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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/2170>

DOI: 10.4000/tvseries.2170

ISSN: 2266-0909

Publisher

GRIC - Groupe de recherche Identités et Cultures

Electronic reference

Charles Joseph and Delphine Letort, « Tom Perrotta's *The Leftovers* in Textual Seriality: Trauma, Resilience... Resolution? », *TV/Series* [Online], 12 | 2017, Online since 20 September 2017, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/2170> ; DOI : 10.4000/tvseries.2170

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

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Tom Perrotta's *The Leftovers* in Textual Seriality: Trauma, Resilience... Resolution?

Charles Joseph and Delphine Letort

"And then it happened. The biblical prophecy came true, or at least partly true. People disappeared, millions of them at the same time, all over the world¹."

- 1 This excerpt from the prologue of *The Leftovers* introduces the traumatic event that propels the narrative of Tom Perrotta's novel *The Leftovers* (2012): two per cent of the world population suddenly disappeared on that fateful day of October 14th creating immediate chaos. The novel focuses on the community of Mapleton and relates how its residents cope with the memory of the rapture three years after it occurred. An omniscient narrator gives insight into the characters' intimate journeys, raising philosophical questions about the meaning of individual and community life. The protagonists embody different life choices, suggesting the long-lasting imprint of the past over the present: Laurie Garvey has decided to join the Guilty Remnants, a community whose members are determined to honour the departed, while her husband Mayor Kevin Garvey strives to preserve social order in Mapleton. Although the novel's narrative structure borrows from the best-selling evangelical apocalyptic literary series entitled *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, which sheds light on the chaos that follows the rapture of those individuals chosen by God to be saved, *The Leftovers* departs from this tradition by highlighting the paths of survival on which the characters engage individually. *Left Behind* characteristically opens with a scene of rapture that prompts the unsaved to convert to Christianity as they face ensuing chaos in the forms of plagues, earthquakes, and wars². By contrast, *The Leftovers* articulates a secular response to the rapture and its adaptation into a television series prompts viewers to question the sacred texts and to ponder metaphysical questions that are in tune with contemporary cultural anxieties.
- 2 Drawing on Robert Stam's understanding of adaptation as a transformative process, this presentation aims at underlining how words turn into dramatic visuals in *The Leftovers* - a television series that associates writer Tom Perrotta as co-creator alongside *Lost*

showrunner Damon Lindelof³. While scriptwriters traditionally work behind the scenes, Perrotta's status as co-writer for episodes 1, 5 and 10, draws attention to his authorial involvement in the adaptation of his own novel to the serial format. The adaptation process and its very meaning are one of *The Leftovers*' poetic themes on more than one level. Indeed, on the one hand the original text is subjected to significant alterations that ground the narrative in a much more tragic tone and thus reinforce its very essence; and on the other hand, adaptation is not limited to Perrotta's text since the two creators and writers interweave other literary subtexts that provide the television series with a much more complex hypertext to dive into. By opening the adaptation to other texts, the showrunners explicitly contest the meaning of the rapture and challenge the evangelical message promoted by the *Left Behind* series.

- 3 Not only does the addition of new scenes to the basic script heighten the tension contained in the novel, leading to violent confrontations that are never read about in Tom Perrotta's written version, but it also sets up the dramatic formula that unfolds throughout the series. For example, even if the first episode of the series closes with the same event as the first chapter of the book – the appearance of the Guilty Remnants during the celebration organized in memory of the departed, it differs strongly in tone from the novel since the residents of Mapleton physically assault the Guilty Remnants. The unexpected violence of the sequence exorcises the feelings of frustration and powerlessness that turn into collective rage as the rapture left no corpse to bury, making mourning and healing an impossible process⁴. The narrative reorganization and the repetitive musical score intensify the sense of loss that pervades each episode of *The Leftovers*, which exploits the interlacing plotlines to point out the devastating effect of October 14th on the sense of community living.
- 4 The adaptation of the novel into a serial enables the writer to revise his manuscript and to introduce new sources that indicate different paths of resilience. One filiation that does make its presence overtly felt for those who have read the original book is that of *The Leftovers*' creator himself, Tom Perrotta. This paper posits that the serial adaptation her permitted the writer to rewrite his book by reinventing some of the key scenes, but also some of the key characters. Perrotta, quite surprisingly, does not look at adaptation through the fidelity prism, considering that the television series is a story in and of itself, which can be taken independently from its literary roots. The author willingly compromises his exclusive narrative voice as an author to collaborate with a team ("we") in a common effort to produce an entertaining show:

What I can say is that I was deeply involved in the creation and the writing of the television show, and that the changes from the book to the screen are the result of a collaborative group process in which I was one voice among several. Our intention was never to simply translate the book into another medium; we wanted to create something new that was rooted in the book, but that had its own independent identity⁵.

- 5 As co-writer of several episodes, Perrotta is committed to re-inventing the story to make it fit the television serial format.

The rapture: lost words and traumatic images

- 6 While the novel opens with a prologue that calls into question the meaning of the rapture through delving into Laurie Garvey's response, a character whose agnostic beliefs were

shattered by the so-called rapture which she interpreted as “God’s intrusion into her life” (2), the series opens with an emotionally dramatic sequence depicting the moment when the “Sudden Departure” occurred. The prologue of the series aptly expresses the traumatizing event through an overcrowded soundtrack that overflows with the cries of a hungry baby before silence sets in and Max Richter’s score begins. When the cacophonous everyday noise that covers the phone conversation an overwhelmed mother is trying to maintain while taking care of domestic chores at the Laundromat suddenly stops, it produces a short sense of relief which will constantly be remembered as guilt. The rapture triggers a sense of panic, signified by the desperate cries of another child calling after his missing father and the sounds of clanging metal and screeching tyres as a car crashes in the background.

