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Horror and Postcolonial Guilt in Abo Rasul's *Unfun*

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In this article, Abo Rasul's *Unfun* (2008) is analysed as an example of race horror. The novel is read along two axes: 1) a medial trajectory along which *Unfun* is understood as a contemporary horror film pastiche in dialogue with Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, and 2) a literary trajectory along which *Unfun* is understood as a postcolonial novel in dialogue with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1902). I examine these two intersecting trajectories in light of collective guilt and postcolonial melancholia – terms used by Paul Gilroy in *After Empire* (2004). What this reading reveals is how Rasul ultimately implicates his Scandinavian reader in post-1989 racism, imperialism and globalization.

Key words:

Matias Faldbakken – Race – Horror – Film – Postcolonialism – Guilt – Melancholia

Matias Faldbakken is a multimedia artist known for his art installations and for his novels published under the pseudonym Abo Rasul. As a literary writer he has a distinct multi- and intermedial imagination that challenges the known boundaries of the literary institution in terms of aesthetics as well as ethics. In

2008 he completed his *Skandinavisk misantropi* (Scandinavian Misanthropy) trilogy with the publication of *Unfun*. Like the two preceding novels, *The Cocka Hola Company* (2001) and *Macht und Rebel* (2002), *Unfun* builds on low genres and media such as comics, computer games and horror films. At the same time, Rasul's works constitute a type of conceptual verbal art, playing off various philosophical and theoretical ideas.¹ In his doctoral thesis *Grensesnittets estetikk* (2013), Anders Skare Malvik analyzes Faldbakken as an «interface artist», focusing in particular on how Faldbakken's art and literature respond to the digital-technological media culture in which they participate (37). This perspective leads him to analyze *Unfun* at the interface of novel and search engine. The artist is a «Google professor» (using Faldbakken's own term), and the novel challenges the reader to regard it – and its characters – from a machine-centric point of view (Malvik 2013: 127, 144). Malvik contrasts his perspective with that of Kjersti Bale (2004), who is concerned with how Faldbakken's absorption of literary theory challenges that very institution, and with that of Ane Farsethås (2012), who offers a theme-oriented existentialist reading while also paying attention to Faldbakken's «Google-method». While these readings all contribute to elucidate Faldbakken's work in interesting and relevant

ways, this article investigates *Unfun* as race horror², taking seriously the novel's generic status as a horror film pastiche as well as its postcolonial focus on race.³

Unfun opens with references to slasher films and Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (2015, orig.1992), a treatise on the horror film and its psycho-social functions. Even the title, *Unfun*, may be read as a reference to the horror film, a genre that combines horror and comedy, being simultaneously fun and terrifying (i.e. not fun).⁴ Important to this genre are twists, turns and surprises. As Isabel Christina Pinedo points out: «The horror genre hinges on violating audience expectations» (80). Thus, when Rasul writes *Unfun* into a Clover-theorized film universe, we expect that he will nevertheless break with the slasher film and the Final Girl as we know them (or get to know them through *Unfun*'s quoting from Clover's book).⁵

In what follows, I examine *Unfun* as a horror story. I presume that the novel posits misanthropy as a vice, but wish to investigate who is ultimately implicated as misanthropic, and how. In order to do this, I explore the novel along two trajectories: 1) a medial trajectory along which *Unfun* is understood as a contemporary horror film pastiche in dialogue with Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, and 2) a literary trajectory along which *Unfun* is understood as a postcolonial novel in dialogue with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1902). I examine these two intersecting trajectories in light of collective guilt and postcolonial melancholia. Guilt and melancholia are terms that Paul Gilroy uses in *After Empire* (2004) to describe the emotions and, in particular, the denial aroused in a postwar, postcolonial Europe marked by immigration and multiculturalism. What this reading – centering on guilt and melancholia – reveals is how Rasul ultimately implicates his Scandinavian reader in post-1989 racism, imperialism and globalization.⁶

Lucy Turning Lucifer: The Horror Film's Final Girl

Unfun is a multilayered work with a fiction within the fiction. The plot to a large extent revolves around the construction of a computer game called *Deathbox*, conceptualized as a reverse *Heart-of-Darkness* story. The two fictive universes, *Unfun* and *Deathbox*, not only reflect upon each other, but also finally intersect and bleed into each other. In the spirit of contemporary, (post)modern horror films, no boundaries are stable.⁷ The work is bilingual – Norwegian and English – with much dialogue rendered in English. The story is told from several points of view, but Lucy is the protagonist and main focal point.

35-year-old Lucy is the ultimate embodiment of a (post)modern play with identity boundaries. Lucy, in other words, is marked by hybridity – racially, ethnically, culturally, sexually, ideologically, psychologically and physically. She is an example of old imagined identities of class, gender, race and sexuality dissolving. As Richard Dyer puts it: «Someone may be black and gay and middle class and female; we may be bi-, poly- or non-sexual, of mixed race, indeterminate gender and heaven knows what class» (11). Specifically, Lucy is part Scandinavian, part African, and has grown up in Norway and Nigeria. She moves to Norway and as a teen, meets and marries the Norwegian Theodor, alias Slaktus, who consistently rapes her. At the age of 15, she gives birth to triplets, but demands that one of them be killed through a «post-natal abortion». It is at this point that she develops a split personality and starts having two voices. Ideologically, Lucy is an anarchist. In terms of sexual orientation she is marked as non-heterosexual. More than anything, Lucy represents the negation that has also been identified as the source of Faldbakken's artistic production.⁸ Her standard answer is «NO», her main wish is to refuse the surrounding world, and by the end of the story she turns into the book's main destructive force – the horror

film's Final Girl – and massacres all the other characters, including Slaktus and her two sons. Nothing is left except the force of Lucy accompanied by laughter. The laughter, however, is as ambivalent as everything else. Lucy explains that her African Ik-genes force her to laugh in the face of danger, pain and destruction, and the ambivalence of her laughter is further enforced by her face, half of which has been damaged by Slaktus and is thus left numb (Rasul 2008: 62).⁹ The same ambivalence finally pertains to her name, Lucy. Farsethås regards it as a reference to our archaeological «primordial mother», the three-million-year-old Lucy fossil (2012: 47), while Malvik considers it a reference to the historical revolutionary anarchist, Lucy Parsons (134-5).¹⁰ Emphasizing her demonic qualities, we could also regard the name's reference to Lucifer, representing both light and darkness. On the book's last page, Lucy comments on the darkness of the setting: «I stappmørket ser man ingen hindringer. Det er liksom det motsatte av opplysning, dette her» (In the dark one sees no obstacles. This is close to the opposite of enlightenment) (Rasul 2008: 256).¹¹

