

The Artistic Evangelism of David Lynch: Transcendental Meditation, World Peace, and Laura Palmer

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<https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue15/The-Artistic-Evangelism-of-David-Lynch-Transcendental-Meditation-World-Peace-and-Laura-Palmer>

Abstract:

David Lynch has long defied explanation, his art confounding traditional interpretations. This article posits that one starting point for interpreting Lynch's work may be found in his dedication to Transcendental Meditation. Some scholars have explored spiritual themes in Lynch's work, but never his own spirituality. Seeing Lynch as a convert to and evangelist for Transcendental Meditation provides insight into the conclusion of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, and arguably provides a new prism through which much of Lynch's oeuvre may be re-examined. Contact: zsheldon@tamu.edu

Keywords: Twin Peaks, David Lynch, Transcendental Meditation, transcendental style

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Message from David Lynch



I started Transcendental Meditation in 1973 and have not missed a single meditation ever since. Twice a day, every day. It has given me effortless access to unlimited reserves of energy, creativity and happiness deep within. This level of life is sometimes called "pure consciousness"—it is a treasure. And this level of life is deep within us all.

But I had no idea how powerful and profound this technique could be until I saw firsthand how it was being practiced by young children in inner-city schools, veterans who suffer the living hell of post-traumatic stress disorder and women and girls who are victims of terrible violence.

TM is, in a word, life changing for the good.

In 2005, we started the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace to ensure that every child anywhere in the world who wanted to learn to meditate could do so. Now, the Foundation is actively teaching TM to adults and children in countries everywhere.

Screenshot of the [David Lynch Foundation's "About Us"](#) page

David Lynch has long defied explanation. Not only does his art often beg coherence and yet strike an evocative chord with audiences, but the man himself revels in subverting expectations of himself and his art. Lynch is a conundrum: the auteur master of darkness, whose psyche birthed an oeuvre replete with eccentric violence and sexuality, has also produced family fare in *The Straight Story*, has been described as “sort of a geeky person who doesn’t especially care whether people think he’s geeky or not” (Wallace 183), and emphasizes his American normality in his self-written bio: “Eagle Scout. Missoula, Montana” (quoted in Rodley 180). Explaining Lynch and his work is difficult yet there is something to his art that continually calls for explanation.

As a consequence of Lynch’s dreamlike sensibility, interpretations abound for his art and career. Postmodernism (Hendershot), liminality (Daye), psychoanalysis (McGowan; Žižek), and nostalgia (Mazullo; Reed) are all prominent themes, all especially in relation to Lynch’s most recent cinematic work, *Twin Peaks: The Return* (Baxter; Hills). Others have mined Lynch’s biography for guidance: Kenneth C. Kaleta argues that Lynch’s training as a painter should lead us to view even his films as an outgrowth of his painting (5); likewise David Crewe suggests a preoccupation with the discrepancy between the “incandescent optimism” of the 1950s America

that Lynch grew up in and the “polluted” world that that America came to be (102-03). Countless other examples could be included—Lynch is an evocative enigma, and the literature around his work borders on overwhelming.

In this article, I propose the expansion of a particular hermeneutic for Lynch and his work—spirituality. Other scholars have explored this to some degree, but few have dedicated space to Lynch’s own spirituality, namely his decades-long practice of Transcendental Meditation (TM). Not only does Lynch practice TM twice-daily (“Message from David Lynch”), he is also the founder of the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace, which promotes TM as a life-changing tool (“About DLF”). Additionally, Lynch is the author of *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*, and the later chapters in his memoir, *Room to Dream*, provide an in-depth discussion of TM and the ways it has shaped him and his work.

While TM is often mentioned in discussions of Lynch and his work as a curiosity, I argue that it should be taken seriously as a guiding principle for Lynch’s art. Even as Lynch does not describe himself as “religious” he and others acknowledge that he is a profoundly spiritual person, and this spirituality is displayed in *Twin Peaks: The Return*, specifically in how Laura Palmer’s murder is resolved and then ambiguously troubled once again. Looking at perspectives on Lynch’s religious impulse and his own missionary zeal for TM provide one reading of the foundational mystery of *Twin Peaks*, while also providing a prism through which much of Lynch’s oeuvre may be mined for new insights.

