The world of television and the immense area of myth collided together on the ABC drama series Twin Peaks. Through the blending of elements from movies and television shows from the last 50 years Twin Peaks was able to capture the attention of audiences everywhere. Its innovative style created a whole new genre of television. But most importantly it became a contemporary myth for the American public. Through Twin Peaks people were able to watch the ultimate struggle of good vs. evil unfold in a small town that was in many cases very similar to their own.

The year was 1990. Although people had their favorite shows such as Cheers and L.A Law these shows were nothing new. They followed the same format as the shows that had come before it and weren't known for their innovation. (Stempel) People were looking for something new. On April 8 1990 David Lynch and Mark Frost first asked the question "Who Killed Laura Palmer?" and television was never the same again.

Although the basic genre of the show seemed simple and straightforward it was unlike anything the public had ever seen on Television. David Lynch acclaimed director of movies such as Eraserhead, The Elephant Man, and Blue Velvet came up with a very simple concept for a television show. "The project was to mix a police investigation with a soap opera. We had drawn a map of the city. We knew where everything was located and that helped us determine the prevailing atmosphere and what might happen there." (Chion, 103) Lynch's main collaborator on this project was Mark Frost who was known for his "eccentric contributions...to shows such as Hill Street Blues." (Rodley, 155) They were both attracted to the idea of a never ending story format that television could offer.

The basic idea of the show came with the image of the dead body of a small town's homecoming queen washing up on the shore of the lake. Lynch told ABC at the time, "The mystery of who killed Laura Palmer was the foreground, but this would recede slightly as you got to know the other people in the town and the problems they were having" (Chion). With 29 episodes, a two hour pilot, and full length motion picture prequel it's difficult to give a summary of all of the show's 40 main characters and its many plots and subplots that it contained. Here is a very basic outline. Twin Peaks is small quiet town where everyone knows eachother's name (a reason the show Cheers was so popular) (Stempel). The town is shocked when the body of the homecoming queen is washed ashore. Harry Truman (the allusion to the president is no coincidence as Harry is supposed to embody the idea of an 'All American' loyal man of the law) is the town's sheriff who is shocked when he finds the body and realizes that another girl almost suffered the same fate when she is found in a state of shock across the state line. It is the small detail of Ronnette Pulaski's being found across the state line which requires FBI agent Dale Cooper to be called in on the case. From there, the two lawmen spend their time trying to figure out who killed Laura Palmer. Some of
the characters under suspicion are Laura's boyfriend Bobby Briggs, Laura's secret boyfriend James Hurley, Laura's drug source Leo Johnson, and the local business tycoon Benjamin Horne. Following cryptic clues, dreams, and psychic intuition FBI agent Dale Cooper discovers that the killer is someone named Bob. Yet only a few people have only seen Bob and only in visions or dreams. Over the course of the next sixteen episodes Special Agent Cooper is shot, visited by a giant, and discovers who the killer is in a dream only to forget it in the morning. The killer claims one more victim, Laura Palmer's identical cousin Madeline Ferguson. In episode 16 Cooper figures out that the killer is Laura's father Leland Palmer taken over by a demonic force of evil known as Bob. Although Leland dies Cooper and Sheriff Truman believe that Bob is still present in Twin Peaks. The second major story arc involves Cooper's insane former partner, Windom Earle, coming to Twin Peaks with two purposes. A) To get revenge on Cooper for falling in love with his now deceased wife and B) To utilize Twin Peaks' nexus point found in the woods to enter something known as the Black Lodge; an ultimate source of evil (the place where Bob comes from). Likewise Cooper begins to search for the White Lodge which is conversely a source of good. In the final episode Cooper follows Windom Earle into the Black Lodge to save Annie Blackburn, Cooper's new love. Although more of the story was written the last episode ends with Cooper being taken over by the evil force of Bob. Some of the other subplots involve an irritable FBI evidence expert who constantly mocks the small town, a scandal involving the town's wood mill, and about a half dozen love affairs (Episodes 1 - 29).