- 7 From that moment on, the rapture becomes associated with a slow musical tune that defines the instant of trauma and induces a reflexive pause whenever it crops up again in the narrative. The piano tune not only replaces vacuous words and fills in the blanks of the narrative, but its repeated use generates an aural serial pattern reactivating the initial trauma whenever it is played. The prologue thus strikes a dramatic chord which resonates throughout the following episodes, evoking the guilt that haunts the remnants who might have wished for some relief in the face of everyday stress. While the novel tends to isolate the characters from each other through the use of an omniscient voice that gives the readers access to unspeakable feelings, a heavy silence pervades the series that both draws attention on gestures that belie the characters’ deep-felt frustrations, and accentuates their isolation and inescapable loneliness.
- 8 The rapture first occurs aurally in the series as language seems to have suddenly broken down into fragments: names (“Sam”, “Dad”) are called out in vain, enhancing the sudden distance between “the leftovers” and the “departed”. The monosyllabic words signify the rupture in the semiotic chain of language, suggesting that signifiers are now detached from their signified leaving an unspeakable void in the life of the remnants. The rapture creates instantaneous chaos, making the date of its happening (October 14th) synonymous with an apocalyptic turning point. Throughout the ten episodes of the first season, the characters refer to October 14th as the moment that transformed their lives: such questions as “Where were you? Where were you when it happened?” seal the encounter between leftovers who are bonded by the collective trauma of loss.
- 9 The prologue ends with a fade-out that denotes the sudden hole in the characters’ lives and the three-year time span that has unfolded when the film reopens. Overlapping voices can be heard over the blank screen, translating the sense of panic that followed the rapture. This technique is reminiscent of the visual imagery created by Alejandro González Iñárritu in his post 9/11 short film⁶; exploiting the identical narrative process to convey the sense of powerlessness and ultimate disorientation generated by the unexpected terrorist attacks that caused the Twin Towers to collapse and disappear from New York’s skyline. The director poetically called the achieved effect “visual silence” arguing that he wanted “to confront people with their own images, their own fears and feelings about what had happened, allowing them to experience catharsis⁷.” Using the same type of editing allows the showrunner of *The Leftovers* to awaken the viewer’s visual and aural experience of 9/11 trauma, implicitly stating that he addresses an audience of “leftovers”.
- 10 The prologue to the first episode conveys the traumatic shock of the rapture by focusing on the mother-child relationship which is brutally severed by the unexplainable

disappearance of the baby; at the same moment a boy realizes in fear that his father has just vanished, providing a mirror-like situation that emphasizes the dramatic impact of the event on families that were split and destroyed. The opening scene of the *Leftovers* breaks with the traditional rapture narratives that “nearly always begin with the rapture of a woman” as Frykholm observes:

In rapture fiction, women are often depicted as disappearing at a moment of domestic crisis. They are taken up just as they are about to be beaten by drunken husbands or abandoned by faithless ones. In the midst of these sufferings, the women have preserved their faith and are rewarded by rapture. The husbands face their wives' disappearance with disbelief and then despair, sometimes committing suicide or simply falling deeper into disgrace and sin. In other cases, rapture provides the context for an unbelieving husband to come to Christ. These narratives offer to woman the role of the faithful and forgiving victim who disappears into silence rather than name the injustices done to her, who received otherworldly reward for her suffering rather than this-worldly justification⁸.

- 11 *The Leftovers* challenges the Christian understanding of the rapture by characterizing the departed as flawed; it is all the more ironic that Reverend Matt Jamison makes it his mission to desacralize the rapture by unveiling the sins of the departed. The raptured should not be mythologized and the left behind undergo no punishment. The series strives to debunk the exploitation of the rapture as myth by self-proclaimed prophets that take advantage of the ensuing chaos to build up their own career and financial assets. Tom Garvey realizes that Holy Wayne has deceived his followers to indulge his obsession with Asian women – including his pregnant friend Christine who is soon left to cope on her own with a newborn baby girl.

The broken families in the television drama

- 12 Television scholars James D. Robinson and Thomas Skill note that families have become a central element to the plots of dramatic series⁹. *The Leftovers* explores the complexities of family relations through the rapture, which lays bare the failures of social conventions to structure the family unit. “There is no family” explains Patti in episode 4, contending that Christmas celebrations can no longer be. The opening scene of *The Leftovers* is replicated throughout the series, introducing slight variations on the family model put to the test of the rapture, which has torn the fabric of society – symbolically represented by stray dogs running loose across town after losing their owners. While Perrotta writes a choral narrative that weaves together individual stories, the series furthers the focus on the tensions internal to the Garvey family whose members have been torn apart since the rapture; they are seen as being miles apart from each both literally and figuratively. Tom has fled to join a cult like his mother whereas Kevin and Jill struggle to continue living, yearning for an idealised past captured in family portraits. The repetitive motif of the family dinner at the Garveys' points out the vacuum left by the missing mother and son: the struggling father figure is unable to salvage the family tradition and the dinner table becomes a token of his doomed efforts at recreating a family atmosphere with Jill and Aimee.
- 13 The series highlights individual responses to the personal losses the characters collectively undergo: each of them embodies a path of coping with the unforgettable wound. Three years after the event most characters are still suffering from the unexplained disappearance of 2 % of the world population. Try as they might to

rationalize the story by making it fit into a scientific narrative which the media present as possible truth, and the local authorities to transcend into a Remembrance Day by turning all the disappeared into “heroes”, individuals are left to cope on their own as suggested by the woman whose dead dog Sheriff Kevin Garvey brings home three years after he ran away. Presenting his condolences to the lonely woman whose husband was among the departed (“Sorry for your loss”), Garvey realizes the failings of a language that cannot accurately depict the brokenness brought about by the rapture (E01).

