

Buoying corpses up: A journey between *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) and *Twin Peaks* (1990-2017)

This article uses a comparative and hermeneutical analysis to explore the similarities and differences between the cinematographic work of Billy Wilder, in particular, *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), and David Lynch and the well-known television series *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch & Mark Frost, CBS, 1990-1991), as well as its widely-expected continuation: *Twin Peaks: The Return* (David Lynch & Mark Frost, Showtime, 2017), paying special attention to the representation of the corpse both in narrative and historical terms. The hypothesis of the authors is that the figuration of the dead contains and symbolizes a specific model of representation at the same time as it anticipates the appearance of a new one. In conclusion, the body in suspension, located in the gap between life and death, functions as a hinge between the past and the future.

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Suspended bodies

Man floating in a room alone. Arms and legs extended. Head down. Static. Weightless. David Lynch's painting from 2009 (Figure 1) prefigures one of the best-known images from his limited event series *Twin Peaks: The Return* (David Lynch & Mark Frost, Showtime, 2017). Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) suddenly appears suspended inside a giant box (Figure 2) as if he was in one of Francis Bacon's studies for a portrait. Still fascinated after the interdimensional voyage, Cooper looks around and wonders. For twenty-five years, the missing special FBI agent has been captive in the Black Lodge: a Kafkaesque maze of zigzagging floors and red curtains. A time-lapse that corresponds to the original ending of *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch & Mark Frost, CBS, 1990-1991) and the beginning of *The Return*.

Cooper's return from the Black Lodge presents him as a body refusing to die. However, he is no longer the coffee-lover audiences knew, and it will take him the whole season to recover his identity. Meanwhile, Cooper occupies the position of Dougie Jones, acting as an automaton illuminated by the fire of the Lodge. He behaves like a newborn child, so he must learn how to walk, talk, and drink his beloved coffee once again. Twenty-five years later, Cooper has escaped from a hereafter similar to the one Jean Cocteau imagined for his Orpheus in 1950. A "nowhere" where time stands still.

Contemporary to *Orpheus* (*Orphée*, Jean Cocteau, 1950), *Sunset Blvd.* (Billy Wilder, 1950) was released. Another body merges in Wilder's opening sequence. In this case, it turns out to be a dead one. Police and ambulance sirens announce the arrival of the authorities at the crime scene. Camera flashes from the press illuminate and surround the event outside a luxury mansion. The lifeless corpse floats in a swimming pool in David Hockney

style in the same position as Lynch's painting and Cooper's body. Arms and legs extended. Suspended. Cradled by the calm water. It is the screenwriter Joe Gillis' (William Holden) dead figure (Figure 3).

Beyond the similarities between the representations of Gillis and Cooper, a more detailed analysis of both sequences reveals certain points that need to be tackled. Both figures are summoned back from the dead to reveal their story. Whereas Lynch's FBI special agent is brought back to continue his quest, Wilder draws upon Gillis' voice-over to become the narrator of his story. Both bodies are introduced at the beginning, being the core of the two narratives. Moreover, the digital cameras which filmed the glass box in which Cooper would appear could be seen as an update of the reporters that, in *Sunset Blvd.*, insisted on taking Gillis' picture.

Talking from the dead

In both *Sunset Blvd.* and *Twin Peaks: The Return*, bodies keep producing discourses after having become deceased. According to Rachel Joseph, David Lynch's "images of dead or distressed and wounded bodies coexist side by side with textual elements" (JOSEPH, 2015: 490) such as the letters under Laura Palmer's fingernails. Back from the hereafter, Gillis and Cooper become – each one in their own way – a not completely dead nor living figure. As Walter Benjamin pointed out: "not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death" (BENJAMIN, 2006: 368).

