

A Modern Lazarus Tale: A Cinematic Allegory of Science, Faith, and Ontological Rupture

Modern Bir Lazarus Hikâyesi: Bilim, İnanç ve Ontolojik Kırılma Üzerine Sinemasal Bir Alegori

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ABSTRACT

The Lazarus Effect (2015), directed by David Gelb, defies the conventional parameters of horror cinema by engaging with multidimensional concerns that intersect biomedicine, theology, philosophy, psychology, and visual narrative. While its premise revolves around the scientific reanimation of a deceased individual, the film ventures far beyond the spectacle of resurrection and instead unfolds as an existential inquiry into the fragile boundaries between life and death, self and other, science and the sacred. At the narrative core lies the resurrection of Zoe, a scientist brought back to life through an experimental serum. However, her return is not marked by spiritual renewal but by ontological disarray, manifested through psychological detachment, heightened aggression, and inexplicable supernatural phenomena. The film refigures the archetype of resurrection not as a redemptive miracle, but as a catastrophic transgression, wherein the sacred is replaced by technoscientific ambition and the divine is displaced by procedural control. In this light, *The Lazarus Effect* may be read not only as a story of corporeal revival, but also as a cautionary tale about epistemological overreach and ethical erosion in the pursuit of mastery over death. Employing a transdisciplinary lens, this paper considers the film as a post-secular allegory that draws upon and destabilizes foundational narratives surrounding resurrection and consciousness. Its intertextual architecture echoes the philosophical horror of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the illusion-reality dialectic of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, and the disciplinary strategies implied by biopolitical governance. Cinematically, the film fuses tropes of supernatural horror with documentary-style realism, enhancing the illusion of authenticity while subtly critiquing the scientific impulse to quantify the unquantifiable. Ultimately, *The Lazarus Effect* operates as a philosophical provocation. It confronts the modern condition wherein technological advancement outpaces ethical reflection, and where the resuscitation of the body does not entail the restoration of the soul. It raises the unsettling possibility that what lies beyond death may not be salvation, but a deeper, more terrifying fragmentation of the self.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Bioethics, Philosophy of mind, Spiritual transgression, Secular modernity, Intertextuality,

ÖZET

David Gelb'in yönetmenliğini üstlendiği *The Lazarus Etkisi* (2015) filmi, yalnızca korku sinemasının geleneksel sınırlarını aşmakla kalmaz; aynı zamanda biyotıp, teoloji, felsefe, psikoloji ve sinematografik anlatı gibi çok katmanlı alanları kesiştiren disiplinlerarası bir düşünsel zemine yerleşir. Her ne kadar film, bilimsel bir deney aracılığıyla ölen bir bireyin hayata döndürülmesini konu edinse de asıl anlatı ölüm ve yaşam, benlik ve öteki, bilim ve kutsal arasındaki sınırların kırılma üzerine felsefi bir sorgulamaya dönüşür. Filmin merkezinde, bir laboratuvar kazasında yaşamını yitiren bilim insanı Zoe'nin deneysel bir serum yardımıyla yeniden hayata döndürülmesi yer alır. Ancak bu diriliş, ruhsal bir arınma ya da kurtuluşla değil; psikolojik yabancılaşma, saldırganlık ve doğaüstü fenomenlerle belirginleşen ontolojik bir çözülüşle birlikte gelir. Film, diriliş arketipini kurtarıcı bir mucize olarak değil; etik sınırların aşılmasıyla doğan felaket niteliğinde bir sapma olarak yeniden kurgular. Bu bağlamda *Lazarus Etkisi*, yalnızca biyolojik bir yeniden canlanmayı değil, insanın ölüm üzerindeki mutlak hâkimiyet kurma arzusunun epistemolojik ve ahlaki boyutlarını da sorgulayan çağdaş bir alegoriye dönüşür. Bu çalışma, söz konusu filmi post-seküler bir alegori olarak değerlendirmekte ve diriliş ile bilinç kavramları etrafında şekillenen anlatı yapısını felsefi, psikolojik ve teolojik yönleriyle ele almaktadır. Film; Mary Shelley'nin *Frankenstein*'indeki felsefi korku, Platon'un *Mağara Alegorisi*'ndeki hakikat ve yanılsama ilişkisi, Michel Foucault'nun biyopolitik iktidar kavramı gibi metinlerle açık bir metinlerarası ilişki kurar. Sinematografik olarak ise belgesel estetiği ile doğaüstü korku öğelerini bir araya getirerek hem gerçeklik algısını güçlendirir hem de bilimin tanımlayamayacağı alanlara dair eleştirel bir bakış geliştirir. Sonuç olarak *Lazarus Etkisi*, sadece "yanlış giden bir bilimsel deneyin" anlatısı değil; teknolojik ilerlemenin etik muhasebesini geride bırakmasıyla ortaya çıkan varoluşsal bir çözülme sürecinin sinemasal ifadesidir. Film, bedeni hayata döndürmenin ruhu da geri getirmeye yetmeyeceği fikrini işler ve ölüm ötesinde karşılaşılabilecek varoluşsal sürecin kurtuluş değil, çok daha derin bir kimlik parçalanması olabileceğini ileri sürer.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Posthümanizm, Biyoetik, Zihin felsefesi, Seküler modernite, Kutsalın ihlali, Metinlerarasılık,

1. INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly shaped by the ambitions of posthumanism, where the boundaries between mortality and machinic life are rapidly eroding, *The Lazarus Effect* (2015) functions not simply as a genre-bound horror narrative but as a cultural artifact that encapsulates the anxieties of an age suspended between techno-utopia and metaphysical despair. Directed by David Gelb, the film presents the story of a group of researchers whose experiment to reanimate dead tissue results in the resurrection of a colleague, Zoe. What begins as a triumph of biomedical innovation quickly unravels into a nightmarish meditation on the cost of transcending natural limits. Zoe's resurrection initiates not a return to life, but an ontological destabilization that challenges the very coherence of personhood. Her post-mortem state, marked by supernatural powers and psychological disintegration, exemplifies a radical rupture in identity and embodiment, an unmaking of the self rather than its reaffirmation. In this regard, the film stages what Julia Kristeva (1982) calls the "abject," that which disturbs identity, system, and order, and which must be expelled for the subject to maintain its integrity. Zoe becomes the very embodiment of the abject: a body that has crossed the ultimate threshold, death and returned not sanctified, but corrupted.

Theologically, *The Lazarus Effect* revisits the biblical motif of resurrection as articulated in the Gospel of John (John 11:1–44), yet it subverts its narrative logic. Whereas Lazarus is revived through divine intervention as an affirmation of Christ's redemptive authority, Zoe's resurrection is enacted through human technology, bereft of grace, ritual, or moral clarity. This desacralization produces what Giorgio Agamben (1998) refers to as "bare life," a life included in the juridico-political order only through its exclusion, reduced to biological existence without symbolic value. Zoe's return is not a reanimation of the soul, but a reinstatement of life-as-function: a body animated, but without ethical orientation. From a philosophical perspective, the film engages in a subtle critique of Enlightenment rationalism and Cartesian dualism. The scientific presumption that consciousness can be reduced to neural activity, and thus revived through chemical means, echoes what Heidegger (1977) identifies as *Gestell*, the enframing logic of modern technology that reduces all beings to resources. Zoe's consciousness, post-resurrection, is no longer "hers" but a vessel for something residual, primordial, and unknowable. In that sense, the film raises a quintessentially phenomenological question: can being be artificially reinstated, or does such an act distort the essence of Dasein itself? Psychologically, Zoe's character becomes a site of convergence for multiple pathologies. Her resurrection not only actualizes Freud's death drive, (1920/2003) the pull toward inorganic stasis, but also functions as a case study in repressed trauma. Her violent behavior, hallucinations, and fragmented identity recall Lacanian psychoanalysis, in which the subject, upon confronting the Real (that which cannot be symbolized), experiences a psychic fracture. Her return is not merely from death, but from the unconscious abyss, a resurrection of what was never properly buried.

In cinematic terms, *The Lazarus Effect* employs a faux-documentary style, found footage aesthetics, and low-key lighting to produce a pseudo-scientific realism that blurs the lines between empirical authority and speculative dread. It situates itself within the lineage of techno-horror, following works like *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818), *Flatliners* (1990), and *Pet Sematary* (1989), all of which explore the devastating consequences of violating the natural order through human ingenuity. The film's aesthetic strategies intensify its thematic preoccupations, lending authenticity to the impossible and immediacy to the metaphysical. Moreover, the film resonates with Foucault's (2008) concept of *biopower*, wherein modern institutions do not merely regulate populations through disciplinary mechanisms, but through the management and production of biological life itself. In this schema, Zoe becomes both subject and object: the beneficiary of life-giving science and its casualty, simultaneously constructed and destroyed by the epistemes of modernity. In sum, *The Lazarus Effect* constitutes a layered and intricate cultural text that demands a cross-disciplinary reading. It is not only a story about the dangers of unbridled scientific ambition but also a philosophical inquiry into

the nature of being, the ethics of intervention, and the dissolution of spiritual structure in a secular-technological age. This paper explores these intersections, medical, theological, psychological, philosophical, and cinematic, in order to unpack the film's complex allegory of resurrection in a world where the sacred has been evacuated, and what remains is the terrifying power to animate without redeeming.

