

YOUNG, SHANNON LEE, M.A. “*I want to hide my body inside of yours*”: Grotesque Female Consumption in Alexandra Kleeman and Sarah Rose Etter. (2020)
Directed by Dr. Ben Clarke. 25 pp.

This paper examines the role of consumption in Alexandra Kleeman’s *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* and Sarah Rose Etter’s *The Book of X* to argue that capitalism plays a dangerous role in A and Cassie’s sense of identity by entangling their bodies with a larger psychological desire that cannot be satisfied. Most significantly, A and Cassie’s physical appearances and identities are linked to consumption through their stomachs, which become metaphors for larger, psychological hungers. Kleeman and Etter’s protagonists reveal how late-stage capitalism depends on a particular cultural understanding of women as bodies.

YOUNG, SHANNON LEE, M.A. "I don't know if you're a detective or a pervert":
Voyeuristic Pleasure and Disgust in *Blue Velvet*. (2020)
Directed by Dr. Christian Moraru. 30 pp.

This paper explores the ways David Lynch's 1986 neo-noir film *Blue Velvet* harnesses Surrealism's power to uncover deeper truths and, in particular, the Surrealist fascination with voyeurism to expose how intertwined the seemingly disparate worlds of the film are. By focusing on scenes where a character such as Jeffrey watches Dorothy, this paper argues that Jeffrey's role of voyeur collapses the comfortable distinction between pleasure and disgust as looking in *Blue Velvet* becomes a powerful gateway into the unconscious, revealing previously unknown desires.

“I WANT TO HIDE MY BODY INSIDE OF YOURS”:

GROTESQUE FEMALE CONSUMPTION

IN ALEXANDRA KLEEMAN AND

SARAH ROSE ETTER

AND

“I DON’T KNOW IF YOU’RE A DETECTIVE OR A PERVERT”:

VOYEURISTIC PLEASURE AND DISGUST

IN *BLUE VELVET*

by

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“I WANT TO HIDE MY BODY INSIDE OF YOURS”:

GROTESQUE FEMALE CONSUMPTION

IN ALEXANDRA KLEEMAN

AND SARAH ROSE ETTER

In Alexandra Kleeman’s *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (2015) and Sarah Rose Etter’s *The Book of X* (2019), American capitalism constructs women’s bodies as grotesque. Kleeman’s protagonist, known only as A, becomes increasingly emaciated, her stomach hollowing out as she joins a cult that only allows her to eat Kandy Kakes, a mostly chemical snack. Etter’s protagonist, Cassie, is defined by her body from birth as she inherited a female genetic condition that twisted her stomach into a hard lump in the shape of a knot. Both protagonists are thin young women who are obsessed with their bodies. While consumption of food is central to their identities, A and Cassie also become defined by their visual consumption of advertisements and television, as well as by their monetary consumption of material goods, especially makeup. Most significantly, their physical appearances and identities are linked to consumption through their stomachs, which become metaphors for larger, psychological hungers. Eventually, A and Cassie realize their hungers cannot be sated by eating the right foods or purchasing the right products.

Women have historically been reduced to and defined by their bodies. This association with the flesh stems from Cartesian mind-body dualism, which not only

separates the logical mind from the irrational body but has contributed to the supposed binary opposition between men and women. In Cartesian dualism, men are associated with the rational mind that must work to control the unruly and feminized body. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz discusses how this female affiliation with corporeality supports patriarchal power, arguing “misogynist thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women’s secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control” (13). Because of this corporeal reduction, a woman’s body is something she learns she must maintain, a burden requiring real labor and money. For both A and Cassie, their sense of identity is insidiously bound up with how they look. By examining the role of consumption in *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* and *The Book of X*, I will argue that capitalism plays a dangerous role in A and Cassie’s sense of identity, entangling their bodies with a larger psychological desire that cannot be satisfied. Kleeman and Etter’s protagonists reveal how late-stage capitalism depends on a particular cultural understanding of women as bodies. Because women are viewed as bodies, the dissatisfaction guaranteed by consumerism attacks female consumers’ sense of self. Moreover, female consumers are seen as bodies that are unstable and fragmented, requiring constant work.

I will begin my examination of how female identity is intertwined with physical bodies in *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* and *The Book of X* by considering A and Cassie’s grotesque female embodiment. Central to both protagonists’ monstrous bodies is

their anxious obsession about bodily borders and food. I will also investigate how A and Cassie become objects to be consumed through acts of psychological violence. While for Cassie, this primarily occurs through her traumatic experiences with men and her literal association with meat, for A, her identity becomes consumed by her female roommate, B, and then by the cult she joins, the Church of the Conjoined Eaters. Next, I will explore how their physical stomachs connect to larger, psychological hungers through alternative realities that haunt A and Cassie's actual experiences and encourage capitalistic consumption in order to achieve happiness. For A, this mainly occurs through her preoccupation with commercials, while Cassie creates her own visions of capitalistic solutions to imagine a life that is better than the one she is living. By the end of each text, A and Cassie's bodies have changed drastically, and they become even more grotesque and unhappy than when their stories began.

The utilization of Surrealist elements in these novels is crucial to my exploration of the psychological relationship between A and Cassie's subjectivities and their physical appearances. As defined by André Breton in his 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism," Surrealism is "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express...the actual functioning of thought" (Kolocotroni 309). Influenced by Sigmund Freud's work on the unconscious, Breton considered Surrealism to be a powerful means of breaking down the barrier between the rational and the irrational to expose reality. He writes: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contrary, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*" (308). By distorting the everyday and making it strange, Surrealism becomes a powerful tool for feminist

intervention by displacing the misogyny inherent in contemporary American consumerism and making it visible. The Surreal depictions of female corporeality and consumerism in Kleeman and Etter's texts get closer to the truth of what the experience of inhabiting a female body feels like by intertwining the physical realities with the psychological ones.

You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine takes place in an unnamed suburban town in America where Kleeman's protagonist A lives with her roommate, and only friend, B. Though the time period is unspecified, there are clear markers of an America located in the twenty-first century, including ubiquitous television sets, massive supermarkets, R&B music, and cellphones. After becoming paranoid that B is trying to steal her identity and losing her boyfriend, C, A leaves her old life to join the Church of the Conjoined Eaters. The Church is a cult that owns shares in many franchises, including Kandy Kakes, the only food followers are allowed to eat. The Church's mission includes transcending previous identities, and everyone looks alike as they are required to wear sheets with eyeholes cut out that make them look like ghosts. In exchange for the unachievable goals the Church sells its followers, it gains free laborers. Instead of getting closer to a unique, true identity, A becomes further removed from herself and her body until she finally leaves the cult. *The Book of X* also takes place in nameless American locations, though these are rural and urban rather than suburban, and there are few temporal markers; beyond telephones, there is little mention of technology. The Internet is noticeably absent in both worlds. Etter's setting also includes much more overt Surrealism than Kleeman's. For example, a key feature of Cassie's childhood is her father's Meat Quarry where the

men of the family work, and where “meat is harvested from the tall walls of a red, fleshy canyon” (7). Etter’s novel follows Cassie’s adolescence with her parents and brother on The Acres, a large plot of land containing the Meat Quarry, to her lonely adult life in the city, and finally to her suicide at an isolated lakeside cabin.

Both novels present A and Cassie’s bodies as grotesque and crucial to their identities through bedroom scenes where each young woman observes her physical appearance while standing in front a mirror. A is concerned that the only way to tell herself apart from other people is through her external appearance. She eerily describes the unknown internal world of bodies, as “Inside a body there is not light. A massed wetness pressing in on itself, shapes thrust against each other with no sense of where they are” (1). She worries over the sameness of bodies by considering the relationship between the internal and external sides of a body, moving outward as she thinks, “Anything could be inside. It’s no surprise, then, that we care most for our surfaces: they alone distinguish us from one another and are so fragile, the thickness of paper” (1-2). Eating an orange, she looks at her reflection and thinks, “Most mornings I barely resembled myself: it was like waking up with a stranger. When I caught a glimpse of my body, tangled and pale, it felt as if there were an intruder in my room...I rebuilt my connection to the face that I took outside and pointed at those around me” (2). Significantly, to rebuild this connection to her reflection requires the aid of makeup, and as I will later explore, makeup plays an important role in B’s ability to resemble her. A is particularly concerned with how similar she looks to her roommate B, and begins starving herself as she becomes increasingly fearful that B is trying to take over her identity.

In sharp contrast to A, Cassie is distressed that her body marks her as abnormal compared to the unknotted bodies she sees at school. Removing her clothing to “take inventory” of her body, she describes how “Just below my ribs, the skin changes. My knot is strained and stretch-marked, shining and hard” (10). Cassie, like B, believes her life would be better if she looked like someone else, to the point that both threateningly imagine taking over another person’s body. Later observing a female classmate whose appearance she covets, Cassie thinks to herself, “*I want to slice you open with a knife. I want to hide my body inside of yours*” (24). In her description of the genetic condition that affects the women of her family, she describes their knots as “simple: Overhand. Our abdomens twist in and out just once, our bodies wrapping back into themselves, creating dark caverns, coiled as snakes” (6). Cassie’s knot is repeatedly associated with a cavern, and along with blood and wildness, it is one of the ways her unruly corporeality is linked to the Meat Quarry. Cassie’s knot also becomes a physical representation of a female vulnerability through her abuse by men. Her first sexual experiences occur with a boy from school who sexually assaults her, her desire for him quickly turning to pain and fear as “His hands go greedy, running over the knot, digging into the crevices, gripping the curves of it” (85). Like her father’s Meat Quarry, Cassie’s knot becomes a fleshy opening for men to harvest.

