



# “ON THE WAY TO PERFECTION”: RED PASSAGES IN *TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN*

THOMAS BRITT  
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

David Lynch and Mark Frost's television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) was a program that blended television genres and conventions in a way that no series had previously done. *Twin Peaks* is a procedural, a murder mystery, a horror story, a primetime soap opera, and so much more. The fact that the series briefly sparked an American television viewing phenomenon (with a subsequent cult following) illustrates that Lynch successfully transferred to the television screen his skill for creating uncanny, troubling works of cinema and visual art. *Twin Peaks* shares much with Lynch's other works in that the series is simultaneously familiar and deeply bizarre. There are codes in *Twin Peaks* that invite a viewer to watch closely and decipher details in service of a multiplicity of meanings. One such code is the use of color, and the present essay considers the use of the color red in third installment *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017).

When the series debuted, the program's most enigmatic character was introduced with aberrant color. Against the brown and green of the natural setting, production design, and titles, Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), the deceased high school homecoming queen, lies by the river, drained of life and wrapped in plastic. Framed in medium close-up, Laura's face is beautiful, but its colors, chiefly bluish lips and an overall deathly pallor, mark her as the series' chief victim and mystery. Laura's appearance simultaneously fascinates the audience and warns them of a deadly threat. FBI Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) is the series' protagonist, and his mission to solve Laura's murder opens the plot in multidimensional directions, spanning the material and spiritual worlds and conflicts between.

The question of who killed Laura Palmer, central to the plot and promotion of *Twin Peaks*, is also eventually answered in part through color, as her killer's



hair changes color overnight. This detail is not necessarily a conclusive piece of evidence when it occurs in the first episode of the second season. But after the complicity of Palmer's father Leland (Ray Wise) is revealed, in retrospect his suddenly white hair seems like a fitting variation on the blanching, annihilating effects of murder.

Robert Iger, to some degree responsible for the American Broadcasting Company's (ABC) decision to broadcast *Twin Peaks*, recalls in his book *The Ride of a Lifetime: Lessons Learned from 15 Years as CEO of the Walt Disney Company* that "David [Lynch] felt the mystery wasn't the most important element of the show; in his ideal version, we'd never find out who the killer was," and then concedes, "my demands for an answer to the question of who killed Laura Palmer threw the show into...narrative disarray" (Iger 2019, 42). Lynch's estrangement from the show following the revelation of the killer is a commonly cited reason for the wildly inconsistent quality of the series' second and final season on ABC.

When Lynch first revisited the story world of *Twin Peaks* for 1992 prequel film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, he contrasted the premiere episode's vision of a desaturated Laura Palmer with another enigmatic character, Lil the Dancer (Kimberly Ann Cole), who was as vivid in appearance as Laura was pale. While Lil's stature within the lore of *Twin Peaks* in no way compares with that of Laura Palmer, her early appearance and function in *Fire Walk with Me* are important for revealing Lynch's perspective about mysteries being revealed too soon as well as his use of color to imbue the story world with ongoing mysterious possibilities.

Lil performs a dance for two FBI agents sent to a nearby town in Washington State to investigate the murder of another young woman, whose death prefigures Laura's. Lil wears a bright red wig, red dress, red lipstick, red shoes, and a blue rose. After she performs a brief, absurd dance for the two FBI agents, one of the agents decodes her every physical gesture and facial expression for their importance to the case they are beginning to investigate. However, he says he cannot comment on the blue rose, and he never once directly mentions the overwhelming amount of red in Lil's appearance. So even in this scene during which Lynch teasingly sends up a mysterious scenario solved too quickly, he allows the significance of the colors to linger as a mystery in the minds of the audience.

Lynch's latest, and possibly final, return to *Twin Peaks* is the subject of this short paper. *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017) revisits the fictional small town of the original series, while also extending the narrative across several other states, countries, and planes of existence. *The Return* includes several colors that are integral to creating and sustaining Lynchian mysteries. Blue is the code for the inexplicable, white is the jolt of a confusing awakening, black is the color of



hidden spectral presences serving demons, and gold is the pure essence of Laura Palmer. Yet, as in the figure of Lil from *Fire Walk with Me*, it is the color red that most suffuses the series. In *The Return*, the color red appears alongside significant transitions and potential transformations, testing characters' resolve and courage in the face of overwhelming evil forces. Red's cautionary significance affects these characters differently according to their circumstances in the narrative. After summarizing the primary symbolic functions of red in the series and related psychological contexts, I will examine three particular red objects--curtains, doors, and balloons--for the ways in which they reveal different characters' readiness to meet the challenges of the plot.

