

VELVET / FRACTURE: DAVID LYNCH, CLAYTON ESHLEMAN, AND THE
CONSTRUCTION OF THE AMERICAN UNDERWORLD

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

Mikel Forrest Parent

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
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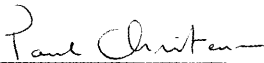
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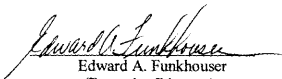
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ABSTRACT

Velvet / Fracture. David Lynch, Clayton Eshleman, and the Construction of the American Underworld. (April 2001)

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The dominant American myth of selfhood is the "Protestant English pioneer," the conquering hero that pulled in the reins on natives and wilderness. However, this heroic selfhood comes at an astonishing price. The maintenance of this identity structure requires the inscription of strict boundaries around the self. Completion of the hero narrative requires not only a mastery of self, but also the reification of that mastery through the domination of the external world. The emergence of a counter myth might allow the cultivation of a fluid selfhood, freed from the heroic narrative's egocentrism and domination of self and other. David Lynch and Clayton Eshleman are attempting a revision of selfhood. If experience must again be widened, then both Lynch and Eshleman must peel back the veneer of Billboard America and pry apart the old consciousness. Lynch and Eshleman seek to forge this new version of self in the smithy of an American underworld.

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The dominant American myth of selfhood is the “Protestant English pioneer,” the conquering hero that pulled in the reins on natives and wilderness (American studies pamphlet, 15). But this heroic selfhood comes at an astonishing price, for it is an “identically persistent self which arises in the abrogation of sacrifice immediately becomes an unyielding, rigidified sacrificial ritual that man celebrates upon himself by opposing his consciousness to the natural context.” Additionally, this “compulsion toward rational domination of... natural forces... heightens... self-preservation, but lets the forces of reconciliation... atrophy” (Habermas 110). The maintenance of this identity structure requires the inscription of strict boundaries around the self. Thus, the self became a reservoir for “Puritan values” of competition, order, and self-mastery (Berman, 113). However, completion of the hero narrative requires not only a mastery of self, but also the reification of that mastery through the domination of the external world. In America, the wilderness to the west of early settlements proved “a neatly packaged set of obstacles by which to “prove” the American hero” (American Studies, 12). The Euro-American (or White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) heroic version of selfhood however, is not a natural given but rather a social artifact and consequence of the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie (Berman, 159).¹ Therefore the emergence of a counter myth allows the history of self in America to be seen in terms of two organized camps: one that articulates the sovereign rational self and another tradition that seeks to convey a fluid self, freed from the heroic narrative’s egocentrism and domination of self and other.

The dominant American myth of selfhood that has been under question at least since Whitman wrote "Song of My Self". In "Song", Whitman situated the self as immersed in the natural world, not as an individual separated from the natural world. This early attempt at a poetry that countered the dominant myth of identity questioned the very underpinnings of the entire mythology that produced the notion of the individuated self. The heroic version of self, the conqueror self, could no longer assert itself as a default fundamental principle. Instead, a whole program of literature rallied around the counter myth of the fluid, multiple idea of selfhood.²

As the avant garde began to congeal into a counter-myth, a burgeoning selfhood, rooted in a Whitmanian substrate, began to shape itself in the work of American avant garde writers such as Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. The counter-tradition was carried forward in post-WWII America foremost by the poet Charles Olson, who took the groundbreaking work of Pound and Stein into the postmodern landscape (a term Olson coined). The difference that Olson brought to the project was one that threatened to sever at the root all ties America had with Europe, a project that sought out a mythology independent of Europe. The project of pruning away European influence from American myth crystallizes in Olson's "The Kingfishers" when in the final lines he says,

I pose you your question
shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?

I hunt among stones (qt. *Call Him Ishmael*, 97).

It is Olson's gesture to excavate Aztec myth (Pre-Columbian myth), and leave behind the Greco-Roman tradition that had fueled Pound's *Cantos*, that carries forward the American poetry's postmodern thrust leading into the postcolonial global climate. The purpose of the Olson led experiment was tripartite: "to expose the myth of heroic selfhood as racism [and rooted in domination], to open form through indeterminate arguments, and to shift attention from *self* to *relations*" (American Studies 13, italics mine). It is in this final move away from a literature rooted in Europe that the work of Clayton Fshleman emerges. Hence, in the epigraph to his book *Indiana*, Fshleman says, "Today I have set my crowbar against all I know/ in a shower of soot and blood/ breaking the backbone of my mother".

This is not to say that an avant garde did not exist in film. In fact the history of film can be seen in terms of two major schools, illusionist film and self-reflexive realist film (*Self Reflexivity*, 1-26). These two camps would later form polemics: one firmly investing in the promise and ability of the camera to transmit the social and historical melodrama of the status quo, and the other bent on questioning the hegemonic myth of self by any means formal or otherwise. A few of the seminal figures of the early period of the avant garde school are Luis Bunuel (*Exterminating Angel*, *Belle de Jour*), Jean-Luc Goddard (*Breathless*, *Weekend*), and Ingmar Bergman (*The Rite*, *Persona*) are some of the most notable of the early filmmakers to move towards a radical revisioning of the self. These filmmaker's works, especially Bunuel, as well as painters Francis Bacon and Edward Hopper are apparent in Lynch's films (Rodley, 16-17).

