From Color to Form: A Breakdown of David Lynch's most notorious films.

Wilfredo J. Ramos

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Film and Television Production
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Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Film and Television Department in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Savannah College of Art and Design

By

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# Table of Contents

List of Figures 1

Abstract 2

**Introduction** 3

   Background of the Study 4
   Purpose of the Study 8
   Research Questions 8
   Research Scope 8

**Methodology and Hypotheses** 9

**Observations and Discussion** 9

   The Color Palettes and Symbolisms 9
   Contrast in Eraserhead, Blue Velvet, and Eraserhead 21
   Composition in Eraserhead, Blue Velvet and Eraserhead 23

**Conclusions** 28

**Works Cited** 30
List of Figures

Fig. 1.1 Rita and Betty

Fig. 1.2 Sandy Williams and Jeffrey Beaumont

Fig. 1.3 Diane, telephone, and lampshade

Fig. 1.4 Diane and red pole

Fig. 1.5 Slow Club from Blue Velvet

Fig. 1.6 Club Silencio from Mulholland Dr.

Fig. 1.7 Frank Booth and Dorothy Vallens in Blue Velvet

Fig. 1.8 Frank Booth with red lipstick

Fig. 1.9 Frank Booth and Jeffrey Beaumont

Fig. 1.10 Adam Kesher in Mulholland Dr.

Fig. 1.11 Rita/Camille and Betty/Diane in Mulholland Dr.

Fig. 1.12 Betty's Arrival to Los Angeles in Mulholland Dr.

Fig. 1.13 Blue Box in Mulholland Dr.

Fig. 1.14 Club Silencio from Mulholland Dr.

Fig. 1.15 Club Silencio Performers

Fig. 1.16 Jeffrey and Dorothy in Blue Velvet

Fig. 1.17 Frank Booth with gun and blue velvet robe

Fig. 2.0 Henry in Eraserhead

Fig. 2.1 Un chien Anadalou and Blue Velvet

Fig. 2.2 Lighting and color contrast in Blue Velvet and Mulholland Dr.

Fig. 3.0 Selected shots from opening sequence in Blue Velvet

Fig. 3.1 Floating camera on Dan and Herb in Mulholland Dr.

Fig. 3.2 Diner table at Winkie's in Mulholland Dr

Fig. 3.3 Arrow signs at Winkie's

Fig 3.4 The face

Fig. 3.5 Eraser baby
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Abstract:
This thesis breaks down the visual elements of composition and color palette in David Lynch’s work. It provides an insightful look on how the filmmaker utilizes: composition and color in order to tell a story. The selected works of David Lynch are closely dissected and referenced to reveal how his artistic choices succeed in providing each of these films a specific underlying tone and context, while maintaining his unique directorial style.
I. INTRODUCTION

David Lynch is considered one of the most enigmatic and controversial filmmakers in cinema history. He is truly an American artist, not only a filmmaker, but a painter, a musician and performance artist. He is methodical and a purist who strives to recreate his vision on screen at all times. His movies are driven by the opposition of light and darkness, good and evil, innocence and knowledge, exhilaration and terror. He is fully aware and embraces human complexity as a complementary contradiction of elements.

His work is considered in the forefront of avant-garde filmmaking and has significantly influenced a new generation of filmmakers’ work. Although he had been critically successful since the late 1970's with “Eraserhead” (1977), it isn’t until what is regarded as his breakthrough film “Blue Velvet” (1986) that Lynch becomes popular with its film’s critical and commercial success. “Mulholland Dr.” (2001) equally recaptures the critics and audience’s attention after roughly fifteen years of outstanding commercial, television and film work. These three films adequately represent Lynch’s directing career of over thirty years and purposely serve as blueprints of masterful cinematic imagery.
Background of the Study

From his first feature “Eraserhead” (1977), which is regarded as a cult classic film, to all of his succeeding films, Lynch has always twisted and disrupted the spectators' anticipations of a traditional filmmaking approach, frame composing, plot points, character development, and peculiar themes. What he portrays to the audience is a surreal perspective, which is usually outlandish, that enables them to experience the world of cinema in a completely new manner.

