

Critiquing an Emotional Unknown: Filmic Excess in Lynch's *Twin Peaks*

by

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The filmography of David Lynch often works with disparate tones. His films frequently go beyond a wry chuckle during a tense confrontation to an all-encompassing feeling that pervades the entire scene. In general, his films are not tonally inconsistent, but instead fuse together a mixture of emotions that bring out unique reactions like disorientation. As a mixture, the different emotions arising from his films become difficult to concretely identify, but they are often associated with feelings of unease, discomfort, and confusion. As a result, Lynch's films hold a specific vibrancy.

Confusion, for example, often becomes both comical and dismaying. In *Twin Peaks: The Missing Pieces*, The Arm and Agent Dale Cooper have a conversation in The Black Lodge where Cooper asks where he is and how he can return to Twin Peaks. The interaction begins as The Arm plainly establishes himself as someone who sometimes sounds like a rapidly hooting owl. Instead of answering Cooper's questions, The Arm responds by saying "You are here, now there is no place to go, but home." The Arm then proceeds to cackle and perform a brief celebratory dance. This unique conversational sidestep by The Arm is, on the one hand, ridiculous, as it does not offer a substantive answer to Cooper's question. On the other hand, it remains disturbing, as Cooper now lacks a point of reference for how to properly identify or communicate with anything in an unfamiliar environment that he cannot relate to.

Part of what makes this interaction between Cooper and The Arm unnerving is its ability to disrupt what Roland Barthes calls the informational meaning, where one takes in a film's mise-en-scène and the relations between characters in order to develop a rudimentary understanding of what is being witnessed on screen. Although Lynch actively distances the viewer from an understanding of the film's internal logic, he recognizes the likely reaction of the viewer. Cooper, the audience's point of view character in the scene, observes The Arm with a look of confusion, despite being put in a horrifying situation. Ironically, this sense of simultaneous unease and humor becomes the grounding point for the audience; the most understandable element of the scene is its off-putting nature.

Upon first viewing, few are likely to immediately understand the motivation behind the unconventional appearance of The Black Lodge, as well as the jilted, stagnant, and spatially disproportionate movements of its participants, especially since an explanation is never plainly offered. Perhaps interpretation can rationalize why red curtains coat the room, why the sounds of footsteps are played in reverse, or why The Arm would be uninterested in providing clear answers to uninitiated visitors. The Arm's rapidly hooting owl noise, for example, could be taken to establish a link between him and an owl, an animal that is frequently associated with Bob, the central antagonist of *Twin Peaks*. By proxy, The Arm is untrustworthy like Bob, making him more intimidating. This interpretation is what Barthes would call an "obvious meaning," which is the symbolic or thematic interpretation that one immediate-

ly perceives when viewing a work. The obvious meaning describes not only ideas and interpretations that are overt, but also those that are comparatively subtle and quiet. In semiotic terms, these meanings represent the message and the signification respectively.

Some viewers may or may not understand these first two meanings, but what is understandable about the scene to all viewers is its unique tone; disorientation is made off-putting, comical, and frightening simultaneously. Past any interpretation that one can offer for why the scene is presented in this manner, viewers often respond to Lynch's works with a sensation that appears to exceed this label of unique unease. For me, this feeling most closely resembles a kind of hollow emptiness that does not exactly connote fear or despair. We may take The Arm's hooting as an example. For me, this elusive emotion begins with the contrast between the formality of his crisp suit, his weathered, wrinkled face, and the rapid yet inexact flapping of his hand against his mouth. I do not know what this contrast signifies, but it certainly feels as real and palpable as the informational and obvious meanings.

A Difficult Meaning

Much of the criticism of Lynch's work analyzes the different types of responses that can be evoked from a sequence. In the most general manner, Justus Neiland describes the sense as a variation of affect that often goes unexplored: "To keep affect ambiguous or indeterminate is one way of generating affective intensity" (63). The ambiguous feeling that is "left over," that appears to actually exceed understanding, is part of what often makes Lynch's work so appealing, but also so difficult to describe, and more importantly, to critique. The primary goal of this paper will be to discover a way for critics not only to develop the ability to recognize the existence of this feeling, but for them to learn to analyze it, and to consider the implications of what it means to be immersed in such a sensation.

The sense of continuing to be held by an image is what Roland Barthes identifies as a third meaning, which he calls "the obtuse meaning." Instead of the obvious meaning, which has a clear definition, he proposes the existence of a sense or feeling that actually *exceeds* semiotics, that has a "signifier [which] possesses a theoretical individuality" (Barthes 53). This sense cannot be aligned with a particular concept; its existence itself is subjective and must be rationalized by each individual viewer. To Barthes, it represents something that intellection cannot fully absorb, but can also exist in tandem with the obvious meaning. The obtuse meaning does not escape interpretation and classification, but it cannot be defined by these, as it instead exceeds concrete definition. That is to say this intellectual association can be felt alongside the obvious meaning. The two are not inherently mutually exclusive.

In "The Third Meaning," Barthes uses Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) as an example to apply his theories. In *Ivan the Terrible*, Barthes is able to easily identify the major theme of the film: the revolution. To

Barthes, Eisenstein's work consistently follows the same rigid thematic structure supporting the uprising of the oppressed. With Eisenstein, the obvious meaning is identified, but alongside this interpretation is something else, something that can be described as a response to the physical trait of a character: "It was neither the facial expression nor the gestural figuration of grief... all that belongs to the full signification, to the obvious meaning" (Barthes 57). Here, Barthes recognizes something exists beyond what can be interpreted, separate from what can be rationalized by an obvious meaning.

This separate more elusive feeling is not inherently changed or informed by the obvious meaning. We may use Lynch's work as an example. Christian Kassung discusses the various ways that audiences are meant to identify with the line between what is human and what is an animal in Lynch's work. To Kassung, the boundary is always eradicated: "The Lynchian humans do not yet know that they are animals" (Kassung). As a result, characters, and viewers by extension, are meant to feel a particular sense of unease in the presence of animals because they signify a character's succumbing to an emotionally primal state. When The Arm hoots, his formal wear may represent the appealing status of giving in to primal emotion, while The Arm's repulsive face represents the ugliness or fear that can be elicited in the presence of primal emotion. Regardless, I am still held by the obtuse meaning while I consider the implications of Lynch's ideas and associations. I feel something that I cannot fully associate with interpretation, something that feels distinct in the moment that it is experienced. Still, being apart from direct interpretation does not make it less impactful or meaningful. Even if the emotion, amusement for example, associated with the sense appears simplistic to the viewer on the surface, it inherently is not, as the sense and ability to be held by an image can be important to recognize and acknowledge.

An exploration into this emotion can help to continue the discussion around why audiences can be moved by film beyond its ability to present narrative and form and what that movement means. In part, the discussion of this unique feeling relates to the root of what makes cinema appealing. The primary goal of this paper will be to establish a way for people to critique this phenomenon instead of merely being able to recognize its existence, as well as using the discussion of it as a tool to more insightfully analyze the work of Lynch.