2. SCIENTIFIC RESURRECTION and the RUPTURE of the POSTHUMAN PSYCHE: ZOE AS METAPHYSICAL THRESHOLD

The resurrection of Zoe in *The Lazarus Effect* does not merely represent a narrative plot device; it constitutes a radical ontological event, one that collapses the dichotomies of life and death, body and mind, subject and object. Her return from the dead, achieved through experimental serum rather than divine intervention, marks the entry of technoscience into metaphysical terrain, and the beginning of a slow, irreversible breakdown of psychic, ethical, and symbolic order. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, Zoe's condition post-resurrection exemplifies not only Freud's *Thanatos*, the drive toward death, but also the traumatic aftermath of a symbolic failure. As Freud (1920/2003) suggests, when the ego confronts an experience beyond its capacity to symbolize, the psyche regresses into repetition and compulsion. Zoe's visions, aggression, and apathy signify a consciousness haunted by the Real, a realm Lacan (1977) defines as radically inassimilable. Her resurrection has not brought her back *into* life, but has left her stranded *outside* of intelligible existence. Indeed, Zoe's position after death is not one of identity, but of "uncontainability." Judith Butler's (2004) concept of "precarious life" is helpful here: Zoe's ontological instability renders her life ethically unrecognizable, a condition that strips her of the relational coordinates through which moral subjecthood is conferred. She exists in a liminal space where social contracts, scientific intentions, and ethical obligations dissolve. This precarity is not just sociopolitical but metaphysical, she becomes, in Agamben's (1998) terms, *homo sacer*, a being whose life can be violated with impunity because it is no longer legible within normative frameworks of meaning or value.

Moreover, Zoe's reanimation through biomedical intervention positions her as a quintessential *posthuman* subject: she is simultaneously enhanced (telekinetic, hyper-intelligent) and dehumanized (emotionally detached, ethically unmoored). Her body, now a site of experimentation, echoes Haraway's (1991) cyborg figure, part human, part technology, and wholly estranged from traditional anthropocentric narratives of agency. Yet while the cyborg often serves as a symbol of feminist empowerment and boundary transgression, Zoe's condition is dystopian: her empowerment leads not to liberation, but to disintegration. Her return marks not transcendence, but an ontological derailment.

Philosophically, the film critiques the Cartesian illusion that the self can be reduced to neural processes and resurrected via technological manipulation. Heidegger's (1977) notion of *Gestell*, the "enframing" of reality by technological rationality, illuminates how Zoe's body is treated as a *standing-reserve*, a resource to be optimized, revived, and controlled. This instrumentalization of life reflects the ethos of late biocapitalism, in which even death is no longer sacred, but a technical threshold to be negotiated, revised, and eventually overcome. In this sense, *The Lazarus Effect* dramatizes the end of thanatopolitics (the governance of death) and the rise of resurrection politics, new regime in which life itself is endlessly deferrable.

Ethically, the film can be read as a case study in institutionalized ethical failure. The researchers not only violate clinical protocols (e.g., lack of informed consent, psychological evaluation, or risk assessment), but they also act under a secular version of the *will to power*, believing that control over death grants ontological mastery. Their transgression is not merely technical, but epistemic: they assume that life is knowable, quantifiable, and thus reproducible, ignoring the layered, symbolic, and spiritual dimensions of personhood. Hans Jonas (1984) argues that modern science must be guided by a "heuristics of fear", a moral restraint rooted in the recognition of unintended

consequences. In the film, the absence of this restraint results not in enlightenment, but in *ontological obscenity*, the creation of life that should not be.

Cinematically, the film's use of documentary-style realism, interviews, lab footage, surveillance aesthetic, intensifies its thematic critique. It generates an atmosphere of *verisimilitude* that renders the impossible plausible, aligning it with *mockumentary horror* traditions that include *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity*. But unlike those films, which externalize horror, *The Lazarus Effect* internalizes it: the locus of terror is not in the environment, but within the resuscitated body itself. Thus, Zoe becomes a cinematic cipher for a culture at war with its own limits, a vessel through which the film interrogates the ethics of creation, the fragmentation of the self, and the collapse of metaphysical grounding in the age of synthetic resurrection. She is not just a character, but a threshold figure: a symbolic rupture in our understanding of life, consciousness, and human dignity.

