



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

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“A savage subversion of TV’s codes,” is the way *Rolling Stone* writer David Breskin depicted *Twin Peaks* (60), a characterization repeated by dozens of reviewers and echoed in the perceptions of multitudes of viewers. *Twin Peaks* was undeniably a phenomenon, a compelling, distressing, distracting inversion of prime time network television. Putting your finger on *Twin Peaks*’ pulse is not so easy, however. With its conspicuous borrowings from both populist televisual forms and cinematic “high” art traditions, bizarre generic and stylistic mix, strident referentiality (self and otherwise), calculatedly disruptive strategies, and attention to surface, *Twin Peaks* has been frequently described as postmodern. And it does seem likely that the show will take its place among an elite cadre of programs which have come to define television postmodernity: MTV, *Miami Vice*, *Pee Wee’s Playhouse*, *Moonlighting*, and *Cop Rock*.¹ At least part of *Twin Peaks*’ power derived from this “tradition”: its use of familiar conventions which are frequently distorted, often subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, in order to undercut expectation, leaving viewers to face a brave new world of postmodern television without conventional channels of response.

Such a process of de-familiarization is effected on many levels.² Critical attention seems to have focussed on the idiosyncratic visual style of co-creator/co-writer/occasional director David Lynch and the meandering, convoluted narrative. It is the music for *Twin Peaks* that interests me here, specifically how the score by Angelo Badalamenti provides a sounding board for the

show's visual and narrative design, mirroring on the auditory level *Twin Peaks'* strategies for disorientation and disruption. What made Badalamenti's music so interesting, however, is the way it functions both iconoclastically and conventionally, interrupting predictable patterns of response which resonate between the spectator and the screen while simultaneously creating new ones. What I intend to do here is trace the place of music in film and television, particularly in the positioning of the filmic and televisual spectator, in order to demonstrate how the music for *Twin Peaks* gains its power and resonance by activating powerful conventions embodied in these models and then both transgressing and reconstructing them.

From the continuous musical accompaniment of silent films to the ear-catching ditties composed to sell hamburgers on television commercials, music creates belief in the visual image and helps to sustain an illusion of reality. In fact, music played a large part in authenticating many forms of visual spectacle even before the birth of motion pictures: overtures and incidental music frequently accompanied stage melodramas of the nineteenth century and musical cues punctuated the overblown historical spectacles, often staged outdoors, popular at the turn of the century. Even earlier, of course, music could be heard in countless dramatic productions from Sophocles to Shakespeare. What music for television shares with all of these forms is its insistence on emotional expression, defining feelings and moods perhaps only dimly realized in the visual field, making them "larger than life" and thus irresistible.

Conventions for the function and placement of music which coalesced during the silent era became institutionalized in Hollywood within the first decade of sound production. Music performed a variety of functions in the classical film score, all designed to sustain the narrative and absorb the spectator into it. As a result music gravitated to moments of emotional climax, drawing upon musical associations in the culture to produce quick and predictable responses from the spectator. (There are literally hundreds of such associations based on form, rhythm, harmony, and instrumentation, among the most recognizable being tremolo strings for suspense and soaring violins for romantic passion.) In a process not unlike the Kuleshov effect, emotion stimulated in the spectator by music is transferred to the image which seems to produce it. Feeling thus resonates between the spectator and the image in such a way as to encourage the perception that the emotions depicted on the screen are not only natural, but ours.

Although it is tempting to think of *Twin Peaks* as a film (it was filmed, not taped, for instance; it used the unified subject positioning created by the integrated camera placement of classical film rather than the dispersed subject position created by the camera arrangement of television; it even premiered both its seasons as the ABC *Sunday Night Movie* and ended its run as an ABC *Monday Night Movie*), it is ultimately a television program with a material basis in the broadcast medium. Raymond Williams and others have described

the essence of television as its flow: its hold over us derives not from the attraction of individual programs, but from the simultaneous accessibility of seemingly infinite programs, an accumulation of segments, always interrupted, never concluded, and always available.³ "The fact of flow" (Williams 95) has proved the starting point for a theorization of the televisual apparatus and helps to account for the fundamental difference between the way filmic and televisual spectators are created and positioned.⁴ Flow is television's ultimate seduction, a vast repository whose reserves are infinite, an unending supply of text that offers the promise of plenitude. Television, with its constant interruption and fragmentation, never delivers on this promise, yet this does not stop us from desiring it. In fact, the contradiction at the heart of television, what Beverly Houston calls "this disturbingly available partial satisfaction" (184), only encourages us to consume it more and more.

