

THE STRANGE CASES OF  
DAVID LYNCH

IS THERE AN ART TELEVISION?

In any comparison of the aesthetic traits of film and television, the name David Lynch will most likely spring to mind. During his career, Lynch has swung between experimental projects and more mainstream work. *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* marked a period of about five years in which he established his reputation as a director of “weird” tales that drew considerable attention from the public and the press.

The two works contain enough similarities to make comparison relatively easy. Both are mysteries set in small lumbering towns, and their two protagonists share some traits and are played by the same actor, Kyle MacLachlan. He has recalled, “Someone said to me that they thought Dale Cooper was Jeffrey Beaumont grown up.”<sup>1</sup> One might easily get that impression, though Cooper’s intelligence distinctly outstrips Jeffrey’s. The similarities between the two works have given rise to a considerable body of writing, primarily thematic interpretations of them as quintessentially

Lynchian. *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* are widely assumed to be his best works, and this is a plausible appraisal.

What more can we learn from such a comparison? I have long been fascinated by the issue of how avant-garde works occasionally emerge within a purely commercial context. Shortly after the end of World War I, the German film industry produced *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and a whole series of Expressionist films. Similarly, Eisenstein's *Potemkin* (1925) and Carl Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) were made by profit-oriented companies in the 1920s. Following World War II, often with the help of government subsidies, an art cinema emerged, initially in Europe and Asia, that has remained as an alternative to mainstream Hollywood-style filmmaking ever since. Here I am using "art" in a much more narrow and conventional sense than in the first chapter, where I referred to fictional television programs as "art," whether good or bad.

We all have a general sense of what "art films" are. They are usually small-scale productions that appeal primarily to an educated audience, often outside their country of origin. They are usually made and exhibited within a set of institutions separate from those of mainstream commercial films. In Britain the lottery now helps support them; in France a tax on cinema tickets funds them. There are special "art cinemas" devoted to them in cities and university towns. An international film-festival circuit has burgeoned in recent decades, meaning that Iranian or Japanese films can be seen in dozens of countries without ever playing in an actual theater. Certain video companies specialize in art films, for example, Artificial Eye and the British Film Institute in the U.K., and New Yorker and Kino International in the U.S.

Art films form a sort of middle ground between mainstream

commercial films and pure experimental cinema—the latter being the kind of personal, often non-narrative films that screen mainly in museums and filmmaking cooperatives. Some art films are daring enough that they approach experimental work—say, some of Jean-Luc Godard's films of the late 1960s and early 1970s or the films of Vertov and Eisenstein in the USSR during the 1920s. At the other end of the art-film spectrum lie films that are subtitled or in other ways “arty” but that nevertheless manage to find a larger audience, something *Life Is Beautiful* (1997) did a few years ago and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) is currently doing.<sup>2</sup> Such films draw in art-cinema lovers, but also a share of the mainstream market as well.

Can the same phenomenon occur in television? Can there be “art TV” that airs on the mainstream networks? Certainly there is no clearcut set of alternative institutions within the television establishment. Government-supported systems like the BBC have a mandate of sorts to create quality television, but that might just mean the sorts of prestigious miniseries exported to fill the schedules of the public broadcasting system in the U.S.—adaptations of Dickens or Austen, for example, which are comparable to the “prestige” literary adaptations of Hollywood's studio era (as with MGM's 1936 *Romeo and Juliet* and its 1940 *Pride and Prejudice*). That is not the sort of television I am referring to as “art television.” What I mean is a sort of television comparable to art films.

Given the current widespread application of the term “postmodern” to television, I should specify that what I am calling “art television” is not synonymous with “postmodern television.” There are two main ways in which television is argued to be postmodern.

Some claim that a postmodernist quality arises from the overall flow of programming, which juxtaposes disparate items: fiction

next to nonfiction, comedy next to drama, commercials next to programs. Thus the format of TV scheduling creates the jumble that has a postmodern effect of reflexivity, irony, and so on. If this is the case, individual programs are not the source of this postmodern effect, and hence they would still be subject to isolation from their place in a schedule and to formal analysis of the type I have been proposing.

A second approach holds that certain individual series are instances of postmodernism, which is then presumably only intermittent across all of TV. In that case, one could sort out which programs are postmodern and which are not. Interestingly, the programs sometimes cited as postmodern—*Late Night with David Letterman*, *Saturday Night Live*, music videos, commercials—are often not narrative programs.

Nevertheless, if any narrative program could be claimed to be postmodern, it would certainly be *Twin Peaks*, which has influenced other eccentric series like *Northern Exposure* and *The X-Files*. *Twin Peaks* has an imbedded soap opera, *Invitation to Love*, which roughly parallels its own events. For example, when Hank shoots Leo Johnson in the first-season finale, Leo lies bleeding and watches a thug get shot on *Invitation to Love*. Reflexivity and irony are working full throttle here.

