Eco-Naturalism:

re-evaluating the role of naturalism in contemporary eco-theatre

Andrew Burton

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD Theatre Studies

Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies

University of Essex

August 2023

Table of Contents

Abstract

My thesis critically re-evaluates the role and potential of naturalism in contemporary eco-theatre. Challenging prevailing orthodoxies which dismiss naturalism as an eco-dramaturgical form on account of its perceived anthropocentrism, phallocentrism and conservatism, I argue that naturalism performs a vital—albeit frequently misunderstood—function within a range of contemporary plays and performances which foreground ecological issues. By introducing this fresh perspective on naturalism's eco-dramaturgical potential, I aim to stimulate a more nuanced critical debate than currently exists.

My original contribution to knowledge centres around my formulation of the naturalistic spectrum, a new conceptual framework designed to help scholars, playwrights and theatre-makers square the spatiotemporal complexities of the 'hyperobjects' (Morton 2013) of global warming and ecological collapse with human scale theatrical representation. My case studies—plays and performances written and produced between 2011 and 2022—interrogate: overt eco-naturalism (Kirkwood's *The Children*); symbolist eco-naturalism (Waters' *On the Beach*); hyper eco-naturalism (Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* and Baker's *The Antipodes*); disrupted eco-naturalism (Macmillan's *Lungs* and Churchill's *Escaped Alone*) and covert eco-naturalism (Emmott and Mitchell's *Ten Billion* and Hickson's *Oil*).

Using a methodology which combines close reading of texts with archive recordings and interviews with playwrights, directors and designers, my study reveals that naturalism performs a number of crucial eco-dramaturgical functions. Firstly, it presents the audience with an image of itself, vicariously suggesting ways to cope on a human scale with the suprahuman scale of ecological crisis. Secondly, it interrogates moral culpability, concerning itself with the long consequence of human actions. Thirdly, it highlights the deterministic effects of environment on

character which, in the Anthropocene, reveals a degraded environment returning to haunt humans for their reckless custodianship of the planet. Lastly, it raises awareness of deep time, a concept which lies at the heart of ecological thinking.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to my inspirational supervisor Prof. Liz Kuti for her sensitive, nurturing and canny guidance and support throughout every stage of my research.

I also owe an immense debt of gratitude to Prof. Steve Waters who was initially co-supervising me and who has continued to sit on my supervisory panel throughout. Steve, thank you for your openness, your intellectual rigour and your generosity of spirit, all of which have helped make this PhD journey a joy.

Dr. James Canton has also been a valued member of my supervisory panel throughout my doctoral research. James, I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your support, your incisive questions, the wider eco-critical perspective you have brought to our discussions, and your grounded good humour.

I would also like to thank Dr. Joanna Rzepa who kindly stepped in as a supervisory panellist while James was on research leave. Joanna, thank you for the fresh perspectives you brought to the chapter on hypernaturalism, for your comments on the overall shape of the emerging thesis, and for our corridor chats.

Thank you Prof. Jonathan Lichtenstein for our ongoing conversations about theatre and the environment, and most recently for inviting me to lead seminars on Tragedy and Climate Change for your Tragedy and Theatre Writing module.

Thank you Dr. Hannah Greenstreet for allowing me to read your unpublished thesis examining realism in contemporary feminist theatre in Britain.

Thanks also to all the writers and creatives who have shared their thoughts and insights with me in interview. I am especially grateful to Lucy Kirkwood, to Ella Hickson and the Almeida Theatre for allowing me to watch an archive recording of *Oil*, and to Sam Steiner who generously shared an archive recording of *You Stupid Darkness!* with me.

While the academic support I've received at the University of Essex has been exceptional, devoting myself to PhD study would not have been possible without the incredible support of my wife Sue and our two wonderful sons Ollie and Will. Sue, thank you for believing in me and for the inevitable sacrifices there have been while I've been immersed in the world of eco-naturalism. Without you this simply could not have happened. I love you and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Ollie and Will, thank you for putting up with me banging on at mealtimes about environmental issues, for me wanting us to watch Greta Thunberg documentaries instead of *Family Guy* and for disappearing up the garden office for vast chunks of time. I hope to be more of a family guy myself from now on, starting with our Dutch cycling adventure!

Patrick Morris, thank you for being an astute and generous listener and for allowing me to discuss key ideas about the developing thesis on our stag walks. Here's to our next country ramble and the next chapter in our life-long conversation.

Thank you Dr. Chris Gribble, Chief Executive of the National Centre for Writing. When I was working for you a few years ago and just about to begin my doctoral studies, I asked if you had any advice about PhD research. I have found your answer—"If it's easy, you're not doing it right"—to be spot on.

Last but by no means least, I would like to thank Dr. Adrian May, associate in the Centre for Creative Writing at the University of Essex. When I began my PhD research, Adrian gave a brief and characteristically droll speech at an induction event. His prescient words have stayed with me: "Doing a PhD is like being stuck in a room for three years with your obsession. You either come out of it nuts and with a PhD, or just nuts." Let's see.

The responsibility of action is in the 'now'... I think the relationship of the subject to a naturalist present is one of responsibility...I have a feeling that it lets it off the hook if you are completely unattached to naturalism.

Ella Hickson on writing *Oil*

Introduction

Research Context

Overview

My desire to investigate the role of naturalism within contemporary eco-theatre was prompted by two apparently contradictory observations. On the one hand, my reading revealed a widespread critical antipathy towards naturalism as a form suitable for or even capable of tackling ecological issues. On the other hand, as I watched and read contemporary plays which foregrounded ecological themes, I noticed that various forms of naturalism were being employed by playwrights and directors in ways that were not always immediately evident. Rather than encountering nuanced debates in the critical literature about naturalism's role in the field of eco-theatre, I frequently found naturalism being summarily dismissed as an eco-dramaturgical form and this dismissal was based primarily on three grounds. The first is that it reinforces the anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism that is the root cause of the ecological and climate crises humanity now faces. The second—articulated most clearly in the feminist critique of realism— is that naturalistic plays offer a phallocentric world view, operating in narrative terms within systems of closure and favouring the male gaze. The third is that naturalism is conservative and can be fatalistic, more concerned with portraying the deterministic effects of environment and heredity on character than with catalysing change. Realising through my review of the creative and critical literature that there was a paucity of nuanced criticism about the role of naturalism within contemporary eco-theatre, I determined to address this by conducting my own original investigations in this field. My significant contribution to knowledge focuses on offering a new counter-argument to this critical consensus, suggesting fresh ways of thinking about the role theatre is playing in our current moment of climate and ecological crisis and

exploring how playwrights are deploying a range of naturalistic modes in order to effect cognitive and behavioural change, awakening us from what Amitav Ghosh (2016) calls “the great derangement” of our climate denial and paralysis. I have formulated an original conceptual framework, what I call the naturalistic spectrum, to help illuminate some of the ways in which naturalism operates within contemporary eco-theatre. My overarching aim is to encourage a more nuanced debate about naturalism’s eco-dramaturgical potential than currently exists in critical and creative spheres.

Research Question

My research question is: what possibilities does naturalism offer contemporary playwrights and theatre-makers in their attempts to dramatize ecological issues? Underpinning this question and informing the five-chapter structure of this thesis, are five implicit sub-questions relating to the eco-dramaturgical potential of a number of forms of eco-naturalism. In chapter 1, I explore overt eco-naturalism by examining Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children* (2016), a play which focuses on the moral and emotional fallout from a nuclear accident. Chapter 2 examines symbolist eco-naturalism with reference to *On the Beach*, the first play in Steve Waters’ diptych of plays *The Contingency Plan* (2009, 2022) which looks at the impacts of rising sea levels through both a personal and a political lens. Chapter 3 probes the eco-dramaturgical efficacy of hyper eco-naturalism with reference to Sam Steiner’s *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019) in which volunteers at a Samaritans-style call centre attempt to reassure callers who are suffering from the effects of climate breakdown, and Annie Baker’s *The Antipodes* (2019) in which freelance workers remain ensconced in a meeting room while the climate catastrophe outside the meeting room gradually makes its presence felt. Chapter 4 examines disrupted eco-

naturalism through a study of two plays which deliberately fracture the naturalistic mode they initially establish; Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011) and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016). Finally, chapter 5 explores covert eco-naturalism by examining two contrasting pieces of theatre; Katie Mitchell and Stephen Emmott's *Ten Billion* (2012) in which the scientist and author Emmott delivers a performance lecture about the effects of anthropogenic carbon emissions on an increasingly over-populated planet, and Ella Hickson's play *Oil* (2016) which uses naturalism within an overarching non-naturalistic, Brechtian epic structure. I elaborate upon these gradations of eco-naturalism later in this introduction when I introduce my conceptual framework of the naturalistic spectrum.

Definition of naturalism

As naturalism is so central to my research, it will be valuable now to attempt a definition. The terms naturalism and realism are frequently used interchangeably in critical discourse. *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, for example, defines naturalism as "…a movement in the theatre of the late nineteenth century which carried a step further the revolt against the artificiality of contemporary forms of playwriting and acting initiated by the selective realism of Ibsen." (Hartnoll 1981: 379) It goes on to explain that *Thérèse Raquin* (1873), dramatized by Émile Zola from his own novel, was "the first consciously conceived naturalistic drama" and calls "Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888)…its first masterpiece." (379) The same source positions naturalism as "the logical outcome of realism" and defines realism as:

> …a movement in the theatre at the end of the nineteenth century which replaced the well-made play and the declamatory acting of the period by dramas which approximated in speech and situation to the social and domestic problems of everyday life, played by actors who spoke

> and moved naturally against scenery which reproduced with fidelity the usual surroundings of the people they represented. (445)

From these initial definitions, there would appear to be a straightforward, linear progression from realism to naturalism along a continuum of increasingly faithful depictions of everyday life. Yet, as one delves more deeply into the literature surrounding naturalism and realism, it soon becomes evident that the picture is more complex than first appears. J.L. Styan, for example, refers to Chekhov's "immeasurably pervasive influence on the form and style of *realistic* drama in the twentieth century" (Styan 1981a: 91, [my emphasis]) while Pickering and Thompson (2013) situate Chekhov's work firmly within a naturalist tradition. Innes (2000) sums up the widespread confusion in his observation that:

> The terms "Naturalism" and "Realism" are particularly ambiguous. As critical labels they are...applied both to a broad category of art in general, and to specific movements in the novel and in drama that may be related, but are by no means identical. In addition, each term tends to be used more imprecisely than other literary or artistic designations, and both have been defined in various competing, even mutually exclusive ways…'Naturalism' and 'Realism' are frequently interpreted in the broadest sense as synonyms… (3)

In his "A Lecture on Realism" (1977a), Raymond Williams pointed out that "Naturalism is originally the conscious opposition to supernaturalism and to metaphysical accounts of human actions, with an attempt to describe human actions in exclusively human terms, with a more precise local emphasis." (65)

He goes on to explain that:

> …the terms naturalism and realism…are for a time interchangeable, even complicated by the fact that in a famous definition Strindberg

> called naturalism the method which sought to go below the surface and discover essential movements and conflicts, while realism, he said, was that which reproduced everything, even the speck of dust on the lens of the camera. As I suppose we all now know, the eventual conventional distinction was the same but with the terms the other way round. (65)

In his seminal essay “Social environment and theatrical environment: the case of English naturalism” (1977b), Williams argues that there are three relevant senses of ‘naturalism’ in contemporary usage. The first, he says, “indicates a method of ‘accurate’ or ‘lifelike’ reproduction which begins in English around 1850 and is mainly used in relation to painting. The second sense, he notes, “began in the late sixteenth century in a form of conscious opposition, or at least distinction, between revealed (divine) and observed (human) knowledge, and was used in close association with accusations of atheism.” (203) Williams observes that “With growing confidence from the seventeenth through to the nineteenth centuries it acquired the more positive associations of a method and practice and body of knowledge, in natural history and the natural sciences.” (203-4) The third sense of ‘naturalism’ that Williams brings to our attention, and the one which he considers to be the most significant in the history of drama, “...indicates a movement in which the method of accurate production and the specific philosophical position are organically and usually consciously fused.” (203) It is in this organic fusion described by Williams’ third sense that I situate my understanding of ‘naturalism’. Simply put, when I use the word ‘naturalism’ (and its derivatives naturalist, naturalistic et al.) I am referring to the fusion of “lifelike reproduction” with an account of behaviour which excludes the supernatural or divine. So, for example, I view Kirkwood’s *The Children* (2016) as naturalistic in these terms precisely because it is a play in which a domestic interior is reproduced in painstaking, lifelike detail whilst at the same time, the conflict and undercurrents

operating in the play have their origins in human behaviour: the inciting incident in the play's backstory—the nuclear "accident" that has precipitated Rose's visit—arose from a human failure to raise awareness of flaws in the reactor's safety systems, and the sexual infidelity which creates ongoing emotional tension between the three characters is of course the result of human actions too.

"Gritty social realism" is a term frequently applied to films and television programmes that purport to show life "as it is". An example of this is Ken Loach's 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake* which deploys a drama-documentary style in its depiction of the titular character, struggling to survive with dignity within an austerity-riven Britain. The point of view in film and television drama is dictated by the choices made by director and/or editor (films are made on the cutting room floor, as the Russian film theorist Pudovkin once observed) and the visual language of film, with its wide establishing shots, emotional intensity reflected in increasingly intimate shots, and the voyeuristic intrusion into characters' inner worlds through the use of close-ups or extreme close-ups, assists in this endeavour. In the theatre, a materially different kind of artifice pertains. The director may signpost certain aspects of a characters' behaviour and this may be complemented by artistic decisions about set, lighting and sound design, but fundamentally, the audience enjoys the quietly radical choice, individually and collectively, of where to place their focus at any given moment. Frequently, this point of focus lies in the non-verbal, and in the apparently insignificant gesture, such as in Kirkwood's *The Children* when Rose's knowing where the glasses are stored suggests to the audience she is far more familiar with the interior of the cottage than her dialogue would have us believe, hinting at the clandestine affair at the heart of the play's backstory. The naturalistic stage becomes

what Esslin (1988) refers to as a blueprint for mimetic action, presenting the audience with a simulacrum of reality.

Naturalistic drama's interest in determinism arises from the development of a scientific view of character that emerges in the late nineteenth century, linked to the theories of evolution by means of natural selection expounded by Charles Darwin. In *Ecology and Environment in European Drama*, Downing Cless observes that: "Darwin's theories were engaging to Ibsen, who applied some of them to many of his plays from *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881) forward" (Cless 2010, 141) and that "Ibsen started to expand well beyond social Darwinism to human connectedness with nature *and* as part of it" (145, [emphasis in original]) in his three later plays *The Wild Duck* (1884)*, The Lady from the Sea* (1888) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859 and Cless points out that "Ibsen's knowledge…was drawn largely if not altogether from discussions (maybe in 1878) with J.P. Jacobsen, whose Danish translations of Darwin's books appeared in 1872 and 1875" (142). In relation to *The Wild Duck*, Cless points out that "Scholars concur on a probable influence from Darwin's observation of the rapid degeneration of captured wild ducks in *Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* (1868)" (142).

Throughout my study, I focus on naturalism not as a movement, genre or theatrical style but rather as a form. Specifically, I am interested in the dramaturgical decisions each playwright must make; for example, those about time and place. In this, I draw on Stephen Jeffreys' posthumously published *Playwriting: Structure, Character, How and What to Write* (2019) which theorises time and place structure as an organising principle in the craft of playwriting. In chapter 1, I examine how Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) occupies an extreme position within Jeffreys'

conception of time and place structure, adhering strictly to a closed time, closed place “pressure cooker” dramaturgy. Later in the study, I show how there are gradations within my theorisation of the naturalistic spectrum that affect how different forms of naturalism operate, and I explore the possibilities these provide for the contemporary eco-dramatist.

For the sake of clarity, I set out below what I consider to be the seven formal characteristics which define naturalistic form in the theatre. I have arrived at these formal characteristics, in the absence of an authoritative work on the topic, through ruminating on the essential formal attributes shared by a wide range of naturalistic plays both contemporary and historical. Firstly, characters speak ‘natural’ sounding dialogue. Secondly, there is no direct audience address. Thirdly, naturalistic plays assume the presence of an invisible fourth wall between performers and spectators. The characters are immersed inside this fictive dream, existing under imaginary given circumstances. Fourthly, naturalistic plays have linear plots which rely on successional temporality. Fifthly, they have causal narrative patterns which progress from exposition to climax then resolution. Sixthly, naturalistic plays make use of realistic props, costumes, furniture and sets. And seventhly, these plays have a narrative focus on a single moral problem that needs to be resolved.

As Raymond Williams argues, a key moment which laid the foundations for naturalism in England occurred in the mid-eighteenth century when “...bourgeois influence and bourgeois forms made their decisive appearance.” (1989: 83) Williams identifies five factors of bourgeois drama which have been “immensely influential” on subsequent drama and in my estimation these five factors help define naturalistic plays to this day so these five aspects of bourgeois drama should be considered alongside the seven formal characteristics of naturalism I have identified above, to

create the most complete picture. Firstly, Williams says, "...there was the radical admission of the *contemporary* as legitimate material for drama" [emphasis in original]; secondly, there was "an admission of the *indigenous* as part of the same movement; the widespread convention of an at least nominally exotic site for drama began to be loosened" [emphasis in original]; thirdly, Williams notes that there was "an increasing emphasis on *everyday speech forms*" [emphasis in original]; fourthly, there was "an emphasis on *social extension*: a deliberate breach of the convention that at least the principal personages of drama should be of elevated social rank" [emphasis in original]; and finally, "...there was the completion of a decisive *secularism...*a steady exclusion *from the dramatic action* of all supernatural or metaphysical agencies. Drama was now, explicitly, to be a human action played in exclusively human terms. [emphasis in original]" (Williams 1989: 83-84) Naturally, some of the naturalism's seven formal characteristics and some of bourgeois drama's five factors overlap and bleed into one another and they should certainly not be viewed as mutually exclusive but interconnected. For example, when characters in a contemporary naturalistic play use natural sounding dialogue, this correlates to the deployment of everyday speech forms which bourgeois drama introduced. It is worth noting, however, that naturalistic dialogue, far from being 'natural', is in fact highly artificial, honed and crafted; what Rib Davis in *Writing Dialogue for Scripts* (2003) refers to as "selective naturalism" or "filleted reality." (55) Throughout this study, I will return to these twelve attributes—the seven formal characteristics of naturalistic theatre alongside Williams' five factors of bourgeois drama—to test the extent to which plays under discussion can be considered naturalistic.

Naturalism and Eco-Theatre: A Prevailing Critical Antipathy

An ecologically themed special edition of the journal *Theater* published in 1994 included theatre scholar Una Chaudhuri's seminal article "There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater" which urged playwrights and scholars to think afresh about the intersection between playwriting and environmental issues. Invoking "Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' who seems to anticipate the ever-dawning ecological consciousness of our century" (23), Chaudhuri refers to the "ticking time-bombs of ecological disaster" (23) and observes that "From the polluted streams of Dr. Stockmann's town to Beckett's ashcans and beyond, a largely negative ecological vision permeates the theater of this century." (23) Chaudhuri links this negative vision to "the disastrous coincidence, in the second half of the 19th century, between the age of ecology and the birth of naturalism" (23), observing that:

> In the theater, naturalism (and then, more tendentiously, realism) hid its complicity with industrialization's animus against nature by proffering a wholly social account of human life…[T]hough its thematics kept in touch with nature through images of cherry orchards, wild ducks, and polluted baths, the ideological discourse of realism thrust the nonhuman world into the shadows. (24)

Chaudhuri calls on playwrights and theatre-makers to reject the values of nineteenth-century humanism which she feels are "programmatically anti-ecological" (24) and to move away from "the metaphorical use of ecology...[which]...can sometimes misrepresent the actual ecological issues at hand" (27) and instead advocates a form of theatre which acknowledges its rupture with the natural world and thereby develops the potential to become a "site of a much-needed ecological consciousness." (28)

In the decades since Chaudhuri's visionary article was published, a critical antipathy has coalesced around the creation of naturalist or realist theatre which attempts to put environmental and ecological issues centre stage. Love (2020), for example, articulates this in her assertion that:

> 'Nature' might be embedded within the term naturalism, but as a movement and a set of theatrical conventions naturalism is not all that interested in the natural world. Indeed, its purely social definition of 'environment'—which naturalists saw as shaping human behaviour—serves to exclude the more-than-human world. (Love 2020: 229)

An unwritten prevailing aesthetic orthodoxy presumes that contemporary ecological theatre work needs to eschew naturalist or realist modes of playwriting and theatre-making.

On one level, this antipathy is understandable. Environmental and ecological issues typically reveal themselves over protracted periods of time. Nixon (2011), for example, conceptualises a "slow violence" that affects the environmentalism of the poor in communities across the globe and particularly in what we have come to call the Global South. Naturalistic drama, with its customary focus on indoor spaces and interpersonal conflict, might seem to have little to offer a playwright who wished, say, to dramatize the plight of contemporary fishermen in the Niger delta whose livelihoods and health have been severely impacted by decades of pollution caused by the alleged irresponsibility of multinational oil companies. One might instinctively feel that a documentary treatment, or perhaps the use of an innovative form such as verbatim theatre, or a more spatiotemporally expansive form such as epic theatre or what Wenzel (2006) calls petro-magic-realism, might be better placed to communicate the multidimensionality of the ecological issues inherent in such a

situation. In Jennifer Wenzel's formulation of petro-magic realism—a neologism she coins in the context of postcolonial Nigerian literary criticism—Ben Okri's novel *What the Tapster Saw* (1987) "pierces [the] illusions" of "wealth without work" offered by petro-magic, "grounding its vision in a recognisably devastated, if also recognisably fantastic, landscape."[1] May's definition of eco-dramaturgy as theatre praxis which "...centres ecological relations by foregrounding as permeable and fluid the socially-constructed boundaries between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, individual and community..." (2021: 4)—which I expand upon in the Methodologies and Theoretical Framework section later in this chapter— also suggests a need for eco-theatre-makers to move away from a purely mimetic, representational aesthetic traditionally associated with naturalism.

On another level, it could be argued that the apparent widespread mistrust of naturalism as a vehicle suitable for conveying environmental or ecological narratives predates Chaudhuri's article and has its genesis in what Davis has called "the pirouette, detour, revolution, deflection, deviation, tack and yaw of the performative turn" from the 1970s.[2] No longer shackled to a reverence for the primacy of the script and free to reimagine the very foundations of the audience/performer relationship, performance events from the late 1970s and early 1980s often display an energy and chutzpah, harnessed in the cause of political or eco-activism. Ann Standing, for example, has analysed the green activist movement Earth First!'s audacious 1981 "Crack the Dam" performance event in which activists unfurled a tapering 300 feet black plastic strip down the side of the environmentally contentious Glen Canyon

[1] Jennifer Wenzel, "Petro-magic-realism: toward a political ecology of Nigerian literature", *Postcolonial Studies*, 9:4 (2006): 457.
[2] Tracy C. Davis, *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.

Dam. The plastic strip “simulated a giant crack opening up in the dam” (Arons and May 2012: 151), having the desired effect of attracting media attention from around the world and imprinting on readers’ and viewers’ minds the fragility of the ecosystems that had been impacted by the dam’s construction. Not content with smashing naturalism’s fourth wall, such performative eco-activism renders the traditional theatre space itself an irrelevance.

Mindful of the media potential of such performative acts, Schechner observes in *Performance Theory* (1977) that “Many guerrilla theater events, terrorist acts, -kidnappings, assassinations, and street demonstrations…are theatricalized in order to catch the TV eye” and that “Apparently two-person exchanges between activist and authority are actually three-person interactions, with the invisible spectator [the TV viewer] being the addressee of last resort.” Although Schechner is theorizing about performance in the 1970s, his environmental theatre work predates this, articulated in the 1968 publication of his “Six axioms for an Environmental Theater”. The six axioms outline an aesthetics of performance that is about as far removed from naturalism or the well-made play as it is possible to conceive. The first axiom states that the theatrical event is “a set of related transactions”, bringing the audience as well as the performer(s) into a reimagined relationship. The second posits that “all the space is used for performance; all the space is used for audience”, prompting new ways of thinking about the role of spectator and spectated. The third axiom introduces the idea that environmental theatre might happen in a “totally transformed space” or within “found space”. This could be seen as a precursor of site-specific theatre work and complements some of the ideas expressed in Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space* which, perhaps not coincidentally, was also published in 1968. It also resonates with recent writings by Chantal Bilodeau, a Canadian-born

playwright and the founder of Climate Change Action Theatre, who asks “Can we regenerate as human beings if our participation is limited to being spectators?”[3] The fourth axiom, that “focus is flexible and variable”, stems from Schechner’s observation that “Single-focus is the trademark of traditional theatre. Even when actions are simultaneous and spread across a large stage…the audience is looking in one direction” and his wish to move towards a more dynamic interrelation between performers and audience. Schechner’s fifth axiom, that “all production elements speak in their own language”, creates the potential for technical effects such as sound and lighting to invert the hierarchical performance pyramid which traditionally positions the performer at the apex. The final axiom, that “The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no text at all” flies fundamentally in the face of naturalistic theatre’s assumption of the primacy of the text as a vector through which the playwright’s intentions are revealed.

Schechner’s views about the need to question mid twentieth-century assumptions about modes of theatrical representation and to challenge the passivity of the audience resonate strongly with those of Antonin Artaud who in the first of his ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ manifestos, initially published in French in 1964, proselytizes that:

> We intend to do away with stage and auditorium, replacing them by a kind of single, undivided locale without any partitions of any kind and this will become the very scene of the action. Direct contact will be established between the audience and the show, between actors and audience, from the very fact that the audience is seated in the centre of the action, is encircled and furrowed by it. (Artaud 1970: 74)

[3] Chantal Bilodeau, “The Story of Extractivism”, *Canadian Theatre Review* 182 (Spring 2020): 37.

Schechner's axiomatic declarations about environmental theatre, Artaud's challenges to theatrical representation and the performative turn from the 1970s are each influenced by the work of Bertolt Brecht whose project of demonstration, of "making the familiar strange" (*Verfremdung*) and of reinstating older dramatic conventions (primarily direct audience address, soliloquy and the use of narrators) would appear to be at odds with naturalism's focus on an audience's emotional identification with an individual character. As Williams points out:

> [W]hat is being attacked [by Brecht, in his manifesto] as 'Aristotelian' or 'dramatic' is the dominant naturalism of the European drama after Ibsen…What is being basically attacked here is the central naturalist thesis of the 'illusion of reality', in which an action is created that is so like life that the verisimilitude absorbs the whole attention of both dramatist and audience. (Williams 1968: 317)

However, as I demonstrate in chapter 5 in my examination of Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016) which is structured as Brechtian epic, while twentieth-century theatre scholarship has viewed Brecht's theatre aesthetic as essentially anti-naturalist, in fact Brechtian theatre is fundamentally reliant on naturalism to create the necessary "flow" which *Verfremdung* is designed to interrupt.

In our current age of ecological crisis, it is easy to see how a prevailing conception of naturalism's focus on interpersonal conflict—illustrated, for example, by theatre scholar Catherine Love's assertion that "Naturalistic theatre recreates social environments, not natural ones" (Love 2020: 229)—might be seen as being at odds with the sense of urgency required to take action against existential ecological threats now facing our species, during what Kolbert (2014) and others are calling the earth's sixth mass extinction. But, as playwright Ella Hickson observed when

explaining her rationale for using naturalism within each of the five scenes of her 2016 play *Oil*:

> The responsibility of action is in the 'now'...The whole subject requires action...There's a responsibility for humans to act... Because of that, I think you have to pin it to the present...I think the relationship of the subject to a naturalist present is one of responsibility...I have a feeling that it lets it off the hook if you are completely unattached to naturalism.[4]

This capacity of naturalism to put characters under intense pressure in the 'now' of the unfolding contemporary climate crisis is something I will expand upon throughout this thesis, starting in chapter 1 where the closed time, closed place pressure cooker dramaturgy of Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* illuminates this sense of urgency and asks how we as audience members might respond if we were facing the existential environmental threats the characters are vicariously facing on our behalf.

One of the key benefits of deploying naturalism within contemporary eco-theatre, and one which is largely ignored in current critical debate, is that it enables us to see the urgent 'now' of human timescales alongside increasingly pressing geological timescales. As Dipesh Chakrabarty explains in his illuminating 2021 book *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age:*

> ...as humans we presently live in two different kinds of "now-time" (or what they call *Jetztzeit* in German) simultaneously: in our own awareness of ourselves, the "now" of human history has become entangled with the long "now" of geological and biological timescales, something that has never happened before in the history of humanity... We need to...[tell]...the story of human empires—of colonial, racial, and gendered oppressions—in tandem with the larger story of how a particular biological species, *Homo sapiens*...came to dominate the biosphere, lithosphere, and the atmosphere of this planet. We have to do all this, moreover, without ever taking our eyes off the individual

[4] Ella Hickson, audio interview with the author, July 18, 2022.

> human who continues to negotiate his or her own phenomenological and everyday experience of life, death and the world...
> (Chakrabarty 2021: 7-8)

Nor is the critical antipathy towards naturalism directed solely towards eco-theatre. In *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (2011), Aleks Sierz observes that "a realistic and naturalistic style embodies the Britishness of British theatre" (59) and that "plays that challenge that style represent a rewriting of this national tradition" (59). He suggests that plays by a number of formally innovative playwrights—including Sarah Kane, Martin Crimp, Caryl Churchill and Simon Stephens—"suggest that *the dead hand of British naturalism* can be shaken off, if only occasionally" (63, [my emphasis]). In her 2016 essay "Room for Realism?" Elaine Aston describes "The so-called 'in-yer-face' wave of angry, young, 1990s playwrights" who "offered experimentally formed drama that was rooted in, yet determined on uprooting, the English tradition of social realism." (20) Aston's view is corroborated by the then Artistic Director of the Royal Court Theatre, Stephen Daldry, whom she quotes as saying that theatre writing of the time was looking at "breaking the mould of social realistic plays." (21)

The prevailing critical antipathy towards naturalism and realism as appropriate vessels to contain environmental stories exists not just within the world of theatre and dramatic criticism but also within contemporary literature more widely. Amitav Ghosh has analysed this phenomenon in *The Great Derangement* (2016), an insightful analysis of climate change and contemporary literary fiction's inability adequately to engage with it. Ghosh was prompted to write the book after puzzling over the fact that—even though he had narrowly escaped a freak tornado which killed 30 people and injured 700 in north Delhi in 1978—he had never seen fit to

bring this traumatic personal experience into any of his fiction writing over the intervening decades. Ghosh links this to “the birth of the modern novel” (16) before which “wherever stories were told, fiction delighted in the unheard-of and the unlikely. Narratives like those of *The Arabian Nights*…proceeded by leaping blithely from one exceptional event to another.” (16) Extraordinary stories of climate devastation and ecological crisis within the world of contemporary fiction have largely become relegated to the sphere of genre fiction, including eco-thrillers (in novels such as Liz Jensen’s *The Rapture* [2009]) or climate fiction (so-called ‘cli-fi’) in novels such as Ben Smith’s *Doggerland* (2019), or are traduced into the comic mode, as is the case with Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010) in which the central character’s attempts to save humanity from environmental catastrophe are inextricably linked with his increasingly desperate attempts to save his frail marriage.

Many contemporary ecocritical writers (including Haraway 2016, Morton 2007, 2010, 2018, Tsing 2016 and Macfarlane 2019) believe that in order to address the fundamental causes of the current ecological crisis, it is necessary to decentre the human: to move away from assumptions of human exceptionalism towards a recognition that humans are simply part of a vast and intricate web of life on earth, and certainly not the most important. Naturalism, which the prevailing critical antipathy conceives as focusing on purely human predicaments rather than nonhuman ones, can also be used to illuminate how intricately entwined and interdependent human and nonhuman worlds are, as I demonstrate in chapter 2 with my analysis of Steve Waters’ *On the Beach* (2009, revised 2022), a play which deploys symbolist eco-naturalism to illuminate shared human and avian environmental vulnerabilities. In fact, I argue in this thesis that naturalism has long considered humans to have been decentred, not least because Naturalism’s early

proponents were heavily influenced by Darwin's theories of evolution. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* was published in 1859 and the first consciously conceived Naturalist drama, Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, was written in 1873. Naturalism shares evolutionists' concerns with the effects of heredity and environmental determinism, eschewing human exceptionalism.

As well as a prevailing critical antipathy, there is also an entrenched artistic suspicion of naturalism as a contemporary playwriting form. The title character of Hickson's *The Writer* (2018) seeks to maintain her artistic integrity by being inventive with form and structure. There is a heated exchange between the Writer and the Director in Act Four where the Director, exasperated at the Writer's unwillingness to restructure her work as a traditional well-made play, tells her:

> Finish the play. Hand it in with a real fucking ending. It has to sell tickets or the whole financial model doesn't work, and if that's too much reality for your delicate artist soul then take a hike. Take it to someone else because I can't listen to this shit any more. (69)

When the Writer complains that writing such a neat ending would "feel like a betrayal", the exasperated Director accuses the Writer of being fickle, saying that "I bet you the next play will be a male protagonist and *good old-fashioned commercial naturalism*" (70, my [emphasis]). Equating naturalism with the safe, the non-experimental, the commercially successful and the conservative could not be further from the intentions of the writers who introduced Naturalism to the nineteenth-century European stage. For Zola, Naturalism represented a radical break with tradition, being "...the study of the natural man, governed by physical and chemical laws, and modified by the influences of his surroundings; it is in one word the literature of our scientific age..." (Zola 1893: 23) Throughout this thesis, I will argue

that this “literature of our scientific age” retains the radical capacity to enable us to empathise with the predicament of characters struggling with the challenges of living in the Anthropocene, the new proposed geological epoch in which *Homo sapiens* has become, in the words of meteorologist Paul Crutzen, “...a major environmental force...” (Crutzen 2002: 23)

A further criticism levelled against naturalism as an eco-dramaturgical form is that it has traditionally required the use of substantial amounts of stage furniture, as well as ‘props’ (actors’ hand properties), and sophisticated lighting effects, all of which contribute to a production’s carbon footprint. The contrast, for example, between seeing a non-naturalistic play (such as Amy Jephta’s *This Liquid Earth: A Eulogy in Verse*, presented as part of the Royal Court’s 2019 International Climate Crisis season) and a naturalistic play (such as Lucy Kirkwood’s 2016 *The Children*) could not be more stark: the former required no set and barely any lighting effects, foregrounding the lyricism of the writing, whereas the latter required a painstaking reproduction of the interior of a cottage in rural Suffolk, where specific props gain in significance during the course of the play. Theresa J. May’s definition of eco-dramaturgy as methodology includes an examination of “how theater as a material craft creates its own ecological footprint and works both to reduce waste and invent new approaches to material practice.” (May 2021, 4) May’s analysis includes a critique of David Belasco’s *The Girl of the Golden West*, a play that opened in 1905 and which acted as “a bridge from melodrama to theatrical realism on the American stage.” (64) In the play’s final tableau, May explains, a couple “...ride east into the rising dawn made possible by electricity” (68), the realistic reproduction of the sunlit dawn being powered by electricity sourced from a recently introduced west coast hydro-electric power supply that threatened to destroy the very sublime beauty the

play sought to depict. In the 2020s, UK theatre-makers have become increasingly mindful of the ecological footprint of their productions, as became evident to me when I interviewed the lighting designer, set and costume designer and directors of the two plays within Steve Waters' *The Contingency Plan* diptych of plays which opened at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre in October 2022. Launched in March 2021, The Theatre Green Book (theatregreenbook.com), an initiative aimed at supporting theatre-makers to create more sustainable work, has now published three volumes to date, focusing respectively on sustainable productions, sustainable buildings and sustainable operations. This eco-consciousness among UK theatre-makers is a relatively recent phenomenon, however, having emerged only in the last few years. When I asked Ella Hickson, for example, whether there had been discussions among the creative team about the carbon footprint of her production of *Oil* at the Almeida Theatre in 2016, she instantly replied: "No, not then. There would be now."[5]

The Feminist Critique of Realism

Ecofeminist writers such as Merchant (1983) and Mies and Shiva (1993) have long considered environmental oppression to be a gendered issue while contemporary eco-theorists including Nixon (2011) and Woynarski (2020) have drawn attention to inequalities which intersect issues of race, gender and poverty. Grochala's declaration that "...dramaturgical structures reproduce social structures..." (2017: 58) is echoed in Woynarski's view that "Ecological issues are often presented in a homogenous way, based on a narrative of a singular problem in need of a 'solution'. The issues are regularly whitewashed and patriarchal, shaped in relation to certain bodies and identities..." (2020: 34) However, my analysis of plays in this study—

[5] Ella Hickson, audio interview with the author, July 18, 2022.

perhaps most clearly in relation to Steve Waters' *On the Beach* (2009, 2022) which I examine in chapter 2—reveals how realist dramatic narratives, far from merely reinforcing social structures, can challenge them through the subtle deployment of eco-naturalism. Robin, the central character in *On the Beach*, for example, initially appears powerful and in control but is eventually revealed to be powerless in the face of fatally rising sea levels, as environmentally vulnerable as the rare Eurasian spoonbill he watches through his telescope. My thesis as a whole seeks to encourage a more nuanced debate about the possibilities of naturalistic eco-dramaturgy than currently exists, challenging the binary position adopted by Grochala (2017), Woynarski (2020), Love (2020) and others that naturalism as an eco-dramaturgical form is limited by its perceived phallocentrism.

It is important to understand the feminist critique of realism in its historical context, not least because it also—as Aston (1995) clarifies below—presents Brechtian non-naturalism and Stanislavskian naturalism as diametric opposites whereas, as I argue in chapter 5 in my examination of *Oil* (2016), Ella Hickson's radical dramaturgy holds Brechtian and Stanislavskian aesthetics together in a productive dynamic tension which reveals gender and colonial inequalities during the age of oil. Furthermore, as I go on to argue later in that chapter, the dichotomy between Brecht and Stanislavski, between non-naturalism and naturalism, is itself a false binary and that even Brecht is shown to be deeply reliant on naturalism to create the sense of 'flow' which his famous *Verfremdung*, or 'making the familiar strange', is consciously designed to interrupt.

Writing in 1995, in the midst of the male-dominated 'in-yer-face' (Sierz 2001) phase of British playwriting and after the second wave of feminism in the 1970s had

suffered a neoliberalist backlash in the 1980s, feminist theatre scholar Elaine Aston explained:

> Feminist theorization of stage practice has been critical of those realist traditions of performance which work in tandem with dominant and oppressive representations of gender. (Aston 1995: 6)

Further, she observes that:

> …theatre studies remains centrally informed by the actor training programmes of Stanislavski and Brecht: between the art of 'becoming' the character and the work of demonstration. As feminism looked to a theatrical practice rooted in a desire for political change it rejected the Stanislavski-based legacy and found an ally in Brecht. (6)

This essential dichotomy between Stanislavski's and Brecht's differing aesthetic approaches helps contextualise feminism's mistrust of realism. Aston also notes that:

> In narrative terms, dramatic and theatrical texts in the realist tradition operate systems of 'closure'. Their well-constructed or well-made forms follow a linear pattern from exposition to crisis and ultimate resolution. The subject of this narrative is male and its discourse is phallocentric…By contrast, the 'female' is enclosed within the male narratives of realism, is most commonly defined in relation to the male 'subject' (as wife, mother, daughter, etc.), is unable to take up a subject position…and is used as an object of exchange in an [sic.] heterosexual, male economy. (Aston 1995: 40)

It is clear how such an analysis pertains to some naturalist or realist plays of the late nineteenth century, even those exhibiting psychological complexity, and remains true into the twentieth century with plays such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Female characters play a

significant (indeed, titular) role in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, first performed in 1901, but in his *Uncle Vanya*, which received its first performance two years earlier, the female characters do indeed appear to be defined primarily in relation to the male characters, through whose gaze the narrative unfolds. Retired professor Serebriakov, for example, spends his days writing academic papers no one will read, but his (much younger) wife Yeliena is at pains to defend him at every turn. His daughter Sonia is infatuated with the forest-loving, ecologically aware Dr Astrov but it is Astrov who has visionary plans for the future. Voinitskaia, the mother of the professor's first wife, may be a spirited and opinionated character but it is her son Voinitsky (the eponymous Vanya) on whom much of the play's focus rests. The elderly children's nurse Marina keeps the household running with her productive labour of darning, cleaning and cooking but in narrative terms remains no more than a peripheral, supportive character throughout.

Though more subtle, it could be argued that vestiges of this male subject / female object narrative structure persist even within contemporary naturalist plays displaying psychological complexity and depth of characterisation, including Steve Waters' *On the Beach* which I analyse in detail in chapter 2 of this thesis. In Waters' play, it is Robin's work as an ex-glaciologist that provides the vital backstory, and in particular his misreporting of ice melt rates in the Antarctic in the late 1970s. Without this, there would have been no reason for him and Jenny to have moved to their off-grid home in North-West Norfolk in the first place. Their life has become a laboratory experiment in which Robin's scientific predictions about an imminent catastrophic sea level surge will be empirically tested in Act Two, with himself and Jenny as human guinea pigs. It takes a while for Jenny to realise the extent of Robin's obsession with proving his scientific predictions, but when he cuts off their telephone

landline (having already destroyed the mobile phone she was secretly hiding) and blocks all physical escape routes towards the end of the play, it is clear that not only his experiments but their very lives have reached their endgame. It is their son Will whose contemporary work as a glaciologist highlights alarming rates of Antarctic ice melts, discrediting the so-called stability hypothesis his father had put his name to, and providing the evidence base with which to call for political policy change in *The Contingency Plan* diptych's second play, *Resilience*. The Oedipal struggles between father and son inform much of the conflict in *On the Beach*. Jenny, however, maintains a largely peace-making and domestic role, worrying about her son and becoming increasingly exasperated by the intransigence of her maverick husband. Will's partner Sarika, though politically influential within Whitehall, is objectified within *On the Beach*; Robin treats her as an outsider from their first meeting and Will, taking a fetishistic interest in her bare feet after they have emerged from the marshes early in Act One, causes Sarika to quip "Feeling a tiny bit objectified now." (Waters 2022: 17) We are a long way from the social mores of nineteenth-century drawing rooms here but nevertheless a case could certainly be made that in *On the Beach* Jenny, as Aston says, remains "enclosed within the male narratives of realism…unable to take up a subject position".

Conversely, it could be argued that Waters, one of the most insightful realist chroniclers of our times, is simply reflecting the prevalent social values he observes around him and that he is using a sophisticated, subtle and affective form of symbolist eco-naturalism to highlight the play's overarching ecological themes. His depiction of birds as harbingers of climate crisis, his evocation of shared human and avian environmental vulnerabilities and his use of metaphor to reveal the play's

thematic focus on ecological tipping points are all possibilities that arise from his deployment of eco-naturalism.

In her 2016 essay “Room for Realism?”, Aston explains how the feminist critique of realism has evolved over the past few decades. Noting that “far less attention was given to the more politically conservative, realist work” by bourgeois feminist writers in the 1980s than to “more politically and aesthetically radical works”, Aston asks whether there could still be “room for realism on the English stage” after Sarah Kane’s controversial and structurally radical *Blasted*, which opened in 1995. Aston concludes that there *is* still room for realism and illustrates this with reference to three plays which she analyses as recent examples of liberal/bourgeois feminist playwriting: Fiona Evans’ *Scarborough* (2008); Lucy Kirkwood’s *NSFW* (2012); and Anupama Chandrasekhar’s *Free Outgoing (2007)*.

It may be instructive at this point to remind ourselves of the three feminisms— liberal/bourgeois, radical and socialist— that Aston and other feminist critics have conceptualised as being operational since the 1970s. As Aston explains:

> Each of these positions posited a different route to women’s empowerment from advocating the improvement of women’s lives within existing social structures (bourgeois), through the dismantling of patriarchy (radical), to the systematic transformation of society’s economic, social and familial structures (socialist).
> (Aston 2016: 18)

Feminist awareness of the influence of Freud’s theories on the development of realist or naturalist drama is articulated by Elin Diamond who, in *Unmaking Mimesis* (1997), expounds her thesis that “realism is itself a form of hysteria”. She explains that:

> Realism's putative object, the truthful representation of social experience within a recognizable, usually contemporary, moment remains a problematic issue for feminism, not least because theatrical realism, rooted in part in domestic melodrama, retains the oedipal family focus even as it tries to undermine the scenarios that Victorian culture had mythified – the angel in the house, the lost child, the poor but faithful husband, among others. (4)

This Oedipal strain within late nineteenth-century naturalism is also noted by Pickering and Thompson (2013) who observe that:

> Freud's work is of particular interest to the student of Naturalism in drama: partly because many of the plays that strove for Naturalism employ what we would now recognize as 'Freudian symbolism' of totemic objects and qualities of light as symbols of sexual repression or other mental states. (47)

They cite Freud's own analysis of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, for example, which he couches in characteristically emphatic and unequivocally Oedipal terms:

> The practising psycho-analytical physician knows how frequently, or how invariably, a girl entering a household as servant, companion or governess, will consciously or unconsciously weave a daydream which derives from the Oedipus complex, of the mistress of the house disappearing and the master taking the newcomer as his wife in her place. *Rosmersholm* is the greatest work of art of the class that treat of this common fantasy in girls. (Ibsen 1980b: 28)

In *Restaging Feminisms*, Aston advocates "the idea of feminism as a counter-hegemonic project whose struggles against neopatriarchal neoliberalism must be fought on many fronts." (Aston 2020: 13) One of the fronts she identifies relates to the roles that women are able to play within contemporary British theatre. Aston highlights "One litmus test aimed specifically at the dominance of male-centred narratives":

> [The] Bechdel-inspired Sphinx Test…prompts theatre makers to consider whether there is a woman centre stage, whether she is a complex character actively driving the dramatic action in a culturally impactful drama. (Aston 2020: 17)

Aston elucidates the political outlook of Caryl Churchill's 2016 play *Escaped Alone*, in which the play's four female characters "are all at least seventy" (Churchill 2016: 4) as "a triangulation of socialism, feminism and environmentalism." (Aston 2020: 12) I analyse this play as an example of disrupted eco-naturalism in chapter 4 of this thesis.

Broadening out this ecofeminist perspective, Woynarski (2020) is among a number of contemporary theatre scholars to highlight intersectionality as a key issue for ecological theatre makers today.[6] For Woynarski:

> Intersectional ecologies are about recognising that ecological issues, such as climate change, cannot be thought of in isolation or as single issues…On a global scale, ecological destruction disproportionately affects women, the poor and people of colour through slow violence and is therefore tied to other forms of violence, marginalisation, political power and social mobility. (37)

Ecological issues, in Woynarski's view, "are regularly whitewashed and patriarchal" (34) and cultural works such as theatre and performance "can reproduce these problems by creating an image of ecological work as 'green and pleasant', middle class, white, singular and reductive." (34) She cites a number of plays that I explore

[6] Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989, setting out to address the way that "dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis." (Crenshaw 1989: 140). She cited legal precedence from a number of cases where Black women were unable to pursue legal action for discrimination on account of them being Black women; they could either claim discrimination on the grounds of being Black, or for being women, but not for happening to be both.

within this thesis as illustrative of this approach, including Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011), Emmott and Mitchell's *Ten Billion* (2012) and Waters' *The Contingency Plan* (2009, 2022).

Woynarski notes that:

> Intersectional ecologies analyses [sic.] the ideologies of conquest, colonialism, accumulation and individualism that shape capitalist patriarchy and ecological exploitation. (35)

and the first work she examines is Chantal Bilodeau's short non-naturalistic play *It Starts with Me*, in which multiple voices from a female cast of indeterminate size use direct audience address to name the gendered and environmental inequalities they face and then commit to becoming agents of change. Bilodeau says the play should be thought of as "a battle cry" and is inspired by a range of contemporary female environmental activists including Greta Thunberg, Naomi Klein, Christina Figueres "and countless more women who are fighting for us all." (Bilodeau and Peterson 2020: 67)

Bilodeau is the Montreal-born, New York-based Artistic Director of The Arctic Cycle, an organisation that uses theatre to encourage dialogue about the global climate crisis. She also established Climate Change Action Theatre which she explains:

> ...was conceived in 2015 as a worldwide series of readings and performances of short climate change plays that coincide with the United Nations Conferences of the Parties – the international meetings where world leaders gather to discuss ways to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. Fifty professional playwrights, representing all inhabited continents as well as several Indigenous nations, are

> commissioned to write five-minute plays about an aspect of climate change…[7]

In an article for *Canadian Theatre Review* published in spring 2020, Bilodeau pondered whether the series of Arctic plays she has been writing (at that point two had been already produced, one was in development and five were still to come) were too reliant on naturalistic fourth wall dramaturgy and could move towards a less "traditional…presentational style", one more akin to ceremony:

> I do experiment with time and form, and use multiple languages…But ultimately, the actors are onstage, and the audience in the theatre, and I wonder, is this enough? Is the presentational format all too disconnected, still too 'us' and 'them'? Can we regenerate as human beings if our participation is limited to being spectators? (37)

Bilodeau's desire to move away from a naturalistic "presentational format" towards the creation of a more ritualistic or ceremonial space, in which the relationship between audience and spectators becomes dynamic and non-hierarchical, is informed by an urge to address the intersectional gendered, social, economic and environmental inequalities brought about by extractive capitalism.

For theatre scholar Catherine Love, "the dilemma that theatre faces in the Anthropocene" is that "Climate change…resists representation; the scope is simply too vast and the set of factors involved too intricate to be easily realised on stage." She cites director Katie Mitchell as observing that the issue of climate change "won't be boiled down into something simpler…and to some extent, theatre needs to boil things down." Love feels that "The solution adopted by much eco-theatre is to

[7] Chantal Bilodeau, "The Story of Extractivism", 37.

incorporate complex environmental issues within the interpersonal dramas with which audiences are more familiar, thus making them graspable" and she cites Waters' *The Contingency Plan* amongst other plays as falling into this category, noting that:

> This approach…risks reinforcing the anthropocentrism that got us into this mess in the first place, falling back on the habitual human exceptionalism of Western dramatic traditions. (Love 2020: 226)

While some contemporary climate plays surely do fall into this trap—I would cite John Godber's *Crown Prince* (2007), with its stereotypical characters and facile humour, as an example—my study reveals that eco-naturalism can be deployed in a variety of powerful, subtle and affective ways which, far from merely reproducing social structures, have the capacity to prompt fresh and original ways of thinking and feeling about the most pressing ecological issues of our times.

Scope of the Study and Selection of Plays

The selection of case studies for this thesis arose from a wide reading of contemporary anglophone plays which foreground ecological issues. Out of this reading, my concept of the naturalistic spectrum emerged. It suggests that gradations of naturalism operate within contemporary eco-theatre, moving from overt to covert forms along a continuum which encompasses symbolist eco-naturalism, hyper eco-naturalism and disrupted eco-naturalism.

