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5. Returning Again. Resurrection Narratives and Afterlife Aesthetics in Contemporary Television Drama

Abstract

This essay examines the return of the dead to life in two television drama series of the last decade, *Les Revenants* (The Returned) (Canal+, 2012-15) and *Glitch* (2015-19, ABC Studios). The returning dead do not figure as classic undead figures, as ghosts or zombies, instead returning to life exactly as they were at the point of death and in search of a renewed purpose and an ultimate destiny. This, the essay suggests, can constitute a form of latter-day resurrection. The essay shows how both series present established religion as incapable of recognizing the return of the dead, while science and the secular state are also never wholly able to explain and manage these apparent miracles. The return of this seemingly religious trope to an ostensibly secular world and the mutual jostling and overlapping of theological, scientific and aesthetic discourses, as they seek to represent and explain the mystery, not only constitutes a postsecular theme, but occasions the search, at times inherent to artistic form, at times explicit and self-reflexive, for an appropriately postsecular televisual aesthetics.

Keywords: postsecular – resurrection – eschatology – television – *Glitch* – *Les Revenants*

1. Two Returns.

A teenage girl is shown to be among the victims of a fatal school bus crash on a bright sunny day in the French Alps. The scene cuts away to show the same stretch of road at dusk, several years later, with the very same girl, confused and in a mild panic, hurriedly making her way home. Meanwhile, in a rural graveyard in Australia, several naked, mud-streaked figures crawl from the

earth on a stormy night. The undead have returned yet again to long-format television drama over the last decade, and the examples cited are taken from two multi-season television dramas that aired over the last six years – the French series *Les Revenants/ The Returned* (2012-15) and the Australian series *Glitch* (2015-19).¹ The appearance of the undead on cinema and television screens is almost as old as moving image culture itself.² Today, the returning dead continue to fascinate artists and academics. In particular the trope of the ghostly dead has been the focus of a “spectral turn” in the arts and humanities over the last decades. There, ghosts are not only a theme treated by scholars but have come to function as a theoretical trope in disciplines such as literary and film studies, media studies, social theory, and historiography.³

Yet how, why, and with what significance and consequences are the dead returning in the two series mentioned, both of which were conceived almost in parallel?⁴ Do these shows merely revel in representing the miraculous on contemporary television screens – an approach asking viewers to suspend disbelief and enjoy the escapism of the experience? (See Silke Hortskotte’s piece on the return of miracles). Do they offer another take on the theme of ghostly “haunting,” now well established and written about in scholarship? Or can they be seen to use the return and ongoing lives of the dead, a theme deeply connected to religion, and especially Christianity, to raise serious questions about the position and role of religion and religious thinking as it returns, at once unexpectedly and unnervingly, to ostensibly secular societies?

2. *A New Lease of Life for the Dead?*

¹ *Les Revenants* spawned a North American remake, *The Returned* (2015, A&E Studios), which was cancelled after one season.

² For an historical overview of this theme see Leeder (2015).

³ Del Pilar Blanco, Perea (2013: 1-37).

⁴ Another television series, entitled *Resurrection* (2014-15, ABC Studios), also aired in recent years. Based on Jason Mott’s novel *The Returned* (2013) the show is set in the rural American town of Arcadia, Missouri and again offers competing scientific and religious explanations for its resurrections. Cancelled after two seasons, the show’s story remains incomplete, however.

For connoisseurs of the undead, the returning characters in both shows exhibit some familiar traits and functions. In *Les Revenants*, the key character of Simon Delaître (Pierre Perrier) returns from death after having committed suicide to reclaim his former fiancée Adèle Werther (Clotilde Hemse), and is referred to as a “ghost” on multiple occasions. He haunts the grainy CCTV footage viewed by Adèle’s new partner, senior police officer Thomas Mézache (Samir Gesme). Thomas cannot decide whether Simon is a symptom of their inner lives, either as Adèle’s ongoing trauma at bereavement or a visualization of his own paranoia about her potential obsession with her former partner, or as a man truly back from the dead (season 1, episode 4). The show arguably toys with zombie tropes, too, by including several instances of cannibalism. However, these are not part of the undead condition and attributable to only two returned characters, one of whom is held without food in a basement and the other of whom is a serial killer. The swelling ranks of the returning dead, who, from the second season, are increasingly mute and nameless, wait around the streets of the town without apparent purpose. They may appear awkward, even sinister, but they are no flesh-eating monsters.⁵

For many of the returned dead their second lives also appear to be contingent on certain limiting factors. In *Glitch*, the so-called “risen” cannot initially move beyond a certain geographical perimeter around the town of Yoorana without developing bleeding from their eyes and orifices, weakening and, ultimately, dying once again. In *Les Revenants*, meanwhile, the “returned” cannot wander too far from each other or their bodies start to scar and decay and, inexplicably, characters both living and dead cannot seem to leave the valley at the highpoints of season two, as roads warp back to their starting point. The binding of the returned dead to delimited geographical places, often through local tragedies and traumas, is not uncommon in supernatural fiction and sees the returned dead functioning, in part, as carriers of site-specific historical narratives, whether

⁵ On this comparison see Johnson (2013).

individual or collective, social or cultural (Del Pilar Blanco and Preen 2015: 395-402; Hudson 2015: 168).