If postmodernism is to be found in individual programs, then these programs are presumably also isolable from the scheduling flow and available for analysis. (Indeed, how could one differentiate postmodern from non-postmodern programs without at least cursory analysis?) I have no objection to analysts looking for postmodern television in this way, but my interest here is different. “Art cinema” is a term in wide public usage, and it implies specific and well-established conventions. I wish to examine whether some of those same conventions occasionally appear in commer-

cial television. This would seem to be a more limited issue than whether television as a whole or some television programs in particular are postmodern. “Art television” might well be considered by some a subcategory of postmodern television. That is, postmodern conventions may now be so pervasive as to constitute a new set of popular norms long since assimilated by many viewers, but art television might have ambiguities and other challenging techniques that stretch or break those conventions. At any rate, for now I am dealing with only how we might define “art television,” postmodern or not.

Before tackling my main subject, David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, I would like to define more specifically what I mean by “art films” and give you a brief, clear-cut example of how that definition could be applied to television. Several traits of art films were laid out by David Bordwell in his 1979 article “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice.” I shall apply his outline of traits not to a film, but to a classic of British television, the 1986 BBC miniseries *The Singing Detective*. If there have been any instances of art television in the Anglophone history of the medium, this one definitely figures high among them.

#### THE SINGING DETECTIVE AS ART TELEVISION

Bordwell discusses five major traits as typical of the art-cinema mode: a loosening of causality, a greater emphasis on psychological or anecdotal realism, violations of classical clarity of space and time, explicit authorial comment, and ambiguity.<sup>3</sup>

*The Singing Detective* certainly eschews the linear cause-and-effect chain typical of classical narratives. It moves freely among three basic levels. The “real” situation has the protagonist, Philip Marlow, suffering from a painful skin disease and confined to a

hospital. He is also suffering mental problems, as we learn in part from scenes of his imagined reworking of his published potboiler, *The Singing Detective*. On a third level, flashbacks from his childhood, also revised by his imagination, display reasons for his adult problems.<sup>4</sup>

The fantasy elements that run so strongly through the series would seem to preclude realism. Yet *The Singing Detective* also focuses on the painful details of Marlow's skin disease and its treatment, the illnesses and deaths of his fellow patients, and ultimately on his emergence from fantasy into health and a departure from the hospital. Moreover, the narrative appeals to the art cinema's deeper form of realism, character psychology. Few film or television narratives have spent so much time probing the fantasies, delusions, and traumas of a protagonist. Bordwell's discussion of art cinema suggests that the typical hero proceeds through an itinerary: a journey, a search, the making of a film. *The Singing Detective* traces Marlow's parallel physical and mental cures; we see the gradual improvement of his skin, just as we see him open up to the hospital psychologist and finally reconcile with his wife.<sup>5</sup> In some ways *The Singing Detective* resembles the classic art film *8½* (1963). In Fellini's film the hero, Guido, is trying to make a film but cannot, and his fantasies—including scenes from his youth—expose and explore his problems.

*The Singing Detective* constantly violates classical notions of redundantly marked shifts in space and time. It freely cuts among fantasy and reality, past and present. Initially the fantasies appear to be confined to a separate space of film-noir settings in which *The Singing Detective* narrative plays out in Marlow's imagination. Soon, however, his fantasies begin invading the hospital ward as well, with the doctors and nurses suddenly breaking into a song and dance number.

Bordwell emphasizes the importance of the author in the art cinema:

Not that the author is represented as a biographical individual (although some art films, e.g., Fellini's, Truffaut's, and Pasolini's, solicit confessional readings), but rather the author becomes a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension. Over this hovers a notion that the art-film director has a creative freedom denied to his/her Hollywood counterpart. Within this frame of reference, the author is the textual force "who" communicates (what is the film *saying?*) and "who" expresses (what is the artist's *personal vision?*).<sup>6</sup>

While film is usually held to be a director's medium, television depends more fundamentally on its writers.<sup>7</sup> Commentaries on *The Singing Detective* attribute it to Dennis Potter rather than to its director, Jon Amiel. Interviewers and commentators have tried to read the series autobiographically because the character of Marlow has a skin disease similar to one which afflicted Potter—though Potter denies any resemblance beyond that detail.<sup>8</sup> Certainly the series encourages not only an interpretation of Marlow's character but also an interpretation of Potter's commentary on his protagonist's psychological progress. The series also draws on Potter's most famous authorial touch, the use of lip-synching to recordings of old popular songs.

Finally, one of the most characteristic traits of the art cinema is ambiguity. If the classical cinema values a clear cause/effect chain, then an uncertainty surrounding how the chain fits together or concludes provides an alternative approach to narrative. In *The Singing Detective*, the increasingly convoluted and dense variations

among Marlow's memories, his reworking of his pulp novel, and his fantasies become increasingly intertwined and often difficult to distinguish. For example, early in the third episode, we see a flashback to a scene of the young Marlow riding in a train with his mother after she has left his father. The boy sees a scarecrow wave to him:

*Close-up of young Marlow seated by the window of a train. He watches as a group of soldiers in the compartment ogle his mother's knees as she sits opposite Marlow, reading a newspaper.*

MARLOW, *heavy country accent*: "Ma? Oh, Ma?"

*One soldier, chagrined, looks away. Marlow's mother ignores him. Marlow looks out the window, then at the newspaper. His point of view of headline: "War Rushing to an End!"*

MARLOW'S *voiceover [boy's voice]*: "That's bloody old 'Itler done for, then. So everythin'll be all right. That's what them do say, y'know. It'll be a luvly day t'morra. Wat's it? Bluebirds an' that, over the . . . Everybody says, when the war is over, lights and flowers, butter, eggs, the lot. Comics, sweets, everythin'. It'll be all right, all right, all right."

