

**New Media Studies**

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**Student Name:** Karen Reilly

**Student Number:** N00192797

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**‘How do David Lynch and Mark Frost use post-modern subversive genre to create the narrative of *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991)?’**

The cult classic television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) broke many of the conventions for television dramas when it aired, not only for the use of cinematic filming techniques but also for its narrative, with one critic writing, ‘Plot is irrelevant; moments are everything. Lynch and Frost have mastered a way to make a weekly series endlessly interesting.’<sup>1</sup> Through David Lynch and Mark Frost’s separate backgrounds within the television and film industries, they created a series that combines a medley of various genres but presents them in a way consistent with the postmodern practices popular at the time, by fragmenting and splicing together the various conventions within them to create a ‘highly melodramatic presentation of character relationships’ and in combination with ‘various interwoven plot strands’.<sup>2</sup> While the most identifiable genres utilised by Lynch and Frost on the surface are detective and soap opera, they also borrow from many others, such as film noir, folklore, science fiction, and horror.

Going forward, it is important to establish an idea of postmodernism with which to analyse Lynch and Frost’s subversive genre use within the series, as the lines between the definitions of modernism and postmodernism are often blurred. Both movements use ‘the most fundamental elements of the practice’ of choice, in the case of *Twin Peaks* that being a combination of genres and their conventions from film, television, and literature, fragmenting the forms and incorporating chance and randomness. However, while the tone of modernist

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Tucker, ‘Twin Peaks, *Entertainment Weekly*, 26 October 1990 < <https://web.archive.org/web/20201114000132/https://ew.com/article/1990/10/26/twin-peaks/>> [accessed 21 March 2023].

<sup>2</sup> J. P. Telotte, “‘Complementary Verses’”: The Science Fiction of *Twin Peaks*, in *Return to Twin Peaks: New Approaches to Materiality, Theory, and Genre on Television*, ed. by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Catherine Spooner (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), p. 162.

work is pessimistic and mournful about the world, postmodernism is more optimistic. Modernism also embraced minimalism and rejected maximalism, whereas postmodernism is the opposite, relishing in excess and gaudiness.<sup>3</sup> Parody and pastiche are common art forms used by postmodernists, as they incorporate all these aspects and rely on intertextuality, and the utilisation of distinctive conventions within the genre or form being parodied to be successful.<sup>4</sup>

The narrative about Laura Palmer's murder investigation can be read as a suspense narrative, as defined by Tzvetan Todorov in his essay *The Typology of Detective Fiction*. Suspense narratives 'keep the mystery of the whodunit and also the two stories, that of the past and that of the present, but it refuses to reduce the second to a simple detection of the truth.'<sup>5</sup> The two stories refer to the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. Within these narratives, the investigation is the main point of interest, with the audience having an equal interest in the past events, that led up to the need for an investigation and the present.

Throughout the series, the mystery of what really happened to Laura is kept under wraps with the investigation of her murder conducted by FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper and the Twin Peaks Sheriff's Department, and the investigation into who Laura was prior to her death is done by Donna Hayward, Laura's former best friend. The interviews with subjects, discussing and debunking possible theories, visiting locations associated with Laura, and the late nights in the department board room with coffee and doughnuts laid out by Lucy are all part of the investigation to discover who Laura was and what happened to her. These events

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 4th edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 83-87.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur A. Berger, *Popular Culture Genres: Theories and Texts* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1992), p. 68 in ProQuest eBook Central, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/reader.action?docID=1920453>> [accessed 15 March 2023].

<sup>5</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 50 in Internet Archive, <<https://archive.org/details/poeticsofprose00todo/page/n7/mode/2up>> [accessed 2 March 2023].

are the main points of interest within the narrative, as the investigators and the audience are discovering together.

