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Blue Velvet and Masculinity during the Reagan Era

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Introduction

Blue Velvet (1986) has been described by his own director, David Lynch, as a "psychological drama" that can also be seen as "sort of a thriller and murder mystery" (in Woods 74). The film was released two years after Ronald Reagan's reelection as the 40th President of the United States and, beneath the personal style that characterizes Lynch's filmmaking, it conveys some of the anxieties that concerned the nation in the 1980s. The story begins when Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan), a young man living in an average small town of the United States, finds a severed human ear abandoned on the ground. Once Jeffrey finds the ear, he wants to know more about the mystery behind it and starts searching for information that leads him to an underworld of crime, passion, and violence. Along the way, he will meet the charming and young Sandy Williams (Laura Dern), as well as a singer, much in the mold of studio-era femme fatales, named Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini), and the perturbed and violent Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper). After the astonishing events he witnesses during his adventure – including a dangerous affair with Dorothy, the wife of the man whose ear has been cut off – Jeffrey discovers what really underlies the artificial facade of what seemed to be a calm and safe town.

Scholars such as Lynne Layton and Barbara Creed, as well as film critic Andrew O'Hehir, assumed that the story behind *Blue Velvet* touches, among other issues, upon questions of masculinity. From this perspective, when seen against the hyper-masculine "hard bodies" that proliferated on the big screen in the 1980s (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 24), the film appears to be closer to the stylistic and thematic concerns of independent or experimental filmmaking than to Hollywood's box office toppers of the time. Often referred to as postmodern, this new mode of filmmaking had some of its roots in the financial crisis of the 1970s, an economic factor that resulted in the decision of the studios to risk more in their productions, hiring new filmmakers who made more personal films (Biskind 15).[1] Lynch's own background helped him become not only a

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1Since my aim is not to prove if the film adheres itself or not to this so-called postmodern movement, I will not examine in depth the reasons that make *Blue Velvet* or David Lynch a postmodern work/author. For further reading on Lynch's film in terms of authorship and film theory, go, for example, to Matt Pearson's analysis of Blue Velvet in The

filmmaker but an *auteur*, since his work conveys a personal perspective that is not the dominant one in Hollywood films. The term *auteur* comes from French theory, holding that "directors are to movies what poets are to poems" (Biskind 16), a category in which Lynch – a fine arts and film student in his youth (Rodley 31) – clearly fits.[2] The sociopolitical context of the USA in the 1980s, whose consequences finally led to the loss of the economic power that had marked the nation since World War II (Chafe and Sitkoff 409),[3] also resulted in what Lynne Layton calls "a crisis of heterosexual masculinity" (389). In the midst of a financial crisis, social movements that already began in the 1960s like the gay and lesbian liberation movement, as well as the women's movement, opened new spaces from which the supremacy of the traditional family, with a male breadwinner and a female homemaker, started to be questioned. However, these traditional gender roles became the norm again due to the political discourse of those Republicans who blamed the ones who tried to challenge the status quo for the economic and spiritual crisis that the country experienced. Lynch's *auteur* approach in *Blue Velvet* allowed him to explore the factors that led to the crisis of masculinity, criticizing the archetypes that prevailed both in American society and in the film industry.

Masculinity is one of the central issues in *Blue Velvet*, but Lynch's representation of maleness differs from the hyper-masculine canon that Hollywood had portrayed in the past and that, according to researchers like Jeffords, gained added predominance during the 1980s. In this regard, Joan Mellen claims that Hollywood has served as a tool to establish a definite male role model in society through the depiction of masculine, almost non-human, men on the screen. In their analysis

British Film Resource (http://www.britishfilm.org.uk/lynch/blue_velvet.html).

[2]Lynch began to make movies already in the 1970s with short films like *The Grandmother* (1970) and his debut feature film *Eraserhead* (1977), in which his concern about familiar issues linked to masculinity are already present. Lynch's *Blue Velvet* provides a personal, unusual approach to the issue of masculinity, specifically in regard to the question of what it meant to be a man in the context of the Reagan presidency. The film was released in 1986, after almost a decade in the career of Lynch without working in an original project (Woods 73) – his two previous films, *The Elephant Man* (1980) and *Dune* (1984), were based on script adaptations (42, 57). However, his first serious projects as a filmmaker, *The Grandmother* and *Eraserhead*, already explored masculinity and family relationships. In fact, family issues have been a central topic in Lynch's filmography, as can be seen in films such as the prequel to the recently resumed series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91, 2017-), *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), or *The Straight Story* (1999).

[3]From now on, the terms "America" and "American" will be used to describe the United States and in relation to the U.S., in order to avoid repeating the same words throughout the text. Nevertheless, I prefer to use the name of the country (United States) since the term America relates not to the States but the whole, diverse continent.

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of the links between American films and society since 1945, Leonard Quart and Albert Auster agree with Mellen in her statement on the existing relationship between Hollywood and the need to patrol traditional, clear-cut gender roles. Moreover, Mellen also asserts that the fabricated screen male that appears in almost every American film has become a vehicle that helps to maintain the status quo in terms of masculinity, due to the moralizing message that screen males convey in their films. Mellen's book describes with accuracy and clarity how film and society have influenced each other reciprocally, and how the context of a particular decade determines the values that the screen male of that period embodies. Furthermore, Mellen suggests that men's violent behavior on American screens derives from the "Western's justification" of the conquest of the frontier (11), a behavior pattern that has lasted until today in the representation of the screen males. Yvonne Tasker and Susan Jeffords have also supported Mellen's theory, concluding that the screen male becomes even more violent in his behavior during the 1980s. Regarding the sociopolitical context of the Reagan era, Tasker and Jeffords explain how social and economic policies during Reagan's two-term mandate shaped the image of the screen male, depicted as a hyper-masculine man who embodies the notion of national identity that the Reagan administration wanted to establish among US citizens. Thus, Tasker emphasizes the "ramboidal violence" (92) that the most successful blockbusters of the 1980s expressed through their male stars – described by Jeffords as "hard bodies" (*Hard Bodies* 24).

In order to analyze the factors that led to Reagan's victory in the 1980s, an appropriate research on the work of scholars from the field of History is required. For example, the work of historians like William H. Chafe and Harvard Sitkoff concisely summarize the sociopolitical factors that have marked America's course from World War II to the victory of Ronald Reagan, and William Kleinknecht's book *The Man Who Sold the World* (2009) analyzes Reagan's presidency. Nevertheless, I have decided to leave aside some prolific right-wing writers that have analyzed Regan's mandate from a hagiographic perspective.[4] Since history and politics are not my specific

4During my research, I have excluded authors like conservative historian Lee Edwards – *The Essential Ronald Reagan:*

fields of expertise, I had recourse to the work of other scholars, such as Rodney Carlisle, Geoffrey Golson, and David C. Wills, in order to contrast information on Reagan's policies and historical events during his presidency. As I will explain below, Regan's victory affected not only the representation of the dominant screen, but also the notion of masculinity embodied in non-mainstream films of the 1980s like *Blue Velvet*.

In their analyses of *Blue* Velvet, scholars have focused on diverse aspects of the film due to the different issues that Lynch's work highlights. For instance, one of the issues that have been discussed by scholars has been the Freudian element that underlies the film, which was widely explored by authors like Barbara Creed and Lynne Layton. However, I disagree with Layton in the way she handles some aspects of the Oedipal situation displayed in the film, mainly because Freudian ideas appear simplistic, dogmatic, and outdated, and do not always provide us with the answers we need. Since my aim is not to analyze the film from a psychoanalytic perspective, I have only turned to Freudian theory obliquely in order to demonstrate how these ideas seem to exclude and discriminate individuals, helping to perpetuate the traditional gender roles that the film challenges. Nevertheless, I have conducted a little research on Freudian theory and agree with the ideas put forward by Rhona Fear – whose book *The Oedipus Complex: Solutions or Resolutions?* summarizes Freud's theory, giving practical examples of the Oedipal issues on which her own professional experience as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist is based – and by Glenn O. Gabbard, Bonnie E. Litowitz, and Paul William – theorists who also seek to overcome the dogmatic narrative on which Freudian theory rests.

On the other hand, some scholars have also analyzed the film from a postmodernist perspective, attending to the use of resources such as the nostalgic depiction of the 1950s, Lynch's cinematographic references, and the use of parody. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of*

A Profile in Courage, Justice, and Wisdom (2005) – that reveal a certain subjectivity from the very title of their books. However, I have found some interesting anecdotes and quotations in Gil Troy's book (*Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the* 1980s), even if I do not share his point of view in terms of ideology and politics.

Late Capitalism (1991), Fredric Jameson dedicates an entire chapter to the study of Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and Philip K. Dick's novel *Time Out of Joint* (1959), highlighting the mixture of elements from the 1950s and the 1980s that appear in the film. Jameson mentions the causes of the idealization of the traditional way of life of the 1950s during the 1980s, and discusses how nostalgia for the 1950s is expressed in the film – nevertheless, in the spirit of the 1980s, he fails to see this nostalgia as a critique of contemporary society. In addition, Barbra Creed assesses the similarities between *Blue Velvet* and *film noir* through an analysis of its technique, and also examines the film in terms of Freudian theory. One of the studies that I have found closer to my interests and my thesis is Paul Coughlin's article *Postmodern Parody and the Subversion of Conservative Frameworks*. However, despite the fact that Coughlin identifies the critique that underlies the film, his article focuses on postmodern devices such as parody, which he identifies with the use of excess, as well as Lynch's references to popular culture and television, but he fails to provide an in-depth analysis of how the film engages with its own reality.