From the onset, Rasul, as mentioned above, gives his reader strong indications that the novel is to be read in dialogue with the genre of the contemporary horror film. *Unfun*'s opening scene is a room full of slasher films, and the only book in the room is Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*.¹² The book belongs to Slaktus and several passages are quoted so that the reader understands the concept of the slasher film's *slasher* and *Final Girl*. The slasher is a figure of arrested development who functions as «a demon of the threshold [of adulthood]», and the *Final Girl* is a female who remains a girl by refusing to take independent steps into adulthood (Rasul 2008: 13). The two type descriptions culminate in the following quote:

At the end of the slasher film, the Final Girl's beauty and purity are victorious: throughout the film she has

not taken a drink, smoked a cigarette or a joint, or taken too keen an interest in anyone's penis, and that is the source of her power over the demon. Ultimately, Final Girl and slasher are on the same side [i.e. the side of childhood]. (14)¹³

The quote clearly foreshadows the novel's end, yet not in the way one might expect based on films such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978) discussed by Clover. Lucy is not pure or on the side of childhood. She is no virgin, she *has* taken a keen interest in someone's penis, she drinks, and she has arranged for the killing of her own child.¹⁴ In the end, *she* is the monster who runs amuck, killing all the other characters. While Malvik sees this irrational killing spree as a sign that the discourse of the novel is remediated within a pattern/randomness-scheme characteristic of digital technologies (156), it may also be understood as a generic trait. Since the horror genre presumes its audience's prior generic knowledge as well as its expectations that things will take a new and thrilling turn, we see how these expectations are fulfilled on several levels as horror subgenres are combined in original ways: 1) Within the primary diegetic universe of *Unfun*, Lucy is part protagonist of a rape-revenge film, part slasher. Slaktus is primarily a rapist. Through most of her partnership with Slaktus, Lucy considers their acts of intercourse «rape-light» (Rasul 2008: 38), until Slaktus (now as her ex) finally attacks her in a fit of rage, committing what she considers plain rape, an act that must be avenged; 2) at the same time, Slaktus is working on the computer game, *Deathbox*, a slasher game in which the Congolese protagonist, Mbo, avenges an African postcolonial past by killing random Parisians with a stonecutter. True to the logic of slasher films, the Final Girl ultimately enters the realm of reason of the slasher (here, modified as the slasher game creator, Slaktus) and is thus able to conquer him.¹⁵ This lends Lucy a Final-Girl trait. Lucy, in a sense, becomes Mbo, who is a figure of Slaktus' imagi-

nation, whom he seeks to realize in his computer game, but ultimately (and inadvertently) also realizes in Lucy. Hence, the dividing line between fiction and reality collapses.¹⁶ In the end, Lucy is both victim and hero, Final Girl and slasher/monster as various realms and categories bleed into one another.

While *Unfun*'s relationship to the horror film is established through thematic references (such as Clover's book), it is also signaled formally through the initial unmarked point of view. According to Clover, the Final Girl is a woman with male attributes who, from the film's onset, engages her audience in a gender tease:

Consider, for example, the now-standard habit of letting us view the action in the first person long before revealing who or what the first person is. [...] The surprise is often within gender, but it is also, in a striking number of cases, across it. [...] We are invited, by conventional expectation [...] to suppose that «we» are male, but «we» are revealed, at film's end, as a woman. (Clover 2015: 56)

In *Unfun*, this tease is radicalized and racialized as, in the first two chapters, the reader is presented with an unmarked point of view he or she assumes is that of a male. Not until the *first person* has made a pass at a woman at a bar, followed her to her cabin (they are on the Kiel-Oslo ferry), and had sex with her, does the reader realize that the presumed man is a woman as she mentions her stretch marks and lets her sex partner – and the reader – know that her name is Lucy (Rasul 2008: 20). The difference between Clover's examples and *Unfun*, then, pertains to sexuality and race, since the unmarked first person, as the novel illustrates, in addition to being regarded as male, tends to be regarded as heterosexual and white until proven otherwise.¹⁷ As the reader discovers the protagonist is a female, he or she also understands that she is non-heterosexual. And, not until page 42 does the reader get an indication of Lucy's ethnic background; she describes her children as «mulattbarn» (mulatto children, 42), and the reader has been informed that

Slaktus is white, although a «neger i hodet» (a Negro in his head, 37). Lucy, then, has to be black.¹⁸ At this point it becomes clear that *Unfun* is to be understood not just in the context of feminism and a new ideology of gender performativity, but also in the context of a contemporary understanding of racism.

Collective Guilt and Race Horror

Given the emphasis placed on Lucy's racial and ethnic hybridity – in addition to her gender and sexuality – Clover's theory may be considered in light of race horror, a genre expounded upon by Pinedo. Turning first to Clover, we see that in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* her initial interest was in the rise of a modern (as opposed to classic) horror movie genre in the 1970s and its hold on audiences until the mid-1980s as it pertained to gender.¹⁹ Why, she wondered, did the low-budget horror film suddenly feature *female* victim-heroes – combining the previous functions of the female victim and the avenging male hero, but now «bolted together in the figure of the female» (17) – with whom primarily young adult *male* audiences would identify? Placing this in a cultural context, she saw this «cross-gender identification» (43) as tied to feminism, to the «new family» (162), to a new understanding of gender as performance,²⁰ and overall to «massive gender confusion» (62). The Final Girl, according to Clover, «is a male surrogate in things oedipal, a homoerotic stand-in» (53). Subsequently, film theorists such as Pinedo have critiqued Clover on this point, wishing to further queer her position, insisting on the progressive potential of gender trouble and focusing on the many female viewers who enjoy horror films (Pinedo 81–84). Lucy, in turn, may be regarded as a character responding to a contemporary focus on the queer, as well as a contemporary interest in postcolonialism and racism.

