Uncanny TV: Estranged Space and Subjectivity in Les Revenants and Top of the Lake

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The uncanny has the capacity to unsettle and estrange us. In episodic television, this estrangement can expand and engulf us as it entwines with thematic preoccupations of a given series. In this article, I identify and examine how televisual textual strategies create a sense of unease and produce moments of the uncanny in two recent television drama miniseries; Top of the Lake (Sundance 2013) and Les Revenants (Canal+ 2013 - ). In particular I examine how aesthetic devices and the televisual moment are deployed to generate a sense of the uncanny that both complicates and enriches the form of the miniseries in these two case studies. I argue that both series produce the uncanny at the level of the symbolic, identified by Freud (2003) as its primary mode of representation, in formal ways made possible by conditions of televisuality characterised by narrative complexity (Mittell 2006) and a pronounced aesthetic, both of which are exploitable expectations of the drama miniseries. Both series draw on recognisable conventions of the police procedural genre, but each develops a dialectical narrative structure which rotates between a rational procedural plotline and an irrational, less linear narrative of a secretive community. It is this dialectical structure, I argue, which enables the narrative production of the uncanny in both series, albeit in service of divergent narrative functions.

The uncanny as formulated by Freud is characterised by duality, by rotation between the familiar and the strange, considered as a close relationship and movement between two ‘inextricably linked’ conceptual terms: heimlich, particularly meaning ‘homely’ and unheimlich, meaning ‘un-homely’ (see Wheatley 2006, 6). This relationship and movement can produce in turn what Hélène Cixous terms a textual ‘labyrinthian space’ typified by interplay between ‘a text and its hesitating shadow’, in which plot and story development are fluid and changeable. In such textual expressions ‘what is brought together here is quickly undone, what asserts itself becomes suspect; each thread leads to its net or to some kind of disentanglement’ (Cixous 1976, 525). Through my readings of these two series, I argue that the miniseries form in particular, when incorporating a highly developed aesthetic characteristic of quality TV, can lend itself to the production of such complexity and to narrative ambiguity within its dialectical structure, within which manifestations of the uncanny resonate and recur. In his discussion of the concept, Freud begins by stating that the uncanny is that which ‘evokes fear and dread’ (Freud 2003, 123) and defines it as ‘that species of the frightening that goes back to what was
once well known and familiar’ (Freud 2003, 124). In both Top of the Lake and Les Revenants, the production of the uncanny enables what Helen Wheatley calls ‘the dissolution of boundaries between the familiar and the strange, or the everyday and the disturbing’ (Wheatley 2006, 7). Building on the recognition of this dissolution of boundaries, Wheatley argues that it is precisely television’s nature as a fundamentally domestic medium which enables it to produce an estranging ‘rendering of homes and families, drawing parallels between the domestic spaces on screen and those homes in which the drama are being viewed’ (Wheatley 2006, 18). In these television texts I identify instances of such ‘estrangement or separation from a familiar world inducing an uncanny feeling which is both frightening and comforting’ (Zipes 1983, 174, emphasis in the original), and draw on Freud’s concept of the uncanny to examine how it is performed in figurations of character subjectivity and representations of community and domestic space.

In their production of the uncanny, both Les Revenants and Top of the Lake create from the opening credits onwards a pronounced visual style which in both series centrally informs, infuses and shapes the unfolding of events. Both series harness the expectations of ‘quality’ television for visual spectacle (enabled in part by technological development and standards created by high production values; see Wheatley 2011) and both deploy frame composition, uses of landscape and the musical score in reflexive and complex ways to deepen the sense of the uncanny. In their pronounced emphasis on aesthetic style, Les Revenants and Top of the Lake can be read as exemplifying a further cinematic turn within recent conditions of what John Caldwell (1995) termed televisuality. Caldwell first identified the then-newly emergent ‘stylistic [and knowing] exhibitionism’ (Caldwell 1995, 18) of selected television programming, specifically in television drama series and miniseries, as created by complex ideological, industrial, material and stylistic frameworks and modes of television production. More recently, quality television drama in particular has availed of material and technological developments such as HD television and recordable television, which enable greater viewer access to and appreciation of a developed cinematic style (see also Wheatley 2011). Both series produce an atmospheric aesthetic resonant with emotional depth; yet in both programmes the aesthetic has a narrative and critical function beyond the mere depiction of a beautiful spectacle.
Instead both *Les Revenants* and *Top of the Lake* activate the landscape, foregrounding and framing it as an entity which surrounds and dwarfs the small built community depicted, which in turn threatens the perceived solidity of home represented by these communities and creates narrative space for textual manifestations of the uncanny.