Lynch has successfully combined the power of unique cinematography and unorthodox story in his films, which are chiefly character driven. The spectators are "introduced to memorable characters through the film corpus" created by "the artistic and eccentric mind of Lynch" (Devlin and Biderman 1). Such characters are unique protagonists, baleful villains, and absolutely mysterious characters. Imagining "a world in which painting would be in perpetual motion", Lynch eagerly "began to make films which looked like moving paintings, no more and no less" (Chion 9). The concept of "moving paintings" or "film paintings" is a helpful way to contemplate the relation of the films of Lynch to mainstream cinema and to conceptualize "the impact of digital technology upon film production, distribution and exhibition" (Mactaggart 141).

Often, the style of a filmmaker refers to his or her visual manner, which may involve the mise-en-scene including "costumes, sets, lighting, and character movement that he or she puts before the camera" (Stubbs 2). The mise-en-scene also involve how the filmmaker uses the camera, which entails camera movement, duration of shots, frame composition or on-screen arrangement of the elements. Since it establishes "which visual elements are included in the image and how they are arranged", composition is vital to the creation of eye-catching moving images that are essential to storytelling (Long and Schenk 185). Moreover, filmmaking style has
something to do the method and rhythm used by the filmmaker to edit the shots within a sequence and subsequently, the sequences within the whole film (Long and Schenk 185).

In terms of uniqueness, the source may be an specific collection of stylistic elements used by a filmmaker although any specific element is also a part of the collection of another filmmaker (Stubbs 2). In other words, a visual element is deemed significant in the filmmaker's style when it is typically repeated from film to film for visual effect. One essential storytelling device that can provide the film with underlying context is color and the fact that Lynch utilizes similar color palettes throughout his films, deems it significant in his style.

It is difficult to determine which colors to use. In order to guarantee that the accent color serves as the focus with a dominant color scheme in the composition, a simple method is to select "two colors similar in nature and one color completely different from the others" (Carrera 11). According to Carrera, the palette should be limited to a maximum of four colors, which will result in a unified appearance, instead of applying all the colors in the rainbow because "the key is to use restraint" (11).

Lynch himself firmly believes in restraint and maintains that there are certain rules that films should obey, and one of the major rules is contrast, since prominent elements are a result of great contrast. As Olson puts it, Lynch's awareness of human intricacy recognizes that "beneath the surface of one side of a duality can flow symbiotic undercurrents of its opposite" despite the fact that his movies are motivated by "the charged, high-definition opposition of light and darkness, good and evil, innocence and knowledge, exhilaration and terror" (5).
Lynch compel the spectators to become aware of how their desire is taken by the film itself into consideration. The great success of Lynch's films, which have sequences that disclose the personal investment of spectators in what they see, lies in their capability to divide the space between spectator and screen.

Instead of fostering the suspension of disbelief by providing the audience with more plausible scenarios, Lynch's cinema modifies "the cinematic viewing situation itself" and deprives the spectator of staying at a secure distance from what happens on the screen (McGowan 2). The films of Lynch convey a feeling or mood that is strongly related to a kind of intellectual ambiguity, which Lynch himself calls as a state of "being lost in darkness and confusion", where "the uncanny clearly expresses itself" (Lynch and Rodley x). This is the very essence of the cinema that is uniquely by Lynch.

Based on Freudian psychology, the uncanny is repressed because it is secretly all too familiar. Its attributes are "the field of what is frightening" and are "those of dread rather than actual terror, of the haunting rather than the apparition" (Lynch and Rodley x). The uncanny, which produces a disconcerting strangeness in the manifestly common by transforming the homely into the unhomely, is the opposite of uncanny or monstrous things, but does not reside in them.