On one level, the return of the dead in the two series can be read as such ruptures of the present by the past, as untold stories of places and communities are brought to light. In season three of *Glitch*, for instance, the character Tam Chi Wai (Harry Tseng) returns from the dead and reconstructs memories of his own murder to recount, in turn, the lesser-known history of Chinese gold miners and the racist violence they faced at the hands of other miners in the goldfields of Victoria and New South Wales in the 1850s and 60s. Other characters, too, seek to make sense of past traumas, amongst them the feisty Kirstie Darrow (Hannah Monson), who starts to piece together memories of her own demise as the victim of sexualized violence at the hands of local boy Pete Rennox (Robert Menzies), who now lives as a wheel-chair bound recluse and who has never been convicted of the crime. In such instances, the dead do, to a degree, return to haunt the people and places of their worlds.⁶

In both series, however, the returning dead do not fit established tropes of the undead in form or function. They have neither the raw physicality of zombies or vampires, nor are they reduced to the incorporeal reflections or silhouettes of ghost narratives (Kröger and Anderson 2013: ix). Once established in the narrative arcs of both series, they live very much in the waking present. Historically dislocated, suspended in time at the point of their deaths, unsure as to who they are and, in some cases, unaware that they have died, the core characters appear nonetheless to be very much their former selves. The returned dead ask why they have returned, but also what is to become of them, what wider significance their return has and, on several occasions, begin to explore whether or not they have been given some kind of “second chance” at life. They seek community, social acceptance and explanations for their return. In short, the dead seek futures

⁶ The return of the dead to address site-specific traumas or histories is a classic trope and function of many ghost narratives as discussed by scholars of spectrality, originating with Derrida (1994) and leading to Del Pilar Blanco, Preen (2013); Hudson (2015).

and ongoing reasons to live. Although their drive to relocate themselves within unfolding narratives of purpose and destiny is, at times, marked by a degree of self-determination, those destinies often appear to be shaped by unknown forces that are greater than themselves. It is therefore not unreasonable to consider their return not merely as a form of biological reanimation or more conventional haunting, but also as a form of latter-day *resurrection* – a term which awakens connotations of, but need not be limited by, religious belief.⁷

3. *Contemporary Resurrections and New Eschatologies?*

Modern usages of the word “resurrection” in most European languages usually awaken associations of Christianity. In such a Christian context, the resurrection refers both to Christ rising from the dead and to the resurrection of all dead on the Day of Judgment. The promise, which lies at the heart of the Christian message, is that of salvation through eternal life after death. The nature and purpose of resurrection in Christianity has been a key focus of the faith’s eschatological traditions, which concern themselves with interpreting and expounding humanity’s ultimate destiny according to scripture. Mainstream theological debates around the precise nature of resurrection, as individual or collective, as physical or symbolic, as realized or yet to come, have cooled off in the modern period. However, an awareness of the diversity of Christian thought remains significant for this discussion, as it demonstrates how interpretations of resurrection are not uniform and are open to ongoing creative re-interpretation as determined by shifting understandings of the content and value of scripture and its application to contemporary cultural and social experiences.⁸ Although both of the series in question are set in largely Christian or Western settings, this essay does not delve further into the nuances of historical or contemporary theologies of resurrection, given that the shows do not do so, either.

⁷ Initial critical receptions of *Glitch* showed sensitivity to the returning dead as “resurrected,” rather than as “zombies”. Bennetts (2017).

⁸ Wallis (2008).

What, then, is the reason for and significance of the renewed interest in resurrection and its eschatological implications in television drama? In fact, eschatological thinking in a broader sense has shaped fictional narratives in the cultural sphere into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sometimes featuring resurrection as a trope or allegory, these narratives have been often co-opted by apparently non-religious or secular popular culture, and feature in films, fantasy novels, comics or computer games, all of which trade in ideas of renewed life and revealed destinies of all kinds.⁹ The phenomenon is particularly prevalent in science-fiction formats such as *Battlestar Galactica* (2004, SciFi), in which a race of artificial humanoids known as the Cylons develops technology, which they see as a form of “resurrection” gifted to them by a monotheistic deity, whereby the consciousness of the dying can be downloaded into cloned bodies.¹⁰ In *Dr Who* (1963 – pres., BBC Studios) the central figure of the Doctor also enjoys a form of regeneration at the point of near death that makes sense of the changing actors playing the role but also creates a mythology of ongoing life-through-transformation, which is in part mystical and in part science-based.

The two shows considered in this essay, however, appear to revisit resurrection and eschatological narratives in a more overt and postsecular mode (see Silke Horstkotte’s piece). Postsecularity, again, describes not so much the wholesale return of religion or religious experiences that had vanished from the world as it does a return to focus of hitherto less visible religious ideas within contemporary cultural production and criticism, often in complex and ambiguous forms.¹¹ The following discussion contends that recent resurrection narratives in contemporary television drama do not serve merely as an allegory or symbol for other themes of interest to secular scholarship, though neither do they necessarily mark a reversion to a wholly religion-centered worldview. Rather, the focus on resurrections serves to reopen questions and

⁹ Jewett, Shelton-Lawrence (2010: 653-70).

¹⁰ Leavenworth (2012).

¹¹ Braidotti, Blaagaard, de Graauw, Midden (2014). Taylor (2007). McClure (2007).

play out tensions between competing religious narratives and between religious and secular worldviews. Both shows can be seen to question how able and willing modern religious thinking, institutions, or practitioners might be to deal with so miraculous an event as resurrection, an event so core to their central narratives, but one which has been historically contested in modern debates,¹² and certainly never been experienced first-hand by modern Christians.

Through a discussion of the dispute around resurrection in the two series, this essay will explore to what extent religious and secular discourses and paradigms seem to exist in inevitable binary oppositions, though also to mutually inform, coexist and overlap. Throughout, attention will also be given to the aesthetic treatment of resurrection and the contexts and the milieux in which it occurs. The analysis will consider, for instance, how the resurrected human body is shown, how secular and religious spaces are represented, how religious iconography functions, and how the framing of shots, the use of lighting, color, and both diegetic sound and non-diegetic soundtracks inform the treatment of the themes at hand. The purpose of this focus is to explore both how televisual aesthetics inflect and articulate the theme of resurrection in its postsecular contexts, and the extent to which both shows foreground explicitly the aesthetics of representing life after death as a concern in its own right.

4. *Les Revenants*. (Re-) *imagining Resurrection*.