My emphasis on formal textual analysis in this context draws on a recognition of cultural form as inherently structural but also mobilised, determining the key cultural functions of the text. Raymond Williams describes this as form understood in two senses: ‘a visible or outward shape, and an inherent shaping impulse’ (Williams 1977, 186). My critical concern here is with the ‘inherent shaping impulse’ located in the aesthetic of these series, especially with the ways in which it determines narrative and thematic preoccupations. My project in examining both series is to uncover the critical function of these preoccupations in each text, following on from recognition that analysis of televisual aesthetics must incorporate identification of what that aesthetic is in service of, and what wider meaning/s it thus produces (Caldwell 1995). My exploration is thus solely focused on the meanings produced within the television texts under discussion, although I recognise the significance of investigating television texts from external perspectives, incorporating industrial practices and production contexts, as well as paratexts generated by a given television text.

Alongside my analysis of the critical possibilities of the televisual aesthetic, I examine the function of the televisual moment. As a formal interpretative device, a televisual moment takes place when meaning coalesces within a standalone slice of the narrative, conveyed by arresting images, a piece of music and/or a pivotal exchange of words or glances, which combined produce a sharp emotional as well as aesthetic impact. Further, a televisual moment functions metonymically, communicating an overarching thematic preoccupation in one or two minutes. Its functionality is thus multifaceted: while the televisual moment can serve as exposition in the first instance, moving the story forward within the overarching narrative is often only its point of departure. The televisual moment has been identified as a key element of television analysis by Matt Hills (2008) amongst others, and Jason Jacobs has emphasised its value as an analytical device, arguing that ‘television is as capable as film of creating expressive richness in moments that are at once fleeting, demonstrative, climactic or
seemingly inconsequential’ (Jacobs and Peacock 2013, 3). In line with these arguments I argue that such ‘moments of apparently breathless jouissance and excess beyond discourse’ (Hills 2011, 101) produce a formal capacity for realisation and rupture. **Such moments contribute to the emotional meaningfulness of television drama (Jacobs 2006; Hills 2011).** My analysis considers this alongside the critical capacities of the televisual moment, leaving aside questions of wider value derived from the aesthetic effect of the televisual moment. My scrutiny of the televisual moment therefore considers it as a ‘textual part rather than the whole’, as Hills describes Jacobs’ approach (Hills 2011), incorporating Jacobs’ identification of ‘the sense of the “fragment” as something complete in itself and yet implying a larger whole’ (Jacobs 2001, 435). This fragmentary quality renders the televisual moment ‘fleeting but decisive’, with a capacity to ‘delight, surrender, disgust, surprise, horror, or outrage’ (Harvey 2001, 429). Building on this description David Harvey (drawing on Henri Lefebvre) suggests culturally produced, standalone moments are ‘conceived of as points of rupture, of radical recognition of possibilities’ (2001, 429). In part precisely because of its ephemeral quality, the televisual moment creates space for greater possibilities in the meaning/s it communicates. In the analysis that follows, I argue that the televisual moment functions as a point of narrative rupture and provides a shortcut to thematic recognition.

I.

