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

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> Many Hackers are expert lock-pickers and carry their "picks" around with them on their key chains. Their pleasure is in "beating the lock." They break, the enter and then they leave. They are not after material goods, but after the thrill of triumph. . . . A closed system is a challenge. A safe is there to be cracked. A mystery is there to be solved.
>
> *Sherry Turkle,* The Second Self

> "Break the code, solve the crime. We've only got four days left."
>
> *contributor, alt.tv.twinpeaks*

Usenet (the User's Network) is an electronic bulletin board shared among computer systems around the world. It is a macro-system that links and coordinates feed from a number of pre-existing communications networks, including UUCP, CSNET, BITENET, and ARPANET. The net system was established to facilitate collaboration between researchers and the exchange of information about the advantages and "bugs" of new technologies. The system has evolved into a great deal more, though its primary users continue to be located at universities, technologically-oriented companies, and research organizations. The system now reaches over fifty thousand participants at over

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two thousand sites in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Japan, and Korea.[1]

Science fiction writers like Orson Scott Card, William Gibson, and Norman Spinrad, among many others, have speculated about the possibilities of a time when government, commerce, and culture are all conducted on "the net" and when most citizens will have access to the system.[2] That day is not yet here. The net system, however, does facilitate discussion of these and many other topics between its scattered (if still highly specialized) users. The system enables subscribers to exchange private electronic mail or to participate within public discussions. The network is organized hierarchically, privileging technologically and scientifically-oriented discussion but allowing lower priority space for exchanges centering on current events, hobbies, and cultural interests. A number of the net groups center around popular media texts (ranging from *Tiny Tunes* to *Dr. Demento*, from WWF Wrestling to Nintendo) and genres (science fiction, soap opera, British television, etc.).

Participants in these groups sometimes exchange digitized sounds or computer graphs, but most often they participate in on-going public debates. Entries may range from a few sentences to ten or more single-spaced spaces. Many participants post daily entries (or I should say nightly entries, since a great deal of posting occurs in the evening or early morning hours). Many spend a sizable percentage of their recreational time (and probably a good deal of company time as well) interacting on the net.

A number of the television-oriented groups maintain a volume of a hundred or more postings a day, offering an incredibly rich resource for audience research. We might, for example, contrast this embarrassment of riches with the forty-two letters that form the corpus of Ien Ang's analysis of Dutch viewers of *Dallas*. The problem working with the net becomes not how to attract sufficient responses to allow for adequate analysis but how to select and process materials from the endless flow of information and commentary. What's so exciting is that the net discussion tends to center on those issues that are of the most interest to media researchers: commentary and criticism not only of specific characters and episodes, but even of specific moments within the aired episodes; attempts to develop aesthetic criteria for the evaluation of television and other popular texts; speculations about media authorship; critiques of ideology; and self-analysis of the netters' own involvement with the broadcast materials. Ethnographic research has often been criticized for its construction of the very audience it seeks to examine, via the organization and structuring of focus groups, rather than engaging with the activity of pre-existing cultural communities as they conduct their daily lives (the focus of more traditional forms of ethnography). Here, the computer net groups allow us to observe a self-defined and ongoing interpretive community as it conducts its normal practices of forming, evaluating, and debating interpretations. These discus-

sions occur without direct control or intervention by the researcher, yet in a form that is legitimately open to public scrutiny and analysis.

The interactive nature of computer net discussion makes it possible to trace the process by which television meanings are socially produced, circulated, and revised. Within moments after an episode is aired, the first posts begin to appear, offering evaluations and identifying issues that will often form the basis for debate and interpretation across the following week. Because this process is ongoing, rather than part of focused and localized interview sessions, computer net discourse allows the researcher to pinpoint specific moments in the shifting meanings generated by unfolding broadcast texts, to locate episodes that generated intense response or that became particularly pivotal in the fans' interpretations of the series as a whole.

Yet we must recognize the social specificity of computer net discourse. I am suspicious of making too easy a move from the particularity of audience response in a concrete context (particularly the highly developed, highly visible response of a fan community) to the sweeping generalizations about semiotic democracy or popular resistance that are the stock and trade of American cultural studies. Examining the nets can tell us a lot about how a particular group of people make sense of television and integrate it into their everyday social interactions; studying the nets cannot by itself provide us with a very good model for a general theory of television spectatorship. Net responses reflect the particular cultural interests and interpretive strategies of their users, who tend to be college-educated, professionally-oriented, technologically-inclined men, most of whom are involved either with the academy or the computer industry.[3]

This paper will provide a concrete case study suggesting the potential relevance and social specificity of computer net discourse to our ongoing attempts to document and analyze popular reception of television texts. Specifically, I will focus on commentary circulated by one discussion group, alt.tv.twinpeaks, during the fall of 1990, the second season of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. I will outline some of the group's reading practices and interpretive strategies (their fixation on resolving narrative enigmas, their development of multiple alternative restagings of the core plotline, their complex relationship to Lynch as author, their appeal to extratextual discourse and intertextual linkages) as well as their perceptions of themselves as sophisticated television viewers and of the series as standing outside the mainstream of American television.[4]