Although Jacques Lacan’s theorization of the Mirror Stage is most useful to my analysis of advertisements, it is worth pausing on the fact that Kleeman and Etter both include literal mirror scenes. Like Lacan’s infant whose reflected image of wholeness contrasts with his bodily experience, A and Cassie are constantly looking for a whole,

perfect body imposed from the outside while their own embodied experience is one of instability and fragmentation. For A, identity is fluid and dependent on external appearance for differentiation, while Cassie is limited by her external appearance and abused because of it. In his essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” Lacan describes this exchanged gaze as “a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality” (1114). As I will explore in my analysis of advertisements that entangle A and Cassie’s minds and bodies, Lacan’s understanding of the Mirror Stage as a foundational gap is crucial to the creation of female subjectivity and the ever-deferred satisfaction advertisements promise.

Before looking closer at how A and Cassie learn to regulate their appearances through consumption, it is important to understand A and Cassie’s subjectivities as both embodied and socially constructed. Julia Kristeva’s theorization of identity construction is particularly useful to my own project on A and Cassie’s grotesque corporeality given her focus on bodily borders. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva describes abjection as an ongoing process that connects the body to the construction of an individual’s subjectivity. She clarifies that the horror of abjection is not “lack of cleanliness or health,” but rather “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In Etter and Kleeman’s texts, women’s bodies are presented as uniquely porous and defined

by openings that highlight their instability and present A and Cassie as grotesque. This emphasis on grotesque female bodies as containing unstable bodily barriers reveals that there is a larger power structure that constructs them as vulnerable and fragmented. Susan Stewart explores the anxiety surrounding how the grotesque body crosses the delineated boundaries by referencing Mikhail Bakhtin's characterization of the grotesque body as a "body in the act of becoming" (105). She considers how the grotesque body is unsettling as it crosses boundaries that normally constitute a subject and argues "The grotesque body thus can be effected by the exaggeration of its internal elements, the turning of the 'inside out,' the display of orifices and gaps upon the exterior of the body" (105).

In her description of polluting liquids, Kristeva writes that they are "excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to borders of the body, have any polluting value," so women are grotesque not just because of their openings, but because the liquids they emit are associated with dirt (71). Barbara Creed, who writes on the monstrous-feminine in film, references Kristeva when discussing the specific grotesque associated with the female body through menstruation and birth. Creed argues that "The womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces...The womb is horrifying *per se* and within patriarchal discourses it has been used to represent woman's body as marked, impure and a part of the natural/animal world" (49). Creed's argument is particularly relevant to Cassie's association with bloodiness and violence through her female body.

In Kleeman and Etter's texts, Surrealism becomes a bridge between material embodied experiences and the socially constructed ones that make up A and Cassie's identities. A's slow starvation and Cassie's knot are the most crucial Surrealist elements that present women's bodies as grotesque in these texts, and because of the significance attached to their stomachs, the mouth is a particularly dangerous boundary. Much of A and Cassie's anxieties about this bodily border are learned and internalized, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and the social construction of femininity is particularly illuminating. Butler describes gender as being created through the unconscious repetition of certain acts. Culture imposes masculinity and femininity upon biology, and this imposition is dangerous because it implies that something is natural when in actuality it is constructed. Gender is performative by "constituting the identity it is purported to be" (33). Butler goes on to argue that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). Significantly, A and Cassie learn how to regulate their behavior through the policing of other women.

Cassie's mother, knotted like her daughter, micromanages Cassie's physical appearance through diets, clothing, and makeup. Cassie's relationship to her mother is complex as their shared genetic deformity has set both women up from birth to suffer. This pain is psychological, making them targets for bullying, as well as physical because their knots begin to ache when they age. The opening line of the novel points to the cyclical nature of this burden: "I was born a knot like my mother and her mother before her...our lineage gnarled, aching, hardened" (5). While Cassie obsessively worries over

her knot, her mother teaches her that there are many more controllable pieces of her body that require work. In a very Foucauldian sense, patriarchy has shaped Cassie's mother to transmit the dominant society's ideal onto her daughter, and she polices Cassie while re-policing herself. The most important way her mother encourages adherence to dominant culture is through "magazine time," where they read tips to improve their appearances. To Cassie, her mother's magazines are "bright portals to new worlds," that reveal how she and her mother contrast against the beautiful women in its pages. Unhappy that she and her mother look so different from these "dazzling" magazine women, Cassie imagines a future where she and her mother look like them, "Our teeth gleaming, our nails red. I picture us beautiful, unknotted" (9). Only two pages later, Cassie creates her first vision in order to improve on what she sees reflected back in her bedroom mirror: Cassie again takes inventory of her body, but instead of her knot she imagines that, "*just below my ribs, my stomach is flat. I run my hands over my belly, skin smooth as a stone from the river*" (11). Cassie's visions, which she calls "scenes from a golden life in another world" run parallel to her actual life (10). These visions become crucial to Cassie's experience in the world, and this imaginative habit seems to be a direct result of her mother's enforcement of "magazine time" (9).

Food is a major way that Cassie's mother teaches her daughter how to be a woman while perpetuating her own difficult place within the patriarchy, and she restricts Cassie's food consumption according to the latest diet fad. As Cassie leaves for school one morning, her mother hands her a bag containing "a single rock" instructing, "Suck on this at lunch. The dirt and meat particles have calories that burn fat in them. I read

about it in a magazine' ” (44). At school, hungrily watching her classmates eat real food, Cassie inserts the rock into her mouth, thinking, “I feed myself the future instead: Slender, cheekbones sharp, mouth pursed, thin thighs, thin arms” (44). This planning for future happiness is an important female lesson her mother teaches her that will continue to impact her as an adult. Significantly, Cassie begins her rock diet before she has even begun menstruating. By her next birthday, Cassie’s “ribs have begun to show above the knot,” and despite her excited anticipation of cake, she is disappointed by a tray where “Stacks of black rocks are shaped like a three-layer cake. No frosting, no sugar, just granite from the ground, that familiar red glisten” (83). This scene juxtaposes a later one where her brother receives a real birthday cake. While Cassie and her mother’s knot are physical representations of the horror and vulnerability of living in a female body, her mother teaches Cassie additional ways to essentialize her body.

Themes of disordered eating permeate Kleeman and Etter’s texts and both include not only the encouragement for women to consume limited food, but also the consumption of non-food items. While Cassie consumes rocks as an adolescent at her mother’s demand, A eats foods that primarily contain chemicals and plastic. Like Cassie, A is shaped by other women who demonstrate how a woman should eat. Though A lives independently of her parents, she is heavily influenced by her anorexic roommate, B. Even before she becomes paranoid that B is trying to steal her identity, A defines her own appearance through comparison to B. She explains that they look almost exactly alike if not for small differentiating features that are “only differences of scale... We had the same brown eyes, but hers were set deeper in her skull... We were thin, but B was

catastrophically so” (5). Despite the fact that A sees B as the weaker and more dependent between the two of them, living with B directly affects A’s food consumption. For example, she decides against making herself a sandwich because B insists, “ ‘Let’s have Popsicles’ ” (16). And despite the fact that B’s eating habits often leave A hungry, she notices that, “Since she had moved in, I had been eating more Popsicles and less of everything else” (17). Significantly, the Popsicles they eat are not made of real fruit juice, but are artificially colored and flavored “red, pink, and orange”; color-flavored rather than fruit-flavored. And while A eats a real fruit orange when she observes her body at the beginning of the novel, she quickly shifts to eating orange Popsicles, and then later, orange-flavored Kandy Kakes. Through B’s influence, and then later the Church’s, A’s hollow stomach progressively shrinks, creeping closer towards starvation.

Like Cassie and her mom, A and B become complicit in their own degradation and in the continuation of broader patriarchal power structures. Michel Foucault’s theorization of power-knowledge elucidates A and Cassie’s internalization of female self-regulation through food consumption. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon as a visual representation of how self-discipline occurs as inmates are caught up in a constant state of visibility that “assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). A panopticon creates a situation where the inmates must always assume they are being watched, so that “the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (201). Susan Bordo extends Foucault’s work on power-knowledge by considering the complex relationship between women’s bodies and minds in their self-surveillance as they seek to

more closely resemble culturally sanctioned ideals. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Bordo argues that “normative feminine practices,” such as dieting, “train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being *experienced* in terms of power and control” (27). Eating disorders are especially crucial to Bordo’s work, and significantly, she goes on to contend that “Within a Foucauldian framework, power and pleasure do not cancel each other” (27). There is very real power to be gained from adhering to the dominant culture’s idealized beauty, and as Bordo points out, “many, if not most, women also are willing (often, enthusiastic) participants in cultural practices that objectify and sexualize us” (28). Cassie in particular learns it is pleasurable to adhere to a culture that reduces her to a body, as her mother praises her for her shrinking figure.

In her examination of anorexia, Bordo argues the disorder involves behavior that “*begins in*, emerges out of, what is, in our time, conventional feminine practice,” referring to the practice of dieting (178). She describes the difference between this “conventional feminine practice” and anorexia as “The young woman discovers what it feels like to crave and want and need and yet, through the exercise of her own will, to triumph over that need” (178). Bordo’s argument is particularly interesting given how Cassie and A seek disassociation from their bodies when they transfer desire from human connection to material goods. This disassociation includes escaping reality and ignoring what bodies communicate through signs of hunger. A becomes so disassociated from her own body during her time in the Church that she comes close to death.