3. INTERTEXTUAL RESURRECTION: MYTH, SCRIPTURE and CINEMATIC DESECRATION in *THE LAZARUS EFFECT*

The theme of resurrection is one of the oldest and most persistent motifs in the mythopoetic imagination. From the seasonal rebirth of nature in agrarian myths to the salvific promise of eternal life in Abrahamic religions, the return from death functions as both a spiritual hope and an ontological rupture. *The Lazarus Effect* (2015) enters this ancient symbolic field but does so by staging a deliberate act of narrative desecration: it simulates the resurrection motif only to strip it of its traditional redemptive, ethical, and symbolic functions. In classical mythology, resurrection often takes the form of katabasis, a hero's descent into the underworld and subsequent return. Orpheus, Aeneas, and Odysseus each undergo this journey, gaining wisdom or knowledge unavailable to the living. The return is transformative: to enter the realm of death and emerge intact is to be ontologically altered. Zoe's resurrection, however, resembles katabasis in form but not in function. She gains no wisdom, offers no revelation, and undergoes no moral catharsis. Her return is marked not by insight, but by contamination, a corruption of the self, the body, and the symbolic order. Biblically, Zoe's resurrection is an intertextual mirror to Lazarus of Bethany, raised by Jesus after four days in the tomb (John 11:1–44). Lazarus's revival is deeply relational: it reaffirms the spiritual authority of Christ and functions as a prefiguration of the final resurrection. In contrast, Zoe's return is devoid of divine agency, ritual significance, or communal celebration. Her rebirth is achieved through chemical intervention, in an isolated laboratory devoid of faith, grace, or sacred intention. In this sense, her resurrection can be read as a parodic inversion of the biblical Lazarus, an act of technological hubris masquerading as miracle.

This cinematic desacralization resonates with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), often considered the first modern myth of scientific resurrection. Victor Frankenstein's creature, like Zoe, is assembled from death and animated through material means. But whereas Shelley's novel interrogates the ethical responsibilities of the creator, *The Lazarus Effect* shifts the focus to the psychological consequences for the resurrected subject herself. Zoe is not merely a failed experiment; she is a posthuman wound, the embodiment of resurrection severed from metaphysical context. This lineage continues in contemporary cinema. In *Flatliners* (1990, 2017), medical students deliberately die and are resuscitated to glimpse what lies beyond death. Each character returns with traumatic visions or past sins made manifest. Similarly, in *Pet Sematary* (1989, 2019), those brought back from the dead are physically alive but spiritually vacant, parodies of their former selves. In *Sunshine* (2007), the resurrected Pinbacker becomes a metaphysical anomaly, claiming to have seen God in the sun and returning as a being of pure destruction. In all these examples, resurrection functions not as an ascent, but as a *fall*, a movement into madness, monstrosity, and metaphysical excess.

Philosophically, this shift signals the postmodern collapse of transcendence. Where resurrection once served as a teleological promise, uniting the temporal with the eternal, it is now

reduced to a technical procedure. Zoe's resurrection is simulacral, in the Baudrillardian sense: it is not a representation of a miracle but a copy without original, a resurrection that has lost all connection to the sacred narrative it mimics (Baudrillard, 1994). The body is revived, but the soul is absent. Life continues, but meaning is deferred.

The film also destabilizes the myth of redemptive suffering. In Christian and mythic structures, suffering is often a precondition for rebirth, Christ's passion, Inanna's descent, Dionysus's dismemberment. Zoe suffers, but not toward renewal; her pain is non-teleological, cyclical, absurd. Her suffering reveals nothing, redeems no one, and offers no moral clarity. She becomes the locus of anti-myth, a symbol of failed transcendence in a closed, immanent universe. In this context, *The Lazarus Effect* functions as an intertextual palimpsest: beneath its horror narrative lies a reconfiguration of mythic and scriptural resurrection tropes, overwritten by the anxieties of late technoculture. It stages a post-sacred world in which resurrection is no longer an act of divine grace or mythic inevitability, but a clinical aberration, a profane parody of what it once meant to return from death. It is a film that mourns not only the loss of transcendence but the atrophy of symbolic imagination itself.

4. THE FEMALE BODY, ONTOLOGICAL REPROGRAMMING and the FAILURE of RITUAL RESURRECTION in *THE LAZARUS EFFECT*

Zoe's transformation stages a profound boundary-crossing between life and death, body and spirit, turning her into a figure of metaphysical threshold that unsettles traditional ontological categories. Zoe's resurrection is not restorative, but entropic. Her sensory perception becomes hyper-acute: she hears conversations behind walls, sees energy forms invisible to others, and reads thoughts. In a key scene (approx. 43:00), she recounts being "somewhere else" during death, what she describes as a place of fire, screaming, and darkness. Rather than portraying death as blank or spiritual, the film imagines it as a psychic abyss, and Zoe's return as the re-entry of that abyss into the symbolic world. This moment aligns with N. Katherine Hayles' (1999) posthuman thesis: the human is no longer defined by continuity of consciousness or stability of flesh, but by data flow, neurological overdrive, and collapse of narrative identity. Zoe's statements are nonlinear and hallucinatory. She claims she can "feel everyone's thoughts" and that she's "never really come back" a dissociation that echoes trauma survivors who describe embodied alienation and discontinuous selfhood (Caruth, 1996). Her physical behavior also changes: her posture stiffens, her voice flattens, and her movements become robotic, cinematic coding for ontological rupture. In the final act (approx. 1:03:00), Zoe impales one of her colleagues, then cradles his dying body with apparent indifference. This juxtaposition of violence and tenderness marks the collapse of affective ethics, she enacts care as a gesture, but without interiority or empathy.

