

You Can Return but No One Is There

Twin Peaks: An Ode to My Longest Relationship

After almost six years, I am proud to announce that I have finished *Twin Peaks*. I began my fifth and final attempt this past October, three months before David Lynch died. I was in the middle of season 3, *The Return*, when he passed. I was eating a sandwich at my kitchen table when I found out. It was softly snowing outside. The radio was on, as it always is, WFMU 91.1. I was only half listening to it when I heard that first note, and exclaimed to my dad in the other room, “They’re playing *Twin Peaks*!”

With the theme droning in the background, I started scrolling Twitter. I came across a tweet that began with “Rest in peace Lynch...” Without reading the rest, I exclaimed, “I think David Lynch died!”

David Lynch, and specifically *Twin Peaks*, occupied such a vast portion of my mind at the time. Every day, I looked forward to the hour or so I’d have alone with it later that night. Images from last night’s episode lingered in my mind like screen burn-ins, and the feelings they evoked in me followed me throughout my day. *Twin Peaks* was the moment, with Lynch at the center of that moment. And now, with Lynch so suddenly gone, it felt like all this momentum that had been building and building in my life had nowhere to go.

Those who knew me well knew that I’d been seriously trying to finish *Twin Peaks*. With how much I had to say about it, they probably thought I spent more time talking about the show than actually watching it. A friend once asked me if I even liked it. My short, long, and complete answer to her was, and is, a resounding “Yes.” But my other answer is, “It’s complicated.”

I love TV. I always have. When I think about the media that has been the most formative for me, I think about *Parks and Recreation* and *Saturday Night Live* and *Portlandia*, sitting in my basement in the dark on a Saturday night in middle school and perusing the Comedy section on Netflix, which I accessed through our Wii. A large part of why I love TV is the long-term commitment it requires. The experience of watching a TV show from start to finish feels similar to a romantic relationship to me. This is also largely why I love books. I finished *Infinite Jest* this past year, which, like *Twin Peaks*, took me a long fucking time. I started it in August 2023 and finished it in May 2024. Ten months. During that time, it became my companion, my confidante, my partner. It charted my growth, saw me through varying hair lengths, short sleeves to long sleeves to short sleeves again. It kept me home on Friday nights, my friends seeing less and less of me once *IJ* entered the scene. It frustrated me, angered me, bored me, and broke my heart. It’s my favorite book ever. I’m in love with it. It’s complicated.

Ten months is a pretty substantial relationship, but it doesn't have anything on six years—that's marriage territory.

I often wonder if this way of thinking has anything to do with the fact that David Lynch and his work have played at least a minor role in every romantic entanglement of my life. There's just something about watching *Mulholland Drive* on a small screen through blown-out speakers beside someone to whom you are slowly inching closer.

I can thank my highschool boyfriend for introducing me to the artist who would go on to shape so many of these close encounters. One night, sitting on the leather couch in his basement, scrolling through the limited streaming services available in 2019, we came upon *Twin Peaks*.

"I love this show!" he said. "I always used to watch it with my brother. Have you seen it?"

I told him no, but that I had heard of it, and that I was interested. He pressed play.

It was mainly background music, something to put on to talk over or make out to or sleep through, but I still had a sense of what was going on. I felt like I knew Laura Palmer, even though I really didn't know much about her. I knew that I was enamored by half the cast, that any time Shelley or Audrey or Bobby or Josie or Cooper etc. etc. etc. appeared on screen, I instantly tuned out whatever my boyfriend was saying. And the music, God, that could cut through anything. I remember exactly how it made my stomach turn, how it made me want to cry. I remember exactly how it made me feel: horrified, blissful, and viciously nostalgic.

We never finished it. I don't know where we ended, but I do know that my later memories of his basement are filled with images of other things, *Adventure Time* and Minecraft.

