
FAMILY TRAUMA IN DAVID LYNCH'S FILMS

How does David Lynch's narrative and film techniques in the films 'Eraserhead' and 'Blue Velvet' comment on the American family dynamic?

Introduction

Cinema is an expression of the subconscious conveying societies' collective unconscious (Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*). However, societies' collective psyches differ culturally and geographically making individual interpretations of their films culturally specific (Ward). It is therefore possible to analyse different ideological frameworks through the lens of the unconscious by watching their films. Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a holistic approach to analysing films because of its "universality and its hegemony over the field of film studies" (McGowan). One prominent and highly acclaimed American director is David Lynch, who is described by the Guardian as the "most important director of the era" (Rose, Bradshaw and Brooks). His films are nearly all based in the United States (US), but have a wide audience outside of the US especially on the Art House circuit. His films are considered surreal satires of certain aspects of American society (Denzin) and are noted for their recurring motifs and techniques, making them suitable for psychoanalysis and further societal commentary.

In his films *Eraserhead* (1977) and *Blue Velvet* (1986), Lynch portrays inept and traumatised Fathers who break the stereotypical family dynamic as evidenced by their oscillations between what Lacan calls the *Real* and *Imaginary*. Prominent film theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey and Slavoj Žižek, developed the initial Lacanian psychoanalytical theory as a means of forming interpretations within film. This form of film theory can be used to analyse, identify and interpret recurring themes within Lynch's films as statements on American society and its family dynamic. Lacanian psychoanalytical film theory was built upon Freudian psychoanalysis, which is contemporaneously regarded as heteronormative and misogynistic (Zakin). Lynch's earlier films may be regarded as quintessentially Freudian as they primarily featured male characters, and any semblance of a female character was used purely as an object for the male character's desires. As such, I find that this makes Lacanian film theory suitable for analysis.

In reference to psychoanalysis published on his films, Lynch has stated, "Film has a great way of giving shape to the subconscious. It's just a great language for that." (Rodley and Lynch). Thus, it can be assumed that any further psychoanalysis on Lynch's films may reveal unintentional meanings, which, as Lynch himself has stated, will simply stem from his subconscious. Additionally, Lacan's influences on post-structuralism also indicate that he intended for his theory to be interpreted differently by various cultures in recognition of the relativism associated with psychoanalysis. It can therefore be assumed that from the perspective of a non-American such as myself, criticisms of American society inferred from the films are valid, given that Lynch usually leaves his work open to the interpretation of the international audience that watches his films.

Analysis

Jacques Lacan introduced various psychoanalytical terms to analyse films: *Manque*, which translates to lack or something we do not have, is what perpetuates *Desire*. By not having what we want, we are incentivised to pursue it. According to Freud, such pursuit creates the impetus to continue living (a tendency he termed *Eros*). Freud observed that the energy that perpetuates *Eros* was of a sexual nature (called *Libido*) and manifested in a part of the subconscious mind known as the *Id*. It is therefore logical that in order to preserve *Eros*, we must never attain what we ultimately desire, the *objet petit a*, which Lacan believed to be our Mothers.

When confronting the *objet petit a*, we are in a specific psychological ‘Realm’ called the *Real*. Our awareness of *manque* will confront us with the *objet petit a*, thus *manque* too comes from the *Real*. Naturally, our minds blur these desirable *Real* concepts using language (*signifiers*) as representations of these ideas (*the signified*). Language is a relativistic structure created by humans, so an individual’s use of a *signifier* will lack the truer signified meaning to another individual, creating *manque*. This is referred to as the *Symbolic* Realm. *Objet petit a* protected by the *Symbolic* is the *Other*, our ultimate phantasy. When a desire created by *manque* from the *Real* is translated through the *Symbolic*, it becomes *demand* in the *Imaginary* Realm. Thus, we live most of our lives in the *Imaginary*, chasing fleeting *demands* for temporary fragments of pleasure known as *Jouissance*. According to Lacan, The *Jouissance* provides us with the motivation to continue pursuing phantastical demands in the hopes of finding the *Other* (figure 1).

