1 From Electronic Theatre to . . . Cyberspace?  
Technology and Televisual Form

It is an underrated truism that all television aspires to the condition of soap opera. . . . The structures of television defer attention away from consequence (Maltby, 1983: 303–4).

I TV FUTURES

Much has changed technologically in little more than half a century since the domestic television apparatus first became widely affordable. The mid-1990s hail the domestic availability of a global, two-way information and communications network. Cables are being laid apace across America, the UK and elsewhere to facilitate digital fibre optics carrying 500 or more channels and capable of interfacing computer technology with more traditional television transmission. This adds to the developments in satellite TV already operating alongside the longer-standing terrestrial modes. A key difference in fibre optics, however – one to which I shall return – is the potential interactivity of the digital network replacing one-way transmission with the possibility of two-way communication. Even one-way, however, digital technology potentially affords cinema-style definition and CD-quality sound in everyone’s home.

New conceptions of TV space accompany the various technological developments in play. On the one hand, television remains vision at a distance, that ‘window on the world’ through which events beyond our parochial horizons can be seen by way of news or current affairs documentary programmes. On the other hand, the space behind the screen has become, in the minds of some, not a direct recording or even a structured
From Electronic Theatre to... Cyberspace?

reflection of the real world we inhabit, but a virtual world, cyberspace, a simulacrum constructed of non-referential codes and conventions in media ideolects divorced from any referents in historical reality.

The new technologies encourage new ways of thinking about television since it is possible like never before to construct and manipulate televisual imagery from a computer database. At the extreme, it is feasible to make from digital samples a virtual world without any trace of an ‘original’ recorded sound or image. Even moderately assessed, images of the historical world can be edited and treated with image-manipulating special effects on a scale such that technological mediation takes on new dimensions. A medium still to some extent trusted to document what happens is in fact increasingly less trustworthy, given its extended capacity to manipulate the images it mediates.

Furthermore, the very process of off-line, digital editing, along with the modes of access to – and reformulation of – information on the InterNet, calls linearity in question. A constellatory approach to relating one item pulled from an extensive and multifarious database to another gives rise to accidents of contiguity, displacing the logic of effect related to cause in linear time. The practice of ‘zapping’ between channels functions similarly. Some postmodernists accordingly suggest that digital technology either gives rise to a new episteme, a new way of mapping and knowing the world, or indeed heralds the end all together of a humanist theory of knowledge. Indeed the new technologies raise a range of quite fundamental philosophical questions, ethical and political as well as aesthetic.

There are clear implications for TV drama in technological developments and the new mind-sets associated with them. I propose to deal with matters technological and practical before turning to developments in narrative form related to new ways of seeing. This order does not imply technological determinism, however, since there are feedback loops – particularly through market research into audience preferences – which make TV drama processes and product concepts mutually influential. To illustrate their inter-dependency and to mark by stark contrast the transitions in progress, however, I begin with a sketch of two viewing experiences, Boys from the Blackstuff in Autumn 1982 and Twin Peaks almost a decade later.