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HETEROTOPIA ON SCREEN- *BLUE VELVET (1986)*

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Abstract: *Based on a framework consisting of postmodern theories of heterotopias, spatial pastiche, schizophrenic temporality and postmodern speed, this paper seeks to identify cinematic features in the works of the American director David Lynch, which exemplify time and space in postmodernism. Michel Foucault's theory of space will trigger the whole problematic of the time-space relation. This is followed by a discussion of Fredric Jameson's concepts of spatial pastiche and schizophrenic temporality and of the involute interaction between the two.*
Keywords: *heterotopia, postmodernism, space, time*

1. Introduction

A reading of the works of David Lynch through the lens of postmodernism can be inspiring in several ways: with the boosting popularity of film studies among the academia, the application of postmodern theories from media (architecture, fiction) to media (film, television, commercials) not only demonstrates that postmodernism is a stylistic phenomenon, but also evinces a socioeconomic phase in cultural development. Likewise, with Lynch's launching his career on television in 1990, the appropriation of film theories in the studies of television may engender the possibility of a multi-media cocktail which is a trait of the postmodern culture.

In the context of late capitalist society, David Lynch has exercised his craftsmanship in wielding a time and a space that are typically Lynchean. Despite earning two Oscar nominations with his direction of *The Elephant Man* in 1980, and writing and directing the explosive hit *Blue Velvet* in 1986, Lynch was not established in Hollywood until 1990 when he won the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or for *Wild At Heart*. Still, viewers and critics have been divided in their reactions to his films, as one viewer commented on *Blue Velvet*: "You either love this film, or you hate it" (Denzin, 1988:468).

Many critics have branded him as a surrealist. To this Lynch coolly replied: "I don't even know that much about surrealism -I guess it's just my take on what's floating by" (Breskin, 1990:62). A reading of his films in the context of postmodern time and space may yield deeper insights into our epoch, as his works are formulaically said to reveal "the dark underside of Middle America" (Sobran,1990:38).

The issues of time and space are central in the discussion of the postmodern culture. They are also two inseparable and intertwining notions in the contemporary era where jargons and concepts like "spatial time" and "temporal space" emerge. And these two abstract concepts are graspable in the phenomenon of speed. The postmodern condition has become what Fredric Jameson calls the "cultural dominant" in the late capitalist society. And America,

being world leader in science and technology, is naturally an excellent site for this cultural experience.

To arrive at a more intelligible conception of space, we have to bear in mind that the contemporary epoch of space can be a comprehensive notion which is not only confined to the level of geographical locale and therefore distinguishes itself from the idea of place. Space can "take for us the form of relations among sites" (Foucault, 1986:23) as suggested by Michel Foucault who formulates a heterotopic space in his 1967 lecture titled "Of Other Spaces". Still, space can also be perceived in terms of time as in the concept of temporal space posited by Fredric Jameson.

Space, according to Foucault, is social rather than physical. In "Of Other Spaces" he outlines several spaces in the "epoch of simultaneity": the "unreal spaces" of Utopias which set up a perfected form in society; and their counter-sites - heterotopias - in which real sites are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. In between is the mixed, joint experience of the mirror which is a step aloof from the first two spaces. Of the three, Foucault singles out heterotopology which possesses the curious property of being connected with all other sites, in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the relations it reflects. Understandably all cultures in the world constitute heterotopias. But it is the heterotopias of deviation that we are probing into and in particular, the heterotopic space of the cinema which is central to our discussion of space.

The Foucaultian heterotopia of deviation is one in which "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault, 1986:25). This explains why the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.

Indeed, the cinema fits in with the description of this category of heterotopias. It is Foucault's belief that our era has to do with space more than time. Foucault's perception of an "external space" seems to play down history for a simplified, sweeping generalization of space into various social sites and institutions (for example, the hospital, the prison, the lunatic asylum and the cinema), it nevertheless provides an exploratory basis on which more contemporary discussions of space can embark. At one point, he mentions that "it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space" (Foucault, 1986:22) and he cannot help admitting that at least "time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space" (Foucault, 1986:23).

The hyperspace, to borrow from Jean Baudrillard, is a space of obscenity satiated with simulacra and an eclecticism of electronic images. It is experienced in an utterly intensive temporality in terms of the spatialization of time where the boundary between marginal and central narratives is blurred. Time does not only afford facility to the elements in space, as suggested by Foucault, it has also become a perpetual spatial present. Hence our relationship to the past is now a spatial one. We can see that the small town setting in *Blue Velvet* is contrived to convey a sense of timeless eternity. It is therefore impossible to isolate either element in the intricate postmodern time-space discussion, as Abbas observes:

> The postcritical theorization of space therefore rejects any dichotomy of space v.s, time, structure v.s. history, focusing instead on how spatial structures are historically produced, as well as on how history itself could be understood in terms of questions of space (1990:8).

