

TV Peaks

Andreas Halskov

TV Peaks

Twin Peaks and Modern Television Drama

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TV Peaks: *Twin Peaks* and Modern Television Drama

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Prologue: Welcome to Twin Peaks

Twin Peaks will change television history.
- *Los Angeles Daily News*¹

I don't think that [*Twin Peaks*] changed TV one iota. No trend developed from this show, whatsoever... A lot of people always look back at *Twin Peaks* and say that was the start of this explosion we've had in good television drama, but we did it in a time when there were still only three networks.

- Mark Frost, co-creator of *Twin Peaks*²

In 1990, American television was living in a transitional phase, but it was still largely dominated by three broadcast networks, NBC (National Broadcasting Company), CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) and ABC (American Broadcasting Company), all of which produced a rather formulaic and episodic kind of television. The credo of American broadcast television was “least objectionable programming,” and television shows were mostly episodic or soap operatic in nature, revolving around a set of regular characters in an unchanging environment or producing a new murder case each week.³ NBC and CBS had a commercial stronghold, and sitcoms like *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-1993) and *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992) – both using a *laugh-track* and a conventional three-camera set-up – had viewers glued to the TV set, while ABC was “languishing in last place.”⁴

In Denmark, a structural change had happened in 1988, when TV 2 broke the monopoly of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), but in 1990 there was still only one national producer of TV drama in Denmark: DR.

In the US and Scandinavia alike, television was broadly discredited, and the TV set was given such dubious nicknames as “the tube” and “the idiot box,” underlining its undesirable position in the *media hierarchy*.⁵ Using the words of TV scholar Roberta Pearson, television could generally be seen as a “Cinderella of the entertainment industry,”⁶ and even the viewing experience was often reduced to an unconscious act on the part of the viewer who had been caught in an endless *flow* of images.⁷ In truth, people, back then, watched television *on* TV, browsing the *TV Guide* and following a schedule to avoid missing this week's action on their favorite show – and to avoid being an outsider when the biggest shows were debated at work. Had you missed this week's episode of *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991), *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989) or *Cheers*, the newly developed VCR afforded the possibility of taping and watching the episode later, or re-watching an episode of your favorite show almost indefinitely. Television drama, albeit largely formulaic and episodic, was often subject to debate by the watercooler, and

with the expansion of the Internet a new arena for collective debate and scrutiny was born. “With *Twin Peaks* we would all sit and watch it,” as the editor Jonathan P. Shaw says, “because it was such a communal thing. It was a watercooler phenomenon. I was getting calls from people wanting to tell me who killed Laura Palmer.”⁸

Indeed, 1990 was a different time, but it was also in many ways a *transitional phase*, and it was the birth year of a TV show which would quickly become one of the most heavily debated and scrutinized drama series of all time: *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991). On April 8, 1990, the pilot episode of *Twin Peaks* was aired, and 34.6 million Americans were thrilled, horrified and even shocked by this unconventional and genre-bending show – a show which was born in the midst of a transition and which, in itself, might have been a *game changer*. In the fall of 1990, an article in *Connoisseur Magazine* emphatically proclaimed that *Twin Peaks* would “change TV” forever, and for all its boldness and simplicity that statement might not have been all wrong.⁹

Twin Peaks was launched in the spring of 1990, when I was only nine years old, and seven months later I saw the very first episode on Danish television. At a time when ratings were seen as the main tool for measuring the success of a given TV show, DR purchased *Twin Peaks*, a relatively artsy and edgy drama series which would hardly be appealing to a broad Danish audience. According to Kaare Schmidt, acquisitions executive at DR, the success of *Twin Peaks* as a foreign drama series on DR was, indeed, not measured in ratings, but in its ability to get good reviews and, thus, to help brand DR as a producer of “quality TV.” “After the French New Wave,” says Kaare Schmidt, “people had generally recognized the artistic potential of film, but now, as *Twin Peaks* came out, people were beginning to see the artistic potential of television.”¹⁰