In *The Return's* present-day Twin Peaks, red surfaces in a variety of ways. Among the least subtle is the fact that a new villain in town is named Red (Balthazar Getty). Red is a drug dealer who may or may not possess magical powers. The younger generation of bad guys in town includes Steven (Caleb Landry Jones), whose conspicuously red-upholstered convertible car excites his young girlfriend Becky, distracting her from the menace he poses.



*Figure 1. Becky rides in Steven's red car (Twin Peaks: The Return 2017).*

There is also a pun in the inclusion of a song by Otis Redding, "I've Been Loving You too Long," which plays during the long-awaited romantic union of two characters who have lived apart in quiet desperation. These examples illustrate existing associations between the presence of red and danger and attraction.



More well-integrated into the series' overarching use of red is Dr. Lawrence Jacoby (Russ Tamblyn), a psychiatrist who treated, and was infatuated with, Laura Palmer when she was a troubled teenager. Jacoby has long been linked to the color red, at least partially, because of his ever-present anaglyph eyeglasses, which render half of his vision as the color red as part of his theory of optical integration. In *The Return*, Jacoby is a conspiracy theorist whose web/radio show (which he delivers in his "Dr. Amp" persona) is largely dedicated to exposing the greed and mendacity of corporate and governmental powers. In one of his broadcasts, he envisions the degraded bodies of the powers that be, eating the chemicals they feed to children, dying, and "bloat[ing] like a big red...balloon." Jacoby's words associate red with death and caution, urging his viewers/listeners to stop being distracted by diversions and to tune into the truth before it is too late.

One scholarly foundation for such uses of the color red in *The Return* is "Color and Psychological Functioning: The Effect of Red on Performance Attainment" by Andrew J. Elliot, Markus A. Maier, Arlen C. Moller, Ron Friedman, and Jörg Meinhardt. In this study, the researchers observe:

...the use of red to mark errors, warn of negative possibilities, and so on in society may emerge from a biologically based tendency to view red as a danger signal. Thus, through associative processes that may themselves be embedded in deeply ingrained proclivities, red comes to function as a danger cue in achievement contexts, signaling the possibility of failure. (Elliot, et al. 2007, 156)

This particular psychological functioning study and similar studies involve the color red in common tasks with measures of "avoidance motivation (e.g. threat appraisal, avoidance goal regulation, vigilance)" (Elliot, et al. 2007, 159). In another article, "Collective Approach-Avoidance Motivation," psychology professor Ken Olson states that "Approach and avoidance motivation may be rooted in fundamental forces of nature. Approach motivation entails attraction to stimuli and goals, and avoidance entails repulsion. Electromagnetism, one of the four fundamental interactions in nature, and atomic bonding both involve attraction and repulsion" (Olson 2013).

Olson's comments about electromagnetism and atomic bonding in the context of approach and avoidance motivation are particularly resonant with *The Return* because of the series' overt attention to the roles of electricity and atomic energy in several dimensions of the story world. That the attractive and dangerous "fundamental forces of nature" in *The Return* are often associated with the color red is additionally fitting because of the preeminence of the color



red, with red being "the archetypal color, the first color humans mastered, fabricated, reproduced, and broke down into different shades" (Pastoureau 2017, 7). Hence, by foregrounding the color red within the series' expanding lore, Lynch and Frost emphasize primal activity in both visual presentation and narrative events.

In the original run of *Twin Peaks*, a supporting character, Deputy Chief "Hawk" Hill (Michael Horse) explains some of his Native American beliefs to Cooper, saying:

My people believe that the White Lodge is a place where the spirits that rule man and nature reside. There is also a legend of a place called the Black Lodge. The shadow self of the White Lodge. Legend says that every spirit must pass through there on the way to perfection. There, you will meet your own shadow self. My people call it The Dweller on the Threshold...But it is said that if you confront the Black Lodge with imperfect courage, it will utterly annihilate your soul.

The Lodges that Hawk speaks of are a central site of the interdimensional activity that takes place within the series. Perhaps the most iconic set design from all of *Twin Peaks* is the "Red Room," likened to a waiting room, which is associated with the Black Lodge.

In this Red Room, surrounded by seemingly limitless red curtains, Cooper becomes trapped while an evil doppelganger is free in the waking world, doing the bidding of malevolent forces. Hawk's comments about "confront[ing] the Black Lodge with imperfect courage" serve as a warning for whatever move Cooper chooses to make when the time comes for him to be free from the Red Room. Cooper realizes, however, that he needs to first simply contend with the red curtains, which must open before hidden things are revealed and the truth can be made known.