This master's thesis examines how David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* – beyond its retro 1950s look – actually tackles the reality of American society in the Reagan era, addressing, in particular, the issue of masculinity and challenging the dominant ideas of what it meant to be a man disseminated by mainstream Hollywood films at the time. In order to achieve this aim, first, I will argue that films not only are always influenced by their context, but that they have an impact on society as well. With the intention of understanding the evolution of American society and film from the beginnings of cinema to the 1980s, a brief summary of how masculinity has changed over the years on the screen is required. Hence, the first section considers how film and society have influenced each other over the years, focusing on the representation of the male, for the issue of masculinity is paramount for my thesis. Then, I will argue that the 1980s screen male has its roots in the classical period, a period that was marked by the censorship of the Motion Picture Production Code or Hays Code. By focusing on the same anticommunist measures that will determine his

future political career, Reagan himself – both as an actor and as president of the Screen Actors Guild – was part of some of the networks that contributed to the censorship that regulated American films from the mid-1930s to the late 1960s. During the 1960s and 1970s, after more than three decades of censorship on the screen, many filmmakers challenged the stereotypes of Hollywood production. In that context directors like Lynch, who developed a more personal style, also challenged the standards that the conventional screen male had embodied over the previous decades. However, as I noted above, society and film have influenced each other. The sociopolitical context and the changes in the country's administration may have shaped the image of the screen male (albeit in more unexpected and complex ways than we often want to believe) but the hyper-masculine role model that films had portrayed since the 1920s has also influenced ordinary men in real life. The Hollywood screen male, along with the new mindset of American society in the late 1950s, has been crucial to perpetuate a masculine role model that has remained a dominant aspect of gender relations to this day. In order to better understand these issues, at this point I will introduce some of the factors that led to Reagan's victory and some of the changes that male representation went through on the screen during his mandate.

The second chapter of this dissertation focuses on the nostalgia for the 1950s that the financial and spiritual crisis that the 1980s fostered, and how that crisis – as well as the social movements that began in the 1960s – affected the notion of masculinity. For that purpose, I will take a deeper look at *Blue Velvet* by means of a thorough analysis of some scenes. From the very beginning of the film, Lynch mixes elements from the 1950s and the 1980s in the film's aesthetics in order to undertake a critique of the values that dominated the Reagan era. In the popular imagination, the 1950s are believed to have been characterized by a sense of conformity and tranquility that, in fact, was far from the reality of the decade. *Blue Velvet* represents that sense of conformity as going hand in hand with the hypocrisy that permeated the postwar years and, by extension, the decade of the 1980s due to the attempt to regain the traditional values of the

Eisenhower era. Nostalgia in Lynch's *Blue Velvet* appears under the guise of a 1950s revival, a fabricated illusion conveyed by the elements that make up the aesthetics of the film – the cars, the clothes, the music, and even the small town way of life. In order to explore the type of ideology that underlies that nostalgia for the 1950s, I will briefly explain the concept of hyperreality that Baudrillard introduced in the 1980s, giving concrete examples of how Baudrillard's ideas may provide us with a different understanding of the film. Regarding the issue of masculinity, the type of masculinity that the Reagan administration promoted was closer to the idealization of the Eisenhower era than to the different masculinities that began to appear in films after the abolition of the Production Code. Since *Blue Velvet* was released in the 1980s, I will then move to an analysis of the concrete representations of the screen male during that decade, as well as the way in which Lynch deviates from the dominant, hyper-masculine screen males that proliferated during the Reagan era.

Section three discusses the concrete representations of masculinity in *Blue Velvet*, emphasizing the anxieties that the characters of Frank Booth and Jeffrey Beaumont embody as men of the 1980s. In order to analyze the frustration and repression that Frank suffers due to a crisis of masculinity, I will illustrate how those anxieties are reflected in different scenes of the film, considering as well the impact of homosexuality and the changes that the United States experienced during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Finally, I will discuss Jeffrey's so-called Oedipal journey by undertaking a critique of the problematic that Freudian dichotomies entail and concluding with an analysis of the opening and ending scenes in which Lynch's criticism of traditional gender roles appears to be clearer. Finally, this master's thesis concludes by shedding some light on the issue of the representation of masculinity in cinema after the 1980s. Everything considered, this thesis argues that *Blue Velvet* remains a cultural barometer that reveals the tensions surrounding the notion of masculinity and the anxieties that men experienced during the Reagan administration; that is, it helps us to properly identify and assess the predicaments faced by men who did not fit in with the

stereotype of the untroubled, hyper-masculine male perpetuated by the film industry and the status quo as a whole.

1. Masculinity and the Status Quo

The issue of masculinity can be said to have been dealt with in films since the beginnings of cinema. But films have not only acted as a mirror that reflects the existing reality of men and society, they have also served as a vehicle to promote, in the words of Joan Mellen, the image of the "masculine male" in order to maintain the status quo (9). For instance, from the mid-1930s to the early 1940s the screen males of the Depression era promoted the image of "the federal agent as hero" (Mellen 128), thus sending the message that a man could only be "successful within the system" (76). This trend stood in sharp contrast with the previous wave of gangster films, which, during the first half of the decade, had presented the gangster as a successful man. However, that faith in public authorities evaporated during the 1960s and reached its lowest point with the Watergate scandal. This shift in the perception of male leaders promoted the emergence of films like *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) in which "a paranoid sense that the world was a far more dangerous and sinister place than most people had previously suspected" underlies the narrative (Booker, From Box Office 107). In order to understand how masculinity is portrayed in *Blue Velvet* and how it engages with the anxieties at the time of its release, a brief summary of the representation of the screen male throughout the history of American film is required, paying special attention to how changes in these representations entered into a dialogue with wider social and historical events. Since my aim is not to analyze this phenomenon in depth, but rather to highlight those features that may help us understand the ways the representation of masculinity in *Blue Velvet* relates with its context, I will not provide the reader with an exhaustive examination. Instead, I will simply tiptoe around the most significant examples of how males have been represented on the US screens.

Considering the censorship that conditioned Hollywood production from the 1930s to the late 1960s, the issue of masculinity was highly affected by the Christian mores that underlay its whole production. Aside from questions of profanity, sexuality, and family values, which were

thoroughly policed by Joseph Breen's office, "real men" started to be portrayed in terms of "competitiveness under the guise of silence, solitariness, and freedom from domestic commitments" (Mellen 9). This stereotype reached its culminating point in the 1970s and 1980s with characters such as Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry and Silvester Stallone's Rambo. Throughout its history, Hollywood filmmaking has been filled with screen males that, despite their particular circumstances, have always been Caucasians linked to "both patriotism and Christianity" (Mellen 4). With the exception of – among others – comedians like Buster Keaton or Charles Chaplin, whose humanity allowed audiences to identify with average, non hyper-masculine men, Hollywood chose to portray a fictitious, almost non-human man in most of its films.[5] Hollywood's tradition of masculine screen males leads from the likes of Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne, or Clint Eastwood to the "hard bodies" that Susan Jeffords identifies in the most successful films of the 1980s (*Hard Bodies* 24). As Joan Mellen observes in her book *Big Bad Wolves*, "the heroes who exhibit the most power stand for status quo" (5), and only the sociopolitical context of each period determines the differences in the representation of the screen male over the years. That is, just like the so-called surveillance state that emerged since 9/11 helped to revamp the spy films of James Bond in the actualized and subversive form of Jason Bourne,[6] the representations of manhood have been determined by the particular political, social, and cultural circumstances of its own time.

Earlier films provided the audience with different types of men, including males who were "both tender and emotionally strong, intellectual and physically active, nonviolent and yet determined," characters who "would rarely reappear in American films" (Mellen 70).[7] In the 1920s,

5Due to space limitations, I will not analyze the representation of males during the pre-Code years. Yet, it must be stressed that, when it comes to male characters, those films lend themselves to rich and contradictory interpretations in line with the fast changing realities in US society at the time. In this respect, Mellen's book provides interesting considerations about actors like Douglas Fairbanks Sr.

6Whereas Bond works for the system, the Bourne trilogy focuses on the persecution that an ex-government spy suffers once he decides to quit.

7According to Mellen, "the tradition of male violence in the American film derives from the Western's justification of the settling of the frontier by means of conquest" (11), and thus the Western genre will be revised again and again in cinema, from William S. Hart to John Wayne, sometimes with the same iconography of the cowboy and the horse, to deal with different challenges. In fact, Wayne himself became an embodiment of national identity due to his "indestructible toughness" (Mellen 175), a role model for average men in the 1950s and 1960s who never really had the artificial, almost non-human attributes of Wayne's characters. Mellen highlights what she identifies as a pattern of violence in the behavior of the US screen male, a reductionist view that I do not really share. However, the Western

the appointment of William H. Hays as president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) marked a turning point for Hollywood production due to his conservative ideas – Hays himself had been a Presbyterian deacon and a chairman of the Republican Party before (Spring 50). Censorship became effective in the context of the Great Depression; the Motion Picture Production Code – popularly known as the Hays Code – was adopted in 1930 although it was not systematically implemented until 1934 due to the increasing unease and the protests of religious groups like the Catholic Legion of Decency – the actual writers, Martin Quigley an Daniel A. Lord, were Catholics, which accounts for the Catholic slant of the text (Black 99). The code prohibited any display of "homosexuality, miscegenation, abortion, incest, drugs, and profanity" (Mellen 72), which determined not only the representation of screen males but also the terms on which women appeared in the narrative. Whereas white heterosexual men were portrayed as masculine breadwinners, "women and visible minorities assumed subsidiary and stereotyped roles, serving as hindrances, helpers, or rewards for the white male's doing" (Grant 176). In addition to the limitations that the Hays Code imposed on the screen, another type of censorship emerged during the Cold War due to the communist menace. Apart from the impact on the narratives, those members of the Hollywood film industry who were suspected of sympathizing with communist ideas were blacklisted by, among others, Ronald Reagan (Staples 284). Both as an actor and as president of the Screen Actor's Guild, Reagan jumped on the anticommunist bandwagon that would later define his political career. He also joined the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPAPAI), "a right-wing, anticommunist alliance" that was created "to combat the notion that Hollywood was rife with communists and left-wing sympathizers" (MacKenzie 420). The MPAPAI promoted the writing of Ayn Rand's *Screen Guide for Americans* (Mellen 189), an anticommunist manifesto in which "the more common devices used to turn non-political pictures

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genre would also be revised from a more contemporary perspective in other films, presenting characters and narratives in which a cowboy-like loner has been replaced by the modern citizen, who does not ride a horse but a car, a taciturn man who takes justice into his own hands, as is the case of the characters of Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Eastwood's Kowalski in *Gran Torino* (2008).

