"GOTTA LIGHT?": INTERROGATING AMERICAN DARKNESS IN EPISODE 8 OF *TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN* THROUGH FORMALISM

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how darkness is visually depicted in American storytelling within the eighth episode, "Gotta Light?" of *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017). To explore the visual storytelling in this episode, I apply the lens of Bruce Block's *The Visual Story* (2020), a formalist framework for visual media, to identify specific visual structures in key sequences. The components of Block's methodology—line, shape, space, and tone—critically explore how visual elements construct thematic depth, portraying darkness as a complex, narrative-rich element of the American psyche. The article provides examples of film scholarship that explore darkness in the context of both America and *Twin Peaks*, underscoring the narrative significance of darkness as a thematic constant. Block's framework not only reveals "Gotta Light?" as a seminal televisual reflection on American sociocultural issues but also demonstrates the accessibility and applicability of a contemporary formalist framework in media studies.

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina cómo se representa visualmente la oscuridad en la narrativa estadounidense dentro del octavo episodio, "Gotta Light?" de *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017). Para explorar la narrativa visual en este episodio, aplico la lente de *The Visual Story* (2020) de Bruce Block, un marco formalista para medios visuales, para identificar estructuras visuales específicas en

secuencias clave. Los componentes de la metodología de Block—línea, forma, espacio y tono—exploran críticamente cómo los elementos visuales construyen profundidad temática, retratando la oscuridad como un elemento complejo y rico en narrativa del psiquismo estadounidense. El artículo proporciona ejemplos de estudios cinematográficos que exploran la oscuridad en el contexto de América y *Twin Peaks*, subrayando la importancia narrativa de la oscuridad como una constante temática. El marco de Block no solo revela "Gotta Light?" como una reflexión televisiva seminal sobre los problemas socioculturales estadounidenses, sino que también demuestra la accesibilidad y aplicabilidad de un marco formalista contemporáneo en los estudios de medios.

INTRODUCTION

In 1990, the premiere of David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks* on ABC starkly introduced audiences to a dark and foreboding world with the discovery of seventeen-year-old Laura Palmer's (Sheryl Lee) murdered body. The haunting opening sequence, with Laura found naked, wrapped in plastic, and washed ashore, set a grim tone that persisted throughout the series. Laura, portrayed as the prom queen, cheerleader, and daughter of a prominent community figure, symbolised the ultimate loss of American innocence in a small-town setting. Steeped in duality—light and shadow, normalcy and the bizarre—the narrative casts a lasting shadow over American culture, especially its tension between surface-level idealism and hidden darkness in small-town life.

The premier of the first season came at the end of the 'quality television' boom of the 1980s, a period marked by a shift towards narrative complexity, depth, and formal innovation in U.S. television (Thompson, 1997).[1] *Twin Peaks* has been cited as pushing the stylistic boundaries of television further, particularly in its opening sequence with the discovery of Laura Palmer's body. The scene's unsettling music, lingering visuals, and stark contrast between small-town life and violence evoked the surreal, haunting qualities found in David Lynch's films. Television scholars such as John Caldwell have recognised its first two-season run for a unique aesthetic, situating it within "the aesthetic pantheon of European cinema and independent

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[1] 'Quality television' is defined by scholars like Robert J. Thompson as a category characterised by high production values, complex narratives, and well-developed characters.

feature films on cable's auteurist boutique, Bravo" (Caldwell, 1994). This is a testament to its blend of televisual quality and cinematic artistry from an auteur that broadly epitomises what I define as 'arthouse television'. This concept extends Kristin Thompson's notion of 'art television' (2003) and David Bordwell's narrative frameworks of 'art cinema' (1985) to a television-based context, in which the visual and narrative innovations made in television by an auteur and their productions are supported by the institution of arthouse cinema, outlined by scholars like Steve Neale (1981) and David Andrews (2010).

An example of such in a contemporary television landscape, is the 2017 third season of *Twin Peaks*, which also serves as a limited series. Airing on the network Showtime, critics remarked that *The Return* signalled *Twin Peaks*' resurgence as "a true artistic force that challenged just about every storytelling convention we know" (Fowler, 2017). This is perhaps most evident within the series' eight episode, "Gotta Light?", where Lynch and Frost present an unexpected origin story that defied the visual and narrative conventions of more recent mainstream television. Known for his aversion to explicit meanings or answers, Lynch, the director of the entire season, which he considers more film than television (Hazelton, 2018), navigated this episode in a typical paradoxical fashion. Despite the episode's ostensible aim to elucidate the origins of a larger evil within the *Twin Peaks* universe, Lynch offers these revelations in a manner that maintains his characteristic embrace of ambiguity and complexity, leaving viewers both enlightened and perplexed. "Gotta Light?" outlines sources of darkness within the narrative that reflect on American politics and history, and ultimately it positions the fictional North-western town of Twin Peaks as a battleground for good versus evil and light versus dark, whilst revising the original story of Laura Palmer and ideas of duality on a much larger scale. The complex interplay of innocence and its corruption in this American story is told within the episode and series through a range of stylistic visuals and visual experimentation. In Lynch and Frost's *Twin Peaks*, darkness as a thematic device not only defines the original series but it palpably permeates *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* and *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Each chapter of the *Twin Peaks* saga expands upon themes that explore darker, deeper and often more surreal interpretations of American life.

The capacity to explore complex themes in television is attributed to forms of television such as "quality television," "peak TV,"

"prestige television," and "arthouse television," which allow the artistic freedom to express darker ideas. "Gotta Light?" exemplifies this freedom not only thematically, with its surreal, unsettling imagery, but also stylistically, through its unconventional pacing and visual experimentation. Critical acclaim, such as Tom Huddleston's assertion in *Sight & Sound* that "there should be no doubt: the eighth episode of *Twin Peaks: The Return* will stand as one of the defining passages in David Lynch's long career," (2017) and Keith Uhlich's remark in *MUBI* that "there's never been anything quite like this episode on any motion picture screen," (2017) underscores the episode's innovation. Its critical acclaim, such as nominations for Emmy Awards in categories such as Outstanding Cinematography and Outstanding Single-Camera Picture Editing underscore its significance and innovation, strengthening an argument for categorisation within these culturally hierarchical categories of television.