Within these suspense narratives, Todorov also describes how the detective ‘is integrated into the universe of the other characters, instead of being an independent observer’, either by having their lives endangered in the pursuit of their investigation, falling in love, or becoming a part of the community around them.<sup>6 7</sup> While Sheriff Harry Truman and Donna are already a part of the ‘universe of the other characters’ within the town of Twin Peaks, Cooper becomes fully immersed in town life and builds strong relationships with the townsfolk during his time there. One of the most notable relationships is his one with Audrey Horne. Audrey’s character holds many of the connotations associated with the *femme fatale* character type from film noir, a genre heavily tied to the detective genre. She is attractive and fashionable while also being seductive and repeatedly lying to manipulate those around her to get what she wants. Sherilyn Fenn, who portrays Audrey, has a similar look to the Old Hollywood glamour, with her strong yet feminine features, adding to the *femme fatale* feel. Audrey is introduced, changing from a pair of saddle shoes into red heels and smoking a cigarette from her locker, instantly portraying her as cunning and having multiple sides to her.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the series, we see Audrey continue to reinforce this *femme fatale* archetype by portraying herself differently to different people to cause chaos or get what she wants. However, she cannot get the one thing that she does want: Agent Cooper. In most ‘traditional detective films’ there is often ‘strong sexual tension... between the detective and the *femme fatale*.’<sup>9</sup> While Audrey develops a crush on Cooper right after their initial meeting, Cooper upholds his ‘strict code of ethics’ and refuses to indulge her, even when she surprises him in

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<sup>6</sup> Todorov, p.51.

<sup>7</sup> Berger, p.105.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Pilot’, *Twin Peaks* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012) [DVD].

<sup>9</sup> William Luhr, *Film Noir* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), p. 150 in ProQuest eBook Centre, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/reader.action?docID=7104634#>> [accessed 12 March 2023].

his hotel room naked. Nevertheless, Cooper keeps a platonic relationship with Audrey, 'providing the healthy paternal attention so lacking from her own father.'<sup>10</sup>

Agent Cooper can be classified as both a classical and procedural detective, as defined by Arthur Berger. Cooper is an eccentric character, in both his personality and his investigation techniques. Yet he still holds himself to a very high professional standard while working and makes use of the resources available to him as an FBI detective. Although he often toes the line between conventional and unconventional, he embraces the supernatural phenomena around him and events in dreams to figure out his next steps.<sup>11 12</sup> Cooper's 'Tibetan method' can be seen as an early example within the series of his eccentric investigation techniques. Cooper brought this unorthodox 'deduction technique involving mind-body coordination operating hand in hand with the deepest level of intuition' to reality after it appeared to him in a dream to try and determine the identity of 'J' within Laura's diary.<sup>13</sup> However, Cooper does hold onto many of the procedural conventions. He is 'an indefatigable truth seeker', by going to all lengths to solve Laura's murder, illegally entering Canada to investigate One Eyed Jacks, and continuing to work as a sheriff's deputy within Twin Peaks after his suspension from the FBI.<sup>14</sup> Throughout Cooper's unconventional investigation methods, he has Harry by his side. Harry fills the role of a traditional procedural-style detective, as opposed to Cooper's more classical detection style. Harry is a loyal and valiant partner and friend to Cooper throughout the series. The pair work well together, with Cooper's expertise from his career working within the FBI, learning different methodologies to understand how

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<sup>10</sup> David Bushman and Arthur Smith, *Twin Peaks FAQ : All That's Left to Know About a Place Both Wonderful and Strange*(Milwaukee: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2016), p. 51 in ProQuest eBook Central, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/reader.action?docID=5674395#>> [accessed 22 March 2023].

<sup>11</sup> Berger, p.104.

<sup>12</sup> Bushman and Smith, p.40.

<sup>13</sup> 'Episode 2' or 'Zen, or the Skill to Catch a Killer', *Twin Peaks* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012) [DVD].

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Nickerson, 'Serial Detection and Serial Killers in Twin Peaks', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 21.4, (1993), 271-276 (p. 272), in *PEAKED OUT! "Twin Peaks" Special Issue* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43798697>> [accessed 19 October 2022].

criminals operate, and Truman's knowledge of the town and its residents. He also fills the role of companion for Cooper, even foreshadowing the duo's bond and relationship together by stating in the first episode that he 'better start studying medicine... because [he's] beginning to feel a bit like Dr. Watson.'<sup>15</sup>