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into carriers of political [communist] propaganda" are listed (Rand 1).

After World War II, the United States experienced a continuing economic growth and reached the desired place of "the most powerful country in the world" (Brownell 8). The first half of the 1950s seemed to contribute to a lasting state of calm, a sense of well-being that vanished with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement and the development of the counterculture in the 1960s. Already in the 1950s, films like *The Wild One* (1953) depicted a social climate in which the youth started to question the status quo, starring sensitive, troubled, and strong males that took to the screen something of the generational disillusionment that transpired in other fields, most notably literature with the emergence of the so-called Beat Generation. As a result of the anticommunist blacklisting, any manifestation of an alternative view of the world was denied on the screen, and young, rebellious characters always reintegrated into society by the end of these films, offering the kind of artificial ending of reassurance that Lynch parodies at the end of *Blue Velvet*. For instance, in an iconic western like John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), Ethan (John Wayne) begins a search to find his niece Debbie (Natalie Wood), who has been raised by Native Americans after being kidnapped as a child. At first, Debbie is portrayed as a rebel white girl who wants to continue living with a her surrogate Comance family, in line with the actual experience and behavior of Cynthia Ann Parker on which the story is based. However, unlike Cynthia Ann Parker, who refused food and water until she died, in Ford's film, Debbie accepts to leave the native community and goes back to an unexisting white home once his white, strong, and masculine uncle, rescues her. On the contrary, in Hollywood, those who did not surrender to the dominant values and the rampant anticommunism, rarely made it to the end of the film alive – a clear example would be Plato (Sal Mineo), Jim's (seemingly) homosexual friend in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).[8] Furthermore, with films like *Rebel Without a Cause*, in which a young rebel feels lost due to the absence of a *real*

8In *Vanity Fair*, writer Sam Kashner also talked about Plato as a homosexual character, pointing out that Mineo himself admitted that "he had portrayed the first gay teenager on film," as the film suggests with "little clues" such as "the photograph of Alan Ladd taped to his locker door" and "his longing looks at Jim Stark". Despite the fact that Plato is not presented as an openly gay character, I agree with Mellen's idea of Plato being killed in the film "because his feelings for Dean were too expressly homosexual and therefore, in keeping with the taboo" (21).

masculine role model, "Freudian ideas" began to reappear on screen "handled in a far more conscious manner than they were in the twenties or thirties" (Mellen 194). As I will later explain, Freudian ideas like the Oedipus complex, the absence of the father, and conflicts associated to the differences between traditional gender roles are also present in *Blue Velvet*.

As Joan Mellen points out, many films in the 1950s "offered alienated, tormented heroes" (like Nicholas Ray's aforementioned film *Rebel Without a Cause*) but, to the extent that "traditional values were reasserted" by the end (191), those films did not offer a real alternative to the sense of alienation that permeates conventional films. In terms of narrative, the issue of masculinity is a central issue both in *Rebel Without a Cause* and in *Blue Velvet*. For example, in both films, the young protagonist lacks a father figure. In Rebel Without a Cause, Jim is confronted with the figure of an emasculated father; likewise, in *Blue Velvet*, Jeffrey's father is recovering from a heart attack and is therefore also depicted as an absent figure. In the former film, as the story progresses, Jim gets into trouble by playing a dangerous speed game with his car. Jim's frustration for the absence of a *real* masculine model leads him to reach a point in which he gets involved in the death of a boy. In fact, with its associations between virility, cars, and speed, the race game expresses a certain frustration that concerns masculinity issues. In the latter, the character of Frank Booth also links virility with speed, and, after the scene at the Pussy Heaven in which he flaunts his homosexual desire for Ben, he gets into the car and starts driving at high speed.[9] Additionally, the issue of homosexuality is also explored in *Rebel Without a Cause* through the character of Plato, as well as, indirectly, through the feminized image of Jim's father doing housework, which contrasts with the traditional family roles of the 1950s. At the end of the film Plato is killed in a shooting, Jim's father starts acting as a masculine role model for his son, and Jim's rebel attitude is left behind in order to embrace the values that society expects him to uphold. The character of Frank in *Blue Velvet* also dies due to a shooting, but in the case of *Blue Velvet* it is Jeffrey – who, like Jim, suffers the absence

9Paradoxically, Hopper himself made one of his first screen appearances in *Rebel Without a Cause* as one of the members of the gang that disturbs Jim and Plato and question their virility.

of a masculine model – the one who pulls the trigger. Despite Jeffrey's choice to maintain the status quo and never look back into the mysteries of gender, the crisis of masculinity that men like Frank experience due to their sexual repression will continue to exist beneath – or in the margins of – the town's artificial atmosphere of conformity and blindness.

The rebels of the 1950s were promptly replaced by the cold and distant James Bond and by Clint Eastwood's nameless character in Sergio Leone's western trilogy *The Man with No Name* (1964-1966). Although a spirit of protest and disenchantment was increasingly growing among young people in the 1960s, American cinema did not reflect those anxieties during the decade. It was not until 1967 that the Hays Code was finally abolished due to a variety of factors, mainly the changes in sexual mores, the expansion of the counterculture, and the Civil Rights and Feminist Movements (Spencer 86); from a different perspective, Klinger also mentions the impact of television since the 1950s and the influence of foreign films as key factors in the increasing obsolescence of the Code by the late 1960s (38). As Ed Rampell notes, the existing alienation and a strong opposition against the Vietnam War, as well as "other perceived American ills" like a "rampant materialism" (95) defined the spirit of young people in the 1960s, finding support not in the film industry but in other cultural expressions such as, for example, Bob Dylan's songs (Brownell 15). Yet, the revolutions of the 1960s, like the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement, shaped some of the contesting topics that proliferated on the screen not only in the 1960s but also during the 1970s. When young people were portrayed in films during the 1960s, they tended to resemble Dustin Hoffman's Ben Braddock in *The Graduate* (1967), a character that does not mention any of the conflicts that had arisen in US society. Depicted as a young maverick, Ben is unable to diagnose what is wrong with the country, and his malaise is only represented as "one more adolescent rebellion soon to be replaced by mature conformity" in the film (Mellen 24). In *Blue Velvet* the same sense of reassurance underlies its ending: Jeffrey decides to leave his dangerous affair with Dorothy – his own Mrs. Robinson – to become Sandy's steady

and faithful partner. However, *The Graduate* and the James Bond series were not the only films that were made during the 1960s. Films like Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1965), for example, offered a decade in which a more reflexive and critical look at society and a more daring take on filmmaking that did not fail to call into question the current values and status quo.

Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda – both of them "strongly associated" with the 1960s counterculture (Rampell 96) – were two of the few filmmakers that attempted to reflect the social malaise that affected young people at the time. Their 1969 film *Easy Rider* managed to capture the generational gap and longing for freedom experienced by a generation that failed to understand the militarism and the violent turn in US politics. These apprehensions are put into words by Billy (Dennis Hopper) and George (Jack Nicholson) in the conversation they have after having been taunted about their appearance by a group of rednecks:

> GEORGE: You know, this used to be a helluva good country. I can't understand what's gone wrong with it.
>
> BILLY: Man, everybody got chicken, that's what happened. Hey, we can't even get into like, a second-rate hotel, I mean, a second-rate motel, you dig? They think we're gonna cut their throat or somethin'. They're scared, man.
>
> GEORGE: They're not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to 'em.
>
> BILLY: Hey, man. All we represent to them, man, is somebody who needs a haircut.
>
> GEORGE: Oh, no. What you represent to them is freedom.
>
> BILLY: What the hell is wrong with freedom? That's what it's all about.
>
> GEORGE: Oh, yeah, that's right. That's what's it's all about, all right. But talkin' about it and bein' it, that's two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. Of course, don't ever tell anybody that they're not free, 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are. Oh, yeah, they're gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom. But they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em.
>
> BILLY: Well, it don't make 'em runnin' scared.
>
> GEORGE: No, it makes 'em dangerous.

Ironically, almost two decades later, Hopper's Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet* is the antithesis of Billy's untroubled and open-minded character. Even though both characters are linked by the phallic

symbolism of their vehicles – a large motorcycle in *Easy Rider* and a fast car in *Blue Velvet* – Frank's emotional disturbance is the result of having repressed all the freedom that Billy is not ashamed to show, even when the rednecks talk about putting him "in a woman's cell" due to his long . However, both characters – Billy and Frank – are murdered at the end of the films.

From a political perspective, the 1970s were marked by the election of Richard Nixon as President of the United States and by his resignation over the Watergate scandal. Nixon was followed by Jimmy Carter's failed attempt to restore hope to the US people, an attempt that only accelerated the decline in which the country had been for almost a decade (Kleinknecth 96). Nixon came to power in 1969 with promises of ending the war in Vietnam, but he actually ended up expanding it with the secret bombing of Cambodia only two months after his election (Quart and Auster 102; Chafe and Sitkoff 410). His lies about the war and the Watergate scandal (Chafe and Sitkoff 417) led to the loss both of the US economic superiority and of the distinctive optimism that had defined the nation during the previous decades (Quart and Auster 108). As Chafe and Sitkoff point out, the Nixon administration can be described as "the purest example of American political tragedy," with devastating consequences for the brand of American politics that operated throughout the country after World War II (409). With a general feeling of apathy and alienation dominating the public, the end of the 1960s signaled the end of an era. Hollywood was not immune to the economic recession of the 1970s and, in this context, the studios decided to assume more risks with their productions, turning to lesser known authors who made the kind of personal film that the Code and the studio system had previously kept at a distance. Directors such as Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, and Brian De Palma created films based on "their awareness of film history, technical competence […], and self-conscious, personal visions," more influenced by European authors than by traditional Hollywood films (Quart and Auster 109). In his book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, Peter Biskind explains how the film industry began to change (15):

> In 1967, two movies, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate*, sent tremors through the
> industry. Others followed in quick succession: *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Rosemary's*

Baby in 1968*, The Wild Bunch, Midnight Cowboy*, and *Easy Rider* in 1969, *M*A*S*H* and *Five Easy Pieces* in 1970*, The French Connection*, *Carnal Knowledge*, *The Last Picture Show*, and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* in 1971, and *The Godfather* in 1972. Before anyone realized it, there was a movement –instantly dubbed the New Hollywood in the press– led by a new generation of directors. This was to be a directors' decade if ever there was one. Directors as a group enjoyed more power, prestige, and wealth than they ever had before. The great directors of the studio era, like John Ford and Howard Hawks, regarded themselves as nothing more than hired help (over-) paid to manufacture entertainment, storytellers who shunned self-conscious style lest it interfere with the business at hand. New Hollywood directors, on the other hand, were unembarrassed –in many cases rightly so– to assume the mantle of the artist, nor did they shrink from developing personal styles that distinguished their work from that of other directors.