Rick Altman has argued that coming to terms with sound's function is crucial to understanding the concept of flow on American television.⁵ Although we speak of television as being "watched," studies have shown that only about half of the sets in operation at any given point are actually being looked at. (Altman "Television Sound" 42).⁶ Many "viewers" experience television aurally, listening to the soundtrack as they do homework, prepare meals, complete tasks around the house, pursue hobbies, and so forth. Part of this phenomenon can be traced to the physical nature of sound itself: as waves it radiates multi-directionally. John Ellis points out, "Sound can be heard where the screen cannot be seen" (129). Thus it is sound that is responsible for keeping sets turned on, for negotiating between programming flow and what Altman calls "household flow" ("Television Sound" 43). It does so primarily by rendering all important narrative and informational cues through sound (so one can continue to keep the set on even though it's time to fix dinner) and by creating continuity in the soundtrack (the way commercials, for instance, are carefully introduced into the soundtrack between program bumpers and with specific and recognizable sound cues and the way networks program blocks of time around similar concerns). Viewers must be able to trust the soundtrack and depend on its faithful translation of important moments into sound. Broadcast television depends on a secure viewer who knows that s/he will be signalled by sound for anything important and will have time to return to the set to watch as well as listen to the highlights of any given program. Ultimately, as John Ellis argues, sound is the central reference point in television, not the image (128-29).⁷

Non-diegetic music in dramatic (narrative-based) television thus has heightened purpose in the televisual apparatus. Like the classical score for Hollywood film from which it is derived, the televisual score relies on the power of cultural association to render important narrative cues musically, gravitating towards moments of emotional climax for the most extended and fully developed music. But because of its added charge of keeping the viewer

engaged aurally and translating narrative information into sound, the televisual score tends to be more hyper-explicit than the classical film score, cueing much more frequently and using more obvious devices. Altman describes the dramatic television score as a "road map for the housepouse trying to follow the program from the kitchen and unable to rush out for just anything" (49).

In an early episode of *Twin Peaks* Ben Horne complains to his daughter Audrey that she is "disturbing the guests with this racket" and turns off the phonograph she is listening to. That "disturbance," like the score for *Twin Peaks* itself, is the result not only of its quirky idiom (finger snapping jazzy riffs produced on a synthesizer) but of its assault on the veracity of the soundtrack itself. The scene begins with Audrey Horne swaying dreamily. We are led to believe that she is responding to some inner voice that we are not privy to since the music on the soundtrack is a theme we've already heard dozens of times before as non-diegetic accompaniment and Audrey is given to enticingly sensual behavior with little or no provocation. Suddenly her father enters. A change of camera placement reveals a phonograph. We have been tricked: what we thought was non-diegetic background music is, in fact, diegetic and Audrey's odd and alluring display becomes justified by the music she hears. Ben Horne lifts the needle from the record and the music stops, mid-phrase. The refusal of the text to treat the soundtrack as sacrosanct undercuts the trust between the viewer and the program that is so crucial to keeping the set turned on. The undermining of trust in sound is decidedly playful here. Nevertheless, the scene works to draw attention to that aspect of the soundtrack that is least malleable in the televisual model: its credibility.

This scene, which I might define as primal in terms of the politics of sound and image relationships in *Twin Peaks*, is enacted in a variety of ways. Bobby and Shelley neck in the front seat of Major Briggs' car to a hybridized bebop that turns out to be coming from the radio; an anxious search for Jacques Renault's hideout in the woods is accompanied by music which turns out to be produced by a phonograph in the cabin. In each example, we are led to believe that the music is non-diegetic only to find out that it isn't. The jukebox at the Double R Diner holds a special place in the creation of *Twin Peaks'* musical discourse: its selections (who programmed this jukebox?) include jazzy, synthesized bebop, what one journalist calls "salacious cocktail-lounge swing" (Woodard 13) and twangy country western songs that play out without ever reaching lyrics. In one unforgettable episode Audrey dances to one of the show's signature tunes on the jukebox; inexplicably the volume gets noticeably louder and softer during her conversation with Donna. I say inexplicably here because changes in volume are not motivated by the presence of dialogue or justified by the narrative the way they would be in a more conventional score. In the series pilot Bobby plays a tune on the jukebox that is almost as loud outside in his car as it is inside in the Double R (and our attention is called to this discrepancy by rapid cuts between inside and outside); when Hank returns