*His POV of the newspaper, voiceover continuing*: "The war rushin' to an end, exclamation mark. Oh, I do like me a good exclamation mark, mind."

*An extreme long shot of the train moving through the countryside, followed by a medium close-up of Marlow seen through the train window. He looks out. An extreme long shot shows his POV through the window. In a field, a scarecrow with arms outstretched appears against the sky. Ominous music begins. In medium close up as before, Marlow rubs fog off the window with his hand. His POV as before reveals the scare-*



*crow lowering its left arm and raising the right one in a waving gesture, a motion accompanied by an eery sting in the music. In medium close-up as before, Marlow continues to look out the window with a frown.*

*Dissolve to the adult Marlow's hospital ward.*

Aside from the status of the scarecrow vision, we are left to wonder whether the line about liking exclamation marks really represents the young Marlow's thoughts. Though the line is spoken in the boy's voice and with the heavy accent that the adult Marlow has lost, it seems an unlikely thing for this naive country boy to ponder. We have seen a number of fairly clearly demarcated flashbacks to Marlow's childhood, but here for the first time a fantasy element enters, and we may wonder: Did the young Marlow have the scarecrow fantasy years ago, or is the adult Marlow embellishing the event in retrospect? (The live scarecrow becomes a motif relating to Marlow's youthful terrors.)

*The Singing Detective* rapidly became an acknowledged classic, but it certainly stands apart from most other television programs—except, of course, some of Potter's other series. The BBC, with its government funding, would be a logical place to find occasional instances of "art television." One might expect that commercial-network American television, however, would be an odd place to find them. Yet many films have had dual careers as both popular hits and art-house classics. The films of the great Japanese directors Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi were mainstream commercial productions when they first appeared; only later did they become darlings of Western art-house audiences. Jacques Tati's comedies were successful with the broad public from the late 1940s on, and one can still occasionally see *Mr.*

*Hulot's Holiday* (1953) or *Play Time* (1967) showing at a Sunday family matinee in Paris. Yet from the start Tati also garnered a more esoteric critical admiration somewhat comparable to that afforded his contemporary Robert Bresson. Thus we might expect that in commercial television, as well, the occasional art program might find a crossover audience—especially in the sphere of comedy, where experimentation is easier to accept.

#### ENTERTAINING UNCERTAINTIES

*Twin Peaks* would be an obvious candidate for the status of art television. To start with, it has manifest similarities to *Blue Velvet*, which I take to be an art film. *Blue Velvet* was in fact produced by mainstream executive Dino De Laurentiis, who agreed to let Lynch make it as a reward for directing the science-fiction epic *Dune*. According to Lynch, De Laurentiis let him have complete control of the film after he agreed to cut the budget and his salary by half. *Blue Velvet* went on to attract something of a crossover popular audience and to make a modest profit. Lynch was nominated for a best-director Oscar, but *Blue Velvet* did not receive any other nominations. He had apparently slid just within the limits of experimentation that Hollywood could tolerate—as long as his films made money.

Some critics hailed *Blue Velvet* as high art. Pauline Kael declared that Lynch's work "goes back to the avant-garde filmmakers of the twenties and thirties, who were often painters—and he himself trained to be one. He takes off from the experimental traditions that Hollywood has usually ignored."<sup>9</sup> To some extent this statement accurately reflects the film. Lynch's use of slow motion, of dream imagery, and of bright, unnaturalistic color recalls techniques of 1920s German Expressionism or French Impres-

sionism. But there was another side of Lynch that audiences could connect with. That was the explicit sex and violence, the “realistic” facing up to the seamy side of life. Any number of aspiring teenage filmmakers seized on these aspects of Lynch.

Other Lynchian traits most obviously included a highly original taste for the grotesque and the bizarre. We should remember that Lynch was, as Kael pointed out, trained as a painter; he has also created in the areas of photography, performance art, songwriting, and comic strips concurrently with his film and television work. Aside from being well aware of traditions like Surrealism, he was used to approaching his work as personal expression.

Lynch based both *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* on his own background and obsessions. He places the action of each in a seemingly ordinary small town of the sort where he grew up; he then digs below the surface in search of the hidden, sordid activities of its citizens. The juxtaposition of banal good and overblown evil that results contributes an uncertainty of tone that forms the basis for the underlying ambiguity of both works.

One possible source of the fluctuation in tone in both *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* is Lynch’s idiosyncratic notions of the connotations of many scenes. His interpretations, as revealed in interviews, seem contrary to how one would expect most viewers to take these scenes. For example, in *Blue Velvet* there is a scene in which Jeffrey meets with Sandy after he has witnessed Frank’s brutal attack on Dorothy. He has been disillusioned by his discovery that such evil exists, and Sandy tries to comfort him:

*Jeffrey with Sandy in her car. He sits brooding dejectedly. Sandy watches him with concern as quiet organ music plays.*

JEFFREY, *suddenly*: “Why are there people like Frank? Why is there so much trouble in this world?”

