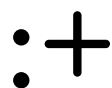


Dariusz Kosiński

The Spectre of Democracy

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Once again, I must begin with a caveat: everything that I wish to say and will try to say is a trial draft. Incomplete and rough like every draft, and at the same time risky, in danger of failure – like every trial.

Initially I wanted to tackle one subject: the democracy represented on freedom squares at least since 2011, and the way these presentations are used in media performances of Western democracy – ‘old and firmly rooted’, as is often said – especially to underline the contrast with such ‘young’ and ‘immature’ democracies as the Polish one. Yet when I embarked on this path, I swiftly came up against topics, associations, echoes and exhortations from which I cannot and do not want to get away. In order to be able to tackle them all in a way that they deserve, I would need a lot more space and time than I have. Than we all have. Because this is not about my own personal lack of time, of secondary importance and not a factor to be taken into account or even disclosed, regardless of real and practical limitations it causes.

Above all it is about the pace of events and changes taking place before our eyes and which we observe with such fascination. It is about the speed of events that means the text of a speech given over a year ago, published five months ago¹ and altered and corrected today, in late August 2015, could be out of date when this journal is published. Adam Mickiewicz’s pained question from *Forefathers’ Eve*, ‘must one wait long for the object to ripen, the fig to sweeten, the tobacco to settle?’, seems groundless today. There is no longer anything to wait for, as the settled tobacco might smell of smoke from our burnt houses. While there’s time to talk, I will try, even taking a few shortcuts or even – to put it colloquially but precisely – overstepping the line.

The risk I want to take is all the greater as, in speaking of freedom squares, I’m talking about people who dared to risk their lives, and some who lost them. By talking about them here and now, in a still comparatively safe country that enjoys civil liberties, without the experience they had, I inevitably turn them into an object and a performance. I therefore participate in the process of representing and substituting that I wish to critically analyse. Perhaps I am even using them to make what I have to say more attractive, intriguing, attention-grabbing. Perhaps I am forcing my way into their struggle with my performative lens and eye, so that I can feel better and play the role of the engaged humanist?

My position is by no means innocent, just as the remote gaze of each of us is not innocent as we turn the people assembled on the Maidan or Tahrir Square into actors in a huge media spectacle. Can I do anything about this? Can I, by writing this text, in any way support those people and what they dared to fight for? Does it still make sense to say anything, what with their failure, supported by our world, resulting in many thousands pressing themselves through walls and barbed wire we erect to protect our fourth wall? I don’t know the answer to these questions, and I often think the best thing would be to say ‘no’ and deal with something

¹ The original version of this article was published as ‘Widma rewolucji. Przedstawianie i podstawianie demokracji’, *Dialog* 2015, 3, pp. 5–15.

else. Yet if only for the fact that I don't know how to do anything else, I'll still try to carry on along this path.

City of the dead

Let us start academically – or maybe not – with the words performance and 'performative'. In Poland, these were once strange and alien concepts, yet today they are so popular that some translators translate the English phrase 'theatre performance' directly, without hesitation, as *performans teatralny*. When performance studies arrived in Poland, I naively thought that performance, with its peculiar anonymity in our language, would allow us to smoothly and easily open the meanings and make it easy to research the phenomena and processes. This was not what happened. Whereas if we used the word *performans* a few years ago, it was necessary to refer to the English source and frequently also to classical definitions and descriptions of Schechner and Carlson, nowadays explanation is still required, but to specify which of the many ways of understanding performance and performativity one has in mind. It is no different in the case of democracy combined with performance and performativity. This is a major bother, but also a necessity that I would like to convert into a perverse opportunity.

In Elżbieta Matynia's renowned book from 2009, which takes above all the example of Polish transformations from the 'carnival of Solidarity' to the Round Table Talks and further, she presented an optimistic vision of performative democracy as a bottom-up process of peaceful acquisition of power through the formation and strengthening of civil society. According to Matynia:

Deeply rooted in distinct and diverse sociocultural sites, performative democracy is [...] neither a theoretical model, a political ideal, nor a tested system of governance. It assumes an array of forms and is expressed through various idioms, but when it occurs under the conditions of authoritarian rule, it usually reflects its actors' basic sense of democratic ideals, and their belief that there are indeed places – 'normal countries' – where civil rights are observed, and where democracy is actually implemented and practiced.²

As this passage shows, the performativity of democracy as Matynia understands it is based, first, on a processual nature and dependence on the context of time and place. Performative democracy is not something constant and universal but is on each occasion constituted anew, differently. As the further analyses show, an equally important influence on its form is held by 'hard' political and economic actions and 'artificial, fictitious' creative processes (e.g. theatre) and intellectual constructions. In studying performativity, one therefore studies the course, the components and the complex conditions of a process which one reaches by analysing presentations representative of its individual phases. This, incidentally, is the essential understanding of performativity proposed by my theatre faculty in Kraków.