Moreover, if "every figure prefigures something" (FILLLOL, 2016: 233), the importance of filmed corpses becomes critical since they do not limit their impact to the plot, but extend their

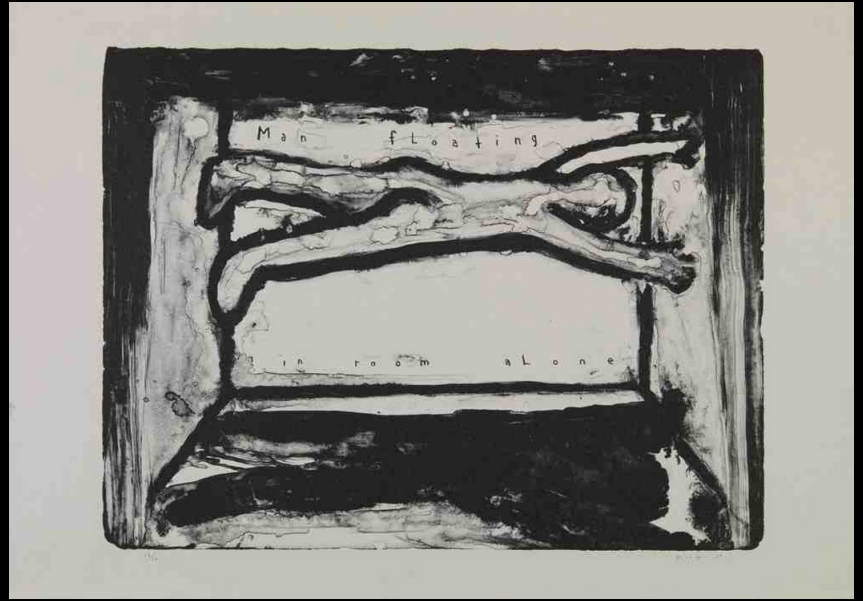


FIGURE 1
Man floating in a room alone (David Lynch, 2009)



FIGURE 2
Twin Peaks: The Return (David Lynch & Mark Frost, 2017)



FIGURE 3
Sunset Blvd. (Billy Wilder, 1950)

meaning to a wider understanding of a particular state of things. The in-between position of Cooper's, Gillis' and Laura Palmer's bodies (as we will explore later on) opens up a breach allowing an analysis of their respective visual horizons. What lies behind their bodies seems to be a much larger corpse: the corpse of a whole system of portrayal for producing and consuming images. Cooper, Gillis and Laura are a symptom of the crisis within the representational modes in which they have been produced. Thus proving the importance of their figuration. As noted by the film critic Manny Farber, *Sunset Blvd.* was not just a noir film about a murder, but "a convincing study about North-American decadence" (FARBER, 2009: 339). However, what kind of decadence was Farber referring to? Was it a moral one or the corruption of an entire cinematographical canon? To that extent, Joe Gillis' death and Norma Desmond's (Gloria Swanson) madness enabled a reflection about a decadence which could be mirrored in Laura Palmer's corpse and her obsessive father, Leland. David Lynch has always been concerned with unveiling the curtains of the alleged American dream, so could we interpret *Twin Peaks* as a new study of North-American decadence? What do we really see when these corpses – crime evidence which their murderers intended to erase but which refuse to disappear – insist on being present?

Floating upside down (Figure 3), Gillis' eyes and mouth are wide open, almost as if he wasn't able to assimilate the fact that he had been shot to death in the back. Or to take it even further, as if he was still unable to comprehend that he has been murdered. The difficulty of filming that particular shot unveils its capital importance:

"a funny thing was that I wanted to photograph Holden after he had been shot and killed by Gloria

Swanson. He was floating there in that pool. I wanted to photograph his face in the water, right? Dark, but still you see him, and the eyes are open. You couldn't photograph through water then. You had to have a mirror on the bottom, and you photograph the mirror image. You could not photograph through water unless you were *outside* the water. So we built a mirrored bottom to the tank, tested it out on a rubber duck, photographed it, and got it." (CROWE, 1999: 239-240)

As Wilder exposed, it was fundamental to shoot Gillis' face in the water. A mirrored image which tries to look back at the audience. In a Freudian sense, Gillis emerges to the surface. He refuses to disappear and it becomes clear when we identify his voice-over. "Poor dope. He always wanted a pool", an ironic quote that shows Wilder's dark sense of humor. Dislocated from his body, Gillis becomes the commentator of the events that develop on screen.