The Lazarus Effect stages resurrection as a ritual without resolution, a "liminal suspension" that never concludes in reincorporation. Victor Turner's (1969) three-part model of ritual, separation, liminality, and reintegration is disrupted. Zoe's death marks separation. Her resurrection marks the liminal phase, but there is no return to symbolic coherence. The film ends with the repetition of the experiment, Zoe attempting to resurrect her partner, Frank, thus continuing the ritual *ad infinitum*, locked in a cycle of sacrificial failure. In ritual theory, failure to complete a rite of passage often results in the subject becoming structurally invisible, a ghost or outcast. Zoe becomes just that. She is not reintroduced into society, nor does she reclaim her subject position. She becomes a vessel of pure disruption, what Kristeva (1982) calls abjection: "what disturbs identity, system, order... the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." This theme is emphasized visually in the final shot: Zoe crouches over Frank's corpse, eyes glowing, bathed in a cold blue light. There is no dialogue, no music, just silence and stasis. This tableau resists narrative closure; it presents resurrection not as an endpoint, but as a recursively traumatic loop, a technological liturgy stripped of eschatological promise.

4.1. *The Lazarus Effect* and the Ontology of Popular Horror: Cultural Aftershocks, Cinematic Strategies, and Intertextual Reanimation

Although *The Lazarus Effect* (2015) did not attain critical acclaim nor establish itself as a major commercial success, its cultural significance lies not in its popularity but in the way it reflects and refracts broader discursive shifts within popular horror. The film emerges at the intersection of biotechnology, spiritual vacuity, and posthuman anxiety, serving as a symptomatic text that encapsulates contemporary fears about death not as a finality, but as a manipulable threshold. Its narrative centers on the resurrection of Zoe, a scientist whose death and return are framed not through religious awe but through clinical procedure and instrumental logic, mirroring the ways in which popular culture increasingly detaches metaphysical motifs from their theological frameworks and repositions them within technological paradigms. In this regard, *The Lazarus Effect* participates in a lineage of what has been termed “biological horror,” or biohorror, a genre concerned less with ghosts and monsters than with the human body’s vulnerability to scientific intervention, ontological destabilization, and failed ethical governance. The film’s narrative logic shares clear affinities with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), where the act of bringing the dead back to life initiates not progress but monstrosity. Zoe, as a female counterpart to Frankenstein’s creature, embodies a similar tragic paradox: her reanimation is both a scientific triumph and an existential undoing, as her identity fragments, her body mutates, and her psychic integrity collapses under the weight of artificial life. Similarly, films such as *Flatliners* (1990, 2017) and *Pet Sematary* (1989, 2019) explore the consequences of returning from death altered, psychically contaminated, or spiritually hollow, suggesting that the liminal space between life and death, once crossed, cannot be undone.

The Lazarus Effect also engages, albeit subtly, with the iconography of possession and spiritual corruption long associated with films like *The Exorcist* (1973), yet it does so in a thoroughly secular register. Zoe’s transformation post-resurrection mimics possession in its physical gestures, catatonia, rage, telekinetic explosions, but there is no demon, no exorcist, no priest. Her condition is framed entirely through scientific language, even as it defies empirical containment. This is where the film’s horror intensifies: it gestures toward spiritual realities but refuses to name them, creating a space where science becomes haunted not by religion, but by its own insufficiency. Visually, the film adopts a compressed aesthetic language that reinforces its claustrophobic atmosphere. The majority of the story unfolds within the confines of a sterile laboratory, evoking the sensation of a philosophical vivisection, an experiment not only on Zoe’s body but on the boundaries of meaning itself. Director David Gelb employs a documentary-influenced style, likely inherited from his earlier work in non-fiction cinema, with the use of handheld camerawork and security-style surveillance footage that blurs the line between objectivity and voyeurism. Lighting is intentionally washed-out and overexposed in key scenes, especially those involving resurrection, visually coding the sacred as clinical, and the miraculous as mechanical. In scenes where Zoe levitates objects or displays psychic powers, the framing isolates her from the others, often from a low angle, mimicking classical religious paintings of ascension while simultaneously twisting the iconography into something estranged and horrifying.

