

# Ecology, Telepathy and Melancholia in John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Handling the Undead*

Ekologi, telepati och melankoli i John Ajvide Lindqvists Hanteringen av odöda

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Since her dissertation on Gothic elements in the fiction of the Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf, *Hemsökelser. Det gotiska i sex berättelser av Selma Lagerlöf* (2009), she has published a number of articles on the Gothic and the uncanny in Swedish and English. Her current research focuses on Nordic Gothic, the uncanniness of nature in contemporary fiction, fictional violence and regional literature.

## ABSTRACT

Nature is omnipresent and ecological questions are often problematized in Gothic fiction produced in the Nordic region during the last two decades. By developing the concept of eco-Gothic in combination with theory related to the concept of the uncanny, this article will discuss how contemporary Gothic texts can be understood as dealing with different notions of nature, place and identity in a time of ecological crisis. The analysis will focus on John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Handling the Undead* (2005), a novel that can be understood as dealing with the issue of solidarity with the nonhuman or unhuman other, the undead people who transgress the boundary between life and death, but also with matters of climate and environmental politics. The discussion will be concentrated mainly on three aspects of the novel of relevance to ecology and the uncanny: the depiction of character, place and climate; the motif of mind reading and mind-altering experiences, and the importance of melancholia and death.

## SAMMANFATTNING

I gotisk fiktion producerad i Norden under de senaste två decennierna är naturen starkt närvarande och ekologiska frågeställningar problematiseras ofta. Genom att utveckla begreppet ekogotik i kombination med teorier relaterade till det kusliga (das unheimliche), undersöker den här artikeln hur samtida nordisk gotik kan förstås i relation till föreställningar om natur, plats och identitet i klimatkrisens tidevarv. Analysen fokuseras på

John Ajvide Lindqvists *Hanteringen av odöda* (2005), en roman som handlar om solidaritet med det icke-mänskliga, berättelsens "omlevande" människor som har överskridit gränsen mellan liv och död, samtidigt som den berör ekologiska problem. Diskussionen koncentreras till tre områden som är relevanta i förhållande till det kusliga: gestaltningen av karaktär, plats och klimat, telepati och annan extrasensorisk perception, samt melankoli och död.

#### Keywords

Eco-Gothic, Nordic Gothic, The Uncanny, Dark Ecology, Telepathy, Melancholia

#### Nyckelord

ekogotik, nordisk gotik, det kusliga, mörk ekologi, telepati, melankoli

Living in an era of climate change can be described as uncanny – our familiar, everyday environment has turned strange, unfamiliar and frightening. Most of us are aware that we created this unhomely environment ourselves, and that our current lifestyle only speeds up the process of destruction, but we manage nevertheless to repress the real scope of the problem in our day-to-day lives. In the Nordic region, caring about nature is an important part of the construction of identity; Nordic countries play a leading role in environmental politics in the global arena, but at the same time their welfare states are still, to a great extent, built on the use of oil and nuclear power, and just as in the rest of the world, consumption in this region is increasing. Moreover, despite the fact that the Nordic countries have had "objectively high levels of ecological modernisation" (Tunkrova 2008, 27) they continually receive alarming reports that the Nordic landscape is transforming and collapsing in the wake of industrial pollution and global warming. The environmental situation has lent itself to a variety of Gothic expressions of ecology and nature in contemporary Nordic fiction. For instance, it has been dealt with in films such as Finnish director A.J. Annila's *Sauna* (2008), Julius Kemp's Icelandic slasher film *The Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre* (2009), Danish director Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), Norwegian Aleksander Nordaas' *Thale* (2012), in Henrik Björn's Swedish TV series *Jordskott* (2014), and in novels and short stories by Swedish author John Ajvide Lindqvist.<sup>1</sup>

As the recent work of Andrew Smith, William Hughes and David Del Principe illustrates, eco-Gothic has emerged as a new direction within Gothic studies, clearly demonstrating the importance of Gothic fiction in the understanding of environmental issues (Smith & Hughes 2013; Del Principe 2014). Eco-Gothic combines the perspectives of eco-criticism, animal studies and posthumanism, aiming to explore a "familiar Gothic subject

1. In her study of nature and wilderness as Gothic conventions, "The Devious Landscape in Scandinavian Horror" (2013), Yvonne Leffler has demonstrated that characters in Nordic Gothic fiction are often depicted as victims of a surrounding threatening wilderness. Leffler regards the contemporary narratives included in her study as expressing modern, urbanized people's fear of losing control over a landscape that they quite recently coexisted with and had intimate knowledge of. Pietari Kääpä, in contrast, has demonstrated how contemporary Norwegian, Finnish and Icelandic horror films combine national traditions and Nordic mythology with genre conventions imported mainly from Hollywood film culture, resulting in reinterpretations of national narratives that combine the appropriation of nature with the logic of anthropocentrism. Kääpä, *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas: From Nation-Building to Ecocosmopolitanism* (2014).

– nature” from a non-anthropocentric perspective, and to re-evaluate its function in evoking the monstrous and terrifying (Del Principe 2014, 1). Ecofeminism has also served as an important theoretical background, as eco-Gothic focuses on the hybrid bodies of Gothic fiction – “unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman” – as a means of questioning species- and gender- related issues in an environmental context (Del Principe 2014, 1).