In focusing on "Gotta Light?", this article examines how the episode's aesthetics and visual form, interrogates and depicts thematic darkness in an American context. To analyse how this cultural and historic darkness is visually portrayed this study employs a formalist approach. Utilising Bruce Block's *The Visual Story* (2020), an accessible formalist framework described as a guide for creators and writers, emphasises seven visual elements: space, line & shape, tone, colour, movement and rhythm. I focus specifically on space, line & shape, and tone to demonstrate visual darkness. These particular elements are used for the purposes of this study because they are fundamental to the episode's overall visual style. Space and line and shape establish the episode's unsettling and surreal atmosphere, whilst tone enhances the mood and emotional impact of scenes, justifying their selection for a formalist analysis the episode. Furthermore, by employing Block's formalist methodology, this analysis explores how specific scenes use visual strategies to portray darkness, offering a nuanced understanding of the episode's aesthetics and narrative. Formalist analysis is a method within academic textual studies, and by applying Block's step-by-step guide to controlling visual form, this article both demonstrates and advocates the value of formalist theories for advancing scholarly interpretations of television.

CONTEXTUALISING DARKNESS

Although a definitive understanding of darkness will always remain elusive and is not the primary focus of this section, examples of interpretations can aid in contextualizing the subject matter. In this section, I highlight a small range of scholarship that addresses darkness as a theme, both in the creative arts and in *Twin Peaks* specifically. Providing these brief perspectives is valuable as it lays a theoretical groundwork that enriches the possibilities of the subsequent visual analysis, ensuring a holistic interpretation of how darkness functions within the *Twin Peaks: The Return* episode, "Gotta Light?". Although I prioritise more academic based studies of darkness in literature, film, television, and their studies, it is important to acknowledge there is extensive philosophy covering the theme.[2]

In literature, darkness frequently emerges as a central narrative device, often embodying elements such as secrets, danger, trauma, the unknown, and larger evils. In American literature there have been countless expressions of darkness, many of which resonate with *Twin Peaks'* broader exploration of the eerie and the hidden underbelly of American life. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), portray psychological horror and the unsettling atmosphere of decaying, isolated places—mirroring the surreal and foreboding tone of *Twin Peaks* (Castelli, 2023). Similarly, Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952) explores themes of violence, redemption, and the grotesque in small-town America, which parallels the juxtaposition of normalcy and darkness in *Twin Peaks*. Whilst works like William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959) portray darkness through addiction and the fragmented human psyche, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) examines the darkness of sin and societal judgment, other works—such as Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), which portrays the brutal and violent darkness of the American frontier—along with Poe and O'Connor's stories more closely echo the series' thematic tension between light and shadow. Beyond these

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[2] There are countless philosophical interpretations of darkness. Two examples of this are Friedrich Nietzsche, who in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1961) addressed nihilism and existential darkness, emphasising the void left by the "death of God" and the resultant meaninglessness. And in contrast, Jean-Paul Sartre explored themes of existential angst and darkness in *Being and Nothingness* (1956), focusing on human freedom, responsibility, and the inherent absurdity of existence.

literary examples, the study of darkness in literature remains broad, continually exploring its multifaceted roles as a thematic device. An example of recent scholarship is Alina Bortniak and Olga Ocheretna's essay, "The Ways of Binary Opposition Realization of Light/Dark Conceptual Metaphors in a Literary Text," which considers a range of literature where darkness often symbolizes evil or malevolence (Bortniak & Ocheretna, 2021).

Such insights extend into media studies. In Charles Forceville and Thijs Renckens' discussion on a lightness and darkness binary in their article "The 'GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARK' Metaphor in Feature Films," darkness in visual media can represent death, sorrow, or the unknown, often misleading protagonists and audiences with its ambiguity (Forceville & Renckens, 2013). And they usefully nod to Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) where visual darkness, such as heavy shadows overpowering characters, enhances tension and mystery, particularly during Captain Willard's first encounter with Colonel Kurtz, powerfully suggesting potential evils and fear of the unknown. This mirrors Cedric Watts's analysis of *Heart of Darkness*—the literary basis for the film—which highlights darkness as device to imply moral ambiguity and existential dread (Watts, 1980). Additionally, Joan Mellen's analysis in the article "Spiralling Downward: America in *Days of Heaven*, *In the Valley of Elah*, and *No Country for Old Men*" reveals how visual and thematic darkness in the titular films underscores the moral decline and societal decay stemming from America's violent history and militarism, depicting characters profoundly impacted by war and symbolising the dehumanization and moral corruption that arise from brutal and violent experiences (Mellen, 2008).

In television, considerations of darkness, in the context of this article, naturally lead to discussions about the works of David Lynch. Lynch and Frost's television series *Twin Peaks* has been the subject of continual research since its premiere in 1990, not just for its capacity to bring something "quirky" to television (Thompson, 1997) but also for inspiring critical and academic discussions that range from cultural, social, political, and historical perspectives to textual analysis. In regard to portrayals of darkness—particularly through secrecy, moral ambiguity, societal decay, and the corruption of innocence—the many iterations of *Twin Peaks* extend these concepts into cultural, social, political, and historical discussions.

For example, Greil Marcus, in his article "Picturing America" argues that *Twin Peaks* presents darkness in a uniquely American

context by depicting a small town that is plagued by criminal
businessmen, reflecting national political issues. Marcus argues that
Twin Peaks expresses an underbelly of violence that comments on
American society, citing murder ballads that echo a harsh reality
where "America is a place where anyone can be killed at any time, for
any reason, or no reason at all" (Marcus, 2006). A similar sentiment is
expressed by Howard Hampton in his article "David Lynch's Secret
History of the United States," where he explores the portrayal of
political and societal darkness. Hampton describes Lynch's
transformation of idyllic American settings into scenes filled with fear,
hypocrisy, and chaos, noting that *Twin Peaks* functions as a
retrospective commentary on the Reagan era. Lynch's work reflects the
1980s' emphasis on conservative values, economic deregulation, and
a façade of national prosperity, whilst exposing the darker forces at
play, such as greed, commodification, and moral decay. The show's
portrayal of small-town America as rife with crime and corruption
parallels the broader national issues of the era, where the veneer of
traditional American values masked societal exploitation and the
dehumanization of individuals for political and market gain. By
focusing on small-town America, Lynch uses these settings as a
microcosm for broader national issues, illustrating how the Reagan-
era ideals of family, prosperity, and security were often accompanied
by hidden forces of violence, inequality, and control (Hampton, 1993).