Due to exaggeration, these uncanny or monstrous things do not provoke fear. The uncanny's psychological manifestation was in the image of the double, where the danger is recognized as a duplication of the self, which especially frightening since its uniqueness is deceptively identical, and Lynch's films, including “Eraserhead”, “Blue Velvet”, and “Mulholland Dr.” are its early artistic manifestation (Lynch and Rodley xi).
A typical film by Lynch can be repulsive to numerous spectators since manipulations and distortions of reality are showcased and the basis for the actions of the characters are rational fallacies and paradoxes. Lynch is often regarded as a filmmaker who manipulates the spectator by impeccably playing an irrational scene upright. For optimal result, a typical film by Lynch has a careful planning and manipulation of reality despite its seemingly uncontrolled and irrational appearance to the spectator. In order to build a sense of order out of disorder within each of his films, Lynch is a filmmaker who forces his brand of logic upon each story. This in turn will make the haphazard and illogical events all around his characters seem right.

Often, repetitive viewings are needed in order for the spectator to completely grasp the multilayered meaning built by Lynch into the structure of his violent and sexually explicit films, which commonly come with grave figurative content and an atypical narrative structure. The films by Lynch are typically structured in such a way that both the spectator's customary experience of the cinema and the film theory history are engaged and challenged (McGowan 2).

From his first feature “Eraserhead”, through each of his subsequent films, the films of David Lynch present a challenge to the viewing situation, in which any experience of the proximity of a film is carefully arbitrated one since the spectators can see without being seen while the characters on screen can never see but will always be seen. Aside from recognizing the basic truth regarding the irrationality of human existence, Lynch is a filmmaker who celebrates such paradox by creating his own perspective. This is the beauty of the works of David Lynch.
**Purpose of the Study**

In general, this paper aims to explore the filmmaking style of Davis Lynch in terms of visual elements. Specifically, three of David Lynch's films, namely “Eraserhead”, “Blue Velvet” and “Mulholland Dr.” will be compared in terms of color palettes, composition, contrast, and symbolisms. It is initially hypothesized that David Lynch applied similar color palettes in “Blue Velvet” and “Mulholland Drive” and similar compositions throughout his films, while contrast is unique to the film. The results of this analysis can help provide a better understanding of David Lynch's body of work.

**Research Questions**

In order to analyze the visual elements used by David Lynch in his films Eraserhead, Blue Velvet and Mulholland Drive, the following research questions are put forth:

1. Are the color palettes and symbolisms in Blue Velvet and Mulholland Dr. similar?
2. Is the contrast unique for all three films?
3. Are screen compositions in all three films similar?

**Research Scope**

Countless studies have tackled the distinctiveness of Lynch's cinema, but in this particular paper only the visual elements of Lynch's films: “Eraserhead”, “Blue Velvet”, and “Mulholland Drive” will be compared. As a filmmaker, Lynch reinforces the very essence of how he defines a film, a subjective thing that will not tell the entire story (Rodley 26). Since Lynch's work is rather personal, it is not the scope of this research to fully interpret his films but to analyze some of its concepts and execution.
II. METHODOLOGY AND HYPOTHESES

Specifically, it is the objective of the study to identify the similarities and differences between “Blue Velvet” and “Mulholland Dr.” in terms of color palettes, as well as, composition and contrast between all three films. Although comparative research methodology lacks peculiar methodology (Heidenheimer, Heclo, & Adams, 51), it is selected for this study since it has the ability to effectively structure a comparison. In order to corroborate the premise that Lynch's films have similar visual characteristics, this research puts forth three hypotheses:

1. Blue Velvet and Mulholland Dr. have similar color palettes and symbolisms.
2. The contrast in all three films is unique.
3. Eraserhead, Blue Velvet, and Mulholland Dr. have similar screen compositions.

III. OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Color Palettes and Symbolisms

Perhaps, color has been the most often used filmmaking element to indicate significant changes. In order to accomplish this, color is used by either combining it with black and white or shifting to a clearly dissimilar color style or accent at the transition stage, which David Lynch used in “Blue Velvet”. In this film, the visual elements feature vibrant color palette and dark sequences. With regards to the colors on the palette of “Blue Velvet”, the artistic decisions of Lynch has incorporated his self-styled film paintings and soft image in the film.