David Lynch and Clayton Eshleman are attempting a re-vision of selfhood as Whitman and others have done before them. Both artists instigate reintegration of the life of the imagination, the soul, which was cut off from them. If experience must again be widened, then both Lynch and Eshleman must peel back the veneer of Billboard America and pry apart the old consciousness. However, Lynch and Eshleman seek to forge this new version of self in the smithy of an American underworld.

In his introduction to *Fracture*, Clayton Eshleman remarks, “[my] controlling obsession from 1960 to 1972 was to build a ‘containing wall’ for what it was to be from Indiana” (*Fracture*, 11). In 1980, when Eshleman’s car nearly swerved into a 50-ft ravine, he knew that the containing wall had broken. Hence, a “fracture” opened a passage between Eshleman’s imagination and the “Paleolithic Dimension”, which is the title of the second chapter of *Fracture*. The fracture takes on several metaphorical functions in the book. The fecundity of the metaphor lies in its essential undecidability. For the fracture is both a break in something, and represents a possible new direction if one descends into the fracture. Due to this inherent undecidability, the journey into the crevasse has both the possibilities of renewal and destruction. The danger of the underworld lies in the necessity of destroying the old self and forming a new one; for the poet, redemption can only be found by plumbing the depths of the underworld.

The journey into the fracture is figured by the journey that the poet takes into the caves at Lascaux, into the Paleolithic underworld. The underworld journey takes a decidedly postmodern flavor. Like Olson before him, Eshleman seeks a non-European cosmology that might allow him to arrive at a non-European version of the underworld.

In spite of the caves being located in France, the cave drawings themselves are not by any means a mythic cosmology formed from European mythology (Greco-Roman mythology). Fishleman asserts that the entire notion of the underworld has its beginnings, not in the European tradition, but rather in the consciousness of Upper Paleolithic man as evidenced by the cave art in the French Dordogne. "Tiresias Drinking" dramatizes the notion of the Upper Paleolithic as a substrate from which all myths of the underworld grow.

In "Tiresias", the blind prophet of Thebes, Tiresias, is in Hades and as he stops to drink he submerges his head into a trench full of "ewe-blood". While submerged, Tiresias sees "...through Hades as if 'down' into an earlier prophecy." The emphasis on "down" points to an important feature of the entire program by which the poet fleshes his vision of the underworld; it is a descent not an ascent. Tiresias glimpses "Pangeac separated into Laurasia and Gondwanaland, so were creatures to separate into animals and men." As Tiresias looks through Hades what he sees is the foundation of the underworld, the point in geologic time when the first "fracture" occurred between human and animal, when consciousness was cleaved from its animal beginnings. The poet figures the immensity of the break between animal and human by using the image of the separation of the continents as a hyperbolic foil. The scale of the poet's vision is geological, epochal. Through this realization of the originary fracture the poet imagines through Tiresias, the rites of the Paleolithic underworld that will become the substance of the remainder of *Fracture* (*Fracture*, 45). Beyond the cleaving of animal from man, the poet also takes from Tiresias' vision the knowledge that

the etymology of magic was in maggots,
 each in syllable rags wending their way
 out a bison belly's imploded cavern,...

...that the prophet's task is
 to conduct the savagery of the grass,
 to register the zeros rising from the circuits of the dead

in suspension below, mouths forever frozen
 at the roller coaster's summit in wild hello.

The image chain that the poet molds from Tiresias' vision of the fundament of the underworld resonates throughout the rest of the chapter; it is these images that the poet will elaborate upon (*Fracture*, 45)

The "etymology of magic... in maggots" points not merely to death as a terminus, but also the cyclical nature of birth and death, death as nourishment for maggots. Magic is not only planted firmly in its relation to death (either to conjure it, or stave it off), but in a counter measure, death, birth, and magic are intertwined in the underworld of the Paleolithic. Another particularly significant image in "Tiresias" is the "bison belly's imploded cavern". The bison belly specifically conjures the underworld and firmly connects it to the grotesque. The grotesque (derived from the Italian *grotto*

meaning cave) links the underworld directly to the physical body, especially the “lower bodily stratum” (*Rabelais*, 311). Furthermore, the “imploded cavern” provides another connection, forming a nexus between body, underworld, and cave. This nexus allows for the construction of the “Paleolithic Dimension” and the “prophet’s task” is to chart a course through the underworld and voice “the zeros rising from the circuits of the dead”. However, just when it would seem that the underworld has been far removed from any American or contemporary connection, “mouths forever frozen/ at the roller coaster’s summit in wild hello” burst through into the Paleolithic underworld at the poem’s close (*Fracture*, 45).

The surrealist juxtaposition of the Paleolithic underworld with a roller coaster points to Eshleman’s notion of the “loaded sleeve of Hades.” The metaphor of the “sleeve” is an image tunnel that “winds back into total discontinuity”. The sleeve also leads the poet to reflect, “There is in you someone/ who does not care about anyone” a frightening figure of the deep psyche who, “must be over 10,000 years old” that is “affectionate, exuberant, and lethal all at once”. The sleeve takes on further complexity in that it leads to a “Hades-Dionysus/ hinged appetite” in which “Dionysus runs Hades empty sleeve” making “death [become]... exuberance”. In the “loaded sleeve” as in “Tiresias Drinking”, Eshleman is still using Greek myth as a frame in which to begin constructing the Paleolithic underworld. Although he has not yet “[dynamited] the blocked Greek passageway”(a phrase from “Visions of Fathers of Lascaux”, discussed below), the signs of a break with traditional Greek myth are obvious (*Fracture*, 65).

