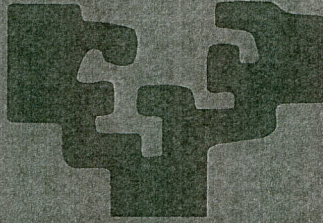


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**UNIVERSIDAD DEL PAIS VASCO
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**DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGIA INGLESA Y ALEMANA
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PLAYING GAMES WITH WORDS
CULTURAL TRANSFER IN DAVID LYNCH'S *BLUE VELVET*

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Scholars and professionals alike concede that literary translation is no easy task. Film dubbing or subtitling can be even more complex because in film, narrative structure combines with cinematographic technique which includes not only the spoken word, but the visual and sound tracks as well. But regardless of whether the text is in the original version or not, and no matter what your preferences in film theory may be, it seems safe to suggest that any critical approach to the formal text that comes up on the screen will require a well-equipped spectator who is ready and willing to get down to some hard work. The point I will try to make in this analysis of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* is that certain cultural allusions which are woven into a text are difficult, even impossible at times to translate, not only from one language to another, but from one culture to another. When this occurs, no matter how hard the spectator works, if she isn't equipped to follow the cultural signposts contained in the film, her final analysis of the text will not be as rich as it might have been.

The film *Blue Velvet*, written and directed by David Lynch in 1986, is a particularly interesting example of the importance of cultural transfer in film analysis. Lynch's film deals thematically with the immense complexity of contemporary America, with specific emphasis on the difficulties of coming of age in a violent society where traditional values no longer seem to guarantee a safe passage into manhood.

The *mise-en-scene* in *Blue Velvet* includes elements which contribute to creating an eerie atmosphere of artificiality. The lighting technique moves from one extreme of almost blinding light to another of near darkness. The stilted, conventional suburban interiors and exteriors are bathed in primary colors. The sets are full of hyper-realistic detail which renders them strangely flat as well. The pastel tones of Sandy's skirts and cardigans and the brash reds and blacks of Dorothy's evening gowns and underwear and, of course, Sandy's blond ponytail, blue eyes and pink lips and Dorothy's jet black wig, dark eyes and her red mouth all contribute to a clear pattern of stereotypes in the *mise-en-scene* which pose little or no difficulty to the spectator.

The narrative structure of the film uses elements which fit nicely into the genre classification of the thriller.¹ Jeffrey and Sandy sit side by side in his father's convertible, just before he is about to go upstairs to Dorothy's apartment to look for some clue that will shed light on the mystery of the amputated ear.

Sandy comments, “I don’t know if you’re a detective or a pervert.” Jeffrey replies, “That’s for me to know and you to find out.” This brief dialogue summarizes the narrative key to the thriller. The hero, (in this case Jeffrey) in his attempts to right something wrong, (by assuming the role of the detective) runs the risk of being contaminated by evil in the process (thus becoming a pervert). The traditional reading of **Blue Velvet** as a thriller is straightforward and not particularly blocked by untranslated names and other references.²

On the other hand, this brief dialogue between Sandy and Jeffrey also foregrounds some of the interesting psychological ideas which are privileged in **Blue Velvet**. While performing his detective work, Jeffrey is transformed into a pervert, both as voyeur and sadomasochist. The Freudian world of the unconscious forms part of the film narrative as well. Jeffrey’s dream sequences, for example, are seen on-screen; Sandy, however, tells Jeffrey her dream about love which, by the end of the film, seems to come true.

It is clear, then, that both the **mise-en-scene** and the psychological thriller genre classification of **Blue Velvet** are important starting points for any spectator who is interested in carrying out a critical analysis of the film. However, a series of written and spoken or sung references, which are either seen on-screen in writing or heard by the spectator, form a socio-cultural network which may remain hidden from those spectators who are unfamiliar with some of the most emblematic historical events or cultural icons in American society. Lumberton, U.S.A., the setting where David Lynch’s psychological thriller about the underworld of drug dealing and police corruption and the inner world of one boy’s rite of passage takes place, should provoke a series of interconnections in the mind of the spectator which will greatly enhance her reception of the film. I will now discuss some of these written and verbal references which are included, in chronological order of appearance, below.

WRITTEN ON-SCREEN

SPOKEN/SUNG OFF-SCREEN

BLUE VELVET

LUMBERTON, U.S.A.

