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Sentiment, Mood, and Performing the Past: James Hurley's Re-enactment of "Just You" in *Twin Peaks: The Return*

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Abstract:

This essay challenges the critical notion of David Lynch as a "trickster figure" in his approach to *Twin Peaks*. David McAvoy points to Lynch's employment of "boring" sequences in *The Return* as evidence of him "trolling" his fanbase, invoking Sianne Ngai's theory of the "stuplime"—the clash of the stupefying with the Kantian sublime—to argue that *The Return*'s aesthetic approach is one of self-reflexiveness through boredom and mock sentimentality. However, while Ngai's theory of the stuplime is applicable to *The Return* and has parallels with cultural theory surrounding internet trolling, it does not follow that *The Return* is applicable to the latter theory. This essay evaluates a sequence cited in McAvoy's chapter—the re-enactment of James Hurley's song "Just You"—to argue that Lynch's sentimentality is anything but a façade to elicit reactions from the audience and that *The Return*'s aesthetic strategy is not limited to concerns of self-reflexiveness.

Keywords: television aesthetics, performance, mood, music, internet trolling, twin peaks

On September 30, 1990, episode 2 of the second season of David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks* ("Coma") presented one of the most perplexing and critically derided sequences in the series' run. Amid an ill-conceived amateur investigation of the murder of teen Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), a trio of teenagers—Laura's former lover James Hurley (James Marshall), his current girlfriend Donna Hayward (Lara Flynn Boyle), and Laura's identical cousin Maddy (Sheryl Lee)—take some time in Donna's parents' house to perform a 1950s doo-wop-inspired ballad entitled "Just You." The main lyrical refrain, "Just You and I," feeds into the boiling tensions of a burgeoning love triangle—James' clear fascination with both Donna and Maddie during the performance causes Donna to storm out of the room in humiliation. However, though the artistic premise of the scene is clear, the aesthetic presentation of the song—particularly James' off-key, pitched-up lead vocals and the inexplicable audible presence of an invisible backing band—undermined this premise, prompting critical responses ranging from utter confusion (Halskov), ironic enjoyment (Borders et al.), to plain derision (Diaz; Mancuso and Grant).

https://youtu.be/o6KHdHygZ6k [film clip]

It was somewhat of a controversial turn, then, in Part 13 of Lynch and Frost's *Twin Peaks: The Return* ("What Story Is That, Charlie?") when James Hurley was announced on the stage of Twin Peaks' Roadhouse bar 27 years later, performing the same song—not just the same piece, but the exact same audio recording—to a serene, swaying audience, ultimately moving one of the spectators to tears. For media scholar David McAvoy, James Hurley's re-enactment of "Just You" in the Roadhouse is a key example of series creators David Lynch and Mark Frost "trolling" their audience: "fans have poked fun at James's musical 'invitation to love' for 25 years, and this reboot has not only given him a literal stage to sing it again—in full—but asks bemused fans to take it seriously, pointing to the very serious responses that James's fans within the universe of the show have" (94). McAvoy notes that Lynch has long since been a "trickster figure" in the minds of *Twin Peaks*' fandom, specifically those who were invested in the show coming to some cohesive, interpretable end but suspected that "Lynch would engage them in a long-form tease preventing them from achieving that necessary narrative closure" (90). McAvoy argues that this is a fully realized aesthetic strategy employed in *The Return*, "commenting on [forensic fandom] and reflecting these practices back to the fans like one of Lynch's typically warped or broken mirrors" (91). Moments of slow pace with little to no narrative relevance are,

for McAvoy, put into relief when understood in relation to Sianne Ngai's concept of the "stuplime," a form of affect "combining the stupefying affect of boredom with the fleeting sense of terror associated with the Kantian sublime" (92). Pointing to James' reprise of "Just You" as part of the stuplime affective strategy (though it is not clear exactly how: likely in its ostensible poor quality stemming from its relation to the original song's presentation, thus invoking the quality of "boring"), McAvoy suggests that Lynch and Frost's "trolling" functions as "part of a larger aesthetic and ethic that implicitly critiques the power dynamics and accretions of media capital that characterize televisual engagement in the era of 'Peak TV'" (95).