to the Double R, a country and western selection on the jukebox mysteriously disappears for Shelley and Norma's entrance only to reappear a few moments later. Even straight-laced Cooper snaps his fingers to non-diegetic music. As viewers of *Twin Peaks*, we are repeatedly made aware not only of the line between the diegetic and the non-diegetic and between illusion and artifice; we are taught not to trust our ears in telling the difference.

Even music defined as clearly diegetic on *Twin Peaks* can be "deceptive" on this level. A scene depicting Leland Palmer's grief over his daughter's death is accompanied by a phonograph recording of "Pennsylvania 6-5000" (is there another fictional town on television with as many record players as this one?); his subsequent crack-up is displayed in a frenetic rendition of "Get Happy" (made famous by Judy Garland) which he himself sings. While these cues are undoubtedly founded in irony and perhaps even parody (more on this later), they nonetheless thwart the trusting televisual spectator. Who would suspect that "Pennsylvania 6-5000" actually accompanies a crucial scene in the murder/detection plot, one of the earliest indicators of the deeply disturbing psychosexual connection between Leland and his daughter? Likewise, would "Get Happy" signal the wayward viewer in the kitchen to come back and watch Leland's breakdown? (In a later episode Leland sings "Getting to Know You" from *The King and I*—is it just a coincidence that Leland Palmer is also the name of a Broadway actor famous for her roles in musicals?)

Other diegetic choices are equally disorienting. The program's foregrounded use of lip-sync further works to undercut the authority of sound on television by activating powerful conventions for the representation of performance established on MTV. As Margaret Morse has convincingly argued, MTV is not characterized by the synchronization of performance to product. In fact, just the opposite tends to be the case with deliberate undercutting of any sense of authenticity or diegetic realism. Thus, David Bowie performs, accompanied only by a bass guitar, while the soundtrack obviously contains many more instruments; Huey Lewis "sings" underwater; Madonna writhes on a bed as she performs a particularly complicated vocal passage. The effect of these performance strategies is to expose the constructed nature of the text, encouraging the viewer's recognition of the diegesis as mediated and produced.⁸

Something of these deconstructive strategies is at work on *Twin Peaks*: Julie Cruise performing at the Roadhouse ("Falling," "The Nightingale," "The World Spins," and "Rockin' Back Inside My Heart"); James "singing" "Just You and I" in the Hayward living room with Donna and Madeleine as back-up; Jimmy Scott performing "Sycamore Trees" at the Black Lodge in the series' finale. In a variety of ways none of these examples are convincing as actual productions of musical performance: the lip-synching is imprecise; the instrumentation we see does not match the instrumentation we hear; sound is obviously manipulated and even distorted. The "Just You and I" number

(uncredited in the episode's end titles) is perhaps the most assaultive of these examples. James, Donna, and Madeleine are ostensibly practicing this number ("That was really good; let's try it again") for some purpose that is never revealed. The electronic manipulation of James's voice and the "impossible" accompaniment (although a variety of instruments, including percussion and bass, can be heard, the only instrument narratively justifiable is the guitar James plays) draw attention to the artifice of the televisual apparatus and foreground the role of sound in this manipulation. Like other elements of *Twin Peaks*' soundtrack, these manipulations function to undermine sound as transcendent and authentic.

