



FULL OF
SECRETS

Critical Approaches
to *Twin Peaks*



Edited by David Lavery

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Twin Peaks

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Wayne State University Press Detroit

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

03

8 7 6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Full of Secrets : critical approaches to Twin Peaks / edited by David Lavery.

p. cm.—(Contemporary film and television series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8143-2506-8 (pbk. alk paper)

I. Twin Peaks (Television program) I. Lavery, David, 1949–

II. Series.

PN1992.77.T88F85 1995

791.45'72—dc20

94-17604

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Acknowledgments

Many, many people helped to create this book. Most deserving of thanks, of course, are the authors of the essays. My sincere thanks to them for the selfless work that made this book possible. I also want to thank all of those who submitted ideas and essays not represented here. I learned from them as well. Thanks to those who completed essays for this book's spinoff, the *Twin Peaks* special issue of *Literature/Film Quarterly*: Mike Carroll, Stuart Pollard, Maria Carrion, Randi Davenport, Melynda Huskey, Nicholas Birns, Kate Nickerson, Lenora Ledwon. And thanks as well to Kathryn Goelzer, Marc Kipness, Matt McAllister, Tom Zaniello, Jim Welsh, and Stuart Semmel for their efforts.

My heartfelt thanks to Ellen Gainor of Cornell University and Kate Nickerson at Emory, who helped me gain access to the many proposals submitted to their would-be MLA session on *Twin Peaks*; without their valuable aid, the book as currently constituted would have been inconceivable.

Several students assisted (as only students can) in my own learning concerning *Twin Peaks*: Ashley Henderson, Daniel Linton, Tricia Clark, the students in COMM 7808 (who endured the book in draft), Linda Brigance, and Rich Dixon (who not only loaned me his *Twin Peaks* collector cards but helped to prepare the plot summary for *Fire Walk with Me*). My special thanks to Potter Palmer at UCLA for his contributions to the bibliography.

Without the assistance of the Memphis State University Library (in particular Deborah Brackstone in the Interlibrary Loan Office) the book would not be so well informed.

A special thanks for various services rendered (they know which) to Jonathan Rosenbaum, Jimmie Reeves, Tom Zaniello, Bill Krohn, Richard Jameson, Robert Getz of *Cooper's Dream* and Craig Miller and John Thorne of *Wrapped in Plastic* (excellent fans and biblio/tv/cinephiles), and especially to Jim Welsh, whose support helped make both *Twin Peaks* collections possible.

I also want to thank the staff at Wayne State University Press, especially Arthur Evans and Lynn Trease for their invaluable support and assistance. A special thank you to Mary Gillis for her patient and expert copy editing.

Acknowledgments

My wife, Joyce Kling Lavery, with whom I spent many enjoyable hours watching *Twin Peaks*, suffered generously (as did my children, Rachel and Sarah) the more solipsistic hours I spent working on this book. Thanks for your patience with my obsession. This book is dedicated to you.

Contents

Contributors vii Acknowledgments ix

Introduction:

The Semiotics of Cobbler: *Twin Peaks*' Interpretive Community

David Lavery 1

Bad Ideas: The Art and Politics of *Twin Peaks*

Jonathan Rosenbaum 22

The Peaks and Valleys of Serial Creativity: What Happened to/on *Twin Peaks*

Marc Dolan 30

"Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?": alt.tv.twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery

Henry Jenkins 51

Family Romance, Family Violence, and the Fantastic in *Twin Peaks*

Diane Stevenson 70

"Disturbing the Guests with This Racket": Music and *Twin Peaks*

Kathryn Kalinak 82

The Canonization of Laura Palmer

Christy Desmet 93

Lynching Women: A Feminist Reading of *Twin Peaks*

Diana Hume George 109

Contents

Double Talk in *Twin Peaks*

Alice Kuzniar 120

Infinite Games: The Derationalization of Detection in *Twin Peaks*

Angela Hague 130

Desire Under the Douglas Firs: Entering the Body of Reality in *Twin Peaks*

Martha Nochimson 144

The Dis-order of Things in *Twin Peaks*

J. P. Telotte 160

Postmodernism and Television: Speaking of *Twin Peaks*

Jimmie L. Reeves, et al. 173

Appendix A:

Directors and Writers 196

Appendix B: Cast List 198

Appendix C: Abbreviations 202

Appendix D:

A *Twin Peaks* Calendar 204

Appendix E:

Twin Peaks Scene Breakdown 208

Bibliography 259

Index 275



Introduction: The Semiotics of Cobbler *Twin Peaks'* Interpretive Community

David Lavery

Never before, in the history of television, had a program inspired so many millions of people to debate and analyze it deeply and excitedly for so prolonged a period. . . . *Twin Peaks* generated the kinds of annotated scrutiny usually associated with scholarly journals and literary monographs. . . .

David Bianculli, Teleliteracy

“Wow, BOB, wow.”

The Man from Another Place

I The End

On February 15, 1991, the American Broadcasting Corporation announced that *Twin Peaks* would be placed on “indefinite hiatus,” a move ordinarily resulting in eventual cancellation. That week’s episode had ended with the soul of Josie Packard (Joan Chen) entrapped in the knob of a bedside table in the Great Northern Hotel room where she had just shot Thomas Eckhardt (David Warner), the mysterious Hong Kong businessman who had rescued her from a life of prostitution so she might become his love slave, and then died herself, of no apparent cause, while engaged in a gun-to-gun standoff with Sheriff Harry S. Truman (Michael Ontkean), her secret lover, and Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan), the FBI man she had tried to kill in the first season’s cliff-hanger finale. The episode—recall, recall!—that had seen the reappearance of both *The Man from Another Place* (Michael Anderson), a strange lounge-lizard-dwarf who in a memorable dream sequence in the third episode had, through dance, backward speech, and prediction of resurgent gum sales, invoked unknown powers to help Cooper’s unorthodox

David Lavery

sleuthing, and BOB (Frank Silva), the mysterious psychopathic being who, while parasitizing since childhood a prominent local lawyer, Leland Palmer (Ray Wise), had raped and murdered Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), the beautiful coke-sniffing, high school homecoming queen whose “first note” dead body, “wrapped in plastic,” had generated, in Shoenbergian atonal style, the whole seriatim music of this nighttime soap opera, murder mystery, comedy. . . .²

The episode, recall, that got a 5.1 on the Nielsen and a 10 share.

Public response was strong. Many critics lamented the likely demise of a series that had been described as a watershed in the history of network television (“the show that will change television forever” [Rodman]; television’s *Citizen Kane* [Welsh]), nominated for fourteen Emmys and in several categories in the 1990 Soap Opera Awards, and named the year’s best show by the Television Critics Association. A group called C.O.O.P. (Coalition Opposed to Offing Peaks), aided by the show’s co-creators, film director David Lynch (*Eraserhead*, *The Elephant Man*, *Dune*, *Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart*) and writer Mark Frost (*Hill Street Blues*), instituted a letter writing campaign to the network (over 10,000 were received). A few weeks later ABC announced that beginning on March 28 it would broadcast the six remaining in-the-can episodes on Thursday nights in the show’s original time slot (it had been airing on Saturday nights): against NBC’s *Cheers*, television’s then number one show.

In the week prior to *Twin Peaks*’ return, ABC ran a promo which not only informed audiences of the show’s relocation but spoofed, in its own imaginative version of what Mark Crispin Miller has called TV’s “deride and conquer” strategy, the network’s mishandling of the series. In a scene intended to recall not only the ending of *The Wizard of Oz* but the importance of its setting in some of the series’ key events, we see Agent Cooper in his bed at the Great Northern, surrounded by Deputy Andy Brennan (Harry Goaz), Catherine Martell (Piper Laurie), the Log Lady (Catherine Coulson), and (at the foot of the bed) The Man from Another Place. Cult watchers of the spot immediately recognized the auteur signature of Lynch himself, whose *Wild at Heart* was a sendup of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Cooper, it seems, has just awakened from a nightmare, and his visitors (an odd selection from the cast, made up, no doubt, of the only actors that could be assembled for a quick shoot) have come to offer solace. He tells of dreaming he was in a horrible place, full of familiar characters (like Dorothy, he recognizes those around him with wide-eyed wonder as having played a part): a horrible place called “Saturday Night.” Sympathetic, the bedside crew turns to look at the camera—to look, that is, at us—as Catherine Martell comments on Cooper’s tale: “Saturday,” she agrees, “that is a bad dream.” From the outermost frame the network’s “Supernarrator” interrupts with the show’s trademark image (the “Welcome to Twin Peaks, population 51,201” sign on the road into town³) and the facts: “*Twin Peaks* is back on Thursday nights