By developing the eco-Gothic perspective in combination with theory related to the concept of the uncanny, this article will discuss how contemporary Nordic Gothic can be understood as dealing with notions of nature, place and identity in a time of ecological crisis. The analysis will focus on Lindqvist’s *Handling the Undead* (*Hantering av odöda* 2005), a novel that can be understood as dealing with the issue of solidarity with the nonhuman or unhuman other, represented by undead people that transgress the boundary between life and death, but also with matters of climate and environmental politics. Initially, the relevance of the concept of the uncanny in relation to an ecological discourse will be outlined in a Gothic context. The discussion will then be focused mainly on three aspects of the novel of relevance to the uncanny and ecology: the depiction of character, place and climate, the motif of mind reading and mind-altering experiences, and the importance of melancholia and death.

The uncanny was defined by Sigmund Freud in the seminal essay “The Uncanny” (“Das Unheimliche” 1919), first and foremost as a certain kind of ambiguous fear related to “what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1995, 220). It has to do with something frightening invading the familiar, everyday life, thus creating a sense of uncertainty, but also with the return of the repressed, either from the individual’s childhood or from the animistic state of the development of human culture. Freud speaks about the uncanny as a concept, but also as a feeling or effect related to the concept. This feeling or effect can be aroused by the meeting with something strangely familiar, something that in a frightening manner reminds us of something we have seen or someone we have met before. It can also take the shape of something familiar suddenly appearing in a strange and unfamiliar context, or the opposite, of something strange that manifests itself in a well-known environment. This is an eerily precise description of the situation of climate crisis. From a Nordic perspective it is, for example, possible to look back at the unusually warm and dry summer of 2014, when Sweden experienced one of the worst forest fires in its history. Suddenly a phenomenon, well known from other parts of the world such as California or Australia, but strange in a Swedish context, appeared in our environment, transforming it into an uncanny, post-apocalyptic desert. The unfamiliar invaded the familiar.

Anneleen Masschelein describes the significance of the uncanny in contemporary culture as “a blend of psychological and aesthetic estrangement, political and social alienation resulting from a deeply rooted, disturbing unhomeliness that characterizes human existence in the world, but tempered by mild, surrealist undertones and the guise of familiarity” (Masschelein 2011, 147). She points to the anxiety that follows from the rapid development of a globalized and increasingly virtualized late-capitalist society, mentioning specifically phenomena like the nuclear threat and the cold war, terrorism, nationalism, xenophobia and individualism – but not the environmental crisis.

However, in several studies Timothy Morton has combined the concept of the uncanny with an ecological perspective. In *The Ecological Thought*, his standpoint is even that “the more ecological awareness we have, the more we experience the uncanny” (Morton 2010,

54). His point of departure is that ecological thinking assumes that we let go of the concept of Nature with a capital N – an “ideal image” of a “pristine wilderness” far away or separated from humanity (Morton 2010, 5). Instead of clinging to this construction, ecological thinking must understand that all life forms are interconnected, or rather intertwined, in a gigantic web – or “mesh” as he prefers to call it. We must let go of hierarchies and rigid categories, and realize that there are no clear boundaries, and no center. This is difficult to grasp and quite terrifying, but it also creates a radical sense of intimacy, Morton claims, since it points to the fact that we coexist with all kinds of life forms, even those with no consciousness, and with those who are not conventionally seen as natural, such as cyborgs and artificial intelligence. It also enables us to see that there is no clear distinction between inside and outside, or between different life forms. What counts as an individual? Who is connected to whom, and in what way? In relation to the concept of the mesh, Morton introduces the concept of the strange stranger as a way of defining all the different life forms that co-exist without clear boundaries, and seem stranger and stranger the better one gets to know them, or the closer one examines them.

Ecological thinking is difficult and unpleasant; it demands a complete openness and forces repressed aspects of our existence to the surface. Ecological awareness is an uncanny feeling, “as if we were seeing something we shouldn’t be seeing, as if we realized we were caught in something” (Morton 2010, 58). Art forms in general might be considered useful for the reflection on the environment, since they “can make us question reality” (Morton 2010, 8). Gothic, I argue, is particularly apt for this practice and indeed, in relation to the argument outlined above, Morton has defined the concept dark ecology as a kind of Gothic aesthetics based on uncertainty and melancholy, expressing the ugly, ironic and horrific aspects of ecology.<sup>2</sup>

## STRANGE STRANGERS AND UNCANNY PLACES

The novels and short stories of Lindqvist often explore the relationship – and the intermingling – between the human and something other-than-human. As a rule, humanity is a destructive force while the monstrous creatures rather become ambiguous heroes, like the vampire in his first novel *Let the Right One In* (*Låt den rätte komma in*, 2004), or harmless until influenced by humans’ mean thoughts, like the undead people of *Handling the Undead. Harbour* (*Människo-hamn*, 2008) has a similar relational structure, but in this novel the monstrous entity influenced by humans is the ocean, the principal setting of the novel. Furthermore, the limit between human and monster is often blurred in the fiction of Lindqvist. His human characters have monstrous qualities, and neither human nor monster is depicted as purely good or bad.<sup>3</sup>

2. Dark Ecology was coined by Morton in 2004, and he also wrote about it in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007). In *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016), he explores the concept further.