- 14 The Guilty Remnants continuously play out the survivors’ guilt by literally embodying the blank in everybody’s lives when wearing white outfits that denote a loss of identity. Their chain-smoking creates clouds of smoke that dissolve into the air, figuratively evoking the disappearance of matter. Typographical blanks in the novel visually point out ellipses in the narrative – a ‘visual silence’ which is dramatized on screen by the Guilty Remnants who literally embody the shortcomings of language, refusing to speak about the internal void they cannot overcome – represented by the loss of a foetus in the case of Laurie (E9)¹⁰. Habits reveal the refusal of loss as Nora Durst goes shopping for cereals and milk to feed her children as though they were still alive, thus expressing her secret hope that they might return.
- 15 While many post-apocalyptic films celebrate “the myth of heroic survivors¹¹”; an effort to re-establish the social contract within the community, *The Leftovers* tends to highlight the failure of reconstructing a social pact among Mapleton inhabitants. Melvin E. Matthews underlines that post-apocalyptic narratives are driven forward by “those individuals who, in the aftermath of the cataclysm, set out to construct a new and better society from the debris of the preceding one¹².” The young generation of Mapleton, embodied by Jill and her bunch of friends, bears no hope for the future; their deadly games bespeak pathological risk taking behaviour in a society that offers only bleak prospects. Nora Durst’s journey to New York reveals a dystopian world in which marchers protest against oblivion, worrying about another possible rapture that might be deserved if no action is taken for collective Redemption. The climactic ending of the first episode forebodes the tragic confrontation in episode 10 when Mapleton citizens wreak vengeance on the Guilty Remnants after they create wax figures replicating the departed characters; the chaotic scene of a burning city points out the cycle of destruction that undergirds the serial format.
- 16 Joyce A. Evans argues that post-apocalyptic fiction characteristically represses all references to the dead population, but *The Leftovers* makes their absence overwhelmingly visible¹³. The series is pervaded with visual traces of the departed epitomized by the creation of sites of memories – including the erection of a public sculpture that is nonetheless felt as a malevolent artefact of the past (E01). As the mayor depicts the statue that represents a mother with her baby flying out of her arms as “outstanding”, the low-angle shot focusing on the bronze baby gives an eerie touch to the scene related through the eyes of Kevin in the novel:

Kevin had laid a wreath at the foot of the Monument to the Departed at Greenway Park, a creepy bronze sculpture produced by one of the high school art teachers. It was supposed to show a baby floating out of the arms of its astonished mother, ascending toward heaven, but something had misfired. Kevin was no art critic, but it always looked to him like the baby was falling instead of rising, and the mother might not be able to catch it¹⁴.

Fig. 1: The statue commemorating the rapture represents a mother with her baby flying out of her arms.

- 17 The statue might well add to the trauma that causes violence to be unleashed on the Guilty Remnants, for it also represents the leftovers' failure to impede the rapture. Such images might translate Perrotta's authorial input, visually expressing the ambiguous mix of powerlessness and guilt the characters refuse to speak about – including Kevin Garvey who represses overwhelming emotions to better embody the male authority his police uniform denotes and personify the patriarchal image Mapleton citizens expect him to fit in as an authority figure.
- 18 The series is marked by moments of contemplation when action stops and allows for gazing, which slows down the narrative rhythm and prompts a reflective, depressing look at an irretrievable past. Close-ups on objects create a visual poetic of absence: Nora has left her kitchen paper roll untouched since Oct. 14 whereas the Guilty Remnants cut out the figures of the departed in the family photographs, thus showing off the blanks that serve as constant reminders of the past. The sole purpose of the Guilty Remnants is to be living reminders of October 14th, which accounts for their dressing in white from head to toe. By interweaving several plotlines, the series draws attention to different ways of coping with the trauma; however, an atmosphere of heavy silence prevails, isolating every character with their internal doubts and questions. *The Leftovers* undermines the sense of nostalgia that usually inflects representations of the past through inserting enigmatic short flashes that hint at the repressed memories of an imperfect life before or since the rapture – including low-angle shots of students jumping to their deaths in Tom Garvey's flashbacks, visually recalling the jumpers from the World Trade Centre (E01)¹⁵.

Redefining the Sacred in the new cults

- 19 Because of the overall adaptation/rewriting process Perrotta's original text undergoes throughout the series, it enabled but also demanded of the author that he put his work under the scrutiny of other eyes. Without overtly stating it, *The Leftovers* series questions the authorial choices originally made by Perrotta, but his substantial involvement in this process makes it both less violent and more valid. The rapture is given new meanings

when translated into a serial motive: the event of October 14th is never explained and no attempts are made to try and make sense of it in the novel. Indeed, the book focuses attention on the shattered lives of individuals who are still traumatized, leaving the lingering mystery of October 14th intact, irrevocably linked with a past that does not seem to pass. The series is more brutal as it replays the event on various screens and in a diversity of narratives, yet cutting short any intellectual yearning for a rational explanation. The rapture cannot be comprehended by the human mind as the following sequence aptly demonstrates only 8 minutes after the first episode opens: the scene depicts Kevin as he watches a television newflash report in which the experts of the international scientific caucus mandated to provide an explanation confesses to their collective failure:

DR. RICHARD DENZIGER. ...to quote Wittgenstein, 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent' thank you.

