# The Owls Are Not What They Seem: Eccentricity and Masculinity in *Twin Peaks*

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**Abstract:**

This essay asks the question: what is the function of eccentrics in American culture and attaches this question to recent research in "freaks." It argues that eccentrics occupy an ambiguous place in the American imagination, providing both incentives for a broadening of normative horizons and models of the human to be distrusted and feared. Using David Lynch's television series *Twin Peaks* as its example, the essay shows how eccentric characters are used to push the boundaries of acceptable masculinities.

1       In the first regular episode[1] of *Twin Peaks*, the camera takes us to the hotel room of FBI special Agent Dale Cooper and slowly reveals him to be hanging upside down from an exposed water pipe, practicing some sort of yoga. Cooper had been introduced as the main character of the series in the pilot episode, which first aired on ABC on April 8, 1990. In the pilot, Cooper was shown to be an offbeat, non-traditional detective with more than a few personal quirks that set him off as unusual. This first re-introduction to the series' protagonist confirms this: Cooper is an eccentric, and as an eccentric, he turns things upside down and contemplates the world from a reverse angle.

2       And so we are immersed in the world of *Twin Peaks*, where an eccentric character is our guide to this strange, new place hidden in Washington State. Eccentricity is, paradoxically, at the centre of *Twin Peaks*, where the lines between good and evil, real and unreal, logic and intuition are confused and blurred. Eccentric characters are deployed in order to challenge conventions and to challenge those who do not consider themselves eccentric to question the lines of demarcation that separate "normal" from "odd," acceptable from unacceptable, conformist from nonconformist. One thing the deployment of eccentricity in *Twin Peaks* achieves is opening up alternative spaces and this works for gender roles as well. In particular, I will argue that the valorization of eccentric characters in the series opened up space for alternative conceptions of masculinity. As many of the main male protagonists in the series exhibit eccentric behaviours, these behaviours often challenge normative masculine gender roles and allow for a freer conception of what masculinity entails.

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[1] Various numbering schemes have been used to refer to the 30 installments that comprise the two seasons of Twin Peaks. Hardcore fans on websites today devote forum threads to the various merits and shortcomings of the differing schemes. For the sake of this paper, I will refer to the pilot episode as the pilot, and then the first regular episode that follows as episode 1, then 2, etc. up to the finale, episode 29, as this is how it is labeled in currently available DVD editions of the series.

3       For two seasons, *Twin Peaks* aired on ABC and, one may assume also through its creation and use of eccentric characters, developed a loyal following. The series created by film director David Lynch and TV veteran Mark Frost was initially an enormous hit, with the pilot episode reaching nearly 20 million households (Rosenbaum 26). The series continued to receive high Nielsen ratings and was nominated for eight Emmys, won three Golden Globes including best TV series and won the Television Critics Association award for program of the year. Then, according to many critics, viewers, and, ultimately, executives at ABC (see, for instance, Lavery 1-3), it became a confusing mishmash of needlessly complex plots and unconnected strangeness. As the series wore on, the viewership declined to the point where the series was finally suspended, resuscitated for a few episodes and then finally cancelled, with the last show airing on June 10, 1991.

4       But even now, almost two decades later, there are dozens of websites dedicated to the show. Many Internet forums are abuzz daily with active users who debate tirelessly the various intricacies of the plot, the strange but lovable characters, the genius of the show's creators and all manner of esoteric details of the series. When innovative, successful television series like *The X-Files* or *Lost* appear today, critics are quick to compare them to *Twin Peaks*. For such a short-lived series, the show has remarkable staying power. A large part of this is due to its depiction and use of eccentric characters.

5       Eccentrics here illuminate some of the fundamental paradoxes of American culture: the tension between individuality and community and between conformity and nonconformity. *Twin Peaks* skillfully employed eccentrics and ideas of eccentricity to confound viewers' expectations and force the audience to question conventions: those of genre as well as those of gender. Through the appealing qualities of eccentric characters, these challenges to conventions were humanized and viewers' emotional attachment to them was thereby increased. Eccentric characters are lovable, confounding, interesting, confusing, enlightening and frustrating, and *Twin Peaks* offered a picture of them that encompassed their many traits and investigated how they operate in culture.

6       Eccentricity is under-studied within American culture. I am aware of only two academic studies that deal directly with eccentrics, one by a psychologist and one by an anthropologist. Academic work from a related field – the study of "freaks" – can be instructive here. Though different from eccentrics in important ways, notably in the fact that people designated as "freaks" have physical attributes that set them apart and mark them as "other" while those considered eccentric engage in behaviour that departs from more widely accepted conventions and attitudes, both freaks and eccentrics exhibit and embody ideas of

difference. They both function, for those who are not considered freaks or eccentrics, as examples of the many possibilities of human existence and provide a measure against which "normal" can be defined and questioned.