https://youtu.be/vxzGGABAU5o [film clip]

Such a reading, however, hinges on McAvoy's implicit judgement that the "Just You" re-enactment sequence is cynical rather than sentimental in nature—that James' song is invoked for the purpose of eliciting earnest reactions from the audience so that those reactions can be subverted through the sheer ridiculousness of the scene and subsequently reflected upon (94). This essay challenges such a reading, arguing instead that the "Just You" re-enactment sequence is evidently sentimental in nature and driven by aesthetic strategies beyond reflecting fan's reactions back at them to comment on fandom and viewership in the age of Peak TV. This essay will undertake a detailed textual analysis of the re-enactment of the song to advance an alternate reading of the scene that considers its aesthetic goals and performance, reading into its rich interplay between James' filmed past, his memory and re-enactment of this past, and how it feeds into the character dynamic between James and his fascination with another character, Renee (Jessica Szohr). In doing so, this essay explores how moments of re-enactment in *The Return* reflect upon the show's status as a re-enactment of the original series by foregrounding the limits of performing the past and, at the same time, the indelible grip that the past has upon a continuing artwork's presentation and reception.

To properly contextualize this reading of the song's re-enactment, it is crucial to understand the aesthetic operations of the song as it was conceived and presented in the original series. These include the aesthetic qualities of the song and how they inflect the character dynamics at play; how the song is affected by James, Donna, and Maddy's role in the larger narrative of *Twin Peaks;* and the song's appropriateness to the mood and aesthetic trends of the original series.

At the center of the musical performance are the characters of James Hurley and Donna Hayward, former lover and best friend (respectively) of recently murdered teen Laura Palmer.

Both in an emotional freefall in the wake of her murder, they fall into a tumultuous romance. Their relationship is haunted at every step by the specter of Laura, whose enigmatic nature fascinates them and compels them to investigate her murder in the hopes of unearthing more clues about her secret double life. This dynamic is further complicated by the arrival of Maddy Ferguson to Twin Peaks, Laura's identical cousin onto whom James cannot help but project his still strong feelings for Laura. The "Just You" sequence attempts for the most part to capitalize on this dynamic, which Michael Goddard describes evocatively: the song is "an idealisation of clear two-way communication, but is already interrupted by a third party [Maddy], […] who in turn summons the deeper affective resonance between James and Laura, introducing so much noise into the system that there is a complete breakdown of communication between the original couple." However, the fact that this tension is apparent and clearly expressed in the scene is undermined by the equally apparent fact that the song is aesthetically displeasing and, as an element of the scene's composition, distracts from the character dynamic at play. The ballad attempts to invoke slow '50s doo-wop in the style of Johnny Tillotson's 1959 rendition of "Earth Angel" with high falsetto vocals reminiscent of Frankie Valli. According to Marshall, the instrumental was conceived and recorded with the expectation that he was able to sing in falsetto in the key of C, which proved too difficult a combination. As a result, the tape had to be slowed down during recording and brought back to speed afterwards, rendering the final performance unnaturally pitched and off-key (Dom).

These aesthetic demerits are compounded by the fact that Donna and James have by this point become somewhat trying characters, with their amateur investigation of Laura's murder frequently interfering with and delaying the progression of the FBI investigation led by Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) and occasionally endangering the town's inhabitants (Borders et al.; Diaz). Given the ample screen-time devoted to James, Donna, and Maddy throughout the series and the relative simplicity of their plotline, the song becomes somewhat of a redundant amplification of a dynamic we could already gather from scenes prior. In addition, the naiveté that James' must display to make this plotline believable collides awkwardly with his performance in the song and the time devoted to its unfolding—we see James err in slow motion, his fascination with both Donna and Maddy communicated to us (and them) through an overabundance of glances. We are cued to focus seriously on the melancholy of this situation as it plays out while James sings ironically inappropriate lyrics in a voice that does not suit his appearance or demeanor. This lack of subtlety and suitability, fueled by the questionable choices involved in the song's composition, performance, and production, creates an