SENATOR L. R. BERGE (R. TX). So we're clear, we convened a council of clerics, representatives of most world religions, who, as you know, were somewhat conflicted about October 14th and were thus unable to reach any kind of consensus, which in turn led us to the scientific community for answers. This document, the findings of your Commission, as to the instantaneous disappearance of 2% of the world's population, some 140 million souls, your conclusion as to what happened to them, why them, and where they've gone, is... and I'm paraphrasing here... "I don't know"? ¹⁶

- 20 Just like the characters of *The Leftovers*, the viewers are left hanging without any satisfying answers to what they have just seen, and the very possibility to reach any level of comprehension and resolution of the enigma is obliterated from the start. Wittgenstein's quote is a very strong textual reminiscence of what the Guilty Remnants also stand for with their vow of silence. In doing so, the series opens rather violently in terms of intertextual and metatextual references to postmodernity. Indeed, according to Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernity's coming of age is simultaneously coming with the end of great metanarratives¹⁷; *The Leftovers* could thus be perceived as an attempt to adapt this philosophical demonstration through questioning the meaning of the rapture.
- 21 The narrative reorganisation affects the meaning of the rapture: while the novel opens with a prologue describing Laurie's perception of the rapture and her subsequent decision to join the Guilty Remnants, those few pages are only at the core of the penultimate episode of the first season. The new narrative order conveys collective repression, an attitude which leads to the raging wave of violence that runs deep in the community. The series is significantly dominated by the presence of Chief Kevin Garvey – who is actually Mayor Kevin Garvey in the novel. The man's change of status exemplifies the adaptation process at work: as an officer of the law in charge of the daily routine of Mapleton, Garvey's inner troubles are constantly exposed and revived by his role as a go-between Mapleton residents and the Guilty Remnants, illustrating the conflict between his public image and his private torments. The character stands on a sharp edge from the very beginning of the story whereas his literary counterpart appears as a passive man who is trying to cope with whatever is coming his way.
- 22 The global event and subsequent trauma of October 14th is neither explained by the word of God, nor understood by the minds of men. No scientific or religious explanation can be given to the rapture, which accentuates the already existing trauma. Lindelof and Perrotta offer little chance of a valid explanation, disrupting the possibilities of narrative closure. This situation propels the viewers in the position of the expectant witnesses of

sudden bursts of anger, which the very first episode establishes as a narrative principle. They are left wondering about the possible remission of this world and the resilience of these characters.

- 23 The showrunners deconstruct the usual metanarratives to promote other paths of resilience by including new subtexts. The credit sequence thus merges its imagery of the sacred with the mundane: modern-day dressed people rise to the sky while others fall from it but it also depicts people fighting, parents in despair, a gay couple and an angry man – all reunited in a basilica-like dome painted in a distinctive Italian style. Such diversity contradicts the exceptionalist purpose associated with the religious iconography, originally used to set examples and celebrate lives to look up to. It further ironically counterpoints Timothy LaHaye's "antigay, antiabortion, and antipornography campaigns" that underpin the *Left Behind* series¹⁸. But now that everything is sacred and everyone is holy, nothing is sacred and no one is holy. Sacred texts being discredited, they allow for the emergence of new religions which however are not fully recognized despite their ostentatious members. The Guilty Remnants stand out as white figures whereas the Barefoot people walk barefoot and adorn a colourful target on their forehead.
- 24 The other cult-like reference made in both the novel and the series is Holy Wayne, a self-proclaimed African American prophet who manages to relieve the pain of others by absorbing it in his own body. Holy Wayne is the epitome of what spectacular cults stand for in American society: he is able to appeal to people from every social class, offering to unburden their guilty soul through hugging. Holy Wayne embodies those evangelical customs that are overtly loud, spectacular and number one channels in the United States TV network... The man is surrounded by an aura of mystery until his fall: he dies unceremoniously by killing himself when faced with no other option in the series whereas his arrest is very heavily mediated in the novel. Caught by the federal government, imprisoned and judged for his actions, he publicly owns up to his quack methods on public television. The young Asian teenage girls with whom he entertains a polygamous relationship is the unusual sexual fad that causes his loss¹⁹. If viewers are witnesses to the fall of sacred texts, they are simultaneously witnessing the rise of others – seeing sacred texts in action as they emerge in the light of inexplicable events. But the one unifying element that stands out of these arising cults is a rhetorical shift in and of sacred texts since they do not aim at making sense out of October 14th, but they rather try to make sense of this post-October 14th world. The Guilty Remnants annihilate what was formerly sacred by purchasing Reverend Jamison's church, which they turn into one of their headquarters for the big manoeuvre they plan during the whole first season. The sect settles in the church where its members perform their cults and reinvent the now obsolete sacred texts.
- 25 Other texts and literary objects, which are not always alluded to in the novel, punctuate the storyline of *The Leftovers*. These are not relying on the sacred but are grounded in the ordinary routine of the characters, providing them tools of resilience. Former Reverend Matt Jamison has put aside his clerical functions to become the instigator of a local self-published tabloid in which he wants to demonstrate that the events of October 14th were no divine actions. In order to do so, he investigates the lives of the people who disappeared and publishes their many sins. For instance, Mr. X was an abusive father, or Mrs. X was cheating on her husband. Even if he is very much aware that the people who were close to the departed will be mad about the divulgation of such information, he

pursues his crusade to persuade people to stop from stepping back from society as the Guilty Remnants do. Nora Durst's shopping list represents another type of text that helps live through every day. She keeps writing the same list of groceries in order to keep her cupboards full with the same cereals and cakes that her departed husband and two kids used to like. Perrotta and Lindelof, in deconstructing metanarratives about the rapture, are able to convey equal sacred importance to Holy Wayne's narrative of Redemption and to Nora's shopping list. Both become essential to the endurance of the narrative and to the survival of the characters.