Donna Hayward also fills the role of detective; distraught by the tragic loss of her best friend, she begins an investigation of her own. This fulfils one of the main aspects of the classical detective, namely that she 'is a private citizen and never was a member of a police organization.'<sup>16</sup> She does this alone, but also with the help of Laura's secret boyfriend, James Hurley, and later, Madeline Ferguson, Laura's cousin. They are not restricted by the protocol imposed on Cooper and the Sheriff's Office, and they have more anonymity to freely conduct operations to gain evidence. Donna takes advantage of this by taking over Laura's *Meals on Wheels* route, and she ends up building a rapport with Harold Smith. This works in her favour, as Harold has a secret diary that belonged to Laura, which is important to the case. Donna also exhibits an eccentric personality, but differently from Cooper. She begins to mirror Laura as she furthers the investigation. Donna is a simple, regular teenage girl, wearing mid-length skirts and cosy knit jumpers, and she is soft-spoken and innocent. However, when she begins to wear Laura's sunglasses, she undergoes a 'radical image overhaul', most evident by her wearing a blue sweater and a black pencil skirt cinched at the waist by a belt while going to visit James in prison. She also changes her personality to try and emulate the more sexually overt *femme fatale* character type, a far cry from 'her usual ingénue persona.' Yet, Donna's *femme fatale* contrasts Audrey, as it comes across as an over-

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<sup>15</sup> 'Episode 1' or 'Traces to Nowhere', *Twin Peaks* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012) [DVD].

<sup>16</sup> Berger, p.107.

the-top, camp performance. However, this campiness, along with her overly sexual nature towards James, can also be seen to link them both into the soap opera genre.<sup>17 18</sup>

The soap opera genre is one that is perfectly suited to postmodernists, as it lends itself to ‘excess’, ‘gaudiness’, and “bad taste” mixture of qualities’ that are associated with work created in the movement.<sup>19</sup> Classic soap opera character types are exaggerated and ostentatious, which in turn adds to the campiness and weirdness of the narrative. Nadine Hurley is a prime example of a soap opera character type. On the surface, she is ‘flamboyantly eccentric’ whose life mission is to achieve completely silent curtain runners. Her large and loud melodramatic outbursts at Ed and others, coupled with her bright red hair and eyepatch, add to her oddball appearance. However, while Nadine’s character type can be seen as a parody of the extravagant nature of soap operas, she is also aware of Ed’s desire to be with Norma Jennings over her.<sup>20</sup> It could be possible that Nadine’s overly eccentric outward personality is to cover the deep insecurity and sadness that she feels knowing that her husband loves someone else more than her. This could also explain her suicide attempt after the patent for her silent drape runners was denied, as this project was something that she had hoped would make her a success and, in turn, make Ed love her more than Norma. This convention with the series, which highlights the friction between ‘profound emotional turmoil and the bizarrely comic distortions such pain can produce’ is a key element to the soap operatic narrative structure of the series, as while the over-the-top performance is entertaining

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<sup>17</sup> Catherine Spooner, ‘“Wrapped in Plastic”: David Lynch’s Material Girls’, in *Return to Twin Peaks: New Approaches to Materiality, Theory, and Genre on Television*, ed. by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Catherine Spooner (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), p. 113-114.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Episode 9’ or ‘Coma’, *Twin Peaks* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012) [DVD].

<sup>19</sup> Barry, p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> Bushman and Smith, p. 70.

and comedic in the moment, it leaves an upsetting and remorseful feeling towards the characters.<sup>21</sup>

Soap operas are often 'dominated by a romantic storyline, forbidden and interesting love stories, with a focus on the inter-relationship, intrigue, love, and conflict between family members.'<sup>22</sup> Arguably, the soap opera genre is equally prominent to the narrative of the series; many of the principal characters do have interesting and often forbidden romantic relationships with each other, with many of the characters being married to one another but then having an affair with someone else. The forbidden relationship between Donna and James is one example, as are those between Bobby and Shelly and Harry and Josie. However, it is the love triangle between Nadine, Ed Hurley, and Norma that is the most dramatic and parodic in the series. Coupled with Nadine's large personality, her husband Ed is 'one of *Twin Peaks*' most overly "soapy" characters - blandly noble, manfully stoic, tall and ruggedly handsome.'<sup>23</sup> They married on a whim after high school after Norma, his high school sweetheart, ran off with notorious bad boy Hank. When Ed found out that Norma never slept with Hank, he took Nadine to his father's cabin to go hunting for their honeymoon, where he planned to talk to her about getting a divorce. But in a hunting accident, Ed accidentally shot Nadine's eye, and he decided to stay with her.<sup>24</sup> Ed and Norma continued their relationship behind their partners' backs, seemingly prior to the series' events and throughout the series. In the Pilot, they plan to get divorces and be together, but after Nadine's suicide attempt and age regression and Hank's parole release, they decide not to go ahead as they do not want to

