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Exhaustion and Regeneration in  
Post-Millennial North-American  
Literature and Culture

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Tomasz Sawczuk

## How the World of TV Series Spins: Exhaustion and Regeneration in *Twin Peaks: The Return*

**Abstract:** The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how *Twin Peaks: The Return* hints at the exhaustion of contemporary television series format while simultaneously regenerating it and inviting the audiences into new modes of audiovisual communication.

**Keywords:** David Lynch, *Twin Peaks*, Kazimir Malevich, televisual aesthetics, (meta)seriality

Aired in the 1990s, the two original seasons of *Twin Peaks* revolutionized the TV series market and recalibrated sensibilities of TV audiences around the world. As observed by Greg Olson, to the enchantment of both viewers and critics, the series reinvigorated the format with its “cinematic look and tone, the sense of an idiosyncratic filmmaking *auteur* at work on Sunday-night television” (270). Commissioned to write and shoot the third season over twenty-five years later, the tandem of David Lynch and Mark Frost once again hold court with those claiming that *Twin Peaks: The Return* comes “like a Taser shock to the ‘golden age of television,’ overturning audience expectations . . . both in narrative and form” (Ma). In my chapter, I first map some points of exhaustion in the world of present-day television series, namely the pressing necessity to consume more and more TV shows as well as contemporary shows’ overreliance on realism, both of which, I believe, hint at reaching some sort of a dead-end critical point for TV series makers and audiences alike. Further, I draw on the affinity between *The Return* and an early 20th-century art movement of Suprematism in order to demonstrate that while inscribed with visual evocations of televisual exhaustion, *The Return* uses multiple techniques to invite aesthetic regeneration into the television series format.

Modern-day TV series have been long receiving both critical and public acclaim and it has become natural to marvel over their improving quality and wide accessibility. No smaller awe comes with the ever burgeoning numbers of new TV releases. In his article on the excess of contemporary television series format, Jędrzej Skrzypczyk mentions a study on the growth of the American TV series market conducted by FX Networks, an American cable and satellite channel station.<sup>1</sup> According to the collected data, 2016 witnessed the release of 455 American TV series, 30 more than in 2015 and over twice as many

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1 All translations from Polish here and henceforth are by the author.

as in 2010 (as highlighted by Skrzypczyk, the study leaves out soap operas, children shows, and overseas TV productions); moreover, the growth of TV streaming platforms (Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu spearheading the market) came up to over 2000 % in the last six years (95). Taking all this into account, Skrzypczyk concludes that sparing no effort to customize and satisfy the needs of various viewers (thus keeping them subscribed) as well as responding to leading viewing practices (such as binge-watching and time-shifting), television production and television consumption seem to have entered a stage which can be labelled as *television of excess* (95), understood as the overabundance of televisual goods, which has well exceeded the viewers' consumptive capacities. Skrzypczyk's conclusion is in accord with that of David Carr's, who points out that "[w]e don't watch TV anymore as much as it seems to watch us, recommending, recording, and dishing up all manner of worthy product... . "[O]ur ability to produce media has outstripped our ability to consume it" (qtd. in Sodano 30). Among some of the discontents of a modern-day viewer engendered thereof there seems to be the fear of missing out (since 2013 recognized as FoMO) on important TV content and feeling excluded. As noted by Conlin, Billings, and Averset,

[i]n past decades, television-based FoMO would likely unfold in people missing other social events to stay home and watch a program in the single time it was being offered (without possibility of taping and/or time-shifting). One could then conclude that FoMO would be lessened in regard to serialized dramas, reality shows, and situation comedies, as there has never been a wider range of TV consumption possibilities. However, evidence suggests that the inverse may be occurring, as FoMO may be prompting people to consume TV at a rapid pace to stay part of a culturally relevant conversation. (154)

Skrzypczyk points to another study which demonstrates that "about 46 % of Americans lie about watching TV series not to feel left out in a conversation" (98). Viewing practices such as binge-watching are therefore "not just about convenience and customization (although those are important) but also connection and community" (Matrix 120).