On the surface (itself a notion made complex in the series) *Top of the Lake* is a police procedural, set in the township of Queenstown and the fictional community of Laketop in the mountainous landscape of New Zealand’s South Island. Yet immediately from the credit sequence onwards the series unsettles the aesthetic conventions of the detective genre, introducing a meditative tone and thematically foregrounding the power of the unconscious and unspoken. As with all television texts, the first episode teaches us how to watch the rest of the series, emphasising its thematic preoccupations and introducing a sense of unease which is sustained throughout. The credit sequence opens with a still image of a painted landscape, under which the grain of canvas can be seen: the words ‘Top of the Lake’ appear over a vista of mountains surrounding a lake. After a beat the camera pans steadily downwards, moving below the painted surface of the lake into darker deeper waters,
within which float odd objects: a stag’s head, a fetus and a photo of Tui (Jacqueline Joe), a pregnant local teenager who goes missing. The first episode then begins by following the small figure of twelve year old Tui on her bike as she leaves her ramshackle family compound, her progress depicted in a series of long shots in which her moving figure is rendered tiny and anonymous by the surrounding trees and hills. The camera follows Tui as she walks into the freezing water of the local lake and stands there motionless, her fists clenched underwater. Tui’s newly discovered mystery pregnancy, her motivation for what may be a suicide attempt, prompts the detective storyline which then unfolds.

Following the pregnancy’s discovery, Tui is interviewed by Robin (Elisabeth Moss), a detective in Sydney just returned home to the region who is pulled on to the case. Robin’s former home had already become strange to her following her gang rape there as a teenager; consequently her reluctant return, to help her dying mother, is marked by wariness and unease. Robin’s gentle questioning of Tui at the police station forges a fragile connection between the two characters, each represented from the start as alienated from their surroundings.

In *Top of the Lake*, the aesthetic foregrounds themes of the isolated individual and of the alienating capacity of community and domestic spaces. The careful visual construction and sustained attention to detail is characteristic of the past film work of New Zealand series creator and director Jane Campion (particularly 1993’s *The Piano* and 1996’s *Portrait of a Lady*) and invites greater attention to the key themes of the series. The visual trope of a lone figure framed within the landscape recurs throughout the series; repeatedly characters are shot at a considerable distance, their appearance diminished within the mountainous terrain. Thus *Top of the Lake’s* atmospheric aesthetic has an active function; the landscape surrounds and engulfs the protagonists, who flail within it, puny and ineffectual when shown against the massive scale of the surrounding terrain. Alongside this the series creates a layered portrait of a damaged and damaging community over its six episodes, in part through recurring images of homes that appear as neglected spaces: dark, cluttered and disordered. There is no apparent physical centre to Queenstown or Laketop; the local bar comes closest and is a rough, male-dominated space dedicated to serious drinking. The random chaos of the domestic spaces is heightened by contrasting long shots of the striking terrain and of the lake, both shown at a scale.
within which houses appear further diminished. Children are especially isolated from the built
environment in *Top of the Lake*. They move between awkwardly located rooms in their homes (Tui’s
frilly bedroom decorations are incongruous in the otherwise masculine disarray of the Mitcham house
and Jamie [Luke Buchanan] lives in a trailer adjacent to his house, which he decorates with animal
bones) and the seemingly normative space of the town café where many of them train as baristas. In
contrast, the newly built women’s commune, ‘Paradise’, is figured as a healthier, if eccentric,
alternative space; sequences set in Paradise are warmer, yellow in tone, with the shipping containers
that make up the women’s accommodation painted in vivid colours. Paradise is represented as a
benign, haphazardly nurturing space, with the Paradise women’s collective project of survival overtly
stated rather than subliminally hinted at. However, the profound thematic alternative to the built
community is the sizeable forest and vast lake just outside its environs.

Within this activated aesthetic, standalone televisual moments function as ruptures in the narrative
rhythm, jarring the viewer out of the steady unfolding of the police procedural plotline and towards
thematic recognition of an embodied uncanny. The first of these moments takes place in episode two,
when Robin enters the forest to follow a lead on a possible sighting of Tui. Once there, she appears
drawn to the nearby lakeshore. As she makes her way towards the water, haunting but sparse music
starts up, a minimal melody in a minor key beginning with a single chime, then seguing into a set of
two and three notes. Robin, unusually in figurations of her character, is briefly seen from far above,
rendering her (like Tui earlier) diminished in the shot, framed by trees as she stands on the shore.
Slowly, with her back to camera and her shape indistinct, she wades into the lake, her hesitant steps
resembling Tui’s into the same water forty-eight hours earlier. Next, Robin is shown in medium shot,
her pale face visible over the water in the dimming blue light as she stands there immobile. Abruptly a
shot of Tui from the earlier scene, also in medium shot, replaces that of Robin, which is then
succeeded by the previous underwater shot of Tui’s clenched fists under the surface. The scene cuts
back to Robin, standing still for another beat; then she abruptly turns and, suddenly panicky, clambers
swiftly out of the water. The moment ends with a shot of Robin changing by the trunk of her car. It is
now fully dark and she is half illuminated by the car’s headlights at the edge of the road. The dim blue
light of the sequence imbues the moment with depth, heightening the sense that the lake in which
Robin stands is haunted. So too does the melody playing, marking out and separating the moment
from the preceding scene of Robin in the forest in broad daylight.