3. This trait is perhaps most obvious in *Let the Right One In*. The protagonist, Oscar, is not only depicted as an innocent boy being bullied, but he also has a quite unhealthy interest in murders, and daydreams of violently stabbing his tormenters. There is also a clear parallel between the vampire’s need for blood, explained as a disease, and the addict’s need for his drug of choice. For instance, Oscar’s otherwise kind father is literally described as transforming into a monster when he is drinking, and the paedophile – the most feared and hated “monster” of our contemporary society – is described as a man of feelings and regrets, trying the best he can to resist his evil urge. At the same time the vampire Eli – even though clearly a predator using human helpers to kill his victims – is perhaps the most sympathetic character of the novel, and in its final scene he is described as an angelic creature.

The undead, or so called “reliving” people of *Handling the Undead* are not common zombies – if there ever was such a thing. They are neither raving mad flesh-eaters nor contagious, and they only become a potential threat when the living people project their negative thoughts on them. But even then they are not in any way uncontrollable. They are simply recently dead individuals who have regained a very faint spark of life, and, just as in real life, the majority died at old age. Lindqvist’s depiction of the reliving creates a sense of intimacy and sympathy with the monstrous creatures, rather than the usual repulsion and horror felt when confronting corpses and putrefaction. The two reliving characters that we follow closely are both beloved family members: Eva, the wife of the stand-up comedian David and mother of his son Magnus, and Elias, a six-year old boy whose mother Anna and grandfather Mahler both exist in a depressive limbo since the fatal accident that killed him. Lindqvist’s very detailed description of Mahler’s exhumation of his grandson from the grave and attempts to care for him in his apartment is painfully realistic: the grooming of the boy’s motionless body; the falling out of his hair when shampooed; the stench of the gas and liquid gently pressed out from his swollen belly; the rubbing of moisturizer on to his darkened skin to make it less leathery. But the atmosphere of the scene calls for empathy and respect, not disgust, and with Morton it can be understood as a concretization of “the ethics of the ecological thought”, that is, to regard even the least conventional forms of life as individuals (Morton 2010, 8). This ethical dimension is also highlighted in the novel by questioning the difference between the living and the reliving, the boundary between life and death. This ambiguity is experienced from the point of view of Elvy, one of the main characters of the novel, whose husband becomes one of the reliving. For the last decade, she has cared for him as he has suffered from Alzheimer’s, and the slow process of dying has been visible in his eyes. Thus, she is prepared to face the most frightening aspect of the reliving individual’s appearance: “There were eyes, but no gaze. Elvy was used to this, she’d had the non-gaze turned on her for three years. It was just that now it was even more frozen, lifeless” (Lindqvist 2011a, 64).

The representation of the reliving people in *Handling the Undead* is complex and covers several of the dimensions and expressions of the uncanny. They are humans, but act like lifeless dolls and are compared to jellyfish, since “[t]heir behavior is influenced by their environment” (Lindqvist 2011a, 231). The motif of the automaton, emphasized by Freud as uncanny because it has the effect of blurring the boundary between the living and the lifeless, appears in more than one shape in the novel (Freud 1995, 226). It is also present from the beginning, the song “Living Doll” being played on a car stereo at full volume in the prologue. Furthermore, the mechanical behavior of the reliving has another parallel in their inexplicable fascination for mechanical toys. The importance of this uncanny otherness can be related to a motto appearing in the novel, in the original Swedish version quite late in the story, under the heading “Attachment 2”, but in the U.S. translation transferred to the first page, before the prologue: “Solidarity is always directed at ‘one of us’ and ‘us’ cannot refer to everyone... For ‘we’ assumes someone who can be excluded, someone who belongs to the others, and these others cannot be animals or machines, but people. Sven-Eric Liedman, *To See Oneself in Others*” (Lindqvist 2011a, no pagination). The quotation from Liedman’s book on the concept of solidarity focuses on a distinction between ‘we’ and ‘the others’ on the one hand, but also, and more importantly in this context, between the human

and the non-human. In the light of this motto we must regard the questions posed by *Handling the Undead*, and the intermingling of human, animal and automaton in the characters of the reliving, as a call for solidarity based on the ecological ethics of regarding all life forms, even the artificial, as ‘people’ worthy of inclusion in the ‘we’.

Lindqvist’s fiction is often defined in terms of a mix of a harsh social realism and Gothic horror, and indeed his depictions of everyday Swedish society are brilliantly accurate, and definitely uncanny. The settings of his novels often include artificial, disproportionate or labyrinthine places imitating a home or a familiar, natural environment, and their uncanniness is possible to understand as related to ecological thinking. The effect is the same as that generated by the automaton, doubling as an artificial version of a real, live human being. For instance, the setting of *Himmelstrand* (2014) is an artificial field with an ever clear blue sky and green grass; vast and empty, but at the same time housing all sorts of horrors. The ‘anywhere’ of the suburb in *Let the Right One In* is equally presented as an artificial environment where everything looks the same and where it is easy to get lost, a rationalized space completely dissociated from anything organic and natural. Its inhabitants feel no connection whatsoever, neither to the modern suburb created by humans, nor to the forest surrounding it.<sup>4</sup> The Heath, the ghetto where the government places the undead people in *Handling the Undead*, is described in a similar way. It is a residential area that was never finished, taken over by homeless people and drug addicts, but cleaned up and fenced by the government to house the undead instead. In a naïve attempt to normalize the situation, the reliving are placed in apartments and their families are allowed to visit. But the attempt almost ends with a disaster and the Heath is closed to the public, since being around the reliving enables mind-reading. The crowding makes the telepathic effect too strong, triggering the fears and aggressions of both the living and the reliving.