Many films began to reflect the disillusionment that the population of the 1970s felt, as well as a strong opposition against wars – like Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the first film that openly criticized the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War (Mellen 253) – and the scandals in which the elected candidates were involved,[10] thus evoking "the destruction of the American Dream" (Quart and Auster 110). William Kleinknecht points out that the nation was in crisis not only due to the unemployment rates and the inflation of the 1970s, but also because of "a deeper ennui" linked to their own national identity (xxi). And Robin Wood, for example, observed that most of the films of the 1970s focused on "the sensation of imminent or actual breakdown, of rottenness at the ideological core of capitalist society" (28).

In terms of masculinity, these political changes and the increasing alienation among citizens affected the representation of male heroes in mainstream Hollywood films. The tough guy of the 1970s was the type of hero that Clint Eastwood portrayed in the Dirty Harry films: an against-the-grain individual who kills criminals in order to defend American citizens from corrupt institutions. If Eastwood represented a certain "estrangement" from familiar issues, "authority," and almost "all externally imposed standards of behavior" as the Man with No Name during the 1960s (Mellen 268) – values that could be shared by the young protesters of the counterculture – his image would evolve into the vigilante cop that saves people from the horrors of the legacy of the counterculture.

10After Nixon's Watergate scandal, Jimmy Carter had to deal with the Iran hostage crisis for 444 days, from November, 1979 to January, 1981 and eventually resolved once Reagan had taken office (Carlisle and Golson 238).

and this type would be followed by the characters recurrently played by actors like Charles Bronson. Those displays of violence and the hyper-masculine attitude that permeate the films of Dirty Harry will increase in the following decade with what Tasker calls "ramboidal violence" (92). The 1980s were a time for the representation of hyper-masculine bodies on the big screen, epitomized by the heroes portrayed by Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. What is more, the leading actors that prevailed throughout the 1980s associated their masculinity with the same type of extreme violence that Frank displays in *Blue Velvet*. As Jeffords points out, it may initially seem that both characterizations of masculinity – the 1970s and the 1980s screen male – are essentially the same (*Hard Bodies* 21). However, there is a crucial difference between them is found in the message that underlies their ends. Violence in the 1980s was seen as an expression of a sense of regeneration after the failure of the Carter administration to reconnect with the people, restore credibility in the institutions, and give people hope for the future.[11]

In 1979 Jimmy Carter acknowledged the growing disenchantment that the nation experienced in terms of national identity, and expressed his concern in the speech that is popularly known as the "Crisis of Confidence" or "Malaise Speech" (Carter):

> In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

In his speech, President Carter stated that the lack of an American identity as the one embodied by the nation in the past was partly a result of the materialism that had come to dominate the country in the 1970s. But Americans "did not want to hear" Carter's self-questioning, and by the end of the 1970s they found in Ronald Reagan a candidate who was "more attuned to the public mood" (Kleinknecht xxii). The ex-actor and governor of California Ronald Reagan became the 40th

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[11] Whereas the isolated hero of the 1970s cannot beat the institutions and remains frustrated at the bitter end, the 1980s hero does no longer focuses on the protection of society but on the defense and regeneration of government institutions (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 19).

President of the United States, being elected consecutively in 1981 and 1984 by "less than 30 percent of those American eligible to vote" (Chafe and Sitkoff 412). The Reagan era was marked by the president's anticommunist policy (in line with his previous position as president of the Screen Actors Guild), by his consistent stance against the welfare state, by his "trickle-down" view of economics, and by the ensuing increase in the gap between the rich and poor (Quart and Auster 137), which placed the country "on the brink of its worst economic downturn since the Great Depression" (Kleinknecht xi-ii). Reagan's success must be seen in the context of the rise of the New Right, whose groups focused on "returning the country to the bedrock values of family discipline, evangelical Christianity, and patriotism" (Chafe and Sitkoff 412). Whereas Carter identified many of the problems that drove American society to a spiritual crisis, such as materialism, Reagan focused on issues of morality and the urgent need to return to the traditional values that characterized the United States in past decades.

The efforts of the Reagan administration to recover traditional values and discipline had an impact on the screen, affecting the notion of what it meant to be a man in the 1980s. As Susan Jeffords notes, there is a certain dichotomy between the notion of masculinity in the presidencies of Carter and Reagan. Compared with the "feminine" image put out by Carter, Reagan came across as "though guy" (Hard Bodies 10-11). Professor John Orman compared the Carter and Reagan administrations and highlighted the role of Rosalynn Carter as a policy advisor during his husband's mandate, thus suggesting that Jimmy Carter "did not project the image of being a 'real man'" (in Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 10). This dichotomy also reflected the values of the New Right: the opposition to the Gay Liberation and Women's Rights movements, which had grown significantly in the 1970s and early 1980s (Fetner 45) and that were perceived as a threat to male supremacy and one of the causes of everything that was wrong with the United States. Yvonne Tasker, for example, considers the 1980s as the "Age of Rambo," and describes Sylvester Stallone's war veteran character as "the literal embodiment of American interventionism" (92). In the 1980s, in the context

of economic recession and the feeling that men were losing power, the film industry answered to the question of what it meant to be a man with the hyper-masculine bodies mentioned above. Thus, the Reagan era resulted in the rise of "physical" actors whose performances were based on their muscular body (Tasker 91), depicting masculinity as a mere violent form of entertainment (Jeffords, Can Masculinity 246).

But there is another side to this story. Building on the same forces that had opened the film industry to untried filmmakers in the 1970s, during the 1980s many films adopted postmodern topic and techniques (Levy 56). Although postmodernism is always a complex topic to deal with, Emanuel Levy's description of non-mainstream cinema brings to mind concerns that are often associated with the postmodern turn. For Levy, there was a crisis that led to a break with metanarratives through "the loss of a sense of history as a continuous and linear sequence of events," which combined with the lack of trust in narratives about "masculinity and patriarchal authority," caused a change in the representation of men in those postmodern films (56). In opposition to the hyper-masculine and violent blockbusters that dominated Hollywood production at that time (Quart and Auster 142), postmodern films of the 1980s were nearest to the new wave of authors that had already arrived to the studios in the 1970s. In opposition to Hollywood blockbusters, the films of "Antonioni, Truffaut, Bergman, Buñuel, and Fellini" were considered as "the only films worth seeing" by many people during the 1980s (Mellen 262). Within this framework, David Lynch was one of those untried filmmakers that created more personal films under the influence of European directors, such as Federico Fellini and Jacques Tati, instead of following the tradition of Hollywood production (Woods 12). In terms of masculinity, postmodern films of the 1980s portrayed a different archetype of men than Reaganite products such as the Rambo films. Unlike most blockbusters of the 1980s, the postmodern approach that many filmmakers adopted in their works affected the representation of masculinity in their films, with directors such as Wim Wenders who explored the issue of masculinity in greater depth during the

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decade. Two years after the release of Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, Wenders depicted the anxieties of the 1980s male in *Paris, Texas* (1984). In the film, Travis (Harry Dean Stanton) is presented as a man devastated by his own masculinity, being abandoned by his wife due to his rages of jealousy. He is not a head of household but a man unable to raise a child, who walks alone through the desert trying to find himself. In fact, his attitude throughout the film is closer to the film stars of male melodramas from the 90s – which described a terrible portrait of the family in which the father is depicted as the culprit (Bruzzi 180) – than to the male stars of the 80s. However, Travis experiences those anxieties once his dreams of traditional marriage and breadwinning start to crumble, and Wender's approach to masculinity issues focuses not on the anxieties that lead men to perform a traditional role but in the despair that follows the decision to perpetuate traditional roles.

In accordance with Jonathan Rutherford, films from the Reagan era presented two images of men: the "New Man" who no longer represses his emotions, and the traditionally tough "Retributive Man" (Chapman and Rutherford 28). However, one of the strengths of the postmodern approach adopted by many filmmakers lies in the multiplicity of male identities that goes beyond any categorization, just like the differences between Travis and the males in *Blue Velvet* suggest. Thus, Rutherford's distinction between a *new* and a retributive man only serves as a simplistic categorization that helps us to distinguish the male archetype of Hollywood blockbusters from the screen males that directors such as Lynch and Wenders portray in their films. Nevertheless, the screen male of the 1980s is linked to the role of the masculine, traditional breadwinner that Hollywood blockbusters of the 1980s tried to perpetuate. Whereas those characters who express themselves through a ramboidal violence follow the tradition of the masculine, violent male, Travis and the male characters of *Blue Velvet* remain frustrated due to their incapability to become a real masculine role model. As Gil Rodman asserts, "the context and the phenomenon are mutually constitutive of each other" (54), and thus *Blue Velvet* serves as an object of study to understand what it meant to be a man in the 1980s and the anxieties that it involves.

