

Drink Full and Descend: The Horror of Twin Peaks: The Return

by Lindsay Hallam

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Abstract:

Throughout the work of director and co-creator David Lynch images of horror recur, as the mundane and the ordinary becomes ominous and terrifying. The home and the self—central to feelings of safety and security—are destabilized in Lynch's works, revealed as inherently unstable and subject to constant change. The fragmented self destabilizes everything around it, reverberating throughout the home and even further still, destabilizing deep-rooted ideas about America's sense of itself as a place of steadfast reason and righteous justice. This paper explores the use of horror in *Twin Peaks: The Return*, from its employment of common genre tropes to its engagement with deeper philosophical ideas about horror as something that goes deeper than just thrills and scares.

Keywords: Twin Peaks, David Lynch, horror, terror, norms, existence

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Screenshot from *Twin Peaks: The Return*, Season 3, Episode 8, 2017.

The original series of *Twin Peaks* hit television at the beginning of the 1990s like a cultural juggernaut, signalling the decade's pervasive postmodernism, with its Generation X-style quotation of movies, TV, and fashions since past, combining 1950s-style kitsch Americana with dark noir tropes and soap opera parody. Yet, beneath this quirky, eccentric exterior were incredibly serious themes, such as incest and filicide, and the series ended with a nightmarish journey to another world where our intrepid hero did not save the day but sacrificed his soul. The prequel film that followed, *Fire Walk with Me*, mined those darker themes even further, bringing all the show's underlying trauma and horror to the surface. Moving forward twenty-five years to *Twin Peaks: The Return*, this horror has only deepened, expanding beyond the borders of Twin Peaks across various states, both geographic and metaphysical. Throughout the eighteen hours of *The Return* horror is omnipresent, taking on several forms. While there are references to the conventional generic tropes of horror, Lynch moves beyond genre, alluding to a deeper level of cosmic disruption that reveals the true horror of existence itself.

In the work of director and co-creator David Lynch, images of horror recur, as the mundane and the ordinary becomes ominous and terrifying. The home and the self—central to feelings of safety and security—are destabilized, revealed as inherently unstable and subject to constant change. This uncertainty is threatening but also seductive, with the challenge being to maintain a balance between darkness and light. The fragmented self unsettles everything around it,

reverberating throughout the home and even further still, disrupting deep-rooted ideas about America's sense of itself as a place of steadfast reason and righteous justice. In *Twin Peaks: The Return* the notion of order at all levels—personal, social, national, and societal—is revealed to be an illusion. Instead, all existence is presented as unified but in a state of constant flux and change. As protagonist Dale Cooper discovers, seeking to control or manipulate this connection among all things, to impose our own sense of order on the unbounded nature of the universe (even with the best of intentions), unleashes horror.

In *Twin Peaks*, Lynch, along with co-creator Mark Frost, seek to convey a sense of horror that is deeper than mere thrills and scares. When *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* was released, its darker theme and capacity to bring to the surface the horrors of trauma made the film seem out of step with the ironic detachment characteristic of the horror films of that period. This form of horror, which expresses states of cosmic imbalance as well as personal trauma, continues in *The Return*. In this essay I will investigate how *The Return* utilizes certain aspects associated with horror, but in a way that expresses a deeper feeling that relates to uncertainties and anxieties about existence. This notion of horror resounds throughout all of Lynch's work, with *The Return* continuing the exploration of the consequences of trying to impose control and order on the delicate balance between different planes of existence.