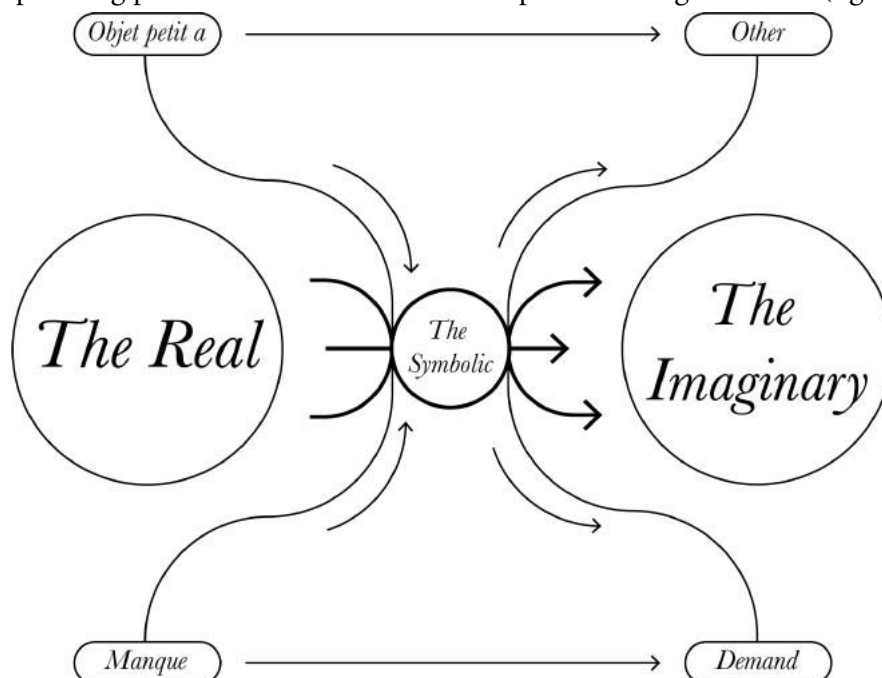


Figure 1: An overview of Lacan’s Triptych of Realms

Characteristic of Lynch’s films, *Blue Velvet’s* opening shot demonstrates this swaying between the *Real* and *Imaginary* Realms. The first frame is that of a dark blue

elliptical gradient, like a hole. The hole symbolises the *manque* in the *Other*, implying the *Real* is currently in frame. Lynch's choice to use the sky as an opening shot allows the audience to connect the colour blue with the *Real*, and by doing so creates a visual cue, blue, that allows the audience to identify transitions between Realms. The camera then slowly tilts downward, to a white picket fence and red roses (figure 2). The striking colours bring the viewer's gaze towards the bright phantasies of the *Imaginary* in the foreground and away from the darker *Real* that sits in the background. The subsequent shots use dissolves to link the colours between shots e.g. the red of the roses dissolves onto the red of the fire truck, and then onto the red of the stop sign and red clothes of the children crossing. Likewise, the yellow tulips combine with the red of the roses to highlight the red lamp and yellow teacup in the shot of the Mother watching television. The flow of colour emulates a chain of linguistic signifiers, creating libidinal tics of *Jouissance*, while at the same time establishing that these brighter colours belong to *Imaginary* phantasies outside the *Real*.



Figure 2: An Idyllic Neighbourhood

When the Father collapses from the seizure with the dog licking at the water from the hose, Lynch uses an axial jump cut and partially slows time. The axial cut draws the viewer's attention to the most dynamic element in the frame, the dog, and highlights the slowing of time, indicating that the reality we perceive to be true has been fractured. This sudden change shows that just beneath the *Imaginary* is a darker underworld, the *Real* beneath the *Imaginary*, populated by disturbing insects representing the sinister aspects of the *Real* (like death and unattainable desire). In this opening scene, Lynch is facilitating the transition between the *Real* and *Imaginary* through vibrant colour and then back into the *Real* using the insects as visual cues. Understanding the transitions between *Real* and *Imaginary* are critical if one is to understand Lynch's intentions.