Introduction: *Twin Peaks'* Interpretive Community

at 9:00 pm E.S.T.”).⁴ In close-up, Cooper then repeats the new night and informs his narratee-microcasstte Diane about the good news: “There’s no place like home,” he rejoices to his techno-ficelle.⁵

We were supposed to rejoice with him, of course—rejoice the network had finally seen the light and returned the show to the slot in which it had gained its original notoriety, becoming the proverbial “most talked about show on television,” causing runs on the cherry pie inventory at local bakeries. Intertextual, self-referential, tongue-in-cheek, just like the show itself, the ad was certainly not intended to gain new viewers but only to bring back into the fold those members of the *Twin Peaks* cult who had strayed.

It did not. Even in its new (old) time spot, the audience continued to decline. In fact, *Twin Peaks* even adversely affected the show it followed, *Prime Time Live*, whose ratings dropped slightly during its brief stint as a lead-in. After four weeks, *Peaks* was again placed on hiatus, and the two remaining episodes were reluctantly scheduled for a joint airing as an *ABC Monday Night at the Movies* on June 10. With no opportunity to film a final episode, the show was quietly cancelled by ABC during its nearly two month disappearance.

When, in the closureless final scene of the last episode (directed, appropriately, by Lynch himself), Agent Cooper himself became the new host for BOB, the only possible escape from interminable irresolution lay in the faint prospect of *Twin Peaks* becoming, like *Star Trek*, a film series. Indeed, a year and two months after its disappearance from television, *Twin Peaks* rematerialized in movie theatres,⁶ but *Fire Walk with Me*, a prequel concerned with the last seven days of Laura Palmer, turned out to be a commercial and critical dud, making the prospect of more *Twin Peaks* films highly unlikely.

II

Twin Peaks as a (Cult)ural Phenomenon

At 10:01 p.m. Thursday, April 19, the telephone started like a tribal drum. Everybody in the continental United States—including my children, my editors, my enemies—wanted to know about the dwarf. What did the dwarf mean? Why was he talking backwards?

In Cambridge, Massachusetts, in Madison, Wisconsin, and in Berkeley, California, there are *Twin Peaks*-watching parties every Thursday night, after which . . . Deconstruction. About the dwarf: Like, wow. Buñuel was mentioned, and Cocteau, and Fellini.

John Leonard, “*The Quirky Allure of Twin Peaks*”

“Thanks to *Twin Peaks*,” Newsweek reported in May, 1990, “trendiness” had become “as simple as turning on the TV each Thursday evening—

David Lavery

and then, at work the next day, pretending you understood what the hell was going on” (Leerhsen and Wright 58).

David Lynch had hoped that *Twin Peaks* would “cast a spell” over its audience (Zoglin, “Like Nothing” 97), would even make its members “sit in their seats differently” (Woodward, “A Dark Lens, 52)—results he had already achieved with the movie audiences that had made *Eraserhead* a cult phenomenon.⁷ For some, such a goal was inherently pretentious. For the show’s adepts, however, anxious to be part of a new “interpretive community,” he succeeded, becoming perhaps the first director to create cult classics in two media.⁸

Twin Peaks was not, of course, the first television show to attain full-fledged cult status. Programs like *The Prisoner*, *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, and *Max Hedroom* had, each in its own way, developed cult followings, but mainly via rebirth through syndication. Prior to *Twin Peaks*, however, no television series had become cultic so quickly, so early in its first incarnation, but then prior to *Twin Peaks* had any prime time network series been so explicitly formulated as cult TV?