   Twin Peaks: The Return reflects further on darkness within
America's political landscape, particularly in relation to the 2016
presidential election. Donald L. Anderson notes that the 2016 election
outcome, which led to Donald Trump becoming President, felt like a
shift into an alternative reality for many (Anderson & McCollum,
2019). This perception of political upheavals and a resurgence of overt
social divisions resonates with Lynch's depiction of shifts into eerie
alternate dimensions like the infamous Black Lodge and an ultimately
altered America in *The Return*'s finale. Anderson points out that the
unexpected political reality of the 2016 election forces a confrontation
with America's darker undercurrents. The Return not only comments
on the recent past, but also the nation's historic past. As both Walter
Metz and Aliza Ma note in their respective articles, "The Atomic Gambit
of *Twin Peaks: The Return*" (Metz, 2018) and "Now it's Dark" (Ma,
2017), the series, and its eighth episode, "Gotta Light?", in particular,
look back at the Trinity atomic bomb test of 1945 and surmise that
this is a crucial moment in human capacity for evil. Metz suggests the
episode "offers an antidote to the repression of the United States'

atomic culpability" and Ma posits that "the atomic bomb, like Bob, is a symbol for the gravest evil, the show's inexorable, invisible leitmotif."

      Within these examples here, darkness is represented in both literal and metaphoric ways, ranging from expressions of violence and murder to more existential fears of the unknown, and to the ramifications of political or historic events. Within these examples, darkness is represented in both literal and metaphoric ways, ranging from expressions of violence and murder to more existential fears of the unknown, and to the ramifications of political or historical events. In *Twin Peaks: The Return*, particularly the episode *"Gotta Light?"*, darkness explores the traumatic impact of significant American events, such as the detonation of the atomic bomb and its aftermath. The Woodsman figure (played in *The Return* by career President Lincoln impersonator, Robert Broski (Broski, 2012)), as Martin Fradley and John A. Riley argue, evokes a haunting blend of American presidential iconicity, folk mythology, and abject poverty. The Woodsman's appearance draws on iconic historical images of American destitution, ranging from the eighteenth century to the Great Depression, and serves as a critique of the mythology of a classless American meritocracy. Fradley and Riley connect the Woodsman's atemporal monstrosity to Trump's "America First" policy, with its echoes of Lincoln's protectionism, and suggest that Trumpism, much like the Woodsman, is not an aberration but the inevitable product of the United States' social, political, and economic structures (Fradley & Riley, 2019). This focus on violence, repression, and the tension between surface-level idealism and underlying darkness situates these examples within the particular sociopolitical and historical context of the U.S.

"GOTTA LIGHT?": FORM AND AMERICAN DARKNESS

      Formalist theory has at times emphasised a priority of form—including visual style, composition, and sensory experiences—over content. However, film theorists David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith argue that form and content are inseparable, as every component functions as part of a system and pattern that engages the viewer. They suggest that subject matter and abstract ideas all enter into the "total form" of the visual text, influencing how viewers frame expectations and imagine possibilities (Bordwell et al., 2020). This section supports their argument by applying a formalist methodology alongside textual analyses. Through a contemporary and

approachable formalist study, it is possible to examine how visual elements within an image are meticulously crafted and curated. This also demonstrates how a formalist analysis can support narrative structures and their intended and interpreted meanings. This integrated approach shows that the elements identified in a formalist framework which comprise a visual image significantly contribute to meaning and narrative depth.

To demonstrate an applicability of formalism, I draw upon on the framework of Bruce Block, which is accompanied here by textual analysis supported by various media scholars. I will be focusing on Block, a film theorist and media consultant who has created an accessible guide to visual form, explaining how controlled visual elements impact the narratives of film and television texts. In his book, *The Visual Story* (Block, 2020), Block introduces seven key visual components that contribute to the structure and meaning of an image: space, line and shape, colour, tone, movement, and rhythm. Using contrast and affinity as scales of high/low and more/less, he provides a structured methodology for analysing visual storytelling, serving as a guide for "picture makers" striving to "make a good picture" (ibid). Block's framework, with its detailed, step-by-step breakdown of these visual components, offers a practical approach to understanding how and why meaning is communicated through images. To illustrate this formal analysis, I have employed basic illustrations that highlight key visual elements to focus on the formal components that shape viewer interpretation. When applied here to *Twin Peaks: The Return*, specifically to the episode "Gotta Light?", Block's framework for controlling the visual components—particularly space, line and shape, and tone in this article—underscore the visuals that enhance narrative moments of darkness.

In this episode, the manipulation of space creates the illusion of depth or flatness, contributing to the episode's disorienting atmosphere. Block categorizes space into four subcomponents: deep space, flat space, limited space, and ambiguous space (16-95). Deep space uses depth cues like perspective and tonal separation to create a three-dimensional illusion, whilst flat space emphasizes the two-dimensional quality of the screen by eliminating depth cues. In contrast, ambiguous space, where viewers cannot discern spatial relationships, is used in "Gotta Light?" to heighten tension, particularly in the atomic explosion sequence, evoking anxiety and confusion. The aspect ratio, surface divisions, and open versus closed space further direct the viewer's eye and influence visual composition,

enhancing the episode's exploration of existential fear. Similarly, line & shape (98-126) are crucial for guiding viewer perception and emotional response. Block explains that lines are created by tonal or colour contrast and can be dynamic (diagonal), rigid (straight), or fluid (curved). In "Gotta Light?", diagonal lines dominate the movements of the Woodsman, emphasizing tension and chaos, whilst horizontal lines suggest fleeting moments of stability. Shapes also play a role in emotional storytelling—triangles evoke instability and danger, whilst squares suggest a sense of order that is continuously disrupted. These visual components work together to reflect the episode's themes of violence and disorder.

Finally, tone (128-144)—the brightness or darkness of objects—directs attention and sets the mood. Tone can be controlled through reflective (object brightness), incident (lighting), and exposure adjustments (camera settings). In "Gotta Light?", tonal noncoincidence, where subjects are obscured in shadow, is used to create suspense. For example, the Woodsman remains hidden in darkness, heightening the tension. High tonal contrast, such as the stark differences between light and shadow, amplifies moments of visual drama, whilst affinity of tone (subtle gradations) can create a more unified, subdued effect. Across these components, Block's principles of contrast and affinity are used to create visual intensity or harmony. Contrast, whether through tonal differences, spatial depth, or line orientation, heightens tension, whilst affinity brings elements into visual coherence. In "Gotta Light?", the interplay between contrast and affinity shapes the episode's dark, foreboding tone, reinforcing its exploration of violence, chaos, and existential uncertainty.

Controlling these visual elements enables filmmakers to enhance narrative depth, guide the viewer's attention, and evoke specific emotional responses. This is illustrated in a selection of key sequences from "Gotta Light?", shown non-chronologically in figures 1 to 6. I apply Block's framework to the images within the figures, accompanied by the original image. These formal assessments will be supported by a description of the scene in the context of the episode and a textual reading that invites critical and academic interpretations of form and meaning to identify themes of American darkness.