Les Revenants is a mystery show extending over two seasons, each comprising eight fifty-minute episodes. Set in a small town by a reservoir lake in the French Alps, it centers on several waves of returning dead, all of whom perished in and around the town over the previous four decades. The circumstances are dark, even gruesome: most of the dead were either victims of a huge flood that

¹² In the modern period Christ's resurrection became a major stumbling-block for Enlightenment thought. In using reasoned argument rather than revelation as proof of God, the eighteenth-century deist thinker Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) presented the historical Jesus as a prophet rather than a supernatural being and denied the resurrection took place. Mulsow (2009).

hit the valley when the reservoir dam burst some thirty-five years before the main narrative arc of the series, or were involved in a mass shooting shortly after the flood, or were either victims of a school bus tragedy or a spate of cannibalistic murders. In some cases, characters simply took their own lives, often owing to trauma and bereavements connected to earlier tragedies. The series creator, Fabrice Gobert, had been inspired by a feature film also entitled *Les Revenants* (2004), in which the dead return *en masse*. Gobert opted for a different approach, however, and most of his episodes center on the stories of single returned characters, often reconstructing their deaths, exploring how they seek to reconnect with their family and friends and how their stories interconnect.

Within the show's array of characters, a number of characters appear imbued with special purpose. Lucy Clarsen (Ana Giradot), for example, mysteriously appears in several time frames, arriving in the town prior to the original flood and again sometime after the bus crash, appearing not to age throughout. She is killed, or nearly killed, in season one, when she is stabbed viciously in an underpass by serial killer Serge Garrel (Guillaume Gouix). However, she is found, taken to hospital, and her wounds heal swiftly and completely in a way that confounds her doctors. In the second season, her importance for the returned dead appears to grow. Inexplicably, the valley floods again, cutting off parts of the town, and further dead of differing generations begin to return, clamoring for meaning and direction. Lucy emerges to lead them, intuiting the central significance of the boy Victor, who acquires an almost messianic role as the show goes on (season 2, episode 7).

Victor (Swann Nambotin) is a wide-eyed, fearful looking child who knows or discloses little about himself. Initially, he is adopted by local nurse Julie Meyer (Céline Salette). Across the two seasons, his mother returns from the dead, announcing that he is in fact her son Louis Lewansky and that they had both been killed in a raid on their home by members of a nearby religious cult in the aftermath of the original flood. Julie further pursues Victor/Louis' story during season two. It emerges that he was not the Lewanskys' child by birth, but had unexpectedly

appeared at their home and attached himself to the family. Increasingly, Victor/Louis appears as a figure who not only returns from death, but is actually located outside the already complex timelines of the story. He returns to life after his murder and provides solace to his bereaved adoptive father, M. Lewansky (Henri-Edouard Osinski), who looks after him in secret while grieving for his wife and other son. In a retrospective scene in the denouement of the series (season 2, episode 8), the aging M. Lewansky is shown to collapse and Victor/Louis, unable to bear his death, seemingly wishes him back to life, vehemently repeating “You must return.” Such is the force of his wish, however, that he in fact recalls several generations of the dead, who appear in eerie blue light at the window of the Lewansky home. Victor/Louis is revealed to have a habit of drawing unnerving, at times horrific, pictures that foretell a range of tragedies, including murders, shootings and the dam breach, and to have been in some sense blamed for these occurrences by locals. Though he has somehow called the dead back to life, the true nature of who or what Victor/Louis is, and what power he has, remains a mystery.

The secular world is represented in various forms and attempts to grapple with these mysteries. The visual symbolism of the series seems to connect the return of the dead to phenomena in the physical, natural world: the water in the reservoir behind the dam rises and falls, while electricity fluctuates, both in the title-sequence of the series, where it crackles along the powerlines under the gloomy skyline, and at various points when the dead are returning.¹³ Yet these resurrections are never identified or explained as wholly physical phenomena through the discourses or methods of science. The workers at the power station near the dam attempt, without success, to explain the fluctuations in power and water, and eventually abandon the site. In season two, Berg (Laurent Lucas), the son of the engineer who designed the failed dam, tries with the support of the army to use cameras and computers to map the sinkhole and new cave networks that have inexplicably opened up in the landscape surrounding the town. While the bright LED

¹³ See, for example, the sequences dealing with Lucy’s healing and recovery in hospital, which coincide uncannily with a power outage across the whole town (season 1, episode 6).

computer screens and digital modelling technology show the outline of the changes to the earth and water levels, and colleagues present factual reports in sober language, no actual explanation is given. The camera footage from the caves is interrupted and plagued by indistinct humanoid figures who flit before the green-tinged night-vision camera feed, implying that the dead are moving somehow deep within the earth. Without answers, Berg ultimately leaves his professional role behind, seeking out a reunion with his own returned father and thus pursuing his personal legacy in the unfolding mystery. Finally, in season two the army has been drafted into the crisis zone. The officer in charge of the operation finds his remit shifting beyond logistical support as he begins to uncover the presence of characters such as Simon, who appear to be dead according to official records. Finally accepting that a small group of people he is detaining are, in fact, returned from the dead, he asks them “Do you know where to go?”, asking not only for details of their intended destination but also of their wider fate. He receives no answer and, perplexed, releases them and lifts the barricades surrounding the town. The secular state, as represented by the army, cannot understand the resurrections and relinquishes control over the fate of the returned (season 2, episode 8).

Thus, science cannot explain what is happening in the town and neither can the secular state control it. How, though, does religion fare? The flood is central to the series and perhaps contains echoes of the deluge story in the Biblical book of Genesis. Yet there is no easy religious explanation for the destructive waters of this series. Visiting the Lewankys house, Berg comments that the whole area had been referred to as the “Hand of God” as the people living there were “spared” from the first great flood, though many of them had since died violent deaths “As if God had decided to take back what he had given” (season 2, episode 7). When applied to the events of the flood and the returning dead, religious narratives centered around God’s retribution or mercy appear to break down and are, ultimately, put aside entirely.

