

## Dissolving Europe?

Fear of refugees and ourselves in  
Christian Lollike's *Living Dead*

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### Abstract

When the performance *Living Dead* premiered in Denmark in 2016, its reception was characterized by an equal amount of praise and unease. Written and directed by Christian Lollike, *Living Dead* dealt with the increasing number of refugees coming to Europe from Africa and the Middle East. Controversially, it was a “horror performance” focusing on the fear, anxiety, and potential dissolution of Europe. The article examines the agency of the performance. How does it engage our senses and sensibilities? How does the affective and intensive elements of horror relate to the representation of the refugees? And how may the horror on stage affect our feelings and stance towards refugees outside the theatre – and relate to contemporary humanitarianism? In order to clarify these questions, I will use the analytics of mediation suggested by Lilie Chouliaraki (2006), Sianne Ngai's theory of “ugly feelings” (2007), and Judith Butler's reflections on the sensual dimensions of war (2009).

*Keywords* performance, refugees, affect, Lollike, agency

In September 2016, the performance *Living Dead* premiered at Aarhus Theatre in Denmark. It was a co-production between Aarhus Theatre and the theatre Sort/Hvid, written and directed by

Christian Lollike, artistic director of Sort/Hvid. Working across art forms and genres, Lollike is well known for his often controversial performances about current political and social issues. Engaged in troubling themes like group rape, right wing extremism, and the Danish warfare in Afghanistan, his performances draw attention in- and outside the world of theatre, as they explore what art can do in a contemporary world in need of new forms of understanding and agency. This is most explicitly manifest in “The Puppet Party”, an artistic political party trying to restart democracy by exhibiting the emptiness of Danish political culture and engaging the citizens in political dialogue (Lollike 2015). However, art’s social and political agency is a key question in all of Lollike’s works also when articulated less explicitly than in “The Puppet Party”.

In this article, I will focus on the agency of *Living Dead*, a performance dealing with Europe’s confrontation with refugees from Africa and the Middle East. At first glance *Living Dead* is not as controversial as the performances in which Lollike gave voice to and tried to understand for instance the group rapists in *Dom over skrig* (Judgment over scream, 2004) or Anders Breivik in *Manifesto 2083* (2012). The response to these performances was highly conflictual, with politicians and others accusing the theatres of sympathizing with the rapists or terrorist. The debate, mainly fueled by people who had not seen the performances, was so heated that the manager and director of the theatre, Katapult, which staged *Dom over skrig*, even felt the need to declare in public that “Katapult does not defend group rape” (Jyllandsposten 2004).

Compared to debates like this, the reception of *Living Dead* has been surprisingly unanimous and positive. Apart from resulting in numerous praising reviews and sympathetic interviews, it made the association of theatre journalists award Lollike “Teaterpokalen” for his remarkable will to face contemporary conflicts and dilemmas without offering easy solutions (Teater1 2016). In spite of this consensual reception, I will argue that *Living Dead* engages in the question of art’s agency in a way that is as controversial as the performances mentioned above. The fact that Aarhus Theatre has *not* felt the need to go public with a declaration saying, “Aarhus Theatre does not blame the refugees for the dissolution of Europe”, does not mean that the performance cannot be understood as a claim to exactly this. According to the website of Sort/Hvid, it is a “horror

performance” about “our time’s greatest refugee crisis”, and the introductory words are “Now they are here, the refugees have reached your town. A stream of zombies who have taken the concern to Europe and that no one can control. Humanism will fall – do we need to fight or flee?” (Sort/Hvid 2016).

But what does this “horror performance” do – to us as spectators and to our understanding of the refugee crisis? How does it engage our senses and sensibilities? How does the affective and intensive elements of horror relate to the representation at play? And how may the horror on stage affect our feelings and stance towards refugees outside the theatre? In order to clarify these questions, I will use the analytics of mediation suggested by Lilie Chouliaraki (2006), Sianne Ngai’s theory of “ugly feelings mgl.” (2007), and Judith Butler’s reflections on the sensual dimensions of war (2009).

### Short feelings and unknown threats

“What does the EU-chairman-president-commissioner think?”<sup>1</sup> This question is repeated several times by the three nameless, slow moving and slow speaking characters in *Living Dead*. They – enacted by Maria Rich, Özlem Saglanmak and Morten Burian – appear like mechanical, maybe post-human, Barbie and Ken-like robots or zombies, with blond artificial wigs, dark contact lenses and long, bare, bronzed limbs. They do not themselves know what to think about the refugees coming to Europe or drowning on the way, but try to stay calm. One is “over-sensitive” (maybe meaning “a little self-centered”) and lacks an emotional filter towards the many catastrophes; another is over-producing, over-communicating, stressed and exhausted, unable to concentrate on one thing; and a third feels “threatened all the time. That I have to be ready. On duty. Even when I eat, I know that something can happen”.