- 26 Another type of text reaches a particular status within the series even though it was absent from the novel – the *National Geographic* issue that Kevin Garvey senior begs his son to read. Perrotta and Lindelof incorporate Kevin's father in the story arch by underlining the parallel between father and son: they both have the same name; Kevin's father used to be the Chief of police, a position which Kevin inherited from him. Kevin signed his own father into a mental institution after the latter turned mad while Kevin himself is experimenting frequent memory lapses living as a sleepwalker. While having an apparently calm period, Kevin senior escapes from the asylum in order to look for the specific issue of the *National Geographic* he wants to give to his son. He vandalizes Mapleton's public library in order to find it but doesn't and manages to buy it from someone else. When father and son are finally reunited and face to face after Kevin chased him across town, Kevin senior hands him the journal and demands his son to read it: according to him, this issue contains answers that everybody is looking for. Because of his father's apparent fragile psychological state and the very cryptic requests he makes regarding this gift, Kevin asks what he is supposed to do with it and Kevin Senior then answers: "You need to accept it. [...] Just listen to me. The lucky ones, they're not needed. They get to stay sane. But we, we're in the fucking game now, you understand? That whistle blew 3 years ago, and you cannot ignore it anymore. Your services are being requested. Eyes open, wide awake. This is your invitation. This is your purpose. This is what you fucking accept." Whether it is just the delusion of an old madman, giving him purpose in a sad life, or a subtext to be taken more seriously, is never clearly explained in the series; however, the creators' use of it and their continuous extradiegetic hints-throwing to the viewers are quite noteworthy. Because of the series' reference to this particular issue of May 1972, the journal was uploaded on the Internet and can easily be accessed in a PDF format by the viewers. Kevin's daughter, Jill, eventually acquires it from ebay, and when Kevin sees it on his kitchen counter, he throws it away before picking it up again from the garbage as if to read it. The issue is seen one last time during the last episode of the first season. When Kevin is committed to the asylum, the magazine becomes a tool of communication between father and son. The elderly man slips a note in the magazine to give directions to his son – a note which is placed on the map of Cairo, name of a neighbouring city to Mapleton and where the plot takes a major turn. Although the *National Geographic* appears crucial to Kevin senior's disturbed mindset, the literary object is never truly explained nor dived into by the characters.
- 27 On the production level however, many references are made to this specific issue. Episode 7 is the one during which the magazine is introduced and during which most references are made. Christine evokes for instance a spider that can breathe underwater, and an article of the said spider was published in the issue of the *National Geographic*. Its very cover, centred on the journal's main focus (Yellowstone National Park) depicts a bear surrounded by people taking pictures, which drastically contrasts with how domestic pets

went back to being wild animals, with the many packs of stray dogs wandering around in Mapleton. Other strong images from the *National Geographic* are also very reminiscent of how the local fauna is depicted in the series. The image of a tranquilized bear wrapped in a bag for transportation looks like the dead dog in Kevin's trunk, and the directors replicate photographs printed in the journal when filming the many appearances of the mad deer colliding with civilization in *The Leftovers*. The different captions used in the article "The Pitfalls of success", which describes the downside of Yellowstone's popularity, could also be read as subtexts for the series in similar perspectives: "The problem: people" could easily be read as *The Leftovers*' main focus and story arch, for the series highlights how people behave in the wake of October 14th; "Courting disaster and breaking the law" might epitomize Kevin Garvey's storyline; "Wilderness collision" and "Fleeing an elk that challenged onlookers" may easily refer to the many violent interactions between men and animals; and finally, "'Tall Tales' were True - at First" prefigures how the events of October 14th shattered all metanarrative structures, creating a *tabula rasa*.

The *National Geographic*: legends and myths

- 28 The most visible reference to the *National Geographic* is the title of episode 7 "Solace for tired feet" which is the caption accompanying a photograph of hikers in Yellowstone, a reference that seems to make a statement. The overall narrative of *The Leftovers* takes its toll and usually leaves the viewer in a state of melancholia and sadness which might appear as rather counterproductive for the American entertaining industry. The magazine thus becomes the one token conceded to the viewers by Lindelof and Perrotta, a "solace for tired feet" that could be read as a comfort for weary minds, a beacon that provides a hypertext to the series itself, another narrative to hold onto, another popular text to help to make sense of this post-October 14th world.
- 29 Episode 8 is entitled "Cairo" like the small city located close to Mapleton where Kevin owns a cabin in the woods, in which he confronts Guilty Remnants leader Patti. A full article is devoted to the "Troubled Capital of the Arab World: Cairo" in the *National Geographic*, thus implicitly anticipating the opposition between Kevin and Patti. Both embody distinct visions of the post-October 14th world and they are about to collide. Another article of the *National Geographic* is entitled "Thera: Key to the Riddle of Minos" and it deals with the sudden downfall of the Minoan civilization which remains a mystery as of today. The creators hint at a possible parallel with the sudden departure, thus projecting the very motif of the trauma outside the boundaries of fiction, relying on a common knowledge that would indicate a sort of cyclical event. This reference is first sealed in the caption which reads "Remnants of a Bronze Age Feast"; it is placed below the last photograph of the issue showing an archaeologist holding snail shells. These empty and fossilized shells are the remnants of this once thriving civilization, a status consistently claimed by the Guilty Remnants. Their civilization died on October 14th and to them, the leftovers died on that same day, relics of a world that cannot endure. The reference to this article is strengthened as the final confrontation between Kevin and Patti occurs against a mural that appears in a double page of the "Thera" article. The creators thus seem to include, in a very forward and literal way, the *National Geographic* as a subtext to this decisive scene as it unfolds in front of it. The caption that accompanies

the mural provides an original comment on the series itself – “Out of Rubble, Enduring Art”.

Fig 2: The mural in the background adds a symbolical dimension to the confrontation between Kevin and Patti.

Fig. 3: The mural painted on animal skin is an extension of the deer symbol.

