

Twin Peaks as a Cult Film

Research Project

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Abstract

Twin Peaks was one of the biggest impacts TV industry has ever experienced thanks to its rebellious nature against the traditional set values of mainstream media. In the realm of “bad movies” and “trash aesthetics”, this behavior is often considered a cult film. This paper will research how David Lynch and Mark Frost changed the film industry with their infamous TV series.

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Introduction

Twin Peaks premiered on April 8, 1990 with 34.6 million [1] viewers on its first day and it completely changed audience's perception of television series as a whole. This research will show in what ways and how the legendary *Twin Peaks* can be referenced as a cult film.

"Cult audiences seek for films, and seek to enjoy films in ways that stand away from regular or mainstream reception."cite:cultfilm Nowadays, we have a big number of high standard TV shows: *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Walking Dead*, and etc. However, looking back to 1990, there was no other film like *Twin Peaks*. It stood out thanks to the heavy story-line that David Lynch was introducing to the audience, to the beautifully composed landscapes and shots, to the level of creative freedom that was unheard of in network television. [2]

Roughly 30 years ago, the "high-class" and "high-quality" film-making was associated with movies and movies only. Audiences were used to classic film genre masterpieces like: *The Shining*, *The Godfather*, *Space Odyssey: 2001*, and etc. Television series were treated mostly as a comedy and means of casual screening. Some of the popular shows that aired at that time were *Santa Barbara*, *The Cosby Show*, *ALF*, and *Cheers*. *Twin Peaks* was simultaneously revolutionary and rebellious by introducing new standards to the field. This work's behavior is called a cult movie. David Lynch's and Mark Frost's new creation went against the established mainstream standards and introduced something new and truly exciting. After the initial airing of *Twin Peaks*, people saw what kind of emotional messages and new techniques can be implemented to develop the area. This is one of the rarest cases where a cult film by going against the mainstream values, has forced the mainstream itself to change and take the cult film as an example. Because *Twin Peaks'* transition from Season 1 to Season 2 is so seamless and swift, both of the seasons will be discussed as they were a single complete unit.

After all those years, *Twin Peaks* has one of the biggest cult followings in the history. COOP, a national *Twin Peaks* fan organization, employed local rallies and computer net-

working to try to keep that doomed series on the air. [3] With the recent release of the 3rd season - *The Return*, the subculture got stronger and bigger with the revived attention to the series and with the new cult fans joining in. Interestingly enough, with completely changing the industry standards in the 90s, the new season was so bizarre, unusual and fascinating that the season became a separate new generation of cult film by itself. The last season introduced some outright strange and “absurd” plot development that still puzzles all the loyal fans.

To evaluate the “cult” value of *Twin Peaks*, I will analyze it from four major elements: Anatomy, Consumption, and Cultural Status. At the conclusion of this paper we should be able to prove our claim that “Twin Peaks” is a cult film. Most of the term definitions are taken from a wonderful book by Ernest Mathjis and Xavier Mendik — “The Cult Film Reader”. All the references to the scenes and events from the series were taken from my personal screenings. The following research contains spoilers for *Twin Peaks*, *The Return*.

1 Anatomy

Anatomy researches the film itself from a technical point of view: content, style, format, and generic modes. This is one of factors of cult films that solely depend on the director and producer of the show.

Innovation. From the very first moments of *Twin Peaks*’ intro, the American audience knew that this is not going to be a regular TV show they were all used to. The opening credits sequence of *Twin Peaks* is accompanied by Angelo Badalamenti. The genius composer behind the *Twin Peaks* soundtrack that “still marks the summit of TV soundtracks”. [4] Even before the actual start of the TV series, audience was already prepared to new experience only by listening to the opening credits. The soundtrack might sound sentimental and slow-developing in the beginning but it serves its purpose to set the mood for the show. This approach that David Lynch made almost forces all of the members of the audience to watch

the opening credits in full. Where in contrast, most of the 1980s and 1990s TV shows' (Knight Rider, 1982) opening credits could be easily skipped because they just became an obstacle before an actual episode.

