

### Additional Reading – Genre – Les Revenants

*It is possibly closest to a zombie text because of its focus on the 'undead'. Gabriel Tate in The Guardian calls it 'A zombie series like no other'.*

A zombie series like no other, where the dead reappear on the doorsteps of their loved ones without warning or explanation: what, indeed, is this nonsense?

It's been two years since *The Returned's* first series shuffled on to our screens (three in France) and it has since won a cult following, not to mention an Emmy, thanks to its profoundly unsettling spin on a previously schlocky genre. Rather than an excuse for a shoot-'em-up, the show uses its walking dead to address themes such as grief and regret, examining the human response to the inconceivable. The zombies decay delicately and pursue carnal and culinary desires instead of roaring around with their faces half-fallen off. And it's beautifully shot, with the misty twilight surrounds of Annecy becoming almost a star in itself.

There was no shortage of drama in the first series as each of the drama's ensemble of characters endured their own intrigue: cannibalistic serial murderer Serge returned to confront Toni, the brother who put a violent end to his activities; twins Camille and Léna Séguret were reunited after the coach crash that killed Camille and devastated their parents, Jérôme and Claire; Adèle, depressed and in a dysfunctional relationship, was impregnated by her dead fiancé, Simon. And then there was child zombie Victor, the cherubic yet troubling face of the series whose traumatic past promised to hold the key to the show's many mysteries. Why had the dead returned to life? Why were the animals killing themselves? By the end of season one there were, according to French broadcaster Canal+, 27 questions to which fans needed an answer. On top of all that the series ended with the dead departing into the darkness and the living huddling inside a community centre as the town below them flooded. As a cliffhanger, it was both formidable and *formidable*.

Season two returns to the story six months later, where the military have blockaded the town. Only the survivors are privy to the details of the resurrection of the local dead, and few of them are talking. Adèle's baby is due, Toni is suffering from amnesia, and Léna and Jérôme are searching for Camille, who is coming to terms with her identity as "a Returned".

The scene I'm watching may not fill in all the blanks, but it could be a start. This hirsute figure is Jérôme (Frédéric Pierrot), his state of mind as ragged as his hair. Alongside him is a new character, Berg (Laurent Lucas), an architect recruited to investigate the dam that caused the flood. After speaking their lines, the pair linger silently in consideration of their "*bordel*". Finally, they turn for advice to the 40-year-old in a duffle coat who has just called "*coupez!*" behind them. This is Fabrice Gobert, *The Returned's* writer and director.

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Gobert is a very down-to-earth sort of genius. When we sit down for a chat he deflects my optimistic probing for plot details with ease. He is happy, however, to talk at length about the show's wider concepts. He explains his direction in the Jérôme and Berg scene. "I love silences, I love people looking at each other, I love suspended time," he says. "It may be the French approach." Another Gallic tactic helps to explain why the second series is so delayed; The Returned often films key scenes "*entre chien et loup*" ("between dog and wolf") in a dusk light that sometimes lasts for just five minutes. "It's very important," explains Gobert, between sips of vin blanc. "It makes a normal landscape very strange, very between day and night... or life and death."

For Gobert, the key to cracking the show's concept was to understand that balance between the real and the eternal. "Dead people don't know they're dead," he says. "It's the people grieving who are sad and living in their thoughts. Here, the dead are the living ones, and the living are the dead." A neat conceit, but knotty to realise. Paul Abbott ditched his proposed adaptation. The official US remake floundered after one series, while Resurrection, an American series with a similar premise but schmaltzier treatment, was cancelled after two seasons. Even Gobert struggled in the wake of his first-series triumph, failing to click with co-writers as they set about reprising its success.

Stylistically, Gobert confirms, The Returned is influenced by Twin Peaks and Let The Right One In, plus the less predictable likes of Channel 4's Misfits (for making fantasy fiction on a low budget) and HBO's True Blood (for addressing contemporary society getting to grips with the impossible). Gobert was inspired by the ease with which American horror handles the fantastical, but also exploits aspects of its popular culture to enhance the sense of unease.

Annecy itself is a charming place, sitting on a lake bordered by mountains and forests, and with well-preserved medieval architecture at its centre. The Returned, however, is filmed on its mundane, slightly spooky fringes, where the natural world begins to intrude. During my stay in the town I spotted a single concession to interested tourists – a Returned burger on the real-life menu of the American Diner, the kitsch eatery used in the series as a regular haunt for its younger characters. But otherwise, the occasional selfie aside, cast and crew have been left to get on with the six-month shoot. "Local people were happy [the town] looked mysterious," says series producer Caroline Benjo. "'Finally! Zombies in France!' We don't usually feel that way about our country: we tell realistic stories, not stories that are so fantastic."

The stories also take a little longer to tell. The journey from Robert Campillo's more bombastic 2004 film, on which the current series is based, was tortuous. At first, the TV show team "worked on the idea of a virus until it became a bad version of a good American show," says Benjo, shaking her head. "Before Fabrice, we were in such trouble that we even mentioned doing it in English, like that would resolve all our problems!"

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Gobert was approached after his debut feature, teen thriller *Lights Out*, established him at Cannes. He transformed Campillo's concept, paring back the detritus, including the virus and other potential causes, interventions from the outside world and budget-busting numbers of zombies, Gobert prioritised the emotional fallout over the geopolitical one. "You cannot have the Oval Office in a French drama," Benjo argues. "It's not possible seeing François Hollande on the phone, talking about the dead coming back – you lose all credibility."

What about those 27 unanswered questions, a list to rival even *Lost*? Gobert laughs and shrugs. "I saw the list. This time we were more careful not to disappoint people. I'm not a huge fan of *Lost*: there were too many mysteries and after two series I was a bit tired. I realised how important it was to deal with the promises you make. I hope that seeing characters we love ask themselves these questions is as interesting as having the answers. It's still the same approach and the same question: can the living live with the dead?"

Victor himself materialises to say a shy, fleeting "*salut*". I was expecting this moment to chill my bones, but instead of his signature spookiness he is all smiles. "Sorry he's not frightening!" Benjo says. "We will learn about Victor's past, his power and whether he can become a normal little kid when that was denied to him. Swann [Nambotin, who plays Victor] looks very childlike, but he's very mature. He gets recognised in the street and people are a little freaked, but he's really gracious about it."

As dog and wolf time draws near, I venture deeper into the woods to watch a scene set 35 years before the drama's main events. Two dozen people are in a circle, some lying on blankets for warmth. One of them is a new character, Milan, played by Michaël Abiteboul. He's Serge's father and thus not exactly a model parent. "He's an ogre at the start," Abiteboul protests, "but I was surprised to discover someone with deep beliefs, very loving and lovable." Fresh-faced Ernst Umhauer is watching quietly nearby. Umhauer is another new character, Virgil, "a messenger of death in charge of bringing back all the Returned into the kingdom of the dead". I ask them why they joined up for the second series, and they both look incredulous. "It was the best French series we've ever seen," says Umhauer.

My visit finishes, appropriately, at the Helping Hand community centre, scene of season one's sinister climax. A children's centre in real life, it's a rather placid spot. Three horses graze nearby, none apparently contemplating suicide. The shutters are down and the building is, like its occasional occupants, giving nothing away. I ask one final question, more in hope than expectation.

"We could do a third [series]," replies Gobert, grinning mischievously. "Why not?"