This sequence eloquently demonstrates how televisual music can help to produce an ‘accumulation
rather than a fragmentation of referentiality’ (van Elferen 2012, 77), building meaning in a given scene
or sequence, resonating with Isabella van Elferen’s suggestion that such ‘[m]usical repetition has
doubling and haunting effects, leading to a dislodging of temporalities and patterns of identification’
(2012, 77). The inclusion of a minor key melody in this moment deepens its function of thematic
rupture and realisation. On the surface of the narrative, this moment is an extension of Robin’s
attempt to find Tui; however the music, the changed, darker blue lighting and the slowed down pacing
all mark out this moment as distinct and standalone. In recalling Tui’s stoic acceptance of the cold
water, Robin is linked to her in this moment more profoundly than has previously been suggested by
the unfolding procedural storyline. This doubling introduces an identification between Robin and Tui,
solidifying their shared struggle against emotional and physical annihilation through abuse. Their
doubling can be further understood in relation to Freud’s suggestion that the uncanny nature of the
double, or doppelgänger, derives from its original function to provide a defense against such
annihilation (Freud 2003). In this sense, therefore, the uncanny double can manifest in multiple ways,
including a process of identification, in which ‘a person may identify himself with another and so
become unsure of his true self, or he may substitute the other’s self for his own’ (Freud 2003, 142).
Now more intricately linked through this doubling, as her investigation draws her closer to Tui’s
neglect and abuse Robin begins to identify with her and to conflate their experiences and attempts to
survive.

A second televisual moment builds on and reinforces the connection between Tui and Robin and
serves to reveal more about Robin’s own past and complicated subjectivity in the community. In
episode three, Robin plays a found videotape of Tui and other children playing in the forest. Again
minor key, mournful music begins and the camera focuses in close-up on Robin’s face as she smiles,
watching Tui on the screen. Robin asks to be left alone with the tape, and the police station setting
appears to recede as the camera moves back and forth between close-ups of Robin’s face and of Tui’s onscreen, with a final shot of Robin smiling at Tui’s image, whose smiling gaze within the television frame appears to return Robin’s. Tui widens her eyes comically, self-consciously at the person filming her. Robin ducks her head as tears come to her eyes, and as Tui on screen begins to laugh their connection is strengthened in the moment. Tui’s introduction in the series’ opening sequence has already established her figuration as estranged and isolated. She is repeatedly depicted at a remove or otherwise at a distance, often in long shot dwarfed by the landscape. After Tui has gone missing, her photographic image replaces her presence in the narrative for those episodes until she is found again. Robin tapes a photograph of Tui to her wall, repeatedly returning to it to consider Tui’s sombre expression; later, in episode four, Tui is briefly captured in the visual frame of a phone video, moving slowly at a distance amongst the trees. She appears in the frame in silence or accompanied by minimal, haunting music: two or three notes in minor key which sound blurred, as if heard underwater. This melody signals and reinforces the unsettling strangeness that is already present in her narrative characterisation: namely that of a pregnant child, already an unnatural subject. Finally, after Tui has re-entered the narrative, she defends her newborn baby in the final episode with a hissing ferocity and a snarling grimace, reinforcing her grip on her own wordless survival.