The formulation of salvation narratives is also shown not to work for the people of the town. Following the first flood, a sect known as “The Circle” grew up around the sinister figure

of Milan Garrel (Michaël Abiteboul), father of Serge, who promised his traumatized followers answers to their questions and reasons for the deaths and the tragedy they have endured. These, though, would only be offered in the afterlife and, calling followers to remain true to the “path” they have found, he convinced his flock to shoot each other in a suicide pact in the woods in order that they might “find the people we love beyond this world,” while in a chilling parallel sequence his wife attempted to kill their children with pills (season 2, episode 7). Following the bus accident, a later group forms around the figure of Pierre (Jean-François Sivadier), part therapist, part spiritual leader. The “Helping Hand,” as it is known, appears initially more benign, offering coffee evenings and therapeutic talking sessions to the bereaved. Pierre and the Helping Hand also offer a safe haven for the returned, who are slowly and secretly integrated into the group. By the end of season one, the members have settled in the group’s headquarters where they begin to interpret recent events in terms of biblical eschatology, painting quotations on the wall such as “And there shall be no more death, nor sorrow” from the book of Revelation (21: 3-4).

However, Pierre eventually loses control over the group, and he is also unable to harmonize the unfolding events with a vision of the future, religious or otherwise. Within the group, for example, the returned figure of Camille (Yara Pilartz) invents a story to comfort bereaved parents of one of her fellow crash victims, Esteban, claiming she has somehow communed with their son in the afterlife. But the gesture backfires as Esteban’s parents, convinced that he is waiting for them beyond death, hang themselves. Later, Pierre pleads for all the returned to remain within the group and to accept their help and hospitality. But Lucy arrives at the headquarters to lead the returned away, telling Pierre that they want and need nothing from him. The dead, it seems, are not interested in his beliefs, narratives, or visions of a shared future. Ultimately, Pierre is revealed to have been a member of Milan’s Circle and to have been involved in the raid on the Lewanksy home. Under Pierre, the Helping Hand then begins to resemble the Circle, morphing into an insular militia group. Members grow increasingly mistrustful of the returned and detain returned members in their basement without food. Upon Milan’s return,

Pierre's failure to free himself and others from past traumas or to map out a future vision of salvation catches up with him, and he finally takes his own life. Salvation-based world views, whether founded in scripture or maverick visionary convictions, and the communities dedicated to living according to these narratives, are discredited in the show in these instances.

Finally, the town's Catholic priest, Father Jean-François (Jérôme Kircher), reacts to the idea of the physical return of the dead with denial and even distaste. When Adèle confides her suspicion that Simon may have returned from the dead, he replies: "I believe that the people we have loved carry on living with us. I believe in the immortal soul, yes. But the resurrection of bodies, I'm not sure that would be desirable ..." (season 1, episode 2). In the fifth episode he visits Adèle to discuss her current fiancée's belief that the deceased Simon has returned to haunt their lives. Clutching his rosary, Father Jean-François scoffs at Thomas's mention of the resurrection and prefers to explain the events using a basic psychology of jealousy. When Simon finally reveals himself to Jean-François at the church, however, Jean-François has been half expecting him; he subsequently turns Simon in to the police, either thinking him an imposter or, simply, delegating the question of his true identity to secular powers.

The church building remains conspicuously empty of visitors or worshippers throughout the two seasons and there is no representation of Mass being celebrated. Whilst Adèle converses with Father Jean-François, her daughter Chloé (Brune Martin) sits in the nave, distractedly playing a video game. Between the haunting chimes of the musical soundtrack, diegetic sounds of rumbling and rushing become audible, perhaps owing to the physical changes occurring in the environment as the water levels change, though partly these disturbingly indistinct sounds unsettle the integrity of the church as a safe haven and a bastion of Christian faith. Swift panning shots of the camera reconstruct Chloé's fearful gaze as she attempts to trace the sounds from wall to wall, settling on a metallic sculpture of Christ and his disciples. The unsettling juxtaposition of Christian imagery and uncanny sound marks a further way in which the authority of the Church appears threatened

by unknown phenomena (season 1, episode 2). Both the Church and Father Jean-François have little power or place in the final episodes of the series and its denouement.

Do the resurrections of *Les Revenants* ultimately remain a supernatural mystery that repels eschatological readings, indeed any kind of religious explanation and resolutions, as much as they do secular narratives? A number of converging plot threads in the final episode might suggest otherwise. Camille, who must leave her sister and parents a second time to accompany her fellow dead into the mysterious watery caves around the town, comforts her family, saying “Don’t worry. I won’t be alone.” Viewers are left to ponder where she will be, and with whom. Adèle and Simon, too, eventually retreat to the caves, waiting for the waters to rise and dressed as if for a strange, subterranean wedding that will unite them in an afterlife of sorts. Most pivotal, though, is Victor’s closing storyline. As he stands with the other returned at the sinkhole, Berg’s father Etienne (Aurélien Recoing) reminds him “If you want, you can change things” (season 2, episode 6). Victor then envisages a scene where he sits with Julie on a beach lit by warm sunshine. Moments later, with Julie having survived the final deluge, the scene cuts away and Victor’s earlier vision is apparently realized. Gone is the blue-grey color grading so prominent in the series, and the sequence is washed with golden, Mediterranean sunlight. Victor sits with Julie, eating ice-cream, having suntan lotion rubbed on his back before swimming with a young friend in the care of Julie’s friend Ophélie (Pauline Parigot). Sitting together, the four appear to have formed a kind of patchwork family. The passage is reminiscent of home video footage, though at this point in the show it does not serve as a record of the past. Instead the episode repurposes an aesthetic perhaps more readably associated with nostalgia and archives of personal memory to help create a new and contrasting vision of a possible future life.

