

Narrating the uncanny: the music of *Les Revenants*

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Summary

- This article explores the narrative function of music in the French TV drama *Les Revenants*, focussing on the representation of the family unit and the (Freudian) uncanny.



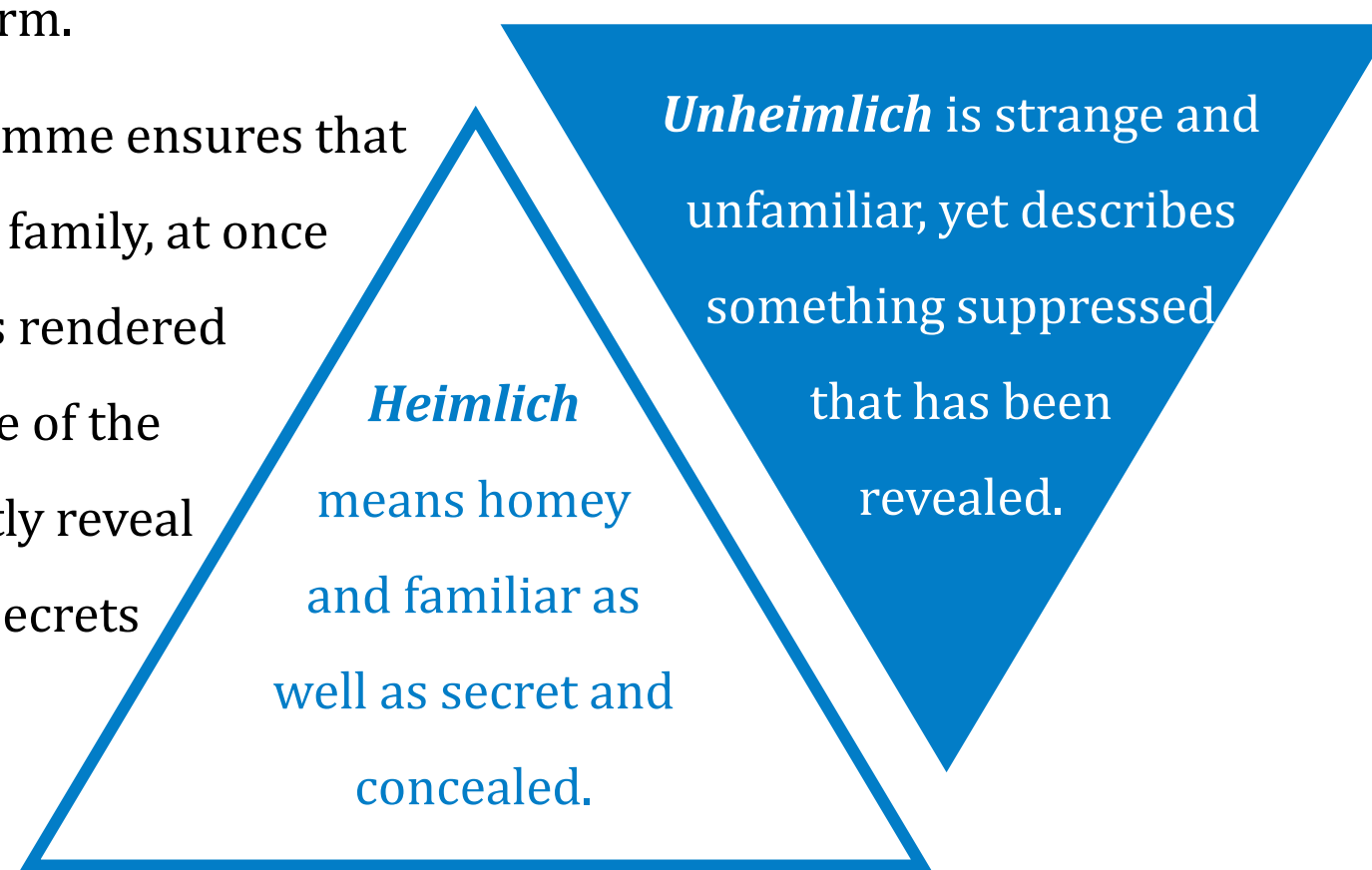
The Ségurets - Les Revenants, Canal Plus (2012)