SANDY: “I don’t know. *[Pause]* I had a dream. In fact, it was the night I met you. *[Looks up through the windshield, gradually becoming awed and delighted as she explains the dream]* In the dream, there was our world, and the world was dark because there weren’t any robins, and the robins represented love, and for the longest time, there was just this darkness, and all of a sudden, *thousands* of robins were set free, and they flew down and brought this blinding light of love, and it seemed like that love would be the only thing that would make any difference. And it did.”

*Jeffrey listens, tears in his eyes.*

SANDY *looks at him, awkwardly*: “So, I guess it means, there is trouble till the robins come.” *Pause.*

JEFFREY: You’re a neat girl.”

SANDY: “So are you.”

*He smiles more broadly.*

SANDY: “I mean, you’re a neat guy.”

*Pause as they look at each other and their smiles fade.*

SANDY: “I—I guess we’d better go.”

JEFFREY: “Yeah, I guess so.”

*Long shot of the car with a church in the background. Sandy starts the car, and they drive away as the organ music swells slightly.*

One common reaction to Sandy’s speech and to the film’s framing scenes of a glossily perfect small-town life has been an assumption that Lynch is mocking such optimism and perfection. Yet he seems to take these elements in a much more straightforward way:

“I like to have contrasts in a film,” explained Lynch, “because there are so many horrific things and so many beautiful things in life . . . Right or wrong, the Dennis Hopper character is, to most people, the coolest character in *Blue Velvet*, and yet there’s another side to that picture. The scene in which Sandy tells Jeffrey about the robins is real important to me.

“That scene is kind of embarrassing,” he admitted. “Sandy is this emotional kind of girl who gets into this euphoric state which is quite beautiful . . . It’s a feeling of what can happen when two people are sitting in a car and falling in love when they’re all alone and no one else is listening. They say things like this in a safe environment, goofy things. And I think films should be embarrassing in some places.”<sup>10</sup>

Lynch’s comment suggests that he realizes that many fans will take the sex and violence to be the essence of his film—that is, they will be fascinated by Frank Booth (played by Dennis Hopper). Yet he seems to intend the treatment of the “good” characters to be quite sincere (i.e., non-ironic).

Another interview, this time concerning *Twin Peaks*, reveals a similar disjunction between Lynch’s attitude toward a scene and a more typical interpretation. The interviewer asks Lynch about the famous scene in Episode 3 of the first season, when Cooper lectures on Tibet to the staff of the police department, then throws rocks at a bottle to whittle down a list of suspects:

*Cooper, setting up a blackboard in the woods. Lucy, Truman, and Hawk are by a donut-laden table.*

ANDY, *with pail, to Cooper*: “Where do you want these rocks?”

COOPER: “Put ’em right down there by the donuts, Deputy.”

LUCY, *proferring a pitcher*: “Anyone for a warm-up?”

*All four men extend cups, with various comments*: “Mmm! Ah! You bet!”

COOPER: “Thanks, Lucy.”

*He sips and spits the coffee out as the others watch.*

COOPER: “*Damn* good coffee! And *hot!* Would every one please take a seat.”

*They move rightward and sit on a row of folding chairs, as if in a classroom. Cooper extends a telescopic pointer.*

COOPER: “By way of explaining what we’re about to do, I am first gonna tell you a little bit about the country . . .”

*He flips over the blackboard to reveal a map of China.*

COOPER: “. . . Tibet.”

*He points to it, and the others lean forward simultaneously.*

COOPER, *lecturing earnestly*: “An extremely spiritual country, for centuries the leader of Tibet has been known as the Dalai Lama. In 1950, Communist China invaded Tibet, and while leaving the Dalai Lama nominally in charge, they in fact seized control of the entire country. In 1959, after a Tibetan uprising against the Chinese, the Dalai Lama was forced to flee to India for his life and has been exiled ever since.”

COOPER, *shutting the telescopic pointer*: “Following a dream I had three years ago, I have become deeply moved by the plight of the Tibetan people and filled with a desire to help them. I also awoke from the same dream realizing that I had subconsciously gained

knowledge of a deductive technique involving mind-body coordination operating hand-in-hand with the deepest level of intuition. Sheriff, Deputy Hawk, if you will assist me, I will now demonstrate.”

*The two rise uncertainly. Cooper flips the map over to the blackboard side.*

COOPER: “You may recall, on the day of her death Laura Palmer wrote the following entry in her diary: ‘Nervous about meeting J.’ Today . . . I’m going to concentrate on the Js.” *He circles the J on the board.* “Harry, when I give the word, would you please read aloud each of the names I’ve written on the blackboard.”

TRUMAN: “Okey-doke.”

COOPER: “Deputy Hawk, stand over here and hold this bucket of rocks up near me where I can get to them. Would you please put on the kitchen mitts? Deputy Andy, move down, stand by the bottle. Lucy, take this piece of chalk—not too near, Andy!”

LUCY: “I’m getting excited.”

COOPER, *to her*: “—and if I should strike the bottle after Sheriff Truman says a particular name, make a check to the right of that name. Sheriff, I almost forgot. When you say the name, also briefly state that person’s relationship to Laura Palmer. Ready?”

LUCY: “Ready!”

ANDY, *off*: “Ready!”

*(As Truman identifies each person, a shot of him or her appears briefly.)*

TRUMAN: “James Hurley. Secret boyfriend.”

