

In the heart of darkness

By Erik Exe Christoffersen

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Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is set in 'dark' Congo, but we are in the heart of Aarhus at Bispetorv square, with the Aarhus Cathedral and Aarhus Theatre a stone's throw away. But like in Conrad's novel, it is here in the heart that we face dark yearnings and fear of the unknown, where our civilisation is forced to acknowledge its limits, and threatens to break down.

The 'unknown' are terrorists and all those who, for whatever reason, are driven to destroy our culture simply because they despise our freedom and don't look the same as us. The performance confronts the audience with the powers of darkness that lie outside of us, but does it force us to see those inside of us, too? In times of war or crisis, where do fear and evil reside? Where do boundaries blur? How does the mass media's anxiety-inducing rhetoric impact our everyday lives?

A tour of today's culture of fear

Grouped into pairs, we are guided into the large, bunker-like installation. We are told to 'Go to room no. 3' and we grope our way down a hallway deep in gloom. We open the door and step inside. The space is empty except for a small car on rails, like the ones used in the haunted house ride at a funfair. Once seated inside the buggy, our journey into darkness begins. As we move, it feels as though we are travelling deeper into a space not unlike a darkened underground car park. The space is lit up in flashes, revealing what looks like a maze without any boundaries and with concrete-like walls, openings and columns. The little car rattles on, along winding tracks, and soon all sense of orientation in terms of direction, duration and time, is lost. Now and then, TV monitors appear and, as your eyes grow used to the dimness, you see shapes, too, through the openings in the walls. It's unnerving, but to be sitting next to someone, even if they're a stranger who suddenly screams, is a comfort.

Right on track

The installation is quite simple really. A large, barely lit space navigated by 10 vehicles, holding 20 passengers. Our sense of unease is magnified by the noises around us – a deep humming, an occasional shriek and an outburst accompanied by a monologue. The disembodied voices talk about terror, telling us we're under threat of attack. The voices continue, speaking of those we are no longer prepared to tolerate, those who are 'other', who don't want the same things we do. The installation triggers our fears. A figure looms into view, only to disappear again. Then, in an instant, two figures materialise, drawing closer and closer. We panic at the thought of their touch – the performance targets our haptic sense, while obstructing or partially blocking what we can see of the space.

The voices issuing from the video monitors gradually become recognisable: Inger Støjberg, Kristian Thulesen Dahl, Lars Lykke. Some of us recall their speeches about refugees, ghettos, burka bans and all kinds of restrictions we need to enforce for our own protection and that of our national culture.

But who are the weird-looking figures? Friend or foe? What do they want from us? Do we fear them simply because the well-known and lesser known political voices cause us to feel anxious? Or are they actually soldiers in a kind of liberation army that hides out underground?

We won't give away too much about what happens next, but the sense of unease builds with uncomfortable intensity towards the end.

Immersive theatre

Phobiarama is what's known as 'immersive theatre', a form of theatre in which the audience becomes involved (immersed) in the performance, becoming part of it. The audience is drawn into the performance, and becomes a participant in the process or unfolding events. Despite the fact that, as spectators, we are only sitting inside a fun-fair car being driven around the scenographic space of the piece, we share the same space as the performers. As the audience, we are guests in the experience environment. We observe the performance universe at a distance, because to some extent, we remain outside it. But still we scream, scared of being touched. We can't leave the performance or the buggies, which rattle on, on their rails. Thus, our response to the piece is purely visceral. We can't choose to leap out of the car. Especially when it reverses, or picks up speed. Which has a symbolism all of its own.

In other words, there is no direct interaction between audience and performance on the level of fiction. The audience experience is far more energetic, dynamic and intense, driven by being enclosed in a blacked-out environment where the boundaries of the space are unseen. To some extent, immersive theatre is a reinterpretation of the 'experience economy' and attractions such as ghost train rides at theme parks. *Phobiarama* creates an affective relationship: the audience is on the alert, susceptible to sensory impressions.

Immersive theatre demands courage and empathy and triggers panic, fright, withdrawal and an increased heart rate. Whilst the piece intensifies the audience's perceptions and emotions, it also activates a cognitive response. In other words, when stimulated to reflect on their individual experience in this unique situation, the audience is engaged in 'self-observation' and, at the same time, immersed in the context. The cars rattle off, and we get a chance to be creeped out and scream, and cling on to each other, fully aware of the absurdity of the situation.

Phobiarama is successful because it satisfies the need for presence; it triggers and inflames our fear of being touched which, of course, is a remarkable feat, but it also invites us to consider the rhetoric of fear used by our politicians. What is their ultimate goal?

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Phobiarama by **Dries Verhoeven**

<https://aarhusfestuge.dk/da/arrangement/phobiarama>

[Link to artist talk](#)

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