The plays I have selected for inclusion in this study are indicative of eco-naturalism on the mainstream British stage between 2011 and 2022. Seven of the plays are by British playwrights and one is by the North American playwright Annie Baker, whose work is frequently performed at the National Theatre in London. While these plays reveal eco-naturalism being deployed in a wide variety of ways, this selection of plays is self-evidently limited in its scope and diversity. Climate breakdown and environmental issues disproportionately affect poor people and those living in the Global South, as Nixon (2011), Ghosh (2017) and others have argued, while Woynarski (2020) has drawn attention to the racial and gendered inequalities inherent in what she terms intersectional ecologies. While some black and marginalised voices have been represented in eco-performances on the British stage in recent years—for example, Complicité's 2021 online tour of *Can I Live?*, which was conceived, written and performed by the black British performer and eco-activist Fehinti Balogun—these instances are rare and, as journalist Julian Agyeman has argued, there is a notable paucity of people of colour engaging with the climate crisis debate.[8] Based on his experiences as an environmental policy advisor for an inner London borough, Agyeman argues that white environmental activist agendas

[8] Julian Agyeman, "People of colour have been shut out of the climate debate. Social justice is the key to a greener world,", *The Guardian,* October 6, 2022.

tend to reinforce a sense of exclusivity whilst remaining blind to the lived experience of Britain's poorest urban residents, many of whom are black or brown and who live in "the most deprived areas in terms of proximity to large polluting roads, poor or unaffordable housing stock, social exclusion, lack of educational and economic opportunity, disinvestment and lack of green and play spaces." With so many pressing social and economic issues to address, perhaps it is not surprising that the work of some of the UK's most prominent contemporary black playwrights—such as debbie tucker green and Roy Williams—should centre around issues of inequality, racism and the black British urban experience rather than on the climate debate. If theatre in the UK is to address this imbalance meaningfully, it behoves commissioning theatres and funding bodies to support and nurture black and marginalised voices who wish to address the climate crisis and its intersection with wider issues of inequality and oppression. Naturalism will surely play a vital role in such new work because these issues demand accountability and, as Hickson explained when I interviewed her about her decision to deploy naturalistic scene writing within a non-naturalistic structure in her 2016 play *Oil* (see page 247 of this thesis), "The responsibility of action is in the 'now'...it lets it off the hook if you are completely unattached to naturalism..."

In late twentieth-century British theatre, there was a notable paucity of plays dealing with environmental issues and this is perhaps understandable given that the climate crisis itself attracted relatively little media attention at the time. The United Nations (UN) established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, tasking it with reviewing scientific data on a global scale and making recommendations about the social and economic impacts of climate change and possible response strategies. The UN's 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro,

Brazil, brought together political leaders, scientists and other representatives of 179 countries to create a blueprint for international action on the environment. But it was not until 1995, with the publication of the IPCC's Second Assessment Report, providing authoritative scientific data for governments to draw upon as they prepared to adopt the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, that climate change issues gained much greater international media coverage, prompting increased public awareness.

A rare example of late twentieth-century eco-drama was Caryl Churchill's 1971 radio play *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* which envisages a dystopian London (it is set in 2010) in which the air has become so polluted that people need to buy oxygen in order to survive. The play, which relies on naturalistic exchanges between its three characters, anticipates Thatcherism and critiques neoliberalism and the commodification of natural resources associated with free market economics. In 1973, John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* used the form of a ceilidh—with naturalistic dialogue linking many of the scenes and songs—to tell the story of how Scotland's natural resources have been historically exploited, from the Highland Clearances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to North Sea oil in the 1970s.

The paucity of ecologically focused plays continued well into the twenty-first century, prompting theatre critic Lyn Gardner, as recently as 2017, to pose the rhetorical question: "...isn't it odd that what is seen by many as one of the greatest challenges of our time receives so little theatrical attention, particularly in the mainstream?"[9] This situation has changed radically in the last few years, with climate crisis dramas proliferating across the British stage, matched by an increased

[9] Lyn Gardner, "Fog, smog and eco-drag: these climate change dramas are a breath of fresh air," *The Guardian*, November 7, 2017.

awareness amongst audiences of the effects of global warming and ecological collapse.

Ushering in the new millennium, Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000) is widely seen as one of contemporary eco-theatre's most significant plays. For Angelaki, "No other contemporary British play, perhaps, has captured the relationship between neoliberalism, capitalism, the environment, globalisation and formal experimentation more aptly..." (2019: 20) Its formal experimentation includes naturalistic exchanges which border on the absurd, a quality which is also evident in Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) which I examine in chapter 4. I selected the latter play for inclusion in this thesis because I was particularly interested in Churchill's decision to break the naturalistic convention of the invisible fourth wall in *Escaped Alone*, as part of the play's wider formal experimentation.

Another early twenty-first century play which deploys naturalistic form in its exploration of the effects of alarmingly erratic weather on its fifteen year-old central character Ellie and her parents and boyfriend, is Clare Pollard's *The Weather*, first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in October 2004. The play's naturalism is unsettled by the introduction of the supernatural which takes the form of a poltergeist. John Godber's *Crown Prince* (2007) takes a largely comedic look at characters living in the north of England whose hobby of crown green bowling is jeopardized by extreme local flooding events associated with global warming. Andrew Bovell's *When the Rain Stops Falling* (2008) is an intergenerational family story ranging from England to Australia between 1975 and a dystopian 2039. Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009) reimagines the trope of the pastoral idyll in contemporary England and Nick Payne's *If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet* (2009) shows a dysfunctional family attempting to make sense of the increasingly fragile

natural environment which surrounds them. The end of the first decade of the twenty-first century saw Steve Waters' diptych of plays *The Contingency Plan* (2009) running at London's intimate Bush Theatre and examining, respectively, personal (in *On the Beach*) and political (in *Resilience*) responses to rising sea levels caused by anthropogenic global warming.

The 2010s saw a significant increase in the programming of environmentally themed plays on the British stage.[10] Now, in the 2020s, Lyn Gardner's observation about a paucity of contemporary eco-dramas no longer holds true and indeed Nick Hern Books has recently published a critical summary of eco-dramas, *100 Plays to Save the World* (2021). Among the plays I considered for inclusion in my study were: Mike Bartlett's epic and spatiotemporally vast *Earthquakes in London* (2010); Richard Bean's satirical *The Heretic* (2011); Simon Stephens' disturbing and enigmatic *Wastwater* (2011); the ambitious but structurally incoherent *Greenland* (2011), co-authored by Moira Buffini, Matt Charman, Penelope Skinner and Jack Thorne; Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* (2013); Tanya Ronder's *Fuck the Polar Bears* (2015); Stef Smith's *Human Animals* (2016); Clare Duffy's *Arctic Oil* (2018); Sabrina Mahfouz's *A History of Water in the Middle East* (2019) and Ed Thomas' *On Bear Ridge* (2019).

As I read this diverse range of plays, including the ones described above, I began to realise that, although naturalism was present to a certain degree in the vast majority of them, it was not being uniformly deployed but was being used in markedly

[10] The proliferation of environmentally themed plays since the 2010s has been mirrored by an increase in the publication of ecocritical texts which deal with theatre and the environment. The first wave of ecocritical theatre scholars included Una Chaudhuri (1994, 1997), Bonnie Marranca (1996), Elinor Fuchs (1994, 1996), Theresa J. May (2007) and Baz Kershaw (2007). Some of the most influential second wave ecocritical theatre scholars are: Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May, (eds., 2012), Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh (2015), Carl Lavery (2016, 2019), Una Chaudhuri (2016, 2017), Vicky Angelaki (2019) and Lisa Woynarski (2020).

different ways. I was intrigued by the fact that, even within formally experimental plays such as Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000) and *Escaped Alone* (2016), the dramatist had felt a dramaturgical need to incorporate naturalistic form. Time and again, I found naturalism, to greater or lesser extents, cropping up in a great variety of eco-dramas. This realisation led to my development of the conceptual framework of the naturalistic spectrum. Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) was the only example of an eco-drama I encountered that used naturalistic form in such an overt way, adhering strictly to a closed time, closed place, pressure cooker structure. My first chapter therefore examines how this overt eco-naturalism, at one extreme of the naturalistic spectrum, helps Kirkwood dramatize existential vulnerability in the aftermath of a nuclear accident. Waters' *On the Beach* (2022) from his diptych of plays *The Contingency Plan* seemed to me to represent a uniquely powerful, subtle and affective form of symbolism, Chekhovian in intent and very much in conversation with Ibsen's 1882 *An Enemy of the People*. Symbolist eco-naturalism consequently became the focus of chapter 2, examined through the lens of Waters' play. I noticed that some eco-naturalistic plays created intensely detailed mimetic onstage interior worlds while extreme weather events and ecological crisis raged outside those claustrophobic spaces, and that these plays—represented by Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019) and Baker's *The Antipodes* (2019) in my study—illustrated a form of hyper eco-naturalism which I explore in chapter 3. Chapter 4 examines the dramaturgical possibilities of disrupted eco-naturalism through close readings of Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011) and Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016). A number of contemporary eco-dramas, including Bovell's *When the Rain Stops Falling* and Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London*, use naturalistically written scenes within epic structures. I decided, however, to focus in my final chapter on Ella Hickson's 2016

play *Oil*. I knew from interviews Hickson had previously given that she is deeply interested in exploring the relationship between form and content and I wanted to find out more about how this had informed the writing of *Oil*, with its covert use of naturalistically written scenes within an overarchingly Brechtian epic structure. Finally, I decided to include Emmott and Mitchell's *Ten Billion* within my final chapter because I wanted to broaden my research to include an exploration of Mitchell's covert use of Stanislavkian methodology through the lens of directing and dramaturgy rather than simply through the lens of playwriting.

The eco-naturalistic spectrum, methodologies and theoretical framework

My original contribution to the field of eco-dramaturgy centres around my theorisation of the naturalistic spectrum, a new conceptual framework through which scholars, theatre-makers and playwrights might gain insights into the interconnected ways in which varying forms of naturalism operate within contemporary ecological theatre.

In this endeavour, I am also contributing to an ongoing scholarly debate initiated by Chaudhuri with the publication of her provocative and seminal 1994 article “There Must Be a Lot of Fish in that Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater” which critiques the role of naturalism and realism within an evolving ecological theatre and suggests that “...theater can become the site of a much-needed ecological consciousness...” (28) only if it rejects the use of nature as metaphor.

In my theorisation, the various strands of eco-naturalism—which move from overt to covert forms along the naturalistic spectrum—ought not be thought of as mutually exclusive but rather as gradations of naturalism which can become productively entangled, as for example in the disrupted naturalism of Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (2016) or in the formal hybridity of Duncan Macmillan’s *Lungs* (2011), both of which texts I examine in chapter 4. Indeed, it may be most helpful when considering these diverse forms of naturalism to deploy what Haraway (2016) calls “tentacular thinking”, in order best to appreciate the nature and inherent possibilities of their entanglements.

In terms of methodology, I have conducted interviews with the following playwrights whose plays are included in this study: Ella Hickson, Lucy Kirkwood, Sam Steiner and Steve Waters. I have also interviewed members of the creative team behind the Sheffield Crucible Theatre’s October 2022 production of Steve Waters’ *The Contingency Plan*; *Resilience* director Caroline Steinbeis, *On the Beach* director Chelsea Walker and production designer Georgia Lowe. I conducted an

interview with theatre critic Alex Sierz, specifically to elucidate what he has referred to as “the dead hand of British naturalism.” (Sierz 2011: 63) I have conducted historically contextualized play analysis through a close reading of play texts within this study. I have seen live productions of Duncan Macmillan’s *Lungs* at London’s Old Vic Theatre in 2019 and Steve Waters’ *The Contingency Plan* at Sheffield’s Crucible Theatre in 2022. I have seen archive video recordings of the 2016 Almeida Theatre production of Ella Hickson’s *Oil*, the 2019 Plymouth Theatre Royal recording of Sam Steiner’s *You Stupid Darkness!* and the National Theatre’s 2019 production of Annie Baker’s *The Antipodes.* I have also listened to the audio archive recording of Stephen Emmott and Katie Mitchell’s 2012 Royal Court Theatre production of *Ten Billion*, including the post-show discussion with the scientist/performer Emmott. The theoretical framework for this thesis comprises several theories, listed and expanded upon below, from the fields of dramaturgy, theatre studies, philosophy, ecology and sociology.

Ecodramaturgy

I adopt Theresa J May’s (2021) definition of ecodramaturgy as:

> ...theater praxis that centres ecological relations by foregrounding as permeable and fluid the socially-constructed boundaries between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, individual and community. It encompasses both artistic work (making theater) and critical work (history, dramaturgy, and criticism) in three interwoven endeavors: (1) examining the often invisible environmental message of a play or production, making its ecological ideologies and implications visible; (2) using theater as a methodology to approach contemporary environmental problems (writing, devising, and producing new plays that engage environmental issues and themes); and (3) examining how theater as a material craft creates its own ecological footprint and works both to reduce waste and invent new approaches to material practice. (4)

While the primary focus of my eco-dramaturgical analysis of plays in this study is on the first and second endeavours May refers to above, my thesis also considers the ecological footprint of productions, particularly inasmuch as it relates to audiences' perceptions of physical stage phenomena (see Theatre Phenomenology, below).

Hyperobjects

Morton (2013) elaborates the term 'hyperobjects' which they first coined in *The Ecological Thought* (2010).[11] Hyberobjects in Morton's formulation refer to "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (2013: 1) and exhibit five defining characteristics: they are viscous; they are nonlocal; their temporalities undulate; they are only visible to humans for stretches of time (phasing); and they exhibit interobjectivity. Hyperobjects are a useful way of conceptualising how the eco-naturalistic dramaturgy of each play in this study reveals the issues of global warming and ecological crisis which lie at the heart of each play. In the first chapter, for example, the hyperobject in Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) is the nuclear radiation which lingers invisibly but palpably in the air outside of the confines of the cottage where the play's action takes place. This radiation is viscous; it sticks to the characters and their fears in ways that cannot easily be shaken off. It is inherently nonlocal because both the radiation, and the tsunami which precipitated the accident at the nearby nuclear plant, cover a vast and sprawling contamination zone. The temporality of the radiation undulates in the sense that the accident has taken place recently but the effects will be so long-lasting as to decentre the human perspectives of the characters. The invisible radiation is only perceived by the humans in the play intermittently, although one

[11] Timothy Morton identifies as non-binary and uses the pronoun 'they', a convention I respectfully adopt throughout this thesis.

character, Rose, reports having seen "...the radiation hanging in the air a sort of a sort of filthy glitter suspended" (Kirkwood 2016: 12). And the radiation reacts interobjectively with other objects referred to in the world of the play, including cows which have been killed by radiation and topsoil which has become irradiated. Morton's conception of hyperobjects emerges from the evolving philosophical field of Object-Oriented Ontology, the foundations for which lie in phenomenology, a philosophical method introduced by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century. Phenomenology describes not things themselves but the way we access them through the phenomena they emit. We can experience the taste, touch, smell and texture of an apple, for example, but the 'real' apple remains inaccessible in its entirety. Phenomenology becomes a very useful lens through which to examine the hyperobjects in the plays in this study, because we as audiences can never perceive the hyperobject in its entirety (say, nuclear radiation or global warming) but we—alongside the characters in the plays—can perceive the phenomena that these hyperobjects emit (for example, dead cows, imagined "filthy glitter" and irradiated topsoil in the case of Kirkwood's *The Children* or rising sea levels caused by melting Antarctic ice sheets in Waters' *The Contingency Plan*). Theatre phenomenology, as well as examining stage phenomena which can be seen (such as actors, costumes, props and furniture) or heard (such as sound effects) also considers the effects of the embodied presence of the audience in the theatre space where these phenomena are perceived.

Theatre Phenomenology

Theatre phenomenology offers a significantly different perspective on dramaturgy than that offered by semiotics. The semiotician views theatre as a sign-system in which characters, primarily through language, become signifiers of offstage events.

In the case of *Ten Billion*, for example, the performer Stephen Emmott, in graphically detailing anthropogenic environmental destruction taking place offstage, would be considered the signifier while the environmental destruction he describes would be considered the signified. Theatre phenomenology, on the other hand, concerns itself with sensory phenomena, usually experienced through sight and sound, that audiences can perceive emanating from the stage, and the audience's embodied response to them. In this way, phenomenology tends to concern itself more with mimesis (showing) than with diegesis (telling) and the naturalistic theatre—with its tendency towards lifelike reproduction, and the heightened importance it attaches to costumes, furnishings and especially props—seems to me ideally suited to phenomenological analysis. As Fortier (2017) explains:

> ...theatre has a special relationship with the presentation of lived experience to the spectator. Theatre appears to the spectator's senses as something to be seen and heard and, less often, as something to be touched, tasted and smelled. The sensory effects of theatre are central to phenomenological concerns...Phenomenology's primary concern is with the engagement in lived experience between the individual consciousness and reality, which manifests itself not as a series of linguistic signs but as sensory and mental phenomena...
> (Fortier 2017: 32)

To return to the case of *Ten Billion*, a phenomenological reading of the performance lecture would consider not just the doom-laden environmental messages contained in Emmott's speech but the fact that, although he is warning about the effects of over consumption amongst privileged people living in the Global North, director Katie Mitchell's naturalistic mise-en-scène, which reproduces an exact replica of Emmott's Cambridge office on stage, creates a space which is overwhelmingly messy and cluttered, with two carbon-emitting laptops and a projector being used throughout.

The audience's perception of this phenomenal technological clutter is also heighted by the fact that the performance lecture takes place in the cramped environs of the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs, a space with a capacity of only 85 seats in which the audience is physically very close to the performer. Thus, the cramped, embodied experience of audience members, through this phenomenological reading, brings a fresh perspective to the issues raised by the performance which is ultimately about how humans might survive on a planet with finite natural resources in the context of the global population edging towards ten billion. Throughout this study, I draw on theatre phenomenology as a critical lens to illuminate how eco-naturalistic dramaturgy reveals the phenomena of ecological hyperobjects within the plays.

Water is a particularly potent natural phenomenon which frequently appears in the plays in this study. In *The Children* (2016) which I examine in the first chapter, for example, sea water has breached the nuclear plant's defences in the play's backstory but towards the end of the play actual water begins to invade and disturb the stage area, leaving the characters pitifully vulnerable. Water, of course, exhibiting vital materiality, does not always behave itself and when I saw the press night of Waters' *On the Beach* at Sheffield Theatres in October 2022, the hose, which was meant to deliver vast quantities of water quickly into the large scale model tank which the central character Robin had constructed, malfunctioned. The stage management team stopped the performance temporarily while the technical issue was resolved then, several minutes later, with a cheer mixed with relief from the audience, the tank filled up and the performance continued. I could not, however, stop thinking for the remainder of the performance how powerful, volatile and potentially threatening the water was; even though it was now enclosed within the tank, I found myself wondering whether the tank had been constructed robustly

enough for it to withstand the substantial pressure the water would continue to exert as long as it remained on stage. This theatrical use of onstage water also prompted me to reflect on how water is frequently squandered in the Global North and, indeed, the autumn 2022 production of *The Contingency* Plan came directly after Britain had experienced record high temperatures, with many regions suffering drought conditions. All of these associations arose from the phenomenological experience of seeing and hearing the water on the Crucible's stage. As Bert O. States observes in his penetrating study of theatre phenomenology *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985):

> ...real water—unlike real chairs, clothing, flower vases, or the painted façades of a village square—retains a certain primal strangeness: its aesthetic function does not exhaust its interest. It is a happening taking place within the aesthetic world: with...water something indisputably real leaks out of the illusion. (31)

What these powerful instances of watery presence reveal—not only in Kirkwood's *The Children* and Waters' *On the Beach* but also in Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* in which water from outside the building seeps in, gradually destroying the office space where the play is set—is how the audience's perception of the phenomenon of actual water, with its "certain primal strangeness", reinforces the uncontrollability of the hyperobject of climate devastation taking place in the world of each play.

The phenomenological lens I employ in this study also relates to how Lavery (2019) conceives of "ecological images" which he theorises as:

> ...stage pictures that, in their troubling immediacy or corporeal presentness, radiate beyond their frame and give rise to ecological thought and feeling through their targeting of spectatorial vision...I contend that the eye in the theatre is not simply an organ that

> sees...More radically, it is an organ that thinks, a machine in which the opposition between subject and object, nature and culture, mind and body, thought and matter are undone, rendered inoperable. (259)

In the chapters that follow, I will use Lavery's concept of ecological images (as defined above) alongside theatre phenomenology to show how some resonant "stage pictures" in the plays in this study provoke ecological thought and feeling.

Solastalgia and Geopathology

Throughout this study, I use theatre scholar Una Chaudhuri's neologism "geopathology" and eco-philosopher Glenn Albrecht's concept of "solastalgia" to shed light on how, in each of the plays I examine, characters experience a sort of homesickness whilst being at home. This is thematically related in each of the plays to the hyperojbects of global warming and ecological crisis which are taking place in the plays' offstage worlds.

For Chaudhuri, who introduced the concept of geopathology in *Staging Place: the Geography of Modern Drama* (1995):

> The problem of place—and place *as problem*—informs realist drama deeply, appearing as a series of ruptures and displacements in various orders of location, from the micro- to the microspatial, from home to nature...The most fundamental dislocation is the one that intrudes...between humankind and nature, which in terms of the drama (but not only in those terms) makes of nature a mere setting – "scenery." (55)

Albrecht (2019) defines his concept of solastalgia as:

> ...the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place. It is characteristically a chronic condition, tied to the gradual erosion of

> identity created by the sense of belonging to a particular loved placed and a feeling of distress, or psychological desolation, about its unwanted transformation...[S]olastalgia is the homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment. (38-39)

Geopathology and solastalgia affect the characters in each play in this study, from Hazel and Robin in Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) who seek refuge in a cottage lying outside a nuclear exclusion zone in the east of England only to discover that it is anything but a sanctuary, to the characters in Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) who seek comfort in one another's company in a bucolic suburban garden setting only to discover, through the play's radical dramaturgy of formal disruption, that the world as they understand it is falling apart.

The Psychology of Climate Denial

Many of the characters in the plays studied in this thesis are living in a state of psychological denial about the global warming and ecological crisis that is affecting their world. The characters working at the Brightline telephone support service in Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019), for example, attempt to create a sense of normality within the Brightline offices where they carry out their volunteering duties but are forced to don gas masks before they venture outside because the environment outside has become so toxic. The characters' sense of hope in the midst of catastrophe is reflected in the ironically named 'Brightline' charity for which they work, and their tendency to live their lives as if dreadful environmental disruption was not happening outside the Brightline office shows that they are living what Norgaard (2011) calls a "double reality":

> *...double reality*...describe[s] the disjuncture I observed that winter in Bygdaby [the fictional name of an actual rural community in western Norway]. In one reality was the collectively constructed sense of normal everyday life. In the other reality existed the troubling

> knowledge of increasing automobile use, polar ice caps melting, and the predictions of future weather scenarios. In the words of Kjersti, a teacher in her thirties at the local agricultural school: “We live in one way, and we think in another. We learn to think in parallel. It’s a skill, an art of living.” (5)

From the characters in Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (2016) who indulge in apparently inconsequential banter while the world around them is disintegrating, to the freelancers in Baker’s *The Antipodes* (2019) who remain focused on a vacuous brainstorming project while real storms rage outside, all of the plays in this study contain characters who are living the double reality Norgaard has observed, using it as a psychological mechanism to cope with the cataclysmic environmental destruction outside of the naturalistic settings where each plays’ action unfolds. Naturalism, with its tendency to emphasize subtext—showing characters saying one thing whilst meaning another—is particularly well suited to showing characters living a “double reality” as a psychological coping mechanism.

It is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer

“South Florida’s temperatures dropped so low that iguanas froze and fell from trees”. This could be a line from Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (2016) as it is eerily similar in tone to some of the prophetic dystopian ecological visions declaimed by Mrs Jarrett during her monologues in Churchill’s play. Yet these lines, describing the effects on wildlife of a “bomb cyclone”—a phenomenon whereby atmospheric pressure drops very quickly in a strong storm— which devastated North America in December 2022 were not penned by Churchill but were broadcast as part of a news bulletin on BBC Radio 4 on the *Today* programme on Boxing Day (26 December)

2022.[12] The lines convey a sense of absurdity, of the unthinkable becoming palpably real, and this uncanny sense of the apparently impossible becoming possible is the unspoken thematic backdrop to many of the plays in this study.

Each of the plays I examine conjure imaginary worlds which reflect real-world climatic and ecological crises. This remains true even for the plays which could be read as depicting future dystopias—such as Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019), Baker's *The Antipodes* (2017) and Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016)—because the extreme weather events and ecological destruction referred to in the plays have now become a global commonplace. Sandy in *The Antipodes* may be trying to escape "wild weather" but his situation is far from unique and even his name echoes the name given to the subtropical cyclone which devastated New York city in 2012; indeed, Dipesh Chakrabarty dedicated his 2021 book *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* to "...the memory of those humans and other living beings who perished in the Australian firestorms of 2019-20 and in the Amphan cyclone in the Bay of Bengal in 2020." Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) was inspired by a story which emerged from the real-world Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011. The rising sea levels in Waters' *The Contingency Plan* (2022) are rising in the real world too; the Antarctic ice sheets continuing to melt at unprecedented and alarming rates.

Referring to arguably the most pressing environmental issue of the late twentieth century (the depletion of the ozone layer and the existential environmental threat this posed for earth systems in the 1990s), Kate Soper observed in *What is Nature?* (1995) that "it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer" (151). Soper's insight articulates the sobering truth that degradation of the natural world is

[12] Today, 06:00 26/12/2022, BBC Radio 4, 180 mins. Excerpt starts 2 hours 2 mins 50 seconds in. https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/3C037A70?bcast=138070625 (Accessed 29 Dec 2022)

empirically measurable, ontologically ‘real’. This is elaborated upon by Barry in *Beginning Theory* (2017) who notes that:

> ...ecocritics reject the notion...that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed...For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it...Theory in general tends to see our external world as socially and linguistically constructed, as ‘always already’ textualized into ‘discourse’, but ecocriticism calls this long-standing theoretical orthodoxy into question... (252)

The plays in this study, then, are not concerned with social or linguistic constructs but ultimately with real-world events relating to global warming and ecological crisis. This underlines both the relevance and the urgency of the research undertaken in this thesis.

Chapter Summaries

In chapter 1, I examine overt eco-naturalism, a form of naturalism which conforms closely to the Naturalistic theories advanced by Émile Zola in the preface to the second edition of his novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), the preface to his stage adaptation of *Thérèse Raquin* (1875), his essay "The Experimental Novel" (1880) and his manifesto "Naturalism on the Stage" (1881). With reference to Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016), I explore how the toxic external environment affects the characters' lives and how the play has a moral issue at its core which needs to be resolved. The chapter goes on to analyse how the intense moral scrutiny to which *The Children* subjects its characters is aided by the play's closed time, closed place structure, exemplifying what Jeffreys (2019) calls "pressure cooker" dramaturgy. I draw on the distinction Issacharoff (1981) makes between mimetic space (made visible to the audience, represented onstage) and diegetic space (invisible to the audience, referred to by characters) to show how *The Children* recreates a detailed onstage space which contrasts starkly with its hazy and poetic offstage space and that this conceptualises the hyperobject (Morton 2013) of global warming and ecological crisis unfolding in the play's offstage world.

Chapter 2 explores symbolist eco-naturalism through a close reading of Waters' *On the Beach* (2022), augmented by an interview with the playwright and with the designer of the production which ran at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre in the autumn of 2022. It analyses how Waters' symbolic use of birds in the play illuminates themes of nativism and isolationism, as well as presenting birds as harbingers of impending climate devastation. This complex and subtle use of symbolism also reveals connections between human and avian vulnerabilities within the play.

Chapter 3 explores hyper eco-naturalism and begins by examining how the term 'hypernaturalism' has been variously defined by theorists, from Schumacher

(1996) who aligns it with ultra-verisimilitude to Lehmann (2006) for whom it resonates with Baudrillard's (1994) concept of hyperrealism. Critically examining Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019) and Baker's *The Antipodes* (2019), the chapter draws parallels between the way hyper eco-naturalism deploys a photorealistic aesthetic in which all elements have roughly equal focus and Morton's (2013) notion of how the hyperobject of global warming ruins the weather conversation by removing any gap between foreground and background. The chapter advances three defining characteristics of hyper eco-naturalistic plays then shows how they are deployed in both *You Stupid Darkness!* and *The Antipodes* to illuminate issues of eco-crisis at the heart of each play. The chapter also examines sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard's concept of living a "double reality", in which people's knowledge about global warming is at odds with their actions, and this "double reality" is found to inhabit the subtexual worlds of both plays.

Chapter 4 investigates the dramaturgical potential of disrupted eco-naturalism through a close reading of Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011) and Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016). Both plays are shown to depend for their dramatic impact on the rupturing of a naturalistic edifice on which they initially appear to rely. In *Lungs* this disruption takes the form of a rapid teleological acceleration during the play's final ten pages, projecting the characters into the ecologically dystopian future they feared earlier in the play. Churchill, on the other hand, disrupts the ostensibly naturalistic form of the cosy garden scenes in *Escaped Alone* by introducing Mrs Jarrett, a Brechtian character/narrator who delivers apocalyptic monologues from a 'void' which straddles the play's onstage and offstage spaces. The chapter also explores how Bennett's (2010) theories of vital materialism are found to operate in a number of plays throughout this study, and with reference specifically to *Escaped Alone* it is

aligned with a Freudian sense of the uncanny as a feature of suppressed eco-anxiety.

Chapter 5 examines the most covert extreme of the naturalistic spectrum by looking at two strikingly diverse texts; Stephen Emmott and Katie Mitchell's *Ten Billion* (2012) and Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016). *Ten Billion* takes the form of a performance lecture while *Oil* is structured as a five-act Brechtian epic. However, the chapter explores how each of them is fundamentally reliant on naturalism. It probes director Mitchell's decision to deploy Stanslavskian naturalism—a key part of her artistic aesthetic and one adopted in a wide range of productions during her long career—by placing the scientist/performer Emmott in an exact replica of his Cambridge office. My analysis reveals how, rather than reinforcing his scientific authority, this decision serves to render him a flawed everyman communicating doom-laden scientific predictions to a group of social referents within the intimate 85-seat Royal Court Theatre Upstairs space. Despite its Brechtian epic structure, its recurring elements of petro-magic-realism and its non-naturalistic interscenes, the chapter examines how each of the five scenes in *Oil* adhere to naturalist conventions, providing what Watson (2022) calls a "zoomed-in" perspective on protagonist May and her daughter Amy as they anachronistically travel 162 years through the "zoomed-out" perspective of the age of oil. Hickson's play polarized critical opinion with its combination of naturalism and non-naturalism but this chapter celebrates the play's formal "indeterminacy" (Angelaki 2019: 17) as it encourages multi-scalar thinking and an appreciation of deep time which is central to ecological thought.

Chapter 1: Overt eco-naturalism

Any discussion of the theatrical and literary movement that became known as Naturalism—originating in France in the 1850s and running its course there until the early twentieth century—will recognize Émile Zola as its primary champion. Zola's passionately held theories about naturalism are articulated more clearly and coherently in his manifesto and in prefaces to his works than in his plays themselves. For example, whereas Zola theorized about the importance of structuring naturalistic drama using a single continuous scene, in practice he appears to have found it impossible to adopt this structure even within his most celebrated play *Thérèse Raquin*, which has a one-year gap between Acts I and II. Instead, it is in Strindberg's early work that we see Zola's theories reaching fuller and more coherent artistic expression; *Miss Julie* runs for approximately 90 minutes and uses no interruptions of time or location within its tightly structured schema. My focus therefore rests on what Zola preached rather than what he practised.

This chapter opens with an exploration of the theatrical legacy of Zola's theories about naturalism and considers their impact within contemporary twenty-first century eco-theatre. I examine Zola's preface to the second edition of his novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), the preface to his stage adaptation of *Thérèse Raquin* (1875), his essay "The Experimental Novel" (1880) and his manifesto "Naturalism on the Stage" (1881). Together, they articulate his theorisation of the coming naturalism that he felt would characterise theatre in the near future. I conceive overt eco-naturalistic plays as those that conform most closely to Zola's prescriptions for a naturalistic theatre and I examine three essential characteristics that continue to define naturalistic plays within contemporary eco-theatre: that characters should be created using objective "true observations"; that characters are affected by the

environments in which they live; and that a moral dilemma lies at the heart of the narrative.

I move on to consider how time and place function within overtly eco-naturalistic plays, recognising that such plays occupy an extreme position within Jeffreys' (2019) conceptual matrix of time and place structure, epitomising what Jeffreys refers to as "pressure cooker" dramaturgy. I discuss how Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016), with its highly charged atmosphere and sense of claustrophobic interiority, puts its characters under intense pressure and foregrounds time, contrasting the urgent 'now' in which the characters are forced to make a moral choice with the vast timescales of radioactive decay.

I open my discussion of the nature of eco-naturalism's onstage and offstage spaces with a consideration of the dramaturgical challenges inherent in what Clark (2012) calls "Derangements of Scale", linking this to Morton's (2013) concept of global warming as a hyperobject. I draw on Issacharoff's semiotic reading of space and reference in drama and in particular his observation that "…mimetic space is that which is made visible to an audience and represented on stage. Diegetic space, on the other hand, is *described*, that is, referred to by the characters." (Issacharoff 1981: 215 [emphasis in original]) I argue that naturalistic drama, with its customary focus on interior settings, tends to create detailed, prosaic, mimetic (onstage and visible) spaces which contrast starkly with its indistinct, often poetic, diegetic (offstage and unseen) spaces. I contend that the contrast between the two is intensified in the case of eco-naturalistic plays, the diegetic offstage environments sometimes becoming hazy to the point of implausibility even as the play's mimetic interiors become increasingly detailed. I illustrate this interior/exterior contrast with

reference to the invisible nuclear radiation which palpably affects the characters in *The Children*.

Influenced by Rebellato's observation that Antoine's deployment of the invisible 'fourth wall' positioned the theatre as "a kind of observational prosthesis…[which] often situates the audience at an impossible angle, suspended in the air outside the first floor of an apartment, for instance", I examine the audience's complex relationship with the invisible fourth wall in eco-naturalistic plays, asking what dramaturgical possibilities this offers the playwright.[13]

[13] Dan Rebellato. "Objectivity and Observation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Science*, edited by Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 23

Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*

Émile Zola's impact on the development of theatrical naturalism is incalculable. Despite the historical movement of Naturalism dying out in France by circa 1919—Dadaism having become the dominant form of avant-garde artistic expression by that point—some 17 years after his death, many of the elements that Zola felt characterise naturalistic drama persist today. In this section I focus on three specific attributes of the naturalist drama associated with Zola's ideas: the scientific, objective "true observation" of character; the way that environments help determine character; and the way naturalistic drama tends to place a moral dilemma at the heart of its narrative. I examine the legacy of each of these attributes, showing how they operate within Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016).

Firstly, a key element of Zola's prescription for a naturalistic theatre is that characters should be created using objective "true observations". In this quest for scientific objectivity, Zola reflects the radical age of scientific discovery in which he lived. Darwin's *Origin of Species* had been published in 1859 when Zola was 19 years old and the growing interest in determinism that flowed from Darwin's evolutionary theories influenced how playwrights and novelists began to conceive of character. In the 1868 Preface to the second edition of his novel *Thérèse Raquin*, which he later (1873) adapted for the stage, Zola spells out the nature of his naturalistic enquiry in unequivocally scientific terms:

> I hope it is now becoming clear that my objective was first and foremost a scientific one…In a word, I had only one aim, which was: given a powerful man and an unsatisfied woman [Laurent and his lover Thérèse], to seek within them the animal, and even to see in them only the animal, to plunge them together into a violent drama and then take scrupulous note of their sensations and their actions. I simply carried out on two living bodies the same analytical examination that surgeons perform on corpses. (Zola, 1992: 2)

Later, in his essay “Naturalism on the Stage” (1881), Zola asserted:

> I am waiting for someone to put a man [sic.] of flesh and bones on the stage, *taken from reality, scientifically analyzed*, and described without one lie. I am waiting for someone to rid us of fictitious characters, of those symbols of virtue and vice which have no worth as *human data*…I am waiting for the time when there is…no more waving of the magic wand, changing persons and things from one minute to the next. I am waiting for the time when no one will tell us any more unbelievable stories, when no one will any longer spoil *the effects of true observations* by imposing romantic incidents…
> (my emphases, quoted in Cole 1961: 6)

In Zola’s world view, characters—rather than exhibiting a God-given, pre-ordained set of traits as they had typically done in the melodramas and well-made-plays that preceded naturalism—could more objectively be viewed as the products of complex social, economic and even genealogical determining factors. Just two years after Zola’s “Naturalism on the Stage” had been published, his near-contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche published *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) with its provocative statement that “God is dead”, demonstrating “his belief that science and rational thinking had made the concept of God redundant.” (Pickering and Thompson 2013: 56)

This striving to create truthful characters that are credible, complex and psychologically more rounded than those in the well-made-plays and melodramas that preceded naturalism represents a fundamental shift of emphasis in theatre writing, the effects of which would resonate throughout representational drama across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This naturalistic legacy can clearly be seen at work in Kirkwood’s *The Children*, a play in which rounded

characters are metaphorically put under the microscope, their past actions and current behaviour subjected to moral scrutiny. Furthermore, all three characters in *The Children* are retired scientists who used to work at a nuclear power plant several decades earlier. It is as if they are now being observed under laboratory conditions, in a Petri dish experiment, to test their mettle under pressure. In the play, detailed information is revealed about the professional and sexual relationships between the three characters which informs our understanding of their backstory and helps explain each character's motivations.

Referring to the role of Thomas Stockmann in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882), Rebellato notes that:

> Since the mid-nineteenth century, science had laid special claim to the objectivity of its methods and findings, situating…the scientist as the impersonal conduit for accurate representations of nature. In scientific method, objectivity and observation are often thought to be complementary, but in fact they are frequently in conflict. Observation seems to tell us that the sun goes around the earth, but objectively we can understand that the reverse is true…[O]bjectivity and observation are shaped profoundly by their historical context, in how they are understood and practised, and how they work together. [14]

We see this conflict between objectivity and observation in *The Children* in the character of Hazel who tells Rose that after the nuclear accident she "...felt like I could *see* it the radiation hanging in the air a sort of a sort of filthy glitter suspended..." (12 [emphasis in original]) but she immediately distrusts the veracity of her own observations, linking this distrust to "...my background [as a scientist]..." (12)

[14] *Ibid.*page 13.

Secondly, and intricately connected with the first idea of truthful observation, is the notion that characters are affected by the environments in which they live. For modern audiences, this is another entirely uncontroversial idea. From the characters facing social and interpersonal issues in the 'kitchen sink' dramas of the 1950s and 1960s to the cultural and religious themes being explored in recent naturalist plays such as Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* (2013), the effects of environmental factors on character are inarguable. For Zola, however, this was a case that still needed to be made, causing him to opine in his essay "Naturalism on The Stage" that:

> ...instead of an abstract man [sic.], I would make a natural man, put him in his proper surroundings, and analyze all the physical and social causes which make him what he is.
> (Zola 1893: 151)

In *The Children*, the environment in which Robin and Hazel now find themselves living—a cottage outside the radioactive exclusion zone in Suffolk which belongs to "some distant cousin of Robin's" (12)—is a constant physical reminder of the precarious position in which the characters find themselves. This sense of precariousness is reinforced by key aspects of the staging: for example, the stage directions reveal that there are "*Candles in wine bottles*" (4), hinting at power shortages in the wake of the nuclear accident, and intriguingly we are told that:

> *…the room is at a slight tilt. The land beneath it is being eroded. But this should not be obvious to the naked eye, and only becomes apparent when, for example, something spherical is placed on the kitchen table.* (4)

These subtly unsettling features of the interior environment affect the audience on an unconscious, preverbal level and remind us that Rose and Robin are in effect refugees from their actual home. Their situation exemplifies what Chaudhuri refers to as a "*static* exilic consciousness, experienced by the characters as a feeling of being homesick while at home" (2015: 11, [emphasis in original]) This sense of being homesick while at home is also encapsulated in philosopher Glenn Albrecht 's neologism "solastalgia" which he defines as:

> ...the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place. (Albrecht 2019: 38)

Both Chaudhuri and Albrecht's conceptions of the unhomeliness of home relate to Freud's notion of *unheimlich* which literally means "unhomelike" and is usually translated into English as "uncanny." Albrecht elaborates Freud's uncanny as referring to, "...something sinister or threatening within 'the home'..." (Albrecht 2019: 36). *The Children*'s skewed set acts as a constant phenomenological reminder to the audience that the characters' lives are also fundamentally askew; the foundations upon which they have built their lives are not as solid as they once thought. The environment in Kirkwood's play thus exerts a powerful influence on the lives of the characters, forcing them either to remain indoors or to venture outdoors at their peril. This dramatic representation of environment is characteristic of "high naturalism" in which, according to Raymond Williams:

> ...the lives of the characters have soaked into their environment. Its detailed presentation, production, is thus an additional dramatic

> dimension, often a common dimension within which they are to an important extent defined. Moreover, the environment has soaked into the lives.[15]

Thirdly, "pure" naturalism tends to place a moral dilemma at the heart of the narrative. Zola himself professed:

> I do not know whether my novel [*Thérèse Raquin*] is immoral; I admit that I never worried about making it more or less chaste…I wrote every scene, even the most torrid ones, with the sole curiosity of the scientist. (Zola, 1868: 3)

Yet the moral focus of the story is undeniable. His two central characters Thérèse and Laurent murder Thérèse's husband Camille in order to consummate the passion they feel for one another, raising fundamental questions about their morality, or lack thereof. Moral choices, often with wider ethical implications, are at the heart of many great twentieth-century naturalistic plays. An example of this is Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) in which the father Joe is haunted by the guilt of having been responsible for the deaths of many young American airmen after failing to stop a batch of cylinders he knew to be faulty being sent to aeroplane manufacturers during World War II. Joe's guilt, and his painful—one might almost say Aeschylean—suffering into truth, provides the play's moral architecture. A number of twenty-first century naturalistic eco-dramas also have moral issues at their core: in *The Children*, the three characters could have notified the authorities of their suspicions about design flaws in the nuclear power plant they worked at several decades before and their moral

[15] Raymond Williams, "Social Environment and theatrical environment: the case of English naturalism" in *English Drama: Forms and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 217.

failing in this regard prompts an examination of conscience as Hazel and Robin consider whether to accept Rose's invitation to help decontaminate the nuclear plant following the "accident", to relieve the burden from the titular children of the next generation. In Waters' *The Contingency Plan* diptych, Will attempts to reset the moral compass by correcting his father's misreporting of historic climate change data, presenting the British government with persuasive and scientifically rigorous contemporary evidence about a devastating imminent sea surge. His father Robin's ethical and moral failure to report the data accurately back in the late 1970s carries tragic associations and could be read (after Wallace, 2019) as an example of what Aristotle in *The Poetics* calls "hamartia", the choice or responsibility he exercises which leads inexorably to tragic consequences.

Linked to this thematic focus on morality, naturalistic dramas frequently centre their narratives around issues of intergenerational culpability, guilt and a quest for expiation. In Kirkwood's *The Children* for example, the protagonist Rose is burdened by a powerful sense of moral obligation towards the younger generation, encoded in the play's title, just as the title of Miller's *All My Sons* reminds us of Joe's guilt and moral obligation towards the dead airmen of his generation who, metaphorically, are all his sons.

It is noteworthy that a number of contemporary environmentally themed plays focus on problems that have arisen as the result of decisions that were made approximately 40 years previously. In *The Contingency Plan*, Will's father Robin misreported data about rates of Antarctic ice sheet melting back in the late 1970s; in *The Children*, it is approximately 40 years since the three characters used to work at the nuclear plant and failed to notify the authorities of inherent safety design flaws; and in Bartlett's non-naturalistic *Earthquakes in London*, there is a span of 37 years

between the contemporary (2010) Act I scenes featuring Freya, and the historic (1973) Act II scene in which her scientist father Robert is persuaded to misreport the environmental impacts of carbon emissions in order to appease the interests of airlines, oil and motor companies. Wallace observes that, because of the thermal inertia of the oceans, it takes approximately 40 years for carbon emissions to translate into global temperature rises and that this time lag presents difficulties for dramatists who are used to constructing narratives with much shorter gaps between cause and effect.[16] She examines how Aeschylus navigated this dramaturgical issue in *Prometheus Bound* by having scenes in which Prometheus is punished as a result of his historic theft of fire from Zeus but he does not despair because he knows the longer term chronological trend ("chronos") will see Zeus defeated and he is therefore able to remain patient and to ride out the current moment of crisis ("kairos"), knowing that ultimately all will be well. The picture is complicated in the Anthropocene—the proposed new geological epoch in which humans have become a geophysical force on the Earth— because we are no longer in a position to share Prometheus' sanguinity about the future.[17] In *The Children* and *The Contingency Plan*, Kirkwood and Waters respectively situate the point of moral crisis in the contemporary scenes yet embed the original moral failure within the backstory roughly 40 years previously.

---

[16] Jennifer Wallace, "Hamartia in the Anthropocene", in *Tragedy Since 9/11: Reading a world out of joint*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 153-179.

[17] "Guterres: The IPCC Report is a code red for humanity," United Nations, accessed February 1, 2023, https:// unric.org/en/guterres-the-ipcc-report-is-a-code-red-for-humanity/. This report, published on August 9, 2021, paints an alarming picture of anthropogenic climate crisis: "The alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable: greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk...Many of the changes observed in the climate are unprecedented in thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years, and some of the changes already set in motion – such as continued sea level rise – are irreversible over hundreds to thousands of years."

Pressure cooker dramaturgy

The embodied nature of theatre requires playwrights and theatre makers to make structural decisions about time and place and the relationship between them. Theorists and practitioners have analysed these entwined spatiotemporal dimensions for many years and they are central to the formulation of the classical unities of time, place and action, introduced into the European drama in sixteenth-century Italy and based on readings of Aristotle.

In 1975, playwright Howard Brenton cannily observed that:

> …you could say that there are two kinds of plays – those set in rooms and those outside rooms…There is a huge difference in the ways of looking at the world amongst playwrights who write inside and outside rooms. [18]

However, it was not until 2019 with the posthumous publication of Stephen Jeffreys' *Playwriting: Structure, Character, How and What to Write* that a comprehensive, codified approach to Time and Place playwriting structure was advanced, accompanied by diagrammatic illustration. Jeffreys observed that plays that are closed in both time and place:

> …are set in one location and unfold in real time. These are what I call *pressure-cooker* plays, because time is ticking by, you're stuck in one place and can't escape it. By the end of the play, when time has stopped ticking, you've really reached your climax. These plays are hot plays; they are full of decisions made under pressure. They also tend to be emotional plays, in which characters feel hemmed in or are trying to break out, and the physical constraints of time and place enhance that effect.
> (Jeffreys, 2019: 30 [emphasis in original]).

[18] Quoted in Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler, "Petrol bombs through the proscenium arch", *Theatre Quarterly*, V, no. 17 (1975).

Jeffreys' definition perfectly articulates the pressure cooker atmosphere of Kirkwood's *The Children* which is closed in time (the 90 minutes or so the characters spend together corresponds to 90 minutes elapsing on the clock in the theatre foyer) and in place (the action takes place in one interior setting, a cottage in rural Suffolk outside a nuclear exclusion zone).

While naturalism tends to favour such interior closed place, closed time dramaturgies, such dramaturgy is uncommon within environmentally themed plays. In their attempts to square the ontological vastness of global warming and ecological crisis with the narrower human scales drama traditionally demands, playwrights are frequently drawn to epic structures (as is the case, for instance, with Hickson's *Oil*, Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London* and Bovell's *When the Rain Stops Falling*) or even to reject mimesis altogether and to create performative, sometimes unscripted, work within the wider field of ecology and performance.[19]

By focusing on a single interior setting and by presenting the play as one continuous scene devoid of interruption, Kirkwood situates *The Children* firmly as a pressure cooker play. The chief possibility this decision dramaturgical decision affords is the capacity to subject the characters to intense emotional pressure. Safely ensconced behind naturalism's fourth wall (of which more later in this chapter), the audience is afforded a unique voyeuristic vantage point from which it can witness the characters reacting under pressure as uncomfortable home truths are revealed and the characters' moral integrity is tested.

[19] Such artistic work has been analysed by several influential practitioner-theorists covering the first, second and third waves of ecocritical writing about ecology and performance and they include Woynarski (2020), Arons and May (2012), Kershaw (2007) and Marranca (1996).

Kirkwood's naturalistic intent is communicated in the opening stage direction which states:

> *The light moves slowly from dark to light.*
> *The effect of a painting being cleaned.*
> *Revealed is:*
>
> *A small cottage on the east coast.*
> *A summer's evening.* (4)

This creates the vivid impression of a painted canvas being revealed, hinting at the "…'accurate' or 'lifelike' reproduction which begins in English around 1850 and is mainly used in relation to painting..." that Williams noted in his definition of the word 'naturalism', referred to in the Introduction to this thesis. Kirkwood has a strong visual aesthetic as a dramatist; her most commercially successful play to date, *Chimerica* (2013), foregrounds the power of the photographic image and memorably begins with "...*An image of a man with two shopping bags in a white shirt, standing in front of a line of tanks.*" (Kirkwood 2016: 250)

After the distinctive visual screen wipe with which *The Children* opens, we soon see Rose whose "*nose is bleeding. Blood has spilled down her top*" (4), an arresting and alarming image that foreshadows the emotional blood-letting that will emerge as the romantic entanglements within the play are gradually revealed. We learn that Hazel has hit Rose after mistaking her for an intruder and before long this emotionally charged opening gives way to naturalistic, subtextual dialogue that provides necessary exposition, laying the groundwork for the arrival of Robin and for Rose eventually to reveal the rationale for her visit.

The scene that unfolds, with two sexagenarian women catching up with one another after a period of some absence, ostensibly projects a sense of rural

contentment: they are in a Suffolk cottage in the countryside, it is a summer's evening, wild flowers adorn the room and Rose and Hazel are about to take tea. However, this cosy picture is undermined when we learn that Hazel and Robin have taken refuge in the cottage following a nuclear accident. The tone oscillates between the matter of fact and the apocalyptic and in this regard is somewhat reminiscent of Mrs Jarret's jarring monologues in Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) which I examine in chapter 4.[20] Hazel explains what happened when the nuclear accident occurred:

> Yes, I was…making banana bread, for the children and, because it was the eggs, they started shaking in the box and – this sounds stupid, but I thought, they're hatching. Something's going to come out of them, like a, like a a…I thought this must be what it's like on a ship in a storm and then I thought, what are you doing you stupid woman, get out, just get out, so I did, I just ran outside in my apron, and I saw the road cracked down the middle and then…and then it just stopped…I saw the tide had gone out. I mean it wasn't miles but it looked like miles, and then I saw the wave, only it didn't look like a wave, it looked like the sea was boiling milk and it just kept boiling and boiling and boiling and...And then everyone was running, so I ran too. , I'm so sorry, did you say you wanted tea [?] (10-11)

The disturbing simile of the sea which resembles "boiling milk" and the juxtaposition of this with the socially inflected question about tea holds the elemental and domestic worlds together in dynamic tension and makes it clear to the audience that, far from being a site of rural tranquillity, the cottage in which the action takes place is a temporary refuge from a recent nuclear catastrophe. The uncanny is never far from the surface in Kirkwood's play and in this instance it makes its presence felt in the

[20] It could be argued that *The Children* is in conversation with Churchill's *Escaped Alone*; Churchill's play premièred at the Royal Court in January 2016 while *The Children* opened in the same space in November of the same year. Also, in October 2016, Ella Hickson's *Oil* opened at the Almeida Theatre. It is noteworthy that 2016 saw the première productions of these three ecologically themed plays by three of the UK's most formally inventive contemporary playwrights whose work has taken a distinctly eco-feminist turn in recent years. Kirkwood and Hickson, whom I interviewed during this study, each acknowledged the significant influence of Churchill's work on their own development as playwrights.

way Hazel describes the eggs “shaking in the box” and sensing that they may be “hatching”. It is a key facet of Freud’s notion of the uncanny that inanimate objects become animate in the mind of the person perceiving the phenomenon:

> ...we have particularly favourable conditions for generating feelings of the uncanny if intellectual uncertainty is aroused as to whether something is animate or inanimate... (Freud 2003 [1919]: 140-141)

We learn that the cottage, belonging to a distant cousin of Robin’s, is “only ten miles from the house” (12) but that crucially it is outside the nuclear exclusion zone. As this information is communicated in the play’s opening minutes, the audience is aware from the outset that this is a location from which the characters may only venture outside at their peril. This adds to the sense of claustrophobia as the emotional pressures build within the play. It also serves to raise the stakes for each character when Rose proposes that Hazel and Robin join her as part of a team to help the clear-up operation at the nuclear plant. What Rose offers, in effect, is a choice between facing the difficulty—what Haraway calls “staying with the trouble”—(Haraway 2016: 4) or retreating from it; between living in denial or the possibility of moral redemption.

