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Sound in "Blue Velvet"

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Sound in *Blue Velvet*

The sound in *Blue Velvet* (1986), as in all of David Lynch's work, is as integral to the emotional response as what is seen on screen. *Blue Velvet*, perhaps more than any of his other works, relies heavily on our conscious and unconscious emotional response to his meticulously crafted soundscapes. Each and every scene in the film receives at least a supporting undercurrent of sound, and several scenes or sequences are primarily effective because of the sound.

A prime example of the importance of sound to a sequence in the film comes early, while the plot is still being set up. After a man is seen collapsing while watering his yard, the camera begins to meander into a seemingly inconspicuous area of grass. A strange and unidentifiable rattling noise is heard, and as Lynch's camera creeps closer



and closer into the minute details of the dirt, the grass, and the water droplets, the quiet rattling steadily builds in intensity as ominous low strings provide an eerie aural backdrop. The hissing, distorted breath of some unknown creature is heard. Suddenly the camera breaks through the last blade of grass, and at first, it is unclear what is being seen. Glistening, gleaming dark shapes are moving around in the dirt. Disgusting squelches, the roars of beasts unidentified, and the skittering footsteps of a million tiny legs illuminate the horrible sight. The viewer catches glimpses of a shining black eye here, a jagged pincer there. Ants.

What would assuredly be a mundane, albeit creepy shot of a group of ants in most other films is elevated to sheer horror and unescapable nightmarishness, not only by the uncomfortably close framing, but more importantly, by the raucous din of the colony. Lynch's use of sound in this sequence is integral to the greater point he is making with the film: beneath the seeming peacefulness of this community, and perhaps the world at large, there is a terrifying undercurrent of sheer evil.

This sonic horror is a gateway into the darker subject matter which builds deeper and deeper as the film goes on. Jeffrey's town seems an idyllic example of 1950's-esque Middle America, a chaste and neighborly community built on hard work and purity, but beneath the facade is a wasteland populated by addicts, murderers, kidnappers, rapists, and thugs, and Jeffrey will have to confront and escape all of them on his twisted journey. The camera's progression through the grass and into the ant colony thereby represents the film's disturbing descent into the underbelly of society.

Sound also functions in more ironic ways in *Blue Velvet*. The sound of a bright and cheery morning radio announcer is almost directly linked to the discovery of a severed human ear in a field. It must be assumed that the broadcast is non-diegetic, as there is no radio near the protagonist. Perhaps Jeffrey is recalling the broadcast, but it seems more likely that the sound is used as another direct comment by Lynch on the underlying sinister nature of things. The broadcast is first heard as Jeffrey strolls through a field on the way to visit his father in the hospital. He absentmindedly lobs a small stone at some nearby debris, and the upbeat tones of a jazzy saxophone walk an old-fashioned two-step.

After the visit is over, Jeffrey comes back through the field. As he pauses midway through the grasses to throw another couple of stones, the only sounds heard are the soothing rhythms of crickets and birds chirping, along with Jeffrey's soft, light footsteps in the grass. Jeffrey moves to pick up another stone and stumbles across the disembodied ear. Dozens of shiny black ants are crawling around in it, linking the earlier ant sequence and its associated metaphor to this event. A high-pitched but understated screech adds to the tension, but it is the juxtaposition of the earlier broadcast and the discovery of the ear that creates the irony of the scene. Once again, our perception of the story's world is unsettlingly challenged by unexpected audio.

In what is perhaps the most infamous scene in the film, the rendezvous at Frank's apartment, music serves as the disturbing centerpiece. Jeffrey and Dorothy are trapped in



the presence of a psychopath and his freakish band of "friends." Certainly, the visuals are key to the audience's experience in this scene, from the garishness of the wallpaper to the lipstick and white powder on Ben's face, but it is the music which sets the ironic tone, at first subtly, and then radically.

Throughout the first portion of the scene, a 1950's style rockabilly tune contradicts the seriousness of the matter. Here is an occurrence of musical irony comparable to the earlier radio broadcast. Once Frank and Ben recede to an adjoining room to have a private exchange, the music comes to a close, highlighting their discussion and providing Jeffrey with a way to listen in. On his return, Ben lip syncs to Roy Orbison's "In Dreams," a sentimental, romantic tune which is now forever subverted by the film's haunting rendition.

"Go to sleep, everything is all right," the song says. Of course, everything is decidedly not all right for Jeffrey and Dorothy. Things are about to get much worse.

Work Cited

Blue Velvet. Dir. David Lynch. Perf. Kyle MacLachlan, Isabella Rossellini, and Dennis Hopper. De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986. Film.