Similar transitions are also seen in *Eraserhead* when Henry explores his fantasy about making love to his neighbour. To both Henry and his child, this scene (and indeed most of the film) is in the *Real*. The non-diegetic monotone hum, or the ever-present *objet petit a*, in the background fills empty audio space while the lighting and

monochromatic colour palette accentuate the shadows, also creating empty space or *manque*. Furthermore, this scene in particular shows both Henry and the child confronting their *objet petit a*, the neighbour, who is in a close up making her the sole focus of the viewer's attention. When the child calls for its *objet petit a*, Henry covers its mouth. This is where Lynch's archetypal Oedipal conflicts begin to play a role.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, when the Son experiments with his phallus, he develops strong sexual feelings for his Mother, and to Lacan, framing her as the *objet petit a*. The girl on the other hand grows up assuming she has a phallus, only to realise she simply has *lack* and develops what Freud termed 'Penis Envy'. The girl then pursues her Father who possesses a phallus and can fill her *lack* in competition with her Mother. The children realise that they are in competition with their opposite-gendered parent for the same-gendered parent's attention creating a conflict known as the *Oedipal complex* for boys, and the *Electra complex* for girls. In both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis it is the Father's role to assist the child in overcoming this stage. Freud believed boys perceive their phallus as the source of their power, so any threat to their sexuality would also threaten their *Eros*.

Thus when Henry silences the child, he is threatening to cut the child's sexual power, scaring it, or creating *castration anxiety*. To Freud, castration anxiety wards the child away from the Mother in search of a surrogate. To Lacan, the Oedipal complex is overcome when the Father sets limitations on the Son. These limitations represent the barriers created by their respective society and allow language from the *Symbolic* to cover up the *objet petit a*. These first limitations are called *Nom du Pere*, or the *Name of the Father*. Once the *Nom du Pere* is set, the *objet petit a* becomes the *Other*, leaving the child safe in the *Imaginary*.

In this scene, however, there is a psychological abnormality. Henry, having already punished his child, continues to compete with his Son. The bath in which Henry and the neighbour engage sexually is filled with a white liquid (figure 3). Like in the opening scene of *Blue Velvet*, the white contrasts the surrounding dark shadows, indicating that the white acts as a port from the *Real* into the *Imaginary*, but as Henry is not fully submerged in the liquid, he is trapped in limbo between the *Real* and the *Imaginary* in a broken *Symbolic*. The abnormality occurs when the child continues to cry. A soft light illuminates the child, fading the borders between the *Real* and the *Imaginary* (figure 4). Although the Father's role is to assist the child into making a full transition into the *Imaginary*, he instead tries to escape into the *Imaginary* himself by descending and disappearing into the white liquid, leaving the child in a purgatory between the two.



Figure 3: Escape into the *Imaginary*



Figure 4: Limbo between the *Real* and the *Imaginary*

The Car Scene in *Blue Velvet* also features this conflict when Frank Booth (Father) attempts to make love to Dorothy Vallens (Mother) in front of Jeffrey Beaumont (Son). When Jeffrey punches Frank to compete for Dorothy, Frank takes him outside to impose the *Nom du Pere*. Frank kisses Jeffrey with red lipstick, linking to the *Imaginary* from the opening scene. Frank then makes Jeffrey feel his muscles, demonstrating his authority and establishing the *Symbolic* using the *Nom du Pere*. When Jeffrey is ultimately rendered unconscious, the black screen acts as a visual cue to symbolise that a transition into the *Imaginary* has occurred. Having overcome the Oedipal complex, Jeffrey is led on by demand signifiers from Dorothy to Sandy, a signifier promising *Jouissance* and allowing Jeffrey to overcome the conflict. Nevertheless, Lynch's attention is not primarily focused on the Son's journey, but rather on the Father's trauma. In both films, the Father is a central figure. When the Son has either attempted to or actually journeyed from the *Real* into the *Imaginary* and reached sexual maturity, the Father continues to compete with the Son for the Mother's attention. This suggests that the primary theme of these films is a tormented family

dynamic that stems from the trauma of the Father. Lynch's depiction of the Father must therefore be psychoanalysed to understand Lynch's portrayal of the family triptych.

