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“That Show You Like Might Be Coming Back in Style”: How *Twin Peaks* Changed the Face of Contemporary Television

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Abstract

The present study revisits one of American television's most famous and influential shows, *Twin Peaks*, which ran on ABC between 1990 and 1991. Its unique visual style, its haunting music, the idiosyncratic characters and the mix of mythical and supernatural elements made it the most talked-about TV series of the 1990s and generated numerous parodies and imitations. *Twin Peaks* was the brainchild of America's probably least mainstream director, David Lynch, and Mark Frost, who was known to television audiences as one of the scriptwriters of the highly popular detective series *Hill Street Blues*. When *Twin Peaks* ended in 1991, the show's severely diminished audience were left with one of most puzzling cliffhangers ever seen on television, but the announcement made by Lynch and Frost in October 2014, that the show would return with nine fresh episodes premiering on Showtime in 2016, quickly went viral and revived interest in *Twin Peaks*' distinctive world. In what follows, I intend to discuss the reasons why *Twin Peaks* was considered a highly original work, well ahead of its time, and how much the show was indebted to the legacy of classic American film noir; finally, I advance a few speculations about the possible plotlines the series might explore upon its return to the small screen.

Keywords: *Twin Peaks*, television series, film noir, David Lynch

Introduction: the Lynchian universe

In October 2014, director David Lynch and scriptwriter Mark Frost announced that *Twin Peaks*, the cult TV series they had created in 1990, would be returning to primetime television for a limited nine episode run

broadcast by the cable channel Showtime in 2016. Coincidentally or not, this announcement fulfilled a promise that Laura Palmer, one of the show's main characters, had made to FBI Agent Dale Cooper in the series' last episode, broadcast by ABC on June 10, 1991: "I'll see you in 25 years."¹ This announcement was enthusiastically greeted by fans and critics alike, not only because it means solving one of television's ultimate cliffhangers, but also because David Lynch, the "czar of bizarre," as *Time* magazine dubbed him in 1990, would return to directing once more, after a 10-year absence.

At the time when it was first shown, *Twin Peaks* brought Lynch to the attention of the general American audience, mostly made up of people who were unlikely to have seen any of his previous films (Odell & LeBlanc 73): the wonderfully weird *Eraserhead* (1977), the sensitive *Elephant Man* (1980), the unfortunately ill-conceived adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1984) and the spellbinding *Blue Velvet* (1986). Nevertheless, Lynch brought his unique creative vision to primetime network television at a time when the television landscape was something of a barren wasteland populated by formulaic soap operas and sitcoms.

In a career spanning six decades, David Lynch has established himself as a distinctive cinematic auteur whose filmic universe has sparked a revival of the uncanny, amplified nostalgia for film noir and is now honoured by many with the same cult acclaim previously reserved for, say, Orson Welles (Mejia 1). So what makes David Lynch stand out in contemporary Hollywood cinema? What are the elements that make up his idiosyncratic worlds? How can one account for the power and magnetism with which the filmmaker draws the spectator in and holds him captive? And how does his previous cinematic experience translate to the small screen and make *Twin Peaks* unforgettable even a quarter of a century later?

Lynch continues the grand tradition of masters like Fellini, Bergman and Bunuel as artists of the human psyche (Olson 263). His work is unusual in that it seemingly violates all the conventions of the classic Hollywood style: his story lines are disconnected, not driven by the logic of cause and effect, his characters are ambiguous and inconsistent, his cinematography is bizarre, filled with unusual camera angles and

disconcerting visual effects. The Lynchian world often resembles a giant and confusing labyrinth where the spectator can easily become lost and alienated. However, Ariadne's thread that can help guide viewers safely to an exit (or, in Lynch's case, to understanding) is the human mind (Devlin & Biderman 2). Lynch's mazes – some of the most remarkable and easily recognizable loci in popular culture (Martin 1) – are hypnotic, distinctive and often seem to blur the dividing line between the world onscreen and the one in which viewers live: the audience is no longer at a safe distance, as the director creates scenes that force the spectator to become aware of how the film itself factors in the viewers' desires (McGowan 2). It is in this sense that Lynch's cinematic universe is bizarre: one cannot watch a Lynch film the same way they would a classic Hollywood production, because the structure of his films challenges the public's traditional experience and expectation of cinema.

It is therefore rather surprising that Lynch had managed, for so long, to simultaneously exist within mainstream cinema (his work was honoured with prestigious accolades such as Oscar nominations and awards at international festivals) and independent cinema (Mactaggart 18; McGowan 13; Todd 14). His interest in cinema actually started with painting during the time he spent studying art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and became obsessed with the idea of making paintings move (Mactaggart 12). That is why, I believe, we can find many similarities between Lynch's films and fine art, especially the paintings of Dutch surrealist Maurits Escher, who manipulated the rules of perspective to create the appearance of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, a technique by which at first – just like Lynch's films – representations appear twisted and chaotic (Arp & Brace 7). Lynch was often accused by critics of being weird for weird's sake, self-indulgent and deliberately obscure (Manning 62); but those who do so, I believe, simply fail to grasp his continuous attempts to make films that are encounters with the sublime. The feelings of uneasiness or incomprehensibility one experiences when watching a Lynch film are simply the result of his efforts to translate into film what we find so difficult to put into words, i.e., the Thing, or the uncanny in a Freudian sense.

