



Blue Velvet

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Contemporary reviews

In terms of David Lynch's work, *Blue Velvet* marks a huge leap forward, almost magically establishing him as the most provocative and inspired director in the American mainstream. At the same time, the film also represents a move back, as it effectively cancels out the two 'commercial' ventures, *The Elephant Man* and *Dune*, which followed the 'cult' success of *Eraserhead*. To all intents and purposes, it is Lynch's second feature. What is so striking about *Blue Velvet*, as with *Eraserhead*, is the absolute conviction with which it renders and embraces the strangeness of its world, with no recourse to any justification or correlative, whether historical/medical (the monstrosity of John Merrick's physical condition in *The Elephant Man*) or generic (the science-fiction grotesquerie of *Dune*).

Although Dennis Hopper's crazed Frank Booth initially seems to serve this function, as he embodies the dark side of idyllic, placid Lumberton, the intense physicality of his performance (as well as its specific relation to his role in his own *Out of the Blue*) effectively seals him off from all around him. The fervour with which he mirrors Jeffrey – 'You're like me, you fucker', he declares, before smearing him with his blood and kissing him – actually emphasises the gap between them. Jeffrey's problems are all his own. Frank's final removal from the film leaves Jeffrey's world healed, but with its capacity for the bizarre still intact. The final image of an artificial robin with a bug in its beak serves precisely to emphasise this: Sandy's dream of restored harmony is fulfilled, but the quality of the image, its tone, signifies infinitely more than it symbolically represents.

This sense of overloading pervades every aspect of the film. From the saturated colours of the opening sequence – its too-red roses, too-white fence and too-blue sky – through the ritualised, regressive excess of Hopper's sexual violence, to the beautifully forced naïveté of most of the dialogue, Lynch resolutely refuses any naturalistic norm. This is not just a matter of the surrealist edge to his work, more apparent than ever here, both visually and ideologically. It also connects, almost paradoxically, with a certain straightforwardness, an obviousness in the tone of *Blue Velvet*. For a film which deals so much in what is hidden and repressed in both Lumberton and its inhabitants, it is remarkably open about its own concerns. In particular, the blatantly Freudian aspect of the proceedings – the striking down of his father launching Jeffrey on an Oedipal journey in which he replaces an absent son, makes love to the mother, and slays a villainous substitute father, before order is precariously restored – is jokingly underlined at every opportunity: the archetypal dream image of Dorothy naked in the street; the figure of Dean Stockwell's Ben, one of Frank's associates, as a focus of sexual ambiguity ('Goddamn, you are one suave fuck ... We love Ben'); the law of the father as embodied in Detective Williams; the castration symbolism of the severed ear, etc.

Lynch then caps all this by hinting that Jeffrey, as he awakens in the garden, may have dreamed the whole scenario. But the film's very openness actually

renders this an irrelevant consideration: since the film displays itself to such a degree, it almost requires no interpretation. The 'dream' is as much Sandy's as Jeffrey's – indeed she claims it as hers as he sets off for his final encounter with Frank – but either way its content is always both manifest and latent. Or rather, these terms are collapsed together as the film speaks its meaning with such clarity, and with a perfect sense of the bizarre. It is noticeable that the movement and meaning of *Blue Velvet* are metaphorically contained in its first sequence: Lumberton's sunny surface disrupted by a chance incident which leads inexorably to a penetration of what seethes below. Thereafter, Lynch merely 'makes flesh' what this trajectory suggests.

Within the opening sequence, however, it should also be noted that the first intimation of violence is linked with the act of looking. Jeffrey's mother watches television, on which we see a shot of a gun. From then on, the film's tendency to offer tableau-like scenes, displays – Dorothy's night-club performance; Dean Stockwell's mimed rendition of 'In Dreams'; the grotesque arrangement of the corpses which Jeffrey discovers in Dorothy's apartment – is always matched by an emphasis on seeing. From Frank's interdiction to Dorothy ('Don't you fucking look at me'), through Jeffrey's plea on being discovered in her closet ('I didn't mean to do anything except see you'), to his realisation that he is 'seeing something that was always hidden', the questions of power, fear and knowledge which drive the film are always linked to the idea of looking and vision. The epitome of this is clearly the long, theatrical sequence in which Jeffrey spies on Frank's mistreatment of Dorothy. This becomes the film's moral vortex, as it mirrors Jeffrey and Frank, emphasising Jeffrey's need to deal with what lies within himself.