The most striking outburst from the Father in *Blue Velvet* is the scene in which Frank sexually abuses Dorothy. When Frank enters, the flat is well lit by yellow lamps, indicating that he has entered from the *Imaginary*, but expects Dorothy to darken the room using candles, creating dark shadows lacking light, which are symbolic of *manque*. Now in the *Real*, to Dorothy, he instructs, "Don't you fucking look at me." He calls her "Mummy" and refers to himself as "Baby" but expects Dorothy to refer to him as "Daddy". He stares at her vulva, then stuffs blue velvet into his and her mouth as well as into her vagina and proceeds to emulate sexual intercourse.

While Frank and Dorothy serve as the paternal authorities to Jeffrey in the absence of his own Father (who suffers from a seizure at the beginning), Frank is clearly traumatised. His sexual proclivities provide clues to what the specific trauma may be. Firstly, his misogynistic and violent treatment of Dorothy stems from a male attitude towards women in that they symbolise *manque*, specifically of the phallus (Mulvey). This scene demonstrates the Freudian structure of this film, as the female character is an incomplete surrogate. She does not serve any greater purpose outside of acting as a solution to Frank's problem. It is therefore likely that Frank fears the lack of a phallus and attacks her in retaliation. From a Lacanian perspective, the phallic lack Frank is suffering from further indicates that Frank is indeed within the *Real*. However, his position as a Father implies that he must have, at one point, sexually progressed. Lacan believed that transitioning from the *Real* to the *Imaginary* after the formation of the *Symbolic* signalled sexual progression, but Frank's return to the *Real* is also indicative of a return to psychosexual immaturity.

This transition is based on Freud's concept of the *Psychosexual Cycle*, a model for the sexual growth of a child. The third stage is the *Phallic stage* when the child experiments with their phallus. This experimentation can either be done with the clitoris or the penis (regardless, Freud perceived all children as 'little men' until their castration or penis envy at the last stage resulting in their genital organisation (Zakin)). The experimentation creates a sexual desire for the Mother and gives way to the Oedipal complex for both boys and girls. Frank, however, is not able to engage his libido; he suffers from *Aphanisis*. He has not engaged the phallic stage because he is stuck at the first stage of the psychosexual cycle, the *Oral stage*. This is why he needs to cover his mouth with a gas mask before he attempts to sexually engage with Dorothy, or why he violently stuffs blue velvet into her mouth. Frank is impotent because is no longer sexually mature, most likely because of a trauma that caused him to return the *Real* and sexual immaturity, thus leaving him in a state of aphanisis. He behaves like a child because he is, psychologically, at the same stage of development as a child. As Slavoj Žižek noted in a "Pervert's Guide to Cinema", Frank's abuse is an overacted performance to hide his impotence from his Son (Jeffrey).



Figure 5: Frank pouts like a Child

The most telling clue of Frank's immaturity comes from his need to look at Dorothy's vulva while at the same time forbidding her to look at him. Freud believed that despite the fact that the *Id* is integral to incentivising humans to live, the *Id* requires restraint from another part of the subconscious, which Freud termed the *Ego*. Lacan takes this a step further and suggests that the *Ego* develops when the child looks into a mirror and ascertains its own place in reality, what he called the *Mirror Phase*. When the *Ego* mirrors the *Real*, it will contain fractures, derived from *manque* in the *Real*. To remedy this, Lacan posits that humans primarily use their visual senses when their *Ego* encounters these fractures. Such an action is called *the Gaze*, and acts as a substitute to the fractured *Ego* (Scott). When Dorothy gazes onto Frank she will no longer have fractures in her *Ego* because the Gaze will substitute those fractures with Frank himself.

Frank's obvious trauma would also have created fractures in his *Ego*. Thus, when he gazes at Dorothy's vulva (figure 5), his *Ego* is searching for a substitute for his own missing phallus as evidenced by the fact that for the majority of the scene, when Frank stares at Dorothy, she is out of frame. Her absence from Frank's gaze represents the *manque* Frank is searching for. The missing phallus substituted by the *manque* implies that Frank has been psychologically castrated. This is idiosyncratic because if Frank wanted to locate a substitute for his missing phallus, he should instead gaze onto male genitalia. An explanation for this comes from Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in which Freud observed a contradiction to *Eros*. Freud observed that children tend to unconsciously repeat traumatic events, a behaviour called *Repetition Compulsion*. Freud believed that repetition compulsion manifested through dreams, play, and recreating the trauma itself. In turn, repetition compulsion would lead to the organism's self-destruction, *Thanatos*, mediated in an opposing energy called *Mortido* or *Destrudo*. Thanatos can serve various useful functions. Firstly, it acts as a defence mechanism by the *Ego* to mediate *Eros*. Secondly, it allows the subject to come to terms with their trauma. Therefore, Frank's Gaze into castration is not to act as a substitute for his own lack but as a form of repetition compulsion (figure 6).