While the cottage interior provides a sense of spatial confinement, the play’s pressure cooker dramaturgy also imposes temporal constraints on the characters, who are forced to make life-and-death decisions with little time for reflection and with no possibility of deferring the decision. We await the imminent arrival of the taxicab Hazel has called in the closing minutes of *The Children* with a mounting sense of urgency. With the taxi meter about to start ticking and time running out for Hazel, Rose and Robin, the central narrative question of whether Hazel and Robin will join

Rose in her clean-up operation hangs over the characters until the play's closing moments. *The Children* may have opened on a "summer's evening" (4) but by the end of the play, which has unfolded in real time, it has darkened outside, the stage directions revealing that "*The sound of the sea rushes in from the dark"* (78) and that "*The women repeat their [yoga] routine as the lights slowly fade."* (79) Without such strict adherence to closed time, closed place structure, Kirkwood would not have been able to sustain this intensity of pressure on her characters. Any expansion of these temporal or spatial axes would have resulted in a diminution of dramatic tension.

Discussing the decision to deploy such a closed time, closed place pressure cooker structure, Kirkwood explained:

> It's very instinctive with me…The plays tend to find the form they need to be in…In its bones…[the play is] dealing with an emergency situation…all those people in that room are dealing with decisions on lots of levels that they made thirty, forty years ago…the reason we find climate change difficult to talk about is the reason we find our own deaths hard to talk about; because it's about the end of us, about there not being any more, looking at our own extinction… [21]

[21] "Royal Court Theatre platform discussion of *The Children*", Lucy Kirkwood, accessed May 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68eFaUKABMc&t=773s

Mimetic clarity, diegetic haziness

Chaudhuri has observed that:

> Engagement with scale is…a key feature of the emerging encounter between dramatic form and the unfolding new realities of climate change…The contrast now is…between huge *forces* and ordinary people, between what Timothy Morton calls 'hyperobjects', and the human systems of thought that attempt to grasp them…The most challenging hyperobject we confront today is global warming—euphemistically called 'climate change'—and a great deal of contemporary ecocritical theory is now focused on how this hyperobject is shaping—or deforming—contemporary life and thought.[22]

Not only in relation to global warming but also in relation to wider contemporary global ecological crises (including species extinctions, oceanic pollution, degradation of fresh water supplies, reductions in biodiversity) questions of scale remain a central issue for playwrights and theatre makers who are engaging with environmental matters. In a sense, this scalar imbalance—between the human scale of drama on the one hand and the ontological vastness of Morton's hyperobjects on the other—is the elephant in the room, lurking in the shadows of each chapter of this thesis. In this current discussion of overt eco-naturalism, for example, I have shown how Kirkwood has stringently deployed a closed time, closed place naturalistic structure to put her characters in *The Children* under intense emotional pressure whilst the exterior world from which they have sought refuge looms large in the imagination whilst being short on detail. Kirkwood positions the devastating effects of a recent nuclear accident (operating at the scale of a hyperobject in that it exhibits each of the five constitutive features of hyperobjects as Morton conceives them: viscosity, non-locality, temporal

[22] Una Chaudhuri, "Anthropo-Scenes: Staging Climate Chaos in the Drama of Bad Ideas," in *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, ed. Siân Adiseshiah and Louise Page (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 303-304.

undulation, phasing and interobjectivity) as an extrinsic, offstage event while her characters are forced to deal with the emotional fallout from their own toxic relationships (on a human scale) within the minutely observed, indeed claustrophobic, onstage space.

In a semiotic reading of space and reference in drama, Issacharoff identifies "two major forms of dramatic space: mimetic and diegetic" (215) and notes that:

> This distinction parallels what narratologists have been inclined to call showing and telling…In the theater, mimetic space is that which is made visible to an audience and represented on stage. Diegetic space, on the other hand, is *described*, that is, referred to by the characters. In other words, mimetic space is transmitted directly, while diegetic space is mediated through the discourse of the characters, and thus communicated verbally and not visually…In modern theater…dramatic tension and interest can often arise from the interplay between mimetic and diegetic space.[23]

With its customary focus on interior settings, naturalistic drama tends to favour the creation of detailed mimetic (onstage and visible) spaces at the expense of less detailed diegetic (offstage and unseen) spaces, and I contend that the contrast between the two is intensified in the case of naturalistic plays that attempt to dramatize the hyperobjects of global warming and ecological crisis, the diegetic offstage spaces sometimes becoming hazy and indistinct to the point of implausibility yet remaining resonant nonetheless. In *The Children*, for example, we learn that the exterior space which was impacted by the nuclear "disaster" (10) is highly contaminated and that the public is forbidden from entering the exclusion zone.

[23] Michael Issacharoff, 'Space and Reference in Drama', *Poetics Today* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 215.

Hazel explains to Rose what happened to their original house when the disaster struck:

> When the wave came, the house was flooded but not destroyed. The fields and the garden were destroyed but the house was just stinking and full of silt…I can't describe the stench. (20)

Hazel explains that she and Robin said goodbye to their cows the evening they drove away as "…we knew they'd all be dead in days" (21) but that, incredibly:

> ...a week later Robin decided to go back. One morning I woke up and he'd just gone. And do you know what he found? The cows were still alive. All of them, flicking their tails and looking at him reproachfully! And that's when he decided he was going to carry on. He has to throw the milk away, but he goes down there every day now. (22)

This unlikely scenario turns out indeed to be a fiction as Robin confides later in the play to Rose when they are alone:

> They [the cows] were dead when I went back the first time. Couldn't bear to tell Hazel. I told you, she's very sentimental about animals…I've been digging graves. You need to dig a very big pit for a cow, it takes me a few days just to do one so it's quite a, quite a slow process. I have to dig it next to wherever they're lying and then I get the tractor and sort of drag them in. (60)

What stretches credulity is the idea that Robin would be able to enter the exclusion zone each day, presumably for several weeks, and be exposed to high concentrations of radiation, and not only be alive but be fit enough to undertake such prolonged periods of strenuous digging day after day. The vivid diegetic imaginary of the play's exterior world begins to feel hazy to the point of implausibility and for

Kirkwood, this resonant but hazy offstage world is precisely where the play's poetry resides: "I think", she explained in interview, "that exterior world is where I allowed the poetry to sit. There's a heightened quality to it."[24]

The play's indistinct, poetic exterior world contrasts sharply with the clarity and detail we find within the cottage's interior in the first half of the play when Hazel and Rose catch up with one another after an absence of many years. Kirkwood uses the naturalistic set's detailed verisimilitude to lace the text with subtle hints that Rose must have visited the cottage much more recently than the 38 years she professes. An observant audience member—aided by suitably nuanced directing, acting and design—will detect the telltale signs of Rose's more recent physical familiarity with the cottage interior. For example, the stage directions reveal that:

> *ROSE sits in a battered armchair.*
> *Without looking she reaches under it and pulls out a footstool, rests her feet on it.*
> *HAZEL watches her.* (7)

Then, a little later:

> *ROSE finds a glass in the first cupboard she opens.*
> *HAZEL watches her.* (9)

We watch Hazel watching Rose, and by observing Rose's non-verbal mimetic actions we begin to piece together the scene's subtext; that Rose must have visited the cottage much more recently than she professes. This indeed turns out to be true,

[24] Lucy Kirkwood, Zoom interview with the author, May 24, 2021.

when we later learn that Robin and Rose enjoyed secret romantic trysts in the cottage until relatively recently, unbeknownst to Hazel.

The diegetic and mimetic worlds of Kirkwood's play begin to collide when "*Water starts to seep into the room from under the door to the bathroom"* (66). Earlier in the play, Rose had used the toilet to do "a number one" (40)—that is, she had urinated—as Hazel had warned her that "...the macerator on the downstairs toilet is very unreliable and if you did - if you did do a number two [that is, defecation] then it will cause it to overflow" (40). When the water seeps on stage some 26 pages later, an exasperated Hazel shouts: "SHE SHAT IN OUR TOILET! YOU SHAT IN OUR TOILET ROSE, WHAT HAVE YOU GOT TO SAY FOR YOURSELF?" (67). Before long, the stage directions reveal that *"The water is halfway across the floor now"* (67) and Robin attempts to brush it away. The phenomenological effect of seeing real water on stage is a visceral reminder to the audience of the power and unpredictability of the tsunami that triggered the nuclear accident in the narrative's backstory. There is a lively materiality about water on stage, what Bennett calls "Thing-Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle." (Bennett 2010: 6) This water—a physical embodiment of the environment that has begun to seep into the characters' lives in Williams' formulation of high naturalism—foreshadows the sea water which will inundate the stage in the play's closing minutes. On the penultimate page of the play text we learn that *"The sound of the sea rushes in from the dark"* (78) and Rose declares that she has heard "the bells you know / From the church, under the water" (78). It is in the midst of this tumult, with *"...the sound of a wave building, It grows and grows / It crashes upon us"* (79) that the play ends. *The Children*'s hazy, resonant and poetic offstage world has invaded its detailed, prosaic onstage world and the apparently

uncontrollable onstage water is the phenomenological nexus which connects these two worlds.

Eco-naturalism's invisible fourth wall

Rebellato has drawn attention to the problematic position naturalism's fourth wall can place the audience in:

> André Antoine's deployment of the invisible 'fourth wall' in his staging has a complex relationship to observation. Most obviously, it provides voyeuristic access to a hidden reality and thus situates the theatre as a kind of observational prosthesis, like the telescope or microscope. However, it often situates the audience at an impossible angle, suspended in the air outside the first floor of an apartment, for instance.[25]

The audience for *The Children* is situated in a precarious position that enables it to watch events unfolding inside the cottage where the action takes place, a cottage which lies just outside a nuclear fallout zone. The audience thus occupies a voyeuristic vantage point, prying into the minutiae of the characters' lives and privy to their most intimate secrets whilst remaining distanced from the radioactive and interpersonal toxicities revealed in the play. Eco-naturalism's invisible fourth wall could be interpreted as a metonymy for humanity's contemporary, uneasy position vis-à-vis global warming and ecological crisis; we sit on the metaphorical fence and watch from a privileged yet impotent position, seemingly unable to act while the tragic consequences of our reckless actions play out with nightmarish inevitably. Of course, this 'we' needs unpacking: it would surely not be contentious to say that the 'we' who watch such naturalistic eco-dramas, in comfortable, air-conditioned theatres in the Global North, are unlikely in this moment in history to be as directly affected by the impacts of global warming and ecological devastation as those living in more precarious conditions in the Global South. We may even have driven to the theatre,

[25] Rebellato, "Objectivity and Observation," 23.

burning fossil fuels along the way, and marvelled at the subtle effects of the stage lighting—imperceptibly darkening the sky as the action of *The Children* unfolds in 'real' time over a summer's evening—without considering the resulting carbon emissions which will linger in the atmosphere for decades after the curtain call. Contemporary western concerns over accelerating climate and ecological devastation emanate from a privileged, predominantly white, world view, a perspective a number of postcolonial ecocritical writers are now challenging. Referring to the devastating impacts of settler colonialism on indigenous communities, for example, Whyte has observed:

> …quite a few indigenous peoples in North America are no longer able to relate locally to many of the plants and animals that are significant to them. In the Anthropocene, then, some indigenous peoples already inhabit what our ancestors would have likely characterized as a dystopian future. So we consider the future from what we believe is already a dystopia… [26]

Yusoff expands on this theme, noting:

> If the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism. The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence. The Anthropocene as a politically infused geology and scientific/popular discourse is just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to continually overlook in the making of its modernity and freedom. [27]

---

[26] Kyle Powys Whyte, "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous conservation and the Anthropocene", in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities,* ed. Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann, (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 207

[27] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xiii

The conventions that overt eco-naturalism ask us to accept reinforce our position of privileged impotence, rendering the audience a passive observer unable to break through the invisible fourth wall while witnessing ecological and emotional devastation taking place on the other side of it.

Sierz points to the ubiquity of naturalism within British theatre in his observation that:

> It [naturalism] has become the 'go to' or default theatre method…It's exceptionally democratic. So, if you wanted to do the Granny test, you'd take your grandmother to the theatre and she will understand a naturalistic, 'normal' [play], especially if it's a three-act drama with a nice story arc…It's perfectly comprehensive, and what you see is what you get. That seems completely unproblematic in one sense because it's comprehensible, it's accessible, there's a certain clarity, and a certain realism. [28]

Yet, as Williams elucidates when setting out his concept of "structures of feeling", the conventions naturalism imposes upon both performers and audience members are quite extraordinary when viewed objectively:

> In a naturalistic play…the convention is that the speech and action should as closely as possible appear to be those of everyday life; but few who watch such a play realize that this is a convention: to the majority it is merely 'what a play is like', 'the sort of thing a play tries to do'. Yet it is, in fact, a very remarkable convention that actors should represent people behaving naturally, and usually privately, before a large audience, while all the time maintaining the illusion that, as characters, these persons are unaware of the audience's presence. The most desperate private confession, or the most dangerous conspiracy, can be played out on the stage, in full view and hearing of a thousand people; yet it will not occur to either the actors or audience that this is in any way strange, because all, by the tacit consent of

[28] Aleks Sierz, Zoom interview with the author, March 17, 2021.

> custom, have accepted this procedure as a convention. Not long ago…it was, however, thought very strange if a character spoke in soliloquy, whether this was thought of as 'thinking aloud' or 'directly addressing the audience'. The complaint would be that this was 'artificial', or 'not true to life', or even 'undramatic'; yet it is surely as normal, and as 'true to life', when one is on a stage before a thousand people, to address them, as to pretend to carry on as if they were not there. [29]

The sense that performers are being observed by an audience they (by convention) cannot see, hidden behind naturalism's invisible fourth wall, reinforces the sense of the naturalist theatre as a site of scientific observation. Pattie (2018) has drawn attention to the way Beckett's characters frequently vocalise their unease at being observed by an unnamed, offstage presence.[30] Beckett's meta-textual awareness-raising of the invisible fourth wall is playful to the point of mischievousness, but such playfulness is not available to the dramatist who, by deploying overt eco-naturalism, conforms rigorously to the conventions of the fourth wall until the curtain call, at which point those conventions, by mutual consent, are exploded.

The effect of naturalism's fourth wall differs according to the spatial and technical constraints of the theatre where the play is being produced. In the original 2009 production of *The Contingency Plan* in London's intimate Bush Theatre, for example—the updated 2022 version of which I examine in the next chapter—the audience was close enough to the actors to test the verisimilitude of the props and this led to some discomfiting moments, as Waters explained:

> [T]he play's original context took that one stage further with the audience in effect within a shared space with the performers; this led to

[29] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), 4-5.
[30] David Pattie, '"At Me Too Someone Is Looking …": Coercive Systems in Beckett's Theatre', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui: An Annual Bilingual Review/Revue Annuelle Bilingue* 30, no. 2 (2018): 227–38.

> some interesting moments – e.g. when, at the interval, after Robin's demonstration with the model of the flood, the audience inspected the model, or when, at one point in *Resilience*, Will/Geoff Streatfield in full flow with his laptop, holding forth to the COBRa meeting, found a woman had stood up and walked behind him to look at the content of his laptop. Amazing moments! That adage of Mike Bradwell about the old Bush that it was a place 'where it was impossible to lie' really landed at such moments.[31]

This is reminiscent of Strindberg's somewhat exasperated observation in his Preface to *Miss Julie* that:

> Our prying minds are not content merely with seeing something happen – they must know why it happens. We want to see the wires, see the machinery, examine the box with the false bottom, finger the magic ring to find the join, look at the cards to see how they are marked.[32]

From its earliest days as a movement in late nineteenth century France, Naturalism flourished, and has continued to flourish, in small, intimate spaces. Writing about the inaugural programme at André Antoine's Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1887, for example, Antoine cites the critic Jules Lemâitre who observed:

> The auditorium is very small...One could shake hands with the actors across the footlights, and stretch one's legs over the prompter's box. The stage is so small that only the simplest scenery can be set up on it, and so near the audience that scenic illusion is impossible. If such illusion were born in us, it was because we created it ourselves... (Antoine 1977: 47)

---

[31] Steve Waters, email message to the author, April 10, 2021.

[32] August Strindberg and Michael Meyer, Preface to *Miss Julie* in *Strindberg: Plays One* (London: Methuen Drama, 1987), 99.

Nor is it coincidental that Bert O. States' seminal 1985 book on the phenomenology of theatre should be titled *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*. In contemporary eco-naturalistic theatre, one could argue, the relative smallness of the rooms operates in inverse proportion to the magnitude of the plays' ecological reckonings.

Conclusions

This chapter opened with a clarification of my conception of overt eco-naturalism, a form of naturalism occupying one extreme of what I am calling the naturalistic spectrum. This overt naturalism conforms closely to Zola's notions about naturalistic form, ideas about which he theorised in detail but which failed to find full expression in his own plays. One key element of Zola's prescription for naturalistic theatre—and hence for my conception of overt eco-naturalism— is that characters should be created using objective "true observations". A second element is the notion that characters are affected by the environments in which they live. Thirdly, I argued that overt naturalism tends to place a moral dilemma at the heart of the narrative, subjecting the characters to intense moral scrutiny.

This chapter went on to explore ways in which overt eco-naturalism tackles issues of intergenerational guilt and often focuses on attempts to expiate previous moral failings. The chapter examined how Kirkwood's *The Children* positions the point of moral failure—the three characters' failure to address safety concerns about the nuclear plant where they worked decades previously—approximately 40 years in the narrative's backstory. Naturalism—from Zola, Ibsen and Strindberg onwards—often concerns itself with the long consequence and in our current age of anthropogenic global warming and climate crisis, this focus on the long consequence of previous human actions makes naturalism a particularly suitable form through which to interrogate such issues.

The chapter continued with an exploration of how naturalism addresses what Clark calls "Derangements of Scale" (2012: 148) in the Anthropocene. With reference to Kirkwood's *The Children*, I showed how overt eco-naturalistic theatre's focus on mimetic onstage clarity helped to conceptualize the hyperobjects (Morton 2013) of global warming and ecological crisis unfolding in the play's hazy, diegetic

offstage spaces, where Kirkwood allowed the play's poetry to sit. In focusing on such detailed mimetic onstage verisimilitude, *The Children* epitomises Jeffreys' (2019) concept of "pressure cooker" dramaturgy which supposes a strict adherence to closed time, closed space structure.

The chapter discussed the problematic voyeuristic position eco-naturalism's invisible fourth wall tends to put the audience in and concluded with an examination of how the material conditions of the theatres in which overt eco-naturalistic plays are staged has a significant impact on the audience's phenomenological perception of what they experience on stage.

In the next chapter, I move further along the naturalistic spectrum to consider symbolist eco-naturalism, illustrated by Steve Waters' *On the Beach* (2009, 2022). Like Kirkwood's *The Children*, Waters' play is set in a single location. However, Waters' play deploys a more open temporal structure than *The Children*, allowing a gap of five months to elapse between the springtime of the first act and the autumn of the second. While this diminishes some of the tension inherent within closed time, closed place pressure cooker dramaturgy, it enables the playwright to explore how characters evolve over time, affected by their changing environment.

Chapter 2: Symbolist eco-naturalism

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?
William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" [33]

In this chapter, I examine how Steve Waters deploys symbolist eco-naturalism in his diptych of plays *The Contingency Plan*, originally produced at London's Bush Theatre in 2009 and subsequently rewritten and updated for production at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre in October 2022. My focus will be on the first play, *On the Beach*, which is set "Above a saltmarsh, on Robin and Jenny's land in North-West Norfolk" in the "Almost now." (12) The second play, *Resilience*, is set in "A room in Whitehall" in the "Nearly now" (76). Both plays share a thematic concern with rising sea levels precipitated by faster than expected melting of Antarctic ice sheets and both plays mirror one another in their temporality; the first act of each play takes place during the same April weekend in an assumed present while the second act of each play takes place five months later, at 8pm on a fateful Saturday in September.

These two starkly contrasting locations represent versions of the country and the city about which, in his 1973 essay "Country and City", Williams observed:

> Powerful hostile associations have...developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.
> (Williams 2016 [1973]: 1)

In *Resilience*, we see the "worldliness and ambition" clearly being played out in the jostling for political power between Tessa Fortnum, Minister of State for Resilience

[33] William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1979), 183

and her maverick boss Christopher Casson, Secretary of State for Resilience. We also see it being played out in the conflict between the Ministry's longstanding Scientific Adviser Professor Colin Jenks and Robin's young glaciologist son Will who initially challenges then usurps Jenks' role. In *On the Beach*, the sense of "limitation" and perhaps even "ignorance" come into sharp focus as Robin's insular and intransigent views lead directly to him and Jenny becoming trapped in their own environment, surrounded by fatally rising sea levels and ultimately cut off from the rest of the world by Robin's isolationism.

Symbols are deployed subtly yet powerfully in *On the Beach*, ranging from birds which function as harbingers of climate crisis, to an ash tree which appears to be alive but which is in fact dead. This latter functions as a synecdoche for the play's wider theme of appearances—such as the apparent solidity of the West Antarctic ice sheet—being deceptive.

Symbolism played an important role in the development naturalistic theatre in the late nineteenth century. As Styan (1981b) points out:

> [I]t is significant that each of the great nineteenth-century naturalists, Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann and Chekhov, chose a more symbolic expression at the very time when he had apparently succeeded in being rigorously realistic. (1-2)

This symbolist naturalism perhaps finds its finest expression around the turn of the century in Chekhov's final play *The Cherry Orchard* (1903). The orchard in the play is a highly resonant symbol which:

> ...symbolizes in a tangle of sentiments both the family's happy past and the ugly days of serfdom; by the end of the play it has grown to mean something different to each of the characters, and it has also embraced

> immense social and economic changes about to take place in the future. This kind of suggestiveness can affect the whole mode of a play...
> (Styan 1981b: 4)

In this chapter, I argue that symbolist eco-naturalism—illustrated by a close reading of Waters' *On the Beach* augmented by interviews with the playwright and the Crucible Theatre production's designer—introduces layers of ecological meaning which would not have been possible had the play simply focused on verisimilitude and mimetic representation. Such symbolist eco-naturalism creates alternative ways of conceptualizing the hyperobject (Morton 2013) of global warming which is occurring in the play's offstage, diegetic world. Unlike the closed time, closed place pressure cooker dramaturgy of Kirkwood's *The Children* which I explored in the first chapter, *On the Beach*—and indeed its sister play *Resilience*—deploy a closed place but open time dramaturgy; in each play the location remains the same but there is a five month temporal jump between acts. Jeffreys observes that "...the problem with this type of play is that we're stuck in the same room" and that plays "...of this type can lack contrast, so you have to find novel ways of achieving that. One option is to vary the characters on stage in each scene" (Jeffreys 2019: 36). This is precisely what Waters does; Will and his girlfriend Sarika appear in Act I, scene 1 of *On the Beach*, then all four characters enjoy—or perhaps more accurately endure—an alfresco meal in the play's second scene. By the play's second and final act, Robin and Jenny are left alone, intensifying their sense of isolation and environmental vulnerability.

While Kirkwood's play was set firmly indoors, *On the Beach* is set "Above a saltmarsh, on Robin and Jenny's land in North-West Norfolk." (12) In dramaturgical terms it functions as a domestic interior realm with characters conscious of social

niceties, even if, like Robin, they resist them. This liminal space acts as an ecotone between the domestic (signified by Robin and Jenny's nearby house) and the wilderness (signified by the North Sea). Such ecotones are inherently sites of tension; as Morton (2007) reminds us, the 'tone' of 'ecotone' is an aesthetic quality that denotes " ... the tension in a string or muscle ... It also, significantly, refers to a notion of place; hence 'ecotone', a zone of ecological transition." (43)

The domestic feel of the space is reinforced when in Act I scene 2, we see that:

> *There's a long trestle table with a hurricane lamp on it.*
> *JENNY is laying a large white cloth on it. She sets out cutlery and glasses.* (27)

This detailed mimetic onstage space allows Waters to focus our attention on finely nuanced aspects of character and subtext. At the beginning of Act I scene 2, Will is "*washing and dipping razor-clam shells in hot water*" (27) in preparation for the evening meal. This mimetic focus on a hand property (a 'prop') lays the groundwork for a witty exchange between Will and his mother just a few pages later. The razor-clams not only hint at Robin and Jenny's green credentials (by showing that they cook, at least when guests are present, with locally sourced, sustainable ingredients) but they also allow Jenny, preparing the razor-clams with Will, gently to mock Robin's insularity:

> JENNY: Try getting them out of the sand, they're stubborn insular buggers. Remind you of anyone? (29)

Waters plays a neat dramaturgical trick in *On the Beach* by setting the play in this ostensibly exterior but functionally interior location. The hazier exterior diegetic space of the ocean—thematically linked to Will and Robin's glaciological work on ice melt rates in the Antarctic—is conjured by characters' references to "Governor's Point" which Jenny dismissively refers to as "a great big lump of sand in the North Sea" (14). References to Governor's Point recur as a leitmotif throughout the play, soaking into the audience's imagination as a potent but unseen symbol of rising sea levels and reinforcing the play's overarching thematic focus. But Governor's Point itself—just like the poetic "filthy glitter" of nuclear radiation in Kirkwood's *The Children*—remains hazy and lacking in detail, visible even to the characters on stage only via binoculars and located somewhere "out Brancaster way." (13) Despite this haziness, it maintains its symbolic power in much the same way that Madame Ranyevskaia's beloved cherry orchard is much referred to but never seen. The stage directions for Act II of Chekhov's play reveal:

> *An old wayside shrine in the open country…On one side and some distance away is a row of dark poplars, and it is there that the cherry orchard begins. Further away is seen a line of telegraph poles, and beyond them, on the horizon, the vague outlines of a large town, visible only in very good, clear weather*.[34]

Waters plays a further deft dramaturgical trick by bringing the hazy diegetic wilderness and the detailed mimetic interior areas together in the form of a scale model which Robin has constructed, to test his hypothesis about the catastrophic effects of the impending sea surge he has been predicting. Robin's scale model, described as "*a relief map of the [nature] reserve within a tank with markings on the*

[34] Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, trans. Elisaveta Fen (London: Penguin Books, 1959), 354.

side" (44), is a totem of the wilderness contained within the domestic domain. He pours water into it, releases a scaled-down sluice gate and even agitates the water with his hands to demonstrate to Jenny, Sarika and Will his predictions for the tidal surge that is about to engulf them. He invokes scientific metaphors to press home the scale of the imminent surge and to emphasize their vulnerability in the face of the huge elemental forces about to be unleashed: "We're the Petri dish, the canary in the coalmine…" (47) But by the end of the play Robin and Jenny will find themselves at the mercy of the waves and the play ends, ominously, with "*Everything...very dark"* (73) and the water continuing to rise.

Birds as harbingers of climate crisis in Steve Waters' *On the Beach*

A superficial reading of *On the Beach* might conclude that it focuses exclusively on the interpersonal conflicts of the human characters, seeming to corroborate Chaudhuri's view that naturalism proffers "a wholly social account of human life" (1994: 24) and Love's view that "Naturalistic theatre recreates social environments, not natural ones." (2020: 229) A deeper reading, however, reveals how intricately its human and more-than-human worlds are enmeshed and how they share a sense of existential vulnerability in the face of impending climate devastation. A well as exemplifying, *par excellence*, Williams' concept of high naturalism which we examined in relation to Kirkwood's *The Children*—a form of naturalism in which the lives of the characters have soaked into the environment and moreover the environment has soaked into the lives—*On the Beach* mixes a concern for the vulnerability of its human characters with a concern for the degradation of the natural environment and its more-than-human inhabitants.

This ecological focus is expressed in a number of ways in the text. Firstly, *On the Beach* portrays birds as harbingers of climate crisis, carrying portents of impending environmental disaster. Secondly, birds fulfil a symbolic role within the drama, irreducibly linked to the play's central themes of nativism and isolationism. Thirdly, there is sonic intrusion from the more-than-human world from the play's very opening moments and these intrusions become noticeably more significant and plangent as the narrative unfolds, the "incredibly loud" (69) cacophony of what "Must be five-hundred odd birds!" (64) prefiguring the eventual devastating tidal surge at the play's denouement, with the sound of the sea "very loud" (72). Fourthly, I examine how the wide range of flora and fauna represented in the play—from the micro to the macro scale, from the living to the dead—contributes to this queering of our ecological perspective; from the various seafood items the humans prepare to

eat; to the weaver fish which enters the human realm by stinging Sarika as she walks on the marsh; from the wide range of birds and bird species that are referenced in the play to the dead ash tree, reminiscent of Yggdrasil, the tree of life in Norse mythology, that is freighted with symbolic meaning.

Will brings his girlfriend Sarika to his parents' off-grid home above a saltmarsh in North-West Norfolk for a first meeting with his parents. She is a senior civil servant working on climate policy with Robin's ex-colleague Colin Jenks who is the government's Chief Scientific Advisor. We learn that back in the late 1970s when Jenks and Robin worked together measuring the rates of ice-melt in the Antarctic, Robin unearthed data that contradicted the "stability hypothesis" upon which Jenks has continued to base his conservative scientific modelling. While Jenks has gained an influential position as a senior civil servant within the Ministry for Resilience, Robin moved to an off-grid coastal property in North-West Norfolk in the late 1970s and has remained there ever since with his wife Jenny, haunted by his moral failing.

The scale and pace of global warming having dramatically increased in the intervening decades and the stability hypothesis now looking increasingly like wishful thinking, Sarika has persuaded Will , a glaciologist in his father's footsteps, to present his recently researched scientific evidence to the government with the aim of injecting a sense of urgency into its climate policy planning, showing how the rate of melting in the West Antarctic Ice Sheet may presage imminent and devastating coastal flooding on a global scale. In parallel, Robin has been making detailed scientific recordings of their local area and tells Jenny in the play's opening moments "…there's a storm on the way; be with us by the small hours" (15), foreshadowing the calamitous tidal surge that in the play's second act will go on to devastate the entire eastern seaboard of Great Britain, including the Thames estuary and London.

Rather high-handedly, Robin boasts to Sarika shortly after meeting her in the play's first act that:

> I know every inch of this hectare of land – the flora and fauna, the microflora and microfauna, every moss and every grub and every particle of soil I've studied through every season, every condition of weather, recorded years of data and tidal patterns, of wind directions, sea currents, logged patterns of bird migrations, studied the life cycles of lugworms and sandworms and I know about cloud formation and silting and am I an *expert*? I can't even say for sure what'll happen tonight. (37 [emphasis in original])

So, although human dilemmas have already been established as a key narrative focus of the drama—for example: will the historic conflict between Jenks and Robin be resolved?; can Will take the "inconvenient truths" of his father's scientific research to their logical conclusion and present the government with irrefutable contemporary scientific evidence of his own?; will Robin and Jenny survive the tidal "event" Robin is predicting?—the more-than-human world is already beginning to make its presence felt within the play's striations of symbol and motif.

The first more-than-human animal we encounter appears or, rather, is referred to, in the play's opening moments, before the arrival of Will and Sarika. Alone with Jenny near their house which looks out to sea, Robin looks through his "telescope of considerable power" (13) and spots an unusual bird with distinctive white plumage which has landed on Governor's Point, dismissed by Jenny as "a great big lump of sand in the North Sea." (14) Although the significance of the sighting is initially lost on Jenny, Robin explains that the bird is a "Eurasian spoonbill...Returned to Norfolk after a four-hundred-year Continental break!" (14) Robin wastes no time in linking the bird's appearance to changing weather patterns

in southern Europe: “Can’t be easy nesting on the Med now, those drying-up estuaries; your spoonbill needs eels, mud, brackish water.” (14)

The Eurasian spoonbill, starkly incongruous in this North Sea location, is thus presented as a signifier of disrupted weather patterns, carrying auguries of impending environmental devastation. This has the effect of linking human and avian vulnerabilities; just as the spoonbill has been displaced by fundamental changes to its natural habitat, so Robin and Jenny will go on to face fatal displacement by the devastating tidal surge Robin has been predicting. In this way, Waters signposts very early in the play that the needs of humans and more-than-human animals are deeply intertwined and that birds are the vectors for these prescient messages.

Birds have been perceived as harbingers, delivering messages into the human realm, since at least Roman times. Indeed, the Latin word ‘augury’ derives from the classical Latin etymon *augurium*, meaning “practice of divining from the flight of birds, art or faculty of divination, omen, portent, sign, indication, presage, prediction…” [35] In ancient Greece, Aristophanes’ comedy *The Birds* (circa. 414 BCE) portrayed birds as having their own kingdom from which they travelled to the human world to help mediate disputes between humans and the gods.

Our sense of the uncanny prescience of birds may be connected to the fact that they have been on the earth considerably longer than humans. As Adele Nozedar points out:

> With birds and their language, and the secrets they hold for us, it is worth remembering that these creatures have existed on the planet for far longer than mankind. Birds have been here for 150 million years…There is…evidence of the extreme age of the sacred ibis, whose fossil records go back 60 million years…*Homo sapiens* is a

[35] ‘Augury, n.’, in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 18 October 2021, http://0.www.oed.com/view/Entry/13108.

> relative newcomer, and has been on this earth for approximately 35,000 years. There is little wonder, then, that these winged creatures, which the ancient Mexicans believed belonged in the fourth dimension – the dimension of fire – and which can also exist under water, on the water and in the air, would have some wisdom to impart to us; and indeed, that the Gods had sent the birds here for the purpose of giving us messages.[36]

In *On the Beach,* the sense of vulnerability shared by both human and nonhuman beings resonates deeply with contemporary ecological thinking, reflected in ecocritical theorisations about multispecies kinship and decentring the human propounded by a growing number of contemporary ecocritics and philosophers.[37] For Morton, "The ecological crisis we face is so obvious that it becomes easy—for some, strangely or frighteningly easy—to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected. This is *the ecological thought*." [emphasis in original] [38] In their discussion of queer ecology, Morton goes on to highlight the fundamental entanglement of the human and more-than-human:

> All life-forms, along with the environments they compose and inhabit, defy boundaries between inside and outside at every level…Queer ecology requires a vocabulary envisioning this liquid life. I propose that life-forms constitute a *mesh*, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the non-living, between organism and environment…How can we ever distinguish properly between humans and nonhumans? Doesn't the fact that identity is in the eye of the beholder put serious constraints on such distinctions? [39]

---

[36] Adele Nozedar, *The Secret Language of Birds: A Treasury of Myths, Folklore & Inspirational True Stories* (London: HarperElement, 2006), 7.

[37] See, for example, Tsing (2015), Haraway (2016), Heise (2016), Morton (2017), Sheldrake (2020) and Nussbaum (2023).

[38] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 1

[39] Timothy Morton, 'Guest Column: Queer Ecology', *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 275-6.

The symbolic role of birds within *On the Beach* becomes more apparent when we step back and consider the significance of the characters' names. Three out of four of them carry the names of birds; Robin, Jenny (the traditional common name for a female wren) and Sarika, who explains that her name is "Hindi for cuckoo." (36) Although the effects of this nomenclature operate at a largely unconscious level, it is striking that the robin and the (Jenny) wren are both resident native British birds while the cuckoo is a summer migrant and a brood parasite to boot. The cuckoo interlopes by laying its eggs in other birds' nests so that the other birds are forced to bring up the juvenile cuckoos as their own. And indeed, Sarika functions as a metaphorical cuckoo in Robin's nest; tempting away Robin and Jenny's only offspring and migrating south with him, to a cabinet room in Whitehall which provides the enclosed setting for *The Contingency Plan*'s second play *Resilience*, leaving Robin and Jenny—without wishing to stretch the avian metaphor too far—as empty nesters.

From the moment they first meet, Robin treats Sarika with suspicion. When she "*runs on, her feet wet, her trousers rolled up"* (26) having been stung by a poisonous weaver fish, Robin barks "Who's this? Hey, what are you- " (26) and even after Will has explained "…this is Sarika" (26), Robin forges ahead with his suspicious probing, interrogating her "Do you have a permit to – " (26) and "You're aware this is an SSSI -" (26). Robin's antagonism towards Sarika deepens during the awkward meal they share later in Act 1. When Will explains that "Sarika's a scientist actually" (36), Robin mocks her by rhetorically asking "A scientist? Veterinary studies, perhaps? Psychology?" (36) and when Sarika explains that she is "a biochemist. By training" (36), Robin instantly attempts to put her down with the misogynistic slur "Don't look like the biochemists I knew. They all had beards." (36)

Robin's intransigence and isolationism become increasingly clear as the play progresses, articulated in his somewhat unhinged speech towards the end of the play when he has cut off his and Jenny's telephonic communication with the outside world, insisting "What we need to remember is we did this, we built this, we made this entirely alone. That we remain entirely alone. Being alone is actually our strength" (70). His outburst—reminiscent of Thomas Stockmann's isolationist speech towards the end of Ibsen's 1882 *An Enemy of the People* ("The fact is, you see, that the strongest man in the world is he who stands alone")—is directly linked to his mistrust of Sarika and the governmental scientific authority she represents, complicated by the fact that the department Sarika works for is headed by Robin's longstanding nemesis, Jenks.[40] The xenophobia Robin displays towards Sarika, and his chauvinistic isolationism, are presented as a form of nativism which is linked to Robin's concerns for conservation in the Site of Special Scientific Interest in which he and Jenny have built their off-grid Shangri La.

The figure of the curmudgeonly, somewhat misanthropic conservationist with a nativist mindset recurs in Waters' work; the character of Ian in Waters' BBC Radio 4 radio drama series *Song of the Reed*, holds strikingly similar views. Waters explains that he "pitched a four-part drama [*The Song of the Reed*] about an imaginary nature reserve called Fleggwick to the BBC, claiming, hubristically, it would 'do for conservation what *The Archers* did for farming.'"[41] The curmudgeonly patriarch Joe Grundy in BBC Radio 4's long-running serial about farming life, *The Archers,* perhaps stands as an archetype for both Ian and Robin; insular, conservative, and equally suspicious of outsiders as of innovation.

---

[40] Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People* in *Plays: Two*, Methuen World Classics. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980a), 222

[41] "The making of *Song of the Reed*: Wild Tracks", University of East Anglia, accessed October 14, 2021, https://stories.uea.ac.uk/wildtracks/

Not only does the symbolic function of birds within *On the Beach* operate at a largely unconscious level, but the choice of the characters' names also appears to have happened at an unconscious level during the writing process. Questioned about the choice of birds' names for three out of his four characters, and their implicit metaphorical associations within the play, Waters explained:

> I think that's an incredible observation. I mean, funnily enough, "Robin" and "Jenny", I'd never made that connection because my parents had two friends called Robin and Jenny…I always found the…euphony of those names very hard to shift. And Robin is such an interesting name anyway; it's sort of strangely not quite gendered and quite déclassé, hard to place...It very much seemed to have a sort of efflorescence as a name in the post-war period, God knows why...So, the link with actual Robins, there's obviously something going on at a deep level with me. [42]

When I shared my observation with Waters that Sarika acts as a metaphorical cuckoo in robin's nest, he replied:

> I do associate it with the seventies perhaps. *Robin's Nest*, yes. [43] …We had lots of discussions about nativism and tentative micro aggressions that are going on between Robin and Sarika when discussing the current production [at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre in October 2022] because in a way when one's working with a slightly different generation of artists, suddenly those questions felt even more powerful...Some people talk about convivial conservation; that idea that…nobody owns this stuff. So that kind of beating up that Sarika receives – and of course she gives as good as she gets – is a little way of saying, you know, it's quite easy to retreat and create a little fortress. And the logical result of that will be Robin's actions in Act Two, because in a way he's severed all connections, processes, politics, connectivity, society. He's created this place of Prospero-like exclusion, but there's no solidarity in that either. [44]

---

[42] Steve Waters, audio interview with the author, September 30, 2021.

[43] *Robin's Nest* was a British television sitcom which aired on ITV from 11 January 1977 to 31 March 1981.

[44] Steve Waters, audio interview with the author, September 30, 2021.

Robin's Prospero-like sense of exclusion and isolationism contrasts sharply in the play with the behaviour of migratory birds who owe no fixed allegiance to country or nationality and who annually cross international boundaries to fulfil their needs for food and reproduction. Sarika reminds us of the nationless nature of migratory birds in the play's second scene; after Robin has described what is for him the highly exotic Eurasian spoonbill as "White like a ghost. Its plumage makes it exposed. Non-native plumage" (40), Sarika simply quips: "Spoonbill, right? Seen them on the Nile. Fabulous things." (40)

From Naturalism to Symbolism and Expressionism

The symbolic function of birds within *On the Beach* acts as a reminder of naturalism's historic progression from a focus on lifelike representation and detailed verisimilitude to a tendency towards symbolism, lyricism and, ultimately, expressionism. Zola clarifies his position in characteristically forthright terms in the 1875 Preface to his 1873 stage adaptation of *Thérèse Raquin*, when he asserts:

> I have the profound conviction—and I am insistent on this point— that the experimental and scientific spirit of our century will gain prominence in the theatre, and that it is the only possible way our stages can be revitalised…The past is dead. We must head towards the future; and the future lies in the study of the human condition framed by reality, the rejection of all myths: people living in their true environment… [45]

By rejecting myth and insisting the focus of the drama should remain on "the human condition", framed exclusively by his very particular conception of truth as revealed through scientific experimentation, Zola is also rejecting the sort of lyricism which became such a central feature of the symbolist reaction against naturalism. In March 1891, Pierre Quillard's play *La Fille aux mains coupées* was presented as a 'manifesto' performance at the Théâtre d'Art in Paris and the programme note—titled 'the drama of the human soul'—unequivocally set out Symbolism's focus on lyricism:

> The intention of this production is to emphasize the lyricism of the verse. The human voice is a precious instrument: it vibrates in the soul of each spectator. We have rejected the imperfect illusions of décor and other material means. Such devices are useless in 'dream' works, that is to say, in works of *real truth*…No material detail will be allowed to spoil the abstract concept. [emphasis in original] [46]

---

[45] Émile Zola, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1969), 123 [my translation].
[46] Pierre Quillard, quoted in Claude Schumacher (ed.), *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre 1850-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 87.

This notion of 'dream' works revealing "*real truth*" anticipates Strindberg's *To Damascus* (1898) and *A Dream Play* (written in 1901-2 but not produced until 1907), plays which helped pave the way for Expressionism in European drama, arguably finding its apotheosis in Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata* (1907). The case could be made, in fact, that we could trace the entire transitional arc from naturalism through symbolism to expressionism by studying the trajectory of Strindberg's dramatic oeuvre alone.

On the Beach's subtle but resonant bird symbolism is part of a wider eco-naturalistic schema to imbue the play with lyrical expressionism, linked to the more-than-human world. Theatre scholar and critic Stephen Bottoms' critique of *The Contingency Plan* notes the play's "adherence to principles of debate-based drama that date back over a century to the work of George Bernard Shaw" and continues with the observation that "Waters' scenario…is consistent with the inter-generational dynamics of classic realist drama".[47] However, his analysis misses the extraordinarily potent and subtle ways in which the more-than-human world makes its presence felt within the plays, through their symbolist eco-naturalism. Asked whether he recognised Bottoms' Shavian reading of *The Contingency Plan*, Waters commented:

> I think *On the Beach* has got nothing to do with Shaw. At all!...I think you can see *Resilience* looks like that sort of play because there is a big stonking debate in the middle of it. It's a dialectical play… The idea that there may be a position that is beyond everybody's position that is not quite reachable—which is actually where I think I am, which I think is a tragic position—is alien to Shaw. No disrespect to Steve Bottoms but I think he has not read the play deeply enough and thought deeply

[47] Stephen Bottoms, 'Climate Change "Science" on the London Stage', *WIREs Climate Change* 3, no. 4 (2012): 341.

> enough about what it is…He also calls it a socialist realist tradition which I don't think Shaw is in. Social realism is not this play. [48]

[48] Steve Waters, audio interview with the author, September 30, 2021.

Echoes of Ibsen and Miller

Rather than attempting to situate Waters' ecological dramaturgy within a Shavian tradition, it may be more productive to conceive of it as operating within an Ibsenesque tradition. Like Robin in *The Contingency Plan*, Thomas Stockmann in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882) gains knowledge about alarming environmental data that some people in positions of power would prefer not to be made public. Stockmann suffers for his adherence to the inconvenient truth of a localised water pollution incident which threatens the health of large numbers of people, potentially jeopardising the town's reputation as a tourist destination. Unlike Stockmann, Robin sacrifices truth for expediency and is forced to live with the consequences of his moral failings. While Stockmann is ostracised for his intransigent views, Robin finds himself breaking down and going into self-imposed exile in North-West Norfolk where he remains detached from political decision making for decades, until Will and Sarika appear on the scene, their presence providing *On the Beach*'s inciting incident.

One might also detect within Waters' eco-naturalism an affinity with Arthur Miller's focus on the intergenerational dimension of tragedy. In *All My Sons* (1947) for example, Joe Keller's historic moral failures—he allowed his factory to ship defective aircraft engine cylinder heads during the war, with fatal results—are exposed by his son Chris. Both Chris and Will reveal their fathers' moral failures and attempt to atone for them, reasserting a sense of moral order that is consistent with tragedy's narrative trajectory. Miller's play ends with Joe's suicide, while *On the Beach* ends with Robin, along with Jenny, facing certain death in the face of the very tidal surge he has been predicting.

Sonic intrusions

One of the central ways in which the more-than-human world leaves an indelible atmospheric imprint on the audience is the soundscape which acts as a constant aural reminder of the proximity of Robin and Jenny's house to the sea. This sense of liminality—aligned with a sense of vulnerability—is reflected in *On the Beach*'s opening stage direction: "*A wash of sound, the distant suck of surf, battling gulls, a dredger."* (13)

While this audible "wash" provides a subliminal soundscape, the more-than-human world also makes its presence felt within the play via a series of sonic intrusions which have the effect of unsettling both characters and audience. Sonic intrusions interrupt the action in *Resilience* too but notably, until the very end of the play, they are human in origin, as when Jenks "*Suddenly…sets of a klaxon."* (101) Act One, scene two of *On the Beach* is set at "*Dusk above the marsh"* (27) and the stage directions reveal "*It's calm."* (27) Robin, Jenny, Sarika and Will sit at a trestle table which Jenny has laid with a large white tablecloth and set with glasses and cutlery. The characters settle down to their meal but, deep in conversation twelve pages later, they are suddenly interrupted by "*The sound of a bird. A strange liquid sound, exotic even, like a scream.*" (39) We soon learn that this sound has been made by the Eurasian spoonbill which was introduced as a rare migrant in the play's opening scene. This resonant and enigmatic stage direction is reminiscent of the famous stage direction in Act Two of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*: "*Suddenly a distant sound is heard, coming as if out of the sky, like the sound of a string snapping, slowly and sadly dying away".* [49]

[49] Anton Chekhov. *Plays*. Translated by Elisaveta Fen. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), 365

Questioned about the dramaturgical significance of this "strange liquid sound", Waters explained:

> The spoonbill does have a slightly...plangent call…I think the power of sound, its insidiousness, and the precision of it…it's unsettling…In a way, in the first half, we're sort of saying sound is really important in this story; listen carefully but it doesn't mean you're going to understand the sound….And sound is inherently ambiguous. I mean, Chekhov...offered us the ultimate example and I've always been obsessed with that—"*Far off, a string breaks, very sad"*—because I think it's the limits of expressivity in naturalism if you like. Those things usher in a completely different realm of storytelling and I love that in theatre.[50]

On the Beach's climax is ushered in via a series of sonic intrusions which begin within the human realm—*"Suddenly a siren calls, off. They stop eating for a moment"* (62)—then move into the avian realm during an extraordinary *coup de théâtre* in which hundreds of birds make their presence felt, presaging the human calamity that is about to unfold. The stage direction describes *"The sound of hundreds of drumming wingbeats as a huge flock of geese take off and circle; it's incredibly loud"* (64) and soon the geese are joined by lapwings, wigeon, teal, oystercatchers, dunlin, godwits, redshanks and avocets, prompting Jenny to observe "Must be five-hundred-odd birds!" (64) After the sound fades away, Robin is "*tearful*" (64) and the emotional terrain of the play has shifted. This marks what director Katie Mitchell would term "an event" within the structure of the play: "An event is the moment in the action when a change occurs and this change affects everyone present…Events don't just alter what the actors play, they also affect what the audience see and often change the tempo of what happens." [51] And the tempo of the

[50] Steve Waters, audio interview with the author, September 30, 2021.
[51] Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft : A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), 55-56

play does indeed increase from this moment on, culminating eight pages later with the tidal inundation with which the play ends, "*…the sea very loud"* (72) and "*Everything...very dark."* (73)

Questioned about the origin of this cacophony of bird sounds that has such an emotive impact on both characters and audience, Waters explained:

> In a sort of Thomas Hardy like way, they [the birds] are a sort of register…Obviously, they can predict the weather and one can sense how they can anticipate things that we would need technology to understand. But also, in the story world of the play, they're absenting themselves. Which is very much inspired by me going to…Titchwell [a nature reserve on the North Norfolk coast run by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds] and one of those crop scarers…this 'boom!' occurred and this vortex of birds appeared above me and it was utter cacophony, and it was thrilling. I mean, there must have been thousands of birds there; geese, waders, and I'd never forgotten that image, so I knew that had to go into the play. Because, again, the trouble is we tend to sort of meet nature in depleted mode but coastal regions, particularly in the UK can still, as you well know, give you sublime experiences of nature in its much more full and prolific mode, and it's a more-than-human experience.[52]

Robin and Jenny are overwhelmed by exposure to the scale of this prolific, more-than-human experience. We perceive their vulnerability and apparent powerlessness in the face of the climatic changes that are unfolding before them, presaged by the birds' instinctive, collective behaviour. This sense of human weakness in the face of more-than-human puissance, an affective decentring of *Anthropos* within the play, links to Lavery's notion that ecological theatre needs to embrace weakness rather than strength:

> Insisting on weakness, but without for all that giving into nihilism or despondency, may permit theatre to refrain from perpetuating the type

[52] Steve Waters, audio interview with the author, September 30, 2021.

> of Promethean thinking that has produced such things as climate change, species extinction, and toxic pollution in the first place. Instead then of 'strong performance' that would succeed in meeting its targets, weak theatre holds out the possibility of an alternative kind of eco-practice, rooted in a recognition of limits and capacities and keenly aware of what Baz Kershaw terms 'mutual vulnerability'.[53]

When I asked Waters what impact he hoped this cacophonous bird scene would have on an audience, he replied:

> To be honest, the most thrilling image for me is two people on a massive stage and the sound of birds filling a 900-seater theatre...I think that…if we get it right, it's a moment of sublimity. And I think I take that to mean it's a moment that's preparing us for the tragic scale of the story if you like, that it is not limited to these individuals. It's about geography, it's about huge populations, it could be about a tidal situation in this country, an estuarine situation. Those migrating flocks of birds link us to the rest of the world as well.[54]

Waters went on to explain the design aesthetic behind the Crucible production of *The Contingency Plan* which, after a Covid-related hiatus of several months, eventually took place in October 2022:

> Ever since they [the characters] arrive on the beach they're getting a steady drip feed of detail about an imagined landscape that they [the audience] never see. And funnily enough, both the design for the current [Crucible Theatre] production and Tom [Scott, designer of the Bush Theatre's 2009 production] before are being very stringent about the fact there's almost no embodiment of that environment, that it is actually constructed through behaviour and language, so that the audience is completely immersed in it.[55]

---

[53] Carl Lavery, 'Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do? [Special Issue]', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 20, no. 3 (2016): 232.
[54] Steve Waters, audio interview with the author, September 30, 2021.
[55] Ibid.

