

The Key to Understanding the New ‘Twin Peaks’ Lies in Another Dimension: David Lynch’s Art Career

The new show brings Lynch back to TV, but also way back, to art school.

Ben Davis, May 31, 2017



Kyle MacLachlan plays FBI Agent Dale Cooper in Showtime's *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Image courtesy Showtime.

“Twin Peaks” is back and the TV-watching world is universal in saying... “Yay?” The first four episodes of the quarter-century-in-the-making third season of David Lynch’s serialized mystery are up on Showtime, meaning that its legions of avid fans can get a good taste of the sickly sweet, occult-flavored pie they’ve been waiting for.

Fans of the pie-and-coffee bits of the show, though, might be disappointed. “Twin Peaks: The Return” mainly scraps the quirky small-town melodrama that made the original fun. Instead, what you get is a kind of supernatural mood piece, with a tone

that crosses the Coen Brothers at their most mannered with Matthew Barney at his dankest—fitting, maybe, since both took a lot from Lynch.

TV recappers have been busy poring over every detail, as if it were *Finnegans Wake*. Ace *Vanity Fair* blogger Joanna Robinson even hypothesizes that to fully grasp the meaning of “The Return,” you need to have watched not just Lynch’s 1992 spinoff film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* but also read co-creator Mark Frost’s recent novel *The Secret History of Twin Peaks*. (It’s apparently the source of “Agent Tamara Preston,” played by Chrysta Bell in the new series.)

For my part, I’ll insist that the key to understanding what’s going on in Lynch’s vexing new reboot lays in his extracurricular activities. “Paintings and music, that’s where the ideas are,” Lynch told me in an interview a few years ago on the occasion of his show at Tilton Gallery in New York.

The influence of Francis Bacon on Lynch is well known. His encounter with the British painter’s work at Marlborough Fine Arts in New York in 1968 was formative.



A visitor admires a triptych by Francis Bacon’s *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962) at the Tate Britain gallery in London on September 9, 2008. Image courtesy Adrian Dennis/AFP/Getty Images.

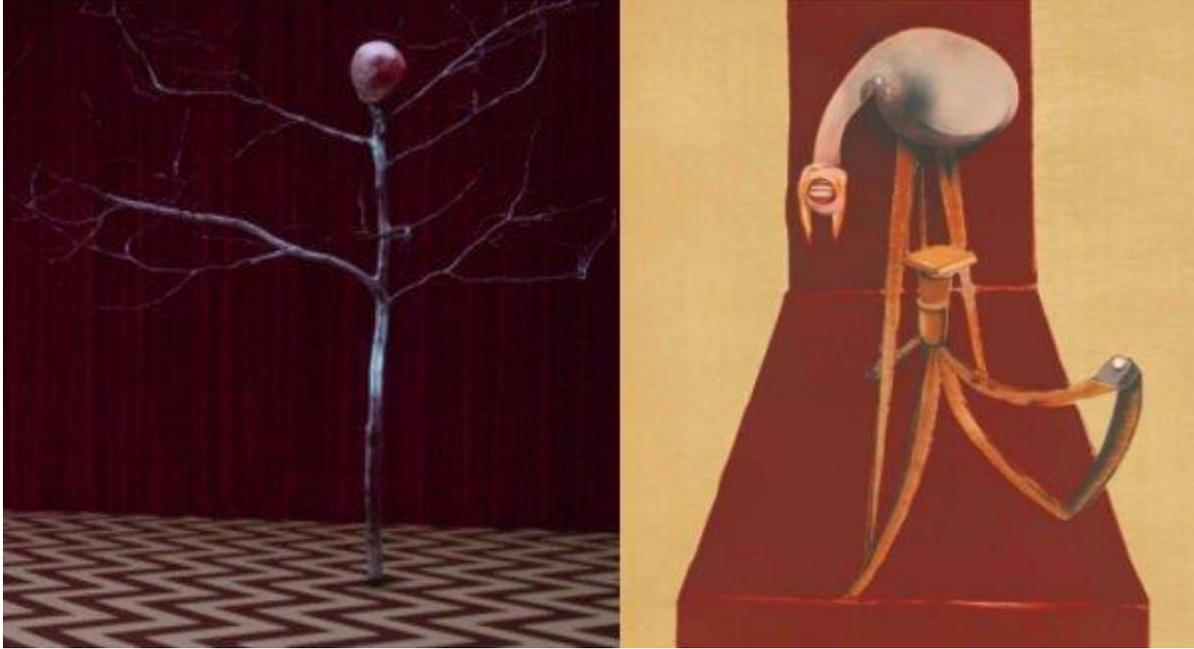
Well, when you distill Bacon down to his key motifs, what do you get? Mutilated bodies, screaming heads, free-floating chunks of flesh. People stranded in limbo spaces. Figures who double and split into multiple forms. Debased, tormented images of moral authority.