7        Eccentrics ride the boundary line between the social construction of the mad and the non-mad, as Foucault would have seen the issue. David Weeks, a psychologist, has performed the only clinical study of eccentrics that I am aware of. He identified eccentricity as existing on a continuum. One end of the continuum would be absolute conformity and the other end would be "utterly bizarre nonconformity" (11). Eccentricity lies on this continuum as a measure of some deviation from conformity. Perhaps a more useful measure for eccentricity is seeing it as lying on a continuum of the rejection or acceptance of conventions. Conformity implies an active acceptance of norms as a means of fitting in, while a mere acceptance of conventions need not imply a commitment to the norms that underlie them, but may remain wary of these norms.

8        In this, the matter of choice is an important determinant: "Eccentricity is taken on at least partly by free choice, and is something positive and pleasurable to the individual" (Weeks 14). This is in contrast to neuroses, which according to Weeks are unwanted and are not a matter of choice. However, as the anthropologist George Marcus argues, eccentricity, though a matter of choice, is not a particularly self-conscious identity. He argues that eccentricity is rarely a term of self-reference, rather it is a social construction imposed upon certain individuals to address a range of identities and behaviours (Marcus 48).

9        What distinguishes it from other categories of deviance is that it is not medicalized or criminalized and carries both negative and positive connotations. As such, eccentricity is seen as something different from neuroses or insanity, or rather, it exists in an uneasy relationship to both insanity and sanity, synonymous with neither, yet not entirely separate from either. Free will and self-identification, however, are very much a component of the eccentric personality. In fact, Weeks goes so far as to claim that eccentrics "have a higher general level of mental health than the population at large" as eccentrics often adopt their strange thinking patterns deliberately and their "difference" is functional rather than dysfunctional (Weeks 16 and 146).

10      Mental illness itself, I believe, is a cultural construct, a diagnosis that is made not only because of biological symptoms but also due to cultural factors and value judgments. In the various histories of psychology and insanity written in the past several decades, a basic schism is evident. One school, comprising for example Thomas Szasz and Michel Foucault, see mental illness as a cultural construct. Szasz maintains that mental illness is not a disease,

rather it is a myth manufactured "by psychiatrists for reasons of professional advancement and endorsed by society because it sanctions easy solutions for problem people" (Porter 2; see also Szasz 1970 and 1974). Foucault argues that a change in attitude, indeed the very creation of separate categories of madness and non-madness, reason and non-reason, arises at the end of the 18th century in Europe. From that time onward, communities only interact with insanity through medical professionals: it is seen as a disease, something to be treated and ideally cured, and, importantly, removed from society until such time when the "insane" will have been readjusted to "normality." In this model, one must conform or risk being labeled mad. In this view, madness, and I believe we could add eccentricity, is a social construction rather than something inherent in one's being (Foucault ix-x).

11      The other school of thought argues that insanity is indeed a biological reality and that "the stability of psychiatric symptoms over time shows that mental illness is no mere label or scapegoating device, but a real psychopathological entity, with an authentic organic base" (Porter 4; see also Roth and Kroll). While there is some truth to the idea that there is a biological basis for the symptoms of mental illness, this perspective ignores the formative role that social forces play in the valuation and stigmatization of those symptoms as a mental illness; in fact, these social forces – working along definitional axes like race, class, gender, and sexuality as well as the power relations embedded therein – have an undeniable role in the very definitions put forward for mental illness. These definitions change over time, even if certain physiological symptoms of mental illness remain constant.

12      The anthropologist Marcus has studied how class and socioeconomic status affect our understanding of eccentrics. He studied the occurrence of eccentricity among very wealthy, dynastic families in the U.S.A. in the 20th century. He found that at certain points in history, as discourses of distinction were undergoing change, many wealthy families turned to eccentric behaviours, valorizing eccentricity as a means of distinguishing themselves in ways that their wealth, power, and celebrity formerly, but, for varying reasons, no longer did. It was a means of creating specific family characteristics, for "while ambivalently discussed and focused upon, eccentricity also serves to mark distinction and honor, when there are few other resources with which to do so" (Marcus 46). As the traditional authority and power accorded to dynastic wealthy families began to wane while industrialization and the economy expanded in postcolonial times, the discourse of what made "character" began to change. Marcus sees a shift from character as being something distinct, elusive and limited to aristocratic families, to character becoming more related to reliability and thus more accessible to a wider range of middle class people. At this time, then, Marcus charts a shift in the attitudes of aristocratic

families towards the character traits they valued. Eccentricity, since it is a form of distinction, became valorized and celebrated in these families as a mode of separating the aristocratic families from others. Since other new families were coming into money, economic opportunity and power, and as the power base of traditionally aristocratic families eroded, this new form of distinction, an eccentricity which in wealthy cases is often marked by social withdrawal and forms of great excess, became a means of retaining the feel of aristocratic privilege (45-46).

13      Marcus also notes, particularly in England, how when lower and working class people adopted eccentric attitudes, they were often disdained for appearing to be putting on airs, claiming this aristocratic privilege for themselves by imitating the behaviour of excess. What is overlooked is that these working class eccentrics may also have been using the behaviour of excess as a means of acting out against a society that denied them many basic opportunities. By flouting norms of behaviour and modesty, eccentric behaviour can here be seen as an act of resistance, a statement against the denial of opportunity by individuals flagrantly seizing new, unconventional opportunities as their own. However, this adoption on the behavioural patterns of eccentricity, as Marcus notes, could (and was often) interpreted not only as a pretension to aristocracy, but also simply as an unacceptable claim to singularity: why should this one individual be allowed to disregard the rules and norms of society that the rest of us feel compelled to obey?

