Chapter 17

‘Listen to the Sounds’: Sound and Storytelling in *Twin Peaks: The Return*

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Following a pre-title sequence that serves to connect the 25 years that separate Showtime’s 2017 reboot from the transmission of its preceding two television seasons (1990-1) and the feature film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (Lynch, 1992), the opening line of *Twin Peaks: The Return* (Lynch, 2017) is spoken. Carel Struycken’s character – described as The Giant in those previous iterations, but referred to initially as ??????? and as The Fireman in later episodes of *The Return* – directs FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) to ‘Listen to the sounds’. Speaking in the unsettling backwards dialect familiar to viewers of the series, The Giant indicates a repetitive, scratching phrase from a gramophone. The instruction is clear and though he can hear only noise, Cooper appears to understand. These opening moments of the latest incarnation of director David Lynch and writer Mark Frost’s groundbreaking television series demonstrates a playful approach to the relationship between what is said, what is shown and what is heard and understood by characters – and ultimately the audience – in the *Twin Peaks* universe.

In this scene, the extra-dimensional Black Lodge is presented in stark monochrome, the audience denied the deep red of velvet curtains which delineated the hallways from the chamber, referred to as the waiting room in previous seasons. Cooper is trapped within this space as his evil doppelgänger Mr C – who escaped the Black Lodge in the second season – commits violence and crime in the real world. Following a further set of instructions from The Fireman and a low rumble of room tone, Cooper vanishes in a flicker of Lynchian wind noise and a crackle of electricity. Frances Morgan argues that Lynch uses noise to augment reality in order to ‘create atmospheres of disquiet and liminality’ (2011, p. 189). In an interview, Lynch has described his use of these sonic atmospheres as ‘presences’ that he further defined as ‘the sound you hear when there’s silence, [the space] in between words or sentences’ (in Rodley 2005, p. 73). As fans speculate as to the purpose

of Cooper's journey from the Black Lodge in *The Return*, this chapter instead explores these Lynchian 'in between' spaces and argues that it is not the spaces themselves that are important, but how sound presents the interconnectivity between these liminal or threshold places. Intrasoundtrack analysis is used to identify moments where components of the soundtrack supplement visual representation in order to provide guidance to the viewer/listener as to the characters, their place in the timeline and the spaces they occupy within the complex narratives of *The Return*.

The first few minutes of the opening episode present the audience with a number of very different spaces, where these connections are articulated in part by sound design. As the narrative shifts from the extra-dimensional Black Lodge to the 'real world' of the Ghostwood National Forest that surrounds the titular town of Twin Peaks, so colour is reintroduced to the image and the sound design becomes more conventional. A non-descript truck reverses into a driveway, and Dr Lawrence Jacoby (Russ Tamblyn) opens his trailer door and speaks with the van's driver over the ambient sounds of the forest. In the sequence that follows, helicopter wide shots of New York City are accompanied by similarly sonic localisation – the soundtrack dominated by the tropes of this most familiar of cinematic cities, brought to bear through distant sirens and the honking horn of a yellow cab. As this exterior wide shot cuts to the interior of a skyscraper, however, the sound design returns to the Lynchian wind noise of the Black Lodge. The interior shot presents a large glass box with a circular porthole situated high above Manhattan. This chamber later serves as a portal between the extra-dimensional and real worlds in *The Return*, and is identified sonically as a liminal space. As the camera tracks backwards and reveals the watcher of the box, Sam Colby (Ben Rosenfield), so the soundtrack foregrounds in the sounds of the room itself - air conditioning, hum of fluorescent lights and whirring servos of surveillance cameras trained upon the box. Changes of camera position correspond with a subtle shift in room tone or Lynch's 'presences', disquieting perhaps in Frances Morgan's vernacular, but a use of sound that situates Colby within the real world, perhaps protected from the inhabitants of the extra-dimensional space by the glass walls of the box itself. When an alarm prompts Colby to change a memory card in one of the cameras, his

movements loudly reverberate in the space accentuating his presence within it. Already, *The Return* is distinguishing the visual and sonic rendering of real world and extra-dimensional spaces and begins to establish the conventions for the whole season.