Yet the quoted passage from Matynia's book shows on its own how quickly and easily performativity combined with a dynamic process of constituting moves or combines with the performativity of exhibiting and presenting, with performativity as a generalised feature of performance. At its core, after all, the process she describes has the character

2 Elżbieta Matynia, *Performative Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

of theatrical staging – and a very traditional one at that, connected with the theatre of illusion. It is an attempt at staging in local conditions a certain idea of society whose impetus comes from the belief that such a society really exists somewhere ‘far, far away’. The result of performativity in this sense is a staging that Elżbieta Matynia also seems to call performative democracy, assigning to it such attributes as festivity, temporality and a non-institutional nature, and finally calling it simply a ‘carnival’. The sociologist argues that performative democracy does not ‘substitute for a well-functioning representative democracy with established mechanisms and procedures’ yet enlivens it at moments of crisis, or prepares foundations where they were previously lacking as it ‘brings out the richer texture of liberal democracy and makes it easier to see the prospects for democratic action in times of crisis: reviving the spirit of democratic polity’.³

Fascinated in equal measure by Bakhtin and Wałęsa, Matynia does not notice that by defining performative democracy as a carnival, she at the same time consigns it inevitably to the loss of its autonomic value and servile position towards a ‘well-functioning representative democracy’. After the carnival, the renewed structures will work even more efficiently, revived by the democratic spirit. Except that where democracy is lacking, the carnival does not revive its own body but that of another, and the ‘well-functioning representative democracy’ proves to be a ghoul, a vampire, feeding on somebody else’s blood. I would suggest that this is what has been happening in recent years with the huge freedom demonstrations on the squares of Arabic states and on the Maidan in Kiev. It is this process of performative consolidation of real democracy at the price of swapping people yearning for freedom for corpses and spectres that I would like to explore, in the hope that we will be able to move beyond helpless hand-wringing compassion and reinforcement of the conviction that the democracy we have is the best of the best.

The events of recent years make it clear that Matynia’s understanding of performative democracy is a charming but naive liberal fantasy – this is also very much evident when one reads the fairy tale that the story of the Polish transformation has become. What I would like to propose, not as a theoretical game, but with the aim of better understanding what is happening before our eyes – as an experiment, if you like – is to retain the concept of performative democracy but to conceptualise it in a different way. Rather than using Austin’s speech acts or the conception of cultural performance, I will refer to the understanding of performance proposed by Joseph Roach in his book *Cities of the Dead*. Since the vampire has appeared on stage, it is high time to head for the city of the dead.

In the introduction to his book, Roach argues that ‘culture reproduces and re-creates itself by a process that can be best described by the word *surrogation*’. It is this process that constitutes the fundamental mechanism of every performance that ‘offers a substitute for something else that preexists it. A performance, in other words, stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace’.⁴ There is no doubt that one of the important aspects of this

3 Matynia.

4 See Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 2–3.

substitution is removal and forgetting of certain elements of the whole. A performance is not exact, and this 'remnant', which it does not manage to materialise and present, is displaced from it, condemned to being forgotten – which is also futile, as sooner or later it will return, often as a spectre, a phantom.

If, in keeping with this mechanism, we now put the performativity founded on substitution in the place of the optimistic and activist performativity of Matynia, performative democracy proves to be much more complicated – but also, I suspect, closer to past and current experiences. Above all, performativity of democracy understood in this way clearly extracts its concealed aspect of exclusion and forgetting, which usually involves denial of the civil rights of a differently defined group of people: slaves, women, children, foreigners, immigrants... This list could go on and on, but suffice to say that it is historically variable but the processes of emancipation that continue to go on mean that gradually, and at least formally, it is becoming shorter (and at times of reaction, longer). Yet it never disappears entirely, as democratic performance entails replacing the 'people' – meaning 'all people' – with the generalised category of citizens, and making them the subject of power. This subject deftly and effectively replaces the ideologically founded, revered and elevated whole, becoming its figure but a demonic one, revealing a fundamental lack that *de facto* denies it the right to live, or even life itself. In other words, performative democracy based on substitution, founding the partial and, as always, metonymic representation, is essentially a spectre living off what it fails to conceal.

