

'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' (1992): A Surreal Saga of Fear and Exploitation

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Abstract: 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' (1992), one of David Lynch's most unique cinematic creations, has mesmerized both viewers and critics with its extraordinary depiction of exploitation, incest, sexual depravity and fear. In the process, Lynch has broken numerous cinematic conventions. Conflicting characterizations, uncanny camerawork, unusual music, the usage of shocking imageries – 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' makes viewers cringe and swirl in despair. Deeply surreal and decidedly disturbing, the movie is a riot on the senses. Different critics have deconstructed the movie differently. This paper makes a distinct attempt at understanding the various elements of the movie using multiple film theories and come to a singular conclusion. In the process, the paper analyzes all the motifs used by the master filmmaker to enhance the scope and meaning of the movie.

IndexTerms - David Lynch, Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me, Fear, Exploitation, Surrealism

I. INTRODUCTION

'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' (1992) is not really a movie. It is an ordeal. It makes us cringe, it makes us angry and it makes us empathize with the protagonist. As much as it is an ordeal, there is a story in the movie as well. Through his dark depiction of incest and deranged sexual depravity, Lynch creates a story so strong that we literally sink into it. Do we like what we see? Of course not! We do not! However, we do not miss the unmistakable aura of the Lynchian world in the process. This Lynchian world makes us sit up and take notice. It makes us understand what a dysfunctional family is (Fader, 2019). It also makes us look at the darker side of the world in all its morbid manifestations.

Well, how does one describe 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' in cinematic terms? Can we put it into words at all? To go in simple terms, it chronicles the last seven days in the life of a popular teenager (Conterio, 2017). The teenager is like other teenagers – fun loving, vivacious, sweet and promising. However, the fate that befalls her is something that is not just grotesque but heartbreaking as well. It is heartbreaking not just in cinematic terms; it is heartbreaking in terms of the crudeness of the society that we live in. We suddenly look at the society around us and feel sick about it. The incidents that happen to the teenager could have happened to any of the people around us and that is what makes us so concerned.

However, does Lynch narrate the story the way a normal filmmaker would? No, he does not. He uses the same Lynchian elements that have made him popular and hated at the same time (Cafolla, 2016). A bit of dreams, a few demonic characters, a whole lot of socially degrading realities and a lot of violence – the story is there for everyone to see.

It might be interesting to note that 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' was made as a prequel to the very popular television series of the same name ('Twin Peaks'), directed by Lynch himself. While most of the characters are the same, the narrative takes a more sinister turn.

The movie could be considered a noirish show that uses horror and dream elements to drive across its point. It is important that we take a closer look at the movie from all different directions. While deconstructing the movie in all its forms is indeed a difficult ask, we can at least have a decent try.

II. DECONSTRUCTING THE MOVIE

When the movie was screened at the Cannes Film Festival, it was reported that the audience there jeered (Kelley, 2017). Although people associated with the movie refused this version, the fact remains that people did not really like what they saw on screen in the name of a prequel to a very popular television series. Even if the version of jeering were to be true, the reason would not have been the film itself. People's anticipations after watching the television series were different. While the television series emphasized on a creepy mystery, the film was more of a family horror. Therefore, people felt betrayed and they were unhappy with the result.

Was this change desirable? Well, yes, it was. The fact that the subject matter of the movie is entirely different from the television series maintains the sanctity of the movie in some strange ways. It has to be remembered that Lynch focusses on the 'Fire Walk with Me' bit instead of the 'Twin Peaks' bit in the movie. This serves as the biggest clue while deconstructing the movie. The aim of the movie is thus redeeming the narrative and not introducing it. Instead of focusing on the mystery surrounding the protagonist's death, the movie focusses on her life instead. This makes it more humane and believable. Were people happy? No, they were not initially. However, 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' has come to be recognized as one of the finest Lynchian movies ever since its release (Castleberry, 2018).

Just like the television series, even the movie centres around Laura Palmer. Through Laura, Lynch sketches one of the most complicated movie characters of all time. The movie emphasizes on how she is disintegrating as an individual. She is a drug addict and treats all the men in her life with absolute disdain. How do we define the character of Laura? Well, she is complicated for sure. In

addition, she is tellingly cruel and very secretive about her affairs. She, in fact, is the archetypal teenaged girl. She is so close to reality that she seems real to any viewer.