In Eshleman's grotesque underworld, Hades can no longer exist as a static entity. Instead, the poet summons Dionysus to join the stagnation of death in the underworld "sleeve" of Hades'. In what at first appears to be a glaring contradiction between the stasis of Hades and the fertility of Dionysus, the union allows the abundance of fecundity to operate in the underworld as well. The superficiality of the contradiction becomes apparent if the birth/death opposition ceases to be *merely* opposition. If instead the focus shifts to thinking of the oppositions primarily as relational, then it becomes apparent that, a distinct transformation of the underworld is underway. The underworld becomes a channel for the emergence of an "alchemical paradigm" or rather the notion that "both attachment and resistance have the same root" (*Reenchantment*, 82-83). Moreover, this reasoning is exactly the focus of Bakhtin's formulation of the grotesque. A kind of illogical logic that connects growth and death (birth/death) by changing the manner in which the terms are comprehended; a shift from linear, hierarchical thinking, to lateral relational and cyclical thinking.

Exploring the Paleolithic is not the result that Eshleman's seeks. He spelunkers caves of the French Dordogne in order to find the base consciousness from which he can begin to construct an American underworld that is independent of Europe and Christian mythology. James Hillman warned Eshleman that he would not find the hierarchy of gods and goddesses that exists in the Greek mythology but rather, an undifferentiated mass of psychic energy would manifest itself in the prehistoric psyche (*Fracture*, 12). In "A Small Cave" the poet encounters, "Something vague to the point of being a lesion" that is "translating one-way forever deeper" into the "bottomless rent of being." The

energies of the Paleolithic imagination pulsate from the cave, which again figures not only a shaft into the mind, but also the body with its “aura of sighs, slit sighs, / blood ghosts, menstrual identities”. The poet notes the problem that Hillman articulated.

“There is no root metaphor—/ there is a string tied around the image amoebae”

(*Fracture*, 29). If the poet’s task was to articulate what might be the fundamental level of the unconscious, then he cannot. There is no base from which the underworld arose; there is only a primordial psyche steeping in Paleolithic anguish. In what ends up being a “postmagist” Olsonian gesture, the poet seeks to get *behind* the cave walls to glimpse the emergence of the image (*Call him Ishmael*, 99).

In “Vision of the Fathers of Lascaux” (one of the longer poems in *Fracture*), Eshleman speculates on the very moment that the Paleolithic imagination cultivated a need to create the underworld. Eshleman decides that the underworld arose when Paleolithic man first wrestled the animal out of his head and became conscious. From that point on, the history of man has been an increasing cleavage between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the human mind. In a notion directly related to Julian Jaynes concept of the “bicameral mind”, this loss of connection between (what have now become) the two separate aspects of the human mind, causes an extreme sense of anguish in the Paleolithic psyche. The emergence of consciousness poses a disjunction between the human and natural world. Just as conscious and unconscious become disjointed, birth and death become a mystery that Paleolithic humans try work out in the caves by forming a cosmology.

The cave is the primary site for the rites of the underworld because of its ability to serve as a corollary to the human vagina. The cave is both entrance and exit, just as the vagina is entrance, during copulation, and exit, during birth. Further emphasis on the correlation of cave and vagina arises from the image chains in the poem, which slide fluidly between cave and vagina. The women “whose wombs has just been vacated” are a “massive girdle” that is “already turbine in the cave.” The cave walls are primed “with menstrual effluvia” (*Fracture*, 62) In a particularly gruesome image, the Fathers

stake out a woman in Lascaux
 she was their first lab, first
 architecture, spread in labor,
 tectiform in anatomical churn
 a kind of windmill in the cave's recesses

...the tube of rejection and reception had split
 to ease the foetus from having to ford the excremental Styx
 clogged with the dark green stuff of monkey suicides (*Fracture*, 64)

The “staked out” woman, particularly the inner workings of her womb, becomes a site of exploration much like the cave. The Fathers are so mesmerized by the mystery of the opposition of birth and death that they open the woman, and in a gruesome

experiment, the woman becomes their “lab”. Within the woman, they discover a difference between the excremental cave or “tube of rejection”, the anus, and the vaginal cave of reception. It is through this differentiation that the foetus is removed from the excremental part of the underworld, and metaphorically removed from the continuity of life and death (where excrement is associated with death). The poet figures the voice of the Fathers of Lascaux saying, “We must release ourselves from the death we are taking in/...” but freedom from death means that a ravine between life and death must be carved, mirroring the separation between the conscious and unconscious aspects of mind (*Fracture*, 60). It is this removal from the cyclical conception of the natural world that will provide Eshleman with the means to connect the Paleolithic underworld to contemporary America via his personal history.