David Lynch starts the story of “Blue Velvet” with a romanticized atmosphere of a small town depicted in adorable dogs, playing children, bright flowers, and white picket fences in shimmering colors. Subsequently, Lynch dims the image as he desaturates color. The spectator is
then taken on a memorable trip into the mysterious underbelly of evil, vice, and sleaze underneath the facade.

On the other hand, among all of the films of David Lynch, “Mulholland Dr.” is considered to be the most entrenched in a detailed background. With its iconic landscape and its potential for a horrifying tryst in the dark, Los Angeles was a perfect backdrop for the aesthetically manipulated visual elements of the film. What Lynch did in “Mulholland Dr.” is to constantly use hot versus cold and light versus dark visually in opposition. Constant visual opposition is shown by the two major characters of the film, portrayed by Naomi Watts with blonde hair and Laura Elena Harring with black hair.

Lynch heavily relies on color to help tell his stories. “Blue Velvet” and “Mulholland Dr.” not only follow a purposefully limited color palette, but also follows certain rules by associating specific colors and hues with each character. Since Lynch's films are widely considered surrealist artwork from a character driven director, it is important to focus our attention to color selection in characters' wardrobe and props. It becomes quite apparent the importance of color symbolism when observing how the distinctions between the use of red, black, blue, and pink are so critical for plot development and tone in both films.

For example, in “Mulholland Dr.” Betty is wearing a pinkish top that she has on throughout many scenes in the film. There is a stark contrast being made between her pink color and the red that Rita constantly wears.
In Blue Velvet, Sandy Williams also wears pink throughout the film. Both characters exude innocence and sexual immaturity and it is no coincidence that Lynch decided to associate the color pink with them.

The way he carefully selects red colored props provide stronger clues to help us understand how Lynch sexualizes that color. When Diane is in the room with the red lampshade, there is an attempt to indicate a situation involving prostitution, with a telephone being present to further indicate a call girl business.
In the scene where we see Diane walk away from Pink's establishment, which by itself is a sexually charged metaphor given the phallic nature of a hot dog business, we see her being trailed by a long red pole or rod that is being carried by a man that has been blatantly placed into the scene which makes it a clear phallic symbol. Lynch develops a color narrative that describes an initial state of pink that is then left behind during a movement toward a red state that involves sexual perversion.

**Fig. 1.4 Diane and red pole**
However, Lynch also utilizes red to portray tension or drama when connected to a stage or curtains as in the Slow Club or Club Silencio.

**Fig. 1.5 Slow Club from Blue Velvet**

![Slow Club from Blue Velvet](image)

**Fig. 1.6 Club Silencio from Mulholland Dr.**

![Club Silencio from Mulholland Dr.](image)

Red is also used to represent sex and violence in Blue Velvet, although in a much muted way. The color red is seen mostly on Dorothy Vallens and Frank Booth's lips. Lynch's use of an intense color red on Dorothy Vallens' lips allude to the receptive nature of the mouth and its sexual connotations. Dorothy flawlessly embodies arousal by liquidity and decay, which according to Mulvey are abject in nature (64). She is a victim of Frank’s transgressions and becomes a mere receptacle to Frank’s sexual frustrations.
In the scene where Frank Booth smears on red lipstick before proceeding to beat Jeffrey Beaumont, Lynch utilizes the color red to symbolize both, Frank's depraved sexuality and his violent nature. The end result is a predatory-like imagery representing Booth's inability to control his violent and sexual impulses.

Lynch's use of black or dark colors is often attributed to either powerful characters or characters with powerful inner conflicts. In both films, the characters who wear black either exercise excessive influence over others or they constantly find themselves questioning their own
identity. For example, Frank Booth wears black throughout Blue Velvet and he overpowers everyone on screen with his misogynistic and violent ways. Jeffrey Beaumont wears black at first as a sign of his inner struggles with the hardships of becoming a man. As the story unfolds, it is a way for David Lynch to portray Jeffrey's affinity to Frank Booth and the homo-social relationship they develop (McGowan 103).