The success of any series (perhaps of any TV show) has always been dependent on whether or not the viewer will “invite” its characters or personalities (Cliff Huxtable or J. R., Peter Jennings or Dan Rather, Bob and Vanna or Alex Trebek) back into their living rooms. For a show to be a hit, network programmers have long known, its night must “belong” to it—as Thursdays belonged for a time to *The Bill Cosby Show* (Gitlin, *Inside* 65). In the cult TV experience something more happens. The visitor (and the visitor’s world) set up housekeeping, move in, altering the personal culture of those individual viewers, already members of a “culture of instinctive semioticians” (Eco 210), ready to seek, indeed anxious to seek, membership in a new *systeme*, ready to belong to it, to learn its language and customs, by committing their imaginaries to time-slotted new (or seemingly new) televisual experience. If one of the functions of a traditional genre is to build cultural consensus (Schatz 15–20), The Cult serves to build cult consensus in a singular interpretive community, a community committed to difference.

Theoretically, TV should lend itself to the cult media experience. Although, as Ellis has noted, the “cultural visibility of particular TV broadcasts” is ordinarily much briefer than that of the movies, for which the cultic has become a much more prominent postmodern experience,⁹ TV nevertheless possesses a unique “immediacy in the sense that its rhythm is that of everyday life.” “TV programs,” Ellis writes, thus become “the stuff of small-talk, of ‘did you see that thing last night where . . . ?’” Such visibility, needless to say, should be instrumental to the development, dissemination, and perpetuation of a show’s cult status, and in the case of *Twin Peaks* they clearly were. Militating against TV’s huge cultural visibility, however, in effect neutralizing it, is the fact that, as Ellis explains, “the centrality and familiarity of broadcast

Introduction: *Twin Peaks*' Interpretive Community

TV create definite ideological limitations to its work." Indeed, "TV is required to be predictable and timetabled; it is required to avoid offense and difficulty" (251–52).¹⁰

If we use the characteristics of a cult object delineated by Umberto Eco (198–99) as a checklist, we immediately recognize *Twin Peaks*' impeccable credentials. I will limit my discussion here to only three of Eco's criteria.

Living Textuality

The authentic cult work, Eco observes, must seem like "living textuality," as if it had no authors, as postmodernist proof that "as literature comes from literature, cinema comes from cinema" (199). Despite the strong authorial presence of Lynch, an identifiable, prominent contemporary auteur, working in a new medium, and Frost, a writer with an excellent track record, *Twin Peaks* nonetheless met this obligation. Lynch, after all, directed only five episodes and co-wrote four as well (all with Frost). In addition, Frost directed one episode and was sole author of three and co-author of six. Nevertheless, non-Lynch/Frost episodes, those directed by their stable¹¹ or by established filmmakers¹² and written by others,¹³ nevertheless perpetuated the show's basic look and feel.

Are not Lynch's already firmly established auteur signatures ("slow dissolves, spotlighting, extreme close-ups, figures who emerge out of darkness, shots held an extra beat to catch the sound and texture of a place or thing . . . an interest in facial deformities, exaggerated noise, sick puns and comically banal dialogue . . . ridiculously specific [characters] . . . [chronological confusion]—brand names from different eras—so that everything takes place in dream time" [Woodward 42]; "the sinister fluidity, . . . the shocking relief, the elegant gesture, the deadpan joke, the painterly pointillism . . . the erotic violence, the lingering close-up camera, the rampaging of non sequiturs, the underlining and italicizing of emotions, the warping of the light, the appetite for all that's grotesque and quirky, a sense of unconscious dreaming . . . moon thoughts . . . sadness . . . demonic possession" [Leonard, "The Quirky Allure" 36]¹⁴) inscribed periodically throughout the thirty episodes?¹⁵