Along with the excess of modern-day TV series comes the question of how justified it is to treat them as an emblem of audiovisual and aesthetic freshness, a belief currently taken at face value. A part of the widely assumed audacity of modern-day TV series and a good reason for acclaim on behalf of the audiences, as one might infer, comes with the series' aiming at boosting the degree of realism, be it breaking down deep-seated taboos or developing deep psychology of flesh-and-blood characters. One of the key criteria identified by Gary Bente and Ansgar Feist in their recent study on personal media selection is the viewers' need of "authenticity – [seemingly and believably] true stories of

real, nonprominent people – like you and me” (qtd. in Snider 123). One may feel inclined to ask a few questions. Does not such a strive for mimesis actually reveal something opposite about the widely praised quality of the TV series format? Does it not attest to its one-dimensional character? How far is the desired authenticity authentic itself? Is it not that it only provides the audiences with as much realism as to safely monetize itself and not to shock them with images which would turn out to be too discomfoting because “too real”?<sup>2</sup> According to Daniel Haas, modern-day TV series and

[t]heir paradoxical logic of combining “the familiar” and “the new” promise[] both permanence and originality. However, ... the originality and innovativeness of series should not be emphasized: the defining criterion remains endless repetition and, as a consequence, [it] implies stagnation. (qtd. in Wohlmann and Reichenpfader 165)

If not predominantly occupied with monetizing the nostalgic appeal of its antecedent, *Twin Peaks: The Return* seems to invite a reading in terms of the exhaustion of both TV series audiences and default aesthetic assumptions of the TV series format. The phenomenon of television has long been the object of Lynch’s fixation, just to mention his *Rabbits*, a dark rendition of a sitcom, or a number of his paintings. Not differently than in other of his film works, in *The Return* we encounter a number of scenes and images serving as an authorial auto-commentary on the exercised medium of expression. Ed Cameron observes that “[t]he critique of the limitations of the televisual format is indicated self-consciously in Part 1 of Season 3 (“My Log Has a Message for You”)” (52). In the episode, we are presented with a twenty-something Sam Colby (Benjamin Rosenfield) occupying a security-protected room in a Manhattan high rise and watching a mysterious glass box. The glass box is connected to another such piece outside and is supervised by multiple cameras located all over the place. Sam is soon joined by a girl named Tracy (Madeline Zima), taking every effort to enter the room, have coffee with him, and inquire about the box. As they begin to caress each other, a ghost-like creature materializes in the box to subsequently break loose and slaughter the bewildered couple. Cameron reads the glass box as “a sort of parody of contemporary television, with high-tech, oversized flat screen televisions, operating here as a synecdoche for today’s standardized subscription television in general” (52). The fact that it is an empty box “parodies the vacuity of the televisual medium” (Cameron 52). Also, the carnage taking

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2 Commenting on *The Wire*, Slavoj Žižek propounds a similar critique of realist modes of televisual representation by pointing to the irreducible link between aesthetic realism and capitalism. See Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (2012).



place in the room seems to form an ironic commentary to go well in line with the already-posed question: is it not so that the so-wanted authenticity channeled to us through most advanced and immersive televisual equipment must not by any chance leave the confines of homely comfort and distance? Would it not otherwise prove to be too traumatic and destructive to our horizons of meaning and, ultimately, to our subjectivity? In *The Return* we get much more screening of the screen. Part 13 (“What Story is That, Charlie?”) offers one an almost three-minute nearly-static scene of intoxicated Sarah Palmer (Grace Zabriskie) sitting in her room and watching a looping video of a boxing match on TV. Several episodes repeatedly present the viewer with the character of Nadine Hurley (Wendy Robie) relentlessly entertaining herself with a video-stream set up by hippie-like Dr. Jakoby (Russ Tamblyn) in order to both disclose some conspiracy theories concerning health matters and merchandise DIY golden shovels supposed to help dig oneself out of proverbial shit. Visualizing the characters’ fixation on a television screen by means of loops and reprises, Lynch’s trademark motifs, might signalize, on the one hand, the repetitiveness of televisual schemata, and on the other, the viewers’ entrapment in them.

Not least important with respect to the themes of exhaustion and regeneration in televisual content might be some of the show’s references to visual arts, Lynch’s prime area of education. In episode 6, while working in his office, Duncan Todd (Patrick Fischler), a co-partner of Dale Cooper’s evil double, Mr. C, notices the gradual appearance of a red square on his computer screen. This triggers him to pick up a white piece of paper with a black dot on it, apparently a message from Mr. C bearing a symbol used by him on some other occasions. What the red square and the black dot are reminiscent of are the paintings of Kazimir Malevich, a Russian avant-garde artist and art theorist. The works, *Red Square/Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions* (1915) and *Black Circle* (1915) respectively, as well as the philosophy behind their creation, appear to inform Lynch’s artistic concerns in *The Return*. Similarly to other abstractionists of his time, Malevich ignored mimetic modes of representation and “declared abstraction the most *realist* of modes” (Foster et al. 119). In the artist’s understanding, taking realism as the supreme form of artistic expression, which offers the best rendition of what is real, misses the point of art. As he declared, “[t]here is creation only where a form appears in the painting that takes nothing from what has been created in nature, but which develops pictorial volumes without repeating or modifying the primary forms of objects in nature” (qtd. in Néret 61). Guided by this, the movement of Suprematism Malevich founded aimed at reaching the clear form of art, often labeled as the “zero of form.” “[O]n the other side of this ‘zero of form,’” Malevich announced, lies “the supremacy of