COOPER: "James Hurley." *Throws the rock. It misses, and he takes another.*

TRUMAN: "Josie Packard. Was instructed in English by Laura."

COOPER: "Josie Packard." *The rock misses.*

LUCY: "So . . . there's no check next to either of these names?"

COOPER: "That's correct. Please continue."

TRUMAN: "Dr. Lawrence Jacoby. Laura's psychiatrist."

COOPER: "Dr. Lawrence Jacoby." *The rock knocks the bottle off the stump on which it had been sitting.*

LUCY: "You did it! You hit it!"

COOPER: "Lucy, make a note that the bottle was struck but did not break. Very important. Andy, put that bottle back *exactly* where it was." *Andy does so.*

TRUMAN: "Johnny Horne. Laura was his special-education tutor."

COOPER: "Johnny Horne." *Rock strikes far from the bottle.*

TRUMAN: "Shelley Johnson. Waitress at diner, friend."

COOPER: "Shelley Johnson." *Rock hits stone, ricochets, and strikes Andy in the forehead.*

LUCY: "Oh . . ."

COOPER: "Sorry, Andy."

LUCY: "Sweetie."

ANDY, *breathing hard*: "It didn't hurt. It didn't hurt a bit."



TRUMAN: “Where there’s no sense, there’s no feeling, Andy.”

*Andy forces a laugh, continues to breath hard. Cooper takes another rock, and Truman pulls him aside.*

TRUMAN: “Coop. Tell me, the idea for all this really came from a dream?”

COOPER, *smiling and confident*: “Yes, it did.” They return to their places.

TRUMAN, *uncertainly*: “Uh, Jack with One Eye.”

LUCY: “Maybe it’s the letter I. There’s no I in Jack.”

COOPER: “I think perhaps it means he only had one eye, Lucy.”

HAWK: “Sounds like Nadine—Big Ed Hurley’s wife.”

TRUMAN: “No, no, no, there’s a casino up north called ‘One-Eyed Jack’s’ across the border on the Canadian side.”

COOPER: “That’s it. We’re gonna have to go up there and check that place out.”

TRUMAN: “Okay.”

LUCY: “Agent Cooper, I’m going to erase this because it’s a place and not a person. Actually, maybe the person could be in the place, so should I erase it?”

COOPER: “Yes.”

LUCY: “Yes, a person could be in a place or yes, I should erase it?”

TRUMAN: “Lucy!”

COOPER, *raising a hand decisively*: “Erase it, Lucy. Next name, Harry.”

TRUMAN: “Leo Johnson, husband of Shelley, drives a truck, connection with Laura . . . unknown.”

COOPER: “Leo Johnson.” *The rock smashes the bottle.*

LUCY: “Oh!”

*Pause as all consider this. Fade on view of broken bottle.*

This scene has often been singled out as indicative of the “weird” qualities of *Twin Peaks*. One interviewer clearly took such a stance when he asked Lynch this question about Cooper’s character development: “He starts off kind of straight—a little unusual maybe—and it’s not until episode three, when he gives a Zen sermon to the Sheriff’s Department in the forest, that you start to realize just how wacky he is. Where did that come from?” Lynch’s answer is quite unexpected: “I went to this place in Hollywood where I met the Dalai Lama. And I got fired up about the plight of the Tibetan people. And I told [coauthor] Mark [Frost], ‘We’ve got to do something.’ And that whole scene developed out of meeting the Dalai Lama! And then it added another layer to Cooper.”<sup>11</sup> We might suspect that in these two cases Lynch is pulling the questioner’s leg, but in general his replies during interviews are so forthright that it seems more reasonable to take him at his word.<sup>12</sup> Yet few viewers of *Blue Velvet* or *Twin Peaks* would interpret these scenes as a touching moment of young love and a plea for the restoration of Tibet.

I am certainly not advocating that the artist’s intentions should dictate our interpretations of a work. My point is that, at least in some cases, Lynch’s notion of what he is doing and the viewer’s

notion are miles apart. Here is a man who thinks Sandy's speech about robins is beautiful, but at the same time he wants it to embarrass us. He apparently thinks that Cooper's speech in the forest is a way of calling attention to the plight of Tibet.<sup>13</sup> If an artist has views this off-kilter, then it is no wonder that we do not know how we are to react to certain scenes. Thus in Lynch's work authorial commentary becomes a major source of ambiguity.

In other cases, however, Lynch quite deliberately creates a mixture of tones. This is perhaps most obvious in the second season of *Twin Peaks*, where Leland Palmer, the bereaved father, apparently goes a bit mad and breaks out into song and dance routines in the middles of scenes. This is realistically motivated as a symptom of his grief at his daughter's death, but it also arouses anxiety because of its inappropriateness—the “embarrassment” that Lynch felt the spectator should feel now and then. Another good example of a deliberate clash of emotional inflection comes in Episode 1 of the second season. Early in the series a mystery is introduced. Big Ed Hurley, owner of the local garage, is married to Nadine, an eccentric character obsessed with inventing a silent drape runner. He loves Norma Jennings, owner of the local diner. Both Ed and Norma are attractive characters who clearly belong together, while Nadine is one of the series' oddest, most grating figures. In a scene from the two-hour premiere of the second season, Ed tells the sympathetic Cooper about the history of his relationship with Nadine, now in a coma after a suicide attempt. Listening nearby are Sheriff Harry Truman, also characterized as a kindly person, and Albert Rosenfeld, a cynical, tactless FBI forensics expert:

*Truman, Cooper, and Albert walk along a hospital corridor.*

*They find Ed Hurley, sitting disconsolately on a chair.*

TRUMAN: “Ed?”