Alt.tv.twinpeaks emerged within just a few weeks of the series' first aired episode and quickly became one of the most active and prolific groups on the system. (One estimate suggests that some twenty-five thousand readers subscribed to alt.tv.twinpeaks, though the vast majority remained "lurkers" who did not actively contribute to the discussion.) The discussion group served many functions for the reception community. One fan provided a detailed

sequence of all of the narrative events (both those explicitly related and those implied by textual references) and updated it following each new episode. Another built a library of digitized sounds from the series, while a third generated a collection of favorite quotes that could be used as signature lines at the bottom of postings. Excerpts of cryptic dialogue were reprinted and deciphered. Fans provided reports from local newspapers or summaries of interviews with program stars and directors on local television stations, helping to pool information not yet nationally available. Others compiled lists of the stars' previous appearances, reviews of Lynch's other films (especially *Wild at Heart*, which appeared in the gap between *Twin Peaks*' first and second season), accounts of Lynch's involvement with Julee Cruise's musical career, reactions to Mark Frost's ill-fated *American Chronicles*, assessment of Sherilyn Fenn's *Playboy* pictorial, and an assortment of other events loosely related to the series. Pacific Northwest fans detailed the local geography and culture and fed the group reports about the commercialization of the region where the series was filmed. The net became the vehicle for the exchange of videotapes as well. Fans who missed episodes scrambled to find other local fans who would make them copies; many fans sought to translate PAL tape copies of the European release (with its alternative ending) into American Beta and VHS formats. When ABC put the series on hiatus, the net provides a rallying point for national fan efforts to organize public support for the endangered show. The net circulated addresses and telephone and fax numbers for the network executives and concerned advertisers and ran reports on efforts in different communities to raise fan support. Some fans even wrote their own *Twin Peaks* scripts to form fodder for group discussion during the long weeks between episodes. When the series' return was announced, the net was full of news about celebration parties and further speculations about its likely chances in the ratings. The group, however, spent much of its time in detailed analysis of the series.

As one fan remarked just a few weeks into the series' second season, "Can you imagine *Twin Peaks* coming out before VCRs or without the net? It would have been Hell!" Lynch's cryptic and idiosyncratic series seemed to invite the close scrutiny and intense speculation enabled by the fans' access to these technological resources. Another explained, "Video-recording has made it possible to treat film like a manuscript, to be pored over and deciphered." If we extend this suggestive metaphor, the computer net allowed a scriptural culture to evolve around the circulation and interpretation of that manuscript. In many ways the perfect text for this computer-based culture, *Twin Peaks* combined the syntagmatic complexity of a mystery with the paradigmatic plenitude of the soap. The space between episodes gave ample time for audience speculations while the core narrative moved forward at a breakneck pace continually opening up new enigmas while closing down others, a practice that reached its peak during the first season finale where one fan

identified no less than twenty-five different cliff-hangers introduced within a single hour. As one post suggested, "This [*Twin Peaks*] isn't *Murder She Wrote* or Nancy Drew where you get all the clues and have to piece them together before the detective does. It's more like peeling an onion, with new and exciting possibilities etched on each succeeding layer." Characters seemed to undergo dramatic transformations between episodes, to shift from good to evil with only the most minimal warning. The narrative abounded with cryptic messages, codes, and chess problems, riddles and conundrums, dreams, visions, clues, secret passages and locked boxes, shadowy figures peering through dark windows and secondary narratives appearing in the televised soap (*Invitation to Love*) that forms a backdrop to the first season's action. All of these details invited the viewer's participation as a minimal condition for comprehending the narrative and even closer consideration if one had any hopes of solving the compelling narrative hook, "Who killed Laura Palmer?" (or WKLP, as netters started to call it).

The program's coming attractions, with their split second shots and mismatched sounds, mandated the use of the VCR as an analytic tool, required that the image be frozen, frame-advanced, and watched several times. The coming attractions became yet another puzzle that could be eagerly controlled by Lynch's ever-dwindling number of hardcore fans.[5] One fan described his experience of deciphering one such image:

> Looking at the scene I see someone who appears to be wearing an orange shirt. Whoever it was was getting out of a big car, a Cad or a Continental, when he/she is surrounded by squad cars. So I looked to see who was wearing orange, but could not find anyone. The closest person was Donna. . . . Did anyone notice this? Was anyone able to pick out who it might be?

Twin Peaks won the computer netters' admiration for its complexity, its density, its technical precision and virtuosity, its consistency and yet its ability to continually pose problems for interpretation. The group's aesthetic criteria mirror those Sherry Turkle sees as characteristic of Hacker culture. Turkle argues that such criteria reflect the Hacker's close engagement with computer technology and programming but shape their response to a broader range of cultural and social experiences. Turkle notes, for example, the group's preference for the technical precision of Bach over the emotionalism of Beethoven, the complex discursiveness of Escher over the blurry impressionism of Monet, the invented and controlled worlds of science fiction over the social ambiguities of realist fiction. Hackers, Turkle argues, seek texts that pose technical rather than emotional problems, that require decipherment and debugging but may eventually be mastered and brought under cognitive control (196–238). As one fan explained, "I don't care who killed Laura Palmer. I just love the puzzle."

