

DESCENDING INTO HELL: AN APPROACH TO CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS AND LYNCH'S BLUE VELVET

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ABSTRACT: *This paper makes a comparative reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* (1987) giving emphases to thematic narrative similitudes between the two works.*

KEY WORDS: *literature; cinema; comparativism.*

I n the Spring of 1987 I first saw David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* at the Lumière cinema in London within a few days of its British release**. It was the time I was leaving in England where I studied for my PhD in English Literature, more precisely on Joseph Conrad's fiction. I saw Lynch's film in the first show early in the afternoon since the tickets were cheaper. That was a time when Conrad's novels occupied my frame of mind intensely. Actually, the night before I saw *Blue Velvet* I had been working on my thesis chapter on Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) until the early hours of the morning. I had already seen a review on Channel 4 about the controversy risen in the United States about Lynch's film because it showed a young man's sexual initiation by an older and highly sensual woman, a night club singer, who enjoyed being beaten when making love. My efforts to find new aspects to explore in Conrad's fiction drove me to see Lynch's film in an attempt to find more about the dark side of ordinary things. Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and *Heart of Darkness*

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(1902) have occupied my mind throughout the years of my study of literature.

As I started seeing *Blue Velvet* I felt very thrilled to notice that I was allowed by my imagination to make a double journey within two different areas of the expression of human emotion I enjoy very much: Literature and cinema. As the protagonist in Lynch's film "the university student Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) returns to his middle-class American hometown of Lumberton where his father has had a heart attack while watering the lawn" and later when the film shows him "crossing a waste lot on his way back from a hospital visit, Jeffrey discovered a human ear covered with ants, and turns it over as evidence to a police officer", (French, 1987) I started a highly cinematic experience led by Lynch's and Conrad's hands. Jeffrey's curiosity about the human ear he found made me think of Conrad's Marlow who in *Heart of Darkness* feels fascinated by maps of unexplored regions and feels particularly impressed about the shape of the Congo river that for him resembles "a snake uncoiled" (12). This made me realize that both the film and the novel deal with the theme of initiation expressed by the two protagonists descent into hell. In Conrad's novel, hell is represented by Marlow's view of the atrocities done by the Congo colonizers whereas in Lynch's film hell is Jeffrey Beaumont's unveiling of Lumberton's dark side. Furthermore, the novel and the film have in common their main protagonist's fascination for the unknown. This is a process that links the two male protagonists to women. What distinguishes the influence of women on masculine initiation from the novella to the film is that in the former women are invited to stay "out of it". In *Heart of Darkness* women contribute to the preservation of a world of masculine idealism. Only men are confronted with evil detected in the hidden face of the costs of civilization, whereas in the film the male protagonist is told by a woman about evil as he initiates his search for the secret side of his provincial hometown. For me Sandy Williams (Laura Dern), Jeffrey Beaumont's girlfriend in *Blue Velvet* corre-

spond to Kurtz's Intended in *Heart of Darkness* to a certain extent. However, differently from the Intended who lives in a world of illusion, Sandy even being a representative of the establishment, is the one who leads Jeffrey towards the mystery concerning the severed human ear.

Sandy is brought to the scene in a unusual way. She resembles an apparition coming out from the darkness. She appears as a mysterious and provocative voice in the night shades of her house garden. This resembles the ambience of Marlow's interview with Kurtz's Intended. It is dark and the Intended is part of the gloom. She greets Marlow and the narrator stresses the darkness of the scene by telling us that "the room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead".(76)

In *Blue Velvet* before Sandy first appears on the screen we hear her voice asking Jeffrey if he is the one who found the ear. Next, she starts telling Jeffrey about her eavesdropping concerned about her father's investigations, (detective Williams, Lumberton's police officer) related to their hometown's criminals. She tells Jeffrey about a seedy singer called Dorothy Vallens (Isabela Rossellini) and they head for the place she lives, a shabby building called *Deep River* on Lincoln Avenue. This represents the starting point of Jeffrey's journey towards the evils of sadomasochism, extreme violence and drug dealing. It is an exploration into the underworld in which he is first of all guided by a woman.

The sinister building where the blues singer lives represents to me a visual symbol to stress the protagonist's gradual descent into Lumberton's darkness. It makes me think of the Company Offices in *Heart of Darkness* since they are immersed "in deep shadow" and show "innumerable windows with venetian blinds" plunged in "a dead silence" (10). This can be related to Jeffrey's fascination for the *Deep River* building where he actually goes under disguise in order to pursue his investigation. Both building the one in the film and the other in the novella provide an ominous atmosphere to the narrative and recall the idea of death. In *Blue Velvet*

Jeffrey and Sandy look at Dorothy's building at nighttime giving to the sequence a nightmarish flavour. The atmosphere of menace in this scene is increased as the camera approaches the street name, Lincoln, perched on an old frame. This time, we hear a striking sound from the soundtrack to stress menace. It is a device that resembles the styles of the Film Noirs, this "vaguely defined genre (as the name announces, it was first named by the French) ... Part detective story, part gangster, part urban melodrama, Film Noir was identified best by its dark and pessimistic under currents" (Monaco 1981:253). *Blue Velvet* resembles a Film Noir in its detective search but is rather hybrid in style as a whole. The film is set in a locale "that appears so extraordinarily familiar, a particle of too many distinctive generational images (from the fifties through the eighties)" (Corrigan, 1991: 71). This because Lumberton and its inhabitants are portrayed in a strange way. There are details and situations in the film narrative resembling both the fifties and the eighties. This makes it impossible for the audience to detect the exact chronological ambience of the film.