In "Gotta Light?", darkness is often literally and metaphorically represented though the actions carried out by morally ambiguous and malevolent agents. An example of such is an early scene featuring the characters Ray Monroe (George Griffiths) and the "bad" (evil) doppelgänger of Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan), who have escaped

from prison by car. Prior to this scene, the highways and roads we see as the pair drive away nod to the dimly lit, winding roads of David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), where the road symbolizes both literal and figurative disorientation for the characters. As Todd McGowan argues, Lynch uses such roads as a "privileged path" to the Real, where fantasy intersects with trauma, blurring the boundary between reality and illusion (McGowan, 2004). This sense of disorientation on the road sets the stage for the surreal and otherworldly events that follow. In the scene I refer to, Ray and Cooper have pulled over into a secluded woodland area, where Ray is about to betray Cooper for reasons yet unknown (analysed in figure 1). This betrayal triggers a series of bizarre, unsettling events: ghostly woodsmen arrive to reanimate Cooper, coaxing an orb-like object containing the grinning face of the demonic spirit BOB (Frank Silva)[3] from the fallen body's chest (analysed later in figure 3). Much like the disorienting roads, these events further dissolve the boundaries of reality, suggesting the larger scale of malevolent forces at play. This moment serves as a critical turning point in both the episode and the series, reintroducing audiences to BOB and amplifying the sense of cosmic darkness surrounding the characters.

Considering the visual component of space in Block's system (Block, pp16-95), the illustration of the scene in which Ray betrays Cooper in figure 1 highlights how various depth cues create the impression of limited space, despite the scene being set in an open forest clearing. In this sequence, Ray stands in the foreground (FG), closer to the viewer, with Cooper's doppelgänger positioned in the background (BG), smaller in scale to indicate distance and separated by several meters of space in the middle ground (MG). This spatial arrangement creates a sense of isolation between the two characters, reinforcing the tension between them. One of the primary depth cues used is overlapping, as Ray's position partially obscures Cooper, creating a layered composition that suggests a spatial hierarchy. Ray's proximity to the viewer implies control or impending action, whilst Cooper's smaller, distant figure emphasizes vulnerability and impending danger. The illustration (figure 1) provides a simplified

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[3] BOB is the primary antagonist in all the *Twin Peaks* texts, representing a malevolent, supernatural force. He is a parasitic entity from the Black Lodge who possesses individuals to commit acts of murder and cruelty. BOB embodies the theme of hidden evil lurking beneath the surface of everyday life in *Twin Peaks*, symbolizing ultimate darkness and moral corruption.

visual aid to clarify the spatial relationships discussed in the scene, emphasizing how the foreground (FG), middle ground (MG), and background (BG) elements work together to create depth and highlight the emotional and narrative tension. Despite the relatively open setting, the visual separation between the two characters feels minimized, heightening the sense of immediacy and betrayal. The minimal lighting and shadows dominating the scene contribute to the overall atmosphere of confinement, making the environment feel claustrophobic and ominous. The use of space and tone underscores the tension between Ray and Cooper, visually reflecting their psychological distance while trapping them in a confined, tense space. The dark tones flatten the depth, enhancing the feeling of entrapment and heightening the dramatic tension as the betrayal unfolds.
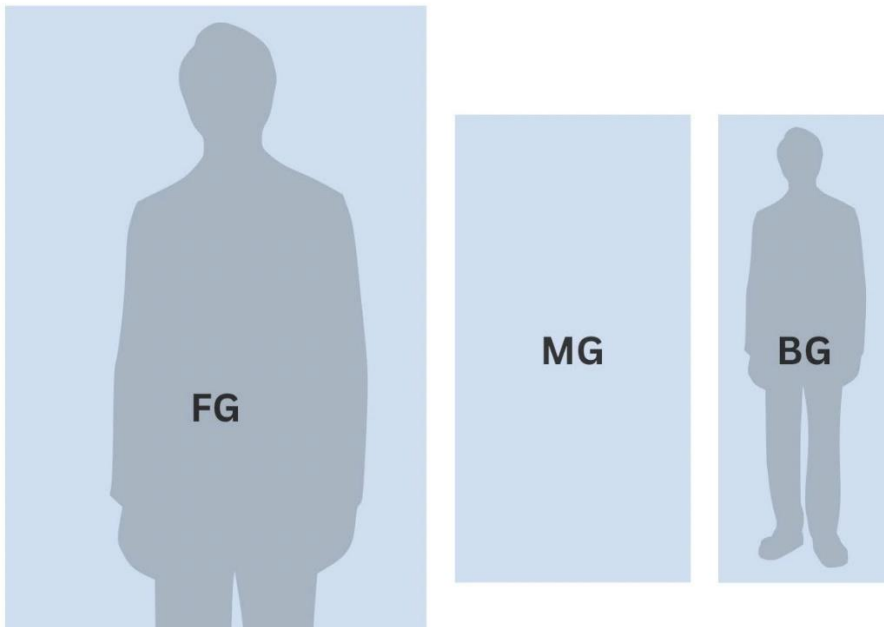

Figure 1: Illustration of space cues: (FG) Ray Munroe (George Griffith) stands with his back to (BG) Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan), whom he is about to betray. (FG: foreground, MG: middle ground BG: background).

Typically, objects closer to the viewer appear larger than those further away. In this scene, the subtle size difference between the foreground and background characters, combined with minimal tonal

separation, reduces the perception of depth and makes the space feel compressed. Both characters are enveloped in shadow, with dark tones dominating the frame, flattening the space and making it feel confined. The shallow depth of field keeps both characters in similar focus, blurring distinctions between spatial planes and enhancing the sense of limited space. Minimal textural diffusion also compresses the space, adding to the closed, restricted environment. The scene exhibits low contrast in tonal values, dominated by dark tones, which reduces visual intensity and creates a subdued, ominous atmosphere. The consistent dark tones across the characters and background create an affinity, unifying the elements and contributing to a claustrophobic space. The uniformly dark and blurred textures help flatten the space, reinforcing limited space. The use of limited depth cues and controlled contrast and affinity significantly express themes of darkness. The confined spatial design mirrors the narrative's exploration of entrapment and pervasive malevolent forces, creating a visual metaphor for the characters' psychological states and the broader thematic concerns of the series. By applying Block's analysis, it is possible to see how the visual elements underscore the narrative moment: Ray's betrayal of Cooper is visually highlighted by their spatial positioning, the confined sense of space, and the tension this creates.

