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# Kafka, Lynch, and Frost—The Trial and Tribulations in Twin Peaks: The Return

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Abstract:

Based on David Lynch's lifelong preoccupation with the prose of Franz Kafka, this article argues that *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017) represents an homage to Kafka's novel *The Trial* (1925). The text identifies and analyzes several parallels between these works (their interplay with what Espen Hammer calls the genre of the metaphysical crime narrative and their use of motifs of doors and thresholds) in order to explain how they contribute to the complexity of Lynch and Frost's television series.

Keywords: Twin Peaks, David Lynch, Franz Kafka, The Trial, literature, novels, crime narrative

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Screenshot from *Twin Peaks: The Return*, Part 3

David Lynch has always been open about his admiration for the work of German-speaking Bohemian writer Franz Kafka (1883-1924). “The one artist that I feel could be my brother—and I almost don’t like saying it because the reaction is always, ‘yeah, you and everybody else’—is Franz Kafka. I really dig him a lot,” Lynch told Rodley (56). His affinity for Kafka is not surprising: as truly modern authors, they have both been interested in highlighting bizarre, eerie, and illogical aspects of reality, as well as depicting protagonists pressured or transformed by powerful forces beyond their control.

One such work by Kafka is *The Trial* (*Der Process,* 1925), a novel about the chief clerk at a bank, referred to as Josef K., who awakes one day to find he is being prosecuted for an unspecified crime he is pretty sure he has not committed. Dark and humorous at the same time, this perplexing book reflects the anxiety of modern man navigating through the labyrinths of social restrictions and one’s own irrational feelings of guilt (Hammer 9-11). When considering Josef K., many Lynch’s characters come to mind. The disoriented Dale Cooper of season three of *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), created by David Lynch and Mark Frost, is one of them.

There are other parallels between *The Trial* and *The Return*, as well. Both pieces honor and play with the conventions of so-called “metaphysical crime narratives,” and both are remarkably fixated on motifs of doors and thresholds. The aim of this paper is to analyze these connections

in order to discover their potential significance for season three and the overall serial universe of *Twin Peaks*. I will start by examining the connections between Kafka and Lynch.

## Connections between Lynch and Kafka: The Research So Far

Kafka is a prominent figure in *The Return*. That is actually a fact—a very large portrait of the writer adorns the wall of Gordon Cole's (David Lynch) FBI office in Part 3, as well as a smaller one in the home of Phyllis (Cornelia Guest) and William "Bill" Hastings (Matthew Lillard) in Part 1 (Boulègue). It is worth noting that his picture was on the cover of Lynch's shooting script of *Lost Highway* (1997), as well (Nochimson 32). By inserting Kafka's portrait into the diegetic world of *Twin Peaks*, Lynch and Frost clearly pay tribute to the writer and indicate that his work might be of special importance for the show, just as it might be for *Lost Highway.*

A few scholars and critics have pondered the meaning of this reference, providing interesting perspectives on the subject. For example, Kafka's portrait inspired Andy Hageman to compare the uncanny dreamworld of *The Return*, as well as other *Twin Peaks* installments, with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*, 1915), a novella about an anxious traveling salesman, Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one day realizing he has turned into a gigantic insect. Hageman especially focuses on Lynch and Kafka's common formal and thematic interest in the "weird space between waking and dreaming worlds," as well as metamorphoses of characters. The latter especially intrigued Hossein Eidizadeh as well. In his article on the connection between *The Metamorphosis* and Lynch's films, he states that "[a]cross the 18 episodes of the recent third season of *Twin Peaks*, Lynch multiplied the number of dual identities, which were already prevalent in the show's original run. No one, in this world, seems to be him or herself—something always seen in Lynch's works." Metamorphosis, "in both literal and figurative sense," is also one of the themes Adam Daniel thinks *The Return* shares with Kafka's crime fiction (223). According to his text "Kafka's Crime Film: *Twin Peaks—The Return* and the Brotherhood of Lynch and Kafka," other common themes include "the absurdity of life, the disconnect between mind and body," and "alienation," for which he finds several examples in the season. However, it is interesting to note that although his insightful text focuses on the authors' joint interest in certain motifs and unconventional crime narrative, he never mentions *The Trial* as a point of reference, especially since this novel serves as a prime example of unconventional crime fiction, as "it is the crime and not the supposed culprit that is unknown" (Hammer 7).