The film sequence showing Jeffrey and Sandy before Dorothy's building also shows Jeffrey's transgression beyond the limits of Lumberton safety. His aunt's warning about Jeffrey's not going to Lincoln comes to one's mind. The sequence showing him leaving home to see detective Williams is highly ironical through visual imagery. Lynch backlights Jeffrey's figure to build up his irony. He is shown as a silhouette coming downstairs. As he approaches the door he listens to his aunt's advice. Furthermore, Lynch's ironically depicts Jeffrey's journey into darkness by making a parallel with his search for the mystery of the human ear and his aunts watching the telly. It shows a close up of a man's legs cautiously climbing up a staircase in an old back and white film. This is precisely what Jeffrey is doing because he is hiding from his aunts everything about his search. Therefore, it is as if the image on the old telly screen were telling Jeffrey's secret to his aunts.

As my mind carries on the parallels between *Blue Velvet* and *Heart of Darkness* I associated Jeffrey's attitude to Marlow's lie. Jeffrey hides from his aunts his fascination for the hidden and forbidden side of Lumberton because these two women are domestic types that wouldn't be able to understand the dark side of their hometown. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow believes women are "out of touch with truth" (18) and ends by lying to Kurtz's Intended endorsing the Victorian attitude of excluding women about the knowledge of the evils of the masculine world.

The evil that is visualised early in the film as a severed ear eventually turns into a woman's sensual open mouth. Firstly, however, the close up made on the ear takes us to recollect the image of a tunnel that takes us and Jeffrey towards mystery. Just before Jeffrey first meets Sandy, and, on his way to her house to see detective Williams, the camera in a close shot takes us inside of a human ear. It is as if we were being taken by a whirlwind leading to a black hole. This creates a tunnel – like symbolism that is reduplicated as Sandy comes out of darkness to join Jeffrey in his search for the ear mystery. The street they walk together in the evening time is also visualised with a camera movement resembling a tunnel. This suggests that Jeffrey and Sandy are travelling together in a journey of initiation towards evil. Taking up the leading role Sandy relates the ear found to the woman singer who lives in a creeping gothic building near the place where the ear was found.

As the narrative unfolds Jeffrey finds out that Dorothy Vallens, the blues singer, is deeply immersed into the evil side of the town. She had her husband and son kidnapped by Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) the perverse drug dealer who develops a sadomasochistic relationship with Dorothy. The sex scenes between Frank and Dorothy involve violence and humiliation. At times, she plays the mother for him and some other times she plays his bitch while Frank curses and hits Dorothy. Her seduction powers are epitomised in her singing "Blue Velvet" in the town's night club. This is the song that opens the film introducing us into the apparent quiet nature of the town. The song played in the film introduction is a

conventional ballad performed into the fifties style. In Dorothy's performance the song becomes a rendering of sensuality. It turns into a sensual version that functions as a lullaby to the pervert Frank who makes love to a piece of blue velvet from her robe, as he watches Dorothy singing while Jeffrey, on his turn, discovers the power of female sexuality in Dorothy's voice.

Dorothy's submission to the satisfaction of Frank Booth's basest instincts can be equated to the plundering of the Congo by the European colonizers in *Heart of Darkness* whose insane violent methods inflicted on the African natives, in the name of progress are also a form of perversion. Marlow's rejection of these methods are an attempt to rescue the African people from the illness of the coloniser's rule. In the end we know that he doesn't succeed and that he even lies about the atrocities he has seen. Marlow's lie proves that he has fallen ill from the idea of progress, disguised in his fascination for Mr. Kurtz and is a variation of the African Intended's attitude. In the scene when Marlow takes Kurtz's away from the Inner Station she opens her arms in despair. This shows that she has fallen under the spell of the colonizer's role. In *Blue Velvet* as Dorothy starts her affair with Jeffrey she expresses her submission to the rule of Frank's violent methods by asking for being beaten while making love. In the end, Jeffrey rescues Dorothy from Frank's rule keeping the promise he made of taking her away from the darkness Frank has put her into. By accepting her as a human being Jeffrey cures Dorothy. In so doing he negates Frank's psychic derangement that reduces Dorothy to a piece of torn blue velvet. However, before cure happens Jeffrey experiences with Dorothy the sadomasochistic ritual she learned from Frank. Now the film iconography shows a variation in its representation of evil. Early it is represented to us as a severed ear. Violence now is associated to sexuality. The ear symbol is exchanged for the red mouth of a sensual woman whispering sounds of physical pleasure, as she asks for being beaten. It takes Jeffrey in a descent into the vast territory of human sexuality and perversion. Jeffrey's crying at home as he remembers his having beaten Dorothy

represents his shock after making contact with his primal instincts. The film visualises this by showing Jeffrey looking at a primitive token he has got hanging on the wall of his room.