ED *stands, to Cooper*: “How *you* doin’? Heard you stopped a couple.”

COOPER: “I’m OK. How’s Nadine?”

ED: “Well, she’s in a coma. They say there’s nothin’ we can do, she has to want to come back.”

COOPER: “How you holdin’ out?”

ED: “Well, all I can do is sit here, thinkin’ about the things I shoulda said or done.”

COOPER: “Ed, don’t be too hard on yourself.”

ED: “I never believed in fate, Agent Cooper. Always felt, you make your own way, you take care of your own, you pick up after yourself.”

ALBERT: “Farmer’s Almanac?”

*Truman and Cooper glance at Albert, annoyed.*

COOPER: “Albert, I would like to speak to Ed.”

TRUMAN, *grim*: “Albert, I’ll buy you a cuppa coffee.”

*Albert and Truman go out right. Ed and Cooper turn away from them.*

COOPER: “Take a seat, Ed.” *They sit.*

ED: “I saw this comin’. I didn’t wanna believe it. What’s worse is, I’m sittin’ here thinkin’ that maybe that there’s a parta me that didn’t wanna stop her. And that’s a full load.”

*Truman pours coffee. Albert sips his, looks with a puzzled grimace at the cup, and glances at Truman.*

COOPER: "When did you get married, Ed?"

ED: "Right out of high school. Norma and I had been together about four years, and everybody figured we'd get hitched, that'd be that. I barely knew Nadine to say hello to."

*Truman glances at Albert as the latter sets his coffee aside.*

*(The next portion of the scene alternates between Ed speaking and Cooper's concerned, sympathetic face, with cutaways to Truman and Albert, nearby.)*

ED: "That spring, one bad weekend, Norma ran off with Hank. I was so twisted up inside I couldn't see straight. When I opened my eyes, there was Nadine right in front of me. There was somethin' so sweet, so helpless about her. We drove all night. Ended up in some little town in Montana out past Great Falls. And I asked her to marry me, half jokin', half drunk, half crazy. It was light before we found a justice of the peace, and Norma—well, she hadn't even slept with Hank. And the look on her face when she found out. Nadine and I, we went out to my dad's old cabin, up in Eagle Pass . . ."

*Cutaway to Truman listening and Albert glancing impatiently at his watch, then rolling his eyes.*

ED: ". . . honeymoon. I was hopin' maybe we'd get around to talking about a divorce, annulment, somethin'—but Nadine was so happy. And you know, by golly, I shot out Nadine's eye on that honeymoon."

*Cutaway to Albert, blinking in confused surprise.*

COOPER: "What do you mean, Ed?"

ED: "Well, the first day we were hunting pheasant."

*Cutaway to Truman, still listening, and Albert, glancing at him. Truman glances at Albert.*

ED: "Nadine's a crack shot, and we already had a coupla birds, and I felt good shootin', listening to the sound echo and roll down those hills. I fired, and a piece of buckshot skipped off a rock and caught Nadine square in the eye."

COOPER: "Man, that's a tough one."

ED: "She lay across my lap as we drove back to town . . ."

*Cutaway to Truman looking at Albert, who is grinning. Seeing Truman's disapproving look, he tries to sober up.*

ED: ". . . she never cried, she never blamed me, she never hated me for it."

*Cooper glances off at Albert in annoyance. Truman watches as Albert whips out a handkerchief and pretends to wipe his eyes as he breaks down in suppressed laughter.*

ED: "Couple months later Norma married Hank, so I don't believe in fate. You make your bed, you sleep in it."

*Truman looks disapprovingly at Albert, who has sobered up.*

ALBERT: "Sorry."

*Cooper puts his hand on Ed's shoulder.*

Thus we have scenes like this, where the tone is deliberately mixed, and other scenes where Lynch apparently has created

something that seems to him “beautiful”—to use his favorite term—but which may strike a reasonable viewer quite differently.

This wide range of responses elicited by the narrative of *Twin Peaks* was for some viewers quite evocative. One commentator describing the enigmatic character of the Log Lady suggested the layers of affect prompted by the series: “In many ways the Log Lady, incidental character though she is, sums up what *Twin Peaks* was about—absurd but poignant, mundane but surreal, touching on the mystical.”<sup>14</sup>

The overall narrative that results from these disparate aesthetic elements is surprisingly unified. Despite some silly moments and tedious subplots in the second season, the series comes across as one of the most daring balancing acts in the history of narrative television. It managed to hold onto its ABC contract as long as it did primarily because much of its audience was able to ignore many of the ambiguities of tone. Apparently they interpreted its grotesque aspects and its excesses as simply humorous. This presumably made the more difficult scenes of *Twin Peaks* less embarrassing to watch, thus dissipating part of Lynch’s power as an artist.

