Soiling Suburbia

Lynch, Solondz and the Power of Dirt

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- Respond to This Article

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"The electronic media do away with cleanliness; they are by their nature 'dirty'. That is part of their productive power..." (Enzensberger qtd. in Hartley 23)

"Why do people have to be so ugly? Write about such ugly characters? It's perverted. I know you all think that I'm being prissy but I don't care. I was brought up in a certain way and this is ... mean-spirited." (Writing student, Storytelling).

In 1986 David Lynch brought the suburbs into focus. Before Lynch they had remained slightly bland and indistinct, white picket fences and lush green lawns in the background of Doris Day comedies, Douglas Sirk films and television sitcoms. But in the opening shots of Blue Velvet (1986) Lynch announced that he was going to do something quite different. He skipped through the stock suburban footage of vibrant colours – the red roses, the blue skies, the happy, smiling faces of the children – preferring instead, to track through the grass. There, through a series of grotesque close-ups of seething, warring insects, Lynch revealed the anomalies and ambiguities beneath the bright and shiny surface of suburbia. Recalling his childhood of "elegant homes, tree-lined streets, the milkman... Middle America as it is supposed to be" (Rodley 10), Lynch explains: "I discovered that if one looks a little closer at this beautiful world, there are always red ants underneath... I saw life in extreme close-ups" (Rodley 11). In Blue Velvet Lynch offers us an extreme close-up of suburbia by focussing on the dirt.

In her seminal work Purity and Danger anthropologist Mary Douglas studied the way some substances are classified as dirt because they are (following William James) "matter out of place" (Douglas 36), something that is considered inappropriate in a given context. "Dirt" is therefore an indication of what is taboo and disruptive, an idea Douglas goes on to link to notions of ambiguity and anomaly. Blue Velvet's "matter out of place" begins with the warring insects beneath the lawn, continues with the discovery of an amputated ear and goes on to include fellatio at knife-point, sex acts with velvet, kidnapping, murder and torture, all juxtaposed against an adolescent romance, a Hardy Boys mystery and the blue skies and birdsong of the opening.

On its release Blue Velvet was considered part of a wave of mid-eighties films that were re-evaluating suburbia, amongst them True Stories (1986), Peggy Sue Got Married (1986), River's Edge (1986) and the thematically similar Something's Wild (1986). But Lynch's ability to make the ordinary strange, through his juxtaposition of image and sound (Chion), meant that Blue Velvet went further than its contemporaries because in this film the suburban as a whole took on the "strange and threatening" characteristics of something without a stable identity (Douglas). Just as critics proclaimed Blue Velvet "leaves us altered, for good or ill – forever" (Total Film 96) so too does Lynch soil our very perception of the suburban, his "red ant" view of the world suggesting disorder where there was order, desperation where there was happiness, filth where there was cleanliness. In this way Blue Velvet inaugurates a genre of "corrupted idealism in the suburbs" (Total Film 97) that would include The Virgin Suicides (1999), Donnie Darko (2001), American Beauty (1999) and the works of Todd Solondz, together with television series like Lynch's own Twin Peaks (1990-1991), Picket Fences (1992-1996), Dead like Me (2003-2004), Close to Home (2005-), Weeds (2005-) and Desperate Housewives (2004-).

John Hartley applies Douglas' notion of dirt to both 'television' and its 'audience', referring to them as 'dirty' categories. This is because "television texts do not supply the analyst with a warrant for considering them either as unitary or as structurally bounded into an inside and outside" (Hartley 22). Similarly what sense an audience might make of television "depends... on the discursive resources available" some of which the audience will "identify" with and some of which will "marginalize", "deny" or be "more obvious, well-worn and time-honoured than others" (Hartley 23). Hartley draws on the work of Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Edmund Leach (discussing the 'dirtiness' of television and individuals respectively) to conclude that "power is located in dirt" (Hartley 23) because dirt creates "ambiguous boundaries" between the media and its readers.

While film may be a more bounded, unitary medium (delineated at the very least by its running time) the "ambiguous boundaries" that dirt creates are something Lynch toys with in Blue Velvet. In a similar fashion to Hitchcock's Rear Window (1954), the viewer is made complicit in the voyeuristic tendencies of his protagonist, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan). But Lynch goes a step further, turning the camera back on his voyeur in answer to a concern voiced by the nurse, Stella (Thelma Ritter), in that earlier film: "We've become a race of Peeping Toms. What people ought to do is look in for a change." Lynch offers us Jeffrey as a potential source of identification but also
makes us witness to Jeffrey’s own moral failings. In this way Jeffrey becomes as ambiguous as his sadomasochistic relationship with singer Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini), simultaneously abuser and abused, truth-teller and deceiver. As his girlfriend Sandy (Laura Dern) states: "I don’t know if you’re a detective or a pervert."

Here, the ambiguity offered by dirt results in the examination – the making visible – of both the voyeur and the audience as (complicit) voyeurs. Both are called into question – “detective or pervert?” – continually blurring the boundaries between subject and object, viewer and participant. By movie’s end Jeffrey can return to Sandy and the alluring veneer of suburbia, but he has murdered, molested and (impliedly) been raped. Dirt sticks. Jeffrey is forever changed and so is our perception of the suburban.

If Lynch’s Blue Velvet revealed the rich vein of dirt running through suburbia, then perhaps it is Todd Solondz who has mined it most extensively. While Lynch was to return to suburbia in his television series Twin Peaks his attention has frequently turned to other more extreme and experimental ideas. In contrast Solondz has focussed almost exclusively on the suburban in four of his projects: Welcome to the Dollhouse (1995), Happiness (1998), Storytelling (2001) and Palindromes (2004).