14      This influence of ideas of class on the definitions of eccentricity strengthens the idea that eccentricity is a very specifically socially constructed category. The world of *Twin Peaks* – its text, creators and intended audience – is most assuredly a white, middle class one, where perceptions of eccentricity are ambivalent and where eccentricity has a troubled history because of its associations with aristocratic privilege and excess. It has also been established that race and class complicate notions of gender, so that *Twin Peaks* is a fictional universe which is American, white and middle class not only in relation to eccentricity but also in relation to masculinity.

15      The cultural work, then, that eccentrics perform is a mixed business. In order to get a better idea of how difference and identity are created and used in culture by groups of people considered strange or excessive, it is helpful to turn to a significantly wider body of academic work focused on "freaks." "Freak" is a contested and not universally accepted term applied to people with certain birth anomalies such as extreme tallness or shortness, conjoined twins, missing limbs, etc. Certain birth anomalies evoke what Leslie Fiedler has called "images of the secret self." He describes watching a freak show as "the sense of watching, unwilling but

enthralled, the exposed obscenity of the self or other" (18). He finds this awe to be pornographic in nature. What we see in a freak show, he argues, is not so much an utterly alien abomination of humanity, but rather a part of humanity writ large; a possibility of humanity that is present in all of us, yet hideously exposed or ridiculed in these "freaks" as they are being exhibited to a "normal" audience. Key to this understanding, both of the fascination and of the disgust, is that it could happen to any one of us. Thus, freaks have indeed been displayed as grotesque spectacles but have also figured in more humane treatments where the audience is asked to empathize with the freak's humanity (one notable example of this is David Lynch's own Oscar-nominated feature film *Elephant Man* [1980]).

16      If we follow this logic of the "freak," displays of eccentricity work in a similar manner: as something everyone may partake of to some extent, in deed or in fantasy, while only the truly eccentric adopt the character of excess and obsession as a primary means of identification. They ostentatiously violate the conventions of acceptable behaviour (*which* behavior exactly will have to be specified for each eccentric) that bind together the rest of society, but society itself is in a constant battle with these same conventions. Rules and norms are seen as necessary to maintain a sense of orderliness and minimize deviance. However, without any disregard for convention society would stagnate: creativity is needed for expansion and progress. Thus, as with freaks, there is an inherently ambivalent attitude toward eccentrics: they are both necessary and excessive, deviant or disturbing. Freaks are necessary in that they help "normal" folks define themselves as normal by establishing an opposite, a distance between "freak" and "normal." In this way, they are reassuring to the non-grotesque. The same holds true for eccentrics: they offer a matrix against which others can measure their behaviour and establish their normalness. At the same time, they are necessary to help expand and challenge the very definitions and limits of normalness which appear to constrain them, as the "normal" is itself a concept that is in constant flux.

17      Freaks and eccentrics, indeed, raise questions about boundaries. Fiedler writes, "Only the true Freak challenges the boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth" (24). For challenging these boundaries, freaks are both admired and despised. They are admired because they embody possibility and difference, and this possibility and difference is within the reach of everyone. Freaks put on display "the freakishness of the normal, the precariousness and absurdity of being, however we define it, fully human" (347). And yet, for these same reasons, freaks are despised, as eccentrics can be. For many there is little comfort in disrupting notions of normality, of expanding the

possibility of freakishness to all. Many define their very being in terms of distance from freakishness, nonconformity, and excess. There is comfort in the normal. Eccentrics and freaks alike ride this boundary between individuality and community that is such a central paradox in American culture as it valorizes individuality, freedom of opportunity and expression, and the individual pursuit of happiness while at the same time extolling the virtues and norms of the home and a coherent community. The "common good" (and the sacrifices to be made in its name) are in turn sharply contrasted with a capitalist ideology which would subordinate everything to the individual consumer's will and desire. As a stark representation of individuality, eccentrics force non-eccentrics to confront this paradox between individual needs and the common good. Through their defiance of social norms, they also open up space for others to conceive of alternative approaches to living their lives.