As the poet moves further into the cave and therefore deeper into the Paleolithic imagination, he begins to conflate his own history with the visions of Paleolithic man. The poet asks, “What might I offer these Fathers and Mothers? / What might I bring from the 20th Century” (*I*, 66). The poet offers his “Baby’s Book of Events” and jumps from the Upper Paleolithic to 1937, the year when “blood was already gushing from/ the breast-severed Nanking of World Individualism.” A direct passageway, a “loaded sleeve” opens between the Upper Paleolithic and the poet’s own time. The deep images of the Paleolithic resonate with contemporary significance. The poet mentions “the Presbyterian sallow ivorying of the groin and Dachau blow-ups” as he “offer[s] this entire century to these crouched tectiformers.” The poet begins with fragments from the contemporary imagination and entwines them with images from the Paleolithic

underworld. Images of “Hershey bar napalm license plates”, “Mickey Mouse,” was bulldozing Catholic stonework.” These images point to the co-presence of the Palcolithic Underworld with the contemporary America, as a nature becomes the “synthesis we despair over” (*Fracture*, 66-67). The result of the loss of the synthesis with nature is an “Iron Maiden of self-sufficiency” and only the “grotesque body could contact in emergency” the hellish tunnel back to any time before consciousness was cleaved into a bi-cameral mind (*Fracture*, 70). Because “much of the lower body remains occult”, it becomes a channel, if not the only channel left, to contact the once fertile aspect of the underworld before Greek and later Christian mythology cleansed the underworld of all the properties of renewal. Eshleman’s aim is to re-open the channel “to reconnect the animal-bereft human-to-be to an underworld.”

Eshleman remarks, in *Antiphonal Swing*, “Most of us inherit a Christianized version of the underworld: hell- a furnace of torture and damnation, rather than a realm of journey and exchange” (*Antiphonal*, 248). The problem of grounding any American poem in a sense of the underworld as journey and exchange is that it becomes taboo. The body has been completely removed from any version of hell, except as a receptacle for torture. Eshleman must re-institute a “plural, unfixed, tragicomic view of life” that found in the Bakhtinian grotesque. The challenge is to articulate an “American Grotesque” (*Antiphonal*, 252). Eshleman tries frantically to shed the “unconscious Protestant theology” associated with demarcation of conscious versus unconscious mind. Eshleman attacks this Christian paradigm of transcendence of the natural world to some

“Wholly Other”, as one more way to escape the natural world and the inevitability of death (*Antiphonal*, 209). The pathology arises when

... the oldest cry,...

that the earth is responsible for our deaths,

that if we die collectively

we will take the earth with us *if we can* (*Fracture*, 37)

Christianity becomes one more pathology created by the fracture in the human psyche that occurred in the Upper Paleolithic.

As evidence of this crippled version of the American underworld, he calls attention to the atrophied trickster archetype in “Apparition of the Duck”. The trickster, animal-human form that represents the in-between of the animal human separation that occurred in the Upper Paleolithic is stripped of all his sexual content, the body, and therefore the fertile unconscious. Donald Duck, for Eshleman is an underworld figure that represents an age of

No change no growth no death no past

no animals

with fake animals for pets

the body a highway of zippers smooth metal interlockings...

A needle slipped into a child reader's fantasy
 injecting adult anxieties
 into his neotony. (*Fracture*, 93)

The absence of all the possible traits of the underworld that allow for a renewal, a birth of new psychic energy, have been completely removed. The desexualized Christian version of the underworld is one in which "outer darkness suddenly filled with held back erections" (*Fracture*, 94). For Eshleman, this is even more dangerous than the Paleolithic underworld. The Christianized American underworld has been cut off from any redemptive properties what so ever, and any passageway back to a connection with a cyclical consciousness has been blocked. The poet cannot use this American underworld to articulate a consciousness of self in which, "the poet is the world, no separation between his skin and everything else" (*Minding the Underworld*, 49).

Throughout Eshleman's attempts to connect with an American underworld the problem remains that "In essence we do not want to be outside/ yet the only way back in is through death" (*Fracture*, 96). But the American underworld is "Goofy and Mickey and Donald... empowered with the wrath of a satanized underworld" (*Fracture*, 98). The poet laments, "I cannot make you real, Donald" and that "Manson in the American underworld... [is] ...hoping it will all be over soon so that... .. he may climb back into the earth" (*Fracture*, 100). The essential positive, affirmative elements that are missing

from the American underworld have left it a realm of murder and destruction. Thus, in “Foetus Graffiti” Eshleman reveals a

baleful American stare out of the octopus formaldehyde jar of
 the American face,
 we have no hades, only foetus graffiti (*Fracture*, 132)

The admission that America in fact, “has no Hades, only foetus graffiti” is a profound statement. It at once recognizes that any living form in Hades has been canceled in the American christianized underworld, hence, the formaldehyde octopus. Furthermore, the “foetus graffiti” Eshleman refers to is the nail etched belly of “Sylvia Likens, 16-year-old boarder on whose belly Gertrude Baniszewsky’s kids, with a nail wrote “I am a prostitute and proud of it,”” (*Fracture*, 131). America’s underworld is “the hallucination of a deprivation: the American poverty” (*Fracture*, 133). It is in this American underworld where “copulation” becomes a “teratoma”, that the danger of the loss of the enriching properties of the body, the unconscious, the fecundity of the underworld becomes apparent. The life of the body has been, “torn away from the life of ... the cosmic whole” (*Rabelais*, 321) America is left with only the negative pole of Bakhtin’s grotesque. The possibility of renewal has been severed, as humanity is severed from nature.