Staged in a depressing orange-green or “vomit-colored” (Dithmer 2016) kitchen scenography by Marie Rosendahl Chemnitz, the three mechanical figures articulate their ambivalent feelings about the refugees with monotone voices. Empathy is overshadowed by fatigue, distractions, sedation, or even relief when the refugees drown on the way. The European zombies do not know what or how to feel. The world makes them suffocate; they “cannot handle more tv-catastrophes, terror-net-news, and now another boat...”

The conversation is fragmented and fluttering, momentarily bordering on the comical and grotesque. It alternates between reflections on the refugees, diagnoses of their own suffering from cold hands, restless bodies, and “empathic disorders”, including hyper-immunity, confusion, forgetfulness, and inability to stay concentrated and have “long feelings” in a time that “has become shorter and more aimless”.

The European zombies conceive the refugees as an indeterminate and nightmarish threat that can be realized at any time: “a black and islamistic mass of zombies” expanding and invading the European souls just as war, terror, and trauma have invaded theirs. They wonder why the “this-is-a-human-like-me-mechanism” does not work. Is it because the refugees are so black or so many? Empathy has become an instrument of survival: taking the position of the other enables one to predict his next step, catch him off-guard if necessary. The danger is articulated as crime and terror but mainly as an undefined disease: a contagious infection originating in the minds of the traumatized, a virus spreading from the refugee camps to the Europeans’ nerve paths, or a mutation derived from fish feeding on the corpses of drowned refugees in the huge Mediterranean mass grave.

The fear of refugees, however, is not only articulated verbally, but also performed and generated physically. The only action in the first part of the performance, apart from moving and talking in slow motion, is when the zombies first fry and then eat a fish. As an audience, sitting close to the stage in a small theatre, we smell the frying fish. We cannot escape it but keep inhaling the microscopic particles of the fish, while the zombies eat and talk about how fish feed on drowned refugees and transmit unknown forms of contagion.

### **Distant and close suffering**

*Living Dead* is a performance about the fear of refugees and the dissolution of European humanism. This is how the websites of Sort/Hvid and Aarhus Theatre present it and how the reviewers understand it. Unavoidably, however, it is also about the object of the fear: the refugees. In order to clarify what the performance’s representation of them does, I will use the analytics of mediation suggested by Lilie Chouliaraki (2006).

Chouliaraki's analytical focus is not on art, but on mediated representations of the suffering, faraway other. Based on an ethical point of view she asks if and how television can cultivate a disposition of care and engagement and create "a global public with a sense of social responsibility towards distant sufferers" (Chouliaraki 2006, 153). Understanding particular cases of television news as unique enactments of an ethical discourse, she suggests analysing mediated representations based on their relationship between text and image, their particular space-times, and their forms of agency.

Visually, street cameras in major disasters have the aesthetic quality of eyewitness and proximity to suffering, implying actuality and activity. They "place the event in the temporality of emergency" and "organize the spectacle of suffering around action that may alleviate the sufferer's misfortune" (Chouliaraki 2006, 158). By contrast, long shots of skylines entail aesthetic contemplation of the sublimity of the catastrophe, inviting reflection over causes, consequences, and historicity.

Verbally, the narrative of the news "performs fundamental classificatory activities: it includes and excludes, foregrounds and backgrounds, justifies and legitimizes. It separates 'us' from 'them'" (Chouliaraki 2006, 162). The verbal narrative organizes the spaces and temporalities of the visual content in a way that makes distinct claims to the reality of suffering: to the facticity of suffering, to the emotion of suffering, or to justice around the cause of suffering (Chouliaraki 2006, 163). In addition, it invokes distinct reactions, addressing the spectator's affective potential anger, tender-heartedness, or reflexive contemplation of the conditions of human misery.<sup>2</sup>

The regimes of pity of the media representations are contingent, and so are the ways in which they performatively shape agency:

agency refers to how active the sufferer appears on screen and (...) how other actors present in the scene appear to engage with the sufferer. These two dimensions of agency come to shape how the spectator herself is invited to relate to the suffering, that is whether she is supposed simply to watch, to feel or to act practically in relation to the 'others' misfortune. (Chouliaraki 2006, 167)