Does the tale end at the description of Laura? No, it does not. From here on, Lynch starts taking the same cinematic liberties that he has been taking for years in all his movies. Before we know, we get to know about this monster, an evil spirit, by the name of Bob. Bob has been visiting Laura for years to rape and abuse her. Bob's presence in Laura's life can be considered a mixture of both dreams and hallucination (Muncy, 2017). There is a distinct possibility that Laura is cooking up the character to hide her father Leland, who is as abusive as it can get. Therefore, Bob might be the dual character of Leland. However, given the fact that we are dealing with Lynch, we cannot be sure vis-à-vis Bob's identity. Laura considers Bob as real as it can get. In multiple conversations, she expresses this.

However, is the narrative so simple? From the surface, it does look simple. However, it is not. On one side of the spectrum, Laura is the victim of an evil spirit and she is trying to fend the spirit off. On the other side, she is a victim of abuse at the hands of her own father. She tries to get through in the process. She keeps secrets; she gets involved in deranged sex and drugs to discover an alternate identity. In very simple terms, she is desperate to get the normal life that a teenaged girl deserves.

In the penultimate moments of the movie, Laura manages to get a ring that she uses as a weapon. Until this point, Laura had only seen the ring in her dreams and hallucinations. Now, she has it and she prevents her father from making advances towards her using this ring. Lynch uses the services of the ring as a talisman.

In the supernatural world crafted by Lynch, Bob can only be prevented using the ring, now that he intends to leave Leland and take hold of Laura. Interestingly though, the ring links Laura to Teresa Banks, a prostitute who was murdered mysteriously. It is pertinent to note here that Leland was paying Teresa for sex and killed her just before the events in the movie unfolded. As soon as Laura wears the ring, everything starts falling in place. While the entire movie is about the agonies of the teenager, in one single moment, she attains redemption and is able to prevent her abuser. As the name suggests, the viewers indeed fire walk with the character.

While we are at it, the fact remains that Laura is not just a character; she is a representation of everything that is wrong about the society. She is a representation of guilt, she is a representation of remorse and she is a representation of redemption as well. It could also be argued that she represents a collective tragedy as well. In fact, a careful analysis of the movie tells a lot about Laura's efforts to come out of the vicious cycle that was unfortunately a constituent of her life. Lynch has repeatedly said that he made the movie purely because he was in love with the character of Laura (Lynch & Rodley, 2005). In very simple terms, 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' is a movie that talks about the perils of incest, more so at the hands of one's own father. The guilt and the shame that accompany incest is shown through the movie. In the given effort, Lynch does not disappoint. He portrays it with the utmost honesty, something that is hardly the trait with most other movies that deal with this subject.

'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' is also about the failure of the family system in America. It needs to be remembered in this context that the background of this movie is a fictional small town called Twin Peaks. This makes it even more intriguing. Lynch is not concocting a loveless family life in a metropolis. He is doing so in a small town; a concept that has been known to preserve family values. This is where the dichotomy lies and this is where the tragedy lies as well. Lynch successfully shows the ugly underbelly of the much-touted American countryside and with some élan. After 'Blue Velvet' (1986), Lynch does it again. It seems he has a fascination to expose the so-called virtues of the countryside.

If we look at the movie a little more carefully, we can appreciate that the intent behind making it was an overwhelming penchant to set Laura free. In some strange way, Lynch was in love with the character and he let her redeem herself. Contrary to what the television series portrays, the movie gives the character of Laura a definite purpose. In some ways, Laura is projected as the eternal tragic heroine, who is fighting against an evil monster. She resists the monster even though she is decidedly powerless. Through the movie, Lynch resurrects the character of Laura. 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' is not the tale of a girl who had to die. It encompasses the tragic fight of Laura in resisting the evil even though she dies. The movie was never about a dead girl. It was always about a living and thriving girl.

III. 'TWIN PEAKS: FIRE WALK WITH ME' AND THEMATIC RICHNESS

Before we get into further details, it might be important to note that 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' is much simpler than most other Lynch creations including 'Mulholland Drive' (2001) and 'Inland Empire' (2006). Thematically, all these three movies are poles apart. However, there is a strange commonality between the three movies. All the three movies deal with women and their primordial fears. All the three movies also emphasize on how the society treats women. All the three movies talk about redemption. Notwithstanding, 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' takes the cake in one respect. It makes the central, protagonist in the movie taste victory. She might die at the end but not before she becomes victorious. When looked at from retrospect, the movie seems like an unsung masterclass. One of the reasons why the movie was not a commercial success was the fact that everyone had expected it to complement the story forwarded by the television series. However, it was decidedly different. It took a darker yet more humane route and established the immortal nature of the human spirit. Although not intended, Lynch draws a very optimistic picture through the movie.