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2. Nostalgia and *Blue Velvet:* A Return to Traditional Values

> I want you to know that this administration is motivated by a political philosophy that sees the greatness of America in you, her people, and in your families, churches, neighborhoods, communities–the institutions that foster and nourish values like concern for others and respect for the rule of law under God.
>
> Now, I don't have to tell you that this puts us in opposition to, or at least out of step with, a–a prevailing attitude of many who have turned to a modern-day secularism, discarding the tried and time-tested values upon which our very civilization is based. No matter how well intentioned, their value system is radically different from that of most Americans. And while they proclaim that they're freeing us from superstitions of the past, they've taken upon themselves the job of superintending us by government rule and regulation. Sometimes their voices are louder than ours, but they are not yet a majority. (Reagan)[12]

Ronald Reagan's legacy consisted of "mergers, deregulation, tax cuts for the wealthy, privatization and globalization", political actions that resulted in the weakening of the family and the loss of the traditional, American small town way of life (Kleinknecht xi). That loss of the average American town life contrasted with the childhood memories of the grown-ups of the 1980s that were raised in the 1950s and missed the happy and familiar small town life, the "normalcy and nondeviant everyday life" of the Eisenhower era (Jameson 280). The feeling of nostalgia that American society experienced in the 1980s was expressed through a 1950s revival. Lynch's *Blue Velvet* can be said to have joined in this trend. As Lynne Layton asserts, the director, who was also raised in the Eisenhower era, uses both images of the 1950s and images of the 1980s in the film (388). This longing and nostalgia for the 1950s is expressed in *Blue Velvet* by means of its timeless aesthetics, the music, the clothes, the cars, and even the neon signs that appear in the film. However, it must be noted that the tone of nostalgia that proliferated in the 1980s did not truly reflect the complex reality of the 1950s, forgetting about the "sense of fatalism and despair" that the nuclear arms race aroused under the guise of conformity (Quart and Auster 44). Eisenhower became the 34th President of the United States of America in January, 1953 and his two-term legislature was marked by the economic revival that the country experienced after World War II. That economic context of

12Reagan's "Evil Empire Speech" (8 March 1983) emphasized the faith-based morality that his administration epitomized, highlighting the weight of traditional values throughout American history. For further details, see Kleinknecht.

prosperity helped to create "a powerful and consumer culture" in which "the pursuit of success and an emphasis on social conformity became the dominant values of the era" (Quart and Auster 43). And the mass media conveyed those values through the increasingly popular television (Quart and Auster 44), a device that became essential in every home in the United States.[13]

The opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* introduces the viewer to the happy small-town life of Meadow Lane, a white fenced neighborhood of Lumberton filled with joy and garden flowers that seems out of the 1950s. But this idealized image will quickly become a nightmare as the story shifts from the peaceful, fairy-tale atmosphere of Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" to a dark, eerie mood. First, we get a shot of the blue sky that reminds us of the film's (and song's) title, as the camera tilts down to reveal some picture-perfect roses that grow by a white picket fence. Then, we see a montage of images of happy firefighters, well-tended gardens, children crossing the street on their way to schools, and other instances of everyday life in the idyllic 1950s-style neighborhood of Meadow Lane. Cut to one specific home in Meadow Lane, in which a woman is watching television indoors while a man waters the garden outside. Suddenly, the man collapses from a heart attack. Then, the camera begins to zoom in on the garden soil until all we can hear is the unpleasant sound of insects moving. In this way, the opening sequence emerges as a metaphor of what actually underlies Reagan's idyllic small-town America. Then, the life of Lumberton seems to return to calm as though nothing had happened. A 1950s song plays again as Lumberton's welcoming sign is showed, and the camera starts pans right in order to show the atmosphere of tranquility that reigns in the city. As Fredric Jameson suggests, the concept of the small town that represented "a certain comfort and even reassurance" three decades ago, resulted in "a source of claustrophobia and anxiety" in the 1980s (281). *Blue Velvet*'s opening sequence reflects that feeling of claustrophobia and calls into question the American Dream in the context of Reagan's conservative revolution but, as I explain below, these opening scenes also work as a metaphor of what it meant to be a man in

13Paul Coughlin highlights the importance of popular culture and television in Blue Velvet in his article "Postmodern Parody and the Subversion of Conservative Frameworks."

the 1980s.

Blue Velvet's opening: calm, turmoil, and the return to calm.

Just like the opening scene points to what actually underlies the friendly – albeit artificial – look of Meadow Lane neighborhood, the 1950s revival that characterizes the film's aesthetics also involves an evil side. The nostalgic viewpoint of the 1980s entails that some realities of the Eisenhower era have been pushed under the carpet, and Lynch manages to establish a certain irony in the depiction of a social conformity rooted in the 1950s. Just before the man collapses while watering his picture-perfect garden, the film shows a woman sitting on a coach, watching a crime film in the tranquility of home, completely unaware of the invisible relationships between the fictional world of the television and life in Lumberton that will soon be revealed to the audience. As Jameson points out, Eisenhower wore "a well-known smile for us but an equally well-known scowl

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for foreigners beyond our borders" (281),[14] a scowl that can be considered as devious and unpleasant as the noise produced by the insects living under the manicured lawn in Lynch's 1950s revival. Conformity and hypocrisy go hand in hand in the context of the 1950s, since the tranquility of the small town life of the white, middle-class family hides the social and economic realities that minorities had to experience. Women who did not conform to the traditional role of the housewife, non-Caucasians and immigrants for whom equality was a utopia, and homosexuals who did not fit in a world dominated by the standards of heterosexuality, probably did not perceive the 1950s peacefulness that has come down to us in mainstream popular fiction.

In his book *David Lynch: The Man from Another Place* (2015), Dennis Lim relates the director's mixture of images from the 1950s and the 1980s with the notion of "hyperreality," highlighting the fact that Jean Baudrillard's *America* was published in the same year that *Blue Velvet* was released (79). Jeffrey and Sandy – who is named like the character of Olivia Newton-John in *Grease* (1978) – are young people of the 1980s, but they wear clothes that unequivocally bring the 1950s to mind, meet at a 1950s diner, drive vintage cars, and go to parties in which they listen to the same rock and roll music that teenagers from the 1950s used to. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard defines the *hyperreal* by recalling one of the many stories that Jorge Luis Borges wrote (1):[15]

> If once we were able to view the Borges fable in which the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly (the decline of the Empire witnesses the fraying of this map, little by little, and its fall into ruins, though some shreds are still discernible in the deserts –the metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction testifying to a pride equal to the Empire and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil, a bit as the double ends by being confused with the real through aging)– as the most beautiful allegory of simulation, this fable has now come full circle for us, and possesses nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra.
>
> Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept.

14Eisenhower's policies on immigration were similar to the ones proposed by Donald Trump in 2016. Trump himself cited Eisenhower's "Operation Wetback" as a model to follow, an operation that involved "an aggressive and unprecedented sweep by U.S. Border Patrol agents in the mid-1950s that plucked Mexican laborers from fields and ranches in targeted raids" (Reston).
15Baudrillard alludes to the short story *On Exactitude in Science* or *On Rigor in Science* (*Del rigor en la ciencia*), wrote by Borges.

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.

Thus, the nostalgia for the 1950s is not precisely based on what the decade really meant but a construction, a revival, since the mythology of the 1950s that has been created over the years is nothing but "a real without origin or reality." For a better understanding of Baudrillard's notion, Lim describes the opening scene of *Blue Velvet* as "the very definition of aesthetic hyperrealism" (79), alluding to its 1950s artificial look of happiness and reassurance. In Lynch's hands, the nostalgic tone that underlies the film and its artificial ending, traditional family life does not appear as the only or the preferred alternative but as a mockery. If *Blue Velvet* opens with the idyllic representation of a traditional family living in a traditional, 1950s-looking middle-class neighborhood, the film can be said to end with the same image of conformity. In terms of masculinity, once Jeffrey has discovered the complexity that it involves including issues of homosexuality and repression that collide with the family values of the New Right, he decides to finally become the traditional breadwinner much in the mold of the 1950s. As the ending scene suggests through the film saturated colors and images of robins singing, the feeling of calmness and happiness that the traditional American family seems to convey is nothing more than an illusion, a fantasy that does not solve the real anxieties of the 1980s male. In fact, just like the opening scene shows what really underlies Reagan's traditional values with the shot of the insects in the garden soil, at the very end of the film a robin is shown with an insect in its beak, as reminder of the other side of the coin that the charade of tranquility and reassurance hides.

Due to the deep sense of disillusionment that the financial crisis aroused (Jameson 282), males of the 1980s who grew up in the decade of the 1950s felt nostalgic about their childhood. As Barbara Ehrenreich points out, in the 1980s "adult manhood was no longer burdened with the automatic expectation of marriage and breadwinning" (12), which resulted in Reagan's policies and the return to the family values that dominated American middle-class society in the Eisenhower era.

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Nothing exemplifies better the conservative turn the New Right embarked on than "The Family: Preserving America's Future"– also known as "Bauer report" – a series of guidelines written in 1986 for federal agencies to effectively assess the impact of new legislation on the (traditional) family. The financial crisis of the 1980s aroused not only a feeling of nostalgia for the past, but also of disenchantment with different concepts of masculinity and class that the social movements of the 1960s had popularized. In the words of Lynne Layton (390), in times of prosperity "men can bond as men and deny class differences" but, in worse economic times, middle-class males "lose a group identity that gives them a sense of phallic power." In her article *Blue Velvet: A Parable of Male Development*, Layton identifies the different factors that led to a masculinity crisis in the 1980s, including women's rights movements, the gay and lesbian liberation movement, the dominance of whiteness and, of course, "the decline of the USA as an economic power" (390). The gay and lesbian liberation movement clashed with the contrasting interests of the New Right, which considered heterosexuality as an imperative. Furthermore, the women's rights movement also played a crucial role in the eroding of traditional gender roles as it challenged taken-for-granted male supremacy and began to demand greater equality and independence.

As Yvonne Tasker points out, the feminism of the 1970s threatened the traditional role of men in terms of financial superiority and independence and led to "a new conservatism in both national and sexual politics" in the course of the 1980s (1). In *Blue Velvet*, Jeffrey finds himself in a love triangle with the strong, independent Dorothy, and the young, delicate Sandy. The dichotomy between the sensuality of an older brunette and the innocent beauty of a blond girl seems to indicate that the artificial standards of the past – as depicted, for example, in a 1950s film like *Mogambo* (1953) through the antagonism between Ava Gardner and Grace Kelly – were still present in the 1980s. In fact, Dorothy, like Gardner in the past, seems to embody "the old fear that an independent woman will rob a man of his virility" (Mellen 243), whereas Sandy epitomizes the stability, the conformity, and the ease that traditional values of the 1950s implied. Sandy represents the

traditional family model that the Reagan era tried to restore, while Dorothy, an independent woman who challenges notions of traditional gender roles, poses a threat to the nuclear family.

