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Citation for final published version:

Garner, Ross 2016. "The series that changed television"? Twin Peaks, "classic" status and temporal capital. *Cinema Journal* 55 (3) , pp. 137-142. 10.1353/cj.2016.0020

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cj.2016.0020>

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“The Series that Changed Television”?: *Twin Peaks*, “Classic” Status and Temporal Capital

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At the launch of the *Twin Peaks: The Entire Mystery* Blu-ray box set, actor James Marshall (who played the series’ James Dean-esque biker teen James Hurley) responded as follows when questioned about the programme’s enduring appeal:

I think it's a timeless quality that David Lynch has. There's a lot of great directors, but he's not like them in the sense of George Stevens and people back in the day where their movies are still classics and you can watch them ...there's a lot of movies that stand the test of time because it seems to be that certain directors are gifted with a certain magnetism and a certain sense of visual poetry that most people don't get. I think it's true art. I think truth always stands the test of time.¹

On the one hand, the themes employed here are familiar as discursive bids for status and prestige—what Pierre Bourdieu names symbolic capital—are made by a particular consecrating agent via associating *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–1991) with culturally-valued concepts such as authorship and, within the context of television, cinema.² However, Marshall’s engagement with the term “classic” is also interesting as this label is employed with increasing frequency across a variety of contexts relating to television at present. These range from everyday talk amongst audiences, to continuity announcements introducing

typically older re-run programming, to promotional campaigns. *Twin Peaks* is a prime example of this as recent articles announcing the programme's return on Showtime positioned the series as "cult classic drama".³ Whereas "cult" is a concept that has generated much academic discussion, the mechanisms underpinning "classic" status have received less scholarly attention and, when this has occurred, have been approached in a problematic way. For example, whilst the UK's *BFI TV Classics* range has seen academics outline the "classic" status of series including *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985) and *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963–1989, 1996, 2005–), these studies typically demonstrate what Jason Mittell names a "textualist assumption" by assuming that "classic" status can be objectively identified by analysing the programme itself.⁴ Such approaches overlook how the term "classic" television can be analysed "as [a] *discursive practice*... as a property and function of discourse" which becomes meaningful according to the requirements of multiple interpretive communities—a point noted elsewhere in some overlapping discussions of televisual "Golden Ages".⁵ Through adopting a discursive approach, this article challenges text-based understandings of "classic" television by considering how *Twin Peaks* has been industrially positioned as "Classic TV" in paratextual sources produced for the Blu-ray release in 2014 and to announce the programme's forthcoming return.

The discussion also draws upon Bourdieu's ideas concerning field and capital to argue that *Twin Peaks*' "classic" status arises from consecrating agents making appeals on behalf of the programme to forms of symbolic and/or temporal capital.⁶ Temporal capital here refers to the length of time that *Twin Peaks* has spent within the televisual field and so differs to Matt Hills's use of the term which concerns the status that TV Studies scholars accrue from being up-to-date and debating new programmes and technologies over historical equivalents.⁷ In contrast, this article argues that *Twin Peaks*' "classic" status is constructed by discursive appeals to longevity and an enduring reputation—discourses that frequently recur in previous

studies of TV “classics”.⁸ Straight away, though, two possible critiques to this approach require addressing: firstly, I am not arguing here that TV shows generate “classic” status independently and so demonstrate agency. Instead, it is posited that *Twin Peaks*’ reputation arises from discursive statements proffered by agents operating within the TV field at specific socio-historical moments which bestow symbolic and temporal capital. Secondly, although this article focuses on paratexts, I am not arguing for a complete rejection of the text. Both Mittell and Hills have rightly discussed “text functions” and how audience subcultures, including academics, produce textual readings to support certain classifications.⁹ Such constructions of the text do, however, need to be read reflexively to recognise the discursive trajectories through which such classifications arise.