Crucial to a postcolonial reading of *Unfun*, I would argue, is Clover's often-overlooked per-

spective on how the horror genre relates to the politics and functions of collective guilt. As Clover has theorized it, notions of national collective guilt may be viewed as intimately connected to, and as the driving engine of, the modern horror film. As Clover turns to the rape-revenge film (in a chapter having received significantly less attention than that on the *Final Girl*),²¹ she reads it along a double-axis involving not only gender, but also an urban–rural axis, pertaining to American settlement, expansion and capitalism, topics that are also highly pertinent to Rasul's pastiche set in Europe several decades later. In rape-revenge films, the city «rapes» the country (through capitalist exploitation), and when the city person visits the country, he or she, in turn, is (literally) raped by the country person. In the end, the city slicker kills the country bumpkin. What Clover ultimately finds as she explores the city/country-split in these films is an alleviation of national guilt. The city people are the haves while the country people are so-called «rednecks», the have-nots. Thus the rapes in the rape-revenge films are about literal as well as figurative rapes – the rape of a landscape (128). The horror film thus ultimately serves the same function as its predecessor, the Western, claims Clover. It shows city men approaching the country guilty (128), but then demonizes the economic victims – the «rednecks», or formerly the «redskins» (in the Western genre) by portraying them as violent (rapists, for instance) so that the haves are ultimately justified.²² The narrative allows the haves to acknowledge their guilt and then get on with business (163). In effect, the tale of the literal rape is a cover-up for the story of the economic rape as «a feminist politics of rape has been deployed in the service of class and racial guilt. Raped and battered, the haves can rise to annihilate the have-nots – all in the name of feminism» (163).

As indicated above, *Unfun* may also be considered a hybrid, double-axis revenge/slasher

narrative, yet it differs from its modern horror predecessors by going global, pitting Africa against Europe, by introducing a metafictional layer through the *Deathbox* theme, and by problematizing national boundaries as well as racial categories. In other words, whereas the contemporary horror films discussed by Clover were marked by gender play (covering, to a certain extent, over issues of racial guilt), Rasul's horror tale is clearly marked not only by gender play, but also by play that disrupts racial, ethnic, national, regional, cultural, fictional and medial boundaries, lending it – among other possibilities – to be read as race horror.

Writing on race horror, Pinedo notes that, on the one hand, American horror movies have avoided racially marked characters because the racial Other is already «marked as monster in the larger culture» (112). This calls for a more coded figure, she reasons, turning to Clover's argument that the «redneck» figures as a displaced racial Other (Pinedo 112). The redneck works as a «universal figure of blame» because he is a safe figure of displacement who is white (allegedly turning race and ethnicity into a non-issue) and because he is «infinitely displaceable» (Clover 2015: 135); all Americans can distance themselves from the redneck who remains «someone else» (135).²³ On the other hand, Pinedo notes, race horror does exist, but critics have not paid much attention to the subgenre. These films usually take place in an urban setting and evoke colonial relations as the horrifying element pertains to a validity of «black magic». «White colonial power» is thus aligned with civilization while «nonwhite colonized people» are aligned with savagery (Pinedo 119). The colonized people usually have links to Africa, the «Dark Continent»; like Lucy, they are unsettling because they embody ostensibly irrational, primitive and savage traditions. In Lucy's case, the «black magic» primarily pertains to her uncanny Ik-ability to endure just about any attacks and suffering, qualities that make her resilient and borderline monstrous. Ra-

sul emphasizes how these beliefs about the Ik are based on the popular, yet academically disputed anthropological writings of Colin Turnbull; nevertheless, (false) beliefs about the African Other remain a source of Western anxiety that may well be exploited in horror narratives. As Pinedo concludes: «The contemporary horror film genre is a combination of feminist and antifeminist elements. It contains racist and antiracist impulses. It criticizes and endorses hierarchical relations of power» (133). Similarly, *Unfun* reflects contemporary ideological clashes and contradictions pertaining to both feminism and racism, leaving it for its readers to work through them.

Still, Clover and Pinedo write about American horror films as they pertain to the historical, social and political context of the U.S. With *Unfun*, Rasul carries the issue of race and racism into a post-1989 Europe. More specifically, he carries it to Scandinavia with the idea that Scandinavians epitomize a new state of Western paralysis, intensifying with the steady increase in broadcast programming:

Hva er en skandinav? En skandinav er en person som til daglig lever i spennet mellom to vesensforskjellige følelser: Følelsen av usårbarhet: jeg kan ikke skades (av det jeg ser på tv) – og følelsen av utilstrekkelighet: jeg har ikke mulighet til å påvirke (det jeg ser på tv). Dette er i prinsippet en trans-vestlig middelklassetilstand, men i Skandinavia kan denne tilstanden sies å være fullbrakt. Skandinave ser like fullt, og uvisst av hvilken grunn, verdien i å kommunisere med omverden. (89)

What is a Scandinavian? A Scandinavian is a person who daily lives suspended between two incommensurable feelings: The feeling of invulnerability: I cannot be hurt (by what I see on TV) – and the feeling of inadequacy: I have no way of influencing (what I see on TV). This, in principle, is a trans-Western, middle-class condition, but in Scandinavia this condition may be regarded as fully accomplished. Scandinavians nevertheless, and for some unknown reason, consider it meaningful to communicate with the rest of the world.