Lynch, the Spiritual, and Transcendental Meditation

Many critics have attached significance to the moral and religious aspects of Lynch’s filmography in a way that ties a pervasive American identity and culture to Eastern religious influences. Jeff Johnson, for instance, argues that Lynch “follows an intrinsically American moralistic obsession with the ideas of innate depravity, a Zoroastrian notion of goodness and evil, and the schizophrenic concept of innocence as both an ideal state and a treacherous, ultimately corrupting vice of the wickedly naïve” (3). Johnson ties this Zoroastrian conception of evil to the American national identity (3). Likewise, John Alexander has characterized Lynch’s moral messaging as emerging from the tradition of the American Gothic, even as the nostalgic elements of Lynch’s work—the deceptive 1950s-esque tranquility of the town of Twin Peaks, for example—evoke a kind of Manichean belief system rolled into the postmodern sentimentality of contemporary American culture (8-13). Similarly, John Carroll sees Lynch’s work as exemplifying “the most fundamental myths of American culture” as interpreted through “the Manichean strain of Christianity” (291, 294).

Eastern and non-traditional religious expressions have a place in Lynch’s world, but only in a highly Westernized, Americanized sense. Lynch’s famous biographical statement ties him both to a specifically American place and a specifically American institution—the Boy Scouts—and

his nostalgic preoccupations are entrenched in classical Hollywood and American popular culture. In this sense, American morality and a distinctly American flavor of Christianity are perhaps necessarily read into Lynch's work. He is, after all, a product of this culture. But for as insightful as such critiques are in taking Lynch's Americanism seriously, I argue that they also fail to recognize Lynch as an individual who takes his own spirituality seriously—specifically because his spiritual commitments are not those which have dominated religious or spiritual interpretations of his work. Lynch was raised Presbyterian, but without much commitment (Lynch 101). In Lynch's own words:

I guess I believed in God in my own way when I was growing up. I didn't really think about it, but I knew there was something kind of running the thing. Then one Sunday morning when I was fourteen I thought to myself, I'm not getting anything out of going to church. I knew I wasn't getting the real thing, and looking back, I can see I was headed for Maharishi. When I was working on *Eraserhead*, I'd see photographs of Indian masters and think, this face knows something that I don't know. Could it be that there's such a thing as enlightenment? Is that real or is it just some Indian thing? Now I know it's real. Anyhow, I stopped going to church. (Lynch and McKenna 50)

For most of his life, what has formed the core of Lynch's public spirituality has been "the art life." As a teenager, Lynch was friends with the son of American artist Bushnell Keeler, and it was Keeler who gave Lynch *The Art Spirit* by Robert Henri, which, according to Lynch, "sort of became my Bible, because that book made the rules for the art life" (Rodley, Lynch on Lynch 9). "The art life" for Lynch was characterized by a life of singular focus: living and breathing art, no matter the form. From his first painting studio to his enrollment at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts to a fellowship with the American Film Institute, producing art was the core of Lynch's being, dominating his relationships and his every waking moment.

It was during the production of Lynch's first feature film, *Eraserhead* (1977), that he discovered TM. Introduced to the notion of a mantra through his sister, Lynch became an avid student at the Spiritual Regeneration Movement center in Los Angeles. The influence was immediately noticeable:

Everything in me changed when I started meditating. Within two weeks of starting, Peggy comes to me and says, "What's going on?" I said, "What are you talking about?" because she could've been referring to any number of things. And she says, "Your anger. Where did it go?" ... I was not happy in those days and I took it out on her ... When I started meditating the anger went away. (Lynch and McKenna 130, 131)

Lynch found that meditation gave him a creative edge, which he poured into *Eraserhead's* production. He now characterizes the film "as my most spiritual movie" (Lynch 33). Since that time Lynch has maintained a strict adherence to the practice of TM as expressed through the life and writings of His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Worth noting, however, is that this particular expression of TM emerges from the Americanized context of New Age spiritualism in Los Angeles in the 1970s. Organizations like the Spiritual Regeneration Movement often had an

implicit ethos of Western critique in their founding and teachings, romanticizing Eastern religiosity in contradistinction to Western materialism and the dogmas of Western religion. Lynch's comments on TM and its influence should thus always be read in light of this Americanized version of TM.

Though TM is not a religion in and of itself—in fact its adherents note that TM “deals with the essential truth which underlies all faiths and its message may be lived by men of all creeds, for its teaching is inconsistent with none” (Lutes 12)—it is easy to see Lynch's dedication to TM through the language of religious conversion. This importantly draws into focus the importance of TM for Lynch as a spiritual phenomenon that shapes and cultivates identity. Whatever the impetus for a religious or spiritual conversion, sociologists note that a hallmark of conversion is a change in identity which influences the interpersonal relationships that the convert has, maintains, and forms, as well as the rituals and habits that they engage with (Yang and Abel 143). Not every conversion narrative is as dramatic as that of Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19), but the implication of conversion is that the convert experiences a shift in worldview and practice. Adherents to a religious or spiritual tradition locate the nexus of their identity and their interpretation of reality in the beliefs of their chosen faith. And though TM may not feature a traditional belief system or theology, it does have aims that serve to direct the intentions of its adherents, to give purpose to their practice. For followers of TM, one of the main directives is that of world peace.