“Blue Velvet” (orig. version)

W-OOD (radio station identification)

LUMBERTON POLICE + emblem

PAY PARKING VIOLATIONS HERE

DO NOT CROSS POLICE LINE

Lincoln (Aunt asks Jeffrey)

Central (Jeffrey asks Sandy)

LINCOLN

Orleans-Arlene’s

ARLENE’S DINER

DEEP RIVER APARTMENTS

7th floor (Sandy tells Jeffrey)

VALLENS

Grand Central Station (Dorothy)
Route 7 (Sandy tells Jeffrey)

SLOW CLUB

Blue Lady (emcee)
“Blue Velvet” (Dorothy’s rendition)
Heineken
Bud(weiser) - King of (Bottled)
Beers (St. Louis)
Meadow Lane (Dorothy asks
into phone)
Don’t - Don

MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE:
DOROTHY ELLIS VALLENS
DONALD JONES WATTS
NINETEENTH OF JUNE
STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA

BEAUMONT’S

“Blue Velvet” (orig. version)

FRANK BOOTH

“Blue Velvet” (original version
- Dorothy’s apt.)

THIS IS IT

Blues guitar music
Heineken
Pabst Blue Ribbon (The Beer that
Made Milwaukee Famous/cart
drawn by Clydesdale horses)
Gordon (Frank tells Ben)
“In Dreams” (original version -
Ben mimics)
Love letters (Frank tells Jeffrey)

CHARGER

“In Dreams” (original version)

MEADOW LANE

GORDON

DET. GORDON
DET. WILLIAMS

Dance music (Badalamenti)
“Love Letters” (original
version - shoot-out)
“Blue Velvet” (orig. version)

Most of the proper names in **Blue Velvet** form a tight web of cross-references which swing from American history, to geography, to musical culture of the sixties, to consumer products and advertising and so on. In fact, the first written sign that comes up on-screen is the film title, **Blue Velvet**, displayed in script against the ominous blue curtain which the spectator will later recognize as Dorothy's blue velvet bathrobe. Following the credits, the curtain disappears abruptly as though opening on to a show that is about to begin and the camera focuses on a huge billboard welcoming visitors to Lumberton, U.S.A. The woman's smiling face on the sign and the up-beat original version of the song "Blue Velvet" on the sound track seem momentarily to blot out the initial threat of the mysterious blue curtain. The radio deejay interrupts the song for station identification: "W-OOD, nine thirty a.m. at the sound of the falling tree on this sunny, woodsy day". The primeval atmosphere of the woods, which Jeffrey walks through on his way to the hospital to visit his father, combines with the name of the local radio station, W-OOD, with the name of the town, Lumberton—which sounds like Slumberton—and with the Lumberton Police sign embossed with its emblem of a log being sawn in half. This series of visual and verbal signs leads the spectator to the American comic strip metaphor for deep sleep, the sawing of wood, to transport this ordinary story to an unreal world of dreams.

This complex inner world of dreams is contrasted in the film directly against the ethos of the American dream. Although neither the time frame nor the location of the film are clearly defined, the setting and the props, including the clothes, the cars and the houses, and particularly the musical sound track, seem to place the action in suburbia somewhere in the Midwest in the late nineteen-sixties.

Having been deprived temporarily of paternal authority due to his father's illness and subsequent hospitalization, Jeffrey abides by the well-learned norm of faith in American justice and immediately heads for the local police station when he finds an amputated ear in the grass near his house. An alert spectator will notice that on his way into Detective Williams' office, Jeffrey crosses a sign hanging on the wall. This written reference on the screen, which remains untranslated in both the subtitled and dubbed versions of the film, contains instructions to traffic offenders in the imperative: "Pay Parking Violations Here". The sign is not hung over a counter top where a police clerk tends to the business of accepting payment of the fines. Instead, there is a box on the wall where payment may be left voluntarily, in keeping with one of the cornerstones of the traditional American moral code: "Honesty Is the Best Policy". The important references to police corruption, centered in the character of Gordon, "the man in the yellow jacket", are reinforced through the use of this ironic visual sign and its cultural implications, which may well go unnoticed by an uninitiated spectator.

