

Presentation I (ELSP 004)

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What makes “Twin Peaks” a great TV show?

General purpose: to inform (to persuade).

Specific purpose: At the end of my speech I want the audience to be able to explain the impact of “Twin Peaks” on TV, the reasons for general audience enjoyment, and the connection between the show and (the western) society.

Central idea: “Twin Peaks” is the best series ever shown on TV since it redefined later TV shows, it provided an ideal combination between catharsis and intellect, and it commented on everyday life issues.

Introduction: Has it ever happened to you that you couldn’t await the next episode of a TV series? That you were filled with joy just hearing the music theme before it started? Well, it happened to me—when I saw “Twin Peaks”. “Twin Peaks” is a TV series shown between 1990 and early 1991 in the US [and at the end of 1991 and in early 1992 in Germany. It was created by David Lynch (a movie director) and Mark Frost.¹]. “Twin Peaks” consists of 30 episodes and one movie, adding up only to around 26 hours of showing time.

Preview: In my talk I will tell you why ‘just some TV show’ could catch me the way I described. There are three main benefits that I want to mention: First, “Twin Peaks” changed the topics and styles of today’s TV shows; second, “Twin Peaks” shows an enjoyable combination of mood and feeling on one side and plot and intellect on the other and finally, what we see in this TV series applies to our society, it calls for change of our everyday behavior.

- I. Let me start with the first benefit: “Twin Peaks” influenced today’s TV shows. So, what is different about “Twin Peaks”, that it could lead to such change?
 - A. The TV station ABC advertised “Twin Peaks” mainly as detective story. In the first scene of “Twin Peaks” a dead body, wrapped in plastic [see picture (Twin Peaks Prod., 1996)], is found and the big question “Who killed Laura

¹Additional information not presented in the speech is included in square brackets

Palmer” arose. But “Twin Peaks” is far from being just a detective story; it’s not Sherlock Holmes. In fact, “Twin Peaks” can’t be put in any one genre. It was different from anything else previously shown on TV. Besides the detective story it incorporates several other genres:

1. Most importantly it has a metaphysical, supernatural, and spiritual side. Demons and visions appear to some of “Twin Peaks”’s characters.
 2. Also, “Twin Peaks” has elements of a soap opera. Like we as audience are watching these elements of “Twin Peaks”, this is even stressed by the fact that some inhabitants of “Twin Peaks” watch another soap opera, too [called “Invitation to love”].
 3. Of course, several love stories and problematic relationships are included,
 4. also very comical aspects are portrayed, even slap stick occurs.
 5. Finally, hints on the western genre can be found, as Marc Rogers points out in an article “Postmodernism and Television” (Lavery, 1995): the sheriff has a cowboy hat and his deputy is native American.
- B. This combination, as described, was totally new to TV. As Craig Miller and John Thorne point out in their “Twin Peaks”-magazine [called “Wrapped in plastic”] (Miller and Thorne, 1996): “Although “Twin Peaks”’s life span on network television was short, its unique style and innovative storylines made a lasting impact.” They even claim that ““Twin Peaks” can be viewed as the first of a new television subgenre”.
1. Especially the TV shows “Northern Exposure” and “Picket Fences” benefited from “Twin Peaks”. Both are located in small towns, examine the relationship between man and nature and accept supernatural events [see (Miller and Thorne, 1996) for details].
 2. Also the TV show X-Files, in which supernatural events are investigated, wouldn’t exist if there hadn’t been “Twin Peaks”. [The strong connection between these two shows is reflected in the fact that the magazine “Wrapped in plastic” features an “X-Files Extra!”-section.]

Transition: Now that we know how “Twin Peaks” already changed today’s TV, let us think about the second benefit: what can you as viewer enjoy?

- II. There are several aspects here but what I like most is the unique combination of emotions and mood on one side and intellect and plot on the other hand.
 - A. In “Twin Peaks” feelings are clearly shown. [They fit into the old Greek definition of catharsis (change is encouraged by feeling only). This side of “Twin Peaks” is mainly introduced by director and co-producer David Lynch, compare and analyse his other works (sometimes called ‘plotless’) for that.]