From the beginning, *Sunset Blvd.*'s use of flashback – as noted by François Jost (1995: 117), as a paradoxical example – takes the spectator back to the starting point. Although flashbacks were a common narrative device, previously used by Wilder and Raymond Chandler in *Double Indemnity* (1944), the difference is meaningful. While insurance representative Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) was a dying person confessing his crime with his last breath, Joe Gillis was dead from the very beginning of his monologue. Coherence did not seem to bother Wilder. As he recalls: "I did a voice-over in *Sunset Boulevard*, where a dead man was speaking – why not? [Laughs.] Why not? We just did it. Nobody got up and said, 'Now wait a minute, a dead man speaking, rum-rum-rum-rah, I don't want to see that. ...' They listened." (CROWE, 1999: 108).

Although Billy Wilder had dealt

with the figuration of the corpse in the opening of his 1943 movie *Five Graves to Cairo*, perhaps it would be interesting to analyze his production between the two films. After *Double Indemnity* and before *Sunset Blvd.* were released, Wilder shot *A Foreign Affair* (1948), set in Berlin during the postwar period and, more importantly, he was responsible for editing *Death Mills* (Billy Wilder, 1945), an English version of the coeval German Concentration Camps Factual Survey. The World War II documentary was not originally aimed at the general public but exclusively at German audiences, in order to show them the horrors of the concentration camps. It contained shots of corpses, emaciated survivors and citizens living nearby who were forced to watch the horrors of the camps they had claimed to know nothing about. As it says in the English version's opening titles: "It is a reminder that behind the curtain of Nazi pageants and parades, millions of men, women, and children were tortured to death – the worst mass murder in human history".

Unlike George Stevens or Samuel Fuller, amongst others, who filmed the atrocities of the Second World War, Wilder did not take a single picture himself. Though Wilder's mother died in Auschwitz, the filmmaker refused to talk much about the camps. Nevertheless, his brief comment on one of the shots seems quite revealing as to the relationship he established with those images:

"There was nothing to direct. It had to be a natural thing that happened that they were just able to photograph. You cannot have corpses built up in a little funeral pyre. No. And there was that one shot that I really loved, a shot that they took in a concentration camp, either Dachau or Auschwitz. There was a field of corpses, a *field*, and one corpse was not quite dead. And he looked and he saw the camera,

did not know what it was, and he walked to the corpses, on top of the corpses, and sat down, ultimately, on dead corpses, and stared at us. That was the shot. I was not there when they photographed it. But that was the shot, and I used the whole shot." (CROWE, 1999: 71)

Between Neff's and Joe Gillis' speeches, Wilder had contemplated the corpses of World War II and therefore witnessed the end of cinema's innocence. In that sense, filmmakers "had to find forms that, in the film themselves, would give expression to the end of innocence and to experimentation with the modern" (BAECQUE, 2012: 45). The experienced screenwriter and filmmaker knew, perhaps better than anyone, that bodies keep speaking after they have become deceased. For this reason, he stated there was nothing to direct: just the very presence of corpses and survivors was enough. However, Wilder still insisted on the individual: it could not be a funeral pile but a person's responsibility to look back and testify to the unbearable. Witnesses had their voice, they had to look directly, but it had to be one at a time.

In the rough cut, Wilder explains, *Sunset Blvd.* started with several corpses in a morgue. Each one of them explained how they died through a voice-over. The idea turned out to be a disaster. During the first screen test in New York, the audience was confused and irritated.

"People didn't know whether they were going to see a comedy or a serious picture. But I was in that theater, with the preview cards all handed out. They're laughing, and now the picture begins. It was a very difficult picture to start with, to go into the monologue of a dead man. So I thought that that was a good idea, you know. But then people got up and left. I left too. I went down some steps, leading to the toilets,

and I looked up and there was a lady with a spring hat on, in her sixties, and she turned to me, and she said, 'Have you ever seen such shit in your life?' And I said, 'Frankly, no.' [Laughs.]

That was that. And then already between Poughkeepsie and Evanston, Illinois, where we had other previews, I was convinced that had to go, the beginning had to go. I just took it out. No new footage was shot. I just cut it." (CROWE, 1999: 255)

The old lady's reaction was equivalent to producer Louis B. Mayer's. As Wilder recalls: "And then I was going out, and they were down below the steps of the projection room, and Louis B. Mayer had a group of his cohorts next to him and he was lecturing them. 'That Wilder! He bites the hand that feeds him, *ruh-ruh-ruh!*' I said, 'Mr. Mayer, I'm Mr. Wilder. Why don't you go and fuck yourself.'" (CROWE, 1999: 255-256).

