traces the significance of instances of auditory and visual confusion in the film, argues that “the close of Blue Velvet reinstates the patriarchal, symbolic order [...] Traditional family values are also reinstated when, for the first time on the screen, Dorothy appears with her son” (Kuzniar 18). Kuzniar points out the violence that has made such an ending possible: “What permits this luridly happy ending is Jeffrey’s assumption of the father role in his killing or punishment of Frank [...] This resolution, which clearly gestures closure in its return to the opening shots, self-consciously parodies the Hollywood happy end” (18). Through such a parody, Kuzniar suggests, Blue Velvet, “in its self-referential closing image [...] pretends to cover up” the kind of intense violence and mutilation it has previously depicted, “both meeting and parodying audience expectations” (18). Kuzniar’s phrase “luridly happy” is particularly evocative of the atmosphere created by this final scene, since it captures the way in which the film’s conclusion, not to mention the film itself, suggest that its ostensibly peaceful vision of small-town life and its depiction of “bugs” like Frank Booth gnawing away in their own separate area are not in the kind of direct opposition in which a viewer might be tempted to place them. Kuzniar suggests that there is something unsettling, unfamiliar, about the happiness depicted in this sequence.

Throughout this thesis, I have contended that, by extension, the inverse is also true—that there is something familiar, homely, about the film’s violence. The film, in short, is “at-home” with violence, combining the familiar and the unfamiliar in a way that suggests Freud’s conception of the *unheimlich*, or uncanny.

In referring to “the film” as being “at-home” with violence, it should be emphasized that we are speaking of the *entire* film in this way, not simply the scenes involving Frank, Dorothy, or the other residents of Boothville, that shadow area of Lumberton in which violence seems to have a freer rein than in the world that Jeffrey and Sandy inhabit. To suggest this is to offer a challenge to the notion that the true area of interest in the world of the film is the “underneath,” that which is outside or allegedly below the social façade of everyday Lumberton, an area that many critics would argue is represented by the insect world to which the camera seems to direct our attention in the film’s opening sequence. The shot in which Mr. Beaumont suffers his seizure informs us that violence is as much a part of Lumberton’s “everyday,” daytime world as it would be in Boothville; it does not tell us that violence is absent from this everyday, supposedly bland “surface” world, occurring only in the area outside of that domain. I have proposed, then, that the film be read “horizontally” rather than from the top down. What distinguishes this mode of reading the film from the more typical psychoanalytic method of analyzing Blue Velvet, as illustrated by critics such as Mulvey and Martha Nochimson, is the claim I am making through this “horizontal” method that what seems to be represented as the “surface” of Lumberton does not exist simply to inform the viewer that he or she should be looking elsewhere (i.e. “below”) for the film’s meaning. The worlds of “light” and “darkness” in the film should not be read with any one area

taking precedence over the other; the relationship between the two is not as antagonistic or competitive as that. Rather, they should be thought of as two distinct yet incestuous neighborhoods, infecting each other with the characteristics most common to their own realms, yet still clearly segregated. This is what establishes the film as a whole as uncanny; if either the “sunniness” suggested in the film’s opening sequence or the “darkness” and violence featured most prominently in the Boothville sequences took over the film completely, such an uncanniness would no longer be present in our response to the film. That both properties are present to some degree in virtually every scene ensures, however, that we are sufficiently conflicted in our response to the film to qualify it as a rare extended instance of the uncanny.

When Kuzniar says that this final scene “meets” audience expectations, she means, of course, that it depicts, even if self-consciously, the final restoration of order and security that we might expect from the conventional Hollywood film, a restoration that ensures that any conflict or trauma visited upon its main characters will be put to rest, and that the film will essentially have circled back on itself, with the world of the film returning to the state of things as it existed before such conflict arose. Kuzniar is right to suggest that the film meets these narrative demands, but I’m not sure that Lynch “parodies” audience expectation for such an ending. The film’s ending is entirely in keeping with the tone of the film leading to this final scene; since this is the case, one would have to make the argument that the film as a whole is a parody of a traditional Hollywood narrative. I would dispute such a claim. The vision of small-town life we are presented with does possess its share of similarities with the conventional depiction of suburban Americana, yet its differences from such a conventional representation, starting