While we dissect the movie using the various scenes, one aspect remains neglected. There is an ingrained horror factor in the movie (Naftule, 2018). Does the horror stem from the demonic character Bob? It does but only partially. The horror factor primarily stems from a severe decomposition of the human character. Suddenly, we are jolted by the stark visuals that come on screen. There is an eternal sense of claustrophobia and paranoia that permeates through the movie. We want to run from it but we cannot. Lynch comprehensively and convincingly draws up a picture so dark and so violent that even the biggest optimist suddenly starts questioning himself/ herself. Is Lynch a cynic? Is he a pessimist? Probably yes, probably no! However, this question makes little difference to the fundamental conjecture of the movie.

At the same time 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' does not forget humour (Loncar, 2017). Lynch, in his usual style, incorporates some very black humour. However, the grotesque nature of the movie is so on the face that it needs some doing to take in the humour angle. Lynch, in his characteristic style, makes people uncomfortable with the humour angle in the story. Although, people would like

to laugh, the incest and exploitation bit bites in. In the process, viewers have to gulp in the laughter that might have appeared on their faces. Lynch creates enigma and how!

When people gathered to watch 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me', they were looking for some resolutions. Although, it was billed as a prequel, the reality remains that some of the viewers wanted a sequel kind of a thing. However, Lynch dashed all hopes. Instead of putting in the solution pointers, he posed some fresh questions through the movie. This is precisely the reason as to why a lot of people practically despised the movie despite it being a masterful one. Lynch played with the expectations of the audiences and won over them. He indeed could not have been any cruder.

Another thing is very significant here. It is the sheer hostility with which the movie shapes up. Even though one might be a big fan of the 'Twin Peaks' series, the movie remains as distant as it is to someone who has no idea about the television series. It is ironical; it is strange; it is baffling and it is beyond any easy analysis. This is where a normal 'Twin Peaks' fan feels cheated. He wants to be a privileged viewer of the movie. However, when that does not happen, the viewers become hostile to the movie. This is probably one of the reasons as to why the movie bombed at the box office.

Another disadvantage that a 'Twin Peaks' fan has is the stream of expectations that accompany the movie. Every time, a fan expects something based on how the television series was, there comes a rude surprise. Possibly, one of the best ways to watch the movie is to shed all baggage of prior knowledge. Knowing the person that Lynch is, he is bound to throw surprises. If at all anything, look at the movie as a fresh audiovisual text. Watching the movie can be likened to reading the margin notes on a book. One is more interested about the notes than the actual book.

The best way to deconstruct the movie is to follow the trajectory of the ring. It contains the most important cue that is required to decrypt the movie, at least partially if not in totality. Therefore, should we consider 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' as a jigsaw puzzle? Possibly not! The meaning is there on the surface. However, a layer covers it. The layer, visibly weak, is strong enough to hold you back. Lynch has always been a spoilsport and now we know why!

IV. 'TWIN PEAKS: FIRE WALK WITH ME' AND THE INGRAINED MADNESS

Lynch outdoes himself and takes Laura to the edge of self-destruction through her trysts with drugs, deranged sex and incest. Lynch also shows her redemption through the ring that possesses magical powers. While doing so, Lynch makes it sure that the camerawork is apt. Through his unique camera positioning, Lynch creates a debilitating atmosphere that is hard to consume for any normal viewer. As repeatedly seen, Lynch does not follow the grammar of filmmaking. The same applies when he does his cinematography as well. On multiple occasions, he changes what he envisioned to incorporate a vision that he just developed. 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' intentionally uses abrupt camera motions and unusual camera angles to complement the vision that is forwarded by the movie.

It could be remembered here that 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' is also the quintessential tale that chronicles the transformation of the archetypal good girl into the archetypal bad girl. On a different note, it exhibits the dual life and duality of our existence. In some way or the other, all of us individually represent multiple personalities.

Teenage delinquency is a serious problem not just in the United States of America, but also across the globe. 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' could also be considered to be representing this social evil in a unique fashion. In addition, if we look a little carefully, we shall be able to appreciate that there is as a conscious effort to recreate the fifties of the last century through the movie. This is visible through both the cinematography and the usage of colour.

An element of guilt engulfs us when we watch the movie. This guilt stems from the fact that we look at many undesirable things in the society without being able to do anything about it. The movie makes us question our pacifist approach.

Let us look at the movie from a little different perspective. The movie is full of scandals, nightmares and violence. In fact, it would not be far from truth if it were to be said that it is the opening to a human sewer. Lynch also likes to look at the world from a rather twisted perspective. Therefore, 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' represents all that is dark and all that is undesirable about the American dream.