Not surprisingly, these technically-oriented viewers embrace the VCR, like the computer, as almost an extension of their own cognitive apparatus. Sean Cubbitt has explored the ways that video technology allows the viewer greater mastery over the flow of images and thus allows the spectator to focus on aspects of the program material that solicit immediate interest. The net discussion was full of passionate narratives describing viewers' slow movement through particular sequences, describing surprising or incongruous shifts in the images. Some fans speculated that Lynch, himself, may have embedded within some single frame a telling clue, planted there just to be located by VCR-users intent on solving the mystery: "I was hoping that maybe for a frame or two they'd superimpose someone else's head over BOB's but no such luck." One fan reported, "I finally had a chance to slow-mo through Ronette's dream, and wow! Lots of interesting stuff I'm amazed nobody's mentioned yet! . . . Reviewing this changed my thinking completely. I think BOB is not Laura's killer at all, but was her lover and grieved her death." Others soon joined in the speculation. Does BOB seem, just for an instant, to take on some of the features of, say, Deputy Andy, as one fan asserted? Is he beating Laura or giving her emergency assistance, as two fans debated? What did you make of that shadow that appears for only a split second on the window behind his head, one fan asked? That door frame didn't look very much like the ones we've seen in other shots of the train car, another asserted, but rather more like the doors at the Great Northern. The viewers looked for continuity errors in the text (such as Laura's heart necklace that appears on a metal chain and sometimes on a leather thong, or the recurrent shots of the moon whose cycle does not correspond to the narrative time of the story) or for the aesthetic conventions of this idiosyncratic work (such as the stop lights that mark a stasis in the narrative and the green lights that signal forward movement, at least according to some fan-critics). More often, they were looking for clues that might shed light on the central narrative enigmas.

Fans might protest, as they often did, that those who focused only on the Palmer murder were missing the point of the series. Yet the net discussion consistently centered on the search for answers to narrative questions. The volume intensified each time it appeared that the series was about to unveil one of its many secrets. Not sure what to highlight for discussion, the net lost steam following the resolution of the Palmer murder and only regained momentum as the Windom Earle plot began to unfold. Where the series itself did not pose mysteries, the fans were forced to invent them. In one second season episode, for example, Hank mockingly salutes Major Briggs, a throw away gesture that is far from the focus of the scene. This gesture formed the basis for a whole series of exchanges speculating about its hidden significance: "Is Hank doing dirty work for this classified program the Major is involved in? . . . I detected a can of worms being opened here." The complexity of Lynch's text justified the viewers' assumption that no matter how closely they looked,

whatever they found there was not only intentional but part of the narrative master plan, pertinent or even vital to understanding textual secrets.

The computer net only intensified this process, allowing fans to compare notes, elaborate and refine theories through collaboration with other contributors. All of the participants saw the group as involved in a communal enterprise. Entries often began with "Did anyone else see . . ." or "Am I the only one who thought . . . ," suggesting a felt need to confirm one's own produced meanings through conversation with a larger community of readers, or often, "I can't believe I'm the first one to comment on this," implying that their own knowledge must already be the common property of the group as well as staking out a claim for their own superior knowledge of the shared narrative. Several contributors vowed that "we can solve this if we all put our minds to it," invoking a kind of collective problem solving quite common in technical fields. Netters frequently began new entries with extensive quotation from previous contributors' letters. While this was sometimes to "flame" or criticize what someone had written, more often, it was so that they could add new insights directly into the body of the previously circulating text.

Many of the net contributors watched the series alone, concerned that those who were not initiated within the *Twin Peaks* fan community would not remain appropriately silent, and would disrupt their initial experience of the episode with foolish questions or inane chatter. However, as soon as the episode was completed, they would log onto the net to discuss the events with those already fully initiated into the game, those who shared their passion for breaking the code. Watching the program required their full and uninterrupted attention, but the broadcast was not complete until they had a chance to discuss it with others. One computer net participant described how his participation within the virtual community on the net influenced his face-to-face interactions with local fans:

> I looked forward to the discussions on the net in the coming week, even though I rarely, if ever, participated in them. Often, I would print up the most interesting ones and give them to my friend who had no net access. When we met on the nights when *Twin Peaks* wasn't on, we would often discuss ideas proposed on the net. Sometimes, those who encountered the net discussion second-hand would log onto their friends' accounts and post suggestions to alt.tv.twinpeaks, further broadening the community's intellectual resources.

