

# THE RETURNED AND THE DEPARTED

## The living and the dead in the TV series *The Leftovers* and *Les Revenants*

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UDK 218:791.43–252  
791.43–252:218

### *Sometimes they come back. An Introduction*

With many differences and nuances, the theme of the coexistence of the living and the dead is common to the mythology of all human societies, because not defining death would lead to a meaningless life.

However in modern times a new consciousness on this theme seems to have arisen. As the sociologist S. Brancato writes, contrary to what happened in the ancient world, “the ghost that appears to the modern subject brings with it a load of fear, investing the image of the past of a lacerating value of loss and bewilderment, an unprocessed grief”<sup>1</sup> Modernity creates ghosts, “which become visible in the feeling of anguish of a discontinuous world and an individual doomed to finiteness”.<sup>2</sup> From Hamlet to the recent famous TV series, Brancato states, the ghost is properly defined as the disturbing, that feeling of fear induced by something “that is at once familiar and strange, or in a situation that confuses the man about his ability to navigate the world and therefore to recognize it completely”.<sup>3</sup>

This phenomenon is quite clear, for example, in American fiction from the last twenty years. On the threshold of the new millennium, indeed, a TV shows relies on a more substantial budget and needs to satisfy a more prudent consumer: it cannot be a simple product anymore. “It must be a complex product, somewhat mysterious, so as to keep the watcher’s atten-

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1 S. Brancato, *Fantasmata della modernità. Oggetti, luoghi e figure dell'industria culturale*, Ip-ermedium libri, Caserta 2014, 9.

2 *Ibidem*, 9–10.

3 *Ibidem*, 15–16. See also A. Saggiaro, “I vivi, i morti e le linee del destino umano” in Aa. Vv, *Cinema e religioni*, Carrocci, Roma 2010.

tion, and so dense that it requires an unknown number of viewings in order to be digested”.<sup>4</sup>

The themes become more profound and complex, too. Since the early 90s, the protagonist of overseas drama becomes the indecent, mysterious and dangerous part of America: “the supernatural and the unusual insinuate strongly in the collective imaginery and the fantasy genre imposes itself as a key tool to interpret a fragmented and unencodable reality”.<sup>5</sup>

Especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, American television stories — but the same topics are gaining ground also in UK series, to mention just one example — respond to the existential anxieties of the start of millennium by preferring some strong themes, which are “essential and profoundly original”.<sup>6</sup> A particularly important place among these is occupied by the last taboo of Western society, that of death and the dead,<sup>7</sup> and a huge number of series base their narratives on this subject, a “palingnetic element of all time narratives”.<sup>8</sup>

We must emphasize, however, that the almost absesive attention that American fiction dedicates to this issue couldn’t have been generated if not as a legacy of Christian culture.<sup>9</sup>

On this matter F. Borkenau claims that at the heart of the Christian religion, in a similar way to the Middle East culture that preceded it, is what he calls “the challenge to death”.<sup>10</sup> From a Christian perspective, death is not an accident, nor an obstacle to faith: it is, on the contrary, completely

4 C. Freccero, “È la rivoluzione, bellezza” in A. Sepinwall, *Telerivoluzione*, BUR, Milano, 16.

5 A. Sigismondi, “La breccia nella schermo” in *Link idee per la televisione*, RTI, Milano 2007, 184.

6 Cf., S. Brancato, “Le narrazioni post-seriali. Il mondo nuovo della fiction tv” in Aa.Vv, *Post-serialità*, 35. For further reading see also Aa. Vv, “The Wire e gli altri: l’America nelle sue serie TV” in Acomà. *Rivista internazionale di Studi Nordamericani*, n.3 anno XIX, Bergamo 2012; L. Bandirali — E.Terrone, *Filosofia delle Serie TV. Dalla scena del crimine al trono di spade*, Mimesis, Milano 2012, 65–212.

7 *Ibidem*, 35–36.

8 *Ibidem*. Also fundamental, on the relationship between death and its TV representation, is Aa. Vv, *La felicità eterna. La rappresentazione della morte in TV e nei media* in A. Abruzzese — A. C. Scalamonti (ed.), RAI–NuovaERI, 1992.

9 For futher reading about the relationship between religion, Christian imagery and popular culture in the US, see Aa. Vv. *Religion in the United States*, Universitätsverlag Winter 2011; Aa. Vv. *Apocalypse soon? Religion and popolar culture in the United States*, Lit Verlag, 2012; H. Bloom, *La religione americana : l’avvento della nazione post-cristiana*, Garzanti, Milano 1994; also useful: R. Curti, *Demoni e dei : Dio, il diavolo, la religione nel cinema horror americano*, Lindau, Torino 2009.