Scandinavians, then, can be regarded as alienated people, living in a bubble in which they are

exposed to entertainment and news about events taking place in the rest of the world, but in which they persist in thinking that these events have no impact on their own lives, and vice versa. The point of view is unattributed in the novel but the quote is often cited by critics, who see it as capturing the main idea of Rasul's trilogy on *Skandinavisk misantropi* (e.g. Vidnes 2008; Farsethås 2008: 104). In terms of Malvik's interface model, we could say that Scandinavians are thus defined by their relationship to the media (here, TV), depriving them of a sense of agency. Yet, why might this condition be «accomplished» («fullbrakt») in Scandinavia in particular? Taking the geopolitical context suggested by the novel into account, one may surmise that it is less the TV-watching than it is denial that renders Scandinavians passive. It might, I would argue, have to do with a sense of Nordic exceptionalism pertaining to the Scandinavian countries being small, relatively peaceful and successful welfare states located on the European periphery. The Scandinavian self-image is based on a sense of having attained equality, wealth, and happiness without being directly engaged with the rest of the world, either through postcolonial or neo-imperial exploitation, or through contemporary warfare. As the bubble position entails regarding the non-Scandinavian or non-Western Other as unreal (a figure on TV), it is ultimately a dehumanizing expression of contempt for the Other, and thus an expression of misanthropy. Yet, as the quote suggests, it is a position fraught with ambivalence, in which the misanthropy unavoidably is directed back at the impotent («innocent») Self.

Scandinavia's Heart of Darkness

Having looked at *Unfun* along the medial/generic trajectory as a horror film pastiche in dialogue with Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, discussing how the genre traditionally has worked to alleviate a nation's class and racial

guilt, I now turn to the literary trajectory along which *Unfun* is to be read in dialogue with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This analysis will indicate how *Unfun* can be read as potentially serving to alleviate class and racial guilt on a global level, pitting the Scandinavian haves against those perceived as non-Scandinavian have-nots – but also ultimately undermining this stance through a thorough problematization of race and postcolonial melancholia. In this analysis, *Deathbox* is read metapoetically as a foil to *Unfun*.

As indicated by his name, Slaktus (slaughterer) is aggressive and violent. His two main interests are bodybuilding and the above-mentioned computer game, *Deathbox*. In the game, the revenge of the colonized takes place as a Congolese immigrant, Mbo, comes to Paris – Europe's heart of darkness (133) – in the fatal year 1989 (238). He gets a job as a road worker and runs amuck with his stonecutter. It becomes a game about the revenge of the colonized – Africa – vis-à-vis a New Europe. Slaktus is concerned about both content and form; the game is to be a technological wonder. However, Slaktus's project is thwarted as there is a bug or virus in the design program. He rages, rapes Lucy, and, as discussed above, Lucy consequently takes over the role of the Congolese road worker as the calm and systematic slasher/avenger.

Slaktus's computer game *Deathbox* is inspired by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and was first conceptualized as the film *Mbo – Avenging Congo*. According to Slaktus:

Hele poenget var å beskrive et *rendezvous* mellom en løssluppen eurokultur i forfall og slavemoral gone bad; en kokko representant for den 3. verden gjør inntog i kulturens hjerte med en steinkutter som interface og Paris [...] var i så måte det perfekte bakteppet. (75)

The entire point was to describe a *rendezvous* between a forsaken Euro-culture in decline and slave moral gone bad; a coo-coo representative of the third world enters the heart of culture with a stone saw as interface and Paris [...], accordingly, was the perfect backdrop.

Seeing this in relation to the modern slasher film, Slaktus explains that with Mbo it is no longer a matter of individual psychology, but rather geopolitics: «A classic slasher figure is really an angry child [...]. He always emerges from abuse somehow ... but for my figure ... our character, Mbo ... this torturous realm is not rape or paedophilia or physical abuse [...]. For Mbo the torturous realm is [...] Africa» (71). Hence, Slaktus – who has read Clover – regards his plot as a clear social allegory. Mbo is not on any level the victim of a personal rape; he is solely the representative victim of an economic rape – the rape of Africa. The Final Girl in Slaktus's film was to be a traditionally prissy and abstaining woman, a young, Parisian student (71).

When his chosen medium for his project was still film, Slaktus applied for financial support but was rejected on the grounds that it came across as more exploitative than critical:

Systemkritikken var ikke tydelig nok for manuskonsulentene, de avskrev «engasjementet» som en tynn unnskyldning for å kunne meske seg i et halvrasistisk slasher univers, den eventuelle «kritikken» forsvant i blodtåke og avskårne lemmer. (72)

The critique of the system was not obvious enough for the manuscript consultants, they dismissed the «engagement» as a thin excuse for indulging in a semi-racist slasher universe, the potential «criticism» disappeared in a fog of blood and in severed limbs.

However, in addition to regarding Slaktus's initial film concept as exploitative, we may also regard it as a reactive expression of postcolonial melancholia. Paul Gilroy uses the terms postimperial and postcolonial melancholia (e.g. Gilroy 2004: 109, 113) to refer to a contemporary melancholic preoccupation with the colonial past during which one could regard the world as consisting of various monocultures rather than being multicultural. *Mbo – Avenging Congo* may thus be regarded as a melancholic representation of a black-and-white world in which Mbo represents Africa, the third world,

and unambiguous blackness. He is threatening as a postcolonial avenger, but he does not destabilize and confuse the binary notion of a white Europe versus a black Africa.

Eventually, though, Slaktus transforms his film concept into a computer game. The computer game is a better medium, he decides, as it further unsettles the boundaries between actor and spectator (active and passive participation). As he changes the title to *Deathbox*, we may also surmise that as a computer game it intensifies the numbing effect of the previously mentioned TV; the *box* (television) becomes the *Deathbox* (television, coffin), ironically the source of his own death.²⁴ At the same time, it is also important to note that the new medium allows for an interesting and unsettling combination of racialized voices and bodies – a combination Slaktus exploits without comment, and which ultimately, I would argue, furthers *Unfun*'s critical potential. Again, this is a strategy that harks back to earlier horror films that play with dislocated voices and bodies, as in *Psycho*'s shocking its audiences by combining a young male body and an older female voice (cf. Williams 180). In *Unfun*, this game of aural-visual discrepancy is once more transposed from a realm of gender to one of race and is further problematized by the fact that the juxtaposition of black and white does not in fact unsettle audiences; the white voice allegedly sounds black, suggesting that white people can somehow give voice to black people (Rasul 2008: 130).

