Twin Peaks and the Look of Television: Visual Literacy in the Writing Class

DIANE SHOOS, DIANA GEORGE, JOSEPH COMPRONE

In CBS's 1991 network campaign, Dr. Joel Fleischman of *Northern Exposure* shivers, waves, and grins to the television audience. Murphy Brown flashes a toothy smile. Major Dad salutes. This, the announcer tells us, is the "look" of CBS. According to this promotional spot and others like it, the look of CBS is contemporary, intimate, stylish, fun. Conspicuously absent from this image campaign is any indication of prime time's penchant for scare stories—reenactments of child molestations, spouse murders, night stalkers, and so on—all drawn from the newspapers and enhanced through docudrama. And, of course, even these frightening tales of danger and loss offer hope. The child is rescued from the icy waters. The falsely accused lawyer is vindicated. The look of CBS, like the look of network television in general, is upbeat and comforting. Stories have closure. Justice is served.

Certainly since the fifties, network television has helped shape and normalize at least one vision of American life—a world of beautiful (mostly white) people who smile, wear trendy clothes, fall in love with other beautiful people, live dangerously, learn through adversity. Television, of course, did not create this mythic world, but it has made that image such a common one on the networks that any deviation may seem an aberration. We would argue that because these images dominate Americans' experience of everyday life, it is crucial that students learn to read them as expressions of a particular set of values formed from the perspective of a commercial medium. The "look" of television, then, is more than a set of camera angles and narrative codes, though certainly it emerges partially through those codes. The look of network television also proposes a way of reading the world, a way of interpreting past and immediate experience.

Because television serves this function and because it seems such a ubiquitous medium, it has become one of the most common popular culture texts to be brought into writing classes, especially those based on the concerns of cultural studies. Television has the added advantage of being the one medium most students feel expert in. Even if college students have suspended their watching in favor of other activities, most have grown up with some experience of watching television. They know the characters. They can sing commercial jingles. They even have access to the television of
their parents’ generation. (Many know Ron Howard as Opie rather than as the director of the hit films *Splash* and *Cocoon.*). It is just this expertise, however, that often prevents students from seeing more than the mere surface of most television programming. Anyone who has taught a course in which television is the primary text can testify to the frequency with which students claim they are not fooled by television’s ideology. No one, these students tell us, takes Miller Beer commercials or sitcoms or soap opera or prime time drama seriously. They are not the dupes of such appeals and persuasions that we, their teachers, think they are. They laugh at and with television, use it for their own purposes. Certainly some scholars would agree with this position.1

Many teachers, on the other hand, argue that it is just this seemingly friendly, in-the-know hipness that disarms the television viewer and makes that viewer susceptible to the medium’s messages. When the EverReady bunny interrupts a parody of a popular commercial, television reminds us that it can laugh at itself. What isn’t quite as obvious is how the ironic stance of that laughter can still be used to sell products. As John Caughie writes, “If irony is a useful concept, even if only to hold at the back of the mind, it is not because it offers a guarantee of the resistance which John Fiske discovers everywhere in television viewing, or even the romance of the guerrilla tactics of counterproduction and refunctioning which de Certeau finds in ‘consumer practices’” (“Playing” 56). What irony does offer, Caughie suggests and we agree, is the recognition of the viewer “being superior *and* being the dupe” of television discourse.

Students *do,* of course, know a great deal about television; they are not simply brainwashed by it. At the same time, television does construct a reality, a way of seeing that can come to influence the viewer’s world. We want our students to know that, to become critical readers of television texts. Writing classes have, however, typically used written texts for discussion and analysis. When television texts are used, teachers and students rarely take the time to consider the specificity of visual texts, or, for that matter, of television itself as a visual medium distinct from, for example, film or advertising. Television does have its own discrete rhetoric, and part of our aim in what follows is to offer a way to begin to explicate that rhetoric for teachers of writing who wish to use television texts in the writing classroom.

Any discussion of network television ought to begin with an acknowledgment of both its commercial nature and its status as a visual medium. As a rule, what networks broadcast is what producers and sponsors deem appropriate, and those programs tend to have a particular “look,” the redundancy of which might seem to make them immune to individual analysis. Occasionally, however, a program breaks with television’s common codes and thus provides a way of understanding how those codes function. In our attempt to delineate the look of television, it is useful, then, to consider one such program that does not conform to typical network programming even while
it draws upon many of this medium's common tropes, narrative lines, and character types. As Todd Gitlin has suggested, "In network television, even the exceptions reveal the rules" (273). Perhaps the exceptions reveal the rules even more powerfully than regular fare, for the exceptions on network television are scarce and often fleeting. The program on which we will focus our discussion is certainly one of television's exceptions.