10 F. Borkenau, “Il concetto della morte” in Aa. Vv, *Il “senso” della morte. Contributi per una sociologia della morte* A. C. Scalamonti (ed.), Liguori Editore, Napoli 1984, 133. See also N. Smart, *La morte nella tradizione Giudaico-Cristiana* in Aa. Vv, *Il “senso” della morte. Contributi per una sociologia della morte* A. C. Scalamonti (ed.), Liguori Editore, Napoli 1984, 105–111.

integrated in the belief in salvation and in the ultimate triumph. Furthermore, according to Borkenau, the real big difference between Christianity and Greek–Roman culture is the cult of the dead. This, in fact, overturns the traditional mentality according to which there are unsurmountable boundaries between men and gods and death doesn't open the way to an eternal afterlife dimension, but rather digs an unbridgeable gulf between mortals and immortals.<sup>11</sup> Again according to Borkenau, finally, as a result of this influence the post–modern era has produced something new. Once suppressed the Christian faith in the immortality of the soul, as a result of secularization, the post–modern man seems unable to go back — as one would expect, according to Borkenau — to a more rational vision, the simple acceptance of death.<sup>12</sup> This difficulty is generated by virtue of the fact that, even if the post–modern and post–Christian man has cut off the legacies of the tradition that preceded him, he is still unable to get rid of the Christian idea that life is nothing without immortality.<sup>13</sup> Hence the relentless pursuit “of a higher, somehow transcendent entity, where to melt into so as to forget personal mortality”.<sup>14</sup>

Nowadays the movies and, even more, TV, are accustoming us to plots that deal with the world of the dead. To rephrase the very–well known title of a tale by Stephen King — *Sometimes they come back* (1978) — we have to admit that lately, on TV or in the movies, the dead tend to come back quite often. Vampires, zombies and ghosts recently started haunting the small and the big screen. It is important to remark that TV series have dealt with the relationship between the living and the dead not only through the lens of the supernatural, the gothic and the horrific: think for example of the importance of this theme in series like *Six Feet Under* or *C.S.I.*, medical dramas like *ER* and *Dr. House*, up to Steven Soderbergh's *The Knick*.

Even without entering the world of supernatural, often the exploration of an original theme as that of the relationship between the living and the dead is not resolved on the field of the supernatural or transcendent. That higher, somehow transcendent entity, into which we all want to melt according to Borkenau, takes instead the very concrete form of everything that shapes our daily life: relationships between people, family or workplace ties.

With no claim to completeness, this paper has the aim of analyzing two among those TV series that recently addressed the theme of the relationship between the living and the dead in a very clever and stimulating way: *Les Revenants* and in particular in *The Leftovers*. They need to be considered

11 *Ibidem*, 134.

12 *Ibidem*, 135.

13 *Ibidem*.

14 *Ibidem*.

together because their approaches are somewhat complementary, with the dead being respectively impossibly far and too close to the world of the living.

### *Les Revenants*

The first season of *Les Revenants* — which counted eight episodes and was inspired by Robin Campillo's movie of the same name from 2006 — was broadcasted by Canal + (France) in 2014<sup>15</sup> and is set in an imaginary town near a dam in the French mountains. There, people come back to their houses and families, years after their death. They seem to be unaware of being dead, or of the causes of their death; and the reason of their coming back is unknown. The pivot around which the story revolves, then, is the relationship that is established between the returned and their loved ones that are still alive. Additionally, a contribution to the narrative comes from the mystery linked to the dam above the town. In the past the town was the scene of a tragedy: a flaw in the old dam caused a flood that submerged the village. At the time when the story of the series is set, the appearance of the returned is followed by a gradual decline in the water level of the new dam. Note that the whole series plays on the water element: already in the beautiful theme song, in fact, the water surface is the mirror in which the worlds of the living and the dead are mutually reflected.