The Lynchian cinematic universe is built on binary oppositions, the strongest of which is the one between social reality and fantasy (McGowan 20), or between the world of desire (sparse and bleak) and the world of fantasy (excessive and compensatory) (Martin 4). This opposition is visible in every one of his films, from the earliest short films he directed in the late 1960s to his more recent productions, and it is very likely we will see it again in the new episodes of *Twin Peaks*. Lynch's films provide the viewers with a total experience of fantasy in which dreams – another essential ingredient of the Lynchian universe – play a prominent role. In *Twin Peaks*, for instance, dreams and intuition are important vehicles by which clues about Laura Palmer's killer are revealed to Agent Cooper² and in *Mulholland Drive*, the spectator realizes half-way through the movie that everything until that point had happened in Diane Selwyn's dreamworld. Lynch's characters are often subject to speculative identity in the Hegelian sense ("self-recognition in absolute otherness," McGowan 23): at the end of *Twin Peaks'* season 2, Agent Cooper appears possessed by the daemonic entity BOB; yet, when looking at himself in the mirror, which reflects back BOB's leering face, Cooper seems to recognize himself in this image, one that stands in sharp opposition to everything that we knew about him until that point.

Another key ingredient of David Lynch's cinematic universe are his outlandish, bizarre characters (Manning 66), who seem to contradict everything we know about traditional movie heroes who act as anchors and help advance the narrative by pursuing their goals. On closer inspection, however, one realizes that these characters are vehicles through which Lynch aims to convey abstract ideas: their primary mission is not that of advancing the plot, but to embody a certain idea. The world of *Twin Peaks* is full of such memorable, quirky characters, such as the Log Lady, or the One-armed man, whose presence, although limited in terms of action, is crucial in terms of understanding the unconscious impulses of human nature that Lynch tries to depict.

The worlds created by David Lynch in his films have a distinctive, instantly recognizable look: no Lynch film is complete without an ominous close-up of a mysterious numbered door, or shots of corridors, staircases, rhythmic machinery (e.g., the whirling blades of ceiling fan in

the Palmer house in *Twin Peaks*), and red curtains (Martin 2). The Red Room in *Twin Peaks* and its prequel, *Fire Walk with Me*, an example of a place with its own internal logic, is probably one of the most iconic spaces in the history of television serials and, undoubtedly, fans are eagerly anticipating its return in Season 3. In fact, many of his films tend to pivot repeatedly on a single, decisive room (Martin 10): Henry's bleak one-room apartment in *Eraserhead*, Dorothy Vallens' drab living room in *Blue Velvet*, the eerie Club Silencio in *Mulholland Drive* and, of course, the mysterious Black Lodge in *Twin Peaks*.

Lynch's films have generated a lot of critical discussion and many authors have tried to analyse his work based on a variety of approaches: some argue that Lynch is undoubtedly an auteur, one of the most original American filmmakers in the history of the medium and a chronological analysis of his work reveals how it forms a cohesive artistic corpus; others simply regard him as a reactionary, an anti-system director whose work is misogynistic and too bizarre to merit inclusion into the mainstream, while a third approach examines his work through Lacanian and other psychoanalytic perspectives (the most notable work in this respect is Slavoj Žižek's *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*) (Mactaggart 21-22). However, irrespective of the perspective adopted, one can count on the fact that David Lynch will continue to fascinate and generate critical scholarship.

In what follows, I intend to examine the reasons why *Twin Peaks* revolutionised the primetime television series, paving the way for some very innovative and popular shows, and whether the series actually borrows from the classic traditions of film noir and neo-noir and reworks tried and tested conventions into a modern, original and enduring product. My conclusion will attempt to make a few predictions about the future episodes of *Twin Peaks* and the place they are likely to occupy in the ever-changing television landscape of the 21st century.

***Twin Peaks*: “like nothing on earth”³**

On April 8, 1990, one of the three major American television networks, ABC, aired the pilot of a new TV series entitled *Twin Peaks*, written by

Mark Frost and David Lynch and directed by Lynch himself. The pilot was watched by 35 million people (an audience contemporary network and cable television can only dream about) and it achieved cult status more rapidly than any other series in the history of the medium (Olson 286). The show came at a time when the television series, the staple of any TV schedule, brought in declining ratings and very little by way of originality (Rosenbaum 27), this being probably the reason why ABC executives decided to take a risk with a director who was anything but mainstream and a plot that broke many of the conventions of genre television at a time when this was formulaic, unimaginative, repetitive and simply plain boring.⁴ Writing for *Time* at the moment when the series debuted, Richard Zoglin argued that "it is like nothing you've seen in prime time – or on God's earth. It may be the most hauntingly original work ever done for American TV." What is more, the pilot had been shot in a "miraculous" fashion (Zoglin), with very little interference from network executives. As Mark Frost recalls, what he and Lynch were doing was so alien to the experience of TV producers that they could not presume to tell the director how to do the pilot any better or different (Olson 269; Odell & LeBlanc 85).⁵

It seemed that the risk undertaken by ABC paid off, because critics were almost unanimous in their praise for the two-hour pilot and in predicting that the series would change television for ever; the epithets used included "one of a kind" (Rothman), "idiosyncratic, ambitious, pure art" (Poniewozik), "unprecedented" (Olson 270). The network had marketed the series as a cross between a crime series and a soap opera, but what they could not describe to the viewers was how stylistically (and even disturbingly) different *Twin Peaks* looked, how slow and hypnotic its pace appeared to be, how quirky, distinctive and secretive its characters were, and how its atmosphere was suffused with creepy foreboding (Zoglin; Olson 270, 285; Burns 24). Critics and viewers alike continued to praise the series during the seven-episode run of its first season, a fact also proven by its unprecedented 14 nominations for the 1990 Primetime Emmy Awards.⁶ The series was renewed for a second season of twenty-two episodes that started airing in September 1990. By mid-season, however, the ratings were declining fast, the network moved it to the

“graveyard spot” of Saturday night and the show was increasingly criticized as “weird”, “incomprehensible” and “out of control”; by the time the final episode aired in June 1991, the audience had dropped to a meagre six million viewers (Burns 37). So how can one explain *Twin Peaks*’ meteoric rise to cult status and its even quicker fall from grace? Or its enduring legacy? I will attempt to answer these questions in the remainder of this section.