Theories about possible murderers emerged with astounding density and even more remarkable diversity within this reception context. In a world where almost anything can count as a clue, including both material explicitly presented within the aired episodes and information from one of the many ancillary texts surrounding the series (interviews, the European release print, the

published Laura Palmer diary, the Cooper tapes and autobiography, the Julee Cruise album and music videos, etc.), almost any character could become a prime suspect. There were strong constituencies behind Leland Palmer and Ben Horne, characters *Twin Peaks* seemed to foreground as likely candidates. Others were convinced that Madeline and Laura had switched places and that, as a result, Laura was actually still alive. Another group was certain that Josie or the mysterious Asian Man (then believed to be her henchman) was the killer (if only because the series' otherwise unmotivated opening shot—focusing on Josie's enigmatic face—must have some significance.) More ambitious critics developed elaborate explanations for why the killer was Sheriff Truman, Deputy Andy, Donna, Ronette Pulaski, or Doc Hayward, going well beyond possibilities explicitly raised on the program. Consider, for example, the case that one fan built to support his theory:

> Why hasn't anyone suspected Donna Hayward of offing her best friend? I mean, Lynch painted Laura as a saint until the truth started coming out about her—so why should we think Donna is any different? She certainly gained a lot by Laura's death—namely, James. Look at their early meetings—this girl was hot for him. And he was seeing her evil best friend. Twice, Donna has made statements that made me confused: first, she convinced James that when they discovered the broken half of the heart necklace was gone, that they should NOT go to the police. . . . Obviously, Donna doesn't want the authorities involved anymore than they already are. Secondly, when Audrey was trying to convince Donna to help her in her own investigation, Donna demanded to know what Audrey had already found out . . . and made Audrey promise that anything they found out would stay between the two of them. Could Donna be concerned that Audrey might stumble onto something she'd rather not have known? We already know that Donna has the potential for evil; she lied to an FBI agent, has hidden evidence in a murder case, broken into a doctor's office, and in one shocking evening of depravity, snuck out of the house and almost forgot her sister's bike!!!:-)[6]

The formulation of such theories is the logical response to a mystery, part of the typical reception of any whodunit, yet rarely has the consumption of a mystery been conducted in such a public fashion. The technology of the net allows what might previously have been private meditations to become the basis for social interaction. Each case made against a possible suspect represented a different formulation of *Twin Peaks*' moral economy, a different emplotment of its events, that necessarily changed the meaning of the whole and foregrounded some moments at the expense of others. A world where Laura Palmer is murdered by the kindly doctor who delivered her into the

world is a very different place than one where she is murdered by the Horne brothers in their efforts to protect their drug trade or where Laura kills her cousin and assumes her identity. Different theories were grounded in different assumptions about the nature of evil and the trustworthiness of authority. No one was sure how black Lynch's narrative would become. What these competing theories meant was the continued circulation and elaboration of multiple narratives, each of which could be sustained by the aired information, each of which posed a different way of making sense of the series. Every new revelation on the air produced new challenges for some theories while seeming to add ammunition to others. Each clue was reread multiple times to provide support for each of these metatextual narratives that assumed lives of their own apart from Lynch's text. These theories often proved so compelling to their advocates that even after the program revealed that Leland had been possessed by BOB, fans continued to speculate that BOB might have multiple hosts he floated between, including, of course, their favorite suspect.

Soon, the elaboration of these theories became so complicated that only a few could play the game, while others watched with a mixture of fascination and irritation. Such a mixed reaction is suggested by one contributor:

> Tell me! Tell me! How many times are people watching *TP*? Do you take notes on every subject as you are watching? Or, when a question comes up you drag out each of the episodes, grab a yellow pad, some popcorn and start watching? Do you have a photographic memory? . . . Do you enjoy making the rest of us feel stupid? Does anyone share my frustration?

Within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power. Knowledge gains currency through its circulation on the net, and so there is a compulsion to be the first to circulate new information and to be among the first to possess it. Net etiquette requires the posting of "spoiler warnings" before contributions that contain information that might give away forthcoming plot developments or "spoil" the pleasure for viewers who have not yet seen the most recent episode, allowing viewers to make a rational choice between their desire for mastery over the program universe and the immediacy of a first viewing. As the mystery drew to a close on *Twin Peaks*, some hardcore net fans began to produce their own speculations about the likely outcomes with "Possible Spoiler Warning," or in one case, "Probable Spoiler Warning," granting only slightly less authority to their musings than to the actual aired material. Such postings point to the extraordinary degree of investment some fans made in their predictions, the certainty with which they promoted particular interpretations of the characters and their motives.

Elsewhere, I have examined the metatextual speculations characteristic of the female media fan community, focusing specifically on the process by which fans comprehend and move beyond the many texts of *Star Trek*.[7] On

one level, the activities of the two fan communities parallel each other: both engage in repeated rereading of a common narrative, as well as group discussion, as a means of building upon narrative excesses and resolving gaps and contradictions; both groups draw not only on the material explicitly presented but also on ancillary texts, extratextual commentary, and fan speculations as a way of building an increasingly complex map of the program universe and its inhabitants.