When purchasing a TV show, Schmidt says, there are two general criteria: (1) the potential for *commercial success* and (2) the potential for *branding* and *critical acclaim*.¹¹ Before 1992 ratings were not measured in a precise way in Denmark, but many have claimed that *Twin Peaks* had a *share* of approximately 15-18%, which, in a country with only two national TV channels, would be somewhat underwhelming.¹² During the second season, the ratings dropped in both the USA and Denmark, as the show was moved to different slots in the schedule. In the US, *Twin Peaks* was moved from Thursday to Saturday night – a notoriously bad TV day in the US – and in Denmark it was moved from Saturday to Thursday.¹³ For cultural reasons, Saturday is considered a good TV day in Denmark, so the rescheduling of *Twin Peaks* reflected its modest ratings. By the end of the second season, *Twin Peaks* had only 10 million viewers in the US, and fi-



Fig. 1: According to TV historian Robert J. Thompson, the network with the lowest ratings always took risks in its content. Maybe *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991) was the result of such a ratings crisis at ABC. Photo by Richard Beymer.

nally the show was placed on “indefinite hiatus” by the network and the executives, who had long been pushing for a clear-cut answer to the question: “Who killed Laura Palmer”?¹⁴

That question was never truly answered, at least not unambiguously, and it became the modern equivalent to “Who shot JR?” – a question which would be heard like an echo among fans and in modern television history.

“TV Too Good for TV”

Twin Peaks tells the story of a fictional small town in the Pacific Northwest, a town which is plagued by the murder of a young high school girl called Laura Palmer. Another girl, Ronette Pulaski (Phoebe Augustine), managed to escape from the train car in which Laura was killed, and on her way back to Twin Peaks, she crossed the state line. Consequently, the FBI gets involved in the case, and FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) is sent to Twin Peaks to investigate the murder case – a case which happens to be connected to the killing of yet another young girl: Teresa Banks (Pamela Gidley). In town, Dale Cooper meets the local police officer Harry S. Truman (Michael Ontkean), and as the story unfolds Cooper and Truman become a quirky and modern version of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Gradually, the case becomes more complex, and the boundary between dream, reality and fantasy is blurred beyond the audience’s abili-

ty to tell them apart. The murder case is ultimately solved, at least partially, but during the investigation other disturbing secrets are revealed. Leaving the audience puzzled, the final episode is open-ended, and the line “How’s Annie?” has become iconic, just as the many catchphrases heard in the various episodes, including “Damn good coffee, and hot,” “Black as midnight on a moonless night” and “There was a fish in the percolator.” In fact, Deputy Andy’s reaction to hearing that he is fertile – “I’m a whole damn town!” – became something of a motto for fathers-to-be in the US, and the phrase “The owls are not what they seem” has become something of a common expression.

During its first season, *Twin Peaks* was heavily mythologized, and stories began to circulate attesting to its popularity and cult status. According to Angelo Badalamenti, a concert with Paul McCartney, celebrating the 65th birthday of the British Queen Elizabeth, was put on hold, since the queen had to watch her weekly episode of *Twin Peaks* at precisely 8 o’clock.¹⁵ In Denmark, a journalist wrote an article asking about the whereabouts of the popular Danish politician Svend Auken at the day of Laura Palmer’s death, funnily questioning Auken’s credibility, and a Swedish journalist related the show to the killing of their former Prime Minister Oluf Palme (who died in 1986).¹⁶ Even more outrageously, the former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev was said to have called George Bush, Sr., asking him to contact David Lynch and Mark Frost in order to get a solution to the murder case of *Twin Peaks*.¹⁷

It started as a commercial success and a boost to ABC, but it was discontinued by the network on February 15, 1991, despite the attempt by diehard fans (e.g. *COOP – Citizens Opposing the Offing of Peaks*) to keep it *on the air*.¹⁸ Ironically, the creators of *Twin Peaks*, Mark Frost and David Lynch, created a sitcom only one year later, entitled *On the Air* (ABC, 1992), as if to mirror the outcry of the many fans who had fought to keep *Twin Peaks* alive. When the American *basic cable* channel Bravo chose to rerun *Twin Peaks* a few years later, some quirky episode introductions were created, in which The Log Lady (Catherine Coulson) introduces each episode, and *Twin Peaks* was seen as the perfect example of Bravo’s motto: “TV Too Good for TV.”¹⁹

Initially, *Twin Peaks* might have been a short-lived phenomenon, but soon it would become a TV historical reference point, and on October 6, 2014 a new season of *Twin Peaks* was announced in a double-tweet by Mark Frost and David Lynch, funnily alluding to a catchphrase from the original show: “That gum you like is going to come back in style.”