Excess Defined

In order to provide a basis for analyzing this sensation in more depth, I will first define it. From "The Third Meaning," Barthes created a niche genre of discourse in film studies that focuses on the previously mentioned phenomenon called excess (and it will be referred to as such throughout this essay), but has been also been referred to as "the homogeneity" by Stephen Heath, "the obtuse meaning" by Barthes, and in some cases, is compared with "cin-

ematic affect,” which is the study of the organization of emotional responses in film. The process of how to define excess remains indistinct. The most cogent and succinct description of excess comes from Kristin Thompson, who describes the phenomenon as “that which exceeds motivation.” Throughout the course of this first section, I will primarily utilize the writings of Stephen Heath, Roland Barthes, and Kristin Thompson to identify the commonalities between their definitions of excess to propose a more unified vision of the phenomenon.

Linked to the idea that art has a tangibility and texture that is beyond reconciliation is Barthes’ belief that the most central quality of excess is a sense of being held by an image: “the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing” (Barthes 53). As a contrast to the obvious meaning, which “presents itself... to the mind,” excess is the supplementary to interpretation and meaning. While describing it, Barthes frequently uses examples of physical traits creating an impact: “A certain compactness of the courtiers’ make-up, thick and insistent for the one, smooth and distinguished for the other. I am not sure if the reading of this [excess] is justified or if it can be generalized” (53). Here, he frames the phenomenon of excess through simple and mundane means, like experiencing a rough and overt image that evokes an emotional reaction.

For Barthes, excess supports the possible spectacles and pleasures of a text and partially rejects the idea that a text can ultimately be broken down into a collection of identifiable elements and signs. It is also not a feeling that is meant to merely describe something as clear as involvement in a story, plot, or character; it is something that exceeds psychology. While discussing the courtiers’ make-up, Barthes makes this clear: “To say these traits refer to a significant ‘attitude’ of the courtiers, this one detached and bored, that one diligent does not leave me fully satisfied” (Barthes 54). In a manner of speaking, excess is a mutually intellectual and emotional occurrence where neither fully takes precedence.

Although we are prone to a certain subjectivity when identifying excess, a phenomenon based in the experience of a particular sensation, we are not doomed to it. In an attempt to assist in the narrowing of what would commonly be considered excess, Thompson identifies common filmic techniques that evoke this phenomenon. In most cases, these techniques are used to exceed the motivation of the narrative. Some of these commonly used and recognizable motifs that evoke excess are moments where narrative function does not overtly motivate the amount of time a subject is on screen, the constant reuse of an unusual formal element, and objects that contain an appearance that is not strictly motivated by narrative. Thompson frames individual formal elements as being subjects of these techniques, using examples of set design, costume design, cinematography, and acting that all call attention to their relationship with the film: “Whereas the Hollywood norm has accustomed us to clear, seamless space, we are not confronted with frequent, pointless shifts and gaps... We may recognize their function in the filmic system, but

this will not obliterate their peculiarity” (Thompson 298). The viewer’s inability to be able to entirely define or recognize the motivation behind some formal techniques and choices in narrative structure is essential to Thompson’s view on excess: in her view, a viewer’s perception of excess will always result from something beyond their ability to understand.

The sequence where The Arm hoots in *Twin Peaks* features many of these filmic techniques. Firstly, The Arm’s extended dance is a seemingly random action that is almost always performed when the character is on screen (at this point in the series, this would be the character’s third appearance and his fourth dance). The Black Lodge, the setting that The Arm inhabits is comprised of choices in acting that call attention to their relationship with the audience. The stilted language of The Arm, for example, bounces and pops with the sound of footage being played in reverse. Lynch makes no attempt to hide or minimize the obviousness of its position as a formal choice by doing this. This may perhaps function to highlight the difficulty of the spirits to properly communicate, but this rational explanation for its inclusion does not remove its unusual nature.

Critiques of Excess Theory

This inability of theorists to agree upon an exact definition of excess is part of what frustrates some theorists about the theory in the first place. According to Elena Oxman, Barthes’ essay, and the concept of excess as a whole, is “theoretical regression” (Oxman 71). She accuses Barthes’ later work as “falling prey to the very mythology of the image that his early work had taken such great pains to expose” instead of continuing to be the champion of semiotics in art. (Oxman 72). Here, Oxman contends Barthes’ description of certain texts that contain this excess is more based in sentimentality than in semiotics, more emotion than intellection. To Oxman, Barthes references this emotion in a vague and broad manner, lacking in a practical grounding for discussion.

For Barthes and other writers, excess often proves difficult to write about: “[Excess] is outside articulated language while nevertheless within interlocution” (Barthes 61). The phenomenon becomes framed as a personal experience, one that becomes less effable when expressed through writing or spoken language. While Oxman’s dismissive attitude towards Barthes may be overstated, her critique of his willingness to concede to the “mythology” of the power of art is substantive. Barthes is seemingly dedicated to the idea that excess is beyond description and discussion: “At the level of articulated language... [excess] will not succeed in entering the critic’s metalanguage” (Barthes 61). Much of the remainder of “The Third Meaning” is comprised of surrendering to the awe-inspiring nature of excess, or more importantly, to something that cannot be easily described. Instead of at-

tempting to consider new ways that excess can be talked about, Barthes accepts the parameters of the discussion as being inherently personal, making the further description of excess reductive.

Barthes' final description of excess comes down to a comparison with what Barthes describes as an accent, or an additional quality of otherness that can help to characterize a work: "[Excess] can be seen as an accent, the very form of an emergence, of a fold (a crease even) marking the heavy layer of informations and significations" (62). It is a recognition that there is an otherness that does not hint at another meaning. Instead, it "outplays meaning" and exceeds description. In Barthes' mind, this is similar to a Japanese haiku, a gesture without a meaningful content that appears as though it has a desire for meaning but cannot find it. What he either fails to recognize or ignores is that haikus have a discourse of their own. This connection between the two art forms is not meant as a recommendation to apply methods of analyzing haikus to excess. Rather, this connection should serve as a reminder that discourses that properly discuss and dissect more difficult art forms without having the appeal of the form diminished already exist. What Oxman describes as Barthes' sentimental view of the phenomenon prevents him from further considering how to help the discussion around excess: "[Excess] appears as a luxury, an expenditure with no exchange. This luxury does not yet belong to today's politics but nevertheless already tomorrow's" (Barthes 62). It instead appears as though he is waiting for the next generation of writers to take over the obligation of continuing his theories.