This new visual aesthetic is also accompanied by non-diegetic music provided by the Scottish band Mogwai. Mogwai (2013) perform a version of the Methodist hymn ‘What are They Doing in Heaven Today?’ in which vocal and guitar parts are heavily backgrounded through reverberation effects, though in which the lyrical content is audible, nonetheless. The hymn’s

lyrical voice envisions an afterlife, free of sin and suffering. But it also poses a series of rhetorical questions about how the dead spend their time:

What are they doing in heaven today,
Where sin and sorrow are all done away?
Peace abounds like a river, they say.
What are they doing there now?

I'm thinking of friends whom I used to know,
Who lived and suffered in this world below,
But they've gone off to heaven, but I want to know
What are they doing there now?¹⁴

This contemporary rendition of a traditional hymn in itself reflects the ambiguity of the postsecular condition. The hymn's reworking as a piece of electric pop music, performed by a band with no religious affiliations whatever, arguably exerts a secularizing pull over the music. This, though, is set against the quality of the vocal delivery, in part wistful and genuinely emotive and yearning, which arguably lends the hymn's semantic content a quality of existential questioning, rather than one of ironic disdain. The ambiguity prevails until the show's end, however. As the hymn fades, diegetic sounds of a baby crying are crossfaded into the soundtrack, and Victor looks up from his bathing, startled as if he hears the sound where he stands and needs to process it in some way. As the crying continues, the scene cuts away to the town, and it is shown to be baby Nathan who is crying. In a final scene, Lucy, still alive and, like Victor, seemingly outside the cycle of life, death, and return, drops off a cradle containing Nathan on the doorstep of an unnamed, unsuspecting family, before walking out of town as the scene fades to final credits.

Victor, who has been able to predict future tragedies in his drawings and has called back the dead from the past, has now learned to lay the dead to rest and to keep alive those important to him. *Les Revenants* can be read as a psychological study in which a young boy manages to work through traumas caused by loss, managing the ghosts of his inner life and forming new

¹⁴ The original version was written by Rev. Charles Albert Tindley in 1901.

relationships. However, the series also explores how individuals cope with the apparently miraculous and unexplained return of the dead to an otherwise mundane, contemporary world, where neither established secular paradigms nor traditional religious narratives and institutions offer explanation or solace. Victor's story allows for differing understandings of what resurrection and salvation can mean. Resurrection can mean a step into the indistinct, transcendent afterlife to which Camille, Adèle, Simon and others have apparently returned. Victor, the "author" of those characters' collective fate, has helped to shape this afterlife, and both he and Julie arguably ponder it from their beachside idyll, accompanied by the unanswered questions of their re-imagined hymn. Resurrection, though, can also be something experienced directly by Victor and Julie. Victor has shaped their renewed lives too, which are arguably marked by a new eschatological vision. This points beyond solely transcendent notions of what resurrection is and what it means, and gestures to an earthly yet also spiritually renewed life to be lived out by the pair – in itself a kind of postsecular state marked by what McClure calls a "new, complexly hybridized" way of being religious and secular at once (2007: 10).

Yet Victor's narrative does not simply explore the fluid relationship between religious and secular experiences as an intellectual debate. The character also opens out a meta-reflexive perspective on events by showing critical self-awareness of his role in shaping afterlives. This is especially true in the case of baby Nathan, for whom Victor must write a future life "story". In so doing, Victor does not completely overwrite the teachings of the Catholic church – in one of the few genuinely religious tableaux of the series, bathed in a halo of golden candlelight in an otherwise darkened, empty church, Nathan is baptized by Father Jean-François in the presence of his family and given "new life" in the language of traditional liturgy (season 2, episode 8). Nonetheless, Victor wrests ultimate control over Nathan's future from an established church. Through Victor, *Les Revenants* affirms the necessary power of the creative imagination in disrupting and re-interpreting traditional narratives of resurrection and envisioning new, evolving narratives of what it might mean in the future. Thus the show begins to explore not only issues of aesthetic form, but also of

aesthetic agency in the postsecular context. In keeping with this departure is a concomitant shift in televisual aesthetics. The “afterlife” created by Victor for himself and Julie is no longer the bleak world of his anxiously crayoned pictures or the dull light of the morbid, waterlogged town, but is given its own televisual language of color, light, and sound. Mogwai in fact wrote and recorded the entire soundtrack to the series, largely atmospheric instrumental music characterized by simple, repeated motifs in minor keys, recorded on reverberant electric piano, cello, and overlaid by unsettling electronic effects. Their performance of the aforementioned hymn, still recognizably the work of the band, nevertheless marks an interruption of the show’s established sound pallet and a change in compositional approach. These shifts in visual and sonic aesthetics mark more than an incidental change in look, sound, and mood. By both referencing and reimagining visual and sonic aesthetic norms associated with earlier representational forms of death, resurrection, mourning and memory, the show both re-invents how afterlives can be represented within the medium of television in the postsecular context, and also makes this an increasingly self-reflexive exploration.

5. *Glitch. Resurrection and Breaking the Rules.*

Playing out over three seasons of six episodes each, *Glitch* strikes different emphases to *Les Revenants*. The series is not set in the iridescent sun-soaked landscapes perhaps too readily associated with much Australian film and television, but in a melancholic, rural setting shown in earthy colors and subdued lighting.¹⁵ From the moment they crawl out of their graves, the mud-streaked, shivering “risen” are arguably more overtly physical than their counterparts in the French Alps, and secular science is far more involved in their return and interested in their future. Initially, seven characters return from different periods in Australian history, hugely contrasting in disposition, with differing levels of awareness as to who they are and connected only by the fact

¹⁵ Despite its title, the show does not explore a ‘glitch’ horror aesthetic, in which new expressive forms and meanings emerge from distortions in media and footage. See Olivier (2015).

that they were buried in the same graveyard. They are quickly taken into the care of medical researcher Dr Elishia McKella (Genevieve O'Reilly). Local policeman Sgt. James Hayes (Patrick Brammall) finds out about their existence and whereabouts, though he agrees not to report this, not least because one of the group turns out to be his deceased wife, Kate (Emma Booth).