I returned to it almost exactly a year later. I wanted a show to watch during quarantine that was all mine and not something I had to share with the five other people living in my house. Every night, I would watch it in the living room with the lights turned off after everyone else had gone to bed. I would have preferred to watch in the basement, but we didn't have Netflix on that TV anymore, as my family was using my best friend and then-roommate's ex-boyfriend's account that he had signed into on the living room TV, for which we didn't have the password.

Having already half-watched parts of it with my ex-boyfriend, I was mesmerized by how everything fit together. I cherished getting to know the characters and their stories. I grieved with them, commiserated with them, puzzled with them. I was completely sucked into the mystery. Until something awful happened: my friend spoiled it. It was only the name of the character, a "Can you believe ___ killed Laura?" before he literally clasped his hands over his mouth upon realizing I hadn't gotten that far, but still. I was disappointed.

I didn't actively stop watching after that, but I didn't make much of an effort to continue. It was summer at that point, and with babysitting and socially distanced graduation ceremonies and my imminent first semester of college to worry about, *Twin Peaks* just sort of faded into the background.

Until it faded back in. It was fall 2020, my freshman year of college at the University of Pittsburgh. Classes and clubs were on Zoom, we weren't allowed in other dorm buildings, and I was too convicted in my morals to consider going to off-campus parties, so much of my socializing took place in dorm rooms. I was lucky to become close friends with a lot of people in my building. My one friend, Rachel, quickly became the unofficial host of the group, likely because she had a TV in her room. As we got to know each other, we learned we had a lot in common, two big things being our taste in movies and TV and our inability to go to bed before 4 am.

I'd stay in her dorm after everyone else had gone to bed or come knocking at ungodly hours, knowing that she'd be happy to entertain me. These nights blend together in my memory: us sitting next to each other on her Twin XL, Rachel doing homework at her desk while I curled up in her papasan, talking or not talking, bathed in the warm-cool glow of her purple LED lights. On one of these nights, we started talking about *Twin Peaks*. I don't remember who brought it up or why, only that we had both seen some of it and wanted to give it a try.

We didn't get very far. We quickly discovered it was one of those shows that only works if you give it your undivided attention, which wasn't possible for us given our constant need to chat and giggle, and even less possible when other friends trickled in, as the late-night crowd often did. What sticks out to me most about this watch has nothing to do with the show and everything to do with my friendship with Rachel. We couldn't tell you a single thing that happened, but we could tell you about the time we tried to make cherry pie smiley face mug cakes in the microwave to accompany our viewing and fucked them up so badly we cried with laughter. When I close my eyes and focus, I can still see that demonic, dark red smile burned into my mind.

Freshman year turned into sophomore year, and Rachel and I turned from dorm-mates to roommates. We rented an off-campus apartment—the top two floors of an old house with lime green walls and questionable plumbing—with two of our other friends. The four of us had such a time in that place I could (and have) write at length about that alone, but in terms of *Twin Peaks*, we didn't cover much ground. Rachel and I decided to give it another go, figuring we might do better now that we lived together. We made it to season 2 this time, and actually knew what was going on—I mean, I would hope that after seeing season 1 four times something would have stuck—but eventually, life got in the way.

Three years passed with no *Twin Peaks*. I didn't think too much about it. Maybe I got excited if it came up in conversation, or joked about how I'd be forever lost somewhere in season 2, but otherwise, it rarely crossed my mind.

Then one day this past October, I was driving to Pittsburgh and listening to the podcast Binchtopia when one of the hosts recommended that listeners get into a good fall show. It was a spectacular morning, the most vivid red and orange and yellow trees I have maybe ever seen, on fire against a pure blue sky, with wisps of fog collecting in the hills. Thinking about the podcast's suggestion while watching the fog swirl around the leaves, I was reminded of *Twin Peaks*.

This was the first time I visited Pittsburgh since I moved out in August. When my lease ended, I said goodbye to my friends and apartment and job and life for the past four years and moved back in with my parents. I came home and did a whole lot of nothing, confused as to what I was supposed to do next. All I knew was that I wanted to go back. And now here I was, going back, even if just for the weekend to visit friends.