The Heath is a truly Gothic location, and possible to understand from an eco-Gothic point of view. The teenage girl Flora, Elvy’s granddaughter and one of the main characters of the novel, has visited the area before it is renovated. The environment is ghostly, gloomy and polluted, since it lacks water and drains, as well as electricity. However, the one feature described as frightening is the absence of nature, and the uncanny lack of sounds that comes with it:

[Flora] took the earpieces out and turned her deafened eardrums toward the silence, chiding herself for the fear that whimpered in her stomach – *middle class loser* – because the only thing you could hear in the area were the sounds of people. They had never got as far as planting trees and bushes, and therefore there were no birds, no rustling leaves. (Lindqvist 2011a, 116)

It is after the area has been renovated, though, that it becomes really terrifying: a place imitating a home but with no homely qualities. Rather, it is a hell in disguise where the reliving people are living the Gothic nightmare of being buried alive:

[Flora] had thought this place was creepy before: all the garbage, people quarrelling in bombed-out apartments, but that was nothing compared to what she felt now. Every speck of dirt had been removed from the walkways and a smell of disinfectant hovered in the air. The apartments had been

4. See also Sofia Wijckmark “Naturen och det kusliga. Nedslag i samtida skönlitteratur” (2012).



set up nicely, cleaned; the dead had been given somewhere to live and it was simply new graves. (Lindqvist 2011a, 283)

Furthermore, from the perspective of the stand-up comedian David, the Heath is perceived as a labyrinthine, disorienting space, especially since the old signs on the houses have been supplemented with new hospital-style signs, resulting in a “contradictory mixture of directions to different street names between identical blocks of houses” (Lindqvist 2011a, 285). The sequel to *Handling the Undead*, a short story called “The Final Processing” (2006), narrates the course of events taking place after the isolation of the reliving, and the similarity between the Heath and a concentration camp is fully realized. It is revealed that the official version of rehabilitation hides a terrible truth: that all sorts of repulsive medical experiments are being performed on the reliving.

The prologue of *Handling the Undead* is important for the understanding of the setting from a national perspective and also relevant to the environmental context. As Katarina Gregersdotter has pointed out, “[t]he welfare state plays a significant part” in the novel (Gregersdotter 2011, 2). Its point of departure is the spot on Sveavägen in Stockholm where the socialist Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme was shot and killed in 1986. A drunken man toasts the memorial plaque on the sidewalk: “Damn it [...] It’s all going to hell, Olof. Down, down and further down” (Lindqvist 2011a, 1). He then walks on to a nearby graveyard, where he unknowingly witnesses the initial awakening of the reliving. Consequently, the places depicted in the prologue signal collective trauma and death. The still unresolved murder of Palme has gained a strong symbolic value for Swedes as an incident marking a kind of end to innocence, and, connected to the gradual dismantling of the Swedish welfare state, it has been referred to by media as “the shot against the Swedish *folkhem*” (*Dagens Nyheter*, 27 Feb. 2006).<sup>5</sup>

The Heath is a picture of the failed project of the Swedish welfare state. Its courtyards are described as constructed in accordance with the vision of the so-called “Million Program”, a public housing programme implemented by the Social Democrats in the 1960s as a realisation of their ‘*folkhem*’ ideology: “the courtyard was dominated by the large structure in the centre. [...] [I]t had been planned as a combined laundry, social space and refuse centre. However, there was no water to wash with, no garbage collection, and no desire for social gatherings” (Lindqvist 2011a, 116). An updated, green version of the *folkhem* was launched in the 1990s by social democrat Göran Persson, Prime Minister from 1996 to 2006, and while his vision definitely resulted in a development of environmental politics and had concrete effects, it was difficult to keep the dream of the green *folkhem* alive in the long run. This became clear in the pre-election period of 2005, the same year as *Handling the Undead* was published. The Swedish socialist tabloid *Aftonbladet* published a series of articles on the topic, one of them containing an interview with the minister then responsible for environmental and natural resources, Mona Sahlin:

**Is the environment still an issue in S [the Social Democratic Party]?** A lot has happened. Sweden has been a driving force on environmental issues in the world, not least regarding climate policy. In

5. Folkhem, meaning home of the people, is a famous metaphor used by the social democrats to describe a state where all people are being treated as equals and are included in the welfare system.

the EU, Göran Persson is one of the main proponents of sustainable development. In Sweden we now have an environment act, environmental goals and a national strategy for sustainable development, spanning everything from spatial planning and energy effectiveness to welfare, demography and public health. Anything from the phasing-out of nuclear power to high-efficiency toilets. Environmental adjustment is supposed to be an incentive to innovations, growth and new jobs. That's the strategy. Actual steps, yes, but is there a sustainable society [green 'folkhem'] in reality? Is it present in the social democratic party? In the voluminous material of the party congress in Malmö in a few days, the concept of sustainable society is hardly mentioned, either in proposals or party executive statements. Mona Sahlin, minister of sustainable development, one of the government's best strategists and communicators, has been given the responsibility for realising Göran Persson's dream. We visited Mona to look for the sustainable society.