This aesthetic of scenographic restraint resonates with the practice of German scenographer Katrin Brack whose work is renowned for its use of single items to conjure whole worlds. Her 2005 production of Chekhov's *Ivanov* at Berlin's Volksbühne directed by Dimiter Gotscheff, for example, employed the simple but otherworldly device of stage fog as a single unifying design concept, thematically linked to the behaviour of the characters within the play. As she explained in interview:

> I thought that the people in the play were constantly wishing they were elsewhere…and I searched for ideas in line with that. What could that be? What could communicate that without simply illustrating it?...so I thought of the fog.[56]

Georgia Lowe, designer of the Crucible production of *The Contingency Plan*, acknowledged that her work is in dialogue with that of Brack: "I love Katrin Brack...I think she's incredible and I love the way she approaches design and the way she thinks about things."[57] When I saw the Crucible production of *The Contingency Plan*, I was struck by how vividly Lowe's eco-scenography enabled the elemental to be realised on stage. Sam Marlowe, reviewing the production for *The Stage*, also noted this elemental aesthetic: "Georgia Lowe's design—stone-slab platforms surrounding a glass box that ominously fills with water as the weather turns stormy and sea levels rise—is starkly elemental." [58] Georgia Lowe went on to explain in interview that "...it was really important to us that...we had real sand on the beach."[59]

---

[56] Joslin McKinney and Kara McKechnie, 'Interview with Katrin Brack', *Theatre and Performance Design* 2, no. 1–2 (2 April 2016): 128.
[57] Georgia Lowe, Zoom interview with the author, June 10, 2022.
[58] Sam Marlowe, "The Stage review of *The Contingency Plan* 22.10.22", *Theatre Record* (1-31 October 2022).
[59] Georgia Lowe, Zoom interview with the author, June 10, 2022.

This use of real sand within the set design complements the real water which fills up in Robin's scale model of the ecotone in which he and Jenny live. The real sand and water serve to heighten the audience's phenomenological perception of the elemental forces at work in the play's *Umwelt*, emphasising the precariousness of Robin and Jenny's habitat, surrounded as it is by shifting sands and which, by the end of the play, will face catastrophic inundation by rising sea water. The use of real sand and water also helps, in the words of theatre phenomenologist Stanton B. Garner, Jr., to "...return perception to the fullness of its encounter with its environment".[60] The embodied, real time nature of the theatrical encounter between performer and spectator helps foster what Fortier has referred to as a "...special attunement and attention, what Heidegger calls hearkening...the special condition of perception that goes with being part of a theatre audience." [61] This sense of heightened attention or attunement is a fundamental part of what Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, seeks to create by means of what he calls 'reduction' or epoché; the deliberate bracketing, or temporary removal, of prefabricated notions of what a thing might be so that we can directly experience the thing itself. Husserl observes that "I use the 'phenomenological' *ἐποχή* [epoché, from the Greek meaning 'suspension of judgement'], which completely bars me from using any judgment that concerns spatio-temporal existence." [62]

The affectiveness of this elemental encounter is something Lavery hints at too in his observations about the ecocritical purchase of theatre:

---

[60] S.B. Garner, Jr., *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,1994), 2
[61] Mark Fortier, *Theory Theatre*, 3rd ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 29
[62] Edmund Husserl, *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012 [1931]), 59.

> [I]n contemporary practice and theory, theatre is seen as a predominantly performative medium, that is to say, as something embodied, ephemeral and affective, with the result that the fundamental concern of scholars is no longer to decipher what the theatre text means but rather to focus on what the theatre medium 'does'; in how, that is, dramaturgical distribution of organic and inorganic bodies in actual time and space creates sensations and experiences in the here and now…[T]he ecocritical purchase of theatre might reside…in its immanent capacity for affecting bodies, individually and collectively.[63]

While I agree with Lavery that theatre is regarded as a predominantly performative medium in contemporary scholarship and that the ecocritical purchase of theatre might reside in its immanent capacity for affecting bodies, I would argue that—in each of the eco-naturalistic plays in this study, with the exception of *Ten Billion*—these affects are created through performative and creative interpretations of the text. It is only by writing a scene in which a cacophony of hundreds of birds reduces a character to tears (as in *On the Beach*) or by writing a stage direction in which sea water inundates the stage and the sound of bells as if from under the sea can be heard (as in *The Children*) that such resonant and affective stage moments have their origins on the eco-naturalistic stage.

[63] Carl Lavery, 'Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do? [Special Issue]', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 20, no. 3 (2016): 230

The Tree of Life

Although a wide range of flora and fauna are mimetically represented on stage (for example, razor clams are shucked and locally sourced sea kale is served at the dinner table), it is in *On the Beach*'s diegetic offstage world that some of the most resonant and thematically significant more-than-human symbols occur. A prime example of this is the dead ash tree which, we learn, attracted birds to Robin and Jenny's place early in their tenure of the land. Robin tells Jenny "When the birds came, I knew it would be okay" (62) to which she replies: "Those harriers, yes, the marsh, the marsh harrier. That hen harrier even – they loved Will's ash tree, I was all for felling it, you said let it stand, and they loved it, that dead ash tree. A sort of blessing, their choosing us." (62)

The fact that the tree is dead does not preclude it from playing a vital role in the ecology of the area, providing a habitat for the harriers. It is only when the organic cycle of birth, life and death is unnaturally interrupted that ecological problems emerge. As Fuller and Goriunova have outlined in their discussion of the effects of radiation in the area surrounding Chernobyl after its nuclear disaster: "…the biochemical effects of radiation interfere with the microbial and fungal ability to process biological decay, thus leading to the conservation of the dead. As a result, thousands of trees lie undecayed in the same spot where they fell." [64]

The spiritual significance of the ash tree in *On the Beach*—even in its dead and rotting state—connects it to Yggdrasill, which in Norse mythology is a great tree whose branches and roots extend through the universe. Questioned about the symbolic function of this tree, Waters explained:

---

[64] Matthew Fuller and Olga Goriunova, *Bleak Joys: Aesthetics of Ecology and Impossibility* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 4.

> I'm always interested in dead things that provide habitats…It's very striking in marshes, particularly salt marsh, where you have ghosts of trees and dead trees but they are actually crucial parts of the habitat but they're very striking, aren't they, because they seem to be sort of these icons of verticality in an otherwise flat landscape. So, I had a very strong image of that tree. And obviously for Will...he talks about the tree that seemed to be alive but turned out to be dead, that creates this kind of symbolic mirror…to some of the certainties that seem to subtend within his family but also within the natural world: that sense of tipping points, things that look solid that quickly collapse; ice that seems to be good for another millennium, that goes within weeks…[65]

Referring to the symbolic function of the tree in relation to Will and his parents, Waters elaborated:

> [O]bviously for them [Robin and Jenny] it's him [Will]. It's a totem of him…The idea of being alienated from my child is just unbearable. Why are they still there? They're there in a sense waiting for him and he's abandoned them, with good reason. So, I feel like there are lots of ghostly moments at the end of both plays, going back to naturalism into symbolism, particularly with the doubling. It was always quite creepy that you'd have Jenks telling Will 'Your dad's probably dead' and then his mum coming in and saying 'do you want to join the government?'. People who say it's a social realist play have no idea how it really works, which is through layers like that. [66]

The theatrically impactful doubling is one of several ways in which the two plays that comprise *The Contingency Plan* are subtly and dynamically bound together. As well as mirroring one another temporally, each play also mirrors the other spatially. Whereas *On the Beach* is imbued with a distinct sense of the outdoors, the characters intensely aware of their natural surroundings and their vulnerability in the face of Robin's predicted tidal surge, in *Resilience*, there is an overarching sense of interiority, bordering on claustrophobia. Near the beginning of *Resilience*, Jenks,

[65] Steve Waters, audio interview with the author, September 30, 2021.
[66] Ibid.

soaking wet from his cycle ride and having pulled out “a soggy doner kebab from his pannier” (77) attempts to open one of the windows in an attempt to dilute the food’s aroma. He is, however, unable to open the window because, as Tessa explains, “They’re sealed. Bomb-proof.” (77) So built into the spatial fabric of *Resilience* from the outset is a sense of enclosure and entrapment.

Whereas in *On the Beach* the focus remains on personal responses to escalating ecological degradation—exemplified by the sustainable lifestyle choices and ethical consumerism Robin and Jenny have chosen to adopt—in *Resilience* the emphasis is on political decisions that need urgently to be made which Jenks, with his stubborn denial of the urgency of the climate crisis and his adherence to the outdated “stability hypothesis”, is singularly ill equipped to address. In *Resilience*’s second act, Will has replaced Jenks in the role of chief advisor, the veracity of his scientific findings having convinced Casson (Secretary of State for Resilience) of the need for change. Although Will now wields greater political influence, he is disempowered in his role as son, unable to make any contact with his parents by phone. He thus bridges the plays’ political and personal worlds, the focus of his concern switching between the two with increasing desperation as the impending extreme weather event approaches.

It is notable how frequently contemporary ecologically themed plays invoke the plight of mammals in their depictions of the contemporary climate crisis. Polar bears, for example, which Chaudhuri has called “the poster animals of global warming” (Chaudhuri 2017, 153), occupy prominent thematic positions within a number of recent ecologically focused plays, including Chantal Bilodeau’s *Sila* (2015) and Tanya Ronder’s *Fuck the Polar Bears* (2015). Other mammals are frequently invoked in contemporary eco-drama, from foxes that gain agency and

trouble humans living in urban environments in Stef Smith's *Human Animals* (2017) and Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* (2013), to the stricken, dying deer ignored by motorists in the final monologue of Nick Payne's *If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet* (2009).

In his ongoing project to dramatize environmental issues, Waters eschews a focus on charismatic fauna and megafauna in favour of a focus on the local distinctiveness of habitats where humans exist cheek by jowl with the more-than-human. Setting *On the Beach* within the liminal saltmarsh area of North-West Norfolk enables him to evoke a wide range of ecological scales, from the overwhelming and cacophonous vortex of birds to the microflora and fauna Robin has been painstakingly recording for decades. Moreover, it affords him the opportunity to explore the relationship between human and more-than-human worlds, and their intricate enmeshments, revealing connections between human and more-than-human environmental vulnerabilities by means of a subtle and affective symbolist eco-naturalism.

Conclusions

This chapter examined the role of birds as harbingers of climate crisis, with particular reference to the Eurasian spoonbill which features prominently in *On the Beach* from the play's opening moments. I argued that the spoonbill functions within the play as a symbol by which Waters reveals the central character Robin's nativism and isolationism, directly linked to his xenophobic and misogynistic mistrust of Will's girlfriend Sarika.

In interview, Waters rejected Bottoms' (2012) Shavian interpretation of *The Contingency Plan*, distancing it from the social realist tradition of dialectic drama Bottoms attempts to place it within. Instead, the chapter suggests that Waters is writing within more of an Ibsenesque tradition, parallels being drawn between the isolationism shared by Thomas Stockmann from Ibsen's 1882 *An Enemy of the People* and Robin in *On the Beach*. The chapter also identified an affinity between the tragic dimension of Waters' naturalist aesthetic and that of Arthur Miller.

I went on to explore how the more-than-human world made its presence felt within *On the Beach* via a series of sonic intrusions and showed how Robin and his wife Jenny's relative insignificance was accentuated by the presence of an overwhelming cacophony of hundreds of birds, presaging the catastrophic tidal inundation at the play's climax.

I explored the material aspects of the production at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre in October 2022, with particular reference to its eco-scenography and designer Georgia Lowe's aesthetic of restraint. I argued that the real sand and water used in the production heightened the audience's phenomenological perception of the elemental forces at work in the play's *Umwelt*, emphasising the precariousness of Robin and Jenny's habitat. Furthermore, I argued, the use of real sand and water created a sense of heightened attention which links directly to what Edmund Husserl,

the founder of phenomenology, refers to as ‘reduction’ or epoché (Husserl 2012 [1931]: 59), the deliberate bracketing of prefabricated notions of what a thing is, to facilitate direct experience of the thing itself.

The chapter went on to examine how, in *On the Beach*, Waters evokes a wide range of flora and fauna from micro to macro scales and how this allows him to reinforce the play’s thematic focus on the interconnectedness and shared vulnerabilities of the human and more-than-human worlds.

The chapter concluded by observing that, whereas contemporary ecologically themed plays frequently focus on the plight of mammals or even charismatic megafauna such as polar bears, Waters bucks this trend by focusing instead on the local distinctiveness of habitats from the micro to the macro scale.

In the next chapter, I move further along the naturalistic spectrum and consider the dramaturgical possibilities offered by hyper eco-naturalism. No longer adhering to the strict closed time, closed place pressure cooker dramaturgy of overt eco-naturalism which I examined in chapter 1, chapter 3 examines how hyper eco-naturalistic plays tend to be characterised by moments of extended narrative longueur in which their deepest ecological meanings are revealed.

Chapter 3: Hyper eco-naturalism

Having examined the dramaturgical potential of overt eco-naturalism in chapter 1 and symbolist eco-naturalism in chapter 2, I now turn my attention to hyper eco-naturalism and ask what possibilities it offers the contemporary ecological playwright. Through a detailed textual analysis of Sam Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019) and Annie Baker's *The Antipodes* (2019), I examine how a mimetic focus on the quotidian minutiae of each plays' onstage world helps to conceptualise the ecological crises unfolding in the offstage, diegetic worlds of each play.

The chapter begins by examining how the term 'hypernaturalism' has been defined in contradictory ways, leading to what I am calling a 'clash of the hypers'. Schumacher (1996), for example, equates it with a quest for ultra-verisimilitude while Lehmann (2006) conceives of it as part of a panorama of postdramatic theatre which resonates with Baudrillard's (1994) concept of hyperrealism, "the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself." (Baudrillard 1994: 23) For Lehmann, the hypernaturalistic stage moves beyond verisimilitude and functions as an arena of signification. I argue that, in the case of hyper eco-naturalistic plays, such signification is vitally important because the hyperobjects (Morton, 2013) of global warming and ecological crisis are so spatiotemporally vast that they cannot be mimetically represented on stage. The 'hyper' in Morton's 'hyperobjects' reveals another aspect of the 'clash of the hypers' as Morton is using it to denote the spatiotemporal vastness, viscosity and non-locality of phenomena such as global warming. For Morton, "[t]he presence of global warming looms into" routine conversations about the weather "like a shadow, introducing strange gaps." (Morton 2013: 99) I explore how this looming shadow affects the subtextual worlds of both *You Stupid Darkness!* and *The Antipodes*.

This chapter also examines how hyper eco-naturalism enables Steiner and Baker to show characters living within what sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard (2011) has called a “double reality” in which characters’ knowledge about global warming is strikingly at odds with their behaviour.

In addition to the seven formal characteristics of naturalism I identified in the Introduction to this thesis, I argue that hyper eco-naturalistic plays exhibit three further defining characteristics. They eschew narrative momentum; they focus on mood, atmosphere and character at the expense of plot; and they deploy a dramaturgy of confinement, intensified by the climatic and ecological crises affecting the plays’ offstage spaces. I illustrate how hyper eco-naturalistic plays differ from merely naturalistic ecological plays, by contrasting the two plays being examined in this chapter with the pressure cooker dramaturgy of Kirkwood’s *The Children* (2016) and the symbolist eco-naturalism of Waters’ *On the Beach* (2022).

Defining hypernaturalism: the clash of the hypers

Before examining *You Stupid Darkness!* and *The Antipodes* as hyper eco-naturalistic texts, it may be worthwhile to justify their inclusion in this study as naturalistic texts at all. I contend that both plays can and should be read as naturalistic texts on the grounds that they satisfy the seven formal characteristics of naturalism I identified in the Introduction: characters in both plays use 'natural' sounding dialogue; no character in either play uses direct audience address; both plays assume the presence of an invisible fourth wall; both plays have linear plots which rely on successional temporality; the narrative patterns of both plays are causal, progressing sequentially from exposition to crisis then resolution, even if that resolution feels anticlimactic or downbeat; both plays make use of realistic props, costumes, stage furniture and sets; and both plays focus on a moral problem that needs to be resolved. The moral problem to be resolved in these plays is not as obvious as in overtly eco-naturalistic texts such as Kirkwood's *The Children* but there remains a central moral issue at stake in each of the plays being examined in this chapter and they are strikingly similar: in *You Stupid Darkness!* the moral issue is whether, in the face of ecological catastrophe, it is better to abandon hope or to embrace it against the odds; in the case of *The Antipodes* the moral issue is whether it is better to remain in a state of denial, inwardly focusing on mundane, trivial concerns, or to acknowledge the existential threat posed by climate breakdown.

Like naturalism itself, hypernaturalism means different things to different people. Schumacher, for example, cites the production of Zola's *La Terre (The Ground)* at the Théâtre Antoine in Paris in 1902 as an example of hypernaturalism, reproducing a photograph from the *Bilbiothèque nationale* showing a grubby farmhouse interior in which a live chicken may clearly be seen feeding from the eponymous ground (Schumacher 1996: 86). The hypernaturalistic set in this

instance epitomises a striving for ultra-verisimilitude, which must surely have provided a lively talking point for the play's contemporary audiences. I witnessed just such an audience reaction when I saw Jez Butterworth's *The Ferryman* in London's Gielgud Theatre in 2017; although the play provided a plethora of potential talking points with its themes of Northern Ireland's "troubles" interwoven with Celtic myth and folklore, the conversations I overheard at the interval centred almost exclusively around the real babe-in-arms and the lively, honking goose that were carried on stage, into the set's rural Derry farmhouse interior. Neither the baby nor the goose would have any self-conscious awareness that they were part of a theatrical performance, just as *La Terre*'s poultry would presumably have remained oblivious to their function as signifiers of verisimilitude.

Such deployment of the 'real' on the hypernaturalistic stage reveals a conundrum at the heart of theatrical representation. As Lehmann (2006) puts it:

> [T]heatre is *at the same time* material process—walking, standing, sitting, speaking, coughing, stumbling, singing—and 'sign for' walking, standing, sitting, etc. Theatre takes place as practice that is at once signifying and entirely real. All theatrical signs are at the same time physically real things...a chair in Ibsen's Alving house is a real chair on stage that the spectator locates not only in the fictive cosmos of the drama but also in its real spatio-temporal situation onstage. (102, [emphasis in original])

Lehmann's use of the term hypernaturalism "makes reference to the concept of 'hyperrealism' that Baudrillard used to designate a non-referential, media produced, heightened resemblance of things to themselves, not the adequacy of images to the real." (117). Lehmann recognises the aesthetic influence of film and television images within popular culture and observes that:

> With respect to Naturalistic reproduction, there is a fundamental difference between film, on the one hand, and theatre and literature, on the other. What becomes crucial for the theatre is a trait it shares with literature: that it does not represent/reproduce but signifies. The theatre image has a low 'density', so to speak; it exhibits lots of gaps where the photographic image is without gaps. (116)

The hypernaturalistic stage, in Lehmann's view, thus moves beyond verisimilitude, and instead fulfils the role of signifier. Such signification becomes increasingly important in hyper eco-naturalistic plays because the issues of global warming and ecological crisis they deal with are hyperobjects (Morton 2013) which need to be signified as they are too spatially and temporally vast to be mimetically represented on stage. This low 'density' of the theatre image and the need for gaps in hypernaturalistic theatrical representation is illustrated in my interview with *You Stupid Darkness!* author Sam Steiner. In the interview, I mentioned how I had felt emotionally disengaged when watching the eco comedy film *Don't Look Up* (2021)—the inciting incident of which is the discovery that a giant comet is about to crash into earth, leading to mass extinction—because it graphically illustrated the impending danger in too much detail; like Lehmann's photographic image, it was "without gaps". On the other hand, I explained to Steiner that I found lines in his play such as "The bridges went down" (9) utterly chilling because they signified so much environmental destruction, without showing it. The devastation was even more powerful for being conjured by my imagination. Steiner concurred, adding:

> As you say, the second you have a CGI [computer-generated image] of something apocalyptic, you diminish what it could be, whereas when you show an audience one room and let them fill in everything around that one room, it can be huge...Yes, exactly. I didn't want to fill it in.[67]

[67] Sam Steiner, Zoom interview with the author, February 18, 2022.

To clarify my understanding of hypernaturalism in the context of the two plays I am examining in this chapter, I argue that it exhibits three defining characteristics as outlined below.

Three defining characteristics of hyper eco-naturalistic plays

I contend that there are three defining characteristics which transform merely eco-naturalistic plays into hyper eco-naturalistic plays. Firstly, hyper eco-naturalistic plays eschew narrative momentum. Secondly, they focus on mood, atmosphere and character at the expense of plot. Thirdly, they deploy a dramaturgy of intense confinement as a result of the climatic and ecological crises unfolding in the plays' uninhabitable offstage spaces.

To illustrate how hyper eco-naturalistic plays differ from merely eco-naturalistic plays, let us consider Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) and Steve Waters' *On the Beach* (2022) which I have analysed respectively in chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis.

Firstly, unlike the hyper eco-naturalistic plays I will go on to examine in this chapter, both *The Children* and *On the Beach* embrace rather than eschew narrative momentum. The central narrative question of *The Children*—will Rose be able to persuade Hazel and Robin to join her in the clean-up operation at the nuclear plant?—provides a structural backbone for the story which begins with the inciting incident of Rose's arrival and the outlining of her plan to help the younger people (the titular children) who are currently cleaning up after the nuclear accident, and holds our attention until the play's dying moments, when that question is finally answered. The play's final sequence reveals that Robin has packed a bag and is ready to join Rose in the clean-up operation but that Hazel is reluctant, defiantly unfurling her yoga mat and performing yoga poses even as an imminent tidal surge threatens to overwhelm them all. In exhibiting behaviour suggestive of psychological denial, Hazel is living a "double reality", of which more shortly. Similarly, *On the Beach* is driven by the central narrative question of whether Robin and Jenny will survive the enormous tidal surge which Robin has been predicting. By the end of the

play, this question is answered in the negative, as Robin's actions—driven by his isolationism and intransigence—have rendered their off-grid utopia a prison from which neither of them will be able to escape.

Secondly, rather than focusing on mood, atmosphere and character at the expense of plot, both *The Children* and *On the Beach* are in fact plot driven. In *The Children*, the subplot revealing Robin's clandestine romance with Rose mirrors the moral turpitude at the heart of the main plot in which all three characters' historic failure to raise awareness of design flaws in the nuclear reactor's safety systems three decades earlier has led to a toxic sense of guilt which informs the play's central narrative question. In *On the Beach*, the arrival of Will and Sarika into Robin and Jenny's domestic realm and Sarika's professional involvement with Robin's nemesis Colin Jenks at the Ministry of Resilience helps drive the plot of Act 1. Sarika and Will having headed to Whitehall, Act 2's plot is driven by fears over Robin's predicted tidal surge and the cracks in Robin and Jenny's emotional defences which become increasingly apparent as the play progresses.

Thirdly, neither *The Children* nor *On the Beach* deploy a dramaturgy of intense confinement, although *The Children* comes close to it. In *The Children*, Robin is free to leave the confines of the cottage to bury his dead cows, Rose initially arrives by taxi and at the end of the play it seems perfectly possible—at least, until the play's ambiguous and expressionistic closing moments—for all three characters to take a taxi to the nuclear site, should they wish. In *On the Beach*, the ostensibly exterior but functionally domestic setting above the saltmarsh in North-West Norfolk offers the characters a certain freedom and sense of possibility. In Act 1, this is reflected in the carefree image of Sarika and Will arriving having walked along the beach. Waters' decision to have a five-month gap between Act 1 (April) and Act 2

(September) feels Chekhovian in intent; consider how the action of *The Cherry Orchard* progresses from Act 1's hopeful cherry blossom month of May to the "oppressive sense of emptiness" (Chekhov 1954: 386) of Act 4's October setting. Leaving a gap of five months between the two Acts of *On the Beach* enables Waters to show how characters develop over a period of several months and also enables him to explore dramatic resonances with the dovetailed timelines of *On the Beach*'s sister play *Resilience*. At the same time, however, it reduces the pressure cooker dramaturgy of closed time, closed place plays as exemplified by Kirkwood's *The Children*.

This chapter examines *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019) by British playwright Sam Steiner and *The Antipodes* (2019) by American playwright Annie Baker as illustrative of hyper eco-naturalistic plays. *The Antipodes* is the only non-British text in this study; originally performed in New York in 2017 it received its European première in the Dorfman auditorium of the National Theatre, London, in October 2019 and it is this text—and the National Theatre archive video recording of the production—which I have used as primary research material. Using close textual analysis, augmented by an interview with Steiner, the chapter reveals how, although culturally distinct from one another, the dramaturgy of each play relies on the three defining characteristics of hyper eco-naturalism I have outlined above. I explore the particular dramaturgical possibilities this hyper eco-naturalistic form affords Steiner and Baker. In doing so, I argue that this heightened version of naturalism, with its exaggerated extensions of conventional naturalistic form, has the effect of foregrounding the plays' themes of global warming and ecological crisis rather than "...thrust[ing] the nonhuman world into the shadows", a charge levelled by Chaudhuri at the ideological discourse of realism. (Chaudhuri, 1994: 24) In showing how hyper

eco-naturalistic dramas can create vivid ecological imaginaries, I also rebut theatre scholar Catherine Love's thesis—which echoes Chaudhuri's seminal 1994 essay "There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater"—that:

> 'Nature' might be embedded within the term naturalism, but as a movement and a set of theatrical conventions naturalism is not all that interested in the natural world. Indeed, its purely social definition of 'environment'—which naturalists saw as shaping human behaviour—serves to exclude the more-than-human world. Naturalistic theatre recreates social environments, not natural ones, and its focus on human behaviour perpetuates the anthropocentrism that has for centuries encouraged and excused humanity's exploitation of natural resources. (Love 2020: 229)

Chaudhuri's and Love's argument that naturalistic theatre recreates purely social environments may hold some validity in relation to late nineteenth-century European, Scandinavian and Russian theatre but I contend that their argument is untenable in relation to contemporary hyper eco-naturalistic plays such as *You Stupid Darkness!* and *The Antipodes* because—as I will demonstrate in this chapter—such plays powerfully evoke the unspeakable horrors of our current climatic and ecological crises precisely by means of the heightened qualities of hypernaturalism they deploy.

Although Baker's play is set in the U.S.A. and Steiner's in Britain, and the speech idioms, vocabulary and cultural references naturally reflect these social and geographical differences, both plays depict near-future dystopias in which the climate crisis has manifested itself in extreme weather events which threaten the lives of the characters should they leave the relative safety of the enclosed heterotopic interior spaces in which each play is set. The hyperobject of climate devastation affects the diegetic, offstage world of each play, forcing characters and

audiences alike to confront unpalatable truths about what David Wallace-Wells (2019) has called *The Uninhabitable Earth* on which they, and we, now live.

A sense of absurdism bordering on nihilism hangs over each play: characters in *The Antipodes* find themselves taking part in a brainstorming session the purpose of which is never quite clarified while in *You Stupid Darkness!* volunteers at the Samaritans-style call centre Brightline attempt (largely unsuccessfully) to assuage the fears of callers who are desperately trying to cling to some sense of normality despite their lives having been devastated by extreme weather events. While the mood of *The Antipodes* darkens as the play progresses, leaving the characters all but hopeless by the end of the story, *You Stupid Darkness!* attempts to locate hope and even comedy in what appears to be the most desperate of situations.

Double reality: living in the shadow of global warming

In attempting to maintain a sense of normality, the characters in *The Antipodes* and *You Stupid Darkness!* are living in a state of denial about the severity of the climate crisis which faces them. In an insightful study, based on a year-long field trip to rural Norway, sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard observed that people in the community she studied were living a "double reality" in which their knowledge of global warming was at odds with their actions:

> …*double reality*…[describes] the disjuncture I observed that winter in Bygdaby [the fictitious name for an actual community in western Norway]. In one reality was the collectively constructed sense of normal everyday life. In the other reality existed the troubling knowledge of increasing automobile use, polar ice caps melting, and the predictions of future weather scenarios. In the words of Kjersti, a teacher in her thirties at the local agricultural school: 'We live in one way, and we think in another. We learn to think in parallel. It's a skill, an art of living'. [emphasis in original] [68]

The Brightline volunteers in *You Stupid Darkness!* are trying to create just such a "collectively constructed sense of normal everyday life", trying to reassure both themselves and their anxious callers that all will be well, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary which we glean from the subtext of their conversations. Similarly, the characters in *The Antipodes* continue to brainstorm stories despite increasingly clear hints as the play progresses that the natural world outside the confines of their meeting room has been devastated by extreme weather events and may already be uninhabitable.

---

[68] Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011), 5.

Depictions of living a “double reality” in response to the climate crisis are not confined to hyper eco-naturalistic theatre. In contemporary dystopian eco-fiction too, similar coping mechanisms are evident. In Jessie Greengrass’s *The High House* (2021) for example, Caro—who has moved to the eponymous property in an English coastal village with her young brother Pauly to escape the ravages of flooding—says that Pauly’s mother Francesca:

> ...didn’t have the habit that the rest of us were learning of *having our minds in two places at once*, of seeing two futures—that ordinary one of summer holidays and new school terms, of Christmases and birthdays and bank accounts in an endless uneventful round, and the other one, the long and empty one we spoke about in hypotheticals, or didn’t speak about at all...The unexalted, tedious familiarity of our daily lives would keep us safe, we thought... (11, 20 [my emphasis])

In the theatre, hyper eco-naturalism’s defining characteristics—an eschewal of narrative momentum, a focus on mood, atmosphere and character at the expense of plot, and a dramaturgy of intense confinement—provide the structural conditions for Norgaard’s “double reality” to be realised on stage: in both *The Antipodes* and *You Stupid Darkness!*, we witness characters enduring what Caro calls the “unexalted, tedious familiarity” of their daily lives which they hope may keep them safe while the world outside their doors is devastated by climatic and ecological crises which are unfolding on an unprecedented scale. They are living under what Morton calls the shadow of global warming:

> You can no longer have a routine conversation about the weather with a stranger. The presence of global warming looms into the conversation *like a shadow*, introducing strange gaps….A hyperobject has ruined the weather conversation, which functions as part of a neutral screen that enables us to have a human drama in the foreground. (Morton, 2013: 99, [my emphasis])

The shadow of global warming haunts the subtextual worlds of both *The Antipodes* and *You Stupid Darkness!* Characters in both plays refer obliquely to the ongoing climate crisis, unwilling or unable to confront the harsh reality of the situation in which they find themselves. Like the real-life villagers in Norgaard's study, they "live in one way and think in another". Moreover, their conversations frequently betray a sense of what Morton (2016: 5) calls the "dark-uncanny". For Morton, there is a "dark-ecological loop" which is:

> [A] *strange loop*…in which two levels that appear utterly separate flip into one another…A strange loop is weirdly weird: a turn of events that has an uncanny appearance. And this defines emerging ecological awareness occurring to 'civilised' people at this moment.
> (Morton 2016: 7 [emphasis in original])

Sarah tells the participants in *The Antipodes* that Sandy "...had another emergency conference call with Jeff and Victor last night and he's exhausted." (61) When Adam asks why it was an emergency conference call, Sarah replies "It wasn't" (61) but when Adam insists "You just said it was an emergency conference call" (61), she replies "I did?...I don't know why I said that. That's so strange" (61). The strangeness that Sarah alludes to when she realises that she has unconsciously used the word "emergency" exemplifies Morton's "dark-uncanny" lurking within *The Antipodes*' dialogic subtext, and its effect on characters and audiences alike is to unsettle, to disturb, and to hint at the severity of the climate devastation affecting the outside world of the play.

Sam Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!*

The characters in Sam Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019) are volunteers for a charity whose purpose is to provide emotional support for callers who are living in a near-future, post-apocalyptic United Kingdom. As with Annie Baker's *The Antipodes* (2019), hyper eco-naturalism's three defining characteristics—an eschewal of narrative momentum; a focus on mood, atmosphere and character at the expense of plot; and a dramaturgy of intense confinement—are deployed in a way that enables the characters' stories and personal reminiscences to come to the narrative fore. Their tendency to tell stories may feel like fiddling while Rome burns (although in the Anthropocene such burning is more likely to be literal than metaphorical) but perhaps represents their only way of coping with living in a time of such catastrophic global warming and ecological collapse.

Seventeen-year-old Joey is an aspiring cartoonist, the play's title deriving from a Peanuts cartoon strip by Schulz (reproduced below) which has inspired him. Joey explains to the Brightline manager Frances:

> Linus – he's one of the characters – he lights a candle and goes (*Pompous voice*.) 'I have heard that it is always better to light a candle than to curse the darkness' and then Lucy – one of the other characters – is just outside shouting 'YOU STUPID DARKNESS!' into the sky. In like…comic sans. (119)

Peanuts by Charles Schulz for September 09, 1965. [69]

[69] Reproduced courtesy of Go Comics: https://www.gocomics.com/peanuts/1965/09/09

Eager but inexperienced sixth-former Joey has just begun his first work experience shift at Brightline, a Samaritans-style charity which seeks to help its callers find cause for optimism in otherwise dark times. “[W]hat we are doing is important and useful and good”, enthuses manager Frances during a pep talk to the volunteers, “because – because people need to know that stuff is gonna work out.” (88) The hesitation and uncertainty contained within that “...because – because...” suggests that it is far from certain that “stuff is gonna work out” for any of them. This darkly humorous tone is characteristic of the play as a whole.

Frances’ optimism is an attempt to assuage the fears the other characters feel about how their lives have been affected by the climate devastation raging outside. Her dogged cheerfulness exemplifies the sort of “double reality” Norgaard has identified; in trying to provide a safe, supportive and happy working environment for her volunteers, she is attempting to create a “collectively constructed sense of everyday life” but the “troubling knowledge” of climate devastation looms like Morton’s shadow of global warming over every telephone call the volunteers answer.

Brightline’s callers are living in an unnamed British town or city where bridges and houses have collapsed, where trees have disappeared and where the air is so toxic that gas masks must be worn outdoors. Although the precise cause of this ecological devastation is never revealed, it has evidently had an enormous psychological and emotional impact on both callers and volunteers. As an exasperated Frances explains to a nuisance caller: “…really this number is for people who are afraid or feeling overwhelmed in some way by the current state of things.” (69) The shadow of global warming hovers over that euphemistic phrase “the current state of things” and hyper eco-naturalism’s focus on mood and atmosphere

has the effect of lengthening that shadow. It may seem counter-intuitive that naturalism, a form associated with portraying contemporary life, should be used to depict a dystopian near-future but dystopias are often allegories for current events. John Wyndham's 1951 science fiction novel *The Day of the Triffids*, for example, reflects fears of Cold War annihilation and concerns about rapid advances in technology, anxieties which were prevalent when the novel was published. Similarly, although Steiner's play is set in a near-future dystopia, its environmental concerns are very contemporary; we are now witnessing what Kolbert (2014) and others call the earth's sixth mass extinction event and extreme weather patterns have become commonplace on a global scale.

The play takes place over five consecutive weeks in the early hours of Wednesday mornings (between midnight and 4am), and maps the shifting dynamics between the four volunteers who comprise the team: the 39-year-old, heavily pregnant manager Frances; 17-year-old sixth-former Joey; 27-year-old Angie; and 21-year-old Jon. Dividing the play into these five sections, with regular weekly temporal breaks, enables Steiner to employ a barely concealed five-act structure, moving from the initiation into a strange new world (Joey beginning his first Brightline shift) in Week 1, to the catastrophe of Week 5 in which the physical dilapidation of the onstage space reflects the disintegration of the natural world offstage. In interview, Steiner explained that his approach to structuring the play had been strongly influenced by Annie Baker's 2009 play *Circle Mirror Transformation*.[70] The six scenes of Baker's play take place over six weeks in the life of an adult drama class in the town of Shirley, Vermont, and the setting is "A windowless dance studio."

[70] Sam Steiner, Zoom interview with the author, February 18, 2022.

(Baker 2012: 87) Baker names her scenes “Week One” to “Week Six”, a convention Steiner also adopts.

Whereas it is common for naturalistic plays to begin with dialogue between two characters which reveals situation, backstory and character (as happens, for example, in both Kirkwood’s *The Children* and in Waters’ *On the Beach*), *You Stupid Darkness!* opens with two characters, Frances and Angie, on separate phone calls, speaking to unheard callers simultaneously while Joey “*just looks around, nervously.*” (5) He observes them and when Frances “*gives him a big thumbs-up*” (5), he tentatively answers the phone that is ringing on the desk in front of him, so we then see and hear all three characters speaking simultaneously on their separate calls. The effect of this hypernaturalistic device is to draw the audience’s attention to the characters’ body language, their tone of voice, and the fragmented snippets of their conversation, while depriving the audience of the capacity to focus on any one of those conversations. This illuminates a crucial aspect of hypernaturalism; that it assigns no hierarchy of focus. As with the representational painting technique of photorealism, every detail is depicted with pinpoint, photographic, clarity. This is reminiscent of Strindberg’s dismissive conception of realism as “...photography which includes everything, even the grain of dust on the lens of the camera. This is realism, a working method elevated to art, or the little art which does not see the forest for the trees.” (Strindberg 1961 [1889]: 17) Hypernaturalism’s lack of hierarchical focus also resonates strongly with Morton’s observation that :

> In an age of global warming, there is no background, and thus there is no foreground. It is the end of the world, since worlds depend on backgrounds and foregrounds. *World* is a fragile aesthetic effect around whose corners we are beginning to see. True planetary awareness is the creeping realization not that “We Are the World,” but that we aren’t. (Morton 2013: 99 [emphasis in original])

Hypernaturalism's photorealistic aesthetic is linked—both in *You Stupid Darkness!* and *The Antipodes*—to an eschewal of narrative momentum. From the very opening moments of *You Stupid Darkness!*, we are not afforded expositional information, nor are we able to glean subtext in the way we might from a conventional dialogic opening to a play. This unconventional way of opening a play feels simultaneously intensely theatrical and plotless, focusing on mood, atmosphere and character at the expensive of narrative drive. It also necessitates an unconventional script layout, the rationale for which Steiner explains in a 'Note on the Text':

> Because there is often a character taking a phone call, I have written the play in landscape with different columns for stuff that's going on at the same time. I've tried to put the most important stuff—the stuff that should be brought to the fore in production—in the left-hand column. Sometimes people end up talking between columns because they're half way through a phone call or something. (3)

The opening eventually gives way to dialogue as Frances simultaneously deals with a caller while asking Joey how he takes his tea. Jon soon enters, introduces himself to Joey, and the two of them engage in small talk before the conversation expands to include Frances and eventually Angie too.

The lack of narrative momentum is reinforced by the inconsequentiality of many of the conversations that take place between the volunteers. For example, Angie "*picks a tissue out of a box and blows her nose a little too loudly*", then muses:

> I was just thinking. Uh. Like. How cool is it that when you pick a tissue out of a box another one just comes right up, ready to be picked next…Imagine, like, when they were designing the tissues and like – this whole team of people – this team of Crack Engineers from like

> *NASA* trying all these different folds, doing loads of like *mathematical* calculations and measurements to find a way to make the next tissue come up when you pull one out. Months and months and *years* of research and like *equations* go into it. Millions of tissues just folded wrong and THOWN INTO THE FIRE. And then they all gather around this one tissue box, in the lab or whatever, and one of them just reaches out a hand, and pulls a tissue from the box and…
> (19, [emphases in original]).

Angie's digressive ruminations on the aesthetics of tissue box design is met with an indifferent "Uh yeah?" (20) by Joey. Her story having run its course, a somewhat dejected Angie simply says "Never-mind though" and then *"…shrinks away.*" (20) Angie's speech, though tangential, is not inconsequential; rather, it highlights the absurd wastefulness of natural resources and misdirection of scientific expertise inherent in the Anthropocene.

In his stage directions describing physical actions, Steiner is frequently at pains to ensure that stage business is not rushed, emphasising the play's eschewal of narrative momentum. The effect on the audience of such protracted, non-verbal stage business—a challenge to naturalism's conventional narrative progression from exposition, to climax then resolution—is to focus attention on mood and atmosphere, and this is particularly noticeable during the awkward silences that permeate these non-verbal interstices.

For example, in the closing moments of Week One, when the characters are preparing to end their shift and Angie has gone to the toilet, the stage directions inform us that: "*Everyone else goes to pick up their bags. This takes as long as it takes.*" (27) This direction for an action to take *"as long as it takes*" is reminiscent of the work of Austrian playwright Peter Handke, a pioneer of postdramatic playwriting, whose plays frequently retard narrative momentum in favour of mood and atmosphere. In his 1969 mime play *Das Mündel will Vormund sein* (which received

its première in English translation in 1971 as *My Foot My Tutor*), a stage direction explains:

> *The ward eats the apple, as if no one were watching. The apple does not crunch especially, as if there were no one listening. The picture as a whole exudes something of the quality of what one might call profound peacefulness.*
> *The ward eats the apple, as if no one were watching.*
> *(If you make a point to watch, apples are often eaten with a good deal of affectation.)*
> *The figure thus consumes the apple, not particularly slowly, not particularly quickly.*
> *The cat does what it does. If it should decide to leave the stage, no one should stop it from doing so.* [71]

The protracted silences frequently endured by the characters in *You Stupid Darkness!* highlight their inarticulacy in the face of an ecological disaster taking place outside the confines of the Brightline office, Morton's shadow of global warming affecting not just the play's dialogue but its non-verbal action too. As they are preparing to lock the office at the end of Week One, the stage directions tell us that "*JON turns round to see FRANCES standing in the doorway. An awkward pause.*" (29) Uncannily echoing Sandy's parting advice in *The Antipodes* for his employees to "Stay safe in this crazy weather" (64), Jon in *You Stupid Darkness!* advises his fellow volunteers to "Stay safe, guys" (29) and then the stage directions reveal:

> *JON leaves – gas mask on, grabs a newspaper from a pile to hold over his head.*
> *FRANCES goes to say something then stops herself.*
> *She resumes packing up.*
> *JOEY hesitates…* (29)

[71] Wolfgang Bauer et al., *Shakespeare the sadist* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), 58.

When they are finally alone, with only Frances and Joey left on stage, the following exchange takes place:

> JOEY: Frances – do you genuinely like…think everything's gonna…
> FRANCES: What?
> JOEY: Never mind.
> *Pause.* (30)

The unspeakable obscenity (in the classical Greek sense of *ob skené*, offstage) of the ecological crisis that has devastated their outside world has rendered the characters incapable of directly discussing the situation, their speech punctuated by silences, hesitancy, and frequent verbal digressions. The hyperobject of global warming has indeed cast a shadow, ruining their everyday conversations.

While these narrative lacunae may appear randomly distributed, Steiner has in fact crafted his hyper eco-naturalistic drama in such a way that extended periods of narrative longueur tend to coincide with emotionally significant moments. An example of this occurs at the midpoint of the script, in the middle of the third week. Jon takes a call, covers the receiver then excitedly calls out to his fellow volunteers "Guys, I think I've got Merlin." (70) There has been no mention of Merlin in the script up to this point and the audience cannot hear him but his call is clearly significant as the stage directions reveal that "*FRANCES puts a hand on JON's shoulder. He puts his hand over hers for a moment*" (71). Angie answers Joey's question "What's going on?" by explaining that "Merlin is this old man that calls every now and then and just monologues for about half an hour", to which Frances adds:

> He tells these stories about his life. He spent about forty-five minutes telling me about the first time he went on a plane a couple of months ago. He'd be really detailed about the seats and the food and the view

> from the window…And at the end he always says Thank You and wishes you a good night. (71)

Merlin's verbal circumlocutions are the dramatic equivalent of contemporary autofiction's tendency to retard narrative momentum by dwelling on quotidian detail, typified by Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggles* series of novels. Whereas Knausgaard's autofiction exploits the intrinsic interiority of novelistic first-person narrative, such moments of rumination on stage need to be translated into action (the word 'drama' deriving from the Greek verb *dran*, meaning 'to do'). As the characters cluster around the headsets to hear Merlin leisurely recounting mundane events from his life, their active listening is what maintains our interest in the scene. That fact that he ends each call by thanking the listener and wishing them goodnight, suggests that one reason the characters on stage are so keen to hear from him is that Merlin represents the more reassuring and palatable part of the "double reality" the Brightline volunteers are living within; Merlin's civility and courtesy contrasts starkly with the panicked, traumatised and sometimes nuisance calls the Brightline volunteers are forced to deal with.

During the narrative hiatus created by Jon's call with Merlin, the audience is invited to slow down along with the characters on stage and ponder the significance of the moment, with its heightened mood and atmosphere. With Frances and Jon listening to Merlin through headsets, and with Joey and Angie crowding around the receiver, the play's narrative momentum grinds to an almost complete standstill as the stage directions reveal:

> *They listen. This should go on for forty-five seconds or so.*
> *FRANCES plucks a tissue from the box.*
> *ANGIE smiles to herself.*

> *Maybe JON takes FRANCES's hand.*
> *Another phone rings.*
> *They all look at each other, nobody wanting to get it.* (72-3)

Forty-five seconds is an extraordinary length of stage time for such a non-verbal narrative lacuna, its intensity amplified by the volunteers' loquaciousness in the moments leading up to Merlin's call. Like the characters in Annie Baker's *The Antipodes* which I examine later in this chapter, the Brightline volunteers in *You Stupid Darkness!* cleave to the comfort of storytelling as escapism and displacement activity; as long as they continue listening to Merlin's tales, they are granted temporary respite from the reality of the ecological devastation which surrounds them. After all, as Eliot reminds us, "...human kind / Cannot bear very much reality."[72] They hang on Merlin's every word, eager to find meaning in his banal utterances, seeking reassurance in his everyday tales which remind them of a time before their notions of normality collapsed. When I asked Steiner about the significance of Merlin's call, he corroborated my interpretation of this scene as being focused on the active listening of the onstage characters:

> AB: What's Merlin's significance for you?
> SS: It's a moment when they're listening. It's a moment of pure togetherness and listening. I think a lot of the plays I've written have been about listening and the possibility of it.
> AB: Yes, *Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons* [Steiner's 2015 play] was definitely about listening, I think.
> SS: Exactly, in a big way, yeah. In a quite literal way, I guess. And I think that's what that moment was for me, about the joy of genuinely listening. And it was a question of whether they're doing that on the phones throughout, whether Frances is ever really listening to these kind of things, really. Whether she's listening to the bad news in the world or whether she just blocks it out. [73]

[72] T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 190
[73] Sam Steiner, Zoom interview with the author, February 18, 2022.

That the mysterious caller is named Merlin is linked to the play's evocation of a world in chaos. The Merlin of Arthurian legend is a wizard with prophetic powers and in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the Fool—a naïf teller of unpalatable truths—foresees a time of "great confusion" that shall come to "the realm of Albion", ending his anachronistic pronouncement with "This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time."[74] In *You Stupid Darkness!*, Albion—a synonym for ancient Britain or a romanticised version of England—has indeed entered a period of "great confusion", the enormity of its ecological devastation being revealed by Jon's impassioned outburst towards the end of Week Four. His exasperation at living within a "double reality"—ridiculing the idea that his inept trombone playing might have the slightest impact on the unfolding ecological crisis—is palpable:

> You think me playing a fucking – that's gonna make everyone feel chirpy? – You think that is gonna magically evaporate – oh you do – you do think everything is just going to melt away at the sound of my pathetic, shitty – you do – you – OKAY I'LL DO IT! I'M GONNA PLAY THE TROMBONE…IT'S 4 A.M. AND I'M GONNA PLAY THE TROMBONE BECAUSE THAT IS THE ANSWER WE HAVE BEEN LOOKING FOR. WE SHOULD JUST PLAY TROMBONE STRAIGHT INTO THE PHONES. THAT WOULD SOLVE EVERYTHING RIGHT? THE DONORS WILL STOP PULLING OUT, THE TREES WILL COME BACK, THE AIR WILL BE CLEAN, THE KETTLES WILL BOIL. (98 [upper case letters in original]).

You Stupid Darkness!'s tendency to focus on mood, atmosphere and character at the expense of plot is further demonstrated during a phone call Angie takes towards the end of Week Three. We only hear Angie's side of the conversation and from this

---

[74] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* edited by Peter Alexander (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1980), III.ii.91-95

we can infer that the caller is a sixteen-year-old of indeterminate gender, named Sephy. From the start of the call, Angie asks Sephy to speak "…just a little bit louder and a little bit clearer" (74) and tells Sephy "You sound a bit fuzzy" (74). When Angie attempts to improve the clarity of Sephy's speech by suggesting they try out some tongue-twisters together, Angie is forced to admit that "…I'm not really hearing your Ts – you're slurring" (75). Angie begins to suspect that Sephy may have overdosed and panic sets into her speech when she tells Sephy:

> Because because if you have [taken tablets or pills] then I really need you to call an ambulance now because because I don't know where you are so…
> Okay, if you just get out your mobile and dial 999 and I can stay on this line and – Sephy please keep talking to me okay? Don't stop talking otherwise I'll get worried. (75)

Note the "because because" construction again, repeated within a single sentence, denoting confusion and hesitancy. Frances intervenes and asks "Sephy, can you tap the phone to let me know you're still there?" (76) but her words are met with an ominous silence. She persists with "If you're still there can you tap it for me?" (76) but chillingly this is followed by:

> *Beat.*
> *FRANCES turns to ANGIE and hugs her tight.*
> *ANGIE takes the phone back and presses it to her ear.*
> *Long silence.* (76)

Moments later, Frances presses the hang-up button on the desktop phone console, the line goes dead and Sephy's presumed suicide shocks the characters into

silence. Angie stares at Frances "*in horror"* while Frances *"stares at the floor"*, prompting Angie simply to utter the single word, with no question mark, "Why." (77)

It is a sombre moment on which to conclude Week Three and a poignant reminder that the play's superficial comedy masks the harshness of a world so devastated by ecological collapse that hopeless teenagers take their own lives.

Naturalism's characteristic dramaturgy of confinement is intensified in the case of hyper eco-naturalistic theatre where interior settings provide a sense of temporary refuge from the precarious offstage environments that surround them. Rose, Hazel and Robin in Kirkwood's *The Children* may be free to enter and leave the Suffolk cottage where the play is set—so long as they remain outside the nuclear exclusion zone—but in *You Stupid Darkness!* the characters are only permitted to venture outdoors if they wear gas masks. The oppressive, claustrophobic atmosphere of the "shabby-looking" (4) Brightline office in Steiner's play is heightened by the lack of natural light. A set note reveals that:

> On the back wall there is a whiteboard and a cardboard-covered window. A yellowish glowing light peeks round the floppy edges of the cardboard. There is a banner somewhere with the name 'BRIGHTLINE' and some kind of tacky logo. (4)

The yellowish light is artificial, all five scenes of the play taking place between midnight and 4 a.m. over five consecutive weeks. The urban feel of the space is amplified by the fact that "Every now and then a siren hurtles past." (4) The dispiriting dinginess of this inhospitable setting, in which "…the walls are covered in damp/mould" (4), stands in ironic contrast to the optimism implicit in Brightline's name; a less salubrious place would be difficult to imagine. There is ironic incongruity too in the fact that we are told "The sound of rain is near-constant

throughout the play" (4), when Jon first appears he is described as "*…wearing a gas mask and soaked*" and after letting out "*a long groan of frustration*" (8) he tells them ominously that "The bridges went down!" (9) yet the resolutely optimistic Frances—exemplifying the denial aspect of Norgaard's "double reality"—jauntily observes "Weather's been better than they said!" (11)

With each successive week, the Brightline office interior becomes increasingly dilapidated and dangerous, the "near-constant" rain threatening to breach the walls. When Week 3 begins, the stage directions tell us that "*All of the posters have fallen off the walls to reveal huge patches of damp and mould. Maybe some cracks in the wall as well?*" (55). By the beginning of Week 4, "*One of the desks has collapsed and all the files, etc., resting on it have spilled on to the floor. The posters have fallen off the wall again. It's a tip."* (78) In the play's final scene, the rain has finally breached the building's defences, the electricity supply is no longer working and the stage remains in darkness. We learn that:

> *There is an inch or two of water covering the entire floor. FRANCES's shoes squelch with each step.*
> *She fiddles with the light switch.*
> *Nothing*. (100)

This water, strangely reminiscent of the water which floods the stage towards the end of Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016), carries a powerful phenomenological charge. Although we have gleaned some information throughout the dialogic exchanges in the play about the extreme weather that is affecting the world outside the Brightline office, it is only when real water seeps on stage—causing the walls to be mouldy, causing posters to fall off the wall, and ultimately covering the entire floor—that we begin to appreciate the extent of its devastating power. As theatre phenomenologist

States has argued, real water on stage "retains a certain primal strangeness" (1985: 31) and this strangeness relates directly to the way the lives of the characters in *You Stupid Darkness!* have been turned upside down, despite their desperate attempts to cling to a sense of socially constructed normality.