Shortly afterwards, a second imperative comes up on the screen in writing. As the camera scans the tape used by the police to block off the entire area where the ear has been found, the spectator reads the words, "Do Not Cross Police Line", and a pair of scissors cuts through the word "not" to open the way for Jeffrey and Detective Williams to go through. As Wills and Brunette³ point out in their critical analysis of *Blue Velvet*, this simple cut works on several levels at the same time. First of all, the obliteration of the second letter "o" in the phrase "do not" forms the contraction "don't"; the removal of the "o" could also be interpreted as a paring down of the words "do" and "not", to form the name "Don", which is, as the spectator will learn shortly, the name of Dorothy's kidnapped husband whose ear has been amputated with a pair of scissors. The confusion between "don't" and "Don", shown graphically on the screen in this sequence, will reappear precisely during Jeffrey's second encounter with Dorothy, when he actually begins to unravel the mystery of the amputated ear. Frightened by Dorothy's demands that he "hurt" her when he offers to "help" her, Jeffrey turns to leave the apartment. Dorothy, played by the Italian actress Isabella Rossellini, cries out "Don", and due to her accent, it is not clear whether she is asking Jeffrey to stay, or confusing Jeffrey with her husband, Don. In a later sequence, Dorothy will clearly identify Jeffrey with her husband, calling him "Don" as they move towards the bedroom.

Another case of confusion between what is said on-screen and what is heard by the spectator, which directly affects the spectator's initial anticipations and her final interpretation, occurs a bit earlier. Detective Williams' daughter, Sandy, has already told Jeffrey what she knows about the case. The next day, Jeffrey decides to pick her up at Central High School to request her help in carrying out his plan to search Dorothy's apartment for clues. As Sandy gets into the car, Jeffrey asks her if she's ever been to "Orleans". The spectator, who already finds herself surrounded by an aura of mystery and exoticism that clashes with the suburban ideals of middle America, formulates a connection between Sandy and the city of New Orleans.⁴ In the next sequence, however, that formulation is corrected as the name of "Arlene's Diner" appears in writing on the screen. Sandy is not imbued with the sort of threatening foreignness that defines Dorothy. Sandy is more suited to the innocent, all-American setting of the high school hangout and a glass of Coke sipped through a straw.

Immediately following these cases of confusion, the film provides a series of visual and spoken references to reinforce the contrasting idea that Dorothy is worldly. When her doorbell rings a second time, shortly after Jeffrey has come in disguised as an exterminator,⁵ Dorothy mutters that her apartment is like "Grand Central Station". Only the spectator who is able to pick-up this metonymic reference to New York City will wonder whether Dorothy comes from New York, or any other metropolis.

This subtle hint that Dorothy's presence represents a threat to the small

Midwestern town of Lumberton, to the American dream itself, is compounded by a number of written and spoken references. The name of the building where she lives, the “Deep River Apartments” is framed on the screen, heightening the spectator’s sense of danger. The emcee at the Slow Club introduces her as “the Blue Lady” which, in English, contains the duality of both sad and pornographic at the same time. The marriage certificate that Jeffrey pulls out from under her living-room couch informs the spectator, as she reads along quickly with Jeffrey, that ironically, in keeping with romantic convention in America, Dorothy was a June bride in North Carolina. This reference to North Carolina foregrounds the signs of rebelliousness, eroticism and excess which are attached to the Deep South. Is Dorothy from the South or is her otherness even further removed? Her accent and her middle name “Ellis”, which can be related to the Ellis Island port of entry for immigrants to New York at the turn of the century, reinforce the signs of difference in her.

The tension that Jeffrey experiences in the narrative, as he struggles against the fascination that Dorothy exercises over him, is reflected in a few cultural signs of rebellion against his own American identity. His last name, Beaumont, has a French sound to it that relates him more to Dorothy Vallens than to any of the others, all of whom have Anglo-sounding last names—Sandy Williams, Detective Gordon, Dorothy’s husband Donald Jones Watts, and Frank Booth.

Jeffrey also shows an unusual preference for Heineken beer. At the Slow Club, where they have gone to see Dorothy perform, Sandy admits to Jeffrey that she has never tried Heineken; her father drinks Bud, that is “Budweiser—the King of Bottled Beers, brewed in St. Louis for generations”, as any American television viewer knows. Jeffrey’s stubborn desire to be different gets him into considerable difficulties later, when Frank invites him to have a beer at Ben’s brothel and drug-front, the “This Is It”. Frank finds the idea of drinking Heineken to the sound of American rhythm and blues unacceptable. “Fuck that stuff”, he says, and orders his man, Raymond, to get some Pabst Blue Ribbon, known in America as “The beer that made Milwaukee famous”. The indirect references to St. Louis and Milwaukee, both important Midwestern towns, go unnoticed by a spectator unfamiliar with the connotations of these two brands of beer. The full impact of Jeffrey’s refusal to integrate into his immediate surroundings is probably missed as well.