1. In the first 30 minutes of “Twin Peaks” the main characters of “Twin Peaks” learn about the murder of Laura Palmer. In “Twin Peaks” it’s not just “some death, who cares?”; instead all people react very emotionally. As audience we are drawn into the show, we feel, too, we participate.
 2. This is enhanced with great, distinctive, moody music, especially the main theme of “Twin Peaks” and Laura Palmer’s song. [These songs can besides all the other songs be found as the two first songs of the soundtrack of “Twin Peaks”.]
- B. On the other side there is the complicated plot. [This is mainly introduced by Mark Frost, co-producer of “Twin Peaks”. Compare his work on “Hill Street Blues”, his movies and his Sherlock Holmes-like novels “The list of seven” and “Six messiah”. This idea follows mainly the view of Berthold Brecht (change through reflection, intellect only).]
1. Again a quote from the “Twin Peaks”-magazine (Miller and Thorne, 1994): “If you hadn’t been watching it from the beginning—or if you missed an episode or two in the middle—you were hopelessly lost.”
 2. To understand the complex plot, one of the most engaging features of the show, you have to always pay strict attention. You can see some of the story lines depicted in this graph (Miller and Thorne, 1994).
 3. Also a very interesting part of “Twin Peaks” are the many references to other work. You always can find something new, even after the eighth viewing.

Transition: We now know that today’s TV shows wouldn’t exist without “Twin Peaks” and that it’s very enjoyable to see “Twin Peaks”. But in my opinion the greatest benefit from “Twin Peaks” is that the show explores “the nature of good and evil in humanity and beyond” [check source of that quote²].

III. It clearly comments on our society and demands change in our behavior.

- A. Some minor examples are thrown into “Twin Peaks”, for example about slowing down or driving faster in front of a yellow traffic light, or about leaving half-filled drinks in a bar.
- B. More important issues are drug abuse, prostitution, dealing with so-called crazy people and suicide.
- C. But the main story, the murder of Laura Palmer is connected to child abuse. It turns out, that Laura’s father Leland abused her for the last five years while inhabited by a monster demon called Bob. Director and producer David Lynch himself says (Rodley, 1997): It was all about “the loneliness, shame, guilt, confusion and devastation of the victim of incest. It also dealt

²Yes, I know. Rule # 1 of Communication 75: Write the source down. . . I know that this quote is in one of the references below, but I didn’t find it again in a 2 hour search. Any suggestions for a search?

with the torment of the father—the war in him”. Why is the father possessed by the demon Bob though? Well, many victims of child abuse block out such traumatic events by describing a monster or demon, not being able to directly accuse their father [for a more thorough discussion, see (Miller and Thorne, 1998)]. And also in a dialogue the FBI agent [dialogue between the FBI agents Dale Cooper and Albert Rosenfield, Major Briggs and Sheriff Truman] is asked if the demon Bob really exists, and he answers (Lavery, 1995): “Is it easier to believe that a father raped and murdered his daughter?”. Asked, if it matters, if Bob is real, he answers: “Yes, it’s our job to stop it”. This explains again why Bob is shown and reinforces my point, that “Twin Peaks” demands change in our behavior.

Conclusion: In summary, I think I have showed you that “Twin Peaks” changed TV and influenced today’s TV series, that it presents a unique combination of plot and mood, and that it has a direct impact on our society, although I could only present a very small number of examples in this short presentation. If you got interested in seeing the 30 episodes of “Twin Peaks”: They are all available on loan at the Public Library, for rent at 9th video store, or for sale at Columbia Mall. The most important point of “Twin Peaks” for me is, that it made me sensitive to several issues in our society but especially about child abuse. Eleven episodes before the detective story is officially resolved, Laura’s friend Bobby says to the attendants of her funeral “You want to know who killed Laura? We all did.” (Knickelbine, 1989). So all people are responsible for Laura’s death since we only wanted to see her good points but ignored her struggles and bad points, her cry for help. And it is a cry for help that all victims of child abuse show very similarly. I believe fighting this ignorance is the main message of “Twin Peaks”. What better message could a TV show send? I don’t know any.

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