The visible degradation of the Brightline office interior also reflects the deterioration of the characters' hopes. Over the course of the previous four weeks, they have attempted to assuage the fears of increasingly desperate callers trying to make sense of the ecological crisis that has engulfed them, and have witnessed a teenage suicide. Attempting to lift the dismal mood, Frances turns on the radio, only to find that it is playing "Suzanne" by Leonard Cohen, the singer's characteristically lugubrious delivery only exacerbating the scene's doom-laden atmosphere. Frances disappears temporarily, reappears with "*an armload of candles*" (102) then goes around the room placing and lighting each one. The stage directions reveal that "*The rest of the play is conducted by candlelight.*" (102) This fosters a meditative and intimate atmosphere in which the four characters become physically closer than previously, a stage direction describing how "*The four of them look strangely close together, huddled round the last remaining desk.*" (113)

Candles are symbolic beacons of hope and are also associated with acts of devotion; when Jon enters the candlelit office space he instinctively asks, "Are we having a vigil?" (105). Indeed, this final section of the play could be read as an extended vigil for a lost natural world. In both *The Antipodes* and *You Stupid Darkness!* candles signify spirituality but whereas in Baker's play the quest for spiritual wisdom is associated with the ancient Hindu spiritual concept of Kali Yuga, in the comic (pun intended) apocalypticism of Steiner's play spiritual truth is derived from the aphorisms of a Peanuts cartoon strip character.

Steiner ends the play with the Brightline volunteers hunched around a tiny table and Bob Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm" playing quietly from the radio. We become disoriented as "*Very slowly the sound of the rain outside begins to swell. An echoey siren. The song from the radio fades up to the theatre speakers*" (117) and the play's final, enigmatic, stage direction states: "*Maybe there's a sudden blinding white light. Or maybe we just listen to the song in the darkness.*" (119)

The suggestion that there may be "*a sudden blinding white light*" and the sound of an *"echoey siren"* in the play's closing moments reveals an expressionistic impulse that we can see at work in the closing moments of other naturalistic plays in this study. In chapter 1, for example, I observed how Kirkwood's *The Children* ends with the sound of a wave building until it eventually "*crashes upon us*" before the distant sound of church bells can be heard "*As if from under the water. The sound distorted but unmistakable."* (79) In chapter 2, I noted how Waters' *On the Beach* ends with Jenny and Robin trapped in their coastal homestead with "*Everything…very dark*" (73) and the waters ominously rising.

Annie Baker's *The Antipodes*

When the play opens, we see seven characters, ranging in age from their early twenties to their early fifties, in a windowless meeting room which forms the play's only setting. A conference table is "surrounded by ten black ergonomic chairs" and there is an "enormous stack of boxes full of sparkling water" (9). The characters are sitting around the table taking part in a brainstorming session which is being led by an eighth character, Sandy, who is older than the rest of them—aged "fifty-five to seventy" (8)—and who appears to be in charge. The point of the brainstorming session is to generate stories about monsters, which will contribute either to a pitch for funding a feature film, or perhaps an advertising campaign; its precise purpose is never revealed. Over the course of four days the participants recollect stories from their lives relating to the monster theme. They mix personal anecdotes with references to classical mythology and contemporary science. Roughly two thirds of the way through the play, Sandy's assistant Sarah deputises for him when Sandy is temporarily unable to join them. She initially attempts to reassure the participants about Sandy's safety in the face of extreme weather events which are reportedly happening outside of the meeting room but her reassurances have a hollow ring and when Sandy makes a surprise reappearance towards the end of the play, it is to inform the participants that he is putting the project on "indefinite hiatus", announcing that he and his partner Rachel are heading north to cooler climes to escape the ravages of climate devastation taking place around them. In the final section of the play, Eleanor, one of the participants, pulls objects out of her bag which she has rescued from her mother's recently flooded cellar. They include a number of very short stories she dictated to her mother when Eleanor was aged four and which her mother wrote down and kept. Encouraged by Sandy, Eleanor reads three of these stories out loud. When she reads 'The End' (84) at the conclusion of her third story,

The Antipodes also ends. The text is structured without acts or scene divisions. Instead, Baker uses an asterisk to denote “a leap forward in time.” (9) We are left to deduce the play’s narrative chronology from clues the playwright has woven into the script, from the ordering and consumption of takeaway lunches and dinners to Sarah’s request for them all to “hang around this weekend” (66) in order for them to finish the project, and her comment that “Um...it’s like six in the morning” at the beginning of their fourth day together.

We meet the characters *in medias res*, sharing ideas about various sorts of monsters. Sandy is keen that they do not include “dwarves or elves or trolls” (10) in their discussions. The monsters they invoke are mainly derived from classical mythology; they talk of centaurs, the Cyclops and the Gorgon. A few minutes into their discussions, Sandy explains that “…the most important thing is that we all feel comfortable saying whatever weird shit comes into our minds so we don’t feel like we have to self-censor and we can all just sit around telling stories. Because that’s where the good stuff comes from.” (15) After Sandy declares “No to gorgons” and asks, “What else do we have[?]” (12), there is a slight pause before Eleanor suggests a potentially fruitful area for discussion when she says: “Well…I’m Icelandic?”, qualifying it almost immediately with “My dad is. And there’s a bunch of like weird Icelandic-monster stuff but I don’t know if that’s interesting.” (12) Before she has a chance to elaborate upon her knowledge of Icelandic folk lore, Josh butts in with “Iceland. That’s cool.” (12) This prompts Danny M1—so called because he and a character who joined the group later, Danny M2, share a first name and have a surname that begins with the letter M— to observe that his “sister just got back from Iceland” (12) and Adam to add that “Iceland is very hip these days.” (12) Danny M1 enthusiastically recounts his sister’s recent trip to Iceland by telling the others

“She showed me this picture that looked like a screensaver…There was a rainbow and a waterfall and / like an eagle.” (12) Not only do these incessant interjections preclude any possibility of sustained discussion on a single topic, they also introduce some of the play’s key themes.

The first of these themes is the characters’ focus on the ephemeral, the fashionable, the “cool” and the “hip”. When Adam, for example, later in the play, begins to outline the Hindu spiritual concept of Kali Yuga—as a way of explaining humanity’s current predicament of living within a damaged natural world—Josh merely responds “Yeah. Yeah. Cool. I mean that’s a little different from what I was saying but yeah that’s – That’s cool.” (43) After the characters don “tiny goggles” (48) and video conference with the influential and mysterious Max (whom the audience can hear but not see), Josh reacts to the intensity of the conversation they have just had by saying “Well that was pretty cool.” (53) This focus on the “cool” and the “hip” reflects the characters’ short-term consumerist behaviour which is at odds with the spatiotemporal vastness of the hyperobject of global warming impacting the play’s offstage spaces. It suggests that the characters are living within Norgaard’s “double reality”; cogitatively they are aware of the ecological crisis affecting the natural world around them but behaviourally they continue to brainstorm monster narratives, order takeaways and yearn for trendy international holidays.

The second theme the characters’ interjections introduce is the idea of superficiality, expressed through recurrent references to two-dimensional imagery: the Icelandic image Josh’s sister has shared with him “looked like a screensaver” while Brian takes notes throughout the play on a laptop, looking up references on the internet to aid their discussions and interfacing with the outside world only via this two-dimensional screen. This focus on the superficial and the two-dimensional

mirrors the characters' lack of engagement with the multidimensionality of the natural world outside of the meeting room. As the play proceeds and it becomes increasingly clear that a climate crisis is looming outside the confines of the room, the characters become increasingly self-referential, focusing on clichéd, reductive imagery, and regressing to recount personal experiences from their adolescence and childhood.

The third theme the character interjections introduce is the idea of excessive consumerism. Not only does the meeting room contain "[a]n enormous stack of boxes full of sparkling water" (9), a constant visual reminder of capitalism's commodification of natural resources, but the thing that stops Danny M1's passionate recalling of the picture of Iceland his sister has shared with him—"Like there was a rainbow and a waterfall and / like an eagle" (12)—is Dave's excited interjection "Oooh" at the arrival of the takeaway lunch menu that Sarah brings into the room. The sense of consumerist excess is reinforced when Sandy urges them "Don't be shy about ordering a lot of food." (14) When Sarah concurs by saying "Yeah. Order whatever you want and um…oh. Let me know if there are any snacks you want that we don't have", Dave spontaneously confesses to being "addicted to Pringles" (14) while Eleanor asks "Could we get green apples?" (14) That the characters can order anything they want, no matter how inessential, over-packaged or processed, whether seasonal or not, reinforces the sense that they are privileged members of a consumerist society that takes the ready availability of a wide range of food products for granted. This satirical portrait of excessive consumerism hints at the cognitive dissonance of living within Norgaard's "double reality"; extractivism and over consumption are fuelling the extreme weather events happening outside the meeting room yet they carry on with demands for Pringles, green apples and exotic

takeaway meals, apparently oblivious to the impacts their behaviour is having on the environment.

Another major theme the play explores is the characters' alienation from the natural world. Early in the play, Sandy tells the other characters "The rest of the world might be going to hell, but stories are better than ever." (17) He rounds off a pep talk with the hyperbolic declaration that "We can change the world" (17) and intrigues them by gnomically observing that "…there's something monstrous. Something deformed and foreign and terrifying. But it might not be a literal monster" (17). The play does not spell out just what it is that Sandy finds so monstrous, but during the course of the play it becomes clear that the characters' relationship with the natural world is increasingly characterised by fear and apprehension. Morton's shadow of global warming looms over their conversations, until they can no longer ignore the reality of what Sandy and his partner Rachel are experiencing outside the confines of the meeting room.

Sandy is central to how the play's environmental fears are expressed. Although he has been facilitating the brainstorming sessions and offering prompts to encourage participants' creativity, two thirds of the way through the play Sarah suddenly announces "…sorry but he's not gonna be able to come in today." (61) Sandy's unexpected absence suggests that the environmental turmoil that is raging outside is beginning to affect the orderliness and safety of the meeting room where the other characters are ensconced but it is something so obscene that it can barely be spoken about, much less represented onstage. From this point onwards, references to extreme weather events occur with increasing frequency, making the audience all too aware—no matter how much the characters on stage might attempt to continue living within what Norgaard calls their "collectively constructed sense of

normal everyday life"—that climate devastation has cast an elongated shadow over their lives.

In a series of brief, consecutive scenes, Sarah offers the participants increasingly implausible reasons why Sandy is unable to visit them. She firstly tells them "Sandy feels terrible about this but it's the twins' birthday today and they're having a treasure hunt with over a hundred kids and Rachel still isn't feeling well so he's not gonna be able to make it in" then explains "Hey guys I have really sad news. Sandy's therapist died" but soon after tells them "This is my bad but I totally forgot Sandy is giving the keynote speech at this conference today." (63) Sarah's cack-handed attempts to explain Sandy's absence with a series of patent lies lends an absurd and comic tone to the scene, contrasting starkly with the seriousness of the extreme weather events which are the actual cause of Sandy's prolonged absence.

Suddenly however, just as we are perhaps giving up hope of seeing him again, Sandy appears "*in the doorway, wearing sunglasses."* (63) He is clearly in a hurry to leave— "…things are pretty crazy so I gotta head home in a few / minutes" (64) he explains—but before doing so he delivers an impassioned speech about the importance of stories: "We need stories. As a culture. It's what we live for. These are dark times. Stories are a little bit of light that we can cup in our palms like votive candles to show us the way out of the forest." (64) Sandy's speech could be interpreted as being darkly ironic; what the world needs to tackle global warming is a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and a reduced reliance on fossil fuels rather than storytelling per se. But perhaps stories are the mechanism through which change can be catalysed. Either way, hyper eco-naturalism's eschewal of narrative momentum allows the characters to focus on such stories and storytelling, even at heighted emotional moments in the play such as this when environmental threats

from the outside world begin to impact the onstage world of the play. As *The Antipodes* premièred in New York in April 2017, in the early months of Trump's presidency, it is tempting to read the "dark times" Sandy refers to as a comment on the political, social and economic turmoil prompted by Trump's divisive tenure. But in my reading, the "dark times" primarily refers to the climate crisis engulfing the *Umwelt* of the play; Sandy ends his speech a few lines later with a valedictory warning to the participants to "Stay safe in this crazy weather." (64)

The "crazy weather" manifests itself several pages later when—the participants having agreed to stay for the entire weekend in the meeting room to finish the project on time—there is *"A single thunderclap"* (72) which wakes Eleanor and causes the lights to *"flicker off and then on again."* (72) After the participants call Sarah, she reappears *"Slightly less chipper than usual"* (76) and breaks the news to them that "…apparently one of his [Sandy's] houses got hit really hard by the storm." (77) After Danny M1, Eleanor and Josh express their surprise and sympathy, Sarah elaborates: "Yeah. Really scary. A lot of water damage and I think a trampoline blew into the ocean or something. It's lucky they were in their other house." (77)

The climate devastation which has been hinted at in the play's subtextual shadows until this point now gate-crashes its thematic foreground. Not only has Eleanor's mother's cellar been flooded but, as Sandy explains when he makes a surprise reappearance towards the end of the play, "Our beach house is fucked…It's been a wild ride." (81) Sandy may be a wealthy property owner, but his wealth cannot cocoon him from the ongoing environmental disaster. He explains that he is going to put the brainstorming project "on indefinite hiatus" (83) and that the participants should try to find themselves "another gig." (83) He outlines his and his partner Rachel's plans for the future, as de facto climate refugees: "I think I'm gonna

head up north for a while. We've got this great little cabin near the border. It's in the middle of a forest and the air always smells like eucalyptus." (82) The forest dwelling which Sandy describes, with its refreshing eucalyptus fragrance, contrasts starkly with the intense dramaturgical confinement of the windowless meeting room in which the other characters remain ensconced.

The natural world is portrayed within the play as having been damaged by human activity. This is perhaps most strikingly evoked when Brian, having done an internet search, asks the others "Guess how old the world's oldest animal is[?]" (33) The participants offer several suggestions, all of them underestimates, before Brian explains: "The oldest animal in the world is Ming the Clam. She's Five Hundred and Seven." (33) The participants mostly express surprise—except for Eleanor who is looking at a text on her phone and can only muster a distracted "Yay" (33)—and want to know more. But the mood darkens when Brian reads the rest of the article: "She's an Icelandic ocean…Qua Hog…They counted the rings on her shell. Like a tree I guess…But…oh shit. They killed her…'Ming was unfortunately killed by researchers when they opened her shell to figure out how old she was'." (33-34) This darkly humorous line, which caused the audience to laugh out loud in the National Theatre's video archive of the production, prompts Josh to observe "That is like such an example of how screwed up everything is right now. That is like…perfect." (34)

Hyper eco-naturalism's tendency to eschew narrative momentum by dwelling on such apparently inconsequential conversations enables Baker to weave the idea of anthropogenic destruction of the natural world into the subliminal fabric of the play. Throughout the narrative, seemingly banal conversations reveal vital and urgent truths. As Luke Jones, reviewing for the *Daily Mail* observed: "...anecdotes that

appear rambling wind up being outstandingly illuminating."[75] Although the meandering and largely uneventful plot exasperated several critics—Quentin Letts writing in *The Sunday Times*, for example, found the play "...lifeless, pseudish, repetitive...it's treacle"—it is the play's hypernaturalistic eschewal of narrative momentum that enables Brian's anecdote about Ming the Clam, a story which is simultaneously humorous and heart-breaking, to be so resonant and freighted with environmental meaning.[76] As in the hyper eco-naturalism of *You Stupid Darkness!*, there is no hierarchy of focus in Baker's play, a point emphasised by Susannah Clapp in her review for *The Observer*: "Her [Baker's] plays, though often described as slow, are not sluggish – they super-saturate each moment with interest. They make distinctions between the everyday and the supernatural look trivial."[77]

Furthermore, hyper eco-naturalism's tendency to focus on mood, atmosphere and character at the expense of plot relates directly to the play's representation of climate crisis through the character of Sandy. It is surely no coincidence that the powerful and mercurial facilitator of the brainstorming sessions in *The Antipodes* carries the name of the post-tropical cyclone that devastated New York in 2012, five years before *The Antipodes* received its première in that city.[78] Like his superstorm namesake, the erratic and unpredictable Sandy in the play leaves a trail of destruction in his wake, disrupting the lives of the other characters who will be forced to find alternative employment after he puts their project on "permanent hiatus".

---

[75] Luke Jones, "Daily Mail review of *The Antipodes*, 1.11.19", *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 115.
[76] Quentin Letts, "The Sunday Times review of *The Antipodes*, 10.11.19", *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 116.
[77] Susannah Clapp, "The Observer review of *The Antipodes*, 3.11.19", *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 115.
[78] "Superstorm Sandy: millions in US count cost of 'major disaster'", Theguardian.com, accessed January 18, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/30/superstorm-sandy-americans-wake-devastation

Sandy might personally be planning to migrate north to cooler climes but the freelancers he is abandoning will continue to be affected by the climate devastation he is fleeing.

While the unpredictable Sandy is free to come and go as he pleases, the play's hyper eco-naturalistic dramaturgy of intense confinement demands that the participants remain within the oppressive windowless meeting room, brainstorming monster narratives without a clear purpose. The mundanity of their quotidian existence—what Greengrass might call the "unexalted, tedious familiarity of [their] daily lives" (2021: 20)— is amplified by the paucity of narrative momentum which I have identified as a defining characteristic of hyper eco-naturalism. Although in an introductory note to the script, Baker states that "*Most of the time, the play moves at a fairly fast clip"* (9), the play text frequently belies this, peppered as it is with extended longueurs. In fact, the characters increasingly exhibit symptoms of boredom, listlessness and, in the play's latter stages, irritability with their interminable confinement. Like Beckett's tramps, the characters in *The Antipodes* have nowhere to go; for them too, perhaps, there is nothing to be done.

In production, *The Antipodes* is frequently very humorous; on one level it can be read as a caustic satire on the vacuous lives of freelancers caught up in a gig economy within an environmentally degraded, late capitalist society which is imploding around them. Claire Allfree, reviewing for *Metro*, succinctly captures the tone of the play with her astute observation that: "It is hyper real, surreally odd and extremely funny." [79] Alongside the play's surreal humour there also emerges a distinct sense of what Morton (2016: 5) calls the "dark-uncanny." The clearest

[79] Clare Allfree, "Metro review of *The Antipodes*, 1.11.19", *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 114.

instance of this occurs towards the end of *The Antipodes* when note-taker Brian "*...starts coughing and dry-heaving a little. Some blood comes out of his mouth and onto his hands.*" (76) It is an unsettling image to which Adam reacts simply "Jesus Christ." (76) However, the tone changes to something darker and more disturbing when the stage directions reveal that Brian "*...dry-heaves some more and then spits something out into his palm. It's a small jellyfish or a seahorse or anemone, covered in blood.*" (76) This unexpected vomiting of what appeared to be a sea creature affected me deeply when I watched the National Theatre's video archive of the production. The audience reacted with audible gasps and for some reviewers the moment was clearly discomfiting. Robert Gore-Langton, for example, writing in the *Daily Mail* observed: "There is a yuk moment, when the office lad sicks up a yellow lump that then twitches on the table!" [80] Gore-Langton attempts to make light of this profoundly unsettling moment by suggesting that it might be a sign "...of the play regurgitating its own inertia." However, his dismissive witticism obscures the fact that this highly resonant and affective stage moment not only introduces the dark-uncanny into the world of the play, but is also freighted with ecological meaning.

In his essay "The Uncanny" (1919), Freud identifies a particular form of the uncanny, linked to repression, which reveals "something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open." (2003 [1919]: 148) He goes on to explain that:

> ...an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes. (150)

[80] Robert Gore-Langton, "Daily Mail review of *The Antipodes*, 9.11.19, *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 116

For the characters in *The Antipodes*, who have spent an interminable amount of time discussing mythical creatures in their quest for a monster narrative that will satisfy Sandy and his unseen superiors, this physical, mimetic eruption on stage of what appears to be an actual, twitching sea creature is uncanny in the extreme. Brian was the character who, earlier in the play, told his fellow freelancers about the 507 year-old qua-hog Ming the Clam who was "...killed by researchers when they opened her shell to figure out how old she was." (34) The news report Brian reads from his laptop continues: "Ming's status as the oldest animal in the world is questionable, though. One species of jellyfish, is *biologically immortal. Instead of dying it simply reverts to an earlier age in its life cycle.*" (34 [emphasis in original]) So, early in the play, Baker subtly connects the remarkable longevity of the ancient qua-hog clam to the bizarre idea of a potentially immortal jellyfish. And it is indeed "...*a small jellyfish or a seahorse or anemone"* (76) which Brian later vomits up. Just as Ming the Clam would have stayed alive had it not been for human interference, so the sea creature Brian vomits up belongs anywhere but within the claustrophobic confines of the meeting room in which the characters are trapped. The sea creature is uncanny precisely because it should have remained hidden but is now out in the open. Similarly, the "crazy weather" (64) to which Sandy refers uncannily reveals the hyperobject of global warming which is devastating the planet and which, as Morton suggests, "...has ruined the weather conversation" (2013: 99) by collapsing distinctions between foreground and background.

Conclusions

This chapter opened with an attempt to define hypernaturalism, a term which—like realism and naturalism—has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways. Schumacher (1996), for example, characterises hypernaturalism as a striving for ultra-verisimilitude. Lehmann (2006), on the other hand, conceives of hypernaturalism as part of a panorama of postdramatic theatre; plays and performance events that embrace theatricality without adhering to conventional notions of dramatic structure. For Lehmann, the naturalistic theatre image has a low 'density' and exhibits gaps, as opposed to the photographic image which is without gaps. The naturalistic stage, for Lehmann (2006: 116), also performs a role as signifier which, I argue, is vitally important within hyper eco-naturalism where the impacts of global warming and ecological crisis affecting the outside world of plays need to be signified because they are diminished if directly shown. Hence, lines such as "The bridges went down" (9) in Steiner's play carry more dramatic heft than the realistic, computer-generated images of comets in the 2021 eco-comedy film *Don't Look Up*, which teeter perilously close to bathos. Lehmann's idea of "the theatre of the real" departs from naturalism by describing a style of theatrical representation which is "permanently switching...between 'real' contiguity (connection with reality) and 'staged' construct" (2006: 103) whereas in the hyper eco-naturalistic worlds of *You Stupid Darkness!* and *The Antipodes* the characters remain trapped within a fictive universe into which the 'real' rarely intrudes.

To create this detailed simulacrum of reality, hypernaturalism exhibits three specific defining characteristics: firstly, it eschews narrative momentum; secondly, it focuses on mood, atmosphere and character at the expense of plot; and thirdly it deploys a dramaturgy of intense confinement.

I challenged theatre scholar Catherine Love's (2020) thesis that naturalistic theatre recreates social environments rather than natural ones. I suggested that Love's argument—and that of Chaudhuri (1994) whose views she echoes—may have some validity in relation to late nineteenth-century European, Scandinavian and Russian theatre but that it is untenable in relation to contemporary hyper eco-naturalistic plays such as Annie Baker's *The Antipodes* (2017) and Sam Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019) because such plays powerfully evoke the unspeakable horrors of our contemporary global climate crisis precisely by means of the heightened and extended qualities of hypernaturalism they deploy.

Moments of narrative suspension within each play are linked to anthropogenic environmental destructiveness (such as when Brian recounts the accidental killing by scientists of the 507-year-old qua-hog Ming the Clam in *The Antipodes*) or offer temporary escapism from the overwhelming awareness of climate crisis (such as when the characters in *You Stupid Darkness!* listen intently to a call from a polite man called Merlin who recounts mundane incidents from his life.) Each plays' focus on mood, atmosphere and character creates resonant and emotionally charged moments in which the horrors of climate devastation are clearly felt.

I went on to explore how hypernaturalism does not assign hierarchical focus, placing roughly equal emphasis on both trivial and momentous events and incidents. I examined what theatre phenomenologist States calls the "certain primal strangeness" (1985: 31) of water, demonstrating how this affects both the characters and the audience when water floods the Brightline offices in *You Stupid Darkness!*, the extreme weather from the play's offstage diegetic world having invaded its onstage mimetic space.

Hyper eco-naturalism's eschewal of narrative momentum also allows apparently trivial and inconsequential conversations to take place, at length. While this frustrated some reviewers of *The Antipodes*, I argued that these instances of narrative inertia enable some of the play's most resonant environmental messages to come to the fore. Hyper eco-naturalism, then, accentuates naturalism's conventional tendency to focus on the 'now' by lingering in the realms of an extended present moment.

Having explored the dramaturgical potential of overt eco-naturalism (chapter 1), symbolist eco-naturalism (chapter 2) and hyper eco-naturalism (chapter 3), I now progress further along the naturalistic spectrum with a consideration of disrupted eco-naturalism. The next chapter examines two British eco-dramas from the 2010s which fundamentally rely for their dramatic impact on a deliberate rupturing of naturalistic form.

Chapter 4: Disrupted eco-naturalism

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" [81]

In this chapter, I focus on two plays which dramatize climate crisis and ecological collapse by formally fracturing the naturalistic forms contained within them. The plays—Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011) and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016)—illustrate a disrupted form of eco-naturalism which is strained to breaking point, depending for its dramatic impact on the deliberate rupturing of some of naturalism's most established conventions. In the final ten pages of *Lungs*, for example, time suddenly accelerates, jolting the character named W into an ecologically devasted future world, decades hence. This teleological acceleration creates a disorienting and powerful affect by disrupting naturalism's real time successional temporal structures. The sense of disorientation this abrupt shift in tempo brings about is all the more powerful for being positioned towards the end of the play, at a point when a conventional naturalistic time signature has been established as the norm. "Deep adaptation" is not just what W needs to practise in order to survive the dystopian future in which she finds herself, it is also what the audience needs to practise if it is to apprehend the full meaning of the play's visceral and unflinching prophesy of impending eco-catastrophe.[82] This sudden change of

[81] T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 194.
[82] "Deep Adaptation" is a phrase coined by Jem Bendell in a paper of the same name, originally published on July 27, 2018, and subsequently updated in his 2021 book *Deep Adaptation: Navigating the Realities of Climate Chaos*, co-edited with Rupert Read. The essential thesis of the book, and indeed the Deep Adaptation movement it has spawned, is that widespread climate chaos is inevitable

tempo also introduces—at the level of form rather than simply content— concepts of geological tipping points and runaway global warming, concepts which lie at the thematic heart of the play. *Escaped Alone* is set in the summertime in a suburban back garden where three women, “all at least seventy”, are joined by a fourth septuagenarian, Mrs Jarrett. Although the setting feels familiar, non-threatening and domestic, and the naturalistic conversation mainly focuses on domestic concerns in the characters’ lives, Churchill shatters the play’s naturalistic façade by introducing monologues which tell of terrifying, apocalyptic ecological collapse, defamiliarizing the ostensibly cosy suburban garden setting. Mrs Jarrett delivers these monologues from a void which is situated neither in the play’s mimetic onstage world, nor in its diegetic offstage world, but which straddles an unsettling non-place between the two. This technique of “scenic dislocation” (Aston 2020: 101) is mirrored by the monologic dislocation of Mrs Jarrett’s stark utterances. By introducing these monologues and by thus violating the naturalistic convention of the invisible fourth wall, Churchill poses the play’s most urgent ecological questions through a form of direct audience address which is inimical to conventional naturalism. Moreover, Churchill also allows the other three characters one soliloquy each, in which their unconscious fears are verbalised. The formal disruption evinced in both *Lungs* and *Escaped Alone* depends on the presence of a naturalistic edifice precisely in order to challenge and disrupt it. It is through this productive, dynamic tension between naturalism and non-naturalism that the plays’ ecological messages are most powerfully conveyed.

---

but that fundamental policy-driven adaptations at national and intergovernmental levels can—and should—be made if societal collapse is to be meaningfully addressed.

The politics of structural disruption

In *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure*, Grochala argues that:

> Plays can be seen as carrying reactionary political messages within their form when they reproduce, rather than reimagine, social structures through their dramaturgical structures. (2017: 69)

She sees the "reproduction of normative social structures" as being a political act because "it supports prevailing power relations within society." (69) The corollary also holds true; that plays which reimagine social structures through their dramaturgical structures can be seen to carry radical political messages. By selectively disrupting some of the key conventions of naturalistic dramaturgy—specifically by rapidly accelerating time, by removing naturalism's invisible fourth wall and by incorporating monologic direct audience address and soliloquies—*Lungs* and *Escaped Alone* convey the political message that society needs to change if it is to avoid the ecological doomsday scenarios contained in the imagined future worlds of each play. Crucially, the dystopic visions contained within each play are set in a future world which is avoidable if society's behaviour changes in the 'now' of the plays' naturalistic present. The future, ash-covered and over-heated world in which the characters find themselves at the end of *Lungs* is a direct result of the carbon emissions about which the two characters agonize during the first part of the play in their deliberations about parenthood. It is in the naturalistic present scenes (where W and M visit Ikea, for example) when those ethical debates are raging; naturalism excels at portraying such moral and ethical decision-making under pressure. In *Escaped Alone*, Mrs Jarrett delivers her apocalyptic visions of a world gone out of kilter from a dystopian future from which, like the biblical Job referred to in the play's

epigraph—"*I only am escaped alone to tell thee*"—she has escaped. This implies that the naturalistic scenes in Sally's back garden represent a contemporary present in which the characters could, if they choose, make radical lifestyle choices, starting with acknowledging the ecological disaster that is fast gathering pace on the other side of the garden fence. My argument is that the formal disruption employed in both plays depends absolutely for its effect on the presence of a naturalistic present which confronts the characters with the possibility of behavioural change if they are to avert future ecological catastrophe and places the emphasis for taking responsibility, as Ella Hickson says, in the 'now'. Even as he announced the United Nation's IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) 2021 report as a "code red for humanity", UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared that "...we can avert climate catastrophe. But, as today's report makes clear, there is no time for delay and no room for excuses." [83] Through their disrupted eco-naturalism, both *Lungs* and *Escaped Alone* also suggest that there is no time for delay and that urgent action is imperative. As naturalism presents the audience with an image of itself on stage, vicariously offering suggestions as to how we might respond to the climate crisis, it is possible for audience members to see their own moral dilemmas, situations and predicaments reflected in W and M from *Lungs* or Sally, Vi, Lena (and even potentially Mrs Jarrett) in *Escaped Alone*. Macmillan, a 31 year-old playwright at the time of writing *Lungs*, presents us with characters of child-rearing age while Churchill, a 77 year-old playwright at the time of writing *Escaped Alone*, presents us with a set of characters who are "all at least seventy" and, considered together, the

[83] "Guterres: The IPCC Report is a code red for humanity," United Nations, accessed February 1, 2023, https:// unric.org/en/guterres-the-ipcc-report-is-a-code-red-for-humanity

plays suggest that we all have behavioural decisions to make in whatever stage of life or circumstances we find ourselves.

The radical message contained in these plays is that a 'business as usual' attitude towards the planet—viewed through the prism of western, consumerist, carbon-addicted lifestyles on a dangerously over-populated planet in the case of *Lungs* and through the prism of the broken ecological relationship between humans and nonhumans in the case of *Escaped Alone*—is no longer tenable. In disrupting naturalistic form by presenting dystopic futures alongside depictions of the present in which eco-disaster might still be avoided, the plays suggest that humanity—or more precisely, the privileged consumers of the Global North epitomised by Churchill's comfortable elderly characters or the guilt-ridden, unnamed heterosexual couple in Macmillan's play—needs urgently to rethink its relationship with the natural world and with nonhuman others if it is to have a chance of surviving the impending eco-catastrophe. Whereas naturalistic plays have long challenged social norms and advocated radical change—for example, arguing for greater emancipation for women in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879)—this has traditionally been conveyed purely at the level of content and through the plays' interpersonal conflicts. What differentiates such conventional naturalism from the disrupted eco-naturalism under consideration in this chapter is that the latter challenges social norms and advocates for change not only at the level of content but also at the level of form.

Raymond Williams has observed that "...the most fundamental cultural history is always a history of forms" (Williams 1989: 83) so it is perhaps no surprise that—when attempting to dramatize humankind's most fundamental and urgent predicament, its headlong descent into what Kolbert (2014) and others are calling

the sixth mass extinction—both Macmillan and Churchill should turn their attention to formal disruption in order to communicate their political messages.

Vital materialism

A theme that emerges within each of the eco-naturalistic plays in my thesis is that the material world can no longer be viewed as an inert depository of resources for humans to exploit with impunity. In each of the plays—and, I would argue, particularly the plays examined in this chapter, whose naturalistic structures are disrupted—the material, nonhuman world takes on the role of an actant, troubling the human world by possessing a vitality which Bennett defines as:

> ... the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. (Bennett, 2010: viii)

This concept of vibrant matter, or vital materialism, also exists in the contemporary philosophical field of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and can be observed in how hyperobjects (Morton 2013) behave in a time of climatic and ecological crisis. In March 2022, for example, news emerged that Saharan dust blown by strong seasonal winds to France was carrying unusually high levels of radiation. The dust settled over a wide area, including parts of Paris and Lyon, creating a discernible haze. The radiation was revealed to have emanated from nuclear tests conducted by France in the Algerian desert in the early 1960s when Algeria was still a French overseas territory. According to Euronews, "a 'boomerang' effect has brought back caesium-137, a product of nuclear fission created in nuclear explosions".[84] France's colonial disregard for Algeria's natural environment returned to haunt it decades later, exhibiting what Bennett calls "thing-power", and each of the qualities Morton

[84] Rafael Cereceda, "Irony as Saharan dust returns radiation from French nuclear tests in the 1960s", https://www.euronews.com/2021/03/01/irony-as-saharan-dust-returns-radiation-from-french-nuclear-tests-in-the-1960s <accessed 30 June 2022>

ascribes to hyperobjects (viscosity, non-locality, temporal undulation, phasing and interobjectivity) are clearly displayed in the vital materiality of the radioactive Saharan dust. The irony of this would surely not have been lost on the philosopher Jacques Derrida, a French Algerian by birth, whose neologism 'hauntology' (a portmanteau of 'haunting' and 'ontology') describes the way in which elements from the cultural past can exert a spectral influence on the present. Morton's introductory words in *Ecology Without Nature* begin to feel oddly prophetic: "When you think about where your waste goes, your world starts to shrink" (Morton 2007: 1). The "filthy glitter" of nuclear radiation that so troubles the characters in Kirkwood's *The Children* (which I examined in chapter 1) fulfils just such a quasi-agential function; it physically and metaphorically haunts the three former scientists Hazel, Rose and Robin who had been aware of design flaws in the nuclear plant where they worked decades earlier but who individually and collectively failed to address the problem at the time. The fatally rising sea levels in Waters' *On the Beach* (which I explored in chapter 2) are animated into vitality by the melting ice sheets in West Antarctica, the melting caused by global warming which stems from long-term anthropogenic carbon emissions. Robin and Jenny may be living off-grid and trying to live sustainably but their well-intentioned actions are woefully inadequate when faced with the severity of the storm surge that eventually engulfs them. In *The Antipodes* (which I analysed in chapter 3), the "wild weather" which destroys Sandy and Rachel's second home, and prompts them to move north as climate refugees, is linked to the wasteful, consumeristic behaviour displayed by the freelance participants in Sandy's brainstorming project, surrounded as they are by symbols of consumer capitalistic excess in the form of giant stacks of mineral water in plastic bottles and takeaway meals that are ordered without regard for environmental costs. The physical

embodiment of capitalistic waste (in the form of plastic bottles of water and discarded takeaway packaging) is a constant visual onstage reminder of the ecological damage affecting the play's offstage world.

When it comes to the plays under consideration in the current chapter, Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, the vital materiality of the nonhuman world is revealed precisely by means of the rupturing of naturalistic conventions. In *Lungs*, the breaking of the naturalistic convention of showing events appearing to unfold in real time enables Macmillan to project the characters into the very dystopian future they feared earlier in the play, a world in which global warming has rendered the earth all but uninhabitable for their only child. In *Escaped Alone*, the nightmarish agency of nonhuman actants revealed in the play's absurd and unsettling monologues are communicated via direct audience address, tearing down naturalism's invisible fourth wall.

There are deep links between naturalism and materialism which relate back to the earliest uses of the word "Naturalism" in English, from the 1590s. Williams reminds us that "Naturalism is originally the conscious opposition to supernaturalism and to metaphysical accounts of human actions..." (Williams, 1977: 65) and we see this opposition to supernaturalism in the positivist outlooks of a number of characters in the plays I examine in this thesis, from the former scientists in *The Children* to ex-glaciologist Robin and his glaciologist son Will in *The Contingency Plan* and finally to the real life scientist Stephen Emmott whose 2012 performance lecture *Ten Billion*, directed by Katie Mitchell, I explore in the final chapter of this thesis. Because epistemological knowledge of the current climatic and ecological crises affecting humankind depends on scientific measurement—for example, Geiger counter readings to measure levels of radioactivity; scientific surveys to measure the melting

rates of Antarctic ice sheets; levels of greenhouse gas emissions and global concentrations of atmospheric carbon described in successive reports by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—there is a close connection between such contemporary scientific empiricism and the scientific method advocated by late nineteenth-century Naturalist playwrights. Zola, in his 1881 essay "Naturalism on the Stage", for example, asserts that "...the naturalistic formula...will take on the strictness of form emanating from its scientific nature, or else the drama will become blunted and more and more inferior." (Zola 2001 [1881]: 5)

However, despite these clear resonances between early Naturalism's appropriation of scientific methodology and the scientific basis of our contemporary knowledge about global warming, the eco-naturalistic plays in this study are frequently imbued with a sense of the supernatural, directly linked to the spectral qualities of vital materialism within the plays. Hazel in *The Children*, for example, cannot believe the testimony of her own eyes when she explains to Rose:

> When we went back to the house, after the wave, after the explosions, I felt like, it's stupid but, I felt like I could *see* it the radiation hanging in the air a sort of a sort of filthy glitter suspended and I didn't like it, I'm not a silly woman and of course my background would suggest that I could but I couldn't I couldn't stand it any longer. Milk?
> (12 [emphasis in original])

What is interesting from a dramatic point of view about Hazel's apparent observation of radioactive "filthy glitter" is not that it suggests that she has objectively witnessed a supernatural event but rather that it subjectively elucidates her volatile emotional state at a moment in the play's backstory when she felt existentially vulnerable.

In *Lungs*, the rapid temporal acceleration that catapults the characters named W and M into a dystopic future feels nightmarish and preternatural. The dreamlike

quality of this device is reminiscent of temporal accelerations in Strindberg's dream plays, which discard naturalism's temporal restrictions by imitating what Strindberg, in the Author's Note to his *A Dream Play* (1901), called "...the inconsequent yet transparently logical shape of a dream." (Strindberg 1991: 175) Consider, for example, the following section from *A Dream Play* in which temporal acceleration introduces a sense of the uncanny and supernatural:

> [*It grows rapidly dark.*]
> STAGE-DOOR KEEPER [*lights lamp*]: It's getting dark quickly today.
> [DAUGHTER: To the gods a year is as a minute.
> STAGE-DOOR KEEPER: And to humans a minute can be as a year.]
> *The OFFICER returns. He looks dusty, the roses are withered.*
> OFFICER: She hasn't come yet?
> STAGE-DOOR KEEPER: No. (195)

One of the most striking aspects of Strindberg's experimentation with form here is how early it occurs within the historical movement of Naturalism. His *Miss Julie* was written in 1888, just fifteen years after the first consciously conceived Naturalist drama (Zola's *Thérèse Raquin,* 1873) and adhered closely to Zola's prescriptions of what Naturalistic theatre should be, most notably in its use of a single set and the action unfolding as one continuous, uninterrupted scene. Yet by 1901, in *The Dream Play*, Strindberg was already testing the limitations of naturalistic form by introducing an expressionist dramaturgy based on what he considered to be dream logic. It is noteworthy in this context that Freud's highly influential *The Interpretation of Dreams* had been published just one year earlier, in 1900.

Returning to Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, there is also a supernatural tinge to some of Mrs Jarrett's disturbing monologues, such as when she declares that

> The illness started when children drank sugar developed from monkeys. Hair fell out, feet swelled, organs atrophied. Hairs blowing in the wind rapidly passed round the world. (29)

Mrs Jarrett's stark, disturbing utterances are a long way from the social niceties of conventional naturalistic speech. Moreover, the uncanny vital materialism they describe (organs atrophying and hairs passing rapidly around the world, for example) creates the unsettling sensation that supernatural forces may be animating these phenomena.

Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs*

Waters asserts that "There is no absolute notion of fast or slow in the theatre; tempo is particular to the story being told." (Waters, 2010: 72) If this is true, then *Lungs* is essentially constructed as two stories.

The first story, occupying roughly the first 70 pages of the script, is comedic in tone and centres around the sexual and romantic tribulations of an unnamed heterosexual couple denoted in the script by the letters W (presumably for 'woman') and M (presumably for 'man'). The stage directions stipulate that "*The letters 'W' and 'M' are not character names. Any programme materials should simply list the actors and not who they are playing*." (9) At the outset of the play, during a shopping trip to Ikea, W and M discuss the idea of becoming parents. They are highly conscious of the environmental impact of parenthood as privileged members of a consumerist society in the Global North and are wracked with doubt and eco-anxiety. The choice of location is significant, Ikea being emblematic of late capitalism's consumerist excess. W and M conceive. The pregnancy initially seems viable but within weeks W suffers a miscarriage and they are each forced to confront their feelings of grief around this loss. They decide to spend time away from one another, a trial separation of sorts, and during this time M's father dies, followed by W's mother. W invites M to attend her mother's funeral with her, he agrees, and their rapprochement catalyses the resumption of their sexual relationship, despite the fact that during their separation M has become affianced to another woman. They delight in their newly rekindled passion, albeit complicated by M's new relationship.

The second story begins on p.87, ten pages from the end of the play. W visits M and reveals that she has become pregnant again. M breaks this news to his fiancée who breaks off the engagement after reportedly "kicking. Screaming. Hitting" (91) and causing M to bleed. W and M's baby boy is born on p.95, two pages from

the end of the script. Between pages 95 and 96, time accelerates rapidly and shows the baby growing up, leaving home, and W and M both entering their old age. By the final page, p. 97, M has died and W addresses his grave, telling her late husband that their son has " ... found me a home...It's nearer to him so a long way from here." (97) W also reveals the extent of the climate catastrophe that has now engulfed them when she chillingly explains:

> Your forests have gone. I don't watch the news any more, it all just gets worse and worse.
> Everything's covered in ash. He [their son] tells me to stop dusting. Snaps at me.
>
> I'm tired. Fed up.
> But I'm okay. Listen to me moaning on. It's a nice cool day today, like we used to have. Fresh air. No sirens. No noise. Nothing.
> It's good. (97)

The first story outlined above moves briskly but the second story (the final ten pages) moves at a dizzying pace. The opening stage directions reveal the playwright's intention to rid the play of any unnecessary theatrical encumbrances which might hinder its pace or fluidity in production:

> *This play is written to be performed on a bare stage. There is no scenery, no furniture, no props and no mime. There are no costume changes. Light and sound should not be used to indicate a change in time or place.* (9)

It might be argued that this minimalist aesthetic means that *Lungs* should not be considered naturalistic *per se*. I would defend describing it as naturalistic, however, on the grounds that—for the first 70 pages of the script before the naturalism is

disrupted in the final ten pages—it displays six out of the seven characteristics of naturalism I identified in my Introduction, specifically: characters speak 'natural' sounding dialogue; there is no direct audience address; it assumes the presence of an invisible fourth wall between performers and spectators; it has a linear plot which relies on successional temporality; it has a causal narrative pattern which progress from exposition to climax then resolution; and it has a narrative focus on a single moral problem (whether to have children given the likely environmental impacts) that needs to be resolved. Moreover, it exhibits each of the five factors of bourgeois drama which Williams (1989) sees as being highly influential in laying the foundations for naturalism: its issues are contemporary; the characters indigenous; the language they use reflects everyday speech forms; the characters are not of elevated social rank; and there is a secularism at the heart of the play, the plot being driven by human desires rather than by metaphysical or supernatural factors.

This minimalist aesthetic revealed in the above stage direction facilitates the speed and flow of the pared down dialogue, inviting the audience to intuit subtext and to imagine spatiotemporal changes in an extremely fluid and dynamic way. The following exchange between W and M demonstrates how this operates. W and M have been bemoaning how "We used to do stuff. Go to the zoo. Go clubbing." (27) then, within a few lines, we see them doing exactly that; clubbing, then visiting a zoo: and all the while the subtext is that they are preparing for parenthood: [85]

W How about tonight?
M Not tonight.
W Friday.
M It'll be too hectic on Friday.
W Wednesday.

[85] A comma on a separate line, according to the stage directions, "*... indicates a pause, a rest or a silence, the length of which should be determined by the context"*: (9)

,
M Okay.
W I'VE MISSED THIS!
M WHAT?
W I SAID I'VE MISSED THIS. BEING OUT.
M BEING OUT, YEAH.
W WE'VE GOT SO BORING. STAYING IN. TELEVISION.
M TELEVISION.
WHAT?
W IT'S VERY LOUD IN HERE.
M I CAN'T HEAR YOU.
W IT'S GREAT.
,
ARE YOU READY TO GO HOME?
M Fresh air.
W My feet still hurt. Used to love those boots.
M Look at those llamas.
W Everyone has a pram.
M Shall I grow a beard? (27-28)

The extraordinarily accelerated pace of the second story unsettles the audience by catapulting the characters forward in time and space to W's widowhood within an environmentally ravaged, dystopian future. In so doing, Macmillan intentionally flouts Ayckbourn's "*Obvious Rule No. 8*" from *The Crafty Art of Playwriting*: "*Generally try not to mix time speeds in a single play. It is confusing to an audience and can lead to a form of travel sickness."* (2004: 22) It is precisely this sensation of travel sickness, a sort of lurching, affective disorientation, that Macmillan is aiming for in disrupting naturalism's steady, linear, successional treatment of time.

The first story focuses on the minutiae of the characters' anxieties about the state of their relationship, their sex life, their desire to become parents, and their worries about the environmental impacts of parenthood. In this initial story, the characters W and M are striving to achieve what they perceive to be a 'normal' sort of life, one in which their relationship will be stable, they aim to be environmentally conscious parents and they plan to watch their offspring mature into adulthood. It

epitomises what Joseph Meeker in *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* refers to as the comic mode:

> ... comedy grows from the biological circumstances of life...Comedy is a celebration, a ritual renewal of biological welfare as it persists in spite of any reasons there may be for feeling metaphysical despair ... Literary comedy depicts the loss of equilibrium and its recovery. Wherever the normal processes of life are obstructed unnecessarily, the comic mode seeks to return to normal. (1972: 23-25)

The second story, by contrast, feels overwhelmingly tragic in tone and shows the couple's lives having been devastated by global warming and ecological catastrophe. The Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000) names an epoch in which humans have become a geophysical planetary force and the effect of this can be felt in the dystopian environment W describes to her late husband at his graveside: "Your forests have gone ...Everything's covered in ash." (97) The latter stages of the play make clear that the anthropogenic carbon addiction which W and M playfully discussed earlier in the play has returned to haunt them. For Meeker:

> The tragic view assumes that man [sic.] exists in a state of conflict with powers that are greater than he is. Such forces as nature, the gods, moral law, passionate love, the greatness of ideas and knowledge all seem enormously above mankind and in some way determine his welfare or his suffering. (22)

And indeed, the play ends with an overarching sense of the insignificance of humankind contrasted with the awesome power of a natural world gone out of kilter, a natural world that will no doubt continue to adapt and survive long after *Homo sapiens* has become extinct.

That “Everything’s covered in ash” is highly significant. The ash not only signifies global warming’s destructive fires; it is also a potent symbol of the vital materialism at work in the play. Like Lovelock’s concept of Gaia which, in *The Revenge of Gaia* (2006), seeks to avenge humankind for its negligent stewardship of the Earth, the ash in Macmillan’s play serves as a material reminder of humanity’s carbon addiction and the climate devastation it is causing. Throughout the first, comic, part of the play, W and M frequently discuss their carbon-emitting lifestyle, each of these discussions comically foreshadowing the ecological tragedy that will have occurred by the end of the play. Just a few pages into the script, for example, W comments that “This weather is insane” (14) and M concurs, adding “Coldest winter ever they’ve just said. Hottest summer, coldest winter” to which W immediately quips “And you left the engine running” (14). W observes that “...if you really care about the planet, if you really care about the future of mankind then don’t have children” (21) and describes herself and M as “...car driving, plastic bag using, aerosol spraying, avocado importing, Western” (22) people whose consumerist lifestyle is responsible for the carbon emissions which are fuelling global warming.

W, who is studying for a PhD in environmentalism, is acutely aware of the harmful ecological impacts their lifestyle is having on the planet. The materiality of carbon as an element linked with global warming is frequently referred to within the play. For example, M has been reading one of the PhD books that W says she “had to stop reading” and explains:

> ...since the Industrial Revolution we, people, everyone, we’ve put half a trillion tonnes of pure carbon into the air. Twenty seven billion tonnes a year...Apparently an elephant weighs a ton. So there’s half a trillion elephants worth of carbon up there. And it’ll only take us forty years to burn the same again. Our kid would be middle aged, maybe have kids of their own. Grandkids even. (45)

And in one of the most oft quoted and memorable comic speeches in the play, W expresses her panicked sense of guilt at the extent of the carbon emissions they will be responsible for if they become parents:

> I could fly to New York and back every day for seven years and still not leave a carbon footprint as big as if I have a child...Ten thousand tonnes of CO_2. That's the weight of the Eiffel Tower. I'd be giving birth to the Eiffel Tower. (42)

The absurd metaphor of giving birth to the Eifel Tower lodges in the audience's mind as an example of the likely material impacts of W and M's decision to become parents as affluent people living in the Global North. Naturalism's ability to communicate characters' eco-anxiety by means of dialogic exchanges such as these helps to cement such imagery in the audience's subconscious as the play progresses.

Lungs was the last face-to-face professional theatre production I saw, on 30 October 2019, before the UK went into its first lockdown in response to the Covid-19 coronavirus global pandemic in the spring of 2020. Directed by Matthew Warchus at London's Old Vic and starring Claire Foy and Matt Smith, its pared down design (both set and costumes were designed by Rob Howell) was true to the playwright's intentions in having no props, no mime, and no lighting changes to denote a change of time or place. Moreover, it intelligently used Ikea-inspired geometric shapes on the stage floor to denote changes of location.

Theatre director Katie Mitchell's 2013 production of the play at the Schaubühne Berlin (renaming the play *Atmen* which means 'lungs' in German) took

Macmillan's stage directions to another level of interpretation, the starkness and immediacy of its dramaturgy mirroring the starkness and immediacy of the play's environmental message. As Angelaki, who witnessed the production, explains:

> The two actors were each placed on a substantial podium/capacitor, separate from each other and facing forward, towards the audience, for the duration of the seventy-five minute performance. As spectators waited to enter the auditorium, an explanatory note was distributed to us, offering a diagram of the space as well as the core facts behind what each member of the company contributed in terms of energy production and keeping the show running.
>
> Specifically, the two actors on standard, stationary bicycles (centre stage) and four additional cyclists on A-Frame standing bicycles (visible to the audience but on the edge of the set, two cyclists placed front left and two front right, following the curvature of the auditorium) produced the energy resources for the show in real time. Upstage centre spectators could see the sound operator's desk. The show was built in such a way that it enabled actors and cyclists to produce a combined result of 623.5 watt-hours, as the accompanying material for the production explained. Every aspect of the production, including lighting, sound, microphones, speakers and projector was powered through this...
> (Angelaki, 2017: 120-121)

Mitchell's production, which also included an LED display on which was projected a constantly escalating number purporting to show real time increases in the global population, brought home the twinned concepts of the finitude of the Earth's resources and the continued burgeoning of the world's population which continues to exert pressure on the planet's dwindling natural resources.