Angry, confused, mistrustful, unsure of their identities and purposes, and plagued by indistinct memories relating to local places and events, the risen attempt to flee at various points, though they find themselves unable to leave town without their resurrected bodies convulsing and bleeding. This boundary, limiting their lives to the town, is slowly revealed to be connected to the world of science. Throughout the three seasons, the sinister Noregard pharmaceutical corporation intervenes in the lives of the risen. Unbeknownst to them, Dr. McKella has been monitoring their progress and reporting back to Professor Nicola Heyson (Pernilla August) at Noregard. Towards the end of the first season, Heyson attends the graveyard, rigs up sonic equipment in a circular configuration, and transmits low-frequency vibrations into the earth. This experiment somehow resets the geographical boundaries within which the risen can live safely. In so doing, however, Heyson reveals that both she and the corporation for which she works have driven the research that caused the return of the dead in the first place.

For all of the existential implications of the presence of the risen in Yoorana, the emerging premise of the series appears to pull it towards a form of speculative science fiction in which science manipulates the physical world with “resurrections” as the outcome. Yet science does not quite enjoy hegemonic rule. As the second and third seasons unfold, other characters, including Chi, rise from the graveyard. Additionally, another group of characters who are killed during the action of the series at diverse locations begin coming back to life moments after their deaths. This second group are powerfully drawn to abduct and ultimately dispose of the original risen from the graveyard. Eventually, several living characters close to the original risen are killed in violent incidents or accidents and return with this apparently sinister purpose. As the original returned are finally convinced to walk willingly to meet their ends in a huge bushfire in the final episode, the

second wave of risen who have guided them here, now far less sinister, dissolve into ash and are no more.

While scientific research has resulted in Australia's dead rising, it also appears to have provoked a reaction from some higher agency whose agents may not be seen to implement the divine will of traditional religious narratives, though they certainly make some form of purposeful intervention in events. Once again, however, problems arise when reading this series in terms of established religious narratives and eschatological traditions. In season one, the story of the risen character Maria (Daniela Farinacci), a middle-aged Italian-Australian woman and a devout Roman Catholic, plays out over a number of episodes. In one of the few and fleeting church scenes she announces herself in near hysterical tones as a new "Lazarus," stating that she is the "resurrected," though in a moment of bathos she receives only an offer of a "nice cup of tea" from a woman arranging the church flowers (season 1, episode 3). Later, while praying in church, Maria is confronted by Sgt. Hayes. Still clinging to faith-based explanations for her return, she chastises him for not accepting "God's miracle" and His "truth" (season 1, episode 3).

When Maria visits her senile husband in a nursing home, he decries her as a "putana" and a "whore." Though these insults appear a symptom of the husband's dementia, they lead Maria to reconstruct memories of her own life and death. She remembers having worked as a driving instructor in the past, recalling in particular a sexual scandal arising around her alleged relationship with a young male student. Although the scandal was unfounded, it sparked a row between Maria and her husband. A memory sequence shows Maria fleeing in distress, crashing her car, killing herself and her daughter in the process (season 1, episode 3). Despite her faith, however, Maria receives neither solace nor explanation for her suffering in her risen life. Indeed, she seemingly receives a final injustice when she is lured away by Vic Eastley (Andrew McFarlane), a former police officer and now one of the other risen, who breaks her neck and bundles her body into the trunk of his car (season 1, episode 4).

In season three, a teenage girl, Belle Donahue (Jessica Faulkner), crawls from her grave and makes her way across the country to her family home, which is also the center of a fundamentalist Christian community. The family have little problem explaining Belle's return in terms of their particularly draconian end-times narrative, with its crude chain of sin, punishment and redemption, though their actions are obviously more focused on enforcing psychological control and repressing sexuality. In an attempt to "save" her, Belle's family retire to their worship hall, located in a barn, to perform an exorcism, first tying her up, then pinning her down. When Belle's sister tries to free her, suggesting that she might be the prophet they have prayed for, this is dismissed as "blasphemy" by the mother, while her father states: "Belle is gone. Now her earthly body has returned and been possessed by a demon." When a fire starts accidentally in the barn, the family take this as "proof" of Belle's possession and leave her to burn, and it is only Chi's return which saves her life (season 3, episode 1). In *Glitch*, then, Christian narratives are generally shown to be inflexible, are applied crudely to unfolding events, or are simply driven by base human behavior.

In the final season, the secular world of science further asserts itself as religion's credibility seemingly fades. The dapper Samarvart 'Sam' Chandra Gard (Dalip Sondhi), an employee of Noregard, takes on a central role. He disassociates himself from Professor Heysen's maverick experiments and their unforeseen outcomes and attempts to build a relationship with two risen figures, Kirsty and Charlie Thompson (Sean Keenan). He tries to convince them to move to Sweden to be "paid partners" in their ground-breaking "cellular regeneration programme," which will mean a life of comfort, though will require them to be the permanent objects of laboratory experiments. In the ensuing discussions, Sam confirms to the pair that there have been others "like them" across human history – not least in Golgotha, Jerusalem. When Charlie asks: "Are you saying we're like Jesus?" Sam responds: "No. I'm saying Jesus is like you" (season 3, episode 4). Rather than elevating the "risen" to religious icons, the inverse occurs in this exchange, as a

particular version of science attempts not to disavow resurrection, but rather to explain it in its own terms and to undermine the authority of religion in the process.

