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Killing the Unconscious Self:

A Study of Freud in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*

David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* has the ability to make one cringe, squirm, feel physically ill, and at what might be considered its peaks, escape to the kitchen to very slowly pour oneself a glass of water. How is it that this master of the uncomfortable is so highly regarded when he is known for making his viewers avert their eyes? Why might we consider this iconic film art if it makes us nauseous? Lynch is known for his command of Surrealism, a genre born out of Freudian theory, and he uses Surrealist films such as *Blue Velvet* as a means of portraying the Unconscious. One might argue that the Unconscious cannot be seen, because once it is, it has already become Conscious (Freud 573). I intend to argue, however, that if psychoanalysis is a feasible and scientifically accepted way to study the places where the Conscious and the Unconscious touch in order to divulge certain urges and desires hidden in the Unconscious and make them Conscious, then through a sort of reverse psychoanalysis, one may be able to assemble associations and other signifying bits of the Conscious into an approximation of the Unconscious. Though Freudian theory may resist this concept through its very definition of the Unconscious, it could be contended that the medium of film, with its ability to utilize visual and auditory elements to stimulate the emotions of its viewers, represents a sculpted form of wish-fulfillment. We may see certain films as dreams with creators, capable of expressing the basest of human desires.

Particular writers and filmmakers have the extraordinary ability to construct characters that feel so “real” that readers and viewers begin to grow emotionally attached or repulsed by them. As consumers we marvel at this ability, and often pass judgement on literature and films solely based on the creators’ competence in this area. The protagonists that we seek out make mistakes, commit parapraxes, and act on their unspoken desires. The characters that Lynch creates are quite unusual in that the bulk of their psychological construction is expressed through the use of space, color, other characters, and additional outside elements, rather than excessive dialogue or intimate emotional connection. We know almost nothing about our hero, Jeffrey, other than what is informed by what is around him. We do not see him wrestling with the emotional hardship of dealing with his father’s illness, nor do we hear him give long and sincere articulations of his romantic feelings for Sandy. This method lends itself very well to Freudian theory; the entirety of the film becomes the coded struggle of the protagonist as certain unpleasant urges and desires move from his Unconscious to his Conscious.

Jeffrey’s struggle is perhaps most readily symbolized by the two female leads, Sandy and Dorothy. Sandy, who is sweet, clever, and non-confrontational, is representational of the Conscious. She is always dressed in light, pastel colors, which lend her character a certain kind of innocence that rejects any kind of perversion to be found in the Unconscious. She is resistant to the idea of getting involved in Dorothy’s affairs because they are of a sordid and dangerous nature. Freud tells us that

...in general a psychical act goes through two phases as regards to its state, between which is interposed a kind of testing (censorship). In the first phase the psychical act is unconscious and belongs to the system *Ucs.*; if, on testing, it is rejected by the

censorship, it is not allowed to pass into the second phase; it is then said to be ‘repressed’ and must remain unconscious (Freud 578).

In her capacity as the representation of Jeffrey’s Conscious process, Sandy has performed a censorship that necessarily separates herself from Dorothy and therefore has rejected Jeffrey’s desire to dominate her.

Jeffrey knows that he is attracted to her, and each scene in which she refuses his advances is immediately followed by a scene in which he is able to be witness to or act on his desires with Dorothy. In effect, Dorothy is Jeffrey’s Unconscious construction of Sandy, and when he watches sexual acts being performed with the former, he is enacting wish-fulfillment that satiates his desire for the untouchable Sandy. “The nucleus of the *Ucs.*,” writes Freud, “consists of instinctual representatives which seek to discharge their cathexis; that is to say, it consists of wishful impulses” (Freud 582). It can be argued that all of the disturbing occurrences that Jeffrey witnesses in the dark, Unconscious spaces created by the film are reflections of his own repressed wants.

Dorothy’s apartment, and indeed much interior space in the film, acts as a sort of Unconscious dream space. Jeffrey only enters the apartment at night, with the exception of the first time, during which he is not entering as himself but rather as “the bug man” (Lynch, Ch. 6). When in this space, normal social behavior is exchanged for the indulgence in pleasure. “The *Ucs.* processes pay just a little regard to *reality*,” writes Freud. “They are subject to the pleasure principle; their fate depends only on how strong they are and on whether they fulfil the demands of the pleasure-unpleasure regulation” (Freud 582). Thus we see the apartment exclusively as a place wherein base and repulsive acts are committed, such as rape, masochism, and murder.

Furthermore, time does not seem to exist in this space. According to Freud, “The processes of the system *Ucs.* are timeless; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all. Reference to time is bound up, once again, with the work of the system *Cs*” (Freud 582). While the rest of the film gives clear indications of time, such as meals, hours of work and school, and specifically temporally associated social activities, in the apartment, wherein Dorothy is always wearing the same clothes, we know only that it is night, with no indication of how much time has passed.