But why would the dead return among the living? If a long tradition considers this return as a result of negligence in burial rituals, or of missing remembrance, neither of these seems to be the cause of the dead's reappearance in *Les Revenants*. Also excluded is the need to restore a moral order; among the *Revenants*, indeed, there is also a serial killer, Serge, who will come back to life only to start again his attacks and savage killings of young women. The only common element of those who return is the fact of having been torn from life prematurely, leaving the loved ones unable to accept the disappearance, tormented by grief and guilt. If the Christian imagination sees the return of the dead among the living as a mark of the beginning of the *eschaton* and the imminence of the kingdom of God, in *Les Revenants* the return of the dead has no pacifying consequence, nor it restores any kind of order or balance; rather, it seems to imply a compulsion to repeat the past with all its errors, so that the protagonists of the show seem to enter some kind of time loop with no escape. Any attempt at a conciliation seems to be futile and ends dramatically. In the case of this series, the dead do not just return from the past: rather, they bring the past with them, and any partial

15 La seconda stagione si è appena conclusa in Francia

redemption or reconciliation proves hopeless when the dead leave the living once again without any explanation; meanwhile, though, the past has already irrevocably transformed the city and its inhabitants.

In the last episode, which has the meaningful title *La Horde* (all the previous episodes bore the name of a dead person who returned to life) the dead themselves will try to restore the natural order of existence, but the refusal of the living will have catastrophic consequences: the city will be submerged by the waters again in a repetition of the ancient tragedy — a symbol of how the past has finally swallowed the present, by dragging the city and its inhabitants beyond the surface that used to separate the two worlds.

### *The Leftovers*

Although refined and innovative, we can still consider *Les Revenants* as belonging to the zombie genre. The success of the French series has not gone unnoticed, and it originated the US remake *The Returned*, developed by Carlton Cuse for A&E network, or the equally similar *Resurrection*, for the ABC network; both — and especially *Resurrection* — are rich in eschatological themes, even if unable to emulate the atmosphere of the French series.

*The Leftovers*, created by Damon Lindeloff — already co-creator of *Lost* — and Tom Perrotta (author of the book of the same name), is more ambitious and somewhat symmetrical. The first season was aired in the summer of 2014 by the US network HBO. This work focuses on the first season, while the second season is currently being aired in the US.

*The Leftovers* starts on October 14th of an unspecified year of our times, when 2% of the world population (that is, 140 million people) suddenly vanish into thin air without a trace and without any obvious explanation. The plot of this first season starts three years after the “sudden departure” and focuses on the personal lives of a few residents of Mapleton, a fictional small town near New York.

To create the world of *The Leftovers*, the authors drew inspiration from the so-called “rapture of the church”, a theological doctrine elaborated by the Anglican clergyman John Darby (1800–1892) at the turn of the nineteenth century. Darby elaborated this theory from the fourth chapter of the first letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians (4, 16–17), where the start of the *eschaton* is marked by the heavenly rapture of the community of those who believe in Christ; but especially in the light of Luke chapter 17: the day of the revelation of the Son of God, where there will be two men, “the one shall be taken and the other left”. According to Darby, those who remain will undergo a period of tribulation of seven years during the reign of the Antichrist, which will end with the defeat of the latter when Christ will come in glory to establish the “Kingdom of the Thousand Years” before the resurrec-

tion of the dead.<sup>16</sup> The work of Perrotta and Lindelof, while finding inspiration in the teachings of Darby, rather aims at highlighting the difficulty of giving a theological reading of the “sudden departure”. Science and religion are completely unable to account for what happened: those who have been taken, in fact, were not necessarily the best or a good example of ethics or religious belief, as we already said for *Les Revenants*.

In this regard, one of the most interesting characters in the series is the pastor Matt Jamison (Christopher Eccleston), who has dedicated his life to show that the departure should not be interpreted as the eschatological kidnapping. He brought together a catalog of all the sins committed by the disappeared and distributes leaflets with names and photos of the departed on street corners, thus gaining the hostility of many people. Actually, the character of Matt embodies a much deeper and radical battle that takes place in the world of *The Leftovers*. In the scenario described by Perrotta and Lindelof, in fact, the most important spiritual fact is not the event of the rapture itself, but instead the decline of traditional churches that goes with it, their inability to justify the disappearance, and as a result the birth of a variety of post-departure cults: new interpreters of the inexplicable event.<sup>17</sup>

Among these are the *Guilty Remnants*, who have collected many followers also in Mapleton. The members of this sect — who are keen to specify that theirs is not a cult — have taken a vow of silence, abandoned their families, to communicate only via written messages on notebooks. They go around dressed completely in white and intend to be a living testimony of what people would rather want to forget.

Also Laurie (Amy Brenneman), wife of Kevin Garvey, chief of Mapleton police and star of the series, has left her family to enter the Guilty Remnants. Kevin struggles to keep together his family, which is in disarray after Laurie’s joining in the sect. Kevin puts all his efforts in trying to be good, worthy of his loved ones, but his attempts to keep the family together will end up producing the opposite effect.