The official press release for the *Twin Peaks* Blu-ray set promised to potential buyers “hours of never-before-released material that dives into the fascinating story behind the celebrated pop culture classic”.¹⁰ If approached purely from a political economy perspective, *Twin Peaks*’ classification as “classic” television within this promotional statement equates such status solely with commercially-rooted discourses. As Simone Murray’s discussion of industrial meanings of “classic” media content suggests:

The optimal commercial goal is for a content package to achieve “classic” status, positioning it for anniversary re-release and repeat consumption long after the initial costs of its production have been amortized, with the resultant revenues representing almost pure profit¹¹

A Bourdieuean perspective demonstrates the limitations of this understanding of “classic”, however. Firstly, this perspective equates “classic” status solely with commercial concerns and so suggests that *Twin Peaks* would be associated with the televisual field’s

heteronomous pole where hierarchies are maintained via the pursuit and acquisition of economic capital.¹² Although financial concerns do motivate CBS's (re-)release of *Twin Peaks* on Blu-ray, further discursive work is required to bestow additional forms of capital upon the series and separate it from negative commercial associations. What's more, this industrially-focused understanding of "classic" status cannot account for the statements provided by other agents adopting positions within the field and operating (semi-)autonomously such as reviewers and/or *Twin Peaks*' cast and crew. These individual agents, despite possibly being attached to commercially-driven organisations (as is the case with online journalists), mobilise forms of symbolic and/or temporal capital to build the series' "classic" status.

Temporally-coded discourses are constructed in various ways to suggest *Twin Peaks*' enduring appeal in paratexts discussing either the Blu-ray release or the series' upcoming return. These sources, framed from the perspective of the present, foreground the series' temporal capital and equate this with symbolic capital to bestow "classic" status upon the show. One recurrent theme that demonstrates this trend concerns referencing historical material which positioned the series as "ground-breaking" and "innovative" at its initial time of broadcast. For example, an article for British newspaper *The Daily Mail* mentions that "[t]he series became [one] of the most top-rated shows of 1990 ...[and that] [t]he pilot was the highest-rated two-hour television event for the 1989–90 season" whilst a review of the Blu-ray set begins by stating:¹³

Twin Peaks is an incredibly memorable and important part of TV history—even if you think the show went off the rails in Season 2, it undeniably had already established itself as something so daring and different, in the process changing all the rules for just how far outside the box you could go with TV drama.¹⁴

Although remaining critical of some areas of the show, this discursive strategy highlights the symbolic capital bestowed upon the series during its initial time of transmission and combines this with appeals to temporal capital by encouraging reflection on behalf of the reader towards the “gap” between then and now. Similar discursive manoeuvres are also displayed in statements made by cast members interviewed about their feelings towards the series. Ray Wise, who played Leland Palmer, has recently stated that:

Twin Peaks was just a special moment in time. And prior to that time, there just hadn't been anything like it, certainly not on any of the television networks...and there really hasn't been anything much like it since I think. It just broke new ground in every way. And I think many shows since *Twin Peaks* have tried to use aspects of the *Twin Peaks* formula, whatever that may be, ...I really think it set some sort of cultural standard. Certainly in television viewing.¹⁵

Such sentiments echo wider discursive constructions of “classic” television; Glen Creeber’s reflection, made in relation to BBC mini-series *The Singing Detective* (1985), that “it is unlikely that we will ever meet its like again” provides a point of reference here since, as with *Twin Peaks*, symbolic capital is equated with discourses of innovation and uniqueness.¹⁶ So, whilst not explicitly using the term “classic”, these contemporary statements discussing *Twin Peaks*’ impact “then” force reflection on behalf of “present-day” viewers and so foreground the series’ enduring reputation.

Of course, these statements are open to other interpretations: on the one hand, such declarations seemingly re-affirm ABC’s original marketing campaign of *Twin Peaks* as “The

Series That Will Change TV”. Alternatively, the statements arguably intersect with *Twin Peaks*’ common “discursive mantra” recited across different interpretive communities that:¹⁷

By way of *Twin Peaks*, David Lynch and Mark Frost brought a cinematic element of dark intrigue, unease and mystery to the screen that television audiences had not been exposed to ...It inspired and shaped its own cult movements, as well as a series of others, that followed in its wake.¹⁸

