

Twin Peaks (USA: ABC, 1990-1991)

Production Details:

Writers: David Lynch, Mark Frost, Robert Engels,
Harley Peyton, Scott Frost

Directors: Lynch, Tim Hunter, Frost, James Foley, Todd
Holland, Duwayne Dunham, Tina Rathone,
Graehme Clifford, Lesli Linka Glatter, Caleb
Deschanel

Producers: Lynch, Frost, Engels, Peyton, Gregg D.
Fienberg

Cast:

Annie Blackburne (Heather Graham)
Deputy Andy Brennan (Harry Goaz)
Bobby Briggs (Dana Ashbrook)
Major Garland Briggs (Don Davis)
Denis(e) Bryson (David Duchovnay)
Gordon Cole (David Lynch)
Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan)
Windom Earle (Kenneth Welsh)
Laura Palmer, Maddy Ferguson (Sheryl Lee)
Philip Gerard/the One-armed Man (Al Strobel)
Donna Hayward (Lara Flynn-Boyle)
Dr. William Hayward (Warren Frost)
Audrey Horne (Sherilyn Fenn)
Ben Horne (Richard Beymer)
Jerry Horne (David Patrick Kelly)
James Hurley (James Marshall)
Big Ed Hurley (Everett McGill)
Nadine Hurley (Wendy Robie)
Dr. Lawrence Jacoby (Russ Tamblyn)
Norma Jennings (Peggy Lipton)
Hank Jennings (Chris Mulkey)
Leo Johnson (Eric Da Re)



Shelley Johnson (Madchen Amick)
The Log Lady (Catherine Coulson)
Man from Another Place (Michael J. Anderson)
Catherine Martell (Piper Laurie)
Pete Martell (Jack Nance)
Lucy Moran (Kimmy Robertson)
Josie Packard (Joan Chen)
Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee)
Leland Palmer (Ray Wise)
Sarah Palmer (Grace Zabriskie)
Albert Rosenfeld (Miguel Ferrer)
Sheriff Harry S. Truman (Michael Ontkean)

With David Lynch's signature amalgamation of surrealism and Americana in mind, Mel Brooks once called the director of such bizarre films as *Eraserhead* (1977), *Elephant Man* (1980), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Lost Highway* (1997), and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) "Jimmy Stewart from Mars." *Twin Peaks*, Lynch's first foray into a broadcast medium, was weird, brilliant, television from Mars. Co-created with Mark Frost, a TV veteran who had been a writer for *Hill Street Blues*, *Twin Peaks* had been labeled before its much-ballyhooed April 8, 1990 premiere (which attracted 33% of the TV audience) "the show that will change television" (Rodman), and in the late 1980s/early 1990s there was a strong feeling that, in the face of new challenges from the emergence of cable programming, TV needed changing.

Dreamy, cinematic (rather than televisual), and slow paced, *Twin Peaks* accentuated its subtext, indulged in extreme violence, emotional excess, disturbing sexuality, uncanny dream sequences, and controversial subject matter, was lushly scored (by Angelo Badalamenti), demanded complete attention to its convoluted narrative from television viewers accustomed to distraction, and was ever reliant on "a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment in the latter" (Wallace). No other television series before or since had featured a lady with a talking log, teleported creamed corn, a giant and a dwarf (and their doubles), a woman who acquires super-human strength after a suicide attempt, a character who suffers from agoraphobia, a high school girl applying for a position as a prostitute tying a cherry stem into a knot with her mouth, ominous ceiling fans, an eye-to-eye encounter with

a llama, a talking mynah bird who witnessed a murder, doughnuts covered with blood, an opening shot in which the camera slowly tracks out of a hole in a ceiling tile, a reference to a sort of gum leading, fourteen episodes later, to solving a crime, a series ending in which the hero is inhabited by the villain . . . It was, in short, decidedly different.

Wallace has described with great precision the distinctive characteristics of Lynch's style as a filmmaker: "both extremely personal and extremely remote," "Lynchian" denotes "the absence of linearity and narrative logic, the heavy multivalence of the symbolism, the glazed opacity of the characters' faces, the weird ponderous quality of the dialogue, the regular deployment of grotesques as figurants, the precise, painterly way scenes are staged and lit, and the over lush, possibly voyeuristic way that violence, deviance, and general hideousness are depicted." *Twin Peaks* is often Lynchian. Even though Lynch himself directed only a half dozen episodes and received writing credit on only four, the series' directors took their lead from him. But Mark Frost was a major contributor as well, and the nature of the Lynch/Frost collaboration remains the subject of a great deal of debate and conjecture.