Film scholars such as Vivian Sobchack and Andrew Tudor have contended that the horror genre functions to ultimately restore order, that the monsters in horror embody what must be rejected by society. Their vanquishment in the narrative represents an expulsion of unwanted elements and a return to the status quo. In this sense horror is considered to be a fundamentally conservative genre, as Martha P. Nochimson explains, with genres such as horror showcasing “paranormal beings and events that highlight the ordinary world as a context of stability and safety that must be protected. The extraordinary must be exterminated” (164). Nochimson also contends that Lynch's films do not fit into the genre: they do not re-establish order and normality but in fact undermine these very notions. Although Nochimson's observations about uncertainty in Lynch's works are enlightening and astute, horror is a vast, contradictory genre, encompassing films that do indeed conform to societal norms, but also films that use generic tropes to celebrate oppositional ideas, questioning and subverting the current prevailing order. This is very much the case with Lynch's films. I argue that *Twin Peaks: The Return* in particular further exposes how order can never be restored and that any notion of order and certainty is a façade. This can relate to ideas about ourselves, about American society and history, and further to the very facts of our existence. Once the veil is lifted, we see beyond our base reality and consciousness begins to expand from this knowledge, a realization of a deeper truth that can be liberating. This is clearly visualized elsewhere in Lynch, for instance, in the closing moments of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, as Laura finds transcendence after her physical death. We must, Lynch's works seem to say, surrender to this knowledge rather than seeking to control it. Trying to do so will lead to dire consequences, a lesson that Cooper learns in the final moments of the series in the hardest and most devastating of ways.

Sex and Death in the Glass Box

Feelings of fear, terror, and dread, associated with the horror genre, are established from the beginning of the new series within the first two parts (originally aired together). What becomes quickly apparent is that much of *The Return* will be taking place outside of Twin Peaks, and the first new location we see is New York City, where a young man, Sam, goes about his very odd job—filming and watching a glass box. It is fitting that this city in particular has been chosen as the site of what will be one of the first moments of horror and violence in the series, for in his autobiography *Room to Dream* Lynch remembers going to New York as a child to visit his grandparents, finding it to be a place that is profoundly unsettling, stating that, “going to New York would upset me when I was growing up. Everything about New York made me fearful” (18). Lynch channels this fear in this scene, creating a space that becomes a portal between worlds, but one that is a locus for Black Lodge forces.

Noticing that for the first time ever there is no security officer guarding the room’s entrance, Sam and Tracey take advantage of the moment to go inside. He shows her around, and they both sit and stare at the glass box, but this is all a pretext to start fooling around. As will become clear, their stolen moment—a rather unique play on “Netflix and chill”—will suddenly take a dark and horrific turn. Standing to undress, Tracey turns her back on the glass box; she mounts Sam and they continue to kiss, ignoring the surrounding camera equipment and monitoring devices. Tracking shots of the equipment, with its the interconnecting network of cables and plugs, are accompanied by a low rumbling sound—these are not neutral devices but machines coursing with energy and electricity, observing but also engaging with the activity taking place, activity that spans across two worlds yet occupies the same space. Again, Lynch’s feelings about New York are telling: “Sometimes you walk into a room and you can sense that something’s wrong, and when I’d go to New York that feeling covered me like a blanket” (10). Lynch indicates a world in which physical places give off different types of feelings and energy—the American landscape imbued with elemental forces that continuously reverberate.

This interaction between two realms of existence, which climaxes with a graphic murder, is played out in this scene through the use of different horror tropes: as in a classic slasher movie scenario, sex between two nubile young people inevitably leads to death, yet this death is not a punishment wielded by your typical knife-wielding masked killer. Instead, a supernatural force is summoned by the surrounding technology, in conjunction with the arousal of sexual energy generated by the two lovers. Recalling the remark made by The Man from Another Place in *The Missing Pieces*, this is an “intercourse between two worlds.” The glass box begins to darken, and a naked figure with an enlarged head appears. Unlike the youthful and alluring flesh of Sam and Tracey, the figure, although also naked, is somewhat androgynous; there is an absence of a phallus, yet its head, enlarged and elongated at the back, takes on a phallic shape. Presented in black and white and mostly grey and featureless, it is reminiscent of the grey aliens traditionally described in UFO abduction stories. But the creature, listed in the credits as “Experiment,” is not extra-terrestrial but ultra-terrestrial, being from another dimension rather than outer space.