Robin is also represented in the narrative as estranged from the community on several levels, having lived in Sydney for years after her departure. Unlike Tui, however, Robin’s perspective is accessible from the first shot, in which she is seen in medium close-up lying on a bed, her fingers curled around her mobile phone. Yet she too embodies the uncanny, giving shape to the return of repressed memories, with her subjectivity rendered complex and contradictory. Within the townships, Robin embodies the familiar made strange. Her family connections, her former teenage relationship with Johnno Mitcham (Thomas M. Wright) and the widely circulated story of her rape have firmly embedded her into the community. Yet these ties are fraught and not what they seem: Robin learns her beloved father may not have been her biological father at all, and her adult relationship with Johnno is based on a lie which calls into question the circumstances of her rape. Already estranged emotionally as well as geographically, her narrative transformation renders her uncanny. Marked by
past events and revised versions of her personal history, she relentlessly excavates Tui’s life and by extension the systemic corruption in the community. In the return of her repressed memories of her rape, Robin exemplifies Freud’s observation that the ‘uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed’ (Freud 2003, 148). It is the return of these repressed memories of her rape that ignites Robin’s anger, prompting her to confront and attack one of her rapists in the town pub. On the surface, in the police procedural narrative, Robin’s focused, possibly obsessive dedication feeds into her representation as coldly professional in contrast to the local police force and townspeople’s intimacy with each other. She is now opaque to those she grew up among. Her suspicions and emerging anger especially unsettle the local men and she is repeatedly and crudely challenged in the local pub and by lead detective Al (David Wenham).

In *Top of the Lake* the crime against Tui is revealed in the final episode, in which we learn that wealthy, powerful businessmen in the township have been regularly drugging local children in order to have sex with their unresisting bodies. This systemic violation is situated within the rotating dialectical structure of *Top of the Lake*, rendering its horrific nature as at least twofold: in the horror of (recurring) abuse and in the implications of such systemic abuse for the community. In representing Robin and Tui’s struggles against annihilation as located in their shared uncanny subjectivity, *Top of the Lake* ultimately posits a progressive, if complex and contradictory, narrative of female survival. This insistence on survival is signposted just before the series’ end, when the two stand together but apart within the frame. Their tacit shared moment is wordless, but as they both face away from the camera and out towards the lake, this final moment signals possibilities for escape from the community which has systemically damaged both Robin and Tui in turn.

II.

While *Top of the Lake* sustains a profound uneasiness in its aesthetic style, its narrative realism is firmly grounded in the police procedural strand. **While it also incorporates an investigative narrative**
strand, French miniseries Les Revenants foregrounds a supernatural storyline as its central framing narrative across its eight episodes. Les Revenants is set in a small isolated village nestled within the sublime landscape of the French Alps. The first shot of the first episode is of a sharply curving motorway over a precipice surrounded by mountains. The camera pans up from the motorway to frame a snow-capped mountain peak. The next shot takes place inside a school bus and focuses on a teenage girl, Camille (Yara Pilartz), listening to headphones and staring out the window. The subsequent sequence depicts the bus externally as it crashes through the barrier of the curving motorway and plummets over the side. In the sequence after this a clearly bewildered Camille is walking along the curved motorway, the first of the ‘returned’ characters. This rapid series of events visually and thematically foregrounds a boundary between ‘before’ and ‘after’ death which informs and shapes the narrative throughout the series.

Following this sequence, the credits begin; first with the delicate chimes of the theme tune, scored in a haunting minor key by Scottish post-rock band Mogwai and played over a title image in which the words ‘Les Revenants’ appear slowly, mirrored in the lake which fills the frame. Subsequent images in the credit sequence appear almost as photographic stills, except for slowly moving figures within. The first image shows a couple entwined in an idyllic green meadow, with the camera then panning left to include a single handmade cross in the shot. Subsequent images repeatedly show lone figures standing apart from the buildings of the village but looking towards them, their backs to us. One character, Simon (Pierre Pierrot), stands aloof on a hillside overlooking a set of houses grouped together; another, Victor (Swann Nambotin), walks along a quiet stretch of motorway overlooked by mountains. Subsequent images include a lone child playing outside a seemingly abandoned school and a tiny figure standing with arms spread wide in the foreground of a large water power plant. A later image, jarring with the others, depicts animals floating under water (oddly and non-diegetically reminiscent of the Top of the Lake credits). The sequence ends with the sombre and pale face of Camille staring out a dusty window; the image of her face is superseded by a ghostly white hand trailing fingers across the window pane. This sequence anchors us within the eerie storyworld of this strange Alpine village and draws us into the experience of the frightened and confused returned, each
of whom first approach the village as sudden outsiders to a place once familiar which has now
suddenly become strange for them.