This scene, its purpose, and its resulting impact on the episode can be read as a reflection of larger themes of malevolence, deceit, and the pervasive darkness within American society—themes which Lynch has explored thoroughly in *Blue Velvet* (1986) and in earlier iterations of *Twin Peaks*. A dark underbelly of sociopolitical issues threatens to bubble to the surface of an unassuming Americana (Marcus, 2006 & Hampton, 1993). As Ray betrays Cooper by shooting him, this dark underbelly and its potential to overwhelm is depicted in a surreal and avant-garde manner. Considering the spatial setup, which underscores the suspense, danger, and violence inherent in the scene, this violent event can be linked to a broader commentary on gun violence in American society. Damon Franke's analysis in "Nostalgia and the Kiss of Ulysses in *Twin Peaks*" supports this theory, noting that *The Return* reflects on societal issues such as gun violence, particularly in relation to the nation's epidemic of school shootings (Franke, 2020). Franke critiques legislative inaction on gun control, evoking real-world violence and reflecting the broader American paralysis in the face of such issues. This aligns with the depiction of morally ambiguous characters like Ray, who engage in gun violence in

"Gotta Light?" and other episodes, reinforcing a critique of a society in decay.

Niels Niessen expands on this, highlighting Lynch's ongoing exploration of the collapse of the American Dream, portraying a country plagued by broken promises, institutional failures, and increasing social fragmentation. Niessen's reference to Lynch's depiction of a "nation crushed by box stores, abandoned by railroads, and bypassed by interstates" speaks to the larger disintegration of American ideals—symbolized by the violence in this episode—making *Twin Peaks* a haunting microcosm of the darker realities of contemporary American society. The confined space of the scene, with its palpable tension and impending violence, serves as a microcosm for these societal issues, reflecting how mainstream culture and political climates have allowed violence to persist unchecked. Furthermore, Niessen points out that *The Return* acts as a countercultural entity, using estrangement and unsettling visuals to comment on violence and societal decay (Niessen, 2018).

In the next illustration (figure 2), which highlights the use of lines within the composition, the ominous figure of the Woodsman leans into a passing vehicle to ask for a cigarette light—"Gotta light?" Arriving out of the literal darkness of the night with another woodsman, his otherworldly presence is conveyed through both his physical appearance and his aura. Speaking with a raspy, electrically charged voice, the Woodsman moves slowly toward an open road. Although his purpose at this stage in the episode is unclear, his demeanour suggests an aggressive, malevolent force. The illustration simplifies the scene by emphasizing the geometric lines of the car window frame, demonstrating how vertical and horizontal lines create a boundary that isolates the Woodsman. These lines contribute to a sense of confinement, echoing themes of entrapment and intrusion. The window's vertical lines, in combination with the telephone pole and car door, further enhance the idea of the Woodsman being trapped in a liminal space. This arrangement of lines leads the viewer's attention toward the Woodsman, whose face is sharply defined by the contrast of light and shadow. The car window's contour frames his face, making it the focal point of the scene, whilst intersecting lines create a grid-like pattern around him. This visual structure emphasizes his entrapment and otherworldly presence. Additionally, diagonal lines formed by the car door and window angles increase the tension, heightening the Woodsman's dominance within the frame. This use of line not only underscores his ominous presence but also

enhances the tension by reinforcing a visual barrier between him and the driver, amplifying the sense of intrusion and danger. Ultimately, these compositional lines guide the viewer's eye directly to the Woodsman's unsettling expression, ensuring it remains the scene's primary focus.
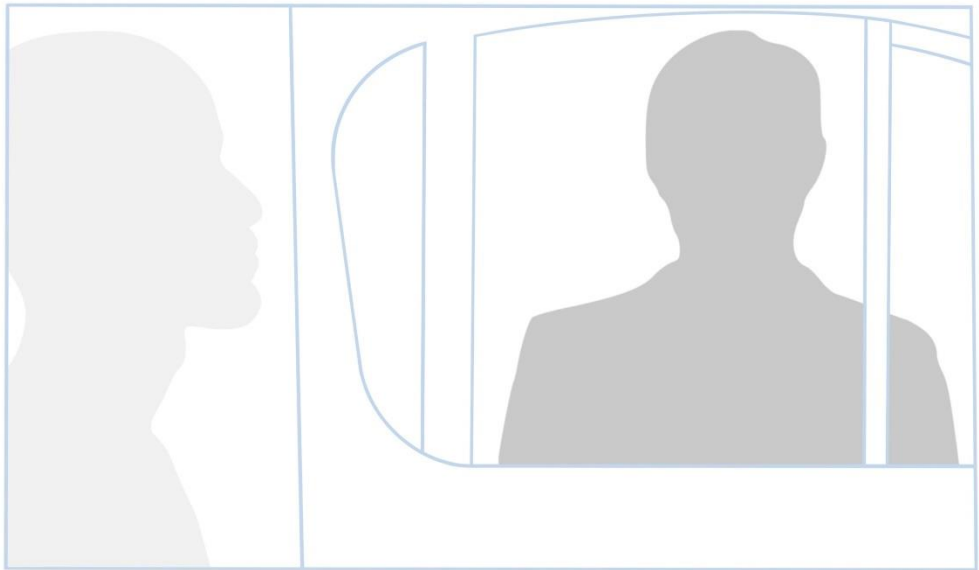

Figure 2: Illustration of lines: The Woodsman (the darker figure in the centre) ominously leans into a passing car and asks for a light for his cigarette.

As the analysis of lines shows, the scene emphasises the Woodsman and his role as an aggressive force. He is isolated by a geometric boundary and placed within a liminal space where the viewer's gaze is directed to his face, which is sharply defined by a contrast of light and shadow. Despite his placement within this boundary, he still invades the driver's space, adding a sense of perverseness to his query for a cigarette light. This moment bears a striking visual resemblance to a scene from Herk Harvey's *Carnival of Souls* (1962), where a similarly eerie apparition leans into a car window. In that scene, the ghostly figure is framed within the confines of the window, his pale face contrasted by light and shadow, creating an unsettling presence as he peers into the vehicle. By employing

similar visual techniques, Lynch amplifies the sense of intrusion and menace in the interaction, heightening the tension and sense of unease.