Seen through the analytical lenses of Chouliaraki, *Living Dead* has a paradoxical ambivalence. On the one hand, we are very distant from the sufferers, the refugees. With two exceptions they are seen from a distance, not as particular refugees but as a general refugee *crisis*. The two exceptions, in which we get some kind of proximity to the sufferers are, first, an anecdote about an Eritrean refugee, who has melted plastic and his fingertips into each other in order to erase his fingerprints and flee to another country. Second, a monologue alternates between first hand memories from drowning in the Mediterranean (“There weren’t life jackets for everyone (...) I clung to the dead”) and the traditional English language course (“Excuse me Madame but where will I find Tate Modern”). The only scenes with proximity and “action that may alleviate the sufferer’s misfortune” thus grotesquely reinforce them by a very concrete erasure of the fingerprints/individuality of the sufferer and a more general highlighting of the unequal life conditions of observer and sufferer.

On the other hand, we get uncomfortably close to the refugees, however not as actual sufferers but as unknown and potentially threatening strangers. Apart from the monologue above, we do not hear their own voices but only hear *about* them. In addition, the verbal presentation of their sufferings makes them objects of fear rather than pity. This seems reinforced by many of the other sensual elements of the performance. The three scenes in which we actually *see* ‘the other’ are scenes of either nightmare or horror: In one, entitled the “Burqa wheel nightmare” in the manuscript (Lollike 2016), figures wearing black burqas move in slow motion on a dark scene, accompanied by disharmonic sound. In another, the three zombies – now with their faces painted black and the blond wigs replaced by afros – approach the spectators directly as beggars, coming close enough to embody a physical and tactile threat, leading to a sudden and shocking scream of horror. And in the third scene, the horror becomes grotesque and nauseous when one of the zombies, who has revealed her black hair and maybe turned out to be one of the refugees or foreigners herself, pulls out octopus from within her shorts before getting killed by the others.

The proximity to the refugees is, however, more frightening when we do *not* see them. The sudden and ‘Aristotelian’ fear caused by the scream is an exception in the affective aesthetics of *Living Dead*.

Rather than the potentially cathartic fear and scream, the threats of the refugees are of a more constant, invisible, and inaudible kind. The fear is not caused by individual, strong subjects with agency, but by anonymous crowds embodying and carrying contagion. It spreads affectively, without any subjectivity or intentionality. The contagion is not decided by anyone, it is just happening, and the origin and character is uncertain. It is therefore difficult to confront, by the zombies on stage as well as by the audience.

### Contagion and ugly feelings

Bodily contagion is thematized on stage. But it seems also to be transferred from stage to audience, resulting in strong embodied affect. When reading the reviews of the performance, the uncomfortable feelings and bodily unease is a dominant trait. This is remarkable also in the fragments of reviews on the website of Aarhus Theatre. According to them, *Living Dead*

“crawls up and into our faces, it wants to go beneath our skin and occupy our bodies” (Kristeligt Dagblad);

“is so present that you want to look away” (Aarhus Studenterradio);

“not only the stench of oil-fried fish but also the Westener as a corpse in decay is difficult to shake off” (Aarhus Stiftstidende);

“the audience moves anxiously in their seats. The performance settles physically in the spectators” (Den fjerde væg). (Aarhus Theatre 2016)

The reviews articulate the intense bodily and affective impact that the performance has on the audience. One can understand these affects as a performative enactment and generation of “ugly feelings”. According to Sianne Ngai (2007), “ugly feelings” is a repertoire of amoral and non-cathartic affects<sup>3</sup> that do not entail virtue or any other grand qualities. The “bestiary” of weak and petty affects includes (among others) envy, irritation, anxiety, paranoia, and disgust (Ngai 2007, 7). These ugly feelings arise when agency is ob-

structed or suspended. They are the feelings of not being focused or gathered, of indecision, weak intentionality, and conspicuous inactivity. They arise in moments when obstructed or suspended agency produces “the inherently ambiguous affect of affective disorientation in general – what we might think of as a state of feeling vaguely ‘unsettled’ or ‘confused’, or, more precisely, a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about *what* one is feeling” (Ngai 2007, 14).

The European robot zombies in *Living Dead* perform the ugly feelings. They embody them in their slow motion, their unfocused conversations, their weak intentionality, and their articulated affective confusion about their own feelings:

“It is not because one doesn’t want to, but one doesn’t know”

“I don’t know what to feel, okay?”