Within an hour of arriving, I told my friends that I was planning to finish *Twin Peaks* (I didn't have a whole lot of exciting life updates). However, my plan didn't come to fruition for another couple of weeks. My friend from home was on a horror movie kick for the month of October, and one night I suggested we watch *Fire Walk With Me*. My friends and I went into the movie casually and with no expectations, chatting and joking over it, and ended in total silence. I hadn't registered that I had been crying until the credits rolled over Laura's face. I thought to myself, "I'm finishing this show."

When I say I resolved to finish *Twin Peaks*, there's a bit of a caveat: my plan was only to finish season 2. I didn't know much about *The Return* other than that it takes place 25 years later and isn't as adored as the first two seasons are. I had this idea in my head that *The Return* was something else entirely and not part of *Twin Peaks* proper. "I've heard it gets weird and supernatural" I'd tell people when justifying my reasons not to include season 3 in my definition of finishing it, as if the first two seasons were not also both "weird and supernatural."

Then I finished the last episode of season 2, and the first thing I did was search for *The Return*. When I realized I couldn't stream it anywhere, I looked it up in my library catalog. There was a copy available on DVD at my local library. I checked it out the next day, turned on our DVD player that hadn't been touched since at least 2019, put disc 1 in, spent about 20 minutes with my dad figuring out how to change the input on a Roku TV, and pressed play on a remote that also hadn't been used for so long my dad was surprised the batteries in it hadn't melted.

Alone in the living room with the lights turned off after my parents had gone to bed, I sat staring at the screen, not understanding a single thing I was seeing. I was confused by the world I was thrown into. It didn't feel like any kind of return to the world of *Twin Peaks* I was familiar with, it didn't even feel like *any* world I was familiar with. It felt utterly alien.

In episode 1, a young man named Sam is employed to sit and observe a glass box in an empty New York City warehouse. He is not allowed to have guests, but he sneaks a young woman named Tracy in when the security guard is absent. They sit on the couch and start having sex, before the Experiment, a vaguely human-like entity, materializes in the box and brutally murders them. As disturbing as this entire sequence was, what stood out to me most were Sam and Tracy's interactions.

All the characters in *Twin Peaks* act strangely to varying degrees. They do and say things that people generally do not say or do in real life. They move stiffly or erratically, smile at inappropriate times, have bizarre and awkward inflections, like actors at a table read who haven't read the script or acted a day. But they always made sense to me, like their strangeness reflected a very real strangeness innate to all of us. They always felt unquestionably human.

These two characters, Sam and Tracy, did not. Everything about their mannerisms, inflections, movements, and language felt like nothing I had ever seen before, on screen or in real life. They seemed like aliens acting as humans, mimicking the things they think humans do—get each other coffee, disobey authority, have sex. I recognized nothing in either of them, so much so that it made me defensive: this isn't the show I know, and I don't want to try to get it.

And then, as I continued watching, I got it.

I mentioned earlier that when asked if I even liked *Twin Peaks*, my answers were “yes” and “it's complicated.” What I mean by “it's complicated” is that I love this show, I am endlessly in awe of it, and I find it incredibly difficult to watch.

There is a scene in *The Return* where a young girl named Ruby gets kicked out of her booth at the Roadhouse by a group of men. She proceeds to crawl on the bar floor, crying and screaming, while The Veils perform “Axolotl,” a dark, screeching song. Hers is the only face we can see as she crawls towards us; the patrons surrounding her, who all appear to be male, are visible only up to their knees. It is like we are the only ones in the world who can see her, and we remain trapped with her for what feels like an eternity before the episode ends.

Of all the viscerally affecting scenes in the show, this one might have disturbed me the most. I didn't even let the credits roll, I just turned the TV off immediately. I felt like I had to get out of

there. I sat in silence for a long time and started to feel guilty that I couldn't help her. She was Laura Palmer, I was everyone else. I could only watch, and so, I couldn't watch.