Another two written references that appear on screen, “Lincoln” and “Booth”, are unavoidably tied together at the root of American history. Jeffrey has not met either Sandy Williams or Dorothy Vallens when he tells his mother and aunt that he is going out. His mother reacts calmly, enquiring whether he will need the car, but when he says that he is simply going to take a walk, his aunt nervously asks: “You’re not going down to Lincoln, are you?” A few sequences later, as Sandy shows Jeffrey the apartment building where Dorothy

lives, that verbal reference is underscored by a close-up of the street sign that says "Lincoln".

The cultural transfer connected to the word "Lincoln" does not come through to the spectator until much later on when Jeffrey follows Frank home to garner more information about the kidnapping. He watches Frank go into his building, then enters the lobby himself, looks at the mailboxes to locate Frank's apartment, and sees his full name written out. Another close-up shot flashes the words "Frank Booth" in front of the spectator's eyes.

The cultural frame of reference for an informed spectator is the assassination in 1865 of Abraham Lincoln, the fifth president of the United States, by the actor, John Wilkes Booth. It was Lincoln, of course, who signed the Emancipation Act which led to the Civil War between the North and South. The name of the street where Dorothy lives links her to the connotations of heroic suffering and martyrdom attached to this historical event, especially in light of the brutal rape scene the spectator has viewed voyeuristically, her gaze positioned next to Jeffrey's, from behind the louver doors of Dorothy's closet. Frank Booth is the sordid rapist who, like the actor-assassin, covers his face with a mask. After inhaling the necessary quantity of the right drug, Frank acts out any one of his numerous roles, identifiable by the spectator through on-screen written or visual references or through off-screen verbal references. He may be "the well-dressed man with the alligator briefcase" making a drug deal; the sadomasochistic "Daddy" or "Baby"; "Sir" Frank in his Dodge "Charger", directly related to the Pabst Blue Ribbon beer wagon drawn by a team of Clydesdale horses; rock and roll star Roy Orbison; or the ambiguous muscle-man with the garishly painted lips who kisses Jeffrey on the mouth and promises to send him a "love letter straight from (his) heart".

One final group of cultural transfer links in **Blue Velvet** is directly related to Frank Booth's threat to send Jeffrey a "love letter", which he uses as a metaphor for a bullet. All these references emanate from the music of the fifties and the sixties. Annex B contains a series of song lyrics, all of which are pertinent to a critical analysis of **Blue Velvet**. The film's title song requires no further comment at this point because its connotations are made sufficiently clear in the film, regardless of the socio-cultural framework the spectator comes from, at least once a literal understanding of the title of both the film and the song have been guaranteed. There are, however, other references to songs, some more overt than others, which decidedly do shed light on a critical analysis of the film and which are probably unidentifiable by spectators who are unfamiliar with American pop music of the fifties and sixties.

Both Sandy Williams and Dorothy Vallens are linked to famous singers from that period and to their hit songs. There is actually a criss-crossing of musical references which occasionally fuses the characters of Sandy and Dorothy, thus increasing the tone of ambiguity in the film.

The idealized dream world of love that Sandy tells Jeffrey about, as they sit in her father's car, parked in front of a church with organ music flowing out of its stained glass windows, is the same world that the singer Andy Williams foregrounds in the ballads that made him rich and famous in the sixties. But the lyrics of his most famous song, "Moon River" seem to parallel the feelings of both Dorothy and Sandy.⁵ Moon River is described as "wider than a mile", not deep and erotic like the river which gives its name to the building where Dorothy lives. Sandy's own words to Jeffrey during their phone conversation, when he calls from the hospital where he has taken Dorothy, seem to mimic the "dream-maker/heart-breaker" paradox of the song: "You lied to me. I forgive you Jeffrey. I love you but I couldn't watch that. Where's my dream?" A similar feeling of confusion, tempered by a determination to go on living and seeking love, is expressed in the lyrics as Williams sings, "You dream-maker, old heart-breaker, wherever you're going, I'm going your way."