Twin Peaks, however, challenges not only the authority of the televisual model for the use of sound; it also confronts deep-seated notions about music's function and the relationship of sound and image institutionalized in classical scoring practices. In a dream that comes to FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper, a midget announces, "There's always music in the air," a revelation that Cooper regards as a clue to unravelling the mystery of Laura Palmer's death. In fact, *Twin Peaks* is filled with music, much of it recurrent. Like the classical film, *Twin Peaks* recycles a limited number of distinctive themes, or leit-motifs, but unlike the classical film, which uses these themes to foster identification between the spectator and specific characters, places, or even abstract ideas, *Twin Peaks* uses its leit-motifs to break conventional identificatory affect by setting up expectation which it then confounds. The score does this by exploiting highly recognizable musical cues which initially delineate specific references (Audrey, love, Laura), then breaking this identificatory function by severing these one-to-one correspondences once they are established. A motif clearly associated with Audrey (it is entitled "Audrey's Dance" on the soundtrack album and accompanies her initial appearances in the program) becomes gradually separated from her (and jazzier) and, by the end of the pilot episode, seems to be associated with Mike and Bobby and, more tentatively, with Donna as well. It is the same music that accompanies many of Dale Cooper's appearances, including his first. Similarly, the motif used for Laura's death (the recovery of her body, the notification of her father, morgue scenes) gradually becomes used as a love theme for Donna and James and later for James and Madeleine. It also accompanies Bobby's breakdown in a family counseling session with Dr. Jacoby and Audrey's attempted seduction of Cooper. One might be able to justify the choice of musical themes in these situations, but in order to do so it is necessary to make the connections between specific pieces of music and characters, places, or ideas so generalized and tenuous as to render them virtually meaningless as leit-motifs per se. There are literally dozens of recurring motifs in *Twin Peaks* which work in fascinating and disturbing ways.⁹ I would like to look at one at some length, what Lynch and Badalamenti have entitled "Laura's Theme" (yet another allusion to the Prem-

inger film via the famous David Raksin melody composed to accompany it?), in order to demonstrate the ways in which the music for *Twin Peaks* works.

The first time we hear Laura's theme it is as her body is unwrapped from the plastic which encases her. In fact, it begins just as she is rolled over and her identity is revealed. It is (or should be) a moment of some horror, and visual and auditory signals preceding this point as well as narrative trajectory create a distinct sense of impending disaster: the discovery of a body washed up on the beach; unnervingly tight close-ups; disorienting mirror shots; a distracting and initially unidentifiable sound which turns out to be a "lonesome" foghorn; and an edgy musical motif that gives voice to this tension. Here a minor mode and a motif based on one of the most unresolved intervals in tonal music (specifically the minor second that opens and closes the cue) produces a musical dis-ease that both plays off and reinforces visual and aural signifiers for anxiety.



As Laura's body is turned over and her identity is revealed, however, we don't get the expected musical pay-off and none of the conventional devices for an important and unsettling narrative revelation are invoked: stingers (chords played at increased volume and with a deliberate attack), dissonance, or tremolo strings. Instead we get a syrupy, lushly orchestrated melody exploiting standard techniques for romance: upward leaps in the melodic pattern, chordal harmony, and the quintessentially romantic arrangement of the nineteenth-century piano concerto—solo piano with orchestra (here synthesized).



It is as if this music is yanked out of context, but comes trailing its familiar connotations, "appropriate" or not, to the new setting. We are supposed to be horrified and shocked, but the music encodes a different emotional response. (Compare this cue to the much more conventional one accompanying Ben Horne's "death" in the last episode where two highly dissonant stingers indicate his demise and signal our response.)¹⁰ It is also interesting to note how the first, anxious motif and the second, romantic one are frequently linked

in *Twin Peaks*, not only in the program itself, but on the soundtrack album and the published sheet music, reinforcing this kind of ambivalent response.

One of the functions of music in narrative film and especially in television is what Roland Barthes has called *ancrage* (37-41): anchoring the image in meaning, authorizing, indeed helping to create, a dominant reading of the visual image which is confluent with narrative objectives. Music performs this function by encoding specific emotions through musical associations already operant in the culture. Music at these moments functions not unlike the laugh track in television situation comedy, initiating and sustaining the "appropriate" response from the viewer and thus anchoring the image in a specific reading.¹¹ *Twin Peaks*, however, consistently short circuits the flow of affect between the spectator and the screen by sending mixed messages for emotional reaction (in the first occurrence of Laura's theme do we react with the pathos the music encodes or the horror the image track encodes? do we respond to love or death?), dislocating us from conventional and familiar modes of response and leaving the image unanchored in the narrative trajectory.