It is Happiness that provides the clearest sense of the “imagined community” of suburbia because its multiple storylines suggest multiple lives being conducted simultaneously. Like Blue Velvet it presents a veneer of suburban life which it then goes on to soil, particularly through the Maplewood family (whose story provides the climax for the film). In the first shot of the Maplewood’s home a cleaner is seen at the rear of the shot scrubbing the floor; dirt is presented as a threat to order and Trish Maplewood (Cynthia Stevenson) refers to “having it all”. By the film’s end the focus will have shifted to masturbation, homicide, dismemberment, various perverse sexual acts and the revelation that her husband is a paedophile. Uniting these disparate streams are the searches for happiness each of the nine central characters undertakes, with only character, the boy Billy Maplewood (Dylan Baker), achieving his happiness, through a successful ejaculation that provides the denouement of the film.

Much like Blue Velvet, Happiness was decried as “sick” upon its release. But Happiness’s dirtiness goes further than its subject matter; it also resides in the “ambiguity of its boundaries with its media neighbours” (Hartley 25). Whereas Hartley finds that television is “characterized by a will to limit its own excess, to settle its significations into established, taken-for-granted, common senses, which viewers can be disciplined to identify and to identify with” (37) the dirty filmic text makes no effort to limit its excess (rather limitation is applied through censorship and ratings); Happiness is simultaneously scary, repellant and poignant.

Allen (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) the obscene phone-caller, Kristina (Camryn Manheim) the lonely woman who dismembers her rapist and Bill Maplewood (Dylan Baker) the loving father and paedophile all elicit moments of horror, humour and sympathy. Indeed, Happiness successfully “scandalizes the overlaps” between categories without attempting to clarify their ambiguities (Hartley 38) by constantly deflecting and redirecting the audience’s identification with any one character by revealing more about that character (he is shallow, she kills, he is a serial rapist) or simply through the constant narrative shifts between characters.

As Hartley notes: "the point about dirt, crudely, is that it encompasses notions of ambiguity, contradiction, power and social relations all in one” (39). In the context of the suburban these ideas of dirt are frequently equated with sex. Lynch had previously depicted sex as “the site of domestic trauma, fear, power and – on occasion – euphoria” (Rodley 125): Jeffrey experiences all four of these aspects in his encounters with Dorothy, something that leaves him profoundly shattered and shamed. Sex is similarly ancillary to dirt in Happiness where Allen, Kristina and Bill’s own predilections and pleasures lead them into ambiguous power and social relations that are alternatively thwarted, indulged and constrained.

This lends “Happiness” itself to being read as an ironic title for the film, but while Billy is the only character to achieve the euphoria promised, many of the characters enjoy (brief) moments of happiness, be it Joy Jordan’s (Jane Adams) one night stand or Allen and Kristina’s date (and possibility of redemption). Similarly, even the paedophile father Bill confesses to his son that sex with young boys is “great”, some small measure of happiness even as he admits to being sick. “Happiness” itself is therefore also a dirty, subjective, embodied and ambiguous term; one man’s happiness is another’s shame, another’s pain, another’s crime.

Solondz actually comments on the power of dirt in the “Nonfiction” segment of his next feature Storytelling. In many respects a parody of the suburban genre (through its obvious digs at American Beauty) “Nonfiction” chronicles the efforts of documentarian Toby Oxman (Paul Giamatti) to construct a film around disaffected teenager Scooby Livingstone (Mark Webber). The end product, “American Scooby”, reveals that Oxman cannot move beyond the surface. Unlike Lynch or Solondz, the dirtiness of his subject slips by unnoticed. Oxman’s documentary can only provoke laughter through its exploitation of Scooby as it ignores the subtleties occurring in the Livingstone family’s lives – most notably Scooby’s relationship with his friend Clayton and the driving preoccupation of the family’s lives: death. Notably Scooby’s relationship with his friend Clayton and the driving preoccupation of the family’s lives: death.
lives, most notably Scooby’s relationship with his friend Stanley and the rising resentment of Consuelo the maid (culminating in her gassing the family to death as they sleep, perhaps the ultimate statement on the ambiguity of happiness). This probable commercial success/social failure of “American Scooby” confirms the power of dirt implicit in Lynch and Solondz’s films. By soiling suburbia Lynch and Solondz have exnominated the middle-class, making visible the minutiae, the motives and the pleasures of a social grouping traditionally under-represented on film.

Typically, Hartley says, we identify the “power of dirt” as being “of the negative kind – it infects and corrupts the rising generation” (25), arguments levelled at both of these films. But as Douglas argues, a culture’s taboos can tell us a great deal about its sense of its own identity. Blue Velvet and Happiness can therefore be understood in Douglas’s terms as part of a “dirt-affirming ritual” that accesses the power “residing in what is excluded from [the traditional] ordering of things” (165), thus exnominating the middle-class and revealing our complicity in the voyeurism of their characters. This then is the true power of dirt. It makes visible all the ambiguities and anomalies we try to exclude from our lives – and our suburbs. That this is currently the formula for one of the most popular series on television (Desperate Housewives), albeit in a slightly cleaner “network friendly” formula, suggests that Lynch and Solondz’s soiling of suburbia will have resonance for some time to come.

References


Citation reference for this article

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