As Agent Albert Rosenfeld outlines in Part 12, there is a connection here to actual American history, with the fictional secret group within the FBI, named The Blue Rose Task Force, stemming from Project Blue Book, an actual division that was formed to investigate instances of alien activity. First mentioned in the original series by Major Briggs (and playing a significant role in Mark Frost's novel *The Secret History of Twin Peaks*), Blue Book's investigations shifted from outer space to Earth, with Twin Peaks pinpointed as a focal point of strange phenomena. In *The Return* we see this paranormal activity rampant throughout America, where any pretence of mastery over the land is undermined by the power of these ancient forces. Attempts to control these forces, outlined in Frost's *Secret History* as dating back to the exploits of explorers Lewis and Clark, are shown to be futile, acts of extreme hubris.

The glass box is therefore revealed as a portal between the two worlds, one that has been created and manufactured, rather than one that naturally occurs (as with the portal found in Ghostwood Forest in Twin Peaks, which is accessed by Agent Cooper in the final episode of season two). Someone is actively trying to interfere in the balance between the two worlds, and this imbalance leads to something crossing over (it is later revealed that the person responsible for the creation of the glass box is Cooper's evil doppelganger, Mr C., further contributing to this imbalance in favor of the negative). Energy can be harnessed and conducted, as with an electrical current, but the base element of electricity, fire, can never be controlled completely. We can only hope to walk with it.

Discontinuity and Disorder

Structurally, the series is like that of *Inland Empire*, with digressions and tangents that seemingly go nowhere but often come full circle. One is also reminded of such a digression in *Mulholland Drive*, the scene in Winkies between two characters who then disappear from the narrative (with only a brief glimpse of them again later in the film), which leads to a climactic moment of shock and horror. Similar digressions in *The Return* also profoundly unsettle, precisely because they happen suddenly, seemingly without meaning, and are never referred to again. Their impact is never resolved. Examples include the scene in Part 11 when there is a random gunshot: Bobby Briggs goes out to investigate to find that it was a child who had found his father's gun in the car, while Bobby tries to calm down the situation a nearby driver honks their horn relentlessly. Bobby asks the woman to stop, in response she shouts that she must get home, when suddenly the young girl next to her rises up, like a zombie, vomiting a green, bile-like substance. This moment occurs, creating a response of shock, disgust, and fear, but then is never referred to again. The lack of resolution ensures that these feelings are kept raw.

Further to this feeling of continued disturbance without conclusion, the Roadhouse—the setting of the show's frequent musical performances—is also the set of strange liminal conversations between characters who are unknown and never seen again. Yet, when considered all together, these conversations, often about drugs, or about people narrowly avoiding accidents, of people being cheated on, disappearing, going crazy, or in once case screaming in despair, all seem to allude to a state of collapse, of an almost apocalyptic feeling as though Twin Peaks is in a state of decay, that it is all about to fall apart or end.

In addition, there are several instances of strange continuity errors (most noticeably in the end credit sequences in Parts 7 and 13), suggestive of a deep imbalance and disturbance, or perhaps alluding to the possibility that there are multiple Twin Peaks. Cooper's unravelling of events in the series finale sends backward reverberations, experienced before the act itself, time becoming unfixed rather than continuing to move forward. In the original series these time disruptions only took place when in the Lodges, with those who enter the Lodges feeling as though they are only gone hours, but learning upon their return that they were missing for days. In the season two finale Cooper, while in the Lodge, holds a cup of coffee that spills out slowly and then solidifies completely, demonstrating that time in this space does not move in a linear fashion, at points slowing, moving backwards (also signalled by the backwards speech of the inhabitants) and even sometimes standing still. Due to Cooper's actions in both the finales of season two and three, not only does his self fracture, but he in turn fractures the town of Twin Peaks along with it. The horror here is that Cooper, the hero who has only good intentions, referred to as "perfect" by Audrey Horne (who it is later revealed to have been raped and impregnated by his doppelganger, Mr. C.), contributes to this disorder while trying to stop it.