I would like to come back to the notion that music for *Twin Peaks* functions ironically or parodically at such moments to effect a kind of distanciation. In deliberately undercutting the dominant reading of the image track, music draws attention to the artifice of the text, its inability to capture the depth and complexity of human emotion, even to simulate reality. In fact, given the dislocation of musical affect and the hyper-stylized, excessive quality of the score, even for television (what one publication described as a "soap opera score on Percodan" [Knickelbine 120]), it's hard not to hear the music as ironic. Certainly the first few times we hear one of these wrenching musical cues (no wonder viewers were aware of the music), we may be confused about how to respond or we may find it humorous. In either case, our attention is drawn out of the diegesis and towards the apparatus that produced it. Watching Leland hear the tragic news of his daughter's death, for instance, to the accompaniment of the "over the top" arrangement of Laura's theme is a very different experience from watching a classical narrative in which image and music track are complicit in terms of emotional coding, in order to control and heighten a single, unambivalent reading.

The more such wrenching juxtapositions are put before us, however, the less effect they have to disorient us. Since Leland's reaction to the news of Laura's murder is only the second time in the series that we have heard the theme, it still retains the power to distance us because of its dislocating context. But the more familiar music becomes, the less power it has to jar us. (Perhaps this is why there is such a wealth of motivic material on *Twin Peaks*, since its disruptive power is so easily depleted.) The initial ironic or parodic effect of a specific musical cue "wears off," so to speak, and the emotion that hovered beneath the surface of irony, that floated in the discourse, gets reattached both

to us as spectators and to the screen and functions not unlike the relay of emotion in a classical text.

Take, for instance, the sequence in which Audrey attempts to seduce Agent Cooper by waiting for him in his bed at the Great Northern. The narrative has established Audrey as something of a siren and there has been a certain amount of sexual chemistry between her and Cooper. The image track reinforces a reading of the sequence as sexy and playful, yet another in a series of skirmishes between them, with Audrey tantalizing and Cooper resisting (provocative medium shots and close-ups of Audrey in the bed, shot/reverse shots of Audrey and Cooper). Yet the music that accompanies the sequence is Laura's theme. The recurrence of the theme by this point in the series is sufficiently familiar to have lost its ironic, parodic dimension, and a scene that began as little more than an erotically charged encounter between Audrey and Cooper becomes something else indeed. Laura's theme, with its odd mix of love and tragedy, activates unexpected responses to the scene, re-interpreting the image track, so to speak, against the grain. Laura's theme beckons us to take this scene as something other than camp, to interpret Audrey's behavior as somehow tragic or pathetic and Cooper's behavior as gallant and noble. Like the classical film score, the score for *Twin Peaks* exploits music's power as a catalyst of emotional response to anchor the image's meaning, but unlike the classical score, it anchors that meaning in unpredictable ways.

There are so many other aspects of *Twin Peaks*' music that I haven't touched upon here: the unresolved quality of many of the cues (like the ending of the Main Title or the prelude to Laura's theme) which form a kind of musical loop, repeating the same motif over and over without coming to rest either melodically or harmonically; the interesting fusion of synthesized sound and acoustic instruments with an entire orchestra on synth and say, for example, an acoustic piano or saxophone; the odd practices of mixing where music drowns out dialogue and distracts from narrative events; the loopy blend of musical genres throughout the series and within individual selections (bebop, swing, jazz, and country and western, sometimes all in one cue); Badalamenti's habit of manipulating the music track by slowing it down once it is recorded. I began this article by describing *Twin Peaks* as a postmodern phenomenon and I'm ready at this point to apply that characterization to the score itself. Frederic Jameson has written that postmodernism is distinguished by "a whole new type of emotional ground tone" ("Postmodernism" 58), and it is in this way that I think the music contributes most to what is postmodern about *Twin Peaks*. It activates conventional patterns of response not only to break them, but in order to reinscribe them, to use them to pull us into what seems to be pure surface, to bind us into what appears to be artifice. When Audrey dances to the jukebox in the Double R, she describes the music as "too dreamy." Music, it seems to me, is "too" everything in *Twin Peaks*: too insistent, too

excessive, too loud, too disorienting, too familiar, and ultimately, too irresistible.