Bordo connects this mastery of the unruly feminine body to management of larger desires by considering the relationship between the internal and external body. Extending Mary Douglas' research on anxieties about maintaining "rigid bodily boundaries," Bordo argues that "preoccupation with the 'internal' management of the body (that is, management of its desires) is produced by instabilities in what could be called the macro-regulation of desire within the system of the social body" (198-199). In her analysis of eating disorders, Bordo explores how bulimia and anorexia represent the internalization of consumerism:

Bulimia embodies the unstable double bind of consumer capitalism, while anorexia and obesity embody an attempted resolution of that double bind. Anorexia could thus be seen as an extreme development of the capacity for self-denial and repression of desire (the work ethic in absolute control); obesity, as an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire (consumerism in control). Both are rooted in the same consumer-culture construction of desire as overwhelming and overtaking the self. (201)

Significantly, Bordo goes on to argue "the part of the obese anatomy most often targeted for vicious attack...is the stomach, symbol of consumption" (202). This connection Bordo makes between the stomach as both a site of bodily regulation as well as desire management is crucial to understanding how capitalism manipulates the ways desire becomes displaced to consumer goods for A and Cassie.

Interestingly, while women are encouraged to eat non-food items, the men in both novels are aligned with meat-eating. Cassie's body also becomes essentialized through her repeated association with meat. For example, the day after she is first sexually assaulted, she wakes to her first period: "A shock shoots through my veins when I find

blood between my legs, a pool of it freshly staining my white cotton underwear. It's a burgundy mark, scented like the Meat Quarry" (74). And then, when the boy shames her from not shaving, she injures herself shaving for the first time, as "My knot shifts me and I slip, the razor slicing the skin between my legs, blood dripping from the mouth of the wound onto the porcelain" (93). In addition to this specifically female violence and blood, Cassie also becomes associated with meat through her physically and psychologically abusive experiences with men who find her knot, and then surgically reconstructed torso, repulsive. Carol J. Adams explores the connections between misogynist culture and meat's association with masculinity in *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. She argues, "Just as dead bodies are absent from our language about meat, in descriptions of cultural violence women are also often the absent referent" (22). Adams traces how women and animals are linked through "a cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption, which links butchering and sexual violence in our culture," arguing that the final stage of consumption "is the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity" (27). I am particularly interested in how Adams' understanding of objectification and fragmentation illuminates how Cassie's body is essentialized. Kleeman also includes scenes of men eating meat while A and B never consume any, becoming physically weak and passive through only consuming chemical snacks.

Two important events occur that help drive A to join the Church of the Conjoined Eaters. First, when B cuts her hair and second, when B asks A to do her makeup. A first begins to fear B when she presents A with "a two-foot-long cord of human hair: dark,

thick, and braided” (10). A thinks that “Hair had always been our way of telling ourselves apart...she reminded me of times when I had seen myself reflected in imperfect surfaces, in the windows of shops or cars” (11). And later, B asks A to do her makeup, telling her, “ ‘You know, I think things would be better if I looked more like you’ ” (57). After doing B’s makeup using the same products and techniques she uses on her own face every day, B not only looks like A’s double, but also begins behaving more like her, becoming “less like prey, more like a predator” (80). Their resemblance becomes so eerie that when she catches B sleeping in her bed, she mistakes B for herself: “It was as if I weren’t there. For a moment it seemed possible that I might have been asleep the last few days, dreaming a long and extremely detailed dream where my roommate was turning into me and I was turning into nobody” (140). Their relationship comes to a breaking point when A swallows the braid of B’s hair, a moment that terrifies B but leaves A with a “fullness” that “felt like it would never leave my body” (163).

A and Cassie worry over their bodies as a means of overcoming their constant feelings of loneliness, and have learned that the best way to gain intimacy is through external appearances that are pleasing to men. This hunger for human connection becomes tangled in a hunger for material goods because capitalistic consumerism promises purchasing can satisfy their cravings for happiness by making them more physically desirable. While A and Cassie seek a general human connection, they are most desperate to feel connected to the men in their lives, which tangles sexual desirability with this desire for intimacy. As both women learn to view their bodies using the perspective of a panoptical male viewer, their desire becomes defined by this other gaze,

much as Lacan argues the Mirror Stage “decisively tips the whole human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other” (1115). A and Cassie’s bodies in general, and stomachs in particular, become representative of a greater, psychical hunger for love and connection that consumerism promises to provide. The advertisements they encounter often encourage them to see purchasing products as solutions to improving their desirability and achieving happiness. But while visual consumption of advertisements generates desire for fulfillment through material consumption, satisfaction is always deferred so that consumers continue to spend money.

In *Theories of Consumption*, John Storey explores the role Lacanian desire plays in consumerism and identity, as “Identities are always a narrative of the self *becoming*” (88). He argues, “What we consume provides us with a script with which we can stage and perform in a variety of ways the drama of who we are” (89). Storey uses Lacan’s Mirror Stage to connect consumption with displacement, as our entrance into subjectivity is defined by a lack we are always seeking to fill, “we console ourselves with displacement strategies and substitute objects” (95). Storey also connects Lacan’s desire as the impossibility of bridging this formative gap to consumerism, which is “a discourse compelled by lack” (98). He explains:

The discourse of consumerism can be seen as a Lacanian displacement strategy, an example of the continual quest for fulfilment and the endless metonymic movement of desire. The promise it holds out is that consumption, or the right kind of consumption (this jacket, that coat) is the answer to all our existential problems; consumption will make us whole again; consumption will return us to the blissful state of the Real. (98-99)

Storey considers consumption under late-stage capitalism as distinct because advertising “produces and reproduces consumer desire” (112). He argues advertising is crucial to consumer capitalism by generating desire, as “The heroes and heroines of advertising’s key narrative are there to show us what is possible when you buy the right product. In this way, rather than satisfaction, advertising seeks instead to spread dissatisfaction: to highlight problems that only the purchase of commodities can solve” (113). The connections Storey makes between subjectivity and consumerism are especially useful in analyzing how advertisements powerfully influence the ways A and Cassie come to believe their larger desires for connection may be achieved through spending money on products.

In *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, A is bombarded by advertisements through her constant consumption of television. Even when she is not actively watching screens, televisions fill the background of her life: alone in her bedroom, in the living room with B, peering through the windows of her neighbors’ home, and in C’s apartment, including while they are having sex. A seems to enjoy commercials more than actual programs, and describes them in detail. Two commercials for beauty products are particularly important because she purchases from the company, TruBeauty, and she also later learns the Church of Conjoined Eaters owns shares in the company. In the first commercial, a woman uses a TruBeauty facial scrub that reveals edges around her face that can be peeled off. Below the original face there is “another face exactly like hers, but prettier” (7). What most strikes A about this commercial is that despite the noticeable improvement, the woman is not content to stop after one layer, peeling multiple layers off

multiple faces until she reveals the celebrity spokesperson for TruBeauty. A notes that “She doesn’t ask what happened to the other woman, the woman who came before her,” as the screen announces the promise: “YOUR REAL SKIN IS WITHIN” (7). The second TruBeauty commercial is for an edible “interior-exterior skin-perfecting cream” (84). In this commercial, a beautiful woman lifts the jar of product to reveal a live dove that “forces itself down her throat” (84). After helping the bird “get itself swallowed,” the woman scoops a spoonful of the cream, putting some on her face and the rest into her mouth, “thrusting it inside luxuriantly” (84). This second advertisement is particularly interesting as it repeats the theme in both novels of encouraging women to consume nonedible things. The use of makeup and skincare products in Kleeman’s text are particularly important as they become an additional means of fragmenting the female body into tiny pieces that each require distinct products. A notes this bodily fragmentation after watching a makeup artist on television, observing how faces “were made of hundreds of different parts, each part separate and tenuous and capable of being ugly, each part waiting for a product designed to isolate and act upon it” (56). This fragmentation also allows companies to sell more products, as each promises to do something different that will help the buyer achieve a more whole and perfect result.

The most important commercials for A are those for Kandy Kakes. Each of these many commercials is a variation of the same plot: Kandy Kat, the anthropomorphized cartoon cat mascot for the snacks, chases animated Kandy Kakes but can never catch and eat them. In one commercial, the Kandy Kakes are “live-action, three-dimensional objects” while Kandy Kat is “always a flat cartoon,” so he is unable to consume the

snacks as they are made out of a different kind of matter that is “fundamentally incompatible” with his body (21). This commercial comes from a campaign focused on how “Kandy Kakes were made of Real Stuff” (21). On the screen, Kandy Kat looks like he is starving as “You can see every rib on Kandy Kat’s brownish body” (21). When he catches sight of the Kandy Kakes, “His ribs throb” and A describes how:

you actually see his emaciation in motion: the skin sags a little off the forearm, the bones and tendons of the arm show starkly with a little drop shadow under them to heighten the effect...I want so badly for him to just take one of those revolting Kakes and shove it all the way into his belly, anything, anything to anchor his body a little bit. (21-22)

At this point in the plot, A has not yet begun seeking out Kandy Kakes to consume herself, but Kandy Kat soon becomes representative of her unconscious desires. Significantly, A watches this particular commercial after eating Popsicles with B, and notes afterwards that “I was hungrier than I’d ever been” (24). As she becomes more fearful of B’s intrusion and continues watching various commercials for Kandy Kakes, A finally starts seeking out the snacks to eat herself. Unable to find them in the grocery store, she meets a member of the Church who convinces her to join The Church of the Conjoined Eaters, and she leaves the store on a truck filled with boxes of Kandy Kakes, abandoning her previous life. A joins the cult believing that it and the Kandy Kakes will quench her physical and psychological hunger. At the end of the novel, A will learn that the ingredients in Kandy Kakes are “Just chemicals, flour, aspartame, and some food-grade plastic” (278).