*Figure 2. Cooper, surrounded by red curtains, searches for a way out (Twin Peaks: The Return 2017).*

He faces physical resistance, initially unable to open the curtains. Then he becomes uncertain about which of the vast amounts of red fabric in the corridors and chambers of the Red Room might lead to his exit into the real world. One alternative is to not exit, which would contradict lawman Cooper's drive to transcend his shadow self and restore order. He eventually finds his way beyond the curtains, but the journey back to waking life is not a direct route.

From the evil doppelganger's perspective, the red curtains appear as a superimposition (also visible to the viewer) as he drives along a desert road, attempting to outrun his fated return to the Red Room. The confining presence of the curtains contrasts sharply with the open desert and road. Whereas the original Cooper has been ensconced within a Red Room for twenty-five years, waiting to exit, his doppelganger has enjoyed the freedom to travel the world. And yet at this moment in which a crossover of dimensions is scheduled to take place, both versions are fighting red curtains, an act which for both "signals the possibility of failure" (Elliot, et al. 2007, 156). That the doppelganger succeeds for the moment in avoiding a return trip to the Red Room, yet is incapacitated and then imprisoned in the process, parallels Cooper's delayed route to his intended path.

There is an additional version of Cooper, one "manufactured for a purpose" (a direct quote about the character from episode three) involving the need for a body to send back to the Red Room to take the place of the doppelganger.



This man, living in Las Vegas and known as insurance agent Dougie Jones, is not a major figure within most of the plot of *The Return*. However, when the original Cooper returns from his stay in the Red Room, he is something like a blank slate, remembering nothing and widely mistaken to be Dougie. This version of Cooper, wandering like an amnesiac, enjoys a relationship to red curtains that sharply contrasts with the experiences of his other two iterations. For this version, the red curtains function more as guides than they do obstacles or deterrents.

This blank version of Cooper, thought to be Dougie, walks through a casino and sees projections of the Red Room above slot machines. Each machine, above which the red curtains appear, yields a winning jackpot. Cooper-as-Dougie is no expert gambler, but his seeming inability to fear risk, or to even understand what risk is, results in an invulnerability that no other iteration of Dale Cooper exhibits. This condition cannot be accurately defined as perfect courage, as courage would involve sensing a threat and persisting. Cooper-as-Dougie is attracted to red objects as he becomes slowly acquainted with the mechanisms of the world beyond the Red Room. Throughout his slow awakening, however, visions of the red curtains appear as a guide.

Another object, a red door, is central to the Cooper-as-Dougie plot. As he wanders through the casino, unknowingly making enemies of the gangsters who run the establishment and resent his impossible success in winning money from their machines, he runs into an associate, Bill Shaker (Ethan Suplee) who believes him to be Dougie. Quickly, Bill intuits that something is wrong with Dougie, as he has to remind him how to find his own home. Bill says, "Lancelot Court. Your house has the red door." This dialogue is significant for emphasizing Cooper-as-Dougie's quasi-courage (the likeness to Lancelot) and its association with red.



Figure 3. Dougie Jones' red door (*Twin Peaks: The Return* 2017).

Unlike the red curtains of the Red Room, which divide, hide, and separate but do not offer security, the door of a home is a firmer portal with a fixed purpose for the home's inhabitants. The red door of Dougie's home, which Cooper-as-Dougie reaches safely, is indicative of several aspects of the character's condition. Specifically, the red door reflects his prosperity (a multiple jackpot-winning rebound from Dougie's gambling debts) and the protection against evil forces that Cooper-as-Dougie enjoys, cheating death several times within the series. Not coincidentally, prosperity and protection are among the qualities identified by real estate and design experts as being associated with red doors, in particular.

A final instance to consider is the recurring image of red balloons, featured in several locations within the plots of *The Return* set in Nevada. The red balloons were a subject of much discussion as the series originally aired in 2017, with viewers tracking their appearances on Reddit, *Welcome to Twin Peaks*, and *25 Years Later*, among other sites and publications. Within the contexts of attraction and avoidance, one cinematic parallel that would be natural to cite (and many viewers/critics did so) is *The Red Balloon* (1956) by Albert Lamorisse. In that short film, a young boy and an apparently perceptive red balloon go through cycles of coming together and separating as part of the boy's maturation and acquaintance with loss. Eileen G. Mykkels interprets Cooper-as-Dougie as being the red balloon of *The Return*, writing, "He certainly carried a message, and the people who came into contact with him each took that



message and interpreted what they needed from it" (Mykkels 2017). Another way of approaching the red balloons of *The Return* is to see their threshold function, albeit in a different way than actual curtains and doors.