In terms of structure, the television series of the 1980s fell in two general categories: the episodic series, broadcast in prime time, and the continuous series (or daytime soap), aired in the afternoon. *Dallas* inaugurated the category of nighttime soap opera with a sequential structure, i.e., a series that normally ends with an end-of-season cliffhanger. In many respects, *Twin Peaks* is neither an episodic series nor a continuous one (Dolan 35). The first season represents an innovative mix of the two: a serialized detective story serves an expositional framework for the introduction of an off-center soap opera (represented by daily life in the town of Twin Peaks, so that one can speak of a continuous serial within an episodic serial pattern (Dolan 35). But, unlike a typical soap opera, *Twin Peaks* displayed a clear inability to pick up new viewers *in medias res* – which partially explains its decline. The central plot of the first season is the murder investigation carried out by FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper and Sheriff Truman’s team into the death of Laura Palmer, a seemingly wholesome, all-American homecoming queen with a seedy double life. As the investigation progressed, however, the detective story appeared unable to sustain the interest of the viewers (especially since the identity of Laura’s killer was only revealed in episode 14 (after repeated pressure from ABC executives) in the long run and the introduction of additional subplots generated a lot of confusion about the show. The last episode of the first season, instead of revealing who the killer was (as many viewers expected), ended instead with a cliffhanger: a mysterious figure shot Agent Cooper, who was seemingly left for dead on the floor of his hotel room; by this time, nearly all major investigative threads were exhausted (Dolan 38). Probably the most memorable scene in the entire season occurs at the end of episode 3 (directed by Lynch himself): the dream during which Cooper is transported to the Red Room and finds out

the name of Laura's killer, only to forget it upon waking up. This sequence was highly innovative in aesthetic terms; yet, in the long run, it seemed to generate more confusion among viewers rather than provide clues about the central mystery of the plot.

The first episode of season 2 erased almost all previous plotlines and the murder investigation now seemed to shift from forensic territory into the supernatural, a fact proven by the central position now occupied by the mysterious and creepy figure of BOB (Dolan 40).⁷ Season 2, much less visually striking than season 1, also adopted a different, hybrid structure, being divided into 5 smaller episodic serials (episodes 9-13; 14-17; 18-21; 22-24; 25-30) that contain many more individual plotlines (Dolan 41-42). But, unlike in daytime and primetime continuous serials, where new plotlines usually come with the introduction of fresh characters, in *Twin Peaks* several of these new plotlines occur as a result of trying to clarify enigmas in existing characters' backstories (e.g., the deadly chess game between Cooper and Windom Earle and the former's involvement with Earle's wife, or the revelation that Benjamin Horne may be Donna's father).

Probably two of the most emblematic themes present in *Twin Peaks* are dreams and duality. The former is mentioned in every single episode, in one form or another; dreams play an important role in the murder investigation itself, as they reveal significant clues to Agent Cooper in the dream sequence where he is transported to the Red Room (Olson 291). In fact, this scene brings together two major themes recurrent in Lynch's work: the nature of the experience one has while dreaming and the idea of gaining knowledge through dreams (Riches 25). Dreams in *Twin Peaks* (as in *Mulholland Drive*, for instance) are used to pose questions about the nature of reality; while in season 1, the dream motif is well integrated into the central plotline⁸ – the murder investigation – by the end of season 2, the "dreamlike unreality" of the series had reached farcical levels (Riches 38).⁹

The theme of duality is suggested from the very title (*Twin Peaks*) and the opening sequence, whose hypnotic musical score, composed by Angelo Badalamenti, seems to take us on dreamy journey awash in dualities: we see two smokestacks, two rivers joining in a single falling

waterfall, two ducks on a lakeshore (Olson 272; Burns 27). The very first image we see is of a mysterious woman (another typical Lynchian motif; here, the woman is later revealed as Josie Packard) gazing at her reflection in a mirror; the mirror's edge forms a prominent curve, as if suggesting that Twin Peaks is a place where reality does not move in a straight line between two points, but arcs out into strange dimensions as it circles back upon itself. Duality is further emphasized by means of characters: Windom Earle is Cooper's evil twin; many characters double and resemble each other (Shelley/Norma, Audrey/Donna); Laura's cousin, Madeleine Ferguson (an obvious reference to Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, another film where duality and doubles feature prominently) seems to be Laura's brunette double (Hughes 147);¹⁰ BOB is Leland Palmer's doppelganger (although he is not a true doppelganger, as he can be seen by other people, too) and the scene in which Leland/BOB kills Maddy is a "doubling of doubles" (Mactaggart 134): Maddy is Laura's double, as BOB is Leland's and the latter reenacts with his niece an earlier dance scene in which he was spinning erratically across the room, holding Laura's photograph. Another example of doubling and duality is the soap opera *Invitation to Love* that everyone in Twin Peaks seems to watch (at least during the first season), another Lynchian creation that functions as a parallel universe to the one depicted in the series (Nochimson 75). The central place occupied by this soap opera within the diegesis and the fact that the conventions of the genre were doubled, ironized and reworked in *Twin Peaks* seems to indicate that the show (or its first eight episodes, anyway) was built on a melodramatic foundation (Martin 81; Suter 182).¹¹ In season 2, *Invitation to Love* disappears almost completely from the story (it appears in one episode only), perhaps signaling the fact that the show started moving in a different direction.