Badness. It is almost a convention for cult movies to be “bad” due to their poor acting, poor cinematic values, poor plot structure or everything together. However, *Twin Peaks* was not considered “bad” under any mainstream criterion. On the contrary, it was revolutionary in terms of cinematography and its acting crew. Every shot in the series was carefully composed and thought-out by David Lynch himself. Many do not know the fact that the lamp flickering technique that is used almost everywhere actually came from *Twin Peaks*. In the first Season when the Leland Palmer goes to the morgue to identify the body of his own daughter, Laura Palmer, the light above the morgue bed flickers. During the set, the lamp actually broke but instead of replacing it, David Lynch told the filming crew to leave it as it is. Accidentally or not, this created one of the most used techniques in the movie industry. The way David Lynch embraced random and probably bad things on the set is what made *Twin Peaks* to some extent “bad” and simultaneously original. [5]

Transgression. A big factor of a cult film is its ability to blur the line between what is believed to be “good” and “bad”. David Lynch’s first feature-length film *Eraserhead*, 1977, is infamous for its inventiveness and its ability to question the long-standing traditions about good and bad through his employment of far-fetched technique that were outright “bad” in traditional sense, however, they bring some authentic satisfaction to the viewing experience that makes us to critically approach the mainstream values. *Twin Peaks* utilizes some of the techniques in the BOB sequences. BOB is an inter-dimensional entity who performs horrific acts towards humanity to “harvest” their pain and sorrow. David Lynch’s mysticism is a key part of the horror side of *Twin Peaks*. His approach to introduce BOB and other supernatural parts were so bizarre and uncommon but they became widely accepted and are still being debated to this day. It really does challenge the conventional ways of thinking about good and bad values in cinematography.

Genre. If you ask anyone to name a movie that combines Mystery, Drama, and Horror, the unanimous answer will always be *Twin Peaks*. It is a common technique of cult films to mix genres. This is one of practices that made cult films more approachable (Alien, 1979) and likable. Some of the most popular movies at the time were always a combination of different genres that made them unique (Blade Runner, 1987). *Twin Peaks* is the first one to hit the classic genres (Drama, Mystery, Horror) and to masterfully combine three of them into one solid piece.

Loose ends. Media produced in the cult field are infamous for making people anxious about letting the endings stay loose. Meaning, without a logical conclusion or a closure (Maniac, 1934). Some of the movies' endings are so complex that if the director tried to make a reasonable conclusion, the audience failed at comprehending it (2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968). *Twin Peaks* Season Two finale was not an exception and it left at the very confusing moment, where the viewers were forced to guess if Dale Cooper at the end of the series is the real agent from FBI or the doppelganger from the red room. *How's Annie?* This question has been answered 26 years later in the *Twin Peaks: The Return* that is considered to be the third season of the legendary show. Interestingly enough, *The Return* left more loose ends than the original run of the series. Even in 26 years, David Lynch stayed true to his own "cult" values.

Nostalgia. Nostalgia is the core feature of any cult film. It is the ability of a cult film to trigger emotions from the idealized past. [6] Arguably, nostalgia is one of the strongest feelings *Twin Peaks* successfully triggers in its audience. David Lynch can be considered one of the classic film directors from the past and he masterfully utilizes many things from the past in *Twin Peaks*. Firstly, David Lynch skillfully connects the 90s clothing style with the 50s and 60s clothing style of America. The main characters: Bobby Riggs, Donna Hayward, and James Hurley, all wear the trending style of their time, therefore symbolizing the youth of the series. [7] On the other hand, employees at the famous Double R Diner, which was founded by Norma Jennings in 1969, wear traditional clothes from the 1960s,

invoking nostalgic feelings in the audience members. It has a very strong effect, because that period of time from 1951 until 1970, is considered to be the Golden Age of America. [8] People enjoy remembering the old good days, subsequently, they enjoy watching *Twin Peaks* that helps them to remember them. Surprisingly, *The Return* does not try to evoke nostalgic feelings towards 1960s, on the contrary, it is making references to the interval of time when the original run of *Twin Peaks* was aired.

Gore. Utilizing gore in films is a sure way to be granted a cult film status. However, first two seasons of *Twin Peaks* did not show any explicit elements of gore. There were moments of domestic violence, where Leo Johnson was beat his wife, Shelley Johnson, with a sock stuffed with a bar of soap (Season 1, Episode 1). This action was not shown, we see only how Leo stuffs the sock, then the screen goes black accompanied by Shelley’s scream, finally we only see the consequences of Shelley having a bruise in later scenes. Besides that, the original episodes did not promote gore. Maybe this is one of the reasons why *Twin Peaks* is considered a family show. On the other hand, *The Return* embraces explicit gore and horror. In no way, the third season is family-friendly. In the very first episode, the series become pure horror and the audience is left frightened on what happens next. Figure 1 shows the supernatural entity that is connected to the spirit of BOB. We see the “Experiment” materialize in the glass box in New York, violently killing the couple on the couch by hacking them to death. Figure 2 shows “The arm”, who transformed from a little man in a red suit to an electric tree that whispers in backward riddles. Finally, Figure 3 shows a brutal execution that was carried out by Dale Cooper’s doppelganger. The figures below show how over the years, David Lynch embraced gore, violence, and mysticism into his work.