Gaze as a substitute for...

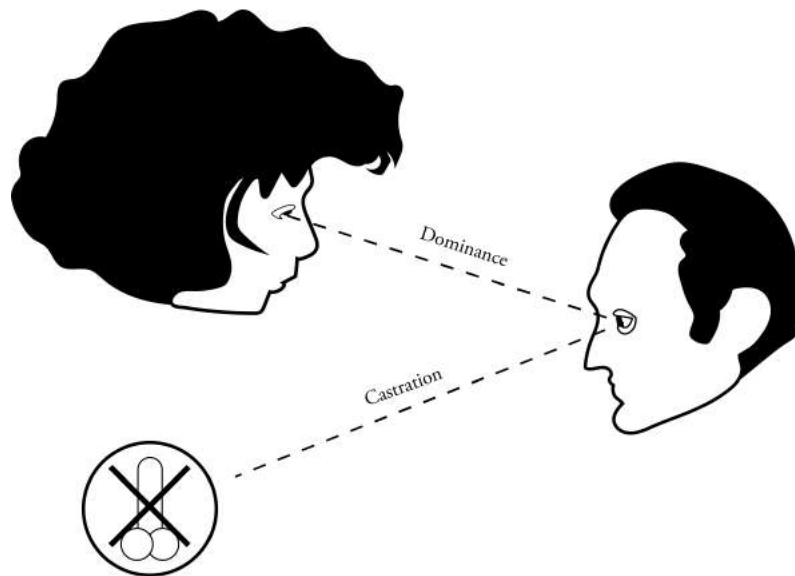


Figure 6: The two gazes present in the scene

It can be inferred that if Frank's castration stemmed from a trauma, then he must have at one point sexually matured, but returned to a state of aphanisis post-trauma. This begs the question: what trauma castrated him? Although Lynch does not explicitly offer an answer to this in *Blue Velvet*, *Eraserhead* provides useful hints considering it focuses solely on the Father.

At the beginning of *Eraserhead*, the man in the planet was seen inside a closed space (the subconscious) operating levers that caused spermatozoa (*libido*) to emerge from Henry's mouth, but at the end, the man is unable to pull the levers. The *Id's* inability to fulfil its function implies that at some point, Henry was castrated. The similar themes between Lynch's films imply that Henry too must suffer from castration as he too competes with his own Son.

When Henry was attempting to consolidate his own castration by making love to his neighbour and attempts to escape into the *Imaginary*, he instead enters the radiator. The appearance of the room within the radiator indicates that it is not the *Real*, *Imaginary* or *Symbolic*, but instead a spatial representation of Henry's own subconscious as evidenced by the *Mise-en-scène*. The set is a theatre, reminiscent of early models of the subconscious (Ward). Onstage are three characters: Henry as the *Ego*, the Man in the Planet as the *Id*, and the Lady in the Radiator as the *Superego*.

The *Superego* is the third part of the subconscious that acts upon the *Id* and the *Ego*. Its values are derived from the world outside the mind. The woman's hair, dress and exaggerated makeup are similar to the fashion in 60s and 70s America, further supporting the notion that she is the *Superego* absorbing the cultural regulations from the outside world (Denzin).

During the radiator scene, Henry's *Ego* first meets the *Superego*, which has crushed his spermatozoa or killed his *libido*. Next, Henry confronts his *Id*, which looks at

him displeased (figure 7). The *Id* is irritated because the *Superego* has castrated Henry, preventing him from accessing his *libido*.



