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"Baby wants to fuck!": Object relations in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*

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Objects were a key component of Freud's structural model of the human psyche. Since Freud however, theorists like Melanie Klein, Winnicott, Kernberg, Kohut and others have moved, in varying degrees, toward a less libidinal and more relational model of the psyche in which an object is the target of relational needs in human development. Objects can be people or things, such as transitional objects, with wich we form attachments. These objects and the developing child's relationship with them are incorporated into a self, and become the building blocks of the self-system. The blueprint of a self-structure is formed in early life out of our relationships with the objects around us. Once formed, the blueprint can be modified, but our basic tendency is to seek out others who will reaffirm these early self-object relationships. It is as if in early childhood we create a script for a drama and then spend the rest of our lives seeking out others to play the parts. This does not mean the script cannot be changed. However, the more traumatic our early self-object relations, the more rigid and resistant to change we become.

As a child develops, he or she chooses friends, forms of play, objects of intellectual interest, and aspects of the mother and father, to give expression to the self. According to Christopher Bollas, we are inhabited by inner structures that can be felt whenever their name is evoked, and we are also filled with the ghosts of others who have affected us. The term "internal objects" does not designate internal pictures, but rather highly condensed psychic textures, traces of our encounters with the object world. This suggests that in our encounter with this object world, we are internally transformed by objects that leave their traces within us, whether it be the effect of music, a novel, a person. For Bollas, to be a character is to gain a history of internal objects, inner presences that are the trace of our encounters, though they are not clearly knowable, but are like intense ghosts who inhabit the human mind.

As Christopher Bollas asserts in *The Shadow of the Object*, "the aesthetic experience is not something learned by the adult; it is an existential recollection of an experience where being handled by the maternal esthetic made thinking seemingly irrelevant to survival". Aesthetic productions can be viewed as embodying traces of the earliest object relations, for these relations comprise the grounds of future creativity. In Melanie Klein's view, artistic structures are reparative gestures made to the feared and always potentially aggressive mother, and literary or visual texts can be seen as

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reconstitutions of the very conditions that inform the initial mother-infant relation. Joanne Feit Diehl writes that "such a supposition draws upon on object relations approach to human experience, and, particularly, to the transmutations and anxieties associated with a specifically female-identified psyche."

According to Bollas, the dream experience constitutes an object relation in its own right and can be examined as such in terms of the dreamer's experience of the dream event. We can go even further and say that the literary or visual text, seen as aesthetic scenario, constitute object relations that can be viewed as reenacting the traumatic core of the maternal-infantile paradigm. A last quote from *The Shadow of the Object:* "In the same way as in the dream, we might consider the dream space as a particular kind of unconscious holding environment, in which the dreamer may be the object of a presentation of desire, guilt, and historical notation, from an unconsciously organized and interpretive portion of the self." What I would like to try, is to look at David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* as a kind of dreamwork inspired by early object relations.

Blue Velvet is a true *film d'auteur*: David Lynch not only wrote and directed the film, he also had a huge hand in almost every aspect of it, even co-authoring songs on the soundtrack with his favourite composer Angelo Badalamenti. According to David Lynch, *Blue Velvet* is "a very American movie, reflecting a very innocent, naive quality to life, and the horror and sickness as well." David Lynch has been called "a psychopathic Norman Rockwell" because he confronts us with a distorted and even perverted vision of American reality. David Foster Wallace speaks of an "unsettling voice, because you don't feel you're entering into any of the standard conscious or unconscious contracts you normally enter when you watch a movie. It is unsettling because in the absence of such a contract we lose some of the psychic protections we normally bring to bear a medium as powerful as film. The absence of recognizable agenda in Lynch's film strips these subliminal defenses and lets Lynch get inside your head in a way movies normally don't".

We will watch two scenes of *Blue Velvet*: first the beginning, "Lumberton, USA", and later the disturbing, famous scene with a brilliant and very creepy Dennis Hopper, called "Crazy Frank".

LUMBERTON, USA

The film opens with the idealized image of small town America, with its iconic themes: the bright blue sky, the shiny white picket fence, the red roses (*American Beauty*!), the fire engine with a waving fireman, a crossing guard helping the children across the street. The father is watering the lawn, the mother watches TV, Bobby Vinton sings *Blue Velvet*. The father holds together and anchors these images of ideal fantasy. When he collapses, we see the emergence of another world, Lumberton's underworld of violence and fear.

What we see here are the first internalized objects: the father, the mother, the house and the streets, cultural images in a world that looks like what Lynch himself calls "a dream of strange desires wrapped into a mystery story". The opening of the film unfolds cultural objects and shows us the structure of the fantasy of returning to the past: the fantasy has two sizes or two poles, one peaceful and idyllic, and one frightening, destructive and obscene, both poles being fully elaborated and standing in front of each other like two separate realities. In the *Blue Velvet* universe, we encounter the fantasy in its two poles, in its pacifying aspect – the idyllic family life – as well as in its destructive/obscene/excessive aspect. Fantasy has a beatific, stabilizing dimension, the dream of a state without disturbance, out of human depravity; on the other hand, fantasy has a destabilizing dimension, whose elementary form is hate and envy. Both poles of the fantasy, one of happiness, peacefulness and stability, the other one destabilizing and based on hate and destruction, utopia and dystopia, are shown separately and in their interaction. The interdependance of the two modes of fantasy causes us to experience them simultaneously and in an interrelated way, like the ambivalent feelings of love and hate, or envy and gratitude.

