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'Twin Peaks' revisited: 'Maybe we shouldn't have solved the mystery'

August 24, 2010 | 3:15 pm

New York writer **Michael Giltz** takes a long look back at a truly strange sensation -- "**Twin Peaks**," the eccentric and eerie murder mystery that took network television down a strange path in 1990.

The TV series "**Twin Peaks**" hit network television with the impact of a meteor 20 years ago. It changed the landscape forever and can now be seen as the harbinger of numerous trends: the flood of top film directors who now work in television regularly; complex, even enigmatic story lines that lasted for seasons; fan obsession taken to a new level via the Internet; cinematic production values becoming commonplace; and above all the creative risk-taking that everyone from major networks to tiny cable channels must take in order to survive.

"We're still talking about it 20 years later, and we're not talking about a lot of shows that were on then," says **Tim Brooks**, TV historian and co-author of "**The Complete Directory To Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows**." "It reminded us that American television could be experimental."

Indeed, the show featured dream-like sequences, surrealism, a giant

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offering gnomish utterances and a backward-talking dwarf, among many other unexpected touches. Brooks lists "**The X-Files**" and "**Lost**" as among the shows that clearly followed in its wake.

For co-creators **David Lynch** and **Mark Frost** as well as star **Kyle MacLachlan**, the show about **Special Agent Dale Cooper** and his investigation of a murder in a small lumber town still looms large, despite their many successes since then.

Lynch quotes the **Bhagavad Gita** ("Man has control of action alone, never the fruits of the action")

before expressing his bemused, delighted reaction to the biggest pop cultural hit of his career.

"When you make something, you don't know what's going to happen when you release it into the world," says Lynch. "And when something like 'Twin Peaks' goes like it did, you just stand back and you just can't ... there's no ... you did not control and *make* it happen. Something else is going on."

For MacLachlan, it was the role of a lifetime. "That perhaps is my most favorite character I've ever done," says MacLachlan, who has gone on to success on shows including "**Sex and the City**" and "**Desperate Housewives**." Speaking of TV in general, he says, "Creatively, I think there've been very few things that have even come close to touching 'Twin Peaks.'"

Frost agrees about its special place for him in a career that also includes his work on "**Hill Street Blues**," arguably the most acclaimed TV show of all time.



"I can remember watching the first day of dailies and thinking, 'This is going to work,'" he says. "There was just something about it. It had a sense of gravity that was very real. Even the credit sequence. [Lynch] and Angelo [Badalamenti] had written the theme. We'd shot a bunch of second unit stuff for the credit sequence and laying it against that music, your jaw dropped the first time."

Still, according to MacLachlan, most of the cast and crew never expected the project to go beyond the pilot. "There was a feeling amongst all of us that what we were doing was going to be strange and was

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probably -- and most people felt absolutely -- that it was not going to go further than the pilot," says the 51-year-old actor, who also worked with Lynch on "**Dune**" and "**Blue Velvet**."

"I think we all signed up with the idea that David Lynch is bringing his strangeness to a television movie and that was really going to be the end of it. So when it was picked up to shoot more episodes, we were all to a person really surprised."

After the first season's eight episodes were filmed, the show premiered on Sunday, April 8, 1990, and was a massive success, averaging 33% of the audience and growing every half hour during the two hours of the pilot. It moved to Thursdays opposite "**Cheers**" -- the No. 3 show of the 1989-1990 season and soon to be No. 1 -- but

maintained momentum as a pop cultural phenomenon. The first season of "Twin Peaks" garnered 14 Emmy nominations, winning two (costume design, editing in a single-camera production), and Golden Globe wins for drama, drama actor for MacLachlan and supporting actress for **Piper Laurie**.

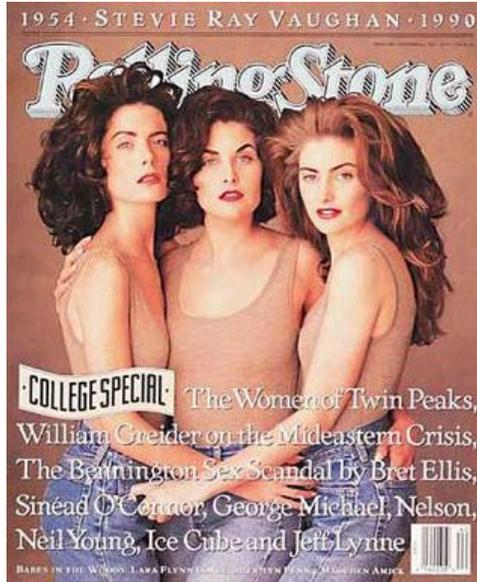
The soundtrack became a hit, recurring bits like an obsession over coffee and cherry pie were instantly parodied (with MacLachlan soon hosting "**Saturday Night Live**"), college students had parties to watch new episodes, and ultimately vacation packages were arranged for overseas tourists who wanted to see the town where it was filmed.

"Honestly, the most annoying and troublesome aspect of making the show was dealing with that entire segment of response to it because it was so unrelated to the actual work itself," says Frost. "The kind of feeding frenzy that is kind of routine in pop culture was just sort of starting to come together then."

While they expected interview requests and perhaps were a bit surprised by "Twin Peaks" merchandise, a new phenomenon also began: online fans obsessing over every line of dialogue, every casual reference, every bit of symbolism whether intended or not.