As these sonic 'presences' help to distinguish different spaces for the audience, they also provide clues as to the different characters within the narrative. Importantly, these sonic rules remain consistent throughout the season and are evident in the use of processing and effects applied to dialogue and bodily movement of the characters, in the deployment of both pre-existing source music conveyed non-diegetically in the soundtrack and through the diegetical performances of acts within venues situated within the narrative, and, finally, in the musical score written specifically for the series by Lynch, composer Angelo Badalamenti and supervising sound editor Dean Hurley. What is most striking about *The Return* is how sound design is privileged throughout: dialogue is often secondary or entirely absent, there is barely any music in the first few episodes and it is the often expressionistic sound design that provides subtext, tone and important narrative information. Where Lynchian wind noise or the hum of electricity appears on the soundtrack, something significant is occurring. '*Listen* to the sounds,' says The Fireman to Cooper in Part 1. '*Pay attention* to the sounds,' say Lynch and his collaborators through their sound design.

In adition to articulating the spaces themselves, sonic cues are indicative of how characters move between the real world and those fantastic, supernatural environments that populate Season Three of the show. *The Return* presents many more real-world spaces than previous iterations of the *Twin Peaks* universe, with characters travelling to and from New York, South Dakota, Las Vegas, Philadelphia, Buenos Aires, New Mexico and London. More significant to the narrative, however, are the numerous portals or gateways that connect the increased number of extra-dimensional spaces of the season. These portals represent ruptures in space and time, and lead characters to specific locations – the Black and White Lodges, The Glass Box, Convenience Store, Mansion Room, Dutchman's Lodge and The Fireman's residence – a fortress above a purple ocean. Where characters move from these extra-dimensional spaces to the real world, it is sonic cues that indicate

their arrival or departure. In Part 8, within a scene in which Ray Monroe (George Griffith) shoots Mr C, a group of Woodsmen appear and attend to the slain man. White noise precedes the Woodsmen's arrival and this changes to radio static as they work on Mr C's body. Ray's real world cries are muffled within the mix, sounding like the cries of an animal and further distinguishing the 'in between' space occupied by the Woodsmen from the real world. Later in the same episode, the Woodsmen flicker into being around a gas station and convenience store following a flashback to 1945 that depicts the Trinity atomic bomb test. In this sequence, the camera is static and frames the entire ground floor with a sign above a window presenting the space as a convenience store and a phone booth and two gas pumps in the exterior surrounded by smoke. Initially, the editing is driven by jump cuts that match an accompanying the arrangement of Krzysztof Penderecki's "Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima" (1960) though the arrival of the Woodsmen corresponds with a pause in this non-diegetic music, in a flurry of what the closed captioning describes as a 'warbling static stuttering' (Part 8)1. This digital and glitching sound cue varies in volume and pitch, and mirrors sonically the strobe lit, jump cut imagery of the sequence as eight woodsmen move around the gas pumps before entering the building and being silhouetted in its windows. The stuttering sound is distorted, jarring and unnerving, and carries with it the tropes of what Karen E. Collins and Philip Tagg describe as the aural qualities of alienation – framing dystopic film and television as typically making use of messy, complex and chaotic sound design (2001). As the scene draws to a conclusion, the closed captioning describes 'ominious atmospheric music' that further underlines the inherent menace of the Woodsmen before the sequence ends with sound design captioned as 'electrical scratching' - the same sound which accompanied Cooper's departure from the Black Lodge in Part 1 of *The Return*, and the arrival and departure of other characters to the space in previous series. This same sound cue of 'static stuttering' announces a Woodsman's appearence in Part 7 where one is seen in a corridor by Air Force Lieutenant Cynthia Knox (Adele René) before passing the doorway of the morgue in Buckhorn, South Dakota. In Part 2, the same noise foreshadows the appearance of an individual Woodsman staring out before fading from the image