18      Since *Twin Peaks* uses eccentricity in generally positive terms, I argue that it is using eccentricity to question conservative conventions of the late 1980s and to valorize the need for difference in a time when the ascension of conservative values denigrated difference as deviant and a possible moral failing. Discussing the shift from the more liberal ideology of the 1960s to the rise of the modern conservative movement in the 1980s,[2] the historian and religious scholar Philip Jenkins writes, "At home and abroad, the post-1975 public was less willing to see social dangers in terms of historical forces, instead preferring a strict moralistic division: problems were a matter of evil, not dysfunction. Ideas of relativism and complex causation were replaced by simpler and more sinister visions of the enemies facing Americans and their nation" (11). The historian Robert M. Collins has noted that at the same time as the American political landscape was shifting to the right with the election of Reagan in 1980 and the formation of the Moral Majority in 1979, many of the country's mainstream cultural institutions remained attached to the more radical ideologies of the 1960s (173). The tensions between the challenging 1960s worldview and the 1980s conservative framework bubbled over into what has been termed the culture war, a battle still very much raging in 1990 when *Twin Peaks* first aired. The critical and popular success of the series suggests that its refusal to capitulate to Manichean notions of good and evil struck a chord with large numbers of people. *Twin Peaks*' uses of eccentricity and eccentric characters served to question boundaries that were very much in contention elsewhere in American culture at the time. The series featured eccentricity as a way of showing that the boundaries between good and evil were not so clearly defined and that there could be value in rejecting conventions in favour of exploring the enormous possibilities of a stubbornly held belief in individuality.

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[2] Jenkins actually argues that the rise to political triumph of conservatism that was embodied by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 can be more accurately dated to 1975 and the post-Watergate atmosphere.

19      The culture war that was widening as *Twin Peaks* hit the small screen was also very much concerned with the opening up of gender roles that occurred in the 1960s, and as a result, there was a concerted effort in one corner to cement traditional gender roles in a backlash against the women's liberation movement. And these openings were very real: the marriage rate went down 25 percent between 1960 and 1980 and by 1985 the median age of marriage had jumped to 25.5 years of age. Abortion, sterilization and the increased availability of birth control led to a decrease in the birth rate while the number of divorced men and women skyrocketed 200 percent from 1960 to 1980. The traditional two-parent family accounted for only 60 percent of all families by 1980 as unmarried cohabitation and female-headed households were on the rise (D'Emilio and Freedman 330-332). All this is to say that the traditional nuclear family was becoming increasingly less the (statistical) norm, and in its place alternatives to traditional masculine roles as father and breadwinner were opened up.

20      The 1960s and the 1970s had seen a very real challenge to traditional ideas of masculinity. This challenge would not go unmet, as historians of sexuality John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman point out in their landmark work *Intimate Matters*: "Reacting to the gains of both feminism and gay liberation, and distressed by the visibility of the erotic in American culture, sexual conservatives sought the restoration of 'traditional values'" (345). Cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich adds that not only did the backlash come in response to women's and gay liberation; it was also a response to the "male revolt." Since men had been allowed to imagine a life outside of the traditional breadwinner role, they now needed to be reined in. As she puts it, "Men are the problem and wives, in the old-fashioned sense, are the solution." Only through containing the male revolt by consigning men back to their roles as jobholders and heads of families could a sense of order be restored to American society. Men were wild and needed to be tamed; only jobs and marriage could successfully accomplish this (165-7). Though throughout this period there was a significant tension between traditional ideas of masculinity and newer, "softer" ones, the rise of the New Right and its critique of the by now very apparent restructuring of the American family brought these tensions to the surface throughout the cultural realm. Susan Jeffords writes about the "remasculinization" of America in the 1980s. By "remasculinization" she meant "a regeneration of the concepts, constructions, and definitions of masculinity in American culture and a restabilization of the gender system within and for which it was formulated" (51).

21      *Twin Peaks* would step into this contested world of masculinity, and through its use of eccentric characters and their role as boundary questioners would argue against these forces

of "remasculinization." But before fully diving into that portion of my argument, a little background on the television series and one of its main creative forces, David Lynch (a personality who himself was seen as something of an eccentric), may prove useful.

22      David Lynch and TV may have seemed a strange pairing from the onset. Lynch was born in Missoula, Montana, and grew up in Washington and Idaho before moving to Virginia for high school. He went to art school and eventually got into filmmaking, directing several animated short films. In 1977, after five years of work, he released his first feature film, *Eraserhead*, a dark, surreal meditation on fatherhood set in a depressing, menacing industrial city. Lynch first achieved mainstream success with *The Elephant Man* (1980), a sympathetic depiction of a "freak," for which he received the first of three eventual nominations for an Academy Award for directing. On the heels of *The Elephant Man*, Lynch got his first opportunity to direct a big-budget, more mainstream project, *Dune*. It was a failure, critically and at the box office. Lynch then returned to smaller features and directed what has been remembered by many critics as one of the best films of the 1980s, *Blue Velvet* (1986). Set in a small town in Washington State, the film follows a young man who after finding an ear in a yard stumbles into the dark underworld of a town that seems wholesome and idyllic on its surface. Lynch was nominated for another Academy Award, but his directing talent seemed to be best suited for smaller, offbeat independent features rather than the larger Hollywood films. There was little indication at this point that his work could appeal to a mass audience on network television.