If Eshleman is reaching towards America from the depths of the Paleolithic, David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* looks for the underworld by tilling the soil in small town America. In *Velvet*, Lynch in a mode similar to earlier surrealist experiments "shockingly... proclaim[s] the ecstatic forces of... dream life, of the instinctive, impulsive... against the imperatives of utility, normality, and sobriety, in order to shake up conventionally set modes of perception and experience" (Habermas, 212). Lynch's film certainly alludes to surrealism stylistically. Some critics and theorists have argued that the severed ear covered with ants in the *Velvet* alludes to one of the most well known surrealist films in film history, *Un Chien Andalou* (dir. Luis Bunuel, 1928). However, the two films are similar on other levels as well. The *Oxford History of World Cinema*, says of *Un Chien*, "[the film] distorts temporal sequence, while its two male leads disconcertingly resemble each other as their identities blur" and "elements of narrative and acting arouse the spectator's psychological participation in plot or scene while at the same time distancing the viewer by disallowing empathy, closure..." (*Oxford*, 100). This *Oxford History* could just as easily have described some of the prominent features of *Velvet*. Lynch's film also recalls other film styles as well, the most prominent of which is film noir. However, what Lynch does to the noir style takes it beyond its 1940's and 50's roots. Lynch retains the "despair" and "cruelty" of the noir world, but also embraces the sitcom styles of 1950's and 60's television (Cook, 449-451). Furthermore, Lynch also mixes elements of the teenage romance figured in films like Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955). In a word, Lynch's film is a bricolage of styles and genres that, when combined, are a form of

“heteroglossia” (*Pleasures*, 70-71). The heteroglossic nature of *Velvet* creates an unsettling multi-tonality to the film, as the images that correspond to each particular genre collide (Gianetti, 433).

The images in Lynch’s film do not only come from filmic sources. The role that painting plays in Lynch’s work especially in *Velvet* is seldom explored by critics and theorists. The works of Edward Hopper and Francis Bacon offer particularly insightful and offer a clearer inventory catalogue of images that composes Lynch’s visual imagination. Both Hopper and Bacon also reaffirm Lynch’s placement within the grotesque (Rodley, 16-17).

Signs of Hopper’s influence are everywhere in the linear composition and color in *Velvet*. The opening slow motion montage sequence of the film recalls Hopper’s ability to capture small town and urban American life, especially the way that Lynch uses dramatic symmetry and sharp lines. The shot of the children in the crosswalk is a classic example of the manner in which Hopper uses space and color. In the shot, the children throw long shadows that complement the diagonals in the frame and the direction of the dominant motion in the frame as well (movement to the left). The astringent, almost documentary use of a stationary camera to film the event evokes a very Hopperesque stillness. The hard shadows and bright primary colors also mark the shot as Hopperesque. This type of symmetrical shot figures largely in the film. Other notable examples of the Hopperesque pictorial style that Lynch employs are almost all the establishing shots in the film, the interior scenes at ‘Arlenc’s’ (where Jeffery and Sandy meet to plan their detective work), and the interior of Dorothy’s apartment.

Another striking quality that is Hopperesque is the manner in which Lynch films Dorothy's naked body. The lens is not softened nor is the lighting manipulated to smooth any imperfections. The shots of Dorothy nude are all shot high key, which are strikingly reminiscent of Hoppers rendering of the nude body in *Morning in a City*, 1944, and *A Woman in the Sun*, 1961 (Lyons, Pl. 5 and 58).

Lynch also draws on the work of British painter Francis Bacon to create some of the more disturbing images in the *Velvet*. The main use of Baconesque imagery occurs in the dream sequences, in which faces and bodies become blurred and smeared across the screen. These shots recall several of Bacon's paintings especially *Three Studies of the Human Head*, 1953 (Sylvester, 24-25). These grotesque blurred images refigure bodies and faces into phantasmal geometries that evoke Bakhtin's "grotesque body" (*Rabelais*, 328).

The narrative of *Velvet*, like Eshleman's *Fracture*, is a descent narrative. The descent makes itself evident in the opening shots of the film in which the camera tracks *down* from the flawless blue sky to a bed of red roses against a white picket fence. The Bobby Venton's *Blue Velvet* plays non-diegetically on the soundtrack. This shot dissolves to a slow-motion shot of a man waving from a red fire engine passing by from the left of the frame to the right. The camera dissolves again to a shot of roses, this time yellow. Another dissolve to a shot of school children crossing a street at a crosswalk from right to left as a crossing guard watches over them. Everything is smooth and congruous thus far. Then the camera dissolves to an establishing shot of the Beaumont's home. Then there is a cut to Mr. Beaumont watering his lawn. Throughout the series of

cuts, thus far the camera has displayed on the slightest panning or tracking motion; most of the setups have been completely static. The next cut is to an interior of the home where Mrs. Beaumont is taking tea and watching her television set. On the television screen, a sinister element enters the diegesis: the television depicts a black and white noir style shot of a hand holding a gun. Suddenly, after a series of more rapid cuts between the hose and Mr. Beaumont watering the lawn, on the sound track a low rumbling is heard while Mr. Beaumont inexplicably grasps his neck and falls to the ground. The camera cuts to a high angle shot of Mr. Beaumont on the ground and then cuts and tracks downward for a few seconds before cutting away again to a full shot of Mr. Beaumont on the ground while a dog bites at the spraying hose in Mr. Beaumont's hand. Then the camera cuts to a slow motion close up of the dog's face as it bites at the water spraying from the hose. The next shot has the camera tracking in a downward motion once again until it penetrates the grass to reveal a group of beetles amassed together while the rumbling on the soundtrack diegetically adds the cracking of insect exoskeletons. Next, in a highly jarring and ironic gesture, the camera cuts to a billboard that depicts a picture of a woman and says, "Welcome to Lumberton". The juxtaposed collision between images of billboard America and the forces that gurgles beneath the pristine surface is a major strategy of the film.