Let there be no confusion. David Lynch is a voyeur and a celebrated one at that. He becomes a voyeur for the first time in 'Blue Velvet'. However, he takes it to another level when he produces the enigmatic yet beautiful 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me'. He takes a rather crude but realistic look at the other side of the American culture, something that very few have openly talked about. Beautiful dames, crafted normalcy, nightmares, monsters, rapists and abusers, drifters, prostitutes and the list continues – Lynch could not have been any more closer to the dark side of humanity.

While dissecting the movie, it is equally important to remember that it should not be viewed just as a singular place. It indeed logically completes the crooked world of the television series. How did Laura die? The question is as much personal as it is public. A murder needs to be investigated and so it would be. However, what are the circumstances under which Laura died and what are the repercussions of her death? Haunting questions with real answers. Just as many other Lynch movies, the viewer becomes the detective.

There is another very interesting perspective that comes out of the entire saga. The government machinery in the form of FBI agents seem passive and powerless. It is as if they are just there for the heck of being there. This is more than evident when FBI agent Chester Desmond goes missing during the investigations to the death of Teresa Banks. Lynch might have taken a dig at government organizations through the movie.

The sexual relationship between Laura's father and the dead prostitute is a great manifestation of how the family system has failed. Carnal depravity is a broad theme that Lynch probes through all his movies. 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' is no exception. On very few instances, Lynch has shown healthy sexual relationships. Probably, that is his way of looking at the world; probably that is exactly what he wants to emphasize. Leland is a pervert; Leland is a serial abuser and Leland indulges in incest. Ideally, he should have been portrayed as the demon in the movie. However, Lynch masterfully superimposes the image of Bob over Leland. This might have been a clever cinematic device or this might have been a psychological escape route for Laura, who was constantly being forced into incest.

Early in the movie itself, Lynch makes his appearance as Gordon Cole, the Regional Bureau Chief of the famed FBI. However, the character of the hearing-impaired Gordon is so caricaturish and so drab that it is almost funny. However, is the fun here intentional or incidental? A careful look at the movie confirms that the humour factor is intentional for it builds up to the most gruesome series of events that are to follow later.

At multiple points, the movie seems like a well-made pornography. While the pornography element cannot really be ignored, it is so because the movie wants to convey a certain message that would otherwise be under the carpet. The biggest problem with most of the Lynchian movies is a distinct possibility of misunderstanding. There is always a gap between what Lynch wants to convey and what people perceive he wants to convey. Was Lynch trying to cash in on the popularity of the television series when he made the movie? Perhaps he did and may be rightfully so. However, that cannot be held against him for he is also a filmmaker, someone who wants recognition if not the commercial returns for his creations.

Purely from a cinematic point of view, 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' is one of the very few Lynchian movies that has some sort of a narrative structure. Bizarre as it may seem, there seems to be an alley along which we can walk. However, what stops people from going the distance is the emotional chaos that Lynch creates through this movie. It is naked and it is remorseless. It does not care about cinematic propriety and does all that it can to stay true to its objective, whatever that may be. Clearly, Lynch wins the war if it were to be a competition between the viewers and the auteur.

The genre experimental movies was conceived for a reason. It includes all those movies that have been made following norms that have not been hitherto adopted. Lynch experiments even with the experimental genre. On a serious note, 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' truly breaks all the conventions and establishes the rule of chaos. Given the person that Lynch is, no two movies from his stable look or feel the same. Consequently, this movie was bound to throw up some surprises and so it did without trying to meet everybody's expectations.

It is pertinent in the context that we try to dissect the character of Bob. Who is Bob? Is he simply a monster who feeds on human fear and sorrow? Is he just a rapist and a murderer? Alternatively, is he the human incarnation of something more obnoxious? Is he representative of the rot that the human society is facing? Is Bob a manifestation of the decay that has crept into the human society? Interesting that the answers to all these questions are interlinked and not separate. Lynch masterfully weaves the character of Bob to fit into a narrative, which talks about the degeneration of human values.

The next character who needs the spotlight here is Leland. An attorney and a respected figure in the fictional town of Twin Peaks, his family seems to be the perfect one. However, it is through Laura that we get to know the other side of Leland. He is a serial abuser and a rapist. Does Leland adopt his sinister form when possessed by Bob? Is he actually a serial offender? The answer is not that simple. He represents the archetypal abuser, part of a breed that is existent across numerous families throughout the world. At the end of the movie, he stands exposed for what he is and the viewers do not pardon him for that.