23      In his career, David Lynch repeatedly stylized himself as a committed eccentric, as for example in one interview in 1991 for the *Playboy* magazine (nothing less!), in which he lets his interview partner participate in his own perception (and hence creation) of himself as "odd." His father, we learn, was a scientist for the US Forest Service and Lynch was often embarrassed because he felt his parents were too normal. In counterdistinction to these humble and uneccentric beginnings, we are told, Lynch's many quirks were apparent early on and continued into adulthood, leaving him at the time of the interview as a person who he says drinks 20 cups of coffee per day, ate at Bob's Big Boy everyday for 7 years, collected chunks of wood that he used to build a series of elaborate additions to his garage, prepared a book of his own photographs solely of dental equipment and "uses words such as neat and golly and cool and peachy keen" (Pond). As Steve Pond, his interview partner, concludes: "It didn't seem possible that Lynch's reach would be so broad back when he was making *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet*; his idyllic daydreams and horrific nightmares seemed poor bets to reverberate beyond the art-house crowd, much less make it in prime time"

(Pond). However, pairing up with Mark Frost, who had written 17 episodes for the successful series *Hill Street Blues* from 1982-1984, Lynch came up with a pilot for a TV series, and ABC took a chance on it. The show was a big success in television terms, immediately winning a 33 percent market share (Zoglin) despite (or because of) the fact that the show sported a large cast of eccentric characters and installed its own story line in an unresolved fusion of realism and fantasy in which dreams make it to the status of forensic clues and evil is perpetrated under conditions of demonic possession by a BOB.

24      The show starts out with the homecoming queen Laura Palmer's body washing up on the shore of a lake. Twin Peaks Sheriff Harry Truman is soon joined by FBI agent Dale Cooper, who employs unusual methods to investigate the murder but is soon accepted by Truman and others in Twin Peaks. The first half of the series revolves around the question of Laura's murder and while the mystery of her murder deepens, romances both real and unrealized, business dealings and double crosses, drug deals, prostitution rings and other subplots are unraveled. Cooper discovers many of his clues in dreams, which include visits by giants and dwarfs who reside in a place called the Red Room, which is a waiting area between the White Lodge (a sort of heaven) and the Black Lodge (a version of hell). Cooper finds out that it was Leland Palmer who raped and killed his own daughter, but Leland reveals that he was in fact inhabited by an evil spirit named BOB at the time. In the second half of the series, the main plot line revolves around the appearance of Windom Earle, Cooper's former partner who has gone insane and terrorizes the town and Cooper. He too is trying to gain access to the White and Black Lodges. Cooper must stop Earle, but in so doing, Cooper himself, in the very last scene of the series, becomes inhabited by BOB.

25      When *Twin Peaks* first aired on ABC in 1990, critics who liked the show framed it as a novel, interesting, ironic take on soap operas, mysteries and other genres. Much of its critical acclaim was grounded in what contemporary critics and scholars felt was its use of irony and parody (Worrell/Zoglin, Hughes, Rafferty, Millman, Goodwin, Lavery). *Twin Peaks* seemed to create an idealized world – a nostalgic, fifties-like suburbia of wholesomeness and small town perfection – and then tore this world up to show its dark underbelly. As it did so, it used the conventions of various genres to expose a hidden world beneath the surface reality of Reagan Era wholesomeness and the return to "family values" espoused by the new right.

26      Genre itself, as Thomas Schatz has shown, is a form of cultural consensus. The creators, producers and consumers of genre films collaborate to draw up the conventions of a particular genre: the producers and the creators, in the early formulations of a genre, try out

certain codes and conventions, and the mass audience articulates which attempts are successful or not by patronizing or not patronizing films with new twists on the conventions. A dialogue thus develops, and when an audience watches a genre film, it brings with it a prior knowledge of its codes and conventions. The successful genre film then tweaks and improves upon those codes, creatively expanding or changing them without fundamentally altering the basic structure of the genre. Creativity is used to intensify rather than confound expectations. Familiar characters perform familiar actions to celebrate familiar values: "In addressing basic cultural conflicts and celebrating the values and attitudes whereby these conflicts might be resolved, all film genres represent the filmmakers' and audience's cooperative efforts to 'tame' those beasts, both actual and imaginary, which threaten the stability of everyday lives" (Schatz 11-29, quote p. 29).

27      Twin Peaks, however, employs generic conventions ultimately to disrupt them, and one of the ways the series is able to accomplish this is through its deployment of eccentrics. At first gloss, the show appears to be a mix of, primarily, police procedural, mystery and soap opera. The main character Agent Cooper plays the role of lead detective in the show. But he is a non-traditional detective to say the least. He has the eccentric habit of talking into his tape recorder, addressing it as Diane, and reporting not only the pertinent facts of the murder mystery he is attempting to solve but also mundane details like what he ate for lunch and what types of trees there are in Twin Peaks. He regularly flashes a good-natured thumbs up, and, of course, loves coffee and cherry pie. Film studies scholar Martha Nochimson sees the character of Agent Cooper as a trailblazer among TV detectives. More than a mere composite or melding of film and TV conventions and ideas of a detective, Cooper invents a new mode, one that does not sacrifice desire and the sensual on the altar of reason and deduction (Nochimson 144-6).