Changes in the TV Landscape

From the birth of *Twin Peaks* in 1990 to the potential rebirth or continuation of the show in 2016 or 2017, television has changed dramatically, and many of the most important changes seem to have been reflected, if not precipitated, by *Twin Peaks*. Since 1990, we have seen a rise of cable television – something which is often referred to as the *third golden age* in American television – and the number of channels and outlets have multiplied. In 1990, there were approximately 80 original series in America, but 25 years later the number is approaching 400.²⁰ In 1990, TV shows were mostly episodic in nature, but in 2015 we have experienced a process of *serialization* or even *hyper-serialization* in American television drama, and many shows are narratively complex and demanding in a way that was uncommon in the nineties. In 1990, most shows were generically definable – often easily categorized within a single genre – but in today’s TV landscape genre hybridity is something of a norm. The genre-bending story of *Twin Peaks*, continually switching between different genres, moods and tonalities, was unconventional in 1990, and the same could be said of the show’s cinematic style. By emphasizing the fact that *Twin Peaks* was created (in part) by a film director, a true visionary, the executives and the network branded *Twin Peaks* as an example of *auteur TV*, which in 1990 was a somewhat unusual phe-



Fig. 2: David Lynch directing Kyle MacLachlan (Agent Cooper) in *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991). Lynch was an early example of a renowned director migrating from film to television. Photo by Richard Beymer.

nomenon. “There was an artistic style to *Twin Peaks* that was new,” says the agent and producer Tony Krantz. “It was a director’s vision, as opposed to traditional television shows which could be executed in a good way, but without having a clear director’s touch.”²¹ The cinematic use of filters, long takes, low-angle shots, expressive sound and music were all attributed to David Lynch as an arthouse director, and *Twin Peaks* was highlighted as an early example of a director migrating from film to television (fig. 2).

In 1990, the move from film to television was fairly unusual, but in 2015 the concept of *TV auteurism* is a well-known phenomenon, as Martin Scorsese (*Boardwalk Empire*, HBO, 2010-2014), David Fincher (*House of Cards*, Netflix, 2013-present), Steven Soderbergh (*The Knick*, Cinemax, 2014-present), Guillermo del Toro (*The Strain*, FX, 2014-present), Andy and Lana Wachowski (*Sense8*, Netflix, 2015-present) and Woody Allen (*Untitled Woody Allen Project*, Amazon, in production) have all migrated to television and helped produce, create and brand some of the most interesting shows of the new millennium. Indeed, many of the episode directors, who came to *Twin Peaks* from independent cinema, have later come to direct and define many of the most important shows of today’s golden age. Lesli Linka Glatter, for example, directed four episodes of *Twin Peaks* before becoming an acclaimed TV director on drama series like *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014), *Justified* (FX, 2010-2015), *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-present), *Boss* (Starz, 2011-2012), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-present) and *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-present). And other directors like James Foley and Tim Hunter came from independent cinema and *Twin Peaks*, before becoming recurring episode directors on *high-end* television series like *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-present), *Mad Men* and *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-present).

However short-lived, *Twin Peaks* was a critically acclaimed TV show that helped *legitimize* television as an art form, and it was heavily debated by fans who watched it religiously, held group viewings and discussed every detail on Usenet or other such platforms. The Peaks Freaks or Peakies²² who debated and analyzed *Twin Peaks* on Usenet, were reminiscent of the Trekkies, who scrutinized and mythologized *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1969), but they were also an early example of the kind of fandom which would later be popularized with the expansion of the Internet.²³ On various discussion boards and social media, fans today discuss and dissect their favorite shows, and Facebook, Twitter and similar social media have become central to the viral hype of a given show or spin-off.

As the film industry has changed, so today’s TV landscape has also undergone a number of significant structural changes. Many shows are part of larger franchises, and tie-in books, sequels, prequels and spin-offs are all

