



Issue 15: Twin Peaks: The Return
February 2020

ISSN: 2160-0104

Editor's Introduction for *NANO* Special Issue 15: *Twin Peaks: The Return*

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<https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue15/Editors-Introduction-for-NANO-Special-Issue-15-Twin-Peaks-The-Return>

Keywords: Twin Peaks, David Lynch, Twin Peaks Season Three, introduction, academic article, literature

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Screenshot from *Twin Peaks: The Return*, Part 1

One of the more enduring debates that has persisted in the aftermath of the third season of *Twin Peaks* relates to interpretation. I do not mean arguments over which of the many interpretations of the show is most cogent or persuasive, though such debates are abundant and have been undertaken with impressive seriousness by fans and critics alike, but rather arguments about the nature of interpretation itself stimulated by *Twin Peaks: The Return*. English and film departments in American academia have for decades debated the roles of author and audience authority in relation to texts and films, and the positions taken on these issues have defined how audiences look at art and literature in the twenty-first century. Most fans of the recent incarnation of *Twin Peaks* did not require a classroom or theory from Barthes or Foucault to inspire such conversations. Motivated by complexly patterned hints and clues, passionate personal reactions, and an abiding sense of mystery and menace, *Twin Peaks* has inspired focused consideration and sophisticated perspectives on essentially theoretical issues, but accomplished within the do-it-yourself ethos of fan culture and the compressed give-and-take of online discourse—all without the exclusory vocabulary often endemic to scholarly exchange.

The fact that *Twin Peaks* has led so many viewers toward deep consideration of the same problems that have preoccupied philosophers and theoreticians for decades is but one

indication of the show's remarkable ambition and achievement. *The Return* has also evoked such powerful emotional reactions among viewers that such debates have sometimes seemed trivial by comparison. The poet, translator, and critic Johannes Göransson has addressed this issue by contrasting interpretive modes based on the idea of "access" with the feeling of "possession" (an important theme in season three with its Tulpas and Black Lodge spirit possessions). [Göransson is describing](#) post-modern poetry, but his ideas also apply to *The Return*:

I would do away with the model of "access"—take away the idea that when we read (or listen or watch etc.) that we are agents, that we are in control and we try to "access" the passive artwork with tools we've learned. Instead of access, let's think about fascination: When I read poems that I love I am not in control, not in charge, not trying to access some meaning that will redeem the work (make the shit valuable). No, I'm enthralled, overwhelmed, spellbound. This is what Steve Shaviro, writing about the movies in *The Cinematic Body*, calls "fascination." Instead of judging the poem, let's become overtaken by it. Instead of reinforcing our position as complete agents of evaluation, let's be compelled and possessed.

As a fan of *Twin Peaks*, I understand both the desire to "access" a more complete and persuasive understanding of the show's mysteries, as well as the feeling of complete abandon to the experience of the show and its imagery. In online forums and Facebook groups, I've contributed many dozens of hours and thousands of earnest words to debates of various problems and premises related to the show. Yet when Cooper fell through the red room's chevron-patterned floor and morphed through various phases of (non?) "ex-ist-ance" in Parts 3 and 4—and for nearly all of Part 8, for example—I was enthralled, overwhelmed, spellbound. At the time, critical thought seemed irrelevant, but as I contemplated what I had seen while waiting for the next episode, I could not resist trying to understand what I had experienced and how the show had evoked it in me. The critical thought that seemed superfluous in the moment seemed inescapable later as *Twin Peaks* refused to let me go.

From this experience, the impetus for this special issue was born, and it is with what co-editor Matthew Lau and I hope is due respect for the enduring importance of mystery and self-abandon to great art that we offer the following essays. We realize that for many fans of Lynch and the world of *Twin Peaks*, such criticism is beside the point, and the only relevant line of thought is the one the show compels each viewer to individually pursue, based on the particular predilections and fervors inspired by the experience of viewing it. We also realize that even those audience members who enjoy reading and assessing others' perspectives are motivated by very different experiences of the show and thus will have different ideas of what kind of questions and problems are worth their time. It seems likely that any work of art that possesses an audience as powerfully and enduringly as *Twin Peaks* will also lead to this kind of engaging disharmony of inquiries and conclusions. Rather than attempt to resolve or unify the most persuasive of the various interpretations that have emerged, it seems more productive to accept that conflict and instability are intrinsic to critical engagement that originates from the experience of possession by great works of art.