Sunset Blvd. was not just a noir movie but a portrayal of the decline of silent films and, in addition, of the decline of classic cinema. "Above everything else in *Sunset Boulevard* was the *drama* of the oncoming era of sound in pictures" (CROWE, 1999: 105-106). Gillis' corpse floating in the swimming pool was the irrefutable evidence of the silent movie star Norma Desmond's madness. By shooting to death the screenwriter and blaming the old actress, Wilder was pointing the gun at the established mode of representation. In a masterly gesture, he was both accusing and sentencing Hollywood to death. *Sunset Blvd.* was the birthplace of modern cinema, and at its center there was a rotting body in a fancy swimming pool. In this way, Wilder developed modernity from the remains of a cinematographical corpse, becoming the judge and executioner of the previous system of production. The breach between dead and living presented by Gillis

demonstrated the breach between classical and modern cinema.

Half a century later, as an unconsciously learned gesture, Cooper floats inside the transparent box in *The Return* almost in the same way that Joe Gillis floated in *Sunset Blvd.*'s swimming pool. If there is a filmmaker in contemporary cinema who has equally assumed a *knee-jerk reaction* (FILLLOL, 2016: 277) to the forms of classical representation, then it is David Lynch. The images of classic cinema flow under Lynch's representation like an underground stream flows under a mountain, and they emerge as Laura Palmer's corpse or as agent Cooper's materialization. However, while Wilder was certifying a death, Lynch found himself facing the ruins of "a figuration already corroded" (FILLLOL, 2016: 277).

Lynch's admiration for Billy Wilder's cinema is no secret. Although the relationship between the work of both directors has often been articulated from Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.*¹ (David Lynch, 2001), it is in *Twin Peaks* – and its cinematographic prolongation *Fire Walk With Me* (David Lynch, 1992) – where we can find the trace of Wilder's *Sunset Blvd.*² This fact corresponds not only to the development of the plot, in which a dead body becomes the starting point of a complex narrative that ranges between past and present, but the depiction of an idealized America vision and its dark side.

Before Dale Cooper returned from the Black Lodge, another corpse emerged from the water in order to disrupt the contemporary scene. If *Sunset Blvd.* was a turning point for cinema, *Twin Peaks* represented an equivalent game-changing moment for television. It transformed the synergies between television, narrative and audience, and altered the latter audiovisual production. From the moment *Twin Peaks* was cancelled, it opened up the gates for a bunch of related series such as *Wild Palms*

(Bruce Wagner, ABC, 1993), *X-Files* (Chris Carter, Fox, 1993-), *Carnivàle* (Daniel Knauf, HBO, 2003-2005), *Lost* (J. J. Abrams & Damon Lindelof, ABC, 2004-2010), *Atlanta* (Donald Glover, FX, 2016-), etc. These are just a few examples of a peculiar baby boom that is still present today. All their creators have openly recognized the influence of David Lynch's work. Though considered nowadays as a cult series, *Twin Peaks* also found resistance in the nineties during its run, just like *Sunset Blvd.* had:

“While a number of critics gleefully asked if television, or television audiences, were ready for it, others accused it of being a postmodern train to nowhere. The genuine affection of *Twin Peaks* for some of the conventions of TV melodrama was often perceived – perversely – as simply too clever and knowing.” (RODLEY, 2005: 156)

In the beginning, the *entire mystery* of Laura Palmer's assassination was welcomed with enthusiasm and intrigue. Nevertheless, as the episodes went on and the killer neither appeared nor was expected to appear, the audience began to give up. Somehow the scent of Laura Palmer's dead body was increasing unbearably. The impatient spectators, accustomed to soap operas and tales with closed endings, wanted answers and felt cheated when they were denied them. Whereas *Twin Peaks* was suggesting a new, fragmented narrative, containing different genres such as thriller, drama, comedies and soap operas, television's audience was still stuck in a more traditional canon. Ratings declined and David Lynch and co-creator Mark Frost were forced by the producers to come up with the murderer and the solving of the crime. The long chain of other directors and scriptwriters who proved incapable of adjusting to the tone and style with which David Lynch's direction was imbued did not help either. The

figuration of Palmer's dead body prefigured a new television. Maybe it had come too soon for its time. As answers were demanded, the mystery was solved and the intrigue vanished. Some viewers were left disappointed and others thought they had had enough. Once again, and definitively this time, the ratings declined and so the series was canceled.