The Soul and the Cosmos

Cooper's disturbance of self is thus part of a larger cosmic disturbance, which is expressed most overwhelmingly in Part 8. Here there are extended sequences taking place backwards in time, in 1945 and 1956, exposing further disruptions that destabilize not only the established history of Twin Peaks, but of America itself. In 1945 we are taken to White Sands, New Mexico to the detonation of the Trinity bomb. Moving into the nuclear explosion itself, we experience a series of colors and shapes, hypnotic but also frightening, as it is set to the screaming strings of Krzysztof Penderecki's "Threnody of the Victims of Hiroshima." The sequence, at four and a half minutes, has been likened to the Stargate sequence in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, although the sense of wonder is offset by a feeling of dread.

Plunging deep into the void created by the nuclear experiment, we see again The Experiment, which spews forth white gel that begins to form into eggs, one of which includes the familiar face of BOB. In the original series and *Fire Walk with Me* BOB was a monster, a transgressive figure able to possess bodies, a tormentor and transgressor, yet he was also a mask, hiding the more disturbing truth of incest. Here we see he was not so much born as vomited up, a manifestation of disgust as well as evil. In horror there is always threat and the fear associated with it, but there is also repulsion, as unsettling sensations get pushed to the point of nausea. Barbara Creed has argued that disgust and abjection in horror are linked to representations of the maternal body, and in this scene there is a perversion of the birthing process.

Vomiting occurs in *The Return* at another key point evoking birth, with Mr C. uncontrollably vomiting at the moment Cooper passes through to Rancho Rosa where he assumes the new identity of Dougie Jones. A current of electricity becomes a birth canal delivering Dougie through an electrical socket. As Dougie, Cooper now responds to everything around him with childlike wonder. He has been reborn. Next to Dougie lays a similar pile of vomit, like a pool of afterbirth. Both vomit and afterbirth are bodily materials that are transgressive in nature,

crossing the boundary between the inside and the outside of the body. The vomit in these scenes is a repulsive mixture of creamed corn and black oil, earthly substances that are physical manifestations of the permeable border between different worlds—the creamed corn is garmonbozia, which in *Fire Walk with Me* is revealed as “pain and sorrow,” negative emotions harvested and ingested by residents of the Black Lodge; while black oil is present outside the entry to the Lodge in Ghostwood Forest (and is known for emitting a strong burning smell).

Therefore, these strong visceral images, associated with the body and the senses, actually point towards a more profound level of spiritual imbalance and disturbance, representative of the bleeding (to use another corporeal term) between worlds which has begun and is unstoppable. Part 8 shows us two forces battling for control, both bringing forth seeds (unlike BOB’s monstrous egg, The Fireman summons an orb containing an image of Laura Palmer from his head in a beam of golden light, in act that is evocative of a birth but with the distinct lack of bodily fluids), and these seeds are then planted in the physical realm, travelling to Earth in the manner of alien lifeforms, proceeding to infiltrate and invade.

This invasion takes on a gross physical form with the creation of a repulsive creature that seems to be a monstrous mutated fusion of a frog and a moth. Moving on from 1945 to 1956 New Mexico, the frogmoth appears just as a group of Woodsmen descend on a town wreaking havoc. After committing a series of gruesome murders, a Woodsman repeats a mantra over the radio, sending the remaining townspeople into a deep sleep. One of those affected is a young girl, who was earlier seen receiving what may be her first kiss. Echoing the earlier scene of Sam and Tracey, burgeoning sexuality calls forth monsters, as the frogmoth enters into the young girl’s room. The girl lies asleep, but her mouth opens and the frogmoth crawls in, an impregnation that again links the birthing process with oral disgust. Mark Frost’s novel *The Final Dossier* infers that this young girl is Sarah Palmer, mother of Laura Palmer, with the frogmoth transporting the golden seed derived from the orb containing Laura’s image. That the conduit of this delivery takes the form of the disgusting frogmoth is once more suggestive of maternal abjection, as well as the connection between bodily violation and transgression and deeper spiritual disruptions. Sarah Palmer in *The Return* is much changed from her original state in the previous seasons, revealed to be an otherworldly being who is all too aware—perhaps the only one who is fully aware—of how the very fabric of time and space is being torn apart around her.