Notes

1. There is a growing body of work on postmodernity and television. See, for instance, the special *Screen* issue on postmodernism (28.2 [Spring 1987]), especially the articles by James Collins ("Postmodernism and Cultural Practice"), Lawrence Grossberg ("The In-Difference of Television"), Barbara Creed ("From Here to Modernity—Feminism and Postmodernism"), and John Roberts ("Postmodernism and the Visual Arts"). See also the chapter on "Postmodern TV, Video and Film" in Steven Connor's *Postmodernist Culture*.

2. I am using the term de-familiarization here as it is defined and developed by the Russian formalists.

3. For a discussion of flow in television, see in particular Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* and John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*.

4. Recent work in television theory has traced the consequences of this difference in both ideological and psychoanalytic terms. See especially E. Ann Kaplan, *Regarding Television* and Robert C. Allen, *Channels of Discourse*.

5. It is important to note that Altman's work refers to the operation of American television. Other national televisions may and do operate differently. Pioneering work on television sound has also been done by John Ellis. See "Broadcast TV as Sound and Image" in *Visible Fictions* (127–44).

6. Terms such as "viewer" and "spectator" obviously become problematic in this respect, but since they are the current language of critical discourse, I do use them here.

7. The now widespread use of remote control devices in television viewing enables viewers to temporarily suspend the soundtrack with the mute button. The theoretical implications of this, it seems to me, do not radically alter the function of sound in the televisual mode of spectatorship. However, its implications for the relationship between sound and image as well as the relationship between sound and spectator provide interesting avenues for further inquiry.

8. Morse goes on to argue that such disruptive strategies open up a place for the subjectivity of the viewer, encouraging the sense that the viewer controls the production of the text along with the performer. For Morse, rock videos are ultimately empowering since they enable viewers "to participate as well in the acting of creating by synching along, inserting themselves as subjects in a prerecorded world, inverting in play the act of reception into one of production" (302).

9. I would like to draw attention here to the driving force of economics in the composition of televisual scores and the ways in which economic concerns promote and heighten some of the postmodern effects of Badalamenti's work on *Twin Peaks*. It is customary in American episodic television for the composer to create a full-length, original score for only the first few episodes or even the first episode of any given show in a particular season. For economic reasons, the composer, or more often an arranger or arrangers, will create scores for the remainder of the season's episodes from this "library," perhaps writing a few new sequences but relying mainly on germ material

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from the original score. Thus, musical scores on television frequently get recycled in interesting and potentially disruptive ways.

On *Twin Peaks* the process was a little different because the budget for the production of each episode was higher than that of the standard television program. The individual episode's director and usually the music editor would choose music for the program from the library, but would turn to Badalamenti for additional, "new" music. Ironically, however, although *Twin Peaks* had both a bigger budget and a single composer who continued to contribute new material throughout the season, the music was scored to maximize the disruptive potential inherent in televisual scoring rather than to minimize it.

It is just this aspect of incongruity and disruption that is missing from the feature-length *Twin Peaks* film, *Fire Walk With Me*. There, Badalamenti constructs the score in a different way from the series, relying more consistently on traditional music devices for the creation of emotion and mood and less on the jarring effects of composing against the grain. With a few notable exceptions (such as the scene between Laura and her father in which she realizes that he is the man who has been raping her), *Fire Walk with Me* has a much more conventional score.

10. It is in *Blue Velvet* that Lynch and Badalamenti seem to have the most fun with stingers, using them in seemingly innocuous shots to create expectation which is left unfulfilled and to create extra-diegetic contact for the wary listener. Stingers, for instance, punctuate marginal shots of the word "Lincoln" on a street sign and later "Booth" on a mail box. (I would like to thank here my summer 1991 seminar in music and film at USC for informative and thought-provoking discussion on *Twin Peaks*. Geoff Chadwick pointed out to me the witty use of stingers in *Blue Velvet*.)

11. Samuel Chell compares the laugh track of situation comedy to the classical film score in "Music and Emotion in the Classic Hollywood Film."