Critical reception of the film was largely unfavorable, with reviewers citing predictable plot structure and underdeveloped characters. However, this surface-level critique may obscure the film’s symbolic ambition. As Dennis Harvey (2015) remarked in *Variety*, *The Lazarus Effect* attempts to explore “unsettling questions about science, soul, and the unintended onsequences of progress,” even if it does so within familiar genre constraints. The film’s perceived shortcomings in narrative innovation are perhaps symptomatic of a deeper cultural impasse: the inability to resolve the contradiction between technoscientific mastery and existential humility. As a result, *The Lazarus Effect* becomes not merely a film about resurrection, but a cultural artifact that registers the contemporary crisis of meaning: a secular society haunted by sacred symbols it can no longer interpret, and by metaphysical rituals it no longer knows how to complete.

Moreover, the film can be situated within what Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry (2008) describe as the "zombie cycle" of post-9/11 cinema, a period marked by the return of the undead not as metaphors for global apocalypse alone, but as expressions of ontological insecurity, unresolved trauma, and the erosion of symbolic structure. Zoe is not a zombie in the traditional sense, but she is undead, alive without being alive, human without being fully human. Her presence on screen is a cinematic symptom of what Baudrillard (1994) terms "the ecstasy of communication": the saturation of the screen with signs of life that no longer point to any spiritual referent. In this sense, *The Lazarus Effect* should be understood not only as a horror film about death and resurrection, but as a media-philosophical statement about resurrection as simulation, the revival of form without essence, animation without soul, narrative without redemption. Its lasting cultural significance lies in how it exposes the limits of science to restore meaning, the limits of genre to contain horror, and the limits of modernity to reconcile resurrection with the sacred.

4.2. Death Without Transcendence: The Theophilosophical Collapse of Resurrection in *The Lazarus Effect*

In *The Lazarus Effect* (2015), death is neither sanctified nor dignified, it is violated, reversed, and stripped of mystery. The resurrection of Zoe, a brilliant scientist whose body is animated through experimental serum, enacts a philosophical provocation: What happens when resurrection is performed in the absence of the divine? The film interrogates this question not through overt theological exposition, but through a sustained subversion of the symbolic functions death traditionally serves within religious and metaphysical systems. By staging resurrection as a scientific experiment devoid of eschatology, *The Lazarus Effect* dramatizes the collapse of death's sacred structure, revealing what remains when immortality is pursued without transcendence. Zoe's reanimation occurs within the sterile confines of a lab, devoid of prayer, ritual, or any gesture toward spiritual mediation. The scene (approx. 30:00–33:00) is saturated with mechanical precision: defibrillator shocks, data monitors, and clinical silence. There is no plea to God, no invocation of soul. The researchers' language remains empirical: they speak of neural reactivation, cellular regeneration, and cortical voltage. Yet what returns is not simply the Zoe they once knew, but a fractured entity that exceeds explanation. Her eyes open slowly, unblinking, her breath staggered, evoking not relief but discomfort. Her awakening is uncanny rather than miraculous, what Freud (1919) would call *das Unheimliche*: the return of what should remain hidden.

This return without metaphysical referent contrasts sharply with resurrection in sacred texts. In the *Gospel of John* (11:1–44), Lazarus is raised not by accident or instrument, but through divine will, embedded in relational and symbolic networks: Jesus weeps, the community gathers, the tomb is opened with reverence. The event is framed as an act of love and revelation, underscoring the continuity between divine purpose and mortal fragility. Zoe's resurrection, by contrast, occurs in isolation, imposed upon her body without consent, devoid of narrative closure or spiritual orientation. Her return reveals no deeper truth, only ontological breakdown.

Her own experience of death, described later in the film (approx. 43:00) as "endless screaming, fire, darkness" offers a counter-mythology of the afterlife. Instead of peace or judgment, she recalls torment and containment. This vision does not align with classical eschatologies of paradise or punishment, but evokes existential horror, perhaps closer to Sartre's or Camus' conceptions of absurdity than any doctrinal vision of Hell. What she returns from is not the underworld or purgatory, but an interiorized abyss, a psychological underworld that cannot be explained or healed. Zoe's resurrection, then, is not the soul reuniting with the body, but the body returning without the soul. Her speech becomes fragmented, affectless; her actions are increasingly erratic and violent. In one scene (approx. 55:00), she crushes a colleague's throat with her mind, not in rage, but with cold inevitability. This act does not depict moral corruption, but the evacuation of ethical personhood. In traditional Christian theology, the resurrected body is *glorified*, freed from sin

and mortality (1 Corinthians 15:42–44). But Zoe's body is monstrously post-glorified, revived, but not redeemed.