- 30 The very motif on the Thera mural painted on animal skin (itself reminiscent of ancient times) in Kevin's cabin could be seen as yet again another extension of the image of the deer. In stretching out this reference to the *National Geographic*, the showrunners engage with a different type of intertextuality: symbols and legends. The deer is a well-established figure in legendary texts, often connoting the religious in texts that are extensively used and usually subverted through the first season of *The Leftovers*. At the end of the first episode, Kevin stands face to face with the deer he has been dreaming of and that might have entered his house and ruined his kitchen; the encounter dramatically ends up with the deer being hunted and devoured by starving stray dogs. The scene evokes the myth of Actaeon: Artemis was bathing in a mountain river when Actaeon saw her naked; she warned the hunter that he would be changed into a stag if he

ever uttered a single word. As he heard his companions and called out to them, he was instantly transformed into the animal and his fifty hounds chased him to death and ripped his body to pieces. *The Leftovers* adapts the myth to the serial, underlining the link between Kevin and Actaeon: sleeping with the woman he has just met on October 14th after she ran over the mad deer, Kevin finds himself at a loss for words with a secret he cannot speak about when the naked woman vanishes under him. The rapture occurs like a punishment to condemn his committing adultery, echoing the notion of an 'original sin' that undergirds the mythical story.

- 31 The penultimate episode of the first season – a flashback episode that retraces the main protagonists' actions before the rapture – furthers the symbolic interpretation surrounding the deer. The then simple police officer Kevin Garvey is sent on a mission to catch a mad deer that is wreaking havoc in Mapleton, entering people's homes and the local high school. The episode opens with Kevin making his usual morning run and while he is hiding in the woods to smoke a cigarette, he catches sight of a deer with a bright light coming from between its antlers. The animal suddenly disappears, but we learn by the end of the episode that it is the same deer that brings about destruction within the small community until it is run over while escaping from a house it has rampaged. Kevin is called to the house and witnesses the chaotic scene, and as he decides to euthanize the agonizing animal, he notices a deflated aluminium balloon between its antlers reflecting sunlight. As argued online by many fans of the series²⁰, the reference to Saint Hubertus' legend, Saint Patron of the Belgium city of Liège and of hunters, becomes all too clear. The story emerged during the xvth century and tells about Saint Hubertus' passion for hunting: while hunting in the forest on Good Friday, he saw a deer with a shining cross between its antlers that spoke to him with a divine-like tone and volume:

Hubertus! Hubertus! Until when will you chase wild beasts in the forests? Until when will this vain passion make you forget about your soul's salvation? Go to Lambert, my bishop in Maastricht and convert! Do penance for your sins as you will be taught. This is what you must do to not be damned for eternity. I trust you to greatly strengthen my church in these wild regions²¹.

- 32 Here again, the subtext of salvation and vain passion resonates strongly with *The Leftovers* story arch and Kevin's in particular. The deflated balloon that Kevin finds between the deer's antlers has a congratulating message that reads "It's a girl!" – a message that will be left hanging since in the following minutes, while Kevin is sleeping with a woman in a hotel room, his wife is having an ultrasound during which her fetus disappears along with the other departed. Instead of being an instrument towards reconciliation and virtue, the violently killed deer becomes a bad omen and its brutal death makes it impossible for Kevin to experience Hubertus' redemption. The deer that was the instrument of God in Saint Hubertus' legend suddenly collides with civilization and dies out abruptly, as if unable to provide both the solace and the mystery that old legends usually do. In this coming of age of humanity's legacy and accomplishments, what is sacred is what men make out of it, and legends will be just that, crushed under the weight of rationality, blind to its poetry. As for Kevin's journey after October 14th and the events triggered by the deer's death, it could be seen as his own Stations of the Cross, steps that lead him to understand that sins can (if not must) be uttered and forgiven. These poetic ongoing interactions between Kevin and the deer serve as visual and narrative links, providing symbolical representations for the character's inner troubles – much like the Thera mural.

- 33 The already highly symbolic “Out of Rubble, Enduring Art” caption leads to what is probably one of the first season’s strongest and defining moments. Towards the end of their talk, Patti concedes to telling Kevin what she wants and yet answers him in what can be seen as a riddle. She wants him to understand what happened on October 14th but also what she and the rest of the Guilty Remnants are standing for. The climactic exchange ends on her reciting an excerpt of W. B. Yeats poem *He bids his beloved be at peace*:

I HEAR the Shadowy Horses, their long manes a-shake,
 Their hoofs heavy with tumult, their eyes glimmering white;
 The North unfolds above them clinging, creeping night,
 The East her hidden joy before the morning break,
 The West weeps in pale dew and sighs passing away,
 The South is pouring down roses of crimson fire:
 O vanity of Sleep, Hope, Dream, endless Desire,
 The Horses of Disaster plunge in the heavy clay:
 Beloved, let your eyes half close, and your heart beat
 Over my heart, and your hair fall over my breast,
 Drowning love’s lonely hour in deep twilight of rest,
 And hiding their tossing manes and their tumultuous feet.