**Göran Persson's dream:** "The green 'folkhem' [Sustainable society] was Göran's expression and it still is Göran's dream. He has included it in government politics but few around him have supported and pursued the issue, or influenced public opinion. The idea has not taken root and grown in social democracy. It has not become the party's dream. Now is the time," Mona Sahlin promises. (*Aftonbladet*, 24 Oct. 2005, my translation).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in the early 2000s, the environment was integrated in the ideology of the *folkhem*, but it had also become obvious that it was difficult for people to make the sacrifices that a sustainable living demanded of them. While the original version of the *folkhem* promised a better standard of living, the green proposition only meant restrictions and coercion. In addition, the insight that the catastrophe had probably already happened was gradually being established on a global scale; for instance, a milestone in worldwide awareness was Al Gore's 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*.

## CLIMATE CHANGE, TELEPATHY AND PSYCHIC VISIONS

*Handling the Undead* describes how the awakening of the dead commences after an extreme summer heat wave followed by a strange electrical phenomenon, hinting that it has to do with global warming. Even though the novel does not elaborate explicitly on this possibility, it definitely plants the idea from the beginning, and weather, as we shall see, turns out to be an important topic. In the prologue, the reader's attention is immediately directed towards the unusual heat:

6. The Swedish original text reads as follows: "Lever miljöfrågorna i S? Det har hänt en del. Sverige har varit pådrivande i världen i miljöfrågor, inte minst i klimatpolitiken. I EU tillhör Göran Persson dem som tuffast driver arbetet för en hållbar utveckling. Här hemma har vi fått en miljöbalk, miljömål och en nationell strategi för hållbar utveckling som spänner över allt från samhällsbyggnad, energieffektivisering till välfärd, demografi och folkhälsa. Allt från kärnkraftsavveckling till snålspolande toaletter. Omställningen ska vara motor för innovationer, tillväxt och nya jobb. Så ser strategin ut. Praktiska steg, javisst, men finns det gröna folkhemmet i politiken? Lever det inom socialdemokratin? I det digra materialet till s-kongressen som hålls i Malmö om några dagar nämns begreppet grönt folkhem nästan inte alls – varken i motioner eller partistyrelsens många utlåtanden. Samhällsbyggnadsminister Mona Sahlin, en av regeringens bästa strateger och kommunikatörer, har fått uppdraget att ro Göran Perssons dröm i land. Vi gick till Mona för att leta efter det gröna folkhemmet.

**Göran Perssons dröm:** 'Det gröna folkhemmet var Görans tal och är fortfarande Görans dröm. Han har givit det plats i regeringspolitiken men få har funnits runt omkring som stöttat och drivit frågorna, skapat opinion. Det har inte riktigt fått fäste och vuxit inom socialdemokratin. Inte blivit partiets. Nu ska det bli det', lovar Mona Sahlin."



*The heat. God almighty, the heat.* For several weeks all the weather charts had shown enormous happy suns plastered across the entire country. The pavement and buildings steamed with heat accumulated during the day and even now, at almost eleven o'clock, the temperature was stuck around thirty degrees. (Lindqvist 2011a, 2)

The scenario is focalized through the drunken man: “*This damned weather. It’s not natural*” (Lindqvist 2011a, 2). Only pages later, in the first chapter, the stand-up comedian David is repeating almost the same phrase: “*This weather. It isn’t natural*” (Lindqvist 2011a, 11). But immediately after, it seems like the text ironically tries, however unsuccessfully, to exorcize this thought from the plot by having him muse on a joke about global warming that he can use for his stand-up performance later that evening.

The opening paragraphs of the first chapter of *Handling the Undead* reinforce the environmental crisis as an important thematic point of departure. David keeps a framed picture of Duane Hanson’s uncannily realistic sculpture “Supermarket Lady” on the wall as an inspiration.<sup>7</sup> The ekphrasis focuses explicitly on the figure as representing death:

*Death...* David lifted his eyes from the desk, looking at the framed photograph of Duane Hanson’s plastic sculpture ‘Supermarket Lady’. A woman, obese, in a pink top and turquoise skirt, pushing a loaded shopping trolley. She has curlers in her hair, a fag dangling from the corner of her mouth. Her shoes are worn down, barely covering the swollen, aching feet. Her gaze is empty. On the bare skin of her upper arms you can just make out a violet mark, bruising. Perhaps her husband beats her. But the trolley is full. Filled to bursting. Cans, cartons, bags. Food. Microwave meals. Her body is a lump of flesh forced inside her skin, which in turn has been crammed into the tight skirt, the tight top. The gaze is empty, the lips hard around the cigarette, a glimpse of teeth. The hands grip the trolley handle. And the trolley is full. Filled to bursting. David drew in air through his nostrils, could almost smell the mixture of cheap perfume and supermarket sweat. *Death...* Every time his ideas dried up, when he felt hesitant, he looked at this picture. It was Death; the thing you struggle against. All the tendencies in society that point towards this picture are evil, everything that points away from it is...better. (Lindqvist 2011a, 7f.)

