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LES REVENANTS

Zombie-horror, true crime, Or French avant-garde?
Andrew McCallum examines the 'genre disruption'
in *Les Revenants*

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Les *Revenants* (Season 1, 2012), a French language TV drama that translates as 'The Returned' is a classic example of what we might call 'genre disruption'. Genre disruption is akin to Todorov's notion of narrative disruption, a key driver in maintaining audience interest. It self-consciously explores how a text breaks the 'equilibrium' of traditional genre conventions, while still paying attention to them. It drives audience engagement by challenging their expectations and also by presenting them with an experience that is simultaneously familiar and radically new. How, a viewer might ask, will the ruptures to this genre be resolved?

Les Revenants sits most obviously within the zombie-horror genre. Starting with an exploration of how this genre is both drawn on and disrupted is key to understanding the show's effect.

Episode 1 (the sole focus of this article) sees a number of children, all of whom drowned in a lake in a coach crash, returning to their home town in the French Alps, four years after their deaths. In zombie fashion, they are the 'living dead', or the 'undead'. There are no explanations as to why they have returned, but the episode is infused with horror tropes sitting alongside the zombie ones. For example, towards the beginning a butterfly comes back to life and smashes through a glass display case; and electrical lights flicker and go out when the returning children pass by. The town itself is presented in zombie apocalypse terms. Its streets, shot in washed out film stock, are almost entirely deserted, but for the returnees. Concrete modernist structures sit incongruously within the Alpine setting, as though abandoned to nature. The



Les Revenants (2012)



living are either alone in their own homes or clustered together, in one case as a literal group of survivors – the left-behind parents of the dead children, gathered together for therapy.

Disruptions to standard zombie-horror tropes are immediately apparent, though. First, the children, while a little pale, look almost exactly as they did when they died. No decaying flesh here. They speak as they used to and have no idea that four years have elapsed since they were last seen or, indeed, that their coach crashed. They have a craving for food rather than human flesh, and they still exhibit human emotions.

Other genres also come into play. For example, a barmaid, Lucy, is stabbed to death in an underpass in an attack more suited to crime than zombie. Her attacker uses a knife and appears human rather than undead. The incident raises the possibility that there will be a standard

Watch the avant-garde opening sequence on artofthetitle.com



Victor and his mother in *Les Revenants*



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Simon, who died a decade ago returning to his fiancée Adele and the daughter he never met

murder hunt alongside an exploration of why the children have come back. Viewers assume the two must be linked in some way, but there appears to be an incongruity at work. How do crime and zombie genres fit together? How will this particular disruption be resolved?

There are also typically French avant-garde moments. The butterflies escaping from the display case seem to represent more than just horror; we get shots in the opening credits of dead stags floating in the town's lake; and we return several times to shots of the town's concrete dam. Taken together, these images suggest that *Les Revenants* belongs to the genre of poetic realism. Developed by French filmmakers in the 1930s, poetic realism relies on a heightened, aestheticised idea of the real, often drawing attention to representational aspects of a narrative. The butterflies, stags and dam all symbolise a liminal (in-between) state, just like the returned children who exist between life and death. Butterflies transition from pupae into their final form; the stags are suspended, lifelike, in the water; the dam holds water on one side, land on the other.

The various genre disruptions allow the show to ask bigger questions of its audience than standard genre offerings might. On one level, these questions are at the level of genre itself. It's impossible to watch without being aware that genre is being played with and so, as a viewer, you begin to reflect on the limits and

possibilities of working within and disrupting familiar forms. The possibilities are existential too: how do these particular genre disruptions allow for reflections on aspects of life itself?

Significantly, the lifelike appearance and behaviour of the returned enables a complex exploration of the psychological effects on parents of losing a child. Episode 1 focuses in large part on a girl called Camille. We know that her mother has not fully recovered from her loss when we see her in Camille's bedroom, sitting in front of a shrine made of photographs and sentimental objects. When Camille enters the house as though not a day has passed since she died, her mother exhibits a series of emotions, one of which is happiness at her daughter's return.

Here *Les Revenants* slips into what might be called the 'lost children' genre, in which children who once disappeared are reunited with their families after a period of time has elapsed. In returning, the children fulfil their parents' desires, but viewers know that the final outcome is unlikely to be positive.