Visually, *Les Revenants* presents the community dialectically: moving between representations of the
village as homely and comforting, and then as forbidding and isolated when seen from an external
perspective. As in *Top of the Lake*, the contrast between the built community and the surrounding
landscape is pointed; but here it reinforces a diegetic and dialectical preoccupation with the role of the
rational within an irrational, natural world. The rational is represented by the public buildings of the
village: the ‘Helping Hand’ community centre, the Lake Pub, the expensively equipped police station,
the power station, the town library—all are modern in shape, with clean lines and right angles, neutral
in colour with flat roofs, their civic functionality foremost. Their utilitarian ugliness is heightened by
the contrast with the beauty of the mountains which surround the town. Further, their stark
functionality provides visual and tonal contrast to the eerie moments of the uncanny which proliferate
throughout the series. Alongside this public functionality, individual houses are recurrently depicted
at night with their lights shining out at the mountains surrounding them, creating a cozy and idyllic
portrait of a self-contained, complacent little town. Repeatedly, we see one of the returned standing
alone outside at night, the houses or apartment block they linger outside lit from within, rendering the
interior a warm cozy space from which they are visually as well as narratively excluded. Several
episodes end with a medium external shot of a particular house, the camera moving slowly to capture
and frame the inhabitants in tableau in each room in ways reminiscent of Jean-Paul Godard’s 1972
film *Tout va Bien*, in which the camera pans slowly at medium shot capturing multiple rooms of a
given building, as if the side of the building was cut away. The careful, reflexive construction of these
tableau compositions invites a deeper, reflective consideration of what is being shown. The first
episode establishes this use of tableaux, concluding with a reflexively formal shot of the returned
teenage Camille with her family: she is encircled by her mother Anne’s (Anne Consigny) arms as they
huddle together on the couch. Her father (Frédéric Pierrot) stands with his back to them and to us,
faceing the window and the idyllic view beyond. Camille’s twin Lena (Jenna Thiam) stands to the left
of the frame, separate from her mother, sister and father. A sense of the uncanny is produced here

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through this dialectical representation of what constitutes ‘home’, acquiring a further blurring layer
produced by the framed domestic space which echoes the traditional viewing space of the living
room.

Alongside the spatial production of the uncanny in Les Revenants, a second register of the uncanny is
produced in those standalone moments in which the true nature of each of the returned is revealed.
Moments of confrontation between the living and the returned function as slices of shocked
realisation, rupturing the narrative rhythm and heightened in their emotional power by uses of music,
performance and lighting. As elements of exposition, these moments further the narrative while
simultaneously deepening understanding of the scale of the phenomenon of the returned and their
emergent centrality in the seemingly tranquil community. Each confrontation produces a further
estrangement from a past homely realism typified by previous cosy shots of the village. The first of
these moments takes place when Anne confronts the newly returned Camille, who is ravenously
foraging in the family kitchen for food after completing her long walk home from the highway,
completely unaware she has ‘returned’ after her death four years previously and with no memory of
the bus crash that killed her. Hearing Camille’s rustlings in the kitchen, we see her through Anne’s
eyes, catching an unexpected glimpse of red hair as she turns from the fridge. When Anne sees
Camille’s face for the first time, her shock informs ours; her stunned attempts to reply to Camille’s
innocuous queries reveal the depth of her surprise. A piece of music from the Mogwai score plays
over this scene, minor key and minimal, comprising a series of repeated notes with a scratchy
undertone communicating a light uncertain menace. This specific melody, alongside two others in
particular, recurs throughout the series; all three melodies are used in turn to indicate a given uncanny
moment. This use of music functions to underscore and deepen the emotional power of the televisual
moment and to reinforce the haunting capacity of televisual music within the series as a whole.