Here, the film aligns with Heidegger's philosophy of death. For Heidegger (1962), death is not merely a biological event but the condition that makes authenticity possible. *Being-toward-death* gives coherence to Dasein's existence. Yet Zoe is denied this horizon; her death is revoked externally, before she can existentially appropriate it. Her return is not self-willed, but imposed. Thus, her post-resurrection condition is one of temporal dislocation, suspended between having died and not being allowed to remain dead. The metaphysical significance of finitude is annihilated; she becomes, in a sense, *undead in the ontological register*. This status also reflects Kierkegaard's concept of *defiance* (*The Sickness Unto Death*, 1980), where the self refuses to be itself under God and instead attempts to constitute itself autonomously. The researchers, especially Frank, act not in humility before death, but in rebellion against it. They do not mourn Zoe; they override her passing. This act of resurrection, performed without spiritual warrant, becomes a blasphemy of form, a ritual that mimics resurrection but severs it from its theological roots. The result is not grace, but ontological desecration. Perhaps most haunting is the final image of the film (approx. 1:23:00), where Zoe, after having killed or incapacitated her entire team, lays Frank's body on the resurrection table and prepares the serum. Her gaze is empty, her voice mechanical. She is no longer human in any meaningful theological sense, she has become a self-replicating mechanism, a secular parody of Christ: not resurrecting out of love, but out of compulsion; not saving the dead, but consuming the living. In this moment, *The Lazarus Effect* collapses resurrection into repetition, a recursive ritual without spirit, where death no longer means closure, and resurrection no longer means hope.

4.3. Resurrecting Without Redemption: Metaphysical Displacement and the Ontology of Death in *The Lazarus Effect*

The modern horror of *The Lazarus Effect* does not arise from death itself, but from the profanation of death's metaphysical function. In this film, death is not finality, not even mystery; it is rendered a problem of technique. This transformation reflects what Paul Tillich (1957) called "the loss of ultimate concern" the severing of human experience from the sacred, from a grounding center of meaning. The act of resurrection, once bound to divine grace and eschatological hope, is here reduced to a biomedical procedure, depersonalized, instrumentalized, and ultimately devoid of ontological integrity. The resurrection of Zoe is emblematic of this displacement. When she is brought back to life through the application of a synthetic serum, the scene contains none of the affective or symbolic gestures associated with religious or mythic rebirth. There is no anointing of the body, no communal grieving, no prayer, no reverence. Instead, the scene is framed clinically, wires, monitors, electrodes, and what returns is not Zoe as she was, but a being whose presence disturbs not only empirical comprehension but symbolic order itself. The film thus replaces the sacred drama of resurrection with a secular parody, a ghost of theological promise reanimated through electrical current.

Her own account of the afterlife, "fire... screaming... no way out", is not one of beatific vision or moral judgment but existential claustrophobia. The afterlife becomes a void without logos. Her description resonates not with heaven or hell, but with a metaphysical nihil, a space stripped of moral architecture. This vision eerily echoes Spinoza's critique of the immortality of the soul; for Spinoza (1677/1996), immortality is not a literal continuation of personal consciousness, but the eternal reality of substance itself. In *The Lazarus Effect*, however, even this impersonal metaphysics is absent. What remains is horror as ontology, resurrection as return from a place where no meaning resides and no reconciliation awaits. Moreover, Zoe's resurrection collapses not only theological teleology but also the phenomenology of death as an event that grants coherence to life. For Heidegger (1962), to live authentically is to live with an awareness of death as one's ownmost possibility. Zoe, however, is denied this existential act. She does not choose death, and she is not granted the dignity of remaining

within it. She is forcibly extracted from mortality and inserted back into the living world, but her place in that world is no longer available. She returns to a world where she cannot be reintegrated, and thus becomes the walking contradiction of being-without-place.

Her physicality becomes the site of this contradiction. The film increasingly detaches Zoe from recognizable human form. Her voice becomes hollow, her gaze unanchored, her movements unpredictable. In one climactic scene (approx. 57:00), she declares, "I brought something back with me." But the film makes clear that what she brings back is not knowledge or spirit, but ontological rupture. She has become a medium through which death leaks into life. This visual and narrative strategy aligns with Jacques Derrida's notion of *hauntology*, the ghost as that which disrupts the present with traces of what cannot be fully known or resolved (Derrida, 1994). Zoe is not the continuation of a life; she is its disfigured echo. The notion of resurrection as repetition, rather than transformation, is further emphasized by the ending. In the final moments of the film (approx. 1:22:00), Zoe resurrects her partner Frank, using the same serum and same process by which she herself was revived. There is no new understanding, no ethical growth, no spiritual insight. Resurrection has become a mechanical liturgy, a closed ritual loop, in which nothing is healed, nothing transcended. In theological terms, this is grace without God, a sacral gesture performed in a desacralized world.