While A joining the Church of Conjoined Eaters is a direct result of watching commercials for Kandy Kakes, Cassie's relationship to capitalist consumerism in *The Book of X* is unique because the most important commodities are the ones she imagines through her visions. Where A responds to advertisements by seeking products, Cassie's interactions with capitalism is more active as she imagines solutions to her appearance and loneliness through shopping. These visions become increasingly centered on capitalistic solutions after she moves to the city to begin her adult life and is no longer under her mother's restrictions. Her new life in the city is marked by extreme solitude and she begins sitting in bars to pick up men, who either abuse her or flee in disgust when they see her knot. Following one such encounter, Cassie imagines a vision of the Man Store. In this vision, Cassie saves her money for weeks, reducing her food consumption drastically, with the goal of purchasing a man from the Man Store. When she finally visits the store, a saleswoman leads her behind a curtain to a room where "*A procession of men walks in perfect formation through the door, twenty of them, all wearing black shorts, nothing else*" (159). Cassie examines each of them as "*The men stare forward, their eyes not even flickering or quivering, strange soldiers,*" as she pauses to "*smell their skins, soaps, underarms, the difference of the chemistries*" (160). In this vision, men become objects. Smiling, and prepared to spend all \$7,000 she has managed to save, Cassie chooses #8. To Cassie's horror, the saleswoman tells her the man she selected costs \$15,000, and Cassie panics, her "*body hurting with the total and absolute want*" (161). The saleswoman then offers Cassie a choice between the top or bottom half of #8 in exchange for \$7,000. Despite feeling sick at the idea of hurting her chosen man, Cassie

purchases #8's top half rather than leaving the store alone, and takes him home in a wheelchair. Although the Man Store is not an example of how Cassie tries to change her own body, it demonstrates that Cassie has learned through her interactions with magazine advertisements and her mother that the solutions to her problems are found through the power of buying. And after repeatedly failing to find a companion in her real life, she creates a vision where being wanted is as easy as paying enough to satisfy the desire. It is also worth briefly noting that Cassie's vision of the Man Store inverts the way in which consumption is gendered.

The advertisement campaigns for TruBeauty and Kandy Kakes, as well as Cassie's Man Store, employ Surrealism to demonstrate how powerfully capitalism can influence the conscious and unconscious desires of consumers. Although consumerism is not always successful in what it aims to achieve as consumers are not unquestionably tricked into purchasing what is advertised, A and Cassie learn that they will be rewarded if they do conform to the structures that constrain them. The lack of satisfaction that accompanies these insatiable psychological desires plays out on both protagonists' bodies without improving their lives. After joining the Church of the Conjoined Eaters, A becomes so disassociated from her body that it takes seeing how skeletal it has become on national television to realize she is starving. And Cassie, finally finding a doctor who can surgically remove her knot, leaves the operating table a monstrous patchwork of flesh and stitches.

By the ends of *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* and *The Book of X*, A and Cassie's bodies have dramatically changed. The Church of the Conjoined Eaters and

Cassie's surgery are the most dangerous ways these women prepare for a better future that never comes. While A returns to her body as she realizes she is starving, Cassie leaves her own body behind in death. A does not realize how malnourished she has become until she catches sight of "a creature" on a television screen with "A haunch collapsed inward, dark in the hollow and skinny like a dog" (274). A becomes horrified when she realizes it is her body: "Then I saw. Those were ribs...It was a whole human body... 'That's my body,' I said to myself, and then I realized that I was starving" (274). Unlike Kandy Kat, whose deferred satisfaction is played out on his cartoon body over the course of many commercials without him dying, A's own hunger is killing her. After realizing she is dying, A decides to try to return to who she was before the cult, starting over with a new boyfriend whose name begins with the letter "C", and choosing to stop searching for something more.

While A ultimately decides to be content with what she originally had, Cassie only becomes more unhopeful about her life after she undergoes the surgery she has dreamed about her whole life. After her surgery, a dangerous procedure involving the removal then reinsertion of her organs, Cassie's life does not improve as fully as she had hoped. Her lonely life in the city continues on as before, although now men are disgusted at her reconstructed stomach instead of her knot. Cassie finally decides to purchase an isolated lakeside cabin and move out of the city. Though initially hopeful about this change, her anguish is exacerbated by her father's death and becomes too much to bear. After digging herself a grave beside her father's ashes, the last thing she consumes is pain medicine prescribed to her mother. Lying in the earth during her last moments, Cassie is

happier than she has been outside of her fictive visions, as “The brilliance illuminates each black cavern inside of me...My ears fail and my eyes widen, all pain finally gone, offering myself up to the wide, bright mouth of death” (284). For Cassie, it is only by escaping her body to be consumed by the “bright mouth of death” that she finds peace (284).

Eventually, A and Cassie realize the psychological satisfaction promised by consumerism is a lie, and they learn that constantly searching for a future happiness is futile. The endings of *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* and *The Book of X* present two options for women to escape the cycle of capitalistic consumption: yield to the current situation or escape it through death. A and Cassie’s experiences and their always deferred happiness reveal how the American Dream of constant, individual self-improvement is not only unrealistic, but it reduces women to bodies that are constructed as fragmented and unstable. While neither novel offers a solution to the dangerous essentializing of women’s bodies, by emphasizing grotesque female consumption, both texts highlight that there is a broader system that reduces women’s identities to their bodies and that it is a system from which capitalism benefits. And by tethering women’s identities to their physical appearances, late-stage capitalism guarantees female unhappiness.

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“I DON’T KNOW IF YOU’RE A DETECTIVE OR A PERVERT”:

VOYEURISTIC PLEASURE AND DISGUST

IN *BLUE VELVET*

David Lynch’s 1986 neo-noir film *Blue Velvet* is infamous for the displeasure it has inspired in its lay audiences. Although the film earned Lynch an Oscar nomination for best director, viewer responses to a preview screening of the film included comments such as “David Lynch should be shot!” while others wrote that their favorite part of the film was “When it was over!” (Rodley 149). Lynch’s inclusion of Surrealist elements contributes significantly to the shock that viewers of his film have experienced; Lynch himself described *Blue Velvet* as being “like a dream of strange desires wrapped inside a mystery story” (Rodley 138). The definition André Breton provides in his 1924 “Manifesto of Surrealism” can be used to illuminate how *Blue Velvet* employs Surrealism to unsettle its audience. Breton describes Surrealism as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express...the actual functioning of thought” (Kolocotroni 309). Greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud’s work on the unconscious, Breton understood the imagination and the subconscious as powerful. He also considered Surrealism to have the ability to break down the barrier between rational and irrational in order to expose reality. “I believe,” he wrote, “in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contrary, into a kind of absolute reality, a

surreality” (308). *Blue Velvet* utilizes Surrealist elements to unnerve its viewers, including the exaggerated distinctiveness between the two worlds the film portrays, especially the juxtaposition of the protagonist Jeffrey Beaumont’s (Kyle MacLachlan) love interests, Sandy Williams (Laura Dern) and Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini). The film also creates dream-like sequences of montage achieved through slow motion filming and jarring music pairings.

Blue Velvet presents two sharply contrasted worlds within the small town of Lumberton: the bright idyllic one inhabited by the pure and girlish Sandy, and the dark underside of that world, inhabited by the sadistic drug dealer Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) and his masochistic victim Dorothy. Jeffrey travels between these two worlds, initially as a self-described detective, but it increasingly becomes clear that the world of darkness is not as separate from the bright world of good as it initially seemed to be, and he becomes dangerously entangled in the mystery surrounding Dorothy. This paper will explore the ways *Blue Velvet* harnesses Surrealism’s power to uncover deeper truths and, in particular, the Surrealist fascination with voyeurism in order to expose how intertwined these seemingly disparate worlds are. By focusing on scenes where Jeffrey watches Dorothy, specifically Dorothy’s performances of Bobby Vinton’s 1961 song “Blue Velvet” and when Jeffrey sneaks into Dorothy’s apartment and watches her from inside her closet, I demonstrate how playing the role of voyeur confronts him with uncomfortable realities. I am most interested especially in how looking unveils pleasure and disgust as being close together. The scenes that focus on the spectacle of the gaze also draw attention to the film screen as a frame, thereby implicating the film viewer as a

voyeur too. I argue that Jeffrey's role of voyeur collapses the comfortable distinction between pleasure and disgust as looking in *Blue Velvet* becomes a powerful gateway into the unconscious, revealing previously unknown desires.

One of the most important ways that dream and reality merge in Lynch's moviemaking poetics is through his use of juxtaposition. The philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, who draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis in his readings of Lynch's films, describes the relationship between reality and fantasy in his book *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*:

By this direct confrontation of the reality of desire with fantasy, Lynch DECOMPOSES the ordinary "sense of reality" sustained by fantasy into, on the one side, pure, aseptic reality and, on the other side, fantasy: reality and fantasy no longer relate vertically (fantasy beneath reality, sustaining it), but horizontally (side by side)...It is this decomposition that ultimately accounts for the unique effect of "extraneation" that pervades Lynch's films...(21)

The spatial distinction Žižek makes between vertical and horizontal is key, and as I will later discuss, this physical positioning can be seen literally in *Blue Velvet* when the camera moves from the pristine neighborhood at the film's opening to beneath the grass where hordes of beetles crawl. What is most significant about these seemingly opposed worlds is that over the course of the film they increasingly invade one another, similarly to how Žižek describes the horizontal relationship of reality and fantasy in Lynch's oeuvre. The illusion that these spaces are diametrically opposed collapses, leaving the viewer with a sense of estrangement. David Foster Wallace makes a related argument in his essay "David Lynch Keeps His Head" when he disagrees with readings of Lynch's films that understand the relationship between good and evil as vertical, explaining,

“Darkness is in everything, all the time — not ‘lurking below’ or ‘lying in wait’ or ‘hovering on the horizon’: evil is *here*, right now... the evil stuff is contained within the good stuff, *encoded* in it” (204-205).