Television sound, whether experienced through laptop headphones or in front of the television set, can
become ‘thoroughly enmeshed in the domestic landscape’, thereby producing a ‘sonic overlap
between televisual and household realities’ (van Elferen 2012, 77). This overlap produces a ‘musical
blurring of the boundaries between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic’ and within this blurring ‘the
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musical signal is repeated, keeps asking the viewer/listener’s attention, literally haunts her’ (van
Elferen 2012, 78). Mogwai’s melodic scoring of these moments emphasises and deepens this blurring,
haunting capacity, facilitating our immersion into the eerie storyworld of the series.

A second moment in the first episode—of exposition, but also of horror and shock, takes place when
Lena returns tipsily to her room after a night at the Lake Pub. Hearing her sister, Camille knocks on
the wall between their bedrooms in greeting. Startled, Lena jumps, then jumps again when the knock
is repeated. Camille leaves her room and goes to Lena’s door. Lena starts back, eyes riveted to
Camille’s face. Her horror both frightens Camille and deepens the sense that she is inherently
uncanny, following Freud’s insistence that manifestation of the uncanny can be considered as
anything to do with the body after death (Freud 2003). Further, reading Camille overtly as undead, she
and by extension all of the returned characters become ‘abject’ in the sense that, as Julia Kristeva puts
it, that ‘[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death
infecting life’ (Kristeva 1982, 4). I draw on Kristeva’s concept of abjection as a way of
conceptualising the abject subjectivity of the returned. The multiple figurations of this abject
subjectivity is inherent to but also complicates Les Revenants’ negotiations of the uncanny. In
separating out abjection and the uncanny, while recognising where they overlap in the series, I also
draw on Kristeva’s (1982) distinction between the uncanny and abjection, in which she argues
abjection is more violent as well as viscerally figured. Kristeva argues that our relationship to the
abject is more intimate than our relationship with the other, which is most often experienced at the
level of social and political subjectivity. In contrast, what is abject, unlike the other, suggests a
transgression of the border between ourselves and the abject, a visceral bleeding across categories but
also a reinforcing of our living self. When faced with the prospect of the corpse, Kristeva writes ‘I am
at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that
border’ (Kristeva 1982, 3). I suggest this border between the living and the abject returned is figured
and negotiated repeatedly in family and romantic relationships between the returned and the living
throughout Les Revenants. In the context of this series, the horror first produced by an aesthetic sense
of the uncanny is most fully realised in the figuration of the abject body, and is located precisely
within the blurred intimacy of the relationship between the abject body and the known, healthy, living body. This blurring surfaces in the first moment of confrontation between Camille and Lena in which the extent of Camille’s uncanniness and her abject nature is revealed. The moment is shocking because it occurs between twins who are no longer the same age and the visual contrast between the two bodies is pronounced. Lena has continued to live and grow up, whereas Camille is frozen at fifteen. Thus the intimacy of shared twinhood is shattered even while they retain the bond of sisterhood.

I suggest both of these moments, and subsequent moments of confrontation with the returned, function to emphasise their abject nature and their lack of awareness about their state. These standalone moments further reinforce the profound schism between the returned and the living. Through these televisual moments, produced within an aesthetic framework of an eerie visual style, near-static camera movement, intense performances and haunting score by Mogwai, our concentration is focused on the televisual aesthetic and its preoccupation with the uncanny. Serving as a formal rupture as well as a jolting expository device, each initial moment of confrontation with one of the returned (Camille, Simon, Victor) reinforces their uncanniness. I argue therefore that the narrative of Les Revenants is built on such moments. Taken together, they foreground the abject nature of the returned as a central theme of the series. At the level of plot, what occurs in each moment is the characters’ realisation of the abrupt removal of the previous relational context, the irradicable alteration of the undead returned and the sense of horror and disbelief produced by that realisation. At the level of aesthetic form, each uncanny moment draws us more deeply into the storyworld of Les Revenants, in which rational logics and procedural practices are ultimately subsumed by a sense of unease produced by the familiar made strange.

III.