Thompson follows the same path as Barthes by treating excess as a phenomenon that is inherently beyond overt discussion. When talking about how to write around and about excess, Thompson consistently refers to discussion as a process of "pointing out" and "a need to talk about it" instead of establishing guidelines for how to critique excess (Thompson 291). In fact, she frequently claims that the most important quality to understanding and appreciating excess is merely recognizing that it exists: "Presumably the only way excess can fail to affect meaning is if the viewer does not notice it" (Thompson 290). To her, the discussion appears to become forever personalized after the viewer is able to initially recognize its existence. Excess theorists appear to lack an investment in developing a critical discourse beyond one that can only be experienced on a purely personal level. As a result, excess is not a branch

of discourse that attempts to further a conversation about how to discern what makes something impactful; the phenomenon becomes inherently successful if it can be recognized and appreciated.¹

From Affect to Excess

In order to further differentiate between different types of excess, there needs to be further discussion of the qualities of excess, what makes it impactful, why it is impactful, and what does it mean that it is impactful. One way to further that conversation is to consider the approaches to similar problems in similar discourses. Affect theory, for example, considers the aesthetic, political, and ethical implications of the emotions that a spectator may experience while watching a film. Discourse around this branch of study primarily focuses on genres that directly stimulate the body. For example, *The Fly* (1986), could potentially provoke a variety of physical response from an audience; many would be moved by the horror of watching a man's body former body disintegrate and mutate into that of a fly, while others may be brought to tears when that same man wordlessly asks for his girlfriend to kill him with a shotgun.²

¹ This approach to excess can be perceived as coming from a misunderstanding of Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation." A landmark work of the 1960s, Sontag's essay, like much of the rest of her writing, attempted to embrace all forms of art, specifically through the destigmatization of other high-brow or low-brow formats. In "Against Interpretation," Sontag devalues indulgent scholars who set out to find the ultimate meaning in every facet of a work. She states that there is only so much that intellection can accomplish or perhaps hinder in the experience of appreciating art, calling it the then contemporary critic's revenge on art. According to Sontag, feeling, hearing, and seeing more is to understand art in a way that popular critics rarely would. Based on their criteria, Barthes and Thompson might be said to replace the urge to interpret with the surrendering to excess: "Interrogation bears precisely on...reading not intellection... My reading remains suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation" (Barthes 53-61). This approach does not properly account for what Sontag requests in her essay. While discussing Ingmar Bergman's *The Silence* (1963), Sontag presents an example of interpretation that does not completely disavow all elements of conventional interpretation: "Ingmar Bergman may have meant the tank rumbling down the empty night street in *The Silence* as a phallic symbol. But if he did, it was a foolish thought. Taken as a brute object, as an immediate sensory equivalent for the mysterious abrupt armored happenings going on inside the hotel, that sequence with the tank is the most striking moment in the film" (Sontag 9). While not as detailed or as presumptive as the Freudian interpretations Sontag mocks in her essay, this discussion of formal elements nevertheless functions as an interpretation; the brute object contains a so-called meaning. By associating loud power and rumblings with the conflicts within the film, Sontag demonstrates a way to identify the obvious meaning without explaining and ultimately devaluing the power behind the excess.

² When compared to excess theory, affect theory holds a robust and extensive collection of theories and clear methodologies. Right now, it is simply a more wide ranging and prolific branch of film studies. Like excess theory, affect theory primarily deals with the reactions that a spectator can have while watching a film. Both discourses tend to not consider structure, but instead think about the visceral experience of watching a film. Both branches of theory deal with phenomena that are inherently subjective, as they are all accounts of individuals being impacted by film. Both fields place a heavy emphasis on the importance of form being able to impact the spectator. Whereas excess theory has Thompson's descriptions of how mise-en-scène can potentially be used to evoke excess, affect theory thrives on its reliance on mise-en-scène being able to affect viewers. Julian Hanich's work has analyzed a wide breadth of formal techniques that can enhance different specific forms of affect related to the horror genre; this includes writings dedicated to techniques that can be used to specifically enhance dread, shock, and suspense. Both branches of film studies analyze formal techniques. While affect theory deals more with the corporeal impact that film can have, both theories have dealt with what Eugenie Brinkema refers to as "the transcendental signified" (xiv). This means that both have had to deal with the idea that interpretation is not the primary interest of their respective discourses; that interest more often than not lies with recognizing an impact on the viewer.

In *The Forms of the Affects*, Eugenie Brinkema calls the penchant to succumbing to the affective fallacy one of the largest problems facing the present discourse surrounding affect theory. The affective fallacy is the error of evaluating a text based on its emotional effect on a reader/viewer. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley call the surrendering to this fallacy as being “a confusion between the poem and its results,” meaning that one would focus primarily on the subjective impression that a viewer has where a work is confused with what its affects (21). They specifically refer to the idea of succumbing to a form of criticism that lacks the ability to be disproved or disputed: “The report of some readers... that a poem or story induces in them intense feelings... is [not something that] can be refuted. The purely affective report is either too physiological or it is too vague” (32). In addition to commenting on affect criticism, Wimsatt and Beardsley here address one of the other major concerns of excess theory: the use of a language that supposedly lacks the ability to properly contain a discussion of such complex or trans-linguistic ideas: “An uncertainty, when it is a matter of describing the obtuse meaning (of giving an idea where it is going, where it goes away)” (Barthes 61). As has been previously mentioned, this claim that language cannot sustain a discussion of complex ideas is not true in excess theory and affect theory. Most accounts of affective responses that focus on the immediate and visceral experiences of the critic tell the reader more about the critic’s self instead of the film itself. According to Brinkema, “If affect does not need to be interpreted, just recorded, then the most affected theorist wins” (32). By this logic, if excess does not need to be considered beyond whether it exists or not, the theorist with the most involving description of their encounter with excess has produced the most insightful writing on excess.

Judging by the definition, excess theorists could be considered to succumb to this phenomenon, a feeling of being so enamored by an immersive feeling that more critical sensibilities are sidelined. By considering Brinkema’s solution to the problem of the affective fallacy, we may be able to find a way to help the currently limited state of excess theory. Her solution to the affective fallacy is to treat affect as a structure that can be used to serve a greater meaning, consciously or unconsciously. According to Brinkema, the most productive way to consider affect is to think of it as a way of helping to fill in theoretical gaps: “Affect’s potential is in pointing out the... non-answers at play in any theory. Treating affect as a form is another way of demanding that we read for and speculate on these non-answers” (39). To call the interpretations of theorists non-answers is to recognize that meanings do not fit into a clearly shaped hole like an appropriately shaped plug. Affect helps to explain the challenges in both writing and speaking about that which is especially difficult to qualify, as it asks participants to develop a relationship with a text that is perpetually unfinished, to accept that normative interpretations cannot fill all theoretical gaps. This approach is a call for symptomatic readings, which can also deal with “repressed meanings that the work divulges involuntarily,” or meanings that a work is unintentionally condoning (Bordwell 9). It is an approach that asks the viewer to

consider what the film may be unconsciously working through. Constant consideration of what affect can do and accomplish is what is essential and what will be relevant to further critiques. In the same way that an affective response which can potentially unveil a new meaning, I propose that the presence of excess in film be considered another avenue towards discovering new interpretations and symptomatic readings.

Let's take *Dressed to Kill* (1980) as an example of how affect can offer these new symptomatic approaches. Brian De Palma's film can be seen as a work that uses affect to evoke a series of responses that ultimately reflect a symptomatic meaning that is separate from the film's normative meaning. After the antagonist of the film is disposed of, the main character continues to have nightmares about being stalked and harmed, waking up screaming and unable to physically control herself; trauma is turned into something that is ever present. This interpretation is an example of an obvious meaning, one that naturally presents itself to the mind when viewing the film.