But it is also worth emphasising the precise pornographic instruction from Frank that Dorothy should spread her legs before his gaze. The sense here of the sexual aggression inherent in looking is at its most acute, and gives a particular edge to the implicating of both Jeffrey and the spectator in the ritual being enacted. And there seems a pre-echo in the camera's penetration of the ground's surface in the opening sequence, and a rhyme in the pull-out from Jeffrey's ear when he finally awakens on the same lawn. The absolute, inextricable link between the film's moral concerns and its investment in the guilty pleasures of looking is crucial, and seems carefully calculated to force male spectators into moralising confusion. In the *Time Out* review, for example (March 4-11, 1987), Lynch is praised for his 'genius' and 'imagination', but the spectator is warned of the dangers of cinephilia, and told of the need for 'a little honesty' and 'a little moral awareness'. The greatness of *Blue Velvet* is exactly that it demonstrates the impossibility of so neatly dividing these areas.

The only other American film of the 80s which comes close to matching this confrontational aspect, and on similar terms, is *Raging Bull*. Otherwise, *Blue Velvet* seems peculiarly unplaceable with regard to genre or antecedents, except perhaps as a warped coming-of-teenage movie. There is something of *Night of the Hunter* in its open invocation of horror, beauty and strangeness within an archetypal American heartland, but that film too is difficult to locate. At the same time, *Blue Velvet* plays cleverly on a collective memory of B-film dialogue and situations – particularly in the scenes between Jeffrey and Detective Williams – which it uses to preclude any conventional identification between spectator and character. The characters' tendency to speak in clichés is initially parodic in effect, but as Jeffrey and Sandy's journey into their heart of darkness progresses, their dialogue becomes unexpectedly moving.

In the end, Sandy's dream of a dark world abandoned by robins has as much force and conviction as Frank's frenzied psycho-babble. 'It's a strange world, Sandy', proclaims Jeffrey. At the moment, Lynch is the only director proving his point.

Steve Jenkins, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1987

David Lynch on 'Blue Velvet'

Bobby Vinton's song 'Blue Velvet' was the beginning of a whole series of ideas for the film. It conjured up a mood to do with small towns and mystery. And then, I'd always had a desire to sneak into a girl's apartment and watch her through the night. I had the idea that while I was doing this I'd see something which I'd later realise was the clue to a mystery. I think people are fascinated by that, by being able to see into a world they couldn't visit. That's the fantastic thing about cinema, everybody can be a voyeur. Voyeurism is a bit like watching television – go one step further and you want to start looking in on things that are really happening. That's where Sandy comes into *Blue Velvet*. She doesn't go into Dorothy's world herself, but she prompts Jeffrey to go deeper and deeper.

The other starting point for the film was an idea about an ear – that an ear in a field could be a ticket into another world. Once found, it would be like a bell answered in the night; nothing would be the same again. There are certain things which stand out when you are going down a street, out of the ordinary things which just stick in your mind, things which sparkle like a little gift left on a sidewalk. That doesn't happen all the time, but when it does, it brings so much power that you can't forget it.

I like the idea that everything has a surface which hides much more underneath. Someone can look very well and have a whole bunch of diseases cooking: there are all sorts of dark, twisted things lurking down there. I go down in that darkness and see what's there. Coffee shops are nice safe places to think. I like sitting in brightly lit places where I can drink coffee and have some sugar. Then, before I know it, I'm down under the surface gliding along; if it becomes too heavy, I can always pop back into the coffee shop.

When you make a film like *Blue Velvet*, there's a danger that Dorothy becomes every woman and Sandy becomes every girl and the film becomes a statement on America. That's not what I meant. *Blue Velvet*'s a film about a small town called Lumberton and this particular group of characters. Jeffrey is not me, but Kyle MacLachlan says he somewhat fashioned him on me. I feel very good about Jeffrey. He's a person who is curious and has got some dark areas inside him. But he has experiences, and he learns from them.