Fig. 1.9 Frank Booth, Jeffrey Beaumont in Blue Velvet

However, in “Mulholland Dr.” black not only represents power by associating it with any character who represents the Hollywood establishment, but also it is mostly used as a complement to the color red, which leads us to believe that black also represents sexual empowerment.

Fig. 1.10 Hollywood director Adam Kesher in Mulholland Dr.
The last color symbol that is fundamental to the subtext of both films is the color blue. Duality is a critical element in “Mulholland Dr.” and “Blue Velvet”. Lynch utilizes some kind of element for shifting between two clashing forces. In these two films, David Lynch uses the color blue to symbolize fundamental transitions. “Mulholland Dr.” utilizes blue as a bridge to connect reality with dreams. Whereas in Blue Velvet, the color blue represents Jeffrey Beaumont's descent into a world of sexual perversity and violence.

When Betty arrives to Los Angeles, she is seen carrying her blue luggage, which clearly represents change or transition within the context of the scene. The luggage represents her transition into a surreal fantasy just as the blue box later in the film will transition her Betty persona out of her fantasy and into Diane's reality.
The blue box, as well as the blue key that is needed to open it, are another important transitional element in the film. The box may very well represent Diane's darkness as it opens the worst possible aspects of her failed persona.
Lynch successfully recreates the Pandora's box metaphor by associating the color blue with container-like objects. In the Club Silencio scene, we see a number of different types of blue transitional objects, not to mention that the establishment itself is a big blue box.

**Fig. 1.14 Club Silencio from Mulholland Dr.**

Diane gradually transitions from her fantasies into the harsh realities of her life in stages until finally realizing her downfall. The events that unfold at the club allow Diane to uncover her repressed persona. The magician at the club and the blue haired lady help Diane transition into reality.
Their presence there is to complete Diane's awakening and revelation of her murderous nature. It is widely known that Lynch has some sort of personal interest in Abraham Lincoln's assassination and that he alludes to it in Blue Velvet and “Mulholland Dr.” (Olson 192). The Lady with the blue hair is placed in an old theater with a box seat. It was in a similar box seat that Abraham Lincoln's assassination took place. All of these transitional elements successfully reveal to Diane her attempts to use her fantasies of Betty and Rita to reinvent her relationship with Camilla and her fantasies slowly fade into reality.

In Blue Velvet, the color blue is used as a transitional element in a more subtle way. Dorothy Vallens wears a blue velvet robe that covers her naked and abused body and the imagery is filled with sexual underpinnings.

Lynch's purposeful selection of a blue robe is analogous to Mulholland Dr.'s blue box. The robe represents a container-like object, a door or pathway that Jeffrey Beaumont opens, exposing himself to Frank Booth's dark and seductive world of sex and violence.
Although Frank Booth mostly wears black or dark colors as the dominant figure he is, he also keeps around the blue velvet robe as he carries out violent acts. In these instances, David Lynch uses the color blue as a catalyst to move the plot forward and thus provoke change.
Contrast in Eraserhead, Blue Velvet, and Mulholland Dr.

The interaction and contrast between light and shadow is essential to the metaphorical and visual aesthetics of David Lynch's films, which extend even to the scrupulously organized black-and-white self-embellishment of the films. In “Eraserhead”, the scene of the character Henry anticipating darkness, which is one of the best images of the films and perhaps of all other Lynch films. The illustrative appearance and elusive metaphysics of the gloomy state of Henry had reverberated all through the later works of Lynch with increasing intricacy.