Even before its debut, Twin Peaks was hyped as a bold experiment written and directed by David Lynch (whose credits include the cult feature films Eraserhead and Blue Velvet) and Mark Frost (a writer and story editor for Hill Street Blues). The reputations of Lynch and Frost as innovators form a part of the aura of difference that surrounded Twin Peaks throughout its popularity, a difference that functioned first as a marketing tool and ultimately as one reason for the program's cancellation after two seasons. Though it is now off the air, Twin Peaks shows in Europe and is available at video rentals, and the show has spawned new programs apparently more palatable to television's image of itself. The most conspicuous is Northern Exposure, a comedy/drama which vaguely picks up its location and sense of play from Twin Peaks. (In fact, in one episode of Northern Exposure, Joel, Holling, and Elaine refer to the weirdness of Twin Peaks, which they judge about as interesting as a pet rock. This easy reference might indicate that Northern Exposure draws much of the same audience that once watched Twin Peaks though, as one writer says, this show is "Twin Peaks for normal people" [Hickey 4].) In his discussion of the two programs, reporter Mike Duffy writes, "The comparisons are obvious: two quirky shows, both located in small towns in the far northwest reaches of the country, both loaded with unusual (to put it mildly) characters" (6Q). Duffy does acknowledge that the producers of Northern Exposure identify a significant distinction between the two shows: "I think our show is very, very different in its sort of underlying feeling. It think that in 'Twin Peaks' the woods were a dangerous place. In our universe, the woods are a kind of benign place. Twin Peaks was a scary place. You don't want to go to Twin Peaks. I think everybody wants to go to Cicely. It looks like a great place to go. Also, and I don't mean this as any kind of reproach, but I think there was an underlying cynicism in the show. And we try never to be cynical or sarcastic" (6Q). Producer Andrew Schneider's remarks are doubly appropriate for our discussion. He identifies the overwhelming character of prime time: the desire to be liked by or acceptable to as large an audience as possible ("everybody wants to go to Cicely"). At the same time, he recognizes a difficulty many have with Twin Peaks ("I think there was an underlying cynicism in the show"). Yet, what Schneider calls cynicism could just as well be understood as the deconstruction of mythic small town America, revealing the kind of unremitting darkness television serial fiction will not endure for long.

In popular culture circles, Twin Peaks captured an audience obsessed with its characters and mysteries. That obsession was partially evident in the
exceptional amount of *Twin Peaks* paraphernalia (tape recordings, books, T-shirts, the *Twin Peaks Gazette*, residency cards, and more), and even more evident in the amount of discussion the show generated among fans, critics, and scholars. Computer networkers compiled cast lists, lists of symbols and allusions, conversations, a “passion play,” summaries of the European ending of *Peaks*’ premiere, and even an episode-by-episode plot outline of the series. Much of this work focused on the multiple borrowings or parody of Lynch-Frost’s creation identified by one networker who called *Twin Peaks* “every bit of pop culture ever made,” suggesting that the program can most easily be understood in terms of parody, pastiche, or just plain camp. Certainly, parody is one way of understanding this program and of connecting it to the look of television in general. Television, Patricia Mellencamp reminds us, relies on “parody, an internal referentiality to itself and the forms, styles, and characters of other media” (4). Mark Crispin Miller has called this self-referentiality a “Hipness Unto Death,” television’s presentation of itself as so hip that it can joke about its own programming; thus, “TV preempts derision by itself evincing endless irony” (14) in its advertising, in its comedies, and even in much of its serial fiction. Although an interpretation of *Twin Peaks* that examines its parodic function can be helpful in understanding televisual representation, reading this series as parody alone does not get us very far in our understanding of how television serial fiction actually works. We suggest, rather, that a discussion of the specific structures of *Twin Peaks* can serve to test commonly held assumptions about television and take us further in situating the show within television discourse.

Before we begin our analysis, however, we should provide some overall direction to this discussion. We choose to analyze *Twin Peaks* for two reasons: first, to establish a means of responding critically to a program that we believe illustrates television rhetoric at its most complex because it is such an exception to usual programming; second, to suggest strategies that might be useful in teaching students how to read the visual and narrative codes of television. What follows, then, is a theoretical foundation for understanding the rhetoric of television in general and an extended analysis of *Twin Peaks* in particular.

**The Look of *Twin Peaks***

"Coop. Tell me. The idea for this really came from a dream?"

Sheriff Harry S. Truman to Agent Cooper (1002)

Throughout our discussion, we will be drawing on the work of John Caughie who, in a recent article in *Screen*, challenges scholars to move beyond familiar television theory. Caughie notes, “Much of the writing about television fiction seems to me to remain at the level of elementary genres, grounded in the dominance of the semantic aspect [theme], with relatively little analytic
or historical attention to the 'verbal' (style, *mise en scène*) or the 'syntactic' (narrative structure)” (“Genres” 137). For Caughie, then, style, *mise en scène*, and narrative structure are integral, if neglected, components of television discourse. That is not to say that, for us, thematic studies are unimportant. Instead, we would suggest that theme or meaning emerges most powerfully through television’s verbal and syntactic elements.