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<sup>21</sup> Bushman and Smith, p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> Cherie Taraghi, 'Muhte ú em Yüzyil or Muhte ú em Rezalet: Controversy Surrounding the Television Series Muhte ú em Yüzyil and the Crisis of Turkish Identity', in *Contemporary Television Series: Narrative Structures and Audience Perception*, ed. by Valentina Marinescu, Silvia Branea, Bianca Mitu (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. 42 in ProQuest eBook Central <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/reader.action?docID=1716669#>> [accessed 21 March 2023].

<sup>23</sup> Bushman and Smith, p.69.

<sup>24</sup> 'Episode 8' or 'May the Giant Be With You', *Twin Peaks* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012) [DVD].



hurt anybody.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the series, Ed seemingly exists only to suffer romantically, while Norma is a 'good woman constrained by impossible circumstances, suffering in silence' with her tumultuous relationship to Hank and her secret one with Ed.<sup>26</sup>

The soap opera show within the series, *Invitation to Love*, is also a very evident parody of the genre within the show. The show is closely followed by the characters of the series throughout the first season. The plot of the series mirrors that of the series, which is made apparent during the montage sequence that occurs during the meeting between Leland Palmer and his niece Madeline. Leland is watching the soap opera as Madeline arrives at his home, which similarly occurs in the show as one of the main characters, Jarrod, is surprised by the visit by his daughter Jade. The dialogue in the show matches that of the scene, as when Madeline announces her presence to Leland, by softly saying 'Uncle Leland', Jade in the soap shouts 'Daddy, it's Jade', both announcing their arrivals, and while Jarrod exclaims 'Jade, what a surprise!' within the series, Leland does not, but the look on his face is evident of his surprise at her arrival. This is also another instance of mirroring, as Madeline is played by the same actor who plays Laura, which gives an eerie feeling as the television in the background says 'Daddy', as if it is Laura saying it.<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> However, while the show is not featured in every episode, the audience is still able to follow along with its plot thanks to the characters, such as Lucy Moran, who discuss the happenings of the episodes with fellow characters and keep us informed. <sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 'Episode 5' or 'Cooper's Dreams', *Twin Peaks* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012) [DVD].

<sup>26</sup> Bushman and Smith, p.75.

<sup>27</sup> 'Episode 3' or 'Rest in Pain', *Twin Peaks* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012) [DVD].

<sup>28</sup> Mark J. Charney, 'Invitation to Love: The Influence of Soap Opera on David Lynch's "Twin Peaks"', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 14.1, (1991), 53-59 (p. 55), in <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23413917>> [accessed 19 October 2022].

<sup>29</sup> 'Episode 4' or 'The One-Armed Man', *Twin Peaks* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012) [DVD].

The significance of the setting of the narrative, which is set in a remote, rural town, within the series is also a convention within the genre. The town 'functions as a force linking characters with each other not only as a positive basis for community but also as a boundary which characters find it difficult to transgress.' The opening title sequence before each episode shows the mountains covered in Douglas firs, the sawmill, and the waterfall view by the Great Northern Hotel while the spellbinding dream pop theme plays over it. This shows the audience how isolated the town is, heightening the feeling of isolation for the characters in their current situations.<sup>30</sup> The woods are also featured in the establishing shots for every scene, making their omnipotent presence known. The heavy presence of the woods can also be analysed from a folklore and mythological narrative perspective, as the 'ultimate narrative enigma concerns the mystery of the woods and not the initial murder mystery established in the pilot.'<sup>31</sup> In a folkloric reading of the woods, it has a more sinister role, as the connotations of it are 'that it is dark and full of dangers, and while traversing it may provide knowledge, it is not without peril.'<sup>32</sup> Throughout the series, multiple places of danger are in the woods, such as One-Eyed Jacks, the Black and White Lodges, and the train car where Laura and Ronette Pulaski were taken. The first season sees this darkness referenced, but it becomes much more prominent as the series progresses as this tension between the civilized 'good' and the wild 'evil' increases. This tension is lightly referred to in the opening sequence, with the contrast between the industrialisation and the natural world but is more prominently brought to the forefront by the conflict between Cooper and Windom Earle, representing good and evil.<sup>33</sup> Major Briggs' involvement in the happenings in the town and the woods is

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<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies*, 3rd edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), p. 129 in ProQuest eBook Centre, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/reader.action?docID=1092810>> [accessed 19 March 2023].