In "Postmodernism, and Consumer Society" published nearly two decades"Of Other Spaces", Jameson states that the postmodern condition is characterized by a spatial pastiche and a schizophrenic temporality. With pastiche there is "an effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the old distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (Foster, 1983:112). Pastiche is an incorporation of forms, an

imitation of dead styles deprived of any satirical impulse. It is different from parody in nature. With parody there is always a sense of irony. Pastiche is a "blank parody" (Jameson, 1984:65). It takes the form of, for example, an imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language, in a neutral sense, devoid of humour. While most critics of *Wild at Heart* reckon it a saga of sex, perverse violence, psychotic killing and muck, few notice its allusiveness and plagiarism to the classical Hollywood cinema which is itself a form of pastiche. In *Wild at Heart*, the linguistic norm is eclipsed and a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity emerges.

Schizophrenia is the breakdown of the signifying chain. It is a view largely developed in the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and is basically a collapse of relationship between signifiers, linked to the failure of access to the Symbolic. To a schizophrenic, language articulation does not take the form of a past or a future. He therefore does not have an experience of temporal continuity, but is condemned to live a perpetual present. Schizophrenic experience is thus "an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence" (Foster, 1983:119). A schizophrenic lives in a series of pure and unrelated presents in time. It is based on the notions of spatial pastiche and schizophrenic temporality that Jameson advances (not without sense of "nostalgia" though) into the consideration of historicism that effaces history, a consideration from which he introduces a more specific cultural mode of expression, namely, the "nostalgia film" in the postmodern cinematic space.

One of the denominators among critics of postmodernism, especially by the Marxists, is that postmodernism, caught in the giant web of superficial images, entails non-history and is therefore ahistorical. Jameson writes off "historicism" as "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (Jameson, 1984:65-66). With the postmodern symptoms of schizophrenia and pastiche, the world is transformed into sheer images of itself and colonized by a new spatial logic of the simulacrum to replace what used to be a linear historical time. However, the past is not merely used as "referent", bracketed and then wilfully effaced. Jameson accuses the participants of postmodernism as if they are collaborating with the late capitalist society out of sheer caprice. In her defence for this "cultural dominant", Linda Hutcheon replies that rather than being an "enfeeblement of historicity",

postmodernist film (and fiction) is, if anything, obsessed with history and with how "we can know the past today" (Hutcheon, 1989:114).

In fact the practice of postmodernism is more akin to the approach of new historicism than historiography. At the least it provides an alternative access to the past in a new historical configuration.

The "nostalgia film", a postmodern film genre introduced by Jameson, reveals "the remarkable current intensification of an addiction to the photographic image [which] is itself a tangible symptom of an omnipresent, omnivorous and well-nigh libidinal historicism" (Jameson, 1984:66). In fact the very concept of la mode retro involves a restructure of pastiche and schizophrenic temporality in a collective and social level in order to lay siege to our past and the present. The postmodernist "nostalgia" art language takes a new form and re-presents the past through stylistic connotation and that "pastness" is conveyed by the "glossy qualities of image" (for example, fashion, architecture, art decor and cars). It follows that "intertextuality" and allusionism contribute to the aesthetic effect to displace "real" history in a "pseudo-historical depth" (Jameson, 1984:67). This may be actualized in, for instance, the style of the acting or the framing of the setting.

Foucault provides a fundamental approach to our understanding of other spatial constructs:

"we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. ... the world ... is a network that connects points" (Foucault, 1986:22).

This seems a valid description of the heterotopias of deviation exemplified in the example of the cinema in which on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three dimensional space. Meanwhile, in front of the screen, an heterogeneous audience is confined in a rectangular room. But the heterotopic space of the cinema probes deeper because things inside this space do not only juxtapose each other as if the cinematic space is a neutral area in which dead objects are inserted. Elements in this space interact with one another and it follows that chemical reactions actually take place between the legibly separate spaces of Utopias and heterotopias as well as among heterotopias.

2. *Blue Velvet*

Set in the small town of Lumberton, a hybrid town of a "heavy" reality and dreaminess, *Blue Velvet* is the most successful film David Lynch has ever directed. Lumberton is a wholesome looking Everytown. Lynch himself repeatedly describes it as any American small town and that there are many Lumbertons in America:

> This is all the way America is to me. There's a very innocent, naive quality to my life, and there's a horror and a sickness as well. It's everything ... Blue Velvet is a trip beneath the surface of a small American town, but it's also a probe into the subconscious or a place where you don't normally face (Chute, 1986:32).