unintentionally humorous effect that renders the messy series of love connections surrounding James, Donna, and Maddy trivial and out of place in the larger scheme of the show's narrative. This is especially apparent in contrast with the intense, gripping scene that follows—Maddy has a psychic vision of Laura's murderer, a supernatural spirit named Killer BOB (Frank Silva), climbing over a sofa and crawling menacingly towards her with a malevolent snarl while James is away attending to Donna's wounded ego. Given the dramatic weight of this terrifying supernatural sighting—only the third appearance of Killer BOB in the series—the drama of James' and Donna's miscommunication becomes unremarkable by comparison. While some have rightly argued that the frightening impact of Killer BOB's appearance is accentuated by the feeling of calm set up by the gentleness of the "Just You" sequence (Horton), it is still evident that the song's artistic demerits render the "Just You" sequence less effective and more out of place than if a less distracting but equally gentle song had been employed in its place.

The song's out-of-placeness is reinforced by the "Just You" sequence's inexplicable element of surrealism, usually reserved in *Twin Peaks* and Lynch's filmography for moments representing inexpressible tensions (either because of cultural taboos or the limitations of the medium) or key supernatural thresholds—neither of which describe the dynamic in this scene. In an interview with Angelo Badalamenti, Andreas Halskov notes with some confusion that "[t]he acoustics don't seem to fit (there seems to be a mismatch between the physical room and the musical room), instruments are introduced even if they aren't part of the scene visually, and James' singing voice is notably different from his speech voice." Badalamenti's response indicates that the music's only intent was to "to underscore the relationship between James, Donna and Maddy" (71). Yet the realism of this scene breaks down as the unseen backing instruments—drums and bass—are inexplicably cut off as Donna leaves the room and James stops playing the guitar. The ostensible surrealism in this scene, then, might better be described as a failure of realism—and the scene's context and purpose described above suggest that this failure of realism is unfitting even by the standards of *Twin Peaks*.

Where the song's original presentation comes across as an overly insistent amplification of the messy series of love connections between James, Donna, and Maddy in the original series, the re-enactment of the song in *The Return* is a moment that deftly expands upon a brief series of interactions between James and a younger woman with whom he has become fascinated. In the time since the original series, we have become removed from our privileged position as spectators of James' life and are reintroduced to him at the same time we are introduced to this

younger woman, Renee, in Part 2 of *The Return* ("The Stars Turn and a Time Presents Itself")**.** In Twin Peaks' Roadhouse bar, a hub of local activity in the original series, Renee sits in a booth with Shelly (Mädchen Amick)—an original series regular—and two other women, having an intimate conversation about Shelly's daughter and her personal life. James enters the bar with a twenty-something British man, evidently introducing him to the space for the first time and ushering him towards the bar for a beer. James smiles openly and genuinely as he absorbs the bar's familiar atmosphere—a rare sight for original series viewers who may be used to his saccharine demeanor. However, the easy normality of these social interactions falls to the wayside as James's smile fades to wonder and he becomes fixated, revealed by a camera cut to be staring towards Shelly and Renee's booth. One of the women notices and informs the booth in hushed tones of James' staring, specifically at Renee and apparently not for the first time. James quickly looks away when he realizes he's been noticed, but Renee takes the news with ease, a slight hint of fascination apparent in her brief regard of James though her attention is soon recaptured by her friends' probing reactions. Shelly quickly comes to James' defense: "There's nothing wrong with him. James was in a motorcycle accident, he's just quiet now," and the somewhat concerning breach of social etiquette is brushed off as a quirk of James' personality. The next time we see these characters, this dynamic is reversed. James is announced on the Roadhouse stage as the next performer—an honor he shares with prestigious acts such as (The) Nine Inch Nails, Eddie Vedder and Julee Cruise. The first notes of "Just You" begin before James comes on screen, inviting from the audience a familiar response to the audio (should they be familiar with it) before connecting it with present-day James. Renee notices James on stage from a booth and becomes transfixed. As James plays through the entirety of the song, Renee becomes increasingly engrossed and is eventually moved to tears—somewhat embarrassed by her public display of emotion, making small gestures to compose herself and later laughing it off with her friends. James, on the other hand, performs without any heed for those watching him, lost in the music, seemingly taken by the personal effect that the song holds for him. Two young back-up singers stand in for Donna and Maddy, a visual accompaniment to the same voices we heard in the song's original performance. When the song comes to an end, the audience erupts into applause and James smiles genuinely once again without noticing Renee's unexpected emotional connection to his performance.