Jeffery Beaumont, on his way home from visiting his father (Mr. Beaumont) at the hospital, finds an ear lying in on the ground in an open field. Jeffery brings the ear to the Police Station and shows it to Detective Williams who responds by saying "Yes, that's a human ear alright," in a comically deadpan manner. In the coroner's office, the

coroner remarks that one can tell many things about the person from looking at the ear. In another grotesquely comical moment, Lynch cuts from a close up of the ear with the voice of the coroner remarking "It looks like the ear was cut off with scissors", to a close up of scissors cutting a strip of ribbon which says "Police Line Do Not Cross".

The next scene begins with a threatening low angle shot of a door opening at the top of a dark stairwell. Jeffery emerges from the doorway and *descends* the stairs towards the camera. Tells his mother and grandmother that he is going out and then the camera tracks *downward* to a shot of another noir style film on the television that depicts someone walking very slowly up a set of stairs.

As Jeffery is walking down the sidewalk, a shot of the severed ear is superimposed over him in very slow dissolve. The dissolve is so slow that Jeffery appears to be walking into the ear. At the same time that the camera is tracking back in the shot of Jeffery walking down the street, the camera is tracking forward, or *down* into the shot of the ear. As the shot of Jeffery walking dissolves completely, the camera descends fully into the ear. Clearly, the major movements of the camera and actors in the frame have marked the narrative of *Velvet* as a descent narrative. The descent will take Jeffery into the American underworld.

The descent into the ear marks the final bookend to the narrative. The overwhelming majority of the story takes place within the "car-framed" narrative. Within this narrative frame, there are five pivotal scenes that re-configure the underworld and the complicate American middle-class notions of fixed identity.

The first scene that begins to shape the bourgeoisie underworld takes place in Dorothy's Apartment. In the scene, Jeffery sneaks into Dorothy's apartment to snoop around. When Dorothy comes home early and surprises Jeffery he runs and hides in her living room closet just in time to escape being found out. While he is in the closet Jeffery watches Dorothy undressing. She gets a mysterious telephone call that distresses her to the brink of panic. Jeffery makes a noise in the closet and provokes Dorothy to grab a large knife and open the closet.

Up until the point at which Dorothy finds Jeffery out, the camera frames Jeffrey's with a full shot of his face as he observes Dorothy. Dorothy on the other hand is not filmed with neutrally, but rather she the camera films her from a series of high angle shot while she curls up on the floor in distress. In every instance, Jeffery is equated with a position of power and Dorothy with a position of weakness and vulnerability. However, when Dorothy opens the closet door the power positions change and she is in control.

When the power position shifts to Dorothy, the two characters act out the Freudian primal scene, complete with castration anxiety literally (and grotesquely) figured by Dorothy holding a knife level with Jeffrey's crotch. Dorothy forces Jeffery to strip off his clothes. Then she begins to take off Jeffrey's underwear and kiss the area near his genitals. She asks "Do you like that?" and Jeffery replies "Yes". Loud knocking interrupts the seduction. Jeffery hides in the closet and Dorothy goes to the door and opens it. Frank rushes in and automatically begins to rattle off obscenities. Jeffery watches passively from the closet as Frank demands that Dorothy bring him his

“fucking bourbon”. Frank sits down in an armchair and demands that Dorothy strip off her clothing at his command. Thus far, the scene has darkly parodied the domestic scene of the husband who has come home from the proverbial long day’s work and expects only the proverbial home cooked meal (in this case bourbon) to be ready and waiting for him. Furthermore, Dorothy playing the dutiful wife is made to call Frank “sir”. Then, in a continuance of the domestic parody and by extension the Freudian parody, the scene turns increasingly ugly, as Frank demands sexual favors.

As Franks demands become more violent, he begins to inhale a mysterious gas from a tank he carries with him. Suddenly, Frank screams “Mommy! Mommy! Baby wants to fuck!” This dialoguc immediately grounds the scene in a parody of the Freudian Oedipal narrative. Frank has switched positions from the father to the son and occupies both father and son simultaneously as he cuts a scrap of velvet from Dorothy’s robe and uses it like a mock umbilical cord between his mouth and Dorothy’s. Furthermore, all the action thus far has been filmed from a continuous full shot of Frank and Dorothy inter-cut with shots of Jeffery observing from the safety of the closet. This again refers to the child observing the parents in the Freudian narrative. The Freudian Oedipal narrative is self consciously acted out in front of the camera in grotesque hyperbole. Moreover, the Oedipal narrative is sabotaged by the fact that Frank is not only seeking sex with the mother, but also a *descent* back into the womb as figured by the umbilical strip of velvet. However, in later scenes the strip of velvet does not figure in the narrative as having the same function. Therefore the Oedipal narrative becomes, instead of a privileged narrative, just one more way to demarcate conscious and