The powerful effect that such juxtapositions have on an audience can be advanced by critic Philip Nel’s work on Surrealism. Nel reconsiders postmodernism by using the historical avant-garde in his book *The Avant-Garde and American Postmodernity: Small Incisive Shocks*, beginning in the 1930’s when Surrealism first became widespread in the United States. For Nel, Surrealism’s use of dream-like techniques is not escapist but rather deals with the real world; in fact such “apparent unrealness...represents a world which has come to feel increasingly unreal itself” and Surrealism therefore has the ability to get closer to the truth because it deals with how reality actually feels (9). In his consideration of post-World War I America, Nel writes, “What we might call ‘Surreal America’ began as Americans became increasingly aware of the cleft between official reality and their experience of reality” where the resulting disgust “upon realizing that the America they believe in diverges sharply from the America they live in” led to a tension between these “opposing realities” (xiii). Nel centers his project on the power of juxtaposition and how it has historically been used to heighten this tension between an idealized America and the lived reality of America. Such disjointed realities are evident in *Blue Velvet* through the excessively idyllic Lumberton presented at the beginning of the film, which soon clashes with the town’s dark underside where murder, sexual violence, and dream logic reign. Significantly, Lynch’s use of juxtaposition is defined by

how both the dark Lumberton as well as the bright, everyday Lumberton are marked by a sense of unreality and excessiveness.

The opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* presents Lumberton as an idealized American town by pairing a slow-motion and vividly colored montage of small-town comfort with Bobby Vinton's peppy 1961 song "Blue Velvet." As the film begins, the camera first focuses on crimson roses that are set against a brilliantly white picket fence and blue skies while Vinton croons. Next, a polished firetruck passes while the camera continues its dreamlike slow-motion technique, focusing on the smiling fireman and his Dalmatian that are riding on the truck, the dog's tongue lolling happily, in an image suggestive of small-town safety and neighborliness. The camera then focuses on more flowers, this time yellow tulips, which are also set against a white picket fence. The consistent brightness of these colors contributes to the unreality that sets the tone of the film. Jeffrey's father, who is watering his green lawn, seemingly completes this entrance into a neighborhood that is almost too tranquil to be real. But with Jeffrey's father, the image of perfection is suddenly interrupted as he suffers either a stroke or heart attack (the film does not confirm his exact ailment). As he falls into a muddy patch of his emerald lawn, Vinton's voice becomes muted and the camera zooms deep into the wet grass where a swarm of beetles crawl beneath the earth, revealing a previously veiled realm.

Throughout his filmography, Lynch demonstrates his fascination with the hidden, dark side of reality, often shown through dreams. An effective example of this is in *Twin Peaks* when Special Agent Dale Cooper accesses clues about Laura Palmer's murder

through his dreams of the Red Room. However, Lynch not only explores what is concealed, but also presents the everyday world itself as bizarre, using dream logic to make the familiar shocking to his viewers. For example, by pairing the anthropomorphic rabbits of *Inland Empire* with illogical applause and a laugh-track, Lynch invokes the familiar genre of sitcom while making it strange. As I will explore in my analysis of voyeurism in *Blue Velvet*, when what is understood as normal becomes uncanny, an individual can be forced to reconsider his understanding of his own desires and become strange to himself. Lynch's ability to render reality absurd connects to the importance Nel places on art to involve its audience by challenging their assumptions. Nel describes how post-World War II America was marked by a sense of paranoia as newly formed government agencies "created invisible channels of power that competed with public ones...the postwar experience was characterized by an awareness of the secret America existing in *disorienting proximity* to the country's public face" (xv; emphasis added). This notion of proximity is what becomes so alarming about Jeffrey's situation in *Blue Velvet*; as the film progresses, the two worlds that originally seemed separate are shown to coexist and infiltrate one another. As Sandy tells Jeffrey during their first conversation, Dorothy's apartment complex is "really close by, that's what's so creepy."

For Nel, understanding the specific historical context that produced a work of art is key to uncovering the power of juxtaposition, and it is worth noting that *Blue Velvet* came out in 1986 and can be understood as a response to Reaganism. In his article on the role of small town social relations in *Blue Velvet*, Richard Martin locates the film in the context the 1980s, with a particular focus on Ronald Reagan's 1984 re-election campaign

that preceded the release of Lynch's film by only two years. In his discussion of the American myth of "an idyllic small town," Martin demonstrates how the sublime images Reagan incorporated into his "Morning in America" commercial look uncomfortably like the opening montage of Lynch's film (236). Martin also describes the Beaumont's neighborhood as "altogether too archetypal for comfort: instinctively, such a flawless vision of small-town America evokes sinister connotations," a response that Martin connects to the figure of Reagan in the American consciousness (240). Martin's description also evokes Nel's interest in the tension between two different Americas following World War I and II. As I will later explore in more detail, one of the most important Surrealist elements that affects viewers of *Blue Velvet* is Lynch's use of montage.

Before discussing the complex relationship between the viewer and the viewed in *Blue Velvet*, it would be useful to consider disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work on looking as described in her book *Staring: How We Look*. Garland-Thomson explains how staring is dangerous for both positions as "the staring encounter can be a tangle of desire and dread for starrer and staree alike. Although we think of staring as an affront to starees, starers suffer a welter of psychological contradictions as well" (57). This relationship is more complicated than an all-powerful viewer and powerless viewed object, especially in the context of America where staring is considered an impolite personal intrusion and individuals are taught to regulate their looks. For the "starrer," staring can be a potential source of shame, while for the "staree," to be the object of a look is "a perversion of the need to be seen...we both need and dread the

intense recognition that staring accords us” (58). This potential shame of the viewer is helpful for understanding Jeffrey as a voyeur, as he is forced to acknowledge the power and unknowability of his own unconscious and shameful desires through looking. The power of looking and its ability to make subjects vulnerable is intensified during scenes where characters watch each other perform songs. The film’s inclusion of music also contributes to the dreaminess in both the light and dark worlds.

The first time Jeffrey sees Dorothy performs Bobby Vinton’s 1961 version of the song “Blue Velvet,” he is entranced by her. Dorothy, who is introduced to the audience of The Slow Club as “The Blue Lady,” wears a black slip dress, bright red lips that match the curtain behind her, and vivid blue eyeshadow. The dramatic blues and reds that mark Dorothy’s appearance contrast against Sandy’s fluffy pink sweater and pale features, and they also recall the bright colors of the film’s opening sequence while changing their meaning by placing them in a gloomier context. As Dorothy begins to sing, blue light is projected onto her, intensifying the dream-like quality of the stage. Sandy looks back and forth between Jeffrey and the stage, clearly uncomfortable, but Jeffrey stares transfixed at Dorothy. Brian Walter writes about the importance of music in the film, and considers the effect this moment has on Jeffrey, arguing that Dorothy’s rendition of “Blue Velvet” helps him “gain access to a higher subconscious” and that Dorothy’s use of music “hooked Jeffrey...her new power over him fueling his own decisive action” (174 and 177). Music plays a crucial role in *Blue Velvet*, not only in its diegetic elements but also in its non-diegetic elements. The power of non-diegetic sound is especially evident as the

same songs get played repeatedly, but in different contexts, which changes the original meaning of the song.

The repetition of non-diegetic music is especially significant in how it heightens the startling contrast between Sandy and Dorothy as exaggerated representations of light and dark. As I will next explore, juxtaposing Sandy's cotton candy-like appearance and accompanying music against Dorothy communicates the difference between the two worlds Jeffrey traverses. Sandy nearly always wears pink, although she also wears shades of white, which completes her soft appearance. The brightness of Sandy's blonde hair literally illuminates her, particularly in nighttime scenes, making her the brightest object on screen. Sandy's physical brightness is exceptionally evident in the scene where she and Jeffrey go for a car ride and he tells her what he discovered about Dorothy while playing detective. Sandy parks in front of a church, and Jeffrey tells her that Frank has kidnapped Dorothy's husband and child and is holding them hostage, using their lives as leverage to force Dorothy to submit to abuse. Sandy replies to this horrifying revelation with a description of a dream she had the night she met Jeffrey. In her dream, their world was dark because there were not any robins, which represent love, until "all of a sudden thousands of robins were set free, and they flew down and brought this blinding light of love. And it seemed like that love would be the only thing that would make any difference, and it did," smiling at Jeffrey as she finishes her tale. While she speaks, the stained-glass windows of the church behind her are colorfully illuminated on either side of her head and organ music swells, marking her as ethereal. And when she finishes her recollection she says, "So I guess it means there is trouble until the robins come." These

overdetermined signs of goodness present this scene, and Sandy herself, as absurd. Žižek cites Sandy's robin dream as an example of how "Lynch's universe is effectively the universe of the 'ridiculous sublime': the most ridiculously pathetic scenes...are to be taken seriously. However...one should also take seriously the ridiculously excessive violent 'evil' figures," which in *Blue Velvet* is unmistakably Frank (22).