We begin our analysis with a discussion of style because, as it manifests itself through technique, style was central to the popularity of *Twin Peaks*, separating it from the banality of network television. There is yet, however, to be a careful analysis of the particular elements and effects of that style. On the one hand, the show makes liberal use of some of the visual conventions or codes of television (for example, the close-up two-shot so common in soap opera). On the other, the look of Lynch-Frost’s text is deliberately different from the look of other prime time serials, the most distinctive (and much discussed) aspect of this style being the show’s use of obtrusive technique, especially unusual camera angles, movement, and position, many of these techniques drawn from stock codes of film noir or fifties cinema: Josie Packard receives an unexpected, threatening phone call from Hank Jennings and the camera tilts, the canted frame suggesting a world suddenly thrown off balance à la Carol Reed or Alfred Hitchcock; Leland’s interrogation scene opens from the inside of an acoustical tile hole, the camera zoom reminiscent of the subjective technique of a “madness” movie like *The Snake Pit* or the dream sequences in *Vertigo*.

In these cases and others like them, the effect of technique is not merely one of parody or quotation, but also of a self-conscious stylization that unsettles and even momentarily disorients. In *Twin Peaks*, the camera frequently dislodges the viewer from the privileged position more common in television fiction. When, for example, Agent Cooper meets with Annie at the diner to tell her that she is on his mind, the camera frustratingly backs away from the action and the ambient sound rises just as their conversation becomes most intimate. When the camera snaps back just in time for the kiss, there is relief at being returned to this typical, thus more comfortable position. At other times, camera position and movement are used to inflect a scene with a particular, often threatening mood, as when Madeline informs Leland and Sarah that she is going to leave *Twin Peaks*. Here, the camera tracks laterally behind a sofa and then slowly past a phonograph playing “It’s a Wonderful World,” these objects temporarily obstructing our view. In this case not only is the viewer’s voyeurism blocked, but the perspective gives the impression of a hidden observer. Situated at the beginning of the episode in which Madeline is killed, this technique functions as a kind of visual foreshadowing of BOB’s murderous presence.

Two other scenes are especially striking demonstrations of the way *Twin Peaks* employs technique to construct ambiance. In the first, Donna has just finished relaying to Harold Smith the memory of the first time she fell in love;
after she sits down, we see a slow motion close-up of the ash falling from her cigarette. Visually the shot comes as a surprise, condensing the sense of temporal suspension and loss conveyed in Donna's story. In the second scene, a continuation of the love scene at the diner, Agent Cooper leans over the counter to kiss Annie, who knocks over a plate of food. A cut to a slow motion close-up of dark, blood-like syrup dripping from the plate onto the floor makes us suddenly aware of the violence and death which threaten that relationship. Such moments possess power and relay significance because they are atypical of televisual style. By contrast, most television fiction takes care to erase the presence of the camera. Lynch-Frost's technique in this case and others like it is more than visual play and, thus, does more than make the program look different; it visually amplifies meaning.

Perhaps the most talked about scenes in *Twin Peaks* and the prime examples of the show's style are the dreams and visions which punctuate the narrative. Many of these take the form of extended sequences represented as the internal point of view of an individual character, primarily Agent Dale B. Cooper. Although the transitions into these longer sequences are not as strongly marked as, say, those of dream sequences in classical cinema, they are nonetheless coded, if only briefly, as shifts in narrative mode. The first such sequence, for example, is introduced by an overhead shot of Cooper lying in bed. A later sequence, this one in the roadhouse, begins with a fade-out of singer Julee Cruise and a reaction shot of Cooper, his face isolated in spotlight; as the vision ends, Cruise fades back in and the lighting returns to normal. In these cases we are warned, as the giant of this vision says to Cooper, that "something is happening." At other times, dreams or visions occur as abrupt, seemingly random eruptions in the narrative. The third episode of season two, for instance, ends with a montage of dream images which, although still attributed to Cooper, are drawn from earlier parts of the narrative, even from other characters' visions. Thus, although they function as narrative memory, these images simultaneously interrupt narrative flow. Besides simply marking *Twin Peaks* as a different kind of television show, then, technical play not only helps to construct what we might call the program's ambiance, but also disrupts narrative structure.

*Twin Peaks* and Television Narrative

"I'm beginning to tire of his interruptions."
Agent Cooper to Annie Blackburn (2020)

*Twin Peaks* departs from television serial fiction particularly in its narrative structure. Later in his discussion of television genres, Caughie draws on work by Mikhail Bakhtin and suggests that television is perhaps most profitably theorized not as identical to or distinct from other narrative forms, but as a particular historical development in the more extensive category of novelistic discourse:
If we are thinking in terms of a specifically televisual addition to the forms which the novelistic has taken since the Greek romance, the organization of narrative around the expectation of interruption seems to me to be central. Just as journal serialization affected the chapter formation and the structure of the nineteenth-century novelistic, so also the break, mediated by the specific form of attention which audiences are believed to give to television, produces a mutation within the novelistic towards segmented narration. Unlike the novelistic of cinema or of the twentieth-century novel, the television novelistic is organized around interruption rather than closure.

(“Genres” 141)

Caughie further proposes that this preeminent interruptability and segmentation has multiple repercussions for television fiction as a genre which is subsequently characterized by “an extended, rather than a condensed form of the novelistic, in which attention is dispersed rather than highly concentrated; highly populated narrative communities in which causality is less essential than character to the sense of continuity; a narrative structure which need not end (because not driven by causality), but which, if it does end, may end arbitrarily” (“Genres” 145).

