

Embracing mystery with David Lynch

The filmmaker knew that our desire to comprehend is intimately tied to our desire to control.

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April 10, 2025



David Lynch as FBI agent Gordon Cole in the 2017 *Twin Peaks* reboot (Source image: Showtime)

There is a scene in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: The Return* in which FBI Deputy Director Gordon Cole (played by Lynch himself) turns to his colleague after a bizarre encounter and says flatly, "I don't understand this situation at all." These words have probably escaped the lips of millions of viewers of the filmmaker's work over

the past 50 years. And yet, so many of us continue to love his enigmatic stories, from his early-career, avant-garde film *Eraserhead* to his incomprehensible final film, *Inland Empire*. I was among those who were deeply grieved when he died in January.

The original *Twin Peaks* series debuted on primetime television 35 years ago this week. I am too young to have experienced the mania for its original run, or for most of Lynch's theatrical debuts. But I've devoted much of the last two years to studying Lynch for various projects. As I fell in love with his vision of the world, I asked many questions. Chief among them: Why?

Why do films filled with such darkness feel so full of hope? Why do his characters feel so real, despite Lynch's spotlight on the artificial? And why are these confusing, Lynchian (yes, his films are so uniquely surreal that he earned his own adjective) stories so meaningful for so many viewers?

I can't answer these questions for everyone. Lynch may not *be* for everyone. He deals deliberately with traumatic themes of violence, sexuality, desire, horror, abuse, and grotesque evil. Yet, for those who are willing, engagement with such art is important. It combats sentimentality that trivializes the existence of evil in the world; it teaches us to faithfully face the darkness of human experience. We might want to turn our face away from the grotesque evil Lynch portrays. Some among us aren't afforded that privilege. Lynch's films can serve as an invitation to Christian viewers to embrace mystery, to draw near to the experiences of others, and to strive for hope, even while nightmarish evil, devastation, and the unknowable attempt to fill us with despair in broad daylight.

Lynch's stories often include forensic investigations, providing a unique opportunity for interrogating our epistemologies, how it is that we know what we know and believe what we believe. Unlike typical procedural dramas on network television, in which the investigator collects data until they accumulate enough knowledge to catch the bad guy, Lynch suggests that reality is far too complex to be understood merely empirically.

In *Twin Peaks*, FBI agent Dale Cooper never abandons reason and scientific investigation in his hunt for Laura Palmer's killer, but he remains open to mystery. Revelation in the form of dreams, Tibetan techniques of deduction, and messages from a sentient log—as in, an actual piece of a tree—prove just as valuable to Cooper's understanding of the universe as reason and observation. Lynchian worlds

are enchanted (and haunted) worlds, permeable and multi-layered, filled with the unknown and the spiritual. In such spaces, viewers are invited to recognize that reality is much more vast than we might otherwise admit.

However, the epistemological openness of Lynch's work doesn't always translate to greater understanding, even if it does move us toward a greater attentiveness to the spiritual. Asked by an interviewer why he considered *Eraserhead* his most spiritual film, Lynch simply said, "No."

This is, of course, frustrating for those of us who want to understand, who want answers so that we can categorize and systematize our experiences. But this is precisely what Lynch pushes back against. Our desire to know and to understand is intimately tied to our desire to control. If we can explain our experience, we will attempt to control it. And we think that if we can control our experience, we can control others as well. Such attempts are futile.

A common interpretation of *Mulholland Drive* suggests that Diane Selwyn, disillusioned with Hollywood and utterly alone, constructs a dream world in which she is a bright-eyed, optimistic, aspiring actress who finds quick success and fulfills her romantic desires. This is the way she hoped her life would be. (Selwyn is like Fred Madison in *Lost Highway*, who says he "likes to remember things my own way. . . How I remembered them, not necessarily the way they happened.") But the illusion has to break eventually. The American dream and the allure of Hollywood glamor she chased prove vaporous, and Selwyn is returned to the drab reality of her loneliness. Unable to cope with the shattering of her dreams—both those constructed for her by society and popular culture and those she constructed for herself—she horrifically ends her tormented life.

I can't watch *Mulholland Drive* without thinking of Ecclesiastes, another narrative that seemingly contradicts itself through the raw expression of a wide spectrum of human emotions, reminding us that life is never straightforward, logical, or even linear.

Qoheleth—the book's narrator, who takes on the persona of King Solomon—implores us toward wisdom, then asserts that the pursuit of wisdom is *hevel* (the Hebrew word at the core of Ecclesiastes literally translates to "mist, vapor, breath," signifying life's ephemerality, absurdity, and fragility). He invites us to enjoy life, but pleasure, too, is *hevel*. Holding together these incongruities is Qoheleth's distinction

between God's reality and human distortions of reality. The former is a gift to be embraced, while the latter only leads to disillusionment and pain. Throughout his oeuvre, Lynch offers us visceral experiences of such disillusionment and the uncontrollable nature of life's mysterious absurdities.

But if life is absurd, are we just supposed to go along for the ride? How do we respond to our inability to comprehend reality and control our experience?

The answer Lynch offers is simply, surprisingly, "love." Despite his unflinching depiction of human evil, Lynch also believed strongly in the power of love to transcend evil. Sometimes it's barely perceptible, like the flicker of a cigarette lighter offering guiding light amid a dark hellscape in *Inland Empire*. Sometimes it rushes over us like the cascading waterfalls of *Twin Peaks* or the heart-gripping romanticism of composer Angelo Badalamenti's scores.

Love overcomes resentment, as in *The Straight Story*, Lynch's only G-rated film, when the aging Alvin Straight resolves to travel hundreds of miles by lawn mower to seek reconciliation with his estranged brother. Love embraces difference and rejects prejudice, as in *The Elephant Man*, when John Merrick, a man born with extreme physical deformities, finds community with those who fight for his dignity and health. Love is present with others in their suffering, as in *Twin Peaks: The Return* when Carl Rodd silently sits and shares the suffering of a wailing mother moments after her son is killed in a violent hit-and-run.

I recently came across the First Nations Translation of 1 Corinthians 13, which ends this way: "For now, my knowledge is full of holes, but when that time comes, I will know the Great Spirit as well as I am known by him. But until then, these three remain—faith, hope, and love—and love is the greatest!"

Our porous knowledge and understanding cannot hinder love, nor can we allow our perceived certainties about life to keep us from one another. As Paul writes elsewhere, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Humbly pursuing truth as Agent Cooper does is still a valuable practice, especially in an age of disputed truth, manipulated messaging, and blatant falsehood. But we will continue to face situations we simply don't understand in this long-lasting, Lynchian "meanwhile." Lynch reminds us, time and again, that the mysteries of pain—though they trouble us today—will be swallowed up in the mysteries of love.