Though Dorothy’s apartment is an Unconscious space, Jeffrey is still a conscious being while inside of it. “Unconscious processes only become cognizable by us under the conditions of dreaming or neurosis,” writes Freud. It is Jeffrey’s own Unconscious that he is viewing in this kind of dream space. In this sense, Frank can be considered the physical manifestation of Jeffrey’s Unconscious self. Freud tells us that in order to psychoanalyze ourselves, “we must say: all the acts and manifestations which I notice in myself and do not know how to link up with the rest of my mental life must be judged as if they belong to someone else: they are to be explained by a mental life ascribed to this other person” (Freud 575 – 576). Jeffrey must begin the process of recognizing his own repressed desires by attributing them to Frank. There are many parallels drawn between the two men; they both watch Dorothy at the club, they each engage in some form of sexual violence against her, and they both don disguises. At one point in the film, Frank looks Jeffrey in the eye and says “You’re like me” (Lynch Ch.19), causing Jeffrey to turn his head in shame. He does not wish to relate to Frank because he is struggling to repress his own desire for sexual violence.

In addition to her romantic unavailability, Jeffrey may wish to dominate Sandy because of her clear intellectual superiority. While he is a student home from college and she is merely in

high school, she occasionally still has cause to laugh at his ignorance. For example, when Jeffrey is first infiltrating Dorothy's apartment, Sandy mocks him while reminding him of Dorothy's name and floor and suggests that he look at her mailbox to see which apartment she lives in. When he returns from his mission with a set of keys, feeling triumphant, she points out that the keys may not open Dorothy's door. As Jeffrey watches from the closet in Dorothy's apartment and does nothing, Frank engages in a disturbing molestation of Dorothy in which he asserts and maintains his control. He tells her what he wants and she has no choice but to submit. Jeffrey, feeling powerless in his desire for Sandy, is therefore viewing his unconscious desire to dominate and possess her. He is watching, but not engaging, in a scenario in which she has no choice but to be with him, and she enjoys it to a certain extent.

This scene also contains strong indications that Jeffrey is experiencing some kind of Oedipal crisis. Frank, who we may understand to be a manifestation of Jeffrey's Unconscious self, begins to call Dorothy "mommy" as he commits sexually aggressive acts against her, and insists on suckling on her blue velvet robe as she feeds it to him. Furthermore, Dorothy is a mother – she has one son, who is her only child and shares a name with her husband, Don. If Dorothy is Jeffrey's Unconscious version of a sexualized woman, the fact that she has one son, as does Jeffrey's mother, cannot be ignored. This furthers the idea that Dorothy is a form of wish-fulfillment meant to relieve him from the frustration of his desire, especially in light of the alignment of Sandy with Jeffrey's mother at the end of the film.

Frank, while assuming the role of an Oedipally conflicted individual, paradoxically also assumes the role of father. While molesting Dorothy, he refers to himself as "baby," but outside of this engagement, he insists that Dorothy call him "daddy." Thus, when Jeffrey shoots him at the end of the film, he is simultaneously silencing his Unconscious by taking control of it and

integrating it into his Consciousness, and completing the Oedipal cycle. He kills Frank, thereby reuniting Dorothy with the son who shares a name with her lover, and destroying the competition of the “father” for control over the object of his own sexual desire.

Frank represents every animal desire that Jeffrey, as a person functioning well in society, must repress. Jeffrey is always polite and considerate, and when outside of Dorothy’s apartment, acts as any conscientious young man does. Frank, on the other hand, indulges in his most perverse inclinations, does immediate violence to those who offend him, screams and makes all kinds of noises whenever it occurs to him to do so, engages in infantile, feminine, and homoerotic behavior, and does not exhibit shame or remorse for any of these actions. He does, however, yell “don’t look at me!” at several moments in the film, directed at both Dorothy and Jeffrey. This also presents a strong link between Frank and the Unconscious as the latter must remain concealed in order to stay intact.

At one point in the film, Frank quotes Roy Orbison’s “Candy Colored Clown” as it plays in the car behind him. In opposition to the melodic and melancholy tone of the original, Frank turns the lyrics into a threat. “In dreams, I walk with you.” he warns, “In dreams, I talk to you. In dreams, you’re mine...*forever* in dreams” (Lynch Ch. 19). If Frank is symbolic of Jeffrey’s Unconscious, these words take on new meaning. He is the part of Jeffrey that makes himself known and felt in dreams, in all his unpleasantness, and Jeffrey’s attempts to repress this part of himself are being tampered with due to his repeated dream-like exposures to Frank.