The characteristics outlined by Caughie are not only valuable ones to consider in a discussion of the structure of television serial fiction; they also help demonstrate the dual status of Twin Peaks as both representative of and a type of limit-case within prime time drama. The question of television’s temporality, its interruptability, is a crucial one. While it may be true that in many homes television is perpetually “on,” the chain of programs creating what Raymond Williams described in the mid-seventies as “flow,” it is also true that viewers habitually disrupt this flow by switching channels, talking, reading, or simply walking away from the set. Unlike watching a film in a movie theater, watching television is rarely experienced as a cohesive, continuous activity. Moreover, the commercial “breaks” which punctuate especially American television constantly challenge the cohesiveness of narrative; as Caughie remarks, “Cagney looks out of the frame and the answering reverse-field is a commercial for Mack trucks” (“Playing” 44). Television fiction accommodates, even capitalizes on this fragmentation, “organizing expectation and attention in the short segments which will soften the disruption of being interrupted” (“Genres” 145).

If television can be said to be generally “interruptable,” then a program like Twin Peaks pushed interruptability to an extreme on several levels. The first and most obvious is that of the multiple storyline. Although in the first season (and slightly beyond), the death of Laura Palmer serves as a kind of narrative core for the show, the number of intertwining storylines it generates creates a sense of fragmentation which far exceeds that of other prime time drama. Here we have not simply two or three subplots, but a tangle of narrative threads: occurring in and around Laura’s death we have the arrival of Agent Cooper and the beginning of the various investigations and relationships at the Sheriff’s office; the love affair between James and Donna and their search for Laura’s killer; the arrival of Laura’s cousin Madeline, who
joins with Donna and James in their search; Audrey's investigation of her father's store and subsequently of One-Eyed Jack's; Leland Palmer's breakdown, and more. In the course of the development of the narrative, some of these subsidiary plots become relatively autonomous—for example, in the second season the set of characters and actions which developed around James Hurley's travels after Maddie's death—adding to the sense of fragmentation. While the overloading of narrative lines did add texture to Twin Peaks and may have been used in homage to daytime and prime time soaps, it ultimately created problems in that there was never enough time in each episode, or even in a season, to accommodate and sustain the momentum of so many plots and characters.

A second level at which interruptability informs the narrative of Twin Peaks is in the internal rhythm of individual episodes. Like a soap opera, a single episode may be composed of as many as eighteen different scenes, some of which may be no more than five or ten seconds in length. However, unlike soap opera, a significant number of these scenes may bear little or no direct relation to what precedes or follows or, even, ultimately to the larger narrative of the show. Indeed, one of the most distinctive aspects of Twin Peaks is the way in which it is marked by odd, "quirky" moments not easily deciphered or integrated into the narrative. Such moments, which stand out precisely because we must stop and try to make sense of them, bring the flow of the narrative to a momentary halt. Near the beginning of the show's premiere, for example, there is a brief shot of Audrey slowly dancing alone in her father's office in the Great Northern Hotel. It is a scene which, although it may add to the mysterious atmosphere of much of the show, contributes nothing to plot and only loosely to the development of Audrey's character. Other similar interruptions occur intermittently throughout both seasons, a particularly effective one coming after the return of Major Briggs from his journey to the White Lodge. On this occasion, Major Briggs has just been taken away to be interrogated by the Air Force. After his departure, Cooper pauses to examine a Polaroid of the odd symbol stamped on Briggs' neck when droplets of water begin to fall like tears on the image he is holding. Cooper, Harry, and Doc Hayward look slowly up to the ceiling where a sprinkler is leaking. They look down at the picture, then at each other, and again at the picture. The camera then cuts to a close-up of the sprinkler and a drop of water falling to Psycho-like music in the background. Perhaps this is an allusion to Leland's death scene in an earlier episode. Perhaps it portends something yet to come. Perhaps it is more of what some viewers consider Lynch's visual play. The point is that as viewers we are left wondering, for the narrative never again picks up this reference, and the characters never speak of it. It stands isolated, a slight suspension of the narrative which then cuts abruptly to a comic scene involving Ernie, Denise/Dennis, and Agent Cooper. In moments like these, the very idea of what constitutes a scene, both in terms of content and of form, is called into
question. In the first example, narrative causality takes a back seat to character, in the second to mood. Although these moments may make viewers ask questions about narrative significance, those questions are not necessarily answered. Thus, Twin Peaks frustrates the narrative logic we have come to expect from network fiction and, moreover, frustrates the viewer’s desire for a coherent narrative world in which all scenes have meaning and stories typically have closure, even if that closure is delayed.