But Kevin’s discomfort is deeper and goes far beyond the familiar metaphor. This uneasiness finds its expression, for example, in his dreams, which are almost prophetic, so that often one has the feeling that the entire series may be a symbolic journey inside the mind of this character. Kevin, and like him all the characters in this show, is looking for a purpose, one that transcends those affections which, though unquestionably vital, are nevertheless insufficient to satisfy his desire for meaning. However, it is interesting

16 Cf., Aa, Vv, *Profeti e profetismi. Escatologia, millenarismo e utopia* (André Vauchez a cura di), EDB, Bologna 2014, 437–444.

17 A. Kirsch, “Finally a Tv show that truly takes religion seriously”, *New Republic* in <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118977/leftovers-turns-religion-entertainment>

to notice how Kevin's desire for the transcendent belongs to its history even before that fateful October 14th. His quest for meaning is actually downsized by the inexplicable miracle of departure. Paradoxically, the miracle is not perceived as a clear sign of a grace, but rather as a curse that pushes Kevin to seek the meaning of life within those limits (in his case, family members) which in the past he tried to escape at all costs.

In this sense Perrotta and Lindelof have designed a new and clever post-apocalyptic scenario. What remains after the end are not the ruins of a world devastated by a cosmic catastrophe (as in many recent movies and series), but rather the unbearable daily life of those who remained after a miracle that loosened the men's deeper bonds.

The last episode reveals finally the *Guilty Remnants's* disquieting project. During the night of the "Day of the Heroes", when the disappearance of the citizens of Mapleton is commemorated, and which has replaced the Day of the Dead, the members of the sect place exact copies of the departed in the same positions and with the same clothes in which they disappeared on October 14th three years earlier. The result of this operation is catastrophic: the day of mourning is transformed into a day of violence and devastation; the citizens of Malpeton, shocked by the symbolic reappearance of their loved ones, rise against the *Guilty Remnants*, burn their houses, drag them out of their homes for a collective beating while a great fire is prepared in order to burn the puppets of the departed.

### *To Conclude*

In order to understand this type of narratives we must go back to the source of the serial narrative itself, in which death played a vital role. Serial narrative, in fact, "originated in a historical period" — the early decades of the nineteenth century — "during which the attitudes of Western culture towards death were beginning to change". During this age, as a result of post-Enlightenment and modernization processes, we can identify the "trends of secularization, bound to erode the certainties and the saving promises of the great religious and providential narratives." With modernity, in fact, our society loses its faith in a transcendent salvation that will mark the end of time, of history and its injustices, among which the inevitability of death certainly stands out.

Whereas for centuries the religious promise of immortality of the soul with the final redemption of the time and history have represented the most effective antidote against death, the nineteenth-century-man it is for the first time in a position where he can give a shape, a sense to his life by counting on his own forces. In this context, death is really scary because it

represents the only obstacle against which all human pretensions of self-realization and mastery over reality collide.

However, these narratives are not intended to replace the promises of redemption of Christianity. Even if they inherit themes and features from Christian mythology, tv series like *The Leftover* or *Les Revenants* stop where Christianity celebrates the myth: that is, through the rite. What really fails in these series is the possibility of the rite itself: the act through which man participates of the beneficial effects of the mythical tale, as a liberation from a situation of oppression or the restoration of a beatific and ordinary state. In the worlds of *Les Revenants* and *The Leftovers* no final reconciliation is possible: not with past nor with their own culture. *The old world is gone*, reads a message that appears in a frame of *The Leftovers*.

Is the man — now lonely and without the mediation of religion and culture — then deprived of any possibility of being saved from his egoism and his mistakes? Despite their catastrophic drama, these two series intend to preserve what eventually — even if constantly threatened by man himself — remains concrete, tangible, here and now; what, alone, can still make the world of the living a better place: human relationships.

### *Abstract*

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## THE RETURNED AND THE DEPARTED

This work is an attempt to analyze two different approaches to the relationship between the living and the dead in two famous television series: *The Leftovers* and *Les Revenants*. In general, in nowadays audiovisual products this theme reflects the need of modern society for understanding the connection between past and future. We also want to underline the role that religion, and Christianity in particular, plays in building the identity of man and of the whole society.

KEY WORDS: Ghost, past and future, morality, end of the world, religion, myth, rite