The World's White Voice

Whereas Mbo will come across as unambiguously black to gamers, we as readers are given insight into how his character is «really» constructed. Slaktus engages a game-developing company, *Rapefruit*, and subsequently hires Dan Castellaneta and Taiwo Jolayemi as Mbo's voice and body. This enables Rasul – as the implied author – to delve into a charged discussion of

contemporary racism. Taiwo is a fictional character, described as Nigeria's most prominent young actor, making a fortune on his noble-savage appearance (66).²⁵ Being tall, dark, libidinal and well endowed, he comes across as hyper-black (66, 135, 145).²⁶ The character of Castellaneta, on the other hand, is a real-life person whom Rasul inserts into his fictional narrative, rewriting his personal history in significant ways. Castellaneta was the voice of Homer of *The Simpsons*, «the whitest tv-show on earth for 30 years», as Taiwo puts it (170). In *Unfun* he is placed in a wheelchair and is characterized as unjustifiably «negrophobic» («neger-skeptisk»)²⁷ Ultimately, he represents the stereotypically white, racist American with a worldwide authoritative voice. Not that he or other Americans deserve that authority, but as the narrator explains: «That's how it is in Scandinavia. No matter how stupid an American is, he has some kind of authority by virtue of being American» (218). In *Unfun*, the «stupid American» serves as a racist foil to the more liberal (Scandinavian) characters and is thus a character recognizable from the genre of race horror (cf. Pinedo 124); yet, while Castellaneta is clearly a racist character from whom the reader can distance him- or herself, he is also a character with whom the reader is likely to identify, as both are put in the position of entering the strange universe of *Unfun* from the outside, having to slowly figure out who the characters are and what their relations are. Thus, the reader is placed in a disturbing position, as he or she has to identify with a racist, if not on ideological, then on narratological grounds.

At the same time, by weakening Castellaneta's body and situating him in a wheelchair, Rasul links him with Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, who is also characterized by his physically disabled body and strong, authoritative voice. Several characters in the book likewise refer to Castellaneta as Kurtz – «the Kurtz of comedy» (173), «the inverted Kurtz» (49), etc. The link

to *Heart of Darkness* allows for various discussions of darkness and lightness – racism and civilization – from a Scandinavian perspective.

Turning to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we find that Kurtz represents Europe as «all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz» (Conrad 2007: 61). His main characteristic is his voice: «The man presented himself as a voice» (58); his «was the unbounded power of eloquence» (61). He was «a universal genius [...] how that man could talk! He electrified large meetings» (90). Castellaneta, too, is described as a vocal genius who can spellbind the largest crowds (Rasul 2008: 219); however, in his case, the ability to mesmerize audiences is not poetic, pertaining to originality and eloquence. Castellaneta's art is one of imitation, repetition and medial transmission. Thus Kurtz, representing a dangerously poetic voice of Europe in the 1900s (related to imperialism), is replaced by Castellaneta, representing an imperative TV-entertainment voice of the U.S. today, reflecting a new type of imperialism linked to American popular culture.

Once Rasul has set up Castellaneta and Taiwo, he uses them to further thematize the psychology and politics of race relations. An entire chapter is devoted to this topic and starts out with a narrative voice reminding the reader that racism is an expression of self-hatred. «Hver og en av oss er vår egen nigger, men det er alltid greit å få utvendiggjort denne indre niggeren» (Each and every one of us is his own nigger, but it is always convenient to externalize this inner nigger) (Rasul 2008: 168).²⁸ Taiwo and Castellaneta go on to discuss whether *Deathbox* is racist. Taiwo first maintains that *Deathbox* is exploitative: It is «as anti-racist as rape-revenge movies are feminist» (170); it is merely an excuse for creating rape scenes and «exploitative scenes of gruesome violence» (171). Again, the link to horror films (and Clover's theories) is highlighted, and Taiwo seems to reproduce the evaluation of the film financiers

who rejected Slaktus's project. Yet, Taiwo views the Conradian twist as making a difference: «I think Slaktus' motivation is to provide that Conradian *engine of demonism* [...]. The thing I like is that Slaktus messes up the relationship between the narrating voice, the 'normal' and the entity possessed by evil» (171). As the white voice is planted within the black victim-hero (Mbo), the game, according to Taiwo's logic, deconstructs our sense of normalcy: «The sound of normality, the howl of evil and the voice of Kurtz in one» (172). In this utterance, Taiwo equates normality with evil and imperialism. This critical potential, he finds, makes *Deathbox* different and likable.

Self-Reflexivity

Read as a mise-en-abyme, the scene becomes a reflection upon Matias Faldbakken, alias Abo Rasul's own project and dilemma as a white author giving voice to African characters in a postcolonial myth of evil. The problem of the white, privileged man giving voice to the black, oppressed man, one may say, is shared by Joseph Conrad, Matias Faldbakken, Abo Rasul, Slaktus and Dan Castellaneta alike. It is a well-known problem from postcolonialist theory (e.g. Gayatri Spivak's essay «Can the Subaltern Speak» from 1988). When it comes to Conrad we may note that, over the years, *Heart of Darkness* has been regarded as everything from ingenious to racist and insensitive (e.g. Achebe 1977). As for Slaktus, he never overtly discusses his understanding of race, but Taiwo, as we have seen, guesses at his intentions and seems to credit both Conrad and Slaktus with a critical stance on racism, regardless of how (un)intended this critical stance may be. In Castellaneta's case, we have a person characterized by his «negrophobic», white voice who – in contrast to Taiwo – is clearly marked as having no interest in this issue of racial politics. He interrupts Taiwo with a blank «No» when Taiwo wants to discuss racism

in *Deathbox*. His position is that of the privileged and naïve white man who lacks motivation to consider the politics of race. Where then does that leave Faldbakken and Rasul?