Yet, the praise heaped on *Twin Peaks* in paratexts promoting the Blu-ray release and the series’ return also bestow symbolic capital upon the series by aligning it with Bourdieu’s autonomous pole, where creativity and innovation are rewarded by consecrating agents, at the time of its original broadcast.¹⁹ More than this, though, such statements prompt reflection on behalf of contemporary-situated audiences and warrant evaluation of *Twin Peaks*’ reputation within the current historical context. It is through these processes that the programme’s original symbolic capital becomes reaffirmed but combined with temporal capital that assists in classifying the series as “classic” television. For example, by highlighting the originality of the show’s visual style, *Twin Peaks*’ enduring reputation becomes discursively associated with contemporary trends in “quality” drama such as HBO’s now-famous tagline of “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO”.

Retrospective evaluations of *Twin Peaks* fuse its original symbolic capital with temporal discourses to reinforce its reputation. In addition, though, the series’ construction as “classic” arises from its positioning as a series with ongoing relevance to the ever-reconfiguring televisual field. Writing about the cultural field(s) of art and literature, Bourdieu observed that the hierarchical organisation of individual fields is always dynamic as new agents enter into these spaces and make bids for forms of capital via introducing new

kinds of creativity and subsequently becoming consecrated by their peers.²⁰ By this logic, *Twin Peaks* might be viewed as “outdated” in that professional codes, technology and criterion of value within the field might be assumed to have advanced since the series was first broadcast (a reading that is off-set in some reviews by commenting on the cleaning up of the original film prints and/or noticing its “advanced” production processes such as shooting on film).²¹ However, by accrediting the series’ “classic” status to such aspects as the programme’s difference to other forms of television of that era, *Twin Peaks* is constructed as still relevant. *Twin Peaks*’ “classic” status is discursively constructed via retrospective comments that ask present-day viewers to consider the programme according to contemporary criteria of value and so bids are made for temporal and symbolic capital via suggesting that, although the field’s structure has changed, the series’ reputation endures. The suggestion is that *Twin Peaks*, much like the diegesis itself, is “timeless” as the show’s appeal negates the dynamic (and, in the context of television, commercially-motivated) nature of the field and this discursive work assists in positioning the series as “classic” television.

Analysing *Twin Peaks*’ construction as “classic” television via discursive bids for symbolic and temporal capital in promotional paratexts subsequently complements Hills’ arguments concerning the “zone of liveness” operating around television. He argues that:

television studies seeks to “keep up” with its object of study, fearing falling behind the medium’s changes and texts of the moment. ...The scholarly zone of liveness can also be joined belatedly, but only up to a point, as it will periodically move on to “new” moments of debate, and new texts of the moment.²²

Although focusing solely on academia, this argument can be extended to other interpretive communities within the televisual field: journalists, for example, are continually

“keeping up with the medium” via making visible and consecrating “the new” whilst distribution companies continue to make “new” content accessible—whether this be contemporary hits or re-positioning older products as “TV classics”. Hills’s argument thus accurately captures the TV field’s dynamic nature *and* the economic imperatives underpinning much of its structure—a point that he recognises in relation to academia but, again, extends to other groups of situated agents taking up positions in the field.²³

In terms of *Twin Peaks*’ discursive construction as “classic” television, it is nevertheless an oversimplification to view assertions of the series’ claims to this term as a practice that displays resistance to television’s “zone of liveness”. Instead, such discursive claims should be read as attempts to extend and reconfigure the series’ “zone of liveness” by re-framing it within of-the-moment understandings of creative value whilst also enhancing the series’ reputation via stressing continuity between the programme’s reputation “then” and criterion of value “now”. Of course, these discursive constructions of *Twin Peaks* mask how the bids made on behalf of the programme for symbolic and/or temporal capital mask wider operations of power within the field such as generating economic capital (whether this be through sales of the box set or clicks to websites). Nevertheless, combining Hills’s arguments concerning television’s “zone of liveness” with an approach that considers classifications of “classic” status through adapting Bourdieu’s concept of field to the televisual context allows for an enhanced understanding of both “classic TV” and key characteristics of TV-as-medium. Re-engaging with *Twin Peaks* to decide whether it is “classic” television asks the wrong question(s). Instead we need to consider: on what discursive criteria are bids for “classic” status being made? By which cultural agents, for what purposes (cultural, temporal, economic or otherwise) and, where relevant, in what national contexts? “Classic” status should not be approached as something residing “within a text” but as a classification that

arises discursively via re-framing “past” programmes within the contemporary structure of the televisual field to enhance their reputation via temporal capital.