A spectre is haunting Europe

If we acknowledge democracy as the core of the ideology and organisation of the West, and agree that this Western democracy is performative in the sense I outlined above, then the logical consequence of both these theses will be the picture of the spectrality and the larval nature of modern life painted by Giorgio Agamben in his essay about Venice, whose brevity belies the breadth of its meanings and inspirations:

Venice is [...] the true emblem of modernity [...]. Our time is not new [*nuovo*], but last [*novissimo*], that is to say, final and larval. This is what we usually understand as posthistory or postmodernity, without suspecting that this condition necessarily means being consigned to a posthumous and spectral life, without imagining that the life of the specter is the most liturgical and impervious condition, that it imposes the observance of uncompromising rules of conduct and ferocious litanies, with all their special prayers for dawn, dusk, night, and the rest of the canonical hours. Hence the lack of rigour and decency of the larval spectres who live among us. All peoples and all languages, all orders and all institutions, all parliaments and all sovereigns, the churches and the synagogues, the ermines and the gowns, have slipped one after another, inexorably, into a larval condition, though they are unprepared for and unconscious of it. [...] This is the reason why we see skeletons and mannequins marching stiffly and mummies pretending to cheerfully conduct their own exhumation, without realizing that their decomposed members are leaving

them in shambles and tatters, that their words have become glossolalic and unintelligible.⁵

Agamben's vision of a larval civilisation derives, of course, from different reasons than mine, which is perhaps why he radically widens it geographically, while at the same time reducing it in temporal terms. I cite this image as I am attracted by its sharpness and convinced that it is an apt diagnosis, although I would be tempted to limit its spatial scope – to what I perhaps imprecisely but in a way I think is easy to understand call the West. I would say that this larval, spectral form of collective existence is the same crux of performative democracy, democracy as representation and substitution of the 'best possible' system. Living within the constant yet continually modified liturgy whose culmination is the electoral spectacle, democracy endeavours ever more futilely to convince us of the effectiveness and entirety of the representation it forms, while at the same time painfully proving every day that its 'representatives' do not represent anybody, even themselves, that they are signifiers without a signified, beings detached from being, spectres chasing through the world in the search of a life that could give them at least partial justification. This was how they were presented by Paweł Demirski and Monika Strzępka in the first part of *The Curse*, the apocalyptic theatre serial in which the ghosts of suddenly murdered politicians grotesquely and terrifyingly possess the bodies of other people.

For the spectral life of performative democracy, the appearances on Tiananmen Square, in the Arab Spring or at Euromaidan are extremely valuable spectacles – indispensable for the spectacular symbolic economics that is the basis of the endurance of this system. The protests and demonstrations of people demanding freedom confirm that democracy is the highest value and, according to Matynia's assertions, reinforce and renew an antiquated democracy tired of itself, restoring its vigour and attractiveness just as Countess Elizabeth Báthory's bathing in the blood of murdered village maidens was said to have rejuvenated her skin. On one hand, freedom squares are persuasive evidence that the democratic system existing in the West constitutes the object of the feverish, almost frenzied desire of people denied it and ready to die for it. On the other, they show that system an idealised, elevated image of itself.

The first mechanism seems rather obvious, and its expression can be found in many commentaries but above all in demonstrations of support. Numerous recent examples include Polish demonstrations on behalf of Ukraine, which took place in such numbers, individually and collectively, during the contentious winter of 2013/2014. Alongside the recurrent and clearly stated belief that Ukraine's struggle for European integration is in Poland's interest, as well as expressions of solidarity and sympathy, another common message was that Ukrainians were fighting for what Poles had gained in the 1980s. In other words, what we have now is what they now want to get. Comparisons were also made between the course and contexts of Ukrainian protests and the Polish 'carnival of Solidarity' of 1980–1981, emphasising that while the goals were similar, the circumstances were entirely different (most important being the much stronger

5 Giorgio Agamben, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living among Specters', *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 41.

and more direct influence of Russia) and elements of the victorious Polish revolution were lacking in the Kiev version, making it even less likely to prevail.