The rich, saturated colours in combination with the romantic softness of the song *Blue Velvet* do not create a mood of happiness, but the kind of extreme melancholy en loneliness we know from Edward Hopper's landscapes, and David Lynch's own paintings. We might say that the position from which the small town of Lumberton is shown, is what Melanie Klein called the depressive position, which is characterized by relating to real objects and their unreal imagos, and where these two kinds of object relations intermingle and color each other constantly, like we saw in the two poles of the fantasy. Esther Sànchez-Pardo writes that "at the onset of the depressive position, good and bad come closer together, and the ego must resort to splitting, dividing imagos into loved and hated and good and dangerous ones. It is also at that point that ambivalence sets in." The baby learns then to reconstruct the reality of the objects in their wholeness and to accept the co-existence of good and bad, of the shining bright colours of Lumberton and the violent and voracious animal life underneath it. It is also in that position that reparation fantasies are set in motion, which can later form the beginning of the aesthetic attitude.

With the next scene, we go even further back in psychic development and we experience some of what Melanie Klein called the paranoid-schizoid position.

CRAZY FRANK

There are many ways to analyze this scene, and they all depend on the perspective you choose. In *The Cinema of David Lynch*, Sam Ishii-Gonzalez chooses Jeffrey's point of view: "This episode not only spectacularly evokes the primal scene, it also conjures up the two other fantasy scenarios identified by Freud as the primal fantasies – namely, the fantasy of seduction and the fantasy of castration. (...) Within the confines of Dorothy's living space, Jeffrey Beaumont is confronted with each of the primal fantasies in all enigmatic force; not in strict succession, but in continuous fluctuation."

According to Slavoj Žižek in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, the crucial question is: For whom is this scene staged? For Jeffrey, reduced to a pure gaze at the act of his own conception, for Frank, who is in fact the true organizer of the game, or for Dorothy, the depressed woman at the center of it all? For Žižek, Frank's terrorizing of Dorothy might be a desperate "therapeutic" attempt to prevent her from sliding into the abyss of absolute depression. Todd Mc Gowan in *The Impossible David Lynch* also focuses on Dorothy, whom he sees as the traumatic object-cause of desire precisely because no one can fantasize away her desire as she seems to desire nothing.

These are all interesting points of view, to which I would like to add another idea. Why not try to understand what David Lynch really wants to show, namely, "Baby wants to fuck"? For baby cannot fuck; the reason why Frank repeatedly says to Dorothy "Don't look at me!" is because there is nothing to see. There is no erection, since Frank is impotent. For Žižek we have here the father's desperate attempt to convince the son he is able to fuck the mother. However, I don't see Frank as the father, but as the baby trying to penetrate his mother, breathing heavily into a mask in a frightening but desired reverse of birth, while she stuffs a piece of her blue velvet gown into his mouth, like an offered transitional object. When Frank enters her room, she calls him "baby", which makes him furious. He wants to be called "daddy". But Frank's sadomasochistic imitation of intercourse only serves to mask the absence of it. Baby wants to fuck, but baby can't.

What Jeffrey sees when he watches Frank is not the father, but an image of himself, in what Melanie Klein called the paranoid-schizoid position. Klein's hypothesis is that in that fase, there is the existence of aggression as an expression of the death drive, which is expressed in sadistic and destructive attacks on the mother's body. Frank is indeed a paranoid sociopath, who will always feel endangered by the objects he himself has persecuted. After having projected his own aggression into the objects, he imagines that the objects are bad and will destroy him. For Jeffrey, Frank is a fascinating but dangerous model, not that of a father but as a part of himself.

Dorothy is a projection of "the bad breast", but after having been sexually attracted to her, Jeffrey will learn to accept her as what she is, a mother, to reconstruct the reality of the object in its wholeness and accept the co-existence of good and bad. Sandra Gosso writes about Melanie Klein's theory that "after having sadistically destroyed, broken into pieces, devoured his primary love-object, the infant is afraid on account of the damage inflicted, feels pity for the destroyed object, and grieves in the attempt to repair it." Jeffrey will try to "repair the object" and he will help Dorothy to find her own son, who has been kidnapped by Frank. She will be a mother again while he falls in love with the traditional girl-next-door.

Both scenes we have viewed, *Lumberton USA* and *Crazy Frank*, find place in the complexity of the transitional fase from paranoid-schizoid into depressive position, and that's what give the film its disturbing and violent mood. This is something only film is able to show. Or, in the words of David Lynch: "When it comes out in a pure sort of stream, from some other place" (I think what Lynch means is Freud's *anderer Schauplatz*, Lacan's *autre scène*), "film has a great way of giving shape to the unconscious. It's just a great language for that".

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