Dorothy is also reflected in the lyrics of "Moon River". Her first name reminds the spectator of Dorothy, the girl in Frank Baum's American children's classic, **The Wonderful Wizard of Oz**, who tries to reach the other side of the rainbow, a quest mentioned in the song as well. The reference to the concept of friendship in the Andy Williams song is reminiscent of Dorothy's attempt to save Jeffrey from Frank's fury when he discovers them together in the door to her apartment. Dorothy's explanation to Frank—"He's a friend from the neighborhood"—is echoed in the song's reference to that "huckleberry friend", close to the name of the most famous of young American adventurers, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn.

Like Sandy, Dorothy Vallens is associated with Richie Vallens, a rock-and-roll singer who was killed in the late fifties in a plane crash, together with Buddy Holly. Vallens' only hit song was a ballad called "Donna". The plaintive lyrics, if altered slightly, speak explicitly about Dorothy's situation, with her husband, Don and son, Donny both kidnapped by Booth: "I had a girl, Donna was her name. Since she left me, I've never been the same. Oh, I love that girl. Donna, where can she be? Where can she be?"

One more set of musical references should be mentioned. Frank Booth has fetichized two songs, "Blue Velvet" and the Roy Orbison song, "In Dreams", both of which are heard on the sound track. "In Dreams" is first performed in playback by Ben at his brothel, the "This Is It". Shortly afterwards, Frank sings the song in playback near Meadow Lane, an abandoned industrial lot on the outskirts of Lumberton and hardly a pastoral place as its name suggests. Here Frank beats Jeffrey and leaves him unconscious, in the world of dreams where, according to the song, "Everything is alright". An understanding of the lyrics of the Roy Orbison song would enhance any critical interpretation of the film, particularly the allusions to the shortlived fiction of the world of dreams as opposed to the harsh reality of life.

A third song, "Love Letters" is used as the musical backdrop for the final shootout and picks up Frank's threat to kill Jeffrey when he promises to send him a love letter if Jeffrey ever dares to challenge him again. The irony of the situation is obvious to any spectator simply because of the contrast between what is taking place on the screen and the register of the music, overriding any specific need to understand the meaning of the lyrics.

However, such understanding permits the spectator to widen the network of cultural references at work in the film to include still another song from the same period which, although it is not on the sound track, reflects ideas from both "In Dreams" and "Love Letters". This final musical reference, "Mr. Sandman", parallels Sandy's desperate question as events unfold at breakneck speed before her eyes: "Where's my dream?" she cries out. In the song conjured up in the spectator's memory, a young girl writes to the Sandman, asking him to "Send me a dream. Make him the cutest boy that you've ever seen..." Her plea to have the Sandman tell the boy "that his roving nights are over" is corroborated by the apparent final closure of the film which takes the spectator back, in reverse order, to the hyper-realistic eeriness of the opening shots.⁶

In conclusion, this brief analysis of the socio-cultural network of references in David Lynch's film, **Blue Velvet**, should serve to underline the importance of cultural transfer in interpreting a film text. The problem of bringing this type of allusion to the surface of the text can only be tackled through increased cultural immersion in the world which the text encloses. The final reward will be a richly enhanced interpretation of the text.

NOTES

¹ For more on genre in film see, for example, Barry Keith Grant, **Film Genre Reader**, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

² See Peter Brunette and David Wills, **Screen/Play. Derrida and Film Theory**, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. Their anagrammatical reading of **Blue Velvet** in Chap. 5 implements effects of cultural transfer.

³ See pp.167-169 in Brunette and Wills (1989). Isabella Rossellini's slurring of the word "Don/don't", which is not clarified at any point in the text, caused me the same sort of problems that Brunette and Wills include in their analysis of the film which I read after several viewings of **Blue Velvet**.

⁴ New Orleans confronts the image of middle-American cleanliness, order and homogeneity with the difference and foreignness of the Other as reflected in the coupling of France and Africa to engender the dark threat of the New Orleans Creole.

⁵ The reference to "two drifters" crossing the river "in style someday" in Williams' song reinforces the desire shared by Sandy and Dorothy to occupy the appropriate roles which will anchor them within society, making them stylish and no longer adrift. By the end of the film, they seem to occupy such roles, Sandy as Jeffrey's future wife and Dorothy as Donny's mother.

⁶ A second version of this song, to be sung by a man, opens up a whole new critical approach which does not fall within the scope of this paper but which is certainly worth contemplating:

"Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream.

Make her complexion, like peaches and cream,

Give her two lips like roses in clover,

And tell her that her lonely nights are over."