These comparisons were made with reference to the lack of the single clear leader on the Maidan that Lech Wałęsa had been in Poland, with protestors there even saying that was the case. It would be useful to make a careful and precise study of the rhetoric and performance aspect of Polish demonstrations of support, in order to see not so much what picture of Ukraine was painted then as how Poles presented themselves thanks to the crisis in Ukraine. For want of time to carry out such a huge task, I will just venture the thesis that there was an elevation and idealisation of Poland as a democratic country, which had managed to win this democracy for itself and was thus now able to support the endeavours of Ukraine, a country weaker in this regard. This mechanism of having a sense of one's own democracy thanks to the struggle of others being presented as a struggle for common values that we already possess resulted in a growth in approval for the ruling Civic Platform party. That party played the situation very well, making one topic of its European Parliament election campaign the pride in achievements of democratic Poland, depicted in contrast to Ukraine with its lack of safety and freedom.⁶

Speaking of demonstrations of support as a telling example of the mechanism of reviving the spectre that is key to performative democracy, I cannot fail to raise a minor but very significant example from across the Atlantic. At the Oscars award ceremony, held less than two weeks after bloody fighting that ended with the deaths of people and the defection of President Yanukovich, Jared Leto was the only person to express his solidarity with Ukraine, when collecting his Best Supporting Actor award for his role in *Dallas Buyers Club*. The actor, also lead singer of the rock band Thirty Seconds to Mars, said, 'To all the dreamers out there around the world watching this tonight, in places like the Ukraine and Venezuela, I want to say we are here [...] we're thinking of you tonight'. This short utterance is purely performative, not necessarily in the Austinian sense – I think we could spend a long time disputing its aptness, and it was questioned in critical commentaries almost immediately – but certainly in what we might call the Roachian one. This is an act of obvious substitution of the feeling of solidarity, however authentic it might be, of a single artist ('I want to say') with an unspecified collective subject ('we're thinking of you'). In the situation of the Oscars ceremony, this can be understood as the synthesis and embodiment of the grand show of Hollywood, presented metonymically during the awards,⁷ showing solidarity with the 'dreamers' of Ukraine and Venezuela. This solidarity, of course, is on the basis of their dreaming of and fighting for

⁶ Writing this in August 2015, given what has transpired since in electoral politics in Poland, that election and the increased support for the Civic Platform party that had preceded it then seems like a story from the dim and distant past.

⁷ Much greater fame was then won by the selfie with a group of stars taken by the ceremony's host than by Jared Leto's speech, a spectacular metonymy of the spectacular metonymy of the show, as well as an ironic commentary on the mechanisms of exhibiting oneself in the Embodied Spectacle that produce it.

what we already have and can enjoy, for example at events like the one in question.⁸

And since we are talking about dreams, I would like to refer to the second aspect of revival of democracy through demonstrations on freedom squares – that is, to the idealised image of equality and freedom, the utopian nature of the festivity of the square. I do not mean the renowned *communitas* associated with Turnerian liminal experience, but rather something more important and not fitting into anthropological models accustomed to the complexity of events – to wit, perceiving in the actions and *modus operandi* of the people gathered on squares the seeds or perhaps efforts to call forth a new society. It was this very understanding of the ‘alternative reality of the Euromaidan’ that Paweł Wodziński asked about in a discussion between him and Jacek Kopciński and Kiev theatre scholars. Nadia Sokolenko’s response was that:

Looking at these moments of self-organisation and formation of other relations, new ideas of how to live, how to get on and in what form that might be realised, you can say that a truly vast transformation took place. When we look at what ordinary people did, when we examine their heroism, we can see that our oligarchs, industrialists and politicians – although they were elected by the nation – are not worthy of that nation. Will a new, alternative reality be created for Ukraine? Fingers crossed we won’t go back to the old forms of operation.⁹

As we know today, Ukraine was forced to return to the ‘old forms of operation’ not because the social energy was exhausted, but because Russian intervention meant that it had to carry out a reconstruction of the political authorities in accordance with tried and tested templates and with Agamben’s model of the ‘state of emergency’. The alternative reality of the Maidan remained a ‘certain form of utopia’, that placed Ukrainians congregated at the Euromaidan even more strongly in the roles of ‘dreamers’ cheered on from afar.