David Lynch interviewed by Jane Root, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1987

BLUE VELVET

Directed by: David Lynch
©: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, Inc.
Presented by: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group
Executive Producer: Richard Roth
Produced by: Fred Caruso
Production Manager: Fred Caruso
Production Supervisor: Gail M. Kearns
Production Office Co-ordinator: Kathryn Colbert
Location Co-ordinator: Morris Atkins
Key Production Assistant: John Wildermuth
1st Assistant Director: Ellen Rauch
2nd Assistant Director: Ian Woolf
Script Supervisor: Rina Sternfeld
Casting by: Johanna Ray, Pat Golden
Casting Associate: Pamela Rack
Extras/Additional Casting: Marc Fincannon and Associates
Screenplay by: David Lynch
Director of Photography: Frederick Elmes
1st Assistant Camera: Lex Dupont
Camera Assistant: David Rudd
Gaffer: Michael Katz
Key Grip: Donne Daniels
Still Photographer: Umberto Montiroli
Special Effects: Greg Hull, George Hill
Edited by: Duwayne Dunham
Assistant Editors: Jonathan Shaw, Mary Sweeney
Production Designer: Patricia Norris
Art Department Assistant: Catherine David
Set Dressers: Michael Anderson, Vernon Harrell, Loren McNamara, Paul Sebastian, Arron Waitz, Doug White
Draughtsperson: Dawn Serody
Chief Scenic Artist: Robert Testerman
Scenic Artist: Tanya Lowe
Property Master: Tantar Levisieur
Construction Co-ordinator: Les Pendleton
Costume Shop Supervisor: Gloria Laughride
Set Wardrobe: Henry Earl Lewis
Make-up Supervisor: Jeff Goodwin
Special Make-up Effects: Dean Jones
Hair Stylist: Barbara Page
Titles/Opticals: Van Der Veer Photo Company
Cameras/Lenses by: Joe Dunton Camera America, Inc.
Negative Cutter: Donah Bassett
Colour by: Technicolor

Music Composed and Conducted by: Angelo Badalamenti
Music Score Performed by: Film Symphony Orchestra of Prague
Music Editor: Mark Adler
Music Re-recording Mixer: Todd Boekelheide
Sound Designer: Alan Splet
Sound Mixer: Ann Kroeber
Boom Operator: Patrick Moriarty
Re-recording Mixers: Mark Berger, David Parker
Sound Editors: Rob Fruchtman, Pat Jackson
Dialogue Editors: Vivien Gilliam, John Nutt, Michael Silvers
Sound Effects Editor: Richard Hyams
Foley Artist: Dennie Thorpe
Stunt Co-ordinator: Richard Langdon
Filmed at: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group Studios

Cast

Kyle MacLachlan (*Jeffrey Beaumont*)
Isabella Rossellini (*Dorothy Vallens*)
Dennis Hopper (*Frank Booth*)
Laura Dern (*Sandy Williams*)
Hope Lange (*Mrs Williams*)
Priscilla Pointer (*Mrs Beaumont*)
George Dickerson (*Detective Williams*)
Frances Bay (*Aunt Barbara*)
Ken Stovitz (*Mike*)
Brad Dourif (*Raymond*)
Jack Nance (*Paul*)
Dean Stockwell (*Ben*)
Jack Harvey (*Tom Beaumont*)
J. Michael Hunter (*Hunter*)
Dick Green (*Don Vallens*)
Fred Pickler (*yellow man*)
Philip Markert (*Dr Gynde*)
Leonard Watkins, Moses Gibson (*Double Ed*)
Selden Smith (*Nurse Cindy*)
Peter Carew (*coroner*)
Jon Jon Snipes (*little Donny*)
Andy Badale (*piano player*)
Jean-Pierre Viale (*master of ceremonies*)
Donald Moore (*desk sergeant*)
A. Michelle Depland, Michell Sasser, Katie Reid (*party girls*)
Sparky (*the dog*)

USA 1986

120 mins

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