Presenting the Woodsman this way emphasises his embodiment as a force of darkness within the episode. Portrayed by Robert Broski, the Woodsman contributes to the overall thematic darkness not only because the character is shown as a malevolent spirit when he murders a receptionist and radio DJ to serve his purpose, but also because he is presented as a uniquely American form of darkness. Robert Gordon Joseph highlights in his article *Lincoln the Woodsman: Native Americans and Obscene Patriarchs in Frost and Lynch's Twin Peaks*, Broski is known for his work as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator, and this image of a beloved American icon is subverted, transforming Lincoln from a revered historical figure into a harbinger of death. Joseph notes that this subversion aligns with the philosopher Slavoj Žižek's concept of "obscene patriarchs" akin to troubling figures like Frank Booth from *Blue Velvet* and Leland Palmer from *Twin Peaks* (Žižek, 2002). This recasts Lincoln, historically seen as "Father Abraham" and a Christ-like saviour, as a symbol of national sins and historical darkness (Joseph, 2022). Joseph goes on to argue that the Woodsman embodies the brutal archetypes of White settlers, challenging the often-vilified image of Native Americans and instead reflecting the darker aspects of American "civilization." This visual entrapment by the lines of the window and the car echoes the historical entrapment and violence associated with American expansion. Joseph compares the Woodsman's violent rampage through New Mexico to the frontier violence depicted in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). Emerging from the desert shadows, the Woodsman assaults indiscriminately, leaving a haunting message before disappearing back into the wilderness, which mirrors the chaotic and violent history of American expansion (Joseph, 2022). This portrayal not only reveals a sinister layer to America's historical identity, intertwined with violence and oppression, but also serves as a crucial example of symbolising the insidious nature of evil beneath the surface.

In "Gotta Light?", shapes and their narrative take on significant meaning in two key scenes involving the figure of BOB. In one scene, an orb containing the face of BOB protrudes from the chest of a fallen Doppelgänger Cooper, summoned outward by ghostly woodsmen after Cooper is shot and betrayed. This moment recalls the events of the *Twin Peaks* season 2 finale (episode 22, 1991), where BOB's control

over Cooper is first revealed, emphasizing that BOB still inhabits this dark version of Cooper. The orb serves as a powerful symbol, encapsulating the essence of BOB's evil whilst linking it to Cooper's physical form. In a later scene, BOB's orb is again visible—this time in a stream of vomit expelled by Judy, the demonic entity tied to the atomic explosion of the Trinity test in 1945. The emergence of BOB in this context ties his evil nature to one of humanity's darkest moments, symbolizing the birth of malevolent forces within the destructive power of the atomic bomb. Here, Lynch connects personal and cosmic evil, as BOB, a metaphysical entity, is rooted in a historical event that reshaped the world. The use of orbs and grotesque physical manifestations in both scenes is emblematic of Lynch's style, where abstract internal evils are transformed into visible, tangible forms.

Lynch Scholar Martha P. Nochimson interprets BOB as a representation of phallic power and the annihilation of meaning, portraying a force that seeks to dominate and erase rather than create (Nochimson, 1997). This concept of BOB's phallic power is crucial, as it situates him not just as a source of physical menace but as a broader symbolic threat to receptivity and balance. In contrast, *Twin Peaks* offers alternative values associated with the feminine, suggesting that BOB's evil is not only destructive but also a challenge to these more nurturing forces. FBI Special Agent Albert Rosenfeld's remark in season 2 of *Twin Peaks*—"maybe that's all BOB is, the evil that men do" (episode 16, 1991)—further underscores this idea. BOB is not simply an external monster but a manifestation of the darker impulses within the human psyche. Through his visual representation of BOB, Lynch highlights the connection between personal evil and larger societal or cosmic forces, revealing how darkness can emerge from both internal and external sources.

This duality of internal and external evil is further emphasized through Lynch's strategic use of shapes, which help convey the underlying narrative and emotional meaning within these scenes. The simplified shape illustrations in Figures 3 and 4 focus on isolating the key geometric elements within the scenes, allowing us to examine how Lynch uses these basic forms to convey deeper emotional and symbolic meanings. In Block's framework (Block, pp98-126), shapes play a critical role in visual storytelling, where different forms carry specific emotional and symbolic weight. Circles, for instance, are traditionally perceived as soft, passive, and safe, whilst triangles and angular shapes evoke aggression and dynamism. The illustration in Figure 3 highlights this contrast between the circular orb and the triangular

features within the scene, bringing attention to how BOB's face emerges as a disruptive force within the softer, more passive form. In the first scene described, where BOB emerges from Cooper's chest, the rounded, organic shape of the orb contrasts with the rigid, angular features of "Bad Cooper's" lifeless face. The contour lines of the orb create a sense of fluidity and movement, suggesting that BOB's presence is dynamic and overpowering, even as Cooper's body remains static and devoid of life.

Typically, circular shapes are associated with passivity, safety, and containment because their smooth, continuous lines lack the sharp angles or points that are usually linked with aggression or dynamism and often perceived to be indirect and organic. Circles have no clear start or end, which can create a sense of flow and calm. However, in Lynch's depiction, this expectation is subverted. The orb containing BOB, instead of symbolizing protection or closure, becomes a vessel for evil. This distortion of the circle's usual meaning amplifies the unsettling nature of BOB's presence, turning what should be a passive form into something menacing and dangerous. This subversion challenges the viewer's perception, turning what would normally be a symbol of safety into one of malevolence. The visual contrast between the soft curve of the orb and the sharp lines of BOB's face intensifies the sense of evil, presenting BOB as a force capable of distorting even the most benign shapes. In the second scene, illustrated by basic shapes in figure 4, where the orb containing BOB's face emerges from a stream of vomit expelled by Judy, this tension between shape and meaning is repeated. Here again, the orb—typically a sign of containment and security—becomes a vessel for something dark and destructive. The triangular form of BOB's face within the circle reinforces the sense that no shape or boundary can contain the evil he represents, further underscoring the themes of intrusion and moral ambiguity. By abstracting the scene into simple shapes, the illustration in Figure 4 emphasizes Block's principle of using geometric forms to enhance narrative meaning. The triangle within the circle creates visual tension, reinforcing the idea that even the most secure boundaries are vulnerable to disruption by malevolent forces.
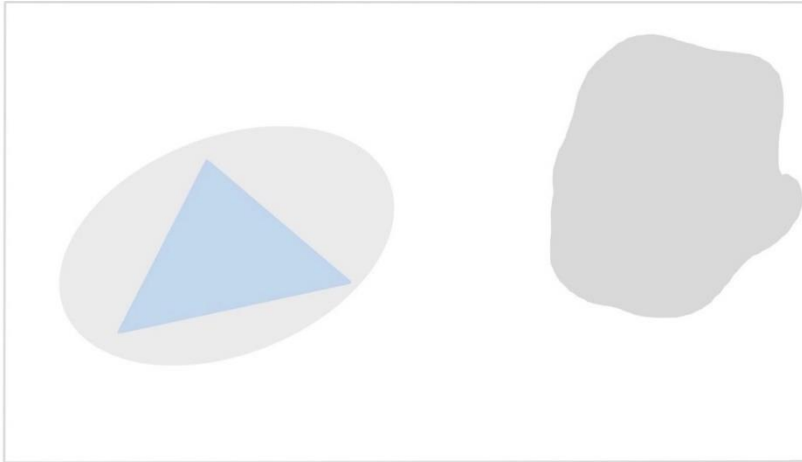
Figure 3: A basic shape illustration depicting an orb containing the face of BOB emerging from the fallen body of Doppelgänger Cooper. The use of simplified forms highlights the symbolic contrast between the smooth, circular shape of the orb and the more rigid, abstract form representing Cooper's body.
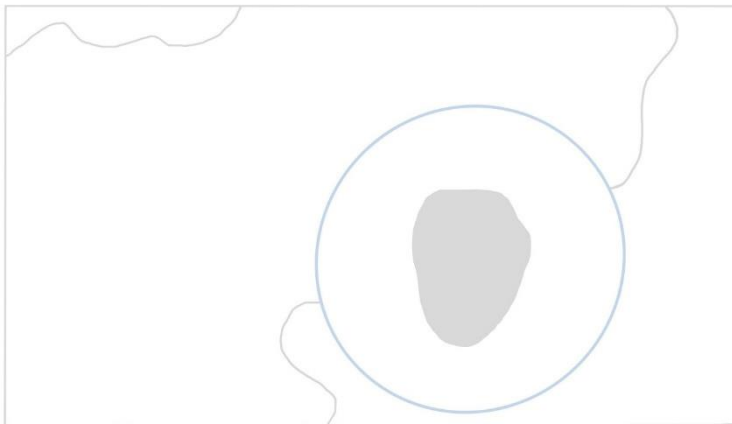