Theologically speaking, this represents the culmination of post-secular anxiety: the yearning for eternal life persists, but the frameworks that once made eternity meaningful have collapsed. Resurrection, once a bridge to God, has become a feedback loop of unresolved mortality. In this sense, *The Lazarus Effect* does not merely dramatize a fear of death, but a horror of undeath, a condition in which death cannot function as closure, and life cannot function as narrative. The resurrected subject becomes a metaphysical redundancy, an ontological glitch. Thus, the film emerges as a secular *via negativa*, a negative theology in which God's absence is not merely noted, but enacted through every gesture of repetition, possession, and failed salvation. It stages the ultimate irony: that in trying to abolish death through human ingenuity, we may instead abolish the conditions for meaning altogether. *The Lazarus Effect* therefore stands not only as a horror film, but as a cinematic lament for the loss of metaphysical architecture, a requiem for a world where resurrection still occurs, but no longer redeems.

5. CONCLUSION

At the intersection of horror, philosophy, and theology, *The Lazarus Effect* (2015) offers a disquieting meditation on what it means to return from death not healed, but ontologically fractured. While on its surface a tale of biomedical resurrection gone wrong, the film harbors within it a far more radical proposition: that resurrection, when divorced from metaphysical frameworks and executed through secular science, does not constitute the defeat of death, but rather its perverse continuation. In this sense, the film does not simply depict a failed scientific experiment, but a failed cosmology, a world in which the soul cannot be recovered, and resurrection becomes a recursive ritual of existential malfunction. The film's portrayal of Zoe's resurrection dramatizes the most essential problem of Platonic dualism: the irreconcilability of the eternal soul and the perishable body once the natural order of death has been transgressed. In *Phaedo*, Plato articulates that the soul, upon death, ascends from the body and continues its journey toward truth and purification. Any attempt to forcibly retrieve the soul from its post-mortem path is, by this logic, a metaphysical violence, an act that risks summoning not the soul itself, but a shadow, a residue, or an echo. Zoe's behaviors post-resurrection, her flattening of affect, her descent into violence, and her supernatural perception, align perfectly with this Platonic nightmare. The soul may not be a substance one can simply reinsert into the flesh. What we see in her is not reintegration, but disintegration masked by animation.

The film aestheticizes a secular version of 'damnation,' presenting a corporeal afterlife devoid of transcendence or redemptive closure. Modern and posthuman philosophies reinforce the film's

critique of resurrection as a technical event rather than a spiritual one. For Descartes, the mind is the true essence of the self. Yet in Zoe's post-resurrection state, her mind appears both intact and other. She recalls memories and acts with deliberate intelligence, but the Zoe who returns lacks ethical personhood, her *res cogitans* is present, but morally unrecognizable. Heidegger would argue that Zoe's *Dasein* has ended, and her posthumous existence is no longer a Being-toward-Death but a being after being, a spectral mode of existence that cannot authentically engage the world. The horror lies in her liminality: she is both present and absent, known and unknowable, alive and hollow. In the final analysis, Zoe embodies what Jacques Derrida would term a hauntological subject: not a living being, but a remainder, a ghost in the ontological machine. Her physical form carries the memory of life, but not its substance. Her resurrection is a spectral performance, a biological reanimation that cannot recapture the metaphysical totality of selfhood. She is thus not a triumph of science, but its ethical collapse. Furthermore, the aesthetics of the film mirror this existential rupture. The cold fluorescence of the laboratory lighting, the sterile *mise-en-scène*, and the claustrophobic camera work all strip the resurrection event of cinematic grandeur. There is no swelling score, no symbolic light, no divine horizon, only mechanical pulses, flickering monitors, and sterile instruments. Resurrection here is not awe-inspiring, but anti-climactic, precisely because it lacks what Paul Tillich called "the ultimate concern": the dimension of the sacred that gives life its ontological weight.

Through these layered lenses, *The Lazarus Effect* becomes a metaphysical tragedy. It tells the story of resurrection not as a return, but as a rupture; not as renewal, but as recursion; not as grace, but as graceless continuity. In doing so, the film interrogates one of the most urgent questions of our time: if science gives us the power to bring back the dead, will we also recover what made them human? Or will we, in doing so, produce only machines haunted by their former souls, creatures animated not by love or memory, but by fragments of trauma, power, and absence? In conclusion, *The Lazarus Effect* reveals the profound fragility of the human condition when technology intervenes in metaphysical structures it cannot comprehend. It stages the body as a battlefield, the soul as an exile, and resurrection as a repetition of trauma rather than a triumph over death. It is not a story about overcoming death, but about failing to mourn, failing to let go, and failing to recognize that some thresholds, once crossed, must not be traversed again. Resurrection without redemption, the film warns us, is not resurrection at all, but a hollow return that empties life of its sacred weight and renders eternity not as salvation, but as endless repetition of loss.

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