When Twin Peaks was first introduced there was already heavy promotion which created a massive hype. The promotion and the uniqueness of the program quickly created a "frenzied cult about it" (Stempel, 244). For the next year it was one of the highest rated shows on television. Books, t-shirts, and coffee mugs soon appeared in stores and were quickly bought by fans. David Lynch was even put on the cover of Time magazine for his "innovative new drama" (Corliss). There are two basic ideas about why the show declined in popularity and eventually canceled in 1991. David Lynch explains "All I know is that they [ABC Executives] killed it by changing nights and then forcing the solving of 'who killed Laura Palmer'....then the ratings were bad...but the ratings were bad because Laura Palmer's killer was found!" (Rodley, 183) The other idea held by critics and casual viewers of the show is just the opposite. Many people were angered and annoyed that it was taking so long to reveal the killer. Another complaint was that "while the investigation is continuing, they were not creating other stories...." (Stempel, 244). Yet fans of the show could cite at least a dozen other stories that were developed. Despite the different opinions the one thing that is clear is that the show definitely had a major impact on the American public and the television industry; an impact that can still be clearly seen today.

Long lasting and popular shows such as The X-Files and Northern Exposure first aired on Television because of the creative doors that Twin Peaks opened. Northern Exposure's setting was inspired by Twin Peaks' setting and the creators have acknowledged this and even made a comical reference to Twin Peaks in an episode where the main characters see a woman carrying a log (a well known Twin Peaks character) and begin to talk about cherry pie and coffee (an obsession that was a trade mark of Twin Peaks) (Rodley). And the X-Files strange story lines would have never interested FOX if Twin Peaks had not been so successful. Creator Chris Carter has cited Twin Peaks as a major influence and casted many Twin Peaks actors and actresses in his show. The biggest homage of all was hiring David Duchovony to play the lead role on The X Files because of his role as a transvestite FBI agent in later episodes of Twin Peaks (Wild).

"It is like nothing else on television. Or maybe it is like everything else
on television, but with a twist that makes it seem completely new." (Pond) Ironically, to show why the show was so different it's necessary to examine the shows and movies that came before which had an influence on Twin Peaks. The most visible genre of the show is that of a soap opera. Lynch and Frost made no effort to hide this fact and even made jokes about it within the show. "When the Sheriff walks into his office and asks his secretary what has happened she replies by updating him on the plot of the soap opera she's watching oblivious to a series of "real" dramatic events which have occurred in his absence." (Fontana) This is a satire of how many Americans seem to be more concerned with what's on television than what is going on in their own lives. The American preoccupation with soap operas is very similar to the reason that people enjoy a ridiculous event such as wrestling; it's a spectacle for all to see. Ronald Barthes explains, "As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of those roles." (17) In Twin Peaks, and other soap operas, it is apparent which characters are good and which characters are bad as soon as they appear on the screen. Cooper, a good character, is immediately shown doing things to help people while an evil character, business tycoon Ben Horne, is immediately shown plotting and scheming. As Himmelstein pointed out in his book Television Myth and the American Mind "Heroes are praised....Villains are....to be feared and hated and eventually eradicated by the hero" (159) This last part of the Himmelstein's point is a way Twin Peaks differs from all other dramas before it. The villain is not eradicated by the hero in the end and actually seems to win in a way. This came to a shock to viewers who were so used to the accepted television conventions.

There have been many specific allusions to television shows that came before Twin Peaks in several episodes. These allusions are placed there to acknowledge that the show is a amalgam of the programs that came before it and also to remind viewers that it's somehow drastically different from these shows. When season one ends with Cooper being shot and his fate left unknown viewers were immediately reminded of the popular show Dallas. Dallas's most popular character J.R was shot at the end of the season and left its viewers guessing all summer just who had shot JR. But instead of appeasing audiences and revealing the shooter in the beginning of the next season, Twin Peaks added it to the list of mysteries they were leaving unsolved with no resolution in sight. Television critic Joyce Millman explained why audiences were so unnerved by this choice in storytelling. "Well, what did you expect--some neat "Who Shot J.R."-style wrap-up? Haven't you learned by now that "Twin Peaks" isn't "Dallas"? That even some "Peaks" diehards were confused and frustrated by the episode's lack of closure only proves how accustomed we are to TV conventions, how enormous the obstacles are for shows that seek to break free from familiar formulas. "Twin Peaks" is a constantly evolving show, one that refuses to lay all its cards on the table at once." She points out that the reason Twin Peaks was so ground breaking was that it took accepted television conventions, introduced them, let people get used to them, and then break them as many ways as possible. And the public seems to have gotten more used to this rule breaking as The X Files utilizes it all the time and is successfully entering it's fifth season.