These sound like storyboard ideas for “Twin Peaks: The Return.”

But there’s a more general relationship to narrative that Lynch picked up from Bacon as well. Martha Nochimson’s *The Passion of David Lynch* is worth quoting at length here:

The young David Lynch dreamed of spending his life as a painter. But as he learned to fill a canvas, he was also learning a lesson that propelled him in what some would call a very different direction. From his early influences he took an understanding that narrative can bring us to truth and to each other if it makes us dream. At the same time, and paradoxically, he instinctively gleaned that the logic of narrative can push an artistic expression too close to empty conventions and become a formidable barrier to the dreaming mind. To use narrative as a support for the dream, Lynch takes a page from the painters who inspired him and neutralizes as much as he can of the drive in narrative to take control of a film. In the interviews that Francis Bacon, the most articulate of his early influences, granted to David Sylvester, Bacon sheds much light on Lynch’s understanding of narrative when he identifies narrative as an expression of the human will and makes the goal of his art ‘the will to lose one’s will.’ Bacon’s ‘will to lose one’s will’ resonates in Lynch’s resolute determination ‘to get out of the way of the paint and let the paint speak,’ as Lynch phrases it. Lynch approaches directing in a similar manner, working from an instinct similar to the one he saw in Bacon’s canvases and bringing to Hollywood the truth of the dream.

The original “Twin Peaks” was made—and as a result compromised, in Lynch’s view—with the supervision of a studio that insisted that the show follow a conventional mystery arc. His subsequent films have moved him further and further from any recognizable narrative conventions, back towards the pure, originary concerns of art school.



Left: The mysterious Arm in the Black Lodge, from *Twin Peaks: The Return*, episode 1. Right: Detail of Francis Bacon, *Second Version, Triptych (Large Version)* (1944).

In the decade-plus since his independently financed, resolutely disjunctive *Inland Empire* (2006), he has been content to work in painting and music, where complete autographic control is much easier. He agreed to return to serial TV only after getting the ability to do it exactly as he liked—which, if you take Nochimson's analysis seriously, probably always meant that the new series was going to be less a return to the mystery narrative of Laura Palmer et al. and more a return to “Twin Peaks” as an atmosphere.

The story of Lynch's discovery of film as an art student has the status of an oft-repeated personal origin myth. Lynch was in his Philadelphia studio when, unbidden, the vision of a wind coming from one of his paintings hit him. That led him to think, “How would I do a moving painting?”

The result was the video installation *Six Figures Getting Sick* (1966), an animation of six heads, seized by an unknown force, vomiting all over themselves.

I thought of that 51-year-old student project during the moment in Episode 3 of “The Return”—spoilers ahead!—when Kyle MacLachlan's Agent Cooper reenters the mortal plane from his unearthly prison of the Black Lodge. In the dream logic of Lynch's universe, this causes his nefarious doppelgängers, still on the loose on earth, to be seized by a mysterious sickness, and to begin to vomit what resembles creamed corn all over themselves. (That would be “Garmonbozia” in “Peaks” lore, the sludge of “pain and sorrow” on which the evil forces of the Black Lodge feed).

The creative “ideas” that Lynch centers his art on are always like this—images of visceral, sub-rational forces bursting into the world, overpowering the ability to intellectualize them.