Interestingly, from the perspective of the question of ‘the presentation of utopia’, Nadia Sokolenko’s words about the Maidan were almost echoed by Mohamed Samir El-Khatib in his article ‘Tahrir Square as Spectacle: Some Exploratory Remarks on Place, Body and Power’. The Egyptian scholar – thus somebody looking at Tahrir Square from near, from within the culture in which it arose – particularly noted the utopian image of the new society presented there:

The square appeared as though it were free of any ideology, as if transformed (momentarily?) into an ideal society that had discarded all hierarchies and forms of discrimination based on class and religion – the very ills that had long been plaguing the Egyptian sociocultural sphere, which the square, in turn, had historically come

8 For the sake of fairness, we should add that Jared Leto showed himself to be consistent in his solidarity, and ten days later appeared in Kiev with his band, again thanking Ukrainians for being ‘an inspiration [...] as you struggle to bring to life the dreams inside your heart’.

9 Nadia Sokolenko in the discussion ‘Niebiański Sotnia, z Hanną Weselowską Nadia Sokolenko i Wiktorem Sobijanskim rozmawiają Jacek Kopciński i Paweł Wodziński’, Teatr 2014, 4, p. 16.

to epitomize. It was as if a new reality had suddenly been 'superimposed' on an old one.¹⁰

By way of proof, El-Khatib invokes the images distributed by the media showing Christians and Muslims in joint prayer, as well as photographs of followers of orthodox Islam mixing with liberals, wearing the secular clothes of protestors.

With the benefit of a longer time perspective on the events of Tahrir Square, El-Khatib soberly notes in his conclusion that, shortly after the victory of Hosni Mubarak's departure, the divides returned and even grew deeper, ultimately leading to the return of strongly centralised political power and transforming Tahrir Square from a utopian scene of unity to one of political struggle. Each group and faction declare it as their own, striving to seize its 'spirit' for themselves and claim the right to the utopia exhibited there.¹¹ It was a similar case, incidentally, with Solidarity in Poland, and no doubt will be little different with the Maidan in Kiev.

This is all somewhat obvious, and does not go beyond the painfully trite narrative about revolutionary fervour being extinguished and the return to a much less colourful reality. It seems to me, however, that the equality and freedom demonstrations returning to squares around the world, played out almost to the same script, form a spectral performance used by performative democracy to underpin the sense of its existence, as well as the impossibility of making further change. The general outline of this common scenario is as follows: a demonstration over a specific issue is transformed, often owing to an unsuccessful police intervention and as a protest against it, into an act of mass occupation of public space. This space is divided by the authorities and/or the demonstrators, symbolically or otherwise, from the outside world, which turns it into a metonymic scene representing the entire community. Constructed within it are interpersonal relations that differ from those dominant outside the square, and this occurs thanks to self-organisation and suspension of divides. A clear representation of an 'alternative reality' is formed. Time is filled by numerous, dispersed performative actions, prepared or spontaneous – a separate, fascinating topic for further research. At a certain point, mounting tensions culminate with an attack from the forces of law and order. When this is ruthless, like on the Square of Heavenly Peace in Beijing, demonstrations end in bloody slaughter and abject failure. Yet this is a specific case, although of course the memory of it as a certain eventuality goes on. In the more recent freedom square revolutions, the attacks of the security forces had many victims, but were usually repelled, and any further pacification was prevented by internal or external intervention, which in turn caused the fall or flight of the hated dictator who embodied the system.

A key role in this drama is played by death and the blood of the wounded, which appears to put a radical end to the performance held on the squares. On one hand, the appearance of many victims means that the dictators cross a boundary for which (paradoxically) they also

10 Mohamed Samir El-Khatib, 'Tahrir Square as Spectacle: Some Exploratory Remarks on Place, Body and Power', *Theatre Research International*, 38.2, July 2013, p. 111.

11 El-Khatib, p. 112.

lose support among their previous allies, while on the other, they form a boundary behind which unquestionable reality begins, enforcing abandonment of the utopian spectacle of equality. Death brings the spectacle to an end, commencing a process of political negotiation which results in the inexorable return of the known, the return to the past.

From the Western perspective, the message of this reconstructed scenario seems obvious: dreamers struggling to build a new society, who are even ready to die for it. Yet their revolutionary acts are ineffective and end in death followed by a return to the previous system, or – as occurred in Arab countries – the chaos and brutality of civil war. This confirms that revolutions are not a way of carrying out lasting changes, and that a ‘new society’ is a dream and utopia. The conclusion is clear: the only true path to increasing freedom is the evolutionary path of democratic reforms, meaning aping the West and adopting the best of all possible systems: representative democracy. The utopian spectacle of freedom as an inspiration staged by ‘dreamers’ also revives spectral democracy, embodying its ideals and strengthening it in its current state, showing that realisation of the ideal of full equality, liberty and fraternity without excluding anybody, is impossible. The result is that performative democracy leads to its being substituted as an important objective and the topic of the illusory spectacle of momentarily achieved dreams, and at the same time presented as the only possible reality – the best possible system, although an imperfect one. In this sense, Francis Fukuyama was right – history has ended, and only repetitions are possible, including repetition of world war. The circle is closed. The square is surrounded.