Moments like these make me abruptly aware of why this show can be so confusing. Beneath all the convoluted plotlines and timelines, beneath all the entities and doppelgängers and extraterrestrials, is the story of a young girl who was raped for years and murdered by her father. Often when I'm watching, I find myself focusing on anything other than this fact. I find myself able to wrap my head around anything other than that. I find myself theorizing and conspiring, drawing maps, counting the number of birds in the sky and playing scenes backward. This is by no means a frivolous way to watch a show that is so intentional in everything it does. But at a certain point, the overpopulated corkboard obscures what lies at the center of the show. When Laura's photo flashes on screen with the credits at the end of every episode, we are momentarily brought back to the center, but in the age of streaming, her face may be no more than an indication that it's time to skip to the next episode.

To say that my feelings of confusion and discomfort were unique to *The Return* and that the first two seasons were all coffee and cherry pie, as I was quick to do when I started the final season, is a gross revision. Inclined as I was to wish for the "old *Twin Peaks*," I eventually realized this was a fairyland, softened by time and existing only in my memory. Did I really think *The Return* was going to open with a scene at the Double R Diner and have Cooper, or rather Cooper's doppelgänger, who is somehow no different than the "real" Cooper, walk in and say, "Norma, you already know what I want!" while a live studio audience applauds?

No, of course not. I knew that wasn't going to happen. But I wanted it to.

I spent a long time trying to find the source of the quote that inspired the title of this piece—"You can go back to the past but no one is there anymore"—but I couldn't find anything. I couldn't even find an official quote; some variations omit the "anymore," some say "no one is there waiting for you." My guess is that it was posted to Tumblr in the early 2010s and everyone assumed it came from somewhere else, and its author didn't care enough to say otherwise.

I find a lot of these internet aphorisms to be a load of endearing, eyerollable bullshit, but there's something about this one that resonates with me. I'm so obsessed with certain periods of my life that I've tried to recreate the conditions of those periods, even wearing the exact same outfits I wore on specific days. I squeeze myself into habits that don't fit anymore because they once made me happy. I routinely put myself back into memories and relive them on a sensory level, almost like I'm dreaming, where my eyes aren't actually seeing anything and my ears aren't actually hearing anything but the feelings are so strong I can't tell the difference. I often dream

about moving back to Pittsburgh, and have to remind myself that moving back is not the same as traveling back in time. I miss everyone I've ever met.

All this to say, nostalgia is a powerful force that can make you do illogical things, like believe *The Return* was going to somehow both take place 25 years later and pick up where it left off, despite "where it left off" being a rose-colored rewrite I fabricated. *Twin Peaks*, especially season 3, is very aware of this specific nostalgia within its viewers. The idea that something or someone can be both profoundly changed and remain the same is a major theme in the show. I can think of no better example than the series finale.

Cooper, having traveled back in time to the night of Laura's murder, holds Laura's hand and leads her through the woods. He has effectively prevented her death. But as they continue walking, Laura vanishes. Back in the timeline we consider the present reality, Cooper and Diane drive to the desert and "cross over" an electrical field, entering what seems to be a new timeline. The next morning, Cooper, now alone, drives to Judy's Diner. Here, he finds a waitress named Carrie Paige who looks just like Laura. He drives her to Twin Peaks and shows her the Palmer house, which she does not recognize and is occupied by different owners. He asks her what year it is. Carrie hears Sarah Palmer calling Laura's name and screams. The lights go out. In the Red Room, Laura whispers to Cooper. The End.

Cooper saves Laura's life, but in doing so, he voids the very existence of the Laura Palmer we know. He is able to return to a world that is familiar, that of Twin Peaks as it was on the night of Laura's death, but the very act of returning irrevocably changes what is familiar about that place: the existence of the character whose life and death the entire show revolves around. Likewise, he can find Laura, but she is no longer Laura, and he can bring her home, but no one she may have once known is there anymore. She doesn't even recognize the house. He cannot save Laura without destroying her.