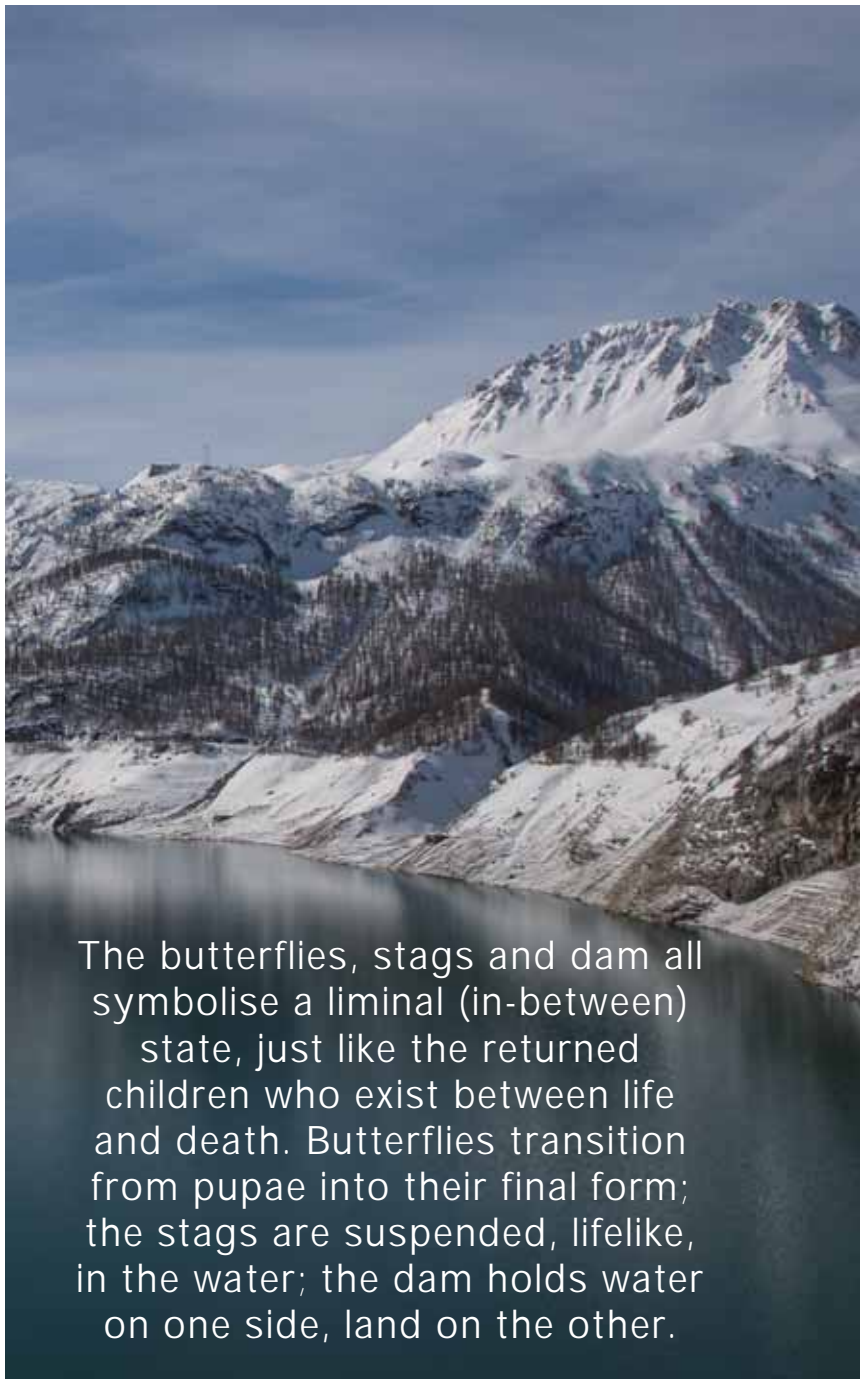
There is even an overlap here with 'true crime'. Real-world child abductions and disappearances generate huge media coverage. The most widely reported in the UK was that of 3-year-old Madeleine McCann. She disappeared from her bedroom while on holiday with her parents in Portugal in 2007 and has never been seen since. Her image, though, still appears

in print and on screen, so preserving her at the same point in time across decades. The popular press plays with this further by periodically producing computer-generated 'reconstructions' of what she might look like now if she really were still alive, an actual if remote possibility. Any lost child returning to parents would resemble their reconstruction, rather than their disappeared self. Their return would also be infused with dread: what happened to them in the intervening years? Are they forever damaged? How can they possibly settle back into family life?

Les Revenants cleverly manages to juxtapose the child at the time of disappearance with the 'reconstructed' child several years on. The Camille who returns is about 14, as she was when she died; her twin sister, Lena, who was not on the coach, is four years older. Both are hugely distressed when they come face-to-face: the disruption in their own sense of time and identity matching the various genre disruptions experienced by viewers. Lena is a troubled young woman, a heavy drinker and sexually promiscuous. We learn at the end of episode one that she is, in a way, responsible for her sister's death. She missed the school trip so that she could sleep with a boy whom Camille was in love with. Drawing on another horror trope, that of twins communicating telepathically, Camille becomes agitated as Lena nears orgasm. She rushes to the front of the coach and distracts the driver, in part, causing the crash. Lena is presented as the kind of troubled child who might return several years after an abduction. Camille represents the innocent, pre-abducted child.

If this reading feels a little far-fetched, it's worth comparing *Les Revenants* with the English television drama, *The Missing*, particularly series two, in which an abducted girl apparently returns to her family several years after her disappearance, with highly disruptive consequences. In style and visual effect, *The Missing* clearly draws on *Les Revenants*. It uses the same washed out film stock and features similarly modernist architecture. The returning girl, bedraggled and malnourished, even looks like a zombie. Given the children in *Les Revenants* don't look like zombies, *The Missing* is perhaps engaging in some genre disruption of its own. It primarily draws on crime tropes, but overlaying these with zombie horror disrupts a standard reading, allowing for more sophisticated storytelling and a more complex audience experience.

Genre disruption might also be read as a 'deconstructive' strategy, an aspect of



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postmodernism by which the underlying structures of a text are teased apart and laid bare. The brilliance of *Les Revenants* lies in how it offers a sophisticated exploration – and deconstruction – of genre, while at the same time providing high-quality entertainment. It's a brilliant show, well worth watching over the length of the series to see how and if its many genre disruptions are resolved.

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