On other levels, the two groups' activities are strikingly different. The female *Star Trek* fans focus their interest on the elaboration of paradigmatic relationships, reading plot actions as shedding light on character psychology and motivations. The largely male fans in the *Twin Peaks* computer group essentially reversed this process, focusing on moments of character interaction as clues that might help to resolve plot questions. The male fans' fascination with solving the mystery justified their intense scrutiny and speculation about father-daughter relations, sexual scandals, psychological and emotional problems, and romantic entanglements. Sherry Turkle suggests that the Hacker culture's focus on technological complexity and formal virtuosity stands in stark contrast to the group's discomfort regarding the ambiguities and unpredictability of personal relations. Here, *Twin Peaks*' complex mixture of soap opera and mystery provided the alt.tv.twinpeaks participants a space to examine the confusions of human interactions by translating them into technical problems requiring decoding.[8]

One can argue that these differences in response merely reflect differences in the generic traditions surrounding the two series, that one reads buddy shows (like *Star Trek*) in terms of their relationships and mysteries (like *Twin Peaks*) in terms of their syntagmatic complexities. In both cases, however, the program is open to alternative readings. If *Twin Peaks* was a mystery, it was also a soap opera and many female fans of the series focused on the bonding between Harry Truman and Dale Cooper as their central interest in the series. Computer net discussions of *Star Trek*, on the other hand, tend to treat the characters as autonomous problem-solvers rather than looking at their interrelationships; Trekkers on the net devote attention to discussions of technical problems and plot holes rather than on the social and emotional lives of the series' protagonists.[9]

Female fans often use the program materials as a basis for gossip, appealing to conceptions of *Star Trek*'s "emotional realism" as a justification for drawing on personal experiences to support their interpretations. Significantly, this strategy was almost entirely absent from computer net discourse.[10] *Twin Peaks* fans hid behind the program, moving through a broad network of texts but revealing little of themselves in the process. The series gave them something to discuss among themselves that allowed netters to deflect rather than explore personal questions. Rather than focusing on personal revelation, interpretation became the occasion for displaying professional expertise (as in

the case of one regular contributor who drew on her psychology background to shed insight into Multiple Personality Disorders and other mental health issues viewed as relevant to the series). The netters pooled their knowledge, shared their mastery, yet held this process at a distance from their emotional lives and personal experiences.

The rules of female fan interpretative practice dictate that explanations must first be sought within the fictional world of the narrative before resorting to explanations based on extratextual knowledge of authorship or the production process. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* fans know, for example, that Diane Muldaar left the series to join the cast of *L.A. Law* or that Denise Crosby departed in a contract dispute with the producers, yet they seek narrative explanations for the unexplained disappearance of Dr. Pulaski or the abrupt death of Lt. Yar, explanations that do not violate the integrity of the program's fictional universe. *Twin Peaks* computer net fans, on the other hand, consistently appealed to knowledge of generic expectations or assumptions about Lynch as author as the primary basis for their speculations about likely plot developments. Lynch's authorial identity emerged in the net discourse as both that of a wizard programmer who has tapped into the network of previously circulating cultural materials and jerryrigged them into a more sophisticated narrative system and that of a trickster who consistently anticipates and undermines audience expectations. These appeals to authorship justified these fans' fascination with the soap opera dimensions of the series, providing a high culture rationale for their preoccupation with what is, after all, "only a television program."

The first conception of Lynch, that of the master programmer, led series enthusiasts to search for an ur-text or texts that might provide the key to decoding his particular narrative: "crack the code and solve the crime." Lynch's predilection for casting roles with actors already familiar from other contexts (including heavy use of the casts of *The Mod Squad*, *West Side Story*, and his own stock company from previous films) and his allusions to other texts (from Romantic poetry to film noir and popular music) gave credence to the fans' efforts to find the solution by looking beyond textual boundaries. Some, repeating the logic of auteurists elsewhere, sought the answers in Lynch's own films, tracing repeated motifs and character names or playing with the previous associations of cast members. This impulse also led to a close scrutiny of the Laura Palmer secret diaries, written by Lynch's daughter (who, as the fans repeatedly reminded each other, was shocked to learn who had committed the crime).[11] Others ransacked the lyrics and liner notes of Julee Cruise's album (which had been written and produced by Lynch and included music used in the series) or *Industrial Symphony #1*, a music performance tape which included Cruise and a good deal of the program iconography. Yet others cast a still broader net, pulling in plots invoked by the series (*Vertigo*, *Laura*, *The Third Man*, *Double Indemnity*, even *Breathless*, *The*

Magic Flute, *Heathers*, and *The Searchers*.) Fans hoped to find the text that contained a key to unravelling *Twin Peaks*' many secrets: "Why go to all the trouble of creating the similarities [to *Vertigo* and *Laura*] if they're not going to use that plot line???" And sometimes the fans hit pay dirt. For example, one fan's discovery that Whitley Strieber's *Communion* asserted that owls are often screen memories for alien encounters allowed the group to predict the program's introduction of a science fiction subtext and to guess why "the owls [were] not what they seemed." Another drew on Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* to determine that the mysterious Japanese gentleman bidding on Ghostwood Estates was Catherine Martell in disguise, a plot twist they recognized weeks before her masquerade was uncovered on the show.