common phenomena. Shows like *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2011-present), *Fargo* (FX, 2013-present), *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-present), *From Dusk Till Dawn* (2014-present, El Rey/Netflix), *Better Call Saul* (AMC, 2015-present) and *12 Monkeys* (Syfy, 2015-present) are connected to larger stories across various products and platforms. When *Twin Peaks* came out, this phenomenon, called *transmedia storytelling*, was relatively uncommon, but through such tie-in books as *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* (Jennifer Lynch, 1990), *The Autobiography of F.B.I. Special Agent Dale Cooper* (Scott Frost, 1991) and *The Secret Lives of Twin Peaks* (Mark Frost, forthcoming), *Twin Peaks* became a complex phenomenon including many different stories and media. Indeed, the story of *Twin Peaks* even came to include cassette tapes (“*Diane...: The Twin Peaks Tapes of Agent Cooper*”) and a cinematic prequel called *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), which was widely discredited and even described as one of the “worst movie[s] ever made.”²⁴ In 2014, another addendum to the story of *Twin Peaks* was featured on *The Entire Mystery* – a featurette called *Between Two Worlds* where the Palmer family is interviewed by David Lynch. And in 2016/2017, *Twin Peaks* is planned to be continued on Showtime, metaphorically pointing to the general *sequel-itis* of today’s film and television industries, and illustrating a general move from network to cable television.²⁵

Today, *high-end television drama* is mostly a cable phenomenon, and the big three broadcast networks, CBS, NBC and ABC, seem to focus mostly on the kind of episodic television which was popular before the birth of *Twin Peaks*. Sitcoms like *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present) and *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-present) and episodic crime shows or procedurals like *CSI* (CBS, 2000-present) are important to their respective networks, and in 2012 *CSI* was named the most watched TV show for the fifth time with more than 70 million viewers worldwide (cf. fig. 3).²⁶

Title	Channel	Viewers (million)
<i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	CBS	21.76
<i>NCIS</i>	CBS	21.75
<i>The Walking Dead</i>	AMC	20.20
<i>NCIS: New Orleans</i>	NBC	19.41
<i>The Blacklist</i>	NBC	16.37
<i>Scorpion</i>	CBS	16.11
<i>How To Get Away With Murder</i>	ABC	16.06
<i>Modern Family</i>	ABC	15.03
<i>Blue Bloods</i>	CBS	14.94
<i>Madam Secretary</i>	CBS	14.80

Fig. 3: Fall 2014’s 10 Most-Watched TV Series. Source: Adalian 2014.

Originally, *Twin Peaks* was discontinued because of declining ratings, but in 2016/2017 the show is scheduled to continue on a *premium cable* channel (Showtime), which is more interested in getting the *right viewers* (i.e. the urban viewers who are willing to pay for a subscription) than in getting the *right number* of viewers.

When *Twin Peaks* came out, American television was a broadcast phenomenon, and, as such, television programs had to be broadly appealing. 25 years later, television, according to TV scholar Amanda D. Lotz, has been “reconfigured [...] as a medium that most commonly addresses fragmented and specialized audience groups,” and *Twin Peaks* may coincidentally and inadvertently have anticipated this development.²⁷ It would hardly be fair to talk of a general shift from *broadcasting* to *narrowcasting*, but if we follow Amanda D. Lotz, we might argue that television today is targeted at many different demographics, and that different channels and outlets try to monetize many different (niche) audiences, all of which demand a certain type of content and televisual style.

Preliminary Mappings

This book argues that TV has changed during the last 25 years, and that a more serialized, complex, transgressive and genre-bending type of TV drama has become possible due to new audience groups and new channels and outlets. This development is mirrored in the cover design of this book, which alludes to an iconic scene from *Twin Peaks*, while mimicking the title sequence of *Mad Men* – one of the most iconic shows of the cable revolution. By merging *Twin Peaks* and *Mad Men*, the book cover seeks to illustrate the transition from one golden age to another – two *peaks* in television history – and the title, *TV Peaks*, refers to *Twin Peaks* as a potential *game changer*, while pointing to the different waves in TV history (*peaks* as a noun) and the revolution that we are experiencing right now (*peaks* as a verb). After all, the creator of *Mad Men*, Matthew Weiner, even mentioned *Twin Peaks* as one of his major influences when making *Mad Men*: “I was already out of college when *Twin Peaks* came on, and that was where I became aware of what was possible on television.”²⁸

In Scandinavia, too, TV has changed, and modern Scandinavian drama series like *Riget I-II* (DR, 1994-1997, *The Kingdom*), *Forbrydelsen I-III* (DR, 2007-2012, *The Killing*), *Bron/Broen I-III* (SVT1/DR, 2011-present, *The Bridge*) and *Jordskott* (SVT, 2015-present), many of which are directly inspired by *Twin Peaks*, have come to be major export successes, sold and remade in France, the UK and even America.