The mixture of images from the 1950s and the 1980s allows Lynch to portray a different reality from that of mainstream film (with their hyper-masculine heroes) that dominated the industry throughout the 1980s. As Susan Jeffords observes (Hard Bodies 24), the body was a central topic throughout Reagan's mandate:

> The Reagan era was an era of bodies. From the anxieties about Reagan's age and the appearance of cancerous spots on his noise; to the profitable craze in aerobics and exercise; to the molding of a former Mr. Universe into the biggest box-office draw on the decade; to the conservative agenda to outlaw abortion; to the identification of "values" through an emphasis on drug use, sexuality, and child-bearing; to the thematized aggression against persons with AIDS– these articulations of bodies constituted the imaginary of the Reagan agenda and the site of its materialization.

Jeffords differentiates between two essential categories in the conception of the body during the Reagan era: the "soft" and the "hard" body. The first represents women – as well as men who are not worthy of the name according to the traditional values promoted at the time – or the bodies that contain "sexually transmitted diseases, immorality, illegal chemicals, laziness and endangered fetuses"; the hard body, male and white, is characterized by "strength, labor, determination, loyalty, and courage" (*Hard Bodies* 24). According to this categorization, manliness in American film has been mainly represented by hard bodies over the decades, since the attributes that Jeffords identifies as inherent in the hard body have always been present in Hollywood screen males.

The 1980s were characterized not only by the measures taken to face the prolonged economic decline of the United States, but also by the impact of a series of civil rights movements that began "to take shape" already in the 1950s (Quart and Auster 44) and by a backlash against these progressive movements in the context of Reagan's conservative revolution. As women protested against gender discrimination and the gay and lesbian community fought for equality, the Reaganite hero saw his masculinity threatened and felst that it needed to be strengthened.

Furthermore, the 1980s increasingly visible multiculturalism also led to demand, not only for manly heroes, but for white heroes as well. As Yvonne Tasker points out, the hero of the Reagan era based his screen appearances on "physical acting," a type of performance "that has been associated most directly with such stars as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone" (91). In addition, Barry Keith Grant also mentions "Jean-Claude Van Damme, Steven Seagal, Chuck Norris, and Bruce Willis" as actors who "rely on anatomy rather than acting" (175). During the Reagan era, those hard bodies are portrayed as hyper-masculine males, heroes who embody both "national and masculine power" by means of the muscular bodies (Jeffords, Hard Bodies 21). Whereas the vigilante cop of the 1970s – e.g., Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry or Charles Bronson's characters – served as a substitute for the corrupt system and an expression of social order, Silvester Stallone's John Rambo is a warrior hero who "serves as a sign of ideological certainty and thereby helps establish credibility for a discredited policy" (Dittmar and Michaud 88), returning power back to governmental institutions.

Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985) was released "in the context of the Beirut hijacking" (Tasker 92) that took place in June, 1985, in which "two Shia Lebanese gunmen" hijacked a plane for more than two weeks with US and Israeli citizens among the passengers (Wills 91). In his book Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980's, Gil Troy refers to Reagan's words about the hijacking crisis after watching the film: "Boy, after seeing Rambo last night, I know what to do the next time this happens" (192). Rambo is chosen to rescue "American POWs" (Jeffords, Hard Bodies 37), prisoners of war who, as well as the US citizens caught in the hijacking, did not represent individual soldiers/citizens but the whole nation and, by extension, national identity. However, during the Reagan administration the best example of the embodiment of national identity is not only found in the hard bodies of all the hyper-masculine Rambos of the decade, but also in Reagan himself. In opposition to Jimmy Carter's presidency, John Orman asserts that Reagan was "the quintessential macho president" (18), the masculine male who was able to solve the

masculinity crisis that – in addition to the financial crisis – the nation was experiencing. As Jeffords points out, Reagan conveyed "certain distinctive images of himself as a president *and* as a man," performing activities such as "chopping wood, breaking horses, toughing out an assassination attempt, bullying Congress, and staging showdowns with the Soviet Union" (*Hard Bodies* 12). What is more, the prolonged financial crisis the country was immersed in when Reagan arrived at the White House was perceived as the result of a weakening of the old values that Reagan had advocated for years, first as a member of the politically conservative Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPAPAI) and later on as a Governor of California and President of the United States. In the Republican book, the economic recession ran parallel to a spiritual crisis that had gradually undermined traditional masculine ideals. Reagan (the right-wing politician, ex-actor, and President of the States) decided to speak to his nation "in the language of popular culture" (Troy 192), and, reciprocally, the popular film industry spoke to the audience in the language of Reagan through its screen males. Reagan's closeness to American citizens progressively increased to the point that he left office "with the highest approval rating since Franklin D. Roosevelt" (Carlisle and Golson 242), despite the controversy that his economic and social policies provoked in a large portion of the citizenry. Thus, both Reagan and the screen male that proliferated in the 1980s embodied a traditional understanding of national identity in times of difficulty.

As I have previously mentioned with respect to Rutherford's categorization of the new and the retributive man, male characters in *Blue Velvet* do not embody the archetype of the hard body that proliferated in 1980s blockbusters. In the film, adult males are better understood when seen in the dialectic between conformist breadwinning husbands like Sandy's father and unhinged hoodlums that do not accept themselves like Frank and Ben. Sandy's father – as well as Jeffrey's father once he reappears at the end – has married and raised a family in the manner of the average 1950s male but his masculinity is called into question by his indolence. On the other hand, Frank and Ben are trapped in a nightmare due to their incapability to develop an ordinary relationship with

a woman. Caught in the midst of this dichotomy, Jeffrey is depicted as the young male in the transition to adulthood who still has to find his way, forced to define himself in a polarized context that engages with problems and anxieties of 1980s America and the masculine ideal embodied by Reagan and mainstream cinema. What is significant is that neither of these male characters – Jeffrey, Sandy's father, Frank, etc. – respond to the one-dimensional dominant ideal. Instead, they reveal the complexity of masculinity in a context that, as has been described above, is marked by the economic crisis, the rise of the New Right and its conservative gender agenda, the backlash against the progressive movements of the previous decades, and the hyper-masculine, hard bodies of the 1980s action films. Both his father and Sandy's father seem to act according to the values and the traditional gender roles of the past, but, far from being rewarded, they appear to be soft, vulnerable, and out of touch with society. On the other hand, Frank, despite his displays of violence and his efforts to be seen as a hyper-masculine man, is unable hide his vulnerability. In order to understand the cultural and sexual forces that *Blue Velvet* brings into play and to analyze how these were dealt with during the Reagan era, in the following section I will provide a thorough analysis of Jeffrey, the main male characters in the film.

3. In Dreams: Masculinity and *Blue Velvet*

Although *Blue Velvet* does not feature any character in the mold of the predominant hyper-masculine hero of the Reagan era, the effects that such a model of masculinity had on US society and the problems that it caused are reflected to a greater or lesser extent in the leading male characters of the film, above all in the character of Frank Booth. It is in this way – by situating the male characters in the context of Reagan's USA – that the spectator can understand the influence and the consequences of the changes in gender norms. One of the best examples of Frank's confusion over his sexuality – despite Dennis Hopper's public image as a well-known Republican (Sherwell and Mendick) – can be found in the scene in which Ben sings Roy Orbison's song of unrequited love "In Dreams" at the ironically called Pussy Heaven. At this point, camera work manages to convey Frank's sexual desire for another male (although in drag make-up): Ben sings the song with passion while Frank lipsyncs the lyrics. All it takes is one glance at Dennis Hopper's performance to perceive his attraction towards Ben. The shots of the these two outlandish characters are increasingly closer. We witness how Frank's repressed desire consumes him until he can't take it anymore and switches off the music. During this scene, the camera focuses on Ben, but the reverse shots of Frank looking at him, with his eyes full of passion, suggest that both Ben and the song mean much more to Frank. At the same time the scene is interspersed shots of Jeffrey looking at them, trying to unravel what is going on. Just like Frank's homosexual desire for Ben turns to rage and frustration in this scene, his overall sexual turmoil has made him a violent and impulsive man and has led him to design a plan to subjugate Dorothy and carry out his twisted perversions. On the other hand, it is Jeffrey's perspective from which the spectator sees the whole scene, which suggest that he is also trying to navigate the conflicting sexual discourses of the times.

Seen within the framework of Rutherford's categorization of the new man and the retributive man – that is, the man who does not feel ashamed of showing his feelings and the man who follows the traditional standards in terms of masculinity – the character of Frank can be said to be dealing

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with both archetypes of masculinity simultaneously. He wants to portray the role of the retributive man – the archetype of the tough guy that dominated the 1980s blockbusters. Throughout almost the whole film, he is depicted as the bad and violent guy who wears a leather jacket, drinks Blue Ribbon beer, and drives a vintage muscle car as an expression of his "sexual potency" (O'Hehir). But Frank is torn by the conflicting models of masculinity predominant at the time, by the sexual confusion and the contradictions that erupted as the conservative turn in sexual politics (and culture as a whole) during the Reagan era collided with the gains made in areas like gender roles and sexual rights and with the sexualities that emerged from these advances. However, in spite of his outer appearance, the new, caring, and fragile man lives in pain within him. One wants to express his feelings for Ben when he sings "In Dreams," the other strives to keep these feelings repressed. In fact, the lyrics of the song fit perfectly with Frank's desire towards Ben:

A candy-colored clown they call the sandman
Tiptoes to my room every night
Just to sprinkle star dust and to whisper
"Go to sleep, everything is alright"

I close my eyes then I drift away
Into the magic night, I softly say
A silent prayer like dreamers do
Then I fall asleep to dream my dreams of you

In dreams I walk with you
In dreams I talk to you
In dreams you're mine all the time
We're together in dreams, in dreams […]

Frank identifies with the song because it is Ben, the object of his desire, who sings it, but also because the lyrics offer him the words to expressed and to understand his conflicting feelings. He prays in silence because his desire cannot be expressed publicly but only in the intimacy of his home, and particularly in his own dreams. Frank's frustration leads him to repress his real feelings, pretending to be the type of retributive man whose sexual desire is located in women and quenched through sadistic domination.