A crucial way that *Blue Velvet* juxtaposes Dorothy and Sandy throughout the film is by associating a specific song with each of them, which puts their contrasting characterizations into sharp relief. For Sandy this is achieved through her connection with the saccharine "Mysteries of Love." The song, which Julee Cruise sings, was written and produced by Lynch and Angelo Badalamenti specifically for the film (Rodley 132). Since working with him for this project, Lynch has continued to collaborate with Badalamenti, including collaborating on the theme song for *Twin Peaks*, "Falling", which Cruise also sings (Rodley 170-171). The lyrics and delicate sound of "Mysteries of Love" are as sentimental as Sandy's robin dream, including lines such as, "and you and I float in love and kiss forever." The song "Blue Velvet," on the other hand, is sung by two different voices in the film, Bobby Vinton's and Dorothy's depending on the scene, and contains much more substance than "Mysteries of Love," both lyrically and aurally. David Copenhafer writes about the music in *Blue Velvet*, with a particular focus on how "the film turns popular, 'everyday' songs toward unfamiliar uses, rendering them uncanny if not terrifying" (138). The original, peppy 1961 version of Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" plays during the opening sequence of the film where the bright, colorful world is first presented, but each time Dorothy sings her darker, sultrier version, it twists the meaning

of the song. This is especially potent during Dorothy's second performance, occurring after Jeffrey witnessed Frank sexually assault her, and the song takes on a sinister meaning by invoking the memory of Frank's abuse. Now when Dorothy sings "she wore blue velvet," Jeffrey, Frank, and the film viewer recall that Dorothy wore a blue velvet robe while she was raped; Frank is even holding a piece of the fabric from her robe, making this association clear. Looking in this second performance mirrors the direction of the gazes from the scene in Dorothy's apartment, as the film viewer watches Jeffrey watch Frank, who stares at Dorothy. Both in the scenes where she sings and in the apartment scene, Dorothy is the viewed object through which the men access their desire. The surreal quality of her musical performances provokes powerful emotional responses in both Frank and Jeffrey; Dorothy's eerie voice and dream-like appearance seem to strike both men in a way that allows them to access buried emotions.

Dorothy's two performances of "Blue Velvet" bookend the violent scene that occurs in her apartment. Significantly, before Jeffrey breaks into Dorothy's apartment, Sandy smiles at him and says, "I don't know if you're a detective or a pervert." This statement gains importance in hindsight, becoming an implied question repeatedly directed at Jeffrey as he gets more involved in the dark mystery of Dorothy's victimization. When Dorothy surprises Jeffrey by returning to her apartment, he hides in her closet, becoming a voyeur, first of her privacy and then of the sadistic scene with Frank. Dorothy's role of victim becomes clear as she removes her clothing, including a wig, elucidating that "The Blue Lady" is not Dorothy's true self. She becomes distressed after speaking with Frank on the phone and, still unclothed, she looks at a photograph

hidden beneath her living room couch, crawls on the floor, and presses her forehead to the carpet. However, Dorothy soon covers up this display of vulnerability, and after replacing her wig and donning her blue velvet robe, she hears Jeffrey hiding in her closet and furiously rebukes him while holding a knife. The power dynamics of looking are significant in this scene. Dorothy yells at Jeffrey for watching her undress then demands that he take his own clothes off, saying “I want to see you.” But this relationship between the dominant, clothed observer and the passive, naked object is complicated by the characters’ sexual desire for one another. In what seems an illogical reaction to discovering her peeping-tom, Dorothy begins to kiss Jeffrey’s body, kneeling and looking up at him while still holding her knife. Jeffrey appears simultaneously terrified and desiring of her. Up until Frank’s arrival, the two become increasingly physical with each other, though Dorothy never drops the knife, and the potential for violence, from their sexual encounter.

When Frank arrives, Dorothy frantically urges Jeffrey back into the closet and Jeffrey then watches Frank’s disturbing sexual assault of Dorothy. Many critics have commented on the complex psychoanalytic elements of this scene, which is often described as being representative of the Freudian primal scene, with Jeffrey acting as the child who witnesses his parents having sexual intercourse. Frank disturbingly oscillates between playacting as “Daddy” and “Baby.” He initially insists to Dorothy that “it’s Daddy, you shithead!” until he inhales unknown drugs through a gas mask he carries and his voice becomes childlike and he whimpers, “Baby wants to fuck!” Dorothy sits in a chair with her back to the closet and camera, so both Jeffrey and the film viewer watch

Frank look at Dorothy but are unable to see her fully. While staring at Dorothy, Frank says, “Don’t you fucking look at me,” a demand that he will repeat, yelling it eight times during the following rape scene. Though Frank is comfortable occupying the role of voyeur, it seems he is also aware of the potential power of looking to reveal, fearing another’s gaze being directed at him in case he exposes more of himself than he is comfortable with. As I will later discuss, the most significant instance of Frank recoiling from an exchanged gaze occurs while Ben (Dean Stockwell) performs his lip-syncing rendition of Roy Orbison’s 1963 song “In Dreams.” The powerful position of a voyeur is made clear in this apartment scene as Frank repeatedly yells at Dorothy to not look at him. Voyeurism’s impact is also addressed before Frank’s arrival, when Dorothy demands Jeffrey remove his clothing and become the object of her gaze after she catches him watching her without her knowledge. But it also becomes clear through Jeffrey’s reaction to what he has seen while hiding in the closet that the one occupying the position of voyeur is in danger of being seen at a deeper level.

For Jeffrey, it is not only Frank’s abuse of Dorothy that disturbs him, but also the fact that after Frank leaves, Dorothy divulges her masochistic desires by telling Jeffrey to hit her, even throwing herself violently against the wall and abandoning him when he refuses to strike her. Frida Beckman considers Dorothy’s sadomasochism in the context of the femme fatale role she seems to occupy. Although when she first appears in the film, Dorothy seems to be empowered, the vulnerability she displays in her apartment makes it clear she is a victim. Beckman considers how disturbing Dorothy’s desire for violence is following the scene where Frank tortures her, arguing that although *Blue*

Velvet revises the role of the femme fatale to a certain extent by making Dorothy “a dangerous sexual threat and a caring mother at the same time, the film lacks subversive potential in terms of the femme fatale on the level of empowerment (the dangerous woman is conventionalized as a victim, and her sadomasochistic sexuality remains in the hands of the man)” (30). Though Dorothy’s initial request for violence seems to repulse Jeffrey, after having watched the scene between her and Frank, it also seems he is intrigued and perhaps able to imagine violence as pleasurable. In their later lovemaking scene, which becomes dream-like through slow motion filming alongside the eerie, slowed sound of a lion’s roar, Jeffrey finally does hit Dorothy. Interestingly, this lovemaking scene begins with Vinton’s version of “Blue Velvet” playing in the background, which acts as a marker for the transition between Sandy’s bright world and Dorothy’s nightmarish one. Vinton’s voice warbles as Jeffrey walks up to Dorothy’s apartment, but then fades as Dorothy pulls Jeffrey into her bedroom. Significantly, Jeffrey does not actually hit Dorothy when she requests that he hurt her, but rather after she yells at him to get out of her bed and he responds by hitting her in anger. After hitting her twice, the second time so hard that he chips her front teeth, Jeffrey then resumes their lovemaking with increased enthusiasm, finally allowing what had previously disgusted him to now also provide pleasure. This moment of submitting to unconscious desires includes the use of montage, first the image of a flickering candle before Jeffrey hits Dorothy, and then a blazing inferno after she smiles, displaying that he has chipped her front teeth in his violent action.

Lynch uses montage throughout *Blue Velvet* to increase the surreality of certain scenes, such as with Jeffrey and Dorothy's lovemaking scene and with the opening sequence. The use of montage in cinema is attributed to the Soviet film director and theoretician Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein understood montage as being politically powerful and argues that "each sequential element is perceived not *next* to the other, but on *top* of the other" (555). This spatial distinction recalls how Žižek described the relationship between fantasy and reality in Lynch's films. Though Eisenstein's work on montage assumes a passive audience that will be forced to make a particular association between the images on screen, his discussion of the "logical deduction" involved for a viewer of montage is useful to analyzing Lynch's filmmaking (556). Eisenstein's discussion of how placing images into new contexts allows for "an opportunity to encourage and direct the whole *thought process*," forcing the viewer to find relationships between the images, is especially noteworthy in the context of Lynch's films (556). Lynch uses the technique of montage to create otherworldly sequences throughout his filmography, such as in the opening dream sequence of *The Elephant Man* where he encourages the viewer to make a logical connection between John Merrick's mother and the stampeding elephants. Similarly, in Jeffrey and Dorothy's lovemaking scene, the inclusion of fire imagery and the eerily slowed sound of a roaring lion makes an argument about what the viewer sees on screen. Here, Jeffrey's unconscious desires are directly linked to nature, both through the raging flames and the vicious sound of the lion, demonstrating that his primal desires have been realized. The use of slow-motion points to the connection between dreams and the unconscious as a means to reveal truth.