By using the pseudonym Abo Rasul in his *Skandinavisk misantropi* project, Faldbakken appears to engage in a game of assuming the voice and perspective of 1) an asshole (Rasul sounding like *rasshol* in Norwegian), 2) a local criminal (Rasul sounding like Rasool, possibly referring to Shahid Rasool, a Norwegian–Pakistani gang leader),²⁹ 3) the Muslim cultural Other in general (the name simply sounding Arabic), and finally, 4) God. «Rasul», according to Wikipedia, is a term for messenger «frequently used in Islam to describe the numerous divinely inspired men who conveyed God’s message to humanity through history».³⁰ Rasul as a pseudonym thus connotes an unrefined, unsophisticated, half-criminal, divine, outsider perspective revealing the Truth about Scandinavians. At the same time, Rasul denotes Faldbakken. Thus, the pseudonym ultimately reflects back on the artist and his project, suggesting that the author is well aware of cultural relativity, yet problematizes this position by suggesting that we do not inhabit pure and stable cultural positions, only hybrid and layered positions.

From Female Purity to Monstrous Hybridity

The horror genre plays upon our fear that behind a surface of normalcy lurks the irrational, the disruptive, the demonic, the monstrous, the source of fear and chaos. The horror film may thus be analyzed to reveal the kind of (repressed) fear people are grappling with at a particular place in time. Whereas the *Final Girl* in Clover’s slasher films pointed to social anxieties pertaining to feminism, new family structures and gender roles, Lucy in *Unfun* – as the *Final Girl*-turned-avenger/monster – represents radical hybridity, related not least to race and

African origins. As such she points to globalization, immigration and racial hybridity as main sources of contemporary anxiety explored in the novel. Race, origins and hybridity are also what ultimately connect Lucy and Mbo, allowing for a merging of the computer game’s slasher plot and *Unfun*’s rape-revenge plot. On the surface, both look «black»; fundamentally they are racial, ethnic and cultural hybrids. Thus, Africa versus «a decadent Europe» no longer exists as a true binary. At a greater critical distance, however, we also note that Lucy and Mbo are figures of a white man’s imagination (Slaktus, Rasul and Faldbakken). The author builds on, and responds to, nineteenth and twentieth-century imperialism while he invites his reader to reflect on what purpose this turn to history serves.

As Gilroy points out, «the imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life in the overdeveloped-but-no-longer-imperial countries» (Gilroy 2004: 2). The West needs to engage with this history of suffering in order to live more peacefully with «Otherness» in today’s Europe where heteroculture is a direct consequence of imperialism: «we need to ask how an increased familiarity with the bloodstained workings of racism – [...] – might be made to yield lessons [...] in the demanding contemporary setting of multicultural social relations» (4). The question in – and through – *Unfun* thus becomes whether the theme of «the bloodstained workings of racism» viewed in a historical context serves to further multicultural conviviality or rather feed post-imperial melancholia and a binary world view.

As in the (post)modern horror film, we may end up with a situation in which the politically correct ideology of feminism (and postcolonialism and queerness) serves as a cover-up that ultimately alleviates a collective sense of guilt pertaining to economic exploitation. In *Deathbox* we superficially have a drama about the colonial «rape» of Africa and its avenger Mbo –

about the first-world haves and the third-world have-nots as viewed in a historical perspective. As shown above, *Deathbox* – by comparison to *Mbo-Avenging Congo* – already complicates this binary plot. *Unfun*, in turn, further disrupts this fantasy of absolutes, by showing how Lucy, taking over the role of Mbo, is neither purely black and African nor under-privileged. Lucy, after all, is marked by a new type of social distinction, namely global mobility. From the onset of her life and the onset of the novel, she crosses national boundaries. It is she who travels to Paris to pick up a stonecutter while Slaktus may be regarded as the less cosmopolitan, parochial loser. In addition, the novel contains a metafictional theme pertaining to a new type of economic exploitation, namely that of the culture and entertainment industry preying on history for the sake of aesthetics, entertainment, cultural and economic capital.

If Lucy, in the end, becomes the avenger of rapes, she is the avenger of literal rapes (of herself and other women) and of rapes of «Africa» rather than Africa. By that I mean that while *Deathbox* may be about the historical, economic rape of Africa, *Unfun* maintains a critical distance to *Deathbox* and is less about the exploitation of the real Africa, than about the exploitation of the way in which Africa figures melancholically in the European imagination.

Finally Off the Guilt Hook?

As an aesthetic, imaginative work of art, *Unfun* – with its particular postcolonialist theme – may be regarded as an example of Gilroy's re-thinking the past: «Creative and negative thinking is needed to generate more complex and challenging narratives which can be faithful to the everyday patterns of heterocultural metropolitan life by reducing the exaggerated dimensions of the racial difference to a liberating ordinarity [sic]» (Gilroy 2004: 131). While *Unfun* can hardly be said to stress the ordinary, it

must be credited with reducing the exaggerated dimensions of racial difference, firstly by depicting a relative amount of conviviality in an urban setting, secondly by thematizing race relations and race politics, thirdly by poking fun at post-imperial melancholia, and finally, by establishing the ultimate victim-hero as hybrid. Yet, the victim-hero is also monstrous and abject in her hybridity. She captures a contemporary fear of immigration, multiculturalism and interracial relations, known from race horror. The fear may be Western, but is situated in a particular Scandinavian context in which notions of racial homogeneity vs. heterogeneity abound. While people in other countries, for instance, have heard that Scandinavia is «the whitest place on earth» (49), Slaktus claims that Scandinavia «is swarming with black people» (51).