Figure 4: A basic shape illustration depicting the stream of vomit expelled by the entity Judy, from which the orb containing BOB emerges. The simplified shapes convey the dynamic relationship between the circular form of the orb and the fluid, irregular shape of the surrounding vomit, underscoring the theme of malevolent forces escaping containment.

The 1992 prequel film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* provided context for the character of BOB and his broader objectives within the

narrative universe of *Twin Peaks*. His search for "garmonbozia"—spirit food symbolizing pain and sorrow—further ties into the visual metaphor of his two emergences shown in "Gotta Light?". His existence feeds on the darkest aspects of human existence, creating a distressing example of both literal and metaphorical darkness within the series. The juxtaposition of BOB's face within the orb encapsulates this, visually representing the consuming nature of evil within. His birth from Judy's vomit stream within the heart of the atomic explosion ties both he and Judy inseparably to this historical event and the later Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, to which Walter Metz contends that the creation of atomic weapons underlies the entire narrative of *Twin Peaks*, framing them as the root of American evil (Metz, 2017). He cites the arguments of Robert J. Lifton and Greg Mitchell, who suggest the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are foundational to the contemporary malaise in America (Lifton & Mitchell, 1996).

Two pivotal scenes within the episode, both set near the Trinity test site in New Mexico in 1956, can be analysed for their use of tone according to Block's framework (pp. 128-144). Both scenes are shot in black and white, enhancing the focus on tonal range and contrast. Without the influence of colour, the viewer's attention is drawn entirely to the interplay of light and shadow, making tonal choices crucial in conveying meaning and emotion. In the first scene which I draw attention to tone as a visual component, the Woodsman's hand reaches towards the frightened face of a radio DJ, partially obscuring him. His hand, poised to grab the DJ's head, foreshadows the brutal act of crushing his skull in the same manner as his previous victim, the station's receptionist. This moment paves the way for the Woodsman to speak into the microphone, uninterrupted, delivering his cryptic message: "this is the water, and this is the well. Drink full and descend. The horse is the white of the eyes, and dark within" (2017). The scene is purposefully dark, both in lighting and in tone, with the Woodsman's hand partially obscuring the DJ's face. This use of shadow and limited illumination creates a mood of menace and foreboding. As Block outlines, the control of tone directs the audience's attention to the most illuminated areas—here, the DJ's frightened expression and the shadowy hand. The greyscale in this scene (Figure 5) accentuates the contrast between deep shadows and bright highlights, intensifying the visual drama and sense of impending threat. By maximizing the tonal disparity, Lynch not only enhances the visual impact but also reinforces thematic tensions

between concealment and revelation, which are central to both noir aesthetics and the episode's broader narrative of looming evil. This aligns with Katie Kapurch and Jon Marc Smith's observation in their article 'A Fear So Real: Film Noir's Fallen Man in Bruce Springsteen's Darkness on the Edge of Town and the David Lynch Oeuvre' that Lynch's work, like film noir, explores existential terror and moral ambiguity (2019).

In the radio DJ scene, incident control is strategically employed to manipulate the tonal range, utilizing lighting techniques reminiscent of classic film noir. Noir lighting is characterized by stark contrasts between light and shadow, reflecting themes of moral ambiguity, entrapment, and psychological tension. The hand in the foreground is cast in deep shadow, sharply contrasting with the brightly lit face of the DJ in the background. This dramatic chiaroscuro draws the viewer's attention to the man's partially obscured face whilst evoking the sense of menace typical of noir's fatalistic mood. Lynch's use of film noir lighting techniques enhances the scene's sense of dread and inevitability, as the intense tonal contrast mirrors the narrative's conflict between light and darkness. Film noir often uses this interplay of light and shadow to convey themes of entrapment and lurking danger, reflecting the moral complexities and existential anxieties of its characters (Kapurch & Smith, 2019). The noncoincidence of tone, where the hand obscures part of the DJ's face, adds to the suspense and unease, directing attention to the hand's dominance in the frame whilst the face—the typical focal point—remains shrouded in shadow. By maximizing the tonal disparity between the dark hand and the illuminated face, Lynch not only creates visual drama but also evokes thematic tensions between concealment and revelation, central to both noir and the episode's broader narrative of looming evil.