As our previous discussion suggests, another aspect of the “interruptability” of Twin Peaks is its constant shift in narrative mode and mood. Surely for much of its audience, a large part of the appeal of Twin Peaks came from its propensity for parody, for exaggerating the very generic tropes, such as multiple intertwining narratives, which it—like other shows—made use of. Yet on another level, Twin Peaks took itself and was apparently meant to be taken as serious drama, especially in those scenes of prolonged violence. Here again the show overlapped with, yet also went beyond other forms of television fiction. Caughie refers to the “bouncing of complicity and distance” which informed programs like Hill Street Blues and thirtysomething, leading to

a form of engagement in which identification and recognition are liable to be wrong-footed at any moment by ironic distance, and, at the same, ironic distance is liable to be caught out by sudden empathetic recognition. In an early episode of Hill Street Blues, the “joke” of a “nut” who thinks he is Dracula, complete with cape and thirst for blood, is caught out by the discovery that he has hanged himself in his cell. ("Genres" 151)

In Caughie’s example, the shift from parody to empathy takes place from scene to scene. In Twin Peaks these shifts occur not only between but within scenes: a conversation between Bobby and Dr. Jacoby begins as a clichéd encounter between shrink and rebellious adolescent that recalls numerous fifties movies (most notably Rebel Without a Cause) and ends with Bobby’s moving revelation that Laura forced him to sell drugs so that she could have access to them. At Laura’s funeral, Bobby’s denouncement of the townspeople’s hypocrisy and his raging attack on James gives way to dark humor when Laura’s father Leland throws himself on his daughter’s coffin, causing the hoist mechanism to go haywire and his wife to scream, “Don’t ruin this, too!” Even further, in some instances, comedy and serious drama, distance and empathy infuse the same moment: the ride on the coffin is at once ridiculous (as reflected in the laughter of the customers at the diner as Shelley recounts the incident) and poignant. Or, later, at the scene of the party for Icelandic investors, Audrey cries in the corner as she watches the partygoers mimic Leland’s bizarre movements as he dances; her weeping suddenly brings to the surface the latent pathos of the scene.

Welcome to Twin Peaks: Television Fiction and Mise en Scène

Diane. 11:30 a.m. February 24. Entering the town of Twin Peaks. Five miles south of the Canadian Border. Twelve miles west of the state line. I’ve never
As John Caughie suggests, *mise en scène* is among those components of television fiction scholars rarely address. *Mise en scène* is most easily understood as the mixture of various elements photographed by the camera—including lighting, make-up, costumes, props, setting, and composition of figures in the frame—that constitute the character of any given scene. Perhaps serious discussion of this aspect of television drama is rare because, in television, *mise en scène* is often reduced nearly to setting alone, and that setting serves as little more than a backdrop for action. Even in those programs in which the place names the series (for example, *Knots Landing*, *Dallas*, and *L.A. Law*), setting does little more than supply color, minimal realism, or narrative opportunity. Police stations and hospitals are the kinds of sites that provide ongoing drama or continuous crises enough to support a season's worth of television fiction, and a few cities are culturally associated with action, adventure, mystery, or a particular social class and can thus be used to create a specific feel or an attempt at regionalism. During the opening credits of *Dallas*, for example, the camera zoomed up a super highway into Dallas and then on to Southfork, a journey which metaphorically mapped the new wealth and excessiveness that has come to be associated with Texas oil. The camera’s trip up that highway also became the viewer’s trip into Dallas. The first seasons of *Knots Landing* opened with an aerial shot of the cul-de-sac in which this California serial is set, the shot suggestive of the stifling intimacy that can accompany close suburban living. Beyond these opening shots, however, *Dallas* and *Knots Landing*, like their counterparts, could take place just about anywhere. *Falcon Crest* was set in a mythical winery; *St. Elsewhere* in a down-and-out Boston hospital; *Hill Street Blues* in an unnamed eastern city’s police station; *L.A. Law* in fast-paced, upscale law offices in the city that bears its name; and *thirtysomething* in the Philadelphia offices and homes of upwardly mobile young American professionals. Television fiction attempts to codify and thereby naturalize representations of place so that viewers recognize the typical hospital, police station, small town, and office quickly without much thought. It might be said, then, that *mise en scène* in most of television fiction asks that viewers believe the people and their stories because the places in which those characters live and work are so familiar, partially through actual experience, but primarily through cultural representation.

The question of such representation is a sticky one. In his discussion of postmodern representations of time, Fredric Jameson notes the difficulties of adequately depicting a period, a place, or a national mood. His discussion is particularly in reference to popular culture’s representation of the fifties, an era most useful for our discussion of *Twin Peaks*. Already in the fifties, small town American life was under scrutiny. In *The Twilight Zone*, in *Rebel*
Without a Cause, in the rock ‘n’ roll of groups like Bill Haley and the Comets, middle-American complacency was being challenged. And yet, later representations of the fifties (Happy Days, Laverne and Shirley, American Graffiti) were able only to recall the surface details of fifties popular culture. Jameson calls this use of detail nostalgia-deco: details without meaning, the bits and pieces of a time without an understanding of that time. Drawing upon nostalgia-deco, seventies replications of the fifties recalled the poodle skirts and pony tails and Coca Cola signs, but they were unable to recreate what Jameson calls “a misery, an unhappiness that doesn’t know its name, that has no way of telling itself apart from genuine satisfaction and fulfillment,” a mood that he identifies as at least one reality of postwar America (280).