Frank (Dennis Hopper) and Ben (Dean Stockwell) at the Pussy Heaven.

One of the most iconic scenes of *Blue Velvet* is the one in which Jeffrey breaks into Dorothy's apartment and, after hiding in her wardrobe, he contemplates the strange relationship that links Frank, Dorothy, and the blue velvet fetish. Once they arrive, Frank pours himself a glass of bourbon and tells Dorothy to spread her legs while he continues drinking on the couch. When he finishes his drink he looks at her not with passion, but with terror, as if he were being forced to abuse her not on purpose but due to life circumstances. After that, he begins to inhale drugs with a medical mask and then starts to crawl towards her open legs, yelling the word "mommy" when, suddenly, he beats Dorothy for looking at him. In fact, Dorothy does not have consensual sex with Frank. Quite the opposite, Frank has kidnapped her son and therefore she feels forced to have sexual relations with her blackmailer for the sake of his son's safety. Meanwhile, Jeffrey observes the grotesque scene from inside the wardrobe, perplexed and confused, but also with the morbid interest of a voyeur. Once again, it is Jeffrey that defines the viewing position for the spectator. The scene is then followed by close-up shots of the faces of Jeffrey, Frank, and Dorothy. Whereas Frank is depicted as a desperate and frustrated man in front of a woman's open legs, whining like a child, Dorothy seems to be enjoying the sadomasochistic show. Then, Frank asks for some of the blue velvet in her robe, and once he tastes it the scene becomes even more violent. Frank actually rapes her, an act that Dorothy, unsurprisingly, does not enjoy. Comparing this scene and the one at the

Pussy Heaven with Ben, Frank's facial expressions show how different it is for him to handle feelings depending on whether they are provoked by a woman or by a man. Compared with the way he looked at Ben in the Pussy Heaven, this scene reveals that Frank's physical attraction to Dorothy does not suit his real self. He has to take drugs and alcohol, have the blue velvet fetish with him, and create "the right atmosphere" (Layton 382) in order to have sex with a woman.

Frank's repression and his attempts to conform to *normal* heterosexual norms – that is, to fit in the archetype of the retributive man – is nothing but the product of the reality created by the backlash against the gay liberation movements that emanated from an administration in which the fundamentalist Christian organizations had gained considerably ground. During the Carter administration the United States reached a high point on issues of civil rights, following in the footsteps of the movements that began to take shape by the end of the 1950s and spread in the 1960s across most of the country. As William O. Kellogg points out, "there was a very limited acceptance by the American people of homosexuality, and homosexual practices were criminalized" until 1962 (362). Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician in the U.S. history, was elected as Supervisor in the city of San Francisco in 1977, but his promises of changing and reaching equality were frustrated only a few months later when he was assassinated by an "anti-gay sentiment, fellow Supervisor" in 1978 (Tong and Lutz 209). However, during the 1980s the White House returned to the traditional values of the past, and the sense of openness that Milk, among others, tried to take to the streets started to fade away with the right-wing administration of Ronald Reagan. However, despite the fact that, as Kellogg notes, homosexuality stopped being criminalized already in the 1960s, the laws that criminalized sodomy were not declared "unconstitutional" by the Supreme Court until 2003 (Kellogg 362). Regardless of the progress made by the gay rights movement and the increasing visibility of other sexualities during the 1970s, the Reagan administration emphasized the need to differentiate between *hard* and *soft* bodies as positive and negative standards of national identity, a dichotomy that have remained up to the present day.

The character of Frank in *Blue Velvet* proves that we must avoid categorizing masculinity in such a simple way; dichotomies like hard/soft bodies or new/retributive man cannot account for the complexity of gender construction and sexual relationships. These generalizations will just lead men to frustration, forcing them to behave according to the dominant type in order to avoid discrimination. In the scene that follows the one in the Pussy Heaven, Frank is still dominated by rage and desire. Once inside the car, the camera shows the events from Jeffrey's viewing angle: Frank starts abusing Dorothy again and Jeffrey, who had witnessed that type of abuse before, asks him to leave Dorothy alone. Then, from the point of view of the front passenger seat, we observe how Jeffrey beats Frank in the face, trying to protect Dorothy from the horror that follows the act of inhalation. Frank needs to drive at high speed as a sign of his maleness, but these displays of virility inside the car are overshadowed by the use of lipstick once he gets out. Being punched by Jeffrey, he feels that his virility has been questioned again, and when he gets out of the car, he inhales his drug of choice, and puts red lipstick on. Then, as he did with Dorothy before, once he has inhaled the drug, he kisses Jeffrey. All the while, Jeffrey observes the scene and, despite Frank's violence towards him, seems to be the submissive observer he was in Dorothy's wardrobe, like an apprentice in the subject of what it means to be a man who is being instructed by the worst teacher. Initially, it may seem that Frank burst out in anger when Jeffrey tries to stop him from abusing Dorothy with a punch, but after that Frank calls him "candy-colored clown," like the man that Orbison mentions at the beginning of the song "In Dreams." Because of Frank's reference to a song that stirs his deeper feelings, we may be right to believe that he also feels attracted to Jeffrey.

As I have demonstrated, masculinity is one of the central issues in *Blue Velvet*. However, Frank is not the only character in the film that engages in the conundrum of the new models of male sexuality in the 1980s. As a coming-of-age teenager who finds himself exposed to an array of conflicting sexual patterns, special attention must be given to Jeffrey in order to fully understand the film's take on issues of masculinity. Many scholars have suggested that Jeffrey is represented in the

film as an Oedipal hero, whose father's absence leads him to a journey of to discover what it means to be a man (Creed 97; Layton 384). In her book *The Oedipus Complex*, psychotherapist Rhona Fear builds on Freud's Oedipal theory to conclude that the wish of death that the son experiences towards his father is based upon his envy towards him, because the child is unconsciously in love with his own mother (Fear 12). According to Freudian theory, Jeffrey's initial attraction towards Dorothy in the film is based on the problematic of the child as a lover of the mother – in fact, Dorothy herself is a mother, and acts as a surrogate mother due to their age difference. However, it is obvious that Jeffrey is not portrayed as a child in the film, and yet the journey he begins in order to understand the mystery of masculinity has certain resemblances with the journey of Oedipus. As Gabbard, Litowitz and Williams argue, the oedipal journey "is launched by the child's discovery of sexual difference," and helps to perpetuate the existing dichotomies between men and women (136):

> The Oedipus complex, as theory and as lived experience, is the psychodynamic narrative that accords personal meaning and social legitimization for the cultural imperative that links the binary system of gender to the obligatory status of heterosexuality and to the implicit prohibition of homosexuality. The tortuous oedipal journey Freud laid out for pre-oedipal boys and girls, whose nominal gender (male/female) had not yet taken on the ideological and psychologically charged meanings of masculinity and femininity, was design in accordance with this invisible cultural a priori: gender must be an exclusionary (either/or) category that "brings about" procreative heterosexuality, as in "opposites attract.

Thus, Jeffrey's journey becomes a trip in which he finally discovers what it means to be a man, not unlike girls and boys discover their sexuality during the Freudian-Oedipal journey. Whereas Jeffrey ends the trip and completes the journey, Frank, who calls Dorothy "mommy," remains trapped in the earlier phase of discovering – the same nightmare that Jeffrey experiences throughout the film as an apprentice – since his own sexuality does not fit into the "invisible cultural a priori" that predetermines "procreative heterosexuality" (Gabbard, Litowitz and Williams 136).

Jeffrey's Oedipal journey began with the discovery of a severed ear on his way back home. The ear in *Blue Velvet* unlocks the mystery of masculinity, taking Jeffrey to the underworld of

forbidden passions in which Frank still lives. In fact, the ear is the symbolic representation of the key to "unlock the unconscious" (Creed 97), acting in the film "like the rabbit hole of *Alice in Wonderland*" (O'Hehir). Apart from the mysterious crime of the severed ear – we can imagine that it belongs to Dorothy's husband, but the film ends without providing answers about what has really happened to him – Jeffrey's journey represents how difficult it is to grow from childhood into manhood, from "innocence and power" into "degradation and impotence" (Layton 386). That sense of impotence that Layton identifies in adult men articulates with the anxieties experienced by men in the 1980s, a product of the sociopolitical atmosphere of the decade that forced men to unequivocally choose which side of masculinity they wanted to embody. Since Jeffrey's father is depicted as an absent father due to his illness, the only role models that he finds throughout the nightmare will be the maniac Frank Booth and Sandy's father, both of them degraded and impotent. Clearly, those qualities are evidenced in the character of Frank, but Sandy's father also conveys the same weaknesses in a different manner. Being a police officer himself, Sandy's father embodies the type of hard body that never expresses his feelings in public and commits himself to enforce the law in favor of social order. But his lack of commitment with Jeffrey's case suggests that he has chosen to perform the role of the traditional breadwinning husband instead of negotiating more complex understandings of masculinity. According to the traditional values attached to the male, the only adults in the film who fit the role of breadwinner and head of the household are Jeffrey's father and Sandy's father, conformist men who are not in tune with their times and who never rebel against preconceived ideas about masculinity; they both represent the middle-class, traditional family man that apparently Jeffrey will also choose to become in the end. In fact, despite being a police officer, Sandy's father decides to remain apart from the mystery that surrounds the ear either because he lives in a fantasy world of certitudes akin to the imaginary fictions of the 1950s or because he knows and has already went through the torments that await Jeffrey and the extreme and complex emotions that masculinity issues stir up. On the contrary, Curiously enough, Sandy does feel curious

about the crime and shows some interest in the issue, but the truth is that she never gets completely involved in the case; the mystery of masculinity is denied to her, a woman who dreams of robins and love:

> JEFFREY. Why are there people like Frank? Why is there so much trouble in this world?
>
> SANDY. I don't know. I had a dream. In fact, it was the night I met you. In the dream, there was our world, and the world was dark because there weren't any robins. And the robins represented love. And for the longest time there was just this darkness. And all of a sudden thousands of robins were set free. And they flew down and brought this blinding light of love. And it seemed like that love would be the only thing that would make any difference, and it did. So I guess it means… there is trouble till the robins come.