Ultimately, even science has its limits in *Glitch*. In the final season, the more personable figure of Millie (Anna McGahan), an off-duty researcher in an experimental physics lab, is driving into Melbourne when her car hits William Blackburn (Roger Corser), one of the first risen and a figure returned from the most distant part of history. Blackburn's journey of self-rediscovery has been one of the most tortuous. He experiences fragmentary memories of his past, which include whippings and incarceration for murder in early colonial Australia. Increasingly, too, he is plagued by premonitions, which the series production team refer to as future glitches or "flitches."¹⁶ Recovering from the accident, his role appears to entwine with that of Millie and he spends time with her in a Melbourne nightclub, where the two witness droplets of water suspended mid-air beneath a bathroom tap. Millie uses the opportunity to describe how her lab is currently inundated with reports of similar freak phenomena, excitedly postulating that the expanding universe, created by the big bang, is reaching a point at which it will "tear" and that that process, some believe, "has just begun" (season 3, episode 2). Indeed, the first episode of season three boasts a new title sequence seemingly in line with Millie's thinking, which includes a montage of interleaving sequences showing cells growing and dividing, and human tissues developing, but also astronomical reconstructions of stars and galaxies in an outwardly expanding universe. In anticipation of the final explanation of the show's story, this imagery juxtaposes two apparently disparate physical phenomena in a world and a universe seemingly heading towards cataclysm.

Inadvertently, Millie reveals that her apocalyptic science is off target, noting that the recent anomalies coincided with two unexplained "electromagnetic spikes" of the last weeks. These freak events, viewers realize in a moment of dramatic irony, coincided with Heysen's experiments in regenerating the dead and resetting the boundary around Yoorana. It begins to emerge that

¹⁶ See director Emma Freeman's discussion of the function of the "flitches" in the plot and techniques involved in making them <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0P691e0Lebw>> (accessed 19 September 2019).

Heysen's experiments, rather than universal expansion, have caused knock-on effects on a grand scale, including distortions in the laws of known physics. The second wave of the rising dead, whose task it is to correct the "glitch" of the original group of seven resurrected characters, also appear to be an outcome of Heysen's work. However, the later risen and their task embody some kind of purposeful response to humanity's meddling in nature. As the series heads towards an apparently apocalyptic conclusion, what is that underlying purpose, what has determined it, and how do science and religion explain it?

As a series subject to season-by-season renewal, the themes underlying the show emerged gradually, according to showrunner and writer Louise Fox. For Fox, although the story began with a number of recognizably religious narratives, tropes, and settings, it ultimately sought to "pull away from more recognizable religious, or at least Judeo-Christian stories of renewed life after death."¹⁷ With the show set against the backdrop of climate change narratives from 2018 onwards, and with a growing sense of religious fundamentalism serving as a distraction from what the show's production team saw as the "real" issues facing the contemporary world, the series was steered further away from religious explanations for the resurrections. The team conducted extensive research into the science of cellular regeneration and also the Gaia principle spawned by scientist James Lovelock, which sees the natural world as a self-regulating entity capable of righting itself if its systems are damaged.¹⁸ Throughout the show, the underlying rules or patterns of the physical world, effectively *Glitch's* take on the Gaia principle, are represented through a particular visual leitmotif: an intricate pattern of interlocking curves and circles. This appears sketched in Heysen's notebooks and forms mysteriously in the earth around the graveyard at the time of her sonic experiments (season 2, episode 6) as humanity begins to manipulate nature. It also flickers in the light of Sgt. Hayes eyes as he returns from an accidental death to shepherd the risen to their fate (season 3, episode 1) and manifests in Blackburn's strange fixation with the iconic Melbourne Star

¹⁷ From an interview conducted with Louise Fox by the author: 19.09.2019.

¹⁸ Interview with Louise Fox. See also Lovelock (2000).

ferrous wheel as he senses oncoming destiny (season 3, episode 2).¹⁹ The symbolism helps to tie the events into the unfolding narrative of a physical universe whose rules are being broken and which is seeking to repair the damage done.

When the risen finally step into the fire at the graveyard, they are not entering the hellfire of Belle Donahue's family religion, but rather a bushfire, a phenomenon which has shifted within the Australian scientific community to be viewed not merely as a threat to the civilization of white settlers, but as an integral aspect of the way in which uniquely Australian ecosystems manage and renew themselves – and one well understood within traditional indigenous Australian culture.²⁰ In the show, the human world also needs “putting right,” given that the dead should not have returned, as Sgt. Hayes explains, echoing countless other utterances to that effect across the three seasons.²¹ Their return has served to give voice to untold histories and to gain perspective on personal tragedies, though many of these stories remain morally ambivalent. Paddy Fitzgerald (Ned Dennehy), for example, begins as a poor Irish gold prospector and ends up as the town's mayor. When he returns to the twenty-first century, his family still dominate local politics, though he exposes the fact that a local mixed-race indigenous Australian family are in fact his descendants via an extra-marital affair and also heirs to his fortune. While Paddy is initially rehabilitated through these actions in season one, that rehabilitation is undercut in season three, when he is shown to be guilty of Chi's murder. His resurrection appears to offer him a second chance at life, but it does not restore social justice. Ultimately, the risen acquire no ongoing self-determination and are

¹⁹ For an image of the “Melbourne Star” see <<https://www.melbournestar.com/>>.

²⁰ For the indigenous Australian and Australian government position on bushfires within Australis ecosystems, see respectively: <<https://www.bushheritage.org.au/what-we-do/science/themes/fire-ecology>> and <<https://www.ga.gov.au/scientific-topics/community-safety/bushfire>>. See also Rigby (2016) on literary representations of bushfires in the context of ecologically driven cultural production.

²¹ See the title of season one, episode six “There Must be Rules.” See, too, James Hayes' closing monologues (season 3 episode 6).

written back out of existence by a secular narrative which requires their demise. Their story, then, does not seem to align easily with any obviously religious eschatology.