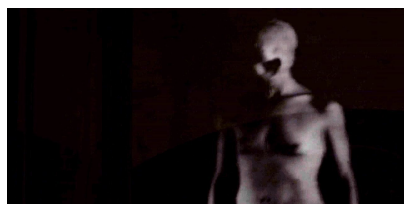


Figure 1: Experiment



Figure 2: The arm



Figure 3: Darya

2 The consumption of Twin Peaks

The way cult films are received by an audience differs drastically from the way mainstream films are received. Cult films do not concentrate on getting box office figures or mass audiences, although there are some exceptions (Herschell Gordon Lewis). In this current scope, *Twin Peaks* is a really interesting case to investigate. The show is one of the most beloved and critically acclaimed TV series ever made. Right before the initial air of the “Pilot” episode, Media Analyst Paul Schulman said, “I don’t think it has a chance of succeeding. It is not commercial, it is radically different from what we as viewers are accustomed to seeing, there’s no one in the show to root for.” [9] It was reasonable to think this way because both *The Colbys* spin-off and *Dynasty* failed at the same time slot that *Twin Peaks* had, Thursday nights. From its release, everyone in the time knew what *Twin Peaks* was. 34.6 rating on the first day made it ABC’s most successful show of the 1990s. [1] David Lynch’s and Mark Frost’s show was ranked among the Top 25 Cult Shows and Top 50 Television Programs of All Time by *TV Guide* [10, 11] and was nominated as one of the 100 Best TV shows in history. [10, 12] Actually, *Twin Peaks* is in every top TV shows listings, which indicates what a massive success it was. If it a TV show got all this attention from the mainstream media, is it still “cult”? Yes, it is. *Twin Peaks* has one of the biggest cult followings of any TV show. No other fan base of a TV show lasted for more than 25 years and still trying to unravel mysteries and secrets that directors put into the series.

Active celebration, community, liveness, and commitment. The followers of *Twin Peaks* fan base and cult is massive to say the least. We have COOP, a national *Twin Peaks* fan organization [3]. With the new era of the Internet, loyal fans from all around the world came together and formed communities like: Twin Peaks Wikia, biggest website that is solely dedicated to the series. It has transcripts for all episodes, separate web pages for characters, events, places, and theories about the show. The website is purely community-driven, meaning that fans gather together and produce new material for the show just because of their devotion to it. [13] *Twin Peaks* also has a separate page on

Reddit, most influential discussion board service. With over 76 thousand [14] readers, the community makes hundreds pages long discussions about new episodes, new theories, and new revelations. This community does not seem to wish stopping. Every day, new questions are being asked and more answers are needed.

3 The cultural status of *Twin Peaks*

Sometimes, cults films can be regarded as “strange” and even “weird” due to their use of unusual and often inappropriate techniques. Casual or uneducated audience may just disregard it as a flick or a trick used by directors, however, some cases and *Twin Peaks* especially, carry a very important task of critically analyzing and criticizing current cultural status, society structure, or topics that people usually do not openly discuss.

Strangeness and Allegory. One of the factors may be the location of *Twin Peaks* as a city. Filmed in a beautiful state of Washington near a waterfall surrounded by famous Douglas firs. Not every film features such relaxing yet mysterious locations as David Lynch’s and Mark Frost’s creation does. This is one of the important but subtle signs of something odd and out of place. BOB, The Arm, Little Man, Red Room, and etc. are the truly strange parts of the show that granted its cult status.

Cultural sensitives and politics. The status of a film as a cultural representation is related to its cult reputation. [3] The reputation of a cult film increases as its cult fandom grows, its cult status is becoming more culturally acceptable, and the meanings are becoming more and more ambiguous. Truly, the creators of *Twin Peaks*, David Lynch and Mark Frost introduced to the world a TV show about a dead high school beauty queen wrapped in a plastic on the beach, special FBI Agent investigating the case while drinking the finest coffee with the best cherry pie you could buy in a small town in the state of Washington that is visited by out-of-the-world demonic creatures whose sole purpose is to corrupt the residents of our fine small town. To the surprise of all audiences members and even the cast, *Twin Peaks* not only became a part of history, it changed and it completely and permanently. [15]

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