And, if you think about it, the very vision conjured by *Six Figures Getting Sick* or those vomiting Cooper clones—men seized by the unexpected and unexplained impulse to expel their guts into the world—doubles back and mirrors David Lynch’s creative method itself: letting himself be seized by a vision, and be compelled to pour what is in his head out onto film.

The interpretive delirium Lynch’s work inspires is somewhat funny given that he has said—many times—that he tries very hard not to interpret the images that come to him before he puts them to film.



Left: The monster in the mysterious glass box from *Twin Peaks: The Return*, Episode 1. Right: Detail of Francis Bacon, *Two figures at a window* (1953–1953).

Sometimes this method leads to scenes that are uncanny, as with the monster that emerges from the glass box to slaughter a copulating couple in Episode 1.

Sometimes the results have the tedious feeling of someone describing a dream that is way more significant to him than it is to you, as in the interminable Episode 3 sequence of a reincarnated, brain damaged Agent Cooper magically hitting the jackpot, over and over, at a casino.

But these Bacon-esque moments of free-floating irrationality are the point of the whole enterprise—everything else is pretext. The result is alternatively eerie, and charming, and ponderous, though I admit that just seeing someone get away with so much on TV is pretty cool.

Does David Lynch care whether you 'get it' or not? Here is what he told me at his painting show:

Every viewer is going to get a different thing. That's the thing about painting, photography, cinema. There's an expression: "The world is as you are." And the thing about a painting is, each person stands in front and looks, and comes back, and there's a circle. Each person is going to have a different experience even though the work stays exactly the same. It's kind of magical. It happens. And sometimes people say that is not for me, and they go away. Others, they love it. It's up to the person.

One of the great pop-culture ironies is that someone with such a serenely monadic creative philosophy could create a story that is the object of such vast shared devotion.



David Lynch as Gordon Cole in *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Photo courtesy Showtime.

Just why did so many people experience the original “Twin Peaks” as a true event (despite its second season decline into nonsense)? Why is it such a nostalgia object?

Part of it was Lynch’s wonderfully efficient spookiness. Part of it was an incredibly charming and telegenic cast. But the third part was that it did touch on a *collective* reality.

“The owls are not what they seem.” The line, from the original series, is still subject to debate. Maybe it’s just me speaking as a child of the Pacific Northwest, but it always reminds me that the year “Twin Peaks” broke, 1990, was also the year of the great controversy over the Northern Spotted Owl, which turned the bird into a national symbol.

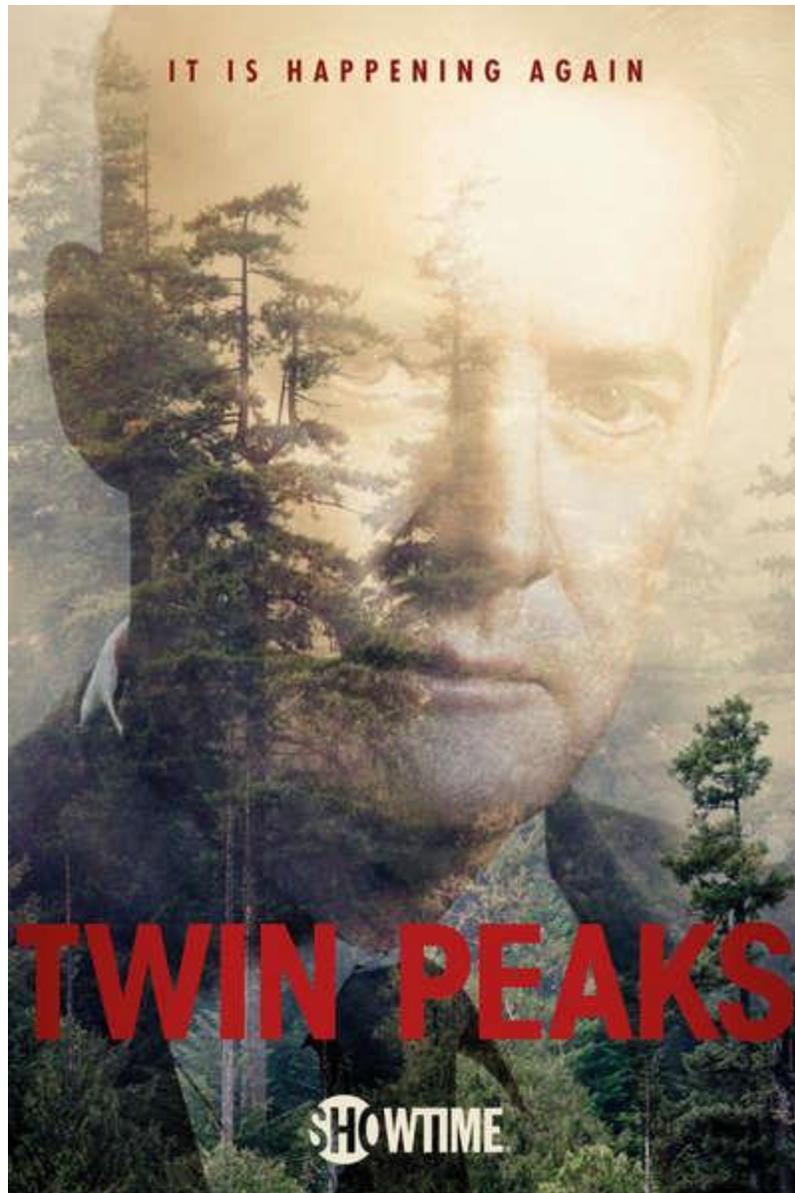
The federal government declared the spotted owl endangered, protecting its woodland habitat. Hard-pressed logging families revolted. There were mass protests, and political posturing. “Loggers Are an Endangered Species Too” was a slogan of the day. Another, less charming, was “I Love Spotted Owls... Fried.” (“Twin Peaks” parodied this in its lame second season plot about the endangered “pine weasel.”)