unconscious in a totalizing gesture (Luckhurst, 176-178). A sort of heroic quest to explain away the depths of the underworld always in terms of a penis, and always in terms of consciousness (Levinas, 83). Furthermore, when Jeffery returns to the apartment, Dorothy takes on the position of a masochist and begs Jeffery to hit her. When he finally gives in and slaps Dorothy, a shot of her open mouth signals her pleasure. Nevertheless, the mouth is also an entrance to the underworld; it is an opening that provides access to the “lower bodily stratum” (Bakhtin, 311). A sexual violence overtakes Jeffery and reshapes him as having within himself a dimension of Frank. The roaring soundtrack and the Baconesque smearing of the image signal this. Thus, the distinction between identities breaks down as *Velvet* depicts a multiplicity of positions that the subject can play (Luckhurst, 178).

The parodic nature of the scene points to the constructedness of the American underworld, which amounts to a cursory reading of Freud that has entered the American consciousness. Lynch is turning the canonized Freudian narrative into an examination of grotesque appetites that over run the narrative in the supposed secure atmosphere of the home. Lynch situates the very explosions of the unconscious, the underworld, as a consequence of conditions arising with the bourgeoisie economy of self. For Lynch, the perverse irruption of desires is that which is always-already-present in the American home. Lynch figures this immanence of perversity in the bourgeoisie by connecting Frank and Jeffrey’s Father through the association of Franks oxygen-mask with the tubes that Mr. Beaumont is hooked up to in earlier scene at the hospital (Luckhurst, 176-179). Lynch’s use of framing as visual metaphor also links the oppressive appetite of Frank

with the entire social structure of Lumberton. The first shot of Sandy is not of the actual physical presence of the actor (Laura Dern) on screen but rather is a picture of Sandy framed by four frames, three of which are in the picture frame itself. Dorothy is also constantly framed. An example of Dorothy being framed is when, after receiving a telephone call from Frank she walks to her bathroom. In the shot she the walls and doorway frame her tightly to suggest entrapment by Frank and by Jeffery, who has been gazing at her from the closet.

The third pivotal scene occurs at 'Ben's Place' or as Frank calls it "pussy heaven". In the scene the Frank is forced to confront his homosexual desires for Ben, a transvestite (played by Dean Stockwell). As Ben lip synchs to Frank's favorite song "In Dreams" by Roy Orbison, Frank looks on adoringly until he realizes that his desire for Ben is overtaking him. In order to hold on to his mastery of him self, he stops the tape tells his henchmen that it is time to leave. Frank screams "Let's fuck! I'll fuck anything that moves!"

The camera cuts from 'Ben's' to an exterior traveling shot of a highway at night from the hood of a car traveling at a high speed. Jeffery started on this journey into the underbelly, the underworld believing that he was in control of what would happen, but now Frank is literally in the driver's seat. Frank pulls the car off the road begins to violently fondle Dorothy. In a particularly chilling moment, Frank turns to Jeffery and says, "You're like me." Jeffery punches Frank to stop him from hurting Dorothy and Frank orders Jeffery out of the car and tells one of his henchmen to play "In Dreams" over the car stereo. As the song plays, Frank acts out the part of both, Ben and Dorothy

echoing Dorothy's "Do you like that?" with "Feel my muscles, do you like that?" In addition, he holds a flashlight to his face, puts on lipstick, and kiss Jeffery. Then he says to Jeffery the lines of the song

In dreams, I walk
 with you
 In dreams, I talk
 to you
 In dreams your mine
 all the time
 Forever and ever, in dreams

As the scene continues the presumed static identities of all the characters slide into uncertainty. Dorothy must now play the voyeur while Frank ritualistically beats Jeffery. Frank takes on feminine dress characteristics and metaphorically "fucks Jeffery forever" while the Franks friends hold Jeffery. The only character not engaged in sexual activity, either voyeur or Sado-Masochist is the hooker, who decides to dance on the roof of the car while the song plays. Frank then beats Jeffery until he falls to the ground unconscious, signaled by a shot of the blowing out of a candle.

When Jeffery awakes he notices his at a log processing cite. He goes home, sits on his bed, and thinks about the events that have transpired. Jeffrey's thoughts are depicted as a series of shot intercut with a master shot of him sitting on his bed crying.

The first shot is an extreme close up of Dorothy's face. The second shot is of Jeffery slapping Dorothy. The third shot is of the musical hat that belongs to Dorothy's son. In the fourth shot, the camera tracks up to the closed door at 'Ben's' that Dorothy went through to visit her son and husband. The final shot is of Jeffery slapping Dorothy, her mouth recoiling with pleasure.

The sequence of shots is Jeffrey's attempt to make a narrative out of the events of the past few days. Jeffrey has journeyed to the underworld and is now reforming his notion of self. However, the notion of self that Jeffrey cultivates is the one that inscribes the hero narrative, the self that conquers itself, and then the dragon in the woods. It is no wonder that Frank takes Jeffrey to the forest where he conquers the underworld within himself. The attempt to narrativize the events of the underworld into a schema, falls back on the Oedipal narrative as well. Jeffrey's insistence, in the shot sequence that occurs when he is on his bed weeping, that Dorothy constantly be thought of in terms of her being a mother, exemplifies his drive toward explaining everything (narrativizing). He then tries to leave this contraction behind and run to the arms of Sandy. Jeffrey finds that he cannot do this, because he has set the underworld in motion and it will not be easily subdued. Jeffrey ends up killing Frank, shooting him in the head. It is the classic ending to the hero narrative, the dragon is slain (Luckhurst, 176-177).