Twin Peaks also pays homage to the classic television series The Fugitive which aired from 1963 to 1967 (Himmelstein, 165). The Fugitive was a melodrama about a man named Richard Kimbell who was constantly "searching for a one armed man named Philip Gerard who had framed Kimbell for his [Kimbell's'] wife's murder." (Platt) Kimbell's search went on for years without ever being resolved. As soon as Kimbell would come close to finding the one armed man he would disappear. The town of Twin Peaks also had a resident one armed citizen and by an amazing coincidence (note the sarcasm) his name was also Philip Gerard. The reason Lynch and Frost made this
obvious reference to The Fugitive was because they wanted to allude to an extremely popular show that was based on one single mystery that was not solved for years. This is exactly what they had planned to do with the mystery of Laura Palmer until ABC executives forced them to solve it. Perhaps the executives weren't fans of The Fugitive.

A search for the unknown has always been a major element of myth. It comes from a desire to "make sense out of things" according to Marina Warner. (87) Twin Peaks was also about a search; a search for the truth. So it makes sense for an allusion to one of the most influential films based solely on a search to appear within the show. John Ford's The Searchers is the tale of Ethan, a man with a mysterious and dubious past, and his search for his niece Debbie. Lynch paid homage to the movie by casting Hank Worden (Chion, 202), who played Moes Harper in The Searchers as the decrepit waiter at the Great Northern Hotel in Twin Peaks. And to eliminate any doubt as to why he cast Worden for the role he has him act out lines that come directly from The Searchers. Worden appears in a scene that would drive the most patient person insane. FBI agent Cooper has just been shot and lies helpless on the hotel floor. Worden slowly enters the room with the warm milk Cooper ordered; oblivious to the fact that he has just been shot. The scene moves at an excruciatingly slow pace and it ends with Worden saying "Thank Ya Kindly" and wooping like an Indian as he did in The Searchers.

One of the most prevalent and reoccurring allusions found in Twin Peaks is that of Alfred Hitchcock's Vertigo. Laura Palmer's cousin comes to Twin Peaks to attend her funeral. Laura Palmer and Madeline Ferguson look identical except that Laura was blonde while Madeline has jet black hair. Madeline Ferguson is a compound of characters name's from Vertigo. Vertigo also features two identical women who's "only discernible difference is their hair color" (Platt). Madeline even dresses up like Laura in attempt to catch the killer just as Scottie from Vertigo tries to dress up Judy like his dead lover Madeline (Martin). And finally when Madeline becomes the next victim of Bob he grabs her and spins her around and around just as a confused Scottie spins around with Judy "in a fit of madness" in Vertigo (Martin). Lynch and Frost obviously found this element of doubles very important to Twin Peaks. There are dozens of examples of doubles or pairs in Twin Peaks. Many characters have a partner that is very similar or the complete opposite of their character. There are two diaries, two parts of a locket, two major story arcs, and most obvious the mention of "Twin" directly in the title of the show. The Vertigo references are the strongest and used to really accent the point. Claude Levi-Strauss explained the importance of doubles and twins within myths in his essay entitled "Harelips and Twins: The Splitting of a Myth". Levi-Strauss points out that "this division between two individuals who are at the beginning presented as twins...is a basic characteristic of all myths in South America or North America." A specific example of this happening in Twin Peaks would be the storyline of Madeline Ferguson. She is first treated strangely because the characters are treating her as if she was Laura's exact double and just an extension of the homecoming queen who is now dead. Madeline fights against this and eventually becomes known for her own unique characteristics.