Another frequent Lynchian theme at the heart of *Twin Peaks* is the family universe; more specifically, the family as the place where "anything can go wrong" (Martin 64). Ever since his first feature film, *Eraserhead*, Lynch has represented the American family as dysfunctional, unstable, and secretive. In *Twin Peaks*, he takes matters one step further by approaching the very sensitive and disturbing topic of incest, a taboo subject on network television before *Twin Peaks*: Laura is, after all,

sexually abused and finally murdered by her own father (even though he was possessed by the daemonic BOB).¹² The core of the series' domestic disorders is the Palmer household (Martin 87; Olson 274), but all the other families who populate the show are dysfunctional in various ways: Ben Horne is a womanizer who neglects his wife and almost rapes his daughter, James's mother is a wandering alcoholic and he has to live with his uncle Ed and his deranged wife, Nadine, the Log Lady cradles a piece of wood as if it were her own child, Shelley is the victim of an abusive and domineering husband, Norma has an affair with Ed while trying to save appearances in her marriage to ex-con Hank, and Dr. and Mrs. Hayward's seemingly perfect family is torn apart when Donna finds out that Ben Horne is her biological father. All these examples support that idea that the Lynchian home is a genuinely uncanny place in a Freudian sense, a place where even the most mundane objects, such as a ceiling fan, can acquire sinister connotations.¹³ In fact, *Twin Peaks* redefined the way in which families (or their televised representations, anyway) could be depicted and considered (Burns 133).

In contrast to family relationships, the connection between man and nature in *Twin Peaks* is much more often represented in positive terms and appears to be vital to this small community. The importance of the natural environment is made clear from the pilot episode, when we see Agent Cooper arriving in Twin Peaks and expressing his genuine amazement at the size and number of trees (Douglas firs) he sees along the road (Suter 180); later on, there are many instances in which Cooper, with child-like admiration, observes nature and marvels at its beauty.¹⁴ Man's relationship with the natural environment in *Twin Peaks*, seems built on many of Emerson's ideas explained in his 1836 essay, *Nature*: man's power over nature comes from understanding, but dreams and intuitions may let us deeper into the secrets of nature than rational experiment (Emerson 43). The woods around the town are also the place where Laura has her final encounter with BOB/Leland and they hide the entrance to the mythical Black Lodge: in the final episode, the doorway is glimpsed through velvet red curtains appearing in circle of sycamore trees bearing the Arthurian-inspired name of Glastonbury Grove. A recurrent image of wind blowing through the fir trees evokes an eerie feeling of uneasiness

and expectation articulated by Sheriff Truman early in season 1 (Suter 180; Kelly 261): “there is a sort of evil out there in these woods,” an evil whose nature is never entirely clarified. The significant place nature occupies in the series is evident from its very first image: a bewick’s wren perched on an evergreen bough, a peaceful image that soon gives way to views of “industrial art” (i.e., the Packard Sawmill), but which nonetheless sets the tone for *Twin Peaks*’ universe and emphasises Lynch’s belief that nature holds significant clues to understanding not only the show but the larger world as well (Suter 179; Martin 48).

Twin Peaks, is, of course, a town unlike any other in the history of American cinema and, in many respects, it acts like the series’ main character. One possible source of inspiration for Lynch and Frost when they created the quirky world of *Twin Peaks* may have been the 1957 film *Peyton Place*, an adaptation of the novel by the same name, which depicted the emotional life and hidden secrets of a small New England town (Olson 266-267; Newman 636). On the other hand, *Twin Peaks* also seems to borrow many features from another emblematic Lynchian small town, Lumberton from *Blue Velvet*, which many critics called the “spiritual prequel of *Twin Peaks*” (Burns 156; Newman 636). Lynch often expressed his nostalgia for 1950s small town America, whose “feel” he tried to recreate, especially in *Blue Velvet*, but, of course, putting his own twist on it: instead of an idyllic place with friendly neighbours and white picket fences, Lynch’s representations of small town America are frightening, bizarre, filled with secrets, engulfed in dread and desire (Olson 281).

One of the show’s main innovative features and, at the same time, a major source of terror in Lynch’s version of small town America depicted in *Twin Peaks* stems from the introduction of the character BOB, as a physical (the serial killer) and metaphysical entity (the demon). BOB is clearly a being of two universes, an emanation of frightening tropes in American literature (Murray 299); the fact that Leland commits incest and murder under his possession infuses the show with definite Oedipal overtones. As a being of another world, BOB only kills when his existence is at risk of being revealed, using the body he possesses as the killing vehicle.¹⁵ His dwelling place is the mysterious Black Lodge and, in

the second part of season 2, it is precisely the power of evil which spawned BOB that Windom Earle tries to appropriate, a fact that ultimately brings about his demise. At the end of season 2, BOB seems to have found another host by possessing Agent Cooper. However, as Lynch explained in an interview, it is not about a case of possession *per se*, but more an issue of doubles and doppelgangers; like everyone, Cooper has an evil side to him and it appears that the "bad Dale" is the one who managed to escape the Black Lodge and return to the Great Northern Hotel: "the thing is, he hasn't [been possessed]. It's the doppelganger thing – the idea of two sides to everyone. He's really up against himself. People were really upset that it ended with an evil Cooper who'd been taken over by Bob" (Suter 185).

A complex being such as BOB needed an equally intriguing dwelling place: the Red Room, a transcendent place where the rules of space and time do not apply. The image of the Red Room simply popped into Lynch's head one Los Angeles afternoon, as his hands touched the warm surface of a parked car (Nieland 164). It would become the series' most iconic space and an instantly recognizable image in popular culture, appearing in TV commercials, music videos, sitcoms and fashion editorials (Olson 293). Viewers were first introduced to it during the last nine minutes of episode 3, when Cooper visits it in his dream and finds there a backward-talking dwarf, the Man from Another Place, and a woman who looks just like Laura Palmer. This scene is probably the best example of surrealism in American cinema (Burns 250; Olson 293; Martin 151) and it is all the more surprising that it appeared on network television during primetime programming. The Red Room is a space entirely defined by flowing walls of red velvet curtains, which – through their elaborate folds and recesses – imply depth, concealment and even boundlessness (Martin 143).¹⁶ The Room appears twice in the series, at the beginning and end, framing the narrative and confirming its special status; moreover, in a show whose 30 episodes were directed by many different filmmakers, only Lynch himself directed scenes in the Red Room, implying that he has a particular relationship with that space. The décor of the room is mixture of styles, with Art Deco armchairs, Greek statues (*Venus de Milo* in the final episode, *Venus Pudica* in episode 3)