Yet for all of its indebtedness to Gaia theory, which sits in the realm of speculative science, *Glitch* allows viewers to envisage and make sense of the show's story through alternative means. The character Chi finds a way of understanding and reconciling himself with unfolding events in a way that is also meaningful through the prism of his own religious beliefs. Chi struggles at first to understand why he has returned from death, though he finally makes sense of this by allotting himself the task of setting free the souls of his fellow murdered countrymen, who lie buried far from their native China. He performs a final ritual, spoken in Mandarin, prostrating himself in prayer and in an appeal for forgiveness from the dead for his own inability to do more. Using smoke from a burning branch, lit from embers created by the surrounding bushfires, he acknowledges his countrymen's resting places, before relinquishing himself to the flames alongside the other risen. In performing this final act, Chi at once taps into the symbolic vocabulary of the bushfire, an allegorical component of the show's secular environmental narrative, and his own religious heritage. The seventh month of the traditional Chinese calendar is known as the "Ghost Month," and on the fifteenth day the sins of the dead can be absolved in rituals conducted by the living. Chi draws upon and modifies this form of ritualized intercession to seek both release for the dead and absolution from his own misplaced guilt. His actions are dignified, appear in no way futile despite his impending demise, and complete his own narrative of spiritual closure in a way which harmonizes with and does not seek to displace or contradict the unfolding secular narrative arc. Not only does Chi reference and adapt Chinese religious heritage, but he also foregrounds a process of spontaneous, improvised cultural reworking as he invents a new form of observance for this unique set of experiences.²² *Glitch*, then, throws light upon the thematic intertwining of

²² See historian Sophie Couchman's comments on the complexity and diverging beliefs on death and the afterlife held in Southern China in the nineteenth century, which allowed *Glitch* some "creative freedom" in representing Chi's religious practices: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JhfToTt5kk>>.

religious and secular experiences in the postsecular moment. In a subtle way, it also shows how contemporary television can promote explicit and critical reflection on cultural processes and aesthetic forms through which it, as a medium, comes to represent contemporary resurrections in the postsecular moment.

6. *Resurrections in a Postsecular World.*

Whilst both *Les Revenants* and *Glitch* present a phenomenology of the returning dead, they grant neither established religious nor secular narratives exclusive rights of explanation. The series either maintain the abiding mystery surrounding the resurrections, thus allowing them to remain open to religious interpretations in the widest sense, or locate those resurrections within a more material worldview which nevertheless accommodates alternative religious perspectives. *Les Revenants* explores how individuals can imagine and reimagine the cycle of death, resurrection, and salvation in a way that resonates with their own complex experiences and helps them maintain some form of faith in a world torn between unyielding forms of belief on the one hand, and a lack of belief on the other. In *Glitch*, humans are physically called back from death only to be re-consigned to it as part of a prescribed destiny narrative, which has potentially apocalyptic and redemptive elements, though it is ultimately grounded in a scientific worldview. Yet the show's sensitivity to the differing perspectives that can coexist in culturally plural societies arguably engenders a kind of interpretative pluralism, and allows a slender though significant religious take on the show's story to sit alongside and co-articulate the apparently dominant, secular explanation of resurrection.²³

²³ Louise Fox stated: "The underlying premise of the show, call it a mystery or a phenomenon, can be looked at through different prisms, I guess. Despite the pull towards science and away from religion, we wanted to suggest that certain cultural or religious viewpoints might be able to access the same truth as science – though that's not true of all religion!" in an interview with the author, 19.09.19.

The differing postsecular treatments of resurrection in both series cannot be reduced to intellectual debate, however. Televisual aesthetics play a key role in constructing the ambivalent experience of a phenomenon which is traditionally located in the sphere of established religion, but which is no longer wholly at home within it. Ultimately, it remains unintelligible to the secular world, too. This manifests, not least, in the artistic treatment of the returned dead themselves. In both series, they are never represented solely as the children of religion: just as they do not return as spectral ghosts or lumbering zombies, neither do they rise from the grave in shafts of light, accompanied by religious music or other recognizably religious tropes. In *Glitch*, for instance, the dead crawl from the mud as adult bodies, but wander directionless, as if naked, bewildered children: they are the products of science, yet return to life in a church cemetery in search of renewed purpose – and thus flit between secular and religious symbolic fields. In *Les Revenants*, conversely, the moment or process of return is even more ambiguous, in that it is never shown: the dead simply arrive, as if conjured from nothing. Institutional religion, moreover, does not lose appeal in both series merely because clergy or worshippers are unwilling to embrace the return of the dead, but also by virtue of how it is represented visually and sonically. The cold, gloomy space of the church in *Les Revenants* is haunted by sounds of rising water and framed through wide-angle shots emphasizing the lack of a congregation, while the makeshift chapel in *Glitch* burns like the very vision of hell its worshippers are desperate to avoid. Both sites are emptied of spiritual relevance not least because of the aesthetic treatments they are given.

Perhaps most noteworthy, though, is a trend that has emerged throughout this discussion – namely that both shows treat explicitly and as a concern in its own right the issue of how contemporary television can and should represent resurrection in aesthetic terms. Both series not only deliberately suspend resurrection between wholly secular and religious aesthetics, but also, to differing degrees, devote time and space to examining the making processes by which individual characters seek to represent their afterlife experiences. Whether as image, sound, or ritual, those representations draw upon traditional religious templates, but repurpose these for a postsecular

world, giving rise to hybridized forms of expression that are both traditional and innovative. Both *Les Revenants* and *Glitch* are marked by this self-reflexive quality. It is a quality that speaks not only of a new attempt to reconceive and represent resurrection specifically and postsecular experience generally, but also promotes critical reflection on how the television medium can renew the aesthetic resources at its disposal to represent this most fascinating and unsettling condition.

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