In the second scene, where the insect-like creature approaches the young girl entranced by the Woodsman's broadcast, the use of tonal contrast and affinity deepens the sense of dread. The girl's face and the creature are lit with a subtle tonal range, creating an eerie softness that contrasts with the darker background. The greyscale (Figure 6) here enhances the soft tonal gradations, contributing to the scene's unsettling atmosphere and emphasizing the girl's vulnerability against the creature's menacing presence. The creature's slow approach within this soft, yet ominous tonal range heightens the sense of impending doom. Both scenes use a limited tonal range, but Lynch carefully employs contrast to reveal key moments whilst obscuring

others, reinforcing themes of evil, contamination, and helplessness. The greyscale in Figure 6 further illustrates this tonal range, showing how contrast and tonal affinity contribute to the scene's eerie atmosphere. The visual similarity between the girl and the insect introduces an unsettling sameness, suggesting a disturbing connection between them. The flat, painterly quality of the tone blurs the boundaries between innocence and malevolence, visually representing the pervasive darkness that corrupts and infiltrates the narrative of *Twin Peaks*. This visual sameness challenges perception, making the scene more disturbing and underscoring entrapment and corruption. The tonal affinity between the girl and the insect deepens the unsettling connection, emphasizing the pervasive darkness that pervades the series and its exploration of American societal fears and anxieties.

Figure 5: Grey scale to illustrate the tonal range in the scene in which the hand of the Woodsman covers the face of the radio broadcaster with murderous intent.

Figure 6: Grey scale to illustrate tonal range in the scene featuring a young, hypnotised girl that lies asleep as an insect-like creature approaches her face.

In both scenes, the use of tone emphasizes the presence and intrusion of evil in distinct ways. The scene in the radio station relies heavily on the contrast of tone, whilst the scene with the girl and the insect emphasizes tonal affinity. The radio station, a quintessential symbol of Americana, initially appears passive until disrupted by the Woodsman. The intrusion of the Woodsman is marked by a dramatic shift in tone, akin to the scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), where the shadowy figure of Norman Bates raises a knife towards Marion Crane in the shower. This scene uses stark contrasts to heighten the sense of menace and impending violence, much like the way Lynch employs tonal contrast to accentuate the Woodsman's threatening presence in the radio station. In contrast, the bedroom

scene with the girl and the insect explores tonal affinity, creating a disquieting connection between the two figures. The tonal similarities between the girl's pale clothing and the insect create a sense of disturbing sameness, which underscores the scene's eerie and unsettling nature. This visual connection echoes the treatment of Americana in Andrew Wyeth's painting *Winter Fields* (1942), where a dead crow and a dark barn share a similar tonal balance, reflecting the darkness that permeates the scene. Lynch's use of tone in the bedroom scene mirrors this balance, blending innocence with malevolence in a way that challenges the viewer's perception and highlights themes of entrapment and corruption. By drawing on these cultural artifacts, Lynch engages in a dialogue about the pervasive darkness and societal anxieties present in both the narrative of *Twin Peaks* and the broader context of American art and cinema.

Block identifies how specific visual elements—space, line and shape, and tone—can be used by creatives to produce particular effects, as this illustrated formalist analysis has demonstrated. Spatially, the tension between characters is often highlighted in locations that, whether open or closed, become limited or ambiguous spaces where uncertainty persists. Lines are used to frame and isolate characters, drawing attention to their physical appearances and often bizarre demeanours and aggressive actions. Shapes are presented and then immediately subverted by other imposing or inner shapes, suggesting an internal struggle. In a mostly black-and-white episode where lighting is low and brightness and exposure are limited, tone contrasts the non-relevant against the stark evil but also indicates an ambiguous sameness between the supposedly innocent and the visibly malign.

However, this formalist analysis does more than simply examine these visual techniques in isolation—it serves as a means to advance a larger argument about U.S. culture and society, particularly the pervasive influence of darkness within it. By applying Block's framework, this study uncovers how these specific visual elements amplify not only the aesthetic qualities of *Twin Peaks: The Return* but also the thematic exploration of societal decay, historical trauma, and moral corruption in an American context. Through the manipulation of space, line and shape, and tone, Lynch reflects a broader critique of the American experience, where small-town life is a facade for hidden layers of evil that reach far beyond into national and global concerns. The birth of BOB during the Trinity atomic bomb test (shape) serves as a haunting metaphor for the unleashing of destructive forces,

rooted in historical events that have reshaped global power and fear. Similarly, the betrayal of 'bad Cooper' by Ray (space) reflects the breakdown of moral codes and the decay of trust in American society. The Woodsman, visually reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln, subverts the iconography of a revered American figure (lines), turning him into a symbol of corruption and violence. His hypnotic radio broadcast and the subsequent invasion of the young girl's body by an insect-like creature (tone) symbolize the corruption of innocence and the insidious spread of malevolence. Thus, this formalist study is not merely an exercise in visual analysis but a deeper interrogation of how these elements reflect political, historical, and societal issues. By focusing on the visual construction of American darkness, "Gotta Light?" offers a layered commentary on the pervasive and insidious nature of evil in American culture, showing how visual techniques serve as conduits for exploring the nation's anxieties, contradictions, and moral struggles.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued for the applicability of formalism in contemporary media studies as a method for identifying themes and representations of American darkness within visual texts. The corruption of innocence, societal decay, and historical violence, as explored in *Twin Peaks*, reflect broader critiques of American culture. R.B. Lewis, in *The American Adam* (1955), identifies the figure of the innocent, self-reliant individual as central to American exceptionalism. Lynch's *Twin Peaks* challenges this notion, showing how innocence is manipulated or destroyed by darker societal forces. Similarly, John Archer's analysis in 'The Resilience of Myth: The American Dream' (2014) illustrates how myths like the American Dream persist even when contradicted by reality, and *Twin Peaks* engages in this interrogation, highlighting the decay beneath the surface of American ideals.

Formalism, beyond its capacity to decode visual structures, provides a critical lens for uncovering how aesthetics reflects societal narratives. The formalist framework developed by Bruce Block in *The Visual Story* has proven valuable for academic and creative analysis of these themes. Block describes his framework as an "ideal blend of theory and practice" (Block, 2020), engaging both students and media creators in understanding the visual elements within an image. Whilst

this article applies several key elements of Block's formalist framework, such as space, line & shape, and tone, *The Visual Story* offers a broader range of tools that can enhance visual media analysis. Additionally, Block's framework is useful for analysing the visual and narrative language of auteur directors like David Lynch. In *Twin Peaks: The Return* episode "Gotta Light?", Block's framework, combined with textual analysis, helps extrapolate themes of American darkness, demonstrating the value of visual formalism for interpreting contemporary media. Formalism not only illuminates American darkness but also deepens our understanding of the relationship between visual form and thematic content. By examining the manipulation of form and its interaction with cultural myths, this analysis shows how Lynch critiques deeply ingrained societal narratives like the American Dream and the myth of innocence. These myths, while foundational to national identity, contain the seeds of their own critique. Lynch actively engages with these cultural products through literature, film, and painting—exploring the binaries of light and darkness, goodness and evil—to expose the contradictions within American mythology.

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