It is precisely Jeffrey's youthful integrity the redeeming force necessary to save Dorothy from Frank's rule. By unmasking the evils of drug dealing, violence and sadomasochism, Jeffrey becomes a valiant knight who rescues a damsel who is under a perverse spell. His acting also entitles him to conquer the love of Sandy, the woman who firstly introduced him into evil. A woman with whom he shares his awareness about his descent into Lumberton's darkness. Jeffrey is much closer to the robins of Sandy's love dream than to the astonishing sexual possibilities he has found in Dorothy.

Like Marlow who finds in Kurtz his double, Jeffrey discovers in Frank a reduplication of himself on the evil side. Jeffrey realizes their doubleness in horrifying images of Frank's distorted face in association to his own beating of Dorothy. This is the revelation lying behind the candle light shown on the screen as the shooting ends. On his turn, Frank is aware of their doubleness as well. He recognizes Jeffrey as the good side of himself that he utterly rejects. The scene on the road after the high speed driving emphasizes his. Thus, as Frank Kisses Jeffrey he says: "We are the same!" As Frank compulsively hits Jeffrey, a woman in a mini-skirt dances on the top of Frank's car at the sound of Roy Orbison's ballad "In Dreams". She is in a state of trance under the spell of Frank's violence. This scene is important because it shows Dorothy breaking the chains of her enslavement to Frank. She intercedes in Jeffrey's favour facing Frank's fury. If in Jeffrey's descent he learns a lot about Lumberton's darkness throughout Dorothy, she on her turn, learns from him how to recuperate self-respect.

Blue Velvet shows that through violence Frank reduces women to automata. At the house where Dorothy's husband and son are imprisoned, two women guard the door leading to the room where they are kept. One of them is large, the other is slim. The large one wears horn-rimmed glasses

and is in black. She seems slow and alienated, lacking in feelings. This is emphasized in the scene when she brings beer to Frank. He shouts at her, curses and hists the tray she carries but she does not react. The guardians of the door in *Blue Velvet* are scared and submissive, differently from the two women in *Heart of Darkness* whom Marlow sees knitting "black wool feverishly" (10) and seem "uncanny and fateful" (11) looking with superiority at Marlow and the other youth who join the Company.

Jeffrey rescues women and his hometown from evil by shooting Frank inside Dorothy's flat in one of the film most thrilling sequences.

The film ends returning to the ear symbology. As the camera withdraws from a close up of Jeffrey's ear we are brought back from the experience of descending into the darkness of Lumberton underworld. From the universe of Jeffrey's initiation to the nature of evil in Lumberton, the film ends in a Summer day. Now Jeffrey, Sandy and their family get together for lunch. It seems to be an informal celebration of Jeffrey's and Sandy's engagement. Music highlights Sandy's romantic view of love. This vision of happiness contrast with the final scene showing Dorothy's pensive look as she holds her son. The camera reveals to us an open blue sky. However, after all we have seen, Dorothy's attitude is a reminder of the darkness of evil that is always threatening the sight of a blue sky.

The white fence and the peaceful fireman sequences shown in the film opening scenes are repeated as the narrative draws toward the end. Apparently, Lumberton evil has been destroyed. The early scene showing the bugs devouring each other is recreated. This time, however, we see a robin eating a bug at the kitchen window. Aunt Barbara is amazed on seeing this. Jeffrey and Sandy smile in contentment. They realize the metaphoric meaning of the robin eating a bug. They understand that we all have to experience evil to overcome it. The experiencing of evil that Jeffrey, Dorothy and Sandy share is a form of awareness of the world which excludes certain women namely, Sandy's mother and Jeffrey's aunt. The film just shows Mrs Williams doing domestic action such as attending the

door, mending Sandy's dress and bringing a coat to hide Dorothy's nudity. As for the two aunts, violence and mystery is just something they experience looking at the telly screen. There are two good instances of this. Firstly, the scene showing one of them savouring a cup of tea comfortably looking at the close up of a gun on the telly. Secondly, the scene showing the two aunt passively enjoying seeing on the telly what seems to be an old Film Noir. But if domestic women are excluded from the knowledge of evil, the worldly Dorothy Vallens is shown in the film last scene with a concerning stare that expresses her full awareness of evil. This resembles the end of *Heart of Darkness*, when, after listening to Marlow's tale about the existence of a heart of darkness in the centre of the idea of civilization, the unknown narrator refers to the scenery in which the narrative closes in a dark ironic mood:

"The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the outmost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (111).

RESUMO: Este trabalho faz uma leitura comparativa da novela de Joseph Conrad *O Coração das Trevas* e do filme *Veludo Azul* de David Lynch enfatizando traços narrativos temáticos de semelhança entre as duas obras.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: literatura; cinema; comparativismo.

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