Why, then, do demonstrations on freedom squares continue to occur? Because the participants do not stage their dreams in the forms that they know from the Western present day or their own or others’ past. Turner would say that those taking part in such liminal events are seized by the paradigmatic metaphors appropriate to the culture in which they were raised. He was mostly referring to sacrificial metaphors, regarding the sense of a radical *communitas* as a kind of universal characteristic of human nature. I am much more cautious when it comes to universals, and am thus more convinced by a solution proposed by Slavoj Žižek, who amid the events of 2011 suggested perceiving ‘signs from the future’ – ‘limited, distorted (sometimes even perverted) fragments of a utopian future that lies dormant in the present as its hidden potential’.¹² To discover them, Žižek writes, one must adopt a subjective and engaged position, or in other words, actively establish their future potential through performative thinking and actions, which again leads to acts of representation and substitution, moving towards the next spectres – this time the spectres of the future.

In his essay cited above, Agamben mentions a different version of spectral existence:

Spectrality is a form of life, a posthumous or complementary life that begins only when everything is finished. Spectrality thus has, with respect to life, the incomparable grace and astuteness of that which is completed, the courtesy and precision of those who no longer have anything ahead of them.¹³

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London, New York: Verso, 2014), pp. 127–128.

¹³ Agamben, p. 40.

This is an entirely different spectrality from the larval one, 'born from not accepting its own condition, from forgetting it',¹⁴ that which seems to be the appropriate spectrality for our democracy. This light, graceful and precise spectrality seems closer to what is taking place on freedom squares, and is absorbed by the democratic larva. Utopia, dream – these are words that describe the spectre full of equality, unity, self-organisation and peace that occurs during the demonstrations, speeches, manifestations and performances of recent years. The same that Giorgio Agamben saw in the Tiananmen Square demonstration that was paradigmatic for them of the symptom of the 'coming community'. So this would be a paradoxical spectre – a spectre of the future, a form of existence not of what has ended, but of what has not yet started and which does not yet have anything ahead of it. Haunting the closed circle of complete history, it cuts it open and destroys it like the Phantom at the end of Part II of Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*, not letting itself be dispelled and refusing to finish with the telling of the history of the fathers. Likewise, it haunts today's democracy, in constant mourning for who knows what, following it, step by step,

Where we with her, he with her everywhere.
What's in the air, what's in the air?

Apocalypse Z

It is late August 2015. The freedom squares are a thing of the past. Sometimes we still refer to the mythical Maidan when talking about Ukraine but in our part of the world Tahrir Square is all but forgotten. In our part of the world, images of crowds of people demanding democracy from their rulers have been replaced by crowds of people fleeing from their successors and from wars they started. People crammed onto boats in danger of sinking. People crowded onto the beaches of Greek islands next to us, also searching for the roots of Mediterranean culture. People squeezed into makeshift camps, sleeping on the ground, held without food and water in this exceptionally hot, dry summer. People storming trains meant to carry them to us. People forcing their way through barbed wire entanglements, jumping fences, slipping through under cover of night. Yes, Jared, these 'swarms of people' are the same dreamers we were thinking of on that beautiful California night. They decided to return the complement, and want to be with us too.

The passage of peoples fleeing war and poverty from the Middle East and Africa is no longer a romantic image showing spectral democracy its own ideal. It is an equally needed threat, reinforcing its existence through the loss of the feeling of safety making it possible to implement a state of emergency. It sounds paradoxical, but democracy needs a state of emergency, a state of being suspended to itself, to be able to become the dream of its own citizens. Bored and tired of its procedures, its bureaucratic inefficiency and the sham representativeness of its politicians, replacing the absence of a collective subject with their own spectacles, the citizens of the 'free world' are attacked by the pictures of the 'hordes' 'flooding Europe', 'besieging' its richest countries and ready to conquer even those that the Nazis failed to secure. This is the language used to refer to them: collective, lacking subjectivity, dehumanising.

¹⁴ Agamben, p. 39.