Besides combining elements of other shows and films and their mythic functions, Twin Peaks eventually created a unique mythic function of its own. By the time Lynch filmed Fire Walk With Me, the Twin Peaks prequel which followed Laura Palmer through her last seven days of life, the main character of the series, Special Agent Dale Cooper, had been fully developed. Michel Chion had an interesting description of Cooper in that final Twin Peaks installment. Chion writes that Cooper has an "all together stunning" presence and that his role in the film is truly "mythical" (151). It's interesting how this television character developed over several years and storylines into a myth.
An early scene in Twin Peaks can easily be compared to one of the oldest recorded myths that we know of, Gilgamesh. In the tale of Gilgamesh, Enkidu is sent to challenge Gilgamesh in a “contest” (Kovacs, 17) “They grappled with each other...they attacked each other...” (18) After a brief struggle Gilgamesh wins and the two men become good friends and are even referred to as brothers. This seems to be a common ritual that men go through when they first meet in myths. In the first scene where special agent Dale Cooper meets Sheriff Harry S. Truman there is a similar struggle. It is not physical but rather a verbal conflict. Cooper quickly explains that when the FBI is called they are in charge “and sometimes local law enforcement has a problem with that” (Pilot Episode). Truman allows this lowering of his status saying “Like I said we're glad that you're here” (Pilot Episode). After this the two men become very close and their relationship even seems to mirror Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's. Both Gilgamesh and Cooper have important dreams in relation to their life and they each confide in their respective friend for the meaning of these dreams. Gilgamesh says “Enkidu, my friend, I have had a dream...” (32) and looks to Enkidu for his interpretation.

Similarly Cooper has an important dream that he believes will reveal the killer of Laura Palmer. He asks for Truman's help and says "Crack the code. Solve the crime" (Episode 4). Finally there is the mysterious female that helps each hero on his way. In Gilgamesh he reports his dreams to his mother and asks her for help in deciphering them (11). Cooper has a mysterious contact known only as Diane. Cooper reports everything to Diane by speaking into a small dictaphone recorder. He informs her on everything from the details of the case he is working on to how much his lunch cost. "Diane....Lunch was six dollars and thirty seven cents at the Lamp Lighter Inn...damn good pie they got there" (Pilot Episode). He also requests help from her by asking her to take certain actions with evidence he is sending her. These women have a omnipresent quality to them and are very important to the story.

But the biggest myth that Twin Peaks created was the idea that the ultimate struggle of good verses evil could be acted out in small every town in America. It's useful to look at Marina Warner's explanation of the function of a myth to further explain. She defines some of a myth's multiple functions as "defining the forbidden and the alluring .... conjuring demons and heroes, saying who we are and what we want, telling a story which makes sense of things" (87). Twin Peaks accomplishes all of these things. The most important aspect is a story which makes sense of things. In Twin Peaks' case it attempts to make sense of why there is evil in this world. Instead of rationalizing how a father could ever rape and kill his own daughter the show explains that this man was taken over by a demonic force of evil and did not act with his own will. Cooper stands by this theory stating "Is it any easier to believe that a father would rape and murder his own daughter?" (Episode 16). But unlike myths like Gilgamesh and The Searchers which take place in uncommon and fantasy like settings, Twin Peaks takes places in a small suburb. It's got locations that are most likely found in every town. There's the diner, the sheriff's station, the local hotel, and most common the town high school. This is how Twin Peaks created it's own mythic function. This localization of the oldest conflict, ultimate good versus ultimate evil, had never been explored so thoroughly as it did in Twin Peaks. The mysterious woods was the entrance point for both the black and white lodge. This is where the sources for evil and good respectively originate. The idea that such power could originate in your own home town is a fascinating and alluring idea. This idea could be a reason for the show's immense popularity. It could also be an idea that many did not wish to think about and therefore the show was canceled.

I believe that the world of Twin Peaks still exists somewhere continuing it's myth and stories, trying to resolve them but never quite accomplishing their goal. But because of the impatience and
resistance to rule/genre breaking that is embedded in the public's mind we'll never get to see these stories. It's no coincidence that Lynch chose to begin Fire Walk With Me, the last installment of Twin Peaks, with a metal pole being thrust into a television; demolishing it. He's finished. A storyteller will only tell his story for a certain amount of time before he realizes that no one is really listening.

Bibliography


Millman, Joyce. " 'Twin' Piques and Perplexes: Wipe that look off your face--it's only innovation." San Francisco Examiner 18 November 1990.