“One should not confuse things, one should not, but one just doesn’t know who is who”

“Then one sticks to human rights, but...they are also on social media, and one has to be able to put one’s telephone aside, so I stopped taking it with me to the bathroom”

Their words articulate exactly what Ngai describes as an affective disorientation, a feeling “of being lost on one’s own map of available affects” (Ngai 2007, 14). They are unable to navigate between the available feelings, and their agency is reduced to *avoiding* decisions – including responding to social media’s call for humanitarian aid. Lost in ambivalent feelings about the refugees, what they *cannot* do is much more certain than what they can do.

The ugly feelings seem unproductive, but Ngai argues that they are fundamentally social and material, bearing with them a kind of truth and a political significance, however ambiguous. Building upon Raymond Williams, feelings are not personal and idiosyncratic phenomena, and their weak intentionality and ambivalent agency can amplify “their power to diagnose situations, and situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular” (Ngai 2007, 27).

This diagnostic power was noticeable as widespread uncomfortable feelings and bodily unease in the audience of *Living Dead*. And the blocked or thwarted action felt alarmingly true when one of the



zombies, staring at the spectators, said, “You cannot tell your children that the war will not come. You cannot say that”.

### **Framing the refugees**

In *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable*, Judith Butler reflects on the sensual dimensions of war. In a normative line of thinking, close to Chouliaraki’s, Butler asks a question almost opposite to hers. Instead of exploring how representations of suffering can foster care and responsibility, she examines the ways in which representations of other populations frame them as war targets in an initial action of destruction. Visual and other representations frame and initiate the war by producing and enforcing what will count as reality: “In some sense, every war is a war upon the senses (...) There is no thinking and judgment without the senses” (Butler 2009, xvi).

The framing influences “why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadness, loss, and indifference” (Butler 2009, 24). Our feelings are in part conditioned by our interpretations of the world around us and by interpretive schemes beyond our control: “We are already social beings, working within elaborate social interpretations both when we feel horror and when we fail to feel it at all. Our affect is never merely our own: affect is, from the start, communicated from elsewhere. It disposes us to perceive the world in a certain way” (Butler 2009, 50).

According to Butler, the differential distribution of grievability across populations is decisive for these affective dispositions. Lives are neither lived, nor injured or lost, in the full sense if they are not first apprehended as living. They become un-grievable when they are represented as already lost, and especially when they are represented as shadow lives or threats to life: “populations are lose-able, or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited; they are cast as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection” (Butler 2009, 31).

Returning now to *Living Dead*, Butler’s reflections shed new light on the title as well as on the representation of the refugees. Seen from the point of view of the three European zombies, the refugees are un-grievable. They are not apprehended as living in the full sense. They are the living dead that constitute an infinite threat and

must be drowned or kept out in other ways. They are framed as the targets of war, which becomes very tangible towards the end of the performance when one of the zombies repeatedly intones “war is coming, war is coming...”.

But what about the performance itself – how does *Living Dead* frame ‘the other’? In a way, its representation of refugees seems similar to the one expressed in the zombies’ ugly feelings. The performance does not offer an alternative to the framing of refugees as contagious, lost, and un-grievable. It does not give voice to refugees or present them in ways that could appeal to or even enable compassion instead of fear. As spectators, we do *feel* the unease and horror.

From a humanitarian point of view – like Chouliaraki’s or Butler’s – *Living Dead* might seem problematic. It is possible to interpret it as a reinforcement of the xenophobic media representations of Denmark and other European countries as being flooded with infinite, unknown, and desperate crowds of refugees. In a way, it seems to contribute to the widespread impression that Europe is sinking under the weight of countless refugees from the South and Middle East.

The migration to Europe can, however, be represented in other ways. Quantitative data gives a less alarming picture. While countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, and Ethiopia host most refugees, the numbers in Europe are relatively modest. In 2015, the year of the so-called European “refugee crisis”, there were 370 asylum applicants per 100,000 inhabitants in Denmark. In the EU, the equivalent number was 260, and 1.53 per 1000 inhabitants were granted asylum in 2015 (Refugees.dk 2016).

Numbers like these frame the question of refugees in a way quite different from the one of *Living Dead*, which – from one point of view – can be criticized for contributing to a framing that exaggerates the “crisis” in Europe. Performatively it generates the feeling of unease, passivity, and fear of a dissolving Europe without questioning whether this fear is reasonable. Following this interpretation, one could even argue, that Lollike’s performance frames the refugees as targets of war. If suffering is presented as a case of action, this action is not help but rather defense and violence.