- 34 Out of the rubble of this chaotic post-October 14th world, art endures and provides Patti with a resolution. What can be seen as another cryptic riddle of the enigmatic woman resounds like a confession as to what the event meant for her. The powerful music accompanying this moment and the tears of the character all convey the same impression. Yeats himself, in his notes to this particular poem, wrote that it was ultimately a text about surrender, a text where symbolism was of the essence and in which, thus set in *The Leftovers*, we could easily compare “the heavy clay” with what Yeats calls “the drifting indefinite bitterness of life²².” After October 14th and its collective trauma, civilization came to a halt and people are left wondering if another post-October 14th age is even remotely possible, if it is liveable, bearable. In this poem, Yeats deals with seasons and insists upon the bleak and yet inevitable unconditional surrender to winter as it is necessary for better days to come – even if they are just a possibility, never a certainty. The very setting of this text in the series emphasizes its importance since it serves as the final answer of Patti to Kevin, her final plea for his surrender but also for her own. This choice is not to be taken out of its original context of publication, and Yeats’ poetry book *The Wind Among the Reeds*, one of the poet’s most melancholic work, can also be taken as an enduring piece of art for the likes of Patti. Moreover, the very poem that appears before the one selected by the writers can also shed light on its meaning: “He mourns for the Change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World.” In this singular moment, poetry appears to transcend all and to endure as the only type of language that could be able to lead to a possible resolution. The fact that this poetic text is so warm-heartedly recited by a leader who pledged a vow of silence makes it that much more powerful. According to Patti, meaning can be found in men’s words, just the right ones, and in the one literary language that can still be relevant in acknowledging October 14th trauma and in doing so, to understand it, to make peace with it, to transcend it.

Conclusion

- 35 The title of Yeat's book itself can act as yet another subtext to ponder. *The Wind Among the Reeds* can also be heard and thus read as *The Wind Among the Reads*. Different meanings can be found, different texts be juxtaposed without one prevailing over the others; all will be valid because they all function as vectors of resilience. Deciphering symbolic charges and interpreting *The Leftovers* can lead to very different results, but it is the process of doing so that is sufficient to unify these many outcomes. One can see the first season finale of *The Leftovers* as reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *Fury* during which the crowd seeks and enacts its own justice, appealing to a social human nature that reflects men's darkest impulses. Patti's final act may resound with a more poetic discourse in which death is not seen as retribution but as liberation because justice has vanished from this post-October 14th world where good and evil have become one and the same. *The Leftovers* gets caught up in these winds, in these variations, since it presents a different take, a different read of Perrotta's original text. As such, Lindelof and Perrotta's *The Leftovers* could be seen as the epitome of what John Fiske identifies as "popular texts" because the intertextual magnitude on which it relies explores so many levels of textual relationships and yet, simultaneously, this same intertextual dimension is deliberately loosely defined in order to leave it as open as possible, as functional as possible for the resilience and endurance viewers might require:

The texts of popular culture, then, are full of gaps, contradictions, and inadequacies. It is what aesthetic criticism would call its "failures" that enables the popular text to invite producerly readings; they allow it to "speak" differently in different contexts, in different moments of reading, but this freedom is always struggling against textual (and social) forces that attempt to limit it. The popular text is a text of struggle between forces of closure and openness, between the readerly and the producerly, between the homogeneity of the preferred meaning and the heterogeneity of its readings. It reproduces and recreates the struggle between the disciplinary power of the social order and the multiple resistances to this power, the multiple bottom-up powers that contest differently the more singular top-down power²³.

- 36 Fiske argues that popular texts are characterized by gaps and disparities, sometimes even contradictions which allow for a producerly reading. Perrotta's ongoing work process on his *Leftovers* storyline exemplifies the popular compromise between a readerly and producerly attitude. The author has rewritten and adapted his original tale to the small screen serial format while collaborating with Lindelof, thus adopting more of a readerly producing posture, while simultaneously favoring a producerly reading among the viewers of *The Leftovers* series by introducing prompts that hint at extradiegetic sources. The showrunners have produced an original story from their own readings of the source material, exploring the dynamic balance between "the readerly and the producerly": October 14th becomes the key pivotal point to the adaptation process, crystallized around the notion of textual seriality, thus enabling the scriptwriters to inscribe the date in his/ story. *The Leftovers*'s post-apocalyptic dystopia incites, even inspires both readers and viewers to adopt readerly and producerly attitudes as defined by Fiske, attitudes revolving and stemming from textual seriality surrounding the event of October 14th. The series thus relies on a common pivotal point first explored by Perrotta and Lindelof themselves, but shared with *The Leftovers* readers and viewers, fueled by an extensive use of intertextuality, and stimulated even more by the many gaps left unresolved, entrusting

a part of the creative process to the readers and viewers, allowing them to generate their own *Leftovers* metanarrative.

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NOTES

1. Tom Perrotta, *The Leftovers*, London, Fourth Estate, 2012, p. 2.
2. “*Left Behind* is part of a tradition of rapture fiction that dates to the early part of the twentieth century. Since at least 1905, dispensationalists have told the story of rapture and tribulation through novels. They have hoped to depict the “truth” by means of fiction in order to explain this complex eschatology to believers and in order to win converts. [...] The series opens with a scene of rapture. Pilot Rayford Steele is flying from New York to London when he receives word that passengers have ‘disappeared’ from the plane, leaving behind their clothing and personal possessions. Because of his Christian wife’s warnings, Rayofrd knows immediately that the rapture has taken place. After the rapture, the story follows the lives of several characters who, like Raymond, have been left behind. They convert to Christianity and band together to form a group calle the Tribulation Force.” Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture, Left Behind in Evangelical America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 29.
3. Robert Stam considers that adaptation is a process of transformation, which allows the filmmaker to unveil hidden aspects of the text: “Adaptation is potentially a way of one medium

seeing another through a process of mutual illumination. [...] The filmmaker can flesh out and sound out the writer's vision. Adaptation can become another way of seeing, hearing, and thinking the novel, showing that which cannot be represented except by film." Robert Stam, *Literature through Film, Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, p. 365.

4. "And yet he just sat there, doing absolutely nothing, until the people in white lowered their letter, turned around, and drifted back into the woods." Tom Perrotta, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

5. Email exchange with the author dated January 12, 2015.

6. Alain Brigand was the producer to the collective film *11'09"01: September 11* which included eleven short films by world-renowned directors such as Claude Lelouch, Youssef Chahine, Ken Loach, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Amos Gitai and Sean Penn, among others.