of a prison cell two doors along from the cell occupied by William Hastings (Matthew Lillard), who has been arrested for the murder of his mistress, the librarian Ruth Davenport (Mary Stofle). Though Hastings denies murdering Ruth, he later acknowleges to his wife that he had dreamt that he had been in her apartment while the killing had taken place – a narrative that echoes Leland Palmer's (Ray Wise) account of the murder of his daughter in the second season of *Twin Peaks*. In Part 11 of *The Return*, the same sound cue precedes the arrival of a number of Woodsmen around a vortex that appears at the trailer park located at 2240 Sycamore, where Gordon Cole and his colleague Albert Rosenfeld are led by Hastings following his arrest. Leaving Hastings in their car, Cole passes briefly into an extra-dimensional space through the vortex to see a number of ashen-faced Woodsmen on a staircase before his colleague Albert Rosenfeld (Miguel Ferrer) is able to pull him back into the real world. As the pair investigate the area and discover a body, a single Woodsman approaches the car occupied by Hastings. Shortly afterwards Hastings' head implodes with fatal consequences. The presence of the Woodsmen suggests that Hastings, like Leland Palmer, has been possessed by an evil force compelling him to commit terrible acts. As Hastings questions his understanding of reality from his jail cell, he is unaware of the forces acting upon him. In each of these instances sound design is effectively serving as leitmotif, a recurrent theme of non-diegetic audio cues associated with the Woodsmen that function as a reminder to the audience of the significance of the Woodsmen's presence as carriers or conduits of evil forces between the real and extra-dimensional spaces.

Julio d'Escriván describes Lynch as a filmmaker who privileges the psychological dimension of sound rather than the representational, and argues that it is sound design that can best serve to link abstraction with representation (2009, p. 1). Lynch appears to wilfully make use of sound as a catalyst for the audience to forge their own connections with narrative events occuring on screen but Brooke McCorkle argues that sound in *The Return* marks a shift from previous seasons – in that it is often 'hyper-rendered not just for an ephemeral "jump scare" moment, but rather [is] in service of the story and/or the overarching aesthetic of the *Twin Peaks* world' (2017).

A core part of this aesthetic rendering of the world is that it becomes 'real' only in certain spaces. McCorkle focuses on electricity, something that she acknowledges has fascinated Lynch throughout his career, and which she connects to the manner with which the nature of evil is presented within the season as a transient or mobile force stating, 'like electricity, the evil is transitory or, to put it better, transmigratory' (2017). Of course, electricity is everywhere in the universe of the real world but is rarely physically manifest, and then only through its interaction with its surroundings such as lightning or where its flow is channeled as in a light bulb, but in Lynch's fictional world electricty serves as an invisible power - a binding force that links real-world locations with extra-dimensional spaces and timelines. Dean Hurley explains that electricity is written into Lynch and Frost's script of *The Return*, and that Hurley's bespoke library of electricity sounds 'became a defining signature of the show' (qtd. in Joyce 2017). Again, this primacy of spaces and what connects them serves as a multi-dimensional palimpsest where sound and image collude to determine and distinguish the real, extra-dimensional and liminal spaces of *Twin Peaks* from one another, and demonstrate the functioning of the portals that will allow for Cooper's eventual return to the real world from his Black Lodge purgatory.

Instructions for the audience to listen are not limited to The Fireman's initial direction to Cooper in Part 1. In Part 7, a scene within the Great Northern Hotel sees the conventional sounds of the busy lobby - customer conversation, the tapping of a computer keyboard and the clink of glasses - lost in the mix when a mysterious ringing tone becomes foregrounded. As the camera pans from the reception desk across the lobby before settling on a lamp the tone becomes more prominent, a call back to an incident in Season 2. In the next scene, the hotel manager Ben Horne (Richard Beymer) asks his assistant Beverly Paige (Ashley Judd) when she first 'started hearing the sound'. Echoing the earlier command of The Fireman, Ben instructs Beverly not to move, but 'just listen carefully'. The pair approach the wall by the lamp, then move towards a totem pole in the corner of the room though the sound gets neither louder nor clearer. Unable to find the source of the tone, Ben asks Beverly to ask the maintenance team to find its source. Variations on this ringing sound

are deployed whenever Agent Cooper sees The Fireman, when he wakes in a hospital in Part 16 and is passed the Owl Cave ring by Phillip Gerard (Al Strobel). In Dean Hurley's *Anthology Resource Vol. 1*, the same cue – entitled 'Tone / Slow Speed Prison / Low Mood' begins with the sound of the ring dropping to the floor of the Black Lodge from Dougie Jones' finger in Part 4, and in a scene in Part 14 when Mr C shoots Ray, who is told to wear the ring before being shot. This investigation into the mysterious ringing tone offers an example of where sound is used to bury the past actions of characters literally in the walls of locations within the narrative. In *Fire Walk With* Me for instance, the Owl Cave ring with which the tone is associated in the narrative has been possessed by Laura Palmer, and its power appears to be the ability to send characters from the real world to the Black Lodge when they die. In *The Return* each of the locations in which the sound occurs serve as a portal between real and extra-dimensional spaces or indicates an instance where characters are moving between these spaces. The use of this sound cue in this instance suggests that the Great Northern Hotel shares this property.