The pinnacle of TM is for the individual to achieve fulfillment, wherein “the mind has transcended all limits of the experience of thought and is left by itself in a state of pure consciousness” (Yogi 249). Pure consciousness is a simultaneous understanding of and integration with all the other living creatures and aspects of the world. Achieving such Oneness and transcending to a state of pure Being has the consequence of bringing about an individual experience of peace. One of the aims, then, of TM is the achievement of an individual peace that can then lead to world peace. As Jack Forem explains:

a society composed of happy, creative individuals could not give rise to such outbreaks of discord ...Thus we can see that the problem of world peace is not insoluble. The solution lies in reducing the problem to its essential terms: individuals. It is the greenness of every tree that makes the whole forest green. (235–36)

World peace is a mission that David Lynch sincerely believes in as an outgrowth of his dedication to TM. Peace has long lingered in the background of TM and other related spiritual movements, a byproduct of their emergence in the 1960s in part as a reaction to the rise of atomic power. The almost unimaginably destructive power wrought by the A-bomb inspired a reactionary movement leaning heavily in the opposite direction.

Though he knows that “People are so convinced we can't have peace that it's a joke now” (Lynch 175), Lynch follows Forem's line of thinking in arguing that if one human being can become “enlivened” through the practice of TM, then groups practicing TM together can have dramatic effects: “In the world, the result of enlivening unity by a peace-creating group would be

real peace on earth” (176). While there are nuances to TM, the objective of peace is one that Lynch has publicly latched onto. It is the Maharishi’s dedication to world peace that inspired Lynch in establishing his foundation, which led to a sixteen-country speaking tour and the writing of *Catching the Big Fish*—all done with the intention of spreading the peace-centric techniques of TM around the world. Though he may not like it as an honorific, the title “Public Evangelist for Transcendental Meditation” is applicable to Lynch.

Given that Lynch is so entrenched in the practice and belief of TM, it is worth asking just how this belief contributes to his art. While much could be gleaned from examining Lynch’s entire cinematic and artistic oeuvre in close contact with TM, it seems that the clearest expression of Lynch’s spiritual preoccupations emerges in his treatment of Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks: The Return*. While Lynch has maintained an obfuscating style across the entirety of his career, *The Return* forefronts his spirituality in an unprecedented manner, specifically in how the story of Laura Palmer is resolved and then complicated in the final two episodes of *The Return*. This demonstrates how Lynch’s content and form combine to evoke the TM concern with world peace and the inner peace of the individual.

Peace in Content and Form

The core of *Twin Peaks’* story all along has been that of Agent Dale Cooper investigating the murder of Laura Palmer. And while much more has happened in Twin Peaks and the broader world, *The Return’s* concluding episodes circle back to the fundamental passion that Agent Cooper has for Laura’s case. In “The Past Dictates the Future,” after defeating BOB with the help of Freddie Sykes and his strength-enhancing glove, Cooper is ultimately transported to the night that Laura was murdered.

In moody black and white we re-live the fateful night we have come to know as Laura’s last. We see her and James fight and tentatively make up in the woods; see her spill off of James’s motorcycle and run screaming into the woods; and we see Leo Johnson, Jacques Renault, and Ronette Pulaski waiting for Laura to arrive for the drug-fueled romp in the train car. But as Laura wanders through the woods she encounters something new: Cooper. “Who are you? Do I know you?” Laura asks. “I do,” she says, “I’ve seen you in a dream. In a dream.” Cooper silently extends his hand and with trepidation brewing in the soundtrack she takes it. The next cut is to close-ups of Laura’s body as seen in the show’s pilot: wet and wrapped in plastic, abandoned on a stony beach. A wide shot reveals the body laying with waves lapping on the shore—and then the cadaver fades from the shot with an electric buzz. Back in the woods, color fades in and Laura asks Cooper, “Where are we going?” “We’re going home,” Cooper answers, and the pair walk away.

The next brief sequence shows Pete Martell going out to fish, and with no body to find on the shore, life in Twin Peaks largely continues on. Back in the woods, Laura and Cooper walk along until Laura disappears, a tragic scream echoing throughout the forest. Paratextual evidence in

the form of Agent Tamara Preston's closing notes in *Twin Peaks: The Final Dossier* (2017) notes that Laura still disappeared, even if she was not killed:

"Agent Cooper had come to town a few months earlier, to aid in the investigation into the disappearance, still unsolved, of local teenage beauty queen, Laura Palmer." Let me repeat that phrase for you: "still unsolved." No mention of "murder," "wrapped in plastic," or "father arrested for shocking crime eventually dies in police custody of self-inflicted wounds." It's right there on the front page: **Laura Palmer did not die.** (Frost 132; original emphasis)

Walter Metz interprets Part 8 ("Gotta Light?") as revealing that "the murder of Laura Palmer has its roots in the creation of American evil, the development of atomic weapons" (72). Such a diagnosis fits with Lynch's TM and its concomitant goals of world peace as a reaction to the atom bomb's deployment. BOB's emergence is as a result of this "original sin," and the Giant delivers to mankind a weapon against this evil in the form of Laura Palmer, "not a heroic figure by any means, but ... a symbol of an American tragedy" (75). In the concluding episodes of *The Return*, Cooper's actions gain him the chance to reverse that tragedy, to bring Laura peace in the wake of BOB's destruction.