The aesthetic presentation of the song's reprise relies heavily on the viewer feeling the full weight of this time gap between *Twin Peaks* and *The Return*. Since part of what undermined the

intent of the song's original presentation was the naiveté of the characters performing it, the impact produced by the new scene gains much from our having had an intimate knowledge of James' naïve younger years and our subsequent distance from him now that he has grown and matured. As with meeting a former acquaintance after a long absence, viewers of the original series must accept that James Hurley can no longer be fully judged or accounted for by our perception of his actions, behavior, and beliefs when we knew him. When he is first reintroduced in Part 2 and throughout his subsequent appearances in *The Return*, we see more experience behind his eyes—a product of James Marshall's lived experience and by proxy James Hurley's—as well as a shift in performance that presents a more composed and circumspect character. The genuine smile speaks to a fondness for the past, where previously the past was a source of great angst for him, and the ease with which he holds himself in the Roadhouse suggests an increased sense of belonging and sureness of self. While we cannot apprehend the content of James' lived experience by virtue of the fiction, its presence invites us to rekindle our fascination with the character. The reprise of the song is not an empty reproduction of the original, despite using the exact same recording; the song's original, artistically flawed presentation is transmuted into an analogue for the memories of past mistakes and absurd happenstance that we were witness to in the original series, events which have inevitably shaped James Hurley's lived experience in the years since. The song amplifies this by hearkening back to James' time with Maddy and Donna, bittersweet moments that evoke his imperfect relationship with Donna, Maddy's death (and Laura's by proxy), and whatever fictional circumstances have led to Donna's unacknowledged absence from the series' return—perhaps in some way related to James' motorcycle accident. While these memories are opaque to Renee, traces of their meaning to James are communicated by subtle suggestions through his performance—his focus and passion for the song evident throughout.

Szohr's performance as Renee here holds a similar place for us as an audience as James's performance holds for Renee, foregrounding a tension between their different modes of fascination towards each other. We get to see very little of the Renee character before this point, so her reasons for crying beyond being moved by the music are a mystery to us, and her attitude towards James is enigmatic throughout. When her attitude to James is revealed in Part 15 ("There's Some Fear in Letting Go"), it is somewhat of a surprise. James approaches her usual booth to say hello, and she looks mildly confused at his approach. Her husband quickly interjects, rudely telling James to back off. James stutters a bewildered apology, trying to communicate that his fascination is platonic, but only succeeds in enraging Renee's husband to

the point of violence. A rowdy fight breaks out and James' young British friend—who we've since learned has a supernaturally strong punch—hits Renee's husband square in the face with enough force to skip the record player in the background and stun the entire bar into silence. Renee runs to her husband's aid as he falls to the floor and begins to seize. When James tries to apologize and comfort her, Renee looks back at him with a look of confusion as if to say, "What do you want from me?"—despite Renee's easy acceptance of James' fascination and her own investment in James' performance, these evidently hold no bearing on her social attitude towards him. This revelation enriches the series of interactions by confirming their nature as an interplay between Renee's passing fascination and James' enduring fascination. What we see in Szohr's portrayal of being moved to tears helps us apprehend what she sees in James' performance: a few small moments culminating in her apprehension of the nature of something that is passingly fascinating. While her experience with James' performance lacks the intimate knowledge of James' past that our privileged position allows, and ultimately holds much less sentiment, the "Just You" sequence and the related scenes that follow successfully hold these two threads in tension: Renee's present, fleeting moment of connection with James' past collides with James' richer, historically and textually contingent performance of this past, culminating in a miscommunication that mirrors that of the song's original performance. However, this time around, keying into the interplay of fascination and miscommunication through James' performance of "Just You" reveals rather than retreads the tensions built into the characters' interactions with each other.