Other authors have connected this novel to *The Return*. In one of his *Facebook* posts, Franck Boulègue compares William "Bill" Hastings—the initial suspect for the murder of Ruth Davenport (Mary Stofle)—with Josef K.,since he has been imprisoned "for a reason he does not understand." On a different note, D. L. Martin notes in his blog entry, "Twin Peaks: Gates, Gatekeepers, Life and Death—Lynch & Kafka," that many season three characters, especially Audrey, resemble the ones from Kafka's book for reasons that will be explained by the end of this article.

It is not surprising that scholars and critics predominantly turn to *The Metamorphosis* while interpreting Lynch's work. After all, his films usually thematize inexplicable transformations of

characters, both physical and/or psychological. *Eraserhead* (1977), *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *Inland Empire* (2006) are the most obvious examples: all feature protagonists who can be described as "strange figure," or "creatures," following Walter Benjamin's assessment of Kafka's characters. According to him, they can be divided into two types—"hybrids or imaginary creatures," like Samsa, who are hopelessly unable to break away from their family circle, and "unfinished beings," or "assistants" and "messengers," without a "firm place" and "inalienable outlines," who reveal oppressive qualities of the law and for whom there is still hope in this world (Benjamin 116-117).

Besides, Lynch himself openly showed admiration for this novella. Olson reports that it particularly inspired him to write a script for *Eraserhead* (54), as well as a never-filmed feature project, *Gardenback*, which revolved around an insect growing in an attic of a house that serves as a metaphor for the leading character's head (57). Lynch has wanted to adapt *The Metamorphosis* for the big screen since the beginning of his film career. According to Eidizadeh, he discussed this with Chris Rodley:

> I identify a lot with the character [Gregor Samsa], but I don't wanna go into all the reasons why. I wrote a script. But I'm not entirely happy with the script. […] We had a plan with Frantisek Daniel, to make a film based on Kafka's story *The Metamorphosis*. I've even finished the storyboard, but the problem is the beetle. In Kafka's story the man metamorphoses into a beetle. It would have been good to make it as a mechanical puppet five years ago, but now it would be possible to do it only with computer animation. And that is very expensive. (qtd. in Eidizadeh)

However, due to the difficulty of adapting the work, in 2017 he announced he had given up the project for good: "Once I finished writing the script for a feature film adaptation I realized that Kafka's beauty is in his words. That story is so full of words that when I was finished writing I realized it was better on paper than it could ever be on film" (Niola).

Although not as frequently as *The Metamorphosis*, some scholars and critics do specifically point to *The Trial* while assessing Kafka's influence on Lynch's oeuvre. For example, Rodley mentions it in the context of *Eraserhead*'s plot, revolving around the disoriented Henry, who is "bemused and alarmed by what is happening to him" (56). Martha P. Nochimson refers to it while interpreting *Lost Highway* (40), featuring the "deranged" Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) who may and may not have killed his wife Renee (Patricia Arquette). Eidizadeh connects it with the plot of *Inland Empire*, which reflects the lead character(s) Nikki/Sue's (Laura Dern) confused mind. Still, the connection between *The Trial* and Lynch's works—especially *The Return*—deserves much more attention than it has yet received. After all, while talking with David Chute about Kafka, Lynch also said: "If Kafka wrote a crime picture, I'd be there. I'd like to direct that. For sure. I'd like to direct a movie of *The Trial*" (qtd. in Barney 38).

On Lynch and Kafka's Love for the Metaphysical Crime Narrative

Lynch's films play with elements of the crime genre and his and Frost's *Twin Peaks* universe is no exception. The original series (1990-91) starts with the discovery of the murdered homecoming queen, Laura Palmer, wrapped in plastic; its cinematic prequel *Fire Walk with Me* (1992) commences with the investigation of Teresa Banks' (Pamela Gidley) murder; and *The Return* begins with the revelation of Ruth Davenport and—as we later find out—Major Garland Briggs' (Don S. Davis) remains. Crime shows are mysteries and mysteries are "pivotal to [Lynch's] work" (Daniel 226). However, his mysteries never seem conventional. Criminal violations in his work cannot be rationally explained or adequately processed, as in most crime fiction, which ultimately offers cathartic resolutions to personal and collective trauma. In this way, Lynch's work, including *Twin Peaks*, resembles Kafka's, whose *The Trial* can equally be read as a mind-bending crime piece.