Macmillan's creative chutzpah in accelerating the passage of time so rapidly within the play's final ten pages is a disruptive dramaturgical conceit which works on two levels. On one level, it offers an emotionally affective vision of the future as seen through the eyes of the bereaved character W, who finds herself isolated on what is fast becoming an uninhabitable earth. It is an elegy to a lost natural world, a world where the "forests have gone" and where everything is "covered in ash", reminding

the audience of humankind's existential vulnerability in the face of global warming and ecological collapse. On another level, it dramaturgically reinforces concepts of tipping points and runaway climate change which are so central to the play's ecological message, and to humanity's current predicament. The accelerated action of the play during these final pages leaves the characters feeling overwhelmed and out of control, a sentiment reflected in W's comment that "This is all just going at a hundred miles an hour and I need a second to breathe." (93) With a rapidly increasing population and with humans' carbon addiction showing no sign of relenting, the play suggests through the rapid temporal acceleration of the final ten pages that we may soon reach a point of no return with global warming, the consequences of which would be catastrophic and beyond the scope of humans to resolve. As Bill McKibben pointed out in his 2019 book *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*, "By most accounts, we've used more energy and resources during the last thirty-five years than in all of human history that came before." (2019: 13). The doomsday scenario envisaged by columnist and author David Wallace-Wells describes the kind of world W inhabits by the end of *Lungs*:

> At two degrees [above pre-Industrial Revolution levels], the ice sheets will begin their collapse, 400 million more people will suffer from water scarcity, major cities in the equatorial band of the planet will become unlivable, and even in the northern latitudes heat waves will kill thousands each summer. There would be thirty-two times as many extreme heat waves in India, and each would last five times as long, exposing ninety-three times more people. This is our best-case scenario.
> (Wallace-Wells, 2019: 12-13)

Rob Nixon (2011) suggests how poor and marginalised communities in the Global South suffer a 'slow violence' caused by systematic intersectional environmental

injustices which have deep historical roots and are closely linked to colonialist legacies. But the accelerated pace of the final ten pages of *Lungs* instead suggests a fast violence of accelerated global warming and ecological destruction which affects people living in the affluent Global North too. In the dystopian setting of *Lungs*' final section, a tipping point has already been reached and the dire situation widow W finds herself in feels irrecoverable. In the naturalistic first 70 pages of the script, by contrast, choices can still be made and this is the assumed contemporary present of the play in which audience members can see their own lives and ethical dilemmas reflected.

It is noteworthy that many of the plays in this study have tipping points embedded within their narratives. In Kirkwood's *The Children* which I looked at in chapter 1, for example, the tipping point is the recent nuclear accident in the play's backstory which has prompted the inciting incident of Rose visiting Robin and Hazel in an attempt to persuade them to help in the clean-up operation. In Waters' *On the Beach* which I explored in chapter 2, the tipping point is the imminent, devastating tidal surge linked to the melting of the West Antarctic ice sheet. In each of the hyper eco-naturalistic plays I examined in chapter 3—Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* and Baker's *The Antipodes*—the tipping point is actively occurring in the offstage world of each play, causing bridges to go down and characters to wear gas masks outside in the case of Steiner's play and causing Sandy and his partner Rachel to migrate north to cooler climes in Baker's play. In the case of the plays being considered in the current chapter, the fractured temporal dramaturgy of Macmillan's *Lungs* projects us forward to a post-tipping point dystopia but its naturalistic first 70 pages depict a contemporary world in which that tipping point has yet to be reached. In Churchill's *Escaped Alone* which I turn to shortly, an ecological tipping point has already been

reached in the future from which, Cassandra-like, Mrs Jarrett reports but again, the naturalistic scenes in Sally's back garden depict a contemporary moment in which that tipping point has not quite been reached. These tipping points are closely aligned with the ancient Greek concept of time as *kairos* which Wallace describes as "the timely moment, the point of crisis, the event rather than the trend" in contrast to the ancient Greek concept of time as *chronos*, which Wallace conceives as "the long-term passage of time" (Wallace 2020: 159). It is precisely by means of fracturing the naturalistic dramaturgy with which both *Lungs* and *Escaped Alone* open that the playwrights are able to foreground such points of crisis. Had the couple in *Lungs* kept pontificating about the ethics of parenthood without the sickening temporal jolt that occurs in the play's final ten pages, the play's ecological message would have been occluded by its focus on interpersonal comedy. Had the characters in *Escaped Alone* not been joined by outsider Mrs Jarrett with her prophetic, apocalyptic messages from the future directly addressed to the audience, or not expressed their unconscious fears and anxieties through soliloquy, the inconsequentiality of their conversations would have obscured the horrors of ecological collapse taking place in the play's projected future imaginary.

Caryl Churchill's Escaped *Alone*

Deploying a pared down, minimalist style characteristic of the playwright's late period—the play runs for a scant 38 pages—on one level Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) explores the quotidian concerns of a group of female friends and acquaintances, "*all at least seventy"* (4), in a back yard on a summer's afternoon comprised of *"A number of afternoons but the action is continuous."* (4) On another level, though, the play offers a view from the abyss; an unflinching vision of a dystopian world in which ecological order has collapsed and humanity, along with many animal species, is on the brink of extinction.

Churchill's disruption of naturalistic form enables these twin perspectives—the reassuringly domestic and the terrifyingly apocalyptic—to exist cheek-by-jowl, creating what reviewer Claire Allfree has called a "persuasive atmosphere of casual, everyday horror."[86] It is the play's deployment of conventional naturalistic techniques—in particular, its use in the garden scenes of natural-sounding dialogue, realistic props and costumes, and its adherence to an invisible fourth wall—which illuminates the unnerving uncanniness of the situation in which the women find themselves. The unconscious fears that emerge through the characters' otherwise inconsequential chatter are linked to the environmental doomsday scenarios depicted in the play's non-naturalistic monologues and soliloquies, creating an imaginary of intense ecological disquiet.

Throughout her long and distinguished playwriting career, Churchill has consistently experimented with form, combining naturalism with non-naturalism in ways which illuminate both interpersonal relationships and wider political themes. In *Top Girls* (1982), for example, the opening scene is distinctly non-naturalistic,

---

[86] Claire Allfree, "Daily Telegraph review of *Escaped Alone*, 1.2.16", *Theatre Record* (January 1-28, 2016): 64.

portraying five women from different points in history who are guests at an anachronistic dinner party hosted by Marlene, the newly appointed manager of the 'Top Girls' employment agency. The formal experimentation of this opening scene contrasts sharply with the play's later naturalistic scenes. Act 2, scene 2, illustratively, takes place in the 'Top Girls' offices and deploys conventional naturalism in its representation of the contemporary office environment, set in the early years of Thatcherism.

Escaped Alone opens when Mrs Jarrett notices three women she's seen before through an open door in a fence. She enters and finds herself in Sally's back garden where she joins the other characters Sally, Vi and Lena. The play has eight short sections. In the first section, the characters talk of family matters; they mention sons and daughters, nephews and grandchildren and marvel at how modern technology such as smartphones ("whole worlds in your pocket", comments Vi on page 6) have transformed their daily lives. In stark contrast to this socially inflected chat, the section ends with Mrs J directly addressing the audience to relate a nightmarish vision of global ecological collapse. "Rats were eaten by those who still had digestive systems", she explains, continuing:

> ...and mushrooms were traded for urine. Babies were born and quickly became blind. Some groups lost their sexuality while others developed a new morality of constant fucking with any proximate body. (8)

The coolly objective manner in which Mrs Jarrett relates these catastrophic events adds a frisson to their telling. The remaining seven sections of the play mostly follow this structural pattern, mundane conversation being appended with scenes of ecological horror recounted in direct audience address monologues by Mrs J: section

2 has the women discussing shops that have closed down in their neighbourhood; in section 3 the discussion concerns favourite TV series; section 4 includes a discussion about how it is no longer socially acceptable to make jokes about people's disabilities or race and we learn that ex-hairdresser Vi "accidentally killed her husband" (20); in section 5 the women discuss what superpowers they would like to have, including the ability to fly; in place of conversation, section 6 shows the women unselfconsciously *"singing for themselves in the garden, not performing to the audience"* (28) which in the original 2016 Royal Court production was a rendition of Ellie Greenwich's 1962 hit *Da Roo Ron Ron*, famously recorded by The Crystals, albeit the play text itself does not specify a particular song; in section 7 the women discuss their previous working lives and former medical practitioner Sally intriguingly explains that when giving evidence at Vi's murder trial she "didn't tell it quite how it was because...I took into account what he was like" (34); and in the final section their talk turns to cooking, baking, decorating and how it is "always nice to be here" (42) in the garden. Mrs Jarrett then once again directly addresses the audience to let us know "...I said thanks for the tea and I went home" (42) and the play ends.

There are in fact no stage directions in the play text to indicate that Mrs J's monologues are intended to be direct audience address but it is clear from reviews of the original 2016 production at the Royal Court Theatre, directed by Churchill's long-standing collaborator James Macdonald, that Mrs J's monologues are intended to stand out as stylistically distinct from the naturalistic discourse that precedes them. As Linda Bassett, who played Mrs J in the Royal Court production, explained:

> I'm getting used to it. It was difficult in rehearsal. We rehearsed the monologues separately so everyone wasn't waiting while I stumbled through my bits! The thing about those speeches is you have to include the audience. They're written to be direct address rather than

> soliloquies, which is what the three other women have at separate points throughout the play.[87]

Theatre scholar Elaine Aston, reflecting on the staging of these monologues in the Royal Court production, noted:

> There are eight garden scenes each punctuated by a monologue, the latter voiced...from a darkened stage surrounded by dual, rectangular frames of glowing electric light. (Aston 2020: 101)

The juxtaposition of these opposing styles—recognisably naturalistic dialogue containing exposition and subtext in the naturalistic scenes, contrasted with visceral, apocalyptic direct address in Mrs J's monologues—creates a dynamic tension which persists throughout the play. *Escaped Alone* switches so fluidly between registers (dwelling on apparently trivial domestic matters one moment and articulating prophetic visions of planetary ecological apocalypse the next) that the audience is left unsure as to which register the next moment will be in. While not resiling from depicting the horrors of a world facing mass extinction, the play is also shot through with surprising and frequently absurd humour and a flippancy of tone which serves to wrongfoot the audience yet further. In this respect, *Escaped Alone* can be viewed as a continuation of the ecofeminist project Churchill began with *Far Away* (2000) which laced its themes of torture and human rights abuses with unexpected flashes of comedy. As theatre scholar Una Chaudhuri has observed of *Far Away*:

---

[87] Chris Wiegand, "Sunshine and terribe rage: Linda Bassett on Caryl Churchill's Escaped Alone", *The Guardian*, February 10, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/10/linda-bassett-caryl-churchill-escaped-alone-royal-court

> Not least of that play's values to me is that it contains the line (my favourite in all of world drama): "The cats have come in on the side of the French"...That such wild humor [sic.] can erupt from a play of otherwise unrelieved desolation captures one of my abiding convictions about animals and animality: they are subjects that shift many of the established grounds of both artistic experience and knowledge production—affective, stylistic, disciplinary, and institutional. They uncover surprising spaces for feeling and thinking anew and askew. (Chaudhuri 2017: Preface xii)

Thinking "anew and askew" characterises *Escaped Alone* too, alongside a wild humour that is liable to erupt when we least expect it, frequently communicated through animal imagery. Chaudhuri has referred to *Far Away*'s "...many disorienting turns" (2017: 31) and this apt phrase might equally be used to describe *Escaped Alone* whose own disorienting turns are created precisely through a formal disruption of the play's naturalistic façade: at one moment we are in a back garden hearing about the minutiae of family life through distinctly naturalistic dialogue and in the next instant we are jolted into a non-naturalistic void from where Mrs J's nightmarish visions of ecological catastrophe are voiced.

Churchill's decision to set the play in a garden is highly significant. As Chaudhuri has noted, "...*where* an action unfolds goes a long way to explaining it" (1997: 6, [emphasis in original]) and as Waters has similarly observed:

> The geography of a play often articulates its latent meaning; the geography of the scene, its dynamic potential. The former is about larger questions of place, topography, community; the latter about doorways, ownership, ways in and out. (Waters 2010: 51)

Waters' insight that the geography of a scene is partly about ownership is particularly relevant in the case of Churchill whose extensive and stylistically varied oeuvre reveals a long-standing engagement with the theme of ownership. Her short radio

play *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (1971) offers a vision of a dystopian England in an imagined 2010 where excessive levels of pollution means that people are forced to buy oxygen in order to survive. Her 1972 play *Owners* is a satire about people who own property and those who rent. *Serious Money* (1987) examines systemic faults in the London stock market. *Top Girls* (1982) offers a fiercely playful feminist critique of neoliberalism in the early years of Thatcherism. And *Fen* (1983) focuses on the commons as a site of contestation. For theatre scholar Sheila Rabillard, *Fen* dramatizes:

> ...the history of human interaction with place and ...[sets]...up a suggestive opposition between a lost commons and intensive highly capitalized agriculture, an opposition which hints at a flawed assumption of the human right to exploit the earth inherent in the very idea of land ownership. [88]

The garden in *Escaped Alone* functions simultaneously as commons and as private property; it becomes a form of commons when Mrs Jarrett steps in unannounced and uninvited, representing, perhaps, everywoman. Hinting at her role as outsider and prophet, the first letter of Mrs Jarrett's surname links her directly to *The Book of Job*, from which the play's epigraph (*"I only am escaped alone to tell thee"*) partially derives. Although the other characters have seen her before, the play text makes clear that she is not part of their friendship circle, remaining at best an acquaintance.

Gardens in modern drama are liminal spaces where the domestic realm intersects with a cultivated version of nature. Our ideas of nature, just like our

[88] Sheila Rabillard, "On Caryl Churchill's Ecological Drama: Right to Poison The Wasps?", in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, ed. Elaine Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 94.

gardens, are culturally specific, as essayist and activist Rebecca Solnit observes in her 2021 book *Orwell's Roses*:

> ...a garden is an ideal version of nature filtered through a particular culture, whether it's as formal as a Japanese rock and sand garden or an Islamic paradise garden with a central fountain—or as haphazard as a lot of ordinary private gardens are, arising as they do from limited space, time, budget, and planning. A garden is what you want (and can manage and afford), and what you want is who you are, and who you are is always a political and cultural question. (149)

The three women who are in Sally's back garden before Mrs Jarrett joins them and who remain there after Mrs Jarrett leaves at the end of the play are notable for their fixed immobility and inertia. Their conversations may range widely—from concerns about how quickly modern technology is progressing, to shops that are closing in their neighbourhood, to reminiscences about their former careers and even recounting an apparently accidental murder—but their lack of physical movement reflects their wider disengagement from politics and activism. It is Mrs Jarrett who enters and leaves their space and whose monologues reveal an intense knowledge of and engagement with the twinned ecological and climatic crises that are unfolding in the diegetic offstage world beyond the sanctuary of the garden. As Hartl explains in *Brecht and Post-1990s British Drama* (2021):

> The play's strategic use of dystopian negativity hinges above all on her [Mrs Jarrett's] interventions, which unsettle the conventional dramatic frame of the play. More precisely, her role can be understood as an agent of dystopian *Verfremdung*, which is particularly evident in her ambivalent double function as both character and narrator in the play. While Mrs J is involved in the dialogue with the other women, she also serves as a commentator...[Mrs Jarrett's] accounts of an apocalyptic future...suggest that she has previously experienced and survived catastrophic events from which she appears to have 'escaped alone',

> thereby reinforcing the urgency of her appearance and emphasizing the precarious state of the world to which she has returned. (140)

Dramaturgically, Sally's backyard garden offers Churchill both the pressure cooker potential of a socially inflected domestic interior and simultaneously the possibility of unexpected interruption and intrusion inherent in outdoor spaces. The "ways in and out" referred to by Waters above are signposted in the very opening line of *Escaped Alone* when Mrs Jarrett confides to the audience:

> I'm walking down the street and there's a door in the fence open and inside are three women I've seen before...So I go in. (5)

Significantly, Mrs Jarrett doesn't tell the audience that she knows the other women, only that she has seen them before. Vi tells her two friends that "there's someone watching us", Lena asks "Is it that woman?" then Sally calls over "Is that you, Mrs Jarrett?". Her being the only character who enters and exits via the door in the fence, her being referred to by Lena as "that woman", and the fact that, unlike the other women, she is only referred to by her surname, establishes Mrs Jarrett as an outsider from the outset. The private conversation between the other three women which Mrs J interrupts is in mid-flow when the naturalistic part of the play begins, reinforcing the sense that Mrs J is intruding upon their social gathering:

> SALLY: Rosie locked out in the rain
> VI: forgot her key
> SALLY: climbed over
> LENA: lucky to have neighbours who
> SALLY: such a high wall
> (5)

The pared down, fragmented speech of the other three characters is characterised by incomplete sentences which flow seamlessly and fluidly in performance. Vi, Lena and Sally anticipate what each other will say, interrupting one another with familiarity and warmth. This contrasts starkly with the grammatically complete sentence structures characteristic of Mrs J's monologues. In the coolly apocalyptic monologue at the end of the fourth section, for example, Mrs J observes:

> The hunger began when eighty per cent of food was diverted to tv programmes. Commuters watched breakfast on iPlayer on their way to work. Smartphones were distributed by charities when rice ran out, so the dying could watch cooking...Cars were traded for used meat. Children fell asleep in class and didn't wake up. The obese sold slices of themselves until hunger drove them to eat their own rashers... (22)

The absurd idea that advanced communication technologies could be used as a substitute for food is part of a trenchant critique of capitalism's exploitation of natural resources which recurs throughout the play. As Elaine Aston has pointed out, Mrs J's monologues carry visions of ecological horror which are inextricably linked to the effects of global capitalism:

> [L]ike a messenger in the biblical story of Job, she [Mrs J] has 'escaped alone' to recount the apocalyptic destruction of the world. Seven times in seven monologues she tells the audience how people and the planet were destroyed by the elemental forces of earth, water, wind and fire—by pollution, hunger and sickness. However, these were neither god-sent nor natural disasters but the result of capitalism's exploitation of nature...every ecological disaster can be traced back to capitalism that pollutes lives and wrecks [sic.] planetary destruction. (Aston 2020: 103)

And indeed, on closer inspection, the seemingly innocuous topics of conversation contained in each of the naturalistic sections of the play reveal a focus on

consumerism which is linked in the world of the play to capitalist excess: the discussion of smartphones in section 1 ("Barney never out of his phone"[6]) is exemplary; as are the shops which have closed in the local neighbourhood in section 2 ("...and the chicken nuggets closed down" [11]); as are the TV series discussed in section 3, and the watching of in-flight movies in section 5.

As well as expressing Cassandra-like horror at the ecological destruction she sees around her, Mrs J's monologues introduce a tone of absurdity into the play which would be difficult to deploy using conventional naturalistic dialogue. For example, she tells us that "The chemicals leaked through cracks in the money" (17) and that there were "Four cases of arson by children and politicians, three of spontaneous combustion of the markets" (37), absurdly imbuing abstract nouns ("money", "markets") with material agency. Max Stafford-Clark, Churchill's erstwhile collaborator and former artistic director of the Royal Court, has noted that Churchill has been considerably influenced "by Ionesco and by the Theatre of the Absurd".[89] It is noteworthy in this context that absurdist plays—exemplified through the work of Romanian-French playwright Eugène Ionesco—frequently assign material agency (what Bennett would call "thing-power") to inanimate objects and in the case of *Amédée, or How to Get Rid Of It* (1958) even to a corpse. Ionesco's absurdist dramaturgy highlights the uncanny and disorienting scale of these objects at the same time that it amplifies their implausibility: examples include the brute menace of the rhinoceros in the 1960 play of the same name; the stage being cluttered by a proliferation of chairs in *The Chairs* (1952); a bizarre courtship ritual involving a three-nosed young woman called Roberta (all the women in the play are confusingly

[89] Max Stafford-Clark, interview in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics,* ed. Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enric Monforte and Pilar Zozaya (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 28.

called Roberta) which unsettles the title character Jacques (all the male characters are equally confusingly called Jacques) in *Jacques or Obedience* (1955); and the burgeoning corpse which so discomfits the middle aged couple in *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*. The monstrous agency of nonhuman actants in Ionesco's work lends itself to metaphorical interpretation: the titular rhinoceros, for example, may clearly be read as representing the rise of totalitarianism in mid twentieth-century Europe, an embodied pachydermatous metaphor of brutishness. Mrs Jarrett's dystopian ecological visions are similarly both monstrous and absurd, deriving much of their power from descriptions of nonhuman agency at work on a planet which has become damaged beyond repair and where humans' relationship with the more-than-human world has broken down.

Through Mrs Jarrett's formally disruptive monologues, Churchill also introduces the concept of tragic lament into *Escaped Alone*. Feminist theatre scholar Elin Diamond has observed how the ghost of a labourer who had worked for 150 years in the fields in Churchill's 1983 play *Fen* marks "Churchill's first foray into tragic lament."[90] Like *Fen's* ghost, Mrs Jarrett bears witness to unspeakable suffering and environmental destruction, except in *Escaped Alone* the scale of destruction is operating at a planetary scale. Classics scholar Jennifer Wallace contextualises the historical role of lamentation within tragedy by explaining that:

> Dating right back to the fifth-century Greek dramatists, who were writing in the shadow of Homer's fictional Trojan War and during the contemporary Peloponnesian War, and evident also in plays like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, composed when plagues were ravaging London, lamentation is traditionally one of the chief modes of tragedy. (Wallace 2020: 23)

[90] Elin Diamond, "Churchill's Tragic Materialism; or, Imagining a Posthuman Tragedy". *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 129, no.4 (2014): 753.

Wallace goes on to observe that:

> Ancient lament followed an established ritual. The mourners would sing, shed tears, raise their arms and lay their hands on the dead body. They would loosen their hair and pluck at their cheeks and clothes. By the time of classical tragedy the lament was known as a *kommos*, the word literally meaning a 'beating' since the women would beat their breasts rhythmically to register their grief...Movement, rhythm and song combine to organise and give structure to the grief. (37)

In the final section of the play, indeed on the very last page of the published script, Churchill departs from the tone of cool objectivity which has characterised Mrs J's dystopian monologues up to that point, and instead gives Mrs J a monologue—or, more precisely, a soliloquy (of which more below)—in which the phrase "Terrible rage" is repeated without interruption no fewer than twenty-five times. This "Terrible rage" speech has a mesmeric quality, vocalising through its rhythm and repetition the ecological grief Mrs J may have been feeling but has been unable to articulate until this point through her objective recitation of calamity. In its raw emotion, its uncompromising rhythmic structure and its starkness, it calls to mind Lear's unbearable grief at the death of his beloved Cordelia and the realisation that he will never see her again, which occurs—as does Mrs J's lament— in the play's final moments:

> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
> And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never. (V.iii.306-8)

In this final line, Shakespeare's inversion of iambic pentameter's conventional stress patterns—placing the emphasis on the first rather than on the second iamb—helps elucidate Lear's overwhelming sense of grief: the iambic pentameter form traditionally places the stress on the second iamb ('de dum') but the "Never, never, never, never, never" line jarringly emphasises the first iamb ('dum de'), giving the actor playing Lear a strong vocal clue that Lear's grief is affecting his breathing pattern, perhaps linked to the "climbing sorrow" of "*hysterica passio*" (II.iv.56) to which Lear alludes in the play's second act. Similarly, the uncompromising starkness of Mrs J's "Terrible rage" speech reinforces the sense that the character has moved beyond objective reportage of ecological catastrophe into an affective mode of tragic eco-lamentation.

As *Telegraph* reviewer Claire Allfree observed in the previously cited review, "Mrs Jarrett repeats the words 'terrible rage' over and over like a religious incantation." By disrupting the play's established naturalistic speech patterns Churchill manages to create a mood of stark and affective lamentation. The raw power of Mrs J's lamentation has influenced other contemporary feminist playwrights who have been affected by its capacity to express, beyond dialogue, intense emotions such as outrage and grief. Lucy Kirkwood, for example, whom I interviewed in relation to her play *The Children* for the first chapter of this thesis and who told me that she views Churchill as "someone whose work I revere" wrote her short play *Maryland* (2021) in a mere 48 hours, in response to the murders of Sarah Everard, Sabina Nessa, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman.[91] Described by the playwright as a "howl", the play, which was quickly programmed and performed at the Royal Court

[91] Lucy Kirkwood, *Maryland*, BBC iPlayer, accessed August 25, 2022, http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0019g29/maryland

as a script-in-hand reading and has since been turned into a BBC film, makes explicit associations with classical tragedy by incorporating a chorus of Furies. Of the aspects of *Maryland* revealing grief, anger and lamentation, theatre reviewer Arifa Akbar observed that "...it has a powerful viscerality and a singularly chilling sound effect – a cross between a woman's scream, a metal screech and a shriek of synthesised menace."[92] *Maryland* also knowingly nods towards Churchill's dystopian play *Far* Away (2000) as Kirkwood's play includes a scene in which a travesty of an identity parade takes place in which participants wear hats, despite the suspect being known to have a scar on his forehead; in *Far Away* hats are chillingly worn by "*A procession of ragged, beaten chained prisoners...on their way to* execution." (30) Lamentation is also a form of ritual which has also been embraced by members of eco-activist group Extinction Rebellion. Its summer 2019 campaign *The Sea is Rising and So Are We*, for example, features red-robed characters who silently and rhythmically lament rising sea levels, using slow, repetitive, ritualistic movements which contrast starkly with the behaviour of the holidaymakers on the Cornish beach where the campaign video was filmed.[93]

As well as Mrs Jarrett's monologues which appear at the end of the first seven scenes of *Escaped Alone* and which are addressed directly to the audience, in the "Terrible rage" incantation Churchill uses the device of the soliloquy. While the play's monologues penetrate naturalism's invisible fourth wall using direct audience address, the soliloquies are addressed to no one—neither the audience or other characters—and are a convention whereby the audience is able to hear a

[92] Arifa Akbar, "'This had to happen now': Lucy Kirkwood on Maryland, her 30-minute 'howl' of a play", *The Guardian*, October 10, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/oct/10/this-had-to-happen-now-lucy-kirkwood-maryland-play-sabina-nessa-sarah-everard
[93] Extinction Rebellion performance campaign *The Sea is Rising and So Are We*, accessed August 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Z7DbR9VY9E

character's inner thoughts. Shakespearean soliloquies are perhaps the most familiar form of soliloquy to anglophone theatre goers; we hear Hamlet contemplating suicide to himself in the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy—one of four soliloquies that act as structural pillars for the entire play—but no other characters are privy to these inner thoughts.

Churchill places Mrs Jarrett's "Terrible rage" soliloquy amidst a conversation about jokes which the other three characters are having, in the play's dying moments. None of these characters seems aware of Mrs Jarrett's mournful incantation: in response to Lena saying she has "always wanted to go to Japan" and Sally quipping "get to Tesco first" (41), Sally explains that her quip was a "joke" to which Vi replies "ha" and Lena retorts "I thought it was funny", Mrs Jarrett then has her "Terrible rage" speech apparently unheard by the other characters and immediately afterwards Vi continues the previous "joke" conversation by asking "Why did the chicken not cross the road?" (42) Of all the jokes she could have chosen, it is significant that Vi opts for this particular joke as it carries Pinteresque associations of threat. In Pinter's 1958 play *The Birthday Party*, Stanley has sought refuge in a seaside boarding house. He is in hiding from the menacing henchmen Goldberg and McCann who, in the play's second act, eventually confront him in the living room of the boarding house. The tension between Stanley and his pursuers is palpable, expressed through elliptical conversation and a veiled sense of threat within the room's confined space. Although Pinter's script is infused with verbal hints of impending physical violence, it is not until page 52 (after at least an hour of playing time) that this violence is suddenly unleashed when Stanley *"looks up and slowly kicks Goldberg in the stomach."* (52) Immediately prior to this physical assault, Goldberg has been goading Stanley, repeatedly asking "Why did the chicken cross

the road?" (51) which Stanley is unable to answer. In Churchill's reappropriation of this joke, the dramatic sense of threat has transferred from the interpersonal to the ecological; in the dystopian world of *Escaped Alone*, chickens no longer obligingly cross roads to facilitate anthropocentric jokes.

As well as disrupting naturalistic form by means of Mrs Jarrett's monologues which are addressed directly to the audience, Churchill also disrupts the naturalistic fabric of the play by allowing each of the other three characters—Lena, Vi and Sally— one soliloquy each in which their unconscious or repressed fears are vocalised. It is significant that Churchill does not allow any of these soliloquies to occur in the first half of the play; in the opening four scenes of this eight-scene play, Lena, Vi and Sally indulge exclusively in naturalistic dialogue. By introducing the first of these three soliloquies (Sally's) in section five, Churchill is asking the audience to accept the convention that the naturalistic dialogue between the characters is continuing as in the previous four sections but with the additional inclusion of the soliloquy. Churchill clearly intends the soliloquies to be read in this way as the dialogue immediately preceding and following Sally's soliloquy in section five flows as if she had not soliloquized at all. The conversation centres around what superpowers the characters would like to have. Vi says that "birds is better than fish" (25) to which Mrs J retorts "I wouldn't want to be a fish" (25) and Lena joins in with "or being invisible is the one I'd like", Sally then delivers her soliloquy, before Lena continues the bird conversation with the observation that "Eagles you get eagles as national." (26) The interpolation of Sally's soliloquy—an extended *non sequitur* revealing her intense fear of cats—contextualises it as thematically disconnected from the dialogue which surrounds it and therefore to be read as an expression of her inner thoughts. Sally's ailurophobia is a direct expression of her repressed

anxieties about nonhuman agency. The visceral, nightmarish nature of her soliloquy puts it directly at odds with the socially inflected dialogue which characterises the other characters' speech:

> ...cat among the pigeons, next door's tabby had a pigeon such flapping and couldn't kill it, wouldn't, just played about kept grabbing it again and the bird was maimed someone had to ugh, and pigeons like rats leads to cats rats cats rats are filthy plague everywhere, only how many feet from a rat, and pigeons are filthy, rats are filthy, cats are filthy their bites are poison they bite you and the bite festers, but that's not it that's not it I know that's just an excuse to give a reason I know I've no reason I know it's just cats cats themselves are the horror because they're cats and I have to keep them out I have to make sure I never think about a cat because if I do I have to make sure there's no cats and they could be anywhere... (25)

Vi's monologue in the play's final section (scene eight) also functions as a soliloquy as the naturalistic conversation that surrounds it continues as if Vi has not spoken at all. In this final scene of the play, Sally, Lena and Mrs J discuss kitchens and this kitchen conversation prompts Vi's soliloquy in which she recalls the trauma evoked by the kitchen space as the location where she killed her husband. "I can't love a kitchen" (40), she begins, explaining that "if you've killed someone in a kitchen you're not going to love that kitchen." (40) Recalling "the blood and the thrashing about and what went wrong", she refers to it as "a horror" (41), echoing Sally's description of cats as "the horror..." (25)

While Sally's and Vi's soliloquies recount horrific fears and traumas, it is Lena's soliloquy in section seven which most clearly parallels Mrs Jarrett's visions of ecological devastation. In a weary tone reminiscent of W's towards the end of Macmillan's *Lungs*—"I don't watch the news any more, it all just gets worse and

worse. Everything's covered in ash...I'm tired. Fed up." (2011: 97)— Lena explains that she:

> ...sat on the bed this morning and didn't stand up
> till lunchtime. The air was too thick. It's hard to
> move, it's hard to see why you'd move...
> I don't like it here. I've no interest.
> Why talk about that? Why move your mouth and do talking? (32)

It becomes clear that the climate devastation that has so affected the characters in *Escaped Alone* has rendered their lives all but unliveable. Within Lena's soliloquy it is noteworthy that she uses the word "move" three times in the space of three lines. As Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht has observed, "...the word 'emotion' is derived from the Latin *ēmovēre*, to disturb, at the root of which is *movēre*, to move." (Albrecht 2019: 63) Lena's disinclination to move, or to be moved, or even to "do talking", reflects her wider emotional detachment from the ecological horrors unfolding around her. Conventional naturalistic dialogue, with its emphasis on subtext, character development and exposition, might not have been able to convey such inner emotional terrain with such precision and clarity and Churchill formally disrupts the play's naturalistic mode through the use of soliloquy to achieve just this level of pinpoint emotional accuracy.

The characters' unwillingness to discuss their ecological fears in open conversation is a symptom of the public silence which sociologist Norgaard (2011) observed in her year-long field study in rural Norway into global warming and emotions. Norgaard noticed that members of the community were open to discussing their fears about issues of climate crisis and ecological collapse when she spoke with them privately but that publicly people tended to revert to the psychological

coping mechanism of silence. This is inextricably linked to Norgaard's concept of people living a "double reality" (thinking one way and behaving in another) and to Morton's notion of "the shadow of global warming" which looms over the dialogic exchanges in the hyper eco-naturalistic plays I examined in chapter 3 of this thesis: Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* and Baker's *The Antipodes.*

The idea of one's home—epitomised in *Escaped Alone*'s *mise-en-scène* of a cosy suburban garden space on a summer's afternoon—becoming a place of threat rather than of escape or solace is encapsulated in Albrecht's concept of "solastaliga" which he defines as:

> ...the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place....solastaliga is the homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment.
> (Albrecht 2019: 38-9)

Albrecht coined the neologism solastalgia in 2003 but eight years earlier, in *Staging Place: the Geography of Modern Drama*, theatre scholar Una Chaudhuri observed of Chekhov's drama that:

> ...the discourse of home is deconstructed to produce the image of a *static* exilic consciousness, experienced by the characters as a feeling of being homesick while at home.
> (Chaudhuri 1995: 11, [emphasis in original])

The characters in *Escaped Alone* evince a pronounced static exilic consciousness, all of them—with the exception of Mrs Jarrett—unwilling or unable to move from the illusory sanctuary of their garden cloister and unable to emote except when the

play's naturalistic façade is disrupted, allowing their unconscious private fears to be fully expressed via soliloquy.

The "static exilic consciousness" experienced by Vi, Lena and Sally in *Escaped Alone*, and the feeling of solastaliga revealed in their soliloquies, suggests a Beckettian sense of existential entrapment and absurdity. Theatre scholar Anja Hartl has drawn attention to further stylistic connections between Churchill's play and the absurdist tradition in her observation that:

> On the level of character constellation, language, space and time, *Escaped Alone*'s dystopian performatives evoke conventional dichotomies—between here and there, now and then, paradise and apocalypse—which, however, increasingly blur and collapse under the impact of the play's use of absurdist stylistic devices.
> (Hartl 2021: 148)

Hartl convincingly argues that Churchill's turn to "a Beckettian style of playwriting" in the twenty-first century—encompassing both *Far Away* (2000) and *Escaped Alone* (2016)—"must be read as an expression of the author's ongoing struggle with the forms and functions of political, more precisely dialectical, theatre today." (133) Situating Churchill's post-millennial plays at the "...crucial nexus between Beckett's theatre of negativity and Brechtian dialectical drama", Hartl argues that Churchill's recent plays "...stage an ostensibly paradoxical aesthetic in which Brechtian dialectical strategies are creatively combined with absurdist elements." (2021: 135) The disrupted eco-naturalism I have examined in this chapter provides the formal mechanism by which Churchill's creative combination of dialectical and absurdist aesthetics is realised.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that the disruption of naturalistic form evident in Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011) and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) helps the playwrights to dramatize issues of climate crisis and ecological breakdown which lie at the thematic heart of each play.

Lungs disrupts the naturalistic conventions established in the play's first 70 pages—which are characterised by a steady, linear successional temporal structure and dialogue that is rich in subtext—by an abrupt and rapid temporal acceleration in the play's final ten pages, projecting the characters W and M into the sort of dystopian future they once feared.

With its suburban garden setting inhabited by three elderly women who sit and talk mainly of ostensibly inconsequential matters, *Escaped Alone* offers a near parody of naturalistic conventions. These conventions are formally disrupted in three ways: firstly, by the outsider Mrs Jarrett entering and leaving Sally's garden at the beginning and end of the play, and speaking directly and confidentially to the audience as she does so; secondly, through Mrs Jarrett's apocalyptic monologues which are directly addressed to the audience and which append seven of the play's eight dialogic scenes; and thirdly through the use of soliloquies which reveal each character's unconscious fears and anxieties.

In the next and final chapter of this thesis, I explore how covert eco-naturalism is employed in the dramaturgical service of two contemporary pieces of climate crisis theatre which superficially appear to eschew naturalism but which, it transpires, are deeply reliant on it.

Chapter 5: Covert eco-naturalism

Petroleum balks at the five-act form, today's catastrophes do not proceed in a straight line but in cyclical crises...
Bertolt Brecht, "On Subject Matter and Form" (1929) [94]

In this final chapter, I turn my attention to the most covert extreme of the naturalistic spectrum and examine two pieces of theatre which initially appear to eschew naturalist dramaturgy but which on closer inspection are found to be fundamentally reliant on it; Katie Mitchell and Stephen Emmott's *Ten Billion* (2012) and Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016). In positioning these plays as illustrative of covert eco-naturalism, I do not mean that the naturalism they contain is concealed from view—Angelaki, for example, observes that Hickson's *Oil* "...reinforced the link between naturalism and environmentalism in contemporary playwriting" (2019: 16)—but rather, that the plays are dependent on naturalism despite appearing to be non-naturalistic in their overall form.

The two texts could hardly be more dissimilar. *Ten Billion* is a one-hour performance lecture for which a printed play text does not even exist; in 2013, a year after the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs production, Penguin published a book which carries the same name and which closely mirrors the words contained in Emmott's solo performance but there are telling differences between the two, which I go on to analyse in this chapter. *Oil*, on the other hand, is a complex and multi-layered five-act play which runs for approximately three hours and deploys an overarching Brechtian epic structure. It took Hickson six years to write, from conception to the

[94] Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn (London: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2019 [1929]), 56.

version which premièred at the Almeida Theatre in 2016, and "...had a hell of a lot of drafting in it...It was slightly development hell." [95]

Directed by Katie Mitchell, *Ten Billion* appears to eschew mimesis, instead presenting the audience with seemingly unadorned and objective scientific facts about anthropogenic global warming and the resulting ecological and climatic crises against the background of an unsustainably burgeoning global population now approaching ten billion people. Emmott, who at the time of the performance was Head of Computational Science at Microsoft Research in Cambridge UK, illustrates his talk with projected images of charts and graphs displaying textual and numeric scientific data, reinforcing the sense that one is attending an academic lecture. The cumulative effect of this dramaturgy—a solo performance in which there is no possibility of dialogue, nor any tangible sense of dramatic conflict, nor any conventional narrative momentum from exposition to climax then resolution—appears to position the performance as fundamentally non-naturalistic. However, as theatre scholar and arts journalist Catherine Love (2020) has insightfully observed, director Katie Mitchell's decision to place Emmott within an exact replica of his Cambridge office reveals that Mitchell and her designer Giles Cadle are employing a Stanislavskian aesthetic which operates at the level of the *mise-en-scène*. Instead of exploiting naturalistic theatre's constituent elements of characterisation, dialogue and plot, the production focuses on detailed lifelike reproduction in terms of the stage setting, costume and props in an attempt to persuade the audience of Emmott's credibility and authority as a scientific expert. *Ten Billion* occupies a unique position within this study; I am arguing for it as a piece of eco-naturalistic theatre not on the

[95] "Playwrights in Lockdown: Ella Hickson," Dan Rebellato, accessed December 17, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIsUahE9wiY

basis of its text *per se* but rather in relation to the dramaturgical decisions Mitchell used in staging it, thereby bringing Emmott's data-heavy text to dramatic life. I contend that Mitchell's Stanislavskian focus on the verisimilitude of the set, props and costume helps position Emmott within our eyes as a knowledgeable but flawed individual whom we relate to as a member of our social referent group rather than as simply an authoritative scientist dispensing dire warnings about climate and ecological crises. Mitchell's dramaturgy also suggests that Emmott's academic environment—with its epistemological reliance on scientific facts, charts, graphs and computational climate predictions—partially determines his world view, just as his choice of weekend newspaper (*The Sunday Times*) and his referring to shops which cater for customers in higher socio-economic groups (for example, John Lewis and Waitrose) suggest other ways in which his perspective is flawed, limited and partial.

From its origins in late nineteenth-century European and Scandinavian drama onwards, Naturalism has long been adept at exploring the deterministic effects of environment on character. The kitchen setting of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888), for example, functions both as a reminder of the valet Jean's social status and, when she crosses the kitchen's threshold, it becomes emblematic of the titular Miss Julie's social transgression. So perhaps it should come as little surprise that Mitchell, whose practice as a theatre director has been strongly influenced by Stanislavskian theory, should place Emmott within a replica of the office in his Cambridge laboratory. However, this Stanislavskian aesthetic of lifelike reproduction has a surprising and hidden consequence; rather than portraying Emmott simply as a scientific expert, it also serves to humanize Emmott and to present him as a contradictory and flawed flesh and blood human being with whom the audience can empathise. Despite his extensive scientific knowledge about greenhouse gas emissions and their role in

anthropogenic global warming, the replica of Emmott's Cambridge office, so painstakingly reproduced, also significantly contains a "...mouldy tangerine and...plants that were unwatered." (Love 2020: 229) Emmott's disregard for the decorative and edible flora in his care suggests that his actions are at odds with his words. Like the interviewees in *Living in Denial* (2011), Norgaard's sociological study into climate crisis denial which I drew on in chapter 3, Emmott is seen to be living a "double reality" in which he thinks one way but acts in another. In this respect, the play's covert eco-naturalism helps render him a flawed everyman with whom the audience can closely identify.

Ella Hickson's *Oil*, presented at London's Almeida Theatre in 2016, is a contemporary ecologically themed play which also superficially appears to eschew naturalistic form. Like its eponymous substance, the play's structure is spatiotemporally vast, exhibiting what theatre scholar Patrick Lonergan (2020), adopting a phrase from Morton's *Dark Ecology* (2016: 6), has called "A Twisted, Looping Form". In his essay, Lonergan argues that *Oil* uses theatrical form, particularly through its structuring of time, to encourage audiences to think deeply about Morton's concept of dark ecology and the temporal consequences that flow from such thinking. The action of Hickson's play shifts from a farm in rural Cornwall in 1889, to a British colonial residence in Tehran in 1908, to a middle-class household in Hampstead (an affluent suburb of north London) in 1970, to the desert near Kirkuk, Kurdistan in 2021 before returning to the Cornish farm in a dystopian 2051. The play's central character May ages more slowly than the 162 years she lives through, an historical continuum broadly coextensive with the age of oil. The play's Brechtian epic structure, in which subplots are thematically rather than causally linked, is emphasised by the inclusion of non-naturalistic 'interscenes' which

link each of the play's five scenes. The Brechtian influence is also manifested in a stage direction which describes the character Joss has having "*...something Mother Courage about him."* (109) Hickson's *Oil* could also be viewed as exemplifying what Szondi calls "station drama", a term he coined to describe the innovative structure of Strindberg's *To Damascus* (1897): "The station technique...[replaces]...continuity of action with a series of scenes. These individual scenes stand in no causal relationship and do not...generate one another. On the contrary, they seem to be isolated stones strung out along the path of the onward moving *I*." (Szondi 1987: 26 [emphasis in original]) Viewed in this light, the character May can certainly be seen to function as an "onward moving *I*" whose subjective experience of key moments or 'stations' in the age of oil reflects the play's overall emotional trajectory.

Yet within this ostensibly non-naturalistic form, whether we think of it as Strindbergian station drama or Brechtian epic (or indeed a combination of the two), each of the play's five scenes are revealed fundamentally to depend on naturalistic conventions for their dramatic impact and to engage the audience on an emotional level. In fact, when viewed individually, each scene adheres to all seven of the formal characteristics of naturalism I identified in the Introduction to this thesis: each part uses natural sounding dialogue; there is no direct audience address; the plot of each scene is based on successional temporality; within each part there is a clear causal narrative movement from exposition to crisis then resolution; each part deploys realistic props, costumes and stage furniture; each part poses a moral issue which needs to be resolved; and each part maintains the convention of naturalism's invisible fourth wall. The only exception to this are aspects of magic realism which Hickson introduces into some of the scenes and which I address later in this chapter.

Although the play's overall structure may engage the audience on an intellectual level—deploying Brecht's famous device of *Verfremdung* or 'making the familiar strange' to raise the audience's awareness of issues which include gender inequality, the socioeconomic impact of extractive capitalism, and the relationship between imperialism and ecological degradation—it is only by means of the naturalistic conventions operating within each of the play's five scenes that we are able emotionally to engage with the characters and the intense interpersonal conflicts in which they are embroiled. Thus, two apparently contradictory impulses—on the one hand, the naturalistic impulse to evoke empathy through emotional engagement on an individual level and on the other hand the Brechtian impulse to catalyse activism through intellectual engagement at a societal level—are held in productive dynamic tension and I argue that this comes about precisely as a result of the play's covert eco-naturalism. While *Oil*'s spatiotemporally vast superstructure depicts humankind's increasing dependency on oil as a sort of Freudian death drive, the naturalism which is so integral to each of its five scenes reveals May to be motivated instead by the pleasure principle. This helps deepen the emotional empathy we feel towards May and her daughter Amy as we see our own desires for greater material comfort reflected in their struggles.

Katie Mitchell and Stephen Emmott's *Ten Billion*

Ten Billion ran at the Royal Court Theatre from 18 July to 11 August 2012, presented not on the theatre's main stage but in the intimate 85-seat Theatre Upstairs, where the theatre's more experimental, and less obviously commercially viable, work is programmed. Contrasting it with another performance lecture Mitchell directed at the same theatre two years later—*2071* by scientist Chris Rapley and playwright Duncan Macmillan—Angelaki points out that:

> The transition from the more intimate Royal Court Theatre Upstairs (*Ten Billion*) to the Theatre Downstairs *(2071*) was itself an indication of how public awareness of the environment issue had changed in the meantime. It also revealed a certain confidence on the part of the Royal Court that a performance lecture could generate a substantial enough audience to fill its main space. Where *Ten Billion* had been an experiment, *2071* was a certainty...[and] was treated as a major event, with increased publicity.
> (Angelaki 2019: 35)

Ten Billion had its genesis in a meeting in 2011 between Mitchell and Emmott who at that time was not only Head of Computational Science at Microsoft Research in Cambridge UK but also a visiting professor of Computational Science at the University of Oxford. Mitchell's recollection of the meeting reveals that it prompted in her something of a Damascene conversion to environmentally themed theatre praxis:

> There are moments in every artist's life when the intellectual flight coordinates are changed resulting in a very different artistic trajectory, and this was one such moment...Stephen presented so many compelling facts and burned with such a powerful mixture of rage and despair that I couldn't look away.
>
> First at the National Theatre and later at the Royal Court, I worked with Stephen and other theatre practitioners (actors, writers, and designers) to develop ideas for a performance to communicate the problem.

> However, the sheer scale of the subject kept overwhelming us, and we couldn't find a theatrical form to contain it. Timothy Morton, professor in English at Rice University in Houston, exploring the intersection of object-orientated thought and ecology, later coined the term 'hyperobject' to describe environmental catastrophe...
>
> Then I suddenly realized that the only person in the room able to hold the complexity of the hyperobject in his head was the scientist himself and so, I thought, why not ask Stephen to do the performance instead of an actor? [96]

Mitchell's decision to use Emmott rather than a trained actor carried risks. His limitations as a performer were commented upon by several theatre critics, including Dominic Cavendish who, reviewing the performance for the *Daily Telegraph*, observed:

> "I'm a scientist not an actor – as is about to become abundantly clear", he [Emmott] declares at the start – and that's conclusively proven within minutes. Contending with some temporary crutches as he keeps one eye on us, another on a perched Apple laptop loaded with data, he makes a steadfast speaker. But in the impassioned delivery stakes he's no Brian Cox. [97]

While Emmott's thespian deficiencies attracted critical attention, the starkness of his message—augmented by animated graphics which helped clarify some of his unpalatable scientific facts—was felt by several critics to be both powerful and unsettling. Sarah Hemming, writing in the *Financial Times*, for example, found it "...one of the most disturbing shows I have seen on a stage", while Georgina Brown,

---

[96] Katie Mitchell, "Existential Creativity: Making Theatre Sustainable", blog post for Digital Theatre Plus, accessed October 29, 2022, https://www.digitaltheatreplus.com/blob/existential-creativity-making-theatre-sustainable

[97] Dominic Cavendish, "Daily Telegraph review of *Ten Billion* 19.7.2012", *Theatre Record* 637 (15-28 July 2012): 812.

reviewing it for the *Mail on Sunday*, declared it not "...quite a play but...certainly the most scary show in London." [98]

Catherine Love (2020), however, referring to the impact of the set's ultra-verisimilitude, also noted that:

> In *Ten Billion*, the illusionistic style of the set curiously positioned Emmott like a dramatic character rather than a scientist presenting his research. This presentation of the performer in a frame more associated with fiction then allowed doubt about what he was saying, as the lecture format knocked up against the precise but artificial detail of the design. In other words, the illusionistic set seemed to be inviting audiences to question whether Emmott's findings were similarly fabricated. (230)

I concur with Love's argument that Mitchell's juxtaposition of styles in *Ten Billion*—an expert computational scientist delivering apparently authoritative climate change data framed within a highly detailed but illusionistic set—creates a clash in which they "knock up" against one another. However, whereas for Love this clash creates space for doubt in the audience's mind about the veracity of the scientific data being presented, I would argue that, on the contrary, it encourages the audience to feel a greater degree of empathy toward Emmott and hence to be more receptive to his message. The mouldy tangerine, the unwatered pot plants, the precariously perched laptop and the messy state of his office, not to mention the fact that he has been involved in a real-life accident which has resulted in him having to support himself with crutches throughout the performance, all help position Emmott in the audience's mind as a flawed individual with whom it can readily identify. This sense of identification is reinforced by the many colloquialisms with which his speech is

[98] Sarah Hemming, "Financial Times review of *Ten Billion* 21.7.2012", *Theatre Record* 637 (15-28 July 2012): 815. Georgina Brown, "Mail on Sunday review of *Ten Billion* 29.7.2012", *Theatre Record* 637 (15-28 July 2012): 816.

peppered, culminating in his levelling, pessimistic conclusion that “I think we’re fucked.” (Emmott 2013: 196)

Mitchell’s covert eco-naturalism—embodied in the ultra-verisimilitude of *Ten Billion*’s detailed *mise-en-scène* and through Emmott’s frequent non-scientific, vernacular asides and interpolations—situates Emmott as contradictory, vulnerable and all too human, and the effect of this is to make the audience more receptive to his dire environmental message than if he had simply delivered a flawless, authoritative TED Talk. Dire environmental messages are not in themselves enough to persuade any group of people—the audience at the intimate Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in this instance—to change their minds or behaviour about the issues under discussion. The problem is not a lack of knowledge, what Hulme (2009), Norgaard (2011) and others refer to as the “information deficit model”; the issue is, rather, the extent to which the audience accepts or rejects the messenger as a member of their referent group. As Hoffman explains in *How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate* (2015):

> ...we employ ideological filters that are influenced by our belief systems (what is called “motivated reasoning”), which are to a large extent formed through the referent groups to which we belong (what is called “cultural cognition”). We are influenced by group values and we will generally endorse the position that most directly reinforces our connections with others in our referent group and at the same time strengthens our definition of self...We give greater weight to evidence and arguments that support our pre-existing beliefs (termed “biased assimilation” or the “confirmation bias”) and expend disproportionate energy trying to refute views or arguments that we find contrary to those beliefs (termed the “disconfirmation bias”)...We first try to determine if the person we engage with is part of our “tribe” and therefore someone whose ideas we can trust. (17)

Time and again throughout the performance lecture, and also during the post-show talk which I listened to in the British Library's audio archive, Emmott positions himself as part of the audience's social referent group. He does this in three distinct ways. Firstly, he uses the words "we" and "us" throughout to implicate himself and the audience in a shared viewpoint. "In 1960 *we* flew 100 billion passenger kilometres", he explains, adding "In 1980 *we* flew 1,000 billion passenger kilometres...Just ten years later, in 1990, there were five billion of *us*." (Emmott 2013: 26-27 [my emphases]). Secondly, he situates himself and the audience as privileged members of the affluent Global North, in contrast to what he refers to as people living in "developing countries":

> Such is the use of wood and charcoal for cooking throughout Africa and Asia that it is producing unprecedented amounts of what is called 'black carbon'—principally soot. More black carbon is now produced every year than in the whole Middle Ages.
>
> It is a major problem in many developing countries. It is contributing significantly to both short-term climate variations and long-term climate change.
>
> But black carbon doesn't just come from poor people in poor countries burning wood and charcoal just to get by every day. It also comes from rich people (*like us*), in rich countries (like the UK, Germany, the USA, Canada, Australia) transporting ourselves, and our stuff, via planes, ships and cars. (80-81, [my emphasis])

Thirdly, he attempts to augment the relationship between himself and the audience through references to culturally specific consumer behaviour. For example, in the printed text of *Ten Billion*, Emmott writes:

> I confess I used to find it amusing but I am now sick of reading in the weekend papers about some celebrity saying 'I gave up my 4 x 4 and now I've bought a Prius. Aren't I doing my bit for the environment?' They are not doing their bit for the environment. (182)

However, in performance—revealed in the British Library's audio archive recording of *Ten Billion*—what Emmott actually says is:

> I have to confess that I'm fairly tired of opening *The Sunday Times* every Sunday reading about some celebrity who's just traded in their massive 4 x 4 and just bought a spanking new Toyota Prius. They're saying 'Aren't I doing my bit for the environment?' The fact is, they're not doing their bit for the environment! [99]

The cultural specificity of *The Sunday Times* as Emmott's Sunday newspaper of choice (he professes to read it "every Sunday") reinforces the sense that he is sharing his opinions with a leisured, bourgeois coterie whom he assumes will share his values. This is reinforced a little later in his presentation when he tells the audience:

> It's worth reminding ourselves that our stuff does not actually come from John Lewis, Tesco, Waitrose, Amazon, Walmart or Best Buy. Our stuff comes from countries: China, Morocco, Brazil, Turkey, Spain, South Korea, Peru. Whether it's asparagus, pyjamas or consumer electronics. (106)

The fact that two of the first three retailers he mentions (John Lewis and Waitrose) position themselves within the UK's retail sector as catering for an affluent, middle-class clientele further emphasises the exclusive nature of the coterie with whom Emmott is sharing his knowledge and opinions. This is reminiscent of the socially exclusive audiences of London's patent theatres in the early 1710s, whose theatre-going habits Ridout (2020) connects with their readership of the single printed sheet

[99] British Library archive audio recording of *Ten Billion*. This excerpt begins at 1 hour, 12 minutes and 37 seconds.

journal *The Spectator* which was published in London six days per week between March 1711 and December 1712:

> During the London theatre season...notices of the evening's theatre at both the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket (which during this period offered programs [sic.] of opera) appeared in each edition, as the first advertisement to appear beneath the "authored" essay. This is a fairly clear indication that there was a significant overlap between the readership of *The Spectator* and the audiences at these two patent theatres.
> (Ridout 2020: 58)

Just as there appears to have been a significant overlap in early eighteenth-century London between attendance at the two patent theatres referred to above and readership of *The Spectator*, so there would seem to be a significant overlap in early twenty-first century London between attendance at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, readership of Sunday broadsheet newspapers and shopping at retail outlets such as John Lewis and Waitrose.