The final act of Part 8, with its 1950s setting and black and white photography, harks back to many 1950s films which also dramatized the invasion of alien or otherworldly creatures. It has been argued that this part tips the series into science fiction, with Matt Zoller Seitz stating that it seems to be

nodding to a rich tradition of post-World War II science-fiction cinema in which monsters birthed by atom bomb tests (and other scientific or military experiments that were essentially stand-ins for atom bomb tests) menaced teenagers and their adult guardians in Norman Rockwellian small towns and suburbs.

Donato Totaro also claims that this episode references both the 1950s science fiction and the Western genre, through its use of a desert landscape presented as a space ripe for colonization.

Zoller Seitz and Totaro are specifically referring to films such as *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951), *It Came from Outer Space* (Jack Arnold, 1953), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), which capitalized on the specific fear and paranoia felt at that time in relation to the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation. The 1950s have been a recurring reference point in Lynch's films, the iconography of that decade often used in order to subvert the perceived wholesomeness and conformity of this period and expose the dark underbelly lying beneath American society. This, however, is the first time that Lynch has actually had action taking place in the 1950s, and it is not a depiction fixated on the accuracy of superficial period details. As in those previous 1950s alien invasion films, the alien and the nonhuman carry with them metaphorical qualities, but in *The Return* these beings are not symbolic of communist invasion, but rather a more internal, metaphysical threat. The shift from Blue Book to Blue Rose is representative of the shift in danger, no longer coming from outer space but from the world around us, a world that we do not fully understand or comprehend.

While it is not the intention of this essay to try to neatly fit *The Return* completely into the horror category, I would still maintain that the exploration of inner space and internal threats places these scenes more within the genre of horror rather than science fiction. What matters for the argument at hand is that instead of situating the threat solely as emanating from the Soviet state or some external force, Part 8 in fact places it internally, not only within the Palmer family (the core family unit at the heart of the *Twin Peaks* universe) but also within American society.

Regarding this notion of the threat coming from within, in this instance from within America itself, the figures of The Woodsmen become of interest. These are clearly interdimensional creatures, emerging whenever a portal opens. In the desert setting of New Mexico, dressed in rags and blackened with soot, The Woodsmen give the impression of being rugged frontiersmen. Moreover, the main Woodsman committing the murders at the radio station is played by Robert Broski, who often gets work as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator. Zoller Seitz even goes so far as to claim that the murders committed by The Woodsman take on the aspect of righteous revenge for past wrongs perpetrated by the American state:

the karmically inflicted bloodbath that coats the screen in the episode's final fifteen minutes feels like payback for any manner of sins, from Native-American genocide to slavery to Jim Crow—a collective uprising against the adorable white folks for whom Lynch has demonstrated both instinctive affection and deep distrust throughout his career.

Certainly, the use of a Lincoln impersonator, who is essentially in blackface, bears weight to this claim that American history is being referenced and commented on. Further substantiation comes when taking into account Frost's novels, which create an alternative history of America

and its dealings with dark forces. The owners of the Owl Cave ring in these books include Nixon, rocket scientist and occultist Jack Parsons, even Trump, as though it was a symbol of a Faustian pact.

No Conclusion

By returning to *Twin Peaks*, Lynch and Frost have expanded their universe and entwined their mythology with the history and landscape of America itself, exposing the horror at its dark heart. The town of Twin Peaks, presented in the original series as a little slice of Americana thought to be long-gone, actually embodies an idea of America that never really existed. The series traverses the length and breadth of the nation before finally returning to Twin Peaks for its final moments, when Cooper realizes in horror that his act of salvation—stopping the murder of Laura Palmer—has in fact been one of hubris and destruction. Cooper's return has been a process of untethering, an undoing of all that was once felt to be clear and undeniable about *Twin Peaks*, both the place and the previous television incarnation, beginning with the show's starting point of the death of Laura Palmer. The truth present throughout *The Return*, and all of Lynch's work, is that there are no answers, no closure, and no certainty, in all aspects of life. This truth can be met with horror or acceptance, the ultimate lesson being to strive for connection, not control.

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