Such remarkable predictions of otherwise unlikely developments led to periodic speculations that Lynch monitored the nets and shaped the program in response to fan debates: "Back in Lit. class we talked about how Dickens wrote his books in installments and sometimes wound up changing his original plan because of the feed-back he got. . . . I wonder how much we are writing our own show?" There was for a brief time a hoax on the net; someone submitted entries claiming to be David Lynch. Later, "Lynch" stopped posting because of the "unjust suspicions" of other netters who demanded that he somehow prove his identity.[12]

The conception of Lynch as trickster played an equally powerful role in the fans' speculations. No sooner did the netters come to accept a previously outlandish line of speculation, then that solution began to seem too obvious, too clichéd to be the real answer, and the search for alternatives began again: "It seemed too obvious to be true. Lynch is one devious guy." "There are not cliches here. You will *not* get what you expect." "If David Lynch doesn't fuck with reality in his shows, who will?" "Wouldn't it be just like Lynch to hint at the solution to the mystery in last night's episode, then have the police decide not to follow up on it?" Lynch's perversity and unpredictability were constantly appealed to as a means of justifying the fans' equally outrageous speculations about lesser suspects: "Since nice well-balanced people are not a hallmark of David Lynch, Donna must be into something really incredibly sleazy." The myth of the trickster author allowed the fans to keep alive the case that the whole series might be Cooper's dream as he confronts his failure to prevent the murders in Pittsburgh or that Sheriff Truman might really be the master mind behind the region's drug traffic: "With Lynch, I don't think you can rule out any possibilities." As one fan explained, evoking an analogy between Lynch and an equally tricky writer, Edgar Allan Poe:

> Poe and Lynch both mock the kind of rationality that assumes that one air-tight explanation will account for all details. . . . Look for someone we Really have not suspected at all, Could not suspect at all. Look for dozens of questions to remain unanswered, for the

> series to end with hundreds of plot threads dangling into a TV vacuum.

Another predicted a total reversal of the program's moral polarities:

> The first season we set up who was good and who was bad. This season we do a *Twin Peaks* flip and change them entirely. Donna becomes BAD. Josie may turn out to be GOOD, while Truman may turn out to be BAD. etc. etc.

The fans' pleasure lay simultaneously in their mastery over the text (their ability to successfully predict the next turn of its convoluted plot) and their vulnerability to Lynch's trickery (their inability to guess what is likely to happen next). Matching wits against Lynch became the ideal test of their own intellectual rigor and creative impulses, a chance to demonstrate their knowledge and mastery at a task that refused to yield easily to their probings. While most critics were pushing the producers to resolve the Palmer murder before they lost all of their viewers, the computer net fans only wanted to see the enigmas expand, wanted to forestall closure in order to prolong their pleasure in playing with textual puzzles. One fan posted a joke that perfectly captured their pleasurable agony over the deferral of narrative resolution: "A robber walks into a bank and says to the teller, 'Give me all your money or I'll tell you who killed Laura Palmer.'" Another described the experience in more personal terms:

> I love what Lynch is doing to me as a viewer. It's a kind of a wonderful masochism. Part of me wishes the answer could never be revealed . . . I am so hoping that when what is really going on in *Twin Peaks* is fully and completely revealed, perhaps at the end of one more season after this, that it will be so shocking and unexpected that it will turn our faces white as a sheet and then the series will end.

While many critics complained that the series had become so complex as to be incomprehensible, the computer net fans feared that it was becoming too simple and predictable, selling out to the lowest common denominator, betraying the promise it offered as the ultimate problem set. Many of them gained a special prestige from their ability to understand this program that proved incoherent and unapproachable to many of their friends and family members. The fans wanted its complexities to proliferate so they could spend more hours trying to work through the problems it posed.

> It will be a sad night indeed if WKLP is neatly tied up and put to rest on November 10. If the WKLP mystery could continually be held out like a carrot on a stick, a tantalizing temptation, so close but yet so far away, for the entire season I think I would go insane.

> But it would be a good kind of insanity. An insanity I could curl up with and keep for my own and revel in as a companion to my weirdness. May WKLP remain an eternal mystery, I gotta have some fun you know.

Many hoped that the Laura Palmer mystery was simply the beginning of what promised to be an ever more complicated narrative, one that could expand outward in many different directions: "We have only just seen the tip of a very large iceberg. . . . I suspect we may be witnessing the creation of a masterpiece of filmmaking." No matter how incoherent the series might seem to average television viewers, the fans remained convinced that it all made sense on some higher level, not yet fully recognizable, that would be more profound than any one had previously suspected. Several expressed outrage at a *TV Guide* article that asked detective writers to offer solutions to the Palmer murder based on generic conventions. As one fan complained: "*Twin Peaks* isn't just some bit of TV fluff where various clues can just be thrown away or ignored at the whim of the writers. *Twin Peaks* is a major work that strives for a wholeness and continuity that is rarely seen on TV or film today."

What these fans admired about Lynch was that he remained true to what they perceived as his "vision": that he kept the problem complex despite pressure to simplify it for mass consumption, and that he did so at the expense not only of commercial success but in the face of increased critical attacks. One fan proclaimed with a kind of suicidal glee, "Quite clearly *Twin Peaks* is about to explode in a fiery ball of weirdness." What they feared most was that Lynch might be simply improvising the scripts as he went along, that there was no master plan within which all the bits of data could be reassembled; that there was no answer to the puzzle they were all brainstorming to solve:

> Am I the only one experiencing a crisis of faith? I waken in the middle of the night in a cold sweat imagining a world in which no one knows who killed Laura Palmer. I imagine Lynch and Frost just making it up as they go along, snickering about attempts to identify the killer when none exits. I see them ultimately making an arbitrary choice of culprits, a totally unsatisfying conclusion to the mystery. Are we being treated to an excruciatingly slow fuck destined to end in a whimper of an orgasm? Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining, there are worse things in life.