A case in point. A part of *Twin Peaks*' cultic appeal certainly lay in its visual inventiveness, its distinctive televisual look. The series frequently invited viewers to "desuture" themselves, through self-conscious awareness, from the ordinary seducements of TV, and in so doing to confirm cult membership. After the opening credits for Episode 12, for example, we find ourselves inside a tunnel, its walls made of what looks to be a kind of fiber. On the soundtrack we hear a low, at first unidentifiable sound, perhaps a human voice in an obscure register, which began even before the image of the tunnel. The camera then begins to pull back out of the tunnel, and as it finally exits, turning circles as it moves, we gradually realize that the tunnel is a hole among

other holes: that it is an opening in a Swiss cheese-like surface of a hundred holes, and then that the square shape of this surface is part of a configuration of dozens of other squares each likewise covered with holes. As the camera continues to pull back (a quick cut edits out part of the withdrawal and takes us further away from the wall of holes, revealing many, many more and making us a little bit dizzy), we are still unable to identify the image. The mysterious sound, however, becomes gradually clearer, and we think we hear a girl's voice beseeching, "Daddy, Daddy." Then from the right side of the frame, Sheriff Truman's head enters the image and begins to read Miranda rights to Leland Palmer, who is himself disclosed in the next image.

The tunnel, we realize, is in fact a hole in a ceiling tile in the Sheriff's Office—seen in subjective camera by a deranged Leland Palmer, who at the end of Episode 11 had been arrested (after being fingered by Doctor Jacoby) for the murder of Jacques Renault. Staring at the ceiling, indeed into the ceiling, hearing his dead daughter's anguished voice, he has been brought back to reality by the Sheriff's importuning; the pullback, we now realize was, in effect, his return to consciousness.

It is an astonishing fifty seven seconds of television, as stunning in its own way as the journey inside the radiator in Henry's room in *Eraserhead* or the descent into the grass at the beginning of *Blue Velvet*, made even more astonishing through retrospective slow motion examination with VCR and remote (has there ever been a television series that so required these tools—the armchair TV detective's Holmesian magnifying glass—for its comprehension?) and more understandable when we learn, three episodes later, that Leland's "inhabiting spirit" BOB has indeed killed Laura Palmer. Needless to say, this is not the customary rhetoric of television camerawork, nor is that of the much talked about dream sequence in Episode 3, with its strange visual and auditory rhythms, or the risky, interminable opening scene of the second season, with all its upward (from the point of view of a prostrate Agent Cooper) and downward (through the eyes of the Old Bellhop and The Giant) angles of vision and its excruciating real-time pacing, or the unsettling, intercut scenes of Cooper's vision of The Giant at the Roadhouse and Maddy's murder in Episode 15, or the convention-defying, one-hundred-eighty-degree-rule-violating, mega-confusing Black Lodge sequence of the final episode. But the directorial vision behind this "tunnel vision" was not, we must remind ourselves, Lynch, but Todd Holland.¹⁶

Though clearly more authored than most in the inherently anonymous "producer's" medium of television, taken as a whole *Twin Peaks* seems generated from, spun intertextually out of (cloned from?) precedent texts and thus cultic in origin, authority, and appeal. A large part of the series' appeal to aficionados—its invitation to feel, as a result of their recognitions, "as though they all belonged to the same little clique" (Eco 209)—was tracking its intertextual, allusionary quotations: the many actors and actresses reborn from the

Introduction: Twin Peaks' Interpretive Community

never-never land of old TV and movies¹⁷; the red herring evocations of old movies¹⁸; allusions to previous Lynch films¹⁹; numerous inside jokes²⁰; cameos by Lynch (as Gordon Cole), Frost (as a newscaster in the first episode of the second season), and even Lynch's son Austin (as Mrs. Tremond's magical grandson, Pierre). These and many other facets of *Twin Peaks* invited fanatic, cultic participation, generating discourse about discourse.

A Completely Furnished World

Another closely related prerequisite of The Cult, Eco observes, is its capacity to "provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the secret recognize through each other a shared experience" (198). *Twin Peaks* talk such as that Leonard recorded (see the epigraph above), contributed mightily to the series' "tertiary text"²¹—speculations about Laura's killer, plot synopses, rumors, gossip, family trees, flow charts, "Peakspeak" (lexicons of the language spoken on the show, favorite quotations)—was heard daily at office and at school and disseminated on computer bulletin boards (as Henry Jenkins details in his essay in this volume). A *Twin Peaks* newsletter appeared. Two years after the series' demise, several Peaks fanzines were still being published in the United States and abroad.²²