Interestingly, Cooper seems unable to do this. As the pair wander through the woods, Laura disappears with a shriek. In the present day, Sarah Palmer tries to smash her daughter's high school photo, only the photograph remains unblemished. Cooper himself stares off into the woods, an ambiguous look on his face as the episode ends. The series' ultimate episode "What Is Your Name?" finds Cooper returning in the end to Twin Peaks with a woman named Carrie Page, who Cooper is convinced is actually Laura Palmer. Cooper takes Carrie to Sarah Palmer's house only to find that Sarah is not there, and that those who live there have never even heard of the Palmers. Leaving the homeowners in peace, Cooper asks what year it is, and Carrie hears Sarah Palmer calling Laura's name, eliciting a terror-stricken scream. The message here is ambiguous, indeterminate—yet the one certain thing is that Laura's story is not entirely finished, and that the peace that Cooper sought for her has not been attained.

What, then, are we to do with this, given the assertion that Lynch is concerned with peace, and with Laura's peace? One interpretation could see Cooper taking Carrie back to the Palmer's house as his meddling in what otherwise seems complete. Though Laura's disappearance in the woods ends in ambiguity, her death has been thwarted, bringing some form of resolution to her story. That Cooper continues on, that he meddles, disrupts whatever peace has been attained. Cooper's trust in himself points out the danger in refusing to let go, a refusal which has consequences for the peace of oneself and others.

Following BOB's death, it seems that Cooper enters a TM-like state, one in which a linear, singular timeline seems to be transcended, perhaps explaining the dissonance of Laura being both herself and not herself. While some interpretations of the show's ending have engaged notions of shifting time continuum's, taking Lynch's TM seriously as an ethos perhaps exhibited by his characters leads to this other explanation. Transcending the mundane through the

entering of a TM-like state breaks down barriers of division and distinctiveness, something which is arguably spiritual, but which nonetheless muddles details and seems to lead to the abrupt, concluding chaos. This, interestingly, seems to contradict standard TM ideology. Rather than the individual's peace providing a starting point for the peace of others and, ultimately, the world, Cooper's individual peace places him outside of everyday reality, leaving him confused and introducing a skepticism in the power of individuals to conquer evil.

Is It the Story of the Little Girl Who Lived Down the Lane?

In *Catching the Big Fish*, Lynch paints a picture of transcendence that is highly personal, even when related to others through the medium of cinema. Cinema, he says, is about "devising a world, an experience" (17). This experience ought not to be interpreted, he argues, because doing so could rob its uniqueness. Even as he contemplates the creation of a film from an idea grasped through TM, Lynch the experience of cinema to the Self: "So transcend, experience the Self—pure consciousness—and see what happens" (29). Thus, the skewed coherence of the series' conclusion evokes the transcendent in content and form in a manner that moves towards a universal experience that ultimately shifts back onto the individual viewer. In so doing, questioning the spiritual implications of Cooper's actions shifts the show's aesthetic consideration onto another plane contained somewhere within the viewer. And this plane seems to be one of chaos, rather than blissful order.

That this is so seems to contradict TM's general ideology, which sees in each individual the power to begin the process to world peace. Reading Lynch's belief in TM as fundamental to his artistic development and to *The Return* in particular raises significant questions about the series' conclusion, which may be read as hinting towards the controversy inherent in collaboration. It is no secret that Lynch and Mark Frost experienced creative tensions throughout *Twin Peaks*' history, and this may be another instance where this is so. While *The Return* may be read in connection with many of TM's fundamental beliefs and ideas, the moments where it diverges—namely in the concluding chapter—hint at another influence that seriously questions such an evangelistic, hopeful endeavor.

Perhaps this interpretation of *The Return*'s conclusion is too simplistic. However, what I hope even this basic interpretation does is show how Lynch's dedication to TM provides a lens through which to view his artistic output, especially in *The Return*. Given that Lynch takes his spirituality seriously, more critics and scholars ought to too. Is *Twin Peaks* Laura's story? Is it Cooper's? This view of Lynch's spiritual preoccupation potentially suggests that the story is Lynch's own, shared with us as an evangelistic message of peace—both its attainment, and the dangers that reside in its pursuit.

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