In his introduction to *Kafka's* The Trial: *Philosophical Perspectives*, Hammer compares this novel with "the more rare species of the *metaphysical* crime narrative," which he considers cultivated by Edgar Allan Poe, Jorge Luis Borges, and Maurice Blanchot (7). According to Hammer, a couple of characteristic features of this genre correspond highly with *The Trial*: "Rather than employing a realistic setting, such novels indulge in symbolism, thus everything in *The Trial ...* seems pregnant with some sort of deep, yet also decisive meaning. K. finds himself in a labyrinth of signs whose significance has become lost to him and around which he does not know his way. In a space of incomprehension of this kind, the psychology of the characters plays a subordinate role" (8). However, unlike metaphysical crime novels that "present readers with a quickly unfolding series of dramatic confrontations moving toward a climax," which serve as "stations of potential self-clarification," Kafka's novel ironically subverts "this scheme of cognitive success" by promising K.'s "enlightenment that never occurs" (8). Another point of dissimilarity between this genre and Kafka's work has to do with the nature of transcendence it represents: the former's focus is often on the metaphysical quest that "sets up a dualistic (and sometimes gnostic) system of human and nonhuman (transcendent) orders," while "*The Trial* seems to disallow any positive recourse to transcendence, and the operations and ultimate meaning of the transcendent or divine law remain beyond human reckoning" (9).

If one compares what Hammer says about Kafka's approach to the crime genre with Lynch's work, it becomes obvious that *Twin Peaks,* just like *The Trial*, experiments with the so-called metaphysical sub-genre. Namely, its fictional universe has always relied on use of symbolism, making its audience work hard to conceive of a viable interpretation of its serial parts, including *The Return*. And like this kind of fiction, it includes the motif of a heroic quest which stretches between a dualistic world of immanence and transcendence.

This especially comes to the fore in the latest season, which portrays the rather odd heroic trajectory of Dale Cooper (played by Kyle MacLachlan, who coincidentally played Josef K. in the 1993 film adaptation of *The Trial,* directed by David Jones). As revealed by the end of the show, his purpose has been to travel between multiple time-space continuums in order to get rid of his evil doppelgänger Mr. C (another character known by an initial!), as well as his own guilt for not saving Laura from her demise. However, like Kafka's K., Cooper struggles in his endeavors to the point of absurdity, especially while he inhabits the body of Dougie Jones. Like K., he seems

unable to reach the climactic enlightenment of a metaphysical hero, since the implied guilt he is laden with never gets resolved. He does not seem to be able to reach complete understanding of his case or of the worlds he traverses, a portrayal similar to the ones employed by postmodernist authors who provide the audience with more questions than answers. All Cooper can be sure of is that he is on a journey filled with many maze-like pathways. Despite his willingness to change things, the ending of the series seems to indicate that he does not fully succeed in his mission, which makes Cooper uncannily akin to K.

Doors and Thresholds

In addition to Lynch, Frost, and Kafka's similar approach to the crime genre, there is another connection between *The Return* and *The Trial*—namely, both works use motifs of doors and thresholds in a significant manner.

When it comes to Kafka's novel, what immediately comes to mind is the parable "Before the Law," told to K. by a priest at a cathedral, where the former was waiting for an Italian business colleague. The story depicts a man from the country who wishes to reach the Law, but the doorkeeper seems to stand between him and his destination. Every time the man from the country asks if he might go through the gates, the doorkeeper finds a way to discourage him. Time passes and the man from the country reaches the end of his life while waiting at the threshold of the Law. Just before he passes away, he asks the doorkeeper why no one had requested to come in through the gate but him. The keeper tells him that this entrance was meant only for him and closes the door.

K.'s fate uncannily resembles the man from the country's demise. Just like him, he too will die in his quest for justice, law, order, and meaning. During his search, he struggles to pass through many rooms and hallways but ultimately reaches the same dead end. Orson Welles, the director of the most notable film adaptation of *The Trial* (1962), has shown K.'s futile meanderings in a particularly expressive manner—by employing rhetorically powerful camera angles, high contrast images, claustrophobic compositions, and surreal scenography. However, both of these works differ in their depiction of K.'s death: Kafka's protagonist lets himself be stabbed by the court employees, and Welles' one gets killed in a dynamite explosion—oddly reminiscent of nuclear detonations from *The Return* (the one in New Mexico and the poster-art explosion from the wall of Cole's office).