pure feeling in creative art' ” (Foster et al. 123). The painter's inclination towards using simple geometric forms could be attributed to a number of reasons. On the one hand, plain shapes, especially squares, offered a sense of delimitation and essence; “quadrum,” as observed by Foster et al., means both “square” and “frame” (132). On the other hand, Malevich and others of his time were “influenced by Theosophy, which (among other beliefs) held that man evolved from physical to spiritual states in a series of stages that could be evoked by geometric forms” (Foster et al. 119). Employing “non-Euclidean geometry” could thus offer “nonperspectival conception of space” and “antimaterialist idea of form” (Foster et al. 119), which could possibly help one in “overcoming of empirical vision and perspectival space by transcendental vision” (Foster et al. 123).

In *The Return*, Lynch's directorial intuitions seem to intersect with such aesthetic tactics. The appearance of the red square on Duncan Todd's computer screen being a message from the otherworldly Mr. C. could be therefore read as Lynch's hint at the exhaustion of realistic modes of televisual representation, which call for a change in paradigm. Such understanding is reinforced by a host of intrinsic constituents of the show's universe, which effect its abstract, surreal quality. *The Return* is characterized by major narrative decomposition; it defies time and space, it is hardly plot-driven, and its numerous subplots, packed with a plethora of characters, are seldom given any sufficient sense of closure. Additionally, each of its episodes ends with a music performance of a real band in a rather setting-detached tavern called Roadhouse, which might be again Lynch poking fun at the popular format of one-song performances during the closing credits of a TV show. According to Brad Stevens, when considering the shape of the show, it might come easy to deride *The Return* offhandedly for its lack of artistic constraint, rigor, and selectivity. Yet, “on the contrary, [the series] is very much about redundancy, treating narrative as less a dynamic process than a form of stasis, something constantly folding back upon itself” (Stevens), and thus, it could be added, not as real as it seems to be. Being all this and much more, the series “detach[es] itself from the dependency demanded by ... cohesion and continuity” (Cameron 53).

When pondering the affinity between *The Return* and the tenets of Suprematism, it is worth focusing also on the undefinable, Lynchean touch to the characters, all of them solipsistic, tellular, and dreamlike. Writing about bodies in Lynch, Marcin Stachowicz observes that in the American director's films

the ideal bodies ... are not in the least ‘natural,’ but are rather artificial social and cultural constructs – their main task is to impose a standard for everyone to follow and nobody to achieve. Film myths and visual clichés, says Lynch, are repeated over and over again because they make it easier to hold image-consumer society on a leash. Keeping in mind

that the screenplay for *Twin Peaks* was originally meant to be a story about Marilyn Monroe – half whore, half goddess – we realize that the main ‘deconstructive’ strategy of the director is to turn the classic film mythologies upside down, to search for ambivalence or opposition in everything that we are ... [inculcated] by cultural codes. (81)

The unnaturalness of Lynchean characters – aptly located by Stachowicz in Lynch’s wish to ridicule clichés governing various visual representations – in *The Return* seems informed by Suprematism; the characters’ ethereality (as opposed to realness) echoes Malevich’s averseness to the artistic mimicry of nature and his strive for pure and transcendental forms. Lynch’s cinematic surplus value in such tactics comes indeed, as observed by Stachowicz, with the mockery of cultural clichés, in *The Return* perhaps best emblemized by Dougie Jones, cinematic “dough,” some sort of an “empty form” of agent Cooper to be filled with any model of personality or behavior.