It is not because of his expertise as a computational climate scientist *per se* but rather by positioning himself as an integral part of the exclusive social referent group to which he and the audience belong, that Emmott is able to communicate his message so powerfully. His dire warnings of impending ecological disaster are dispensed not from 'on high' but emerge as an agonised *cri de coeur* shared with coequals within his referent group. The exclusivity of this referent group is heightened by the paucity of seats available: the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs has only 85 seats, the show ran for a mere 24 days, it did not transfer to another theatre, the performance was not made available as a YouTube recording nor did it reach a mass viewership by being adapted for television, as was the case, for example, with the Royal Court's production of Kirkwood's *Maryland* (2021). The dramaturgical

means by which *Ten Billion*'s bourgeois audience comes to accept Emmott as a member of its own "tribe"—thereby becoming more than usually receptive to his message—is precisely the covert eco-naturalism Mitchell deploys. This eco-naturalism is revealed through the painstaking verisimilitude of the set and in Mitchell's characterisation of Emmott not as a voice of detached scientific rationalism but as a flawed, opinionated, and emotionally engaged human caught, like the rest of us, in the fraught problematics of attempting to live ethically in the Anthropocene.

The intimacy of the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs space amplifies the intensity of Emmott's relationship with his audience. As a preamble to the performance lecture, he refers to the set as a "frighteningly accurate reproduction of what my office in my lab in Cambridge looks like" and in the post-show talk he muses:

> It's almost like being in my lab...Oddly enough, I often give talks at scientific conferences or even lectures in a big university where it's just massive really and because of that everyone feels anonymous but I have to confess, the first night we opened and how close everyone was...on the front row, it was a bit alarming...because it's quite intimate it was a bit more difficult to deal with.

Naturalism's tendency to reveal intimate details of a character's life helps create a powerful bond between audience and character. This is heightened through the use of significant and realistic props, as when, for example, Mrs Alving discovers that her son Oswald is carrying twelve capsules of morphine power on his person in the final act of Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), with all the devastating interpersonal implications that revelation carries for mother and son. In *Ten Billion*, seeing Emmott at home amid the clutter of his academic office and apparently oblivious to domestic tasks like watering his pot plants, reinforces not his scientific credibility but his fallibility as a fellow human. From a phenomenological perspective, Emmott's cluttered onstage

office—with its carbon-emitting screens, tottering piles of academic papers, mouldy fruit and neglected house plants—reflects more powerfully than words the very over consumption against which he rails in his talk. As theatre phenomenologist Pannill Camp (2004) reminds us:

> The phenomenology of theatre addresses itself to objects that, for varying purposes, are not to be read as signs for something else. It is employed as a theoretical framework for the articulation of the affective and purely sensory...Phenomenologists emphasize what is felt and lived, rather than read. (83)

The audience's "felt and lived" experience of being in such close physical proximity to Emmott and his cloying office clutter powerfully reinforces *Ten Billion*'s message about over population and the over consumption of privileged nations. Not only does Emmott find the audience proximity "...a bit...difficult to deal with..." but the audience surely also finds the intense bodily proximity and overwhelming sense of stage clutter just as difficult to deal with as the scientist's Cassandra-like warnings of impending doom.

Emmott's sense of connection to his social referent group is complicated by the fact that at least one of the audience members during the performance and post-show talk recorded for the British Library's audio archive was actually a research student from Emmott's Cambridge laboratory. Emmott is thus not only preaching to the converted but to a member of his very own research team who, one might reasonably infer, would already be aware of the scientific facts he is presenting.

In the British Library's audio archive recording of *Ten Billion*'s post-show talk, an astute audience member asked Emmott the following incisive question,

highlighting the tension between the truthfulness of the scientific findings being presented and the illusionistic setting of the performance. She asked:

> You're now in the context of a theatre and habitually in a theatre we have an illusion of reality as opposed to reality itself and I just wondered if it changed anything for you, giving a lecture in a theatre?

Emmott's response is illuminating:

> Yes, it's changed it dramatically. I mean, not in terms of the content, certainly, erm...but in terms of the way in which the content is articulated in some parts. Also, I think what *has* changed, which is not my doing—this has been the brilliance of Katie—has been to change the overall context. So, you know, I would never have music and sound and lights. I mean...when you're at a scientific conference, someone gives you a USB stick and tells you to get on with it! Just using some theatrical devices in the way in which I might say things; if you said those in a scientific podium, you know, people would think you'd just had a stroke! [*Laughter from the audience*.]

For Emmott, "the brilliance of Katie" changed "the overall context" of his performance lecture through the introduction of the theatrical elements of "music and sound and lights". Listening to the audio archive recording of the production, it becomes immediately clear that the music—by composer Paul Clark—establishes mood and atmosphere from the outset, when the subtle, soulful strains of a woodwind instrument, possibly a clarinet or oboe, are first introduced. Throughout the performance they continue to exert a powerful subliminal influence, accentuating moments of heighted emotion, such as when Emmott observes:

> Arctic coastlines are retreating by 14 meters per year. Greenland and Arctic ice sheets are now losing some 475 billion tonnes of mass per year into the sea. This is going to contribute to rising sea levels. And to make matters worse, probably much worse, melting sea ice caused by our activities is now causing the release of significant quantities of methane from the Arctic Ocean.

> For the first time, hundreds of plumes of methane—many of them kilometres across—have been observed rising from previously frozen methane stores in the Laptev Sea, off the East Siberia Arctic shelf.
>
> This could be very big trouble on a very big scale. (108-9)

As Emmott's vocabulary and syntax move from a coolly objective scientific narrative voice ("frozen methane stores in the Laptev Sea", for example) to the much plainer, direct and affective language of feeling overwhelmed ("very big trouble on a very big scale", for example) so the music reflects and augments Emmott's increasing emotional engagement with his subject matter.

The incorporation of emotive, non-diegetic music might feel an incongruous intrusion within a piece of theatre which otherwise places significant emphasis on naturalistic lifelike reproduction, but a similar sort of effect was also used in the autumn 2022 production of Steve Waters' *The Contingency Plan* at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre. Subtle and emotionally engaging music was introduced, along with muted, stylised lighting effects, to emphasize the emotional intensity of key speeches within the two plays of which the diptych is comprised. Robin's last substantive speech in *On the* Beach, for example, was accompanied by just such subliminal lighting and music, accentuating his acute emotional investment in the subject about which he feels so passionately:

> Been dreaming of that sea for years, seeing it as I wake, tasting the salt in my mouth. And this, this is not the end Jenny. You know that, I know that. Might be the end of us, what we do, but who are we? We're just the world's sickness, we're an infection, a disturbance in the sleep of the world and we're gonna be brushed away, sweated out.
>
> The sea rises, the land goes, the cities go, the people are gone. No, you can't fight that. (Waters 2022: 71)

Emotive, non-diegetic music—intermixed with arresting still and video images from key historical moments from the age of oil—also played a pivotal role in the original production of Ella Hickson's *Oil*, directed by Carrie Cracknell at London's Almeida Theatre in October 2016. The music and projected images featured prominently in the play's five 'interscenes', four of which act as a bridge between the play's five scenes, the final interscene functioning as a futuristic coda to the entire play. Although spatiotemporally expansive in structure and bold in its depiction of dreamlike sequences, embracing what Wenzel (2006) has termed "petro-magic-realism", I argue below that the play relies for its emotional impact on the naturalism embedded within each of its five scenes. Just as I contended in chapter 4 that Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) held Brechtian and Beckettian aesthetics together in a productive dynamic tension, so I argue in this chapter that Hickson's *Oil* creates a similar productive dynamic tension but in this instance it is between Brechtian and Stanislavskian aesthetics. Towards the end of this chapter, I will challenge the validity of twentieth-century theatre studies assumptions that Brecht and Stanislavski's approaches to theatre making were diametrically opposed—what Aston has characterised as the essential difference "...between the art of 'becoming' the character [Stanislavskian] and the work of demonstration [Brechtian]" (1995: 6)—and will argue that, in our current age of natural resource depletion and environmental degradation, the dramaturgy of *Oil* urges us to think ecologically, on two scales at once. This multi-scalar thinking explains and contextualises Hickson's formally experimental amalgamation of naturalism and non-naturalism; the naturalistic aspects of the play prompt an emotional engagement with individual characters whose lives are being blighted by the effects of extractive capitalism while

the non-naturalistic elements of the play—viewed through the particular lens of director Carrie Cracknell's debut production at the Almeida Theatre in 2016—prompt an intellectual engagement with the socio-political and gender inequalities underpinning the world of the play. *Oil*'s innovative structure, containing naturalistic scenes within a non-naturalistic overarching framework, offers a dramaturgical solution to the narrative conundrum articulated by historian Dipesh Chakrabarty in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*:

> In thinking historically about humans in an age when intensive capitalist globalization has given rise to the threat of global warming and mass extinction, we need to bring together conceptual categories that we have usually treated in the past as separate and virtually unconnected. We need to connect deep and recorded histories and put geological time and the biological time of evolution in conversation with the time of human history and experience. And this means telling the story of human empires—of colonial, racial, and gendered oppressions—in tandem with the larger story of how a particular biological species, *Homo sapiens*...came to dominate the biosphere, lithosphere, and the atmosphere of this planet. We have to do all this, moreover, without ever taking our eyes off the individual human who continues to negotiate his or her own phenomenological and everyday experience of life, death and the world...
> (Chakrabarty 2021: 7-8)

Angelaki's observation that "We cannot call *Oil* a purely formally experimental play, nor can we describe it as fully realist. The indeterminacy far from reduces its significance, which rests in how the play applies naturalist formulas to concerns of female social involvement" (2019: 17) goes to the heart of the matter. Later in this chapter, I link the play's formal indeterminacy to the multi-scalar thinking which is integral to Morton's (2010) concept of ecological thinking and which also addresses Chakrabarty's (2021) call for a way of "...telling the story of human empires... in tandem with the larger story of how...*Homo sapiens*...came to dominate

the...planet...without ever taking our eyes off the individual human.” This human, in the world of Hickson’s play, is embodied in the character of May.

Ella Hickson's *Oil*

The overall structural conceit of *Oil* is that the protagonist May ages more slowly than the 162 years of history she moves through, a continuum roughly coextensive with the age of oil from its first exploitation in the late nineteenth century to its imagined economically viable depletion by the mid twenty-first century.

Addressing the non-naturalistic time signature of the play and her decision to encompass one human lifetime within the play's five scenes whilst traversing a longer historical continuum through the play's structure, Hickson explained:

> I knew that we had to take one character through time in order to...emotionally relate to them...[T]he formal task was set by the subject matter. So, I think one of our problems with taking responsibility for natural resources is that they are slightly longer than our own lifetime. Oil takes 150 million years to make. We will have used all of it in 250 years and somehow because that 250 years is just a smidge longer than our one lifetime, it feels like no one has to take singular responsibility for what is a kind of awful use of resources...[T]hat relationship between one human life and the age of oil has been the thing that has kind of created this mad selection of moments in history to tell both the human story and the historical story.[100]

Formal experimentation is central to Hickson's playwriting aesthetic, as it is for Caryl Churchill whose work has influenced Hickson's development as a writer. Non-chronological and anachronistic scenes, for example, were a distinctive feature of Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982). Explaining the centrality of formal experimentation in her work, Hickson stated:

> The relationship between form and content in theatre is where my politics lie...That's like my whole thing. I find the reforming of theatrical

[100] "Ella Hickson on Writing Oil", Almeida Theatre, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCqmdNgIwXk

> expression in relation to content just is a political expression and that's the thing I'm obsessed with.[101]

The detailed plot summary of *Oil* below is intended to convey a sense of the range and scope of the play's complex narrative and structural ambition, to show the relationship between the play's form and its content, and to provide a context for the textual analysis that follows.

Described as *"twenty – hardy, slim, muscular and three months pregnant"* (1), we first encounter domestic farmworker May enduring physical hardship in the depths of a *"bitingly cold"* (1) winter in the Singer family's Cornish farmhouse in 1889, a household presided over by matriarch Ma Singer. May's husband Joss spits logs to provide firewood, while May is forced to break the "inches thick" (2) ice from the animals' drinking trough. Along with Ma Singer, Joss and May, Joss's sister Fanny, his brother Samuel and Samuel's wife Anne are also present in the farmhouse when a stranger calls. The stranger is the American William Whitcomb who offers to buy the family's farmstead so that he can use it as a storage depot for the kerosene which he has recently begun distributing from America. He describes kerosene as "This here miracle...[that] was made when the earth started" (18) and when a drop of it spills onto May's finger, we are told not only that *"she loves the smell"* (18) but that she is also *"transfixed."* (18) Whitcomb tells her "There are millions of years, right there on the end of your finger" and May is astonished, asking "How can a million years fit on one person's finger? Magic?" (18) The phenomenological impact of this moment will resonate throughout the play. It uses

[101] "Playwrights in Lockdown: Ella Hickson", Dan Rebellato, accessed December 17, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIsUahE9wiY

naturalism's focus on a highly significant prop—a tiny drop of kerosene in this instance—to raise awareness of the two scales at which the play will operate; the minutely observed domestic scale (characterised by the drop of kerosene which May loves to smell) and the expansive socio-historical scale, as the kerosene represents the beginning of the age of oil in the world of the play. The drop of kerosene is also a powerful example what Lavery calls an "ecological image"; a stage picture that radiates beyond its frame, giving "...rise to ecological thought and feeling through...[its]...targeting of spectatorial vision." (Lavery 2019: 259) After the family, led by Ma Singer and her son Joss, reject Whitcomb's offer and the dingy farmhouse interior is plunged back into the darkness his kerosene lamp had temporarily illuminated, May waits until the others have gone to bed before setting out on an extraordinary journey into her own future, walking *"out into the night."* (25) Her emphatic departure, reminiscent of Nora's famously assertive departure at the end of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), not only closes a metaphorical door on the gender inequalities underlying society at the time—only Joss is in a position to negotiate with Whitcomb because property passes down the male line—but it also closes the door on the play's adherence to naturalistic representation.

The play's second scene advances 19 years to 1908, the setting being a colonial residence in Tehran where members of the British Admiralty are attempting to inveigle their way into a position of influence with their Iranian counterparts and thus gain access to the Persian oilfields which are visible in the distance. May is now a serving woman and her anagrammatic daughter Amy is alongside her, hiding under a table on which sit the remnants of a sumptuous buffet. As 19 years have elapsed between the first and second scenes, biologically speaking May should be 39 but we learn that Amy is only eight years old so we can infer that May has also

only aged eight years, making her just 28. A drunken naval officer, Samuel—played by the same actor who played the character named Samuel in the first scene—attempts to seduce May but she resists, aided by naval orderly Thomas. At the end of the scene, May and Amy *"speed off across the desert"* (53) in a motorcar May has stolen.

The third scene is set in a detached house in Hampstead, an affluent suburb of London. It is now 1970 so a further 62 years have elapsed in chronological time yet it is only seven years later in terms of the characters' biological ages, Amy now being 15 years old and May, correspondingly, around the age of 35. Having undergone a journey from impoverished farmworker to domestic servant in the play's first two scenes, May is now the high-achieving executive of a British-owned multinational oil company. Amy and her teenage boyfriend Nate indulge in sexual foreplay but are secretly watched by May, leading to a confrontation between mother and daughter and a testy verbal fight between May and Nate. May's problems intensify later in the scene when Mr Farouk, a "representative of Mr Gaddafi's Revolutionary Command Council currently conducting negotiations with the [oil] majors that are based in London" (63) turns up at the house unannounced. Mr Farouk confronts May, explaining that the Libyan government wants a "twenty-five-per-cent ownership - or its financial equivalent" (66) of the company's profits, as payback for the imperialist exploitation the country has endured. After Mr Farouk's departure and feeling *"exhausted"* (80) after further arguing with Amy, May has a dreamlike, magic-realist encounter with her former husband Joss who has incongruously ventured from the first scene's 1889 rural Cornwall setting to the detached house in Hampstead in 1970. After Joss's surreal departure—*"He dissolves from between her hands—he disappears into the sink—and down into the*

plughole..." (82), Amy tells May that from her bedroom window she had seen a man siphoning petrol from a car in the street and that "He was burning...He went up like a bonfire." (83)

The fourth scene progresses the narrative a further 51 years from 1970 to 2021 (a projected near future when the play was published in 2016). The setting is the desert near Kirkuk, Kurdistan, outside Baghdad, a location which *Spectator* reviewer Lloyd Evans found "openly contradictory. The script identifies the location as 'nr Kirkuk' and 'outside Baghdad', although the two cities are 236 km distant from one another."[102] Evans is not the only reviewer to find fault with this scene; *Evening Standard* reviewer Henry Hitchings described it as "the weakest scene..."[103] Amy is having an argument with her Kurdish girlfriend Aminah. Amy and Aminah have been living together for the last three years but they are interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Amy's mother May, who has come to take her daughter back to London. May, now an ex-MP whom we learn is "over fifty and on her own" (96), has paid Aminah to learn their whereabouts and Aminah intends to use the money "to rebuild my house" (90) and to look after her sick mother. Layers of deceit are revealed after we learn that Aminah, whom Amy thought could only speak Arabic, can speak English perfectly well. Aminah views her country's oil as a resource curse; "There has been war in my country as long as I've been alive" (95) she says, adding "maybe it will run out quicker and at last we can have some peace." (95) A helicopter whisks May and Amy away from the privations of the desert and to the luxury of an affluent tourist hotel.

---

[102] Lloyd Evans, "Spectator review of *Oil* 22.10.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1155.
[103] Henry Hitchings, "Evening Standard review of *Oil* 17.10.16, *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1154.

The fifth and final scene is set back in the Singer Farm in rural Cornwall where the play began but it is the winter of 2051 and May and Amy, now "*Older, heavier",* sit in armchairs in a "Bare interior" with "Grey light. Dead screens. Dead lights. Dead consoles." (102) They are living in a dystopian post-oil world and are struggling to fend off the cold; it is snowing outside and the house suffers from frequent power outages which Amy refers to as "black patch[es]." (106) Reminiscing about her childhood, Amy remembers seeing the "burning man" (108) which she first told her mother about at the end of the Hampstead scene. In another instance of magic-realism, Joss once again appears, again apparently from the play's first scene, his entrance preceded by *"Crunching steps from outside"* and *"The braying of a horse."* (109) Joss appears not to recognise May or Amy but we learn from a conversation he has with Amy that he has a daughter who is aged "A year and a half or thereabouts." (111) After Joss's departure, there is a knock at the door, reminiscent of the knock of the door on page 15 which announced William Whitcomb's arrival in the first scene. The visitor this time is the Mandarin-speaking Fan Wang, a representative of the Chinese Nangto corporation. As neither May nor Amy speak Mandarin fluently, Fan dons a pair of glasses which translates her speech into English. She demonstrates a device called a Toroid which *"produces a low hum"* (115) and which rises into the air. Just as May was transfixed by Whitcomb's kerosene lamp in the play's first scene, so Amy is *"immediately entranced"* (114) by the Toroid in this final scene. Fan attempts to sell May and Amy a subscription to the Toroid, which she promises will offer them "Three times more power than you have at the moment – for half the price. No black patches. No surge pricing." (117) Fan tells them that the Nangto corporation targeted May and Amy's residence because it knows that the elderly May might benefit from "a robotic care

system" (118) which the Toroid could also provide. When Amy presses Fan, she learns that the Toroid generates all its power from a cold fusion nuclear reaction and—in a grotesque parody of late capitalism's opportunistic commodification of natural resources—that it is fuelled by Helium 3, which the Nangto corporation harvests from the moon. The women reject Fan's offer of a subscription to the Toroid and, some time after Fan has left, Amy heads out into the night for a walk, leaving May by herself. Amy's departure is reminiscent of May's departure in the play's opening scene. When footsteps approach the doorway, the person who returns is not Amy but the American entrepreneur William Whitcomb from the play's opening scene. Whitcomb and May anachronistically *"line dance to Justin Bieber"* (123) by the light of Whitcomb's kerosene lamp and as the final stage direction explains, *"The age of oil now comes to an end."* (123)

This complex, texturally rich and formally inventive play divided critical opinion sharply during its opening production at London's Almeida Theatre in October 2016. *The Guardian*'s Michael Billington, found it "...a remarkable play that...contains one of the best theatrical mother-daughter relationships of recent years".[104] For Paul Taylor writing in *The Independent*, it was a "hugely imaginative new play" which "never ceases to impress you with its bold, form-bending playfulness and passion".[105] Jane Edwardes in the *Sunday Times* praised the way it "intertwines the rise of feminism with the exploitation and depletion of our most vital commodity" and concluded it was "admirably ambitious".[106] Aleks Sierz, reviewing for *Tribune*, hailed the play "a hugely ambitious and fascinating epic of five female-centred stories" and welcomed its "breathtaking scope" yet also found himself "conscious of how

[104] Michael Billington, "Guardian review of *Oil* 17.10.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1153.
[105] Paul Taylor, "Independent review of *Oil* 17.10.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1153.
[106] Jane Edwardes, "Sunday Times review of *Oil* 23.10.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1155.

unsatisfactory the play is."[107] For several critics, what they perceived as the play's unsatisfactoriness centred around the dichotomy between the vastness of its epic narrative ambition—what Henry Hitchings, writing in the *Evening Standard*, referred to as its "grand imaginative sweep"—and the more human scale mother and daughter domestic conflicts being played out within each of the five scenes.[108] This gulf between the grand gesturing of the play's epic structure and the domestic intimacy of its naturalistic scenes prompted some critics to denounce *Oil* as a failed experiment. Mark Shenton, reviewing for *The Stage*, for example, felt that "...the play often feels like it is slipping out of the author's grasp – she tries to cram in too much."[109] In a similar vein, Ian Shuttleworth, writing in the *Financial Times*, found it "...one of those vast, sprawling epics whose reach is almost doomed to exceed its grasp..."[110] Lloyd Evans, writing in the *Spectator,* felt that:

> ...Hickson really wants to write about chippy mums locking horns with their rebellious daughters, but artistic directors want large ideas and grand motifs: politics, religion, war, and so on. Hence this attempted 'history of oil' which keeps turning into snitty gobbets of parent/kid angst.[111]

Neil Norman, reviewing for the *Daily Express*, referred to it as:

> ...one of the oddest plays I have seen in a long while. As the title suggests, it is partly about oil and the energy crisis but it also seems to be about the relationship between a mother and daughter...Hickson has attempted to draw the two subjects together in a kind of social-historical tapestry...The idea probably looked better on paper.[112]

---

[107] Aleks Sierz, "Tribune review of *Oil* 4.11.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1155-6.
[108] Henry Hitchings, "Evening Standard review of *Oil* 17.10.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1154.
[109] Mark Shenton, "The Stage review of *Oil* 20.10.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1154.
[110] Ian Shuttleworth, "Financial Times review of *Oil* 17.10.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1154.
[111] Evans, "*Oil* ", 1154-5.
[112] Neil Norman, "Daily Express review of *Oil* 28.10.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1155.

Even more dismissively, Michael Arditti in the *Sunday Express* felt *Oil* was "...a strong contender for the worst play of the year."[113] And Lloyd Evans intensified his damning criticism of the play by referring to it as "...one of the most disorganised pieces of stage writing I've ever witnessed", rhetorically asking "Can anything be salvaged from this ziggurat of bilge?"[114] But a ziggurat, as any student of architecture (and possibly anyone familiar with student accommodation at the University of East Anglia's campus in Norwich) will be aware, is a multi-storey building of pyramid form in which each successive storey is smaller than the one below it. Far from being a tottering, unwieldly tower as the tone of Evans' criticism implies, this ancient Babylonian architectural structure is both elegant and remarkably stable, the large footprint of its foundations providing structural integrity for the edifice as a whole. Hickson may indeed have deployed what one might call a deeply unconventional ziggurat dramaturgy but I would argue that its foundation is hewn from a bedrock of covert naturalism which quietly performs the vital dramaturgical function of enabling the audience to engage emotionally with the interpersonal dramas at the heart of the play, while the play's larger ideas around politics, feminism, imperialism, and the harmful effects of extractive capitalism are most powerfully expressed through the upper storeys of its non-naturalistic interscenes, which I analyse in detail later in this chapter, and in its epochal reach.

[113] Michael Arditti, "Sunday Express review of *Oil* 23.10.16", *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1155.
[114] Evans, "*Oil* ", 1154-5.

In interview, Hickson described her decision to combine non-naturalistic structure with naturalistic scenes as both “instinctive” and dramaturgically “pragmatic”, explaining that:

> I knew I wanted to hit certain points in history and I knew that I wanted one protagonist to last for the whole play so there was a really basic, pragmatic need there to fulfil. I think there was something about the fact that oil itself has a lot of time condensed inside it. Like, a single drop of oil has billions of years in it so it felt like that was permission for the single drop of May to have more than a lifetime inside her.[115]

Hickson perceived her central dramaturgical challenge to be balancing the accumulation of interesting facts she amassed while researching the age of oil with the need to keep the audience emotionally engaged. She elaborated on this theme by ruminating that:

> There’s so many fascinating facts that you read and there’s so much that you want to teach an audience...but, you know, that’s a TED Talk...or a lecture...[Y]ou have to constantly find the right interpersonal drama to allow people to emotionally connect. So it’s been a really big and interesting struggle about that; about what information you compromise to serve drama, and what drama you compromise to serve information.[116]

For Hickson, the theatre offers a uniquely affective forum through which to explore the intersection between intellectual stimulation and emotional engagement:

> “[T]hat very special hybrid of intellectual rigour and emotional connection feels like it lives in its most robust form in the theatre. And I think there’s something really interesting that theatre is so temporary that if you are writing plays that are about...a resource that has been

[115] Rebellato. “Playwrights in Lockdown: Ella Hickson.”
[116] Almeida Theatre. “Ella Hickson on Writing Oil.”

> around for 150 million years, it makes sense to choose an art form that is only going to exist for three months and then disappear off the face of the planet. So the impermanence of theatre feels like it suits the high stakes impermanence of the situation we're in, I suppose.[117]

What is most striking about the hostile critical reactions to the play outlined earlier in this chapter is that they consistently focus on what they perceive as a dichotomy between *Oil*'s expansive epic structure and the domestic focus of its naturalistic scenes. It is as if this negative critical position will only afford serious critical consideration to plays which are written in one form or the other but not both. This takes us back to Aristotle's Law of Noncontradiction which Morton feels represents a fundamental block to ecological thinking. "It's strange", says Morton:

> ...that we still carry this old law around in our heads, never thinking to prove it formally. According to the Law of Noncontradiction, being true means not contradicting yourself. You can't say *p* and *not-p* at the very same time. You can't say *A meadow is a meadow and is not a meadow.* Yet this is what is required... (Morton 2016: 74)

Hickson's deployment of both naturalism and non-naturalism within the same play encourages multi-scalar ecological thinking which melds together a concern with the deleterious global environmental impacts of oil extraction with domestic and social struggles experienced by mothers and daughters at key points along the historical continuum of the age of oil. With all due respect to Aristotle, *Oil* is simultaneously both a non-naturalistic and a naturalistic play; it is saying *p* and *not-p* at the same time. Its formal "indeterminacy" (Angelaki 2019: 17) is what enables the play to

[117] Ibid.

engage us simultaneously on an emotional and an intellectual level, so that we see human-scale effects alongside global-scale (anthropogenic) causes.

The conundrum at the heart of our fossil fuel dependency is that fossil fuels have vastly improved levels of material comfort, particularly for people living in developed nations of the Global North, yet the exponential increase in their use— most noticeably since the Great Acceleration driven by consumer capitalism from the mid twentieth century to the present day— has brought planetary scale environmental destruction in its wake. Hickson's deployment of naturalism within a non-naturalistic framework allows these twin perspectives—the domestic desire for greater material comfort and the devastating ecological consequences of our fossil fuel dependency in the age of oil— to be shown side by side. This juxtaposition is manifest, for example, in how Amy's chronological development mirrors that of the age of oil: in the first scene, the age of oil has only just been conceived and correspondingly Amy is an unborn child; in the second scene, set in 1908 in Persia, the age of oil is in its infancy and Amy is a young child; the third scene set in Hampstead in 1970 shows the age of oil moving into what might be thought of as its adolescent period, with developing countries such as Libya asserting their independence and wanting to gain autonomy by benefitting more directly from oil extraction, mirrored by Amy's teenage rebellion against her mother; the fourth scene set in the desert near Kirkuk suggests that the moment of peak oil—that is, the moment when oil extraction becomes economically unviable—is imminent, Aminah bemoaning it as a resource curse, and Amy concomitantly nearing middle age; and in the final dystopian scene set back in Cornwall in 2051 the age of oil is drawing to a close and correspondingly Amy and her mother are both near the end of their lives.

The deployment of naturalistic scene writing within an overall non-naturalistic structure also enables Hickson to highlight the issue of responsibility which she feels lies at the thematic heart of the play. In interview, Hickson explained:

> If you just do the future, or if you just do the non-naturalism, I feel like it takes away the responsibility. The responsibility of action is in the 'now'...I feel the imagined past goes some way to try and explain the position we're in, and the imagined future is some sort of warning...The whole subject requires action...There's a responsibility for humans to act... Because of that, I think you have to pin it to the present...I think the relationship of the subject to a naturalist present is one of responsibility. It's all a story...I have a feeling that it lets it off the hook if you are completely unattached to naturalism, if it's a completely abstract world. [118]

Hickson's comment that "The responsibility of action is in the 'now'...it lets it off the hook if you are completely unattached to naturalism..." is crucial to understanding one of naturalism's key contributions to contemporary eco-theatre. While non-naturalistic playwriting forms such as epic theatre are able to offer a broad historical perspective, exploiting what theatre scholar Alex Watson has referred to as a "zoomed-out approach to temporality" (Watson 2022: 145), *Oil*'s naturalistic scenes focus instead on the urgency of taking ameliorative action, deploying what Watson calls a "zoomed-in" perspective which prioritises moral decision-making with a pressing sense of urgency, in the 'now'. Thus, there is an urgent sense of the clock ticking throughout Kirkwood's *The Children* as Rose tries to persuade Robin and Hazel to join her in the nuclear clean-up operation "...and let the young ones go, while they still have the chance..." (49) and this is inextricably linked to the moral responsibility she feels: "Because we built it [the nuclear reactor], didn't we?...we're

[118] Ella Hickson, audio interview with the author, July 18, 2022.

responsible...” (49). The naturalism in *Oil* similarly highlights the urgency of moral decision-making which exerts pressure on the characters in each scene: in the opening scene, for example, May needs to escape the gendered inequality and privations of the Singer farmhouse in Cornwall if she is to stand a chance of improving material conditions for herself and her daughter.

The naturalistic nature of *Oil*’s “zoomed-in” scenes not only helps to reveal character and engage the audience on an emotional level; it also serves to highlight social inequalities contemporary to the period when each scene is set. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the play’s first scene. The dingy farmhouse interior in rural Cornwall in which this opening scene is set is conspicuously dark and Samuel uses this cover of darkness to inflict physical pain on his wife Anne. Moments after Whitcomb’s kerosene lamp illuminates the space in a way which enables us to *“...see parts of the room – dirt – corners – which we’ve never seen before”* (18), a stage direction reveals that:

> *SAMUEL is caught – he’s been squeezing the back of ANNE’s neck cruelly hard in the dark – her eyes are watering – she’s crying. SAMUEL – seen – lets go.* (18)

Whitcomb’s lamp thus not only illuminates Samuel’s coercive and controlling behaviour towards his wife but also sheds light on social norms which conceal misogyny and the suppression of women. This scene is set in 1889 and it is perhaps no coincidence that John Stuart Mill’s highly influential *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) had been published relatively recently, a work which, after it had been translated into Danish, had had “...an immediate effect on the dramatist Ibsen and

much of his subsequent work [including *Hedda Gabler*, 1890] reflects this." (Pickering and Thompson 2013: 49)

When I questioned Hickson about the stage direction in which Samuel squeezes Anne's neck *"cruelly hard in the dark"*, she acknowledged that this was a resonant stage moment and explained that it was written in "a higher register of naturalism."[119]

Expanding on the notion of gradations of naturalistic register within the play, Hickson explained:

> There is a lack of naturalism in the future scene [scene five, set in 2051]...It's a thought experiment. You feel the final part to be a thought experiment far more than I think you do in either the present or the recent past...Mostly, when you watch things in the future, you're sort of interested by the intellectual act of constructing a new world...Rarely, I think, do you watch a piece of action in the future and feel...complicit or moved or responsible...You don't apply it to yourself in quite the same way.[120]

The "higher register", zoomed-in naturalism within the play is also reflected in Hickson's stipulation that, in production, each scene should be lit according to the energy source available in the historical period when the scene is set. This radical dramaturgy presumably excludes, at least for the time being, powering the play's final scene by means of nuclear cold fusion, despite recent scientific advances suggesting that positive energy gain by means of nuclear fusion is now theoretically achievable.[121]

---

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Nicola Davis, "Breakthrough in nuclear fusion could mean 'near-limitless energy'", *Guardian*, December 12, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/dec/12/breakthrough-in-nuclear-fusion-could-mean-near-limitless-energy

It is surely no coincidence that *Oil*'s opening scene, written in this higher naturalistic register, is set at a historical moment when, it could be argued, the Naturalistic movement itself was at its apogee: Strindberg's naturalist masterpiece *Miss Julie* had received its première at the Copenhagen University Students' Union in that very year (1889) while Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* premièred the following year.

Cultural theorist Imre Szeman has provocatively asked:

> What if we were to think about the history of capital not exclusively in geo-political terms, but in terms of the forms of energy available to it at any given historical moment? So steam capitalism in 1765... [is] ... followed by the advent of oil capitalism in 1859 (with its discovery in Titusville, Pennsylvania), which enabled powerful and forceful new modalities of capitalist reproduction and expansion.[122]

The forms of energy available in each of *Oil*'s five scenes are not only revealed through each scene's approach to lighting. The ways in which chicken is prepared and consumed throughout the play also reveals the forms of energy available during each of the historical periods it covers. The preparation of chicken is a covert eco-naturalistic leitmotif which subtly reinforces one of the play's major thematic concerns; the exploitation of natural resources by humans since the beginning of the age of oil. In the opening scene, for example, May struggles to eviscerate a chicken which "Doesn't smell right" (4) but which is a much-needed source of protein for the impoverished farm workers; in the third scene, set in 1970, May—riding the second wave of feminism and too busy as a career woman to cook from scratch—microwaves a dish of Chicken Kiev which she has bought in a supermarket; when the middle aged May interrupts Amy and her girlfriend Aminah in the desert near

[122] Imre Szeman, 'System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (1 October 2007): 806.

Kirkuk in 2021 in the fourth scene, she brings with her “some chicken sandwiches. They’re your favourite – I thought you might want something that reminded you of home” (89) and in the final, futuristic, scene, the elderly May and Amy are unable to eat the chicken that was in the fridge because the “Fridge has gone warm” (105) as a result of the power outages they are enduring. This culinary leitmotif also relates to the idea that humans have become a geophysical force on the planet as humankind’s use of the domestic chicken is a semiotic marker of the Anthropocene. In 2016, the year *Oil* was written, the Working Group on the Anthropocene advised the International Geological Congress in Cape Town formally to adopt the term ‘Anthropocene’ and, according to one of its contributors Jan Zalasiewicz, cited the global proliferation of domestic chicken bones as a proponent of the sedimentary strata being formed. Zalasiewicz elaborated on this in an interview for *The Guardian*: “Since the mid-20th century, it [the domestic chicken] has become the world's most common bird. It has been fossilised in thousands of landfill sites and on street corners around the world...It is also a much bigger bird with a different skeleton than its pre-war ancestor.”[123]

If the play’s five naturalistic scenes are where Hickson’s “zoomed-in” naturalistic form is most evident, then it is in the play’s five interscenes where what Watson calls her “zoomed-out” non-naturalistic form reaches its fullest expression. The interscenes poetically describe non-naturalistic actions—illustratively; *“She walks through lands, through empires, through time”* (26)—which are open to multiple interpretation by creative teams. Lonergan, referencing the opening

[123] Damian Carrington, “The Anthropocene Epoch: scientists declare dawn of human-influenced age,” *Guardian*, August 29, 2016.

production at the Almeida Theatre, found the interscenes problematic, stating that they are:

> ...of uncertain theatrical application: they are not attributed to actors as spoken dialogue, nor do they explicitly direct stage action. If anything, they read like poems. (Lonergan 2020: 39)

Just as Kirkwood in *The Children* (2016) allowed the poetry to reside in the play's diegetic, offstage world (see chapter 1), so Hickson turns to the non-naturalistic interscenes as the chief loci of *Oil*'s poetry, leaving the emotionally charged but prosaic interpersonal exchanges to be confined within the play's onstage, mimetic, naturalistic scenes. Lonergan asks "how might a theatre-maker render the statements that follow?" (Lonergan 2020: 39) in relation to the first interscene, which separates the first two scenes of the play and which I reproduce below:

> **Interscene**
>
> *A woman steps out into the night*
> *Carrying a single lamp*
> *She walks barefoot across freezing fields*
> *She walks and walks and walks and walks.*
>
> *She walks through lands, through empires, through time.*
>
> *A woman walks across a desert.*
> *The air is hot; the night is black.*
>
> *One newborn baby gasps for breath.*
> *A million newborn babies gasp for breath.* (26)

Lonergan concludes that "Hickson leaves room for interpretation...indeed, opacity is the most apparent of her intentions." (39) The interpretation offered by director Carrie

Cracknell in the play's opening production at the Almeida Theatre in 2016 was to run each interscene concurrently with scene changes, aligning aesthetic sensibility with the pragmatic need for the stage management team to reset props and for the performers to change costumes. Each interscene offered a rich and multi-sensory experience which unmoored the play from each scene's intense naturalism. In Cracknell's production, the first interscene consisted of eight interconnected elements: firstly, members of the stage management team cleared and reset props; secondly, the interscenes were accompanied by emotive music (consisting of a frenetically paced techno beat in the case of this first interscene); thirdly, the actor playing May (Anne-Marie Duff in the Almeida production) changed costume, removing her Victorian garb to reveal the Edwardian costume required in the next scene; fourthly, lighting effects flickered, casting shadows and revealing unusual perspectives on the evolving stage pictures; fifthly, sound effects gradually morphed from icy wind to a desert soundscape; sixthly, video projection displayed iconic scenes from the age of oil; seventhly, archival photographs were projected, showing images which included deserts and oil derricks; and finally, an unnamed actor voiced over the interscene's poetic lines, as published in the play text.

Although he devotes a substantial proportion of his article to celebrating the poetic ambiguity of *Oil*'s interscenes, what is missing from Lonergan's analysis is a recognition of their Brechtian origin. This is a significant omission because the Brechtian *Verfremdung* or 'making the familiar strange' they introduce into the play ushers in a strand of petro-magic realism (Wenzel 2006) which becomes increasingly significant as the play evolves. In *Oil*'s fourth interscene, we can clearly see petro-magic realism's illusion of wealth without work being portrayed in its depiction of a woman who effortlessly *"flies across a desert / ...She asks the hostess*

for extra ice / She flies above time" (85) yet the same interscene also evokes a fantastic and devastated landscape in its chillingly spare observation that *"Toddlers are shot in the back / By planes with no pilots in them."* (85)

While Lonergan fails to mention the formal Brechtian nature of *Oil*'s interscenes, critical theorist Alireza Fakhrkonandeh corrects this omission in an extended essay which examines the form of Hickson's play from three points of view; petro-magic realism, Brechtian epic and *Trauerspiel*.[124] Fakhrkonandeh explicitly recognises that the play's "...historical narrative breaks and gaps can be construed as a Brechtian technique."[125] To evidence this, he points towards Brecht's 1949 essay "A Short Organon for the Theatre" in which Brecht likens the flow of a play's plot to that of a river, explaining that the flow should be interrupted by joints or "knots" of *Verfremdung* ('making strange') in order that the audience may assert its judgement:

> As the audience is not of course being invited to plunge into the plot as if it were a river, so as to drift indecisively hither and thither, the individual events have to be tied together in such a way that the knots become conspicuous. The events must not succeed one another imperceptibly, on the contrary we must be able to interpose our judgement.[126]

The "zoomed-out" nature of *Oil*'s interscenes provide just such a sense of *Verfremdung*, encouraging the audience to engage its critical faculties, whilst

[124] The *Trauerspeil* is a form of baroque mourning play which Walter Benjamin reads as the precursor to German tragic drama.
[125] Alireza Fakhrkonandeh, "Oil Cultures, World drama and contemporaneity: questions of time, space and form in Ella Hickson's Oil", *Textual Practice* 36:11 (2022): 1789.
[126] Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn. (London: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2019), 294-5

conversely the play's naturalistic "zoomed-in" scenes engage the audience on an emotional level.

For Fakhrkonandeh, *Oil*'s structure consists of "...three main components: epigraphs, main parts [by which he means the play's five scenes] and interscenes." (1786) He argues that the epigraphs are "the most important paratextual element in the play" as they "articulate the manifold vision of the play and provide a socialist feminist stance that places the logics, historical scope and dynamics of the play in their global anthropogenic context and history." (1786) Although his essay is insightful and wide-ranging, with a considerably greater depth of critical analysis than that offered by Lonergan, I challenge Fakhrkonandeh on the significance he attributes to *Oil*'s epigraphs on the grounds that these epigraphs are dramaturgically irrelevant. A critical theorist by training, Fakhrkonandeh's interest in the "paratextual" nature of *Oil*'s interscenes obscures the simple truth that audiences, unless they happen to have read the play's text at some point before, during or after their visit to the theatre, would simply not be aware that the epigraphs even existed. In my view, the only elements of Hickson's play that need to be considered from a dramaturgical perspective are the naturalistic scenes and the non-naturalistic interscenes and the respective "zoomed-in" and "zoomed-out" perspectives they offer.

In fairness to Fakhrkonandeh, I accept that epigraphs can deepen a reader's appreciation of a text—the same could be said of the highly apposite epigraph by Albert Camus with which Waters prefaces *The Contingency Plan*'s second play *Resilience*: *"There are many injustices in this world, but there is one that is never mentioned, that of climate"* (Waters 2022: 75)—but this appreciation takes place, if at

all, outside of the experience of the performance. Epigraphs are thus, as Derrida (2016 [1974]) might conceive of it, strictly "outside text".[127]

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the two Brechtian influenced ecologically themed plays examined in this chapter—*Ten Billion* through its demonstrative performance lecture format and *Oil* through the *Verfremdung* of its interscenes, its epic structure and in specific stage directions such as *"JOS, bulky, enters. He's carrying bags full of things, there's something Mother Courage about him"* (109)—should have naturalism embedded within their fabric. It could be argued that Brecht's work itself, long viewed as antithetical to naturalism, is fundamentally reliant on it; naturalism creates the necessary "flow" which Brecht's *Verfremdung* is designed to interrupt. Take this exchange, for example, between Mother Courage and the Cook in the second scene of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1949) as translated by David Hare (1995):

Mother Courage	Go ahead. Cook it. As it's at least a year old.
The Cook	This cow was walking about with a smile on its face, only yesterday. I saw it myself.
Mother Courage	Then it must have been stinking even when it was alive.
The Cook	I don't care, I'm stewing it five hours if I have to, and then let's see if it smells.
Mother Courage	Yeah, well, I'd use a lot of pepper if I were you.[128]

Mother Courage urges us simultaneously to look backwards—the play is set between 1624 and 1636, between the Polish-Swedish War and the Thirty Years

[127] It is unfortunate that the journal which published Fakhrkonandeh's otherwise exemplary and insightful article, *Textual Practice*, with its presumed focus on close textual analysis, should allow such glaring typographical errors as "Mary" for "May" (1781) and "Whitcombe" for "Whitcomb" (1783) into the essay's final edit.

[128] Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, translated by David Hare. London: Methuen Drama, 1995: 16-17

War—and forwards; its language is both colloquial and contemporary and there are clear parallels with World War II, the play having first been performed in 1941 but not published until 1949.

Bringing us back to the present day, I would argue that most contemporary ecologically themed, scripted plays are reliant on naturalism in varying degrees. In my estimation, there are four reasons to explain this and I elucidate these reasons in the overall Conclusions to this thesis.

Conclusions

The two plays under consideration in this final chapter— Kate Mitchell and Stephen Emmott's *Ten Billion* (2012) and Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016)— illustrate the most covert extreme of what I call the naturalistic spectrum, deploying naturalism within ostensibly non-naturalistic overall structures.

Ten Billion, with its performance lecture format in which the scientist/author Emmott delivers factual scientific information about anthropogenic global warming and what he sees as unsustainable increases in global population growth, initially appears to eschew naturalist dramaturgy altogether. However, as Love (2020) has insightfully pointed out, Mitchell's directorial decision to create a faithful and detailed reproduction of Emmott's laboratory reveals a fundamentally Stanislavskian impulse. I argued in this chapter that, despite its apparently non-naturalistic façade, *Ten Billion*'s covert use of naturalism—at the level of the mise-en-scène—has the effect of bringing Emmott closer to the audience on an emotional level, creating an empathy the audience would not feel if Emmott had remained merely an authoritative scientific expert, dispensing scientific information from on high, in what Morton calls the unproductive "ecological information dump mode." (Morton 2018: 11)

The chapter moved on to examine Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016), analysing its complex narrative structure and the relationship between its five naturalistic scenes and the non-naturalistic interscenes connecting them, and arguing that Hickson's play holds Brechtian and Stanislavskian aesthetics together in a dynamic tension. Hickson's use of covert eco-naturalism within the play enables the audience to become intellectually conscious of anthropogenic environmental destruction during the age of oil whilst simultaneously being emotionally engaged with the interpersonal struggles endured by a mother and daughter whose motivations stem from an understandable desire for greater material comfort.

Conclusions

My research was prompted by a contradiction I observed at the heart of contemporary ecological playwriting: on the one hand, I became aware of a prevailing critical antipathy towards naturalism as an eco-dramaturgical form while on the other hand I saw naturalism continuing to be deployed in a diverse range of contexts by contemporary theatre-makers and playwrights whose work foregrounds ecological issues. As naturalism itself is a notoriously slippery concept, and as the spatiotemporal complexity of ecological issues presents fundamental challenges to theatrical representation, I developed a new theoretical framework to help conceptualise how various kinds of naturalism function within contemporary eco-theatre. This framework, which I call the naturalistic spectrum, represents a significant contribution to knowledge in the field of eco-dramaturgy and provides a structure for the five-chapter analysis which follows. It also supports my overarching aim in conducting this research: to create a more nuanced debate about the role of naturalism within contemporary eco-theatre than currently exists.

At the most overt end of the naturalistic spectrum, there are plays which adhere closely to naturalistic form as it was conceived by early theorists of the Naturalistic movement, in the late nineteenth century, principally Émile Zola. I illustrated this with reference to Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016). I then looked at symbolist eco-naturalism, a form of naturalism which adheres less stringently to closed time, closed place structure and which reveals its deepest ecological meanings through symbol and motif, analysing Waters' *On the Beach* as illustrative of this form. Towards the middle of the naturalistic spectrum, I examined Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019) and Baker's *The Antipodes* (2019) as examples of hyper eco-naturalism, a form of naturalism in which an intense focus on detailed mimetic lifelike reproduction helps conceptualise the horrors of climate devastation

taking place in the plays' diegetic offstage worlds. I then looked at Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011) and Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) as examples of plays which open in a naturalistic register before being formally disrupted, revealing the unmistakable presence of the hyperobjects (Morton 2013) of global warming and ecological devastation. My final chapter moved to the most covert extreme of the naturalistic spectrum, looking at how eco-naturalism operates in two plays which initially appear to eschew naturalist conventions altogether—Emmott and Mitchell's *Ten Billion* (2012) and Hickson's *Oil* (2016)—but which turn out to be fundamentally reliant on it.