Here, as elsewhere, the intellectual challenges posed by Lynch's mystery assume an erotic charge within a cultural economy that, as Turkle suggests, links knowledge with potency and prizes cognitive values over sensual experience.

Others acknowledged that, given the intensity of their interest, the plot's resolution could only be a letdown:

> After so much build up, so much analysis, so much waiting and so many false clues, how can any answer totally satisfy the antic-

> ipation that has built up. If WKLP is firmly resolved on the 11/10 episode we will all be in for a huge let down. Even those who guessed right will only celebrate and gloat briefly and then be left empty inside.

Disappointment seemed inevitable. If Lynch did not betray them, then the medium of TV would. As one fan warned at the end of the first season: "The series is destined to lose most of this edge-of-reality feeling, if for no other reason than it has to keep going, speaking from a little box and protecting its market share. TV consumes all." Underlying their celebration of the program was a profound skepticism about American popular culture and a contempt for most of television.

> The primary qualification for a network programming position is the ability and willingness to ultimately force any show into a standard-form, three-lines-or-less mold, regardless of how well it really fits there. The sorts of things that *Twin Peaks* has—a non-trivial plot that requires multiple episodes to resolve; clues, events presented such that their significance might take a few minutes, a few hours, or even a few days to sink in, instead of being tube-fed to the audience point by agonizing point; characters that are complex and interesting and don't always segregate well into "good guys" and "bad guys"; high quality, non-mundane production values, the attitude that a single show can be quirky and bizarre and obscure and funny and dramatic and horrifying and satirical and exciting and thought-provoking and more, all at once . . . —these possibilities are utterly alien to the folks in "TV-land" (due perhaps to the belief that such things would be over the heads of the short attention spans, limited mental capacities, and defective comprehensional abilities that they assume their viewers possess).

For these viewers, what made the program so exceptional was the demands *Twin Peaks* made upon the spectator, the justification its narrative complexity offered for their own preferred activities. "What other show would motivate that level of criticism? Yes, it failed to meet your expectations, but would you have expected so much from *Three's Company*?" The fact that the program was more difficult to follow than most network series simply made their mastery over its material that much more impressive. One fan described what it took to become a fan of the series:

> I think you have to like things that challenge the mainstream; you have to like wandering down a twisted path without concern for the fact that there might be a quicker and more direct way. You have to be a bit of a movie/tv buff to appreciate some of the subtle,

> inside jokes. It also helps increase enjoyment being able to exchange dialogue and ideas with you folks here on the net.

If *Twin Peaks* was an exceptional television series, then they were an exceptional audience who possessed all the cultural competencies necessary to fully appreciate its greatness: "*TP* is not a passive work, like all too much of television and film; it is an active process of participation—almost like a sport. . . . All is never absolutely clear in *TP* and I for one hope that it remains that way. . . . What's the interest in a program (or in a world) where everything is known and certain?"[13]

Paradoxically, the more authority fans ascribed to the author, the more suspicious they became of that authority. So much was riding on their conception of Lynch's masterfulness that their anxiety intensified as the series unfolded. If Lynch as author justified their fannish activity, rationalized the time and attention devoted to his text, what would happen if the text was meaningless—or rather, if all that they found meaningful originated within the reception community rather than the author? For some, the revelation of a supernatural or science fiction dimension in the series made their previous efforts futile and destroyed the pleasure of the game; Cooper's dreams or his bottle-breaking could still be decipherable and as a result uninvolving. For others, however, these new twists were embraced as opening the text to even more baffling enigmas, creating a cosmic labyrinth where WKLP was simply the opening to a maze that led toward the Black and White Lodges. And, as Sherry Turkle suggests, a locked room poses an irresistible challenge.

The netters hoped that *Twin Peaks* would be "full of secrets": that it would provide fodder for their speculations for years to come. For these fans, the computer had become an integral part of their experience of the series and the many fan meta-texts that circulated on alt.tv.twinpeaks were as compelling as the aired episodes themselves. The computer provided a way of linking their own, admittedly obsessive, fixation upon *Twin Peaks*' enigmas to a broader social community of others who shared similar fascinations and frustrations. Participating in this virtual community became a way of increasing the intensity and density of those speculations, of building up other fans' explorations and expanding upon their theories. Both the mode and content of this television talk originated not only within the complexities of Lynch's text but also within the traditions and interests of computer culture. Lynch's *Twin Peaks* might have been able to exist in a world without VCRs and the net; ABC's preferred text certainly could. But the fans' could not. For that reason alt.tv.twinpeaks has survived the hoopla about the series, has survived for several years beyond its cancellation. The international circulation of the series helped sustain the group's activities, with American fans acting as expert guides and bemused witnesses to the viewers of the series in Europe, Australia, and Asia (via the international linkages the net provides). The group watched with renewed in-

terest the release of *Fire Walk with Me*, the Lynch feature film that gave new nuances to their previous accounts of Laura Palmer's life and death. The group's output has dwindled, down to thirty or forty postings a week, compared to the one hundred to two hundred entries a day at its peak, but it still reflects the ongoing efforts of the interpretive community to master a series that they feel uniquely realized the potentials of network television and fully exploited the potentials of computer communication.