The questions, then, that this book poses and seeks to answer are: (1) How has TV changed in the US and Scandinavia during the last 25 years,

and (2) what impact and influence has *Twin Peaks* had on this development? In attempting to answer these questions, I have interviewed more than 100 different people, including cast and crew members of *Twin Peaks*, renowned Scandinavian TV creators, international TV scholars and fans of *Twin Peaks*. Also, I have made a survey of 700 different *Twin Peaks* fans across different ages, genders and nationalities, a survey which is meant to shed a light on the type of fandom connected to this particular show. The book combines textual analysis, television history, fan studies and various points regarding industrial, technological and sociological developments (e.g. the invention of new technologies for sound in television, the growth of television ownership and changing patterns in terms of viewing).²⁹

In doing the different interviews, I have come to learn that the questions are not easily answered, and, indeed, it is difficult to determine precisely how (much) *Twin Peaks* has impacted modern television drama. Similarly, many argue that *À bout de souffle* (1960, *Breathless*) was a *game changer* in film history, but how exactly do we measure the impact and influence of any one film, and how do we choose which film to single out? The same questions could be relevant in this context, and, consequently, I do not wish to argue that *Twin Peaks* has, indeed, changed television forever. Such statements, however bold and aphoristic, are too simplistic. On the other hand, many TV scholars, critics, fans and even practitioners point to *Twin Peaks* as an important and influential show, so it would hardly be unfair to look at television history through the perspective of this one particular TV series. Indeed, a conference was held in Salford, England in May 2015 about this particular topic (*Twin Peaks* and modern television drama), and after attending this conference, I am certain that *Twin Peaks* has been a *game changer*.³⁰ If nothing else, the show is still – even heavily – debated at academic conferences, and four books about *Twin Peaks* have come out within less than a year: *Reflections: An Oral History of Twin Peaks* (2014), *Twin Peaks 192 Success Secrets: 192 Most Asked Questions on Twin Peaks* (2014), *Twin Peaks: The Unofficial Companion* (2015) and *Wrapped in Plastic: Twin Peaks* (2015). In 2015 and 2016, then, at least three *Twin Peaks*-related books, apart from *TV Peaks*, are planned to hit the market: A collection of essays called *Return to Twin Peaks*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Catherine Spooner, a monograph by Martha Nochimson about ‘television beyond formula’ and a book by David Bushman about the characters, mysteries and mythology of *Twin Peaks*. Apart from Brad Dukes (*Reflections*) and Andy Burns (*Wrapped in Plastic*), I wish to thank the many fans that I have interviewed for the book, and I particularly want to thank Josh Eisenstadt, Roland Kermarec, Charles de Lauzirika, Rob Lindley and Jared Lyon and the many fans who have gener-

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Finally, I wish to thank Jennifer Lynch for talking to me about her book *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* and her own experiences as a TV director, and I wish to send my warmest regards to Mark Frost and Jennifer's father, David Lynch, for having created one of the most interesting shows of all times. *Twin Peaks* scared and captivated me, when it first came out in 1990, and still to this day it moves me, it unsettles me, and it baffles me. It makes me laugh, cry and jump in my seat.

It may not have changed TV forever, but it has certainly been a *game changer*, and in the following pages I shall try to investigate the impact that it has had. After a general introduction to TV history, I will look at various phenomena and objects of interest, including *TV auteurism*, genre hybridity, serialization, *transmedia storytelling* and fandom. Finally, I will look at *Twin Peaks* in the light of modern Scandinavian television.

In 1991, *Twin Peaks* ended with a series of cliffhangers, and the story of this book, too, will most likely be somewhat open-ended. One thing that I can say rather bluntly, however, is that I will not concur with Mark Frost in saying that no trend developed from *Twin Peaks*. Granted, it may not have produced an immediate set of copycat-shows, and it has hardly single-handedly changed television as an industry. Even so, it may be reasonable to compare it with *À bout de souffle*, as Kaare Schmidt does, and, following that logic, it might be fair to argue that it has helped spark a new wave of American and Scandinavian drama series. In any case, it has left TV viewers *breathless*, not unlike the aforementioned film by Jean-Luc Godard. And the third season, which is scheduled to air in 2016 or 2017, is already subject to much debate and speculation online. In 1990, *Twin Peaks* was one of the most heavily debated shows on TV. In 2015, the potential new season of *Twin Peaks* is likely to be the most heavily anticipated show of the new millennium. Some types of "gum," it seems, will never go out of style...