Because much of televi­sional representation of time and place tends toward nostalgia-deco, viewers are often treated to bits of a fictional past or a mythical present even in shows in which place or time would seem peripheral at best. At the opening of each episode of the now-cancelled Trials of Rosie O’Neill, after Rosie had complained once again to her psychiatrist, the credits rolled past the objects in Rosie’s apartment—from law books and study aids to sepia-toned pictures in silver frames, crystal perfume bottles, a rose. Such details, photographed in isolation, function purely as collective memory, nostalgia-deco. Crystal and silver and soft lighting combine to represent a mythically simpler, more elegant past where long-suffering mothers and hardworking fathers fought to keep families together. This idealized past can be measured against a present, in this case Rosie’s rushed life, her broken marriage, her visits to the psychiatrist’s office—all subjects continually visited throughout the brief run of this series. Jameson calls such representation “the expression of a deep, unconscious yearning for a simple and more human social system,” a kind of “cognitive mapping” of place and values proclaimed by details alone.

As a cognitive map of small town, rural America, Twin Peaks might seem to fit quite nicely. Like Garrison Keillor’s “little town that time forgot,” Twin Peaks projects a timelessness typical of idealized spaces. Norma’s RR Diner is a fifties-style restaurant in which the waitresses still wear those blue uniforms with scallop-edged aprons and useless little waitress hats. At the Sheriff’s Department, Lucy sets out coffee and doughnuts each night for Harry and the boys and can call Doc Hayward in on a case at a moment’s notice. Certainly ABC’s promotional materials capitalize on the timeless innocence projected by these details:

Welcome to Twin Peaks. It’s one of those picturesque rural towns that reminds you of time-honored American traditions, like peace and order and homemade cherry pie. Visitors tend to marvel over the magnificent Douglas firs and admire the breathtaking mountain scenery. Located in the Pacific Northwest, just five miles south of the Canadian border, Twin Peaks looks like a prosperous community of contented citizens devoted to their families. On the surface, at least, it’s a bucolic life. But that’s on the surface.
Here Twin Peaks could be Peyton Place or Another World's Bay City or any of a number of television towns with what ABC's promotional description later calls "the veneer of respectable gentility" beneath which are "seething undercurrents of illicit passion, greed, jealousy and intrigue."

ABC's promotion links Twin Peaks to soap opera, melodrama, and even popular romance novels. And, as we have already noted, there is much of soap opera and the rest in this series. Still, Twin Peaks does not completely replicate this formula. Certainly, Lynch-Frost pick up the details of small town living that have become common on American television: a sheriff who is friendly, quiet, and surprisingly competent; a local doctor who has delivered everyone in town under thirty-five; an unscrupulous businessman who "owns half the town"; and the oddballs, star-crossed lovers, and rock-solid family people we might expect to find in this sort of fictionalization. The particulars alone might seem to be no more than the nostalgia-deco Jameson describes, the town's surface appearance placing it within the myth of small town American life as it is most often represented in television fiction. Twin Peaks, however, seems to insist upon questioning this myth and exposing it as the sham it is. The sham is evident in fairly obvious ways—in the failed marriages, dysfunctional families, and social and political intrigues evident throughout the story. Whereas in soap opera we have come to accept—and thereby perhaps no longer question—the flaws of individual lives, in Twin Peaks simple corruption pales in the face of what seems to be a far-reaching, inexplicable, even unstoppable evil. And whereas in soap opera love conquers all, in Twin Peaks the evil cannot be redeemed. Thus, the Lynch-Frost creation does not simply debunk that myth and thereby do away with it, but rather continually confronts viewers with its inadequacy.

On a more disturbing level, then, the sham is the very myth itself, a myth that Twin Peaks' central character, Agent Cooper, seems to believe must still exist somewhere beyond the crime-ridden streets of America. In the third episode, Cooper sets out what is for him the importance of a place like Twin Peaks. Confronting the big city attitude of Albert Rosenfield, Cooper declares,

> Albert, I hope you can hear me. I have only been in Twin Peaks a short time. But in that time I have seen decency, honor, and dignity. Murder is not a faceless event here. It is not a statistic to be tallied up at the end of the day. Laura Palmer's death has affected each and every man, woman, and child because life has meaning here—every life. That's a way of living I thought had vanished from the earth but it hasn't, Albert. It's right here in Twin Peaks. (1003)

With that statement, Albert leaves and Cooper turns to his tape recorder to ask Diane to check into his pension options. He may look into buying property in Twin Peaks.

The action that completes this episode suggests, however, that Cooper's idyllic setting does not exist even for the people who already live there.
Despite opening credits showing the town's welcoming sign, the Great Northern Hotel, and the majestic waterfall, the visual image of peace and harmony must be read against narrative action and character development. At Laura Palmer's funeral, Bobby Briggs accuses the town of knowing all along that Laura was in trouble: "You damn hypocrites, you make me sick. Everybody knew she was in trouble, but we didn't do anything. All you good people. You want to know who killed Laura? You did! We all did" (1003). Still later in this same episode, Harry, Hawk, and Ed call Cooper to the diner to tell him what he really needs to know about Twin Peaks:

Twin Peaks is different. Long way from the world... That's exactly the way we like it. But, there's a back end of that that's kinda different, too. Maybe that's the price we pay for all the good things... There's a sort of evil out there. Something very, very strange in these old woods. Call it what you want—a darkness, a presence—it takes many forms. But it's been out there for as long as anyone can remember.