Two of the significant appearances of red balloons occur in scenes with children, strengthening the comparisons to *The Red Balloon*. One of these scenes involves a birthday party for Dougie's son, and the other is at a home in a housing development where a nameless Boy (Sawyer Shipman) with a terribly drug-addicted mother looks after himself amid squalid conditions. Unlike the red balloon in Dougie's son's life, which is of a piece with his comfortable, clean home, birthday cake, and loving mother attending to his birthday, the red balloon in the poor Boy's life is an exception to the conditions of his home. This solitary red balloon functions as a type of warning, highlighting the volatility of the Boy's home life and the (literally) explosive dangers that wait outside, beyond the door. Curious about Dougie's car, which is parked at a nearby house, the Boy narrowly escapes being blown up by a bomb attached to the car. His rescue is not through any force of obvious good, but rather a group of men attempting to steal Dougie's car and paying with their lives.

Two other characters in Dougie's orbit, the gangster Rodney Mitchum (Robert Knepper) and the insurance agent Anthony Sinclair (Tom Sizemore), share an impetuous, immature quality. They are not children, but their tendency to act with criminal violence against those who threaten their status, ironically opens them up to threats from unexpected sources. In his casino apartment, Rodney sits and completes paperwork near a cabinet holding a red balloon (or something strongly resembling one). This red balloon is situated above the characters; portentous like the weather they are frequently shown discussing. One of Rodney's subservient female employees, Candie (Amy Shiels) hits him hard in the face with a remote control that she is using to thwart a fly. The only object within the scene that hints at the sudden burst of violence is the red balloon looming above them. Similarly, at work, Anthony realizes that his dishonesty is coming back to haunt him in the form of traditional heavies (the Mitchum brothers) and Cooper-as-Dougie. Upon seeing his adversaries dancing in celebration through the workplace, Anthony panics and crouches beside his desk, under wall art bearing a red balloon, certain his luck has changed. He, like Rodney, seems unaware of any link between the representation of a red balloon above him and the troubles in front of him.

The many red balloons of *The Return* are alternately emblems of rescue, surprise, damnation, and in the case of Cooper-as-Dougie's own experience, simple wonder. Each red balloon seems to watch over corresponding characters as they act along a spectrum of approach and avoidance, taking risks and determining which thresholds not to cross in order to survive. Red balloons



are therefore an appropriate intermediary symbol between the capricious movements of red curtains and the comparative stability of red doors.

Commenting on Walt Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth," Justine Rowe notes the significance of the color red in this poem about "a child...learning about the world through observation, and...thus gaining knowledge": "The fact that the child encounters these particular colors in nature when he first goes forth sets him up for new discoveries and a clear and thoughtful mind" (Rowe 2010). Perhaps the clear and thoughtful mind Rowe observes in Whitman's use of the color red is a component of the courage Hawk believes is necessary for an individual to confront one's shadow self. In this sense, the red curtains, doors, and balloons of *The Return* become totems for acquiring virtue each time one risks falling victim to violence or annihilation. Those who succeed heed the color before the shadows overtake them.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Elliot, A.J., Maier, M.A., Moller, A.C., Friedman, R., and J. Meinhardt. 2007. "Color and psychological functioning: the effect of red on performance attainment." *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 136(1):154-68. doi: 10.1037/0096-3445.136.1.154. PMID: 17324089.
- Iger, Robert. 2019. *The Ride of a Lifetime: Lessons Learned from 15 Years as CEO of the Walt Disney Company*. New York: Random House.
- Lynch, David, dir. 1990-2017. *Twin Peaks: From Z to A*. Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2019. Blu-ray.
- Mykkels, Eileen G. 2017. "Don't Pop the Balloon." 25 Years Later. Accessed 28 September, 2021. <https://25yearslatersite.com/2017/09/20/dont-pop-the-balloon/>.
- Olson, Ken. 2013. "Collective Approach-Avoidance Motivation." *A Theory of Everything (social)*. Accessed 28 September, 2021. <https://www.socialmood.net/articles/collective-approach-avoidance-motivation>.
- Pastoureau, Michel. 2017. *Red: The History of a Color*. Jody Gladding, translator. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rowe, Justine. 2010. "The Colors of Innocence." *The Walt Whitman Blog/Transnational Poetry*. Accessed 28 September, 2021. <http://blogs.cofc.edu/whitman/2010/09/08/the-colors-of-innocence/>.



SUGGESTED CITATION: Britt, Thomas. 2021. "'On the Way to Perfection': Red Passages in *Twin Peaks: The Return*." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published December 7.