And the same town of Lumberton is just like any town in America, "our" town, redolent of the vacant moral naivety that American popular culture often mistakes for innocence. The uncovering of the evil is therefore an exposure of the margins of the social in (or under) the centre of the safe society. Denzin aptly observes: "These violent margins are now placed in small towns, next door to middle- and lower-class Americans who are attempting to live safe, respectable lives" (Denzin, 1988:463).

Lynch is certainly cautious to opt for his films niches for his particular stories. One also thinks of the scenic, seemingly tranquil but enclosed town of the elegantly named TV serial *Twin Peaks*. In both stereotypical US small towns, the emphasis on community and locality implies the possibility of limited action and social movement as characters' moves are confined to a certain locale. It may also suggest, but only deceptively, parochialism, myopia and self-contentedness.

The first five shots of *Blue Velvet* sketch Lumberton with cliche images of what are considered normal and ideal of the fifties: it begins with a clear blue sky, blooming bloody red roses waving in front of a white picket fence, to a classic 1940's fire truck. Artificially bright yellow flowers against the fence are cut to school children crossing a road. Although one doubts if such a town still survives the engulfment of urbanization in nowadays America, these images nevertheless present society itself in a flawless condition. The employment of slow motion and the contrasting use of colours add to an ideal but unreal quality. In Foucault's sense of the word, the first thirty seconds of Blue Velvet create a Utopian space on the screen, only to be immediately acted upon by and mingled with an other world.

This heterotopic space is open to us when Jeffrey finds the severed ear in a vacant lot. It centres around Frank Booth, local crime lord who had club singer Dorothy Vallens victimized, having kidnapped her son and husband. This heterotopia of deviation is inhabited by characters who are incompatible and yet jumbled together in the cinematic space. While Frank is the embodiment of evil, Jeffrey is a teen hero - with a flattened character - who undergoes a series of Hardy Boys style adventure during his vacation. Dorothy, posed as a sophisticated woman who at once possesses and suffers from the knowledge of darkness, sees in Sandy an innocent and pure girl-from-next-door. A constant dichotomy between good and evil, light and darkness, innocent and knowledge is therefore visible. But this dichotomy is

transgressive in nature. Frank's violent rape of Dorothy is punctuated by a lion's roar which comes back on the sound track when Jeffrey, surrendered to Dorothy's command, struck her across the face with the back of his hand during their intercourse, and the two of them melt in to dreamy bliss, marked by slow-motion slides of their love-making. The madman, Frank, is right when he tells Jeffrey, "You're just like me. We're the same," just before he punches him. Drawn to curiosity and his desire for sexual adventure, Jeffrey, like Frank, has become a slave to sadistic lust. Dorothy's knowledge is not a stark contrast to Sandy's innocence either. Her knowledge is one aligned with guilt, danger, horror. Her knowledge is a kind of sickness. This heterotopic space of deviant transgresses the taboos set for traditional Hollywood cinema where the world is usually composed of binary oppositions.

It shatters the myth of popular culture and unmasks Hollywood "hypocrisy". Part of *Blue Velvet*'s horror is that the expected is reversed; the irrational exists within the same context as the rational. Critic Pauline Kael sees that "mystery and madness are hidden in the 'normal'" (Preston, 1990:168). But this seamy side of Lumberton does not hide itself under the rippleless surface, nor is it displayed side by side through antithesis. The hidden and the apparent has become an organic jumble. The good and the evil all float to the surface.

A more complex heterotopic space is found in *Wild at Heart* where, in a den of unhinged mother, creeps and ritual killers, emerges two innocent and lovely young persons: Sailor Ripley, who wears a snakeskin jacket as "a symbol of individuality and my belief in personal freedom" (it is exactly these modes of freedom and self-expression that the postmodern period is both fearful of and drawn to at the same time); and Lula Pace Fortune, a faithful and understanding lover. Their wholesome characters are however tainted by Lynch who gives Sailor a hidden past and a rebel streak, with a hot temper and brutal violence that enable him to literally crack the skull of his assassin. Raped by her uncle at the age of thirteen, Lula is a symbol of (excessive) sex which yields to the sexual harassment of Bobby Peru who tried to seduce Sailor to a bank robbery.

The alternate world does not only take its form through presentation of contrasting characters, it also expresses itself by means of cohabitation of disparate and uninhibited images. Lynch enjoys presenting "the unpresentable in front of the viewers in ways that challenge the boundaries that ordinarily separate private and private life" (Denzin, 1988:462). The Baudrillardian sense of the obscene images and shots which do exist in real life but which normally are shielded from the eyes of the spectators are unreservedly displayed on screen.