and modernist high-standing lamps, while the floor (previously seen in the hallway of Henry's building in *Eraserhead*) is a zig-zag of white and black lines resembling electric shockwaves (Martin 151).¹⁷ Upon entering the Red Room in the final episode, Cooper is greeted by the Man from Another Place with the words, "this is the waiting room," suggesting a space of permanent transition, where nothing is settled: soon enough, this space becomes infused with doppelgangers, physical metamorphosis and injury. Matter switches from liquid to solid, lights flash wildly and the camera shoots from some very unusual angles, creating unsettling images. Cooper wanders through endlessly looping chambers and corridors, encountering Earle, Leland Palmer, BOB, the Giant, Laura, Maddy, Annie, Caroline Earle and, finally, his own doppelganger, who chases him through the curtains. It is quite evident that the architecture of this room borrows from the ancient myth of the labyrinth, built by Daedalus to house a monstrous hybrid, the Minotaur (Martin 156). Like a proper maze, *Twin Peaks* is full of false pathways, dead ends and cul-de-sacs which generate the ultimate encounter: Cooper, an Orpheus-like figure who wanders a curtained underworld in search of a woman, meets himself.

The Red Room accurately reflects several markers of Lynch's style: the frames are uncluttered, there is a notable contrast between gray and green tones of outside scenes and the reddish wooden glows of the inside ones, the camera hardly ever moves and many scenes are filmed in long, unbroken takes; even the conversations scenes do not normally follow the standard shot-reverse shot pattern, as Lynch prefers tableau shots in which all the characters are visible (Olson 300).¹⁸

Another element in *Twin Peaks* that is just as distinctive as its visual style is its score, composed by the long-time Lynch collaborator Angelo Badalamenti. While in many films and TV series, music serves as a mere aural bridge from one scene to the next, or reinforces moments of danger or romance, in *Twin Peaks* the music is an integral part of the narrative (Gherasim 459). On many occasions, the viewers are led to believe that the music is non-diegetic when, in fact, it is (Kalinak 85). There are several musical themes that feature prominently in the score, one of them being Laura's theme, first heard when her body was unwrapped from its plastic cover; at this point, the viewer is supposed to

be horrified and shocked, but the music elicits a different emotional response more appropriate to a romance scene. Therefore, music often functions as a tool to distantiate the viewer from the image onscreen (in a Brechtian sense), and it draws attention to the artifice of the narrative (Kalinak 88), creating a very unsettling effect (Brown 70).

All the elements discussed above undeniably point to the many innovations *Twin Peaks* introduced to primetime network television; but its very uniqueness in terms of plot and look ultimately proved to be its undoing: after the end of season 1, many viewers started growing impatient with the lack of a resolution to the murder; its multiple subsequent plotlines became too confusing; it was difficult for new viewers to become familiar with the show; the topics of rape and incest made many spectators uncomfortable; the network kept changing its time slot during the week, so that the public became confused as to whether the show was even still on television (Olson 357). With ratings declining at an alarming rate, ABC decided to cancel the show after only 2 seasons, which however did not prevent it from becoming one of the most distinctive and talked-about shows in the history of American television.

***Twin Peaks* and the legacy of film noir**

Anyone who is familiar with David Lynch's work can detect strong noir influences in his films, from *Eraserhead* to *Mulholland Drive* and from *Blue Velvet* to *Twin Peaks*. The director has in fact confessed to his admiration for masters of noir such as Billy Wilder or Otto Preminger on more than one occasion. While I am not arguing that *Twin Peaks* is a series noir, the noir elements present in its episodes only add to its aesthetic value and originality.¹⁹

As Sheen and Davison rightfully observe,

one of the most important features of Lynch's work is his continuing engagement with the *noir* aesthetic. Arguably the strand of film-making that has maintained the disruptive potential of European traditions within mainstream production, *noir* has emerged in post-classical Hollywood as the narrative and stylistic template for an independent aesthetic. (3)

The most prominent examples of noir intertextual references in *Twin Peaks* are Otto Preminger's *Laura*, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (Mactaggart 150; Nieland 81).²⁰

Certainly, *Twin Peaks* is not the first TV series to draw on the tradition of classic film noir: in the 1950s and 1960s, we can find noir echoes in urban melodramas (*Naked City*), suspense stories (*The Fugitive*),²¹ and espionage tales (*Danger Man*), while in the 1980s noir aesthetic appears again in *Miami Vice* and *Crime Story* (Sanders 4). These series, *Twin Peaks* included, are not a mere extension of film noir from the big to the small screen; rather, they establish TV noir as an aesthetic category in its own right, which does not mean that one cannot find plenty of common points between the two: a strange, convoluted plot, a morally ambiguous, tormented hero, and a labyrinthine urban environment. In fact, the motif of the labyrinth occupies an important place both in *Twin Peaks*, where the Black Lodge closely resembles an intricate maze, and in film noir, where it functions on different levels: the shadowy big city is laid out like a labyrinth, with its claustrophobic streets, alleys and stairwells; the intricate plots often have a labyrinthine structure, with unexpected twists and turns, while the protagonists' inner struggles seem to offer them no escape, much like a maze appears to trap the ones who wander there, willingly or by mistake (Martin 157).

All these characteristics are to be found in *Twin Peaks*, a highly original mix of noirish influences and melodrama. Although some critics have argued that characterizing *Twin Peaks* as noir means limiting the possibilities of interpreting it, since noir is a type of realism (Sanders 25), it is my opinion that noir influences and references in the series actually add to its depth of meaning, despite the fact that comparatively few film critics have interpreted the series through the filter of noir sensibility (Holt 248).