Lynch also uses montage in an Eisensteinian way in the opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* to force his viewers to make a connection between the two discrepant realities. As I described in my analysis of the film's opening, Lynch invokes an American nostalgia for the 1950s in a way strangely similar to the nostalgia Reagan employs in his re-election campaign. And throughout the film, Lynch continues to reference and undermine this exaggerated perfection by his repeated use of popular music from the 1950s and 1960s. In doing so, Lynch not only reveals how uncomfortably close the idealized Lumberton is to evil, but by linking this 1986 film to these earlier decades through Vinton and Orbison's music, Lynch also forces his viewers to conclude that the 1980s might be dangerously similar to the 1950s. In his introduction to *Postmodern Hollywood: What's New in Film and Why It Makes Us Feel So Strange*, M. Keith Booker describes a sense of disorientation following the 1950's that is similar to the one Nel explains Americans felt after World War I and II. Again, there is a tension between the America that people believe in and the one they are experiencing, as there was "a loss of any sense of historical continuity" (Booker xv). Booker cites the nuclear bomb as an example of how "Beginning in the 1950s, individuals in advanced Western societies have increasingly felt that they were living in unprecedented situations to which the experience of the past was irrelevant" (xv). Booker also argues music is important to postmodern nostalgia, such as that evidenced in *Blue Velvet*, where "the oddly nonspecific nostalgic tone" is heightened by "Badalamenti's often-jazzy score" and "is supplemented by well-known popular music, usually from the 1950s and early 1960s" (52). This lack of

historical distinction between the 1950s and 1980s is symptomatic of the “nostalgic sensibility” that accompanies postmodernism (Boggs 196).

Lynch’s use of nostalgia is one example of the many postmodern techniques Lynch employs in *Blue Velvet* and it is worth briefly situating Lynch in the history of postmodern film. Wallace’s essay includes an extended analysis of what *Lynchian* means, beginning with the assertion that: “the term ‘refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former’s perpetual containment within the latter’ ” (161). In order to get at the meaning of *Lynchian*, Wallace considers Lynch’s continued influence in Hollywood and compares him to Quentin Tarantino, who, like Lynch, is famous for utilizing postmodern techniques such as non-linear storylines and intertextuality. Wallace describes Tarantino as “Lynch made commercial, i.e. faster, linearer, and with what was idiosyncratically surreal now made fashionably (i.e. ‘hiply’) surreal” (164). Wallace makes this distinction clear through the two directors’ approaches to violence:

For, unlike Tarantino, D. Lynch knows that an act of violence in an American film has, through repetition and desensitization, lost the ability to refer to anything but itself. This is why violence in Lynch’s films, grotesque and coldly stylized and symbolically heavy as it may be, is qualitatively different from Hollywood’s or even anti-Hollywood’s hip cartoon-violence. Lynch’s violence always tries to *mean* something. (165)

Following this analysis of violence, Wallace gives his well-known line that “Quentin Tarantino is interested in watching somebody’s ear getting cut off; David Lynch is interested in the ear” (166). This distinction Wallace makes between Lynch and Tarantino as filmmakers in the postmodern tradition can be clarified by looking at

Wallace's analysis of what makes Lynch's films are so uniquely "unsettling" (170).

Wallace describes him as a third kind of filmmaker, rather than one who works in some combination of commercial and art film (170). Wallace argues:

...because in the absence of such an unconscious contract we lose some of the psychic protections we normally (and necessarily) bring to bear on a medium as powerful as film...The absence of point or recognizable agenda in Lynch's films, though, strips these subliminal defenses and lets Lynch get inside your head in a way movies normally don't. This is why his best films' effects are often so emotional and nightmarish (we're defenseless in our dreams too). (170-171)

Wallace also describes how powerfully *Blue Velvet* affected him personally, demonstrating Nel's argument that Surrealism can get closer to the truth than reality. What most moved Wallace when he watched the film after its release in 1986 was "the way the movie's surrealism and dream-logic *felt*: they felt *true, real*...*Blue Velvet* captured something crucial about the way the U.S. present acted on our nerve endings" (201). As I will explore in my analysis of the film's conclusion, Lynch utilizes Surrealist techniques that not only shock his viewers into a new understanding of America, but through Jeffrey's voyeurism, they also force his viewers to confront their own disturbing unconscious desires.

One of the ways that Lynch's Surrealism powerfully affects film viewers is his inclusion of nonlinear time and a repeated phrase that Žižek, who takes a Lacanian approach in his work on Lynch, calls "a signifying chain, which resonates as a Real that insists and always returns—a kind of basic formula that suspends and cuts across time" (17). Žižek provides several important examples, including one from *Lost Highway*, "the phrase which is the first and the last spoken words in the film, 'Dick Laurant is dead' "

(17). There are several phrases repeated throughout *Blue Velvet*, including Sandy and Jeffrey's "it's a strange world" and Frank's "don't look at me". Sometimes, these repeated phrases seem to come too soon as their reoccurrence recalls the other contexts in which they were spoken. For example, Jeffrey says "it's a strange world" when he is distressed at having witnessed Frank sexually assault Dorothy, but he also says these lines at the film's close, smiling because all seems well. Lynch's use of Surrealist elements, especially using repeated, and sometimes disembodied phrases, seems to represent the effects of trauma on screen. In her seminal book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth extends Sigmund Freud's work on trauma as a "wound of the mind" to characterize trauma as not only repetitive but also as incomprehensible, "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (4). The circulatory nature of Lynch's repeated phrases give the sense that they have no distinct beginning or end, but instead occur in a continuous flow that goes back and forth throughout the film, repeating events already told, and hinting at events yet to come. The experience of trauma as a repeating event that can never be fully understood exemplifies the power and foreignness of the unconscious mind. As Surrealism in the tradition of Breton is a movement inspired by the power of the unconscious, *Blue Velvet* lends itself to a psychoanalytic reading.

Blue Velvet demonstrates not only through Jeffrey but also through Frank that the unconscious is powerful. Similarly to Jeffrey, Frank gains access into his own unconscious desires through voyeurism, but unlike Jeffrey, Frank does not allow himself to fully realize what these desires might mean, let alone act on them. The most telling

example of this process of discovery through looking for Frank occurs when he watches Ben, his business associate who is keeping Dorothy's son hostage for him, perform a lip-sync version of Roy Orbison's 1963 song "In Dreams." Frank repeatedly calls the song "candy-colored clown," a mistake stemming from the first line of the song, but a misnaming that points to Ben's physical appearance, which actually resembles a "candy-colored clown" with his powder white face, red lips, and ruffled button-down shirt. Frank continually calls Ben "suave" during this scene, an accurate description as Ben is polite and calm, with a soft, measured voice. After entering Ben's building, Frank introduces Ben by gesturing towards him and calling him "suave," then says, "goddamn you are one suave fucker!" In his analysis of the music in *Blue Velvet*, Walter describes Ben as "almost too 'suave' for Frank to bear" and both he and Copenhafer consider the potential homoerotic desire between Ben and Frank in their respective articles (178). Frank expresses admiration for Ben, which appears uncharacteristic given his previous violent behavior in the film. Ben is also the only person in the film whom Frank yields to, successfully calming Frank when he begins to yell about needing glasses for his beer. Unlike Frank, Ben's violent tendencies are restrained, hidden beneath the surface of his "suave" presentation.

During Ben's strange performance of "In Dreams", the room looks like a stage as the audience gathers to one side of the room facing Ben who stands between two curtains and holds a light as a faux microphone. Frank stands awkwardly next to Ben but facing him, so the audience sees the side of him while he watches Ben perform. Frank stares at Ben with wonderment, much like he does during Dorothy's second performance. But

here, Frank also mouths along to the song, even as Ben sidles closer as if performing just for him, motioning towards Frank as he sings “in dreams I walk with you.” There are several moments where Frank’s expression shifts, as if unnerved by what he sees, but it is not until Ben mimics Orbison singing “In dreams you’re mine, all of the time” that Frank’s expression completely changes to one of disgust. As this line ends and he notices Frank’s face, Ben’s convincing lip-syncing performance breaks down and he stops to look at Frank while Orbison’s disembodied voice continues to sing. It seems this intimate moment and their exchanged looks had become too powerful for Frank, for he then takes out his cassette tape of “In Dreams” and tells his gang that it is time to leave. Frank’s angry response seems to occur in a moment of realization, similar to Jeffrey’s, that his sexual desire is tied up in something that also disturbs him. For Jeffrey, this revulsion is with violence alongside sex, which he is able to imagine as pleasurable, while for Frank, it seems to be sexual attraction to another man that is bared.

In her article on the voice as a material object in Lynch’s films, Beckman considers the disembodied voice in the lip-syncing scene in *Mulholland Drive* when Rebekah Del Rio sings a Spanish version of “Crying,” which is interestingly another song by Roy Orbison. As Beckman explains, “despite this seeming commitment to the emotion of the song, the song does not emanate from Rebekah’s body but, rather, it exists outside it,” which becomes clear to the audience as she collapses while her voice continues to sing (78). Similarly to this moment on stage in *Mulholland Drive*, a gap is created in *Blue Velvet* when Ben stops moving his mouth but Orbison continues to sing. Beckman argues that “the uncanny relation between subjective presence and absence, clearly anticipates a

Lacanian analysis” where the voice itself serves as “the *objet petit a*” (78). In *Blue Velvet*, music plays a powerful role in creating dream-like scenes, and Ben’s disjointed lip-syncing seems to gesture to the exposing of hidden desires. The disembodiment of Ben’s performance also points to the disjunction between what we think we know and reality, as what we see does not always match what is true. This intimate scene with Ben, which momentarily exposes Frank’s unconscious, is especially important when considering the numerous occasions throughout the film where Frank is preoccupied with not being looked at. The looks he exchanges with Ben demonstrate that he was right to fear the power that looking has to access the unconscious.