This determination of the significance of sound even precedes the events of the narrative within the very opening moments of *The Return*. Jeff Wilser observes that in the opening titles of *The Return* Badalamenti's pervasive theme begins a full 12 seconds after the opening shot, a gap that presents 'an uncomfortable stretch of stillness' (2017). The powerful use of silence or stillness established in this moment is continued throughout the season, most unusually in dialogue scenes – a rarely deployed device in television, which favours exposition. In another instance of a character prompting others to pay attention to sound, in the opening scene of Part 17 Gordon Cole (played by David Lynch himself) commands his fellow FBI Agents Albert Rosenfield (Miguel Ferrer) and Tammy Preston (Chrysta Bell) to 'Now listen to me.' His rapt audience sit – somewhat ironically – in front of surveillance equipment and Cole pauses for more than ten seconds before explaining to Albert and Tammy the intricacies of Jowday, something he describes to them as an 'extreme negative force'. This moment of discomposure finds the soundtrack occupied solely by an awkward shuffling of Rosenfield in his chair, and a background hum of room tone. Lynch's notion of a

‘presence’ is articulated through the context of what surrounds this moment of perceived silence within the narrative, where Cole’s initial dialogue asks Rosenfield and Preston to listen, but in withdrawing sound from the scene they – and the viewer/listener – are directed to listen carefully to the space itself. Here, Cole’s pause both builds tension and also illustrates what Michel Chion describes as external flow, a sudden change of tempo that draws attention to the temporality of the scene (Chion, 1994).

In *The Return*, silence is occasionally deployed as a subversion of form rather than something drawn to the attention of the audience by expositional dialogue. In the opening scenes of Part 1, for example, the use of a sound bridge that traditionally serves to link or suture a visual transition from an exterior to an interior space is missing. As an example, the first exterior wide shot of the Great Northern Hotel shows a unified visual and sonic representation of the waterfall outside, but a visual cut to the interior of the hotel is accompanied by a similar sonic cut – the abrupt silence of the hotel manager’s office divorcing it from the previous shot and its location. Sven Raeymaekers suggests that the use of such techniques reinforces an ‘uncertain sense of coherence rather than providing a cohrent ambiguity’ (2014, p. 41), a destablization of spaces which suits the movement between the real world and the extra-dimensional places central to the narrative of *The Return*. Raeymaekers describes this mode of silence as metaphorical, and observes that its use in the horror genre often serves to represent the ‘absence of a connection to reality, or life, conjuring up otherworldly places and extraordinary events’ (2014, p. 12). This is certainly the case throughout *The Return* where Lynch’s presences, or awkward periods of filmic silence, are coupled with the use of barely audible or manipulated dialogue. The silence is further literalized within the narrative through the presence of mute characters such as Naido (Nae Yuuki) and, to some extent, characters who are only able to repeat the dialogue of others including Dougie Jones (Kyle MacLachlan) and the Drunk (Jay Aaseng) incarcerated in the lock up of the Twin Peaks Sheriff Department. All encourage the audience to pay attention to both sonic and visual cues within a world where filmic characters are themselves often unable to hear, listen or understand what is

being said to them. Jeff Jensen argues that this serves as a meta-narrative acknowledgment where Lynch is expressing to a knowing audience the challenges of returning to an intellectual property that is so obviously resisting many of the demands of a contemporary television reboot (2017).