So, what are the noir conventions apparent in *Twin Peaks*? First of all, the central plotline of season 1 involves a detective investigation into the murder of Laura Palmer (an omnipresent narrative element in film noir), while the focal point of season 2 is the cat-and-mouse game played out between the villain (Windom Earle) and the hero (Agent Cooper) (Holt 249) – a parodic interpretation of the antagonistic relationship

between another very famous cinematic detective, Sherlock Holmes, and his arch-nemesis, Professor Moriarty (Nochimson 77; Short 9).

Agent Cooper arrives in an apparently idyllic small town (although the typical noir setting is the big city, the environment of *Twin Peaks* is still an urban one),²² populated by idiosyncratic characters and an alarmingly high number of femme fatales (Holt 249) – although none, with the exception of Laura's absent figure, occupy a central role in the narrative in the same manner in which they do in classic film noir.²³ The narrative includes both flashbacks and voice-overs, a recurrent feature of film noir (Cooper is constantly dictating notes into a tape recorder to his unseen secretary, Diane) (Holt 250).

The series' distinctive visual style, featuring unusual camera angles, shifts in point of view and crossing the line of action also bears a clear resemblance to noir aesthetic conventions (Richardson 79; Holt 250). Finally, the series' dark, foreboding atmosphere, enhanced by the often downbeat, jazzy score, helps create a noir-like mood, despite the occasional comic (and absurd) interludes provided by quirky characters such as Andy, Lucy or Nadine. All these influences clearly prove that *Twin Peaks* would have been a very different product without the key ingredient of noir, which is mixed, in different proportions, with elements of horror, fantasy, drama, soap opera, comedy and romance to create a truly distinctive TV series.

Critics who dispute the extent to which *Twin Peaks* can be considered a noir series point, among other things, to the metaphysical status of BOB (Holt 253): he emanates from and returns to the Red Room, a spiritual realm accessible to the gifted and visionary (such as Agent Cooper), where one can meet one's "shadow self," or – as Deputy Hawk puts it – "the dweller on the threshold." This kind of emphasis on the supernatural runs counter to the realism and naturalism characteristic of noir. Nevertheless, such criticism does not weaken the value that noir elements bring to the *Twin Peaks* universe.

The parallels between *Twin Peaks* and Otto Preminger's *Laura* go beyond the fact that the heroines in the two productions share the same first name: both films prominently feature portraits of their protagonists (although, in Laura Palmer's case, this portrait is a large size photo of

Laura as homecoming queen, displayed in the Palmer household and in the high school's trophy case, among other places) to whom the detectives investigating their murder grow strangely attached (Martin 92-93; Hughes 187). *Laura's* Waldo Lydecker comes to life in *Twin Peaks* as Waldo, the mynah bird, and Dr. Lydecker, its veterinarian. Both Laura Palmer's and Laura Hunt's diaries play an important role in the murder investigation, and both films feature heroines who are killed at the beginning and, later on, come back to life – literally in Laura Hunt's case, and metaphorically (through recollections, home videos and her appearances in the Red Room) in Laura Palmer's case.

The name of Laura's cousin is a clear allusion to the character Madeleine in *Vertigo*, while her surname, Ferguson, is borrowed from Hitchcock's acrophobic detective hero (Hughes 213). Lynch also pays tribute to another noir classic, *Sunset Boulevard*: the character of the deaf FBI chief he himself plays in the series – Gordon Cole – is named after an obscure, unseen protagonist in Wilder's film, one of Cecil B. DeMille's assistants at Paramount, who calls Norma Desmond and makes her think the studio wants her to return to the screen, when in fact all they needed was permission to use her car in a period film. Last, but not least, *Twin Peaks* makes several poignant references to Lynch's neo-noir masterpiece, *Blue Velvet*, including the fact that both films are set in small towns where everything appears perfect, but where danger, vice and immorality lurk just beneath the surface (Hughes 197). *Blue Velvet* ends with the hopeful image of a robin, while *Twin Peaks* begins with the emblematic wren sitting on a tree branch, a harbinger of the significant role nature will play throughout the series.

Twin Peaks has the merit of having introduced television audiences to a series unlike any other they might have seen before and of having brought the cinematic spectacle of the big screen to the intimacy of their living rooms; the Lynchian world of the series, with its distinctive throwbacks to noir aesthetic, remained with them long after the final credits rolled off the screen at the end of each episode.

Coda: *Twin Peaks*, twenty-five years later

When ABC network cancelled *Twin Peaks* in June 1991, after only 30 episodes, the show’s viewership had dropped to about six million hardcore fans, who had stuck with the show throughout the entire second season, despite the unusual (and sometimes absurd) plotlines and lack of consistency, primarily due to the fact that both Lynch and Frost had become involved in other projects (Crouch). But even this dwindled audience could not have been satisfied with the cliffhanger-packed final episode and especially with the fact that the show’s main protagonist, Agent Cooper, finally went over to the “dark side”, seemingly possessed by the maleficent BOB. Many reasons were put forward as to why the show was cancelled (some of them discussed in the previous sections of this study), but perhaps the simplest explanation is that *Twin Peaks* was, at the time, an example of what one could not do on TV (or, at least, not in the long run, anyway): it was dangerous to be too original, weird even, too ahead of its time and sometimes out of time altogether (Crouch) and to keep audiences hanging on for closure (it took about eight months to reveal Laura Palmer’s killer) (Poniewozik).