Even if Sandy never realizes what the secret really implies, she suffers due to Jeffrey's confusing attitude until the mystery is solved. Sandy, like her own father and Jeffrey, finally decides to perform the traditional role of women and never look back into gender-related conflicts, choosing the illusory conformity of family values in the 1950s. The only alternatives for Jeffrey after his journey as a teenager through the underworld of Reagan's USA seem to be to become either a conformist breadwinner who decides to never look back and never question the dominant understanding of masculinity, or a repressed and frustrated man like Frank. Unlike Frank, Jeffrey manages to overcome the conflicts associated with masculinity once he chooses the path of conformity, whereas Frank's attempts to adopt a masculine role that goes against his deeper nature have him trapped in a sexual nightmare until his death.

The final solution to Jeffrey's dilemma in terms of masculinity has been represented since the very beginning of the film. The opening scene of *Blue Velvet* serves not only as a metaphor of the hyperreality that underlies the 1950s nostalgia, but also as a metaphor of Jeffrey's Oedipal journey. In the beginning, The innocence of childhood is represented during the first minutes of the film, first with a blue sky that reminds us of blue velvet, and then with shots of small-town life complete with happy children on their way to school. Then, when Jeffrey's father collapses while watering the garden and the camera zooms in on the picture-perfect grass, a journey into darkness

begins, the insects representing the episodes of violence that Jeffrey will experience during his nightmarish journey through the underworld of masculinity. Although the sequence ends happily with a cut that restores the sense of peace while retro music plays in the background, its overall structure calls into question any easy resolution. Besides, the bright, saturated colors highlight the unrealistic and false ending. The fact that everything returns to calm after the bizarre episodes Jeffrey and Sandy witness suggests the hypocrisy of a society fashioned after a narrow interpretation of the 1950s as discussed above, but also the hypocrisy in the acceptance of a notion of masculinity rooted in the traditional values promoted during the 1980s, a notion that the mainstream film industry has continued to promote to this day. In terms of narrative, the film ends with a finale that replicates the opening scene, with an artificial happy ending in which robins sing, women remain in the kitchen, and, apparently, unproblematic male breadwinners barbecue in the garden, denying or at least obscuring any other viable alternative to the middle-class society of the Reagan era. However, both the first and final shots of the film contain the blue sky that symbolizes another perfect, peaceful day in an average small US town but also the blue velvet fetish that has been suppressed into the unconscious. In fact, one of the key issues in the film is how our perception of what the color blue stands for changes in the course of the narrative. If, at first, the image of the blue sky conveyed a sense of calmness, once we have discovered Frank's fetish with the blue velvet, the final shot can only be regarded as a reminder of the unpleasant side of the fantasy world Jeffrey inhabits, just like the insect that the robin has in its beak reminds us of the reality that lies beneath the gorgeous suburban neighborhood. In a sense, the opening sequence establishes a narrative – calmness, turmoil, and restored calm – that recurs during the film as a strategy to unearth both the dark side of the Reagan era and the schemes deployed to keep it out of sight. Jeffrey is unaware of the realities that lurk under the spotless surface; he lives a carefree, quiet life until he discovers a severed human ear. Then, he witnesses Frank's grotesque underworld and begins to question his own masculinity. Finally, he chooses the same 1950s-like conformity of

traditional gender roles with which the film opened. However, after everything he has been through, his acceptance of the role that 1980s US society expects him to perform as an adult male cannot be considered unproblematic.

Conclusion

> Well now Jeffrey, you found something which is very interesting to us. Very interesting. I know you must be curious to know more. But I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask you now not only not to tell anyone about your find but also not to ask more about the case. One day, when it's all sewed up, I'll let you know all the details. Right now, though, I can't.

My main objective throughout this Master's thesis has been to examine how the sociopolitical context of the Reagan era affected the representation of the screen male in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, a film that reciprocally challenges the hard bodies that proliferated during the 1980s on the screen, and whose roots can be traced back to the origins of Hollywood censorship. Because Reagan's victory marked a return to traditional values in the context of a severe economic recession, during his mandate the masculinity crisis that men had suffered over the years as a consequence of Civil Rights, Women's and Gay movements experienced a significant growth. This is the reality that Lynch addressed in his 1986 film *Blue Velvet*. Whereas films had usually acted as a vehicle to maintain the status quo, in the 1970s a more personal style of filmmaking began to take shape, and young directors started to challenge the traditional image of the screen male that had dominated American film and society. Simultaneously, progressive social movements also contributed to the development of a new mindset in American society, questioning the dominant, traditional gender roles. Thus, in the 1980s Hollywood developed a hyper-masculine hero that connected with Reagan's simplistic solutions and ideals for a period of recession. Yet, an emerging group of filmmakers who followed in the footsteps of the young, more personal directors of the 1970s, touched upon the anxieties generated by this turn, as in the case of David Lynch and *Blue Velvet*.

Taking a sociopolitical approach, I have moved from the general to the particular in my thesis. In order to provide the reader with the necessary contextual background, I have briefly explained how the dominant ideology of each period has shaped the image of the screen male over the years, establishing a pattern of hyper-masculine models in The United States film industry. Then, I have focused in more depth on the specific case of the 1980s, relating the screen males that

proliferated during the decade to the return to traditional, faith-based values that Reagan's policies propitiated, and the consequent nostalgia that those values aroused. As Susan Jeffords and Yvonne Tasker point out, male representation in cinema during the 1980s consisted of hyper-masculine, physical actors who portrayed a reality that differed from the average man of the decade. Just like not all men in the 1930s behaved or looked like Gable's character in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the ramboidal characters that proliferated in the Reagan era did not reflect the reality of the average man in the United States. Instead of focusing on films like *First Blood* (1982) or *Terminator* (1984) – films that functioned as a mechanism for the embodiment of an actualized, improved version of post-World War II American identity for the context of the 1980s – I have chosen *Blue Velvet* as the particular case of study in my thesis. Whereas *First Blood* and *Terminator*, among other films, maintained the status quo in terms of male representation, Lynch's film challenged the traditional pattern of masculinity that the film industry perpetuated for decades. An exhaustive analysis of the film demonstrates that the anxieties experienced by men in the 1980s (and that the Reagan administration wanted to keep hidden) had their roots in the sexual repression that men went through in an effort to conform to traditional gender roles in the context of a backlash against alternative sexualities.

As Lynne Layton asserts, *Blue Velvet* might seem another confusing Lynch film (Layton 388) but, as I have demonstrated in this thesis, Lynch is able to portray the reality faced by the 1980s male with more accuracy than the most successful films of the decade. Despite the characteristic style that permeates the work of David Lynch, *Blue Velvet* entails a close evaluation of the traditional notion of masculinity, challenging the status quo and giving pause for thought about how traditional roles pertaining to gender and sexuality actually affect individuals. In line with previous films like *Easy Rider,* in which filmmakers opened up the discussion on masculinity and repression, *Blue Velvet* highlights the price to be paid when men do not fit in with the status quo. Instead of giving solutions to a crisis that goes beyond the cinematographic sphere, the film helps to

identify a problem that has affected men until the present day. Just like Reagan's policies fostered the appearance of hyper-masculine stars after the Carter administration, ordinary men tried – in many cases they still try – to imitate the behavior of those violent, fabricated males that still proliferate on the screen. Of course, society is not as strange and nightmarish as a film by David Lynch, but Frank's frustration and Jeffrey's hypocrisy on the issue of masculinity affect ordinary people in real life, and those anxieties may become a real nightmare for some men.

If films like *Easy Rider* were almost an exception in the 1970s, challenging the traditional notion of maleness, a new sub-genre in American film was born during the 1990s. In the 1990s, the appearance of the male melodrama allowed the audiences to watch films in which male stars appeared as main characters in narratives that focused on family issues (Bruzzi 180). Thus, during the 1990s films like *American Beauty* (1998) and *Magnolia* (1999) proliferated, films in which fathers are portrayed as responsible for the pain of their sons – not unlike the family Wim Wenders already depicted in his 1980s film *Paris, Texas*. Furthermore, the late 1990s and the noughts would also develop narratives in which "male protagonists enlist the help of analyst to unblock their repressed emotions", as well as films in which men will suffer from different identity crisis and "memory loss", with titles like *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Memento* (2000), and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) (Rehling 69). However, the physical body of the male screen will continue to be depicted from the same hyper-masculine perspective of the 1980s in films like *Fight Club* (1999), in which their male characters also extol the use of physical body despite the inner message that the film sends, always in a different context and, by extension, conveying different meanings.

Nevertheless, the masculinity crisis that Lynch examined in *Blue Velvet* is still a taboo subject in many of the films on the billboard nowadays. Despite the fact that the issue of masculinity has been examined by filmmakers since the 1970s, films like *Rocky* (1976) and *Die Hard* (1988) have spawned several sequels so far, perpetuating the male role of those hyper-

masculine characters that permeated Reaganite films. Furthermore, new stars have joined in the hyper-masculine style of Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Norris, or Willis. Names like Vin Diesel and Jason Statham – and hyper-masculine films like *The Expendables* (2010) – continue to release sequels. However, while a majority of Hollywood blockbusters seem to refuse to embrace the issue of masculinity from another point of view, the film industry appears to be more critical than ever, and many directors take risks in their productions with films like *The Danish Girl* (2015), in which even transsexualism seems to have broken down the barriers of the film industry. In fact, Lynch himself risked to break down that same barrier in the 1990s, and in a mass medium like television, with the character of Denyse Bryson (David Duchovny), a transsexual FBI agent who arrives in the small town of Twin Peaks to investigate a murder.

Blue Velvet was released 30 years ago and it still seems that some of the topics that surrounded the issue of masculinity in the film are taboo in Hollywood current production. Due to space limitations I will not dwell on the sociopolitical factors that influence the representation of the screen male nowadays but, as I have already demonstrated, each period attends to a series of circumstances that condition and shape the issue of masculinity in film. As long as there is a dominant stereotype like the one of the hyper-masculine male on screen, there will be repressed Franks in and out of the screen.

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