A teleplay manual devoted to daytime soap operas refers to *Twin Peaks* as “David Lynch’s prime-time spoof of soap opera.”<sup>15</sup> In some ways this seems odd, since relatively few of the series’ plotlines were clearly supposed to be comic: most notably Nadine’s obsession with silent drape-runners and the screwball-comedy triangle of Lucy, Andy, and Dick Tremayne. But when during the first season devoted fans held their *Twin Peaks* parties, they seized on the obviously comic elements of cherry pie, coffee, and doughnuts. The fact that many people, including young women, were eager to wrap themselves in plastic to imitate

the victim of sexual torture and murder suggested that they were not taking the narrative very seriously. I suspect that some of the second season's episodes played into this mocking appreciation by fans, but by that point many in this contingent had already abandoned *Twin Peaks*. Those of us who valued the series for its range of tones did not welcome the introduction of easy humor, and fortunately the later episodes downplayed it in favor of the series' gothic and grotesque elements.

#### LYNCH'S TAKE ON TV SERIALITY

Many critics have noted that *Twin Peaks* contains a mixture of several television genres.<sup>16</sup> The series' fundamental lines of action combine the soap opera with the detective story. In the soap opera, parallel stories spin out over many episodes, branching and crisscrossing. By starting their series with the discovery of Laura Palmer's murdered body, however, Lynch and Frost undoubtedly created an expectation on the part of the public that the revelation of the killer would not be drawn out excessively.

In fact Lynch and Frost had different ideas about when that revelation should come. On the tenth anniversary of the show's first season, *Entertainment Weekly* interviewed participants for a story of how *Twin Peaks* was conceived, put on the air, and canceled. Lynch and Frost discussed the Laura Palmer mystery:

*Lynch:* When we wrote *Twin Peaks*, we never intended the murder of Laura Palmer to be solved . . . Maybe in the last episode.

*Frost:* I know David was always enamored of that notion, but I felt we had an obligation to the audience to give them



some resolution. That was a bit of tension between him and me . . . It took us about 17 episodes to reveal it, and by then people were getting a little antsy . . .

*Lynch:* All I know is, I just felt it—that once that was solved, the murder of Laura Palmer, it was over. It was over.

*Frost:* We didn't have an event of similar impact to start the second cycle, and that was to the detriment of the show.<sup>17</sup>

At another point in the same interview, Lynch commented: “A continuing story is a beautiful thing to me, and mystery is a beautiful thing to me, so if you have a continuing mystery, it's so beautiful. And you can go deeper and deeper into a story and discover so many things.”<sup>18</sup> This almost goofy infatuation with the possibilities of serial television narratives is hardly in line with the practical demands of network programming.

To understand the opposed viewpoints of the series' two creators, it helps to know that Frost's main accomplishment before *Twin Peaks* was a three-year period as a staff writer for *Hill Street Blues*. As you may recall from Chapter 2, NBC had forced the producers and writers of this program to agree to have at least one of the multiple concurrent storylines achieve closure in each episode. Thus Frost was trained in a format that became widely influential and continues as a norm to this day. He was used to the notion of slowly developing some stories that could eventually come into prominence in later episodes while others developed rapidly within one. It makes perfect sense that he would seek to find “an event of similar magnitude” to Laura's death to carry the beginning of the second season.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, for Lynch such conventions of television were merely a starting point. One interviewer asked him, “How much

of the developing story of *Twin Peaks* was worked out in advance? Did you have a pretty good idea of where it was going?” Lynch replied: “Yes. In TV they have names for everything. Like the ‘arc’ of the story: where it’s going, who’s going to do what and all that stuff. And it makes sense to have a plan. So we wrote down our arc, but that’s a real general thing. Filling in the blanks is what’s so much fun. But the arc satisfies the executives.”<sup>20</sup> Apparently for Lynch, Laura’s death could provide an arc, but the reactions of members of the community could spin out endlessly developing story lines, with more and more secrets revealed as long as the series lasted. In the *Entertainment Weekly* interview he speaks of revealing the solution to Laura Palmer’s murder in the “last episode”—but for a successful prime-time network show, that last episode might be years away.

Lynch seems to have gotten his way to a considerable extent in the final shape that *Twin Peaks* took. Not only was the killer of Laura Palmer kept secret for longer than Frost would have wished, but the revelation was not a full resolution of the mystery: Leland indeed has murdered his daughter, but only, as we realize, because he is possessed by an evil being named Bob who has the power to move from one body to another. In effect Bob is a serial killer who apparently cannot be defeated—obviously a strong force against closure! As the second season develops, it becomes clear that Bob is connected with a mysterious set of seemingly extraterrestrial or supernatural forces centered in the Black Lodge, located in Ghostwood Forest. The possibility of stopping the string of murders seems to rest with Cooper’s ability to penetrate this mysterious place and perhaps defeat Bob. When he fails to do so, he himself becomes possessed by Bob at the end of the final episode of *Twin Peaks*. Far from stopping the string of mur-

ders, Cooper may be doomed to continue them. Thus we are left with what seems to be a classic season-end cliffhanger. Other plotlines of course are also left open.

The effect on the overall shape of the series was that viewers who wanted closure in the mystery got only partial satisfaction. Presumably they, like Frost, expected another strong plotline to take the place of the Laura Palmer murder. Instead the same storylines that had been opened at the start kept developing, often in more grotesque, bizarre, indeed “Lynchian” ways. The mixture of tones, which as we have seen is typical of Lynch’s work, became more extreme. Nadine, whose suicide attempt and lost eye began this plot thread on a poignant note, suddenly awoke possessing superhuman strength and believing herself to be a high school student; her comic affair with the teenaged Mike lasted through much of the second season.