These creative decisions, coupled with the lack of cues from the original score in the first three parts of *The Return*, caused some critics to speculate that Lynch was deliberately distancing the 2017 season from previous iterations of *Twin Peaks*. Sarah Nicole Prickett, for instance, suggests that 'the theme remains, but nothing else plays' (2017) and notes that this lack of music, coupled with Lynch's predilection for abstraction, extended use of cinematic silence and elongated shot lengths, finds time moving achingly slowly in those early episodes. This sparing use of score makes the use of diegetic source music in *The Return* all the more striking. Handpicked acts feature in the majority of the parts by playing to the residents of Twin Peaks in The Bang Bang Bar, the Roadhouse venue familiar from earlier iterations of the series. These performances provide the opportunity for the audience to decompress, escaping Cooper's existential stasis and return to the town to spend time with those still resident there. Andreas Halskov argues that these sequences are one of only a handful of markers of seriality, in a season which otherwise 'radically subverts our expectations of television storytelling and causality' (2017). Yet by performing under their pro-filmic names, each of these sequences has a disturbing secondary effect. The performances directly connect the real world of *The Return* with *our* world and situate the fantastical events in the present day. In doing so, Lynch and Frost prompt the audience to consider how the historical events articulated within the narrative – such as the Trinity bomb test – continue to resonate in the contemporary moment.

With such a dense narrative, large array of characters and Lynch's resistance to conventional expositional dialogue, it is sound design that is required to do much of the narrative heavy lifting. Dean Hurley explains that Lynch's practice involves the introduction of 'music into sound and sound into music where everything blurs', what he calls an 'omni-lateral understanding of all aspects of film' (in Amorosi 2017). This notion of omni-laterality, or the representation of all points

of view, resonates with the larger meaning of *The Return* defined by its multiple dimensionality and coexisting timelines. This is also evident in the lack of conventional narrative hierarchies and playful misdirection. Lynch and Frost's description of the season as a film, or narrative born of literature, rather than TV – is a disruptive one. Deviating from the conventional is, in part, how Lynch moved from noun to the Lynchian adjective and, as sound designer for *The Return*, he continues in a career-long avoidance of the familiar. This is made manifest also through the director's use of editing techniques such as jump cuts and glitching that are evident in the sound design as much as in the visuals, an unusual combination where sound more commonly serves to provide an anchor to space or narrative events where a filmmaker makes use of expressionistic visuals or otherwise deviates from traditional continuity editing. Michael Ewins describes deviations from traditional continuity as a fantastic corruption of form that allows events to be 'rearranged, recontextualised or completely reversed', this observation serving as apt description of how Lynch and his collaborators unify their production practices with narrative meaning in *The Return* (2018, p. 34). This divergence from familiar practices of continuity is evident across the season, and manifests in some unusual spaces

Instead of focusing on narrative cause and effect, *The Return* is interested in articulating the fluidity of space, temporality and subjectivity through a complex combination of visual and sonic information. The emphasis on the *inbetweenness* of each of these states allows for a nuanced exploration of both the existential and physical explosions that can disrupt reality. Since *Blue Velvet* (1986), David Lynch's films have depicted the underbelly of American society but *The Return* has more similarities with the industrial surrealism of the director's earlier film *Eraserhead* (1977). Adrift in the lodges, traveling the electric wires and alive in at least three versions of himself, Agent Dale Cooper communes with the dead and missing, travels through the spirit world, laments lost love, and rescues Diane (Laura Dern) from the trauma of rape by his doppelgänger. In doing so he loses himself, sets Diane adrift, and finds himself in a world where Laura Palmer is another person, she is alive but the cozy town of *Twin Peaks* is gone. If much of Lynch's work reveals the hidden

arguments, sexualities, addictions, violence and strangeness of society and familial life, *The Return* goes even further, to reveal literally hidden, underground and occult geographies. There are no easy answers, but it is sound that plays a large part in the manner with which Lynch and his collaborators allow characters to transition between the real to the extra-dimensional in their storytelling - a suture that connects the representation of alternative realities through the crackle of electricity and the resonant hum of half-forgotten memories.

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1 Sarah Nicole Prickett observes that even the close captioning of *The Return* takes an unusually cinematic form, with ‘incredible, specific descriptors of sound and score. A line dialed by the Log Lady […] isn’t ringing but “trilling.” Footsteps on tile in the Black Lodge are “odd reverberations.” Skin “crinkles.” In the anonymous woods are “whooshing sustains,” followed by, naturally, an “ominous tone”’ (2017).