We may instead consider how affect manipulates the emotions of the viewer and brings them towards another meaning. The main character of the second half of the film is frequently stalked by a cloaked, blonde figure that is made to be an intimidating and ruthless presence by way of affective formal techniques. For example, the use of split diopter shots to create a sense of looming space between the villain and the hero, made only more uncomfortable and dread-filled when she moves forward to attack, make the villain a threatening presence. Once the antagonist is revealed to be a transgendered person, the audience's association with the villain ultimately remains hostile and cold. In the film's dialogue, being transgendered is referenced as being similar to having schizophrenia. A fearful and dismissive attitude towards the trans community can be interpreted from this new reading, one that sees the entire community as suffering from mental illness.

Once this meaning has been identified, it is the job of the critic or theorist to critique the film on the basis of its message, whether it is intended or not. By applying my approach to the use of affective techniques in *Dressed to Kill*, my argument would be that Brian De Palma's affective techniques are ultimately problematic. Instead of supporting the film because of its engaging nature, the conversation shifts to what the affect accomplishes. Regardless of their impactful application, the techniques uphold a problematic viewpoint. In order to further criticize the film, the symptomatic meaning, and the affect by proxy, will be analyzed. What must be highlighted is the importance of a discussion around a film's apparent symptomatic meaning. I propose that we make that discussion important to excess theory as well.

Like affect, excess carries an emotional connotation. As has been described, all of the major theorists who discuss excess have varying approaches to the ways of defining and qualifying excess, but all theorists have agreed the phenomenon is linked with an emotional reaction. The intention of any film that attempts to have its audience

feel something; for example, a person can be directed to like the protagonist of a comedy by making them the source of laughter. By asking the audience to relate to a character in some way, the artist is in some regard humanizing, condoning, or attempting to have a conversation about ideology. Inherent in all art is an ideology, whether it's on the surface, hidden farther beneath the surface, or presented unconsciously without the makers being aware of what they are creating. To be emotionally manipulated is to be swayed towards a meaning and interpretation. The readings of excess can continue to avoid an implied or connotative meaning and instead engage in discussions about the meanings that are ultimately being supported. What makes excess acceptable can become a discussion of what the film is condoning. Excess is a mean to an ends and if the means is problematic, the excess is as well.

This theory is not beyond what prominent excess theorists have claimed is possible. Heath proposes something similar when he suggests that it is the responsibility of the critic to focus on tensions between the coherent elements of film (form and narrative) and the excess that it produces. If what is produced is a new meaning, Heath would essentially be saying that this new meaning is what must be critiqued.

This approach eliminates the two major issues that excess theory has faced: a missing structure for substantive excess criticism and the imagined inability of language to hold a proper discussion of excess without devaluing its impact. By considering excess as a sort of formal technique used by filmmakers, it can be viewed as something that upholds a film's symptomatic meaning. From there, discourse around excess can be about what it condones, a type of conversations that has always been possible and accessible to the common critic.

This approach would ultimately utilize tenets of reader-response criticism, a school of literary theory that focuses on the experience of the participant and recognizes them as an active agent who can interpret art on their own. This has been the previous approach towards the discussion of excess and affect, as writing around them often took on the appearance of a log of felt emotions during a screening. Instead, this discussion would involve identifying the way that the excessive elements move the critic; however, instead of ending the discussion of the film at the personal account of the viewer's emotional reactions, the critic would more thoughtfully consider what these emotions led them to think and believe about the film and its messaging. Perhaps they would favorably analyze the symptomatic meaning if they were more or less inclined to believe in a film's pessimistic or optimistic view on a particular moral issue.

When talking about the preferred form of criticism, Wimsatt refers to a type of criticism that is beyond a record of affective reactions, one that shows the shades of distinction and similarity between objects of emotion. These shades of distinction very appropriately apply to excess, a sense that could certainly be considered to be distinct and in need of further recognition and analysis. To Wimsatt, "the critic is not a contributor to statistical count-

able reports about the poem, but a teacher or explicator of meanings” (Wimsatt 34). As Wimsatt claims, it all returns to meaning. As critics, much of the responsibility is to identify, contextualize, and analyze meaning, specifically the delivery of that meaning through form. This is what excess ultimately is and how it should be treated.

Twin Peaks: The Return and the Application of a Theory

In an attempt to examine this new approach to excess theory, let’s apply this new line of thought to the work of David Lynch. By applying this theory to a variety of Lynch’s works, we can explore how different presentations of excess can help to reflect or reveal a variety of symptomatic meanings.

We will first need to identify a moment of excess before we can properly discuss it. In the final episode of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the environment that surrounds Dale Cooper and Carrie Paige as they quietly drive across the American west is an all-encompassing, drastically underexposed blackness. A similar sequence comes earlier in the episode, as Cooper and Diane listlessly drive through the dark deserts of Texas towards a goal that stays vague throughout the episode. Both sequences last four minutes in length, making roughly one-sixth of the 57 minute episode silent stretches where two passengers do not communicate with each other verbally or physically. These character pairings are not necessarily disjointed as a unit, but each participant appears to lack an interest or need to say much to the other. Car seats become indistinguishable from the darkness that surrounds the vehicle and the dashboard takes up the bottom third of the frame in nearly every shot. The outlines between where characters and backgrounds begin and end are blurred, making it seem as though torsos are moving through an empty space as Dale Cooper and Carrie Paige move across the country towards a goal that is not made clear; still, the two are never difficult to find in the frame.

I believe that the combination of visual clarity and opacity is where excess begins for me. When I watch these characters moving through space in silence, I feel something beyond anything I can associate with a clear bodily affect, like sorrow, fear, or shock. Watching what could be easily mistaken as two physically and emotionally inert people in motion holds me. I instead feel a calm emptiness. Where emotion or feeling should be present, I feel a particular void, a deadened flatness in my stomach. For two elongated sequences, I am able to feel a specific, identical emotional association. My experience of this feeling is not accidental; it is a particular sensation that is sought out by Lynch.

Twin Peaks and Narrative

Let’s first consider the context of the narrative up to this point. This void comes not from a dissatisfaction with the narrative that preceded this final episode, but with a sudden lack of closure during the ending. To speak of

my own experience, I found the season to be a consistently engaging hodgepodge collection of interwoven small town citizens going through emotional trials and supernatural tribulations. As Audrey Horne had an argument with her distant husband, a man was sucked into a vortex. As a young child was run over by a small-time drug dealer, the spirits of the Black Lodge replayed the eruption of the atomic in 1945. My response is not a boredom with the direction of the narrative. It is, in fact, far from it. After seeing Cooper essentially resurrect Laura Palmer from death, I was noticeably moved by her return to life as tears of relief streamed down my face. As she unceremoniously disappeared into darkness never to be seen again, my tears quickly turned to those of panic and dread. Where she had gone and why? Answering these questions was of great interest to me by the time Cooper began driving. Clearly, I was already affectively involved and engaged with the narrative.