Through *Unfun*, Rasul engages his reader in a discussion of a contemporary Scandinavia marked by immigration. In this universe, a notion of misanthropy tied to racism stands particularly strong: «Det er viktig å huske at skepsis til – og hat mot – andre raser er et uttrykk for menneskets hat mot seg selv» (It is important to recall that skepticism – and hatred – towards other races is an expression of man's hatred towards himself) (Rasul 2008: 168). It is unclear from whose point of view this message is narrated, and overall it is wrapped in layers of satire, irony, horror and fun. Perhaps it may be dismissed, perhaps not. The moral of the work is as ambiguous as its title, yet this too is consistent with the genre of both horror and satire. A distorted mirror is held up, and it is up to the reader how he or she will react. Clearly, Rasul's work opens up for a variety of existential, aesthetic and political readings. My aim has been to show how it builds on the genre of the horror film and the postcolonial themes depicted in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to posit a multicultural Scandinavia beyond postcolonial melancholia.

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Noter

- 1 In an article on the lack of popularity of contemporary (visual) art, Faldbakken explains that it becomes tempting for the (visual) artist to cross over into other media and genres. With *Skandinavisk misantropi* he wanted to cross over into the field of literature to take advantage of its popularity and explore its system of distribution and dissemination. However, the experiment left him feeling dirty (losing his integrity). Art, he claims, is up against film, literature and theory in terms of exploring and communicating new ideas. While film, literature and theory communicate more clearly with mainstream audiences, Faldbakken ends up claiming the unpopularity of art as its advantage. Literature is read for its entertainment value, while art insists on exploring and problematizing sensitive and subtle issues that may not be easily accessible, but nevertheless important to discuss through a medium that offers an alternative to other contemporary constructions (Faldbakken 2001).
- 2 I have taken the term from Isabel Cristina Pinedo, who has included a chapter on this subgenre, entitled «Race Horror», in her work on horror film viewing.
- 3 I take the term pastiche from Gérard Génette, for whom a pastiche constitutes a «playful imitation» of another work's form. In this case the term has to be understood intermedially (Genette 1997: 28). Malvik has similarly considered *Unfun* a pastiche, referring to Fredric Jameson's definition of this term (Malvik 2010: 128–129). While Génette defines the term from a narratological point of view, Jameson historicizes it from a Marxist point of view, relating it specifically to postmodernist art and a sense of the impossibility of creating something new.
- 4 Horror films are often historicized in two epochs. There is the classic and the contemporary horror film. Examples of classic horror films include *Dracula* (1931) and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931). The question then becomes where the line should be drawn between classic and contemporary horror. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) is often drawn into this discussion. Carol Clover and Isabel Cristina Pinedo both regard it as a classic horror film, with Clover contrasting it with a «modern» horror film arising in the 1970s and with Pinedo arguing for a shift in 1968 after which contemporary horror films ought to be regarded as postmodern rather than modern. Linda Williams, in turn, has argued for *Psycho*'s postmodern features, emphasizing not least the extent to which it was intended and perceived as «fun». In this article, I refer to contemporary horror films as (post)modern.

- 5 Clover coined the term «Final Girl» in reference to the last woman alive to confront the killer in a horror (slasher) film.
- 6 We are informed that the avenger of Africa, Mbo, moves to France in 1989 (Rasul 238). Thus, the horror he instigates – as his creator, Slaktus, imagines it – is tied to a new world order and a new Europe being formed after the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- 7 Pinedo outlines five postmodern characteristics of contemporary (i.e. post-1968) horror films: 1) They depict a «violent disruption of everyday life», 2) they transgress all boundaries, blurring «the putative boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal», etc., 3) they throw into question the validity of rationality – «causal logic collapses», 4) they reject narrative closure, and 5) they constitute a form of «recreational horror» in which «controlled loss substitutes for loss of control». Herein lies the source of enjoyment for its audiences (Pinedo 5).
- 8 Faldbakken is generally known for his avant-garde stance against the art institution, for his «negations», and for his resigned struggle against «repressive tolerance». As one critic puts it: «Å navigere og definere etter det negative er hans kunstneriske måte» (Navigating and defining according to the negative is his artistic method) (Hof-fengh 2008). In this interview, Faldbakken explains: «Det spektakulære og negasjonen. Dette henger sammen med mitt kunsthistoriske ståsted, avantgarde, som har vært den største frontkjemperen mot kulturindustrien og det spektakulære. – Samtidig er jeg veldig opptatt av underholdningsindustrien, og så prøver jeg å binde disse to sammen. Være kritisk og samtidig se kvalitetene» (The spectacular and the negation. This is connected to my art historical standpoint, the avantgarde, which has been the front fighter against the culture industry and the spectacular. – At the same time I'm into the entertainment industry and I try to connect the two. Be critical and see its positive qualities) (ibid.).
- 9 Malvik similarly sees the laughter as ambiguous, as simultaneously representing an echo from the Ugandan mountains and from Western popular culture (Malvik 2013: 136).
- 10 Lucy's father is in fact adopted by a Swedish family called Parsons, and Lucy consequently appears as Lucy Parsons in Eurochild's adoption catalogue (Rasul 82).
- 11 All translations of Norwegian excerpts from *Unfun* into English are my own.
- 12 Malvik reads this scene as signaling on the one hand how the basic premises of human beings can no longer be regarded in isolation from the network of media with which we surround ourselves, and on the other hand how *Unfun* is about literature in a digital media culture (Malvik 2013: 130).
- 13 I have not found this exact quote in Carol Clover's text, but the narrator explains that the book also contained Slaktus's internet print-outs on the topic; thus the quotes could be from the internet. To Malvik, this strengthens his thesis that *Unfun* has to be read in relation to Google, and he further locates the quote to an essay on the film blog «Planet Fury» (Malvik 2013: 133–34). Clover's book is mentioned by title, but not by author.
- 14 Lucy nevertheless remains a virginal character in the sense that her main desire is to remain intact with a bounded body. She strongly dislikes being penetrated – by penises as well as by food, for instance (Rasul 2008: 39). The penis she has taken particular interest in is the actor, Taiwo's (135, 142–143).
- 15 As Pinedo points out, the Final Girl has to adapt to the irrational thinking of the perpetrator – as well as the irrational logic of the horror universe itself. Thus, in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), the Final Girl has to «understand» that one may be killed in a dream – dreams do not constitute a separate realm apart from reality. «The ones who survive necessarily suspend their rational presuppositions and trust their gut instincts» (Pinedo 24). They may thus act with irrationality, paranoia, and excessive violence, combined, of course, with cool, instrumental rationality employed in the acts of killing (25).
- 16 Slaktus has not expected that his computer game logic could affect his own reality in this manner. Malvik, on this count, refers to his blind spot. His limitation is that he thinks there is a boundary between the virtual and the «real» world. *Unfun*, in turn, holds up a media situation in which this boundary is invalidated (Malvik 2013: 146).
- 17 Dyer, for instance, writes: «Research [...] repeatedly shows that in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard» (11).
- 18 Lucy is part black, part white, the daughter of an Ik-father and a Scandinavian ecstasy whore. She basically identifies as black and refers to herself as «neger» (Rasul 56, 62).
- 19 Prime examples from this period were *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* from 1974, *Carrie* from 1976, and *Halloween* from 1978. «We have, in short, a cinematic formula with a twenty-six-year history, of which the first phase, from 1960 to 1974, is dominated by a film clearly rooted in the sensibility of the 1950s, while the second phase, bracketed by the two *Texas Chain Saw* films from 1974 and 1986, responds to the values of the late sixties and early seventies» (Clover 2015: 26).
- 20 Also: «Rape-revenge films too operate on the basis of a one-sex body, the maleness or femaleness of which is