This is one reason why I sought out approval from *NANO: New American Notes Online* editor, Sean Scanlan, to publish this collection of essays. With its emphasis on relatively short, focused essays capable of engaging a wide variety of audiences—combined with its multi-media-friendly emphasis and format—*NANO* is a publication well suited to take advantage of the outpouring of conversations of ideas generated by *Twin Peaks*. As guest editors, we have avoided writing that seemed oriented to project a sense of control or mastery over the show and sought work that focuses on claims and details that can contribute to many overall understandings. In doing so, we hope to honor the sense of amazed artistic abandon *Twin Peaks* can induce, as well as all of the passionate intellectual attachments that arise later. In line with *NANO*'s vision, co-editor Matthew Lau and I believe that conceiving of critical responses in terms of “notes” is an appropriately focused and modest approach to critical engagement with a work of art of this scope and accomplishment, especially while still in the immediate shadow of its initial release. *NANO*'s focus upon topics and short articles of interest to generalist and non-specialist audiences, as well as its online open access and open-source format, also seemed fitting for a volume of short essays on *The Return*, since many of the most intriguing responses to the show have been written by non-academics and published in online general-interest publications such as the website [25 Years Later](#), which has been an invaluable source of insightful writing on season three.

These same non-academic sources have also produced some impressively focused and specialized lines of inquiry, and this was reflected in the submissions we received, which I suspect again relates to the possessive fascination created by the show. Since the work we received that best fit our approach addressed a wide variety of audience expectations, it seemed practical to accept that this volume as a whole reflects this variousness among expected readers. While some of these essays are more introductory and general, others focus on details that have long persisted as concerns for fans who have sought secondary literature on the show. We hope that viewers not already immersed in the scholarship and criticism addressing *Twin Peaks* will find helpful overviews of important topics, while scholars of Lynch and Frost's work and the devoted fans who have kept critical conversations about the show alive over the last three decades will also find focused, detailed, and informed takes on enduring concerns.

Two essays that provide valuable introductions to their topics and which may be of particular interest to readers relatively new to the literature on *Twin Peaks* include Karla Lončar's “Kafka, Lynch, and Frost—*The Trial* and Tribulations in *Twin Peaks: The Return*” and Robert Peeters' review-essay, “Someone Is in My House: The Art of David Lynch at the Bonnefanten Museum.” Lončar's essay provides an overview of previous writings relating Lynch and Kafka and contributes to this ongoing discussion with an astute comparison between *The Return* and Kafka's best known novel, *The Trial*. Lončar offers insightful analysis of how both works contribute to the tradition of “metaphysical crime narratives” by focusing on connections between how *The Trial* and *The Return* each emphasize thresholds, gatekeepers, and doors that resist opening. Along the way, the essay presents an intriguing take on the Audrey Horne subplot that has puzzled and intrigued many viewers. Peeters provides a compelling overview of Lynch's work in painting and offers a review of his recent solo exhibit at the Bonnefanten

Museum in Maastricht. He explores interconnecting influences between Lynch's cinema and painting, and his interpretation of specific details in some of the key paintings adds to our understanding of the work's connections with the world of *Twin Peaks*.

More focused responses that may be of greater interest to Lynch scholars and longtime fans of the show include Allister Mactaggart's "'I am dead yet I live:': Revealing the Enigma of Art in *Twin Peaks: The Return*" and, perhaps our collection's "deepest cut," Simon Hall's "Sentiment, Mood, and Performing the Past: James Hurley's Re-enactment of 'Just You' in *Twin Peaks: The Return*." The former of these essays presents a specialized look at the role of visual art in *The Return*, but instead of focusing on Lynch's painting career, as in Peeters' review, Mactaggart focuses on photography and in particular the famous photograph of Laura Palmer that has confronted audiences since the show's premier. Using ideas from Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and André Bazin, Mactaggart's essay explores how the plastic arts have long sought to preserve and "embalm" the dead and relates Laura's photograph to funereal art and a tradition in portraiture that goes back to the Fayyum portraits of the ancient Egyptians. Hall's essay focuses upon a single song in *Twin Peaks*—James Hurley's awkward and frequently-derided rendition of "Just You" that was one of the few nostalgic elements in *The Return* not met with enthusiasm by most longtime fans. Hall contextualizes *The Return's* peculiar reenactment of a song whose original problems seem more closely related to dubious production decisions and actor James Marshall's vocal limitation than the claims proposed by some of the more elaborate fan theories. Hall argues that rather than "trolling" his audience, as some viewers have assumed, Lynch instead uses the song to expand upon the emotional dynamics emerging between new and old characters socializing at The Roadhouse, to give voice to the persistent theme of nostalgia, and to tighten the show's grip on its own past.