As for *Twin Peaks*, there are many special doors in the series, some of which serve as portals to the other-worldly realm of the Black and White Lodges, which "every spirit must pass through to reach perfection" (Season 2, Part 18). In the first two seasons, one of the ways to enter the lodges is through the curtained portal at the Glastonbury Grove. In *Fire Walk with Me*, Lynch introduces the motif of doors (e.g. FBI elevator doors and Laura's picture door), which lead not only to the lodges but also to the "convenience store" where other-worldly beings dwell. He also confirms that portals to multiple transcendent and immanent locations open via electricity, which was hinted at in previous seasons. He and Frost use all these motifs in *The Return* too, showcasing portals which were made by mortals (like the one that appears after the atomic

blast and to some extent, the one in the glass box), or initiated by the transcendental creatures (like the entrances to the Zone and Jack Rabbit's palace). In the *Twin Peak*s universe portals are always thresholds where a potential dweller or one's shadow side awaits, inviting the person entering to embark on a path of change.

This applies to any type of passage in the show, even the ones that do not connect the two worlds per se; namely, a narrative always progresses if a certain character crosses a certain threshold, and it does not if the character shows signs of reluctance. In Lynch and Frost's universe, this motif produces anxiety in the audience, especially in *The Return*, which is why one of the most disturbing plotlines is the one involving Audrey Horne (Sherilyn Fenn), precisely because it does not offer a satisfactory resolution. In a series of scenes, Audrey seems stuck in the house she lives in. In one of them (Part 15), she is literally unable to walk out of it, even though all she seemingly wants is to go to The Roadhouse. In the end, she makes several excuses not to go, despite her husband Charlie (Clark Middleton) implying he will accompany her if she walks through the door. Eventually they do find themselves in The Roadhouse, but it becomes clear that this scene is part of her fantasy. This seems to be confirmed in Audrey's last scene (Part 16), where she is portrayed looking at her reflection in a room like one in a mental institution.

Audrey's case in many aspects reflects the parable presented in *The Trial.* D. L. Martin particularly sees her as a version of Kafka's man from the country, although many other characters fit the profile too. In his insightful analysis of Part 15, he states that in this episode "[a]lmost every scene contains either a metaphorical or quasi-physical gate, gatekeeper, and desire or attempt to cross the threshold to move into the next phase" of the characters' lives. However, one can apply the same metaphor onto the whole season—which is why the most tragic characters are the ones who, like the man from the country and K., remain stuck in some sort of liminal state, or in a real, imaginary or other-worldly waiting room, even though they have the potential to "shovel their way out of the shit," to quote Dr. Amp (Russ Tamblyn). Audrey, Sarah Palmer (Grace Zabriskie), Drugged-out Mother (Hailey Gates), and the ghost of Leland Palmer (Ray Wise), to name a few, all fit this description.

However, the character with the most complex relationship with doors and thresholds is Cooper. In a way, the whole third season represents his attempt to cross some final threshold after which he would become a unified persona and ultimately the savior of Laura Palmer. After many trials and tribulations, he unifies himself by letting his BOB-possessed doppelgänger be killed and entering his former room at the Great Northern Hotel, thanks to which he becomes ready to enter another storyline. In this new story, he personifies the FBI agent Richard on a mission to find Laura under the name of Carrie Page. To accomplish this, he must walk through many doorways as well but ultimately fails to cross the last one, the threshold of the Palmer's house. After this failed attempt, he returns to the Black Lodge, where ghostly Laura awaits him with another secret message. This scene is particularly disturbing since it does not offer a clear resolution, not only to this storyline, but to the whole season.