28      Cooper's work has less in common with the hard realities of most detective shows than with the land of dreams: dreams and visions are most often the sites where significant clues are found in *Twin Peaks*, and this serves to mitigate the hegemony of logic. Nochimson notes Cooper's expertise in this netherworld between dreams and reality, which I would argue is a key feature of his eccentricity: "a boundary specialist, Cooper is not the disavower of the body, the purger of bodily fluctuation through the rigid limits of convention, but a specialist in crossing boundaries, a quester capable of moving confidently and productively between the mental clarity of law enforcement and the intelligent fluidity of the body" (Nochimson 147).

29 The law is supposed to operate on the basis of common sense, but common sense is confused in *Twin Peaks* because the very nature of a fact is under debate. In the second

episode, for example, Cooper employs what he calls the Tibetan Method to narrow the list of suspects in the murder case. The Tibetan Method involves Sheriff Truman calling out the names of the various suspects as Cooper throws a rock at bottles lined up precisely sixty feet and six inches away. If he hits the bottle or breaks it, that person remains a suspect whereas if he misses, the name is crossed off the list. Midway through the exercise, Truman pulls Cooper aside and asks, "Coop, tell me. The idea for all this really came from a dream?" Cooper smiles broadly and says "Yes, it did."

30      Facts and clues, then, emerge from dreams in *Twin Peaks*. Cooper's willingness to believe in them as he would in "hard" evidence renders him eccentric in terms of the genre conventions of the police procedural. As the series in its entire trajectory establishes that the most eccentric methods are also the most successful, these conventions are themselves systematically undermined. In making use of and upending generic conventions, particularly through its embrace of eccentric characters, *Twin Peaks* potentially threatened to upend the cultural consensus that bound together the audience and creators of this genre, disrupting the attempt to "'tame' those beasts" of deviancy and irrationality the police procedural is designed to combat.

31      Eccentricity is foregrounded right from the start in the pilot episode. One of the series' more unusual characters, the Log Lady, was immediately shown to be an accepted part of the community, and her eccentricity is also an accepted, unquestioned part of *Twin Peaks*. When she first appears, Cooper notices her and asks Sheriff Truman, "Who's the lady with the log?" Truman replies, "We call her the Log Lady." This is a very matter of fact, unelaborated answer, just like his answer to Cooper's question about what kind of trees there are or what kind of rabbit he saw. This indicates that the Log Lady and her eccentric habit of carrying a log around with her wherever she goes is a permanent fixture in *Twin Peaks*, something as common and unquestioned as the Douglas firs.

32      It seems then that it is not only characters who appear eccentric: it is the very world they are embedded in. One of the ways *Twin Peaks* has an eccentric feel to it is through its continual toying with the intrusion of the incongruous into the regimes of order. Literary critic J.P. Telotte, drawing on the work of Foucault, argues that order is a human creation imposed on nature. Annie Blackburne, Cooper's love interest at the end of the series, quotes German physicist Werner Heisenberg: "What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning." But since order is an artificial construction, it is susceptible to the fallacies of humans and human logic. *Twin Peaks* exposes these fallacies: "Here, the order of our world begins to show just how threadbare and fragile it really is, while the signs that

sustain that order, including the various codes of the television narrative, reveal a sense of meaninglessness or blankness that also haunts our world" (Telotte 160).

33      Order is consistently disrupted and our expectations are continually confounded by *Twin Peaks*. Telotte discusses a scene where Cooper and Sheriff Truman go the bank to look at Laura's safety deposit box. There is a deer head lying on the table for no apparent reason. This is a particularly jarring depiction of the intrusion of the incongruous, one might say the "eccentric," in the hyper-orderly world of the bank: "But this dead head, lying there amid the orderly world of the bank, turning its blank, wild eyes on the calculated business of man, inserts in an unsettling way a spirit of chaos, disorder, and death that moves through this world, and hints at the connection of those forces to the neat, orderly world of business and exchange" (Telotte 163).

34      This confounding of expectations of order is central to the show, particularly in the first half of the series. One remarkable scene that warrants comment is the very first scene of the second season. The first season of *Twin Peaks* ended with Agent Cooper shot by an unknown person. The show was nominated for eight Emmy awards, Laura Palmer was listed by *People* magazine as one of the 25 most intriguing people of the year, and *TV Guide* asked several best selling authors to come up with a solution to the mysteries of the first season.

35      So how did Lynch (who directed this episode) choose to start this reopening of a series that had ended with such a cliffhanger and that had received such publicity? For the first five minutes of the new season, we see Agent Cooper lying on his hotel room floor, bleeding, while an elderly waiter brings him warm milk, hangs up his phone, gives him a thumbs up and a wink, all in agonizingly slow, real time. The old waiter even gives Cooper the room service bill to sign, and before signing it, Cooper bothers to ask if the gratuity is included. What could justifiably be expected to be an action-packed season premiere was slowed down to a grinding halt as the old waiter slowly shuffles about the room in a long scene that has little to do with any of the various plot developments. The pathos of the scene is already bewildering. Adding to this, in the next scene (where we might hope that things would pick up), Cooper is visited by a giant (!) who offers up three clues that will help him solve the murder. This visionary fantasy world is in turn disconcertingly connected back to reality as the Giant reminds Cooper, not unreasonably, that he will require medical attention.