Fig. 2.0 Henry in Eraserhead

According to Sheen and Davidson (5), "Eraserhead” relies upon formal and thematic techniques familiar within the horror genre in order to engender its uncanny effects". Aesthetically, “Eraserhead” is a mixture between expressionism and surrealism, which is a powerful, illuminating black and white space condemned to suffer the injuries of the misfortunes of a man whose obsession is planted between paternity and sharing a life in unbearable company. Beyond mere artistic ability, Lynch provides a very personal and sincere approach to all of his films.
Lynch's low-key lighting approach enhances Eraserhead's thematic elements and surrealistic approach reminiscent to Buñuel's “Un chien Andalou” (1929).

**Fig. 2.1** *Un chien Andalou and Eraserhead*

High contrast lighting is also used by Lynch in “Blue Velvet” and "Mulholland Dr." to a certain degree. However, in those films Lynch prefers color over lighting for contrast. Lynch is known for not shying away from the recording medium's limitation. Therefore, it is possible he decided to embrace the black and white film stock's inherent qualities by pushing lighting contrast in “Eraserhead” while embracing color in the other films.

**Fig. 2.2** *Lighting (left) and color contrast (right) in Blue Velvet (top) and Mulholland Dr. (Bottom)*
Composition in Eraserhead, Blue Velvet, and Mulholland Dr.

The juxtaposition of opposites on screen is a unifying element in these three films. The clash of good versus evil, life or death, and innocence versus sex permeate through each of Lynch's films. However, it is through his predominant use of close-ups or tight framing that we develop a cohesive understanding of what really drives David Lynch's work. Close-ups allow motion pictures to portray large scale portions of an action or imagery and transport the audience into a scene while creating narrative emphasis (Mascelli 173). It is through this narrative emphasis that Lynch creates unsettling compositions of the grotesque.

Lynch uses the grotesque as a driving force behind his films. Thompson refers to it as a fundamental element of disharmony and disparity (11). Lynch basically observes the textbook definition of the grotesque in his films as it is defined as an artistic representation having: bizarre, incongruous, ugly, unnatural, fantastic, abnormal qualities (Harmon 244). Furthermore, grotesque art may very well express the repressed and push boundaries (Bloom 95).

Lynch provides cinematic emphasis to the grotesque through his close-up compositions of decay and disgust. For example, in “Blue Velvet” he creates an opening sequence comprised of beautiful shots depicting suburban America, immediately followed by an unsettling scene where Jeffrey Beaumont's dad suffers a stroke in a somewhat comedic fashion as the camera quickly settles by moving into a close-up of insects crawling on the dirt underneath the luscious grass. In such a short sequence Lynch manages to combine opposites by juxtaposing: beauty with ugliness and comedy with tragedy.
David Lynch opening sequence is a clash of opposites by itself. An ordinary day, immediately becomes abnormal when Mr. Beaumont suffers a stroke. Lynch also lets the audience know with his close-up shot on insects that although things might look pretty and perfect on the surface, ugliness crawls underneath. Lynch cinematically emphasizes, through his camera movement and tight framing, that contradicting elements have always harmoniously coexisted in nature even if they can't be seen at first glance.

In "Mulholland Dr.", grotesque elements are not as conspicuous as in his other films. The grotesque emerges from Lynch's purposefully concealment of what is real and what is a dream, thus resulting in a nightmare. The diner scene at Winkie's is a great example of Lynch's masterful blend of reality and fantasy. In the scene, Dan is telling Herb about his keen interest
on meeting at that particular diner and how that location relates to an awful dream he had where he encounters a beast with such repulsive characteristics that he winds up psychologically scarred from seeing it.

The scene is filled with subtle contradictions, that when combined, enhance Lynch's surrealist imagery. Lynch intentionally keeps the camera constantly floating while both characters interact in a rather rigid and limited range of motion, which magnifies the camera movement.

**Fig. 3.1** *Floating camera on Dan and Herb in Mulholland Dr.*

![Floating camera on Dan and Herb in Mulholland Dr.](image)

When Dan steps out of the frame, the camera proceeds to frame the diner table where Dan's breakfast is neatly set up and completely untouched. Lynch subtlety warns the audience that what is actually unfolding is Dan's nightmare.