The critique against contemporary civilization is often overt in Lindqvist’s fiction, and in *Handling the Undead* it also clearly frames the whole narrative. The first word of the first chapter in the novel is “death” and it refers to the culture of consumerism. By combining a depiction of a person who obviously tries to fill the void inside by shopping and overconsuming food with repeated commentaries on the unusually hot weather, the novel puts the question of climate change on its agenda.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, it also suggests death and depression as inspiration for comedy.

As indicated above, the ecological discourse of *Handling the Undead* is made visible by

7. On Duane Hanson and the uncanny, see Mike Kelley, 2007, 178. Kelley identifies Duane Hanson as one of “the first contemporary sculptors willing to make works that evoked the banality of the wax museum. The literalness of the wax figures found at Madame Tussaud’s is one emptied of magic. These figures, obviously a secular outgrowth of the magical/religious votive figure, are no longer in sympathetic vibration with the souls of their models. They are as dead as the corpses they portray.”
8. See also Gregersdotter “The (Swedish) Zombie and the Welfare State: Politics and Emotion in John Ajvide Lindqvist’s *Handling the Undead*” (2011). Gregersdotter discusses the novels’ discourse of consumerism as a gendered issue related to the destruction of the welfare state.

how the novel deals with the topic of weather: the awakening of the dead occurs in August at the end of a long-lasting heat wave, and the drought is severe. A fictional transcript of the TV morning news the day after the incident ends ironically in this respect. Present in the studio are representatives from three different areas: the medical sciences, the military and the parapsychological branch of the psychological discipline:

Int: Our time is almost up. To wrap up: why do you think this has happened? Johan Stenberg [Colonel]?

JS: If I had an opinion on that subject I would keep it to myself.

Int: Sten Bergwall [head physician at Danderyd hospital]?

SB: As I said, we're waiting for the results of the tests.

Int: Runo Sahlin [PhD in Parapsychology]?

RS: A mistake has occurred. Something has gone wrong that has...interrupted the normal order.

Int: And that's something that I think we can all agree on. Now for the weather. Camilla?

(Lindqvist 2011a, 151)

None of the experts can give a concrete answer on the question of what has caused the awakening of the dead, but the text itself indicates that the weather might have something to do with it.

The heavy rain of the thunderstorm that follows the day after the awakening illustrates the significance of water as a life-giving resource. This thematic strand is also present in the story of the reliving six-year-old boy Elias and how he is taken care of by his grandfather Mahler. The dry landscape has a parallel in Elias's body: the dry earth in the graveyard has mummified his body; it has not decomposed. As indicated above, the novel elaborates extensively on how Mahler takes care of the body of his grandson. All the procedures involve water or moisture: he bathes him, rubs his skin with moisturizer and feeds him salt-water. It all comes together in the chapter significantly titled "14 August II: The Green Force of the Flower". Mahler has a vision, described as a sudden flash of insight impossible to express in a comprehensible way. It comes to him when he compares the body of Elias to the surrounding landscape, now damp and nourished from the rain:

When he stepped out onto the patio the air was new. During the long drought he had forgotten that the air could feel so rich, so much like nourishment. The darkness was dense and filled with scents from a landscape that the downpour had restored to life. *Does some...intention exist?* Elias had been dead and withered. Something that was not rain had brought him back to life. What? And what was keeping him alive if he was empty inside? A seed can lie dormant for hundreds and thousands of years. Dried or frozen in a glacier. Place it in moist earth and it sprouts. There is a power. The green force of the flower. What is the power of the human being? [...] Something touched him. An insight, inexpressible. He shivered. In a rapid succession of images he saw a blade of grass break

through the seed casing and struggle toward the surface, saw a sunflower strive toward the sky, turning to the light, saw a small child pull itself to its feet, hold its arms out, jubilant, and everything lives and is drawn to the light, and he saw... *It is not inevitable*. The green force of the flower. Not inevitable. Everything is effort, work. A gift. It can be taken from us. It can be given back. (Lindqvist 2011a, 221f.)

The vision, resembling a tacky ad for cereals, or the styled and manipulated version of Nature-with-a-capital-N broadcast on TV channels such as Nat Geo Wild, does not give him an answer to his question. And the sprouting seed, thousands of years old, that we can describe scientifically, is in a way as big and uncanny a mystery as dead people coming back to life. It is noteworthy that the stylistic device used to describe the vision is that of time-lapse photography, which disturbs the normal perception of processes by accelerating time, and can thus be regarded as another means of revealing the uncanniness of the seemingly natural.

Mahler's vision, qualifying as a kind of extra sensory perception, connects to a central motif in the novel: telepathy. To begin with, two of the main characters, the teenage-girl Flora and her grandmother Elvy, share the ability to read minds. Their special gift has made them self-destructive and depressed, because they know too much – and their image of the true nature of humanity is not positive. People, in general, are dishonest and miserable; “*all*, almost all of them, are unhappy. Some of them don't know it themselves, but I know and it hurts”, says Flora (Lindqvist 2011a, 40). However, during the course of narration, the motif of telepathy expands and becomes a general phenomenon, since a strange effect of the dead coming back to life is that being around them enables mind-reading. The sensation is described as almost unbearable; the staff at the hospitals and the military dealing with the reliving experience psychological breakdowns and have to be replaced continuously. David, the stand-up comedian, compares the situation at the hospital, where the dead have been gathered in great numbers into a small space, with his own experience of telepathy as he visits his wife at the residential area to which the reliving has been moved:

The disconcerting thing about the telepathy was not so much that he could read [...] other people's thoughts, as the fact that he didn't know which thoughts were his own. Now he understood why the situation at the hospital had been untenable. Here, the thoughts of others were mostly fainter, a background murmur of voices, images. After ten minutes of aimless wandering he started to identify his own consciousness in the hubbub. But when the reliving had been closer together it must have been almost impossible. All the ‘I’ and ‘me’ flowing in and out of each other like watercolours. (Lindqvist 2011a, 285f.)