Through close readings of complex expansions of the aesthetic possibilities of these two examples of the television drama miniseries, I have argued that both Top of the Lake and Les Revenants present and negotiate moments of the uncanny via careful and deliberate uses of formal televisual strategies
and the televisual moment. In both series, thematic negotiations are produced within a distinct aesthetic style which reinforces both the beauty and isolation of the community depicted. I suggest that both series incorporate moments of the uncanny which function as ruptures in the narrative and as jarring moments of realisation, producing multiple meanings in fragments of narrative excess.

Through these moments located within an estranging televisual aesthetic, both series produce a ‘reconstitution of home on a new plane’ (Zipes 1983, 176), actively reworking notions of ‘home’ and the familiar, but resulting in two very different conclusions. Yet in both the invocation of the uncanny emerges in relation to spaces and subjectivities, enabling a critical framing which produces a gendered critique from the perspective of violated subjectivity in Top of the Lake and sustains a meditation on abject subjectivity in Les Revenants. Also in both series, the procedural logic of the detective narrative fails to come to a full resolution; instead, the rational mechanisms of the official investigation are shown as ultimately ineffectual.

Top of the Lake activates a critique through recurring figurations of its two uncanny protagonists, each imbued with a ferocious capacity for survival, developed within a slowly unfolding narrative which reveals the extent of corruption in an alienating community characterised by systemic abuse and tacitly condoned violence. The conclusions offered by Top of the Lake are ultimately located in individual rather than collective responses: the community is shown to be economically and socially dependent on corruption (in particular, drug manufacturing and business deals incorporating the unknowing barista kids as objects of exchange) and the women’s commune posited as an alternative community faces an uncertain future by series’ end, following leader G.J.’s (Holly Hunter) abrupt departure. In Les Revenants, the village is itself subsumed into the spectre of the uncanny introduced by the returned, culminating finally in a transformed community in which the living inhabitants are physically unable to leave and are contrarily turned around on any outward journeys, ultimately contained and locked into one of the modern community buildings as ‘the horde’ roams freely in the forest outside. Instead of the primarily progressive, if individually centred, narrative of Top of the Lake, Les Revenants presents a reflective one, circling back to questions around the returned body and its legitimacy. Figurations of the uncanny returned produce the fear that those living will be drawn
over to the side of the undead, in an evocation of Freud’s assertion that ‘whoever dies becomes the
enemy of the survivor, intent upon carrying him off with him to share his new existence’ (Freud 2003,
149). Enabled by moments of the uncanny, a further, more complex exploration is developed around
the abject nature of those returned, still ‘living’ in one sense but in ways questioned by lovers and
family members, as well as by the wider community. The emotional relationships which persist
between the living and the returned are haunted by a blurring between the two subjectivities, a
blurring finally manifested viscerally in the living Adele’s (Clotilde Hesme) pregnancy, resulting
from her rekindled relationship with the returned Simon. The thematic exploration of the abject
subjectivity of the returned is based on ongoing interrogations of their bodily and social legitimacy,
which invites questions in turn of how this emergent subjectivity will be integrated, or rejected, by the
village community. The horde, the emergent collective of the returned, represent the full
manifestation of the exilic nature of the abject returned, embodying the abject qualities of separation
and the search for spaces of belonging in negotiating a ‘new existence’ post-death. Ultimately the
space that the abject subject seeks is never singular but instead ‘essentially divisible, foldable, and
catastrophic’ (Kristeva 1982, 8) as the Alpine village ultimately becomes. In conclusion, then, I argue
that *Top of the Lake* produces a cognitive estrangement in its moments of rupture, inviting a critical
look at a damaging community via the uncanny perspectives of Robin and Tui; whereas *Les
Revenants* produces moments of reflection which refer back to past shared histories and forward to the
possibilities of abject subjectivity, but which offer no avenues for escape.

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Notes

1 Wheatley’s argument incorporates analysis of television’s domesticity in two ways: the implications for the text and as the location for reception. This essay draws on the first of these and particularly on the ways the television text visually references and draws upon the domestic viewing context.

2 I continue to use the term ‘returned’ below mainly minus the quotation marks, following the series’ narrative normalisation of the existence of the villagers returned from the dead. Where the quotation marks do appear, they indicate the term is being problematized.