Introduction

- The underlying concern of the French TV drama *Les Revenants* (Canal Plus France, 2012–15) is simple: how might people react if their loved ones returned from the dead?
- The programme offers an extended meditation on matters of life, love and loss; its overriding atmosphere is both melancholic and uncanny.¹
- Academic study of *Les Revenants* to date has tended to side-line the music or even, by omission, silence it altogether.
- This neglects its potential as ‘a character’ within the show, with its own narrative agency – as well as the creative input the band had in determining its expressive qualities and hence meaning.²

Freud’s Uncanny³

- Taken literally *uncanny* translates to the German *unheimlich*, the origins of which adds a new dimension to the term.
- The premise of the programme ensures that the *heimlich* quality of the family, at once familiar but also private, is rendered *unheimlich* by the presence of the returned, who inadvertently reveal the previously concealed secrets of the different families within the show.



Methodology

- Collected extensive data on the series as whole, taking note of action, music cue, cue effects, and shot type.
- Divided our findings into subsections corresponding to the Freudian definition of the uncanny; secrets revealed, doubling through doppelganger effect, the return of the dead, and breaching of the home.

| Séguret Family - Secrets Revealed | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------------|
| Scene | Action | Music |
| 1.30 | Léna and Frédéric are intimate | Wizard Motor |
| 3.5 | Jérôme tells Camille about Claire split | - |
| 3.37 | Frederic sees Léna’s scar | Wizard Motor |
| 4.18 | Police reveal that Jérôme hit Léna | Sustain |
| 4.26 | Camille asks Frédéric about bus crash | Unnamed Theme |
| 4.30 | Léna tries to reveal Camille’s identity to Frédéric | Eagle Tax |
| 5.38 | Camille reveals her identity to Frédéric | Wizard Motor |
| 6.3 | Jérôme is intimate with Lucy to see Camille | Special N |

A table showing the corresponding musical cue when secrets are revealed in the Séguret family

- The Séguret family dominate the screen time of all the families in the series and so took a natural lead in our investigation.
- Each music cue corresponded irregularly with each uncanny feeling therefore looking at the musical themes intrinsically proved an important next step.

Music

- All of the main cues of Mogwai’s soundtrack unsettle temporality, whether it be through the use of drones (long notes) that suspend time, irregular melodic cycles, or unpredictable changes in metre and tempo.

- The contrasting way that music and plot express an uncanny, dis-jointed temporality suggests that their relationship is more than one of simple coherence or congruence.

Such temporal dislocations help contribute to a species of the uncanny described by Derrida in *Spectres of Marx*, in which we encounter ‘time ... out of joint’.⁴

Wizard Motor – S.1, E.1

| Scene | Action | Uncanny |
|-------|---|------------------|
| 1.2 | Butterfly comes to life and flies through house | Returned |
| 1.9 | Camille found in the kitchen | Returned |
| 1.11 | Jérôme meets Camille (transition) | Returned |
| 1.12 | Mrs Costa revealed in the kitchen | Returned |
| 1.31 | Léna and Frédéric are intimate (flashback) | Secrets Revealed |

A table showing the use of music cue ‘Wizard Motor’ throughout Series 1 of *Les Revenants*

- The final appearance of the cue seems random as it is used when a secret is revealed rather than being associated with returned revenants.
- Due to the flashback in 1.31, associations of ‘Wizard Motor’ with returning revenants in the present is juxtaposed with themes of sex and death in the past.
- This suggests a narrative distancing between the action and the music as neither are obviously linked.

- However, understood in chronology of the plot, ‘Wizard Motor’ carries forward Léna’s betrayal from the past into the present day of *Les Revenants*, asking the viewer to reevaluate what they have heard before.
- The music gives us an advanced insight into the uncanny heart of the show as ‘Wizard Motor’ follows the repressed secret as it unfolds in the present narrative.
- Throughout both series, the music continues in a similar fashion, aligning not with individual psychologies or dramatic situations, but being dispersed in such a way as to invite interpretative engagement, to narrate uncanniness.

Conclusion

By virtue of its play of style, generic convention, harmony and timbre, the music itself can be configured as an uncanny double of the events depicted on screen, serving as a narrating voice that renders the action more, rather than less, ambiguous.

Acknowledgements

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