at the film's beginning, and which we have traced in the first chapter, are sufficiently pronounced that the world of Lumberton strays too far from the conventional model of American suburbia to register as a parody of such a model. Instead of remaining dependent on an existing standard for depicting American small towns such as Lumberton, Lynch avoids the use of such a "mould" around which to sculpt the world of Blue Velvet, instead bringing the characteristics associated with such a conventional "mould" into a richly incestuous relationship with the darker urges and desires typically shut out of the kind of idyllic world suggested most notably in the film's opening sequence.

In arguing that the elements of harmony and violence within the film exist in a relationship defined by codependence rather than opposition and antagonism, a relationship distinct from the oppositional analytic model of conscious/repressed, or of real/spectacle, espoused by critics such as Nochimson and Mulvey, I have considered the question of what kind of artwork, whether it be film, literary work, painting, or musical piece, might fit the topographical psychoanalytic model of reading a work that Nochimson and Mulvey both adopt in their reading of Blue Velvet. In other words, does there exist an artwork truly worthy of study and scrutiny (or, as the case may be, of adoration) that does not resist attempts to "understand" it, or "diagnose" it, through the imposition of pre-existing archetypes or systems of analysis? My own answer to this question would be "no"—in which case, one might suggest that Blue Velvet, in its refusal to be explained by such a topographical model (the surface is a spectacle of happiness, while the "underneath" represents what is repressed in the composition of this spectacle, making it the true focal point of our interest as viewers), is not so unique in its rebellion

against such efforts to contain an artwork within a proscribed analytic system designed to make the reader or viewer's job easier. I would suggest that this is, in fact, true, and it is the key to applying my thesis regarding Blue Velvet to discussions of other artworks—potentially texts or literary works, but particularly works in visual media, such as film or art.

In a larger context, the “uncanny” as it is found in Blue Velvet suggests that assumptions that what seems to be depicted as “lurking underneath” the surface of an artwork should take analytical precedence over that surface must be avoided. In other words, one must always investigate the notion that a film or other artwork can be “understood” through the sort of topographical approach that is often used to read Blue Velvet. The notion that the true source of fascination within a work of art is the dark “underneath,” that area which, at least in Blue Velvet, Laura Mulvey claims is the location of that matter truly worthy of our consideration and analysis, is tired and insufficient in fully coming to terms with the worth of a film, text, or artwork. Blue Velvet's particular version of the uncanny is significant in its demand that the viewer keep his/her attention focused on the *surface* of its world, rather than looking past or underneath that surface for hints of what we as viewers should *really* be looking for in our analysis. I have been specifically addressing a topographical psychoanalytic approach in my analysis of Lynch's film, but the notion of giving greater consideration to the “surface” of a work can apply to virtually any instance of symbology in a piece of art, any example of an element within a work of art that might be said to represent another idea or meaning lurking in the background—or “underneath,” depending on how one prefers to conceive of it.

Charles Laughton's film The Night of the Hunter provides a useful example in its main character, Reverend Harry Powell, a murderous preacher who insinuates himself into the lives of two children, John and Pearl Harper, by becoming romantically involved with their mother, all in an effort to gain ownership of a bundle of money stolen by their late father Ben. Near the end of the film, as Powell is arrested for tracking the children down and attempting to kill them, John seems to relive the scene of his own father's arrest for burglary and murder, his anguished movements and exclamations in this scene almost precisely recalling his actions in the earlier scene. The symbology at work here, then, would suggest that Powell is a paternal substitute for John, a figure through which John can finally come to terms with the fate of his biological father. This is certainly present in John's relationship to Powell, yet this notion alone does not allow us to "understand" either that relationship or the film as a whole. The scene seems to qualify as uncanny, in the sense that it seems to point toward a "return of the repressed," yet the "uncanniness" of that film is as resistant to the binary opposition of "consciousness versus repressed" as Blue Velvet is. To suggest, in other words, that the main source of interest in Night of the Hunter is in the opposition between the conscious, if perhaps false, sense of unity among the churchgoing members of John and Pearl's community and the violence that supposedly keeps forcing its way to the surface of that community is to risk ignoring the fact that violence, most notably in the form of Reverend Powell, is very much a part of the "surface" world of the film, just as it is in Blue Velvet. Even in artworks that do not display the kind of "uncanny" relationship to violence that both Blue Velvet and Night of the Hunter do, I propose that the critic of a given work would do well to avoid the assumption that such binary oppositions as conscious/repressed,

surface/underneath, and peaceful/violent are present in such a way that each “area” of the opposition remains entirely distinct from the other, without infecting that opposing area with any of its own unique properties.