In addition, the supernatural elements that had been primarily motivated as dreams, visions, and memories became more central and objective as the second season progressed. Major Briggs, hitherto seen mainly as Bobby’s stodgy, estranged father, turns out to have mysterious extraterrestrial contacts (a secret he seems to share with the Log Lady). No doubt the writers’ invention flagged a bit midway in the second season, especially in the wanderings of James Hurley in his attempt to find himself. I personally felt that it picked up later. I suspect, however, that many fans were not sorry to see the program go by the time ABC cancelled it well into the second season. Aside from all its other baffling qualities, *Twin Peaks* had manifestly ceased to be interpretable simply as a spoof of soap operas.

Thus one major challenge that *Twin Peaks* posed to conventional TV, alongside its mixture of genres and tones, seems to have been the violation of expectations concerning the nature of

seriality. Multiple continuing stories in prime-time dramas have conventionally been established as interweaving plotlines that periodically achieve closure. *Twin Peaks* instead spun each story line out, adding a twist whenever it seemed about to achieve closure. In Chapter 1, I described how the protagonists of art films like *L'Avventura* and *Toto le héros* may not achieve their goals. The plot of *Twin Peaks* is a case of a protagonist pursuing what threatens to be an ever-receding goal. Lynch took advantage of the serial format to explore his personal interests and obsessions—something he had been rewarded for in his films but which eventually lost him the support of both the network and a large segment of *Twin Peaks*'s viewership.<sup>21</sup>

A trait of both *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* that seems fairly common in art films and by extension in art television as well is that the author parodies common conventions of classical storytelling technique. One of my favorite examples comes when *Blue Velvet* plays on the classic dialogue hook, which you may recall is a line spoken at the end of one scene designed to provide a clear causal transition to the next. In this short segment, Jeffrey has found a severed human ear and has taken it to the police station, where a coroner examines it:

*Coroner's laboratory. The Coroner, Jeffrey, and Detective Williams looking at the ear on a table.*

CORONER: "The person may very well still be alive somewhere."

JEFFREY: "What can you tell about the person from the ear?"

CORONER: "Well, once the tests are done, quite a lot. Sex, blood type, whether or not the ear came off a dead person."

*A close view of the ear from above.*

CORONER, *continuing, off*: “Also, it look like the ear was cut off with scissors.”

NEW SCENE: *close view of scissors cutting a yellow plastic tape reading “Police line do not cross.”*

*Distant view of the field where Jeffrey had found the ear; a team of people searching the ground as Jeffrey watches.*

This dialogue hook does not in fact provide a causal link, since the scissors we see in the opening of the new scene are not the ones that cut off the ear. It creates instead a bit of typically Lynchian grotesque humor.

*Twin Peaks* parodies the conventions of several genres. As one critic points out, “In audacious soap-opera style, Sheryl Lee, who played the dead Laura, was brought back a few episodes down the line as Madeline Ferguson, Laura’s near-identical cousin.”<sup>22</sup> A number of scenes poke fun at the convention of recapping action. At the end of the final episode of the first season, the main cliffhanger had consisted of Cooper being shot by an unseen assailant. In the second season, he wakes in the hospital and gets a rundown of the other cliffhanger situations he has missed overnight:

*Cooper’s POV from his hospital bed. Truman, Lucy, and Dr. Hayward look down at him.*

TRUMAN: “Did you get a look at the gunman?”

COOPER, *groggily*: “I saw a masked face, a muzzle flash . . .” *He shakes his head.*

TRUMAN, *sighs*: “Lucy, you’d better bring Agent Cooper up to date.”

LUCY *opens her notebook and reads*: “Leo Johnson was shot, Jacques Renault was strangled, the mill burned, Shelley and Pete got smoke inhalation, Catherine and Josie are missing, Nadine is in a coma from taking sleeping pills.”

*Sardonic music begins.*

COOPER, *incredulously*: “How long have I been out?”

DR. HAYWARD: “It’s 7:45 in the morning. We haven’t had this much action in one night since the Elks’ Club fire of ’59.”

This scene also points up the absurdly short duration of the story action in *Twin Peaks*, which extends for little more than a month.<sup>23</sup> Another parody of recapping comes in the earlier scene I quoted: the list of suspects Lucy reads out as Cooper throws stones at a bottle.<sup>24</sup> Such play with narrative conventions seems especially likely to be an attribute of art television, since the medium tends to encourage a great dependence on the formulaic.

Before I leave *Twin Peaks*, I would like to offer one more bit of evidence that it achieved a diverse audience, from general spectators to intellectuals: it is surely the only TV show ever to be the subject of articles in both *Artforum* and *Soap Opera Weekly*.<sup>25</sup>

#### OTHER ART TELEVISION

So far I have given you only two examples of what I am calling “art television”: *The Singing Detective* and *Twin Peaks*. I suspect that there are other such programs, rare though they be. Let me offer you two more candidates—one British, one American. Both programs center on families, but their narrative strategies could hardly be more unlike.