Faced with automation, the lumber industry—including mills like the show’s Packard Sawmill—was already in decline. Snoqualmie, the actual town where “Twin Peaks” was set, was one such town, and was evidently assisted in its transition from lumber town via the tourism inspired by the show.

In general, rural America itself was at a crossroads, battered by the economic forces of the Reagan ‘80s. “The American small town, which has long occupied a revered place in the nation’s history and mythology, is becoming something of a museum piece,” the *New York Times* wrote in 1990. Increasingly, small towns were known mainly via nostalgic media image—reruns of the “Andy Griffith Show” and the like.

And so, my theory is, the cosmology of “Twin Peaks” struck a particular nerve because it pinged off of this moment with its vaguely unreal picture of a folksy small town, shot through by sinister forces that it could neither contain nor understand. It rekindled its enchantment, mobilized its nostalgia, and allegorized its decline all at once.

As for “The Return,” David Lynch is too in his own mind for it to update such themes consciously—but even that hermetic quality, in its way, might be timely.



Poster for "Twin Peaks: The Return." Image courtesy Showtime.

"The Return" still has its lovable eccentrics, but it is much less rooted in any one community. It is a much more networked and ghostly world, floating from one setting to the next—rural Washington, suburban South Dakota, ultra-urban New York—with the action in one having effects in the next.

Thematically, the comforting small-town soap opera is rotted down to a rind. The violence, depravity, and unreality unleashed by the erosion of this reality now occupies centerstage.

These themes clearly reflect how those urban-rural tension are playing out in our fragmented times. But they also reflect another shift.

The original series was remarkable for how it balanced popular entertainment with David Lynch's arty, surrealist-infused sensibility. The reboot is remarkable in how close it comes to squeezing a pure art film into the serialized form of television.

This very creative liberation, though, is a product of fragmentation—in this case media fragmentation, as premium cable is freed up to court ever more niche tastes. It is the creative flip side of the internet and cable news splintering public discourse into self-selecting worlds.

If the original "Twin Peaks" channeled a kind of nostalgia for a vanishing image of small town quirkiness, the hubbub of "The Return" is playing on a different nostalgia object altogether: the original "Twin Peaks" itself, and the kind of affirmingly collective media experience that made watching and rewatching it, and trading its references, into a hipster rite of passage.

Like the original though, Lynch's new vision offers you a taste of something you long for at the same time that it poisons it from within.