In fact, this reaction is precisely a result of my previous investment in the narrative. For an extended period of time, *The Return* functions as a window into the daily lives of a group of seemingly disparate people who occasionally bump up against a supernatural force that appears to have an autonomy of its own. A quarreling married couple stops their bickering after the husband's head is suddenly bitten off by a transparent demon in one episode. In another, a comatose man is convinced to buy a pie for a casino kingpin by a floating ball of yellow light. Built up for over a dozen episodes, most of the show presents characters going about their day-to-day lives, struggling with issues like the goings-on at the Roadhouse every night, a divorced couple considering a reconnection, and an ex-doctor selling shovels on his podcast. These appear mundane in comparison to the potential corruption of humanity by BOB. Usually, these characters would repeat this cycle or die. These deaths often end storylines in unceremonious ways; Richard Horne is electrocuted by lightning after assisting Mr. C, ending a potential redemption arc. The drama of an abusive relationship involving the daughter of a Shelley Johnson ends after Stephen Burnett disappears during a bad drug trip. William Hastings is absconded by a supernatural force, ending a complicated dynamic he held with his wife involving money and a divorce.

Further, major storylines that span the duration of the entire series are left at a similarly abbreviated point by the time the final episode begins. Big Ed and Norma, after decades of romantic tension suddenly decide to wed. Sarah Palmer becomes possessed by a demon in the middle of an emotional breakdown and sits alone in her home. Bobby continues to long for Shelley's affection without resolution for either party. After Mr. C, the primary antagonist of the series, is killed, there is still time to continue the stories of those the audience has been following.

The series primarily served as a murder mystery with a general interest in catching Palmer's killer, but it also worked as a small-town soap opera, a collection of intertwining stories of lost love and crime that unraveled and changed as a result of her murder. Teenagers living in Twin Peaks fell in and out of love without Palmer's magnetic

personality standing in the way. Plans to change the ownership of a local sawmill escalated because of a shift in the demeanor of the town. Demons and spirits that lived in the surrounding woods became more active following Laura Palmer's death. Their possessions of human bodies eventually caused the deaths of Maddy Ferguson, Windom Earle, and Josie Packard.

Now, 25 years later, the shockwaves of her death are still felt throughout the town, as few of these interpersonal, corporate, and supernatural issues have been wrapped up in the 25 years that separate the second and the third seasons. With Norma's prospect of a franchised diner, James still traveling around the country in an attempt to find his place in the world, and the Black Lodge still occasionally abducting a Twin Peaks resident or two, few people or entities have progressed over the years. While most of the new conflicts belong to a new generation, they appear similar to the ones that impacted those in the first two seasons. Shelley Johnson was in a toxic relationship and now her daughter has fallen victim to a similar drug-addicted criminal who beats and abuses her. Janey-E, like Big Ed before her, has fallen into a loveless marriage and an emotional rut.

The solution *The Return* offers is to reverse all of the character's problems, to take the most basic wish fulfillment of the characters and the viewers and satisfy it: to make everything return to a more innocent time. To save Laura from dying in the first place. Without Palmer's death, most of the characters return to a more blissfully simple time. Her parents would not have lost a daughter, her classmates would not have to face the hard truths of their strained relationships with Laura, and local law enforcement would continue to not worry about the influences of supernatural beings that rape and control young women.

Throughout the season, the "good" supernatural beings who inhabit the show such as MIKE, The Fireman, The Woodsmen, and The Evolution of The Arm conspire to move Cooper through one convoluted situation after another in order to have a corporeal being to send back in time to save Laura from being initially murdered. Cooper is trapped in the nearly comatose body of a man named Dougie Jones after leaving the Black Lodge, stranding him with nothing to do for almost ten entire episodes. Cooper is prompted to buy a pie for gangsters so they will fall in love with him and eventually provide him with quick transport to Twin Peaks. Freddy Sykes is told by The Fireman to purchase a rubber glove and wear it everyday in order to obtain superhuman strength. This power eventually becomes essential in the fight against BOB. These seemingly random obstacles and silly solutions litter the path to this goal, some that momentarily help to improve the lives of individuals and some that make them more cruel. A put-upon house wife, Janey-E, is able to have a loving husband for a few weeks, but a child is run over by a truck. The ramifications of this divine plan help and hurt. Instead of asking its characters to fully work through their grief,

Cooper, led on a strange and complicated divine plan that allows him to move through time, essentially “fixes” the problem, saving Laura from her death. Theoretically, the future is changed for the better.

Instead, the entirety of the world appears different, not just in the appearances and interests of the protagonists. What was once was a plethora of unique motivations presented through a quirky up-beat soundtrack, wacky performances, and off-kilter humor has become emotionally flat. The final episode of *Twin Peaks* is devoid of any overt character motivation, as Cooper refuses to explain the rationale behind any of his choices and interests. His once charismatic and charming presence has become that of a pale-faced, silent, and stoic onlooker. His conflict may exist, but it is presented with no apparent flair, no interest in appealing to the possible investment of an audience. There is little to no conversation had. Instead, there is silent driving.

The Role of Narrative

The structure and emotional impact of a narrative is frequently cited as being tied to excess, but the specifics of this belief are not consistent among excess theorists. Heath defines excess as that which does not have narrative function, using examples from films that largely adhere to a streamlined and deliberate 1950s Hollywood filmmaking style. His justification for this is “narrative can never contain the whole film which permanently exceeds its fictions” (Heath 67). This essentially means that because narrative does not have the ability to justify everything that is presented in a film, the first step that must be taken when identifying excess is to consider what the narrative cannot contain or rationalize.³ Heath specifically references *Touch of Evil* as an example, specifically citing scenes that take place in Tanya’s apartment as containing excess because they “have no narrative function” (67).

While discussing *Ivan the Terrible*, Barthes claims the complexity and emotional impact of a plot on a viewer can determine the effect of excess: “The importance given to the narrative is necessary in order [for excess] to be understood in a society which... draws support from mythical (narrative) solutions” (63). He points out that society’s ability to consciously associate with morality tales, like *Ivan the Terrible*, depends on an audience’s ability to understand the basic informational meaning of a film. While all viewers can potentially come up with obvious meanings that are different in a variety of ways, the audience must be able to understand what is going on from scene to scene and why.

³ Thompson ultimately contradicts Heath’s theory by pointing out the potential ability of any viewer or critic to find a narrative function in any particular scene in the examples that he provides. According to Thompson, scenes could then be easily dismissed as not containing any excess if they contain portions of the narrative. Heath’s definition becomes easily refutable when any viewer could potentially argue what does or does not serve or exceed a narrative function. Essentially, his stance on the relevance of narrative turns excess into a debate not over feeling, but over the logistics of what might or might not be motivated within a scene.