But in the media images of the people trying to get to our part of the world in search of safety and a better life for themselves and their children, it is this discourse of compassion that is dominant. In photos and films, parents carrying babies recur (interestingly, large men cuddling sleeping children are a favourite), along with the faces of children screaming in terror as they are crushed by the crowd, separated by the crowd from their parents, crying with fear and tiredness. By way of contrast, children playing in the dust, among bundles and tired refugees, are also depicted.

There is no doubt that these images restore the human dimension to the 'hordes', arousing compassion that is as powerless as ever but at least allows us to feel a little better and distance ourselves from politicians speaking of the need to close the borders, and no doubt soon giving the order to stop the 'swarm' by force. We vote for them all the more the readier they are to do this, but 'in human terms' we feel compassion for the refugees, and would probably give some money for somebody to do something about them.

The way in which the refugees heading en masse from Africa and Asia to the rich European countries are actuated in Europe stretches between threat and compassion. It is not true that we speak about and show them only as a de-individualised threat. Equally strongly, we need their humanity, which – like the images of the 'dreamers' and expressions of support for them – reinforces our sense of the value of what we have. If it was the entirely dehumanised troops of the 'so-called Islamic State' heading our way, we would only feel fear. But the crying children of refugees coming to us also arouse our pity and place us in the favourite position of tragic victims of fate: we don't want to stop you but we have to, to protect ourselves, our houses, our families, our homelands. The pity and fear that we experience at the sight of the approaching crowds allows us to again feel the value of what we have. Pity through the empathetic understanding of the desires of those on their way. Fear thanks to the relief we experience as we are able to delegate the necessary decisions to 'democratic mechanisms' and 'representatives'. When the need to shoot arises, it won't be us pulling the trigger, just the spectre of democracy – its empty subject, which proves to be the most dangerous scapegoat. Democracy will absolve us from guilt, and although without guilt there can be no catharsis, we will certainly view this as a small price to pay.

But what if the refugees are not stopped by the expected bullets?¹⁵ If the 'hordes' seep through the fences, barbed wire and walls? If no shots can halt the tens of thousands in the crowds?

Summer 2013 saw the release of the Hollywood blockbuster *World War Z* with Brad Pitt in the role of UN expert Gerry Lane, who travels around an apocalyptic world searching for a way to save the remnants of humanity, including his family. This was the latest product of popular culture to make use of the motif, recently hugely popular, of the zombie, the 'living dead'. Once the preserve of horror films and associated with the incredible return of the dead, revived in magical ways, it flourishes today in a rational and scientific version. In the hit television series

¹⁵ Shots will be fired one way or another – if not here, in defence of 'our homes', then 'over there' – when for the sake of our security we reach an agreement with dictators, help them to bring an end to wars and bolster power, then turn a blind eye so as not to see how the 'dreamers' are shot.

The Walking Dead, in the well-received video game *The Last of Us*, or in films such as *World War Z*, there are no longer 'voodoo priests' or other supernatural forces able to revive the dead. To be precise, the contemporary 'zombies' are not 'living dead', as they never died – they are people attacked by some mysterious virus or bacteria, who live an inhuman life. They are similar to humans – they look almost like humans, can move almost like humans – yet they are not humans. Stronger, faster, more decisive, impossible to kill (except with a shot or blow to the head), but at the same time lacking a language and feelings, with deformed features – resembling people we once knew, to whom we may have been close,¹⁶ but at the same time completely different from them. Zombies are ideal opponents in shooter games. If killing people, even bad ones, arouses your moral unease, killing 'clickers' or 'walkers' does not. Their monstrously deformed faces and the fact that if you don't shoot them alive they'll rip out your arteries with their teeth quickly assuages any sense of unease. Zombies are killed en masse, with no mercy and no shadow of reflection.

One of the most striking scenes of mass zombie annihilation in *World War Z* is the sequence of their attack on the walls of Jerusalem. This whole plot is so illogical and the script so far-fetched that it seems all the more significant. Travelling the world in search of the source of the pandemic, Gerry is surprised to learn that Jerusalem is untouched, as before the outbreak the Israeli government built a high wall surrounding the city. This shows that the Jews knew about the imminent cataclysm. So Gerry flies to Jerusalem, where ostensibly he fails to learn much of note but sees crowds of refugees heading for the high walls of the Holy City. Suddenly, affected by an utterly improbable impulse,¹⁷ the thousands of zombies roaming outside the walls enter a frenzy, form something like an (un-)living ladder – or rather a stream of bodies flowing upwards – and flood inexorably into the city. People are dying in their hundreds but even the Israeli army, prepared for the attack, is unable to stop them. Jerusalem is taken.