But it was precisely this haunting weirdness that ensured the series’ cult status and its enduring presence in contemporary popular culture. The television landscape of the year 2015 is very different from what it was twenty-five years ago (as I have mentioned in a previous section) and the new episodes of *Twin Peaks* – should they ever air, in the aftermath of Lynch’s financial dispute with Showtime and his April 5, 2015 announcement that he was leaving the project – will be under much less pressure to turn in consistently high ratings: there are far more outlets (especially cable channels, like Showtime itself), and the sheer number and diversity of current TV series prove that a show can survive with a much smaller audience (Poniewozik). Moreover, even if the new episodes manage to replicate the first two seasons’ uniquely distinctive qualities, I very much doubt that anyone will pay too much attention to its “weirdness”, after having been exposed to series like *The X Files*, *Millennium*, or *The Sopranos*. After all, scattered references to its main

plot – a young girl is murdered and this reveals the evil lurking behind the surface of an apparently ideal community – are omnipresent in contemporary TV shows, yet the unique, unsettling tone of *Twin Peaks* has never been recreated (Crouch; Rothman).

A show like *Twin Peaks* was bound to be the inspiration behind many future television series and to generate numerous references to it in popular culture.²⁴ Shows like *Northern Exposure* (a parody of *Twin Peaks*, set in an Alaskan small town populated with distinctly quirky characters, modeled after *Twin Peaks* residents) (Olson 341), *The X Files* (which borrows from *Twin Peaks* the extraterrestrial plotline and, of course, its main protagonist, David Duchovny, who played DEA Agent Dennis/Denise Bryson) (Olson 353; Riches 42), *The Sopranos* – which was often called “*Twin Peaks* in New Jersey” (Burns 114) (and whose writer-producer, David Chase, confessed to being mesmerized by the series) (Olson 301), *Picket Fences*, *The Killing* or *American Gothic* (Hughes 201; Howe 76), to name but a few, are proof of *Twin Peaks*’ enduring and influential legacy.

Even if David Lynch has announced – for now – that he would no longer direct the upcoming *Twin Peaks* episodes, Showtime has been silent about cancelling the show; instead, they declared that negotiations were still ongoing with Lynch, in the hope of solving the outstanding dispute. Moreover, neither Mark Frost nor Kyle MacLachlan has made any public declaration about wanting to withdraw from the project. Chances are, the new episodes will happen with or without David Lynch – so what are we to expect from them? Lynch and Frost have made it clear already that the new season will not be a remake, but a continuation of the first two seasons, so first of all, the script needs to account for the 25 year gap and clarify what has happened to the characters in this interval. The last image of *Twin Peaks* was that of Agent Cooper, who smashes his head against the mirror and laughs sardonically, echoed by BOB, whose leering face is seen reflected in the mirror. Referring to this much-discussed ending, David Lynch declared, some years ago, that Agent Cooper was not in fact possessed by BOB, as many fans and critics believed:

It’s the doppelganger thing—the idea of two sides to everyone. He’s really

up against himself. People were really upset that it ended with an evil Cooper who'd been taken over by Bob. But that's *not* the ending. That's the ending that people were stuck with. That's just the ending of the second season. If it had continued... (Suter 185; Burns 267)²⁵

Therefore, one major plotline to be addressed is the struggle of Agent Cooper against himself. In the mid-1990s, Mark Frost said that, if the show had continued at that time, he had some definite threads in mind for season 3: Audrey and Pete would survive the bomb explosion at the bank, Ben Horne would survive his blow to the head, the good Cooper would remain trapped in the Black Lodge for a long time, while the evil Cooper threatened Annie and other inhabitants, and Josie, whose spirit remained trapped in a wooden drawer knob at the Great Northern Hotel, would be resurrected (Olson 365). Speaking in an interview in October 2014, shortly after the announcement of *Twin Peaks*' return was made public, Mark Frost addressed some of the issues raised by the plotline of the new episodes: knowing that expectations would be high not simply to match what had been done in 1990, but to improve upon it, he promised a "very strong central plotline," as both show creators had a very clear idea of what had happened at the end of season 2 and that nothing of the new plot would seem ambiguous (Blake).

If the new episodes live up to these promises, it remains to be seen next year, if the show survives the current crisis. But hardcore fans and those who appreciate quality television should be enthusiastic: if the new season is great, it may once more change the face of television; if it is disappointing, at least they will be given some closure and, hopefully, some answers to questions left unanswered for a quarter of a century.

Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) is credited to have made, for the first time, the cinematic space unsafe for the viewer: not only was its monster a seemingly quiet, ordinary young man (unlike in previously made horror films, where the source of evil was always an otherworldly creature: a vampire, a giant lizard, or a monstrous gorilla), but the knife that kills Marion Crane seems to be directed straight at the audience comfortably seated in the movie theatre and to destroy the cinematic illusion. In a similar manner, in 1990, *Twin Peaks* made television, a much smaller, more intimate medium than cinema, unsafe for the viewer: one's very

home was now invaded by terrifying monsters hiding behind benign, well-trusted family members. If the new season of *Twin Peaks* manages to provide the viewers the same recipe of thrill, anxiety, apprehension and excitement, then one is perfectly justified to wish time could be fast-forwarded to its premiere and to hope that the David Lynch and Showtime will resolve their issues to the benefit of quality TV lovers everywhere.

Notes:

¹ Meanwhile, between the time when the article was written and its publication date, Lynch announced on April 5, 2015, that he was quitting the project over budgetary issues, although the official Showtime website is still announcing production plans will continue. In late April 2015, negotiations were still under way to persuade Lynch to return on board. Mark Frost confirmed he would not abandon the project.

² In his investigation of Laura Palmer's murder, Agent Cooper often favours intuitive approaches (mostly borrowed from Buddhism and Tibetan practices) over conventional reasoning; his intuitions are often more incisive than the observations of his rational colleague, Albert Rosenfield.

³ This quote is actually the title of a review published in *Time* magazine on April 9, 1990, one day after the *Twin Peaks* pilot was aired by ABC.