Thompson disagrees with this stance, instead taking the position that the inaccessibility of a narrative is what relates to excess instead of narrative clarity. Thompson frequently lambasts the conventional analytical perspective that a narrative or formal technique that lacks a clear motivation is off-putting. She readily accepts the idea that some things in film go past what can be comfortably rationalized. Thompson, in fact, often refers to excess as that which exceeds motivation or the unifying forces, otherwise known as narrative and style, of a film: “the minute a viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works that do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning” (Thompson 290). To Thompson, the diet of classical narrative cinema that “ignores the material aspects of the artwork” has conditioned the majority of audiences to become uncomfortable with the idea of something exceeding the relevancy of a narrative (291). As a result, presenting something that may exceed the necessity of a plot would make most audiences prone to noticing excess.

Twin Peaks: The Return is able to simultaneously meet the criteria of both Heath and Thompson by presenting a scene that on its surface serves no integral relevance to the narrative and does not provide a clear motivation. Although both theorists apply their approaches to two very different types of films, both find value in the same thing: a narrative that intentionally alienates the viewer from what is being witnessed on-screen. Essentially, both theorists ask the viewer to actively consider their response to and relationship with the narrative; the viewer must be aware of their understanding of the plot and the relevance of scenes within the plot.

Again, what is most constantly considered is the impact the narrative will have on the viewer. In the case of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the audience is suddenly left with a contrast of dozens of intertwining plot lines that stop shortly only to be replaced by one storyline, one which is propelled forward by a man who actively refuses to explain his motivations to the people around him. During this final episode, Cooper exists in a timeline and space he is unfamiliar with and cannot relate to. Frequently, he sees things that quietly concern and unnerve him, but the viewer is not given the chance to understand why he feels disassociated and uncomfortable. After saving a woman from being sexually harassed, Cooper surveys his surroundings, gun in hand. Blankly surveying the room like a confused elderly man who has suddenly forgotten where he is, he awkwardly paces back and forth from the table to the fryer to his car. When Carrie Paige asks why a trip across the country is necessary, Cooper responds with a dismissive attitude: “It’s difficult to explain.” During the ensuing car ride to Twin Peaks, Cooper does not speak a single word to Carrie. The viewer is left with no clear viewpoint character, as Cooper, the protagonist, does not allow any understanding of where he plans on going, and Carrie, his passenger, shows an active disinterest in learning about the motivation behind the trip, unlike the audience. This nearly sequence of the two characters driving in the dark

lasts nearly four minutes. Audiences would have the ability to understand that the pair had moved from one area to another without showing so much of their trip. If one were to consider its relevance to the narrative, it is irrelevant.

I am left to consider what this absence of narrative clarity has emotionally left me with. More than anything else, it leaves a confused emptiness, a flatness that I do not associate with frustration or a lack of passion. I feel a void, a particular lack as I sit with these passionless people who, on the surface, appear distinctly removed from their lives, interests, and situation.

Barthes and Analysis

Similar to the relevance of narrative, Brinkema highlights the relevance of form when discussing affect. In the same way that technical tricks with cinematography, set design, and editing can be used to create an affective response, the same can be done with excess, the way it uses style to elicit sensations, and the possible ways to experience excess.

Barthes' parameters of viewing excess in film brings up the question of what element of the film the excessive emotion is associated with on a moment to moment basis. Barthes discusses excess as though it has one possible connotation and emotional reading when he references Euphrosyne as having skin that possesses a "heavy, ugly, dullness" while discussing *Ivan the Terrible* (Barthes 63). What if another viewer were to view the film, know her own experiences, and witness this woman not as repulsive, but as tragic? To Thompson, this moment does not contain an excessive quality that presents ugliness, though she also does not identify what she feels: "We may not agree that the texture of Efrosinia's skin has a 'heavy, ugly dullness.' The fact, however, that we can agree that it has some texture opens the possibility of analysis" (Thompson 292). The importance of the discourse surrounding excess lies more with the discussion of how to talk about it and how to find a value for it, not so much identifying the correct associated emotion.

Depending on the particular theorist, excess should be experienced in a particular manner. According to Barthes, this emotion should be analyzed by looking at a series of stills: "Imagine 'following' not... the character (as a diegetic entity or as a symbolic figure)... but only... that grimace, that black veil, the heavy, ugly, dullness of that skin. You will have another temporality... you will have another film" (63). Excess is complex and by experiencing it at 24 frames per second, we will be prevented from being able to properly analyze the plenitude of meaning in a signifier. Barthes calls this style of analysis wherein the viewer watches the film at the pace dictated by the filmmaker "horizontal analysis." The viewer will instead assign it an immediate signified and miss the excess altogether. This makes Barthes' offhanded claim to "look at Ivan's beard raised to [excess]" more problematic; excess becomes less of a phenomenon and more of an analytical technique (Barthes 63).

For example, The Arm's hooting in *Twin Peaks* would need to be experienced as a collection of stills the viewer could analyze at their own pace. Barthes would claim that to properly recognize the excess in the hooting, one would need to subvert the pace that Lynch has provided by presenting it in movement. If one were to look at The Arm's flapping hand, the viewer could theoretically see excess when The Arm's hand is pressed to his mouth in one still, but not see it when first looking at a still where The Arm does not have his hand on his mouth. The viewer would then need to take time to analyze at their own pace and reestablish the second image's connection with excess.

Horizontal analysis can make this emotion fleeting and can leave a residue of other emotions: "In Image VI, however, the obtuse meaning vanishes, leaving only a message of grief" (Barthes 57). After much further consideration of Image VI, Barthes comes to a new conclusion about the image: "In connection with the noble grief of the obvious meaning, [excess forms] a dialogism" (Barthes 57). When allowed to read the stills at his own pace, Barthes is able to reestablish the connection of Image VI to excess. This form of watching and considering film at your own pace is called vertical analysis, with which one could pause a film and continue to contemplate the image on screen so as to not miss any of the excess.⁴ While Barthes does not necessarily disavow film in motion as a way of experiencing excess, he does prefer it in a still form for purposes of excess analysis. The easiest way for this to happen with more contemporary technology would be to use the pause button and mull over the image.

In the finale of *Twin Peaks*, Lynch is able to incorporate the qualities of a vertical analysis into the format of a horizontal analysis by turning a scene into one with a minimalist style, one that holds no formal bombast or even much movement. Vertical analysis not only requires a pace that may be dictated by the participant, but a visual stillness. When Cooper and Carrie drive, they are presented mid-frame in a medium long shot, their bodies almost completely blocked by the hood of the vehicle, where only their shoulders and heads are visible in the darkness of their surroundings. As the low exposure makes the darkness of the car appear indistinguishable from that of the surroundings, the two seemingly hold still in an empty space. There is a visual simplicity to the presentation of the two, as they do not move their limbs, eyes, or mouths, quietly remaining passive for a scene that lasts four minutes in

⁴ To Thompson, images must be paired together and contrasted with one another within the filmic structure. She offers a counterpoint that suggests that because films are almost never viewed as a frame by frame dissection of the non-diegetic aspect of an image, a non-emotional analytical vacuum where objects within a film's structure exists for little reason beyond analysis, Barthes' parameters of discussing excess are flawed. To Thompson, excess occurs when the viewer notices "style for its own sake or [when they] watch works that do not provide such thorough motivation" (Thompson 290). In other words, excess needs something to exceed. Whether that be the structure of a film's narrative or its formal structure, something must be pushed past for the sake of contrasting the comparatively conventional "obvious meaning" or the informational meaning. This makes Barthes' offhanded claim to "look at Ivan's beard raised to [excess]" more problematic; excess becomes less of a phenomenon and more of an analytical technique (Barthes 63).

duration. Beyond the presentation of the scene, the performances are removed from any sense of attachment and involvement, with soundlessly blank expressions that do not connote a lack of interest, but a lack of emotion that exceeds placidity. In this immobile state, the frame appears nearly entirely static for an extended period of time, providing the opportunity for the viewer to vertically analyze.