While this speech is certainly a reference to many horror films, it is also the first the audience has heard of the town's dark side. After all, every American city and town has known murder. Laura Palmer's death is dreadful but not unfamiliar. What is unfamiliar is the continuous questioning of the nature of place—small town America, the good life—that seems to engage Lynch-Frost and that takes Twin Peaks beyond nostalgia-deco. The mise en scène that results is not a mere simulation of gritty reality but rather the deconstruction of a myth against which American television fiction measures good and evil.

Television Fiction and Character

"You look like Cary Grant."
Blackie to Agent Cooper (1006)

Ironically, the vehicle for this challenge is the character of Agent Cooper. Cooper serves, as Caughie suggests most often happens in television fiction, to hold narrative together. This character—handsome, competent, moral, innocent, smart, intuitive, spiritual—is crucial to our understanding of what is actually "happening" in Twin Peaks and absolutely integral to the way in which the narrative is finally worked out. If, as has been suggested earlier, narrative flow is subordinate in television fiction, it is subordinate to character, which we expect to remain stable, even predictable, throughout.

From the show's premiere, viewers are led to believe that Cooper will not change, that he will be the center force in this wildly de-centered narrative, and early dialogue reinforces that impression. In the first episode, Jacoby calls him Gary Cooper. Later, Blackie says he looks like Cary Grant, and he does. He believes in dreams, has visions, mourns for the Dalí Lhama, and is genuinely swept away by the world he believes he has entered—where people don't take death easily, where there are ducks on the lake, where the cherry
pie and coffee are "damn good," and where Douglas Fir scents the air. Cooper is a believer in the myth even though that myth is contradicted for him in every episode. After Leland has been arrested for Jacques Renault's murder, for example, Cooper meets Judge Sternwood, who has just comforted the pregnant Lucy by telling her, "Life is hard, dear. Still in all, it's harder in most places than in Twin Peaks." In a continuation of that same scene, however, Sternwood's exchange with Agent Cooper suggests that, though life may be harder in other places, Twin Peaks is no Mayberry:

"Mr. Cooper, how do you find our little corner of the world?"
"Heaven, sir."
"Well, this week heaven includes arson, multiple homicides, and an attempt on the life of a federal agent."
"Heaven is a large and interesting place, sir." (1011)

Later in the series, Jean Renault accuses Cooper of ruining a simple town, but as Jean describes it, Twin Peaks appears to be a simple town of drug running, prostitution, and theft:

"Before you came here, Twin Peak was a simple place. My brothers deal dope to the teenagers and the truck drivers. One-Eyed Jacks welcomed the businessman and the tourist. Quiet people lived a quiet life. Then, a pretty girl die, and you arrive, and everything change. My brother Bernard shot and left to die in the woods. A grieving father smother my remaining brother with a pillow. Kidnapping. Death. Suddenly, the quiet people they are quiet no more. Suddenly the simple dream become the nightmare. So, if you die, maybe you will be the last to die. Maybe you brought the nightmare with you. And maybe the nightmare will die with you." (2013)

The nightmare Agent Cooper brought with him was, apparently, his insistence that the population of Twin Peaks acknowledge the evil around them. During the series, Cooper's faith in truthfulness led him to confront everyone (even Harry after the death of Josie) with hard realities; yet, he never did quite accept those realities himself, the foremost reality being that his mythic Twin Peaks (or, for viewers, Lake Wobegon or Mayberry or Cicely, Alaska) does not exist (never has) at least not in the way he wishes it would.

Because Cooper believes so absolutely in the myth of small town America, he believes he can stop the corruption simply by ferreting out the wrong-doers. He essentially admits this when, after Leland's death, Harry, Cooper, Albert, and Major Briggs gather to talk over what has just happened. In searching for a way of understanding this horror, Major Briggs asks, "An evil that great . . . Finally, does it matter what the cause?" "Yes," Cooper answers, "because it's our job to stop it." Law and order are here evoked, the camera angle slightly below Cooper, looking up at his square jaw and padded shoulders, the image linking him to clean-cut comic book and Western heroes of the past. Yet, the narrative has already revealed that Cooper cannot stop this evil. It is not a matter of catching and jailing the criminal. BOB is something that cannot be controlled, at least not in the cops-and-
robbers way of popular legend.