So why, in spite of this deeply troubling trait of *Living Dead*, is the agency of the performance different from the ugly feelings and suspended agency of its three European characters?

### **(In)equal precariousness**

*Living Dead* is a nightmarish horror performance, establishing two alarming approximations or equalizations. One, which has been discussed above, is the performative and affective approximation of the ugly feelings of the European zombie characters and one self as a spectator. One can hardly attend the performance without feeling infected by the fear or at least anxiety regarding the refugees' impact on the future of Europe.

The other equally alarming equalization is that the Europeans are framed as just as un-grievable and frightening as the refugees are. As mechanical zombies who have lost their ability to focus, to feel, to reflect, and to act, they also do not live in the full sense. They are not human any more, and the title's living dead may just as easily refer to them as to the refugees. The already lost populations are not only the refugee others but also the Europeans, i.e. ourselves.

This double equalization between xenophobic Europeans and spectators on the one hand, and between already lost refugees and already lost Europeans on the other, is what makes *Living Dead* a "horror performance". It is also what enables the performance to explore our stance towards refugees in a way that challenges well-known xenophobic or humanitarian arguments and feelings. As Devika Sharma has argued (2013), contemporary humanitarianism can be criticized for being a self-gratulating feeling for the privileged, who practice it for their own well-being, cherish human rights on social media, and thus save their self-image. They, or rather we, who profit on global inequality, can pretend to be in solidarity with the world without the inconvenience of political struggle. With the victims as passive receivers, we can take the roles as powerful benefactors, thereby affectively contributing to the global inequality that we claim to fight with our media-generated momentary feeling of compassion.

Seen in the light of Sharma's critique (based on Alain Badiou, T.J. Demos, Didier Fassin and others), it is obvious that *Living Dead* wants to and succeeds in doing something radically different from a self-gratulating humanitarianism. Instead of making us the

powerful subjects of humanitarian action and the refugees the objects, it performs and generates ugly feelings and obstructed agency. Instead of depoliticizing and sentimentalizing the structural inequalities of the world by appealing to compassion with individual refugees, it equalizes us and them by making us all objects of contagious affect.

This contagion, of course, does not entail that our life conditions are equal. There is a world of difference between being a refugee and fearing one. But in *Living Dead*, we all lack agency. There are no strong subjects here. Rather there seems to be what Butler calls a “generalized condition of precariousness” which is not a feature of a single life, but a fundamental social condition (Butler 2009).

*Living Dead*'s equalization of unlivable lives can be seen as a performative enactment of such a general precariousness. As made tangible in the affective contagion, we are exposed to others, vulnerable by definition. In the performance, this exposure and vulnerability includes the refugee others, the European zombies, and us as spectators. When it ends by exposing us to an elegiac madrigal by Monteverdi, beautifully performed by five singers of the Mogens Dahl Chamber Choir, it seems to suggest the deeply human character of this vulnerability. We may understand the elegiac song as a nostalgic remembrance of a proper European humanism, as a deep grief over all the “living dead” in our current world, or as a sensual and emotional insistence on the immense beauty that the exposure to other people *also* can entail. After all the ugly sensations and feelings, the almost otherworldly beauty seemed more ethereal than the nightmarish horror. But simultaneously, the beauty was present, it was where *Living Dead* ended, indicating the potential of other affective intensities than the ones of fear and horror.

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### Notes

- 1 I have seen the performance at Stiklingen, Aarhus Theater, live as well as video-recorded. In the following, quotes without reference are all from the unpublished manuscript *Living Dead* (Lollike 2016).
- 2 Chouliaraki refers to Luc Boltanski's description of these three topics of suffering – political "pamphleteering", caring "philanthropy", and distancing "sublimation" – in *Distant Suffering. Politics, morality, and the media* (1999).

- 3 Differently from Lawrence Grossberg, Brian Massumi and others, Ngai uses the terms feeling and affect more or less interchangeably, and I follow her in taking the difference as modal rather than formal: a difference of intensity or degree rather than quality or kind. She assumes that “affects are *less* formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking forms of structure altogether; *less* ‘sociolinguistically fixed’, but by no means code-free or meaningless; less ‘organized in response to our interpretation of situations’, but by no means entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers” (Ngai 2007, 27). This modal understanding enables her to analyse the transition between affect and emotion: “the passages whereby affects acquire the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions, and emotions conversely denature into affects” (Ngai 2007, 27).