The use of telepathy can be regarded as part of the aesthetics of the uncanny, as a painful revelation of that which should have remained a secret, but also as a blurring of boundaries between the self and the other. In this matter, Freud refers to telepathy as “concerned with the phenomenon of the ‘double’”, which he considers as being one the most striking manifestations of the uncanny, since one character “possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other” (Freud 1995, 234).

Telepathy is a recurrent motif in the fiction of Lindqvist. In *Let the Right One In*, kissing the vampire enables the protagonist to read his mind, and to look into his past to under-

stand the tragic circumstances of his transformation. A humanized troll in the short story “Border” makes an excellent customs officer, due to her ability to sense when people are hiding something. In *Handling the Undead*, the intermingling of psyches is not restricted to humans, dead or alive: David even gets the unique privilege of glimpsing the consciousness of a rabbit. It is described as a soothing and comforting experience, compared to the chaos of anxiety, aggression and panic detectable in the minds of humans. Thus, telepathy here makes it possible to bridge the gap not only between the living and the reliving people, but also between human and animal, suggesting that there is no real gap. We become aware that we are all equally strange strangers. According to Morton, art and fiction that depict minds sliding into each other emphasize our consciousness and can thus be regarded as environmental, as a means of experiencing the entangled network of life forms that constitutes “the mesh” (Morton 2010, 105).

If we look at the overall picture that the motif of mind reading creates in Lindqvist’s work, the ecological thought is clearly detectable, especially if the perspective is slightly broadened to include other kinds of mind-altering experiences as well. The vision, exemplified above by the time-lapse movie played in Mahler’s head, is such a mind-altering experience. In the novel *Harbour*, we find a vision that, in a similar way, can be interpreted as charged with environmental significance. Like in *Handling the Undead*, the reader is haunted by a nagging suspicion that the horrifying and supernatural events of the plot are provoked by environmental destruction. An ancient pact, established between the people of the archipelago where the novel is set and the ocean, has made their society prosperous, but it is based on human sacrifice, and reveals the greediness and materialism of humankind. In present times, something has gone wrong and the ocean has become disturbed and damaged. A character, by way of magic, is able to perceive the water flowing in everything that surrounds him, and he is also capable of sensing that there is something wrong with the ocean:

The morning dew was shining on the grass and he felt as if he could see every single drop, could touch every single drop with his thoughts. In the trunk of the trees he could see the hidden vessels, the water being sucked up by the capillary action, out into the thin veins in the leaves. [...] He saw all the water. The moisture in the earth and how it was constituted. The rainwater in the barrel, a living body wrapped around dead insects and old leaves. Through the lawn he saw the underground veins run through the bedrock. And he saw how everything that lived and was green or yellow or red... how it consisted almost entirely of water. He carried on down towards the jetty and he saw the sea. *Broken*. (Lindqvist 2011b, 164)

This unlimited perception is described as not suitable for a human being. It is too painful and strong to be able to grasp the big picture, the revelation of what has been hidden. When the character regains his normal perception there is but a faint sensation left, “a consciousness and a sense, nothing more [...] Everything was in its place, but with no mutual connection. He saw everything that his eyes saw, but the totality escaped him” (Lindqvist 2011b, 166). He becomes a stranger to nature and feels nothing but emptiness: “The morning light was slanting across the maple leaves in a thousand nuances between red and yellow, but he saw only a tree. The clouds in the sky were clouds and the sky behind them a vast emptiness” (Lindqvist 2011b, 166).

Thus, at one level, *Harbour* can be understood as expressing a dichotomy between a limited and a limitless space:

If we are walking around in a forest, a meadow or a town, we see our surroundings as being made up of individual elements. There are this many different kinds of trees in varying sizes, those buildings, these streets. The meadow, the flowers, the bushes. Our gaze lingers on details, and if we are standing in a forest in the autumn, we become tongue-tied if we try to describe the richness around us. All this exists on land. But the sea. The sea is something completely different. The sea is one. [...] The sea knows no limits (Lindqvist 2011b, 175f.)

The musing on the polarization between the limited and systematic on the one hand, and the limitless and uncontrollable on the other, can be related to an anxiety that in many ways is discernible in the fiction of Lindqvist. It has to do with an incapacity, or unwillingness, to grasp the complexity of the surrounding environment, but also with the inability of both our senses and our rigid systems to measure it. Through their visions and telepathic experiences, the characters of *Handling the Undead* and *Harbour* become aware of something that has been hidden, a sudden glimpse into a complicated web of relations – between the living and the non-living, the human and non-human, and between all the components of environment, and when it is revealed to them it seems terrifying and difficult to endure.