Just like the man from the country and K., Cooper reaches a narrative dead end after searching for his desires behind many doors. His dwelling at the Waiting Room and the dialogues presented there seem particularly “Trialesque,” with him resembling both the man from the country and K. alike. For example, similar to the spatially disoriented K., who asks the priest for guidance around the cathedral after talking about the story of the man from the country, Cooper also waits for some sort of aid before exiting the Lodges. In Part 1, cryptic advice first comes from the Fireman, a seemingly benevolent White Lodge creature, warning him he is “far away.” This warning parallels the priest’s remark on K.’s whereabouts:

> K. asked, “Aren’t we near the main doorway now?” "No," said the priest, "we're a long way from it. Do you want to leave already?" Although at that moment K. had not been thinking of leaving, he answered at once: “Of course, I must go.” (Kafka 221)

In Part 2, Cooper seems to be seeking advice from Laura’s phantom as well. If the character of the Fireman represents Kafka’s priest, one can argue that “Laura” plays the role of the doorkeeper and the door itself—by unmasking herself she even reveals a little portal through her head, showing Cooper her glowing essence, just as “inextinguishable” as the light that began to “shine from the darkness behind the door” in the wake of the man from the country’s final moments in the parable (214).

Along these lines a major difference needs to be noted: *The Return* is ultimately not as dark as *The Trial*. In his labyrinthine reality, K. is only able to find solace in death, just like Laura did in *Fire Walk with Me*. Although *The Return* does not show Cooper finding a happy ending, it does not show him simply *ending* either: his ability to change space, time, and narrative lines show that he, whoever he is, at least has the potential to transform and to reach the understanding and relief Laura does, only without dying. In his pursuit of enlightenment, or perhaps the light inside Laura’s body, he ultimately hits the wall, represented by the electric explosion inside the Palmer's house, which could also be associated with the atomic bomb and Welles’ ending of *The Trial*. But unlike Welles’ K., whose death by detonation indicated that the game for him was over, a short circuit blast brought Cooper back to Level One of his quest-game—or the Waiting Room with “Laura”—where Life still has a chance of winning.

In order for Life to win, to continue with the gaming analogy, Cooper needs to listen to “Laura’s” message, as shown in the last scene which mirrors the one from Part 2, where he asks her: “When can I go?” Perhaps her secret advice had even been said aloud before, since “Laura” answers his question with “You can go out now.” At the point when this comment was made, it appeared he did not want to hear what she had told him. In the last episode, audiences do learn what happens next. However, one thing remains clear: “Laura’s” instruction is something Kafka’s doorman never would have said. Namely, in Kafka’s story, when the man from the country asks if he can go through the door, the doorkeeper replies: “but not now”—indicating that the resolution to the man from the country’s desires lies exclusively in the unforeseeable future. For Cooper, the potential transcendence can be reached in the present but only if he unlocks the right door using the metaphorical key he already owns yet is unaware of—just like

Marjorie Green (Melissa Bailey) from the Part 1, who forgot she carried Ruth Davenport's apartment key with her the whole time.

## Conclusion

Lynch, as an admirer of uncanny and surreal fiction, finds inspiration in the literature of Franz Kafka. He used some of this inspiration to co-create *Twin Peaks*, a world he conceived along with Mark Frost. This is especially noticeable in *The Return*, which features Kafka's portraits and bears a strong mark of two of his prose pieces—the novella, *The Metamorphosis,* and especially his novel, *The Trial*. The latter has not received sufficient attention regarding scholarly comparison between Lynch and Kafka. As argued in this paper, both of these works exhibit a similar approach to the so-called metaphysical crime genre, whose generic codes they play with and reinterpret. As a mystery and crime fiction with lots of fantastical elements, all of the *Twin Peaks* installments fit some of the conventions of this sub-genre. However, unlike previous seasons, *The Return* puts much more emphasis on the motif of a failed and rather absurd heroic quest, which is a thematic interest it shares with *The Trial*. Another point of conjunction between these works is their focus on the motifs of doors and thresholds, through which they both symbolize the struggles of modern humanity. But unlike *The Trial*, whose ending adds nihilistic or negative connotations to K.'s demise, *The Return* plays with the characters' potential for reaching a certain enlightenment or transcendence, promised in the realm of the lodges. But in order to do so, they have to cross certain thresholds until they come up with the solution to their problems. Cooper, as with many others, doesn't seem to find one yet, according to the ending of the season. However, he does not look like he is interested in quitting either.

Bearing all of this in mind, it seems that the themes and literary devices of *The Trial* served as a significant inspiration for *The Return*—especially if we interpret it as a follow-up to the story of one's journey towards meaning and spiritual understanding, started and developed in previous installments of *Twin Peaks*, including *Fire Walk with Me.* In other words, deeper consideration of *The Trial* provides a convincing path to understanding the fictional world of *Twin Peaks*, as well as other cinematic depictions of the various "inland empires" in the Lynch universe.

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