Special Agent Dale Cooper is painted as the show's hero, but ultimately he fails because he cannot accept the past and his powerlessness over it. It was not enough for him to solve the case, it had to be reversed. While the ending is inconclusive, it is decidedly bleak. Cooper's insatiable curiosity and inability to accept reality led not just to his demise but the demise of those he loved and did all of it for. He is Orpheus; he must look back.

At the end of season 2, Cooper and his colleagues share lofty dreams of saving humanity from an impending, unnamable doom, framing their cause as something that extends far beyond the borders of one small town in the Pacific Northwest. For a moment, there is a sense of hope. But by the end of season 3, it feels depressing to even think about such a grand cause, and embarrassing to admit you ever rallied behind it. The first atomic bomb was dropped in Alamogordo, New Mexico on July 16, 1945, at 5:29:45 AM as part of a test carried out by the

U.S. government. Its detonation unleashed entities whose destructive powers were so great they wouldn't be fully understood until nearly a century later. This event could not be reversed, this fact could not be changed.

And yet, people tried. Cooper tried. Call it hubris, call it curiosity, but don't forget to call it love. At the heart of everything Cooper did was a deep, unwavering love—love for Laura, for Twin Peaks, for the earth, for truth and justice, for humanity—it guided him. Love had a profound presence in the lives of nearly all the characters and the show as a whole. And maybe they aren't so inseparable, hubris, curiosity, love. Love can certainly make you act selfishly—Orpheus looked back because he loved Eurydice. Love can convince you that everything will turn out okay in the end, because no universe that allows you to experience so great a love could ever make you suffer the loss of it. Maybe Major Briggs wasn't trying to confess so much as warn us when he said that what he feared most in the world was “the possibility that love is not enough”.¹

Hero or not, Cooper seems to be the most aspirational character in the show. At least, he was to me. I've joked before that I want to be Special Agent Dale Cooper when I grow up. His discipline, clear-headedness, dedication, and strict adherence to his own set of principles seemed to me to represent the platonic ideal of a human. To see him fail in the end almost felt like a betrayal.

But also, part of me sensed it was coming. At the end of season 2, Doc Hayward delivers one of my favorite lines in the show: “Goodness in you is like a time bomb.”¹ He is speaking to Ben Horne, but I think Cooper could have benefitted from hearing it too. It certainly struck me, filling me with an immediate sense of dread. From that point on, I sat waiting for the other shoe to drop. Seeing Cooper ultimately fail by trying to play god reminded me he was human. What a relief.

It wasn't just admiration that drew me to Cooper's character; I saw reflected in him my own obsession with the past. I'd be remiss not to mention David Lynch's death and admit that a part of me believes that by engaging with his work, by writing all this, I'm somehow reviving him. Maybe there is some truth to that, that people live beyond their deaths through those who knew and loved them, but to call this a revival would be a flat denial of reality. *Twin Peaks* didn't die with Lynch, but it changed. I could go back and watch episode 1 for the sixth time, but it wouldn't be the same knowing I would never have the chance to talk to the man behind it.

And also, it wouldn't be the same because I would not be the same. Every time I returned to *Twin Peaks*, I returned to a slightly different show. It always met me where I was at, changing its size and shape to do so.

I am endlessly grateful for David Lynch. I have so much love for him and his art, especially *Twin Peaks*. I said earlier that when he died, a certain momentum in my life seemed to suddenly have

nowhere to go, but that's not really true. Rather, it just slowed and became something more stable.

I was unclear about what exactly that momentum was, but I know what it is now. This momentum was, and is, a very powerful love, not just for Lynch and *Twin Peaks*, but a form of love *Twin Peaks* offered me in return. A love beyond pleasure that not only exists alongside but necessitates friction, conflict, confusion, and pain. A love that encourages you to sit quietly with the discomfort and listen to what it has to say. A love that asks you to look Ruby in the eye, to watch the atomic bomb drop, to not skip the credits—to accept reality in all its horror while never once surrendering your agency. A love that dares you to look forward, not back.

References

1. Frost M, Lynch D. *Twin Peaks* [Television series]. United States: ABC; 1990.