Lynch avoids the trap of the hero narrative, but in doing so creates a fundamentally cynical if not apocalyptic ending to the film. The hero narrative is countered by the explicit parody of the hero narrative as the narrative-of- transcendence.

After, Frank's head explodes and Sandy and Detective William arrive on the scene, Lynch cuts to the camera making an ascent out of the ear-framed narrative. This time the camera comes out of out of Jeffrey's ear. The ear, no longer severed, signals that everything is back to normal. Jeffrey's father is in the periphery of the shot of Jeffrey and remarks that he is feeling much better. The sappy music that played earlier in the film when Jeffrey and Sandy danced at a party and kissed is now playing again non-diegetically. Then the biting parody of the transcendence narrative occurs.

Jeffery walks from the backyard into the kitchen to talk to Sandy, who is in the kitchen making dinner with Jeffrey's mother and grandmother. The scene is something out of a 1950's or 60's sitcom. Earlier in the *Velvet*, Sandy told Jeffrey of a dream she had in which "robins" that "represented love" chased away all the "darkness in the world" and in this scene the "robins" return as Sandy had predicted. This time the "robin" that landed on the windowsill has a beetle in its mouth identical to the one that the camera glimpsed when it penetrated the ground in the opening scenes. However, the entire narrative is severely undercut by a satiric rendering of the bird as blatantly mechanical and artificial. The wings of the bird flop back and forth like a broken metronome. It is a textbook parody of the "happy Hollywood-ending" that tries to tie together all the loose ends in the film.

The film then dissolves though the image motifs that began the film. Dorothy reunites with her son in the last shot, which further undercuts the happy conclusion. The camera pans upward (the transcendence, ascent motion of the camera) from the scene of Dorothy embracing her son the soundtrack sings "I still can see blue velvet through my

tears”, hinting at the deep sadness that still plagues her. Then the blue sky dissolves to a shot of a billowing blue curtain as the credits roll. The entire film is contained in the bookends of the narrative-within-a-narrative of the blue curtains. Lynch seems to be hinting that the hero narrative is not a way out of the problem of the American underworld, but rather merely traps us within its reach grasp. For, the same drive to conquer the self can easily slip into the drive to conquer others. This seems especially true of Frank who, cannot suppress his patently homosexual urges, and so becomes furious and lashes out like a spoiled child to prove his mastery of self by torturing others. In each instance, the totalization of the hero or the villain remain static entities that trap the fluid energies of selfhood.

Both Eshleman and Lynch are caught at an impasse when it comes to the underworld. Eshleman is seeking to find the fundamental principles that will govern a reintegration of the underworld into the psyche, Lynch is exposing the narratives of the American underworld for what they are, but offers no new direction. A solution may lie not in the central position of the two projects, but rather on the periphery.

Terry Eagleton, in his essay “Bakhtin, Shopenhauer, Kundera”, warns, “Those who can no longer tolerate shitless discourse are always likely to end up in the shit, boomeranging from one metaphysical pole to the other” (*Bakhtin*, 186). The only alternative is to exist in a sort of limbo between the poles. Morris Berman, in *Wandering God*, speaks of an immediate connection that does not preclude a loss of all sense of self or slippage in to nihilism (as Eagleton warns of “ending up in the shit”). This connection is likened to Deleuzian “rhizomes”, “a multiplicity of interconnected shoots

going off in all directions," the "segmentary lineage" of nomadic life." Berman goes on to quote Parnet, "Nomads are always in the middle. ... they have only becomings, woman-becoming, animal-becoming..." (*Wandering*, 190). Berman goes on to suggest a maintenance of tension between hierarchical and "rhizomatic" or relational thinking he calls, "paradox" (*Wandering*, 9). However, Berman warns, "There is no salvation on this path, only questions, indications, possibilities" (*Wandering*, 245). If Lynch and Eshleman are caught at an underworld impasse between the poles of birth and death, then this maybe the ideal. Perhaps a hint that Lynch and Eshleman are moving in the right direction lies in the manner in which the ecological world is always in the periphery their works. Another step in the right direction (for Berman at least) could also be evident in both artists fundamental rejection of the transcendence narrative. At the very least, Lynch and Eshleman offer the possibility of opening the human being to an ecology of self (relational, "rhizomal") instead of an economy of self.

¹ Jerome Rothenberg, in his two-volume anthology *Poems for the Millenium*, gathers a sampling of an entire century of work from counter tradition

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Curriculum Vita

1997 Recipient of the Texas Interscholastic League Foundation Able-Hanger Award

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Director of Programs Texas Film Festival 1998, 1999, 2000

Guest Lecturer for MSC Film Society's Audience Education Program

-The Birds in 1998

-Blue Velvet, Terminator 2, Rebel Without a Cause, and The Big Lebowski in 2000

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1st Prize in Music Performance and 2nd Prize in Poetry Performance 1999 Black Leaders In Science Talent Show

1999-1999 Published small political satire/literary zine (4 issues)

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