Robert Briggs, Laura's boyfriend, is another interesting character that helps us in deconstructing the movie. An aggressive chap, Briggs hardly cares about anybody else in his life. He has been actually cheating Laura. However, he becomes furious when he realizes that even Laura was using him to get access to cocaine. Again, Briggs is an abusing teenager, who probably does not enjoy a normal relationship with his parents or other family members. His character is also indicative of the degradation of the American family system.

Another character that needs a mention here is Major Garland Briggs. In fact, Major Briggs completes the dysfunctional family circuit. In this, Major Briggs and his son Robert do not enjoy a particularly fruitful relationship. Major Briggs considers his son to be a rogue. He is secretive and does not come out to be a very friendly person. Through 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me', Lynch has really delved on the strenuous and tensed relationship between a father and his daughter and another father and his son. There seems to be an emotional disconnect in both the cases.

One of the most important triggering characters in the movie is that of Teresa Banks. It is important to remember that her murder starts the entire story. A young teenager, who has gone astray, Teresa has peculiar character similarities with Laura. It seems that Laura is following in on the footsteps of Teresa. Her ring becomes the redeeming factor for Laura. Lynch portrays a very grim figure of the girl, something that were to be the guiding force of the entire movie. She is also a cocaine addict. The concept of drug abuse is used in the movie like a constant motif.

When we try to sketch the various important characters in the movie in order to deconstruct it better, the most important thing that tumbles out is that none of those characters paints a very bright hue. It seems Lynch deliberately made all the characters having darker shades. A bleak world inhabited by dark characters with questionable sense of ethics – this is how the Lynchian world is so carefully crafted. The demonic and supernatural characters add to the darkness. At times, these demonic characters add a dash of black humour to the saga.

It can also be alleged that all the thrills and mysteries that are created through the television series are destroyed by the direct narration of the movie. Probably, that was the idea. 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' is a distinct attempt at humanizing the saga and showing all that is supposed to be shown. While a television series is always bound by populist tendencies, an auteur can take significant liberties with a movie. The fact that Lynch wanted to liberate himself is manifested in the fact that he had a row with the producer during the second season of the series and he left afterwards.

There are numerous surrealist motifs to stay true to Lynch's usual style. We see a boy with a mask; we also see a horse in a room and many other things – 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' could be classified as one of the finest teenaged horror movies of all time. Like Stanley Kubrick's 'The Shining' (1980), the horror stems from a degradation of humanity and not from supernatural things. While we see Laura slowly but gradually going to the pits, we see another form of teenage fantasy as well. An immaculately designed red chamber actually creates the horror factor.

A strange dichotomy permeates through the movie. While viewers are less likely to like what is being projected on screen, at the same time, they do not withdraw from it either. In other words, Lynch makes one see the pit and does not let that person come out of it as well. In very simple words, Lynch creates a strange relationship between a possible viewer and the protagonist thus carefully

redrawing the fourth wall. It could also be remembered in this context that a strange poetic beauty marks the movie despite its grotesque settings.

V. CONCLUSION

We have looked at the evolution of surrealist movie genre earlier. When it all started, there was an innate attempt at letting the subconscious express itself without any inhibition. This was more or less the case for a long time. However, the emergence of Lynch imparted a sense of purpose to the entire genre. In fact, Lynch created a grammar of surrealist cinema, no matter how bizarre it was. 'Eraserhead' (1977) was the movie with which Lynch experimented the most. However, by the time 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' was released, Lynch had established a method in the madness. The movie was just an avenue for Lynch to go the distance that he could not do with the television series primarily because of its decided commercial nature.

Despite its artistic bent, the movie did not really qualify as a critical success. The reasons were multifarious – the primary being an overtly layered structure that does not do any justice to the subject being covered. Many critics believed that the subject matter needed a more direct approach, something that could drive the point home. Another reason was the emphasis on gore, violence and dark humour. Nevertheless, when the movie was seen in retrospect, many critics not only changed their opinion but also praised it for its deeply experimental nature. Contemporary opinion pegs it as one of the most notable creations of Lynch.

Quentin Tarantino, one of the modern masters of the cinematic art form was so disgusted with the movie that he made a rather crude comment about it. He said, "After I saw 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' at Cannes, David Lynch had disappeared so far up his own ass that I have no desire to see another David Lynch movie until I hear something different. And you know, I loved him. I loved him" (Nordine, 2017).

As we look back at the movie, we find it a masterpiece subject to multiple reasons – one of the reasons being its ability to shake our collective conscience and the other reason being the ease with which the subject matter was placed. However, we also know that the movie has its own share of detractors, who blame it for being overambitious and crude. Notwithstanding, surrealism got a new meaning after the movie was released. Popular culture was jolted and the mass taste was projected for a change. The rest is all history.

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