Laura Palmer and the return of the repressed

Dead, wrapped in plastic. That was the first appearance by Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) in *Twin Peaks*; an “image of a body washing up on the shore of a lake” (RODLEY, 2005: 157) (Figure 4). As in *Sunset Blvd.*, the apparition of a corpse floating in the water triggered the plot. Once again, water presented itself as an element which paradoxically erased any fingerprints, at the same time as it allowed the evidence to surface. Hence, the lifeless body emerged as both a symbol and a sign asking to be discovered and examined:

“The beginning of the pilot chapter of *Twin Peaks* could represent, in consequence and in Freudian terms, the return of the repressed, of those forms of the past of the American cinema that return to show their true face: the corrupted and frozen-forever female beauty, abandoned in the waters of a river that flows and flows” (LOSILLA, 2017: 264).

If Wilder enabled a discourse on decadence of cinema with Gillis' corpse, David Lynch did so with Laura Palmer. Palmer's corpse was the taboo that classicism had not been able to accept in its images. It returned, cradled by the river, to be integrated into a new discursive model, taking on all the previous visual imaginary and ready to be launched in a new direction. According to Ivan Pintor: “Lynch links



FIGURE 4
Twin Peaks (David Lynch & Mark Frost, 1990-1991)

two archetypes to the corpse: the spectral and impenetrable femme fatale emerged as an externalization of the threat in the patriarchal erotic discourse of classical Hollywood, and the femme fatale of the new *film noir* genre” (2017: 223). The female archetype in Lynch’s work is often built on Lacan’s idea of splitting the subject. Such a trait is a key concept in Lynch’s women, from Patricia Arquette in *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997), to Naomi Watts and Laura Harring in *Mulholland Dr.*, and Laura Dern in *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006). Regarding this topic, Domènec Font notices that “the Lynchian representation of women seems to assume an idea of unfolding”; and more particularly with Laura Palmer. Font follows Michel Chion and writes that she “is a compilation of all females in one – that woman – a corpse with the different costumes of a schoolgirl, slut, saint, mother, daughter, governess and queen, nymphomaniac and depressed” (2012: 280). Consequently, these angles compose polyhedral and complex women, all of them funneled into one single woman wrapped in plastic.

Far from Gillis’ rigor mortis, Laura Palmer’s face reveals no surprise but a quiet calm. Eyes closed. Her peaceful expression hides a violent crime while her wet hair recalls the romantic paintings of Shakespearean Ophelia. As presented in the monologue *There is a willow grows aslant the brook* in the 7th scene of act 4, Queen Gertrude describes Ophelia as someone unable to handle her own angst for her lover (1992: 114). This implies a clear connection with Laura Palmer since they are seen as transgressive women for their epoch, living secretly with anxiety and angst. Furthermore, their deaths are tragic and poetic. According to Anne T. Donahue (2017), the Western obsession for “The Pretty Dead Girl” started with *Twin Peaks* and the bluish mermaid look of Laura Palmer instead

of her decomposing corpse on the water. Lynch recollects in one of the episodes of his autobiography, *Room to Dream*:

“I was out one night with my brother and we were down at the end of the street. Everything is lit up at night now, but in the fifties in small towns like Boise, there were streetlights, but they were dimmer and it was much darker. It makes night kind of magical because things just go into black. So, we were down at the end of this street at night, and out of the darkness – it was so incredible – came this nude woman with white skin. Maybe it was something about the light and the way she came out of the darkness, but it seemed to me that her skin was the color of milk, and she had a bloodied mouth. She couldn’t walk very well and she was in bad shape, and she was coming toward us but not really seeing us. My brother started to cry and she sat down on the curb. I wanted to help her but I was young and didn’t know what to do. I might’ve asked, Are you okay? What’s wrong? But she didn’t say anything. She was scared and beat up, but even though she was traumatized, she was beautiful.” (LYNCH, 2018: 26)

In Wilder’s work, as in Lynch’s imaginary, death has been a major motif. Since the artist’s early years, he has shown a particular fascination for what lies beneath the surface. This can be traced, for instance, in the ear sequence in *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), where Lynch showed that “if one looks a little closer at this beautiful world, there are always red ants underneath it” (RODLEY, 2005: 11). In contrast to Wilder, it is not the corpse that truly motivates Lynch, it’s the decomposition. From *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977) to *Twin Peaks*, including his paintings, Lynch has shown a certain fascination for the profanation

and decay of the body. Bodies serve in his oeuvre as a vehicle that is both aesthetic (with reminiscences of Francis Bacon's treatment of the flesh) and metaphorical, often related to Freudian concepts (ISHII-GONZALES, 2004: 48).