Joshua Jones' essay, "'The Past Dictates the Future': Epistemic Ambivalence and the Compromised Ethics of Complicity in *Twin Peaks: The Return* and *Fire Walk with Me*" adopts a broader focus and traces how audience expectations for closure and reactions to sexual violence are anticipated, reflected, and commented upon in *Twin Peaks* as it has evolved since the original two seasons. Jones' interpretation is enriched by approaches and terms derived from Shannon Scott Clute and Richard L. Edwards' analysis of film noir, as well as other scholars including Allister Mactaggart and Lindsay Hallam, whose work also appears in this collection. Using Clute and Edwards' concept of an "auto-exegetical text," Jones interprets *Twin Peaks* as a work of art that "critically reads itself" in such a manner that its narrative gaps, fragmented structure, and, especially, its persistent insistence on lack of closure become crucial elements in the narrative and its impact on viewers. For Jones, *Twin Peaks* forces upon viewers a condition defined as "epistemic ambivalence," which I understand through what the poet John Keats called "negative capability"—the ability to dwell in uncertainty "without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (277). Jones carefully traces how Laura Palmer and the sexual violence she endures is portrayed in ways that encourage various states of objectification by viewers and argues that such objectification ultimately implicates not only the audience but *Twin Peaks* itself. The essay culminates in an impressive interpretation of the crucial scene in Part 8 in which the Fireman stares the *Twin Peaks* audience down after witnessing humanity's first atomic detonation, then goes on to dream into existence the inchoate spirit of Laura Palmer.

Two of the essays we have included are related by their mutual focus on place and in particular the American West. Rob E. King's "The Horse is the White of the Eye: Pioneering and the American Southwest in *Twin Peaks*" takes as its starting point the fact that in season three *Twin Peaks* is no longer a show about a single place, one located in the American Northwest, but rather a much more sprawling cinematic experience that includes a new focus on the empty spaces of the Southwest. We see this in the show's emphasis on deserts and ghost towns that endure in contemporary form in the sprawling, empty spaces of the pre-fab housing district known as "Rancho Rosa." King interprets elements of "the Southwestern mythos" in the context of Mark Frost's paratextual novel, *The Secret History of Twin Peaks*, and its contextualization of the show in terms of actual historical events. These new aspects of the show allow Lynch and Frost to comment freshly on "the boundlessness of western conquest and the evil that men do," as King aptly expresses it. Richard Martin's essay, "David Lynch Sprawls," takes on sprawl itself as a theoretical concept and thematic element. Whereas King addressed empty spaces and sprawl in terms of how they have enabled humanity's destructive impulses, Martin argues that the show uses "sprawl as a productive mode of thinking, despite the negative associations the term usually evokes." In their physical form, empty spaces are often dangerous and haunted, but both mentally and in terms of artistic form sprawl can also be an inviting concept, at least in Lynch's terms. Such a sprawling work as *The Return* provides audiences with "room to dream," while also positioning the negative aspects of sprawl as a kind of "junkspace" (an idea Martin derives from Rem Koolhaas) that exists in conflict with the inhabited spaces of human love and community.

Two other essays round out our collection and, appropriately for a show rooted in dualisms and dichotomies, approach *Twin Peaks* from opposing perspectives—one focusing on the role of horror and fear, the other on meditation and peace. Lindsay Hallam's essay, "Drink Full and Descend: The Horror of *Twin Peaks: The Return*" shows how Lynch and Frost's use of elements associated with horror films "goes beyond just thrills and scares" and instead offers a more deeply unsettling vision of the world, one that refuses and refutes the simplistic moral economy underlying conventional horror films. Many horror films have, like *Twin Peaks*, achieved frightening effects by subverting the comfort associated with home and family, but Lynch's use of horror goes further by refusing closure and presenting the self as intrinsically fragmented and constantly subject to change, thus destabilizing the world around it and "disrupting deep-rooted ideas about America's sense of itself as a place of steadfast reason and righteous justice." In its focus on lack of closure and assessment of the role of violence, Hallam's essay resonates with Jones', approaching similar topics through the lens of genre analysis. Zachary Sheldon's "The Artistic Evangelism of David Lynch: Transcendental Meditation, World Peace, and Laura Palmer," in contrast, contemplates potential connections between Lynch's longstanding devotion to Transcendental Meditation as practiced and promulgated by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Sheldon examines various sides to arguments on whether and how Lynch's work embodies his spiritual beliefs. Since the ultimate end of transcendental meditation is world peace, Sheldon assesses whether *Twin Peaks: The Return* can also be seen as engaged in producing such an outcome. While certain moments in the show suggest themes aligned with transcendental meditation, ultimately the show's message seems either conflicted or pessimistic about the possibility of "such an evangelistic, hopeful endeavor" as that of the Maharishi.

Together these essays, like *Twin Peaks* itself, offer no overall conclusion and are not meant to cohere into a unifying whole, but they do provide a map for entry or re-entry into Lynch's magnum opus and what for now stands as the summary work of his cinematic career. While the show's greatest achievement may be, for many of us, the sense of spellbound possession it evokes in its most powerful moments, for fans still poking among the [ashes](#) left behind by its searing impact, we hope with these essays to indicate new possibilities and critical formulations to the impressions and mysteries that linger and haunt us.

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