Considering the overall picture of mind reading and mind-altering experiences in Lindqvist's fiction, it is possible to discern an oscillation between a somewhat traditional concept of Nature-with-a-capital-N and those sudden glimpses of something else, the perspective of the ecological thought encompassing the mesh of strange strangers. On the one hand a quite nostalgic version of Nature as pristine and separated from humanity is detectable in his narratives, but on the other hand, as has been demonstrated, the visionary, telepathic gaze allows us to take part of a much more complex world of strange connections.

## COLLECTIVE MELANCHOLIA

Lindqvist's background as a stand-up comedian and scriptwriter of TV comedy has clearly had an influence on his writing. But despite the fact that (dark) humour is one of his trademarks, his fiction has, above all, a genuinely sad and depressive feeling to it; the comic aspects rather enhance the melancholic atmosphere, since they convey a sense of dark irony. Melancholy is important from an ecological perspective. According to Morton, the aesthetics of dark ecology is melancholic, since "melancholy is more apt, even more ethically appropriate, to an ecological situation in which the worst has already happened, and in which we find ourselves [...] already fully implicated" (Morton 2007, 75f.). Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan have elaborated on this idea in a reading of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) as an environmental film:

The film's central dramatic metaphor is that the experience of a severe depressive episode is like the destruction of the world. But the metaphor can be turned around to suggest that ecological crisis, real irreparable damage to the environment to the point where it may no longer be able to support human life, affects us with a collective melancholia because the destruction of the human species is a strictly ungrievable event. (Matts & Tynan 2012, 1)

Their point is not that we should accept the traumatic reality of the ecological crisis. In contrast, they want to “suggest that well-being and harmony may no longer describe the appropriate emotional register for ecological thinking, given the current urgency of the crisis. Human and ecological health may, after all, be radically different and incommensurable things” (Matts & Tynan 2012, 10).

Juliette, the depressed protagonist of *Melancholia*, welcomes the end of the world, and the same goes for the telepathic teenager Flora in *Handling the Undead*. When her grandmother interprets the course of events as the apocalypse, it does not frighten her; on the contrary, she looks forward to it: “It is going to be chaos, it is going to be something else, and damn if I don’t think that’s good” (Lindqvist 2011a, 93). In von Trier’s film there is no clear cause for the melancholic state of the character, but as has been demonstrated above, Flora’s depressive and self-destructive tendencies follow from her sensitivity to what might be regarded as the collective melancholia of humankind. Ironically, one of the few things that can put her mind at rest is playing the zombie survival video game *Resident Evil*, while her DVD copy of the romantic feel-good film *Pretty Woman* is just an empty cover, a hiding place for the razor blades she uses to cut herself. Flora also represents the most outspoken critical voice of the novel. Her critique is directed towards the consumerist culture and hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie represented by her parents, trying to bribe their children with the rustle of shopping bags and nostalgically singing the proletarian songs of their radical 1970s at their fancy parties.<sup>9</sup> Listening to her parents singing she realizes something: “I know, she thought. I know what’s missing there. It’s death. Death doesn’t exist for them, it’s not permitted. And for me it’s everywhere” (Lindqvist 2011a, 216).

To conclude, death is certainly at the kernel of this discourse. Freud considered death to be perhaps the strongest topic of the uncanny, and he points out that our thinking and feeling on the subject might still be considered primitive:

Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead [...] There is scarcely any other matter, however, upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very earliest times, and in which discarded forms have been so completely preserved under a thin disguise, as our relation to death. [...] It is true that the statement ‘All men are mortal’ is paraded in text-books of logic as an example of a general proposition; but no human being really grasps it, and our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality. (Freud 1995, 242)

We all rationally know that death excludes no one, that is, but we still cannot cope with the fact of our own death. Freud refers only to the individual death in his essay but it is also possible to apply his thoughts on a more general level (death of planet Earth), much the same as he himself speaks of the return of the repressed on both the ontogenetic and phylogenetic level. Indeed, in our time Slavoj Žižek has described our attitude towards the environmental crisis in terms of a “split between the (real) knowledge and (symbolic)

9. In the English translation this dimension of the hypocrisy of the parents is somewhat toned down. “Hög Standard” [High Standard] (1975), a very political song criticizing consumerism and the bourgeoisie by the Swedish blues and reggae artist Peps Persson, is changed into the pop song “Girls Just Want to Have Fun”, best known in the 1983 version by Cindy Lauper, and the proletarian songs are changed into sea shanties.



belief” (Žižek 1992, 27). “We are quite aware that it may already be too late”, he says, “that we are already on the brink of catastrophe [...] but nevertheless we do not believe it. We act as though it were only an exaggerated concern over a few trees, a few birds, and not literally a question of our survival” (Žižek 1992, 28). We know about the environmental crisis; most of us have not repressed its existence. However, like with our own death, it is something we are aware of, but still have a tendency to deny or repress, and we cannot grasp it in its entire meaning. In an interview, Lindqvist tried to explain what his writing is ultimately about: “Horror is to prod that feeling of fear that people have. The fear of things that in the long run lead to our extinction. Our death. Physically or spiritually” (Allonsson 2013, no pagination). It is difficult not to read this statement in the light of the argument above, of the environmental crisis as the one fundamental aspect of modern-day life that it is impossible to cope with in any rational way. This is why we need the Gothic horror stories to transform it into fiction.

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