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Handling the Undead

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Handling the Undead* (2024), directed by Thea Hvistendahl.

Keywords

Zombies, Death, Horror

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Author Notes

Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (Routledge, 2012); and *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called *Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy*: <https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567>



Handling the Undead (2024), dir. Thea Hvistendahl

Handling the Undead is a curious hybrid of a movie: part-European art house film dealing with lament and loss, while the other is a zombie movie which unsettles, once we realize that the dead who return following a freak electrical storm are not in a hurry to return to the life they had before. This is an identity-led movie which asks challenging questions about the fluidity between temporal and cosmic realms and whether deathlessness is a state that we would really hunger for. It is told more from the point of view of those left behind than the dead themselves, and it is this poignant element which drives *Handling the Undead* and makes it quite different from any other film of its type.

Set in Oslo, this elliptical Norwegian film asks why we may not want to let go of those closest to us, and the pacing is very slow, lethargic even, as we are afforded a glimpse into a world of bereavement and pain, and at least for the first hour this is more a pensive psychological character study than the outright horror it swiftly becomes once the genre shifts in the second half.

The turning point is when one of the undead is visited in hospital by her ‘grieving’ family, and no words are exchanged. The hollow corpse-like face of the dead mother is unsettling enough, but when the family bring her the pet rabbit she had looked after before her passing, she takes it in her arms and what we hope is a tight cuddle becomes an act of strangulation—the whimpering sound of the rabbit being squeezed to death is the first in a series of tortuous actions that follow. The undead proceed to take the life out of the bereaved relatives who are, at best, conflicted as to their unexpected return.

There is only a minimal use of dialogue, and this contributes to the overall sense of sparseness that imbues the picture, which is effective (provided that the viewer is sufficiently patient) in terms of how it raises the question as to how we would react to something as unnatural as the dead reawakening and the heavy toll it generates in its place. This is a film which redefines the zombie genre, but this is not framed as a traditional zombie flick, as it instead explores whether to have a pallid and insipid version of our loved ones is better than not having them at all. The film straddles the line quite effectively between presence and absence, living and dying, with Death itself the principal agent at work.

If there is a criticism it is that we are never really afforded a glimpse into what the characters are thinking. In a sense, of course, we don’t need to, as they are stunned and on some level repelled to see shadowy, semi-living versions of their loved ones back in their homes. But no one questions as such what is happening, and there is no attempt at contact with the outside world or the launching of any kind of enquiry to determine what has happened. These are all small-scale, individually rendered scenarios, and this is partly determined by the film’s budget (though the make-up and prosthetics are exceptionally good).