"The Internet was in its infancy," says Frost, "and I remember someone coming in and plopping down like 500 pages of transcripts from Internet chat rooms and being absolutely stunned that it had hit at that level."

Nowadays, networks feed and encourage that passion from fans. At the time, it was just one more curious aspect of the show's success. Strangely, the initial hit status brought more pressure from the network instead of less. Lynch says they always had control because if you don't have control "you'd be a fool." Frost describes a "creative fence" around the show bolstered by the fact that they owned the series themselves, which removed one layer of overview, plus the useful fact that the show was so strange none of the executives probably knew what to suggest anyway.



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But a potential long-running hit was quite different from an oddball lark. And ABC insisted on one thing and one thing alone: Solve the mystery of who killed **Laura Palmer**. Countless future shows like "The X-Files," "**24**" and "Lost" would tease out story lines for an entire season and even the entire run of a series. They learned what "Twin Peaks" unfortunately had to demonstrate: Not every mystery should be solved.

Once the killer was revealed in the middle of the second season, interest plummeted. "Twin Peaks" also dealt with being moved around in time slots, numerous delays in airing new episodes because of the launch of the Gulf War and Lynch's lack of day-to-day involvement (he was filming "**Wild At Heart**"). It petered out after two seasons and 30 episodes.

"David was adamant that we shouldn't," says Frost about solving the central mystery that hovered over the show. "The network was adamant that we should. I had to kind of forge a compromise. I'm not sure that David wasn't right. Maybe we shouldn't have solved the mystery. Let it drift on into the background and churn up more incidents as you went forward."

Lynch now realizes that a TV series demands your full and complete attention.

"It's all-consuming," says Lynch. "If you're going to go in there for a continuing story, now I know that it is all-consuming. It's a fast-moving train. So if you want to go there, you've got to give it that."



Frost was there from beginning to end, working with directors (including accomplished cinematographer **Caleb Deschanel**) who were given an unusual amount of freedom.

"I said to everyone who came in, 'Please don't feel obligated to imitate a house style,'" says Frost. "There are parameters to work with and a vocabulary we'd like to use, but we want you to feel like you have the freedom to shoot the episode the way you want to shoot it."

The show used a small stable of directors including TV talent **Todd Holland** and **Lesli Linka Glatter** and film director **Tim Hunter ("River's Edge")**. It's no coincidence you see Holland's success with his own series, "**Malcolm In The Middle**," and Hunter and Glatter's names among the credits of TV's current big phenomenon, "**Mad Men**."

Nowadays, Frost has no interest in second-guessing whether the show would have been better as a miniseries or on cable with only 12 episodes a season a la "**The Sopranos**."

"It's like a bar game," says Frost, who has written numerous bestselling books, including a string of acclaimed nonfiction sports titles.

"It's a little futile to go down that road. We kicked open some doors. We didn't get the full benefit of then bursting into the room. A lot of other shows benefited from those doors being opened. That's the way things happen. The fact that you kicked those doors open is not a cause for regret."

But there remains the eternal question: Will they ever return to "Twin Peaks?" MacLachlan

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certainly wouldn't mind. "I made the mistake a couple of years ago saying, 'Wouldn't it be great if they had webisodes?'" McLachlan recalls with a laugh of thinking out loud at a TV convention.

"I was just shooting from the hip and not really thinking anything and suddenly it got picked up by some of the digital media and spread like wildfire. I thought, 'Oh jeez, what have I done?'"

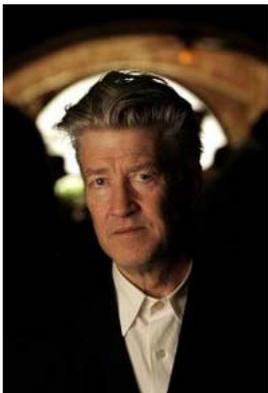
Frost has a TV project in the works after years of focusing on his writing career, which includes turning his book "**The Greatest Game Ever Played**" into the successful Disney film starring **Shia LaBeouf**, as well as the **Fantastic Four** franchise. He says they've discussed the possibility of reviving "Twin Peaks" over the years but says, "at this point, it feels best to let bygones be bygones."

Lynch also tried to return to TV. He developed a script for ABC about Hollywood and shot the pilot. But the the network hated it, so Lynch got funding to shoot additional scenes and turned it into a feature film. The result was "**Mulholland Drive**," widely touted in critics' polls as one of the best films of the last decade, or more specifically the best, according to surveys by [indiewire.com](#), [Film Comment](#) and the [Los Angeles Film Critics Assn](#).

But perhaps he's too open to the random and unexpected to dismiss the question out of hand. "I don't think it's going to happen," says Lynch in his flat, direct manner of speaking. Because it wouldn't interest him? Lynch paused for the longest point in the interview. "Well, I always go by ideas. One night maybe I catch an idea and get all fired up about it and maybe call Mark Frost and write something. Who knows? It hasn't happened yet."

-- [Michael Giltz](#)

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Photos: Top, Michael Ontkean and Kyle MacLachlan in "Twin Peaks" (ABC). Second, David Lynch in April 2010 (Pascal Rossignol /

Reuters). Third, the women of "Twin Peaks" (Rolling Stone). Fourth, the young faces of "Twin Peaks" (ABC). Fifth, the show's autopsy photo of Laura Palmer, played by Sheryl Lee (ABC). Bottom, David Lynch portrait by Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times.

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