⁴ The genre of television series has undergone almost unrecognizable changes since the premiere of *Twin Peaks* in 1990: while, back then, television was not considered, by any means, a "serious" medium, nowadays, the concept of quality TV (which mainly refers to TV series) has received considerable critical attention. Books and scholarly studies focusing both on certain series themselves (e.g., David Lavery, Douglas L. Howard, Paul Levinson (eds.), *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011; David P. Pierson (ed.), *Breaking Bad. Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014) and on the concept of quality television in general (Janet McCabe, Kim Akass, *Quality TV. Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007; Toby Miller, *Television Studies. The Basics*, London: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2010; Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York: N.Y.U. Press, 2015, to mention but a few more relevant works) have been published to critical acclaim, proving that "television studies" has become a valuable and fascinating field of research.

⁵ Interestingly enough, the idea for *Twin Peaks* originated with a different project envisaged by Frost and Lynch: a series about Marilyn Monroe and the mysteries surrounding her death, called *Venus Descending*. Eventually, they abandoned this project, but retained the idea of a beautiful blond woman whose death sparks off countless mysteries (Hughes 103; Martin 92; Olson 265).

⁶ Surprisingly, it only managed to win in two technical categories (editing and costume design), perhaps an indicator of the fact that the industry was not yet

ready to officially acknowledge a series that was so radically different from anything that existed in the television landscape of the early 1990s and thought it safe to honour formulaic, tried-and-tested series like *Murphy Brown*, *Cheers* or *LA Law*.

⁷ Previously, BOB had only appeared in the pilot episode, during a terrifying vision of a feral man crouching at the foot of Laura’s bed that Sarah Palmer. However, the plot paid very little attention to this sinister-looking man and his possible connection to Laura Palmer’s murder.

⁸ For instance, Cooper understands – in true Emersonian fashion – that his bizarre dream is actually a code that will help him find the killer; as he tells Sheriff Truman, “Break the code, solve the crime.”

⁹ During the last, Lynch-directed episode of season 2, several characters are (seemingly) killed off in unnecessary fashion (Audrey Horne, Pete Martell, Andrew Packard, Ben Horne), as their death does not help advance the main storyline, the search for the Black Lodge, which is ultimately revealed at the site of Red Room in Cooper’s dream.

¹⁰ The fact that Maddy “transforms” into Laura in season 1 by putting on a blonde wig, in order to help Donna and James search Dr. Jacoby’s office, brings to mind obvious comparisons to Luis Bunuel’s two Conchitas in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), a film where the main female protagonist shifts between two identities and representations (Nieland 60).

¹¹ Is it quite evident that the first seven episodes of the series allude to and rework the conventions of the soap opera genre, while the finale of episode 8, directed by Mark Frost, plunges the show into full-scale melodrama (Olson 298).

¹² The fact that many viewers were clearly uncomfortable with the references to incest in the series may have contributed to its declining ratings in season 2 and to the network’s decision to cancel the show.

¹³ In his 1919 essay, “The Uncanny” (*Unheimlich*) Freud examines how everyday, familiar spaces – such as one’s family home, in this case – can produce uneasy, eerie sensations.

¹⁴ Cooper is so impressed by the communion between man and nature that he, a man of the big city, finds in Twin Peaks, that he comes to understand, as he explains to Albert Rosenfield in episode 3, that “Laura Palmer’s death has affected every man, woman and child in this town. Life has meaning here.”

¹⁵ The show was criticised for the fact that, by making BOB the perpetrator, Leland is absolved of any responsibility, he is only a vessel for supernatural forces, not a killer himself (McGowan 143).

¹⁶ The Red Room is not the only space in *Twin Peaks* containing red velvet curtains: the stage at the Roadhouse has a wall of red velvet drapes, prominently visible during the episode when Maddy is killed by BOB/Leland, which evidently associates the supernatural being of the demonic spirit to his original dwelling place, the Black Lodge. It is from this very same stage that the Giant announces Cooper that “It is happening again,” a sentence repeated twice, an unsurprising fact in a world built on repetition and reenactment.

¹⁷ The architecture of the Red Room brings to mind a lesser-known, strange Le Corbusier creation: the Beistegui apartment in Paris, a minimalist stage containing disparate motifs, a delineated space apart from the rest of the community (Martin 154).

¹⁸ Even though Lynch himself directed only 6 episodes throughout the series, his stylistic imprint is visible in many more episodes, giving the show a remarkable aesthetic unity rarely seen in television series.

¹⁹ The noir sensibility present in *Twin Peaks* has been imitated in later, highly successful TV series such as *The X Files* and *Millennium*.

²⁰ One should also include here Wilder's noir masterpiece, *Double Indemnity*: the insurance agent who visits Catherine Martell in one of the early episodes of season 1 is named Mr. Neff, a clear allusion to the insurance agent Walter Neff, the doomed protagonist of Wilder's 1944 film.

²¹ *Twin Peaks* also acknowledges the influence of *The Fugitive*: the One Armed Man is named Philip Gerrard, the same as the policeman pursuing Richard Kimble (Burns 133).

²² Moreover, not all film noirs are set in an urban milieu: *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, for instance, takes place in a rural environment.

²³ According to Michael Chion, neither the references to *Laura* or to *Vertigo* are strong enough to earn *Twin Peaks* the label of "noir series"; the only part of the series clearly modelled on noir narrative is James's affair with a Veronica Lake lookalike in the second season (114).

²⁴ For instance, *Twin Peaks* was parodied in an episode of *Sesame Street*, entitled "Twin Beaks", it served as the inspiration behind two popular commercials for Ruffles crisps and Vodafone and it was referenced in a memorable 1995 episode of *The Simpsons* (Hughes 213).

²⁵ Lynch, who directed the last episode, actually suggested that Cooper had not been possessed, but that in fact the "Evil Dale," who was seen chasing the "Good Dale" in the Red Room, had escaped from the Black Lodge, while the "Good Dale" remained trapped (as Annie tells Laura in a dream in *Twin Peaks*'s prequel, released two years later, *Fire Walk with Me*). If one pays close attention, one notices that the voice of the "new Dale" sounds metallic, completely unlike the tone of good Agent Cooper to whom we had grown accustomed.

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