performatively determined by the social gendering of the acts it undergoes or undertakes» (Clover 2015: 159).

- 21 Cf. Clover's preface to the 2015 edition of her book, in which she comments on her audience's having focused primarily on her notion of the Final Girl: «The fate of that trope since then has largely determined, for better or worse, the intellectual and more broadly cultural trajectory of the book itself» (Clover 2015: x). She writes «for worse» since the Final Girl, in the course of that reception history, has «eclipsed other figures and issues of the book,» and tended to be appropriated in other media and genres in simplified versions as, for instance, the «triumphant feminist hero» (x).
- 22 Clover uses the example of *Deliverance* (1972) in which four men from Atlanta go to the Appalachian backwoods to enjoy a canoe trip on a river that is near extinction because of a dam being built by the «power company». The city people represent the development that ultimately leaves the countryside destitute and depleted of natural resources. As one of the city men puts it during the credit sequence: «You push a little more power into Atlanta, a little more air conditioners for your smug little suburb, and you know what's going to happen? We're gonna rape this whole goddamn landscape. We're gonna rape it!» (Clover 128).
- 23 The closest we come to a «redneck» figure in *Unfun* is Slaktus. Yet, the figure is deconstructed as Slaktus simultaneously serves as an intellectual author-figure, creator of the universe in which we as readers partake.
- 24 Box can mean both coffin and television (Merriam Websters online); *Deathbox* seems to play with both meanings.
- 25 Taiwo, as Castellana puts it, is perfectly molded and genetically bursting with health («helstøpt», «sunn og genetisk struttende») (Rasul 2008: 170). I assume the character Taiwo Jolayemi is made up even though a Google search indicates that a person by that name lives in Sandnes, Norway. The search, however, does not indicate any Nigerian actors.
- 26 The reader is let in on the secret that this is an image he self-reflectively exploits, so that he may more correctly be considered a «post-noble savage noble savage» (66).
- 27 Castellana, we are told, turned racist («negrophobic») after he and his wife visited a garden where they stood on a bridge that collapsed. His wife died, and Castellana himself became paralyzed due to the fall. Since the gardener was black, Castellana has been skeptical of all black people ever since. Clearly, the «explanation» of Castellana's racism illustrates how irrational and emotionally «colored» such aversions are.
- 28 This is a point well known from postcolonial theory, specifically Frantz Fanon's psycho-social study of racism in *Black Skin, White Masks* (orig. *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952) (Fanon 2008).
- 29 «Han skriver også under pseudonymet Abo Rasul, inspirert av navnet til en beryktet norsk-pakistansk kriminell» (He also writes under the pseudonym Abo Rasul, inspired by the name of an infamous Norwegian-Pakistani criminal) (Hoffenigh 2008). «I utgangspunktet er Abo Rasul en konstruksjon av en slags kriminell innvandrerstemme (navnet er inspirert av gjenglederen Shahid Rasool), noe som understreker det anti-litterære, uten at det er klart hvordan dette kan forenes med det avanserte kunst-teoretiske nivået på Rasuls refleksjoner» (Originally Abo Rasul is the construction of a kind of criminal immigrant voice [the name is inspired by the gang leader Shahid Rasool], which underscores the anti-literary without it being clear how this may be combined with the advanced art theoretical level of Rasul's reflections) (Farsethås 2008: 105). Malvik sees the name in relation to Shahid Rasool and the Arabic word for «Prophet» (2013: 165, footnote 88).
- 30 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prophets_and_messengers_in_Islam, accessed Jan. 14, 2015. While Wikipedia may not be a stable source of knowledge, it may well be a source consulted by Faldbakken, the «Google-professor», as he decided on his pseudonym. Critics often suggest that Faldbakken consults the internet. Farsethås refers to his *Google-method*, Olsson refers to his *Wikipedia-based literature* and Faldbakken has confirmed this in interviews: «Du har nok rett i at det blir en del googling underveis, ja. Også en del sampling og appropriasjon. Jeg stjeler mye tekst» (You are probably right that I google a lot in the process. Also a good deal of sampling and appropriations. I steal a lot of text) (Farsethås 2012: 50; Olsson 2008: 142; Larsen 2008). As indicated in the introduction to this article, this is a main point in Malvik's dissertation.