36      Clearly, Lynch is hoping to confound the audience's expectations of television shows. But there is also a disconcerting lack of directorial guidance as to how these eccentric goings on should be viewed, "re-centred" as it were, by the audience. As a consequence, some recent scholarly work on *Twin Peaks* has looked beyond seeing the series as simple irony or parody

in its exploration of genre. Sheli Ayers argues that *Twin Peaks* generally encouraged an empathetic response rather than ironic distancing (Ayers 94). Others have noted that the show rode the line between irony and sincerity (Rombes 61-3). David Lynch has said that he is not an ironist but rather that his films depict what he sees in America. Discussing the dark sequences in much of his work, Lynch said: "This is the way America is to me. There's a very innocent, naïve quality to life, and there's a horror and sickness as well. It's everything" (qtd. in Rombes 65). Aaron Lecklider has offered a helpful concept that he terms the post-ironic:

The post-ironic is that which is so ironic it is sincere. Rather than using irony as a mechanism for avoiding commitment, the post-ironic employs the tools of ironic detachment to express a deep commitment, albeit one which recognizes its own contingency. It is a reversal of appearances, where sincerity not only masks as utter disregard: such disregard deepens the experience of commitment. Where the ironist exploits appearances to discredit reality, the post-ironist assumes the gravity of appearances and uses their transparency to develop political commitments in a world ruled by appearances (qtd. in Melnick 16).

37      *Twin Peaks* is very much a post-ironic work: it highlights appearances and their contradictions with ironic detachment, but it refuses to provide a comfortably superior viewpoint from which these contradictions and absurdities could be put into perspective. Rather, they appear as essential to the very nature of the people they represent. The outward appearance of eccentric characters can seem ridiculous and funny – it may appear that they are being used to set up ironic commentary – but *Twin Peaks* does not use these characters to create an ironic distance to the underlying emotion of the plot developments but rather to enhance that emotion, to install the disconnected, the absurd, the incongruous, in short the "eccentric" as an everyday component of the fictional universe it creates. Leland Palmer, for example, grieves for his murdered daughter Laura with a genuine anguish that is then interrupted by his eccentric bursts, out of the blue, into song and dance. Irony is used against itself in his case, as viewers are encouraged to both laugh with him and share in his pain rather than distance themselves from his emotional turmoil as an ironist would have it.

38      It is through its use of eccentric characters and eccentricity that *Twin Peaks* most often achieves its post-ironic recognition that internal contradictions of flawed appearances are constitutive of the world and the characters' positions and options in that world. As discussed earlier, eccentrics are associated with the dissolution of boundaries, through parody, recognition and disregard of those boundaries. Eccentricity, in many ways, is the ultimate post-ironic condition and few characters are used as compellingly as Agent Cooper. After Laura Palmer's murder has been solved partway through the second season, Cooper is forced

to defend himself to the FBI's internal affairs agent, Roger, after he has been suspended for crossing the border into Canada twice, during which time several people were killed and cocaine was planted and found in his car. Cooper defends his unorthodox methods and his eccentricity: "I've started to focus out beyond the edge of the board on a bigger game…The sound the wind makes through the pines. The sentience of animals. What we fear in the dark and what lies beyond the darkness." "What the hell are you talking about?" Roger asks him. Cooper responds, "I am talking about seeing beyond fear, Roger, about looking at the world with love." Roger shakes his head in disbelief and says, "They're liable to extradite you for murder and drug trafficking." "These are things I cannot control," Cooper answers.

39     This is an important exchange as Cooper defends himself and his eccentricity to the outside world and to the official government overseers. Roger only sees the real world manifestations that a crime may have occurred and that Cooper might get sent to jail. Cooper, in true eccentric fashion, acknowledges that he has no control over those who cannot see beyond the logical and rational, the languages of the 'normal' and of convention on which the police procedural depends, and that he can only accept the worldly manifestations of this failure – going to jail – because he cannot make others see as he does. Of course, the audience, since it is aware that Cooper has solved the crime and only done good in his transgressions, is inclined to side with Cooper against this real world that cannot privilege love over fear, eccentricity and openness over a strict adherence to the rules. But the government, in the form of Roger, sees it differently: Roger, at the end of the scene, suggests a full psychological evaluation. It seems that if Cooper cannot conform to the strict, artificially constructed rules of an orderly society, his condition is deficient and he needs to be treated. But because the show trades so freely and positively in eccentricity, we are encouraged to dismiss Roger's assessment and valorize Cooper's resistance.

40     Major Briggs, an Air Force officer working on the secret Blue Book project in the woods of *Twin Peaks*, is another character who trusts in otherworldliness and dreams. It is interesting that two of the most sensual, intuitive characters in the series are also agents of the government, men who would traditionally be thought to be rational, logical people. However, these two men are probably the most eccentric characters in the show, and they are also the most crucial to solving the different mysteries in *Twin Peaks*. They have to be eccentric rather than crazy because they are working to solve real mysteries – Laura's murder, Windom Earle's reign of terror – even if that "real" world terror is grounded in another, "unreal" place. Only eccentrics are equipped to cross over into the supernatural world of the White and Black Lodge – the realms in *Twin Peaks* for good and evil souls – because they are not restrained by

the boundaries that prevent rational, logical people from recognizing the existence of these other worlds. Yet, at the same time, these eccentrics, unlike the truly insane, are not confined to this other world. They can float back and forth, inhabiting otherwise incompatible mental universes.