In accordance with the above, Laura Palmer may not be seen as the death of a specific representational system, but as the announcement of its disintegration. Consistent with *Sunset Blvd.*, *Twin Peaks* challenged the imaginary of the nineties and pushed audiences one step forward. It invited them to emulate agent's Cooper procedures, for: "it is less when trying to decipher the events coherently than to accept their confusion and get absorbed in the enigma, trusting in the mystery of dreams as Dale Cooper did, the strange detective from *Twin Peaks*" (FONT, 2012: 271). It is precisely Cooper, displaced in multiple bodies, who will become the main character of *Twin Peaks: The Return*.

Whereas *Sunset Blvd.* and *Twin Peaks*' original series respectively marked a point of no return in relation to classic cinema and serial structures, *The Return* impacts the contemporary audiovisual landscape like an atomic bomb. In the so-called "Third Golden Age of Television" it had to be Lynch, twenty-five years later, who was the one to shake the foundations of a television image that was still weighed down by ancient narratives and aesthetics, whereas in his oeuvre "as if it was Kafka's narrative, there is not even the typical hesitation that defines the fantastic, which opposes a rational explanation to a supernatural one, but only the literality of the physical world and the inconsistency of the phantom" (PINTOR, 2017: 223). Thus presenting *The Return* as a groundbreaking TV series. Perhaps that's why agent Cooper is floating inside the crystal box, waiting for *the return* to happen.

In this comeback, *Twin Peaks* tackles

the paradox of television: "Being very familiar with the postmodern, we still have to face modernity completely! [...] Can television ever abandon its obsession with making narrative the dominant production guide?" (MARTIN, 2018: 50), even though most of *The Return*'s events still required an ultimate narrative justification, such as the existence of parallel spaces. Nonetheless, Lynch ventures far beyond the contemporary stream of images; one where the undead body of Cooper prefigures, perhaps, that "the new television will be a psychogenic experience or it will not be" (SÁNCHEZ, 2017: 42).

Conclusions

We have shown through a comparative and hermeneutical analysis that in both *Sunset Blvd.* and *Twin Peaks*, the corpse or the redive body, floating on both water or air, becomes a capital object whose representation is due to a narrative and aesthetic interest. As we have stated, in all scenarios bodies continued to produce discourses even though they were supposed to be dead. Furthermore, their apparition answered not only to concerns that dealt with their figuration but with the mode of representation itself.

Connections between the two audiovisual pieces, *Sunset Blvd.* and *Twin Peaks* can be established not only due to Wilder's influence on Lynch's work, but also because of the relevancy of the bodies. Joe Gillis, Laura Palmer and Dale Cooper deny their disappearance or, even further, insist on their presence. They become the narrative core or the narrators themselves. They stand as intermediate figures, neither alive nor dead.

In their figuration they are prefiguring new forms. Whereas "cinema is prophetic, it predicts and announces things" (GODARD, 2007:

32), filmed corpses can be read as a symptom of a representation which is about to decompose in order to allow new forms. While Wilder's film marked the rupture with classical Hollywood and the beginning of modern cinema, when cameras lost their innocence,

Lynch's television series stands as a game-changer in both the nineties and its contemporary *return*. Everything started with a corpse. Though their representation encloses not just the *mise-en-scène* of an ending, but the promise of a new beginning.

1/ Mulholland Drive and Sunset Boulevard are roads both located in Los Angeles, California.

2/ David Lynch's admiration for *Sunset Blvd.* has been often claimed. In fact, it seems a meaningful coincidence that the character he himself played in *Twin Peaks*, agent Gordon Cole, shares his name with Bert Moorhouse's character in Wilder's picture.

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