Teach Me How To Dougie Like A Mediocre White Man

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Abstract

In the third episode of Twin Peaks: The Return (2017), we meet Dougie Jones, a new character who is, as an otherworldly being will tell him, "manufactured." Dougie's sonic presence on the show is primarily marked by repetition, as the majority of his dialogue involves him parroting those around him.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Film/Movies/Cinema, Gender, Identity, Language



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In the third episode of *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), we meet Dougie Jones, a new character who is, as an otherworldly being will tell him, "manufactured." Dougie's sonic presence on the show is primarily marked by repetition, as the majority of his dialogue involves him parroting those around him. Though Dougie has been received as a symbol of purity or a magical conduit for others' best selves (14:53-19:00), a close listen to his repetitions suggests that he is instead what Sarah Hagi has dubbed the "mediocre white man."

> *DAILY PRAYER TO COMBAT IMPOSTOR SYNDROME: God give me the confidence of a mediocre white dude*
>
> *— Sarah Hagi (@geekylonglegs) January 21, 2015*

Hagi's so-called prayer is a brilliantly concise instance of intersectional analysis that can also provide a framework for understanding Dougie Jones. In a few short words, she's able to 1) demonstrate how white supremacist patriarchy makes her life more difficult, 2) call into question the achievements of those who hold so much power that it's doled out to the most mediocre among them, and 3) situate the entire critique in a systemic framework. That is, though one possible reading of this tweet is that Hagi suffers from a shortcoming she is responsible to correct–a lack of confidence–the fact that she frames her critique as a prayer suggests that this confidence isn't so much an inner belief in oneself as it is a privilege granted to some but not others. *Twin Peaks: The Return* offers, in the vocal interactions of Dougie, an extended meditation on the systemic mechanizations that produce the kind of mediocre white man Hagi laments.



"Twin Peaks Returns to Television in 2016" by Flickr user BagoGames, CC BY 2.0.

For readers who aren't *Twin Peaks* viewers, hang on: explaining the origin of Dougie Jones requires a few sentences that may read as something bordering on nonsense outside the show's bizarre universe. Dougie is played by Kyle MacLachlan, who also plays the show's main character, Agent Dale Cooper, as well as *The Return*'s Mr C, Cooper's evil doppelganger who overcame Cooper in an extradimensional realm in the Season 2 finale and who has been living in the "real world" ever since, while Cooper is stuck in another dimension. The show implies that Mr C has only 25 years–roughly the amount of time since the show's first run in the early 90s–before Cooper switches places with him (extradimensional bureaucracies, amiright?). As a ploy to stay

in the real world, Mr C "manufactures" Dougie Jones so that when Cooper is finally released from extradimensional detention, he replaces Dougie, not Mr C. For the bulk of *The Return*, Mr C continues wreaking havoc across the Midwest and Western US, while Cooper, adversely affected by his transit across dimensions, is trapped in Dougie's life, barely able to function beyond the level of a small child. Technically, then, the character called Dougie Jones is really Dale Cooper, but Cooper's episodes-long inability to regain control of himself leads to an extended case of mistaken identity, where everyone in Dougie's life believes Cooper to be Dougie.

Significantly, Dougie's family and co-workers are barely phased by his ineptitude. At worst, like when he doesn't know how to use the bathroom, people are annoyed by Dougie. But, more often than not, Dougie's moments of silence and often erratic behavior — including befuddlement over how to feed or dress himself — are interpreted as quirky, humble, and endearing. More than that, Dougie's boss believes him to be a courageous and principled whistle-blower whose cryptic drawings on insurance forms outs one of his co-workers for defrauding the company's clients.



Screenshot of Twin Peaks: The Return

Dougie is beyond mediocre, yet over the course of the season, he falls into hundreds of thousands of dollars, a luxury car, a family life that seems to be fulfilling for his wife and son, and the respect and gratitude of his boss. Confidence isn't something this mediocre white man possesses; rather, it's a trait projected onto him by everyone around him. In riffing on the way people exist in systems of inequity, Sylvia Wynter notes in *On Being Human As Praxis* (2015) that we end up keeping "the *reality of our own agency* opaque by attributing that *agency* to extrahumanly mandating entities" (45). Put another way, the god who would grant us the confidence of a mediocre white man isn't a deity but a system of patriarchal white supremacy that makes itself opaque behind the rationale that a person like, say, Dougie Jones couldn't possibly be as successful in his life if he hadn't earned it.