Writer-producer Harley Peyton observes on the DVD of the first season that, though Lynch's improvisations may have provided the creative impetus behind *Twin Peaks*, it was Frost who made it work as a TV series, Frost "who kept the series inside his head" at all times, Frost who minded the details. According to Nochimson's Irigaray-influenced provocative analysis of Lynch's role in *Twin Peaks*, "the complications of the extensively collaborative nature of television production had a deleterious effect on the series. . . ." During Lynch's prolonged absence from the series (he was filming *Wild at Heart* [1992]), Nochimson argues, Frost seized control of the narrative and moved it away from Lynch's commitment to vision, feminine wisdom, and "the bounty of the subconscious" toward emphasis on male, verbal, and rational control. Not surprisingly, neither Lynch nor Frost now remembers their partnership fondly.

Frost once described *Twin Peaks* as "a moody, dark soap opera murder-mystery, set in a fictional town in the Northwest, with an ensemble cast and an edge." (Pond), but the series exhibited multiple generic allegiances. It was a mystery ("Who killed Laura Palmer" drove the story for its entire first season and nine episodes into the second) and a soap opera (it even contained within it another soap opera, *Invitation to Love*, watched by all the residents of Twin Peaks, which mirrored

the metatext, and the series received regular coverage in *Soap Opera Digest*), but it was also an FBI drama (Malach), a sitcom (Deputy Andy and Lucy Moran seem to have strayed into the series from that most popular of television genres), a detective story (Hague, Nickerson), a sensation novel (Huskey), a western (complete with a "Doc" right out of *Gunsmoke* and a Sheriff in a cowboy hat), and a coffee commercial (Reeves, et al). Thoroughly postmodern, it sampled innumerable other texts, connected (through overt and implicit references and the presence of consciously-cast actors) in its intertext to movies like *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *The Searchers* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958), *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961), *West Side Story* (Robert Wise, 1961), television shows like *The Flintstones*, *The Mod Squad*, *Then Came Bronson*, and *Mister Ed*, and literature from the Arthurian legends (Umland) to Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, to Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (Carroll), and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Twin Peaks utilized Special Agent Cooper as "a combination private-eye and (cult)ural ethnographer" through whose eyes we learned about the peculiar characters of and bizarre events transpiring in the community of Twin Peaks. He may have served as well as a surrogate for Lynch as he discovered "the equally odd goings-on, the textual geography, characteristics, conventions, taboos, unexplored possibilities, of network television itself" (Lavery, "Semiotics"). But unlike traditional soaps *Twin Peaks* proved incapable of picking up new viewers in medias res, and even many of its fans seemed to grow bored with the "same kind of different" (Lavery, "Semiotics") it offered. Mark Frost had worried, prophetically, early in the show's run that "The pace of the culture is accelerating all the time in this country. Trends and fads. Too much attention is dangerous. Maybe [the show's audience will] digest us too quickly, spit us out" (quoted by Leonard).

Twin Peaks was one of the first television series to inspire active fan participation and heavy investment in a current series. At water coolers around the nation, at *Twin Peaks* parties featuring joe (coffee), cherry pie, and doughnuts, and on alt.tv.twinpeaks, avid followers of the show speculated endlessly about the significance of minute visual details (often captured and rewatched on their VCRs) and narrative developments in the series (Jenkins). Between the first and second seasons buzz about who shot Agent Cooper in the cliffhanger ending of the final episode was comparable to that occasioned by the infamous shooting of J. R. in *Dallas* (1980). Interest in the series was not limited to the United States: *Twin Peaks* was a cultural phenomenon in the UK, in Europe, and, especially in Japan. Even after

the show's cancellation, Japanese flocked to the Pacific Northwest to tour the "actual" sites of the series: the Double R Cafe, the Great Northern Hotel, the location where Laura Palmer's body was found, "dead, wrapped in plastic."

Fueling the conjectures of the interpretive community of *Twin Peaks* were the commodity intertexts (Collins) that began to appear in the first season. Revelations about the identity of Laura's killer and the secret backstory of the series' hero in books like *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*, written by Lynch's daughter Jennifer, and *The Autobiography of F.B.I. Special Agent Dale Cooper: My Life, My Tapes*, authored by Scott Frost (Mark's brother) became part of *Twin Peaks'* already formidably complicated narrative skein. Those who read the former were not completely surprised to learn that it was Laura's father, Leland Palmer, under the control of the parasitic supernatural being BOB, who had killed her. Those who had read the latter knew that Cooper had a dark side not yet revealed in *Twin Peaks'* narrative but were as shocked as anyone at the series' final scene. (According to Nochimson, the final episode as it aired on June 10, 1991 was the somewhat botched result of a creative clash between the series' co-creators, with Lynch tossing out much of the screenplay by Frost, Engels, and Peyton and extemporizing his own version of the finale.)