The value of this re-enactment is accentuated by the fact that the song's (originally inexplicable) lack of realism finds a more suitable site in its presentation at the Roadhouse bar. Having hosted a crucial moment of supernatural intervention in episode 7 of season 2 ("Lonely Souls") just before Laura Palmer's killer was revealed, the Roadhouse has transitioned in *The Return* to a space where realism regularly breaks down and the supernatural and surreal leeches into the mundane. *The Return* routinely cuts to the Roadhouse near the end of its episodes, though sometimes earlier, to host a wide variety of musical acts to set audiovisual moods, most evidently when (The) Nine Inch Nails' forlorn, twisted rock-ballad "She's Gone Away" sets the mood for a visceral, upsetting and surreal representation of an atomic bomb explosion in Part 8 ("Gotta Light?"). Located in this same site of instability and uncertainty**,** the lack of visual backing instruments and the general disjunction between audio and image in "Just You" becomes more appropriate, coming to mirror threshold moments in Lynch's filmography such as Rebekah Del Rio's performance of "Silencio" in *Mulholland Drive* where no band is visible and

Del Rio's vocals persist even after she visibly faints and is dragged backstage. The light eeriness of "Just You" and its audiovisual disjunction fits with the pervasive mood that something is fundamentally wrong in the town of Twin Peaks on a supernatural level, thus avoiding the out-of-placeness that the original sequence held by virtue of its failures of realism.

Considering these points of difference in the song's presentation, we can account for the choices made in the "Just You" re-enactment sequence without reading it first and foremost as part of a self-reflexive aesthetic strategy. With far fewer narrative strokes than the song's original narrative context required**,** the same recording that once compounded James' frustrating denseness as a teenager becomes somewhat of an enigmatic and touching experience. Unlike in the original series, the aesthetic demerits of the song "Just You" do not directly undermine the artistic dynamic at play in *The Return*, but rather function to enhance its grip on the past. While it is tempting to argue that the use of a more aesthetically pleasing song in this sequence would have better accentuated some aspects of the scene's character dynamics, this would also have lacked the indexical connection to James' and the show's history that the scene relies upon to render its expression of performing the past so impactful. In its strong attention to memory, performance, and fascination, the scene is an expression of the transient beauty—and the limitations—of reading into the experience and attitudes of others, as well as a tribute to an imperfect character with an imperfect past. Rather than a resurrection of a ridiculous moment for the purpose of commentary and reflection, the scene embraces a moment so vulnerable and unflinchingly sentimental that it is easily mistaken for cynicism. This re-enactment demonstrates the difficulties inherent in ever fully performing the past, but also the past's overwhelming capability to pervade the present even as it eludes precise or complete articulation. This tension is felt strongly throughout *The Return*—opaque but vivid re-enactments of the past provide striking evocations of that which is lost or hidden from view, as with Audrey Horne's supernaturally-charged re-enactment of her dance to the song "Audrey's Dance" from the original series amidst her mysterious absence from the rest of the series. Such re-enactments in *The Return* mark a fascinated acknowledgment of the loss of what once was alongside the emergence of something new, something contingent on that past but separate from it and alive to new possibilities.

This analysis of *The Return*'s re-enactment of "Just You" suggests that the aesthetic strategy employed in this sequence has less to do with the show's fandom or viewership and more to do with its own past and present. This perhaps also illuminates the importance for scholarship to

accept inconsistency in television texts: to accept that not every moment will add up to an encompassing design, and so each moment needs to be understood on its own terms or else we risk distorting the text in the interest of preserving the work's integrity as it relates to one framework or another. This is especially germane to study of *The Return*, where the frequent and varied moments of incoherence threaten any understanding of the series as a congruous whole. While this analysis of James Hurley's re-enactment of "Just You" does not necessarily reveal *The Return*'s larger aesthetic strategy—though it illuminates ways in which the series re-enacts its past—close attention to the scene reveals that it speaks for itself. Moments in *The Return* tend to speak emphatically, and many of the series' hidden pleasures are revealed by listening to them.

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