

David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: The Return*—Living inside a dream?

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The long-delayed third season of David Lynch's surreal small-town mystery *Twin Peaks* has just ended its 18-episode run on the premium cable channel *Showtime*. A fourth season has not been ruled out, but according to Lynch it would likely take years to write and produce. As things stand now, Lynch has once more left his viewers with questions that none of the theories now circulating have been able to answer.

When *Twin Peaks* debuted on US television in 1990, it became a pop culture phenomenon. Its success, it should be noted, had something to do with the generally drab cultural landscape. Young people in particular, searching for something outside the official conformism of the Reagan-Bush-Clinton era, responded in considerable numbers to Lynch's eccentricities.

The original show was filled with quirky characters and surreal, supernatural elements. It was shot in a cinematic style, then uncommon in television. Its creators were Lynch and Mark Frost. The former had already directed *Eraserhead* (1977), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Dune* (1984) and *Blue Velvet* (1986), and would later make the confounding *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Aside from *Twin Peaks*, Frost is best known for his work on the popular police drama *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987).

The story begins in 1989, when homecoming queen Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) is murdered in the idyllic town of Twin Peaks, nestled in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. FBI Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) is brought in to investigate. Cooper is an all-American good guy who likes strong black coffee and cherry pie. He gives everyone a goofy smile and a thumbs-up, all the time.

As Cooper and the local sheriff's department deepen their investigation, they uncover multiple dark secrets lurking beneath the town's seemingly happy surface. An evil spirit named Bob (Frank Silva), able to possess people, is behind the worst violence.

When *Twin Peaks* ended its initial run in 1991, it left viewers with a cliffhanger. Agent Cooper had travelled into the mysterious extra-dimensional Red Room, the apparent

home of several evil spirits, to rescue his girlfriend Annie (Heather Graham) and defeat Bob. But he became trapped. Bob created a Cooper doppelganger, which he then possessed, and who escaped the Red Room instead of Cooper.

Twin Peaks: The Return picks things up from there.

Agent Cooper has been trapped inside the Red Room for 25 years while his doppelganger has been roaming free and committing all sorts of unspeakable acts. By some mysterious law, the doppelganger is now scheduled to return to the Red Room so that Cooper may finally leave. But he enjoys life on the outside and has a plan to prevent his return. He has created a second Cooper look-alike named Dougie Jones, an insurance agent who gambles and visits prostitutes, and who lives in Las Vegas with his wife and son. It is this version of Cooper that is drawn back into the Red Room, allowing the evil doppelganger to remain outside.

But whether by forces that seek to help or harm him, Agent Cooper is released early and transported to what is perhaps still another dimension, before he is rerouted to Las Vegas, where he takes the place of the just-departed Dougie Jones. But something goes wrong. His mind is left in a fog and he takes on the life of Dougie Jones as a blank slate, like a newborn baby unfamiliar with everything. He can only communicate by repeating the last words said to him.

From this point, it is a race for Agent Cooper/Dougie to come back to his senses and defeat his doppelganger before he can do any more harm.

And that's not the half of it.

This season of *Twin Peaks* is a strange mess of stream-of-consciousness filmmaking and would-be surrealism. While the whole is ultimately unsatisfying, one appreciates certain moments, especially the comedic ones.

Kyle MacLachlan, in three or four distinct roles, depending on one's interpretation, gives the performance or performances of his life. He is the reason to watch. Naomi Watts is memorable as Janey-E, the wife of Dougie Jones, and Lynch is amusing as hard-of-hearing FBI Deputy

Director Gordon Cole, who talks too loud and misunderstands half of what is said to him. Harry Goaz, as the simple-minded but well-meaning Twin Peaks sheriff's deputy Andy, and Kimmy Robertson as his wife Lucy, the confused receptionist of the sheriff's department, make for an excellent comedy team, as they did in the original run.

There is a lightness of touch here that is unusual for Lynch, and it is welcome. For the most part, the director is not taking himself too seriously. And he has probably never before created such stunning images. He is more than capable of composing a striking shot or sequence. However, it has never been clear that the director had important, coherent thoughts or feelings to communicate.

The new *Twin Peaks* show tends to be somewhat formless. Stories do not arc as much as they undergo sudden spikes and drops, like graphs representing some horrible financial or physiological crisis. The principle of Chekhov's gun does not apply to Lynch. Just because something is mentioned or shown at one point does not mean it will show up again or have any relevance to the story later. Anything can become a loose end.

Lynch and his admirers will say that he doesn't like to tie things up too neatly, that he doesn't want to spoon feed his audience. Fair enough. But should they be starved instead?

Not everything that goes on feels necessary or vital. In fact, much of what happens feels arbitrary or chosen because it seems particularly weird. One character is sent by a spirit known as the Fireman from London to Twin Peaks to fulfill his destiny, which includes donning a green gardening glove that gives him superhuman strength in one hand. The evil doppelganger defeats a rival criminal by means of arm wrestling. A gangster confronts a recurring character, demonstrates an ability to make a coin levitate, and then is almost never seen or heard from again for the duration of the series. A former FBI agent, Phillip Jeffries (Nathan Frizzell), who has "gone native" with the evil spirits, has either turned into a giant tea kettle or is trapped inside one.

On the other hand, characters in whom fans have invested a lot over the years are barely present or given incomplete story lines, like femme fatale Audrey Horne (Sherilyn Fenn). Characters who played a significant role in the first two seasons, like Donna (played by Lara Flynn Boyle in the series and Moira Kelly in the film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*) or Annie, do not return for season 3.

Until episode 18, when the Lynch of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* returns, even the stranger moments more or less hold together. Then, as one might expect, Lynch pulls the rug out from under us. Unexplained thresholds are crossed over, familiar characters reappear in new settings with different identities and relationships. The mood darkens. Agent Cooper, if he is still Agent Cooper, first

travels through time and then to Odessa, Texas in an effort to save Laura Palmer, who died 25 years earlier. The consequences may or may not be devastating--they are certainly incomprehensible.

Among the many clues at our disposal is a line spoken in one form or another by a few different characters: "We live inside a dream." What does it mean? Has Lynch given his characters self-awareness? Is the final episode a dramatic break with the fictional dream world of *Twin Peaks* into something meant to represent our reality? That's one of several theories, anyway. Lynch has himself been heard to use the line in interviews, and it would appear to relate to his practice of Transcendental Meditation. This element of mysticism, or meta-mysticism, is certainly not a point in the show's favor.

Despite all the artistic pretensions, at bottom this is another abstract story of Good vs. Evil, even if they end up blended together in a confused jumble by the time it's over. The ideas appear strange and different, but they are thin. There is precious little of substance here. The whole thing feels as if it was created in a special, protected place, far away from the problems of real life as millions live it.

The show's fans are now stuck in their own Red Room of Internet forums devoted to piecing together clues and developing a theory that explains everything. Hours upon hours of analysis have already been devoted to it. It is only a matter of time before someone writes a dissertation.

The *Twin Peaks* finale leaves us, then, with two questions: What does it all mean, if anything? And is it worth finding out?



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