¹ Eric Goldman, “*Twin Peaks* Cast on the Show’s Enduring Popularity,” *IGN UK*, July 30, 2014a, <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2014/07/31/twin-peaks-cast-on-the-shows-enduring-popularity>.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 75.

³ CNBC.com Staff, “Showtime to Revive Cult Classic “*Twin Peaks*” in 2016,” *CNBC.com*, October 6, 2014, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/102063521>.

⁴ See John Caughie, *BFI TV Classics: Edge of Darkness* (London: BFI, 2007) and Kim Newman, *BFI TV Classics: Doctor Who* (London: BFI, 2005) respectively. The quote comes from Jason Mittell, “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory,” in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (London: Routledge, 2004), 172.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 173. See Amy Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan), 117-21, on Golden Ages.

⁶ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*.

⁷ Matt Hills, “When Television *Doesn’t* Overflow “Beyond the Box”: The Invisibility of “Momentary” Fandom,” *Critical Studies in Television* 5, no. 1 (2010a): 97-110, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/CST.5.1.10>.

⁸ See Caughie, *BFI TV Classics: Edge of Darkness* or Glen Creeber, *BFI TV Classics: The Singing Detective* (London: BFI, 2007) as examples.

⁹ See Jason Mittell, “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory” and Matt Hills, *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty-First Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010b), 147–77.

¹⁰ Adam Chitwood, “Watch: Trailer for TWIN PEAKS Blu-ray Set Teases 90 Minutes of Never-Before-Seen Deleted Scenes [Updated with Blu-ray Details],” *Collider*, May 15, 2014, <http://collider.com/twin-peaks-blu-ray-trailer/#pdzTV7CTKIHS4Chu.99>.

¹¹ Simone Murray, “Brand Loyalties: Rethinking Content within Global Corporate Media,” *Media, Culture and Society* 27, no. 3 (2005): 417, doi: 10.1177/0163443705053973.

¹² Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 45–6.

¹³ George Stark, ““It’s Happening Again”: *Twin Peaks* Creator David Lynch Confirms his Cult Classic Show is Set to Return with a New Series,” *MailOnline*, October 6, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2782540/Twin-Peaks-creator-David-Lynch-confirms-rumours-classic-set-return-cryptic-tweet.html#ixzz3PT6sgGgs>.

¹⁴ Eric Goldman, “Still Dead. Still Wrapped in Plastic. Still Fantastic,” *IGN UK*, August 5, 2014b, <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2014/08/05/twin-peaks-the-entire-mystery-blu-ray-review>.

¹⁵ Eric Diaz, “*Twin Peaks*’ Ray Wise Talks *The Entire Mystery* Blu-Ray Set, The Show’s Legacy & More,” *Nerdist*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.nerdist.com/2014/08/twin-peaks-ray-wise-talks-the-entire-mystery-blu-ray-set-the-shows-legacy-more/>.

¹⁶ Creeber, *BFI TV Classics: The Singing Detective*, 140.

¹⁷ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 67.

¹⁸ Shara Lorea Clark, “*Peaks* and Pop Culture,” in *Twin Peaks: Fan Phenomena*, ed. Marisa C Hayes and Franck Boulégue (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2013), 9.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 53–4.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Daniel Rasmus, “Retracing Classic TV with “*Twin Peaks the Entire Mystery*,”” *PopMatters*, November 14, 2014, <http://www.popmatters.com/feature/188120-retracing-classic-tv-with-twin-peaks-the-entire-mystery/>.

²² Hills, “When Television *Doesn’t* Overflow “Beyond the Box,”” 101.

²³ Ibid., 102.