The primary marker of the mechanization of Dougie's confidence is a sonic one: we can *hear* his ascendence in moments of repetition. *Twin Peaks* is a show comprised of overlapping aural and visual loops, recurring sounds, and doubled and tripled characters, so keying in on the sound of Dougie's repetition fits into the series' aesthetic. Early in Dougie's presence in the series, when Cooper is fresh from the other dimension, his repetition is delayed, partial, and generally out of synch with regular patterns of conversation; people react to this repetition with concern. The following scene occurs in the moments just after Cooper has replaced Dougie Jones; his scene partner, Jade, was in the shower when the switch happened.



https://youtu.be/uOVYcTQp3uI

This clip is cut so that the phrase "Jade give two rides" happens back-to-back, but in the episode, there's over a minute of a screen time between Jade saying (a grammatically correct version of) it and Dougie repeating it. Dougie's imprecise and ill-timed repetition suggests to Jade that something may be wrong with him, and she rightly advises him to find some help. A similar interaction occurs in Episode 6, which opens with Dougie standing outside his work at night, unaware of what people do when work is over. When a police officer tries to shoo him

away, Dougie is able to repeat back information he had heard several days earlier, and his delayed reaction again elicits concern from the person he's with. A few scenes later, "Jade gives two rides" returns.



https://youtu.be/feTaze9quy4

As the season progresses, however, Dougie begins to repeat back exact phrases or words that have *just been spoken* to him. The effect is one of understated agreement or even prescience, as if he's repeating something he's known for some time and has been waiting for others to realize, too. Note the way Dougie responds in the following two videos. In the first, he's asked a question, which rises in pitch in the final syllables, and Dougie repeats the phrase with a falling pitch figure, which his conversants interpret to be confirmation. In the second, he's given advice, and he responds by repeating the last word in uptalk, which his conversants interpret as a hilarious joke rather than the limitations of a person whose interdimensional travel has left his verbal skills lacking.



https://youtu.be/QjmRMvNfjGA

https://youtu.be/yyDI7QJhy_o

As Dougie's repetition locks into a quicker, more immediate responsorial pattern, the people around him no longer worry about his well-being and, in fact, begin to project onto him a confidence he's incapable of possessing. This repetition, the kind that immediately plays with or confirms what his boss or potential murderers say, suggests a couple different theoretical constructions of repetition. Butler, in describing the performativity of gender, notes that gender norms are "the stylized acts of repetition through time," the rehearsed and rehashed ideas that we ascribe, in this case, to white men: well-timed humor on the one hand, and wise confirmation on the other (520). Sara Ahmed underscores a similar idea, noting that "compulsory heterosexuality" is "the accumulative effect of the repetition of the narrative of heterosexuality as an ideal coupling" (145). Here, Dougie's white masculinity isn't all that makes him the target of others' projections of confidence and competence; his nuclear family also marks him as a productively repetitive person, a person capable of reproduction. To modify Hagi's tweet a bit, the world projects onto Dougie the confidence of a mediocre, white, reproductive man.

Both Butler and Ahmed also gesture toward distinctly sonic phenomena present in Dougie's repetitions. Repetition accumulating over time becomes not just distinct events happening in succession but a discrete, singular *thing* unto itself. When thinking in terms of systemic oppression like white supremacy or cisheteropatriarchy, the repetitive privileging of white masculinity congeals into a continuous power flow. In musical terms, we hear the accumulative, rapid retriggering of a sound as pitch rather than many distinct events. Timing matters here: if the repetition is delayed or metered just so, we can perceive instances of the same events as moving in concert either melodically or harmonically. The shift in Dougie's repetitions over the course of *The Return* is the sound of institutional privilege tuning white masculinity, retriggering moments of repetition–which sounds like a rise in pitch as the repetitions move closer together, a literal ascent–until those around Dougie stop worrying about him and start believing that this mediocre white straight man must have earned the success he seemingly enjoys.

Though a perusal of *Twin Peaks: The Return* analyses and recaps demonstrates that viewers and critics have been far more interested in the archetypal Jekyll/Hyde duality of Dale Cooper and Mr C than they have been in the nature of Dougie Jones, Dougie's relative lack of drive or desire offers the opportunity to hear how white male mediocrity is made. *The Return* checks in on Dougie regularly from his introduction in the third episode until he transforms back into Cooper, then is remanufactured and sent home to his family in the sixteenth and eighteenth episodes. What we're privy to in that time is a different kind of manufacturing, where Dougie is constructed by his surroundings to be wise, caring, attentive, upright, and brave, though we know he's none of those things. The slow burn of *Twin Peaks: The Return* means that we're stripped of any easy excuses for Dougie's upward momentum in the season beyond the obvious explanation that the gods of mediocre white men have gifted him with treasures out of reach for others. Dougie repeats what he hears, and what he hears is that his mediocrity is good enough.

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Featured image: Screenshot from "'Dougie' Cooper – All Phrases (Twin Peaks Compilation)" by Youtube user AKA.

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Justin Adams Burton *is Assistant Professor of Music at Rider University. His research revolves around critical race and gender theory in hip hop and pop, and his book,* Posthuman *Rap, is available now. He is also co-editing the forthcoming (2018)* Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music Studies*. You can catch him at justindburton.com and on Twitter @j_adams_burton. His favorite rapper is one or two of the Fat Boys.*

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