During the summer re-runs of its first season, *Peaks* merchandise, its "commodity intertexts" (Collins 341–42), arrived: tie-in books (*The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*, which eventually reached number five on The *New York Times* bestseller list, *The Autobiography of F.B.I. Special Agent Dale Cooper*, the official *Twin Peaks* access guide); a set of *Twin Peaks* collector cards; a recording of the series' music; and, of course, the complete Cooper-to-Diane audio tapes—further confirmation of Todd Gitlin's contention that "the genius of consumer society is its ability to convert the desire for change into a desire for novel goods" (*Inside* 77).²³ Still, these ancillary texts offer much of interest to serious students of the series. They "hail" those of us who could not get enough of *Twin Peaks*, inviting us not just to spend our money but to immerse ourselves, in the fullest possible way, in *Twin Peaks*, to become its "subjects."

Written by Lynch's daughter, Jennifer,²⁴ *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*, the first of the ancillary texts to hit the market, was, judged on its own merits, the most imaginative and interesting. Although Jennifer Lynch remains faithful to Laura Palmer's own point of view, never pretending to know more than Laura herself did, for those who read it prior to the final disclosure of her killer in the second season, little mystery remained about the culprit. The subject of *The Secret Diary* is the awakening of Laura Palmer's "secret sharer" in her frightening struggles with the sinister BOB, a being who has

David Lavery

been visiting her at night, mysteriously able to enter her room at will, sexually abusing and terrorizing her as long as she can remember. Laura's good girl/bad girl split, we learn, is a survival strategy. Along with accounts of her promiscuous sexual adventures (with, among others, Bobby Briggs, Jacques Renault, Leo Johnson, Josie Packard, the patrons at One-Eyed Jack's), her cocaine use, her vivid, menacing dreams, her awareness of Benjamin Horne's sinister nature, her obsession with death, *The Diary* records her growing consciousness of BOB's role in her dual identity, as the repressed knowledge that he is, in fact, her own father surfaces—an equation she never completes in the book's pages. (Though in its last entry she announces that she knows at last “who and what BOB is,” she is murdered before she can record her realization, and pages missing from the diary—torn out, as *Fire Walk with Me* confirms, by her father—prevent its reader from reaching a definitive conclusion.) The Diary remains “fantastic” in Todorov's sense (see Diane Stevenson's essay in this volume). As a fiction that offers an inside-out imaginal record of the nightmare of sexual abuse, it is worth reading in its own right, not just as a *Twin Peaks* commodity.

A much more commercial endeavor, *Welcome to TWIN PEAKS: Access Guide to the Town* nevertheless offers a variety of pleasures: maps of Twin Peaks (who knew that the Palmer house was so close to the high school or that Glastonbury Grove was so far from the Great Northern?); an incoherent letter from Mayor Dwayne Milford (“My advice to those who visit is to get out”); an excerpt from Andrew Packard's will bequeathing money for the preparation of the access guide; brief biographies of each main character; a history of the town; guides to local flora and fauna; recipes (for cherry pie—depicted in a hyperreal photograph on the book's cover—and, of course, doughnuts); a photo of the undefeated 1968 Twin Peaks High School football team; a survey of local points of interest (White Tail Falls, Owl Cave, the Train Graveyard); accounts of the annual Twin Peaks Passion Play and the Packard Timber Games; a page from the phone directory; mileage charts showing the distance from Twin Peaks to the rest of the world (Hong Kong is 8004 miles away); “interesting” facts and figures about the town (e.g. that its per capita doughnut consumption is the highest in the world).

The limited edition set of “*Twin Peaks* Collectible CardArt” supplies seventy-six cards representing individual characters (“Dewar's Profiles” of both major and minor players detailing “accomplishments,” “strengths,” “weaknesses,” birthdates, nicknames, astrological signs, “likes,” educational backgrounds), places (the Double R Diner, Big Ed's Gas Farm, One-Eyed Jack's, the Roadhouse, the Great Northern Hotel), “famous dialogue” from the series (“I'm going to have the world's first one hundred percent quiet drape runner”), trivia questions about the show (“What is the mascot for Twin Peaks High School?”), and various other “things” (the Berwick's Wren seen in the opening credits, Agent Cooper's tape recorder, the Palmers' ceiling fan,