In the context of Blue Velvet, then, we are dealing with such an infectious world, a “strange world,” in Jeffrey’s words, in which, as Greil Marcus suggests, those figures or objects which might typically seem exhausted or overly familiar to us take on an unsettling air, carrying a hint or vague suggestion of violence. By virtue of the familiar becoming unsettling, or even outright violent, that which is more obviously violent or unsettling (i.e. “Boothville”) becomes oddly familiar or “homely” to us. Blue Velvet’s final scene is a prime example of such a confusion of these typically opposed qualities. The robin perched on the window outside of the Beaumonts’ kitchen, which might initially seem to supplement the thick, almost oppressive air of tranquility established in the previous scene outside, instead registers as distinctly uncanny in its obviously mechanical motions. The use of this robotic bird suggests, not that the world inhabited by Jeffrey and Sandy is fake or lifeless, but that it is in fact darker and richer than many viewers might think it is. Following Aunt Barbara’s proclamation about not being able to eat a bird, with its echoes of Jeffrey’s earlier statement to Sandy regarding their surveillance of Dorothy that no one would expect such a thing from “people like them,” Jeffrey and Sandy gaze knowingly at each other, apparently basking in the realization that they are no longer forced to confront “bugs” such as Frank Booth. Jeffrey, having flirted with the other side of the divide between his and Sandy’s neighborhood and Boothville, seems more than willing to banish his adventure in that other neighborhood to the

inaccessible past, to relegate it to the ranks of growth experiences which one learns from only to discard.

The violence Jeffrey has encountered, then, has not given him the ability to truly see his town, to acknowledge both facets of its reality. Dorothy, however, cannot avoid seeing both the beauty and the ugliness of her surroundings, and this insight, which Dorothy may experience more as a curse than anything else, manifests itself in the snippet of Dorothy's performance of Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" that takes over for the song "Mysteries of Love" on the soundtrack: "And I still can see blue velvet through my tears." Frank, then, is present, even in the vision of happiness presented to us in this final scene, in his absence, a fact that encapsulates the relationship in the film between Frank's world and Jeffrey's. The barrier between the violence that Frank represents and the harmony suggested in Jeffrey and Sandy's existence remains in place, yet "pieces" of Frank, evoked in Dorothy's sung reference to the omnipresent "blue velvet," continue to infect the other side of that barrier.

To be able to see those "pieces" of Frank, manifesting themselves in the ever-present possibility of violence within even the "daytime" world of Lumberton, is to know where to look. Those signs or manifestations of violence reside squarely on the surface. This fact is essential to a citizen of Lumberton looking to gain a true awareness of his/her surroundings, and to the viewer attempting to read Blue Velvet. Beyond either of these endeavors, however, I would also suggest that such a close attention to the surface should play an integral part in any reading or analysis, particularly that of an artwork. We might, like Frank, imagine that we are children, struggling to come to terms with the true nature of what we see in front of us, rather than peering behind or below it in a gesture of

false mastery. Casting aside pretensions to being analytically “grounded” in our use of theory, psychoanalytic or otherwise, to diagnose a text, we might in our analysis conceive of ourselves, in the words of the Handsome Family, as being “weightless again,” as having returned to a stage as readers or viewers in which we are unsure or uneasy in our investigation, a state that violence and the uncanny in Blue Velvet helps to engender within us. We will, of course, use whatever pieces of theory or criticism seem useful in order to aid us in our inquiry, yet we are essentially still, to use a phrase that Frank Booth would appreciate, “in the dark.”

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