This scene is essential, as well, for understanding the horror represented in the creature BOB. Apparently, BOB is the unspeakable, the violence this culture refuses to confront:

Harry: I've seen some weird things, but this is way off the map. I'm having a hard time believing.
Cooper: Harry, is it easier to believe that a man would rape and murder his own daughter? Any more comforting?
Harry: No. (2009)

Though no more comforting, this violence is what viewers know has happened. The fact of Leland's possession might save him as a character, but it does nothing to blunt the pain of watching Laura and Maddie die at the hands of a man who is father and uncle, trusted friend, local lawyer, pillar of the community. In the end, perhaps it was that pain that contributed most powerfully to the failure of Twin Peaks as a television serial. Television, as we suggested earlier, is no stranger to violence, but Twin Peaks laid bare the frightening senselessness of violence as it happens in ordinary people's homes. Violent death is ugly, as these scenes revealed, and the killer is often exonerated. For us, at least, it is no more comforting to think that a man would rape and murder his own daughter, but (contrary to Lynch-Frost's narrative) it is sadly more likely than ghostly possession and most viewers recognize that. Twilight Zone was clearly a series of stories about another world, a scary place of imagination and fear; Twin Peaks was too often a story of a scary place of real-world violence and macabre humor.

The final episode of Twin Peaks leaves us with one further point made by John Caughie and worth returning to here. Television narrative, not driven by causality but instead by character, may end arbitrarily if it ends at all ("Genres" 145). At the close of season two, Agent Cooper has become BOB. The possession was not entirely unprepared for. Before Major Briggs disappeared, the two spoke of Leland's death:

Cooper: You know, Major, I find myself thinking a lot about BOB—if he truly exists.
Major Briggs: I've pondered that same question continuously—before it was revealed.
Cooper: I try to imagine him out there, incarnate, [CLOSE-UP OF COOPER] looking for another victim to inhabit.
Major Briggs: There are powerful forces of evil. It is some men's fate to face great darkness. We each choose how to react. If the choice is fear, then we become vulnerable to darkness. There are ways to resist. You, sir, were blessed with certain gifts.

Thus, though the camera might seem to presage Cooper's failure in the Black Lodge, Major Briggs assures viewers that Cooper is one of those special people, "blessed with certain gifts." The stalwart hero who exchanged himself to save Denise/Dennis and Ernie in an earlier episode, valiantly offers his soul to save Annie in this final episode. The only trouble is—the devil takes him up on it.
In television, that is not what happens. As in the first exchange, Cooper should somehow have been able to cheat the devil and save Annie, but Lynch-Frost uncover the flaw of such fairy tale endings and, in so doing, leave viewers unsettled in what would seem a parallel to narrative interruptability: the arbitrary reversal of a character who has, until the end, served to hold narrative together. In fact, until this moment, it has been Cooper's naïveté, his belief in the goodness of small town life and in his own ability to stop whatever is out there, that has made the Lynch-Frost vision bearable for viewers. Without that possibility of redemption, Twin Peaks may indeed have been too dark, too unpredictable for the "look" of television. In fact, when the series did end, many viewers were ready for the relief they found in Northern Exposure's Cicely, Alaska.

A Final Note

"What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our own method of questioning."
Annie (quoting Heisenberg) to Agent Cooper

Our analysis of Twin Peaks has served as one way of delineating the manner in which television constructs meaning, how that meaning is coded, and how those codes might be deconstructed. In the classroom, however, teachers need not rely on this particular program to encourage that same discussion. There are others, some available in video rental, that might serve the same ends. At least one reader of this essay, for example, worried about its datedness, about the problem that Twin Peaks is now off the air and that Northern Exposure (or any extremely popular series) may just be this year's new fad. That is a reasonable concern, and yet we hope we have shown, not simply how one very difficult program works, but how television in general constructs a perspective on the world that has implications for the way regular viewers make sense of their own world. For us as teachers, a critical approach to television can only be achieved by close examination of individual instances of television discourse with an eye to their specificity, their similarity to and difference from other programs and other visual media.

A culture's values and fears are often embedded in its stories, and today television relates most of our stories. A careful examination of what those stories say and how they are told can give us insight into contemporary moods, values and frustrations. Prime time fiction, news programming, even commercials carry with them information about a culture's desires and failures. Our students know a great deal about this world already. We believe that they can teach us and each other as they interrogate the common and the uncommon look of television.
Notes

1 Within cultural studies discussions of television, John Fiske has been the main proponent of this position.

2 From the time Twin Peaks premiered to beyond its cancellation, a nationwide computer network generated a conversation about the program. This network and other computer conferences like it recorded interviews with cast members, gossip about the program, speculation about plot changes, ABC promotional materials, and much more. We would like to thank John Dan Johnson-Eilola and Fritz Ruehr for introducing us to the network and for helping us to access information from it. In addition, we acknowledge the help, encouragement, conversations, and arguments we had with friends and colleagues Susan Guitar and Marilyn Cooper.

3 Twin Peaks episodes are not named and so Lynch-Frost refer to individual episodes with four-digit numbers. The first digit indicates the season number, and the others are the order of the episodes within that season. The premiere episode of Twin Peaks is numbered 1000; thus, episode 1002 indicates the second episode following the premiere. The second season premiere is numbered 2001.

4 Caughie borrows the terms “verbal,” “syntactical,” and “semantic” from Tzvetan Todorov, The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre.

5 Tania Modleski, for example, suggests that the interruptable nature of soap operas mimics the frustratingly interruptable nature of women’s daily lives (101).

Michigan Technological University
Houghton, Michigan
Michigan Technological University
Houghton, Michigan
Arizona State University—West
Phoenix, Arizona

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