Jeffrey only begins to brave his own repressed desires when he engages in activity that he found repulsive when performed by Frank. “How are we to arrive at the Unconscious?” asks Freud. “In order that this should come about, the person under analysis must overcome certain resistances-the same resistances as those which, earlier, made the material concerned into

something repressed by rejecting it from the conscious” (Freud 573). Thus Jeffrey is forced to confront his Unconscious desires when Dorothy, who he had previously seen sexually attacked by Frank, expresses her desire for him to hit her while they are engaged in sexual intercourse. At first, he resists, telling her “I don’t want to hurt you, I told you I want to help you” (Lynch Ch. 16) in keeping with the boyish innocence and moral assuredness with which he comports himself outside of the apartment. When she insists, however, he hits her, with some hesitation, and chips her tooth. A shot of fire interrupts the action, which concludes in slow motion while grating and undefinable animalistic noises echo. The intensity of this scene is perhaps meant to signify that a change is taking place in the protagonist as he begins to understand what he is capable of and what his unknown desires truly are.

It is worth noting that this scene is bookended by shots of the same open window, the movement of the curtains indicating that the wind is moving into the apartment. This conflation of outside and inside is crucial to Jeffrey’s own symbolic catharsis in terms of his allowance of certain desires to move from his Unconscious to his Conscious. If we understand that Dorothy’s apartment is constructed as an Unconscious space, and exterior spaces are largely representational of the Conscious in this film, we may then infer that the conflation of the two is indicative of a movement toward realization and acceptance by Jeffrey. It is no accident, then, that immediately after this breakthrough Jeffrey is confronted by the violent and jealous Frank, who proceeds take him on a terrifying journey in the company of Dorothy and his cronies, only to beat him to a pulp and leave him in a heap in an unnamed industrial area.

In order to truly accept his own repressed desires, and in order to complete the Oedipal cycle, Jeffrey must kill Frank and take his place, both because he will then be the dominant male, and because he will in effect be replacing his Unconscious self with his Conscious self. It is in

this scene, as mentioned earlier, that Frank equates Jeffrey with himself. This is also the scene in which Jeffrey first acts aggressively toward Frank. Their struggle for dominance and respective acts of physical aggression toward the other are representative of Jeffrey's struggle to make Conscious and accept his own repressed desires. Perhaps this is why Frank, before beating Jeffrey mercilessly, smears on lipstick and hostilely kisses Jeffrey on the mouth. Jeffrey is being dominated by his own desire, and although he has made the first move in overcoming the figure and the idea that is Frank, he is not yet prepared to take him on. This may have much to do with feelings of guilt and remorse experienced by Jeffrey for his previous act of violence against Dorothy. He is still not prepared to deal with the implications of his desires, and while Dorothy remains in the interior space of the car screaming "No, Frank!" (Lynch Ch.19), Jeffrey is conflating his self with Frank's and taking the punishment he thinks he deserves. Thus, although they are outside in Conscious space when this confrontation occurs, Jeffrey fails in his attempt because of his unwillingness to understand and accept his own Unconscious.

While most of the scenes featuring Sandy take place outside, Dorothy only appears in the "Slow Club" her apartment, in Ben's apartment, and in Frank's car. There are two exceptions to this rule, the first being when she appears outside of Jeffrey's house and makes herself known to Sandy. She, being a representation of Jeffrey's Unconscious sexualized woman, has placed herself, completely exposed, in an outside Conscious space, directly after Jeffrey is able to realize his desire of making a physical and emotional connection with Sandy. Her nakedness and lack of impulse control in this scene put her woefully out of place in the Conscious world of those around her. "The unconscious comprises ...processes such as repressed ones, which if they were to become conscious would be bound to stand out in the crudest contrast to the rest of the conscious processes" (Freud 577). Thus, during the very first and last encounter of the two

women, Dorothy stands in direct opposition to the sweet and morally righteous Sandy. While she mutters over and over a variation of the line she utters immediately after Jeffrey hits her, “He put his disease in me” (Lynch Ch.16), Sandy experiences an overflow of emotion and cries out, looking to be in physical pain. When subsequently called by Jeffrey, who apologizes, she says “I love you, but I couldn’t watch that” (Lynch Ch.24). It is as though her innocence has been compromised by Jeffrey’s acts, as though she is experiencing pain and trauma at the movement of his desire from the Unconscious to the Conscious. In seeing Dorothy exposed, Sandy, acting as the Conscious, now must integrate this representation of Jeffrey’s desire.

This is also the scene in which Dorothy tells Jeffrey that he must confront Frank once and for all. She has been exposed, pushed to the point where she can no longer remain hidden, and in order for Jeffrey to accept himself and his newly Conscious desires, he must eliminate Frank, and in so doing eliminate the evil that he sees in himself for having such desires.

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