41      This floating back and forth extends to gender roles as well. Major Briggs and Agent Cooper are in roles traditionally encoded as masculine: an officer in the armed forces and a government agent. These roles, traditionally, are performed by men who believe in logic, action, and a sense of duty. Without actually crossing over into the feminine, Cooper and Briggs are allowed to trust in their intuition in addition to their logic, action and sense of duty. Intuition is also connected to emotion and emotion has traditionally been coded as feminine. By giving Cooper and Major Briggs a heightened sense of intuition and also a respect for the sensuality of the body, *Twin Peaks* challenges rigid boundaries of gender and opens up space for a wider range of acceptable masculinities. Cooper and Briggs are not only deemed acceptable in their eccentricity and their recognition of emotion and intuition, they are valorized for it. By casting official government figures like Cooper and Major Briggs as eccentrics, in touch with their more "feminine" qualities of intuition, *Twin Peaks* has opened up space for differing notions of masculinity. At the same time, however, traditional masculinity as embodied by strong, virtuous men like Sheriff Truman and Big Ed is not discarded or even vigorously questioned. Such characters are shown to be decent, honorable men, though it is important to note that, contrary to typical law enforcement dramas, they play a subordinate role to their eccentric partners.

42      The one character who most explicitly challenges the male/female binary, the cross-dressing DEA agent Denis/Denise (played by David Duchovny, who would play another eccentric FBI agent a few years later in the TV series *The X Files*), again opens space for boundary crossings in regard to gender roles. While dressed as a woman, he remarks on the beauty of Audrey to Cooper, who says he didn't think Denis/Denise would still be interested in such things. Denis/Denise responds, "Coop, I may be wearing a dress, but I still pull my panties on one leg at a time if you know what I mean." Cooper responds, "Not really." Though he wears women's clothes, Denis/Denise maintains his claim to heterosexuality and masculinity, a sexuality and masculinity, however, far removed from the demands and exclusions of heteronormativity. This at least seems to be the meaning of his utterance. But then, pulling one's panties on one leg at a time is, in fact, not helpful in determining either sexuality or gender as most human beings, male, female, homosexual, heterosexual, may be assumed to proceed in exactly this manner when putting on panties. Denis/Denise's "if you

know what I mean" then certainly offers something of a poser not only to Cooper but also to the audience who are invited to speculate on what exactly this *can* be taken to mean. In this, it seems that even the eccentric Cooper is bested for once, as this mode of being (and of being male), this mode of perception and of framing such basic concerns as those of gender and sexuality is obviously beyond him. Does he know what this means? "Not really."

43      Though originally sent to investigate Cooper, Denis/Denise is clearly an ally of Cooper and for this we are inclined to accept him. In crucial moments when he can be of most service to Cooper, Denis/Denise is most fluid in his dissolution of gender boundaries. He is introduced in women's clothes and remains in them until he goes undercover, this time dressed as a man, to help Cooper trap his opponents in a drug deal set-up. When this set-up goes awry, Denis/Denise, this time dressed as a sexy waitress delivering food to the drug dealers, gains access to the house where Cooper is being held hostage. It is precisely Denis/Denise's ability to transgress gender boundaries that serves to aid Cooper, and these boundary crossings are deeply intertwined with the series' sense of eccentricity. His cross-dressing, in the scheme of *Twin Peaks*, is generally cast as just another eccentricity. In fact, it is precisely the fact that Denis/Denise comes off as another eccentric that makes his gender bending acceptable, "ordinary" within the standards of acceptability that reign in *Twin Peaks*. Because he is an eccentric and non-traditional law enforcement agent, he fits neatly into the version of expanded masculinity that the *Twin Peaks* universe has privileged, extending it into territories explicitly prohibited by heteronormative gender codes while at the same time making this masculinity look no less extraordinary than all the others to be found in *Twin Peaks*.

44      In *Twin Peaks*, eccentricity is used as a bridge between competing binaries such as reality/illusion, good/evil and male/female. The show trades freely in eccentricity, and when it is at its most successful (and popular), this eccentricity is privileged as crucial to the solving of real world problems. As the series progressed, many of the eccentric characters like the Log Lady were used merely to bring a further layer of quirkiness to the town rather than being given a central role in the developing drama. In turn Cooper, the beloved eccentric from the first half of the series, becomes more inclined to privilege logic and rationality over intuition and a reliance on otherworldliness. When eccentrics start to fade from the foreground and instead are used as atmosphere, the show loses some of its uniqueness, and, consequently, its audience. The show was canceled after two short seasons. But *Twin Peaks* never fully ceded to convention, and as such never lost its core audience. For a brief moment in time, the show

was able to harness its eccentric characters to question the many boundaries that society erects, and in so doing offered space to challenge these conventions.

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