Figure 7: Displeased *Id*

After Henry's decapitation in the pulpit, his head (*Ego*) falls into the world outside the subconscious. His *Ego* was removed by his Son, which implies that his *Ego*'s inability to prevent his castration is because of his Son who killed the *Ego*. It is possible that the Son is the source of trauma. When the head is taken to the pencil factory, material from his head is extracted and made into pencil rubbers. The pencils are phallic in shape but their shapes are rigidly controlled by their very nature as a wooden pencil. The machine that makes these pencils lines them and moves them as if they were being marched. The controlling machine is suggestive of an oppressive industrial setting that forcibly controls its units, implying that the society's male phallic aspect is being oppressed. A similar image is also shown at the beginning of the film when Henry goes to have dinner with the X family. The chickens are supposedly "manmade", or synthetic. When Henry proceeds to carve one of the chickens, it begins to bleed out a large orifice as if it were menstruating, suggesting that the chicken is a symbol of the female genitalia. Like the pencils in the pencil factory, the female genital aspect is also being controlled and oppressed by the industrial society outside Henry's mind.

Freud himself comments upon the effect of institutional oppression on the mind.

"In the domain of sexuality, where suppression is most difficult to carry out, the result is seen in the reactive phenomena of neurotic disorders [...] shown in malformations of character, and in the perpetual readiness of the inhibited instincts to *break through* to satisfaction at any suitable opportunity," (my italics)

(Freud, Thoughts for the Times on War and Death).

The dark, oppressive and industrial setting of *Eraserhead* reflects a traumatic and suppressive historical event. *Eraserhead* shows that sexuality under oppression manifests itself, specifically through the child. To both Mary and Henry, the child is an outward expression of their sexual oppression; they most likely only had intercourse as a reactionary 'break through'. Consequently, they refuse to nurture the child.

To the Father, the child is the symbol of oppression that traumatises him. He perceives the child not as a Son but as a sexual threat and causes him to psychologically regress. Regression is a psychological defence mechanism Freud identified that the *Ego* uses when it is threatened by either the *Id* or the *Superego*. It is characterised by the subject's return to an earlier stage of the psychosexual cycle. Such a diagnosis can also be applied to Frank's trauma in *Blue Velvet*, as evidenced by his fear of castration and his obsession with the oral stage.

Regression would explain why Frank was fixated on the oral stage. Likewise in *Eraserhead*, Henry's regression causes him to return to the *Real* as a child would in order to relocate its *objet petit a*, explaining Lynch's consistent use of shadows throughout *Eraserhead*. In both films, as the Father is unable to nurture the Son in an authoritative role, he childishly competes with the child's own *objet petit a*, its Mother, so that he may rediscover his own. With no grandfather to impose the *Nom du Pere* on the Father, he is ultimately trapped in the *Real* until either he or his Son perishes.

Conclusion

In essence, Lynch is highlighting the psychological effects of societal trauma such as war or an economic crisis on a family scale. He is showing that when a trauma manifests sexually, it can cause psychological defence mechanisms like regression to occur, leading to the destruction of families.

One can see from Lynch's films that the effects of societal traumas can have devastating individual effects. In *Eraserhead*, Henry was unable to serve the parental role because he was competing with his Son, leading to their destruction leaving the Father trapped in the *Real*. *The Psychoses*, Lacan writes, "Where is the Father in this [Father-Mother-Child Triangle]? He is in the ring that holds all this together." Lacan is saying that imposing the *Nom du Pere* is not enough for the child to fully develop. The Father needs to consciously allow the Son to accede him so that the Son may realise the power of his own phallus. At the end of *Blue Velvet* when Jeffrey shoots Frank, even though Jeffrey has already overcome the Oedipal complex, he has forcefully acceded his Father. When the Father is trapped in the *Real*, the Son's accession necessitates one of the two perishing. It seems that in a competition between Father and Son, Lynch favours the destruction of the former over the latter. In the final scene, when Jeffrey and Sandy embrace, a bright light completely illuminates the screen, then fades to an ear, except this time, the camera is zooming out and away from the ear, symbolising an exit from the *Real* and back to the *Imaginary*.

Despite the fact that the family unit can be destroyed as shown in *Eraserhead*, it is possible for the child to escape the *Real* and return stability to the family as shown in *Blue Velvet*. Through his films, Lynch has shown that a return to stability in a family primarily rests on the psychosexual health of the child, and not the Father.

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