Recognising that theatre scholars have long struggled to define naturalism, I clarify my understanding of the term by situating it within Williams' elucidation of it in his seminal 1977 essay "Social environment and theatrical environment: the case of English naturalism". Naturalism, in Williams' formulation, "...indicates a movement in which the method of accurate production [that is, lifelike mimetic reproduction by means of acting and the use of realistic props, sets, stage furniture and costumes] and the specific philosophical position [that is, a repudiation of supernaturalism and an allegiance to science, natural history and materialism] are organically and usually consciously fused." (Williams 1977b: 203) Considered in this light, each of the plays I examine in this study—with the exception of *Ten Billion* which is technically a performance lecture rather than a play *per se*—are revealed to have plots which are driven by human, as opposed to supernatural or spiritual, actions and simultaneously this is fused with lifelike onstage reproduction by means of acting and the use of realistic props, sets, stage furniture and costumes.

To help determine the extent to which a play can be considered naturalistic, I have also identified seven formal characteristics of naturalism: natural sounding dialogue; no direct audience address; the presence of an invisible fourth wall which

separates performers from spectators; linear plots which rely on successional temporality; causal narrative patterns which progress from exposition to climax then resolution; realistic props, sets, stage furniture and costumes; and a narrative focus on a moral issue that needs to be resolved. In addition to the formal characteristics noted above, what has also become significant throughout this study is the influence exerted by eighteenth-century bourgeois drama on the historical development of Naturalism and the fact that this influence still resonates today in eco-naturalistic drama. For Williams, the transformative influence of bourgeois drama was "...one of the two major transformations in the whole history of drama" (1989: 83) and he identifies bourgeois drama's five defining factors as: an admission of the contemporary as legitimate material for drama; an admission of the indigenous as part of the same development; an increasing emphasis on everyday speech forms; an emphasis on social extension; and a decisive secularism. Eighteenth-century Britain saw a huge expansion of urban populations as the industrial revolution meant fewer people worked the land or worked in traditional occupations and more people were needed to work in the burgeoning cities. While the proletariat created wealth through their labour, it was the bourgeoisie who were the chief beneficiaries of this wealth creation and what they craved in their leisure time was entertainment. They flocked to theatres in large cities and, crucially, what they wanted was to see was not the tropes of neoclassical drama with historical settings and high ranking characters far removed from their own lives but images of their own lives reflected on stage. The parallel with contemporary eco-theatre is clear: in our current moment of climate crisis, what we crave are images of ourselves on stage, in an attempt to understand how we might cope with the seismic environmental changes which the earth is now undergoing. Each of the plays in this study invite us to see versions of our

contemporary Anthropocene selves on stage, asking us to address the question of how we should respond to the diverse and complex challenges that global warming and ecological collapse represent. After summarising below the insights I have gleaned by researching each of the gradations of eco-naturalism along the naturalistic spectrum, I set out four overarching conclusions which have emerged from my research.

In chapter 1, I looked at overt eco-naturalism, that is to say eco-naturalism which conforms closely to how Émile Zola theorised it in the late nineteenth century. Zola's ideas that naturalism should be based on "true observations" and that the environment exerts a determinant influence on character were seen to hold true in relation to Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016), a play which adheres closely to naturalist conventions. Kirkwood's play also illustrated Raymond Williams' conception of "high naturalism", in which "...the lives of the characters have soaked into their environment...Moreover, the environment has soaked into the lives." (Williams 1977b: 217) A key conclusion from this investigation into overt eco-naturalism was that it excels at placing a moral dilemma at the heart of the narrative then subjects characters to intense moral scrutiny. This was evident in *The Children* where Kirkwood deploys a closed time, closed place "pressure cooker" dramaturgy in which Robin and Hazel are forced to decide whether to join their former colleague Rose in the clean-up operation at the nearby nuclear plant where they used to work; the pressure cooker dramaturgy means that there is no possibility of escape, nor is it possible for the characters to defer their moral decision. Another conclusion that arose from this chapter was that overt eco-naturalism tends to concern itself with the long consequence and this is related to issues of intergenerational guilt. Both Kirkwood's *The Children* and Waters' *On the Beach* (2022), which I examined in

chapter 2, situate the point of moral failure approximately 40 years in the plays' backstories; this is the point in *The Children* when the characters could have raised awareness of design flaws in the nuclear plant's safety systems but failed to do so. The characters in both plays are haunted by the moral failures of their past, and significantly, both plays have characters who seek to expiate their guilt by taking ameliorative action in the present. The intense focus on mimetic onstage clarity within *The Children* helped to conceptualise what Morton (2013) calls the "hyperobjects" of global warming and ecological collapse unfolding in the play's hazier, diegetic offstage spaces. Finally, pressure cooker dramaturgy excels at showing characters under the microscope, up close and very personal and this is reflected in the intimate theatres in which naturalism has often flourished, harking back to Antoine's Théâtre Libre in late nineteenth-century Paris and the intensely intimate former Bush Theatre in London where *On the Beach* was first performed in 2009 as part of the diptych *The Contingency Plan*.

In chapter 2, I examined Steve Waters' *On the Beach* as illustrative of symbolist eco-naturalism. My close reading of the text, augmented by interviewing the playwright, revealed important insights about the role and function of symbolism in this strand of eco-naturalistic playwriting. Firstly, the Eurasian spoonbill—which has returned to North-West Norfolk after a 400-year break because of worsening environmental conditions in the Mediterranean—is presented as a harbinger of climate devastation, carrying auguries of extreme weather events which lie at the thematic heart of the play. Waters also uses characters' reactions to the spoonbill to shed light on central character Robin's nativism and isolationism which are directly linked to his xenophobia and sexist distrust of his son Will's girlfriend Sarika. Nomenclature within the play also carries a symbolic charge: three out of the four

characters' names relate to birds and Sarika, whose name means "cuckoo" in Hindi, acts as a symbolic brood parasite by migrating south with Robin and Jenny's son Will, to a cabinet room in Whitehall, leaving them as empty nesters. Sonic intrusions—most notably the cacophony of hundreds of birds which foreshadows the tidal inundation at the play's climax—symbolically reinforced shared human and avian vulnerabilities, epitomising what Lavery (2016) has called a sort of 'weak theatre' which "holds out the possibility of an alternative kind of eco-practice, rooted in a recognition of limits and capacities and keenly aware of what Baz Kershaw terms 'mutual vulnerability'." (Lavery 2016: 232) Finally, *On the* Beach illustrates how subtly and powerfully symbolism can be deployed within contemporary ecological playwriting; Will's ash tree, which was thought be alive but which is dead, introduces notions of climatic tipping points and hidden ecological fragility which lie at the thematic centre of the play.

In chapter 3, hyper eco-naturalism was explored, with reference to Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!* (2019) and Baker's *The Antipodes* (2019). The intense focus on the minutiae of mundane experience in each plays' mimetic, onstage worlds revealed characters who were living in denial about the climate devastation affecting the plays' diegetic, offstage worlds. This form of hyper eco-naturalism is particularly adept at showing characters' behaviour being at odds with their knowledge about global warming and ecological collapse, epitomising what sociologist Norgaard (2011) calls living a "double reality". Subtextual dialogic exchanges between characters in both plays revealed their subconscious fears of living under what Morton (2013) calls the "shadow" of global warming and this was intensified by what I have identified as three defining characteristics of hyper eco-naturalistic theatre: an eschewal of narrative momentum; a focus on mood, atmosphere and character at

the expense of plot; and a dramaturgy of intense confinement. In a time of global warming when, as Morton observes, “a hyperobject has ruined the weather conversation...there is no background, and thus there is no foreground” (2013: 99), hyper eco-naturalistic theatre reflects this dissolution of perspective by deploying a form of photorealistic mimesis in which all events and conversations, trivial or momentous, appear equally weighted. The chapter continued with an examination of how the characters’ alienation from the natural world in *The Antipodes* was emphasised by their being contained within a claustrophobic, windowless meeting room. The onstage presence of enormous stacks of bottled mineral water and the characters’ ability to order any kind of takeaway food they wanted revealed the wastefulness of late capitalism and its commodification of natural resources. The character of Sandy was shown to have profound links with the “crazy weather” (64) which is taking place in *The Antipodes*’ offstage world; he even carries the same name as the subtropical cyclone which devastated New York in 2012, five years before Baker’s play received its première production in that city. The chapter ended with an exploration of the highly charged moment in *The Antipodes* when Brian dry-heaves then vomits *“...a small jellyfish or a seahorse or anemone, covered in blood.*” (76) The incongruous, visceral eruption of this wriggling sea creature into the windowless meeting room was linked to one of Freud’s definitions of the uncanny in which something that should have remained hidden has come into the open. This parallels the uncanny way in which the hyperobject of global warming is glimpsed throughout the play through characters’ increasingly desperate reports of extreme weather events in the world outside the windowless meeting room.

Chapter 4 examined two plays—Macmillan’s *Lungs* (2011) and Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (2016)—which illustrate a disrupted form of eco-naturalism. Both

plays open in a naturalistic register but then formally fracture this naturalistic edifice to reveal the devastating impact of climate crisis and ecological collapse taking place in their wider, offstage worlds. The rapid teleological acceleration of the final pages of *Lungs* disrupts the play's essentially naturalistic form, introducing concepts of ecological tipping points and runaway global warming. It also has the effect of radically altering the play's tone from the comic mode (Meeker 1972) into an affective, tragic mode. While the latter stages of the play depict an imagined future ecological dystopia, the play's first 70 pages rely on naturalism to show characters making life-changing decisions under pressure in an unfolding contemporary present. In a similarly disruptive vein, Churchill dismantles the naturalistic conventions she has established in the garden scenes in *Escaped Alone* by introducing direct address, by allowing the characters to soliloquize and, most strikingly, by having the outsider Mrs Jarrett speak in glaringly apocalyptic tones about the ravaged state of the planet from a stylistic 'void' which straddles the play's mimetic and diegetic spaces. The power of the play's formal disruption depends on a strict adherence to the conventions of naturalistic form, just as the power of Kane's *Blasted* (1995) depends on the establishment of an ostensibly naturalistic opening scene which represents a sense of order which will suddenly and brutally be undermined by the ensuring action. One of the reasons Mrs Jarrett's monologues are so unsettling is that they frequently imbue abstract nouns with material agency, what Bennett (2010) calls "thing-power", reinforcing the idea that in the Anthropocene, matter can no longer be considered dull or inert but assumes a quasi-agential role. This vital materialism can be seen at work in many of the plays in this study, from the awesome power of melting Antarctic ice sheets to wild weather which is so extreme that it turns people into climate refugees, to menacing and invisible

nuclear radiation which makes lives all but unliveable. Hartl (2021) recognises a combination of both Brechtian and Beckettian influences in Churchill's play which creates a dynamic tension characterised by a Brechtian sense of *Verfremdung* twinned with a Beckettian sense of existential fatality. It is in this dynamic tension—between the dialogic scenes and the monologues; between banal conversation and dystopian visions of ecological collapse; and in the dismantling of naturalism's invisible fourth wall and the call for activism that implies—that the play's deepest ecological and political meanings reside.

Chapter 5 examined two plays—Emmott and Mitchell's *Ten Billion* (2012) and Hickson's *Oil* (2016)— as illustrative of covert eco-naturalism. Each has an ostensibly non-naturalistic overall structure, a performance lecture in the case of *Ten Billion* and Brechtian epic structure in the case of *Oil*, but each are deeply reliant on naturalistic convention for their emotional impact. In *Ten Billion*, the naturalism arises not from the text itself—which remains a rather doom-laden catalogue of dire climate predictions based on computational science models—but rather from director Katie Mitchell's decision to place Emmott in a facsimile of his office, showing the scientist, as it were, in his natural environment. The effect of this intimacy—amplified by being presented in the 85-seat Royal Court Theatre Upstairs—is to show Emmott in extreme close-up, warts-and-all. Naturalism has long excelled at showing characters' personal lives in close-up detail but this particular staging, in which a scientist plays a version of himself in a replica of his own office, reveals Emmott to be less a figure of scientific authority and more a flawed everyman who, like the rest of us, is overwhelmed by predictions of climate catastrophe and who feels powerless to effect change. From a phenomenological perspective, the reproduction of Emmott's cluttered office experienced at close quarters powerfully reinforced the performance

lecture's thematic concerns about over-consumption in the context of a dangerously over-populated planet. The chapter went on to reveal how Emmott attempts to position himself as part of the audience's social referent group by using the words "we" and "us" throughout; by situating himself and the audience as privileged citizens of the Global North; and by referring to culturally specific consumer behaviour.

Hickson's *Oil*, on the other hand, takes us on a journey from 1889 to a projected 2051, a period during which we see the protagonist May and her daughter Amy age more slowly that the 162 years of history they move through and during the non-naturalistic, Brechtian interscenes we see iconic images from the age of oil. The naturalism in this play rests solely within the play's five scenes, each of which adheres closely to naturalistic conventions. While the socio-economic history of the age of oil is conveyed through the grand gesturing of the play's epic structure, it is the intense naturalism within each of the five scenes that engages the audience emotionally. In interview, Hickson explained the need she felt to embed naturalism within the play's scenes: "...if you just do the non-naturalism, I feel like it takes away the responsibility. The responsibility of action is in the 'now'..." In a way, Hickson's statement rings true in relation to all of the plays in this study—which is why I have used it as an epigraph to the thesis as a whole—and is a key reason why naturalism will continue to be deployed by playwrights and theatre-makers whose work addresses our current climatic and ecological crises. These twinned crises have developed as a result of deep-rooted historic intersectional inequalities which would be too vast and complex for any individual or community to rectify. However, as Hickson suggests, as individuals we all have choices to make "in the 'now'" and naturalism can help illuminate what those choices should be.

To return to my research question—what possibilities does naturalism offer contemporary playwrights and theatre-makers in their attempts to dramatize ecological issues?—my study has revealed that naturalism offers significant eco-dramaturgical potential, which my conceptual framework of the naturalistic spectrum helps illuminate. Overt eco-naturalism, which I examined in chapter 1 of this thesis, subjects its characters to intense moral scrutiny, focusing on the long consequence of human actions as it attempts to identify culpability for current ecological crises. The symbolist eco-naturalism I explored in chapter 2 enables contemporary environmental issues to be dramatized not merely through interpersonal conflicts with which theatregoers are familiar but through symbols which subtly link human and nonhuman vulnerabilities. Hyper eco-naturalism, which I examined in chapter 3, has the capacity to create intensely confined interior spaces in which, during moments of narrative longueur, characters' fears about the climate chaos unfolding in the outside world is powerfully evoked. Disrupted eco-naturalism, illustrated by the two plays I examined in chapter 4, ruptures naturalistic form so as to jolt the audience out of any complacency it may be feeling toward the ecological issues being explored. At the most covert extreme of the naturalistic spectrum, some plays and performance events which are structured in an ostensibly non-naturalistic way (for example, performance lectures and plays deploying Brechtian epic form) rely deeply on naturalism to engage audience empathy and maintain emotional engagement.

Finally, and emerging organically from this study, I advance four overarching and interconnected reasons to explain why naturalism plays such a vitally important function within contemporary ecological playwriting and why I believe it will continue to do so into the foreseeable future.

Firstly, naturalism presents the audience with an image of itself on stage, vicariously suggesting ways to cope on a human scale with the suprahuman scale of ecological crisis. It could be argued that all forms of theatre, to varying degrees, present spectators with images of themselves. However, I contend that this is particularly integral to naturalism because one of naturalism's chief antecedents was eighteen century bourgeois drama which rejected neoclassical forms of theatre presentation and was driven by the needs of middle class urban audiences who wanted to see their own lives and predicaments reflected on stage. After all, it was as long ago as 1757—more than a century before Zola developed his theories of Naturalism—that the French playwright and philosopher Denis Diderot, in his essay "Discourse on Dramatic Poetry", introduced the concept of the invisible fourth wall which we recognise as such a cornerstone of naturalistic form today. Naturalism's capacity to present us with an image of ourselves on stage is vitally important in contemporary eco-theatre because the current climate crisis feels so overwhelming on an individual level that we seek representations of ourselves on stage in an attempt to work out how best we might behave and what our moral stance should be. When we look at the characters in Kirkwood's *The Children*, for example, we are subconsciously asking ourselves how we might react if faced with the predicament they face; would we, like Rose, decide to take action by assembling a team of elderly volunteers to help with the clean-up at the nuclear plant in order to relieve the pressure from the younger generation of the play's title, or like Hazel would we continue to live in a state of denial, unfurling our yoga mat even as water inundates the stage? When we watch the scientist Stephen Emmott in *Ten Billion*, do we not see ourselves mirrored in his situation? Like him, we have become accustomed to being bombarded by scientific facts concerning global warming, over-consumption

by citizens of rich nations and an alarmingly burgeoning global population but equally like him, don't we feel powerless and overwhelmed by this information, looking for a way out of the ecological mess we have inadvertently been complicit in creating, whilst forgetting to eat those exotic fruits we purchased from the supermarket? When we see Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, do we identify with Sally, Vi and Lena , preferring to sit in a garden sanctuary on a summer's afternoon and discuss domestic matters, or do we find ourselves identifying more with Mrs Jarrett, with her uncompromising visions of climate devastation and ecological Armageddon? When we watch Baker's *The Antipodes*, isn't it easy to see ourselves in the shoes of those freelance workers, feeling vulnerable and insecure, somewhat lacking a sense of purpose, distanced from nature but aware that there is increasingly "wild weather" ravaging the outside world? And perhaps most intriguingly of all, when we watch Steiner's *You Stupid Darkness!*, don't we all see a little of ourselves in the character of Joey? As a teenage work experience student in an unfamiliar office environment with an outside world in ruins, Joey views the climate crisis issues which emerge in the play with an open mind (what Buddhists would call beginner's mind), without preconceptions and with an adaptive and flexible mindset. Of all the characters, he appears most capable of the deep adaptation needed to navigate the crisis. In an insightful Jungian psychological paper "The Hero Versus the Initiate: The Western Ego Faced with Climate Chaos", Rachael Vaughan (2020) suggests that "...the archetype of the initiate may be a better guide [than that of the hero] as we move into the uncertain, contingent future" of eco-crisis. Joey personifies this figure of the initiate or novice perfectly: even his name encodes this essential function as it means both clown—mirroring perhaps the way clowns and Fools function as clear-eyed truth tellers in Shakespeare—and a young animal or child. If we are to adapt sufficiently to face the

future on an ecologically devastated planet, don't we all need to embrace something of Joey's beginner's mind, to be initiates rather than heroes?

Secondly, naturalism excels at interrogating moral culpability and concerns itself with the long consequence. Our current climatic and ecological crises have deep historical roots, whether we view the Anthropocene as originating in the Great Acceleration of consumer capitalism in the mid twentieth-century, in the eighteenth century when the burning of fossil fuels stoked the fires of the industrial revolution, in the sixteenth century with the rise of European mercantile capitalism and the slave trade, or as Morton (2016) playfully suggests, with the rise of 'agrilogistics' some 12,000 years ago. Ibsen was famously obsessed with the idea of the long consequence, many of his plays showing the current effects of historic causes. A good example of this is *Ghosts* (1881) which explores the intergenerational ramifications of lies, deceit and—possibly, as this is not made explicit in the text—syphilis. When it comes to contemporary climate crisis theatre, naturalism is the dramatic form, *par excellence*, for testing moral culpability, connecting this with the long consequence of characters' actions or historic failure to act. The backstory of *The Contingency Plan*, for example, hinges on Robin's failure to stand by the scientific data he discovered back in the late 1970s and in *The Children* it is the historic failure to address flaws in the safety systems of the nuclear plant where Rose, Hazel and Robin used to work decades earlier which returns to haunt them. Not only does naturalism excel at placing characters under intense moral scrutiny, but it also shows the long consequence of the characters' actions by locating the point of moral failure in the distant past. Wallace has drawn attention to the fact that, due to oceanic thermal inertia, there is approximately a 40-year time lag between carbon emissions and resultant rises in global temperatures so that, as she says,

"...we are now experiencing the temperature rise caused by carbon emissions released in the 1970s while simultaneously laying down the conditions for global warming forty years from now." (Wallace 2020: 154) In our contemporary moment of climate crisis, then, naturalism performs a vital dual function of suggesting how our current predicament might have arisen, and simultaneously who should assume responsibility.

The third reason I would like to advance is that naturalism is adept at showing the deterministic effects of environment on character and in the Anthropocene, naturalism shows a degraded environment returning to haunt humans with the results of their ecologically reckless actions. This is powerfully evoked in *The Contingency Plan* through the vital materialism of the melting Antarctic ice sheets, leading to catastrophic sea level rises which affect all characters, whether ensconced a bomb-proof Whitehall cabinet office or in a liminal saltmarsh in North-West Norfolk. The "wild weather" which affects the outside world in *The Antipodes*, the eco-catastrophe which has occurred outside the Brightline office in *You Stupid Darkness!* and the accounts Mrs Jarrett provides in *Escaped Alone* about a natural world gone nightmarishly out of kilter all show a damaged natural environment exerting a deterministic influence on the way the human characters behave. Williams defined high naturalism as a dramatic form in which "...the lives of the characters have soaked into their environment...Moreover, the environment has soaked into the lives." (Williams 1977b: 217) We might revise this in our current age of eco-crisis by suggesting that high eco-naturalism is a dramatic form in which the past actions of the characters have damaged the natural environment, a natural environment which has now returned to damage their lives.

Finally, the fourth reason why naturalism should continue to play such a vital role within contemporary eco-theatre is that due to the historical circumstances in which Naturalism was conceived, it has long been concerned with notions of deep time which are increasingly relevant in the Anthropocene. “Deep time”, according to ecocritical writer Robert Macfarlane, “...is the dizzying expanses of Earth history that stretch away from the present moment. Deep time is measured in units that humble the human instant: epochs and aeons, instead of minutes and years.” (Macfarlane 2019: 15) When fossil collector and palaeontologist Mary Anning discovered the first complete fossilised skeleton of a dinosaur, in Dorset’s Lyme Regis in 1811, her discovery provoked a radical rethinking of the scale of Earth’s history and *Homo sapiens*’ position relative to it. The 5.2 metre ichthyosaur she painstakingly excavated, which is now housed in the British Museum and whose binomial name *Ichthyosaurus anningae* memorialises her literally ground-breaking discovery, sparked great interest throughout Britain and internationally.[129] Two years later, the French naturalist Georges Cuvier published his *Essay on the Theory of the Earth* (1813) which proposed that species—such as the ichthyosaur unearthed by Anning—had been wiped out during what we would now call a mass extinction event. Cuvier was a leading proponent of catastrophism which was gradually superseded by theories of evolution, culminating in the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), a work which deeply influenced Naturalist writers of the period including Ibsen who read it a decade later when it was eventually translated into Danish in 1869. Naturalist playwrights then, from the first consciously conceived Naturalist play, Zola’s *Thérèse*

[129] Further information about Mary Anning’s palaeontology, including her 1823 discovery of the first complete Plesiosaurus skeleton, may be found at: https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/mary-anning-unsung-hero.html

Raquin (1873) onwards, lived with a knowledge of deep palaeontological time and a sense of the relative insignificance of human time frames vis-à-vis geological time frames. This is evident, for example, in the way Dr Astrov in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1899) talks about the forests. Chaudhuri feels that:

> Astrov cannot read his eco-maps ecologically, as a visual narrative of the ongoing destruction of nature by human beings; rather, he reads them as records of cultural deficiency...To Astrov, material and cultural progress justifies the destruction of nature. (1994: 25)

I would argue, on the contrary, that Astrov displays not only a deep concern for the fauna and flora in the forest which surrounds the Serebriakov estate where the play is set but that he is highly conscious of the relative insignificance of human time frames when measured against the life span of the forest. This is demonstrated in the following speech in which he passionately declares:

> Man is endowed with reason and creative power...but up to the present he's been destroying and not creating. There are fewer and fewer forests, the rivers are drying up, the wild creatures are almost exterminated, the climate is being ruined, and the land is getting poorer and more hideous every day...[W]hen I hear the rustling of the young trees I planted with my own hands, I'm conscious of the fact that the climate is to some extent in my power too, and that if mankind is happy in a thousand years' time, I'll be responsible for it even though to a very minute extent. (Chekhov 1951: 197-8)

Astrov, a committed vegetarian, is keenly aware of the ecology of the surrounding forests, the flora and fauna that live within that ecosystem, and the responsibility humans have towards it. His views are startlingly modern, at odds with "industrialization's animus against nature" (Chaudhuri 1994: 24) which Chaudhuri accuses naturalism of being complicit with. Far from "proffering a purely social

account of human life" (Chaudhuri 1994: 24), Astrov's speech suggests that late nineteenth-century naturalism is capable of depicting profound ecological sensitivity alongside an awareness of deep ecological time. Nor is this deep time thinking confined to Astrov's musings; in Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896) the budding playwright Trepliov declares that his play is set "two hundred thousand years from now" (Chekhov 1954: 128) and Nina, performing in Trepliov's play dressed in timeless white and sitting on a rock with a moonlit lake in the background, envisages a time when:

> ...matter and spirit will merge in beautiful harmony and the Kingdom of Cosmic Will will come into being. But this will only happen after a long succession of millennia... (Chekhov 1954: 130)

Far from there being, as Chaudhuri suggests, a "...disastrous coincidence, in the second half of the 19th century, between the age of ecology and the birth of naturalism" (Chaudhuri 1994: 23), I would argue that there was, on the contrary, a fortuitous coincidence between the birth of naturalism and the dawning of multi-scalar thinking and an appreciation of deep time which lies at the heart of ecological awareness.

In its interrogation of the dramaturgical potential of eco-naturalism, my study has focused exclusively on anglophone plays and performances seen on the British stage between 2011 and 2022. Research into the possibilities of contemporary eco-naturalism could profitably be expanded to include theatre and performance events from non-English speaking cultures and, more broadly, from non-western theatre traditions. It would be particularly valuable, in my view, for further research to be conducted into the dramaturgical potential of eco-naturalistic plays and

performances by playwrights and theatre-makers who represent marginalised voices, whether the root cause of marginalisation be economic deprivation, racial injustice, gender inequality or other forms of oppression.

Had my approved period of research lasted longer, my study would also have critiqued a forthcoming book on naturalism by Dan Rebellato. After I had submitted my thesis, he talked at a panel discussion at the Central School of Speech and Drama in spring 2023 about this book and, in particular, about how the scientific methodology historically associated with Naturalism parallels our contemporary scientific epistemological knowledge about global warming and ecological crisis, making naturalism a highly appropriate form by which to interrogate ecological issues on stage. Further, Rebellato is interested in how naturalism is able to create characters who exhibit psychological interiority. Developing this idea, I would suggest that another valuable area for future scholarship into the eco-dramaturgical potential of naturalism would be to examine how naturalism's psychological interiority is able to illuminate the phenomena of eco-anxiety and eco-grief which, as studies from the Climate Psychology Alliance and others reveal, are becoming increasingly prevalent within society.[130]

Another scholar whose recent work has explored the idea of theatre *as* ecology, is Carl Lavery. His forthcoming monograph—the first in a three-book series— is certain to provoke new critical perspectives on how theatre, beyond merely addressing ecological issues thematically, has the capacity itself to *be* a form of ecology.

[130] The Climate Psychology Alliance is a community of therapeutic practitioners, thinkers, artists, researchers and others who place the psychology and emotions of climate and ecological crisis at the centre of its work. http://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org

Looking to the future, it is my fervent hope that theatre scholars will continue to probe the eco-dramaturgical potential of naturalism. This research will be all the richer if it includes perspectives from non-anglophone cultures, marginalised voices, and those suffering intersectional inequalities. In our current moment of climate and ecological crisis, when humanity's disastrous impact on the earth and its systems is becoming daily more obvious, we need to heed these voices now more than ever.

Bibliography

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Adiseshiah, Siân, and Louise LePage, eds. *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Agyeman, Julian. "People of colour have been shut out of the climate debate. Social justice is the key to a greener world." *The Guardian,* October 6, 2022.

Akhtar, Ayad. *Disgraced*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013.

Allfree, Claire. "Daily Telegraph review of *Escaped Alone* 1.2.16, *Theatre Record* (January 1-28, 2016): 62-66.

Allfree, Claire. "Metro review of *The Antipodes* 1.11.19", *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 109-117.

Akbar, Arifa. "'This had to happen now': Lucy Kirkwood on Maryland, her 30-minute 'howl' of a play", *The Guardian*, October 10, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/oct/10/this-had-to-happen-now-lucy-kirkwood-maryland-play-sabina-nessa-sarah-everard

Albrecht, Glenn A. *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019.

Almeida Theatre. "Ella Hickson on Writing Oil." Accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCqmdNgIwXk

Andreach, Robert J. *The War Against Naturalism in the Contemporary American Theatre*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008.

Angelaki, Vicky. *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017.

Angelaki, Vicky. *Theatre and Environment.* London: Red Globe Press, 2019.

Angelaki, Vicky. "Writing in the Green: Imperatives towards an Eco-n-Temporary Theatre Canon". *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 10:1 (2022): 26–43. https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2022-0003.

Angelaki, Vicky. and Elizabeth Sakellaridou. "On Theater and Ecology at Critical Junctions: Editors' Introduction". *Critical Stages / Scènes critiques* No.26 (2022). https://www.critical-stages.org/26/category/special-topic/

Antoine, André. *Memories of the Théâtre Libre*, translated by M. Carlson. Miami, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1977 [1964].

Arditti, Michael. “Sunday Express review of *Oil* 23.10.16”, *Theatre Record* (October 7-20, 2016): 1152-6.

Aristophanes, David Barrett, and Alan H. Sommerstein. *The Birds and Other Plays : The Knights, Peace, Wealth, The Assembly Women*. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by Hugh Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin Books, 1998.

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcolm Heath. London: Penguin Books, 1996.

Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and Its Double.* Translated by Victor Corti. London: John Calder, 1970.

Arons, Wendy and May, Theresa J.,eds, *Readings in Performance and Ecology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Aston, Elaine. “Room for Realism?”. In *Twenty-First Century Drama*, edited by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage, 17-35. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Aston, Elaine. *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Aston, Elaine. *Restaging Feminisms*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2020.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Ayckbourn, Alan. *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*. London: Faber, 2004.

Baker, Annie. *The Antipodes*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2019.

Baker, Annie. *Circle Mirror Transformation* in *Annie Baker: The Vermont Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2012.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Fourth edition. Beginnings. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.

Bartlett, Mike. *Earthquakes in London*. London: Methuen Drama, 2010.

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1972].

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Bauer, Wolfgang, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Peter Handke, and Franz Xaver Kroetz. *Shakespeare the sadist*. Translated by Renata and Martin Esslin, Anthony Vivis, Michael Roloff and Katharina Hehn. London: Eyre Methuen, 1977.

Bendell, Jem and Rupert Read. eds, *Deep Adaptation: Navigating the Realities of Climate Chaos*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Billington Michael. “Guardian review of *Oil* 17.10.16”, *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1152-6.

Bilodeau, Chantal and Peterson, Thomas. *Lighting the Way*. The Centre for Sustainable Practice in the Arts, 2000.

Bilodeau, Chantal. “The Story of Extractivism” in *Canadian Theatre Review* 182 (Spring 2020): 35-38

Bilodeau, Chantal. *Sila: a play*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2015.

Blake, William. *The Complete Poems*, edited by Alicia Ostriker. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1979

Bottoms, Stephen. ‘Climate Change “Science” on the London Stage’. *WIREs Climate Change* 3, no. 4 (2012): 339–48.

Bovell, Andrew. *When the Rain Stops Falling*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2009.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Mother Courage and Her Children*, translated by David Hare. London: Methuen Drama, 1995.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre*, edited by Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn. London: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2019.

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. London: Penguin Books, 1968.

Brown, Georgina. “Mail on Sunday review of *Ten Billion* 29.7.2012”, *Theatre Record* 637 (July 15-28, 2012): 816.

Buffini, Moira, Matt Charman, Penelope Skinner and Jack Thorne. *Greenland.* London: Faber and Faber, 2011.

Butterworth, Jez. *Jerusalem*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2009.

Butterworth, Jez. *The Ferryman*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2017.

Camp, Pannill. “The Trouble with Phenomenology”, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 1 (September 2004), 79–100.

Carrington, Damian. “The Anthropocene Epoch: scientists declare dawn of human-influenced age.” *Guardian*, August 29, 2016.

Carson, Rachel, Edward O. Wilson, Linda J. Lear, Lois Darling, and Louis Darling. *Silent Spring*. 50th anniversary edition, 1st Mariner books edition 2002. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002.

Cavendish, Dominic, "Daily Telegraph review of *Ten Billion* 19.7.2012", *Theatre Record* 637 (July 15-28, 2012): 812-816.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Chaudhuri, Una. '"There Must be a Lot of Fish in that Lake": Toward an Ecological Theater', *Theater,* vol. 25, no. 1 (1994), 23 – 31.

Chaudhuri, Una. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Chaudhuri, Una and Shonni Enelow. *Research Theatre, Climate Change, and the Ecocide Project*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Chaudhuri, Una. *Stage Lives of Animals Zooësis and Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

Chaudhuri, Una. "Anthropo-Scenes: Staging Climate Chaos in the Drama of Bad Ideas." In *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, edited by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise Page, 303-321. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich. *Plays*. Translated by Elisaveta Fen. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954.

Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich, Jutta Hercher, and Peter Urban. *Chekhov on Theatre*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2012.

Churchill, Caryl. *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* in *Churchill: Shorts*. London: Nick Hern Books, 1990.

Churchill, Caryl. *Cloud Nine* in *Churchill: Plays One*. London: Methuen Drama, 1985.

Churchill, Caryl. *Owners* in *Plays One*. London: Methuen Drama, 1985.

Churchill, Caryl. *Top Girls, Serious Money* and *Fen* in *Plays Two*. Methuen Drama, 1990.

Churchill, Caryl. *Far Away*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2000.

Churchill, Caryl. *Escaped Alone*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2016.

Churchill, Caryl. *Plays Five*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2019.

Clapp, Susannah, "The Observer review of *The Antipodes* 3.11.19", *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 109-117.

Clark, Timothy. “Derangements of Scale.” In *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, Vol. 1, edited by Tom Cohen, 148-166. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press [Imprint] MPublishing., 2012.

Cless, Downing. *Ecology and Environment in European Drama*. New York; London: Routledge, 2011.

Cole, Toby, ed. *Playwrights on Playwriting: From Ibsen to Ionesco*. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé."Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. “The Anthropocene”, *International Geosphere-Biosphere Program Newsletter* 41 (May 2000): 17-18.

Crutzen, Paul. “Geology of Mankind”, *Nature* Vol. 415 (January 3, 2002): 23.

Cuvier, Georges. *Essay on the Theory of the Earth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 [1813].

Darwin, Charles. *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (Sixth edition). London: John Murray, 1876 (1859)

Davis, Rib. *Writing Dialogue for Scripts*. London: Bloomsbury, 2008.

Davis, Nicola. “Breakthrough in nuclear fusion could mean ‘near-limitless energy’”. *Guardian*, December 12, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/dec/12/breakthrough-in-nuclear-fusion-could-mean-near-limitless-energy

Davis, Tracy C. *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Derrida, Jacques. ‘The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation’. *Theater* 9:3 (1978): 6–19. https://doi.org/10.1215/00440167-9-3-6.

Derrida, Jacques, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Of Grammatology*. Fortieth-Anniversary edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Diamond, Catherine. “Staging Global Warming, the Genre-Bending Hyperobject”. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Vol. 30, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 101-123.

Diamond, Elin. *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Diamond, Elin. “Churchill’s Tragic Materialism; or, Imagining a Posthuman Tragedy”. *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 129, no. 4 (2014): 751-760.

Diderot, Denis. “Discourse on Dramatic Poetry” (1757) translated by Barbara Kerslake in *Sources of Dramatic Theory Vol. 2: Voltaire to Hugo* edited by Michael J. Sidnell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Duffy, Clare. *Arctic Oil*. London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2018.

Eccleshare, Thomas. *Pastoral*. London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2013.

Edgar, David. *How Plays Work*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2009.

Edwardes, Jane. “Sunday Times review of *Oil* 23.10.16”, *Theatre Record* (October 7-20 October, 2016): 1152-6.

Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1963.

Emmott, Stephen. *Ten Billion*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.

Esslin, Martin. *An Anatomy of Drama*. London: Abacus Books, 1978.

Esslin, Martin. *The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen*. London: Methuen Drama, 1988.

Evans, Lloyd, “Spectator review of *Oil* 22.10.16”, *Theatre Record* (October 7-20, 2016): 1152-1156.

Extinction Rebellion performance campaign *The Sea is Rising and So Are We*. Accessed August 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Z7DbR9VY9E

Fakhrkonandeh, Alireza. “Oil Cultures, World drama and contemporaneity: questions of time, space and form in Ella Hickson’s *Oil*.” *Textual Practice* 36:11, 1775-1811.

Fortier, Mark. *Theory Theatre*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016.

Fragkou, Marissia. *Ecologies of Precarity in Twenty-First Century Theatre*. London: Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama, 2018

Freestone, Elizabeth and Jeanie O’Hare. *100 Plays to Save the World*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2021.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock. London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1919].

Fuchs, Elinor. “Play as Landscape: Another Version of Pastoral”, *Theater,* Vol. 25, No. 1 (1994): 44-51.

Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Fuchs, Elinor and Una Chaudhuri eds., *Land/Scape/Theater*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002.

Fuller, Matthew and Goriunova, Olga. *Bleak Joys: Aesthetics of Ecology and Impossibility*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

Furst, Lilian R. and Peter N. Skrine. *Naturalism*. Methuen and Co., 1971.

Gardner, Lyn. “Fog, smog and eco-drag: these climate change dramas are a breath of fresh air.” *The Guardian*, November 7, 2017.

Garner, Jr., SB. *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin Family Lectures. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Giannachi, Gabriella and Nigel Stewart eds., *Performing Nature*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2005.

Godber, John. *Crown Prince* in *Godber: Plays 4*. London: Methuen Drama, 2009.

Gore-Langton. “Daily Mail review of *The Antipodes* 9.11.19”, *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 109-117

Greengrass, Jessie. *The High House*. London: Swift Press, 2021.

Greenstreet, Hannah Carys. “Experiments with Realism in Contemporary Feminist Theatre in Britain.” PhD diss., Jesus College, University of Oxford, 2021.

Grochala, Sarah. *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Harman, Graham. *Object-Oriented Ontology*. London: Penguin Books, 2018.

Hartnoll, Phyllis, ed. *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Hartl, Anja. *Brecht and Post-1990s British Drama: Dialectical Theatre Today*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021.

Hemming, Sarah. “Financial Times review of *Ten Billion* 21.7.2012”, *Theatre Record* 637 (July 15-28, 2012): 815.

Heise, Ursula K. *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Hickson, Ella. *Oil*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2016.

Hickson, Ella. *The Writer*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2018.

Hitchings, Henry, "Evening Standard review of *Oil* 17.10.16, *Theatre Record* (October 7-20, 2016): 1152-1156.

Hoffman, Andrew J. *How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate*. Stanford, California: Standard University Press, 2015.

Hoggett, Paul, ed. *Climate Psychology: On Indifference to Disaster*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Hulme, Mike. *Why We Disagree about Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Husserl, Edmund. *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Translated by W.R. Boyce Gibson. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012 [1931].

Ibsen, Henrik. *Hedda Gabler*, *An Enemy of the People* and *A Doll's House* in *Plays: Two.* Methuen World Classics. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980a

Ibsen, Henrik. *Rosmersholm, The Lady from the Sea* and *Little Eyolf* in *Plays: Three*. Methuen World Classics. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980b

Innes, Christopher. *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Ionesco, Eugène. *The Chairs* and *Jacques* in *Ionesco: Plays One*. London: John Calder Ltd., 1958

Ionesco, Eugène. *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It* in *Ionesco: Plays Two*. London: John Calder Ltd., 1958

Ionesco, Eugène. *Rhinoceros* in *Ionesco: Plays Four*. London: John Calder Ltd., 1960

Issacharoff, Michael. 'Space and Reference in Drama'. *Poetics Today* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 211–24.

Itzin, Catherine and Simon Trussler. "Petrol bombs through the proscenium arch", *Theatre Quarterly*, V, no. 17 (1975).

Jeffreys, Stephen, and Maeve McKeown. *Playwriting: Structure, Character, How and What to Write*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2019.

Jensen, Liz. *The Rapture*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.

Johnston, Daniel. *Theatre and Phenomenology: Manual Philosophy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Jones, Luke, "Daily Mail review of *The Antipodes* 1.11.19", *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 109-117.

Kane, Sarah. *Blasted*. London: Methuen Drama, 1995.

Kershaw, Baz. *Theatre Ecology : Environments and Performance Events*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Kirkwood, Lucy. *Chimerica* in *Lucy Kirkwood: Plays One*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2016.

Kirkwood, Lucy. *The Children*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2016.

Kirkwood, Lucy. "Royal Court Theatre platform discussion of *The Children.*" Accessed May 17, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68eFaUKABMc&t=773s

Kirkwood, Lucy. *Maryland*, BBC iPlayer, accessed August 25, 2022, http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0019g29/maryland

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. *A Death in the Family: My Struggle Book 1*, translated by Don Bartlett. London: Vintage, 2013.

Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Latour, Bruno. "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene", *New Literary History*, v.45, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 1-18

Latour, Bruno. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

Lavery, Carl & Finburgh, Clare. *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage*. London: Methuen Drama Engage, 2015.

Lavery, Carl. "Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do? [Special Issue]". *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 20, no. 3 (2016): 229–348.

Lavery, Carl. "How Does Theatre Think Through Ecology?" In *Thinking Through Theatre and Performance*, edited by Maaike Bleeker, Adrian Kelleher and Heike Roms. 257-269. London: Bloomsbury, 2019.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Letts, Quentin, "The Sunday Times review of *The Antipodes* 10.11.19", *Theatre Record* (October 15-31, 2019): 109-117.

Loach, Ken, dir. *I, Daniel Blake.* London, British Film Institute, 2016.

Lonergan, Patrick (2020) "'A Twisted, Looping Form', Staging dark ecologies in Ella Hickson's *Oil*", *Performance Research*, 25:2, 38-44.

Love, Catherine (2020) "From Facts to Feelings: The Development of Katie Mitchell's Ecodramaturgy", *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 30:2, 226-235.

Lovelock, James. *The Revenge of Gaia*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.

McEwan, Ian. *Solar*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2010.

McGrath, John. *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. London: Methuen Modern Drama, 1981.

McKay, Adam, dir. *Don't Look Up*. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2021. https://www.netflix.com/gb/title/81252357

McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature*. Viking Books, 1990.

McKibben, Bill. *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* London: Wildfire, 2019.

McKinney, Joslin, and Kara McKechnie. 'Interview with Katrin Brack'. *Theatre and Performance Design* 2, no. 1–2 (2 April 2016): 127–35.

MacDonald, Claire, Tim Etchells, Deirdre Heddon and Lenora Champagne. *Utopia: Three Plays for a Postdramatic Theatre*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2015.

Macfarlane, Robert. *Underland: A Deep Time Journey.* London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019.

Macmillan, Duncan. *Lungs*. Oberon Modern Plays. London: Oberon Books, 2011.

Mahfouz, Sabrina. *A History of Water in the Middle East*. London: Methuen Drama, 2019.

Marker, Lise-Lone. *David Belasco: Naturalism in the American Theatre*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975.

Marlowe, Sam. "The Stage review of *The Contingency Plan* 22.10.22", *Theatre Record* (October 1-31, 2022).

Marranca, Bonnie. *Ecologies of Theater*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Marshall, George. *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

May, Theresa J. “Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies”, *Theatre Topics*, v.17, no. 2 (Sep 2007): 95-110.

May, Theresa J. *Earth Matters on Stage*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021.

Meeker, Joseph. *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972.

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperCollins, 1983.

Merchant, Carolyn. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publications, 1993.

Mill, John Stuart. *The Subjection of Women*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1869.

Miller, Arthur. *All My Sons*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1975 [1947].

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961 [1949].

Mitchell, Katie. *The Director’s Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Mitchell, Katie. “Existential Creativity: Making Theatre Sustainable”, blog post for Digital Theatre Plus. Accessed October 29, 2022. https://www.digitaltheatreplus.com/blog/existential-creativity-making-theatre-sustainable.

Moore, Jason W., ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Morton, Timothy. “Guest Column: Queer Ecology”. *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (March 2010): 273–82.

Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. The Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Morton, Timothy. *Humankind : Solidarity with Nonhuman People*. London: Verso, 2017.

Morton, Timothy. *Being Ecological.* London: Pelican Books, 2018.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Translated by Thomas Common. London: Wordsworth Classics, 1997.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Norgaard, Kari Marie. *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011)

Norman, Neil. "Daily Express review of *Oil* 28.10.16", *Theatre Record* (October 7-20, 2016): 1152-6.

Nozedar, Adele. *The Secret Language of Birds: A Treasury of Myths, Folklore & Inspirational True Stories*. London: HarperElement, 2006.

Nussbaum, Martha. *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility.* London: Simon & Schuster, 2023.

Orton, Joe, and John Lahr. *The Orton Diaries: Including the Correspondence of Edna Welthorpe and Others*. London: Methuen, 1986.

Osborne, John. *Look Back in Anger*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957.

Pattie, David. '"At Me Too Someone Is Looking …": Coercive Systems in Beckett's Theatre'. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui: An Annual Bilingual Review/Revue Annuelle Bilingue* 30, no. 2 (2018): 227–38.

Pinter, Harold. *The Birthday Party*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1960.

Payne, Nick. *If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet*. London: Faber and Faber, 2009.

Pickering, Kenneth, and Jayne Thompson. *Naturalism in Theatre: Its Development and Legacy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Rabillard, Sheila. "On Caryl Churchill's Ecological Drama: Right to Poison The Wasps?" In *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, edited by Elaine Aston, 88-104. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Rebellato, Dan. "Objectivity and Observation". In *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Science*, edited by Kirsten Shepherd-Barr. 12-25. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Rebellato, Dan. “Playwrights in Lockdown: Ella Hickson.” Accessed December 17, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIsUahE9wiY

Rich, Nathaniel. *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change*. London: Picador, 2019.

Ridout, Nicholas. *Scenes from Bourgeois Life*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020.

Ronder, Tanya. *F*ck the Polar Bears*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2015.

Schechner, Richard, *Performance Theory*, revised and expanded edn, London and New York: Routledge, 2004 [1997].

Schechner, Richard. *Environmental Theater: An Expanded New Edition Including ‘Six Axioms for Environmental Theater’*. The Applause Acting Series. New York: Applause, 1994.

Schumacher, Claude. *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre, 1850-1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works,* edited by Peter Alexander. London and Glasgow: Collins, 1980.

Shaw, George Bernard. “The Quintessence of Ibsenism” in *Major Critical Essays*. London: Penguin Books, 1986 [1958].

Sheldrake, Merlin. *Entangled Life*. London: Vintage, 2020.

Shenton, Mark. “The Stage review of *Oil* 20.10.16”, *Theatre Record* (October 7-20, 2016): 1152-6.

Shuttleworth, Ian. “Financial Times review of *Oil* 17.10.16”, *Theatre Record* (October 7-20, 2016): 1152-6.

Sierz, Aleks. *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.

Sierz, Aleks. *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*. London: Methuen Drama, 2011.

Sierz, Aleks. “Tribune review of *Oil* 4.11.16”, *Theatre Record* (October 7-20, 2016): 1152-6.

Sierz, Aleks. *Good Nights Out*. London: Methuen Drama, 2021.

Simard, Suzanne. *Finding the Mother Tree: Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest*. London: Allen Lane, 2021.

Smith, Ben. *Doggerland*. London: 4th Estate, 2019.

Smith, Stef. *Human Animals*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2017.

Sofer, Andrew. “Thinking Through Phenomena: Theatre Phenomenology in Theory and Practice”. *Theatre Journal* 74, no. 3 (2022): 389–403. https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2022.0079.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Orwell’s Roses*. London: Granta Books, 2021.

Soper, Kate. *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human*. Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1995.

Stafford-Clark, Max. Interview in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics,* edited by Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enric Monforte and Pilar Zozaya, 27-40. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

States, Bert O. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1985.

Steiner, Sam. *You Stupid Darkness!* London: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2019.

Stephens, Simon. *Wastwater and T5*. Modern Plays. London: Methuen Drama, 2011.

Strindberg, August. *Miss Julie* (including Preface,1888) in *Plays One*. Translated by Michael Meyer. London: Methuen Drama, 1987.

Strindberg, August. *A Dream Play* in *Plays Two*. Translated by Michael Meyer. London: Methuen Drama, 1991.

Strindberg, August. “On Modern Drama and Modern Theatre” (1889) in *Playwrights on Playwriting*, edited by Toby Cole. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.

Styan, J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice Volume 1: Realism and Naturalism.* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981(a)

Styan, J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice Volume 2: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd.* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981(b)

Szeman, Imre. ‘System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster’. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (1 October 2007): 805–23. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2007-047.

Szerszynski, Bronislaw, Claire Waterton and Wallace Heim eds., *Nature Performed*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

Szondi, Peter, and Michael Hays. *Theory of the Modern Drama: A Critical Edition*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.

Taylor, Paul. “Independent review of *Oil* 17.10.16”, *Theatre Record* (7-20 October 2016): 1152-6.

Thomas, Ed. *On Bear Ridge*. London: Methuen Drama, 2019.

Today, 06:00 26/12/2022, BBC Radio 4, 180 mins. https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/3C037A70?bcast=138070625 (Accessed 29 Dec 2022)

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015.

United Nations. “Guterres: The IPCC Report is a code red for humanity”, Accessed February 1, 2023. https:// unric.org/en/guterres-the-ipcc-report-is-a-code-red-for-humanity/.

University of East Anglia. “The making of *Song of the Reed*: Wild Tracks”. Accessed October 14, 2021. https://stories.uea.ac.uk/wildtracks/

Vaughan, Rachael. “The Hero Versus the Initiate: The Western Ego Faced with Climate Chaos”. *Journal of Jungian Scholarly Studies* 15, no. 1 (23 March 2020): 48–62.

Wallace-Wells, David. *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Global Warming*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019

Wallace, Jennifer. *Tragedy Since 9/11 Reading a World Out of Joint*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020

Waters, Steve. *The Contingency Plan.* London: Nick Hern Books, 2022.

Waters, Steve. *The Secret Life of Plays*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2010.

Watson, Alex. “Contemporary Catastrophes: 2010s British Climate Crisis Theatre and Performativity.” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 32:2 (2022): 140-161.

Wenzel, Jennifer. ‘Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature’. *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 4 (2006): 449–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790600993263.

Whyte, Kyle Powys. “Our Ancestors’ Dystopia Now: Indigenous conservation and the Anthropocene”. In *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities,* edited by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann, 206-215. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

Wiegand, Chris. “Sunshine and terribe rage: Linda Bassett on Caryl Churchill’s Escaped Alone”, *The Guardian*, February 10, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/10/linda-bassett-caryl-churchill-escaped-alone-royal-court.

Williams, Raymond. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. London: Chatto & Windus,1968.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. London: Vintage, 2016 [1973].

Williams, Raymond. 'A Lecture on Realism'. *Screen* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1977a): 61–74.

Williams, Raymond. "Social Environment and theatrical environment: the case of English naturalism". In *English Drama : Forms and Development*, 203-223. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977b.

Williams, Raymond. "Theatre as a Political Forum". In *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, edited by Tony Pinkney, 81-94. London: Verso, 1989.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015 [1976].

Woynarski, Lisa. *Ecodramaturgies: Theatre, Performance and Climate Change*. New Dramaturgies. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Wyndham, John. *The Day of the Triffids*. London: Penguin Books, 1954.

Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Zalasiewicz, Jan. *Rocks: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Living in the End Times*. London and New York: Verso, 2011.

Zola, Émile. *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, translated by Belle M. Sherman. New York: The Cassell Publishing Company, 1893.

Zola, Émile, and Andrew Rothwell. *Thérèse Raquin*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 [1868].

Zola, Émile. "Naturalism on the Stage" (1881) in *Playwrights on Playwriting: From Ibsen to Ionesco*, edited by Toby Cole. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001.

Zola, Émile. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1969.