Baudrillard's concept of obscenity rests on speed and the explosion of information rather than the notion of space, perhaps Lyotard's conception of the postmodern can better illustrate the argument here:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable (Lyotard, 1984:81).

To present the unpresentable and not governed by any preestablished cinematic norm is the spirit in the works of David Lynch. The unpresentable, brought onto the screen, challenges the boundary which separates public and private life. It wipes off the gap between high art and mass culture and erase the demarcation between a film shown on art-house circuits and a slick movie.

Grotesque and macabre objects that shock the cinema come in abundance in the Lynchean artifacts: a rotting, severed ear, sado-masochistic sex rituals, violence in nature, etc. are

prevailing images in Blue Velvet in which the nostalgic sense of the ideal homespun American life evoked by the opening shots do little to suggest stability and security. Soon we witness Jeffrey's father, seized by a stroke, fell down when watering the lawn: the water from the fallen man's hose shot straight in the air, asthe camera begins a rapid tracking shot beneath the surface of the lawn and again we glimpse the more odious, distasteful aspects of a nature which rapaciously feeds upon itself. We see a magnified, microscopic shot of tall, menacing blades of grass where unknown insects fought to death in the dark greenery of their own miniature jungle.

Mapping these "unpresentable" images onto a typical small town setting in the fifties would be unthinkable in the traditional small town movie genre. But in an America where you browse the pages of any newspaper and would not be particularly thrilled by headlines about psychotic killing, massacre, or perverse rapes that fill up the pages, Lynch's weird images only serve as a reminder of the omnipresence of violence and the unpresentable.

When Bobby Peru's head is blown off with a shotgun during the bank robbery in *Wild at Heart*, Lynch shows it flying through the air, and then holds on it as it smashed to the ground and bounced away. During the same sequence, two security guards crawled across a blood-drenched floor searching for the hand one of them just lost to a shotgun blast, as one guard voiced hope that doctors would be able to sew the appendage back on, Lynch cuts to a dog escaping out of the back door, the missing hand in its mouth. These most ghastly images are exhibited with a humorous twist and leaves an audience feeling exhilarated and disoriented simultaneously. And Lynch subtly shows his humour as if he is making an action cartoon with real life performance. The entanglement of the normal and the perverse on the same cinematic plane makes Sandy comment, "It's a strange world, isn't it?" and Lula protest, "it's wild at heart and weird on top".

Lynch's style helps enrich the cinematic space. Deep focus cinematography enables an equal clarity of things in foreground and background. When Jeffrey and Dorothy are kidnapped to the whorehouse of Ben, grotesquely obese women are constantly moving in the background.

These obese women appear again (but half naked this time) in *Wild at Heart* when Sailor and Lula pull over at the motel where they first meet Bobby Peru in their exile. These revolting figures are an emblem of repulsively perverse sex rather than a sex symbol. They have no apparent contribution to the plot but serve to de-eroticize the notion of sexuality in both films. Their appearance is comparable to that of the bruised, naked Dorothy Vallens who is an empty sign of sexuality.

The presentation of the unpresentable presents profuse sex which is regarded as signs leading not to real sexual activity but to an "apprehension of sex", a complement to Baudrillard's theory of "sign fetishism" (Kellner, 1989:99,100). The naked body is anything but sexually attractive or appealing and the striking image of a woman's body reveals exactly what a woman lacks. Whether short independent takes or deep focus cinematography, these styles contribute to a deeper spatial dimension and enhance the development of spatial relations.

These scenes are disparate but not disjointed. The women are fetish of a sexual desire that embodies the gist of postmodern sex. It is an experience of 'Virtual sex" in which seduction is liquidized (Kroker & Cook, 1986:24).

C. Kenneth Fellow has launched a not very lenient criticism against Betsy Berry's reading of Blue Velvet, saying that Lynch "commits blunders ... in the areas of sequence, causation, and consistency" (Fellow, 1990:173). He charges Berry of actually filling in gaps for the screenwriter and director and thus ironically exposing the film's fault more clearly. While Berry's essay may be an amelioristic criticism on Blue Velvet and an attempt to link up gaps deliberately left by Lynch, Fellow's attack on Lynch's lack of narrative logic which "is the

criterion that renders this film unsuccessful" (Fellow, 1990:174) only reveals a fallacy in his approach to the film. In fact, one will be frustrated if one looks at Blue Velvet (along with Lynch's other films) according to its logical sequence in the narrative because the film will then be nothing but a presentation of symbols at random, Lynch's emphasis is not that much on narrative logic as it is on cinematic style and visual effect. Pauline Kael begins her favourable review with a sheerly visual emphasis: "When you come out of the theatre after seeing ... "Blue Velvet", you certainly know that you've seen something. You wouldn't mistake frames from [it] for frames from any other movie (Fellow, 1990:176).
Even Lynch himself admits that when he wrote the script, he began with no plot in mind but only a set of fantasies. We cannot simply dismiss his film as nonsequential because here time defies linearity and the continuity of time is shaped by images sometimes at the level of subtexts. Although rarely do we find a critic label Lynch a postmodernist artist, his works definitely share what Baudrillard describes as the postmodern:

> the characteristic of a universe where there are no more definitions possible. ... It is also the possibility of resuscitating images at the second level, ironically of course. It all revolves around an impossible definition. One is no longer in a histoty of art or a history of forms. They have been deconstructed, destroyed. ... So all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces - that is postmodern (Kellner, 1989:116).

The pieces left over after the deconstruction of history explained by Baudrillard are revived and reappropriated with a twist. Very often, these "pieces" are employed because of their exemplary values of the built-in cliches and stereotypes, ideas of facts and historical realities. One can say that the history of postmodern art is a fragmentation of history. Time in a film is experienced only in a spatial pastiche of various filmic devices: art decor, fashion, etc. History
experienced in such a manner is mostly found in what Jameson terms as "nostalgia film". The nostalgia film is not merely a film about the past and about specific generational moments of the past. Jameson expounds in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society":

> [The nostalgia film] does not reinvent a picture of the past in its lived totality; rather, by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period (the serials), it seeks to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects (Foster, 1983:116).

Rather than accusing the age of postmodernism of being ahistorical, we can consider it attached with ideas of history. The feeling of timelessness is felt in most of Lynch's works as viewers are never informed of a specific time when the plot takes place. This setting also has a crucial strategic function: it allows the film to do without most of the signals and references which we might associate with the contemporary world. This works together with a new formal inventiveness through the glossy qualities of the images - the typical kitchen scene, living room setting, costumes and music - because nostalgia film, according to Jameson, is not some old-fashioned representation of historical content, but approaches the past through stylistic connotation, conveying the "pastness", the "1950s-ness", the "Victorianness" by the attributes of fashion. The "remake" of the past therefore endows the film with a new temporal meaning in a new spatial language and our understanding of the pre-existing representation is now a constitutive and essential part of the film's structure. Jameson explains:

> we are now, in other words, in ’intertextuality’ as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and as the operator of a new connotation of 'pastness' and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces Veal' history (Jameson, 1984:67).

History is evoked in Blue Velvet in the form of ideology but not temporal narrative or themes. A collage of images fill the screen with normalcy and decency, with what is always expected of the American middle-class bourgeoisie of the fifties: the collection of nostalgic images of perfect mothers in ideal kitchens, affable fathers watering manicured lawns, and grinning firemen waving to school kids. But all of them are purposefully made unreal, and dreamy. The past is consumed as pastness within an intensity of the present in the cinematic space. It is a past we can construct but not recover (Jameson, 1989:526).

However, what Jameson regards as "image-fixation cum historicist cravings" (Jameson, 1989:527) soon crosses with big city crimes like drug dealing and sado-masochistic sexual violence and even psychotic killing - something you would easily take for granted in Moonlighting or Miami Vice. The audience are baffled when the police constable received with indifference the cut ear from Jeffrey as if it was a daily routine in the small community of Lumberton, The social, ideological and aesthetic contradiction feeds on a spatial pastiche where a simulacrum of history is established.

3. Conclusion

The works of David Lynch by no means afford a social, political or moral reading. His vision and treatment of history and space, however, do facilitate a deeper insight into our contemporary surroundings and a more thorough understanding of the postmodern sense of history and spatial dimension. By employing Foucault's concept of space, Jameson's argument on postmodern historicism, its bearing on space and his introduction of the nostalgia film genre in addition to Virilio's interpretation of speed and space, the following observations are yielded: first, the Foucaultian heterotopia can be experienced in the small town setting in the films of Lynch. Contrasting characterization and fragmentary weird images help enrich the heterotopic space. Secondly, in deploying certain cinematographic techniques such as deep focus photography and adopting self-referentiality, a spatial pastiche is detected. Third, spatial pastiche of signs of different periods undermines the sense of history in the film world and produces an anachronistic schizophrenic temporality. This is typical of the genre of nostalgia films. Forth, the acceleration of speed in the late capitalist society may become a form of inertia. The postmodern speed is paradoxically a medium of decay.

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