Owing to the striking visuals of this scene, its symbolic power and the surrounding improbabilities, I find it particularly significant. Perhaps the most conspicuous of the many significant unlikely things that form it is the fact that the thousands of zombies attacking the walls of Jerusalem have essentially sprung out of nowhere. In the scenes preceding the attack, we do not see crowds of 'undead' surrounding the city, so it is unclear where they have suddenly come from. The only explanation that arises is that crowds of refugees seeking shelter in the Holy City have turned into them. They changed in the blink of an eye, at the exact moment when we looked away for a second: those whom we welcomed with delight, doing everything possible to help them, have become in a flash

16 'Something that used to be my wife' – this phrase, used by one of the characters from *World War Z*, accurately describes a constant motif in zombie films: meeting the 'living dead' version of a loved one. We observe this as early as the first episode of *The Walking Dead* (a scene featuring a husband unsuccessfully trying to shoot his wife in zombie-form), and is complemented much later by a sequence with the necessary killing of the zombie of one's child.

17 This is the joyful singing of survivors. The explanation is that zombies are particularly sensitive to noise. Clearly, though, they are untroubled by the din of the engines of military helicopters circling over Jerusalem. Their fury is unleashed by the singing of groups of survivors. This explanation is so illogical that it is of course significant.

mortal enemies who can be killed en masse and without a sense of guilt or fear of punishment, or remembering. I find it almost unimaginable that Hollywood saw fit to set this sequence of transformation of survivors into *homines sacri* in Jerusalem, casting Jews in the role of exterminators. I see no other explanation for this than as an image of the licence to kill that we have awarded ourselves.

World War Z is a movie, a major-studio summer release, so the ending cannot be an unhappy one. In fact, all stories about 'zombie apocalypses' and 'the last humans' have 'happy' endings. Gerry learns – thanks partly to the scenes observed in Jerusalem – that the 'undead' infected with the virus do not attack people who have other infectious diseases. He checks whether this is the case and upon finding the answer is yes sets about creating a 'vaccine' to protect against zombie attack, and thus... allowing them to be killed with impunity. In the film this is not spelt out, but heavily hinted at. People 'vaccinated' with the viruses of other serious but curable illnesses can wipe out the undead en masse and unpunished, before pushing their bodies into huge pits and burning them, creating a morally justified repeat of Auschwitz. The causes of Apocalypse Z were never discovered, and it was cured. Quite simply, all carriers were killed – millions of people who in the blink of an eye ceased to be people.

The fact that in mass entertainment the spectre of the zombie replaces the otherness that we fear and that assembles at the walls of our world is obvious, and it is hardly necessary to mention Marc Forster's mediocre film to confirm it. I did so for two reasons: owing to the horrifying Jerusalem scene, because I fear that it shows a spectacular condensation of what might soon await us, and owing to the denouement – the need to become infected to survive. In this I would see the spectrality of democracy led to the extreme: to secure its survival, the 'rule of the people' is ready to infect itself temporarily with totalitarianism, Nazism, even the most brutal tyranny. If the spectacles of the dreamers do not suffice to raise its vigour and value, it turns into a monster eliminating the 'remnants' produced by the mechanisms of substitution, to save its own, and then again to allow them to build the best of possible worlds.

Translated by Ben Koschalka

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ABSTRACT

Dariusz Kosiński

The Spectre of Democracy

In this article I attempt to analyse the pro-democratic appearances that have taken place in many countries in recent years, using the concept of performative democracy proposed by Elżbieta Matynia in her well-known book of the same name. I accept her argument that appearances that create a distanced performative democracy movement revive the emotions associated with democracy in countries that accepted it long ago, and therefore often treat it as something well known, or even boring, and use it to demonstrate the spectral and vampiric nature of democracy that is manifested in its representations. I perceive the former in the performances of democratic utopia on the “freedom squares” in Ukraine and Egypt, and the latter in the reactions to them from the representatives of “old democracies”. I bring these out by combining Matynia’s proposals with the understanding of performance as surrogation developed by Joseph Roach in his book *Cities of the Dead*. These analyses lead to problematisation of democracy as a complex construct based at least equally on sustaining and excluding, whereby every so often the hidden mechanisms of the latter threaten to disintegrate the whole system.