If Malevich’s squares codify the grammar of not only visual exhaustion but also regeneration, so does *Twin Peaks: The Return* with regard to the TV series format. Referring once more to Episode 1, the scene with the slaughter in the glass box room seems to convey not only Lynch’s mockery of contemporary television but also his hopes for new ways of televisual communication. As believed by Cameron, “[t]he Thing’s ability to breach the glass box ... figures Lynch’s ability to provide televisual programming that expands the comfortable narrative design traditionally associated with the television medium” (53). The aesthetics of *The Return* mark a new televisual opening as they aim at non-articulate communication, and further, at offering the viewer a sense of transcendence, a strategy co-exercised by Malevich and Suprematists. The attainment of otherworldly states of being is a feature recognized by many commentators as one of the key ambitions of *The Return* (as is the case with many other of Lynch’s works). Stachowicz points out that “the core of [Lynch’s] ... creative action is not to produce countless carbon copies and imitate the world, but to create new realities” (83). Similarly, pondering the excessive nature of *The Return*, Thirlwell notices that in the case of the series, excess might hint “at a world’s slippage into other worlds.” Another parallel between *The Return* and Suprematism concerns focus on color and texture of the work as meaning-generative. Malevich’s black, red, and ultimately white squares were an attempt to isolate and distill the “zero” of color, its pure suprematist radiance, by detaching it from “any determination of a subject matter” (Foster et al. 133). Malevich highlighted the creative potential of such a gesture: “We don’t know who color belongs to: to the Earth, Mars, Venus. The Sun or the Moon? Is it not simply that color is that without which the world is impossible? ... Color is a creator in space!” (qtd. in Néret 52–53). Lynch seems to hold dear such an aesthetics; as claimed by Thirlwell, he is “the

filmmaker of surface, of texture,” who claims “[t]here are things ... that you can’t say with words” and what is there to help is “the beautiful language of cinema ... [which] has to do with time and juxtapositions and all the rules in painting” (qtd. in Thirlwell). Colors, as well as framing and isolating them, hold considerable importance in denoting the spaces of Lynch’s universe, as evidenced by the used proper names: the Red Room, the White Lodge, the Black Lodge. With Malevich’s isolated red square in mind, it is very tempting to see the tension between the Red Room and the material world not, as wished by many commentators, in terms of a Manichean conflict between good and evil or a dialectic between the conscious and the subconscious, but in terms of a tension between realism and abstraction. Analogously to Malevich’s distortions of perspective communicating transcendence, the extradimensional, twisted-perspective settings of *Twin Peaks* appear to promise alternative forms of technology-mediated communication.

What also offers the viewer uncommon aesthetic quality in televisual format are the strategies of scene-stretching and superimpositions *The Return* employs. The former gives the series a meditative flavor turning the show into “a kind of eighteen-hour mantra for meditation” (Thirlwell) or “visual tone poems with little if any dialogue” (Ma). As underscored by Brad Stevens, in times of compulsive consumption of TV series, scene-stretching “brings *Twin Peaks* into the realm of slow cinema,” where “stretching ... becomes an aesthetic event” (Stevens), and challenges the established standards for TV post-production. Superimpositions, as observed by Ma, allow Lynch to convey a “hallucinatory experience of time and space.” Many fans of the show advise viewing overlaid episodes in order to reach yet another level of meaning. Such is the case with the two final installments of *The Return*, in which, in the most striking way, Sarah Palmer’s furious smashing of her daughter’s picture (the concluding scene of episode 17, “The Past Dictates the Future”) overlaps with Carrie Page’s/Laura Palmer’s piercing scream (the concluding scene of episode 18, “What Is Your Name?”) (“*Twin Peaks* Final Episodes Synced”).

Commenting on metaseriality as an important factor to consider when gauging innovativeness of a given TV series, Andreas Sudmann suggests that

whenever we underscore the experimental qualities of TV series these days, we should take seriously how much the aesthetics of intensification contribute to this status. The dynamics of serial outbidding are closely connected to the way a TV series comments on itself and its position in culture, which not only includes answering questions but questioning itself as a serial form *and* as a medium. (112)

With all its audiovisual richness, *Twin Peaks: The Return* successfully accomplishes the task set by Sudmann. Not only does it reflect on the limitations regulating

televisual content and therefore contributing to TV's aesthetic exhaustion but it also struggles to reinvigorate the format by "blow[ing] established forms of television wide open and generat[ing] some of the most sublime digital artwork of all time" (Ma). Possibly then it would not be an exaggeration to claim that over a hundred years after Malevich's revolution in visual arts Lynch succeeds in repeating the gesture of the master Suprematist in the televisual format, a gesture perhaps underappreciated now but likely to be seen as a game-changer by the future generations of TV audiences.

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