<sup>31</sup> Karra Shimabukuro, 'The Mystery of the Woods: "Twin Peaks" and the Folkloric Forest', *Cinema Journal*, 55.3, (2016), 121-125 (p. 122), in <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44072099>> [accessed 19 October 2022].

<sup>32</sup> Shimabukuro, p.125.

<sup>33</sup> Shimabukuro, p.123.

an example of the woods holding valuable knowledge for the characters, but at a cost, as while he can travel between the two worlds, bringing knowledge from one to the other, he sacrifices time to do so. Major Briggs' ability to be a part of both worlds and the consequences of it are an example to Cooper, as he eventually must enter the Black Lodge, to face BOB and rescue Annie Blackburn.<sup>34</sup>

While the detective genre is the most prominent, it has been influenced by aspects of the science fiction genre, primarily through the existence of BOB and the other paranormal entities within the series. While they are present for the first season and used by Cooper in his investigations, they are arguably not at the forefront of the narrative. Arguably, it is in the scenes where Leland is arrested and 'confesses' to Laura's murder that the genre is brought more prominently into the narrative. This is also the point where the existence of BOB is confirmed to Harry and the other investigators, and Cooper's unconventional supernatural influences are legitimised.<sup>35</sup> BOB is coded as a traditional horror film monster, and his links to the supernatural worlds of the Black and White Lodge in the science fiction genre within the series bridge the two genres together. The main function of the horror genre is 'to provide thrills and to scare people by connecting to various morbid residues in our psyches' and this function is often fulfilled through the medium of the monster.<sup>36</sup> BOB holds many of the conventions of a monster from classic horror literature. On the surface, he fulfils the basic purpose of scaring the townsfolk of Twin Peaks. However, BOB is also 'a nightmare creature who speaks to our secret fears and evokes dread, disgust, fright, and similar feelings in us.'<sup>37</sup> For Laura's mother, Sarah, who BOB stalks and torments her repeatedly after Laura's death, this 'nightmare creature' creates a living nightmare for her, by being responsible for her

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<sup>34</sup> Shimabukuro, p.124-125.

<sup>35</sup> 'Episode 16' or 'Arbitrary Law', *Twin Peaks* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012) [DVD].

<sup>36</sup> Berger, p. 169.

<sup>37</sup> Berger, p. 175.

daughter's death but also by stalking and tormenting her repeatedly. But BOB also can represent the fears of being controlled and forced to do things that we have no control over, such as his possession of Leland and Cooper.

The narrative structure of the series of *Twin Peaks* benefited hugely from the fragmented assembly of conventions and character types from a medley of genres, as it allowed for a richer narrative for the series overall. By focusing on the detective and soap opera genres, Lynch and Frost successfully brought 'together two genres that have traditionally been associated with distinctive male and female audiences, [and it] could even be said to create a new kind of hybrid text that deconstructs gender-based programming in its very form.'<sup>38</sup>

Characters, such as Agent Cooper, exhibit conventions from the majority of the genres at play, with his professionalism as a detective, the wacky personality of a soap opera character, and a strong belief in the supernatural around him, whereas characters such as Nadine and Audrey encapsulate the core qualities associated with the character type they are parodies of. By using easily recognisable conventions from the various genres, the pastiche aspect of the series is clear from the onset of the series right through to the end as the tone becomes darker. The inclusion of the conventions from the wide array of genres to create the 'highly melodramatic presentation of character relationships' and in combination with 'various interwoven plot strands' allowed for a series that engaged viewers to be hooked initially on to find out who killed Laura Palmer, but stay to see if Ed and Norma would get to be together.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Linnie Blake, 'Trapped in the Hysterical Sublime: *Twin Peaks*, Postmodernism, and the Neoliberal Now', in *Return to Twin Peaks: New Approaches to Materiality, Theory, and Genre on Television*, ed. by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Catherine Spooner (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), p. 239.

<sup>39</sup> Telotte, p. 162.

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