It is thus not truth that varies with social, psychological and cultural contexts but the symbols we construct in our unequally effective attempts to grasp it (Geertz, 1993: 212).

I

It is an irony – though not of that postmodern kind which places everything in inverted commas like raised eyebrows – that, at the time of completion of this book, the BBC made and transmitted a social realist serial, Our Friends in the North (BBC2), written by Peter Flannery. That a single dramatist was given – or more precisely fought for – a major space for a political drama is rare at a time when writing teams predominate. TV drama production practice increasingly equals the challenge to authorship posed by poststructuralist theory. Being one dramatist’s interpretation of the political history of Britain in the period of postmodernity, furthermore, Our Friends defies fragmented, flexiad drama by tracing the lives of four central characters through thirty years in nine episodes running over three months (January–March, 1996). It demands a sustained viewing, premised on the realist aesthetic assuming a correspondence (though not a transparency) between fictional construct and historical events. It is a factitive fiction in the critical realist tradition. It took a considerable risk by BBC2 to make such a serial in the early 1990s, the more particularly since Our Friends commanded the highest budget of any UK drama series ever produced by the BBC.

Hailed in critical discourse as the ultimate postmodern text, *Twin Peaks*, so its advocates allege, has almost single-handedly effected a paradigm shift in TV drama, changing its (sur)face for ever.\(^1\) In the light of postmodernism’s dismissal of authorship to emphasize textual multivalency and the fluidity of process, the habitual connection of *Twin Peaks* with David Lynch as *auteur* is also ironic, since a range of writers and directors were co-authors of the serial.\(^2\) Despite considerable differences between episodes, however, the serial’s look and feel are indeed marked with Lynch’s distinctive *auteur* signature, as established in his films. Thus *Twin Peaks* serves as an example of the kind of both/and text noted at the outset where a (postmodernist) non-authored sense of writing or textuality is not incompatible with a (modernist) distinctive authorial signature.

Given the fragmentation of audiences in the US multi-channel context, the commissioning of *Twin Peaks* might in part be explained by a move away from network, catch-all, ‘lowest common denominator’ programming to niche marketing of specific products to attract different segments of the audience at different times of the day. Following the ‘quality demograpics’ approach established in *Hill Street Blues* a decade since, *Twin Peaks*, along with *Moonlighting* and *Thirtysomething*, aims to appeal to the young professionals (in the jargon ‘baby boomers’ or ‘yuppies’) whose relatively high disposable income is attractive to advertisers.

Detailed discussion of either *Twin Peaks* or *Our Friends* is not possible in the remaining space here. As *Twin Peaks* has already received wide critical attention beyond my brief discussion of the series in Chapter 2, I shall treat the more recent *Our Friends* at a little more length. But the purpose of this coda – in the light of the need established constantly to reflect on the evaluation of value – is to set in juxtaposition the progressive potential in TV drama, as we approach the twenty-first century, of a critical postmodernism and an ever-adapting critical realism.

To take *Twin Peaks* first, there is a considerable difference between its assemblage of disparate discourses and that of *Heartbeat*, though there are superficial similarities. *Twin Peaks*, whilst it appears to be set in a 1990s ‘present’ sustains a sense of the 1950s just as *Heartbeat* blurs a temporal distinction between the 1990s and the 1960s. The compilation in *Heartbeat* of different strands of catchment established in viewergraphics to maximize