Having plummeted in the ratings, routinely ranked among the bottom five shows in the Nielsens, *Twin Peaks* was cancelled by ABC in the Spring of 1991 after a confusing sequence of events in which the series was temporarily suspended, then shifted to a new night and time, and finally axed, Lynch/Frost were given no opportunity to bring their narrative to an end. The forever frozen-in-time final image of the series—a bloody Cooper staring into a bathroom mirror he has just smashed with his head and seeing BOB as his reflection—will forever be "the end." In 1992 Lynch delivered the feature film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, but the prequel, dealing with the last seven days in the life of Laura Palmer, was a critical and financial disaster and did little to provide closure for the series' narrative. (Nochimson sees *Fire Walk with Me*, a film lacking the television series' wonderful sense of humor and missing many of its most intriguing characters, as standing closer to the *Twin Peaks* story as Lynch would have told it without a collaborator.)

No television series has been more carefully studied. A decade of work by the fanzine *Wrapped in Plastic* has examined virtually every facet of the series' creation and production, interviewing many of the writers and directors and almost all of the key performers, and comparing scripted and televised versions of whole episodes. As

a result of the efforts of Craig Miller and John Thorne we now possess unsurpassed behind-the-scenes knowledge about *Twin Peaks* and understand better how much of the genius of the series was intended and how much a lucky accident. The many commentaries on the first season DVD of the series (by the director of photography, writers, directors) add much to this knowledge base. As a result *Twin Peaks* has been subjected to a televisual version of textual criticism—debate about authorial intent, internal and external evidence, etc—normally associated with literature. (The series even provided an aberrant text: the “European version” of the pilot: a complete *Twin Peaks* narrative, released as a feature film, including Cooper’s famous dream sequence from the second episode, in which Laura’s murderer is found and killed.)

Critics and scholars have likewise illuminated the series’ subject matter and themes, examining (a partial list only) its quintessentially postmodern music (Kalinak), its use of doubling (Kuznier), its failed challenge to commercial television (Dienst), its politics (Rosenbaum), its nature as a cult (as defined by Eco) television program (Lavery, “Semiotics”), Laura Palmer as a television saint (Desmet), its strategic use of the fantastic in order to depict the unthinkable subject of child sexual abuse (Stevenson), the series as an exemplar of Foucauldian disorder (Telotte), its depiction of women (George), its translation of Gothic conventions to television (Ledwon), its role as “difficult viewing” (Chisholm), its implications for understanding the complex nature of serial storytelling (Dolan); its revisioning of Oedipal themes (Kimball).

Though *Twin Peaks* did not, as predicted, radically alter television, it has had a lasting influence. *Northern Exposure* (1990-1995), *Picket Fences* (1992-1996) and *The X-Files* (1993-2002)—whose star David Duchovny played a transvestite Drug Enforcement Administration agent in *Twin Peaks*—colonized television territory *Twin Peaks* had opened up, as did, less successfully, such flops as *Eerie, Indiana* (1991), *American Gothic* (1995-96), *Murder One* (1995-97), and *Wolf Lake* (2001). Though post-*Twin Peaks* television has often seemed designed for a viewership with Attention Deficit Disorder (Peyton), some of the medium’s most important contemporary creators now think of the series as a television touchstone: both Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*) and David Chase (*The Sopranos*) speak of *Twin Peaks* in hushed tones. And the name itself has become part of the language: to evoke “Twin Peaks” in relation to any narrative or any sequence of events in the “real” world is to label it as fantastic, inexplicable, unique.

Questions to Consider:

- In what ways was *Twin Peaks* a radical departure from standard television?
- *Twin Peaks* has been described as more cinematic than televisual. In what respects is the series indebted to the movies?
- Can you make the case for identifying *Twin Peaks* as a soap opera?
- Can you identify the presence of other genres in *Twin Peaks*?
- Using Eco's description of the cult movie (in "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage") is it possible to characterize *Twin Peaks* as cult TV?
- Why did *Twin Peaks* acquire a devoted fan base? What is there about the series which seems to solicit active fan involvement?
- Early predictions held that *Twin Peaks* would change the nature of television. Did this prediction come true? If it did not, why did it not?

Recommended Readings

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