Instead of being presented as one long continuous shot that lasts four minutes, allowing the viewer to fully indulge in the excess, Lynch presents the darkness as one recurring shot that lasts roughly thirty seconds in a sequence whenever it is presented. Cooper and Carrie can be made distinguishable from their surroundings when they are shown in profile, the brightness of the car's lights making the outlines of their faces distinct from the dark exterior of the car. Cooper's face is sometimes solely shown, as well as Carrie's. The lanes of the road can be seen speeding by from the car's headlights. The couple and the darkness are not the viewer's only image. During this period of time, both the informational and easiest of obvious meanings are made blatantly clear. From the extended period of time the characters are shown moving towards their destination, the viewer would certainly be able to understand their method of transportation and the length of their travel. The obvious meaning of a descent into evil and despair is made plain. The extended period of time the two are motionless on screen gives the viewer time to process these meanings to the fullest extent. With the first two meanings essentially mastered by the time the medium wide shot returns, the viewer is given an opportunity to sit with the original, distinct stillness that encapsulates both characters for an extended period of time, increasing the chances they will notice the third meaning, excess.

Where Are We Left?

Contrasted with the previous episode, where a flying ball of energy is battled by a man determined to fist-fight wearing a sacred single glove and Cooper is sent back in time with a mixture of formally audaciously nauseating editing and sound design that mimics the whizzing and humming of a collapsing factory, this sequence removes the momentum of the narrative and the propulsive energy of the style. I am left with not with a blankness, but a lack of affect. The film elicits a response that halts all emotion, but does not cause confusion or a disappointment. It is simultaneously calming and deadening. I ask that instead of recognizing that we have been left with this excess, we consider why have we been made to experience it in this manner.

As viewers, we have been led down a path that appeared to lead to something grand and fulfilling. Having been presented with so many individuals with unique stories and personalities that were impacted by the benevolent divinity of such odd supernatural creatures, we perhaps expected something more. Maybe an environment that feels lighter, brighter, and more alive. Devoid of the misery so many of these characters felt, the appearance of the show

could maybe change from one so bright and colorful to one even more rhapsodically beautiful, brimming with the unbridled happiness and life of people who haven't a care in the world. Instead, nobody is recognizable in an environment that appears slightly duller, but not overtly. Maybe the sky is more grey than it used to be, but not distinctly. All evil supernatural beings are gone, but nobody is recognizable, as known characters have become unfamiliar and new. Cooper's name has been changed to Richard, Diane's has been changed to Linda, and Laura Palmer's has been changed to Carrie Paige. This implies that all of the other characters in *Twin Peaks* have had their lives and personalities erased, invalidated. And still their woes live on in new forms. Townspeople still hurt each other in this new world. Old couples still reunite and disconnect. Burly men still hurt unassuming women like before. Young women continue to force themselves into violent situations. After all the effort and investment, the world may have changed slightly, but not enough has been changed.

With this void the excess has instilled in me from this drive, I consider what all of this effort was for. What was this elongated endeavor in the name of? It certainly did not improve anyone's lives, as they had all been wiped clean, not even destroyed, but invalidated. The supernatural creatures in *Twin Peaks* do not make their intentions known out loud, but the viewer is consistently meant to have faith in their all-encompassing apparent autonomy of intent. They are divine, benevolent, and often kind. They must know what they are doing, yet the pit in my stomach, the void of emotion I experience convinces me otherwise. Perhaps, there is a disconnect between what the everyday common folk care about and wish for and what divinity has in store for the populous. These are the ideas and the feelings that I consider as a result of the excess.

These thoughts can be most closely aligned with those of Gnosticism, a dualistic theology that highlights the inherent flaws in the concept of divinity, or a perfect world. To the Gnostics, reality is a never-ending battle between the Monad, the supreme good of the world, and the demiurge, the gnostic representation of evil. What is unique about Gnosticism is its disinterest in seeing the fall of the demiurge at the hands of the Monad; they instead hope for the prevailing influence of the Monad over the demiurge. To gnostics, light cannot exist without a darkness to contrast with. Perfection is inherently impossible, as conflict is a constant, a through line of reality that cannot be removed. What would the implications of these ideas brought out by the excess in *Twin Peaks* be?

The outlook on what is conventionally good and bad in *Twin Peaks* becomes inherently changed. After the divine plan is completed, the world is still violent and depraved. Carrie Paige is implied to have murdered a man and innocent waitresses are sexually assaulted in public. If anything has changed, crimes are slightly more prevalent on the streets, in restaurants, and other public areas, as opposed to the violence of the previous episodes which were often contained to private arenas. Yet, the supernatural has seemingly abandoned the world. Where there was once

an abundance of supernatural activity, there is now none. The idea of progress is gone. If the divine plan that was supposedly meant to solve all of the world's problems does not entirely correct the woes of a society, perhaps the disconnect between our concerns and the concerns of the supernatural are not only incompatible, but dissimilar. To the supernatural beings, people may be hurt in the name of the divine plan, as dozens of people (including children) die at the hands of their actions. As a contrast, characters grieve and mourn over deaths and loss; violence still impacts them negatively.

On the surface, Gnosticism presents a reluctance towards indulging in the results of divinity. Self-determination and self-reliance become key traits, as there is no guarantee that something beyond one's own control can account for the future turning out for the brighter. Yet, this belief appears to lack a hope for or belief in the idea of perfection. Inherently, the darkness must be included in order for reality to be made whole. Does this ultimately make excuses for bad things to happen? Perhaps, but it is not a defeatist position, as good people continue to try and do good in the world.

Prior to *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the series has laid dormant for 26 years, having concluded with Dale Cooper being trapped in the Black Lodge and Laura Palmer, despite her pain in life, going to a better place in death. On the surface, this ending is not meant as happy, but it is meant as a conclusion, a recognition that bad can happen from good and vice versa. The idea that good must come with bad is consistent within Lynch's vision of *Twin Peaks*, but *The Return* attempts to follow this vision to a further conclusion if one was removed from the equation.

Further discussion of whether this symptomatic meaning is one that should be respected and upheld as a strong way of considering spirituality is debatable, but now a conversation can be held. Excess can, by proxy, be critiqued on the merits of the symptomatic meanings that can be found as a result of it.