7. Alejandro González Iñárritu, « Interview with Alejandro González Iñárritu about 11' 09" 01 – september 11 », *artificialeye.com*, septembre 2002, <http://www.artificial-eye.com/dvd/ART240dvd/inter7.html>, accessed on November 1, 2016.

8. Amy Johnson Frykholm, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

9. Families used to be an element of comedies in the 1950s. James D. Robinson and Thomas Skill, "Five Decades of Family on Television: from the 50s through the 90s", J. Alison Bryant, *Television and the American Family*, Mahwah, New Jersey, Taylor and Francis, 2009, p. 140.

10. "When your words are futile, you're better off keeping them to yourself, or never even thinking them in the first place". Tom Perrotta, p. 119. The use of the pronoun is important here because it stresses a very personal relationship to language and to words. It is not language itself, it what you make of that language, "your words".

11. Melvin E. Matthews Jr., *Duck and Cover, Civil Defense Images in Film and Television from the Cold War to 9/11*, Jefferson NC, McFarland, 2012, p. 50.

12. *Idem.*

13. "There is never any attempt to confront the horrors of the overall situation; the reality of the nuclear destruction is not allowed to interfere with the mostly illogical contrivances. For example, the dead population have conveniently disappeared and are only fleetingly referred to." Joyce A. Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds: Hollywood and the Atomic Bomb*, Boulder, Co, Westview Press, 1998, p. 136-137.

14. Tom Perrotta, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

15. Marie-Christine Clemente contends that the figure of the 'jumpers' incarnates the 9/11 trauma and its "inescapable fate". *The Leftovers* uses this figure as an intertextual link to the 9/11 trauma, suggesting the rapture may be interpreted as another 9/11. Marie-Christine Clemente, "Representing 9/11: Alejandro González Iñárritu's short film in *11'09"01: September 11*", *E-rea* [Online], 9.1 | 2011. <<http://erea.revues.org/2060>; DOI: 10.4000/erea.2060>, accessed on November 1, 2016.

16. *The Leftovers*, Season 1, Episode 1.

17. Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

18. Amy Johnson Frykholm, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

19. Because of the narrative structure inherent to Holy Wayne's character, couldn't we draw an onomastic parallel between Holy Wayne and Hollywood? Because of his heavily mediated story arch in the novel and his compelling story-telling abilities in the series, a plausible superposition of these two very parent names seems adequate.

20. The website watchingtheleftovers.com or discussion thread on Reddit dedicated to the series' multileveled intertextuality rapidly became watching companions for many viewers who wished to dive further into the new visual and original subtexts introduced by the showrunners. Here is an example of John Bucher's contribution which hints at the Saint Hubertus' myth: <http://www.watchingtheleftovers.com/blog/2014/8/26/saint-hubertus-holy-men-deer-and-dogs>, last accessed November 25, 2016.

21. "Hubert! Hubert! Jusqu'à quand poursuivras-tu les bêtes dans les forêts? Jusqu'à quand cette vaine passion te fera-t-elle oublier le salut de ton âme? [...] Vas donc auprès de Lambert, mon évêque à Maastricht. Convertis-toi. Fais pénitence de tes pêchés, ainsi qu'il te sera enseigné. Voilà ce à quoi tu dois te résoudre pour n'être point damné dans l'éternité. Je te fais confiance, afin que mon église, en ces régions sauvages, soit par toi grandement fortifiée." <<http://www.st-hubert-du-grand-val.org/ACCUEIL004.pdf>>, accessed on Dec. 17, 2015.

22. "November, the old beginning of winter, or of the victory of the Fomor, or powers of death, and dismay, and cold, and darkness, is associated by the Irish people with the horse-shaped Púcas, who are now mischievous spirits, but were once Fomorian divinities. I think that they may have some connection with the horses of Mannannan, who reigned over the country of the dead, where the Fomorian Tethra reigned also; and the horses of Mannannan, though they could cross the land as easily as the sea, are constantly associated with the waves. Some neo-platonist, I forget who, describes the sea as a symbol of the drifting indefinite bitterness of life, and I believe there is like symbolism intended in the many Irish voyages to the islands of enchantment, or that there was, at any rate, in the mythology out of which these stories have been shaped. I follow much Irish and other mythology, and the magical tradition, in associating the North with night and sleep, and the East, the place of sunrise, with hope, and the South, the place of the sun when at its height, with passion and desire, and the West, the place of sunset, with fading and dreaming things." W. B. Yeats in A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1968, p. 66.

23. Fiske John, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 101.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines the narrative strategies used in the television series adaptation of *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-2017), originally a post-apocalyptic novel that revisits the literature of the rapture. The creators of the series incorporate new literary subtexts that provide the television series with a complex hypertext which questions the meaning of the rapture, calling attention to different ways of coping with the traumatic event of October 14th. *The Leftovers* tends to highlight the failure of reconstructing a social pact among Mapleton inhabitants, focusing on family units that have been torn apart by the rapture.

Cet article étudie les stratégies narratives adoptées dans la série télévisée *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-2017), adaptation basée sur un roman post-apocalyptique de fiction chrétienne. Les créateurs de la série introduisent de nouveaux sous-textes littéraires et développent un hypertexte complexe de manière à interroger la signification donnée à l'Enlèvement ; ils attirent également l'attention sur les différentes manières de faire face à ce traumatisme du 14 octobre. *The Leftovers* s'attache à souligner l'échec des habitants de Mapleton à reconstruire un pacte social, en se concentrant sur les familles déchirées par l'Enlèvement.

INDEX

Mots-clés: adaptation, trauma, sérialité, intertextualité, ravissement, *The Leftovers*

Keywords: adaptation, trauma, seriality, intertextuality, rapture, *The Leftovers*

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