Notes

1. For additional information on the computer nets and their roles in the reception of popular television, see Nancy K. Baym, "Computer-Mediated Soap Talk: Communication, Community, and Entertainment on the Net," presented at the Speech Communication Association, February, 1992, and Maureen Furness, "Sex with a Hard (Disk) On: Computer Bulletin Boards and Pornography" (forthcoming in *Wide Angle*).

2. For examples of science fiction stories which explore the potential ramifications of the computer net, see Card's *Ender's Game*, Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and Spinrad's *Little Heroes*.

3. The gender balance on the nets has gradually shifted, but the technological sphere continues to be a highly masculine space. Female participation is reported to be much higher on commercially accessible networks such as Prodigy and Compuserve.

4. As with other writing on media audiences, this essay is at least implicitly autobiographical. My discovery of *Twin Peaks* coincided with my introduction to the potentials of e-mail and computer net discussion groups. I fell for both of them hard. The experience of "lurking" on the nets (i.e. acting as a voyeur rather than an active contributor to the virtual community) shaped my responses to the series, became a central part of what *Twin Peaks* meant to me. In writing this essay, I therefore commemorate this moment as well as try to recapture and communicate something of what it meant to those of us who were part of that reception community. I therefore dedicate this essay to the men and women who shared with me the experience of alt.tv.twinpeaks. I also wish to thank the members of the Narrative Intelligence reading group at MIT, especially Marc Davis and Amy Bruckman, who have encouraged me to bring my insights as a humanist to the previously unfamiliar realm of contemporary American technoculture.

5. According to one news story posted on the net, *Twin Peaks* had become the most video-taped program on network television during the time of its airing, with about 830,000 recording it each week. Most netters claimed that they watched the episodes multiple times during the week between their initial airing and the appearance of a new episode.

6. The figure ";-)" is used in computer net postings to mark statements which are intended to be read as comical or ironical. What is not clear here is what portion of this posting the writer intended to be read ironically, the specific reference to Donna's theft of her sister's bike or the entire case that was being constructed around Donna's potential guilt in the murders.

7. See my *Textual Poachers*.

8. The space was tightly regulated, however, by the appearance of characters (such as James Hurley) who most closely resembled the protagonists of traditional soap operas often attacked and ridiculed by the computer net fans, for whom they had little interest.

9. For a fuller account of computer net discussions of *Star Trek*, see John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins, *The Science Fiction Audience*.

10. My use of the term "emotional realism" is derived from Ien Ang.

11. Once the murder was solved in the series, Jennifer Lynch's shocked response to her father's narrative makes more sense, given the incestuous relationship posited between Leland Palmer and his daughter in the series.

12. Although "Lynch" proved to be a fraud in this case, the fans' premise was not totally far-fetched. It is well established that some soap producers do tap into the nets to monitor audience response to their plot lines, while producer Joe Straczynski made extensive use of net communications to build audience interest in the airing of his science fiction television pilot, *Babylon 5*. At least one contributor to the net did seem to have personal contact with Mark Frost, who occasionally leaked additional information to the group.

13. A team of MIT students (Douglas D. Keller, David Kung, Rich Payne) surveyed participants on alt.tv.twinpeaks in March 1993 as part of their work for my American Television course. Asked about the qualities they associated with the "average Twin Peaks fan," the respondents offered descriptions which stressed their own exceptional qualities, particularly their intellectual abilities:

> "The average *Twin Peaks* fan is intelligent, odd, quirky, overanalytical and does not watch *Full House* or *Family Matters*."
>
> "*Twin Peaks* required a great deal of patience and intelligence to watch . . . and the average American has neither in abundance."
>
> "Fairly intellectual . . . also creative."
>
> "High IQ, patient attention span."
>
> "Exactly the same core audience for *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who* and *Masterpiece Theatre*.
>
> . . . The die-hard *TP* watchers are probably white, male, middle-class or higher, college-educated in the liberal arts, like jazz and Thai food."
>
> "A strange and wonderful person with hidden personality traits that make him or her relate to the weirdness in the show. Probably a fan of *Star Trek*, *Picket Fences*, *Northern Exposure*. Probably doesn't watch a lot of TV."
>
> "Most people found it took too much thought to stay involved in the show. For instance, my mother and sister didn't like the show. They are both average intelligence. To them *TP* was just an annoyingly confusing blur of images. But everyone I know who likes the show is above average intelligence."

Here, the program's exceptional qualities, the demands it made on the spectator's activity, allows them to assert their own intellectual superiority to the bulk of the viewing public, stressing traits that are particularly valued within the computer net subculture.

Twin Peaks, they explained, was "not a show for passive people." Many cited the fact that the program did not sustain strong ratings and was cancelled as evidence of their discriminating taste and departure from the cultural mainstreams: "Heaven forbid that Americans think about anything."