Frank also draws attention to one of the most significant instances of voyeurism’s power in *Blue Velvet*. When he and his gang leave Ben and resume their “joyride,” Frank becomes infuriated because Dorothy glances back at Jeffrey. Pulling the car over to a deserted lumber mill, Frank turns around in his seat to look at Jeffrey and yell, “What are you looking at?” He then tells Jeffrey, “don’t you look at me, fuck...I shoot when I see the whites of the eyes” and proceeds to use his drug-filled gas mask. After inhaling, Frank’s eyes widen, giving him a strange and alarming expression, as he stares at Jeffrey and says with a grin, “you’re like me.” What makes this moment particularly chilling is the way the camera is positioned just to the side of Jeffrey’s perspective, so when Frank delivers these lines it is almost as if he is making eye contact with the camera, and thus with the film’s audience. This moment of recognition recalls Garland-Thomson’s argument on the simultaneous need and dread of being seen, as such looks have the power to divulge things that might be unknown and unwelcome, such as Jeffrey being

forced to look for himself in the sadistic Frank. This moment, which nearly breaks the fourth wall, also directs Frank's stare and accusation towards the film viewer, asking the audience to see themselves in Frank too.

As a filmmaker who creates in the Surrealist tradition, the relationship between Lynch's film screen and its viewer is one that shocks. The participation of Lynch's audience in the meaning of his films is especially apparent in *Blue Velvet* because of how explicitly the film deals with the theme of voyeurism within the plot. For Surrealism, the emotional responses evoked in the audience are essential. When asked about the theme of looking in *Blue Velvet*, Lynch replied that "film is really voyeurism" (Rodley 145). Lynch continues to explain what he means by this, saying "you sit there in the safety of the theatre, and seeing is such a powerful thing. And we want to see secret things, we *really* wanna see them. New things. It drives you *nuts*, you know! And the more new and secret they are, the more we wanna see them" (Rodley 145). This desire involved in voyeurism is not only what drives Jeffrey as he acts as a detective, but as Lynch argues, it is also what drives cinema goers.

Lynch's explanation of film in general as voyeurism speaks to film theories on the cinematic apparatus that use Lacanian analysis, such as Constance Penley's work on filmic identification and desire in her article "Feminism, Film Theory, and the Bachelor Machines." Penley sees the relationship between film screen and viewer as a triangulation like that Lacan describes in his account of the Mirror Stage. Penley argues that the identification of the infant (viewer of film) is dependent on the look of affirmation by the one holding it up to the mirror (a mother or Other who is placed in and

transmits language/culture), so that there is always something beyond that does not allow for a direct, pure, relationship between viewer and screen. The power of the Other over what a subject perceives, according to Penley, actually places the viewer in “an extremely vulnerable position” (461). There is a gap within which the subject “can never see from the place from which it is seen,” meaning it is seen more than it sees (461). What one sees on the film screen is never in an untainted relationship to the viewer of a film because the imaginary is always “permeated by the desire of the Other” (460). Penley’s description of the experience of a film viewer places significance on the role the Other plays in the dream-like context of a movie theatre, much like the important role the unconscious performs in desire. In both cases, desire can be revealed through the power of looking. As I will explore in my analysis of *Blue Velvet*’s conclusion, the film’s use of Surrealism has a powerful psychological effect on its viewers.

At the end of *Blue Velvet*, the idyllic Lumberton is seemingly restored and the world of darkness vanquished, as “Mysteries of Love,” the sickly-sweet song associated with Sandy, plays in the background accompanied by the twittering of birds. This final scene begins with the camera zooming out of Jeffrey’s ear to show him relaxing on the Beaumont’s fenced lawn. This moment recalls the camera going into the severed ear earlier in the film, representing a closure of the events that happened in between the entering and exiting ear shots. As the camera moves further away from Jeffrey’s ear, the viewer can see that his eyes are closed, and then watches as they open, almost as if Jeffrey has just awoken from a dream. Smiling as he spots a robin in the tree above him, he rises to join his family for lunch. When Jeffrey enters the kitchen, he finds Sandy and

his Aunt Barbara looking at a robin that is perched on the windowsill with a beetle held in its mouth. Noticeably, everyone in this scene is wearing white or neutral clothing; there are none of the dramatic shades or fabrics of the nightmarish world. This image of the bug-eating robin recalls both the opening sequence when the camera showed the beetles hidden beneath the Beaumont's lawn as well as Sandy's sentimental dream about the robins bringing back light to overcome the darkness. Watching the robin with the bug in its mouth, Aunt Barbara shutters and says, "I don't see how they could do that. I could never eat a bug" at the same time that she puts something dark into her own mouth. It is unclear what Aunt Barbara eats, and while it might not be a bug, it certainly looks similar to the beetle in the robin's mouth. This moment helps unsettle the seemingly perfect ending, reminding the film viewer that the dark world still exists. This moment also reminds the viewer how unconscious desire functions when Aunt Barbara's words of repulsion do not seem to match her actions. Even at the film's close, where the world of good has ostensibly conquered the world of evil, disgust is revealed again to lie disturbingly close to pleasure.

Immediately following this bizarre moment with Aunt Barbara and the robin, Sandy looks up at Jeffrey and repeats that oft-spoken line, "It's a strange world, isn't it?" and the camera focuses on the robin once more before fading to an idyllic montage. This closing sequence mirrors that of the opening, repeating the same images in reverse order: yellow tulips, waving fireman, and red roses. Like the earlier image of the camera moving in and out of an ear, these montages that bracket either end of the film also enact an inward and outward movement. However, the last scene of this dream-like sequence

differs from this echo, and further disturbs the ending's image of perfection. Dorothy sits on a park bench as her son, whom the audience never fully sees, walks toward her in slow motion. She smiles and hugs him to her, finally looking happy after so much abuse, and she closes her eyes contently. But this moment of maternal bliss is fleeting. Dorothy's eyes reopen, and she looks off into the distance, troubled, as her own haunting voice cuts in over the cheery, hopeful "Mysteries of Love" to sing the closing lines of her dark version of "Blue Velvet." As the audience hears the disembodied sound of Dorothy singing "And I still can see blue velvet through my tears," the camera pans up past blurred trees and sky to be immediately replaced with a close up image of blue velvet fabric.

While at first glance, it seems as though the virtuous Lumberton has defeated the sinful Lumberton, the ending of *Blue Velvet* serves as a reminder that darkness always lies alongside and within the light, rather than lurking safely below. Žižek's reading of the Real in *Lost Highway* is crucial to understanding the ending of *Blue Velvet*. He explains the relationship between the two separate yet intertwined plots in *Lost Highway* using Freud's description of "The Burning Child" dream. Žižek follows Lacan's interpretation of the dream:

The logic here is precisely that of Lacan's reading of Freud's dream, 'Father, can't you see I'm burning?' in which the dreamer is awakened when the Real of the horror encountered in the dream (the dead son's reproach) is more horrible than the awakened reality itself, so that the dreamer escapes into reality in order to escape the Real encountered in the dream. (17)

For Lacan and Žižek, the guilt the father experiences in his dream is much worse than the reality of his dead son, so when the father wakes up, he is escaping the Real through the fantasy of reality. As Žižek explains throughout his extended argument on Lynch's film, "fantasy sustains our 'sense of reality' " (21). This argument is key to understanding the relationship between the two overlapping worlds in *Blue Velvet*, particularly the ending where on the surface all seems well. Frank and Jeffrey reflect the behavior of the father who dreams of his burning son because both use reality to escape the Real of their desires. Frank, captivated by Ben's lip-syncing performance, snaps out of his trance so as to avoid the truth of his attraction to another man. And at the end of the film, Jeffrey has turned away from the truth of his own desire for violence by choosing Sandy's chastity over Dorothy's masochism.

Žižek's analysis of *Lost Highway* also illuminates how the greatest horror of *Blue Velvet* resides not in Frank but in Jeffrey. When discussing fantasy in the context of extreme violence, Žižek focuses in particular on how "the images of utter catastrophe, far from giving access to the Real, can function as a protective shield AGAINST the Real" (34). Returning to Lynch's films and violent figures such as Frank, Žižek asks, "Aren't these figures, in their very comic horror, also fantasmatic defense formations—not the threat, but the defense against the true threat?" (35). And, as I have discussed in the case of *Blue Velvet*, what most disturbs Jeffrey is not Frank's abuse of Dorothy, but instead how watching this abuse awakens a craving for violence within himself. Wallace also sees the true horror of *Blue Velvet* in Jeffrey rather than Frank, exploring the powerful psychological effect Lynch's film has on his audience members by forcing viewers to

confront the horrors within themselves. Wallace writes that Lynch seems to be “one of these people with unusual access to their own unconscious...it’s the psychic intimacy of the work that makes it hard to sort out what you are feeling” (166). He goes on to say how through the film viewers’ identification with Jeffrey, “we (I, anyway) find some parts of the sadism and degeneracy he witnesses compelling and somehow erotic, it’s little wonder that I find Lynch’s movie ‘sick’—nothing sickens me like seeing on-screen some of the very parts of myself I’ve gone to the movies to try to forget about” (167). Wallace’s description demonstrates how the film forces both Jeffrey and the film viewer to acknowledge that pleasure and disgust can coexist in disturbing ways. Just as the worlds of good and evil, which at first seem disparate, are discovered to coexist, so too are pleasure and disgust exposed as being intertwined in startling ways. This access to unconscious desires is granted through the power of becoming a voyeur. Both Frank and Jeffrey are able to access their own subconscious emotions as they watch Dorothy perform her haunting version of “Blue Velvet,” and Frank comes close to comprehending desire for Ben. Significantly, it is through his role of voyeur in Dorothy’s apartment that Jeffrey discovers his own capacity to find pleasure in combining violence with sex, a desire that surprises and disturbs even while providing him pleasure when he later acts on it by striking Dorothy during their lovemaking scene. In *Blue Velvet*, looking becomes a way to discover previously hidden unconscious desires, revealing the unsettling truth that we are unknown to ourselves.

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