Issues that Remain

The subjectivity of excess is precisely what will continue to distance even more observant film viewers. Excess theorists have always recognized the abstruse nature of excess as the major hurdle to get past when introducing the theory: "For critics, [the recognition of excess] means the realization that they need to talk about those aspects of the work that are usually ignored because they don't fit into a tight analysis" (Thompson 291). Even after the application of a vertical reading, excess will remain abstruse, as it requires a recognition that it exists in the first place. Excess is inherently a more difficult phenomenon to merely identify let alone analyze than the obvious meaning. Still, there is a humility involved in the identification of excess. It involves recognition that even though a difficult feeling can be associated with a symptomatic meaning, some things in a work are beyond direct interpretation.

The inability to practice viewing in this way likely comes from the precept that great art must be a unified whole that creates a perfect order.

In most cases, excess is tied to an intense level of awareness of both narrative, form, and the ability to be moved by formal techniques that transcends meaning. Only those who possess this ability can recognize, let alone criticize, its existence: “[Excess] is not to be found not everywhere, but somewhere... in a certain manner of reading ‘life’ and so ‘reality’ itself” (Barthes 60). The theory exceeds the notion of meaning and asks the spectator to think about their *experience* with a text, not just their ability to identify an interpretation. This is an ability that most viewers and some critics will lack and unfortunately the inaccessible nature of excess could have it labeled as an inherently elitist phenomenon, as though only the gifted would be able to understand.

The inherently subjective nature of excess will also inevitably lead to the question of what does and does not signify as excess, as well as the emotion that can be associated with the excess. As Thompson has mentioned when discussing Barthes’ writing, “We may not agree that the texture of Efrosinia’s skin has a ‘heavy, ugly dullness.’ The fact, however, that we can agree that it has some texture opens the possibility of analysis” (Thompson 292). Thompson’s sentiment may hold true for beginning a conversation, as analysis is made possible, but this point could potentially direct excess theory to a dead end. The possibility arises that theorists will reach an impasse over an inability to agree on the supposedly “proper” identification and emotion associated with the excess. If Barthes references scenes as having the ability to hold informational, obvious, and obtuse meanings, we are theoretically left with limitless possibilities to find excess and discuss excess, but we also run the risk of discovering a discourse where everything is so subjective that no progress can be made.

This impasse is the unfortunate result of the perpetual presence of reader-response criticism in excess theory. The identification of excess might reveal more about the critic than the film itself; the “I” cannot be removed. For example, Barthes frequently observes excess in relation to those in a position of power in *Ivan the Terrible*: “[Ivan’s beard] declares its article but without in so abandoning the ‘good faith’ of its referent (the historical figure of the czar)” (Barthes 58). This penchant for observing excess as being connected to the powerful could be impacted by Barthes’ own thematic interests. Barthes makes his admiration for the work of Sergei Eisenstein clear in “The Third Meaning.” When referencing the obvious meaning, Barthes lauds Eisenstein as a Soviet filmmaker inherently interested in revolution. A theorist that possesses less of an interest in this particular theme could potentially find excess in separate places.

At the core of the conversation, beyond the hand-wringing over the relevance of narrative and form to the role of excess, is a phenomenon that Barthes, the writer who started the discourse around excess theory, referenced

as being beyond words. More than any other reason, Barthes wrote against attempting to find a language for excess because it is an inherently personal experience. With, perhaps, an appropriately talented descriptive writer, the experience of excess could be accurately detailed, but the quality that makes it so involving would be removed and the appeal would be limited. It is, by its nature, more than words can encapsulate.

Still, my approach should not ultimately fall victim to what Barthes fears excess will be turned into. Sontag, a writer whose belief that intellection cannot account for all elements of a work was similar to Barthes', often fought against critics bestowing on art the need to justify itself. When discussing *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), Sontag reminds the audience that the urge towards interpretation should be resisted: "What matters in *Marienbad* is the pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy of some of its images, and its rigorous if narrow solutions to certain problems of cinematic form" (9). With Sontag, an indulgence in what the form can make the viewer feel is privileged, not what the form can be interpreted as saying. Like Sontag, I do not suggest a way of taming excess by directly associating a meaning to it. Rather, I consider what the "pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy of some of its images" leads me feel. From there, I consider what it means that I am asked to feel this way.

The experience of allowing an image to hold me beyond the effects of its obvious meaning can still impact me, even after I consider what the felt emotion has taught me. As I consider the implications of my feelings about seeing darkness that blends Cooper and Carrie together, I still feel and I am still held by a feeling that exceeds language. Even if the context of the emotion that excess presents to me leads me to new avenues of thought, I can still be held by the emotion itself. The same can be said for *The Arm's* hooting and much of the rest of Lynch's filmography. The conversation around excess simply cannot stop with the praise of being led towards something so unique. Excess is not above discussion.

Moving Forward

Excess comes from the act of viewing film, inherently linking it to phenomenology. According to Vivian Sobchack, this branch of discourse can be briefly summarized as a "reflection upon the general structures that always emerge particularly and contingently as the entailment of the lived-body and the world" (8). Essentially, it encompasses the experiences and consciousness of the viewer and considers how they may impact one's experience with a film. Plainly, this description encapsulates excess and as a field it may provide a strong opportunity for further expansion on the parameters and limits of excess as a discourse. This paper's discussion of excess has focused on the ways that both formal style and narrative can help to bring out excess. If one were more invested in the ways that excess can be brought out through stylistic and formal means, one would likely look towards phenomenology, specifically Sobchack's "The Address of the Eye," which is concerned with discussing the aesthetics of phenome-

nology through a discussion of film theory. As has been previously mentioned, affect theory, like phenomenology, taps into the essential characteristic of excess: the analysis and critique of where emotions in film can take us. For a further discussion of the role of emotions in the discussion of affect, I would recommend the work of Carl Plantinga, specifically “Moving Viewers” as it actively attempts to move away from a psychoanalytic approach and focuses on a rhetorical approach.

For the purpose of further research, I would recommend that readers look at the work of directors that produce films which could easily be analyzed in a vertical manner within a horizontal context. This would involve films that present their narratives in a flattened manner. A story is still being told, but moments are given permission to linger. On a narrative level, I would recommend the work of Michelangelo Antonioni, a filmmaker who often presents stories that feature characters that lack an immediate goal that can be clearly understood throughout the film. The distinction between what is of central importance in the protagonist’s life and what is peripheral begins to disintegrate as conversations between people are given as much time as wandering in oppressive environments.

Antonioni’s work is often affectively placid and still enough to work within the context of a vertical analysis within a horizontal context. If one were looking for a filmmaker that more encompasses the style needed for a vertical analysis, I would look at the work of Andrei Tarkovsky, a filmmaker who frequently holds on the stillness of immobile characters and inanimate objects for extended periods of time. Without the movement, the viewer is able to dictate their own analytical pace.

Even if this approach that emphasizes the importance of a symptomatic meaning does remove some of the luster around the experience of excess, it will have been for the greater good. In the name of a deeper consideration of the implications of what a film is presenting, the beauty of excess should be subverted, but not tamed to the point that it cannot still impact. I do not ask for a full rationalization of what we cannot immediately understand, but I do ask for deeper consideration than blanket praise.

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