**Fig. 3.2** *Diner table at Winkie's in Mulholland Dr.*

![Diner table at Winkie's in Mulholland Dr.](image)
Once again Lynch provides cinematic emphasis by drawing the audience's attention to the intrinsic contradiction of Dan's actions. Dan feels compelled to walk towards his nightmare, even though all the signs tell him not to do so. Consequently, the nightmare materializes with the expected yet sudden apparition of the monstrous face through which the grotesque is fully formed, a beast with kind green eyes and smile.

**Fig. 3.3** *Arrow sign at Winkie's*

![Arrow sign at Winkie's](image)

**Fig. 3.4** *The face*

![The face](image)
In “Eraserhead”, the grotesque takes prominence. From the lady in the radiator with prominent cheeks, to the disturbing images of worm-like figures; the film never lacks shocking elements to draw the audience's attention. However, it is the baby what embodies the grotesque like no other cinematic imagery from the film. It represents a living contradiction of something that under normal circumstances should not be alive. Lynch's use of a baby as a breathing manifestation of fear is paramount to his film as it represents his own fears on parenthood and how he successfully embraces filmmaking as a personal endeavor.

**Fig. 3.5 Eraserhead baby**
IV. CONCLUSIONS

More than three decades ago, a painter from the midwest created the characters namely Mary and Henry Spencer, who demonstrated a complex vision of anxious and repressed sexuality and failed marriage in the film “Eraserhead”. Almost a decade later, Blue Velvet is indeed the breakthrough work in the filmmaking career of David Lynch, by mixing Oedipal madness, sadism, and voyeurism. The three vital characters of the film, Jeffrey Beaumont, Frank Booth and Dorothy Vallens all exist in a world that depicts the sadistic and sexual underbelly of suburban tranquil life. Both, “Eraserhead” and “Blue Velvet” present a peek into the surrealist image of the outlandish sexuality and deviant family structure of David Lynch. A pattern of surreal and misshapen imagery weaves through every Lynch film, and jointly and individually merge them as cinematic compositions condensed from an entirely American auteur's imagination.

The ominous character Frank Booth in Blue Velvet both proclaims "nocturnal solace found" and invokes "the ravenous, animalistic demons eager to spring forth from his twisted psyche" (Olson 65). In like manner, Lynch crafted “Mulholland Drive” as an ominous and carefree schizoid fantasy. It is an amazing film in several ways, as it is filled with extraordinary imagery and risky elegant endeavors. As the perfect and most personal film by Lynch, “Eraserhead” portrays sex as a horrendous and blameworthy act that influences the characters in a life-changing physical materialization. On the other hand, Mulholland Drive ingeniously blends surreal eeriness, black comedy, and tragic drama.
As a surrealistic filmmaker, David Lynch takes the most primitive and diabolic truths of human existence. Then, he intensifies those truths and projects them on screen through characters and their interface with the surroundings. The visual elements established by Lynch reveal a prominent textural detail, and interconnect them with a firm consistency between dream and logic, which eliminates our disbelief.

Aside from investigating analogous themes of misshapen sexuality and failed marriage, both Eraserhead and Blue Velvet examine the surreal world of imagination of David Lynch. Like “Blue Velvet”, “Mulholland Dr.” features one of the specially remarkable elements of Lynch filmography, which is the vision of the city.

Three conclusions were derived from this qualitative analysis of the three David Lynch films. First, in the films “Blue Velvet” and “Mulholland Dr.”, the color palettes applied by David Lynch are similar in terms of pattern and use. Second, although all three films have unifying elements and patterns, they are not similar in terms of the overall use of light and color contrast. However, this may be due to Lynch's extensive use of multiple film and video formats to shoot his movies, which he fully embraces. Third, the compositions applied by David Lynch in “Eraserhead”, “Blue Velvet”, and "Mulholland Dr." are similar, although the latter one somewhat diverts from the rest.
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